

A review of  
*Counseling Elders & Their Families*  
*Practical Techniques for Applied Gerontology*

by John Herr and John H. Weakland, (1979). New York, NY: Springer.

Review by

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Over the span of the 39 years that have passed since this book was originally published, a lot has changed in society; however, impressively the techniques contained within have aged timelessly and remain beneficial and appropriate in working with elders of current generations and their families. The systemic, interaction focused approach to understanding and working with individuals, couples, families and people groups of all types, which was pioneered by authors such as John Herr and John H. Weakland, has not only maintained its relevance but has grown to be even more widely utilized and accepted by practitioners across helping fields. Evidence continues to support the efficacy of the systemic techniques outlined in this book. In this book, the authors do a stunning job of recognizing the vast array of both the issues presented in working with the specific population of elders and the vast array of the types of people and

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<sup>1</sup> (In Press). In *Contemporary Southern Psychology*, (2019).

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professions who work with them. Additionally, they present a collection of interventions and examples that can be molded to the needs of this vast array. The authors also manage to make this information useful in the context of the barriers and limitations that elders, families, and helpers face. The problem is recognized in the context of its system and the authors do a superb job of outlining the importance of the perspective of each member in the system, including the perspective of those family members and others affected by the problem who never grace the helper's room but can still be helped through positive changes in the system. All of this is accomplished within a 3-section layout in which the authors outline what a counselor's role is, provide information about systems theory as a framework for fulfilling that role, and provide thorough case examples to illustrate the use of systems theory with the elderly and their family systems.

In addition, the authors provide practical advice for helpers to continually improve their services by giving clear advice for self-critical reflection throughout the process of counseling elders. Helpers are provided with easy-to-understand explanations of why they should and should not do specific things and how to recognize when they are succeeding or in need of improvement. Helpers are shown how to maintain a helping perspective that keeps them from getting too close to the system's problems; they are also reminded of the power they wield to influence a family system and given practical advice for using this power responsibly and avoiding harmfully manipulating families. It is recognized that families do not always need to know why change happens or why specific strategies work in order for change to occur, but an ethical helper must keep the goals, interests, and well-being of the family system as the focus of the helping process. Most critically, this practical advice is not limited to any one part of a helping situation but is provided for every step from initiating a helping relationship to

terminating successfully and recognizing that an outside helper is no longer needed or appropriate.

Perhaps the most invaluable tools provided to helpers by the authors are those tools related to communication. It is one thing to be a helper who provides practical information about how and why to do certain things, but it is quite another to be a helper who is able to effectively communicate the concepts that need to be communicated with the people being helped. In fact, the authors do not limit their advice to helping professionals develop verbal communication skills as they also provide helpers with useful clues to decipher and use nonverbal communication to effect change in the lives of the elderly and their family systems.

In the second part of the book, the authors back up the practical applications and information they outline in parts one and three by providing a summary of the history of systems theory that sufficiently introduces those with no foundational knowledge of the theory to systemic thinking so that they can understand and utilize the techniques presented in the book, while also balancing the length and detail of this introductory summary so as not to bore those who are familiar with systems theory. This summary effectively addresses the needs of those readers with a desire to learn more about systems theory by providing outside resources and encouraging further study while also establishing the authority of the systems perspective to those for whom further study is not relevant, helpful, or necessary. The technical language utilized by the authors throughout the book also achieves a balance of being understandable to those with no prior training in systems counseling while not demeaning the intelligence of those highly familiar with the concepts being explored.

Each chapter is formatted in an easy-to-follow style. In particular, the authors did an exceptional job of laying out the chapters of part three, which focus on case examples. In

these chapters, readers are provided with relevant information about a topic being explored in a case example so that once they begin reading the case example they are fully equipped to follow the progression of the case and the technical information included within it. This prevents a need to return to explaining technical information about an overall problem and instead allows for a more in-depth analysis of the actions of the helpers in the case examples.

If there is any criticism of this book, it is that this book leaves one wanting a longer, more detailed conclusion with a brilliant and succinct summary of the information presented in its three parts. Considering the book's wise use of space to provide summaries and explanations within each section of each chapter as necessary and its overall length of nearly 300 pages that may leave some readers to forget the important information in the beginning sections of the book by the time they reach the end, it is surprising that overall summary was not deemed more necessary at the end of the book. However, despite perceiving a lack in the book's overall summary, the end goals of the authors are clear, as they intend to leave readers empowered to choose how best to use the presented information to meet their own individual needs, if at all.