

UDC 616.89-008.441.44:159.923.2:316.356.2+616.89-008.441.44:159.947.5

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF FAMILY PSYCHOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF SYSTEMIC THEORIES

Anna Kamallaya Khefors
Family psychologist
Moscow, Russia

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF FAMILY PSYCHOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF SYSTEMIC THEORIES

Anna Khefors
Family psychologist
Moscow, Russia

DOI: 10.31618/ESU.2413-9335.2024.5.125.2178

ABSTRACT

The article examines the substantive aspects of the systemic approach in family psychology. Contemporary families face increasingly complex relationships: the transformation of traditional roles, continual changes in social norms, and intergenerational conflicts create new forms of tension that classical approaches do not always address successfully. In these circumstances, systemic thinking becomes particularly relevant because it considers not the individual in isolation but the whole family as a unified entity in which each member influences the others. The aim of this article is to analyze the key characteristics of systemic thinking and identify the difficulties that arise when psychologists apply the corresponding approaches in practice. The focus is on the differences between structural, strategic, and narrative models, as well as attempts to combine them with cognitive-behavioral methods. The diversity of views and concepts has produced clear contradictions in the literature: there is no agreement on the boundaries of systemic thinking or a shared position on how to adapt the methods to particular families. The article examines a typology of systemic models and emphasizes that psychologists' effectiveness depends less on technique than on their ability to see the family as a living, changing organism. The material will be useful to family psychologists and educators involved in professional training. It provides a deeper understanding of how systemic methods work, what practitioners should draw on, and where gaps remain in theory and research.

ABSTRACT

The article explores the substantive dimensions of the systemic approach within family psychology. Contemporary families are increasingly confronted with complex relational dynamics—transformations of traditional roles, continuous shifts in social norms, and intergenerational conflicts all contribute to emerging forms of tension that classical psychological approaches often fail to address effectively. In this context, systemic thinking gains particular relevance, as it shifts the focus from the individual to the family as a cohesive unit, in which each member influences and is influenced by others. The objective of the article is to analyze the key characteristics of systemicity and to identify the challenges that arise in the practical implementation of systemic approaches by psychologists. Special attention is devoted to the distinctions among structural, strategic, and narrative models, as well as to recent efforts to integrate them with cognitive-behavioral methods. The literature reveals marked contradictions stemming from the diversity of perspectives and conceptual frameworks: there is no consensus on the boundaries of systemicity, nor a unified stance on how to adapt these methods to the unique dynamics of individual families. The article offers a typology of systemic models and emphasizes that a psychologist's effectiveness depends less on specific techniques than on their capacity to perceive the family as a living, evolving system. The materials presented are intended for family psychologists and educators involved in the training of professionals. They provide a deeper understanding of how systemic methods operate, highlight practical points of orientation, and delineate the theoretical and empirical gaps that remain.

Keywords: interaction, communication, mediation, model, family psychology, symptom, systemic approach

Keywords: interaction, communication, mediation, model, family psychology, symptom, systemic approach

Introduction

Despite significant progress in the development of methods of psychological support for families, the problem of integrating multiple approaches remains unresolved.

Numerous practices that focus primarily on the individual do not fully address the complex nature of intrafamilial

interactions. Disregarding systemic interconnections often leads to the recurrence of symptoms and limits the effectiveness of the psychologist's efforts.

According to a study conducted by the NAFI Analytical Center in February 2025, family psychology services are becoming more popular in Russia. Increasingly, those seeking help include not

only women but also men who recognize the importance of working on their relationships [11].

In light of the above, systemic thinking takes on particular significance in this field because it offers a holistic view of the family as a dynamic structure whose members continually influence one another. It is therefore important to examine analytically the conceptual foundations of systemic approaches in this field, identify their methodological underpinnings and practical implications, and determine the internal contradictions that arise in their application.

Materials and Methods

The contemporary scientific literature on this topic displays methodological heterogeneity and a diversity of emphases, allowing several substantive groups of studies to be identified. The publications can provisionally be grouped into four areas:

- integrative and adjunctive techniques within the systemic approach;
- the application of systemic thinking to specific categories;
- theoretical and model-based studies;
- the integration of systemic and cognitive-behavioral paradigms.

For example, S. Ataeva and colleagues [1] focus on the mechanisms that mediate the transformation of communication in family psychology. T. V. Kazak and coauthors [2] analyze work with families in which psychosomatic symptoms arise as a result of chronic structural disturbances in family hierarchy and communication. Particular importance is assigned to methodology. M. V. Konnova and colleagues [3], in turn, focus on taking systemic interconnections into account when working with families. Their publication also describes various approaches within this field.

Addressing the historical context and origins of systemic thinking, A. P. Lacheva [5] provides a comparative overview of key models, including the strategic, structural, narrative, and multigenerational paradigms. Methodological differences are highlighted, and the choice of approach is said to depend on the family's type and stage of development. N. V. Nozikova [6] addresses a similar task, focusing on the psychosemantics of family goal orientation. F. M. Osipov [7] examines the concept of family structure through

the lens of the systemic organization of role expectations and distortions in communication.

A. A. Koshmanova [4] analyzes the integration of systemic and cognitive-behavioral paradigms, emphasizing their compatibility in addressing cognitive distortions that emerge in family dynamics. L. N. Uvarova and R. R. Yagafarova [8] raise the question of the distinctive features of the current stage in the development of the psychology of family relationships.

English-language sources should also be highlighted, in which systemic thinking is presented in the context of historical development and professional reflection. In his review of theories, D. R. Chabot [9] considers systemic schools to be the outcome of an intellectual shift from individualizing interpretations to an understanding of the symptom as an element of family interaction. The publication by V. L. Presley and G. Jones [10] addresses an important aspect: how psychologists' personal and professional reflection transforms their approach to their work.

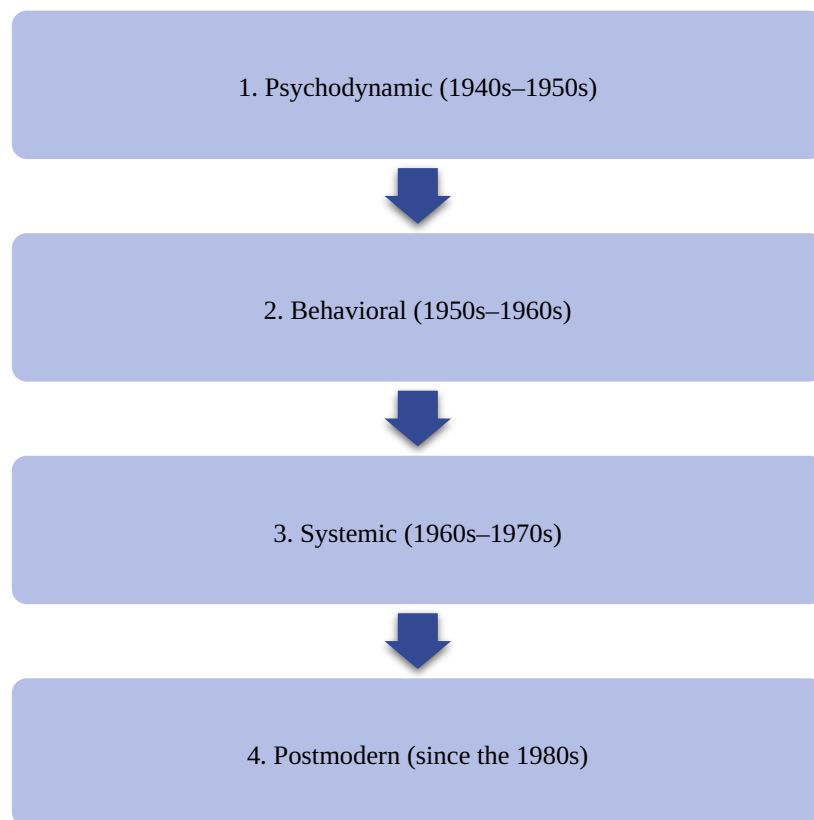
Finally, current statistics on the popularity of family psychology services, reported in online sources, are also valuable [11].

Despite the methodological diversity, certain contradictions are clearly apparent in this body of publications. Above all, the boundaries of integration between cognitive-behavioral and systemic techniques remain unresolved, particularly when working with high-conflict families. Cultural variation in perceptions of family norms within the systemic framework has received little attention. Work with covert violence within the family system is also insufficiently developed.

The following methods were used to explore the topic in this article: content analysis of scientific publications, comparison of models, conceptual reconstruction, critical review methodology, systematization, and generalization.

Results and Discussion

First, a retrospective analysis is appropriate in order to trace the origins of systemic thinking. The history of approaches in family psychology is a process of evolution in theoretical and practical models of support for families. It reflects a paradigm shift from individually oriented and psychodynamic interpretations of intrafamilial conflict to systemic, behavioral, and postmodern understandings of the family as a dynamic structure of interconnected individuals (Fig. 1).



*Fig. 1. Stages in the evolution of approaches in family psychology
(compiled by the author based on [2, 5, 6, 8])*

*Fig. 1. The stages of the evolution of approaches in family psychology
(compiled by the author on the basis of [2, 5, 6, 8])*

The first attempts emerged under the influence of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic ideas were integrated with a view of the family as a unified emotional field. Close attention was paid to hidden intrafamilial conflicts.

The psychodynamic orientation was replaced by an emphasis on observable behavior. The focus shifted to modifying dysfunctional patterns of interaction through reinforcement and punishment. The aim was to change specific attitudes without an in-depth analysis of motivations.

Systemic approaches began to take shape in the 1960s, laying the foundation for a new perspective: the family was regarded as an integrated, self-regulating system, while a symptom was understood as a function of an imbalance within it rather than as an individual problem.

Later, the development of constructivism and social constructionism gave rise to narrative interventions, solution-focused interventions, and other approaches. In these models, the family is understood as a construct comprising multiple versions of reality. Psychologists' work emphasizes changing interpretations and narratives, rather than focusing solely on structure or behavior.

Thus, the systemic school, which is the focus of this article, took its definitive form in the 1960s and 1970s against a backdrop of dissatisfaction with

psychoanalytic and behavioral models, which interpreted the nature of family dysfunction too narrowly.

The fundamental premise of these views is to consider the family as an open system characterized by:

- wholeness;
- self-regulation;
- homeostasis [1, 3, 9].

Individual symptoms are no longer interpreted exclusively through the individual's inner world; they are viewed as manifestations of disturbances in the system of relationships. Attention is focused on the structural, communicational, and strategic aspects of intrafamilial functioning.

It is appropriate next to characterize the principal directions within systemic approaches.

The structural model focuses on analyzing and modifying family structure: a stable yet flexible set of rules that determines the details of interaction between family members. The psychologist identifies subsystems (marital, parental, and child) and emphasizes the need for clear boundaries between them. Disruptions of these boundaries, for example through the formation of coalitions or disturbances in the hierarchy, lead to pathological forms of communication.

Intervention within this approach involves

the practitioner's active participation in restructuring the system through the enactment of situations, strengthening adaptive interactions, and establishing new boundaries.

The strategic approach focuses on changing dysfunctional behavioral manifestations through targeted intervention strategies. Here, a symptom is viewed as an adaptive means of resolving intrafamilial conflict or maintaining a balance of power. Distinctive features include the use of paradoxical directives, behavior-change tasks, and the deliberate provocation of crises to mobilize the system's latent resources. The psychologist maintains a directive stance, guiding the family out of a state of pathological equilibrium.

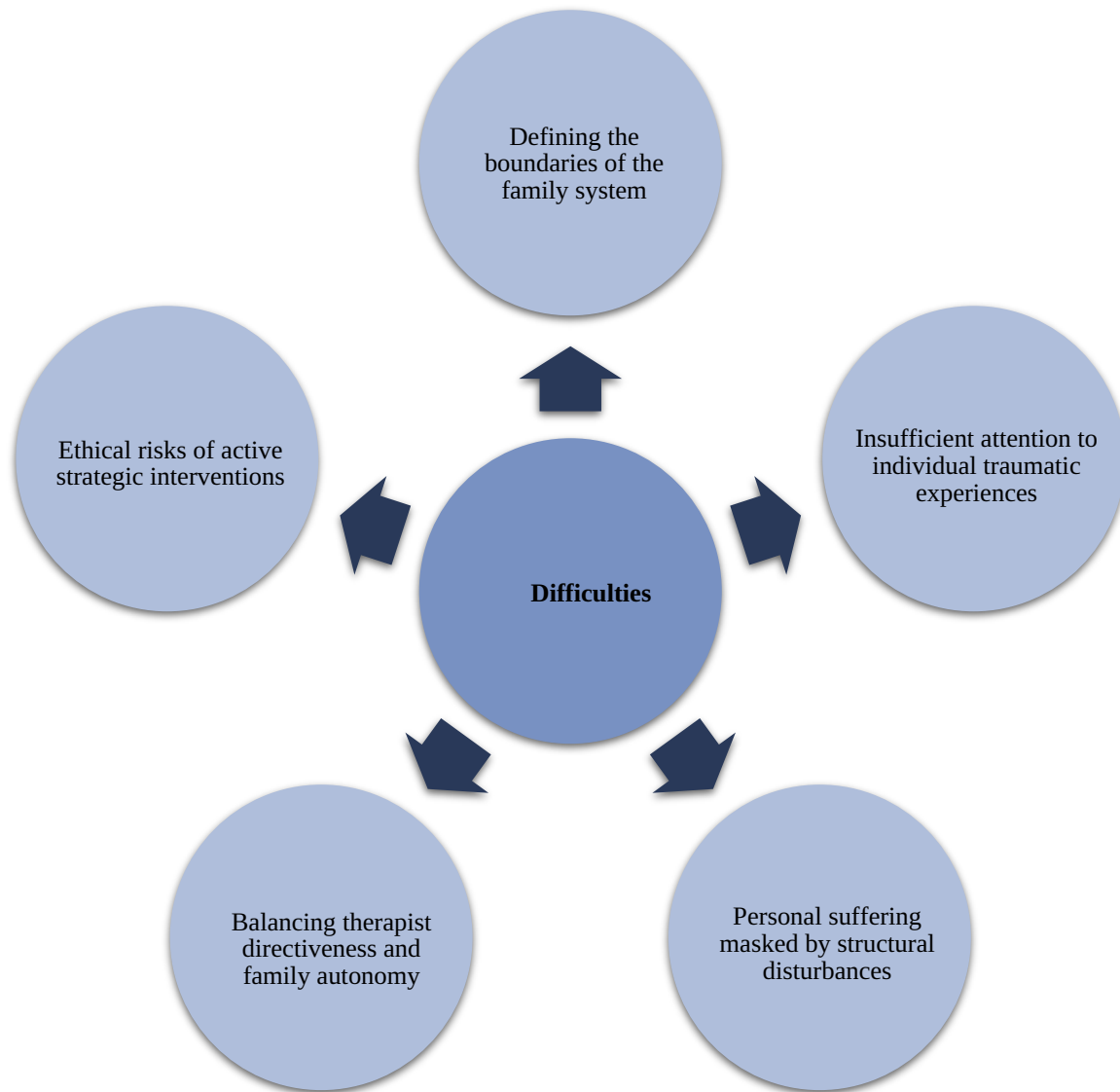
In the cybernetic approach formulated by the Palo Alto group, the family system is understood as a network of interconnected messages. A key concept is the "double bind": a contradictory message received by a child from a significant adult, leading to the development of disorganized behavior. The main focus is on analyzing communicational parameters:

- the level of metamessages;
- paradoxes;
- disturbances in verification;
- pathological feedback.

Intervention aims to break closed loops of dysfunctional communication and establish new ways of interacting.

It is appropriate next to describe the narrative approach as a systemic practice. Although it is often classified within the postmodern tradition, it is closely connected with systemic thinking. The family is understood here as the collective author of a story, while symptoms result from the dominance of problem-saturated narratives. Acting as an "outsider witness," the psychologist helps family members redefine their experiences, construct alternative stories, and thereby transform their system of relationships. This approach emphasizes the diversity of interpretations of reality and proposes abandoning pathologizing labels in favor of resource-oriented constructions [5, 8, 10].

Despite the methodological appeal of the systemic paradigm, its application is accompanied by a number of difficulties (Fig. 2).



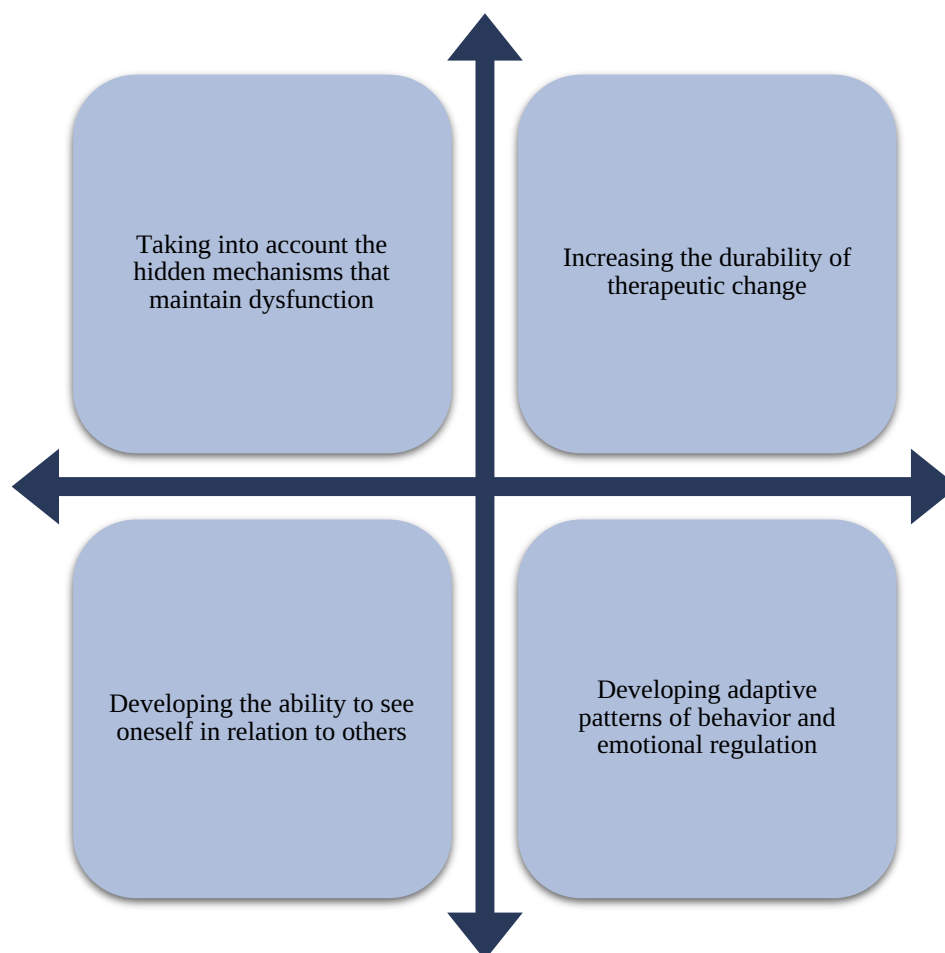
*Fig. 2. Methodological difficulties in implementing the systemic approach
(compiled by the author based on [1, 3–5, 8])*

*Fig. 2. Methodological difficulties of implementing a systematic approach
(compiled by the author on the basis of [1, 3-5, 8])*

First and foremost, the problem of defining the boundaries of the system remains unresolved: in which cases should the intervention process involve the wider family network, including grandparents and other significant figures? In addition, systemic methods are often criticized for paying insufficient attention to individual traumatic experiences. An emphasis on the family's structure and functions can conceal the personal suffering of its members, often leading to an underestimation of their subjective experience.

Balancing directiveness with respect for the family's autonomy also presents a difficulty. Strategic interventions that involve actively guiding the process require a high level of clinical intuition and clear ethical self-monitoring on the part of the psychologist.

The practical significance of systemic approaches is considerable and is summarized in the key points presented in Figure 3.



*Fig. 3. Rationale for the practical significance of systemic approaches
(compiled by the author based on [2, 4])*

*Fig. 3. Substantiation of the practical significance of system approaches
(compiled by the author on the basis of [2, 4])*

The approaches under consideration provide unique tools for working with a variety of clinical cases, from treating adolescent disorders to overcoming the consequences of marital crises. Their use makes it possible to consider not only the presenting symptoms but also the hidden mechanisms that maintain dysfunction, thereby substantially increasing the chances of a lasting resolution of the problem.

In addition, systemic thinking encourages clients to develop the ability to perceive themselves not in isolation but in relation to those around them, positively contributing to the formation of more adaptive patterns of behavior and emotional regulation.

Conclusions

With their considerable heuristic potential, systemic approaches in family psychology offer practitioners opportunities for comprehensive analysis and effective intervention in disrupted family relationships.

Nevertheless, their application requires a high level of professional reflection and a willingness to take the multidimensional nature of human experience into account, together with the ability

to navigate subtle ethical issues in the intervention process.

The integration of systemic methods with individually oriented interventions appears to remain a pressing task for contemporary psychological practice, requiring further conceptual development.

References

1. Ataeva S., Garadzhaev M., Kovusova E. Features of family psychology // Bulletin of Science. – 2023. – Vol. 1. – No. 3 (60). – Pp. 230–234.
2. Kazak T. V., Vasilkova A. N. Methodology, theory, and problems of family psychology // Family Psychology: Current Problems and Solutions. Proceedings of the IX International Scientific and Practical Conference. – Saratov: 2024. – Pp. 66–71.
3. Konnova M. V., Sirotina A. A. Psychology of family relationships // The Family in Contemporary Society: Problems and Social Support Practices. Proceedings of the All-Russian Scientific and Practical Conference. – Orel: 2024. – Pp. 301–305.

4. Koshmanova A. A. Features of the psychology of family relationships // World Science. – 2022. – No. 8 (65). – Pp. 32–38.

5. Lacheva A. P. The history of the development of the systemic approach in family counseling // Scientific Initiative in Psychology. Interuniversity collection of scientific papers. – Kursk: 2023. – Pp. 85–91.

6. Nozikova N. V. A systemic approach to the study of the psychosemantics of family goal orientation // Experimental Psychology in Social Practices. Proceedings of the 2nd All-Russian Scientific Conference. – Moscow: 2021. – Pp. 167–184.

7. Osipov F. M. Family structures and models // Proceedings of the International Symposium "Reliability and Quality." – 2024. – Vol. 1. – Pp. 200–202.

8. Uvarova L. N., Yagafarova R. R. Psychology of family relationships // E-Scio. – 2021. – No. 6 (57). – Pp. 174–178.

9. Chabot D. R. Family systems theories of psychotherapy // History of Psychotherapy: Continuity and Change (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association // URL:

<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2010-09280-006> (accessed: 28 April 2025).

10. Presley V. L., Jones G. "Crossing the reflective bridge": How therapists synthesise personal and professional development from self-practice/self-reflection during CBT training // The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist // URL:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-cognitive-behaviour-therapist/article/crossing-the-reflective-bridge-how-therapists-synthesise-personal-and-professional-development-from-selfpracticeselfreflection-during-cbt-training/C3AE8DAAFE7B8EAF80EC EE29E18BE47E> (accessed: 24 April 2025).

11. Women are more likely than men to see family therapy as an opportunity to save their marriage // URL: <https://nafi.ru/analytics/zhenshchiny-chashche-muzhchin-vidyat-v-semeynoy-terapii-vozmozhnost-sokhranit-brak/> (accessed: 20 April 2025).

References

1. Ataeva S., Garadzhaev M., Kovusova E. Features of family psychology // Bulletin of Science. – 2023. – Vol. 1. – No. 3 (60). – Pp. 230–234.

2. Kazak T.V., Vasilkova A.N. Methodology, theory and problems of family psychology // Psychology of the family: modern problems and

solutions. Collection of materials of the IX International Scientific and Practical Conference. – Saratov: 2024. – Pp. 66–71.

3. Konnova M.V., Sirotinina A.A. Psychology of family relations // Family in modern society: problems and socially helpful practices. Materials of the All-Russian scientific and practical conference. – Orel: 2024. – Pp. 301–305.

4. Koshmanova A.A. Features of the psychology of family relationships // World Science. – 2022. – No. 8 (65). – Pp. 32–38.

5. Lacheva A.P. The history of the development of a systematic approach in family counseling // Scientific initiative in psychology. Interuniversity collection of scientific papers. – Kursk: 2023. – Pp. 85–91.

6. Nozikova N.V. A systematic approach in the study of the psychosemantics of family purposefulness // Experimental psychology in social practices. Materials of the 2nd All-Russian Scientific Conference. – Moscow: 2021. – Pp. 167–184.

7. Osipov F.M. Family structures and models // Proceedings of the International Symposium "Reliability and Quality". – 2024. – Vol. 1. – Pp. 200–202.

8. Uvarova L.N., Yagafarova R.R. Psychology of family relations // E-Scio. – 2021. – No. 6 (57). – Pp. 174–178.

9. Chabot, D.R. Family Systems Theories of Psychotherapy. In: History of Psychotherapy: Continuity and Change (2nd Ed.). American Psychological Association. // URL: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2010-09280-006> (accessed: 04/28/2025).

10. Presley, V.L., Jones, G. "Crossing the Reflective Bridge": How Therapists Synthesize Personal and Professional Development from Self-Practice/Self-Reflection during CBT Training. The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist. // URL: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-cognitive-behaviour-therapist/article/crossing-the-reflective-bridge-how-therapists-synthesise-personal-and-professional-development-from-selfpracticeselfreflection-during-cbt-training/C3AE8DAAFE7B8EAF80EC EE29E18BE47E> (accessed: 04/24/2025).

11. Women are more likely than men to see family therapy as an opportunity to save their marriage // URL: <https://nafi.ru/analytics/zhenshchiny-chashche-muzhchin-vidyat-v-semeynoy-terapii-vozmozhnost-sokhranit-brak/> (accessed: 04/20/2025).