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Lucas A C Derks

Family Systems in the Social Panorama

In *The Structure of Magic, Volume II* and in *Changing with Families* (both 1976), Richard Bandler and John Grinder, inspired by the family therapist Virginia Satir, wrote about "systems therapy". Historically seen, Bandler and Grinder's interest in this subject stemmed from the fact that the systems approach to family therapy shares some of its major roots with what became NLP: the work of Bateson, Weakland, Haley, Laing, Erickson, Jackson, Watzlawick and others.

"To accept the family as a system unit for therapy," Grinder and Bandler write," is to use an overall strategy to work with the family as if it were a living organism, each member being an essential part and resource and, therefore, crucial to the satisfactory behavior of the organism as a whole" (*The Structure of Magic, Volume II*, p.126).

The concept of the "family system"
Viewing the family as a system enables a therapist to leave causality behind and search for dysfunctional interaction patterns. Consequently such a therapist will concentrate not so much on the one single patient to be cured, but on improving interactions within the family; this will involve changes in all its members. However useful this concept has proved to be, working with family members as a group can be very complicated indeed. Often too complicated. And this complexity is caused mainly by the fact that a family is in many ways like a haunted house, with "ghosts" all over the place. It would be a mistake for a therapist to think he has the "real" family members in front of him, and that he is dealing with a limited number of individuals that respond to each other's actual behavior. Okay, the family members are indeed physically present, but that means nothing whatsoever, because they tend to respond not to what is actually happening, but to *what they believe, fantasize and imagine* to be there. They react to their *mental images of each other*, and these reactions may have