A key notion is the principle of feedback – how information could loop back into a system in order to enable control in the form of adjustments to be made. A system was seen as able to maintain its stability through a process of self-regulation by using information about past performance, and specifically how this deviated from the desired or optimal setting to make corrections. This not only offered some important practical applications but was also an important philosophical leap in explanations of causation. Rather than seeing events in linear sequences, cybernetics proposed that causation was a continuous circular process taking place over time. This offered a dynamic rather than static model of the world.

Abraham Moles (1986) ‘the generalised science of organisms, irrespective of their physical nature.

Systems can be applied to anything, cybernetics is applying it to machines.

Homeostasis

The second path or strand of development (Cybernetics is the first) is the application of systems theory concepts to biological systems. Walter Cannon (1932) had earlier suggested the concept of dynamic equilibrium to explain how the body is capable of maintaining steady states despite external changes.

Claude Bernard first defined the term homeostasis in 1865 calling it the ‘constancy of the internal milieu.’

It is the ability of systems to regulate and maintain their own internal environments.

Different elements can be introduced to systems but they will always respond by trying to maintain and regulate themselves – Maturana (1972) called this process autopoiesis (meaning ‘self-creation’).

Jackson (1957) proposed that a symptom in one or more of the family members develops and functions as a response to the actions of the others in the family, and in some way becomes part of the patterning of the system. Attempts to change the symptom or other parts of the system were seen to encounter ‘resistance’ since the system operated as an integrated whole and strove to maintain homeostasis.

Jackson (1965) suggested that a family be likened to central heating system.

Operated on the basis of a set of rules – deviations from these rules may be resisted.

Early Family Therapy

1950-1965 in the USA

Aetiology: schizophrenia is caused by dysfunctional relationships in the family (Bateson’s Double Bind Theory: if a person is in a lose-lose situation they could develop schizophrenia).

The therapeutic aim was that by working on the stuck family system schizophrenia can be resolved.

Early family therapy was the beginning of psychiatric deinstitutionalisation. And also the idea of mental illness having relational and environmental aetiology led to optimism in exploring new interventions – the idea of environmental therapies.

Early family therapy included strategic and structural family therapy.

The focus was on exploring interpersonal processes within the family rather than investigating internal drives (psychoanalysis).