The Mutiny and the Bounty: The Place of Milan Ideas Today

David Campbell

The author traces the development of the Milan approach from the beginning, through the split into two teams in 1980, and subsequent developments in theory and application. He identifies possible unrecognised or undeclared influences of Milan in other family therapy approaches.

It is generally agreed that family therapy sprang from simultaneous developments on the East and West coasts of America in the 1960s. Those on the West coast, inspired by the work of Bateson (1972), Haley (1963) and Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson (1967), took the view that symptomatic behaviour was the result of faulty problem-solving logic which subsequently became embedded in family relationships. Any attention paid to family history and relational dynamics was for the purpose of understanding the problem-solving pattern. On the East Coast, where many of the family therapy pioneers were trained psychoanalysts, the emphasis was on the dynamics of family relationships, in which the scapegoating or oppression of a family member made individuation and open communication impossible. Here family relations were seen as paramount and it was considered that they directly influenced the patterns of communication (Ackerman, 1958; Minuchin et al., 1967).

In one sense the work of the Milan group combined these two perspectives. They argued that symptoms were the result of an individual maintaining a behaviour which was designed to control other important family relationships, but which had escalated beyond its effectiveness and its original meaning. While behaviour in families was strategic, and while it was based on a faulty cognitive premise that one person could control another in a linear fashion, the Milan approach was firmly grounded in observing and understanding the meanings of daily family interactions. The Milan group's great contribution to our field was that they devised techniques directly corresponding with Bateson's theoretical model, which enabled therapists to create a systemic picture of the mutual influences on family interaction, and allowed family members to relinquish their own linear assumption that a problem is the result of one cause or one set of relationships.

These ideas were being forged from the mid 1970s to the early 1980s, and burst into the public domain with the publication of *Paradox and Counterparadox* (1978) and the 'Hypothesizing, Circularity, Neutrality' paper (Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1980). However, many concepts we use today were undeveloped at that time. For example, the group did not actively challenge gender inequalities and power imbalances, holding the view that concerns about these issues were political stances incommensurate with therapy. It took the critique of feminist family therapists to move the field forward in this area (MacKinnon & Miller, 1987). Likewise, the Milan group did not write about the way the hypothesising of the therapist was implicitly affected by influences of culture and social discourse, yet today this is a rich seam of family therapy activity. The founders of the Milan approach, like all who stake a claim to a particular position, should be critiqued from the standpoint of today's best practice. Nevertheless, I will argue in this paper that the Milan group were among the first to think systemically about certain essential features of family therapy practice, and that these concepts, and the techniques derived from, them have provided a foundation which has allowed therapists to 'maintain the systemic course' in their work, and stimulated creative expansion of ideas and techniques.

I will discuss four areas in particular, in which the Milan group made significant and original contributions:

- the systemic interview
- the understanding of context

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- the use of self in developing a therapeutic relationship
- the development of teams

I have titled this paper 'The Mutiny and the Bounty' to reflect two strongly held opinions of my own. The first is that the convergence and the splitting up of the original four members of the Milan team are two sides of a very important coin. Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin and Prata needed to come together to share ideas and collectively build a complex model of therapy, yet only by doing so could they highlight the differences they would need to articulate in order to develop their work into its next stage. The 'mutiny' allowed some of the team members to travel widely and interact with hundreds of therapists, working in many contexts, and in many cultures throughout the world. It has been these interactions, these dialogues across many differences, that have produced the 'bounty' of ideas and techniques we owe to Milan.

I, along with other colleagues in London, am among those who have been influenced by a dialogue with the Milan group and their ideas. Their approach emerged in the family therapy field at the time I was emerging as a clinical psychologist and family therapist. I was aware that this was a movement I could join at the start and develop my expertise as the approach developed its own status. The concepts suited me well because I am a relatively quiet person, and here was an approach which enabled me to manage the power attributed to therapists with a neutral, questioning, hypothesising style rather than relying on direct action and force of personality for therapeutic results. My clinical work has been done at the Tavistock Clinic in London, which is a training centre as well as an outpatient child and family mental health service. The model suited me personally, but also proved to be very 'teachable' because the basic tenets could be explained, and the techniques, such as hypothesising and circular questioning, could be learned through skills training and simulation exercises.

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When the Milan team split apart in 1980, Boscolo and Cecchin established a centre in Milan dedicated to training other professionals in what became known as the Milan approach, and they did a great deal of travelling to kindle interest among groups throughout the world. They invited Selvini and Prata to join them, but Selvini believed she did not know enough about the method to begin teaching others, so she and Prata started their own institute in Milan and concentrated their efforts on researching what they called the family 'game'. Because of this, I was introduced to Milan work through Boscolo and Cecchin, and their cross-fertilisation, through contact with many practitioners, meant that their ideas were always on the cutting edge of the field and always responsive to what other individuals and groups were thinking. For these reasons, I will briefly discuss the work of Selvini and Prata, but the bulk of the paper will focus on the work of Boscolo and Cecchin and the people most influenced by them.

My thesis in this paper is that while there is a core of ideas central to the Milan approach which are still being used, these ideas also triggered a chain reaction in which an idea or technique was modified to fit a particular context, before being modified further by someone in yet another context. In the end, as in the game of Chinese whispers, it is difficult to trace the route back to the source. My aim is to review some of the developments of the core concepts of the Milan approach, and also to use the ideas as a template to hold up to other frameworks within the field (such as the linguistic and narrative approaches and social constructionism), to enable the reader to see such developments in a new perspective.

I am also aware that this article is based on the people I have met, the places I have been, and the ideas and techniques which have inspired me. Since this represents only a small portion of all that is going on in this field, I apologise in advance to those who could have been referred to in this paper and whom I may have omitted.

The Founding Concepts

There are fascinating stories about how four pyschoanalysts found themselves on the same professional trajectory for a few years in Milan. The scope of this paper means I must refer the reader to other authors who have written about their formation as a group (Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman & Penn, 1987; Campbell, 1991; Tomm, 1985), and authors who have written comprehensively about the early development of their ideas (Boscolo et al., 1987; Tomm, 1987; Hoffman, 1981; Campbell, Draper & Crutchley, 1991; MacKinnon & James, 1987; Penn, 1982). In the 1970s, the group cloistered themselves for several years to study the work of Bateson, Haley and Jackson, and they invited Watzlawick to consult to them in Milan; gradually they created a model which combined these early influences. They began with a definition of *system*. For this they turned to Bateson's definition of a system as any unit structured by *feedback* (Bateson, 1972). Feedback conveys information about *difference*, what Bateson called 'news of a difference'. The Milan team put these ideas into practice by devising an interviewing technique which used feedback from clients to stimulate a new question that introduced difference and enabled a family to see their ideas and behaviours in a new *context*: a process described as 'circular questioning'. They gradually moved towards the idea that a system describes a series of interconnected *relationships* which generate *meaning*

to guide people's actions. This amounted to a move from a biological, equilibrium model to a cognitive, meaning-generating model. Hoffman (1985) noted that the Milan model 'developed renewed interest in mental phenomena such as ideas, beliefs, attitudes, premises and values'.

By 1980 the Milan group were able to identify central concepts and techniques which, as they were subsequently described and practised across the world, added up to the 'Milan Approach'. They frequently acknowledged that other writers and therapists were often better at describing their work than they were! For example, a group of Milan trained therapists in Padua analysed the work done by the Milan group over many years and also saw 1980 as a watershed. They found that the post-1980 model of family therapy reflected greater interest in the use of questioning during therapy, attention to family interaction and the idea that the family system was indeed created by the therapist (Mosconi, Gonzo, Sorgato, Tirelli & Tomas, 1995).

With the publication of the seminal 'Hypothesising-Circularity-Neutrality' paper in 1980, the group articulated their most renowned principles.

Hypothesising refers to the therapists' efforts to articulate for themselves and others the systemic formulation guiding their thinking about the family. The hypothesis should be tested with questions. If the hypothesis is not confirmed, it is discarded in favour of a new one.

Circularity was a frequently misunderstood term. Originally it referred to the process of the therapist gathering feedback from the family's responses, matching it with the hypothesis in his/her mind, and then moving from the feedback to explore through the next question a difference or a new connection within the family's belief system. So the 'circularity' was the feedback loop from client to therapist who added some 'difference' and passed the question back to the client (Brown, 1997).

Cecchin once said that his definition of *neutrality* was that if every family member were asked at the end of a session 'Whose side was the therapist on during the session?' they would all say, 'My side'. This means that the therapist is not without opinions and positions, but is attempting to value and validate each person's point of view.

The Mutiny

Selvini and Prata

Following the dissolution of the team in 1980, Selvini and Prata worked together until 1985, refining the concepts and the methodology which the original team had described in *Paradox and Counterparadox*. They are best known for their development of the 'game' metaphor. That is, family members always behave strategically to advance their positions and gain status and power within the family relationships. They have many strategies at their disposal, such as forming or breaking alliances, or pretending to favour one person while secretly preferring another. When a whole family is involved in this behaviour, the patterns can be described as *family games* (Selvini, 1989). While much of the field was struggling with the implications of a second-order cybernetic position, Selvini and Prata maintained a first order position, that is, they observed the family games as researchers without taking full account of the effect of their observations. Selvini aspired to test a single hypothesis with all the families she saw. This became known as the *invariable prescription*, and consisted of negotiating with a couple to tell other family members they had a secret, which they would tell no one. The next step in the prescription was for the parents to leave the house together for increasing periods of time without telling anyone where they were going (Cade, 1985).

Prata's descriptions of Selvini's and her own clinical work are gripping (1990). The analyses of family games quickly reveal the underlying passion and drama of family life and the interventions take the therapist and family to the very threshold of high risk. I, and many other therapists, have used the insights gleaned from Selvini's work to understand our own cases better. Selvini and Prata were consummate therapists, who wrote helpfully about how to manage therapeutic pitfalls, such as being entrusted with a secret by one family member, without losing one's therapeutic neutrality (Selvini Palazzoli & Prata, 1982).

Yet one is entitled to ask why the work of Selvini and Prata has not had the same impact on the field as the work of Boscolo and Cecchin. Why do their ideas seem to be locked into a historical cul de sac rather than being alive and influential today? I think there are two reasons for this. Firstly, there is a general impression that Selvini and Prata closed their doors to the outside world in order to develop and test their own hypotheses, whereas Boscolo and Cecchin travelled and trained others deliberately to spread the techniques of systemic family therapy. To some extent this is true, yet Matteo Selvini, Selvini Palazzoli's son and colleague, made the interesting comment that:

> Boscolo and Cecchin's present approach is still close to the original ideas expressed in *Paradox and Counterparadox* … Mara Selvini Palazzoli and her team, on the other hand, have made a more radical change (1991: 265).

Perhaps the Selvini-Prata team felt they were making changes, but they certainly did not have same impact beyond Italy's shores as Boscolo and Cecchin who connected themselves to the preoccupations of therapists from many different cultural contexts.

The second point is about the nature of research. To criticise Selvini for maintaining a first order position is to miss the point that her brand of research required her to take one position and observe family behaviour from that position. Her research method would have been undermined if she were continuously altering her observation on the basis of feedback from the family. Selvini's research is valuable, and it should be tested by clinicians on its own terms, in spite of the fact it has come from a different paradigm than the more recent qualitative, self reflexive approaches to research.

Boscolo and Cecchin

One of the stories Boscolo and Cecchin tell is that they invited their first cohort of trainees back to Milan to discuss how the ideas from their training were being applied in various regional settings. 'Oh, we can't do the Milan approach where *we* work … It's not appropriate because we don't work in therapy centres, but we've adapted it to fit our own settings', they said. It is a credit to these trainers that they recognised that one strength of their approach was its solid conceptual foundation, which could be applied in many different settings without losing its essential coherence.

In the early 1980s, the paradigm shift represented by second order cybernetics, which is captured in the Hoffman-Goolishian dictum: 'The problem creates a system' (Hoffman, 1985), gave permission for therapists to do just that: to create new systems. It freed them to believe that every problem, every clinical population, or every working context, allowed for the creation of a new system (Cornwell, 1989).

A similar point is made by Boscolo and Bertrando when they describe the development of their work as an epigenetic process:

> We believe that learning to do therapy should take place in two phases. In the first phase the trainee should learn a model, and while learning it, it is necessary for him to be a 'purist' with regard to that model … However, once the model has been learned … it is possible to learn about other models in a more or less skilful way. As a consequence, this new learning will inevitably contribute to enriching the thinking and practice of the therapist (1996: 37).

During the mid-1980s, in the work of Boscolo and Cecchin, the Milan approach reached a turning point. In order to incorporate second-order cybernetic thinking within their model, they had to recast the three principles of hypothesising, circularity and neutrality. So, for example, a hypothesis was reformulated as a framework for thinking, which allowed the therapist to remain curious and engaged with the family while also holding the observer's systemic position (Brown, 1995). Circularity was seen less as a method of exploring hypotheses and increasingly as a process of the co-construction of realities between therapist and clients. Neutrality (discussed below) was incorporated in Cecchin's new concept of 'curiosity' (Campbell, Draper & Huffington, 1989; Furlong & Lipp, 1995). For a comprehensive review of the concepts and techniques underpinning Boscolo and Cecchin's work, readers are referred to MacKinnon and James' Education Update in this Journal (1987).

In my view, the Milan approach was also transformed by two important developments in the wider context of mental health and therapy at this time. The first was the increased awareness of abuse within family groups. For some of us it was as though the lid had been lifted off an idealised family environment, to reveal stories of child abuse and marital violence. The family could be a dangerous place to be. The second, not unrelated, development was the emergence of feminist family therapy, which also raised awareness, not only of the plight of many women in oppressive relationships, but of the gender differences which influence the assumptions we all make about the families we observe and the way we act as therapists (Goldner, 1988; Walters, Carter, Papp & Silverstein, 1988; Jones, 1993; Burck & Daniel, 1995).

The effect of these developments was to challenge the family therapy field to reconsider the values, beliefs and positions which the therapist brings to therapy. This was particularly pertinent to the Milan approach because their concept of therapeutic neutrality was widely used but frequently misunderstood. Jones warned about 'moral neutrality' and raised the point that a

> therapist who is required to work with a father who has had sex with his daughter needs to be clear about the differences in access to choice, influence, independence, power and responsibility between father and daughter (1993: 146).

MacKinnon and Miller (1987) added that it may be those who lack an analysis of power relations who most easily, albeit unintentionally, engage in oppressive relationships.

All of this emphasis upon the therapist as an active, necessarily biased, co-constructor of therapeutic realities constitutes the foundations of what many people now refer to as Post-Milan Therapy. Certainly in the 1980s the field was moving from modernism to postmodernism, from structuralism to poststructuralism, from constructivism to constructionism, so why shouldn't the Milan approach join the crowd and acquire the same prefix? The new label has provided a home for many divergent approaches which share some basic philosophical and ideological positions. While I recognise that we need defining labels to communicate what we are doing to one another, 'Post-Milan' is not a term I like very much, because of its modernist connotations of a 'before and after'. As I hope to establish in this paper, I think the developments of the Milan model have been subtle and various.

The Bounty

The Milan approach gained prominence and respect during this time. One reason for this is that Boscolo and Cecchin had a clear vision of the way systemic concepts could be applied to therapy. They developed specific techniques which allowed therapists to conduct therapy systemically, and allowed family members to experience a systemic exploration of their own beliefs and behaviours. I now want to address four areas of theory and technique, which have not only been crucial pillars of the Milan approach but also demonstrate the 'bounty' of new techniques which have been shared elsewhere. These are:

The Systemic Interview

Nowhere is the isomorphism between systems concepts and technique more clear than in the Milan group's attempts to

conduct a 'systemic interview'. They were able to structure questions on the basis of the family's feedback; to ask questions which made differences understandable and acceptable; and to ask questions which placed family beliefs and behaviour in new contexts. We owe an enormous debt to Karl Tomm (1987, 1988), a Boswell to Milan's Dr. Johnson, who has consistently codified and explained the Milan techniques to the rest of the field.

The fact that the Milan technique was grounded in theory has made it easier for others to develop new techniques by building on the previous work and adding variations to suit their local perspectives. For example, the Milan group asked questions which placed great emphasis on exploring relationships in therapy. It was as though their questions created an interconnecting web, which pulled individuals into relationships. They might ask: 'What effect does your sadness have on your parents?' or 'Who else in the family shares this desire to be independent?' Then, as the method developed, other practitioners interpreted 'relationship' in new ways and devised new questions to match their models.

For example, Tomm (1987) developed the concept of relationship by asserting that we have internalised our relationships between self and significant others, and proposed that this could be explored by a very creative interviewing technique he labelled 'interviewing the internalised other'. The mutual influence from the time Tomm worked with Michael White can be seen in the latter's method of interviewing. For example, White hypothesises that we internalise the view which others have of us, and then he devises a method of questioning which identifies these crucial planks in our narrative and enables us to move from an internalised to an externalised relationship with these ideas (White, 1988).

The Milan group's use of future-oriented questions was picked up and developed as a singular intervention by Penn and her colleagues at the Ackerman Institute in New York (Penn, 1982). Since then, Boscolo and Bertrando have themselves written eloquently about interviewing families to engage them in the notion that their past is constructed in the present to make certain behaviours possible in the future (1993). White's practice has similarly made use of this idea. Gibney (1994) has also borrowed concepts from wider sources such as psychoanalytic theory to explore means of bringing past conflicts into present-based interviews. Based on the idea that ' … problems are examples of frustrated hopes and dreams', Lang and McAdam (1997) have also developed an interviewing method which concentrates on hopes for the future, and this approach has much resonance with the solution focused work of de Shazer (1985) and others.

In Finland, Seikkula (1995) works with larger systems of professionals and family members clustered around young people with mental illness. He has developed an interview approach which concentrates on the differences and contradictions among the many voices in the professional group, in order to enable them to hear more clearly the contradictions between patient and their own family members.

The Understanding of Context

The original Milan group supported the Batesonian view that therapy was fundamentally a process of new learning made possible by being placed in a new context: if we leave the context of childhood, we can learn new things in the context of adulthood; if we leave the context of despair, we can learn new things in the context of hope. This has prompted Milan therapists to place great emphasis on recognising and defining the context in which behaviour is observed and values are formed. As the Milan group reinterpreted the system as the source of meaning-making in people's lives, context was seen as central because it gave birth to meaning. Without context, there is no meaning.

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The ideas about meaning were given structure and theoretical rigour by Pearce and Cronen (1980). These two American communication scientists first connected with Milan ideas in an article with the not unambitious title, 'How the Milan Method Works' (1985). From that point, they developed their well-known model of Coordinated Management of Meaning, which, curiously, has been more influential amongst the British advocates of Milan work than in other parts of the world. This model arranges the multiple meanings which guide our thought and action into a hierarchical framework. It then tracks the interplay amongst the levels of meaning, asserting that higher order meanings (such as the meaning of being a therapist in our society) 'cascade down' to influence our behaviour. The lower level meanings (such as reading this paper in order to develop some professional knowledge) will ripple upwards to change the higher order meaning about being a therapist.

Other practitioners in the UK have devised their own ways to use context in their therapeutic work. Mason (1993) expanded therapeutic curiosity by introducing the concept of doubt. For him, both family members and therapists must tolerate uncertainty and doubt before they can 'hear' new ideas. He utilised the concept of context by describing the passage a client may take from *unsafe certainty* toward *safe uncertainty* and placed these positions in a grid which therapists can use to plot their relationship with their clients.

Lindsey (1993) argues that the meanings which therapists attach to their clients' behaviour derive from co-existing in two parallel contexts: the personal and the professional. Each is hierarchically organised, and impacts on the other. For example in the context of fostering, a

foster family will be attributed many different meanings by society, by social services, by the child and by the family itself. Understanding the problems which may arise in complex fostering cases then requires a careful exploration of the personal and professional meanings which fostering holds for these different levels of the system.

The Use of Self in Developing a Therapeutic Relationship

One theme within the Milan legacy is an interest in conceptualising the activity of the therapist as part of the evolving system. This began with the concept of neutrality, which was defined as the ability to respect and validate the contributions of all family members regardless of how contradictory they might be. Bolstered by the work of Maturana and the constructivists, Cecchin's concept of 'curiosity' (1987) carried this further by suggesting that the therapist was not neutral in the traditional sense of the word (see Campbell et al., 1989), but filled with her own ideas or curiosities about the way in which the family understood the world. It was this curiosity which kept the therapist connected to the family and drove the therapy forward. The next step along this road was Cecchin's book, *The Cybernetics of Prejudice* (1994), co-authored with Lane and Ray.

Here the authors elevate our simple curiosities to a system of beliefs called 'prejudice'. I'm sure the provocative nature of this word was not lost on these authors. Cecchin, Lane and Ray elaborate some of the many prejudices we hold, such as 'It is good to help people' and 'People with problems benefit from therapy', which influence the way we see our interaction with families and inevitably influence the direction of therapy. In my view, this mantle has been picked up by a group of therapists who have addressed the use of self in family therapy (Flaskas, 1996; Real, 1990; Haber, 1990).

The original Milan group and their immediate followers were experienced therapists and whenever I have seen them working, I have been struck by the way they stay very close to the emotional life of the clients without necessarily commenting on their emotional expressions. However, because the Milan model conceptualises family beliefs and meanings rather than emotion, I think there can be a tendency in less experienced therapists to concentrate on interaction and systemic formulations to the detriment of close awareness of the clients' feelings. I therefore welcome the current return to the conceptualisation of the emotional connectedness between therapist and client (Dallos & Draper, 2001; Byng-Hall, 1995).

I am particularly interested in Hardham's idea (1996) that the therapist communicates several aspects of self that reflect different levels of reality. One level is the cultural or social constructions which provide the discourse from which we draw our ideas; but there is also another level, our felt emotions, our 'bodied' responses; and both of these are realities of our selves which we only come to know in our relationship to our clients.

The Use of Teams

The Milan approach was devised by a team of four working together. They claimed they could do a more 'systemic' therapy when they worked as a team because the effort to reconcile their own different views into one formulation enabled them to work with the multiple perspectives being presented by the family. Matteo and Mara Selvini (1991) wrote about the way a group develops a 'team mind', and produced helpful guidelines to facilitate the working together of a peer consultation team. Mara said for example that all members of a team must have psychological space to have their own thoughts, yet must be loyal to the common objectives.

When Boscolo and Cecchin set up their training course in Milan in 1977, they built teamwork into its structure by splitting the trainees into a therapy team (T-group) and an observing team (O-group) (Boscolo & Cecchin, 1982). One might say this was the original reflecting team, because at the end of each therapy session, the observing team then presented their own hypotheses and ideas about how they might have worked with the family. The ensuing discussion about the different perspectives in the two groups was a great stimulus to the trainees' learning (Jones, 1993).

Tom Andersen, in Norway, had been interested in the Milan group and attended the inaugural training course for foreign therapists in Montisola in 1981. He took the thinking a step further by bringing the observing team into the therapy room to present their ideas directly to the family and therapist. He coined the phrase *'reflecting team'* and the format has become a very popular addition to the range of systemic techniques (1987). Inevitably the format has been adapted to many different settings. One of the most interesting has been the work of the 'just therapy' group in Auckland (Waldegrave, 1990) who use 'cultural consultants' from the client's own community to sit behind the screen and advise the therapy team. In relation to Selvini's concept of the team mind, the just therapy group has alerted the field to the dangers of a team mind becoming too narrow and self referential. Relatively little research has been done into what types of team discussions are most therapeutic for families. White (1995) developed an approach he calls the 'reflecting team as definitional ceremony' in which the observers comment on the way their observation has affected them personally: how they might be feeling or what personal experience they are reminded of. While this is a step toward clarifying what happens in the process, a reflective conversation is part of the therapy itself and should be given the same amount of investigation as other aspects of therapy.

Using Milan Ideas as a Template

In the family therapy field, 'known for its indifference to theoretical issues' (R. Simon, cited in Hoffman, 2002), I have always valued the way the Milan group use systemic concepts to critique their own thinking and to examine the robustness of new ideas. What follows is a presentation of

some of the new ideas and approaches which have emerged in the field since the Milan approach, but I am presenting them as they might be positioned in relation to the body of Milan ideas and techniques.

While I find some of the recent articles 'bridging' systemic work and psychoanalysis disappointing due to their failure to tackle the differences in fundamental processes such as transference and countertransference, Boscolo and Bertrando (1996) hold Bateson's concept of the unconscious up to Freud's to test the strength of their own new approach to individual therapy. They make the point that psychoanalytic work is based on a view of an unconscious made up of instinctual forces which, in the course of therapy, are brought to consciousness; whereas Bateson maintained that the unconscious is made up of the individual premises we acquire from learning, and from learning about our learning. For Bateson, then, therapy is a process of becoming increasingly aware of our premises and the way we learn about ourselves interacting with the environment. This type of analysis is very helpful because it gives systemic therapists a framework within which to judge the value of psychoanalytic ideas in the systemic field.

Social Constructionism

A second example concerns the positions the Milan group took vis a vis the newly emerging field of social constructionism in the early 1990s. Cecchin (Cecchin et al., 1992: 89) gives a memorable account of the Milan group's shift from the idea that families stayed together to control relationships toward the view that they stay together 'to make sense *with* one another'. And when the therapist is added to the equation, therapy becomes a process of the social construction of meaning.

This led the group to re-evaluate the role of the therapist as an active shaper of conversation, deciding what to say and when to say it. But Fruggeri pulled their thinking back from the brink of solipsism and self-reference by revisiting Bateson's concept of negative restraint (1972).

> The therapists' descriptions are *constrained* by the descriptions of the clients' own descriptions ... thus therapists' constructions are linked to the way their actions are interpreted by the client, to the way their questions, comments, and interventions are 'heard' by the client (Fruggeri, 1992: 44).

While the observer's lens widened to include the therapist and client as a co-constructing unit, the Milan group never relinquished their view that therapists are the 'conductor[s] of the session' and as such, must claim responsibility for their own thoughts and actions. Therapists retain responsibility through the process of hypothesising; and when the idea of co-construction demanded a re-evaluation of Milan methods, hypothesising was never abandoned. Unlike the 'not knowing' position advocated by Anderson and Goolishian (1988), the Milan group held firm to a method based on the therapists' awareness and acknowledgement of their own ideas and 'prejudices' (Cecchin, 1996). As we have seen, Cecchin (1987) recast hypothesising as a means of maintaining curiosity about the way family patterns fit together. Fruggeri placed hypothesising squarely in the social constructionist context when she wrote,

> therapists cannot know the meanings attributed by the client to his or her actions ... in an objective way ... but it is through hypothesising about this position that they construct the therapeutic context (1992: 46).

Cecchin takes the argument a step further when he redefines hypothesising in the interactional context. He says that therapists must by all means be aware of their own ideas, but should be prepared to let go of them immediately, and attempt to see them in a wider context. It is important to take responsibility for one's own convictions and realise that they are the 'result of ethical standards which stem from the therapist's personal history, cultural context and theoretical orientation' (Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1992: 93). It is the 'reflexive loop between our taking a stand and immediately thereafter putting this stand in a larger context that creates the "becoming" and not the "being' of a therapist"' (ibid.).

In my own experience as a therapist and trainer, I have found this to be an invaluable concept for therapists. I describe this process as 'temporary conviction' and frequently implore trainees to value and use their convictions but then be prepared to let them go and become curious about the other's response. I often encourage them to be more interested in other people's ideas than their own.

The centrality of the hypothesising therapist raises a question about the ethical basis upon which the therapist is acting. The Milan group along with Tomm (1992) were among the first to highlight the need for the therapist to take responsibility for each contribution in the social construction process. The dilemma appears to be how a therapist can reconcile the position of being influenced or constrained by the response of clients with holding firmly to an ethical responsibility for his own actions. My own view is that therapists must commit themselves to an 'ethic of dialogue'. In other words, ethical positions are socially constructed through an exchange of interpretations, which create meaning. Once this dialogue stops, we are left with an ethic of our own making and therefore taken out of the context in which it has meaning. But we can attempt to stay in dialogue and continually reshape our ethics based on the others' response to our 'temporary convictions' (Campbell, 2000).

Language and Meaning

After Harlene Anderson and Harry Goolishian (1988) awakened the field to the way in which meanings are created in language, Boscolo, Bertrando, Fiocco, Palvarini & Pereira (1995) entered the discussion with their concept of 'keywords'. They emphasised that some words have the power to connect the three levels of cognition, emotion and

action, yet they can also be ambiguous, which empowers them to offer alternative definitions, thus leading to change. Therapists explore the multiple, 'polyvalent' connotations of keywords, such as 'strike'. When a range of meanings is brought forth, the client has the experience of having greater freedom to choose new meaning from the balance within the therapeutic discourse.

While this technique seems to link the earlier circular questioning process with later thinking about linguistic systems, I find that the work of Valeria Ugazio (1998) has drawn the traditions of the Milan group into new and creative areas. She asserts that the complete meaning system which organises the family's behaviour is made up of a number of semantic polarities such as 'dependence/independence' or 'strong/weak'. These meaning polarities are like spectacles which the family uses to give meaning to the world around them. In the example above, this family would tend to attribute meaning to behaviour in terms of whether it was very strong, very weak or somewhere in between.

Ugazio then explores the function of language, making the point that we can only know 'strong' if we have a concept of 'weak', and therefore if a family is going to utilise the strong/weak semantic polarity to create meaning in their world, they must have an idea of what 'strong' and 'weak' positions on the polarity look like. And in order to know this, they need opportunities to see strength and weakness enacted by people who occupy those particular positions on the continuum. Therefore others will be in a complementary position to the one occupied by the family member they define as weak. Ugazio has described how this process operates in the families of phobics, obsessive-compulsives and anorexics.

This formulation is similar to the process of 'recruitment' which White (1995) describes as the ways individuals are drawn into certain roles within a family narrative. But Ugazio's is based on a notion of complementarity between polarised positions and it suggests that complementarity itself constitutes the meaning system under which the family operates.

I have used this framework in both clinical and organisational work. It can be a freeing concept because it locates personal problems as positions which are made available by the family organisation and which play a crucial role in generating meaning. If these are simply positions, then they can also change, so that someone who starts from a position of 'I am strong' could take a new position called 'I am not always strong', providing other positions shifted to change the existing complementary relationship amongst the positions.

Narrative

One of the most creative and well-received developments arising from the shift from families-as-cybernetic-systems to families-as-meaning-making-systems has been the narrative approach to therapy. One of the founders of this approach, Michael White, based his original thinking on the work of Bateson, and his idea that the act of receiving feedback itself restrains or limits the possible ways one can think and behave (White, 1986). These 'restraints of redundancy' led White to become interested in how people derive meaning from these restraints, and then it was a small step to adopt the narrative metaphor as the basis of our interpretative repertoire.

Apart from this common ancestry in Gregory Bateson, narrative therapy technique has several features in common with the original Milan approach. Questions of relative influence are similar to the 'more-or-less' questions the Milan team used to define the limits of the system and introduce difference into the interview. The Milan group's hypothetical or future-oriented questions have their echo in the elegant way narrative therapists weave new identities from unique outcomes projected into the future. Finally, the impact of many narrative interviews has the effect of challenging the family member's construction of reality and opening the way to a reconstruction, much as Tomm (1985; 1993) described with his technique of reflexive questioning.

Some critics have said the narrative approach is not family therapy, nor is it 'systemic' because it does not focus on patterns of family interaction. However, Lundby (2000) makes the interesting point that although narrative therapy is generally not seen to be a 'systemic' therapy, it can be seen to adhere to a different definition of 'systemic'. Instead of working with many family members simultaneously, and tracking the unfolding interaction among them, the narrative therapist slows the process down and stretches the interaction apart by working with one family member at a time. In the end the individual can be rejoined to direct feedback from other members of the family system through witnessing groups and practices of applause.

The creative way in which narrative therapists enlarge the system by bringing in other people as friends or witnesses to support new narratives is in fact another way in which narrative can be linked to the tradition of systemic therapy. From members of the extended family or community to children's parties which celebrate the defeat of the externalised 'monster', the narrative therapist holds a large, interacting system in mind.

Toward Integrative Models

Boscolo and Bertrando (1996) describe their longstanding struggle to integrate the complexity of the individual's intrapsychic world with the systemic model of a relational world. Their epigenetic model (1996) enabled them to see that they could use a number of reductionistic frames such as behavioural patterns or experiences and meanings without losing sight of the holistic frame. Their systemic therapy with individuals bears testimony to this, drawing inspiration from cognitive, gestalt and psychoanalytic as well as systemic models. *Systemic Therapy with Individuals* (1996) not only describes a new integrative approach to therapy but it also revisits many of the original Milan ideas in the light of recent developments in thinking.

For example, they demonstrate ways in which circular questioning (which had been used in the presence of family

groups) can be used in individual therapy to bring other people to mind and give them 'voice' in the therapeutic dialogue. They coin the phrase 'presentification of the third party' and acknowledge some of the similarities with the therapeutic technique of externalisation. They say the use of circular questions retains its fundamental purpose of creating connections, although the connections are built up in the absence of the other components of the system.

Work with Organisations

Milan ideas have also been applied to work with organisations. One of the first forays into this field was a book which I co-edited with Ros Draper, which gathered the experiences of many practitioners (from Europe and the USA) who were trying to introduce the Milan approach or systemic thinking into their various agencies. The diversity of strategies reflected the necessity of understanding the primary purpose of each organisation as well as the meaning it attributed to change. In many ways, each of these practitioners needed to act as strategic organisational consultants (Campbell & Draper, 1985). Around the same time Selvini (1986) gathered case studies of consultations to public sector agencies in Italy, which were flavoured by the Milan team's trademark insights into the staff's struggles for power and status.

Cecchin (1999) employs the same framework in describing his work as a consultant to a family therapy team in the public sector. He observed that some members of the team had been sent by superiors who did not subscribe to the systemic model. Therefore the members would have been disloyal and lost status if they had embraced the family therapy work wholeheartedly. Instead they feigned an attitude of curiosity which was accompanied by covert contempt for the model. Cecchin hypothesised that the larger organisational system was maintained by lack of clarity, including the ambiguity about the meaning of the family therapy team. The lack of clarity avoided certain conflicts amongst staff and kept the power in the hands of certain people. As a consultant, he reckoned he would be dismissed if he introduced clarity into the system; so the question for him was how to make an intervention which might have some impact without creating too much clarity — and his dismissal.

Ceccin's intervention was 'counterparadoxical' in the mould of the traditional Milan approach. He positively connoted the lack of clarity as useful in preventing too much change and conflict between different points of view. He suggested that the family therapy team should be organised to retain the ambiguity and that its members should all write notes about the things about the family approach which worked and didn't work, and should circulate these notes as a form of research to the senior people in the organisation.

Fruggeri (2002) has recently written about providing supervision to different types of therapy teams. One type of team uses systemic theory and practice, and as a supervisor she uses her own systemic thinking to understand the way the therapists' premises influence how they may see their clients. The second type of team does not use the systemic model, and here Fruggeri acts more as a consultant to help the team identify the dilemmas or contradictions within the constructs of their model, guiding them to their own dilemmas and solutions. She states that her method relies on a clear identification of two different contexts, each of which places her in a different position in the system and requires a different behaviour to provide effective consultation. In the former example, she takes (or is offered) a position as a systemic expert; whereas in the latter she is on the edge of the system as a consultant to an observed process.

The process of co-constructing realities through conversation has been addressed by many authors (Shotter, 1993; Gergen, 1994), and several Milan-inspired consultants have developed a conversational model for work with organisations (Anderson & Burney, 1999; Campbell, 2000). Anderson describes her work as a 'shared enquiry' based on dialogue amongst the clients and between the consultant and clients. The role of the consultant becomes one of maintaining the space where these dialogues can take place and designing exercises which enable employees to speak and listen to each other.

My own work is similar. I place great emphasis on creating a safe enough environment for people to listen carefully to their colleagues, but also to challenge one another to let go of some of their cherished ideas. I try to shift the emphasis away from understanding the problems of an organisation toward establishing a context in which new conversations can take place. I preface my consultations with lengthy discussions about ground rules to create a safe environment for new conversations. This approach resonates with the fixed rule language game of Wittgenstein (Cronen & Lang, 1994); the Fifth Province work of McCarthy and Byrne in Dublin (McCarthy & Byrne, 1988); and the Public Conversations Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Becker et al., 1995).

My work emphasises context. New conversations are fostered when the participants are able to listen in a non-judgemental and unthreatened manner and able to take the risk of entertaining new ideas. In addition to the ground rules and specific skills, I find it is essential to negotiate the meaning and the risk of change at higher levels of the organisation. New conversations will only take place with the 'permission' of the larger organisation (Campbell, 1995; 1999; Campbell, Coldicott & Kinsella, 1994).

Conclusion: Having Faith in the Future of the Past

I am going to conclude this paper by making reference to my own experience of writing it. Although I like to think of myself as a therapist who has 'moved on' from the influences of the original Milan group of the 1980s, I assumed I had enough latent knowledge in mind to be able to write this piece without too much strain, so I accepted the invitation from the editors of the *ANZJFT* to assemble the article. I was wrong. The more I thought

about the dissemination of Milan ideas in the field, the more I felt I had opened the proverbial 'can of worms'. I began to feel defeated and resentful that I had accepted the task. But gradually I have come, personally, to see the value of revisiting some of the original papers, particularly those of Selvini. As a result I have been thinking of the way contexts change and the way our acceptance or rejection of certain ideas is so heavily influenced by everything going on around us: our colleagues, our work place, recent conferences, the *zeitgeist*. In taking a step back and surveying the span of development over 25 years, I felt that I was lifting ideas out of their original contexts and giving them a second chance. And in their new 21st century contexts they are attributed new meanings. But this exercise has also made me pause to look at the value-laden contexts that led me originally to favour or reject certain ideas. I am more aware of what influenced me then, and perhaps I can be a bit more aware in the future.

So, I wonder if we should be *required* to revisit some of the classical papers of the past from the vantage point of the present. If the purpose of a good idea is to begin an internal dialogue, we could explore the quality of the dialogue that emerges from our encounters with previously held ideas, rather than the ideas themselves.

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