

The Modern Family Therapy Movement: Is Systematic Edification Possible?

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SYSTEMS, EDIFICATION AND CHANGE

The modern family therapy movement involves significantly novel behavioural technologies for bringing about change in patterns of human relationships. As a professional discipline it is characterised by a central tension which can usefully be understood in terms of the relationship between what Rorty has identified as the systematising and edifying paradigms in philosophy. Rorty argues that:

In every sufficiently reflective culture, there are those who single out one area, one set of practices, and see it as the paradigm human activity. They then try to show how the rest of culture can profit from this example. In the mainstream of the Western philosophical tradition, this paradigm has been *knowing* – possessing justified true beliefs, or, better yet, beliefs so intrinsically persuasive as to make justification unnecessary (Rorty, 1980, p. 366).

Opposed to such absolute and imperialist systematising philosophy, Rorty identifies several philosophers who engage in processes which he calls 'edification'. He writes:

I shall use 'edification' to stand for this project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking. The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the 'poetic' activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions... For edifying discourse is **supposed** to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings (Rorty, 1980, p. 360).

To be an edifying philosopher is to engage in a process of promoting change in the ways we think, without simultaneously prescribing the content of such new thinking as may develop out of these processes. Thinking up new aims, and aiding us to become new beings, is to engage in the promotion of change, and in the promotion of the abnormal as a lever for change. It is not about getting change as the result of new insights into how something may have come about, or of discovering what lies hidden within. It is about achieving change simply through getting people to think, behave, feel and perceive differently. Such change may consist simply in persuading and cajoling

people into stopping doing something, so as to leave space for different feelings, thoughts, behaviours and so on. For example, for Wittgenstein it is enough that we stop thinking of thinking as a mental process. How we have come to think of thinking in this way, or what deep intellectual, social and emotional needs such thinking satisfies, is by the way. The *Philosophical Investigations* does not attempt any systematic answer to such queries, it is instead an intervention designed simply to make it impossible for us any longer to go on thinking of thinking as a mental process. What we think instead about thinking is left very open. In this sense we can understand Wittgenstein as an edifying philosopher, and as an exemplary agent of change.

A recent deconstructive reading of Wittgenstein conveys the sense of his writings as interventions aimed to facilitate change, as against the promotion of a new system of truths, or a new representation of how things are. Staten writes:

The *Philosophical Investigations* is an intricate mixture of arguments, images, satire, dramatic mimicry, and how-to instructions, rather than a treatise... On the one hand, Wittgenstein wanted to loosen up crystallized patterns of philosophical language in order to force real thought, thought subject to the most radical perplexities, for which it would have no ready-made answers, but would have to forge new language sequences. On the other hand, the philosophical patterns which supposedly forestall the necessity for real thought at the same time appear to him to be sources of endless perplexity and unrest because they do not correspond to the true complexity of the facts (Staten, 1985, p. 64).

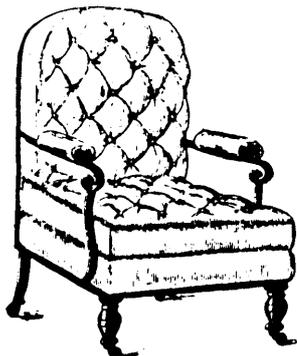
This idea of the edifying philosopher as an agent of change in a system of thought, or way of life, or family of language-games, has immediate parallels with the idea of the family therapist as an agent of change in a system of human relationships.

FAMILY THERAPY AS EDIFICATION

The modern family therapist understands individual pathology such as anorexia, or sexual abuse of children in the family, as a function of a pattern of relationships which need to change, but which are somehow both perplexed and stuck. The family therapist seeks to 'loosen up crystallized patterns'; to facilitate new sequences of behaviour and ways of thinking; to help people develop increased cognitive and behavioural complexity which will correspond better to the facts of their actual situation. So, for example, in a well known video-taped session conducted by a founding family therapist, Salvador Minuchin intervenes in a family with an anorexic son in a way which reframes family members' understanding of the son as 'sick' to a son who is

'tyrannical' and 'immature'. Minuchin is not concerned to discover whether it is true that the son is sick or not. Nor is it his concern to promote the truth that the son is tyrannical. Centrally, he is concerned to help the family members find 'new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking'. In doing this, his discourse is, and has to be, 'abnormal' for the family members. It is important to remember here that talking of 'speaking' and 'discourse' needs to be understood to include behavioural and contextual communications, not just words. The way Minuchin goes about promoting such change is structurally identical to the ways Wittgenstein goes about changing the ways we think about language and philosophical problems (see Tuson, 1985).

He does not do this through interpreting the family members' communications, or through interpreting members' relationships with him, as happens through transference and interpretations of



dreams and free associations in psychoanalysis. Minuchin does not primarily seek insight, either for himself, or for individual family members. He does not try to dig out truths which lie within. Rather he endeavours to get changes in the behaviour of family members which simultaneously affect each individual's perceptions of themselves, each other, and each other's relationships. He endeavours to get a theme in the family conversation going again.

The later Wittgenstein occasionally likened philosophy, or his method of philosophising, to therapy, or the treatment of an illness. The model of therapy which he had in mind was the depth-psychology of psychoanalysis, yet this is in many ways a particularly unsuitable model for a philosopher preoccupied with challenging the idea of philosophy as the discovery of essences. If Wittgenstein disagrees with the view that the purpose of philosophy is the discovery of 'something that lies *beneath* the surface, something that lies within, which we see when we look *into* the thing, and which an analysis digs out' (Wittgenstein, 1972, para. 92), then it is in many ways misleading of him to use, in his counterarguments, a model of therapy which is itself essentially a seeking for, and digging out of, that which lies deeply within.

This is not to argue that philosophical and psychoanalytical ideas of 'essences' are the same, but to indicate that there is a family resemblance, perhaps emerging from a common root in figures of 'depth', and which misleads because of this. Modern family therapy thinking provides a language which is not grounded in such figurations of 'depth', and hence can provide a more apposite model for considering relationships between philosophy as edification or as a process of change, and philosophy as systematising, or as providing a system of thought.

The position of the family therapist in relation to the family is identical to Rorty's description of the edifying philosopher. He writes:

Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires,

parodies, aphorisms. They know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over. They are *intentionally* peripheral (Rorty, 1980, p. 369).

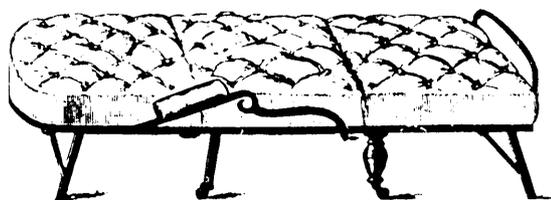
It is a central feature of family therapy practice that the therapist remains marginal to the family. That is, neither inside nor outside the patterns of relationships which bound the family, but remaining on or near to those boundaries. Family therapists are intentionally peripheral, and they have no role in relation to the family when the pathology which they are reacting against is over. And they are major users of satire, parody, and aphorism. When Minuchin hears a member of the family characterise the anorexic son as too old for his years, he asks 'How old? 60? 70?' The family member agrees to 60, and thenceforth Minuchin uses this in gentle satire and parody to show how the sick member is being allowed to behave inappropriately like a grandparent in the family. None of this is 'true', and will lose its point if and when the family move on in the ways its members relate to each other. Perhaps it is an example in practice of what Johansson has recently characterised as 'truthlikeness' (Johansson, 1987).

SYSTEMS, EDIFICATION AND PROFESSIONALISATION

The systematising and edifying trends in the family therapy movement intertwine and overlap in ways which often seem to create conceptual and organisational problems. There is a drive to create a system, a profession, and a normal science of family therapy, but this drive actually conflicts with some of the most basic assumptions in which it is grounded. As a social movement it is partly grounded in the ideas of general systems theory, and seeks to build itself into a systematic professional discipline on this conceptual base, but its actual character as an edifying social practice precludes this possibility. The practical need of the therapist to remain on the margins of fluid and indeterminate patterns of relationships will be hindered by adherence to the fixed and determinate theories which professions, disciplines, and normal sciences require. The therapist requires a philosophical approach which allows him or her to access and use the relationships between all the different ways people think about their situation, so as to be able to help people negotiate amongst them all, and to keep the conversation going without determining its content through the intrusion of a particular theory or point of view.

One way in which contradiction arises between these two paradigms is the way the movement retains focus on the family. The basic assumptions within an edifying viewpoint, and within much of the practice theory of family therapy, imply the need for openness about the boundaries of the systems involved. 'Finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking...', or making connections between incommensurable vocabularies, requires that boundaries around disciplines, ideas, languages, social institutions, etc. should be open to radical change and permeation. Similarly, much of family therapy practice is to do with challenging and changing the boundaries which people create and which become the source of problems, and the perpetuation of problems. For example, a couple who are separating and engaged in conflict with each other may be unable to retain a boundary between their marital relationship and their parental relationship, and so unhelpfully draw their children into their marital fights. A family therapist would intervene to get them to deal with their adult interpersonal battle separately from their relationship as parents. In this sense the therapist would be challenging and changing the boundaries which are defining a set of human relationships.

The main point here is that focussing on 'the family' is to impose a boundary which may be quite counterproductive in practice, and which is unjustified in theory. The boundaries around any particular family, and families in general, are indeterminate, shifting, and different in relation to different situations. However, the family therapy movement needs such an arbitrary, boundary-creating focus since it needs to see itself as, and be seen as, a system of thought and practice, a discipline, and a profession. It needs this because of the need of its members to have a niche in the market place. A distinctive product is needed by its members in order to make a living or a reputation, and to have a distinctive place in the social and economic world. In the same way that Wittgenstein could not sell his school of philosophy because he was seeking to avoid founding a school based on a particular point of view, so the family therapy movement cannot take its edifying position fully and simultaneously sell itself as a professional school of thought. This contradiction creates many insoluble issues round elitism, professionalisation, theory competition, accreditation of practitioners, the place of charismatic practitioners, and so forth. To move towards a system will allow a social system of professionalisation, but to do so will do violence to the most basic assumptions of marginality and edification in which the practice of family therapy is grounded.



The authority of family therapy practitioners comes not from their privileged access to, and application of, theory, but from the way they are with people. A significant feature of this issue has been the relationship between the American founders of the basic ideas and practices of modern family therapy, and their followers in the UK. A major influence in the growth of family therapy has been the observed and videotaped performances of a handful of 'star' practitioners and theorists. This handful of stars has provided all the significant theoretical and practice innovations in this field, and have been unashamedly entrepreneurial and technocratic in doing so. They have straightforwardly asserted their ambition to develop an interventive technology which will actually make a difference to seemingly intractable personal and social problems. These star performers have remained in an edifying position, at least in part because this fits well with the entrepreneurial culture of the US. In so far as 'schools' have developed, they have remained closely identified with the person of the original innovator, and have remained more like a business than a bureaucracy. This has been very uncomfortable for the UK development, since the tendency here is to create a professional system which fits within a social class hierarchy and a welfare bureaucracy. Progress in the field is understood to lie in the increasing development of professionalisation. The development of charismatic entrepreneurialism implied in the success of the US innovators is fundamentally frowned upon by a significant proportion of practitioners in the field, even if valued by Thatcherite politicians. One consequence of this may be that the fundamental lessons of the stars are not actually being understood and heard.

The systematising drive in the family therapy movement is fuelled by many elements, such as the social and economic needs of its members; the need to integrate a disparate range of innovative approaches to old problems; the use of new technology; and the use of systematising philosophical assumptions within family therapy theory. The intertwining of edifying and systematising trends is of particular significance in relation to the use of technology, and the use of systematic philosophy.

One important conceptual strand in the systematising trend in family therapy has been the use of Russell's Theory of Logical Typing. Bateson, the major foundational theorist of family therapy, makes large claims for the importance of Russell's work. For example he has written:

Insofar as behavioural scientists still ignore the problems of *Principia Mathematica* they can claim approximately sixty years of obsolescence (Bateson, 1972, p. 279).

More recently he has written:

In what is offered in this book, the hierarchic structure of thought, which Bertrand Russell called *logical typing*, will take the place of the hierarchic structure of the Great Chain of Being and an attempt will be made to propose a sacred unity of the biosphere that will contain fewer epistemological errors than the versions of that sacred unity which the various religions of history have offered (Bateson, 1980, p. 29).

Bateson's systematising ambitions, evident in these quotes, although not necessarily explicitly shared by family therapy theorists and practitioners, nevertheless re-appear in many different and displaced ways. The Theory of Types was developed by Russell to deal with paradoxes of self-reference. The paradox, or self-contradiction, built into a sentence such as 'This sentence is false', was removed simply by asserting a rule that a proposition about a statement is at a different logical level to the statement itself. Similarly, a member of a class is not of the same logical level as the class, and a class cannot be a member of itself. Without going into the validity or otherwise of Russell's views on the problem of paradox and his resolution through the Theory of Types, what is important is to recognise the nature of the use which Bateson and his followers in the family therapy movement have made of this theory.

Watzlawick, an influential follower of Bateson, explicitly characterises his use of the Theory of Types as 'an attempt at exemplification through analogy' (Watzlawick, 1974, p. 2). The theory is used figuratively to help describe patterns of interpersonal communication in which communication at one 'logical level' may be contradicted by a communication at another 'logical level', to create an interpersonal impasse identical with the logical impasse created by sentences such as 'this sentence is false'. The use of this basic thinking to develop a range of sophisticated understandings about interpersonal behaviour, and ways of intervening to facilitate change, has been spectacular, particularly in the activities of the founding practitioners and theorists.

This figurative use of the theory has to be understood as the 'finding of new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking ... the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions...' It is not the application of a philosophical theory about the true nature of reality, which is the systematising emphasis in Bateson. In this sense, the whole development of the family therapy movement may be seen as a successful piece of applied edification. However,

this is to place it within a different philosophical paradigm to that which Bateson seems to be striving for in the earlier quotes, and which is evident also in lower level thinking and practice in this area. Family therapists often practice and talk about their practice as if they are simply applying a true theory about the hidden and underlying structure of social relations, to which they have special and privileged access, as against engaging in relationships with people so as to lead them towards becoming 'new beings' through finding or creating new ways of speaking and understanding.

The figurative use of such systematising philosophy has been closely connected with the developing use of video-recording and one-way screens. A history of the use of video technology has yet to be written, but it has been a major influence in the family therapy field, and in the client-centred tradition of counselling. It is no coincidence that both these approaches to interpersonal change have used video and have also spawned a great deal of outcome and effectiveness research. By contrast, the psychoanalytical tradition has been scandalously under-researched. The use of videotape of interactions between people allows the study of what actually goes on between them, as against what is reported. No doubt we would have a very different view of psychoanalysis if we had lots of video-tapes of Freud at work to compare with his self-reported case studies.

The use of video has many aspects, but a central one has been that it has enabled practitioners and researchers to look at actual social processes rather than participants' or observers' remembered perceptions of them. This possibility has meshed very well with the family therapy movement's systematising needs, since it puts the viewer of the tape, or the observer through the one-way screen, into a seemingly privileged epistemological position. In a recent article seeking to go beyond existing dualisms of 'objectivism' and 'relativism', Johansson identifies a position which seeks to save epistemological objectivism, not by denying that knowledge is determined by social factors, but by claiming that there are 'cognitively privileged positions in society'. Johansson does not defend this view, but rather sees it as part of a polarisation which needs to be broken out of (Johansson, 1987).

He articulates what has become a central viewpoint within the family therapy movement. That is, the use of video and the use of systematising philosophical assumptions together contribute towards encouraging family therapists into thinking they can

occupy a cognitively privileged position relative to the family. It is as if, while assuming the relativity of knowledge the family members have about themselves, the family therapist is able to be objective about the family members, and objective about the relativity of knowledge they have about each other. The video allows the therapist to think that he is in a second order position to the family members' first order positions, whereas in fact he is simply in a position which gives another viewpoint which may be helpful, and which may contribute to the family conversation.

The video does not ensure the therapist the privilege of 'really' seeing what is going on, but simply ensures a position from which he may be able to contribute to the family hermeneutic. The systematising trend in the family therapy movement would tend to understand the videotape as providing a mirror of reality to which the therapist has access, as against its role as an element in the process of edification. The videotape still has to be viewed, interpreted, re-interpreted and used within a network of interactions. It cannot be understood as reflecting the truth of the situation as if it were a new technological alternative to the discredited mirror of the mind of the therapist. The video does not actually provide the grounding in reality of a philosophical or professional discipline, it simply provides another point of view, another contribution to the conversation.

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