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This essay proposes that family therapy is currently undergoing a paradigm shift as a result of the ascendance of an epistemological focus absent in the foundational works that gave rise to the field's dominant clinical approaches. While systemic metaphors for the family are based on mechanistic, biological, and linguistic models primarily concerned with how the world is (ontology), postmodernism's social constructionist leanings give primacy to meaning, interpretation, and the inter-subjectivity of knowledge (epistemology). Thus, the metaphor of the family as a system is gradually being subsumed by a metaphor that construes families as interpretive communities, or storying cultures. It is suggested that this largely implicit transformation be made explicit in order to explore more fully the clinical implications of the new epistemology.

> *We shall not cease from exploration*
> *And the end of all our exploring*
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
> *And know the place for the first time.*
> T.S. Elliot "Little Gidding"

The field of family therapy is up to something big. For more than a quarter century, family therapists have challenged individualistic approaches to psychotherapy with an array of powerful insights into the interconnective and relational aspects of human experience. Now the field1 is at it again, prodding detractors and disciples alike with a series of provocative jabs in the ribs. This wake-up call on entrenched ways of viewing and working with families is evident in a steadily accumulating body of work (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; de Shazer, 1991, 1993a; Epston & White, 1992; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992; Hoffman, 1985, 1990; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). The "something big" I believe these prominent family practitioners are proposing is a fundamental change in the way we construe our coming to know the world around us, with resounding implications for the theory and practice of family therapy.

The change is inextricably linked to epistemology--that sometimes troublesome, always controversial, but "heart-of-the-matter" (Hoffman, 1985) word that has preoccupied the field since its inception. In this essay, I will characterize the field of family therapy as undergoing a paradigm shift founded on epistemology--a change in direction of equal proportion to the one family therapy, with its challenge to established linear and intrapsychic views, visited upon all of psychotherapy. More than a mere revision in our manner of talking about the work of therapy (Sluzki, 1988), this shift in perspective

brings into being "incommensurably different worlds of action and existence" (Goolishian & Anderson, 1992, p. 10).

Specifically, I will propose that the widespread critique of mainstream family therapy is evidence of this shifting paradigm. I will argue that postmodernism's ubiquitous focus on epistemology--on meaning, interpretation, and the intersubjectivity of knowledge--cannot be adequately represented by the biological, mechanistic, and linguistic models that frame the systemic orientation of family therapy. I suggest that the central metaphor of families as systems is now being subsumed by a view that construes families and other client groupings as interpretive communities, or storying cultures. Finally, I will propose that this largely implicit transformation be made explicit to facilitate the convergence of a range of emerging ideas about the practice of family therapy and, indeed, psychotherapy in general.

AN EVOLVING EPISTEMOLOGY

Nichols and Schwartz (1991) describe a "philosophic midlife crisis" (p. 143) that befell family therapy in the 1980s. A preponderance of new ideas emerging from physics, neurobiology, hermeneutics, social constructionism, literary deconstruction, feminism, and cross-cultural studies, to name but a few of the influences, were trained on the basic premises of family therapy. Indeed, this assault on mainstream family therapy appears much like the "period of pronounced professional insecurity," which Kuhn (1970, pp. 67-68) describes as preceding a shift in scientific paradigms. While balking at placing a timeline on this conceptual revolution, I would suggest that the cumulative critique of family therapy has raised issues beyond the descriptive scope of systemic metaphors for the family--"second-order" or not. The effort to accommodate the new epistemology within the mainstream, metaphorical frame of family therapy (Atkinson & Heath, 1990; Auerswald, 1987; Becvar & Becvar, 1988; Bopp & Weeks, 1984; Golann, 1987; Hoffman, 1985; Real, 1990; Simon, 1992) looks increasingly like the movement toward over-complexity, which Kuhn (1970) describes as the hallmark of a theory's desperate reorganization in the face of a paradigmatic challenge.

The Foundation of Clinical Practice

While epistemology may seem to reside in a heady conceptual realm far removed from the clinician's doorstep, it is of fundamental concern to the practice of therapy. One cannot operate without epistemological assumptions, although it is possible to be unaware of them. Our theories are founded on epistemology--whether theories of psychotherapy, or personal theories of life manifest in the choices we make on a daily basis. When one considers, then, that epistemology informs all of our beliefs about where problems come from, how they are maintained, and what facilitates their resolution, the distinctions examined here are fundamental.

Because the topic of epistemology is so central to this discussion, it is worth iterating its typical meaning in philosophical discourse. Epistemology is the study of knowledge, the study not of how the world "really" is but, rather, of how we come to know it. And so

"epistemologies aim at understanding understanding" (von Foerster, 1985, p. 519).
Questions of reality are left to another discipline, ontology.3 The reason this distinction
is here regarded as so critical is simple: family therapy is increasingly directing its
attention at the world of experience, the world we can know. In other words, it is shifting
its focus to an epistemological domain, and leaving aside its former preoccupation with
the "real" world, which concerns ontology. But the mainstream models of family therapy
are firmly rooted in ontological foundations--in models concerned mostly with the way
the world "really" is. The resulting tension and confusion are typical of the unsettled
period between scientific paradigms (Kuhn, 1970). This abstract premise will become
more concrete as the discussion proceeds.

Before examining the assumptions underlying the systemic metaphors of family therapy,
it would be useful to survey the changing ideas about "how we know what we know,"
which are reshaping the landscape of the humanities. In this task, I plead guilty in
advance for the omissions and discontinuities I will inevitably perpetrate. Once a
distinction is made between the "real" and the "known," the world becomes a complex
place indeed. The epistemological debate within family therapy and throughout the
humanities has seen countless twists and turns over the past years. The discussion here
focuses on developments seen as relevant to the overarching premise of this discussion.

The Locus of Knowledge

In greatly simplified form, it might be said that the prevalent epistemology in the
humanities--the view of how we come to know the world--has been evolving during this
century from a focus on the observed world as object, to a focus on the observing person
as subject, to a focus on the place between subject and object, that is, the intersubjective
domain where interpretation occurs in community with others.

There is nothing particularly "tidy" about this evolution, and many approaches to family
therapy display features of epistemological premises that straddle more than one of the
stances delineated above (Auerswald, 1987). Nevertheless, I propose that from (1) a core
belief in a knowable reality (Gergen, 1992), a "logical and ordered universe whose laws
could be uncovered by science" (Polkinghorne, 1992, p. 147), there has been a movement
toward (2) a perspectivist position, which concludes that "all description tells us primarily
about the person giving the description" (Golann, 1987, p. 332), and gradually to (3) a
view that places the locus of knowledge in a community of persons, with meaning
construes as lying "in between people rather than hidden away inside an individual" (de
Shazer & Berg, 1992, p. 74)

Although postmodern thinking is not unified under one coherent philosophy (Kvale,
1992), this growing emphasis on the intersubjective/consensual nature of knowledge
reflects a trend in the contemporary zeitgeist. In this essay, I will argue that both the
positivist stance typically equated with modernism and the constructivist (Efran, Lukens,
& Lukens, 1988; Hoffman, 1985; Simon, 1992) orientation identified with second-order
cybernetic views of the family is being replaced by a social constructionist (Gergen,

1985; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992; Hoffman, 1990) view, with powerful implications for the practice of family therapy.

The pragmatic, object-centered epistemology of modernism (Gergen, 1991) is perhaps most readily associated in psychotherapy with behaviorist approaches distinguished by a rigorous attention to data gathering, linear causal sequences, and so on. Family therapy came into prominence on the heels of the new physics, which concluded that the nature of the world cannot be understood separately from the relationship of its various parts (Hawking, 1989). Family therapy therefore emerged from models that replaced behaviorism's linear view with a focus on circularity and relationship. However, as this discussion unfolds, I will argue that the field's systemic metaphors do not inherently address another conclusion of "new science"--the futility of seeking to gain knowledge of an underlying reality unhindered by the influence of the observer (Hawking, 1989).

The question of the observer's influence is all about how we come to know the world. In recent years, there has been a dawning awareness of its relevance to family therapy, with the result that the word epistemology has been "used, overused, and abused" (von Foerster, 1985, p. 517) in writings and discussions in the field. The questions are difficult, but if the "hard" science of physics has been compelled to address them, then certainly they must be tackled head-on by family therapy and, indeed, by the humanities, because the act of knowing is a distinctly human endeavor. What follows are two epistemological views that have gained an increasingly firm foothold in family therapy, and are here described as precipitating a paradigm shift now underway in the field.

Constructivism and Social Constructionism

Although the terms constructivism and social constructionism both suggest that "the observer generates the distinction we call 'reality'" (Andersen, 1987, p. 416), they are not synonymous. Constructivism is primarily individualistic, focusing on sense data and information processing, while social constructionism is concerned with the person in community and focuses on meaning and interpretation.

Although "constructivism" is not infrequently used more or less interchangeably with "social constructionism' (see Efran et al., 1988; Real, 1990), a significant distinction can be made between the two terms. Hoffman (1990) clarifies a divergence in focus that I will elucidate here because it lays bare the direction of the paradigm shift to which I have referred.

Constructivism is largely informed by research in neurobiology, including the finding (Dell, 1985; Hoffman, 1990) that there is no apparent correlation between the perceived object and what the retinal cells receive. For biologist Maturana (1978), the epistemological conclusion is what he calls "structure determinism"--that the structure of the perceiving system determines the outcome of any interaction with outside systems. In other words, in contrast with a modernist epistemology, which construes knowledge as being about an objective world "out there" beyond the observer, constructivism points to the observer as the reference point of knowledge.

Constructivist thinking was the first epistemological wave to break on the shores of family therapy. It has had a large impact on systemic frameworks for viewing the family (Becvar & Becvar, 1988). While systemic metaphors emphasize circular processes, feedback, connection between levels, et cetera, they are not inherently about how we come to know the world, but rather about how the world is. They construe systems as complex entities observed in the world. By turning attention from the observed system to the observing system, constructivism introduced a new level of complexity to cybernetics, one of the foundations of the family systems view. Thus was born "second-order cybernetics" or "cybernetics of cybernetics," erasing the sharp distinction between observer and observed (Golann, 1987). I believe this convoluted attempt to accommodate an evolving epistemology has rendered unwieldy a range of metaphors for describing families.

While constructivism has been awkwardly embraced by family therapy, social constructionism presents a range of new distinctions beyond the pale of the field's conventional systemic frameworks. In formulating its epistemological stance, social constructionism turns not to the nervous system but to the intersubjective influence of language and culture, as well as to the hermeneutical tradition of textual interpretation (Hekman, 1984; Packer, 1985). In so doing, it references knowledge neither in the observed nor the observer, but rather in the place between the two, in the social arena among interpreting subjects.

Berger and Luckmann (1967) unravel a compelling description of this process of coming to know the world, depicting knowledge as a socially negotiated construction that takes shape "in a world that we define through our descriptive language in social intercourse with others" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 377). Although de Shazer (1991) uses the terms "interactional constructivism" (p. 76) and "post-structuralism" (de Shazer & Berg, 1992) to describe this view, his emphasis on "the interaction of people as an activity through which meaning is constructed" (p. 73) is essentially the same. These related positions reject the notion of knowledge as the function of a solitary observer's structure --an isolationist view that has been construed (Hoffman, 1993) as depicting each of us inhabiting our own "bathysphere."

While social constructionism does not explicitly refute the constructivist view, it arguably subsumes it. As isolated as each of us is within our own biological organisms, so are we also members of a community of interpreting beings. Our bathyspheres are linked by telephone, as it were. So, while persons can be seen as processing data in accordance with their unique structures (constructivism), they share with others interpretations of the "text" of their experience. Social constructionism is primarily concerned with the process whereby meaning is arrived at communally. It emphasizes neither the biology of the observer nor the ontology of the observed world, focusing instead on knowledge as a function of communal textual interpretation.

Geertz (quoted by White & Epston, 1990, p. 9) calls the text analogy the "broadest and most recent refiguration of social thought." According to this epistemological view,

meaning attains primacy, and events are seen as "having a semantic rather than a logical or causal organization" (Packer, 1985, p. 1081). An important consequence of this departure from modernist thinking is that epistemology in effect replaces ontology as the focus of attention, at least in the humanities. Inother words, pursuit of the understanding of how the world is becomes secondary to the preoccupation with the way we perceive, interpret, and semantically construct it. Lived experience is regarded as the primary reality4 (Bruner, 1986). As a result, discussion of human action departs from mainstream family therapy's abstracted systemic models and focuses on the seedbeds of semantics: language and culture.

Social Constructionism

The semantic dimension entertained by a social constructionist orientation opens the door to consideration of language and culture in a way that constructivism, with its emphasis on biology, is less equipped to do. Says Sellick (1989):

> Our history is more than a history of biological evolution. We are coupled not only to a biological niche, but also a cultural niche--a world we have created, and are creating, through language, in dialogue, and in community with others. [p. 33]

When experience is regarded as text, conjointly interpreted in community, then language plays the critical role of bearing the distinctions that bring our world into being.

The sense of this view is apparent even in the present discussion: it is language that gives birth to the very concept of "epistemology," language that enables us to create a distinction between "constructivism" and "social constructionism," or between "table" and "chair" for that matter. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) put it, "language makes the co-ordinates of my life in society and fills that life with meaningful objects" (p. 22). The act of knowing and the act of "languaging" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988) are therefore inseparable, and are regarded as constitutive. "World-making" becomes the primary function of mind (Bruner, 1987).

According to this emerging view, language cannot properly be considered in isolation from culture because language inevitably originates from a cultural milieu, and it is typically construed as the feature that most clearly differentiates cultures. And so our claims to truth and right embedded in the words we use to depict our worlds are "more reasonably viewed as the constructions of communities with particular interests, values, and ways of life" (Gergen, 1991, p. 134).

The writings of the French social historian Michel Foucault provide some of the most telling examples of the process whereby knowledge (embedded in language) serves the ends of dominant cultures--to the extent that human sexuality itself may be regarded as socially legislated, shaped by normative prescriptions about viewing and communicating about the body (Foucault, 1980). Family therapist Michael White (1992) draws heavily on Foucault's ideas when he describes how each of us enter a world where particular distinctions embedded in language and culture have been granted truth status:

These practices and knowledges have been negotiated over time within contexts of communities of persons and institutions that comprise culture. This social formation of communities and institutions compose relations of forces that, in engaging in various practices of power, determine which ideas, of all those possible, are acceptable-- they determine what is to count as legitimate knowledge. [p. 124]

The critical implication of the link between language and culture, and a conclusion implicit in the quotation above, is that cultures--including influential institutional forces within cultures--propagate values. And so cultures do not create their realities through language in a neutral way; rather, the language distinctions that cultures make are inherently ideological. Says Mair (1988), "we think and speak and act in the forms our culture has prepared. It is through these already existing and unquestioned means that we are molded toward what we suppose we know" (p. 129), and "we are coated and permeated by the ideology of our place and time" (p. 135).

Narrative: Container for Our Constructions

The social constructionist view therefore places a heavy emphasis on the ways in which we collectively perceive, interpret, and construct our experience in order to make meaning of it, and thereby shape our worlds. In this context, individuals, families, and whole cultures are accorded a different kind of creative power than that proffered by the modernist formulations, as informed by an objectivist epistemology that gave rise to family therapy's dominant systemic model. If the modernist is an engineer guided by the laws of science, the postmodernist is a storyteller inspired by the imagination. This leads to a further description of our experience, which unfolds from a social constructionist view: narrative. While language and culture contribute a context for our creative formulations, narrative provides their form.

Narrative has become a popular means of framing both cultural and individual experience (Bruner, 1987; Combs & Freedman, 1990; Howard, 1991; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). When our experience is more closely equated with constructions than with reality, "story" becomes a useful way of describing the package in which it is delivered. Stories incorporate the flow of time, capturing the temporal dimension of experience and our expressions of that experience. Bruner comes to a pithier conclusion regarding the utility of stories: "narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative" (1987, p. 15).

Theory (Scientific and Otherwise) as Story

The emerging social constructionist epistemology elaborated thus far leads naturally to a conclusion that science-- whether "hard" physical science or "soft" human science--itself represents a body of cultural stories. Like all human creations communicated through language, the work of science can be situated in a cultural context--the scientific milieu. Howard (1991) describes scientific theories as "refined stories (or rich metaphors) meant to depict complex causal processes in the world" (p. 189). When matters of internal consistency or cause and effect are deemed preeminent, we turn to the stories of science.

If we want to get at the meaning (rather than the cause) of an event such as a baby's birth or the death of a loved one, we are likely to turn to stories forged in an altogether different cultural context: the stories of literature, philosophy, or religion.

Sellick (1989) makes the same point in reference to the interpretive dimension of our understanding:

> We can begin to see that what we distinguish as "true" as the product of the means by which we distinguished it, that even scientifically established fact is part of the hermeneutic circle of human understanding, and is shaped by the individual preunderstandings and assumptions, as well as the historical, political and ideological climate in which it took root. [p. 23]

Whether the reader is prepared to assign such an interpretive and constitutive function to the physical sciences, it has become commonplace to view psychological theory in metaphorical terms--as stories forged in cultural contexts according to the biases inherent in their particular perspectives. The distinctions represented by terms like intergenerational boundary, differentiation of self, and negative feedback may all be regarded as metaphorical descriptions valued for their context-specific usefulness and fertility rather than their accuracy. This is a paradigm-shattering departure from the assumptions upon which those constructs were founded.

Neither can the present discussion be excluded. It can also be seen as a construction, a story, a postmodern narrative founded upon a range of assumptions depicting one way of viewing our experience. The "social constructionist paradigm," which reigns in this discussion, is a distinction we "perform" (Maturana, 1978). It does not exist in a wide range of other cultural contexts.

Viewed from this epistemological perch, persons are regarded in terms of their culturally informed, world-making practices: "knowledge about society is thus a realization in the double sense of the word, in the sense of apprehending the objectivated social reality, and in the sense of ongoingly producing the reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 66; emphasis in the original). The metaphorical stories we tell--including our theories--are therefore seen as constitutive acts. As such, they are informed by our purposes and intentions, reflecting not so much what is as what we deem important. When examining the dominant metaphors of family therapy, then, it is important to consider how well they reflect the way we view our worlds. Inescapably, this brings us back to that heart-of-the-matter word, epistemology.

FAMILIES AS SYSTEMS

The systemic view of the family in all of its myriad manifestations has given rise to a dazzling range of metaphorical constructions which have in turn inspired innovative new approaches to working with families5 (Bowen, 1978; Haley, 1976 ; Madanes, 1981; Minuchin, 1974; Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1978; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Following the social constructionist epistemology of this

discussion, these therapeutic approaches can be viewed as cultural expressions emerging from an intellectual milieu and informed by a range of seminal thinkers, including Bateson (1972, 1979), de Saussure (1959), von Bertalanffy (1968), and Wiener (1961). It is these expressions that are the subject of the aforementioned critique of family therapy-- a critique here characterized as the manifestation of an ongoing paradigm shift. In effect, a range of established cultural expressions in family therapy no longer resonate with the meanings of an emerging epistemology. The stories don't fit.

What follows is a highly condensed summary of some of the primary concerns raised in the critique of family therapy. While many of these have appeared in publications over the past decade and more, the intent here is to examine each through a social constructionist lens to demonstrate the incongruence between the field's growing assumptions about how we know what we know, and the predominant metaphors it relies on to depict families.

Absence of Race, Class, Gender Distinctions

The thermostat was one of Bateson's favorite metaphors. He applied it to the family, arguing that members serve their families in the way that a thermostat's parts help to maintain a steady temperature. While this ingenious view captures systemic interdependence, it obscures any view of interpreting subjects inhabiting a culture and historical context in which negotiations over "reality" are tempered by social hierarchy. And so issues of race, class, and gender are largely overlook by systemic practitioners (Hoffman, 1990).

Power and Neutrality

Bateson (1972) referred to the "myth of power" (p. 494), calling it "epistemological lunacy" (p. 495). Dell (1989) says that the invalidation of power is an inevitable consequence of adopting a systemic perspective. According to a social constructionist view, however, to tell a community of persons (women, for example) that the power differentials they experience and name are illusory is inconsistent with the notion that the distinctions we make through language construct the experiential world we inhabit.

In systemic terminology, to speak of victims and abusers in families is to slip into "linear causality." And so familial relations are typically couched in terms of "complementarity," "recursiveness," and "circularity." To explain this divergence from linear thinking, Becvar and Becvar (1988) write: "Thus a sadist requires a masochist, just as a masochist requires a sadist" (p. 62). What is missing, of course, is acknowledgment that the victims of sadists are not, by definition, willing partners. Says Goldner (1985): "the systemic sine qua non of circulatory looks suspiciously like a hypersophisticated version of blaming the victim and rationalizing the status quo" (p. 333).

The postmodern view states that power grants privilege--the privilege to have one's story dominate another's, to have one's truth prevail. However, these meanings are foreign to

the analysis of biological organisms or electronic feedback mechanisms; when those metaphors are transplanted into family therapy, power remains tellingly absent.

The notion of therapist neutrality--a variation on the theme of power--is also incongruent with a social constructionist view. Neutrality fails to address the ideological nature of world-making. The meanings generated by therapists, no less than those of clients, are embedded in language and emerge from cultural milieus. Anderson and Goolishian (1988), remind us that our theories--including those about therapy--"are ideologies invented at a moment in time for practical reasons" (p. 373). It is not a question of whether we bring politics into the therapy room, says Michael White (1994), "it's a question of whether we admit it or not."

Functionalism: Persons as Objects

When attention is focused primarily on a behavior's service to the wider context (family, society, for example), the subjective experience of the behaving person is overlooked. The resulting explanations--such as the notion that symptoms represent family members' attempts to control or re-balance the family--are "functionalist" in nature (Nichols & Schwartz, 1991).

Built on an objectivist foundation, functionalism objectifies persons by interpreting their behaviors in terms of their service (deliberate or not) to the unit of which they are a part, rather than construing human action as exemplifying the meaning-making practices of persons in the world. In effect, functionalist explanations assume our stories are not our stories. While a woman's experience tells her she is depressed because her life lacks meaning, the adept functionalist "knows" that her behavior is in fact an attempt to control her family. Luepnitz (1988) says, "Functionalist historians have argued that lynchings and witch hunts serve a social need, i.e., a cathartic or 'therapeutic' need. Therapeutic for whom? one might well ask" (p. 65).

Adversaries and Hierarchies

The systemic orientation to families frequently leads to a pragmatic clinical approach dressed in the language of "strategies," "maneuvers," and "countermaneuvers." The critique of this demeanor typically cites the emphasis on an adversarial/hierarchical relationship, premised on a perspective that Hoffman (1990) says requires "distance that only compounds the professional distance already bequeathed to psychotherapists by the medical model" (p. 9).

As with other critiques of the predominant metaphors of family therapy, this plea for a more cooperative stance can be seen to be founded on epistemological differences. A hierarchical stance diverges significantly from a "subject-subject" perspective (Goolishian & Anderson, 1992), which encourages an exploration of the world as it is co-constructed by therapist and client.

Whose Story Is It, Anyway?

Another alienating consequence of this privilege differential is obfuscated communication. Because it is founded upon (increasingly) convoluted systemic models, Parry (1991) says that family therapy lacks "metaphorical resonance" in a contemporay context. To the uninitiated, its decrees are obtuse, and thus fail to promote mutual understanding:

> Just as the modernist critic or scholar could claim a privileged position by virtue of an understanding of the underlying structure, myth, or subterranean force that the text expressed, the therapist has retained a privileged vantage point arising out of access to a body of knowledge that explained the client on a different and superior level to her experience of herself. [pp. 39-40]

In other words, the therapist's story is given primacy, and that story is taken to be more reflective of the underlying truth than the family's own story about itself.

These recurring criticisms of the system view's alienating tendencies reflect a growing emphasis on respect for the client, which follows naturally from a social constructionist perspective. If knowledge is regarded as intersubjective, it is presumptuous to elevate the status of the therapist's interpretation.

Absence of Historical Context

The absence of a temporal dimension to the system metaphor is another widely cited shortcoming. While morphogenesis --the behavior that allows for change--is recognized in a systemic framework, it is overshadowed by the complementary concept of morphostasis. Other central terms like "homeostasis," "circularity," and "autopoeisis" are spatial metaphors that fail to capture temporal flow in the way that "story" and "narrative" do. Hoffman (1985) says that mainstream approaches to family therapy overlook the lived experience of the systems they observe: families dwell in time. As a result, a mother may be labeled "overinvolved" when her dominance in the home is the inevitable expression of a widespread historical trend "that family therapists mistake for a clinical disturbance" (Goldner, 1985, p. 35).

Absence of Cultural Context

A social constructionist epistemology, which construes knowledge as embedded in language and arising from culture, inevitably must call into question any accepted clinical wisdom regarding appropriate hierarchies and boundaries, any normative prescriptions for what constitutes a "healthy" family. When our gaze extends beyond the Western cultures that gave rise to mainstream family therapy, we discover that our fundamental conceptions of the child, of mothers' love, of the self, and of countless other constructs are widely differentiated across contemporary societies (Gergen, 1985). This comes as no surprise when it is assumed that "the process of understanding is not driven automatically by forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in

relationship (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). From this perspective, the normalizing edicts of systemic family therapy suffer from a debilitating dose of ethnocentricity.

Contrasting Epistemologies

If (as is argued here) the metaphor of the family as a system fails to match an emerging epistemology, it would seem to follow that it is founded on a contrasting epistemology. What is that view? Following Held and Pols (1985), I submit that the systems view grew not out of assumptions about how we come to know the world, but about how the world is. It is founded on ontological--not epistemological--premises. In other words, "systems" are construed not as a way of describing experience, but as the inherent structure of the "real" world. It is no wonder, then, that the more recent introduction of epistemology (in the conventional, philosophical meaning of the term) into the systemic framework has perpetrated such a muddle.

Held and Pols (1985) and Dell, in his rigorous critique (1985) of Bateson's work, provide cogent support for this thesis. Bateson (1972) claimed that epistemology (how we know) is the same as ontology (what is real). He then called his elaborate ecological view an "epistemology," though it was more properly an ontological description of a relational, nonlinear world. The result is that, while he acknowledged that epistemologies might vary from culture to culture, he left open the possibility that a "local epistemology is wrong" (p. 314; emphasis in the original).

The implication is that the epistemologies of some communities of persons may not conform to the epistemology that he proposes to be somehow universally true. Following social constructionism, however, an epistemology, like any other theory, is a story embedded in language, culture, ideology, and history, and is not considered in terms of truth or falsity. Bateson privileged his ecosystemic picture of the universe, rather than seeing it as a story that both captured the spirit of the times and resonated with meaning for a large audience. He took his social scientific formulations for truth, rejecting the notion that "social science is but one cultural way of describing events" (Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Waldegrave, 1994). It is not surprising, then, that he applied the term "epistemological error" to concepts (like power), which he viewed as being "in disagreement with how the world is" (Dell, 1985, pp. 4-5; emphasis in original).

Any assumption about how the world really is creates the possibility of distinguishing between those who have it right, and those who have it wrong. This exclusionary aspect of the systems view is widely seen as objectionable by critics of family therapy. With the advent of social constructionism, the "universe" of modernism gives way to a "multiverse," with profound implications for how we characterize what is happening when persons (for example, therapists and clients) engage in discourse about the world.

An Outdated Story

These convoluted but critical distinctions help to explain the emergence of a vast matrix of ideas that presuppose an objective understanding of families and their workings.

Whether they are founded primarily on cybernetic's closed-system formulations or the more expansive, open-system view of General System Theory, the systemic metaphors of family therapy emerge from disciplines that share traditional science's ontological quest.

That is not to say they are "wrong." But metaphors concerned largely with how the world (or families) "are" will inevitably struggle to accommodate the ascendant emphasis on meaning, interpretation, and intersubjective knowledge. They comprise an outdated story. It is a story that arose in a machine-driven era (Gergen, 1991), a story that became "the very nucleus of a new technology and technocracy" (von Bertalanffy, 1968. p. 3), a story that has proven a prolific source of useful ideas for clinical practice. But it is a story whose metaphorical resonance is waning.

Parry (1993) writes that the worth of an artistic or intellectual movement should be gauged by its "success in holding a mirror to the times its works reflect" (p. 429). Given the current reshaping of the intellectual landscape, family therapy's portrayal of the family fails to reflect current sensitivities. The notions of expert intervention, of fixing dysfunctions, of therapy as a technology of change, are out of step with a wide range of contemporary assumptions.

Family therapy would be better served at this "developmental stage" (Goolishian & Anderson, 1992) if the useful insights and approaches generated by the systems view could be reconstrued around a body of metaphors that convey how families interpret their experience and construct their realities in a cultural context. We need to frame this dynamic and creative process in a way that accounts for the social interchanges that inform and direct family expressions. Perhaps most of all, we need to return the person to the center of the story of the family, and to construct a narrative that views families as collections of people, rather than as biological, mechanistic, or linguistic entities. I believe this largely implicit transformation is already underway. The intention of this essay is to articulate and contextualize the emerging paradigm in order to unleash its creative potential.

FAMILIES AND OTHER CULTURES

"Words are like freight engines that are pulling boxcars behind them filled with all their previous meanings," say de Shazer and Berg (1992, p. 79). Those meanings are forged in the crucible of culture. This is, of course, particularly relevant to the practice of therapy in all its manifestations. As therapy is increasingly construed as a process of co-constructing meanings (de Shazer, 1991; Friedman, 1993; Gilligan & Price, 1993; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992; Hoffman, 1990; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston, 1990), it makes sense to depict individuals, families, and other client groupings as storying cultures.

Howard (1991) says "a culture can be thought of as a community of individuals who see their world in a particular manner --who share particular interpretations as central to the meaning of their lives and action" (p 190). According to this usage, the word "culture" depicts a collection of people in terms of their world-making practices, and thus gives

primacy to the interpretive, constructionist, cultural, and narrative aspects of lived experience, which are so widely emphasized in the postmodern debate and so congruent with social constructionist epistemology.

However one wishes to view individuals, families, or other groupings of people, they must inevitably be considered in some cultural context. For, as Foucault emphasizes, it is impossible to situate ourselves or our actions outside of culture (Madigan, 1992). Writes Mair (1988), "We inhabit the great stories of our culture. We live through stories. We are lived by the stories of our race and place" (p. 127).

When used in this way, culture becomes a particularly fertile organizing framework for viewing the family. It suggests a constellation of metaphors related to cultural expression, which can be applied to families and which resonate with their meaning-making practices. Rather than being seen as reactive responses to the disequilibrium of the system, family relations may be seen as the creative expressions of individuals who co-inhabit an interpretive community.

When families are viewed as interpretive communities or storying cultures, family narratives are rich with meaning. Like all cultures, families tell stories of themselves-- stories about who they are, about where they have been, and where they are going. These stories powerfully portray the status quo; but, like all of our individual or cultural meaning-making endeavors, they are also constitutive. To tell a story is to construct one's life.

A cultural framework for viewing the family accommodates this vital narrative and historical aspect of experience, and thus incorporates the temporal dimension so evidently lacking in the construct of system. By viewing the family or any other client grouping as a culture, we are also able to address another major deficiency of the system metaphor: the omission of the wider sociopolitical context of experience. Families are subcultures within the wider culture in the same way that First Nation people, women, or the disabled are subcultures of Canadian society.6 In the same way that the expressions of Afro-American culture both reflect the influence of the wider society and establish the uniqueness of that cultural subgroup, so do the expressions of families unite them with and differentiate them from the cultures they inhabit.

The notions of power, violence, domination, and oppression, which are either ignored or contentiously represented in the systemic family metaphor, are inevitably built into cultural metaphors. Each family member can be viewed as a more or less disenfranchised subculture of the family itself, in the same way that families may be considered relative to the wider society. The emphasis here is on the process whereby the normative prescriptions of one cultural group may act to constrain the freedom of its members-- whether they are individuals or subgroups. Drawing on Foucault's critique, Madigan (1992) writes: "The cost to [people] for accepting society's cultural story of them is often subjugation, restraint, and oppression of all alternative descriptions of themselves they may have entertained" (p. 274). The power of families in society, or individuals in families, can be gauged by the degree of legitimacy accorded their stories.

As well as incorporating the critical dimension of power differentials, the cultural framework contextualizes the relationships between family members in terms of the co-construction of their worlds, rather than their service to the morphostasis/genesis of a feedback mechanism. This to me is a vital distinction. By viewing families and other client groupings as creative communities of people collectively striving to articulate and perform their meanings, we effectively humanize a framework given over to the objectifying practices of technology. Whether the postmodern critique of family therapy is regarded as an intellectual and philosophical exercise or an emotional and value-laden polemic, the consequences of the paradigm shift cited here are the same. The emerging descriptions of families seek to capture human experience, thereby reclaiming the dignity of persons.

THERAPY IN A NEW CONTEXT

In his critique of what he calls the "circular-systemic paradigm," Erickson (1988) asks:

> [W]hat would a family therapy look like that made no pretense of eing value-free, that included a temporal dimension, that included both persons and relations, that was contextual, that induced the reduction of power differentials between therapist and family, that hoped for, and promoted, the empowerment of families, that valued equality over authoritarianism, and that valued an education method as well as the therapeutic? [p. 233]

I believe the answer is a therapy that views families as storying cultures, an approach anticipated by Hoffman (1990): "What intrigues me most right now is the idea that the cybernetic-systems metaphor can be fruitfully replaced by a postmodern, anthropological one" (p. 10). In adopting that cultural anthropological lens, we inevitably adopt a more collaborative orientation to therapy that is evident in a range of emerging new approaches to working with individuals and families (Friedman, 1993; Gilligan & Price, 1993).

Though the approaches that manifest this orientation differ in a number of ways (see Chang & Phillips, 1993; de Shazer, 1993b; White, 1993), they share a social constructionist orientation that eschews objectivist and essentialistic formulations -- clients are viewed in terms of their creative, world-making potential. The emphasis is on possibilities (O'Hanlon, 1993a) over problems, on how clients construe, and in effect construct their situations. While systemically oriented metaphors strain to accommodate this focus, the focus is intrinsic to a cultural view that places persons in interpretive communities, including the community of which the therapist is also a member.

Space limitations do not permit an in-depth examination here of the varied clinical approaches that exemplify what I describe as a paradigm shift in family therapy. While a range of emerging social constructionist orientations to therapy focus on client narratives and construe the stories clients bring to therapy as representative of their meaning-making practices, Friedman (1993) loosely separates the approaches into three categories.

Of the emerging approaches to family therapy named here, the "narrative" orientation most explicitly acknowledges the cultural implications of a social constructionist epistemology. Narrative approaches (Epston & White, 1992; Freedman & Combs, 1993; Freeman & Lobovits, 1993; Hewson, 1991; Jenkins, 1990; Kinman, 1994; Maisel, 1994; Parry & Doan, 1994; Tamasese et al., 1994; White & Epston, 1990; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993) place a strong emphasis on helping clients to identify the cultural context of the stories they bring to therapy in order to facilitate the "re-authoring" of their lives.

The latter two of these three clinical orientations, which I am here uniting under the banner of social constructionism, are far less explicit in their attention to the cultural origins of the meanings clients bring to therapy. Instead, they are more concerned with the way meaning is constructed through language and between persons within the therapy session, prompting Real (1990) to refer to an emerging "language-based" phase of family therapy. Of course, language is the ultimate social construction; it carries its own cultural baggage. It cannot be divorced from its origins, whether they are deliberately attended to or not.

Solution-focused practice (de Shazer, 1991; de Shazer & Berg, 1992; Lipchik, 1993, 1994; O'Hanlon, 1993a, 1993b; Weiner-Davis, 1993) takes a "minimalist" stance (Friedman, 1993, p. 21) and focuses primarily on the construction of solutions by building on exceptions; de Shazer (1993a) de-emphasizes external context, claiming that "there is nothing outside of the therapy session that can help us understand what is going on in the session" (p. 89).

The third variation of collaborative, social constructionist therapy Friedman (1993) calls the "reflexive conversation" approach (Andersen, 1987, 1993; Anderson, 1993; Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992; Hoffman, 1993; Hoffman-Hennessey & Davis, 1993). It can be distinguished from the others in its more deliberate eschewal of goals, outcomes, and solutions in favor of an exploratory demeanor. Therapy is construed as a primarily linguistic event, and the therapist as a "master conversationalist" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

Stories are hard to tell, says Mair (1988): "The speaker of a new word, a different story, has to leave the warmth of the tribal fires to live as an outsider, beyond the pale, isolated, often invalidated" (p. 135). The cultural metaphor captures the grandness and scope of this creative--and at times defiant--process. Common to each of the emerging social constructionist approaches is the postmodern view that new stories, new worlds, are ours for the creating, and that the act of creation leads to the demise of what has gone before. Says Parry (1991), "Beliefs are embedded in the story; change the story and old beliefs are shattered" (p. 43).

CONCLUSIONS

Either/Or or Both-And?

One clear characteristic of the postmodern debate is its openness to a diversity of perspectives without reverting to an "either/or" stance. Despite its preoccupation with the deconstruction of the family system metaphor, this discussion does not aspire to that exclusionary stance. Indeed, the emphasis on the relational aspect of experience is a most welcome contribution of systems thinking, and is inherent in an epistemology that construes knowledge in intersubjective terms. Social constructionism proposes, in effect, that the meanings which constitute our "realities" cannot exist in a vacuum, but rather grow out of our connection to each other.

However, I believe the systemic view in its application has engendered some approaches that could be humanized by adapting them to a contemporary framework. In other words, the mechanistic system metaphor could be subsumed rather than supplanted by the anthropological culture one. And so the notions of boundaries, positive connotation, intergenerational transmission, and a wide range of other concepts, which have demonstrated clinical utility, could be retained.

For example, boundaries would then be considered relative to the unique structure of each family culture and its subcultures, and the interpenetration of its meanings. A positive connotation would be proffered tentatively as an alternative meaning to be considered among many others. And the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission might be framed as the recurring re-telling of family stories. This re-visioning of existing descriptions is to some extent evident in emerging approaches; however, the possibilities for further revisions of systemic constructs appear virtually boundless. Re-visioning represents more than a dressing up of old meanings in new clothes: it is characteristic of the transformational aspect of interpretation so central to this discussion. By changing our meanings, we change our worlds.

Truths and Preferred Meanings

Although I have not attempted to conceal my disagreement with some of the clinical manifestations of cybernetic/systemic thinking, or my excitement about some newer entries into the family therapy field, I do not submit that my argument or the family-as-culture metaphor is a "more true reflection of reality," for reasons that should be obvious by now. I acknowledge the danger of "getting it right" (Amundson, Parry, & Stewart, 1994), and I identify with the conclusion that our certainties about the world may also restrict and constrain us (Amundson, Stewart, & Valentine, 1993). But I also identify with the notion that some interpretations, in some contexts, at some times, deserve to be favored. Waldegrave and his colleagues call these "preferred meanings" (Tamasese et al., 1994). "Preferable for whom?" one might ask. My answer, though it lacks the precision of a cybernetic formula, is unambiguous: for individuals and communities, now. The epistemological trend toward metaphors that construe families in human terms is a welcome move in this direction.

T.S. Elliot's words at the outset of this essay speak of coming to know a place for the first time. This is just what family therapy is undertaking by reshaping its view of those prodigiously storying cultures, our families.

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