

SYSTEMIC THINKING AND PRACTICE SERIES
Edited by David Campbell and Ros Draper

Co~constructing Therapeutic Conversations

A Consultation of Restraint

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CO-CONSTRUCTING THERAPEUTIC CONVERSATIONS

A Consultation of Restraint

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Foreword by

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EDITORS' FOREWORD

We have known Jeri and Ivan Inger for several years through our jointly organised family therapy exchange in Britain, the United States and Denmark. As co-founders of The Family Studies Institute in Portland, Oregon, they are experienced as teachers, supervisors and practitioners of systemic family therapy.

We are very pleased to publish this book, making an exciting contribution to the development of the current wave of systemic thinking. When we first saw them work we were struck by the way they enacted systemic thinking in their family therapy sessions. It seemed to us that theoretical underpinnings of the systemic approach such as dissolving the problem system, making new connections and leading family members to an observer position, were happening before our eyes. Theory and practice had become one.

The format of this book captures the essence of their work. Since, similar to a family's experiences, much of it cannot be described, the

Ingers offer a detailed commentary on a transcript of a consultation session with a family. They demonstrate through a group discussion the way they generate systemic understanding, and the book closes with a presentation of the theoretical background to their work. In spite of their background as Milan systemic therapists, their approach creates a bridge between systemic thinking and other approaches such as communication theory, Gestalt, the use of metaphor, play and humour, and it is truly integrative.

We feel this book is very important as an intervention to the family therapy field. The Ingers demonstrate here that as systemic thinking and practice continue to evolve, workers can develop new techniques and integrate different approaches without giving up their basic foundation of systemic thinking.

*David Campbell,
Ros Draper*

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I. B. I.

J. I.



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Introduction: theoretical considerations

We believe that as therapists it is important that the methods we use reflect our own belief systems and that our ideas and our interactions with families about those ideas be coherent. We claim an approach called an aesthetic preference (Allman, 1982; Keeney, 1983) as opposed to that of an applied science approach or belief system. Family therapists who subscribe to an applied science belief system identify with values associated with the physical sciences and are concerned with the control of nature for practical purposes. Differences between applied science therapists and aesthetically oriented therapists often revolve around issues of power and control (Hoffman, 1985), differences about who or what “determines” change, and which methods are useful in facilitating change.

When we speak of an aesthetic preference, we are speaking of the ideas of Gregory Bateson about cybernetics or feedback functions of biological and social systems based on cognitive or mental organization (Bateson, 1972, 1979). We also call into service

the ideas of the new biologists or constructivists, Von Foerster (1981), Maturana (1978), Varela (1979), Maturana and Varela (1980) and von Glasersfeld (1984). Von Foerster proposed second-order cybernetics as opposed to first-order cybernetics of the "hard" sciences (Keeney, 1983; Hoffman, 1990). Second-order cybernetics requires that the observer or observing system be considered part of the whole. As Hoffman puts it:

A second-order view would mean that therapists include themselves as part of what must change; they do not stand outside. [1990, p. 5]

As second-order family therapists, we work as guests of families in a foreign domain. As guests, we behave in a respectful manner towards our hosts. This attitude of respect requires that we learn their language and meanings. It is, therefore, our job to discover those meanings and to try to understand how they operate within the family. Meanings given to experiences depend upon the contexts within which they are experienced. Thus, our work with the family centres around understanding and inclusion (Buber, 1965, p. 97) of both their dynamics and their contexts. Inclusion and understanding are processes in which one acknowledges the legitimacy of the position of "the other" but does not necessarily endorse their position. This topic will be further discussed in the "Further Theoretical Considerations" section.

We find that in being part of the system, we are able to interact with families and co-construct meanings that come from that interaction. This languaging exchange or transformation of meanings must be conducted in a safe-enough environment. The process of making it safe-enough requires the therapist to take major responsibility for assuming an observing position separate from their own beliefs and those of the family. We introduce this reflective position into the dialogue by conversing with each other about our observations of the families' ideas and their meanings as they are put forth in the interview, interjecting, from time to time, our own meanings and, thus, planting the seeds of co-creation (Inger and Inger, 1990b).

In our work and our teaching, we use a two-person team in the room interviewing the family (Inger and Inger, 1990b). We see this as a way of translating Bateson's (1979) notions of

double description into action. Bateson discusses this concept of double description by saying:

It is correct (and a great improvement) to begin to think of two parties to the interaction as two eyes, each giving a monocular view of what goes on and, together, giving a binocular view in depth. This double view is the relationship. [Bateson, 1979, p. 133]

Two persons conjointly conducting the interview create information in-depth through complementary and symmetrical descriptions. Two therapists can have two different opinions or two matching opinions. Both interactions enhance the distinctions, descriptions and meanings around the family issues. By offering either symmetrical or complementary descriptions of the issues in continuous dyadic reflections throughout the interview, the two of us can create the necessary conditions for coupling between ourselves and the family. Our intentions are to help families transform their interactions from redundant patterns into interactions with new and different constructions of meanings which prove to be more useful to their relationships with each other than their, heretofore, redundant meanings with which they believed they were stuck.

The interview presented in the text represents many of the beliefs and methods presented above, and in the "Further Theoretical Considerations" section of the book. We will amplify ideas about the content/process recursion in therapy, the implications and consequences of the intentions of therapists on their interventive interactions with families, and we will discuss differential aspects of interpretation as they relate to a second-order cybernetic family therapy. Regarding the differential aspects of interpretation, we will discuss the importance of understanding and inclusion as being consistent with a second-order cybernetic therapy belief system.

The Consultation

This consultation is conducted with a family and their therapist as part of an Exchange Training Seminar (Inger, Inger and Baker, 1990a). This Exchange was an idea developed by co-trainers David Campbell and Ros Draper of London, England and ourselves, Ivan B. Inger and