Satir the Interventionist: A Response to Lee and Rovers

Christopher J. Wretman, MSW

1University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher J. Wretman, School of Social Work, Tate-Turner-Kuralt Building, 301 Pittsboro Street CB #3550, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, wretman@live.unc.edu.
Drs. Bonnie K. Lee and Martin Rovers provide a thoughtful, well-reasoned response (2017) to my article “Saving Satir: Contemporary Perspectives on the Change Process Model” (Wretman, 2016). I greatly appreciate the authors’ commentary. Far from being oppositional, Lee and Rovers’ article presents an alternative perspective on Virginia Satir and family therapy that leads to an important discussion regarding the role of evidence-based practice in contemporary social work research. I believe that this dialogue between Lee, Rovers, and myself is an excellent example of the discovery process that is integral to our profession.

Lee and Rovers’ perspective begs the question of what exactly constitutes Satir’s body of work. My answer is straightforward: What is Satir’s model if not an intervention? Respectfully, it is my opinion that the authors create something of a false dichotomy between the realm of Satir on one hand, and the “academic enterprise” on the other with its “different agenda and rules of the game” (Lee & Rovers, 2017, p. 2). Narrowly speaking, social work research often does play by the different rules of its own game. However, when thinking broadly about the essential goals of our profession, it seems clear to me that Satir and research ultimately play a larger game with the same goal: to work towards positively influencing peoples’ lives. One need not be an entrenched member of the Academy, as Satir clearly was not, to desire a successful and valid outcome.

Indeed, if we define interventions as “purposively implemented change strategies” (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010, p. 459), we arrive at a succinct description of the essence of Satir’s model. Her therapeutic practice was without question purposive in its goals (Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991; Satir, 1983). It was also actively implemented, if not by Satir herself, then by others trained in her methods. And her model was, by necessity, focused on change. So,
if we accept that Satir’s model was a form of intervention, can we not also accept that Satir herself has an interventionist? And, moreover, that placed within this broader context her work should be investigated using the empirical evaluations that often accompany and validate our profession’s interventions? I believe that we should.

It is important here to unpack what it means for a program, model, therapy, project, or other endeavor to exist within an intervention context. To do so helps explain how we may make the seemingly long jump from Satir to evaluation and evidence. First, we must recognize that interventions exist within the broader endeavor of intervention research, or “the systematic study of purposive change strategies” (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010, p. 459). Intervention research these days is increasingly linked with evaluation research, or the focus on the assessment of processes and outcomes of interventions and their components (Fraser et al., 2009). And evaluation, in turn, is increasingly synonymous with quantitative methods, often in the form of advanced statistical applications (Guo, 2008). This linkage between Satir and quantitative empiricism need not be troubling! Although Satir’s model is an intervention this does not, however, entail that it be evaluated by the same methods as other, different interventions. Satir’s model need not, for example, be evaluated solely by quantitative methods. Means can and should be found that offer robust evidence of the validity of Satir’s model without compromising it or its creator’s vision. I believe this is not only possible but necessary, and I encourage Drs. Lee, Rovers, and others within family therapy to pursue such empirical evaluation of Satir in the future.

Ultimately, I believe that Satir’s model benefits from explicit conceptualization as an intervention. My attempt, and subsequent failure, to find a substantive body of empirical research related to Satir’s model lead me directly to the conclusion that her legacy is in serious jeopardy. I believe that the underrepresentation of Satir’s work in current empirical inquiry presents a real
and potentially fatal threat to its continued existence. Likely gone are the days when “a collection of creative techniques” that are “lacking in theoretical substance” and “a structured guide” are sufficiently valid for social work research and practice (Lee & Rovers, 2017, p. 2).

Lee, Rovers, and others may fundamentally disagree. The choice does exist to dodge empirical inquiry of Satir’s model. Whereas her work exists inherently within an intervention context, it need not be subject to evaluation. Indeed, the dearth of extant inquiry to date suggests this has been the approach taken. But what are the consequences of this choice? Fair or not, we exist in an age where empiricism equates with livelihood and non-empiricism is likely a death sentence. I realize these words are harsh but I believe them to be true. It is simply by experience that those in power with the ability to fund, support, publish, and nurture our practices increasingly rely on a system that requires empirical evidence as a prerequisite.

So, do we wish for Satir’s model to be confined to the realm of non-empiricism and miss such supports? If we continue to fail to investigate and validate her methods this will be likely be the inevitable result. However, if we embrace empirical evaluation we can, with skill and sensitivity, enhance the standing of Satir within the research world and ensure its future. Considering the diverse methods of inquiry that researchers have been and are developing to investigate social work interventions, the time is right for collaborations between practitioners and researchers to investigate and build an evidence-base for Satir’s model. Simply put, the choice is ours as the therapists, clinicians, and researchers to determine the fate and future of Satir. I know the choice I would make!
References


doi:10.1177/1049731509358424


doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780199975839.013.333


