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# The Matrix as a Bridge to Systems Thinking

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*Introducing the concept of systems to beginning family counseling students who have been traditionally trained in a mental health model can be an arduous task. This article offers an instructional method of using popular films to help students to widen their range of personal constructs to include that of cybernetics. The Matrix offers the opportunity to discuss multiple realities and the concepts of recursion, equifinality, morphostasis, morphogenesis, and open and closed systems with relation to selected scenes from the movie. Questions for discussion and other potential systems-oriented popular films are offered.*

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Many counselor preparation programs offer, at a minimum, an introductory course in family counseling (Hollis, 2000). Students traditionally trained in community counseling and mental health models often have difficulty incorporating systems approaches into their epistemologies (Liddle & Saba, 1982). For these individuals, the medical model as an epistemology or way of knowing is deeply ingrained. These students typically see clients through the mental health lens (Amatea & Sherrard, 1995). Often considered Lockean, the mental health lens provides for direct cause and effect relationships, whereas family systems and cybernetics espouse reciprocal causality (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). This lack of beginning, end, and point of intervention can be confusing to the counselor in training. Thus, the purpose of this article is to introduce a pragmatic tool for teaching the concepts of cybernetics.

As part of a course in family counseling, a film approach was used to address the systems perspective, to help widen the students' range of constructs and to provide several lenses to choose from when working with clients. The use of film is becoming a more popular method of instruction in counselor preparation programs (Higgins & Dermer, 2001; Pittman, 1999). The primary film used in this approach was *The Matrix*, a postapocalyptic, sci-fi film starring Keanu Reeves and Laurence Fishbourne (Silverman, Wachowski, & Wachowski, 1999).

## FILM PLOT

The main premise of *The Matrix* revolves around the idea that human beings are unknowing slaves to computers. After the birth of artificial intelligence, the machines became "aware" and waged war on the humans, eventually enslaving them and growing them as sources of energy for the survival of the machines. Human beings are enslaved through the use of a computer matrix designed to make people believe that they are part of today's society and still in control. A group of individuals have been freed from the matrix and are rebelling against the machines. Laurence Fishbourne (Morpheus) leads one faction of the rebels whose personal mission is to find the prophesized savior of the human race.

Enter Reeves (Neo), a human enslaved by the machines who believes his computerized life is real. In *The Matrix*, Neo is a computer programmer by day and an outlaw hacker by night. He spent a large portion of his life in search of Morpheus and understanding something called the matrix. Morpheus believes Neo is the savior and attempts to free his mind from computer slavery.

## CONNECTION TO SYSTEMS THINKING

Although on the surface *The Matrix* may seem to be a sci-fi, action film, it has direct ties to systems thinking and postmodernism and serves as an effective tool for demonstrating these concepts to students having difficulty incorporating cybernetic thinking into their current ways of knowing. For the purposes of this article, the terms *systems* and *cybernetics* are used interchangeably. Although the format of this article does not allow for extended discussion on the basics of systems thought, Becvar and Becvar (2000) described the systemic perspective as having these essential components: It (a) asks "why," (b) has reciprocal causality, (c) is holistic, (d) is dialectical, (e) is subjective/perceptual, (f) has freedom of choice and is proactive, (g) looks for patterns, (h) maintains a

here and now focus, (i) is relational, (j) is contextual, and (k) is relativistic.

Providing a method by which students can see these concepts in action can help the possibility of expanding belief systems to incorporate these new ideas. In essence, we were conducting an exercise in systems thinking by simply asking students to view the film through a different lens (Higgins & Dermer, 2001). However, to delineate the usefulness of this film as a teaching tool, the remainder of this article will focus on plot connections to cybernetic concepts, points of discussion, and other useful resources for addressing systems thinking in the classroom.

In the film, Morpheus eventually contacts Neo in an effort to free Neo's mind from the machines. However, Neo cannot simply be told that he is a slave to machines and that his reality is only a computer matrix; this would be too far outside of his range of constructs and would result in rejection of the notions being presented. Like Neo, we all possess a limited range of constructs (Neimeyer, 1993). Although the concept of psychological constructs is similar to the notions of Adler's "lifestyle" and Piaget's "schema," the term *constructs* is directly related to a postmodern approach to therapy developed in the 1950s by Kelly (1955). According to Warren (1990), "the fundamental postulate of personal construct theory is this: A person's processes are psychologically channeled by the ways in which he or she anticipates events" (p. 453). For students in a beginning family counseling course, the process of anticipating events does not typically emanate from a cybernetic perspective. To widen those constructs and to incorporate new ways of knowing, individuals must develop methods of expression for these new concepts.

At the beginning of a course in family counseling, words such as *epistemology*, *entropy*, *morphostasis*, and *morphogenesis* are foreign to traditionally trained students (Becvar & Becvar, 2000; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). These students have difficulty accepting the systems process as a viable option to the medical model. It is important to allow students to have an appropriate time frame for incorporating these new ideas and expanding their belief systems to not only know of them but to use them in practice. One way to encourage this expansion of ideas is to use the film as a basis for discussion, with the application of course terminology as part of that process. By immersing in systems language through a discussion of the film, students move more toward the possibility of adopting those terms as part of their own language systems. The immersion requires that the instructor remain consistent in the use of systems terminology and that the same focus is required of the students.

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## EXPANDING CONSTRUCTS

In the film, Morpheus and his crew lead Neo through a series of interactions until a point comes where Morpheus asks Neo to choose if he is willing to know more. In a sense, Morpheus asks Neo to open the possibility of widening his personal constructs. Neo is offered two pills: a red one that will provide him with answers about the postapocalyptic reality and a blue pill that will make him forget any of the interactions with Morpheus and his crew. In essence, the action of the individual, in the creation of his own future, is emphasized. Once Neo takes the red pill, he awakens in the "real" world.

At some point, we ask our students to choose between the red pill and the blue pill. If they are to choose the red pill, then they will accompany us on a journey through the course, discovering new things about themselves and their impact on the therapeutic process. If they choose the blue pill, they will maintain their sole adherence to the medical model and reject the notions that are presented to them about systems thinking. This is not to say that by accepting the red pill that students must reject all that they have learned to this point in their training but rather to have them agree to learn more. Certainly, aspects of training in the medical model such as effective and accurate use of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) may prove to be essential in working with third-party payers. However, by choosing the red pill, students accept the notion that there are different ways of knowing and simply incorporate more information into their current knowledge bases.

We cannot simply lecture about the process of systems thinking. To effectively create a reality where students' personal ways of knowing are open to expansion, the red pill must be swallowed. All other efforts are in vain. As a result, a classroom environment where students are enmeshed in the process of systems thinking is essential. The use of *The Matrix* as a guideline for discussion and point of elaboration for course concepts provides a vehicle for such a goal.

Giving students the option of swallowing the red pill is parallel to providing clients with opportunities to restore their lives. Restorying is an essential aspect of narrative therapy, another postmodern approach (Monk, Winslade, Crocket, & Epston, 1997; Strand, 1997). According to Nichols and Schwartz (1998),

the central assumption of the narrative approach is that personal experience is fundamentally ambiguous . . . understanding human experience, including one's own, is never simply a process of seeing it or analyzing it. The elements of human experience are understood only through a process that

organizes those elements, puts them together, assigns them meaning, and prioritizes them. (p. 397)

Thus, a central task is to help students develop a method to restory their experiences of the counseling process by providing them with different ways of organizing, prioritizing, and assigning meaning to their experiences in a family counseling course.

### MULTIPLE REALITIES

It is important to recognize that choosing the red pill is difficult in that it asks the students to reexamine their ways of knowing and to expand their belief systems to allow for information that may be contrary to their current epistemologies. Finding a new lens with which to view life's processes is indeed a difficult task (Amatea & Sherrard, 1995). The film provides a clear example of the potential difficulty in using new lenses. At one point in the film, Cypher, one of Morpheus's crew members, becomes involved in a scheme to overthrow Morpheus. He engages in an alliance with the machines in an effort to be placed back inside the matrix. To him, the fantasy world is better than the reality of postapocalyptic society. He cannot manage the reality of his world and seeks to escape.

For students trained in the mental health model, the concepts of multiple realities, restorying, and personal constructs provide a bridge to explain serious mental health conditions from a systems perspective. For example, individuals who are diagnosed with disorders such as schizophrenia can be seen to have multiple realities. Some of those realities are more painful than others. As these individuals enter the "fantasy" world more often, the pathway to the real world becomes more and more obscured. In essence, they take the blue pill. The high incidence of medical noncompliance in this population may be related to this phenomenon. In reality, these individuals are refusing the red pill.

In an effective example of the acceptance of multiple realities, Milton Erickson once had an interaction with an individual who was hospitalized for having a "Christ" delusion. Instead of attempting to convince this particular individual that he was not Christ and that he was having a break with reality, Erickson said to him, "So, they tell me you are a carpenter." This acceptance of the individual's reality allowed for less defensive interactions and more effective treatment.

We all create our own realities, and the boundaries of those realities are defined by our ability to describe them (Neimeyer, 1993). In *The Matrix*, Morpheus believes Neo is the savior of the human race and puts Neo through a series of training tests. In the first test, the jump program, Morpheus explains that they are inside a computer matrix, there are few rules to the environment, and those rules can be bent. They find themselves on the roof of a skyscraper. Morpheus runs and jumps an inhuman distance from one skyscraper to

another, demonstrating the ability to bend the rules of the matrix. When Neo attempts the same, he falls to the ground. When he is taken back to reality, he is in pain and bleeding. Although the matrix is not real, the brain believes it to be real, thus causing injury to the body. Neo's pain and blood exemplify the postmodern concept that reality lies within each of us. Reality is a matter of perception, and it is impossible to share the same perception with someone else. We are each a universe of reality circling and interacting with realities around our own. Sometimes those realities clash, and other times they are assimilated. It depends on the boundaries we maintain.

According to Bertrando (2000), there is a certain set of "prescriptions" that counselors can follow in adopting a postmodern approach. One of those prescriptions includes the idea that

reality must be considered as a social construction, i.e. realities are but the conversations we have about them, and therefore all views are a consequence of language: every theory and every system of ideas is merely a narrative. Thus the unlimited production of new meaning (of new stories), while keeping open the conversation, becomes the therapist's only task. (p. 86)

If students can see Morpheus as the counselor and Neo as the client, then the concept of guidance rather than direction can be emphasized. Knowing that Neo must have his own experiences, Morpheus simply acts as a guide and allows Neo to process the information received in the jump program. This action is an example of Bertrando's (2000) statement that counselors must recognize their levels of expert power. It is important for students of family therapy to learn from the film that collaboration is the goal of a postmodern approach rather than coerced adherence to a preset path (Bertrando, 2000).

Instructors of family therapy should note that the concept of collaboration is a key factor not only in the practice of family therapy but also in the learning of theory. The notion of collaboration allows for discussion of ideas and disagreements. Students should be taught to critically apply the tenets of family therapy, not to blindly accept what they are taught.

In another scene from the movie, Morpheus and Neo are in a martial arts training scenario within the matrix. After minutes of sparring, Neo is out of breath, kneeling on the floor. Morpheus approaches him and says, "Do you think that is air you are breathing?" In other words, because Neo was not able to escape his way of knowing from his prior existence, he used the same rules for life in this existence, although those rules did not apply. Rather than explain all of this to Neo, Morpheus simply made a statement that punctuated the system of beliefs that Neo relied on.

Interventions from a cybernetic perspective can take place at any juncture and have effects on the entire system. From a systems perspective, cause and effect are not recognizable.

Life is a recursive process in which things and people only exist in relation to each other (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). Neo's limitations result from all of his prior experiences in relation to the current one with Morpheus. It is not necessary to explore all of those past experiences to make changes in present functioning. Morpheus simply intervenes in the present by introducing new information. The results of this presentation affect Neo on multiple levels.

From that point on throughout the movie, Neo progressed toward the belief that he was the savior or the "one" (an anagram for Neo). If students refuse to accept the possibility of other realities and use the same rules, then they will miss opportunities to help families by nature of their own limitations. As instructors, it is our duty to punctuate the classroom system in an effort to affect outcomes in the therapeutic environment. If we miss these opportunities, then we help perpetuate the matrix created by traditional training approaches.

### STUDENT REACTIONS

In an effort to punctuate the classroom system and the lives of the counseling students in that system, *The Matrix* was used as a tool for teaching systems theory over several semesters. Students were given an introduction to systems concepts through lecture and assigned reading materials. After two class sessions, students were asked to view *The Matrix* as an out-of-class assignment. Students were asked to view the film with an open mind and to attempt to understand the film using some of the concepts discussed in class and in the reading materials.

During the third class meeting, students were shown several excerpts of the film that depicted systems concepts, including Neo's choice between the red and blue pill. Immediately following the excerpts, students were individually offered the choice of a red or blue pill (jellybean). A classroom discussion followed, and students were asked to write a reaction paper about the use of *The Matrix* as a tool for introducing systems concepts and their choice of the blue or red pill.

Student reactions to the use of *The Matrix* as an instructional tool were overwhelmingly positive. In general, students viewed the use of popular film as an exciting adjunct to textbooks and lectures. Although some students were not fans of science fiction or action films, they were able to comprehend the connection between the film and systems thinking. One student commented that her preference would have been to view a drama or other non-science fiction type of film. However, she also recognized that her preference to stay with a venue that was comfortable was, in a sense, taking the blue pill. Because she recognized this as a blue pill action, she was able to move forward and broaden her epistemology.

Over the course of three semesters, only five people chose the blue pill as part of the in-class experience. Although each of these students' reactions was unique, the common themes

among them were "fear of the unknown" and "a hesitance about stepping outside of the box." One student in particular commented that she often did not have the confidence to begin exploring the unknown alone. Although she did not choose the red pill in class, she, like the other students who chose the blue pill, indicated a desire to explore the road not taken with some help and guidance.

Students who took the red pill generally reacted with excitement and curiosity to both the film and the in-class exercise. One example of this occurred when students spontaneously adopted the red pill as a theme for a different in-class exercise. Students were asked to break into dyads and to tell their stories to their partners. The purpose of this exercise was to recognize how we shape the perceptions that others have by the stories we tell. Several students spontaneously decided to talk about times in their lives when they had taken the red pill. Thus, the stories told in this particular instance were far more personal than would have been expected.

Several students took the initiative to watch the film several more times in an effort to gain even more understanding of *The Matrix* from a systems perspective. One student stated that although she had seen the film prior to class and had some understanding of systems concepts, she did not initially recognize the systemic nature of the film. Because of this experience, she found herself viewing other films and television programs from multiple perspectives.

### EXAMPLES OF SYSTEMS CONCEPTS THROUGHOUT THE FILM

Films such as *The Matrix* provide an excellent opportunity to reach students in an effective, yet entertaining, manner. However, it is essential that the consumers of this method of instruction be presented with a clear conceptual framework for understanding the media. *The Matrix* contains clear examples of such systems concepts as recursion, equifinality, feedback, morphostasis, and morphogenesis.

According to Becvar and Becvar (2000), recursion is a process by which meaning is derived from the relation between individuals and elements as each defines each other. With the concept of recursion in mind, Becvar and Becvar claimed that "similarly, while dominance may look more powerful than submission, one cannot dominate another unless that other agrees to submit; one cannot be submissive without the cooperation, conscious or not, of another who dominates" (p. 65). The concept of recursion is clearly presented in *The Matrix*. Until Neo accepts himself as the one, he is vulnerable to the agents. The oracle informs Neo that no one can tell him that he is the one; it is something that he must know. Once he accepts the notion, the agents can no longer affect him.

The oracle represents the notion of equifinality. According to Nichols and Schwartz (1998), equifinality "means that no matter where system change begins, the final result is the

same" (p. 90). In other words, no matter where the characters in the film start in their cycles of interaction, the end will be the same. The oracle predicted that Morpheus would find the one and that Trinity (another rebel) would fall in love with the one. This cannot change regardless of interactions. In contrast, equipotentiality provides that a different end state may be arrived at from the same initial conditions (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). In other words, individuals can choose or create their destinies.

The concept of feedback (both positive and negative) is a basic part of this film, and examples are provided throughout. From a family systems perspective, we know that both change and stability are necessary for healthy system functioning (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). In the matrix, all of the training programs that Neo uses provide positive feedback. They are radical in that they promote a change in the rules. However, in the jump training program described earlier, Neo fails to jump the same distance as Morpheus and falls to the ground; information from the cyber world system keeps him from accepting the changes in rules inherent in the matrix. As a result, the status quo is promoted, and Neo falls to the ground.

In an attempt to control the lives of humans, the machines develop the matrix. In a sense, the machines use the concept of morphostasis as a control mechanism. Morphostasis is defined as a "system's tendency toward stability, a state of dynamic equilibrium" (Becvar & Becvar, 2000, p. 68). The machines design the matrix as a mechanism to promote stability in the minds of humans. However, overemphasis on stability threatens the system's well-being. The original matrix failed for this reason. From this example, students can recognize the need for balance in the client's world.

When Morpheus is training Neo, he touches on the concept of morphogenesis, which "refers to the system-enhancing behavior that allows for growth, creativity, innovation, and change, all of which are characteristics of functional systems" (Becvar & Becvar, 2000, p. 68). He tells Neo that there are rules and boundaries to the matrix but that those rules can be broken. The matrix has an ability to change in the context of stability. The notion that Neo can incorporate knowledge from the computer training programs in a relatively short time indicates that the matrix allows for growth and change.

In a sense, the matrix is a closed system. It attempts to screen out new information and to maintain the status quo, as do some family systems (Becvar & Becvar, 2000; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). When a closed family system is threatened, it shuts down. For instance, when the rebel group journeys to see the oracle, their exit from the matrix is blocked. They are seen as a threat, and the system closes down in an effort to deal with the threat. However, when a system is at either extreme of openness or closedness, then the system is headed toward maximum disorder and disintegration (entropy) (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). Once Neo becomes the one and the potential extreme openness of the system is at hand, system failure occurs.

## SUMMARY

Cybernetic concepts can be quite foreign to students who have been trained in traditional mental health models. The limits of students' personal constructs must be expanded to allow this new information to be processed. The use of a film such as *The Matrix* provides students with an opportunity to see these foreign concepts in action, thus helping to restore their experiences of the therapeutic process.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are some examples of multiple realities in this film? What examples of multiple realities might exist in families? What are two examples of multiple realities in your own life?
2. Explain the similarities and differences between the plot and narrative therapy. How can you use this film as a tool in family counseling?
3. Discuss examples of second-order cybernetics. How can you use these examples to be more effective in your work with families?
4. Explain, from a systems perspective, Neo's process of becoming the one. How does this relate to a family's process in counseling? How does this apply to your process of becoming a counselor?
5. Which roles represent modernism, and which ones represent postmodernism? Give examples of modernist and postmodernist approaches to family counseling.
6. Why did the original matrix fail? Is this the reason why some marriages fail?
7. Why did Morpheus have the rule of not "freeing minds" after a certain age? How does this apply to family therapy? Can it be too late for a family to change? What about your family of origin?
8. What is the role of the oracle from a systems perspective? Describe the similarities and differences between the role of the oracle and your role as a family counselor.
9. Explain the young boy's statement to Neo: "Don't attempt to bend the spoon, that is impossible. Instead, realize that the spoon does not exist and that it is you who bends." How can this notion be applied to families? Describe two examples of times when you attempted to "bend the spoon."
10. Explain the use of humans for a power source, by the machines, through a cybernetics lens. How can you use that analogy in your work with families?

## OTHER POTENTIAL FILMS FOR SYSTEMS THINKING

*The Story of Us* (Zweibel, Nelson, & Reiner, 1999): This film, directed by Rob Reiner, examines the triumphs and struggles of a family over 15 years. Universal Pictures appropriately used the phrase "Can a marriage survive 15 years of marriage?" as a promotion for this film. Systems concepts such as equifinality, equipotentiality, morphogenesis, second-order cybernetics, and recursion are evident throughout the film.

*Dead Poet's Society* (Haft, Jungerwitt, Thomas, & Weir, 1989): Tennyson said, "Come, my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world." This line reflects well the theme of expanding

- your reality and range of constructs in *Dead Poet's Society*. This film addresses many psychological concepts but contains especially appropriate examples of transgenerational rules and values, multiple realities, and equipotentiality.
- Stand and Deliver* (Musca & Menendez, 1988): Edward James Olmos portrays real-life teacher Jamie Escalante, who taught a group of Hispanic students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to believe in themselves and their futures. This film clearly identifies the differences between equipotentiality and equipotentiality.
- Dangerous Minds* (Simpson, Bruckheimer, & Smith, 1995): Yet another film based on a true story about a teacher who expands the horizons of inner-city youth, *Dangerous Minds* serves as an appropriate tool for delineating aspects of family counseling (e.g., multigenerational transmission of rules and values, expansion of personal constructs, equipotentiality, equipotentiality, and multiple realities).
- Mother* (Rudin, Nanas, & Brooks, 1996): You are who you are because of your parents. If you stay that way, it is your own choice. Albert Brooks set out to examine his relationship with his mother and the effects it had on his interactions with women throughout his life in this quirky comedy about transgenerational patterns, rules, and values.
- Stepmom* (Finerman, Radcliffe, Barnathan, & Columbus, 1998): All of the modern issues related to blended families are highlighted in this film starring Julia Roberts, Susan Sarandon, and Ed Harris. The children in this film try to maintain a closed system (morphostasis) when Luke (Ed Harris) remarries. Jackie (Susan Sarandon), Luke's ex-wife, battles cancer throughout the film, and the family is forced to face her eventual death.
- Family Man* (Abraham, Rosenman, Ludwig, Riche, & Ratner, 2000): In a modern-day version of *It's a Wonderful Life*, Nicolas Cage plays the role of Jack Campbell, a workaholic bachelor who is preoccupied with stature and wealth. Jack gets the opportunity to experience the possibility of multiple realities when he wakes up married with children. A clear example of systems theory, this film will enable students to identify important concepts relevant to family counseling.
- Man of La Mancha* (Hiller, 1972): An excellent resource for delineating narrative concepts, *Man of La Mancha* begins in a dungeon during the Spanish Inquisition with Miguel de Cervantes (Peter O'Toole) writing his infamous story about Don Quixote de la Mancha. Quixote travels the Spanish countryside with his loyal servant Sancho Panza (James Coco).
- Shirley Valentine* (Gilbert, 1989): Another excellent resource for explaining narrative concepts, *Shirley Valentine* is a film that relates the story of a middle-aged Liverpool housewife who has changed from an incorrigible, antiestablishment rebel to a subservient wife. Shirley's (Pauline Collins) life enters a new phase when her best friend Jane (Alison Steadman) wins an all-expenses-paid vacation to Greece, and Shirley is given the opportunity to travel without her husband.
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