

Chapter 3: Causality in Systems Theory in Action by Shelly Smith-Acuña

In Chapter 3: Causality, Shelly Smith-Acuña explores how systems theory frames the understanding of cause-and-effect relationships within the context of human behavior, relationships, and therapy. The chapter builds on the foundational concepts introduced in Chapter 2 (Context) and sets the stage for later topics like communication, change, and structure.

Core focus of the chapter

Smith-Acuña explains that in systems thinking, causality is not viewed as a simple linear chain of events, but as a **network of interrelated influences**. This means that problems or behaviors are embedded in multiple systems and subsystems, and their causes are often **multifactorial and reciprocal**. For example, a client's anxiety may be influenced by personal history, family dynamics, cultural expectations, and current relational stressors, all of which feed into and are fed by each other (Perlego+I).

Key systems theory principles covered

- **Circular causality:** In systems, causes and effects can loop back on each other, creating feedback cycles that sustain or intensify patterns of behavior.
- **Contextual causality:** Causes are embedded in the broader context of the system, including social, cultural, and historical factors.
- **Interdependence:** No single factor operates in isolation; each part of a system influences and is influenced by others.
- **Dynamic causality:** Causality is not static; it changes over time as systems evolve and adapt.

Clinical applications

The chapter uses **realistic case examples** to show how therapists can apply these causality concepts in practice. For instance, Smith-Acuña illustrates how identifying the multiple, interwoven causes of a presenting problem helps therapists avoid oversimplifying diagnoses and instead work with the **whole system**. This approach supports more effective interventions that address root causes rather than just symptoms (Perlego+I).

Why it matters in therapy

Understanding causality in a systems framework allows therapists to: