

Interaction Focused Therapy The Don Jackson Legacy

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Abstract

Don D. Jackson was one of the most prolific pioneers of the family and brief therapy, the founder of this discipline. This pioneering work was carried out by Jackson and his colleagues around the 1950s and the 1960s, first together with G. Bateson and then at the Mental Research Institute. His works still influences most of the systemic approaches of therapy still in use till the very day: from the brief therapy model developed after the death of Jackson at M.R.I. to the strategic work of Jay Haley and Cloe Madanes, from the structural model developed by Salvador Minuchin, to the work of the Milan School and the solution-focused therapy of De Shazer. The author revisits Jackson's career, which was brought to an end at an age of 48 years by a tragic and unexpected death, recollecting his successes and his contributions in the founding of the International Theory and its application to brief and family therapy. The cybernetic model together with the basic notions regarding systems, social constructivism, the use of circular questioning and others are only a fragment of the influence generated by Jackson on the majority of the brief and family therapy models. Just like clay that holds together the foundation blocks, Jackson's contributions continue to be the cohesive element that bounds most of our present systemic approaches- these act as a testimony of the vitality, the courage and the far-sighting vision of Don D. Jackson after more than thirty years from his death.

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How did Don Jackson influence the field of family therapy? How did Watts influence the steam engine? He made it. Others have refined the steam engine into a better, more efficient machine. I'd say that is what Don did for family therapy, he established the discipline. Others have gone on to refine it..

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If Don D. Jackson, MD, was alive today he would be popular even though controversial. That was so when he was making his contributions. Jackson was a systems purist, and purists of any kind, at least in the soft science of family studies, are not in vogue, rather they are controversial. In this age of compromise, where integration is the buzz word of the family therapy field, and funding from pharmaceutical companies have all but extinguished talk therapies from the curriculum of psychiatric training programs, advocates of a purely relational approach are hard to come by.

But there was a time in the not too distant past that many in the behavioral sciences hung on every word Don Jackson wrote or spoke. His tragic and unanticipated death in January 1968 at the age of 48 stunned the emerging field of family therapy, and the effects of this loss continue to reverberate throughout the discipline. It is my privately held conviction that the gradual shift away from the firm grounding of family theory and therapy in system and communications theory began soon after Jackson's articulate and convincing voice fell silent.

Who was Jackson and why would brief family therapists find his work interesting today? Jackson was one of the most prolific of the early family and brief therapy pioneers. He was a therapist of genius – one of those rare people who could produce lasting changes in a family, often within only one or a few sessions. When Jackson is remembered it is for the contributions he made to family theory – family homeostasis, family rules, the marital quid pro quo, and with long time collaborators Gregory Bateson, Jay Haley, and John Weakland, the concept of the double bind.

In a career that spanned a brief 24 years Jackson's accomplishments are nothing short of astonishing. Author or co-author of more than 130 professional papers and seven books, Jackson won virtually every prestigious award in the field of psychiatry: the Freida Fromm-Reichmann award for contribution to understanding of schizophrenia, the first Edward R. Strecker award for contribution to treatment of hospitalized patients, he was named recipient of the 1967 Salmon Lecturer.

In 1958 Jackson founded the Mental Research Institute (MRI), the first institute in the world specifically for the purpose of studying interactional processes and teaching family therapy (staff writer, 1958 a&b, Jackson, 1968 a&b). The first family therapy training program funded by the US government was at the MRI. In collaboration with Jay Haley and Nathan Ackerman, Jackson founded the first family therapy journal, *Family Process*.

To educate the larger medical community about interactional theory, Jackson helped found and was an editor for a medical news journal, *Medical Opinion and Review*. In order to create a forum from which researchers in the newly emerging field of family therapy could publish their work, Jackson helped found and was the editor of *Science and Behavior Books*.

These accomplishments, as impressive as they are, only hint at the reason Jackson's contributions retain their importance – like the great pyramids of Giza, they are the surviving artifacts, a mere framework of a once thriving vision of this fallen leader.

Who was Jackson and how did he develop such an uncommon understanding of interactional processes? Jackson received his medical training at Stanford Medical School, graduating in early 1944. After completing his residency, Jackson spent two years in the U.S. Army, specializing in neurology. Then, from August, 1947, to April, 1951, Jackson trained at Chestnut Lodge in Maryland, and the Washington School of Psychiatry, two of the most prestigious analytic institutes then in existence, under the tutelage of Harry Stack Sullivan. Sullivan offered a radically alternative definition of psychiatry as “the study of processes that involve or go on between people... the field of interpersonal relations, under any and all circumstances in which these relations exist ... it seems a personality can never be isolated from the complex of interpersonal relations in which the person lives and has his being” (Sullivan, 1945, pp. 4-5.)

Jackson fully embraced the implications of Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory, which so profoundly influenced the direction of his career that Jackson can legitimately be characterized as being “Sullivanian”. At the same time, after Jackson returned to Palo Alto, California to enter into private practice in April 1951, the differences between Sullivan and Jackson soon became evident. The *primary* difference between Sullivan and Jackson is that Sullivan worked with mentally ill individuals *in isolation* from their families, envisioning his brilliant Interpersonal Theory by *inferential* conception of what *past* interpersonal relations must have been like to so severely restrict patients. In contrast, Jackson extended Sullivan's theory by focusing on the actual relationship between one individual and other individuals *in the present* as *Primary Data*.

The fundamental shift in the conception of causality, from looking at past causes of behavior to placing the primary emphasis on the relationship between the symptom bearer and significant others in the present happened, in part, by accident. Palo Alto is a small, university town, and Jackson could not avoid running into the relatives of some of his patients. On one occasion, in mid 1951, one of Jackson's patients, a young psychotic female, was making solid progress. Jackson asked the young woman's mother to stay at home and allow her daughter to come to the next session alone. When the session came around, and Jackson saw the mother was sitting in the lobby with her daughter. The mother's refusal to follow Jackson's suggestion irritated him. So Jackson invited the mother to join her daughter in what was one of the first family sessions ever reported. The results were interesting to Jackson and he began experimenting with family therapy:

I became interested in family therapy ...when I went from Chestnut Lodge to Palo Alto... which is a small university town. I couldn't avoid the relatives; and this led to a lot of surprising and sometimes not very pleasant results. I became interested in the question of family homeostasis, which seemed most marked in the families where a schizophrenic patient was able to live at home. If he then went through psycho-therapy and benefited from it, any move on his part would usually produce all sorts of disruptions at home...At any rate, for practical reasons, I started seeing the patients' parents, and then eventually... the parents and patient together (Jackson, 1962).

Jackson was just beginning to outline a purely here and now, interactional theory and conjoint family approach to therapy when yet another fortuitous turn of events occurred that would have profound ramifications for the future field of family and brief therapy – Don

Jackson met Gregory Bateson. On a bleak day in January 1954 Jackson was giving a lecture on the concept of family homeostasis at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Menlo Park, California. Gregory Bateson was in the audience and approached Jackson after his talk. Bateson felt Jackson's work related to research he was involved in with Jay Haley, John Weakland, and William Fry. As a result of this meeting Jackson soon became a member of the projects. Collaboration with Bateson, Haley, Weakland, and Fry opened new vistas for Jackson. He now had ongoing interaction with a group of thinkers equal to himself in conceptual abilities and daring⁶.

Now for a special treat. The Jackson Archives at the Mental Research Institute contain thousands of written documents, film and audio recordings. One file contains pieces of a book Jackson was working on but was never published. Following is an outline of seventeen "principles, assumptions, and postulates," Jackson believed central to understanding human interaction:

1. A person is always attempting to define the nature of his relationship with other people, as he interacts with them. (Related to idea of seeking or maintaining one's identity?) (Could this be viewed as a "driving force" of this theory?)
2. (Reciprocal of #1) So long as a person is interacting, i.e., alive, he is never not seeking to define the nature of relationship; There is no "not caring," there is never a "resting state".
3. At times this tendency (to define nature of relationship) is in sharper focus than at other times. (This leaves open the question of whether the principle operates more strongly at some times compared to others).
4. The dimensions of "nature of relationship" are exhaustively defined as 1) symmetrical and 2) complementary (offering or asking). Therefore all interaction may be seen in these terms.
5. "Character traits", "symptoms," are a person's typical ways, in an interaction, of attempting to define the nature of relationship.
6. Interaction between two or more people may be seen as a system, which at any given time has some kind of central point of equilibrium. (The central point is probably inferred, i.e., conceptual, rather than factual.) The system is maintained (and perhaps operationally gotten at or defined?) by a series of governors (homeostatic mechanisms).
7. There is always a tendency towards maintaining the status quo. (Is this another "driving force"?)

⁶ John Weakland (1988) described the rich body of ideas that constitute Interactional Theory as having emerged not so much from any one individual, but, rather, as the product of the *interaction between* the members of what has become known as the Palo Alto Group, primarily Gregory Bateson's research team, Jackson, Jay Haley, John Weakland, and William Fry, during the ten year long series of research projects on the nature of paradox in communication processes, and later under the leadership of Jackson at the Mental Research Institute (MRI), where such notable people as Jules Riskin, Virginia Satir, Paul Watzlawick, Richard Fisch, Janet Beavin-Bavelas, and Antonio Ferreria joined the team. A source of fertile input into the group's work were the many visiting experts, including such eminent scholars as Norbert Wiener, Alan Watts, Weldon Keys, Freida Fromm-Reichmann, Ray Birdwhistell, among many others, and especially Haley and Weakland's detailed study of Milton H. Erickson – all of whom can be considered to have contributed to the creation of Interactional Theory.

8. At the same time, there is also always present a tendency towards change in the system. (This follows, partly at least, from no. 1 and 6) Therefore, the system is never conceptually static.

9. The nature of the system (including its equilibrium point and governors) may be modified by the introduction of new parameters. (Can these be conceptualized as “rules”?)

10. “System” is quite abstract – it will be manifested or defined by the occurrence of repetitive sequences of specific patterns of qualifications and ways of attempting to define the nature of relationship.

11. “Homeostatic mechanisms” also are abstractions. They will be revealed indirectly by observing repetitive patterns of qualifications, etc.

12. All messages have both a report and command aspect. (Report of the speakers state? Command refers to attempting to define nature of relationship?) This needs further spelling out).

13. All messages are modified by either disqualifications or affirmations. (The cutoff point for meta-messages to prevent the problem of infinite regression needs to be clarified)

14. A given message, in analysis, is arbitrarily seen in relation to the immediately previous message. A simplification such as this is necessary, in order to avoid an otherwise potentially infinitely complex task of viewing every message in relation to all previous messages. Justification of this particular cutoff point must be empirical.

15. Knowledge of the prior history of a system is not necessary for studying the current patterns of interaction. I.E., in terms of this theory, a cross-sectional approach is sufficient.

16. Particular patterns of a system (i.e. particular kinds of equilibriums) will tend to be associated with particular kinds of individual behavior (including character traits, symptoms, etc.). This assumption does not exclude 1) possible constitutional factors, or 2) the effect of an external event (s) (acts of God.).

17. A statement can always be prefaced by “I have the right to say such and such in this relationship (Jackson, 1962, Unpublished draft).

While most of the premises in this early synthesis appeared in more refined form in later publications (Jackson, 1965 a & b, Watzlawick, Beavin-Bavelas, Jackson, 1967), the uncompromisingly interactional focus of his thinking is clear.

Jackson approach focused singularly on family *process*:

With our proclivity for the individual view of things, it runs against the grain to see ourselves as participants in a system, the nature of which we little understand. Yet I am convinced that we can make such dire appraisals (and such undeserved praises) only by translating a highly complex composite of people and context into a term which is then inappropriately applied to an individual (Jackson, 1963, The sick, the sad, the savage, and the sane).

The extent to which Jackson’s Interactional Theory and its clinical application permeate the field of family and brief therapy is a tribute both to his willingness to share ideas with others and his commitment to point the way for psychiatry, psychology, social work, and the other applied human sciences to make the discontinuous shift from monadic explanations of human behavior to a perspective which is contextual in orientation, placing

primary focus on the relationship between individuals. Jackson described the fear of change and the illusion of stability central to many relationship conflicts as a “tug of war” (1967), cutting through the oversimplifications and reductionistic thinking inherent in theories of human behavior which attempt to explain the individual in trivializing, artificial isolation from the context of which he or she is part.

Jackson’s most enduring contribution to understanding the nature of humankind was his expansion of the definition of behavior beyond looking at the individual *in vitro* to the development of an awareness of behavior as a manifestation of “relationship in the widest sense” (Nos Nex, 1967). This uncompromising appreciation of context represents a revolutionary leap, an evolutionary step potentially as significant as when “the organism gradually ceases to respond quite “automatically” to the mood-signs of another and becomes able to recognize ... the other individual’s and its own signals are only signals” (Bateson, 1955/ 1972, p. 178). A discontinuous paradigmatic shift in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1970), which has changed in profound ways the order of data appropriate to understand behavior (i.e. the relation between individuals in distinct contrast to a monadic view), context, and how causality in human behavior is conceptualized (cybernetic in contrast to lineal).

Paul Watzlawick (1988) and Janet Beavin-Bavelas (1998) describe the groundbreaking book *Pragmatics of Human Communication* as having been the product of their effort to understand and describe Jackson’s incredible theoretical and clinical abilities. After months of observing Jackson conduct interviews and asking him questions in an effort to comprehend his incredible clinical acumen, Jackson, exasperated, drafted an outline and suggested they write the book which was to become one of the cornerstones of an Interactional Theory of human behavior:

A phenomenon remains unexplainable as long as the range of observation is not wide enough to include the context in which the phenomenon occurs. Failure to realize the relationship between an event and the matrix in which it takes place, between an organism and its environment, either confronts the observer with something “mysterious” or induces him to attribute to his object of study certain properties the object may not possess. Compared with the wide acceptance of this fact in the biological sciences, the behavioral sciences seem still to base themselves to a large extent on the monadic view of the individual and on the time-honored method of isolating variables (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 21).

Extending a relational understanding of human behavior beyond the mental health sciences, and disseminating these ideas to nonprofessional as well as professional audiences can be seen in Jackson’s collaboration with famed author and close friend William Lederer. In the first systemically oriented marital self help book, *Mirages of Marriage* (1968) Lederer and Jackson write:

The systems concept helps explain much of the previously mysterious behavior which results whenever two or more human beings relate to one another. We know that the family is a unit in which all individuals have an important influence – whether they like it or not and whether they know it or not. The family is an interacting communications network in which every member from the day-old baby to the seventy-year-old grand-mother influences the nature of the entire system and in turn is influenced by it. For example, if someone in the family feels ill, another member may function more effectively than he usually does. The [family as a] system tends, by nature, to keep itself in balance. An

unusual action by one member invariably results in a compensating reaction by another member. If mother hates to take Sunday drives but hides this feeling from her husband, the message is nevertheless somehow broadcast throughout the family communication network, and it may be Johnny, the four-year-old, who becomes “carsick” and ruins the Sunday drive (p. 14).

This shift of primary focus from the intrapsychic processes of the individual to the relationship between members of the individual’s relational system can be seen in the work of many of the eminent clinician-theoreticians of today (Keeney, 1983, 1987; Tomm, 1987, 1988; Penn, 1983, 1986; Palazzoli, et al., 1980; Cecchin, Lane, and Ray, 1993, 1994; Papp, 1983; Boscolo, et al., 1987).

The pioneering work done in the 1950’s and 1960’s by Jackson and his colleagues, first in the Bateson projects and later at the Mental Research Institute, inform most present day systemically oriented approaches to therapy. The non-pathological, non-normative, interactional focus originated by Jackson, form the most fundamental premises underlying the Brief Therapy Model, developed after Jackson’s death, at the Mental Research Institute (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974; Fisch, Weakland & Segal, 1982; Weakland & Ray, 1995; Ray & de Shazer, 1999), the strategic work of Jay Haley and his colleagues (Haley, 1963; 1976; 1980; Madanes, 1981 & 1984), the structural model developed by Salvador Minuchin and his colleagues (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin & Fishman, 1982; Stanton & Todd, 1982), the work of the Milan Associates both before and after their split into two separate groups (Palazzoli, et. al., 1978; Palazzoli, et. al., 1989; Boscolo, et. al., 1987), the Solution Focused brief therapy approach of deShazer and his associates at the Brief Therapy Center of Milwaukee (de Shazer, 1982, 1985), the work of Keeney and his colleagues (Keeney & Ross, 1985; Keeney & Silverstein, 1986; Keeney, 1987; Ray & Keeney, 1992); the work of Andersen, 1987, and even the “Post-Modern” narrative orientations of Anderson & Goolishian (1990); Hoffman (1993), and Michael White (1989), as well as most other systemically and contextually oriented approaches.

The cybernetic model and basic notions about systems (for example, if change occurs in one part of the system, the rest will change to accommodate that change), social constructionism, ignoring most of the received wisdom of the day, attending to pragmatics (i.e. who does what when and to whom in the present), accepting and going with the symptom, speaking the clients language, using circular questioning, prescribing behavior at one order of abstraction to address the organization of the system at another order of abstraction are but a few of the ways Jackson influenced present day work of most models of family and brief therapy in practice today. Since Jackson’s death, the work of his colleagues at the MRI have continued to inform most of the family and brief oriented systemic work being done around the world today.

Therapeutic work which is directed toward changing the organization of the family, for example, by interrupting problematic coalitional processes across generational lines, and strengthening the boundaries of various subsystems, are ways in which the structural therapy of Salvador Minuchin, both through reading Jackson (Minuchin, 1987) and a ten year affiliation with Jay Haley, has been influenced by Jackson. The coherent set of theoretical premises and techniques of clinical practice, set forth by Jackson continue to provide the solid bedrock on which the rest of the systemically oriented theoreticians and clinicians have built. The influence of Jackson continues to ripple across the work of the rest of the systemically oriented theoreticians and clinicians. The original Milan group and the subsequent work by both Palazzoli’s, and Boscolo and Cecchin’s groups has been

strongly influenced by Jackson. Such fundamental elements of their work as circular questioning, hypothesizing, positive connotation, the use of rituals and tasks, attending to the implications of language as evidenced in the shift from using the verb tense “to be” to “to seem,” and attending to the importance of the referring person are all ideas originally pioneered by Jackson.

The work of MRI, Haley, Minuchin, the Milan groups, deShazer and Berg’s Solution Focused orientation have, in turn, influenced such notable clinicians and theoreticians as members of the Ackerman group including Peggy Papp, Peggy Penn, and Joel Bergman, as well as other eminent members of the field such as Karl Tomm, Steve deShazer, Goolishian and Anderson, Tom Andersen, Lynn Hoffman, and Michael White. Even within the Behavioral Family Therapy orientation, albeit at the literal level, have explicitly adopted such fundamental concepts as the marital quid pro quo (Stewart, 1974; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979).

Why should clinicians, theoreticians, academicians, and students be interested in Jackson's work? Because Jackson's Interactional Theory permeates the fields of family and brief therapy. Like mortar that holds together the bricks, Jackson's contributions continue to be the cohesive element which binds together most present day systemically orientations – a living testimony to the vitality, courage, and far-reaching vision of Don D. Jackson more than thirty-five years after his death.

Since his death, regardless of all the rhetoric about being rooted in a systemic and contextual orientation, the field has yet to achieve the potentialities once imagined by its founders for ushering in a revolutionary shift in how human problems are conceptualized and managed. Instead of consensual validation across schools about the systemic nature of the theoretical base, there continues to be a pervasive lack of appreciation of the fundamental difference between individual theory and interactional theory. A consequence has been efforts to blend the two theories which are doomed to confuse both orientations because they focus on distinctly different orders of phenomena, with diametrically opposite implications for treatment. What has resulted is a field which remains theoretically muddled, unable to offer a genuinely alternative perspective, and fragmented into various camps, each claiming to possess a better understanding of the nature of behavior and change than the others, with no unified direction or understanding of its purposes or goals. In the presence of this fragmentation, the field has yet to produce a giant of the stature of a Freud, capable of blazing a path into the future. Had Jackson lived, one cannot help but wonder whether or not he would have attained such stature.

The shift of focus, set forth by Jackson and his colleagues, from the individual to the relationship between, and from the “reality” of pathology to the “construction of ecologically respectful realities,” carries implications far beyond the field of family and brief therapy. These ideas have ramifications of global proportions which influence concerns from ecology to the world political arena.

How today’s issues would have been addressed by Jackson is, to some extent, unknowable. One can speculate, however, that Jackson’s utter disdain for reductionistic, non self-referential thinking, in all its manifestations, would have continued. His call for appreciation of the interconnected nature of behavior and context would undoubtedly have endured. Certainly he would have continued to take to task those within the human sciences who advocate a non-contextual, individual pathology-oriented research and treatment approach to human problems in living. Unquestionably his razor sharp intellect, and skill at being persuasive, would have been aroused by the recent resurgence of a shared

belief in the viability of individual diagnostics and genetic explanations of “individual pathology.”

What difference would it make if the fields of brief and family therapy reawakened to the implications of Jackson’s insights? Could these fields, thoroughly committed to a world view rooted in cybernetics, and attentive to the implications of the paradigmatic shift Jackson represented, truly lead the way for human kind to transcend the linear causal mentality so prevalent today? Perhaps. Hope still exists for such a paradigmatic transformation, as can be evidenced in the on-going work of Ray, Watlawick, Fisch, Schlanger, Anger-Díaz, and Bobrow that continues at the MRI, in the work being done by Giorgio Nardone and team in Arezo Italy, in the continuing work by Jay Haley, in the exploration that continue by cybernetic theoreticians such as Brad Keeney, and in the continuing exploration and application of Milton Erickson’s work by Zeig, Rossi, and others. It is equally likely that the opportunity for such a transformation has passed. The effects of humankind’s long standing addiction to the illusion of power and control may have, as one of Jackson’s closest colleagues Gregory Bateson (1970) suggests, already corrupted the ecology beyond the point of recovery. Does the echo of Don Jackson’s voice still resonant enough to make a difference?

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