

Feeding and fanning the winds of creative imagination

In a recent workshop the authors invited the participants to observe, in silence, what happened in the room for the next five to ten minutes. We, the authors, then proceeded to wander around the room, giving each other glances of various sorts, bending down, looking intently at something imagined on the floor, simulating picking up something precious, examining it, throwing it to each other, gazing out of the window. None of the details was prearranged. We felt our way, following and leading each other in a series of mimed gestures. We had no particular story which we were enacting, as one might in the game of charades. We simply moved. After some minutes we ended this miming play. We then proceeded to invite the workshop participants, in small groups, to create their stories of their observations of what had occurred in the room.

A fascinating array of stories was told. Some people quite simply told the story of two workshop leaders trying to make a point in their teaching. Amongst these stories there was amusement and delight at the imaginative moves of the workshop leaders. Others were irritated and told the story based on a desire that their participation on the workshop involved an expectation that there would be formal, didactic presentation and learning.

There were some groups who made up elaborate stories about two people walking on a beach and finding something precious which they shared with each other. Yet another set of stories involved describing beautiful parks and scenes of flowers in the spring. These groups commented that they had observed expressions of delight and joie-de-vivre on our faces. These stories tended to focus upon the two workshop leaders. One or two groups told stories which

included the workshop participants in their stories and incorporated something about the leaders and the participants in interaction. The stories related patterns of inter-action between us as workshop leaders and the participants. These groups looked at a kind of total gestalt of what had been occurring in the room. Their stories included notions explaining why the participants, in the workshop, all sat observing without anyone getting up to participate with the leaders in what they were doing. The stories which took a wider frame of observation were richer in their complexity and opened up greater possibilities for curiosity and fascination.

One of the points of interest for us as leaders, when we reflected upon it, was the emotional patterns interwoven in the way people in the different groups told their stories. As different groups told their stories we found ourselves affected, not only by the content of the story, but also by the emotions with which the telling of the story was accompanied. We also noted that members of the workshop related with us in ways that were closely congruent with the stories that they told and the emotions and feelings which went together with the stories. So, for example, the group that told a story expecting formal didactic presentation spent a good deal of the remainder of the day challenging and questioning us in our work. They did this during those occasions when we provided didactic presentations even though in these didactic presentations we were doing what they were asking for. Other groups, such as those who had taken a perspective which included the observers in their stories, took our ideas and elaborated upon them as we went through the day. We also noted, with interest, that there was a difference in the range of grammatical abilities¹ of the participants. Those with more elaborate stories tended to have a greater range of grammatical abilities, in that they tended to develop a wider range and a greater variety of stories. This variety was based on, and arose out of, moving from one perspective to another or connecting material together in a variety of different ways. These latter groups were no less challenging. What was striking was that they challenged and

questioned in ways which expanded understanding for both workshop participants and leaders and opened up new discussions and ideas.

STORIES, GIVING ACCOUNTS AND SYSTEMIC DESCRIPTIONS

**Perspectives and positions in conversations.
Feeding and fanning the winds of creative imagination**

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ABSTRACT

People who work in the human relations or helping industry are trained to influence, to get people to trust them, to act as if they know, to be the experts in how people should carry out their lives. Through training and practice they become extremely skilful in these abilities. They diagnose, they give advice, they influence people to think their way, they turn out clients who talk their way, use their language, buy into their philosophies. Intrinsic to all this is a problem about power and colonisation or what Paulo Freire calls "cultural invasion"². This paper argues for a stance for professionals in human relations called systemic story creation. This process is seen as an elaboration of what the Milan Associates refer to as "Hypothesising"³. We present here a discussion of why we engage in this practice and a variety of methods of living in the practice. Examples based on the sorts of families we have worked with are used to illustrate the practices being described. References at the end of the paper are designed to provide for those who wish to follow up the ideas and develop their practices further.

PERSONS AND UNITY

The authors, as workshop leaders, see the reactions of members of the workshop which we described above as an intriguing demonstration of a tenet which we have found increasingly useful in our work. The way we relate, the emotions *we live* in and *through which* we are in relationship, the stories we tell, the explanations or assumptions on which we base our observations of the world, are all of a unity. There is no space between emotions, explanations, assumptions and relationships. It is not that emotions and intellect are separate, but rather that they are all interwoven and of a piece, which is a complete unity in living and relating. So, for example, our practice is lived theory and our theory is lived practice.

We find this an important consideration when thinking about our work as systemic consultants, therapists, professionals and so on. If we see the *relationship* between ourselves and our clients, customers or service users as basic to the co-creation of change and relief of suffering and the resolving or dis-solving of problems, then our work is rendered more or less effective depending on our own range of ways of relating, of story telling and creation, of "emotioning" and feeling. We find it useful to think of this range of possibilities as *grammatical abilities*⁴. Just as in the grammar of a language there are rules, conventions and patterns of how words, sentences, paragraphs are put together, so in living there are "rules", conventions or patterns for how emotions, stories, intellect and relationships are put together in a unified whole. Using this metaphor of grammatical abilities, which we take from Wittgenstein⁵, we would say that we learn to tell stories, and do this according to conventions and patterns and "rules" which make the telling of the story meaningful and coherent. In the same way we learn to "do emotions" as part of a coherent flow in day to day living. The learning to "do emotions" is laid down in our cultural patterns over time. This sense of being laid down over

time Wittgenstein refers to as our "Weltbild" or "World-picture" This world picture is taken-for-granted, guiding the culture, "imparting significance here, withdrawing it there". This world picture is a unity:

"When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions"⁶

We have patterns and conventions of ways of relating. We would also add that our grammatical abilities simultaneously create a) constraints or limitations as well as b) affordances or opportunities in our possible range of ways of relating with others. All these are inter-related and we find the general term "grammatical abilities" useful in our understanding. So when working systemically we see it as useful and, often necessary, **to expand the range** of grammatical abilities with which we are able to engage when meeting people who come to us for help. One of the ways in which we do this is through what we have called systemic story creation.

SYSTEMIC STORY CREATION: GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF WHY WE ENGAGE IN THE PRACTICE

In our practice we consider that for effective therapy and consultation to take place it is important to develop a wide range of grammatical abilities. Developing these grammatical abilities enhances our work and enables change to take place more easily! We consider that this range of abilities needs to be developed, generally, as part of our practice as systemic professionals. However, maintaining a position consistent with a systemic approach to our work, we also consider that the range of grammatical abilities needs to be developed specifically, in **each case** that we work with and **at each stage** in the process of the work through time. One of the ways which we use to develop and enhance our grammatical abilities is through using time before taking any action, before, during and after any session, meeting or telephone call or other contact, to develop our stories and perspectives about the situations of the people with whom we meet. We do this because we find that, whatever happens, we tend

to have a series of basic premises arising out of a) our cultural beliefs and practices, b) our personal prejudices, c) our professional training, d) our moral positions in relation with certain strongly held views about life, e) our assumptions about what is mentally healthy or unhealthy, f) our beliefs about the way that families or other professionals should behave and so on, g) emotions that are or should be felt as appropriate to particular situations.

As professionals, we have explanations and theories as to why people behave the way they do.

These have arisen through our training and experience, from our professional organizations and from our peer groups. Many of these explanations become part of the dominant culture or dominant discourses in society. Thus, parts of these discourses are in the public domain, e.g. ideas of transference, attachment, ideas that you should express anger, that you should leave home, the idea that there is an identifiable grief process that you should go through after a loss and so on. In the creation of systemic stories what the interviewer and team in any piece of work begin to do, is to articulate aspects of these dominant discourses and their own prejudices and co-evolve new ways of talking, thinking, feeling and relating that go beyond to something new.

These beliefs, prejudices, moral values, emotions and the like are all forms of practice in which we relate with those who come to work with us in therapy and consultation. These beliefs, prejudices and the like all have what we would call "grammars". These "grammars" include gestures, attitudes, emotions, ways of talking and questioning which determine, as it were, how we relate and, in their turn, affect our clients and influence dramatically how useful we are able to be for them. Using systemic notions we see it as essential in our work to develop and go beyond the limitations which these considerations impose on our patterns of relating, our ability to do things usefully for our clients even though they may be unfamiliar and new to us. Therefore, we try to expand what we do through processes of systemic story creation which enhance, develop and create new grammatical abilities. This has the potential firstly, of freeing us to be able to be closer to the grammars of those who consult us such that we *enter* their

grammars. By this we mean understanding their stories through their own assumptions and patterns rather than our own. Secondly, having entered their grammars, systemic story creation enables us to begin to co-work with them to co-evolve new grammars through the creation of new stories, perspectives and patterns of connection which relate to the details of the ways they put their stories together. We find Wittgenstein's metaphor of our language as being like a city useful here.

"Our language can be seen as an old city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."⁷

Entering the grammar is, as it were, about learning to live in the "city" of people's worlds of stories; the stories are the city with all that living in it involves.

There is another central point in this process of systemic story creation. This point is connected with the aspect of what we would call ***learned-not-knowing***, which is an attitude which is paramount in our working practices. We act on the assumption that every meeting with any group, family or individual who comes to us, is a meeting with a uniquely individual culture. Each group, family or individual has its own unique history, ways of relating, collections of stories and moral orders. When we meet with any of these we assume that we are always novices, in a position of having to learn new grammars, ways of relating, new languages and new stories. We are, so we think, always in some sense in a ***learned-not-knowing*** position. We see this as strange, since we cannot act as if we know nothing at all. For, at the same time, we find that we know a great deal about ways of living, pathology, moral orders, ways of talking and the like. We also see ourselves as being a resource for the people who come to us; a resource which has grown out of the learning, experience and elaboration of our own grammatical abilities which we have gained from all those families, individuals and groups that we have already worked with. So we are both in a ***learned-not-knowing*** position and also in a ***knowing*** position. We see it in this way. To know nothing, in an

absolute sense, would mean that it would be impossible for us to know how to go on relating to any group, family, couple or individual. We paraphrase Wittgenstein⁸ in saying that **to know is to know how to go on** in the conversation. So when we relate we do so, as it were, based on our forms of knowing. Our interactions are what we know being lived out in practice. A major way in which we are able to enhance the **learned-not-knowing-ability**, so as to ensure that our forms of knowing do not cloud how we relate and so that we can work in the **learned-not-knowing** position, is through the practice of **systemic story creation**.

Systemic story creation is a way of giving attention to the unique details of any particular group, family or individual and connecting with, in advance of working with any group, the unique coherence of that group of people. We would say that systemic story creation enhances the sense of "negative capability"⁹ enabling us to go on in the not knowing position more fully and use-fully. This is a process which privileges our views as mere assumptions, trivial hypotheses, pre-judgements releasing us from **knowing** into the worlds and practices of **learned-not-knowing**. These worlds have been variously described as worlds of curiosity, irreverence, irony-to-the-discourse-in-progress, fascination, wonder, engaged-amaze-ment, prejudices and the like.¹⁰

We would say that through the process of **systemic story creation** as we call it, our curiosity will be raised: a sense of awe, wonder and respect created; a respect for the uniqueness of the system will be engendered; a fascination for the logic of the system may grow. So we approach our work with an attitude of joining the grammar of the client's world and then from within that world we try to create a different story with the client - a story or stories that is neither theirs as it was nor ours as it was.

This stance, arrived at through systemic story creation, guides the way you interpret every action and the answers given to questions, as you begin to enter into conversations with the

family or people with whom you might be working. The stance of being neutral to the traditional views but instead open and curious helps to get into the grammar of the family more quickly, listening and responding to the way they relate. A systemic construction is a construction about understanding the coherence of their grammar. It gets you away from blame - so you approach people with a sense of respect rather than approaching them from the rather critical, causal, individualistic and pathological frame many clients or referrers have at the start of therapy.

Systemic story creation provides a way of managing your own forms of self consciousness and emotions. Being aware of the emotional responses that the information, which emerges in a session, produces in the therapist and team is helpful. We find that powerful emotions tend to create a **uni-verse** rather than a **multi-verse**. As a result, if there are strong, deeply felt emotions or moral positions relating to the circumstances we are asked to work with, you get more easily stuck in the belief that there is only one reality or story. In such conditions, self consciousness and self reflexivity become all the more important. Thus the reflective process of creating systemic stories gives the space and opportunity of changing the worker so that she/he can do the job of creating new stories without the narrow constraints of the emotions and stories which are part of the worker's paraphernalia. So we might say that, due to systemic story creation, the worker enters the conversation with others, in a different position.

There are some writers in the systemic tradition whose style is to prefer not to engage in a systemic story creation processes. For them, the priority of the not knowing position is so important that they feel that to create systemic stories about the people with whom we work would interfere with that not knowing. Our style, on the other hand, is to find this unhelpful for it assumes that it is possible not to know in an absolute sense. We find that **to maintain** the not knowing way of relating it is important to engage in systemic story creation. Avoiding the creation of systemic stories potentially reinforces, often unknowingly, prejudices and dominant discourses which are part of our forms of knowing.

Steve de Shazer has been known to say that he goes to bed when he feels a hypothesis or what we would call a systemic story coming upon him¹¹. We would say that his whole approach to therapy is based on a series of global hypotheses - or stories - namely, that the solution predates the problem, or another story that the exceptions to the problem "are open to view, they are not seen by the client as differences that make the difference"¹² There is much further discussion of this that we could do. We would see these approaches of de Shazer as examples of particular hypotheses or stories. When we think that these particular hypotheses might be fruitful either for us as therapists or for our clients we use them. However, we are wary of universal global hypotheses, or stories. Rather we are interested in the unique details of each particular group or family that we meet and their unique connections of stories. Our style would be to say that there is no transcendent detail which will make sense of all situations. So we give attention to the unique details of the stories that we hear or have before us when we meet people : we do this before during and after a meeting.

Finally, we would say that the process of systemic story making enables us, when working, to enhance the possibilities for the elaboration¹³ of stories. Systemic story making may be seen as providing possibilities and invitations to improvisation¹⁴ with our clients.

PROFESSIONALS, POWER, RELATING AND THE STORIES WHICH WE TELL

We consider that giving attention to power in the relationship between ourselves and our clients is a way of liberating the possibility for good work to go on. We like, for our working purposes, to use one of Barnett Pearce's definitions of power as the "**possibility** to co-create multiple stories in different contexts and episodes of interaction"¹⁵ It is this possibility that we would like to be able to co-create for our clients. We work with them to have the freedom and the ability to create

multiple stories. This empowers clients to learn about ways of living that go beyond the mere solving of particular individual problems. This is what Bateson called the ability to learn to learn¹⁶. The effects mean that people can know how to use stories and abilities in other contexts. They learn about the differences of context and this give them a sense of empowerment and being able to manage their own lives. Depending on which story you have, you will create realities in a particular way, so it is important to engage in systemic story creation and thus to change the power relationship to people we are working with. In our experience we also position ourselves differently in relation to how you approach those who come to work with us. For creativity to take place and for therapy to be a creative act we find it important to give attention to aspects of our work which may be experienced abusively. Giving attention through systemic story creation to the power aspects of therapy we hope to enable greater creativity to take place in the process of our work.

Hypothesising gives the therapist and the team the time to consider issues of power in any session. Society through its beliefs and stories invests a great deal of power in the healing professions. for example, doctors are or were seen as people who would give you a diagnosis for your problem and an instruction on how to act to overcome it. Analytic therapists are seen as the gateway to the unconscious and were seen, by some, as never able to be in the wrong. Why? Because they could see what is really, truly, going on inside of us. We would say that whenever we use this sort of professionalism we make people comatose; they lose their ability to act or, as we would say, their ability to create stories. We agree with Foucault, who similarly talked about the way professionals and others in society take up positions as the Great Interpreter with a capital G and a capital I. He talks about this stance as decreasing peoples choice to act.

It thus becomes important to be aware of the power invested in the therapist and to consider ways that this can be discussed so as not to make people comatose. We may have some

expertise, but not in ***this family or this system***; we may have areas of expertise e.g. doctoring, diagnosing, testing, use of techniques but we are not experts in this family's or this group's unique coherence. Indeed our expertise is as nothing unless it fits the unique stories and meanings of each group of people with whom we work.

In our creation of systemic stories we discuss and reflect upon the difference that it will make if we are a male or female interviewer, or men and women in the team of workers. We also reflect on our assumptions as men and women and how we will influence the process of the conversations in an interview. We look at how we might exercise power and how the clients with whom we work may be able to ensure that their voice is heard and that we can understand them, in their terms. We also look at how power is established through the "normalities" of social and cultural life. So, for example, we discuss and create systemic stories about ways in which we might be reinforcing what is problematic in our cultures or how we might be seen as those who we will create normal people according to the dominant culture. We develop sensitivity and awareness to our biases and the things which we might not see since we are so embedded in our own cultural stories.

Additionally, thought should be given, in our experience, to what the client's ideas are of what the therapist might think and want to know. We like to give consideration to how this may affect the flow of co-creation within the session. By doing this, the dominance of certain discourses can be questioned and the therapist become more aware of creating space for the client to tell their stories. For example, many families have had the experience of having been seen previously, by professionals, as a failure and, as a result, they found that the services they received were less than helpful and that they had not received what they had hoped for. We have found that it is essential to think about this before people come to meet with us and then to give attention to this at the beginning of any meeting. We try to understand what is foremost in their relationship with us, such as their scepticism and apprehension about being seen as a

family, for example. Once they have been afforded this level of respect, it allows the family, individual or group to become the experts which they are of their own lives and problems rather than the usual assumption that the professional the expert and has the answers.

A further example of this is for us to be sensitive, before we meet people, through the creation of systemic stories, of what the assumptions might be, that they bring to the meeting with us. A meeting between a social worker and a mother, living alone with a thirteen year old son who is not going to school and, who has been in trouble with school, may result in the mother having certain assumptive expectations of what a social worker may think about her as a mother and the problems of the child going to school. If, for example, the mother feels, and has been made to feel, either through societal stories or through comments from friends and school teachers, that somehow it is all her fault and that she is responsible for her son's behaviour, she will interpret every action that the social worker might take as an attempt to find out what she is doing that is wrong. This may lead to her being defensive despite the workers' belief that they are being supportive, problem solving or even neutral in their work. This begins to address some of the power issues in therapy.

We find it particularly helpful, when the content of our systemic stories is widened to include relevant issues like culture, ethnicity, race, gender. These are often unspoken but will have an intimate influence on different aspects of people's lives and consequently on our relationship with them. During the hypothesizing time opportunities should be created to give attention to important societal issues like racism, sexism, feminism etc. These issues should be raised in, and during, the process of systemic story creation, to ensure that they are actively alive in the consciousness of the therapist and team whilst they are working.

ENLARGING THE RANGE OF A PROFESSIONAL'S GRAMMATICAL ABILITIES: PATTERNS OF SYSTEMIC STORY-MAKING

There are as great a range of ways of creating systemic stories as stories that can be told and stories that have yet to be told. We have certain patterns which we find useful and fascinating.

- * We talk of stories that relate to the symptoms, problems or concerns as in some sense "fitting" in the patterns of living of particular groups or families.
- * We create stories about a therapist's or a team's prejudices, practices and dearly held views and the way in which they might influence the therapeutic contact with the client.
- * We create stories which widen the context and include people other than those who are obvious or, we create, a range of stories or considerations which expand the focus of our attention.
- * We create stories about the interactions between people and the stories which they would tell as ways which make sense of what is happening.
- * There are stories that we create around the notion of the coherence or grammar of a particular group.
- * We talk of future oriented stories which highlight the way in which a request for help is an attempt to find a way forward into the future when our clients have no detailed understanding of the way in which this can be done.
- * We create stories about developing grammatical abilities to be able to go on into the future.
- * We create stories of absurdity about what is happening in the lives of any group of people when you look at it from a particular perspective.
- * There are stories about the potential loops¹⁷ that people may be in through their valiant attempts to sort out something and move into the future.

- * We create stories about changing language and grammar and thus getting out of being stuck with one definition of the problems or concerns with which to work.

We will take a number of these in case examples and discuss them more fully.

EXPLORING "FITTING STORIES".

Perhaps, at this stage, it is important to explore what we understand by fit. The ideas of fit which we use came from our studying the writings of the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. They describe organisms in their relationship with each other as "structurally coupled" ¹⁸. What they refer to here is the notion that organisms can only relate or "couple" according to their structure and the possibilities and limitations which this structure creates for them. So, biologically, for example, a fish can only do what its structure allows it to do in its medium. It cannot, for example, fly like a bird. Extending their thinking we would say that any interaction of any living organism is consistent with or **fitting** with its structure, in its medium or environment. Maturana would say that any organism is, at any time, behaving with a perfect fit with its structure in its medium. Thus any interaction could be seen as a perfect one when related to that coupling of structures. It is, as it were, the only possible way of being , **at that point in time.**

We would develop the metaphor of structural coupling and talk of the interactions between people as related to their stories and patterns of relationships. Thus we could say that their stories lived and told might be the structure creating the possibilities and limitations for ways of being. So, when creating systemic stories, we might look at what the fit is between the stories lived out by parts of any group and those in the surroundings. It is this notion of fit which will be a way of understanding how the problems, symptoms, concerns or whatever, take the form that they do.

Take, for example a mother who feels (lives the story) that to be a mother it is necessary that she should have the answers to her children's problems. When professionals engage with her to try and "help" she might react with what looks, to them, like being obstructive and resistant responses. The more they try to be helpful the more she might experience them as interfering, undermining, or not recognising her concern and skills. Eventually this could result in a total breakdown in the relationships between professionals and the mother. By creating systemic stories which attend to our sense of fascination for what may be happening between the mother and the professionals in terms of the fit of stories we can eventually create a new story of the mother's strength, devotion and desire to appear competent to both children and professionals. This will open up new possibilities for ways to go forward for both the family and the professionals.

Let us take, as a further example of the use of the concept of fit, the sort of situation where a family has been referred to a child guidance clinic both by, a number of professionals which might include, a school nurse and head teacher , a psychologist from an adult mental health clinic, as well as, the social services department. Often such requests come with a desire that we "do something about the mother". The concern, as expressed by the professionals, is that the mother does not want her children. So, it might be presented that the mother was now rejecting her children with such vehemence that it was an urgent question of how to protect the children, and that they should be permanently taken from the family and placed in foster care. The father, it might be said, was devoted to the children but unable to give them the care they needed, in the eyes of the professionals, so, the conclusion reached was that foster care was necessary. Nonetheless the social services and the psychologist from adult psychiatry might be concerned for the mother's mental state if the children were taken away. The request to do a piece of work might include a long summary of a number of years help that this family had received from social workers, psychologists and other professionals trying to coach them in

ways of being good parents. The description of the mother in such a situation might be wholly negative referring to her as totally unable to be a mother and rejecting of her children. There could be, in the referral letter, a passing reference to the mother having been the only child of her mother and how she had to care for the mother and got very little care for herself.

In our pre-session discussion, of such a referral, we might begin, in a fairly traditional way, thinking about how to give this mother skills to be able to be a mother so that she should not lose her children. The members of the team might have a strong prejudice that, to be a woman you would love children and under no circumstances want to part with them. On further exploring this prejudice we identify that this is a particularly strongly held cultural value in the country in which we are working. Our storying leads us to pay attention to this particular view and its potential for interfering in our respect for the mother when we meet her. As the conversation progresses we became curious about the fit between a number of the elements of what we know. Why would a mother be insisting that her children be taken into foster care and at the same time present so much distress so that those working with her are concerned for her mental health? Why is the mother so clearly seen as bad and the father as a good parent? Why were the professionals so anxious to turn the mother into a good mother, presumably according to their standards, but are now accepting that they could not do anything and therefore the children should be taken away permanently? As we talk we begin to play around with the idea of fit. We wonder whether the mother had a story that she had to work extra hard to be a good mother so that her children did not have to take care of her as she had done of her mother. We wonder whether the husband also encouraged her to do this, and that if she was extra sensitive when he helped her she felt criticised and disqualified by this. But, struggling to be good at mothering, she would then double her efforts and try even harder whilst criticising herself even more. This might lead to asking for professional help. But the professional help might have had the effect of further giving the mother ideas of how to be a good mother which she became less and less able to achieve. The very act of professionals showing her what to do

and offering and insisting on further help confirmed the mother's picture that she was no good and therefore should give the children up to be a good mother. Accompanying this would be a picture of herself as being a failure at the very task that she had set out to achieve and therefore, the professionals appropriately should be concerned about the mother's mental health if the children were taken away. Meanwhile we develop a story that probably she had been a very good mother but that the fit between her stories and the stories of the professionals and the husband (and as we found in the interview of the grandmother) had led to an escalation of debasement of the woman and her undoubted abilities.

Many things emerged in the interview. Using our supposed systemic stories to guide our explorations and to co create a new story, had an even greater effect than we thought. The effect was particularly useful, as both the psychologist and the social worker were present. When the mother started telling a very different series of stories, it emerged how competent she was. This enabled both the psychologist and the social worker to get a very different picture of the mother's competence as a mother. Similarly, when each person saw the fit between various stories and patterns of relating in interaction they became aware of the effects of their actions. This had important consequences and resulted in the mother being able to keep her children. The professionals relaxed and supported her in different ways such that they were able to leave her to get on with life as the competent mother she had now become in everyone's perception.

We find that this concept of fit and perfection creates a sense of respect and awe for any interaction, however uncomfortable. It also generates the energy and curiosity to look for the connections as to why THAT coupling and interaction and how come THIS fit. It places us in a frame of being neutral to the material as we receive it and developing the connections between the various elements. This co-creates a position of positive respect for the way this system is in interaction. This is then what is explored in the process of systemic story creation.

Our systemic approach has incorporated into the idea of fit the notion that what is fitting happens through a process of weaving together of many stories and many strands of stories. Through this process of inter-weaving we are creating the meaning and action in the lives of the people with whom we work. This fit comes from the different stories and voices that are lived out in any set of episodes. The potential patterns and further ways of living that are emergent in any conversation are discussed in any systemic story creation session. There are discourses which will influence and inform interactions that have arisen in a number of different contexts; for instance, there may be discourses in the family that mean that nothing is discussed outside the family, the effect being that they should be the only ones to cope with any problems. So we take seriously not only the idea of fit in terms of structural coupling, but also of the coupling taking place in a medium that Maturana and Varela talk about.

COHERENCE AND THE GRAMMAR OF A GROUP OF PEOPLE

When looking at an event, problem or pathology being described by a referrer or a family we would see that description as the result of the inter-weaving of all sorts of stories that come from a number of different contexts. Meaning emerges through the stories that people have about previous or future experiences that they have had or heard about which bear a family resemblance¹⁹ to this present episode, event problem or pathology. Following Wittgenstein we would say that, "words and the like...have their meanings with the sorts of resemblances that hold between members of a family. These may be of very different kinds: resemblance in build, facial features, colour, eyes or hair, gait temperament, manner of speaking attitude or manners.....it is not in virtue of their all having some set of common properties that we group together members of an extended family; no property is sufficient for membership in the group, nor is any one necessary."²⁰ So by family resemblances we mean that episodes, a teaching session, a family meal, a dance and the like are all sorts of situations which are similar but different, rather like members of the same family. Often there are similarities between these, but

each has its own distinctive, unique characteristics. The stories about and around these contexts are different for each individual and will be affected by stories from other experiences, family stories, cultural stories, stories about time and development, societal stories and our life script stories. Thus episodes are given meaning through the weaving together of strands of stories from different contexts. These strands create a well woven cloth or omnibus of stories that makes sense and possesses a logic or coherence when all the strands are taken together.

This cloth is woven in an interaction between people in relationship. An interaction in which the definition of the relationship between the participants is very relevant to the manner in which stories get woven together. For example, when a teacher talks to a small child, the definition of relationship will suggest that much of the story told will be created by the teacher. In a therapeutic situation it is important to be attentive to how the definition of relationship gets created so that the stories that emerge are not imposed by the therapist but are co-evolved. Thus we would say that the stories that define relationships in a particular way are central to the coherence of interactions in any group.

So, one of the important things about creating systemic stories is that it involves making connections between stories, the details of the stories and moving beyond the given in terms of pathology, blame, scapegoating and the like. Making connections tends towards the coherence and logic of all that is happening in the relations between a group of people. Through these stories people live out moral orders and emotional participation in events, problems and pathologies. In creating systemic stories we look at how problems and pathologies are choices which arise out of the stories of a particular group. The events can be described in a number of different ways, through a variety of stories. Emerging out of each story will be the creation of a different moral order and emotion.

One of the ways of beginning to understand the logic and coherence of what is happening in the interactions people engage in together is to see all their interactions as communication. This means that instead of thinking about what people are feeling or doing in isolation we are always trying to connect it with what people SHOW, who they SHOW the behaviour/emotion to, what is co created through processes of mutual showing. During the process of hypothesizing we have found by using the word SHOW we start thinking relationally, as the Milan team originally suggested, we move away from blame and begin to understand the way in which problems, behaviours, pathologies are all part of what "makes sense" for those involved in the interactions. Then the way each person's responsibility for participation in and co-creation of behaviours is appreciated then behaviour becomes a choice in relation to the context of the relationship.

The circumstances of a young woman who had been given the diagnosis anorexia nervosa illustrates the way in which we use the notion of the **coherence and logic** of stories that people involved in a situation live out. Before meeting with the family, we had information that the young woman had been suffering for a number of years and we were curious to do some work in the therapy which would lead us beyond the symptoms and to a fuller life for the young woman. This was consistent with her request as she did not want to end up in long term work as had happened to her previously. We created a systemic story that the young woman had a deep sense of love for both her mother and her father and that she had "chosen" anorexia as a way of being with her parents in order to give them the opportunity to resolve dilemmas which they had. As our conversation progressed we began to develop a theme of the importance of perfection for those in the family. We hypothesised that the mother had a story that she had to be a perfect person by being a perfect daughter to her mother, whilst the father had to be a perfect husband by taking care of the daughter and allowing his wife to remain loyal and obedient to her mother. The daughter, through her symptoms, was choosing to be a perfect daughter to enable the parents to go on with the pursuit of perfection.

These are the bare bones of how we developed our systemic story. On meeting with the family we explored, from this perspective, the coherence and logic of the ways everyone was relating. As we did so they made embellishments and began to create elaborations around the stories which together we were using to guide the process of co-creation in the interview. Gradually the anorexia took on a form of being sensible, having a meaning when appreciated in the context of the stories which we had explored and through the connections that we made.

This was only part of the work which we undertook in that early meeting. When the family made urgent requests for us to give them advice we discussed this and gradually created a story connecting their pursuit of perfection with the process of therapy. Part of the logic that we co-created about therapy going on for so many years connected with understanding that previous treatment had repeatedly taken the form of advice giving. Whilst this may have worked quite satisfactorily for many groups of people, in this unique family it did not. The request for and the following of advice, we began to see, was closely connected with the theme of perfection. The more the advice was followed the more firmly the symptoms took effect. Why? One of the stories which we created made sense for them and unlocked and freed up the family members to move one. We began to create a story that the daughter with the anorexic symptoms was trying to enable the parents to choose for themselves and not to keep on following the theme of perfection out of obedience to others. So when they followed the advice of the therapists they remained in the state of obedience that she was trying to give them the opportunity from which to free themselves. Working with these people the coherence and logic of their stories became interwoven with the previous therapist's desire to be helpful through advice-giving and thus attempt to create relief in a way that perpetuated the difficulties and the suffering of the young woman and the a parents.

REFLEXIVITY ABOUT TEAM AND THERAPISTS' BELIEFS AND DISCURSIVE FORMATIONS.

We would see one of the important reasons for taking the time to hypothesise/create systemic stories is for the therapist to become aware of his/her own beliefs or stories of life and the effect they might have on the interaction with the client. It gives the therapist and the team the opportunity to be freer and expansive about their own beliefs and how these might alter so as to co-create with the clients new ways of living, fitting for the clients and enhancing for the therapists. This involves going beyond fixed and formalised and unquestioned truths and assumptions.

An example of this might be working with a couple who had both already undertaken extensive periods of therapy for their relational difficulties which included episodes of violent temper and rage followed by deep depression and despair. Both might speak of not being able to find ways out of their dilemmas. Their previous therapy had been framed around a style which examined in detail their history and the stories of that history as a way out of their difficulties. We found ourselves repeating the pattern of their previous therapeutic experience and seeing them over a long period in what seemed to be developing into a therapy-without-end. We reviewed the tape recordings of sessions and discussed our various systemic stories in the process of our work with them. We found that we were doing something different from their previous experience of therapy by developing and elaborating their histories of the past, creating a new past, and thus new ways of relating were emerging. At the same time, through our preoccupation with the past, we were re-invigorating the notion that it was the past that we had to do something about rather than to explore the possibilities and goals for the future. Our dearly held view that the past needed work had diverted us into working with what was endless, rather than working with the signs that the couple were trying to live for a future, which might not be all that long in view of their ages, as they saw it. Thus we went beyond our fixed, formalised and unquestioned truths, which were leading us into a cul-de-sac, and we created a new systemic story for ourselves as

the therapists which very quickly resulted in the couple making changes and the therapy proceeding along more fruitful, briefer lines.

WIDENING THE CONTEXT: INCLUDING SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

STORIES AT THE POINT OF THE FIRST REQUEST

We do this in a number of ways. When we get a request to do something we will develop our curiosity about the whole social group of people around the concerns that are being brought forth as the basis of their request. So we do not think only about the identified person as needing help or some action; rather we see the request as arising from a whole network of people in varying degrees of concern. Our practice is to relate from the position that the situation that gives cause for concern is a co-creation of many people who are relating through a variety of stories and interactions. Our focus for our work is *that* network of interactions and stories. So before we act we develop our understanding of who would be involved, what stories might they be living with each other that gives rise to the concern with which they are asking for help. Out of this process of thinking through we approach the person who makes the request and arrange a Referral Meeting ²¹.

For example, take the situation of a referral letter from a general practitioner to an adult psychiatric department. We were interested in the details of the request which was to see a young woman of twenty eight. We began to create stories around some of these questions. Why did the doctor choose to give the details of information he chose to give us in the letter of request? What had happened in the relationship between the doctor and the young woman that the request for help should come now? Who else has been involved with this situation? How have they all influenced each other for this problem or concern to have arisen now? We created a story that the young woman's new work in a school social work service, as a secretary, had

brought her into contact with new ideas about how you understand certain events in life and their significance for your identity. For this woman to get on in life she should have some psychological help to get over events which were troubling her. This fitted well with a general practitioner who had a particular interest in mental health and in enhancing the mental and emotional health of her patients. So we began to see the various participants as co-operating to do the best for each other and for the young woman. This in turn affected our way of engaging with the request by first being in contact with the doctor and then the young woman and others involved in her network.

ENHANCING OUR GRAMMATICAL ABILITIES OVER TIME:

CREATING SYSTEMIC STORIES DURING THE MEETINGS

At the beginning of every session it is useful to review the previous sessions and to develop conjectures about any likely changes. We find this very useful as we have noticed that as mental health professionals we have a predisposition to listen for problems and notice what has not changed. Developing stories about changes has been one way of keeping us alive to the potential of new events, new meanings, new stories and new ways of living. It helps us to be alive to the possibilities that people bring. We find, for example, that often people tell a story that nothing has changed, but when we discuss things people have done, then frequently all sorts of changes become apparent. It is as if the story told has to catch up with the story lived; the things people do have to be articulated and then built on for further developments.

If it appears that very little has happened in the interval since a family were last seen then it is helpful to think about what we have previously done and the sorts of stories and focus for work which have been used in previous sessions. Very often we discover that we have imagined that we have participated in a variety of conversations, and that we have explored different stories, but that all the conversations we have engaged in have the same general theme. For instance,

there may be an idea of sacrifice or of attachment that has continued through the sessions. These ideas may fit the therapist's beliefs more than that of the family. We often find that we had become married to our assumptions, believing that we know exactly what is happening in the family. Often the family valiantly co-operates with us but what we do does not fit for them so nothing changes. Sometimes the family does things which seem to resist us. For us, this is one of the sure signs that we are pursuing our interests, not theirs.

Take as an example, working with a family where an adolescent daughter had developed a weakness and partial paralysis, so that she was wheelchair bound. This had developed gradually over a period of three years but had increased dramatically in the previous six months. The father had died after a long illness a year before we saw the family. The therapists were sure that the daughter's symptoms were related fairly exclusively to the mother's sadness in connection with the death of the husband. Over a number of sessions the family limply agreed, accepting the direction which we were going in. However, it made no difference to the daughter and made the mother and the grandmother feel guilty and unhappy. At the fourth session, aware of the repetitive nature of our stories, we developed a new story about time. We shifted focus to the period of the onset of the paralysis. We decided to have a conversation about what had happened six months previously when the daughter had got much worse. In this new conversation it emerged that an elder sister had gone to live in Africa and, at the same time, the mother had started taking care of her one year old grandchild born to another daughter who was living alone without a partner. This opened up our fascination about the daughter who was paralysed. What was her place in the family and how did her paralysis fit in with all these events? The team began to develop a systemic story about the meaning of this daughter's existence in the family. What were the circumstances of her birth? What were the stories which created a place for her in the family. How have the changes that have taken place altered her relationships and her identity in the family?

What emerged in the conversation exploring this was more interesting than we imagined. This daughter had been the child conceived to provide a balance to the sadness of the father and the mother on losing the father's mother after a tragically sudden death. The daughter had then seen her life in the family as one of having a mission to keep the family together and provide a meaning for living for the mother and father. Now that the sister had left, mother had settled down and was recovering from the death of her husband and mother was now clearly happy in her new role as grandmother and enjoying the freedom of life, the paralysed daughter's task no longer existed. She was, as it were, redundant. A story was then developed about her paralysis which gave it a new meaning. The story that we developed, through a conversation, was that she was seen to be going through a re-birth by becoming like a little child relying on others, needing to be carried everywhere, and told by the physiotherapists to try and crawl rather than walk. She was determining a new meaning for her life by going through this rebirth. A rebirth to life for herself rather than the previous task which she had been fulfilling in the family.

This conversation was a change for the family as there was more of a fit for them. Before changing the focus the mother had been seen as a sad woman, now she was seen as freer, happier and fulfilled. With the evolution of the new story the sisters too saw their sibling differently and were able to relate to her in a way that was less demanding of physical activity, less frustrating and validating the more reflective style of life that the daughter was now embracing. These changes created space for the daughter to grow freely because of the story created about her "re-birth" into a new life with more opportunities.

This example highlights the importance of a team. Since creating new stories requires a change in perspective it is often useful for the interviewing therapist or worker to listen to a team reflecting and then doing some separate story making on the basis of the team's story making. So each party to the conversations relates to and from a new perspective or position. An essential element is constantly moving of one's position. If one position does not fit we discard it and try another "so that both client and therapist form a library of stories that can be told" ²².

CREATING SYSTEMIC STORIES OVER TIME

If after four or five meetings the family are still presenting similar problems and there appears to be little or no change, it is useful for the team or the worker involved to spend time both before and during the session reflecting on the position of the professionals in the process of the work. The professionals may well have become part of maintaining the problem through their work. We usually see this as a time for the co-creative process between therapist/worker and client to be reflected upon with particular care. It may be that at some stage we did something which left one or more people misunderstood or connoted negatively or blamed in some way or another. We find that if we misunderstand someone or connote them negatively that others support them in such a way that change is prevented. Sometimes too, we may have allied too closely with one person or have taken on their story without being able to see what has been co-created during the session.

One such example was that of a single client who was trying to sort out being stressed at work. This was a situation where we had been meeting for some months and the stressful aspects of life both at home and at work had not changed greatly. Preparing for about twenty minutes before the meeting we found ourselves drying up and suffering from a dearth of ideas. So we reviewed what we had been doing in the sessions and found that we had concentrated exclusively on the problem of stress without any understanding of the details of particular stressful episodes and the people and circumstances in which they occurred. We also found that we had been working more and more individually and ignoring other people in the person's network of relationships. One point shone through our review, namely that it appeared that we had gone on talking about stress more and more, trying harder and harder to do something about it. We then developed a story about professional language and the pathologising of life. The person involved was in a "helping profession" which involved diagnosing problems and what was not working in situations. We had, through our work, joined her grammar too literally

and were repeating the stress story looking at only those things that were troublesome and stress related in her life. This left us free to ask the person for help with our problem of looking for the pathology in almost every situation. We asked her to help us to avoid our habit and try to find areas in life that were stress free or ways in which stress was useful or ways in which stress had been overcome through things which she had done. By helping us break our habit of creating problems and pathology she began to produce other stories and move beyond the stress stories to new ways of living which included renegotiating her contract with her employer. In this example, through our systemic story creation, we changed the relation between the client and ourselves and thus changed the grammar of therapy. Previously we had been giving advice about relaxation, together with other ideas about what can be done. After this particular understanding, we sought her advice and moved to a not-knowing position. The pattern of what happened between us was radically different.

CO-CREATING STORIES ABOUT THE ABSURDITY OF LIFE

One example which led us to do something out of the ordinary concerned a young mother who had been sexually abused. She came reliably and devotedly to every session. These were initially held at weekly intervals because she had been in a serious series of panic attacks about the possibility of harming her child. The therapist thoroughly enjoyed seeing this talented, intriguing young mother who talked very little but kept giving snippets of information about the fear of harming her child and the abuse. This was just enough to keep the therapist engaged. The therapist obliged by then exploring these details. Upon feeling frustrated about the pattern of the therapy and the sense that nothing was progressing, the therapist asked a colleague to co-create systemic stories about ways of making sense of what was happening in the therapy. In this discussion we remembered that the young woman had talked to someone in social services who had told her that she would need long term weekly supportive psychotherapy for overcoming the effects of the abuse and the fear of harming her child would take many years.

Perhaps this was not what she herself wanted. Rather out of loyalty to a professional who had listened to her and been helpful she felt that she should somehow continue seeing the therapist. Absurdly, both therapist and the young woman were continuing with something which neither thought was proving useful out of "obedience", as it were, to the remarks of another professional. After discussing this, with her, we changed the contact to one of professional friendship so that the young person was able to come to the clinic as a friend rather than a client. She rang and suggested a long walk through a large local park during which she talked about how she was managing her life with no mention of the fears nor the abuse and its effects on her. She changed the story of herself from an ill person to one who was coping with and gradually creating a very full life.

There are many ways that events can be perceived or interpreted and when people come for therapy they often have strong ideas about their explanations as being the only one. So one of the tasks of the therapy is to open up the possibility for other explanations, and to create a story with the clients that fits their beliefs, explanations and stories.

CO-CREATING STORIES ABOUT TIME

The relevance of stories about time, or development or maturity can be seen in much of our work. We find that it can be useful to co-create in advance of meeting or during a meeting stories about time. These will often lead to us being able to make sense of the concerns which are presented for us to work with.

An illustration of this is of work we did with a young man who came to therapy, finding it difficult to leave home at the age of 22. A number of people in his network thought he should leave, whilst he was uncertain about this. In the process of creating systemic stories we began to think

of the stories around time. Our curiosity connected with questions about whether or not this was the right time for him to take this step. We began to look at what meaning time might have for him. His father and mother had died when he was 14 and he felt very responsible for his two younger siblings. His grandmother, a comparatively young person with whom the children lived, had had two new relationships with men and this young man of 22 was reluctant to let them work. It was as though he was trying to keep his grandmother for the three children. During a meeting with him, his grandmother and his younger brother and sister, the following elements of a story emerged. His parents had got married and then two years later when he was born his maternal grandfather had died early in life. This led to him believing that the time that family members might have with each other is very short and that he was responsible for seeing that those who were close remained close to each other. This had been supported by the love and joy that his grandmother and his mother gained from his existence and life. Throughout his life, even before his parents' death he had felt a great sense of responsibility for keeping his siblings close and ensuring the very existence of his family by keeping everyone close. In a sense he was responsible for the making of this family, if he had not been born then perhaps his parents and grandmother would never have had the same meaning in their lives because the sadness of the death of the grandfather. There was no story about the possibility of a time when leaving home was a prospect. The death of his mother and father had created a story about time which included the young 22 year old giving this time of his life to his siblings. An exploration of his future and the future of the family ensued. In this conversation time was explored in terms of when the time would be for each member of the family to make new pathways in life. There would be times to take care of each other, times to have a life of your own for each of the children and a time for the grandmother to be able to have a life with another man if she so chose. So we created stories about future time which led to a greater freedom for every family member including the twenty two year old. Soon after this meeting dramatic changes resulted in the whole family moving into a different series of times.

The importance of time for professionals is something we have frequently had to work with. This has become particularly noteworthy when things have happened which are dramatic for those who are clients and for the professionals who surround them. An illustration of this was a young boy who had witnessed horrors between his mother and a series of partners who had been violent to her. Even though there were grandparents and a biological father, social services and other professionals had felt the only way to protect this young lad was to place him in a foster-home away from all memories and possible negative influences. Some years later when the boy started to act aggressively refusing comfort in his distress it was felt that he should be more firmly kept away from the influences which had led to this decision to place him in foster care as this might be influencing and confirming his aggression. We developed a story that the time had come when the child was wanting some contact with his relatives and that his aggressive behaviour was trying to show this in a situation where those who cared professionally could not conceive of the possibility. During a meeting of all the relatives and social workers and other important personnel, it became apparent that perhaps this boy was looking for connections with his mother and an explanation of what had happened and that he no longer required the degree of protection that may have been necessary initially. The importance of time that had somehow got frozen for the overall management of the case was brought forth. Each of the groups involved had worked and changed and yet could not be seen or heard by others as the new stories were blocked by a conflicting dominant story of protection that had no end in time.

MAKING USE OF OUR SYSTEMIC STORIES IN MEETINGS.

Finally, brief points about using our systemic stories. We would say that the therapist does not go into a meeting with people with AN HYPOTHESIS, or a true SYSTEMIC story but that in the process of the conversation she opens up the frame for explanation and therapist and clients move away from one concrete reality. The more stories you have before meeting a group the greater the number of ways we can make sense of the stories which we are hearing and co-

creating. So we would say that our systemic stories guide the process of the co-creation of new realities in both stories lived and told during the process of an interview.

When with the family, the interviewer connects closely with the family, their emotions, their stories, their values and their relationships, she lets go of the team's stories. However, when taking breaks for reflections, it is the team which helps her to be an observer to the way, as interviewer, she and the family interact. The therapist oscillates between team and family maintaining an observer position both to the team and to the family. The process of story creating and making connections needs to continue throughout the session. With every question you are in an observer position momentarily, so you are making links all the time and making selections about what connections to make and what further questions to ask. This keeps you in a position to be able to do sensitive therapeutic work. In addition the family also become observers to themselves and they too are making connections to the different sorts of information and links that are being made.

ENDINGS

When the clients have begun to live their lives within a new story, it is often useful to create stories with a colleague or team about when to end. We often discuss why we should go on meeting. The therapist, if they have made strong connections to the client will sometimes want the therapy to go on longer than perhaps need be. There may also be financial considerations as well as enjoyment of the whole process from the therapists as well as the clients view point. Clients may also have the belief that therapy goes on for ever. So we would make stories about the understanding of therapy.

Finally, we would sum up much of the work which we have been describing in words from Barnett Pearce.

".....human beings.....both live *within* stories and, at least at times, stand *outside* them as critics, judges, authors, or editors. We are not the only characters in the stories we tell, we are authors; not only authors but anthologists (we call this "personality"); and not only anthologists but browsers in libraries filled with the stories told by others, deciding which to read and which to leave undisturbed on the shelf (we call this "living a life")."²³

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN CREATIVITY

- 1 You could make an exercise about oscillating between different observer positions. What would it look like from the different perspective of each of the persons involved in a particular situation. What stories would each of the persons tell? It would be interesting for you to work out how to do this.

- 2 To develop the habit of creating libraries of stories that might describe the coherence or fit for an event or problem. Identify who might be involved in the situation. Then develop stories which might make sense of the situation using headings of threads which might be interwoven. Try and create stories which might fit with each of the following threads:

Societal stories and values;

Cultural stories including those of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, practices that mark you out culturally distinctively;

Personal life script stories;

Family stories;

Stories about definitions of relationship.

When you have done this imagine who would carry which of these stories more clearly and forcefully.

3. A way of developing multiple perspectives can be done through what we call a rolling role play. The group or team sit in a circle and each takes a turn to make a statement. Each person does this in the following way. For example, "I am the mother and I am glad my mother supports me in my difficulties with this child. No one else understands". The next person might say, "As the teacher I feel sorry for the mother. She is the one who

carries the burdens of the family." The next person might say, "As the father....." When it comes round to each person's turn, that person can chose to speak with any voice that comes to mind in a game of associations. Unlike the usual role play each person takes on a different or the same role as they had last time it was their turn. Each person does not simply take on one role and stick with it. So, using this exercise each member of the team states whose voice they are speaking with and then makes a comment from that person's perspective. Individuals in the team take turns responding to the last person's comment and changing their role with each turn. In doing this a whole chorus of voices can be heard instead of just the roles of the number of people in a group. Once we have done this for some time, for example 10, 15 or even 20 to 30 minutes, we begin to elaborate the stories and understanding of the good reasons for each person's action and position in the particular constellation of events, problems or concerns which we are working with.

4. Another way of developing your grammatical abilities is for the team to identify who is involved in an event or problem and then to create a tableau of those involved. In the tableau place people in relation to each other in terms of closeness and distance which reflects something about their relationships. You can also place them in different postures to somehow encapsulate something of what they might be feeling and the way in which they relate and also the positions they may occupy in the network of relations and stories. Sometime we will have different members of the group changing places with other members in order to develop a multi-perspective. Importantly after the tableaux people discuss who they felt being part of it and what was happening to relationships within it. We may then play with what people describe. For example someone may feel very angry with someone else. We develop a story about the passion between them. Or again someone may feel very small and powerless. Then we play with

turning it upside down. What is the power of that powerlessness and how do others get into the power of the so called week one? Through this process we develop stories to guide our work with people.

FIVE ASPECTS OF HYPOTHESIZING TO BE CONSIDERED

At times it can be useful to have some table of things to think about. We have found going through the following process very occasionally has been useful for our inventiveness.

1. What do we want to explain?
2. What is the system in focus?
3. Links and connections - what pieces of detail do we fit together?
4. What explanations do we create for the phenomena that we connect together?
5. What evidence will confirm or disconfirm, the usefulness of our hypothesis or story?

DEEPENING AND FURTHERING YOUR LEARNING

The original paper by the Milan Group is useful. It gives their original definition of hypothesising and describes how they use the concept as part of their practice.

Selvini M.S et al Hypothesising, Circularity and Neutrality:
Three Guidelines for the Conductor of the Session
Family Process 1980 Vol. 19:1 pp 3-12

Peggy Papp describes ways in which she employs hypothesising as a process and the uses she puts this to. In chapter 3, "Forming a Hypothesis: The Behavioural Level. The Interactional Level> The Ideational Level", she gives a rich variety of ideas about hypothesising

Papp P. (1983) THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

New York Guilford Press

Brad Keeney describes and defines hypothesising and ways of engaging in it.

Keeney B. MIND IN THERAPY

Guilford Press

Further thoughts and inspiration can be found by referring to:

Cecchin G Hypothesising, circularity and neutrality revisited: an Invitation to
Curiosity

Family Process 1987 Vol 26:4 405-413

Cecchin G The Cybernetics of Prejudice

Lane Karnac Books

Ray

Maturanization in Milan

Journal of Systemic and Strategic Therapies.

Sadler J & Hypothesising and Evidence Gathering

Hulgus Y The Nexus of Understanding

Family Process 1989 Vol 28: 255-267

Ugazio V Hypothesis Making: The Milan Approach Revisited.

From Applications of Systemic Family Therapy. The Milan Approach

Grune and Stratton 1985 London

Ulf Korman and Patricia Moen give examples of the ways that they used practices like hypothesising in their team development in a Child Guidance Clinic.

Korman U & Moen P The Formation and Subsequent Integration of a Milan Systemic Team at a Child Psychiatric Clinic in Sweden
Human Systems The Journal of Systemic Consultation and Management
Vol 1:23-38

NOTES AND DISCUSSION

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein says that we can investigate the "grammar" of words, emotions gestures and the like. In doing this we come to an understanding on what anything is (Wittgenstein 1953 PI para 373). In this he means that we understand the ways that words can be connected with others in sentences to make coherent sense. As we develop our work we evolve more and interesting varieties of ways of connecting words, phrases, gestures and the like to make sense. We adduce the comic in the tragic, for example or the tragic in the comic.

2. Freire, Paulo (1972) "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" Harmondsworth Middlesex. Freire discusses "cultural invasion" on pages 121 to 135.

An example of his focus and what he alerts us to is in the following quotation:

"In this phenomenon (cultural invasion), the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, and ignoring the potential of the latter, they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression". (p. 121)

For further interest see also J. Kearney (1995) "Beyond the Social Exclusion Zone: Family Therapy, Social Constructionism and Social Action" Human Systems Vol 6:2. The author develops some thoughts on links between Freire and social constructionism.

3. See the paper "Hypothesising, Circularity and Neutrality: Three Guidelines for the Conductor of the Session" Selvini et al (1980) Family Process 19,1 3-12

4. The range of abilities which we are able to use in our work as therapists, consultants, managers and the like is connected with abilities to talk in a particular way, to have a range of emotions with which to relate in a variety of ways, to develop abilities of a range of gestures with which to carry out our work. We would extend Wittgenstein's use of the term "grammar" to grammars of emotions, gestures, non-verbal behaviour as well as grammar in relation to language. We use the term "grammar" as a short hand, following Wittgenstein, to refer to those patterns with which we use emotions, gestures words and the like in such a way that they make sense.

5. For a discussion of "grammatical abilities" there are many references in Wittgenstein's Philosophical investigations (Blackwell 1953), for example in paragraph 90 and paragraph 304. There is also a fuller discussion by Vernon Cronen and Peter Lang in "Language and Action: Wittgenstein and Dewey in Therapy and Consultation" in Human Systems 1994 volume 5.

6. Edwards James C. Ethics Without Philosophy pp.175 & 177 Tampa, Florida. University Presses of Florida

7. From Wittgenstein L., Philosophical Investigations, trans. G.E.M Anscombe (Oxford 1967) Basil Blackwell p 8.

8. Wittgenstein in "Philosophical Investigations" (PI 151 & 179) talks about understanding

and knowing as relating not to knowing an object, or something outside of ourselves in any objective sense. Rather he takes the line that to know is to know how to go on in conversations and relationships in ways that are meaningful and coherent. To know the meaning of a word is to know how to use it in a conversation and to know how to relate to the way others use it in conversations with us.

9. Keats uses the term "negative capability" to refer to the ability to go on without certainty as it were feeling one's way.
10. The different terms are related by different practitioners all of whom have particular styles which we draw on. We find it useful, in our practice to draw on the different styles of these different practitioners as they all enhance our own limited grammatical abilities. For further understanding see the following:

The practice of "curiosity" as we call it is developed by Cecchin in his paper "Hypothesising, Circularity and Neutrality revisited: An invitation to curiosity." Family Process

The use of "irreverence" as a practice is developed by Gianfranco Cecchin, Lane and Ray in two small monographs. "Irreverence: A Strategy for Therapist's Survival" (1992) and "The Cybernetics of Prejudices in the Practice of Psychotherapy" (1994). These are published by Karnac Books, London

In a comprehensive, densely argued paper Roz Leppington develops the notion of irony-to-the-discourse-in-progress. Human Systems The Journal of Systemic Consultation and Management 1991 Vol 2:2, 79-103

Our own approach includes the notions of **awe, wonder and amaze-ment**. We use these terms to describe our sense of learned not knowing and to enable us to position ourselves in an engaging relationship whenever we work, respecting the uniqueness of any group that we may be working with. We also pursue humour and absurdity in the unlocking of situations to bring about change.

11. Steve de Shazer at the "Milan meets Milwaukee" Conference, KCC November 1993
12. For further details of the broad brush stroke, in our view, universalising hypotheses or stories which de Shazer employs in his approach to therapy see his work in Putting Difference to Work (1991) W.W.Norton and Keys to Solution in Brief Therapy (1985) W.W.Norton.
13. For a discussion of the centrality of "elaboration" as a practice in our way of working see Lang P, Little M and Cronen V. The Systemic Professional: Domains of Action and the Question of Neutrality. Human Systems. The Journal of Systemic Consultation and Management. Vol 1 pp 39-56. 1990
14. We are indebted to Polly de Boer for this insight into the process of hypothesising. She writes ".....I am suggesting that social constructionist hypothesising" involves "a continual attempt to monitor how far our conversations was co-ordinated and whether new possibilities of meaning were emerging for both of us, and also whether these meanings were likely to lead to new and more fruitful ways of getting on with life". From "Hypothesising Revisited: An Invitation to Improvisation." Unpublished final dissertation for the KCC Diploma in Individual Psychotherapy and Counselling 1994.

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15. This definition of power is a shorthand which incorporates many important notions. In the KCC Oxford Conference on Management July 1994 Barnett Pearce talked of the things that both constrain the telling of stories and create the possibility of telling stories. Any action which limits or opens up the abilities to create many stories is an act exercising power in some way. So, for example, poverty, because of the way in which it affects people socially, biologically and so on is an act of power and morally problematic at the very least since it constrains radically the ability to co-create and develop multiple stories. Stories, of course, are not trivial. They are the actual possibilities of living in its total sense, physically, biologically, emotionally, culturally, ethnically, genderwise and the like.
 16. Gregory Bateson gives repeated attention to what he calls "deutero learning" He defines this loosely as the ability to learn to learn. In further discussions he talks about this as learning about the context of learning.
"Briefly, I believe that the phenomena of Learning II (deutero learning) can be included under the rubric of changes in the manner in which the stream of action and experience is segmented or punctuated into contexts together with changes in the use of context markers." From Steps to an Ecology of Mind p 293. Jason Aronson 1972/1987. Northvale, New Jersey The brackets are ours.

Learning to learn involves comparing different contexts and thus freedom to be able to change what we are doing. It gives a freedom to tell new stories and engage in new ways of action and relationship.
 17. For a discussion of strange loops and charmed loops see Cronen, Johnson and Lannaman and Cronen and Pearce Towards an Explanation of How the Milan Approach Works
 18. "We speak of structural coupling whenever there is a history of recurrent interactions leading to the structural congruence between two (or more) systems." (page 75) The Tree of Knowledge Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela. New Science Library, Shambhala Publications Boston 1987. For further discussion about structural coupling see pp 75 - 80 and p 234 of The Tree of Knowledge.
 19. We are using the term "family resemblance" as introduced by Wittgenstein. For further discussion of this way of thinking see "Language and Action: Wittgenstein and Dewey in the practice of therapy and consultation" by Vernon Cronen and Peter Lang in Human Systems Vol 5:1 & 2 pp 1-40 (1994).
 20. This is taken from an extended discussion of "family resemblances" in Language and Action: Wittgenstein and Dewey in the Practice of Therapy and Consultation from Human Systems Vol 5:1 & 2
 21. For a fuller discussion about referral meeting and the way these are approached and conducted see our chapter called "Referrals, Referrers and the System in Focus" in "Real-ising Ends-In-View Explorations in Systemic Therapeutic Practice" in press.
 22. Quoted from Polly de Boer 1994. See above for the details.
 23. This is taken from Barnett Pearce's Communication and the Human Condition p 68 (1989) Southern Illinois University Press Carbondale and Edwardsville