

(2011)

In the 2011 edition of *Systems Theory in Action*, Shelly Smith-Acuña's Chapter 5: History and Development provides a concise but comprehensive overview of how systems theory evolved from early conceptualizations to its current role in psychotherapy.

Early roots and conceptual origins

The chapter traces systems theory's intellectual lineage to early 20th-century ideas in biology, physics, and sociology, where scholars began to see living organisms and social entities as interdependent wholes rather than collections of isolated parts. It highlights the influence of general systems theory—pioneered by thinkers such as Ludwig von Bertalanffy—and its emphasis on the relationship between parts and the whole, feedback loops, and boundary definitions [Perlego+1](#).

Adoption in psychology and therapy

Smith-Acuña explains how systems thinking migrated into psychology in the mid-20th century, influenced by family systems pioneers like Murray Bowen and the work of Gregory Bateson on communication patterns. The chapter notes that early applications focused on understanding family interactions, feedback, and circular causality, moving away from purely linear cause-effect models [Perlego+1](#).

Development of systemic perspectives in clinical practice

The text outlines how systems theory became embedded in individual, couple, and family therapy through the integration of structural, strategic, and narrative approaches. It describes the shift from viewing problems as located within the individual to understanding them as embedded in relational and contextual systems. This evolution included the recognition of multiple levels of analysis—micro, meso, and macro systems—and the importance of boundaries, roles, and hierarchies in therapeutic work [Perlego+1](#).

Contemporary relevance and integration

Smith-Acuña concludes by situating systems theory in the present day: as a unifying framework that bridges diverse therapeutic modalities, it offers a "big picture" perspective for understanding client problems within their broader contexts. The chapter emphasizes that while the field has matured, its core principles—interdependence, context, and systemic thinking—remain central to effective practice [Perlego+1](#).