

The Reflecting Team: Dialogue and Meta-Dialogue in Clinical Work.

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A "stuck" system, that is, a family with a problem, needs new ideas in order to broaden its perspectives and its contextual premises. In this approach, a team behind a one-way screen watches and listens to an interviewer's conversation with the family members. The interviewer, with the permission of the family, then asks the team members about their perceptions of what went on in the interview. The family and the interviewer watch and listen to the team discussion. The interviewer then asks the family to comment on what they have heard. This may happen once or several times during an interview. In this article, we will first describe the way we interview the family because the interview is the source from which the reflections flow. We will then describe and exemplify the reflecting team's manner of working and give some guidelines because the process of observation has a tendency to magnify every utterance. Two case examples will be used as illustrations.

Several years ago we were supervising a young family interviewer who was repeatedly drawn into the pessimism of the family he was interviewing. The three of us who were observing from behind the screen called him out three times to suggest more optimistic questions to him, but each time the family pulled him back into their pessimism. We knew that there was a set of microphones and speakers in both rooms and asked if the family and interviewer would like to listen to the three of us talk. The lighting and the sound were switched, and the family and interviewer watched and listened to the team reflecting in a more positive fashion about the family. The sound and the lighting were then switched back and the family interview proceeded in a more optimistic fashion. Later, when we discussed this innovation, it was striking how everyone liked the process of reflecting. The family liked it; the interviewer and the reflecting team liked it; and everyone we talked to about it liked it. This is how the "reflecting team" began.

THE BACKGROUND OF OUR WORK

As Arthur Koestler (7) noted in his book *The Act of Creation*: "It [the creative act] does not create something out of nothing; it uncovers, selects, reshuffles, combines, synthesizes already existing facts, ideas, faculties, skills. The more familiar the parts, the more striking the whole" (p. 120). In line with this observation, the main contributions to our mode of working have been the writings of Gregory Bateson and Humberto Maturana (1-3, 6, 8, 9, 15) and our observations of certain family therapists working with families. These therapists are members of the Milan team in Italy, of the Ackerman Institute in New York, and of the Galveston Family Institute in Texas. What impressed us the most was the carefulness and genuine respect these teams showed for the integrity of those persons with whom they talked.

Our interest in the writings of Bateson and Maturana focused primarily on what they wrote about epistemology. Both agree that it is the *observer* who generates the distinctions we call "reality." One's picture of or knowledge about the world will be the basis for one's attitude to it. Because persons experiencing the same world "out there" make different pictures of it, problems will arise when they debate which picture is right: *either* mine *or* yours. Maturana speaks not of the universum but of the multiversa—the many possible meanings that constitute our many possible worlds. That is why he puts the word "objectivity" in parentheses. He means, I believe, that one should think of the picture and its explanation more in terms of *both-and* or *neither-nor*, and leave out the *either/or*.

A living system composed of two or more persons allows the possibility for exchanging pictures and explanations. When two persons share their views, each receives from the other different versions of "reality." These differences will give new perspectives to each person's picture, and the enriched pictures created from these ongoing differences can become, as Bogdan (5) calls it, an ecology of ideas. These exchanges, which one can hardly escape, make life an ongoing, changing process.

As I understand Maturana (8), he says that living entities are "structurally determined." That is, they can operate only out of and in accord with the way they are built. In a system of two or more people, the exchanges between them must respect the fact that the persons must remain the way that they are. This applies as well to the relationship between groups of people, say a family in trouble and a helping team. Both groups have to acknowledge the other's need to retain its pattern of ongoing relationships. Every living system is organized as an autonomous system, and only the system itself knows how and when it is ready to change its structure, or when it is ready to disintegrate and cease to exist. One part, whether a group or a person, must bear in mind that the other part can only participate through one of the modes of relating that is already available in its repertory. If the relationship between the parts is "safe" enough, nonintrusive enough, interesting enough, the mutual exchanges that carry new ideas may trigger new modes of relating.

According to Maturana (9), there are three ways to foster variety, change, and observerhood in a relationship. One is through love. Another is to become a "foreigner" who, because of a different background, can add a new and exciting version of the world to the one the system had before. The third possibility is that one can pull back into loneliness for a while, which we in the North of Norway do when we disappear into the mountains and come back as a "small" foreigner.

Bateson points out the importance of sharing different versions of the same world. A different version influences the person's attitude to that world and makes it different than it was before. In therapeutic settings, this means that the new versions presented to the stuck system move it away from the "standstill" around the problem. In considering Bateson's (1) statement that information "is a *difference which makes a difference*" (p. 453), we found it important to differentiate between three kinds of difference. The first is a difference that is too small to be noticed by the recipient. The second is an appreciable difference, meaning that it is big enough to be noticed. The third is a difference that is too great and may have a disorganizing effect on the system. In such cases, the system often closes itself to those who would try to implement such a difference. From considerations such as these have come a few general guidelines and some smaller, guided steps for our work.

MAIN WORKING GUIDELINES

First, a system that is standing still contains too many repeating samenesses (16) and too few new differences. A helper must basically respect the sameness because it represents where and how the present system is and has to be. In practical terms, this means that the helping team has to find a not too unusual setting in order to talk about not too unusual issues in a not too unusual manner. It is important to respect the stuck system's resistance to that which is too unusual. The only way to know if one is on the right side of this boundary is to be sensitive for signs the system itself gives us when it closes itself to our questions. So we must let our imagination fly freely, but not too freely, in order to find questions that will be different enough but not too different from those the system usually asks itself.

Second, the main structure of the interview is an oscillation between three levels that have been described by Blount (4). One is called the picture-level, one the explanation-level, and one the alternative-level. I like to depict this structure according to the schema below (see Figure 1).

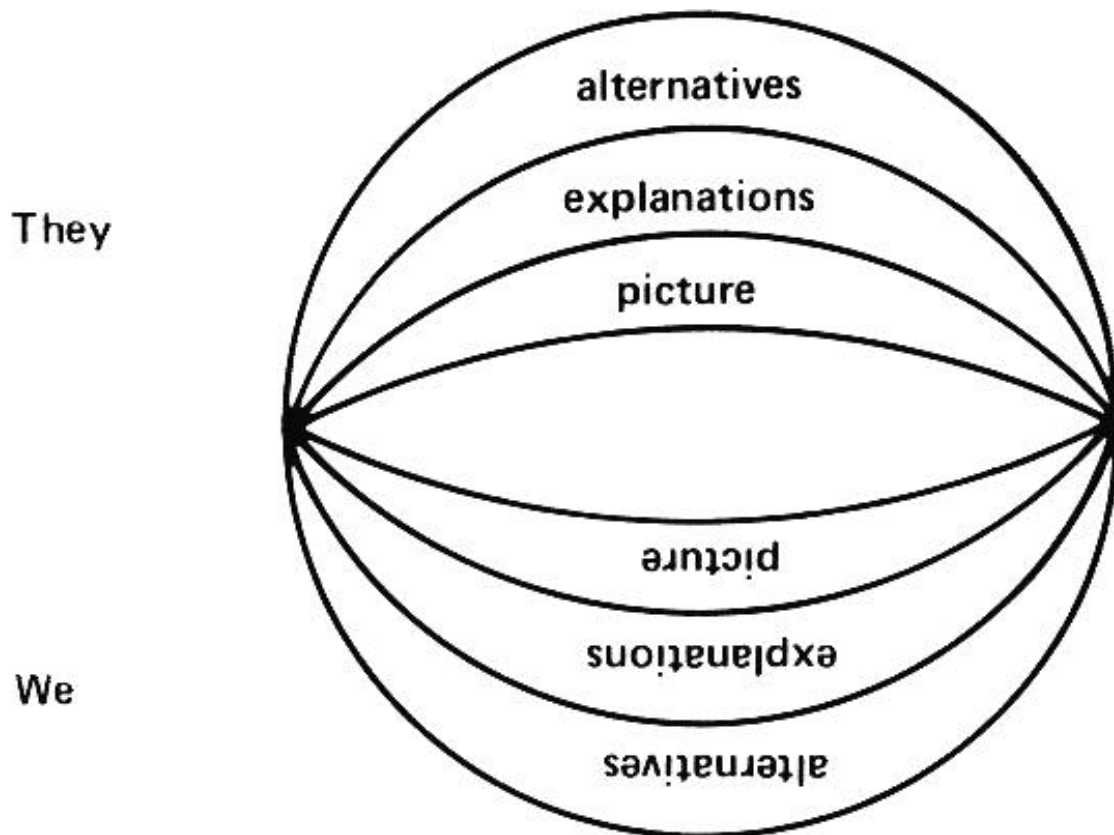


Figure 1.
Exchange of descriptions of picture, explanations of the problem, and alternative descriptions.

Depending on what the family members are willing to talk about, I begin to ask questions and to draw my own picture of their picture, nuanced, of course, according to my epistemology. I assume that my questioning will evoke new and different answers that will prompt new questions, all of which will create a hopefully wider and more elaborate picture for them and myself.

I then ask them what explanation they have for the picture. Tracing the evolution of the picture over time, it often becomes clear that the problematic issue has varied, which suggests that it might also vary in the future. One can then appropriately ask some of hypothetical questions about the future of the kind that Penn (12) has written about. These questions, which one can use only if the family does not believe the future is predetermined, take the form of asking if there are any changes anyone might like to make in the picture, and then asking what the consequences would be if that happened. One can also ask what would happen to the situations included in the picture if another explanation for the picture emerged.

Alternative approaches like this may provide alternative answers to troublesome situations, as well as allowing more flexibility in the family's thinking process. The team behind the screen will, in addition to making their own pictures, explanations, and alternatives, have the possibility of thinking about how family members draw their pictures, how they explain them, and how they invent alternatives. The interviewer may, as already suggested, shift from a "what is?" (picture) question to the meta-level "how come?" (explanation) question.

One has to bear in mind that there will never be two families that will depart from the "standstill" of a problem at the same speed. The circular questioning invented by the Milan team (11, 13) is introduced according to the family's readiness for it. The Milan group's strong emphasis on neutrality and its care in avoiding negative connotation is also used in our work. These two aspects of the work are considered necessary for the family to move to a meta-position in relation to itself.

Small Guided Steps

The steps mentioned below may follow a different sequence in the session because they can be taken whenever it seems most natural.

Watching the Openings for Conversation

When the problematic situation is brought up by the family, there may be some marked utterances or expressions of emotion. If this happens, one should slow down and let the family have a chance to elaborate on these emotions because they are significant and may lead to the "core" of the problem.

How Unusual is the Setting

Two of the team members first meet with the family to explain the setting, namely, that they would prefer to work with a one-way screen and a team. This procedure allows the family to excuse themselves from such a setting if it is too unusual and to continue only with the two therapists.

History of the Decision to Seek Help

Everyone in the family is caught between two desires: to make a change and not to make any change. Some may lean toward one end of the continuum, some toward the other, and there may be one person who is extremely suspicious of change. This is an important person to keep in touch with because that person is in charge, one might say, of conserving the family status quo. He or she should be checked with frequently or consulted in order to assess if the discussion is within safe limits.

Some of our questions are: "Who was the person who first had the idea to come here?" "Who did this person consult first? Who second?" "Who was most pleased by the idea? Who was the most reserved?" "If the person who first presented the idea had not done so, would another person have done it?" "Which of you talked the most together about the meeting beforehand?" "When you woke up this morning, who most looked forward to coming here?" "What did you hope to achieve from this meeting?"

The Problem

The following questions can be asked about the problem: "What is the problem or problems?" "Who agrees and who disagrees with the various definitions of the problem?" "What is the history of the problem? When did it start? Have there been any shifts?" "What is your explanation?" "Who is involved? How are they involved?" "Who came on the scene first? Who next? Who of the persons involved in the problem is least involved? How is it that some persons became involved and some not?" "Which agencies are involved?" "What have the various people who are involved done to resolve the problem? How did the others respond when this person made his or her attempt? If another person had made the attempt, how would the outcome be different?" "If another explanation emerged for the problem, what would happen?"

What is the Usual Pattern

This will emerge in the family's way of presenting themselves. The team will have to be aware, therefore, of who sits next to whom in the circle of chairs that we set up beforehand. Who sits in opposition to whom? Are some persons repeatedly agreeing and some repeatedly disagreeing? Is the family strongly tied together or strongly disconnected? Families that are strongly tied together tend to present similarities. This indicates that questions that reveal differences will be of value. Families in which members keep each other at a distance tend to present very different opinions and attitudes and might be asked questions about similarities. Whether the questions are congruent or incongruent with the family will be shown by its signs of openness to the interviewer.

Some families or family members may be most occupied with issues related to individuals, particularly those connected with the identified patient. Questions of a relational nature may provide a fruitful difference here. Conversely, if a family typically uses relational notions, questions that address issues of the individual may be useful. Some people are exclusively oriented toward the past. For them, questions addressing the present and future may be most meaningful. Some people firmly concentrate on the solution to the problem, and on a particular problem-solving activity. In such instances one must stay with that theme, carefully questioning the premise on which the attempted solution is based, posing new questions to broaden the basis for the premise, and discussing alternative solutions. Some people are overwhelmed by the many unclear aspects of the problem and feel that it is impossible to find a way out. In such a case, one asks about all the parts of the picture and how the parts are connected. Surveying the whole picture in this way may pave the way for making new decisions.

In some families, we may notice that a certain emotional overtone prevails, for instance a depressed or pessimistic mood. The interviewer may inquire first about the particular mood. If the family members say that this mood has dominated for some time, the interviewer may ask when was the last time they felt happy: "What did you do then? Who was the happiest then? Who most believes it will happen again? When do you think it will be likely to happen again? Who will be the first to start to think of doing something that might make it happen again?"

Being Aware of the Therapeutic Relationship

Because the tool for our work is the relationship between the family and the team or interviewer, one has to keep a sharp eye on that relationship. Sometimes family members are so eager to share their knowledge and ideas that they all try to talk at once, not realizing that the interviewer becomes overwhelmed. In order to be able to talk, the team may suggest dividing the family into those who are being interviewed and those who follow the conversation from behind the screen. Sometimes the amount of talk is so minimal that the team may suggest waiting a while before continuing the conversation.

Evaluating the Process of Change

If certain kinds of questions begin increasingly to be accepted, we have found that this indicates the beginning of a process of change. The questions we carefully pursue in this case are those of a relational nature, questions of differences and similarities, and hypothetical questions. We also compare our impressions of the way family members shake hands and look at us when they leave the session with corresponding impressions from the beginning of the session. More open hands and more open eyes when the family leaves indicate that a change is in progress.

THE TEAM REFLECTS ON THE CONVERSATION

The interviewer and the family are each fully respected as autonomous systems. They talk about what they choose to talk about in the manner they prefer. The interviewer, ideally, is not interrupted by the team with suggestions that certain questions be asked or certain topics be considered. The family-interviewer system is left to its own devices. The interviewer uses the guidelines mentioned above in the way that feels most comfortable.

As the conversation unfolds, the members of the team behind the screen create their own ideas. Because everyone behind the screen respects the autonomy of every other person to create his or her ideas, there is a quiet listening behind the screen. This contrasts with the way we behaved formerly, which was to discuss and hypothesize together. We have found that the less we discuss ideas beforehand, the greater the possibility of enlarging the ecology of ideas.

After having followed the conversation for a while, minimally from 10 to 15 minutes, sometimes as much as 45 minutes, the team or the interviewer suggests the possibility of hearing the team reflect. The interviewer may ask the family, "I wonder if the team at this point has any ideas that might be helpful. May I ask them if they have?" If the family agrees, the people behind the screen switch on their sound and the family and the interviewer switch off theirs. The light in the conversation-room is dimmed and that in the team's room is turned on. This exchange can also come about if a team member knocks on the door saying, "We have some ideas that might be useful for your conversation." The family and the interviewer then listen to the team's conversation about the family's conversation, which usually lasts from 2 to 15 minutes.

The reflections, which are speculative, begin by the members of the team first spontaneously presenting their ideas. Some of these ideas may be elaborated during the conversation, depending upon which ones the team members feel are

most significant. These ideas should be connected to verbal or nonverbal material that emerged during the interview. Some families can tolerate only a few ideas; some can tolerate more. The rule of not being too different holds also for the reflecting team, which means that the ideas discussed should be new to the family, but not too unusual in content or in the way they are conveyed.

The team should be careful of mentioning the family's nonverbal exchanges. Sometimes the team sees things that the family is not ready to talk about, for instance, strong but unexpressed emotions, or evidence of distance between family members of which they are not aware. The team might either ignore such communications or else comment on them with a tentative uncertainty in order to help the family become more sensitive to things previously unnoticed. What is commented on is certainly a matter of timing.

We have also found it useful for the team as a whole to talk in terms of *both-and* or *neither-nor* because families so often tend to talk in terms of *either/or*. However, whenever a family is lacking in boundaries between members, and presents itself as holding all beliefs in common, this is when the team might introduce an *either/or* as a contrast. How these various possibilities are carried out varies. Sometimes each team member reflects in terms of *both-and*. Sometimes one person talks about the *both* and another person talks about the *and*.

As a general rule, everything that is said should be speculative: "I am not sure," "It occurred to me," "Maybe," "I had the feeling that," "Maybe this is not appropriate, but," and so forth. The reflections must have the quality of tentative offerings, not pronouncements, interpretations, or supervisory remarks.

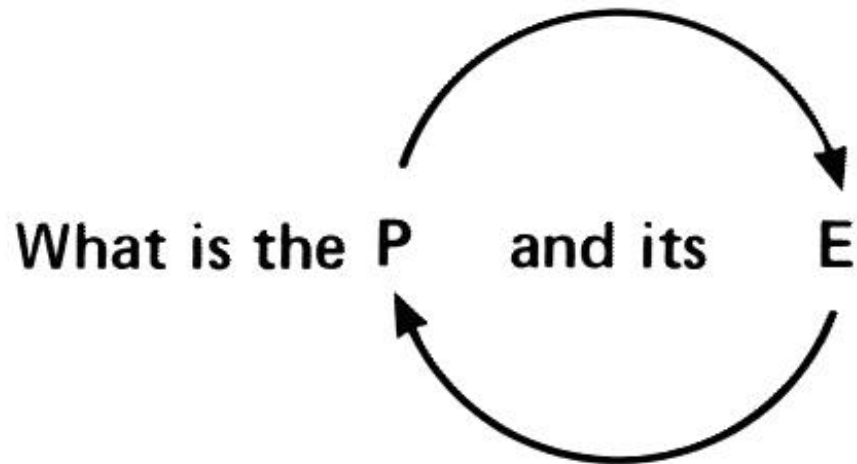
So far, we have found it useful to have a reflecting team of three persons because one person listening to the other two sharing their ideas will come up with new ideas that she or he may feed back into the conversation. If there are more than four persons on the therapy team (one interviewer and three on the reflecting team), other observers should sit behind the reflecting team as a quietly observing unit, available to the interviewer-family system or the reflecting team if they want it. If the observing unit is consulted, it might be done in such a way that the whole system—family plus interviewer plus team—an benefit.

The reflecting team has to bear in mind that its task is to create ideas even though some of those ideas may not be found interesting by the family, or may even be rejected. What is important is to realize that the family will select those ideas that fit. Some may be found useful and be used; the hope is that they will trigger a small change in the family's picture or in its understanding of the picture. The reflections may even trigger a change in the understanding of this understanding.

The team ideally tries to figure out the family's own style of reflecting, their rhythm, speed, and modes of communicating, so that they may copy that style as much as possible. Norwegians speak slowly, so our reflecting teams are often slow-moving.

The team members' way of dealing with their picture of the family's picture and the corresponding explanation of it is indicated in the following schema (see Figure 2). The arrows show the circular feedback between picture (P) and explanation (E).

The family's versions



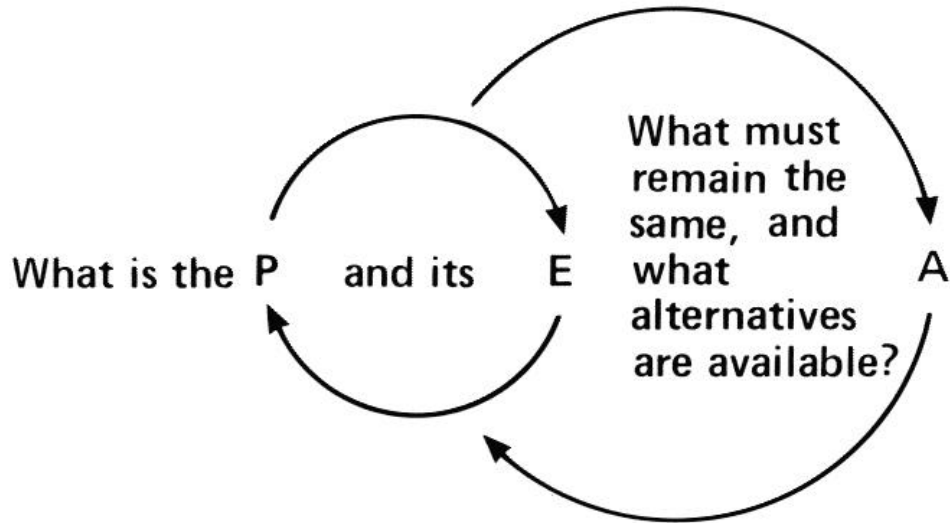
The reflecting team's versions

Figure 2.

The family's and the reflecting team's versions of the described problem and its explanation.

The team may then proceed to reflect hypothetically what would happen if anything in the picture changed or if the explanation given thus far was replaced by another explanation (see Figure 3). The arrows indicate a circular loop connecting the ability to invent alternatives (A) with the existing picture and the explanation.

The family's versions



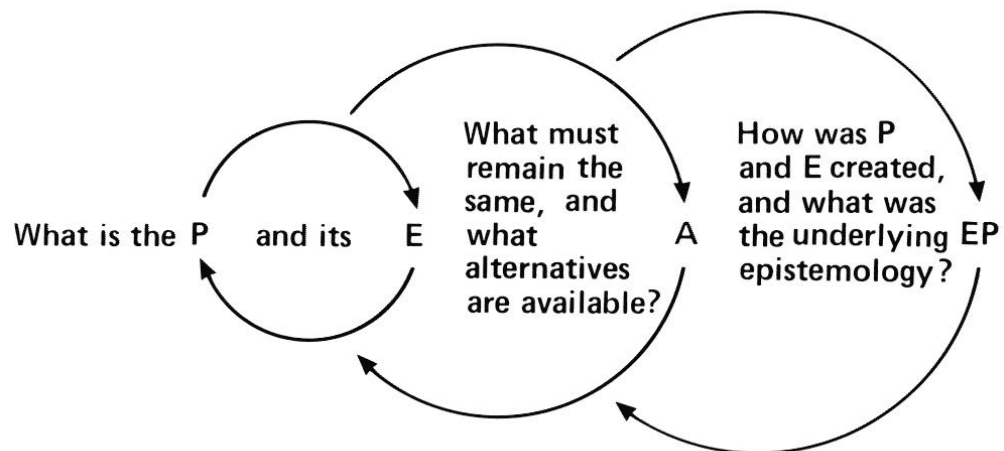
The reflecting team's versions

Figure 3.

The family's and the reflecting team's versions of alternative descriptions and explanations of the problem.

The team, like the family-interviewer system, may leap to the level of epistemology (see Figure 4), reflecting on how the family members drew distinctions as they described the problematic situation. This may help the family to understand the link between *what* one understands and *how* one understands. Figure 4 illustrates the correspondence between what and how, that is, the underlying epistemology (EP).

The family's versions



The reflecting team's versions

Figure 4.

The family's and the reflecting team's discussion of the underlying epistemology.

The reader has probably realized that there is one more level, namely, the possibility of expanding or implementing a new epistemology in the family. The schema in Figure 5 contains arrows indicating the feedback loops of Figures 2 through 4, as well as the feedback of an alternative epistemology (AEP).

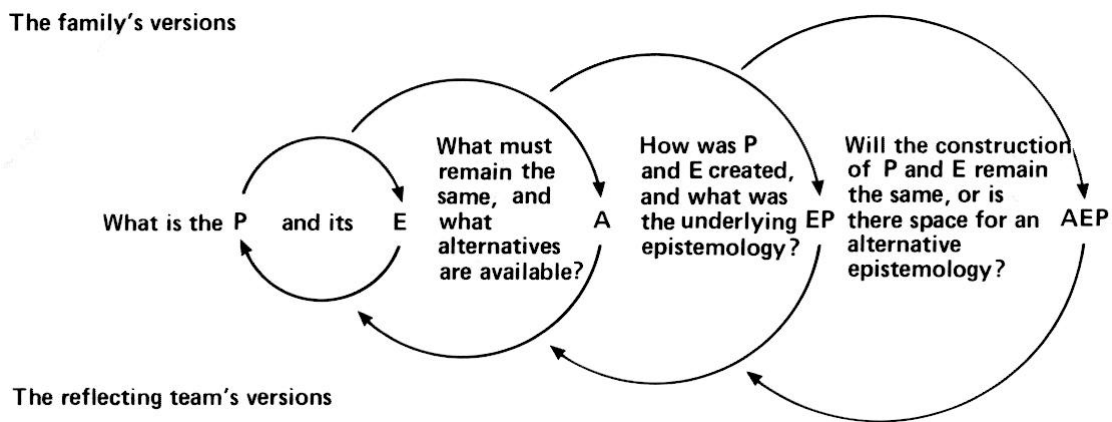


Figure 5.

The family's and the reflecting team's discussion of alternative epistemology and its eventual effect on the description and explanation of the problem.

The expansion of the schema from Figure 2 to Figure 5 goes from left to right, from picture and explanation to alternative explanation, and shows the increasing possibility for the family to grasp the meaning of the problematic situation in its wholeness. This expansion takes place over time. Mostly, the team works within the first two diagrams. The larger organization of the family-team system loses the glue that sticks them together when the problem vanishes. This dissolution usually takes place before the team can start on the two processes shown in Figure 4 and 5.

As the team reflects, the interviewer on the other side of the screen follows the reactions of the family. These reactions will in themselves indicate if the reflections are positive, if they help to expand the ecology of ideas, or if they are too unusual and make the family hold on even harder to their original ideas.

When the team has finished its reflections, the light and sound are switched and the interviewer asks the family if there was something in the team's conversation that the family would like to talk about, comment on, or correct. The interviewer will also have gained one or two ideas from listening to the team, which she or he may share for further discussion. Because members of stuck systems often protect the team by not expressing their negative responses to the team's speculations, we have found it safest to have the interviewer ask one or some of the following questions: "Was there anything said that you liked very much?" "Was there anything you disliked?" "Was there anything of particular interest?" "Anything of no interest of all?" "Was anything close to your own understanding or experience?" "Was anything far-fetched according to your understanding or experience?" "Was there anything that did not please you, or that did please you?" The conversation thus continues from the new place provided by the break for reflections.

The interviewer may have noticed during the team's reflections that one or more family members showed negative responses to something that was said and that this was not expressed in answer to the questions above. In such instances, the interviewer might say: "When this or that was said, I thought that might be hard for people to listen to or think about. But I am not sure." This may provide the disturbed family member a way to indicate his or her response. This kind of feedback will serve to tell the reflecting team whether it has stayed within or gone outside the appropriate limits for this family.

The screen can be switched one to three times during a session, although twice is the usual number. It is particularly important, however, to remember that each side should have the possibility for a final comment if that is wanted, and that the family-interviewer system must always have the last word.

Reflections in Other Settings

When a double set of microphones and loudspeakers is not available, the team and family exchange rooms. However, a feeling of strangeness may be evoked when the two groups pass each other in the hall. Obviously, this is not as ideal as when the groups can stay in their own room and switch the light and sound. When a screen is not available, the team may sit in a corner of the room and reflect from there.

If consultation is provided by another professional, say a general practitioner (GP), and the family is present in the room, the interviewer can stop now and then and announce to the family that he or she wants to discuss ideas with the GP. The GP and the interviewer then exchange comments, being careful to talk only to each other in order to keep their reflections distinct from what went on in the rest of the interview. The family listens to the reflections from its meta-position and does not participate. When the team consists of only one person, this person may leave the room for a while; it could be minutes, or it could be days or weeks. On returning, she or he might say, "When I was away from you, I had these ideas that I would

like to share," and then give the speculative reflections, saying afterward, "Were some of these ideas worthwhile? Would you like to talk about them?"

Warnings

It must be emphasized that connotations must always be positive and never negative. That means that every normative judgment must be omitted. The screen (the process of observing) tends to magnify criticisms and remarks of the "why-did-they-do-this-or-that" category. The reflecting team must also remember that comments about family members' behaviors may expose a sensitive area that the family does not wish to talk about. When the family is indiscreet, in the sense of betraying more than they meant to, the team must respond with a protective carefulness. The team must remain positive, discreet, respectful, sensitive, imaginative, and creatively free.

TWO CASE EXAMPLES

A Fatherly Small Boy

A mother who worked during the day as a schoolteacher wanted advice because her youngest, eight-year-old son had beat up on his five-year-old sister. The father came with her because she had asked him. His eyes, and the way he shook hands, indicated that he did not like the idea of this meeting. The mother said that the boy behaved well as long as the father was at home, but when the father was at sea, he acted rebellious and hard to control. The father said that being a fisherman was the only way he knew to make a living.

As the mother described how overwhelmed she was when she was at home alone with the children, the reflecting team (RT) noticed that the father's head sank down and his shoulders drooped. The interviewer asked, "Who missed the father the most when he was away?" "Everyone," the mother answered. "The kids love to be with him. They like the way he plays with them. He is very strong and they love it when he lifts them above his head." She leaned slightly toward her husband, whereupon he turned his head slightly away from her. "Was there anyone else who could do the things father could do so well when he was not there?" The mother said, "The boy even protected me when a drunk man behaved impolitely toward me." The RT (consisting of members One, Two, and Three), noticing that father was not satisfied so far, asked if they could share their ideas.

Three: "I was immediately struck by the importance of the parents to the children, and I could not let go of the image of the children and mother waiting for father to come home from the sea. Everybody looks forward to his coming, maybe most of all the boy who seems to admire his father very much."

One: "He does not only admire his father, but he seems to want to replace him when he is away."

Two: "It is interesting, listening to you two, because I find myself staying with the problems presented by the mother, problems that certainly worried her."

Three: "I saw first of all the boy's admiration for his father. Enormous admiration."

The couple had been eagerly watching without sound or movement. As the family interview continued, the father straightened his body and began to talk more. The interviewer discussed with him what the children liked most to do with him. This led into the topic of the fights between the two sons. How could that be explained? Mishaps? Mistakes? Too much energy? Or what? The RT asked to share ideas again, and the interviewer and family agreed.

Two: "Maybe the boy took his job of replacing father too seriously. Maybe he thought he should be in charge of bringing up his sister. Maybe he thought that his sister was as rebellious as himself and needed a strong hand."

One: "If mother, who originally requested some help, still wants it, maybe the father and the oldest son should talk seriously together about what the boy might do when the father is away and what he should be careful about. Small fathers of eight years of age need supervision."

The silence in the family room when the screen was switched indicated that the couple, especially father, felt relieved, but they had nothing they wanted to say. Their behavior told the interviewer that they wanted to think and not talk. The father's wet eyes and warm, solid handshake made us think that he felt included again.

The mother came alone the next time and said that the father had not found the meeting with the team of any use. At first the team members were surprised that he had not shown up. However, they found a reasonable explanation when they looked more closely at last session. During its reflections, the team had assumed that the father wanted to be included without knowing whether he wanted to be or not. The RT realized that its former strategic mode of working does not necessarily disappear simply by making all discussions available to the family. What they could have done instead was to reflect in a different way: Who liked the idea of coming to this meeting the most? If both parents did not favor it equally, could other arrangements be made? For instance, could one parent come and exchange some ideas with the team and then go home and process these ideas with the other one?

The Body Understands Something the Mind Has Not Yet Grasped

A couple requested help because the wife was complaining of increased fatigue and a worsening problem with swallowing food in the past four years. A medical examination did not find anything physically wrong, and the woman accepted the advice that she should look at other aspects of the problem. She reported that she had to lie on a bed if she wanted to eat. Her embarrassment about this peculiar behavior kept her away from the family table where her husband and two children (ages 4 and 1 1/2) ate their meals without her. The husband missed her company more than she missed his. She said, "I have got so used to it that I don't remember any more what his company would be like." She spoke freely about her condition. Her husband, when commenting on her story, had a short coughing bout that indicated to the team how badly he felt about the situation.

The team learned that three events had happened at about the same time four years ago: (a) the couple had their first child (one year after they got married); (b) her symptoms began; and (c) her brother, who was nine years older, finally left home against the wishes of their mother who had tried to prevent his leaving for many years. The mother appealed to her daughter to help bring him back. This appeal was in vain, but the wife's oldest child, a nine-year-old boy from a former marriage, began to visit his grandmother frequently. The husband had often thought that the boy was a replacement person for his uncle. The grandmother found the boy as gentle and friendly a companion as her son had been all those years, making up for the fact that she and her husband had very little in common and hardly spoke to each other.

The boy's visits to his grandmother's house did not please his mother, particularly when he came home and started to call his mother "grandma" and his grandmother "mom." His increasing wish to stay overnight at his grandmother's house did not diminish the mother's annoyance. When the boy stayed with mother and stepfather, he behaved in such a way that the mother could not control him, making the stepfather "guardian of the peace." The stepfather's way of handling the boy upset the mother and she would interfere with his angry rages. These sequences distanced the couple but brought mother and son closer. The RT, comprised of team member One and team member Two, shared the following ideas:

One: "I see two problem areas. The first is the mother's difficulties with fatigue and with swallowing. The second is the issue, not yet settled, of how much the nine-year-old son should stay with his grandmother and how much he should stay with his mother."

Two: "My thoughts were circling around the two problem areas too. And I wondered if these two areas were totally separated or somewhat connected. Sometimes the body, full of wisdom, expresses itself clearly in situations the mind has not fully understood. Maybe the body, acting like this, warns 'our patient' against participating in situations she is not ready for. If the two areas are not connected, I wonder if the one problem area might influence the other indirectly, by capturing so much energy that nothing is left for the other area."

One: "If I may elaborate on your ideas, I wonder if any moves of the boy to get closer either to his mother or to his grandmother might alleviate the mother's tension. If any such move were to be successful, I wonder whether the wife or the husband would be more pleased. I was, in fact, wondering about the effect of such a shift on their life. The problem they have been struggling with for the last four years, actually four of the five years they have had together, has forced them apart, not giving them a chance to develop a married relationship. It might be that the two of them would find themselves in the same strange and unprepared situation that grandmother and grandfather found themselves in when 'our patient's' brother finally left home."

Two: "I don't know what would be most appropriate, but if there should be a question of any attempt to regulate the boy's comings and going between mother and grandmother, I believe it would be wise of the couple to include grandmother and the boy in the conversation."

The interviewer had noticed that the wife, when the RT had speculated on the boy's moving back and forth between his mother and grandmother, had eagerly commented, "That's right, that's right." After switching the light and sound back, the couple seemed much more quiet and relaxed. The husband in particular seemed to breathe more freely. The wife waited a long time before commenting. When she did, she said, "I was shocked by the thought of what my husband and I would do if we had more time available for each other." The husband, for his part, liked the idea of meeting together with his mother-in-law and stepson the next time in order to discuss the stepson's position in relation to the mother and grandmother.

THE EFFECTS OF THE REFLECTING TEAM

There are a number of differences between being on this type of team and the more strategically oriented teams of other family therapies. We no longer use a team break to unburden ourselves of tensions or personal feelings about the family we have been seeing by making funny jokes or disparaging remarks. Our new way of working makes us feel that we are participants in a process in which family members become our equals. We do not feel we can or should control the therapy process, and we accept that we are merely a part of it. Also, it is a good feeling to have the family say, "We were wondering what you behind the screen were thinking about us. Now we know."

If we have trainees, they join the reflecting team from the beginning of their training. They determine themselves how much they wish to participate. They usually have few speculations the first time, but soon begin to share more ideas.

NOTHING IS NEW

The reader has probably noticed the strong influence of the Milan approach on the work presented in this article. We have made a number of small changes in adapting this model to our ideas. For one thing, we choose to meet people without making any hypotheses beforehand. Hypotheses may influence us to see the family within the frame of our preoccupations rather than within the frame of what currently preoccupies the people in the family.

We have also deliberately avoided interventions because family members can so easily believe that our intervention is better than what they themselves have pictured and explained. For those who do not like a competing explanation, an intervention might even reinforce their own "standstill" position.

The reader may also have noticed the similarity the reflecting team bears to the "Strategic Debate" developed by Papp, Olga Silverstein, and Stanley Siegel (see 14), which is a further development of the ideas presented in Papp's article, "The Greek Chorus" (10). There are, however, some differences between the "debate" and our reflecting team. What we try to emphasize is that every person in a stuck system tends to think too much in terms of *either/or* and to compete for the right to denote what is the right understanding and the right action. The reflecting team tries to imply the notion of *both-and* and *neither-nor* by having members of the reflecting team take this stance, and by members of the team underlining that what they say is based only on the version of the problem that each perceives. In this way, they convey the idea that the problem has many aspects and is multifaceted. We believe that the family, or whoever is watching the reflecting team, can discover the richness embedded in the sharing of various points of view on the same issue. One version stimulated another version to become richer, which turns back on the first version, which...

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