MEETINGS FOR THE FIRST TIME

MAKING CONNECTIONS, OPENINGS TO THE BEST WAY FORWARD

FAMILY AND NETWORK CONSULTATIONS

FIRST MEETINGS : AIMS, WHEN, HOW, WITH WHOM

What seems to be a large group of people emerge from a head teacher's office in a school. Some are looking thoughtful; a mother and two teachers are engaging in lively conversation about the meeting they are planning to have during the next week thinking through their ways of co-operating and supporting each other in relation to a child's unhappiness and lack of engagement at school. Joining the conversation the father expresses his wish to be involved and to contribute to the new way of handling the difficulties both in the school and at home. The head teacher, social worker and school nurse are talking, in a relaxed way, of keeping in touch with each other, with the parents and with the child. Instead of feeling criticised by each other for not doing what each thought the other ought to be doing they are now working out, together, how each can carry out the tasks needed to be able to find a new way of creating a useful and fruitful situation for a child to develop and make use of what the school has to offer. Amongst all these adults a child is to be seen. This is the child about whom the group of people involved in the meeting that has just taken place have been concerned. The child is looking relieved. She has not been blamed or criticised. She has been able to talk about matters which have been upsetting and distressing to her. She has found that her voice was and is heard, her parents

understand her better, and that the other people present have responded in ways that make her secure and able to take on trying to work out school life more successfully. There were difficult moments in the meeting but they were used to create a good way forward. She is looking forward to a further meeting, in three weeks time, between her, the mother and father and the two teachers that were at this meeting.

Present at the meeting were two school teachers, the head teacher of the school, a family social worker, a school nurse, a school child who had also brought with her one of her closest friends from her class and the mother and father of the child. They have just participated in a meeting of those involved and concerned about problems that the child was having at school. We call these first meetings a meeting of those people who are ***THE-SYSTEM-OF-CONCERN or THE SYSTEM-IN-FOCUS-FOR-THE-TIME-BEING.***

How the people described here or many other people with whom we have worked got to this position, from one in which they felt stuck, hopeless, unable to go forward not knowing what to do next, is our focus for discussion. We will use a variety of examples similar to that described above to illustrate the ways we work to reach a conclusion which is en-nobling and empowering so that people are able to go forward in ways that they describe as liberating and fruitful.

ON MEETING A NEW CULTURE, NOT KNOWING AND BLIND DATING..........

A blind date.....   Imagine that friends of yours have an idea that there is someone they know whom they think that you should meet, perhaps because they think that you are lonely, or there is something missing in your life; someone who would enjoy your company and who they think that you would like. Imagine they have told you that the person they want you to meet is from a very different culture from your own. At this point you may be a little apprehensive but possibly

also intrigued. Your curiosity is likely to lead to you asking questions of yourself and of the other person. Likewise, that person will be asking similar or related questions. All three parties to the meeting may be forming ideas and stories about the others and the possibilities of where the meeting may lead.

This is similar to the position both clients and professionals can often find themselves in when we and they meet each other for the first time. All those involved may have hopes and expectations, they will be curious or uncertain and sometimes fearful about each other. For some there may have been a long history of involvement with professionals leading to apathy or despair. Many things may be influencing the way each person approaches such a meeting.

Blind dates and first meetings can be special, mysterious, exhilarating, frightening and more. We regard them as profound. They are also not something we can know about beforehand. We believe that we go into them with an attitude of **not knowing.** This is what Keats called "negative capability". He describes this as, "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" [1] So we are concerned with finding ways to make them useful and successful.

When we meet an unknown person, as on a blind date, we often begin to make interpretations of that person. Our interpretations, assessments and judgements of the other are usually based on many of our own assumptions and prejudices. Clifford Geertz talks of the necessity of making sense of other's behaviour in terms of the **practices of their own culture** rather than our beliefs about them.

>".........the study of interpretive culture represents an attempt to
>
>come to terms with the diversity of the ways that human beings
>
>construct their lives in the act of leading them..............

To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes."[2]

We see all meetings as *meetings of people-in-culture.* Whatever the group of people we are meeting with, even when they seem to be people from what we call our own culture, we look upon each group of people we meet as having a unique culture; a culture with its own practices, ways of talking, its own conventions of language, its own coherence and logic about the way in which its lives. We find the definition of culture used by Donal Carbaugh very useful here. He describes culture as those practices in any community which are widely available, deeply felt and part of the moment by moment interactions and relationships of people in everyday life [3]. We are keen to ensure that our meeting should be a meeting in which respect for that culture will be inherent. Giving attention to culture will, amongst other things, involve attention to gender, race, religion, class and other elements such as practices and ways of living which go to making up the richness of how people we meet with, live. We often observe that, when professionals act as experts without careful attention to the culture of the group they are working with, their assistance is experienced as colonising and thus alienating and usually less useful than it might be [4]. So we approach the meeting and engage with the uniqueness of people-in-culture with curiosity, caution, wonder and a sense of awe at their unique ways of living.

When a blind date has been arranged both of the people or parties who are going to participate in the meeting will be thinking about what may happen. The people coming to a meeting have their

4

own questions and expectations as much as we may have. We have learnt to appreciate that families and involved professionals prepare for a meeting in much the same way as we do. Often we tended to forget this or not to give it as much attention as we should have done. Now we highlight this aspect of our work. We ask the person who is arranging the meeting, usually the referring person, to discuss with those coming what their questions are about. For example, who is coming to the meeting? Why they are there? What they would like them to know and what might occur at the meeting? We encourage those participating in the meeting to prepare what they want out of the meeting and also any suggestions about how we might work in the meeting. This is then discussed and checked out as part of the context and contract creation at the beginning of the meeting. If we ignore this we are in danger of reasserting our position of power as colonising agents. A blind date gives all the parties in a meeting the right to ask questions and to get information. At the same time it gives all the people participating in such a meeting a duty to be respectful of each other, which helps to create greater equality between all those involved.

If you were to start thinking about meeting with an unknown person on a blind date, what sort of questions occur to you? Perhaps you will have questions and thoughts about meetings and blind dates, perhaps the last blind date you went on didn't work out or led to an exciting future relationship. What are the other person's views of blind dates? What are their view of us? What are society's notions about such meetings? What are your hopes, expectations and fears? What do you feel in terms of your power position? If, for example, your friend has an idea that you are lonely, how might this affect your relationship with the person you are meeting? Will the other person feel sorry for you and put you in a one down position, and is this a useful position to be in at the start of a meeting with strangers? These are some of the questions that might go through your mind.

As Systemic workers, whenever we meet with new clients, it is like a blind date that we have had

a **_gracious invitation_** to join. We try to take into account many of the above ideas so that the meeting becomes en-nobling and empowering both for the clients we meet and ourselves. Therefore before we meet any new client system, we like to think through some of the implications of the meeting for both the client group and ourselves. How can we best en-noble them so that they feel they are respected and that the power differentials which may be there as part of meeting with us can be addressed? What gender issues may affect us? What effect will the gender of the interviewer have on the relationships created? What are the stories around our service and us as professionals? How are we thought about in terms of power and competence? How does our service fit with other services in the peoples' lives?   What is the meaning of the service? Is it a mental health provision, is it private or is it a social services meeting. What effect will this meaning have on the clients?

When preparing for meetings we attend to what the meaning of the meeting itself may have for all the participants. Do the clients, whether they are professionals or others come with a sense of failure at having to come? It is important to understand how the meeting came about; to consider their fantasies about us, as well as ours about them; the expectations and hopes, the different agendas that may be being brought to this meeting.

For our part, as systemic workers we, formally, make time before meetings to create and develop our emotional relationship and our general way of approaching those we are about to meet by cultivating our thinking and sensitivity to their unique culture of living. This is discussed more fully in the chapter on "Systemic Story-Telling". We do this to create possibilities for elaboration and improvisation in the meeting.

There are all sorts of first meetings that the systemic worker may become involved in. She may act as a consultant to a system. She may well be seeing an individual or a family. There may be meetings that result from the sort of Referral Meeting already discussed in the previous chapter.

6

Whatever the meeting there are some general principles that are helpful to think about. First meetings have a variety of implications for a systemic worker. It may be that they act as a consultant to the system, empowering those already involved to go on by generating a positive context of concern. It may also be the first meeting of a series of therapy sessions that will involve different configurations of people within the system.

THE CONTEXT OF THE FIRST MEETING

In our first meeting we try to create a context which will lead to new meanings and ways forward for those involved in a situation which is surrounded by a number of concerned people.

> "Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all. This
> is true not only of human communication in words but also of all
> communication whatsoever, of all mental process, of all mind......"
> **5**

There will be many threads interwoven in the co creation of the context of the first meeting. The organisation of and invitations to first meetings has been discussed previously. A general principle would be to start big and include as many as possible from amongst those who are concerned or involved with their concerns. One of the many reasons for starting with a larger group is to try and understand the context in which the concerns arise. To do this we make use of two sets of ideas. First, that concerns, problems and difficulties arise when they are brought forth in language. Second that there is an agreement between those involved in the problem creating conversations that there is a problem to be addressed. The conversations that have led up to a referral, the people who have participated in these conversations, the effects on the participants, and their responses, all create the context in which the concerns arise and in which they can be felt as meaningful.

Often the behaviour which is being defined as problematic is something about which there are strong societal or cultural beliefs as, for example, when there may be cultural norms about bringing up of children which clash with the laws of a particular society or host culture. The meaning of the behaviour and practices in the culture and how they relate to the legal system are part of the context in which the concerns emerge as a preoccupation and need for further action. By starting with a big group those who are concerned can be heard and can hear each other. In our experience this creates a way for the emergence of a new context in which the behaviour is given a different meaning and will allow and enable different responses from all those participating. Thus our belief would be not to move the symptom from its context as that is where it make sense; re-solution becomes possible as the meaning of concern changes from being potentially pathologising to concern being relational and caring.

CO-CREATING CONTEXTS IN THE PROCESS OF A MEETING

There are some general considerations that we believe can make these meetings useful experiences for all those involved in trying to overcome difficulties or puzzles. We try to do all the work about the context of the meeting in a style of negotiation. We give an out line here of some of the things which we think it is important to negotiate.

CONTEXT, CONTRACTS AND INFORMED CONSENT: RESPECTING AND CLARIFYING PRIVATE AND PUBLIC DOMAINS

Co-creating contracts for work involve many dimensions and interests. One, which we have found particularly important involves ensuring that people feel that they have given their informed consent to what is happening as a meeting progresses. We define this as one of the essential

strands being interwoven in the context as it emerges through the interactions in a meeting. In those first meetings where there is a mix of both professionals and family we negotiate an understanding that our contract is for:

*   ***exploration of the concerns*** of those who have come to the meeting

*   the ***purpose of mutually finding the best way forward for the future.***

We have found it important to be clear both with ourselves and with those who come to meeting that there is NO contract for what might be called therapy or consultation to any of the parties involved. By this we mean that we try to avoid entering unnecessarily into the private affairs or lives of those who come. We usually keep the meeting focused, enabling all the voices of those participating to be heard, expressing their concerns and worries. Then we work with them in the way that they relate with each other to create a way forward. Our task is not to sort out relationships in the family or between social workers, or between teachers in a school or between other professionals. These could all be done separately if requested after a first meeting.

Thus what is being explored is the context in which the concerns arise in order that new ways forward evolve. The family has agreed with the referrer to come to a meeting to explore their concerns. It may well be that the issues have been discussed between the family and different professionals in their specific contexts. Everyone who comes to the meeting will exist in different domains, for examples, domains as parents, domains as teachers, domains as social workers or domains as psychiatrists. These Domains carry with them responsibilities and demands for what sorts of action could and should be taken both in the future as well as in the past. From the very beginning of the meeting and throughout the process of a meeting we find it important to be aware of the different interests, agendas, rights, duties and obligations of all those who are present. These interests relate to the domains within which each of those participating in the meeting live and work. These possibilities for action could involve admission to a psychiatric

unit, a children's home, a foster home, a treatment home or therapeutic community, admission to police custody or a secure centre. Other possible actions might include programmes of training, psychological testing, further education, boarding school and the like [6].

There may be things that are considered private to certain relationships and contexts and some that have become public through conversations in a number of different contexts. The family or client have not usually agreed to having the private made public in this context, that is, they have not agreed to therapy at this point in time. Importantly the first meeting needs to be seen as an exploration of multi-system interaction and there should be a respect for the privacy and integrity of the different systems which are in the room. For instance, problems within the professional system may well be evident: disagreements between the workers and their management; different disciplinary styles within a staff group; professionals wanting special services for their client which management will not agree to. There is not a contract for us to explore these issues in this context. It would not be appropriate to make public these private professional issues. At the end of a meeting, when we make future plans, consultation to the professional system involved could be offered as one of the possible ways forward. In the same way, during this meeting, it may become evident that are many disagreements in the family that one might feel are relevant to the issues which are being explored. We do not have consent to enter a therapeutic relationship at this stage. We can observe it and comment on how the worrying behaviour makes sense to us in this context and then offer further therapy or consultation to the family at a later time. The family is then in a position to give their consent.

Sometimes, it is aspects of the relationship between a professional and a family that needs to remain in the private domain. When we have mistakenly not respected this, professionals, the family or both may feel exposed and thus defensive. One such example involved a meeting attended by a mother, her son the social worker, the police, the school teacher and ourselves.

Without realising it we started exploring the details of the work the social worker had been doing with the boy. The social worker was very close to the boy and had, in may ways become very like an alternative father. One of the consequences of this was that the social wore felt exposed and humiliated, having his work laid bare in front of the police and the teacher. The mother and the boy then defended the social worker and initially rejected our offer to be involved and work with them. Only after a considerable amount of further work were we able to gain an engaging relationships with them for further work. Had we been more attentive to the importance of giving attention to the private and public domain in the relationship between these people we could have been involved much earlier and reduced considerable distress and discomfort.

This is an ethical and aesthetic position with a balance of, and respect for, private and public domains for every group in the meeting. These are some of the ways that we try to ensure that power issues within the meeting are addressed so that the family and the professionals feel that their privacy is respected and that consent for further work has to be sought and given.

FIRST MEETINGS WITH A FAMILY, COUPLE OR INDIVIDUAL

If the first meeting is with the family, a couple or an individual alone, and without the presence of other professionals, the same principles of exploring the context and conversations around the concerns pertains. Who was first concerned, whom did they talk to about their anxiety, what was the response, what ideas have they, what explanations as to why the behaviour and why there is so much concern. By exploring the journey of the problem, during which concerns emerged and became a preoccupation, a great deal of new information may arise. The problems and difficulties presented by the family can begin to be seen as concerns. Each member's participation and connections with their family and their living context becomes evident making the concerns part of relationships rather than restricted to an individual.

CONTEXT MARKERS

Bateson [7] draws attention to the way in which changes in meaning come about through marking out one context as different from another.

"...certainly, in human life and probably in that of many other organisms, there occur signals whose major function is to *classify* contexts."

Bateson calls these *context markers.* He identifies three important context markers namely those of *time, place, and definition of relationship* [8]. We have added *content* to these three as an important marker of context. In our work with people we negotiate clearly and respectfully the creation of the working context by giving close attention to these four context markers.

DEFINITION OF RELATIONSHIP AS A MARKER OF CONTEXT

When everyone has arrived we customarily welcome and thank them all for coming. We begin by introducing ourselves. For example, "I am, ..., I will be chairing the meeting , I have a colleague here who will be working with me, during our consultation. We explain that the colleague is there to help us in our explorations, to pick up on things that we might miss, to be slightly outside the discussion so as to be able to bring in new ideas and make different connections. We also explain that there may be times when we might find it useful to take breaks during the meeting to take stock and think about how we are getting on. Similarly, if the colleague thinks of things they would like to contribute, they may well interrupt and we will have a discussion. Discussions may either take place in the presence of all those at a meeting or sometimes we will withdraw to have a brief shorthand private discussion which wold not be particularly meaningful for those present. Towards the end of the meeting we will usually take a 10 - 15 minute break to try to make sense of and understand what has been talked about and then have some plans and ideas as to a way forward.

Introductions: Everyone in the group is invited to introduce themselves by name and describe their role in relation to the referred person. When introducing themselves what they want to be called in the meeting is negotiated; whether they wish to be addressed by their first name or surname. The privileges and duties and responsibilities of any member of he meeting are clarified. If, for instance, a foster care officer is there the reason s/he is there should be made explicit. If one parent has particular legal responsibilities for the children talked about this is made explicit.

TIME AS A MARKER OF THE CONTEXT

We, together, arrive at an understanding of how long the meeting will be. We are specific, for example, that the meeting will last no longer than this length of time eg one and a quarter hours. We usually find that an hour and a quarter to an hour and a half is sufficient.

We also talk about this as a time for new beginnings, reflections, ensuring that all voices of concern are heard; a time for finding new ways forward in relationships for the future. We talk about this as a time for us to co-create new meanings and understanding which will lead to new ways of relating with each other.

CONTENT OF THE MEETING AS A MARKER OF CONTEXT.

Aims and purposes of the meeting.

These are stated in broad terms: we are all here to try and understand what has been happening, and to make sense of and communicate to the whole network each person's involvement and their concerns. We hope by the end of the meeting that we will all have some understanding of

the symptomatic, problematic or concerning behaviour and have other ideas of a way forward. If there are other purposes for the meeting like the preparation of a court report or recommendations for care etc. then these should be made clear.

Confidentiality.

A contract with group members about the confidentiality of the meeting should be negotiated. Everyone should be told clearly what the limits to confidentiality are, who will get information about this meeting if they are not present at the meeting. At this stage it is important to clarify what can be told to whom, and if there are things that become privileged information that the family or professionals do not want to go to another context, then they need to be able to say this. One family was very clear that they had to be sure that we would not report back to social security any information about their hobbies. We clarified that this was not a context for checking up on them, but one for trying to understand how the family and professionals related with each other.

Within the context marker of **content** we make it clear that if it any time we ask questions about anything that any participant in a meeting would rather not answer or wishes to remain unspoken, that they should alert us to this fact. We try to state very clearly that there is information which people are happy to speak about openly and thus make public and that there is information which should remain private for the time being and in this context. In our view, what is public and what is private is always related to particular contexts and relationships. There may be other meetings in which the private or public would be very differently understood. For example, the private could be come public in a smaller group of people where this might be seen as appropriate or useful by the participants or where the consequences could be worked out before making the decision to go public.

Once the contract and thus the context has been set and everyone introduced, it is useful to think about this meeting as a meeting to understand the concerns of all those involved, including the context in which the concern arises. By giving meaning to the concern - both the behaviour causing the concern and the response to the behaviour - the meeting turns into a re-solving

meeting. This evolution takes place through the meeting as the interviewer tries to get a common language and understanding of different perspectives of the concerns people have arising out of their different contexts, domains and relationships.   The general theme of the questioning is to think about, in what conversations, with whom did each person first feel concerned, and what problems of living does each participant in the drama encounter through their concerns, as they have defined them.

The first meeting is intended as a meeting of those involved in the conversations around the concerns, namely the system of influence or concern. We find this important however many people actually attend the meeting. Closely connected with this is the attention we give to those who are unable to attend but are often equally important. We usually name and identify either at the beginning of the meeting or as their importance emerges in the process of an interview. In addition, we ask questions about them and what they would think about or say to the discussion as it progresses. Often we will place empty chairs to mark out their importance and keep their presence in mind.

PROCESS AND QUESTIONING

As we approach a first meeting we are acutely aware of a number of considerations which are part of what we intend to achieve in the encounter between ourselves, professionals, families and others who may be present. To facilitate the possibilities for change we consider that we need to give people a very different experience of what these meetings can be like as well as a very different experience of each other. We want to turn blame into curiosity and understanding; we want to give hope and a future to those who are stuck and bewildered; we want to co create joint work and clarity where confusion abounds. John Dewey in "Experience and Nature" [9] outlines a way of thinking about experience which we find useful in our practice. He views experience, not

as some given, but as something which we learn and do. Experience is seen as a way of ***participating in*** the flow of events which surround us. So, in this view, experience refers to something that is socially created through conversations. We learn to experience the world in which we live, the relations in which we are involved through cultural, family and societal traditions. So we may say that women experience life differently from men; christians experience life differently from Muslims, and so on.

The process of questioning relates to this notion of experience in very interesting ways. When we ask questions of people as they answer, emotions, relationships and the like are invoked in the living flow of experience. Thus through questioning you experience life. In the process of describing an event you potentially experience the event differently. Thus the stories we tell may begin to change or the potential is established for the event itself to take on a new meaning and significance. In a meeting where a number of people are present the process of questioning creates an interesting dimension to experience. As one person overhears another giving an answer to questions that person may begin to experience the person speaking as different from their preconceptions. Similarly, if someone else is being described, that person or the person making the description may be experienced differently. As these changes of experience take place, relationships change and patterns of the way people act with each other, change. The practice of interviewing may be said to be designed to change the ***lived or living experience*** of those who participate in the interview such that radical alterations in people's interactions come about.

In order to begin the process of making sense of the context in which the concerns have arisen, it is helpful to start by asking the referrer about their concerns and their involvement to date. We start with the referrer as they are the person in the system who has often been designated to refer on and as such may be the holder of the anxieties at this point in time. If the meeting is attended by a family or smaller group we similarly ask an open question such as, "Who is most

concerned?" We follow this with asking about their concerns and thus move round the group. The questioning about the concerns and how each participant views it continues around the group. Who is asked next is determined by the feedback given from the previous answer, and what seems to fit the logic of the system and the interviewer's curiosity at that point in time. In this way we enter the grammar of the group of people attending an interview, using their language and following their agendas. This questioning should continue until all who are attending the meeting, including the referred person, have contributed and given their perspective of their concerns.

RELATING TO THE WAY PEOPLE TALK AND THE THINGS THAT THEY SAY

When we meet a series of conversations develop and as the interview progresses connections are made for all those who are present. We find it useful when negative statements are made to give them a more positive frame with an appreciation of the context from which the statements are being made. For example, if an adolescent complains that a parent "Always nags at me about my homework", we might follow this by asking something like, "How long has your parent been so concerned about your future and success so that they have been taking such responsibility for trying to get you to do your homework?"

> "A new word is like a new seed sown on the ground of discussion"
> [10]

The exploration of the anxiety experienced and the explanations about everyone's concerns often has very different meanings for the different people involved. At the end of this process participants often think about the concerns they had and their reactions to it very differently. A different story has been lived during the session where they have had the opportunity to broaden the context of their understanding.

While this is taking place there is a process of questioning and listening to feedback and making connections that the team members should be very alert to. During this time it is preferable to talk about worries and concerns and not problems and pathology. Concern has an interactional quality to it that takes into account the struggles and anxiety experienced by the carers and professionals. It also puts them in a position of care and help as opposed to complaining. Professionals participating in these meetings have subsequently told us that their position of concern and frustration has been appreciated.

By asking all involved in and around the issues causing concern, including the young person and possibly even his/her friends, there is a challenging of the power basis of the way authority is exercised in conversations: everyone is given a voice. This process may also challenge the stories that constrain, which are often the well repeated stories and which carry particular conviction - eg he is delinquent, amoral and unhelpable. For example, depending on the circumstances, we might ask questions like, "What do you think would happen if the delinquent behaviour stopped?" "Who gets most excited about your son's delinquent behaviour or who gets most upset about it?" One might ask the person "causing" the trouble, "Do you think that your parents, friends, teachers or others are sometimes proud of the things that you do?" or "How come you're so good at getting caught?" Through the challenging of these stories new connections and stories emerge.

As this information is being gathered any contradictions, differences and similarities should be questioned or commented on. For example, a mother, talking about her daughter during and interview, said that she knew her child "inside out". The interviewer then followed this by asking how the mother made sense of not being able to understand the daughter's truanting from school. Other examples of questioning and commenting could include questions like, "How do you understand that your son is so confident when he is being delinquent whilst he is totally

lacking in confidence when working at school?" "How come your daughter is so much in control of how little she manages to eat, but not able to control herself so that she could stay out of hospital?" Or with a person who was depressed we asked, "Since he became depressed he has been very good at getting a lot of people to be concerned about him, who do you think he learnt this ability from?"

Often there are contradictions over the information being given. This can usefully be fed back to the participants as the therapist's confusion: "I'm sorry I don't understand, I can't put these two bits of information together, how do various members of the group make sense of this." One example of this was in a family who kept on saying how close they were, understanding each other very well. In the questioning it became clear that both mother and father were perpetually out at work and the children, two adolescents lived very independent lives and no one talked to anyone else in the family so that there were considerable secrets in the family. We asked the question,"You say you are all so close and yet everyone lives totally separate lives, we don't understand how these two stories fit together, can you help us understand?" The youngest daughter immediately answered that the problem was that "We are trying to be close because we are so separate". On hearing this the mother was immediately freed to begin to ask questions about what different members of the family were doing with their lives whereas she had been totally constrained before. Another example where we questioned about contradictions involved the school teachers describing how uncontrollable and untrustworthy the young boy was in class. Earlier, in the interview, the story the father had given was that he trusted the youngster to do some quite dangerous and responsible things because he was always so obedient. When we asked how they understood the difference in behaviour, the father was eventfully able to describe how he was always extremely strict with the young lad, never letting him get away with anything. At the same time it emerged that the boy enjoyed doing the tasks with his father because the father did it in a way that helped him learn a lot, so that the boy enjoyed the relationship with the father. Listening to this conversation the school staff made some useful connections from this questioning without being told what to do. So we see that continually asking for explanations and

20

attributions for behaviour can be very useful for all involved in the meeting.

In order to create a different story connections between ideas and people are usefully positively connoted - "The teacher is always on his back" can be reframed[11] as "So the teacher cares a great deal - Does the teacher care so much about everybody else or more so for you?...........How do you manage to get so many people to be so concerned about you?" Reframing and not blaming is very useful as a way of beginning to tell different stories about the relationships between people. It brings out differences which create different meanings and understandings of people in the meeting. It also helps resolve some of the isolation that the identified client may be feeling. Adults or professionals are also helped to understand how the situation has arisen (the story lived), through their participation. The stance is not one of blaming, but understanding the context so that they then can decide to take different action, having reached different understandings.

Through the questioning, we find that it is important to look at the future in a positive way, bringing out all the participants' end-in-view so that there is a sense of a future and this gives a way for all to act to achieve it, particularly when the meaning of the symptomatic behaviour is brought out, alternative ways of acting, for all concerned, becomes evident.

These new stories emerge as they are co-created within the session through the process of questioning and the making of connections that are not expected. Connections are also being made between the descriptions and the explanations given. Questioning is an immensely powerful process as are the answers which mutually influence each other in the co creation process.

For example, in one family, the eldest son, Mark, rang asking for an appointment for the family because the younger son was very sad and depressed. The older boy was at university studying

psychology and felt he had to act in a professional and concerned way towards members of his family. On the telephone he feared that it would be impossible to get the rest of the family to the appointment. When asked why, he described a family pattern, held particularly strongly by the father, that "as a family we always cope, problems are kept in the family and we don't talk about them outside our family". The son felt that his father would never agree to discussing the privacy of the family life with someone outside. Asking the son about his relationship to his father he told us that despite arguments, his father was very respectful and interested in the psychology that the son was studying. We wondered whether this respect might provide an entre to an invitation such that it might be more possible for the father to respond. The father responded tentatively whilst expressing anxiety about his family's privacy.

In the meeting, attended by the mother, the father and the four sons and a professional friend who had been very influential, (a grandmother living in the family home declined to attend) Mark introduced his concerns as his brother's sadness and depression. The questioning followed this theme exploring who Luke shows his sadness to and how they respond. Both the mother and the father responded with getting depressed themselves. When asked who they showed their sadness to they said that they both kept it to themselves. Doing this resulted in withdrawing from activities which were seen as social and instead burying themselves in work activities. Following the theme of work activities it emerged that some of the most creative times were when the parents were in the "isolation which they took upon themselves" when feeling distressed and sad. Luke's sadness was then experienced not as something odd which should be avoided but as part of a family pattern whereby sadness and creativity are closely linked. The change in meaning of sadness and depression to giving energy and creativity was an important change in the lived experience, during the interview, both for the family and for the family friend who had been begging the parents to get professional help for Luke and for themselves. At the same time the family experienced the interview as affirming the validity and value of a family pattern. Sadness and suffering, in this family, came to be seen, during the interview, not as negative but as a form

22

of struggle, leading to creativity. Luke subsequently reported that he felt validated and understood and incorporated into the family rather than being isolated as the "sad one". The father ended the meeting announcing that he felt that the family's privacy had been respected because the questions about relationships rather than individual culpability and intentionality had shown respect for each person as a loyal member of the family.

During the session the desire of the elder son to get his family involved, in a therapeutic consultation, became evident as a continuing battle between father and elder son. The battle could be described as the clash between their different stories about the family's life. So the son was very keen to have us as fellow professionals on his side. We found a way through the interview to identify both the son's concern and the father's concern as a desire that each had to help to create a better life for the family each in their own unique way. So instead of the son being seen as disloyal, he was seen by the father as following the family tradition of going for the best, whilst at the same time the son could see the father as committed to the good of the family by wanting to protect the members' privacy. So these two men were able to become complementary in relation with each other rather than remain competitive. Discussing the meaning of the meeting created a way forward for an exploration of the context of concern about the younger brother.

TAKING BREAKS AND USING THE TEAM OF COLLEAGUES

If it appears difficult to make connections or the interview does not seem to be creating new stories, it is important to stop and take a break and perhaps question the context. It maybe that there is a confusion of contexts or that people have come with very different expectations and understandings of the meeting. It may also be that you are marrying your assumptions or deeply held views, this is where having team members there to help you make connections to what is

emerging is so useful. Sometimes interviews feel uncomfortable because someone has been inadvertently negatively reframed and this must be addressed. Another instance where discomfort may be experienced is if the public/private boundary has been transgressed, and therapy or work in the private domain has been inadvertently strayed into.

During the interview we find that it is helpful to pay a lot of attention to process - who is speaking most or for whom - who is questioning, who is defending, who is protecting - making the connections across systems and explanations, this will create new stories for both sides. These new stories are experienced in the session and become a new reality, they are what we call a "lived experience ". They are also witnessed by those at the meeting so the new lived and told stories can be related to in the present and future interactions.

In summary we may say some of the following points are ones we find it useful to remind ourselves of. All meetings are characterised by the questioning process. Questions are constantly asked to give information not only to the interviewer but to all the participants. Questions are also asked as a way of bringing out similarities and differences, beliefs and practices in the different individuals present. It is a way of exploring the coherence of the system, the coherence between people's beliefs and their actions in certain contexts. These are often not overt or clearly thought through. Through the questioning process different ideas emerge that create a different understanding or story which gives each participant a choice of what action to take in the future is something which we negotiate together. Questioning rather than providing answers and solutions for people respects their own ability to find the solutions for themselves, those that fit them. It becomes an ennobling experience for the future.

CONCLUDING AND FUTURE CONTEXTS

By the end of the meeting hopefully the problem will be perceived differently and connections made which will allow those present to see their part in the story. They may have begun to see how the new understandings will require different action from themselves. The beginnings of creating a resolution and starting to live a different story has been experienced during the session, different interactions are inevitable.

An example from a meeting.

Recently in such a meeting it became apparent that the school psychologist felt that the youngster for whom the meeting had been called was a "poor neglected little waif", who never had clean clothes, looked grubby and miserable. He defended and spoke up for the young lad whenever there was criticism of any sort. The school felt the child was way out of control and utterly disruptive in lessons. However, they had been influenced by the school psychologists ideas of him being a deprived child that they had to go easy on. The mother felt that the school were not pulling their weight to help the boy with his fairly severe reading difficulty. The content of the school psychologist's, school's and the parents' concerns was very different. Previously there had been several meetings between the psychologist and the mother, but very little headway had been made as there had been no creation of a common language or understanding of the other's concerns. The meaning of dirt to the educational psychologist reminded him of post-war deprivation, neglect and poverty, whereas for the mother it meant that boys will be boys and they are always scruffy. The meaning of learning problems also was very different. The mother believed that verbal ability and intelligence went together, father left school at the age of 14 unable to read or write very well, but had a very successful unconventional business which the young boy helped him with. The parents had argued a great deal about their son which resulted in mother getting involved with the school. Her need to have her son labelled as learning disordered had become part of seeing herself as a good mother. The school felt free after the meeting to use the usual disciplinary methods used for other youngsters in the school, they realised that they had been rather soft when trying to control this very lively youngster. No further

input from the systemic therapist was necessary, as all had witnessed the changed story and now could relate to the mother as a good mother. The witnessing of new lived stories in the session predicts well for the future as the story becomes part fo the new lived identity.

At the end of the meeting a plan of everyone's future involvement is discussed. This may include the systemic worker in further work with the family, school, social worker etc either together or separately. If the meeting has been one where a number of professionals have met with a family, a clear negotiation of what work or role different parts of the system are going to take should occur. If the family are to be seen for therapy, this should be negotiated so that consent is given to enter a different sort of domain and conversation the next session, where the private between the family members becomes slightly more public with the therapist. Similarly if work is to be done with the school or social services this has to be clarified. Who within and without of the meeting needs to be informed of what is happening, both now and in the future. A discussion about the best way of doing that, whether by letter, a meeting or phone clarifies communication. Dissemination of information about future meetings and progress should be planned, so all know what to expect from others in the future. The frequency of this feedback should also be clarified.

Alternatively the workers already involved, or the individual or the family, may have made enough new connections or have a very different story that will enable them to continue living in a more harmonious way or working together to achieve this. Thus, as in the example discussed above, making the input of the systemic therapist unnecessary. Letting go and trusting individuals, families or other professionals to find their own solutions is part of the systemic stance of ennoblement.

This brings us full circle. A group of people are leaving a social services office......... or an educational psychologist's office......... Working as we have described it frequently happens that entrenchment and frustration is dissolved, life has become meaningful and with new energy to relate in the emerging new story and the relationships and emotions that go with it.......

26

The ending of Shelley's Prometheus Unbound we feel gives expression to some of our emotions about the work we are engaged in describing here; to co-create hope.......

"To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;

To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;

    To defy power which seems omnipotent;

To love, and bear, to hope till Hope creates

From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;

Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;

This like thy glory, Titan, is to be

Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;

This is alone Life, Joy, empire and Victory." [12]

For a very useful description of working with people when the referral might be initiated from schools we have found Rod Slater and Ann Webb's paper very useful.

Webb A (1990)   A Systems Approach to School Referrals

Slater R   Human Systems Vol 1: 99-114

Anderson H (1988)   Human Systems as Linguistic Systems: Preliminary and Evolving Ideas

Goolishian H. A.   about the Implications for Clinical Theory.

Family Process 27: 371-394

Peter Bruggen and Charles O'Brian's book on Helping Families is a mine of information and practice relating to Residential Establishments, ways of working with admission and discharge. They present a whole range of possible way of meeting people in different arrangements of meetings of a variety of sorts.

Bruggen Peter (1987) Helping Families. Systems, residential and agency responsibility

O'Brian Charles   London Faber and Faber

For useful papers on Consultation Skills and Tools for family and multi-helper meetings.

Castellucci A   Instability and Evolutionary Change

Fruggeri L   in a Psychiatric Community

Marzari M   Applications of Systemic Family Therapy: the Milan Approach pp 181-189.

Matteini M (1988)   Larger Systems. Beyond a Dualistic Approach to the Process of Change.

The Irish Journal of Psychology 9:1 pp. 183-194

Roberts et al   Reflecting Team Consultations

Journal of Systemic and Strategic Therapy 8:2 & 3 pp 38 -46

Williams A (1989)   The Problem of the Referring Person in Consultancy.

Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapy 8:2 & 3 pp 16-21

LISTS OF QUESTIONS

What have you done that has gone well?

What have you done that could have gone better?

With whom have you had meetings already - which went well?

Are there others who you wish could have come to meetings but were unable to come?

What are the concerns that have made you feel that it would be useful to talk to our agency?

Of the things that concern you most who else shares the same concerns?

If this was not a problem would you still be concerned?

Are there area in the person's life that are going well? and give no rise for concern?

How does the school see...?

How do the peer group relate to.....?

Before .... would you have seen this as a problem and been concerned about his behaviour?

Who have you talked to about your concerns and what has their response 30en?

How often has it been necessary to inform the parents?

Do you think that the parents share the same concerns or have they others?

Who do you think that the parents have found most helpful?

What effect do you think the situation had on brothers and sisters?

How do you understand what the person HE?SHE does?

What explanation do you give yourself for what happens?

Do you give what the person does a name.... what do you call it?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1.   Ward A (1963)   **John Keats The Making of a Poet** p 162
                                        Secker and Warburg London

2. Geertz C. (1993)   **Local Knowledge** p 16
                                        Fontana Press London

3. Carbaugh D.   Get the reference for this.

4. McCarthy I C &   **Mis-taken love: Conversation on the**
    Byrne N (1988)   **Problem of Incest in an Irish Context**
                                        Family Process 27: 181-199

5.   Bateson G. (1979)   **Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity. p 15**
                                        Wildwood House Ltd. London

6.   We are not in this chapter discussing those forms of action in detail. We have found that it is beneficial to try and keep people in the community working together a system of concern. However, where it becomes necessary for admission to be considered we have found that a ***planned admission*** facilitates the sharing of the concerns with those who have been previously involved, without taking over from them and excluding them. Planned admission are also beneficial in ensuring that family and professionals do not withdraw. For a fuller discussion of these aspects of the work we have found Peter Bruggen and Charles O'Brian,s work in **Helping Families** very useful and fruitful in use. The sections that we have found particularly useful include..........

7.   Bateson G. (1972)   **Steps to an Ecology of Mind pp 289 - 291.**
                                        Jason Aronson Inc Northvale New Jersey

        For Gregory Bateson's discussion of **time** as a context marker see Steps to An Ecology of Mind pp 288 & 289.

8.   We use the term "definition of relationship" in the sense described by Bateson (1972 p 298). "In ..... systems, involving two or more persons, where most of the important events are postures, actions, or utterances of the living creatures, we note immediately that the stream of events is commonly punctuated into contexts of learning by a tacit agreement between people of the nature of their relationship - or by context markers...." Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen talk of this as "the propensity persons have to define relationships with others as having particular attributes". They relate these to the concept of contracts. "There are four aspects to interpersonal contracts: boundaries, repertoires, valence and enmeshment. Boundaries identify the differences between we and they.......Repertoires denote the array of events that are legitimated within the contract.... Valence is the configuration of the affect for this contract, individuals' comparison level for

their social relations and the comparison level for alternative contracts they perceive as actually available. Enmeshment describes the extent to which persons identify themselves as within the system." From **"Communication, Action and Meaning. The creation of Social Realities.** W. Barnett Pearce & Vernon E. Cronen (1980) Praeger New York. p 133." For a further and detailed discussion of the concept as outlined by Bateson and then applied to the therapeutic context see **"Pragmatics of Human Communication - A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes.** Watzlawick P, Beavin Bavelas J, and Jackson Don D. pp 80 -94 WW Norton 1967 New York."

9.   Dewey J (1925/1958)   **Experience and Nature**
                                               Dover Publications Inc. New York

10.   Wittgenstein L (1980)   **Culture and Value.** p 2e
                                               Ed G. von Wright and trans, by Peter Winch.
                                               Oxford. Blackwell.

11.   Cronen V. and Lang W.P (**Language and Action: Wittgenstein and Dewey in the Practice of Therapy and Consultation** - in press) discuss the way in which reframing opens up new possibilities through bringing new dimensions and practices of living into focus through the changing of words and phrases. Each new word and phrase, as it were, potentially gives access to all the associations, emotions and ways of relating connected to that word or phrase. So changing a word or phrase may literally be said to change life.

12.   ed. Hutchinson T (1970)   **Shelley Poetical Works**
                                               from Prometheus Unbound p 268
                                               Oxford University Press London