
STRANGE ATTRACTORS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF NARRATIVES IN THERAPY

Carlos E. Sluzki

The field of family therapy was born in the cauldron of interdisciplinary study. These origins provided us with a therapeutic approach for the relief of human suffering that was totally original and forced us to speak a language that was both novel and difficult: “information,” “feedback,” “metacommunication,” “circular causality,” “deviation-amplification” and “deviation-counteracting,” “self-fulfilling prophecies”—a language that today is familiar to us, and even, some times, old fashioned. These interdisciplinary origins appear to have branded us in an indelible way, defining us as permanent inhabitants of an ever-changing frontier, destined to constantly explore new possibilities, challenging us with new languages that generate new horizons...that generate new languages. What was extraordinary yesterday is commonplace today, and what is extraordinary today may tomorrow become our guideline of choice for helping us to think.

I embark into these introductory musings because I realize that what was difficult for me to grasp yesterday, the postmodern world of constructionism, is my orientation of choice today and, consequently, what was a foreign tongue for me yesterday, that of “narratives,” is now my customary language. However, instead of simply enjoying this familiarity, instead of harvesting the already plowed and sewn land, I find myself exploring once again new concepts, new languages.

In what follows I will present some ideas regarding clinical practices for narrative transformation (Sluzki, 1992), framed on the languages of both social constructionism and chaos theory. An extended example from a consultation interview will illustrate the conceptual discourse.

Clinical Practices: Focusing on Narrative Transformations

Seen through a postmodern lens, our activity as therapists consists of facilitating conversations that favor qualitative transformation in certain stories, namely, those that contain and maintain the problems or dilemmas or symptomatic behaviors that trigger our
patients/families consultation, stories that restrain them from the possibility of evolution or resolution or dissolution of those problems (e.g., see Anderson and Goolishian, 1989; Hoyt, 1994, 1996; McNamee and Gergen 1992).

The therapeutic interview, if not the whole therapeutic process, consists of a set of activities that occurs sequentially as well as simultaneously:

• We specify and negotiate, sometimes explicitly and always implicitly, the politics of the encounter, aiming at establishing a modicum of agreement about the scope and boundaries of the therapeutic contract. This entails a negotiation about power, collective and individual responsibility, what will be defined as a problem, who has authorship and who has a voice, which values will guide us and will be respected, which are the thematic and ethical parameters that will be recognized as acceptable for the therapist and for each of the participants, and who will be in charge of monitoring the process. This agreement is a necessary pre-condition to enable us to become a legitimate member of the conversational system.

• Through our active exploration, we facilitate the description and enactment of stories that are dominant in the consulting system, from the point of view of each of the participants, as it unfolds throughout the interview. We explore in this way the motive for the consultation and the explanatory hypotheses of each of the participants (Cecchin, 1987), clarifying, among others, the location of the functions “patient” (the locus of the problem) and “client” (those who seek a change) (Watzlawick et al, 1974), and existing alternative descriptions of their conflictive issues.

• In the course of that exploration, we generate information that proposes new elements, angles, logic and priorities in the displayed stories or in the relationship among stories.

• The methodology used to generate that information— including circular questions, reframing, positive connotation, naive comments—has as one of its important effects that of destabilizing the structure or logic of the dominant stories in the complex web of narratives that constitute the reality of that family, through a process that, far from disqualifying the participants, provides them with authorship.

• Through that process, and responding to keys offered by the participants in the course of the session, we facilitate the transformation of the problem-based and problem-perpetuating stories into “better formed stories” that do not contain the problem such as it has been described, or contain solutions or constructive alternatives, or displace the centrality of the
original story within the complex web of narratives.

- Finally, we anchor the new stories through metaphors or examples that stem from, or resonate with, other stories and anecdotes and provided throughout the session by that family, or through other models of consensus building such as homework, rituals or prescriptions.

The narratives provided by the family about the nature of their problem are relatively stable and coherent systems: “This is the problem and these are the causes, explanations, ethical and behavioral consequences, and interpersonal implications.” The above mentioned activities allow us, first, to incorporate ourselves as legitimate members of the network that maintains the original story and, without disqualifying it, respectfully explore the stories that are brought to us; and then, progressively, to reduce the coherence of that narrative, challenging its presumed consensuality. In sum, we destabilize the narrative while we highlight, favor, or “seed” (Zeig, 1990), alternatives. Once legitimized by the participants, those alternatives are consolidated in such a way that they can be recognized, reconstituted or incorporated by them as dominant descriptions.

Allow me to further explain one of the steps of this process. With our help, problem-maintaining stories become destabilized, disorganized, pushed farther and farther toward their threshold of disequilibrium (or “points of bifurcation,” in the language of Prigoyine and Stengers [1979]; see also Elkaim et al., 1980); that is, toward the limit beyond which a qualitative reorganizations of the complex systems unavoidably takes place. And, as it happens in any system that reaches a point of bifurcation, when people’s stories destabilize, they crave clarity, they seek ways to reconfigure and stabilize, to organize themselves once again with coherence. And, while the specific shape of this new configuration is, in each case, unpredictable, our expectation is that the reconfigured story will not contain whatever was defined as the problem, or that it will contain novel solutions for it, or that another story will become the dominant one and overshadow the previous story. In summary, those who consult us will end the interview taking with them an alternate reality, grounded in a story that has more advantageous properties, that is “better formed” than the one with which they came.

The Direction of the Change: Strange Attractors

Beyond being guided with “systemic optimism” (Stierlin, 1988), can we predict which will be the direction of the transformation of a story? One first response to that question is: no, we can't, the evolution of complex self-organizing systems is, as we already mentioned,
unpredictable. We can even bring to our aid the famous “Butterfly Effect”, a theoretical model of three systems with interconnected feedback loops proposed by Edward Lorenz and made famous by the felicitous metaphor that the flapping of the wings of a butterfly in one country may become a hurricane at the other end of the globe, a description that evokes the enormous complexity of the world’s atmospheric system and hence the impossibility of long-range meteorological forecasts. This model served, in fact, to launch Chaos Theory into the scientific arena (Gleick, 1987; also Capra, 1996).

However, Chaos Theory offers, in addition to a description of the problem, the sketch of a solution: while in each specific case it is impossible to predict the outcome of an evolving dynamic system, it is possible to predict qualitative traits in the evolution of those systems, as the so-called chaotic behavior contains steps, that is, entails deterministic patterns. The key to these steps lies in what in the mathematical world of the theory of complex systems is called attractors:

- Systems in stable equilibrium are organized around punctual attractors. A simplified example would be a pendulum in motion, whose punctual attractor is the neutral point of gravity, to which it ends up yielding.
- Systems close to equilibrium with predictable oscillations contain periodical attractors. A simplified example would be the effect on the waves of the shifting gravitational pull of the moon.
- In systems that are further away from equilibrium, these dynamic organizers are called stranger attractors. A simplified example would be the overall design of the trajectory of a marble made to roll in a basin.

When a complex system is destabilized until it reaches a bifurcation point, the system “chooses” between various states or possible changes, and organizes itself around them following steps that are generically predictable while, in each case, idiosyncratic. In summary, given certain conditions, the system changes qualitatively in a predictable fashion.

Trying to translate these processes to our field, in the course of a therapeutic consultation, and with the help of our destabilizing participation (Sluzki, 1992), the relatively stable narrative that contains / maintains the problem becomes unbalanced. Now, when we push the conversing system (which includes us) toward disequilibrium, toward those thresholds of bifurcation, is it possible to influence the direction of the change? The answer is, as I have hinted above: quantitatively no, but qualitatively yes. It so happens that, in the course of the session, by the way in which we manage the therapeutic dialogue, we generate
in / with them (or at least we plant the seed along the way for) a series of possible options, a set of potential “strange attractors,” that contribute to the probability that the presenting stories will be reconfigured around those new organizing principles as stories that are distinctly different qualitatively, that have a “better form.”

These “better-formed stories” (Sluzki, 1992b) contain scripts that:

• appeal to (resonate with, “attract”) those who consult us
• are richer in connections between individuals and contexts
• do not require the presence of stereotyping and self-perpetuating diagnostic labels
• contain assumptions about evolution and change, progress and hope
• define the participants as active, competent, responsible and reflexive
• presuppose that the participants follow ethical / moral principles such as good intent, self respect and respect for the other, avoidance of suffering, promotion of evolution and change, and sense of collective responsibility.

A consultation interview: “We are born wearing a scapular”:

In order to exemplify this series of concepts, I will present transcribed fragments of an interview, with interspersed comments, that I conducted last year in a Spanish-speaking country with a family of farmers from a small town and two family therapists involved in their care.

The family was composed of a couple, 66 and 56 years old, and their four children -- two daughters, 30 and 20 years old, and two sons, 28 and 18. The 28-year-old son, Virgilio, had been a client of the region’s mental health and chemical dependency services for many years, with behaviors that, over the years, had been clearly deviant and disruptive. He was an insulin-dependent early-onset diabetic, about 5 feet tall, with borderline intellectual ability, a long history of alcohol abuse, and a track record of never having lived outside of the family house nor having developed steady skills or interests. In contrast, his three siblings were autonomous and self-motivated. His oldest sister, a high-school teacher, lives in a neighboring city, his second sister studied philosophy at a university and also lived on her own, and his younger brother was finishing high school and had plans to leave home to continue his studies.

For the past year and a half Virgilio had participated in the programs of a day
hospital, where he was also engaged in individual therapy sessions every two weeks and, very occasionally, family interviews. In spite of the relentless enticement of the therapeutic team, he had failed to develop any initiative toward autonomy, maintaining instead passive, irresponsible behavior.

The current therapists had conducted two family interviews prior to this consultation. They described this family, and specifically the father, as difficult to reach and impervious to the therapeutic team. They requested this consultation to expand their options, since they experienced themselves as stalled in an impasse. More specifically, they wished to see Virgilio developing autonomous plans and leaving home, rather than remaining passive and overattached.

The following fragments are from our consultation interview.

**Consultant:** Good afternoon. How are you all? In the first place, thank you very much for having come here today. As you know, I come as a consultant, at the request of the therapeutic team. Since I have experience working with families with problems, they asked me to join them, just for this time. They were just beginning to tell me some things about the work they have done with you--you are the patient, right?--and with you all. And, by what they told me, my impression is that in recent time there have been a series of positive changes in your lives. Is that the case as you see it?

(...)

**Father:** I believe so, he is better, because now he is more entertained. The most important thing is to be busy and entertained, as I think that what he needs is to be more relaxed and more calm. Because we have already told him that if this young man worked, and earned even a few cents, well, he would be happy. But at least he comes (to the day hospital) and it is as if he would be working, because he is busy and... he is better.

**Consultant:** Okay, good. And, what is your point of view, ma’am?

**Mother:** I think that he has improved a lot in comparison to before. He has improved, but he hasn’t changed the situation much, because I think that his expectations... what I think he wants I don’t think he has. He is better, but I don’t think that he has what he wants. He has improved, because at home he was very desperate. If he is always at home he despairs. So he plans to be, I don’t know if with other people or like that, I think that among us he is a little... he is pressured because... I don’t know why.

(...)

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Consultant: But, fundamentally, in your life, is that also the way you sense it?
Virgilio: Yes, I have improved, but, well, I continue to become desperate. I haven't finished taking off.
Consultant: You haven't finished...?
Virgilio: I haven't finished choosing a path. I continue to be where I was in the beginning, without making up my mind. I haven't finished choosing a path, and also when I get desperate it is because I think that I am never going to find my path.
Consultant: So, is it in that sense that you are desperate?
Virgilio: One step backwards, one step forwards and six backwards, and I finish time at the same spot. That is, I stop myself. Each time that I try to do something for myself right away I stop myself.
Consultant: And what is it that stops you?
Virgilio: Well, I think the family in general.
Consultant: The family stops you? In what way can the family...?
Virgilio: With their commentaries. That is, they hold me as much as they can, most of all my parents, as much as they can. They seem to get something out of that. Since I am not very secure and I have little faith in myself, well, they say “don’t move from here”, perhaps.

[The “official story” is being displayed, centered in Virgilio’s inability to move away from home as well as implicating his parents as the ones to blame (a not too infrequent byproduct of individual therapy). I begin to destabilize the story through challenging those assumptions.]

Consultant: What benefit would they get from stopping you, from holding you down?
Virgilio: Like, since I was young I have had problems, they want to protect me so much and I, to a certain degree, I allow them to.
Consultant: However, they (the therapists) say that some things have changed for the good, right?
Virgilio: Yes, the relationship with my parents is better.
Consultant: What have you all done in order to be able to improve relations between you?
[This question further challenges the blame-based logic of the story—in itself one of the “strange attractors” around which the story seems to be organized. This is immediately picked-up by one of the “culprits.”]
Father: Well, talking. Before, for example, I wouldn’t say anything to this one because the man
would escape and I couldn’t say anything to him. And what Virgilio has said about us holding him down, I don’t see that...

**Consultant:** That is his opinion. My question is, how have you managed to improve the relationships between you all?

**Father:** I already told you before. A person that comes from my town—I live in a small town and I have seen it—goes to a city and want to hide, as it were. Instead, if you come from the capital you are open and loose and you talk and nobody stops you. Is that the way it is or is it not?

**Consultant:** Aha, yes, yes.

**Father:** And this one [Virgilio], since he started to go to X [the capital city], he is less inhibited, more relaxed.

**Consultant:** What you are saying is that these are your son’s achievements?

**Father:** I think he is better, he has gained a lot, I think he is better, a lot, sometimes he walks here, other times...

**Consultant:** Excuse me. Not only does your son deserve the credit because he has opened up, because he has grown with his experience in the capital, but you also deserve some credit. You were saying that it is as if he is less inhibited, less fearful...

**Father:** I am delighted. These ones [his other offspring and his wife] can talk with him, but I have to be careful to talk to him about things; anything that I could tell him he takes it wrong. Now it seems that he doesn’t take it so wrong. He is desperate with his life. And I tell him, “Look, you shouldn’t become desperate with your life because you are fine. If you are a diabetic, well, you are a diabetic,” I have told him many times. “There are others who are worse off than you, that have their legs cut off, for example, that is very serious, it is sad.” He already goes to the capital by himself, and comes back, he goes biking, and I think that is fine. I think, if he would be working it would be, well, very well, but he has the misfortune that the current job market is so bad that no one can find a job. He becomes desperate because he thinks that no job is ever going to come to him, which is very sad, because we don’t need to take him to an office. He could do another type of job.

[A non-blaming, patient-centered variation is proposed--an alternative “official story,” carried by the father and organized around two “attractors”: outside circumstances--the job market-- and Virgilio’s limitations. In the following fragment I begin to enrich it and adding future orientation, while essentially not challenging it...for the time being.]
Consultant: So you say that you want to go and work at a supermarket. Your sister had a reasonable idea: If you want [to work] you can go [to the work place] to find out. I had another reasonable idea: if I have a friend who is working, I would ask that friend to take me with him. What do you think about it? Virgilio: I won’t move, for example, to go to the supermarket and tell them that I want to work, that is what I am lacking. I say that I could work in many places, but, to move, impossible. Consultant: And, in what way could your family help you to move in this regard? Because if you don’t have any experience looking for a job, then that is going to become more difficult, that is, if in your life you haven’t developed the experience to look for a job... Virgilio: I don’t know, perhaps by telling me directly to do it. They don’t tell me either. Consultant: What do you mean by “tell you”? Who would be the person who has to do that? Who has the strongest voice, so that you would do it without resenting it? Virgilio: Well, my father. Consultant: Uh huh, so it is your father who would have to help you. Uh huh. (…) Father: No, I have told him that he has to try and get jobs that are a little special, because in construction it’s hard, I don’t want him to work in construction either, it would be too hard. But if he can go to the supermarket, perfect, that would be lighter, or something similar. Consultant: A supermarket job wouldn’t necessarily be lighter, but you don’t have any reason to have to do light work, you are not a weak person, right? Virgilio: Yes, yes. Consultant: So it is like any other job. Okay, now, once you are working, for instance, in a supermarket, do you think that your folks are going to be worried about you, or that they are going to get used to having a son who works? [The father has raised issues that may restrain an expanded story of Virgilio’s options. Note that I attribute the concerns to the father, not Virgilio. And the focus becomes “the worries”, rather than Virgilio’s limitations, potentially a very different story.] Virgilio: [Mumbles] Still, or that I am more worried about them than about myself. Consultant: What, what? Virgilio: That still I would be more worried.
Father: About us? And why?
Consultant: You would be more worried?
Virgilio: Yes, just the same, yes.
Father: How are you going to be more worried about us!
Virgilio: That is what you think, but also I would not be happy working. I have already told Mom that many times.

[Mother is invited by the son as a spokesperson and she obliges readily, providing in the process an extremely important piece of information.]

Mother: What is going on is that Virgilio finds himself with a problem, namely, that by remaining at home -- we work in agriculture -- he becomes more inhibited, as we tell him. He should feel free, like his brother does. Some times we are born wearing a scapular⁴, I don't know how to say it: “This one is for the house.” It seems like Virgilio has picked that up, too. That one [the other son] has said, “Me, I am going to study, the farming is not for me.” I would say that all the kids have done the same, but this one [Virgilio] is a little stuck. But it is not that he completely dislikes agriculture either. Virgilio likes it, really, he finds pleasure at home, but he is not totally into it because agriculture is very hard and he doesn’t see himself with the capacity to take it on alone. He doesn't manage the tractor. If he did, well, he would be set. But the cattle are the only thing that he understands.

(...)

[I highlight the new information and begin to enhance a story around it to “capture” all the participants around this new “attractor”.]

Consultant: [To Virgilio] Do you see it the way your mother does? Oh, that's a different perspective on the subject! [To the mother] What a good observation! So -- of course, now I understand -- you are at home, but it is not that you are home to take care of your folks, what happens is that you become part of the farm team.

Mother: Yes, he feels more included, while the others, already since the beginning, they have, well....

Consultant: And, what would be inconvenient with you being part of the farm team? Who, was I following a wrong track! Why would you want to work at the supermarket if, in fact, you can be a part of the farm team at home?

Mother: Do you want me to answer? No, well, it would be better if he is the one who says it.
Virgilio: Because I haven’t yet become a member of the team.
Consultant: How would it be to become a member? How would it be for you to incorporate yourself more, feel that you have become a member?

Virgilio: By doing more things.

Consultant: Such as, for example, which are the things that you don’t do but could do?

Virgilio: For example, I could do everything with the animals.

Consultant: The animals, uh huh. And what is it that made you decide to not do that?

Virgilio: Well, not now, at least. Broadly speaking, as long as my father is there I think it is very complicated for me to get into it.

Consultant: Uh huh. What is it that is complicated for you? In what way does it seem complicated to you?

Virgilio: He makes it complicated; my father isn’t going to let me do things. As long as he is there, I am not going to do it.

Consultant: And what, are you going to wait until your father is stricken by a lightning bolt during a storm?

Father: [laughing] This is really good!

Mother: [laughing] Oh, what a disaster! [Everyone laughs]

Consultant: That is a bad way to do it, the lightning bolt method, because you might have to wait 30 more years.

Mother: They can’t do it, they have never done things together, I don’t know why, but...

Consultant: [to the father] And you, do you take care of the animals?

Father: Well, everyone does it, she [the mother] does too.

Virgilio: Me? [Implying, “Me, never!”]

Father: When I am there, well, I go with him, between the two of us we do it, we feed the cattle, and I have cows, and I milk them, because I think that...

Mother: ...that no one can milk them like he does.

Father: ...that someone could get kicked, they could get angry.

Consultant: Kick someone? Who can kick whom? A cow would kick Virgilio, or Virgilio will kick the cow? [general laughter]

Father: Either one, it could be either one.

Mother: What happens is that...

Father: Victor still hasn’t told me, “Let me milk the cows today, I am going to do the milking today.” At home now we milk mechanically but before I milked by hand, and well, often my mother milked and I would tell her “I am going to do the milking today.” I would get
less milk because I wasn’t used to doing it, but this one has still never told me, “I am going to do the milking today”.

Virgilio: Nor will I say it to him.

Consultant: Why, aren’t you interested in milking?

Father: For me it is a little bit difficult to say, “Go do the milking”.

Consultant: [To Virgilio] Why is it that you don’t tell him? You must have a reason for not telling him that.

Virgilio: Because of the comments that he would make later.

Consultant: For example, what?

Virgilio: [To the father] You know very well.

Consultant: But I don’t know, that is why I am asking. What comments do you believe your father would make to you?

Virgilio: That I did it wrong!

Consultant: Ah!

Father: But, I think it is just fine if you don’t do it right the first time!

Virgilio: What I want is a chance to do it for the first time.

Father: What I want is for you to tell me, “I’ll go for it!” and I would tell you, “Well, look, this is done this way”. “All right,” you would tell me, “you do it.”

Consultant: So you are very sensitive to criticism from your father.

[This relabeling destabilizes the cohesion of the prior description. In fact, it proposes a drastic reorganization of the story: it locates the responsibility in Virgilio (the issue is no longer father’s criticisms but Virgilio’s sensitivity) while the label does not entail a negative trait (it is just that being too sensitive is problematic.) This description may also facilitate father’s acceptance of the new story (“It is not that I am doing things wrong, but that he is very sensitive to my criticism.”)]

Virgilio: Yes, and that is what stops me. That is, if I start to do something and he tells me, or I understand that he doesn’t think I am doing it right, well, I won’t do it.

Consultant: So it is much more difficult for you to learn.

Virgilio: Learn, and do.

Consultant: Of course it is much more difficult, because to do you have to learn, and to learn one must learn by making mistakes, right? One learns by the criticism of the others. But if you are very sensitive to the criticisms of your father, it is a difficult situation.

Virgilio: Yes. For example, that same comment, coming from other people who aren’t my
father...

Consultant: ...You would tolerate.

Virgilio: ...I would tolerate it, I wouldn’t take it wrong.

(...)  

[in the following fragment I attempt at expanding and anchoring the new story, organized around Virgilio’s sensitivity, by exploring whatever resonance it may have with father’s story.]

Consultant: [to the father] My question is, in your life experience, when you were young or an adolescent, were you also easily hurt or sensitive, or you were a person who was like your other children, with a less sensitive skin?

Father: Like my other children?

Consultant: You, how were you like when you were 20 or 22 years old?

Father: Well, I don’t know what to tell you.

Consultant: The question is if you were a person...

Father: Sensitive? I think I was not sensitive.

Consultant: No. [To the mother] How old was he when you met him?

Mother: How old was he? When he was 30 years old, something like that.

Consultant: And you, how old were you when you met him?

Mother: Me, 10 years younger.

Consultant: So, he was 30 and you were 20. How, of all of the people in the world, did the two of you meet each other and form a couple?

Mother: [Exchange of glances between them, with a broad smile and a hint of shyness] Very difficult.

Father: [Also smiling shyly]: Well, it is easy.

(...)  

Consultant: And the farm where you are living, is it your family’s or are you the owner?

Father: The farm? I bought it, I bought it.

Mother: Well, it was passed down from his parents.

Consultant: So part of the family history is in this farm also. What also makes it important is that there be a person from this generation working on the farm, right?

Father: Well, now, I don’t know if you know about this, but a lot of people have abandoned farming, it isn’t the same as it was before, when a person would stay home more than anything else, you know, then it was a good business. Today people have gotten bored.
Mother: Today, here, if young people find a job they don’t stay in the countryside.
Father: Yes, if they found work, none would stay in town.

(…)

Father: (To Virgilio) I have already told you more than once: I would like for you to look for a job so that you can appreciate what work is. Because you can always come back home, as it has happened to many people. Like the people who have gone to the Americas and have stayed for two weeks, thinking that they were going to bring their wallets filled with money, and they came back in two weeks stripped clean. I can understand why they don’t go over there so much anymore. You [to consultant] are from there and you would know that many people have gone--from my family many, and from her family, too--and some have come right back, saying that that is a swindle, that there is no business there. And he can do the same, to go to look for work in the city and wherever, and then, “I don’t like that job.”

(…)

[I then endeavor to enhance the mother’s connections as well, and make more explicit an alternative construction that may encompass both son’s possible wish to remain in the farm and his father’s possible wish to protect him.]

Consultant: [to the mother] Your work, do you enjoy it, or no?
Mother: Well, I don’t dislike it.

Consultant: You, sir, your job, do you like it?
Father: Farming? Yes, I do like it.

Consultant: …In spite of seeing little future in that activity?
Mother: I don’t see a lot of future in it. Of course, it is hard and…

Consultant: I am trying to know why are you protecting your son from choosing farming, as if it had more disadvantages than advantages.

Father: I like the job that I have, but I am lamenting not having gone to work in a factory when I could have, as I did have that kind of an offer. But by then a person was forced to stay home. I have told him [Virgilio] to do what he wants.

Consultant: I didn’t totally understand what you just said.

Mother: It’s that when a person does…We, parents, often influence our children from the time they are born, as well as before they are born. And we want them to do all the things that we were unable to do ourselves, generally.

Consultant: [To the mother] Did his [the father’s] brothers leave from…
Mother: They were free, they didn’t feel tied.
Consultant: And he was the one who stayed and says...
Mother: Yes, and he continuously complains: “They left me here.” Well, you should have gone! But he only wishes that he had left. Do you understand? It is that now...
Consultant: [To the therapists] What I realize is that everything was the reverse from what I was thinking! In fact, he [the father] is trying to protect his son so he wouldn’t repeat his own situation. So he tells him...
Father: I keep him free to go wherever he wants.
Consultant: Exactly, you are protecting him.
Father: I am not going to force him to stay or to leave.
Consultant: No, quite the contrary. Even more...
Father: He should be free.
Consultant: I find your attitude very noble.
Father: Look, my father has told me that many times, when I was 20 years old-- I am the oldest of the brothers... Since I was 10 years old I have been in this world doing the work I do now, and I have been told this many times... I would tell him, “What am I doing here? I don’t like to be pushed and pulled because I am the oldest, and I would tell him, “I am going to leave and go work somewhere else.” He would tell me, “If you go I will get rid of the farm.” He would leave the business, and then I would tell myself, “If I leave this... it would be a shame if another would take advantage of it.” If I would have gone to work --at home there were others, my parents that could work, my brothers, and I was 20 years old, I was old enough to make a decision-- perhaps I would have crashed. He would tell me that [i.e., that he would sell the farm] over and over again. For me that would have been very unpleasant: it would make me feel guilty, that because of me he had left the business, that because of me he would have sold it and someone else would run it. I don’t know what would have happened. So I have resisted, and because of that I realize that one can’t do that to a son. Instead, if he goes to work, I won’t tell him that I will leave the business; I will continue on the farm until I die, if I can.

[This moving revelation begins to anchor the new story. The consultant underlines it to anchor it in the therapists, that is, to help them change their own story of the family’s problem.]
Consultant: [To the therapists]: The interesting thing is that the father is protecting the son from repeating his own fate. It is very moving. [To the father] He is telling you, “Maybe I
want to stay on the farm. “And you are telling him, “Son, don’t repeat my mistake!” You are regretting your decision of many years ago, you are thinking, “I should have gone somewhere else, to work outside,” and you want to protect him against repeating what for you it may have been a mistake.

Father: Not a mistake. I think that a person has to be somewhere.

Consultant: True, it is your philosophy of life.

Father: I don’t know if it would have been better or worse if I would have gone, I don’t know.

Consultant: Of course. That is why...

Father: And that is why I tell him that he should try and go somewhere to work. If he doesn’t like it, I am going to say, “Hey, if you don’t like it...” He is free, he can decide. If he wants, I can go with him wherever.

[The tenacity of the corollary of the father’s own life experience attempts against the new version. I challenge him, counting on having already established with him an empathic connection.]

Consultant: You are telling him that he is free to go.

Mother: And to stay, too.

Consultant: That I am not so sure. [To the father] You are telling your son that he is free to go. Now, is he free to stay?

Father: Also.

Consultant: But you, as a responsible father, think that you don’t want him to repeat your mistakes. So, each time he says, “I want to stay”, you tell him, “Why don’t you go away for a while?” I think it is very noble on your part.

Father: Noble?

Consultant: Of course, you do it in order for him not to repeat what has been for you the heavy load of a doubt: “What would have happened in my life if I had gone away to work? Maybe everything would have been very different.”

Father: Yes.

Consultant: It is the drama of your life, right?

Father: Yes.

Consultant: So, since it is the drama of your life, you want to protect your son so he wouldn’t repeat your drama. You want to make sure that he doesn’t suffer. So you keep on telling him, “Go away, go away, go away.” Well, this is your way of protecting him.

Father: [Agreeing] Or else I don’t tell him anything.
Consultant: Well, it is your way to protect him. [To the son] Now I understand what you were saying about not being able to decide to stay. Because your father’s message is, “Man, if you stay you haven’t looked into the possibilities.” Now, if you would consider working away from home it would be in order to please him, not because you want to make a career away from home. What a trap, right? (...) “I want to leave because he wants me to leave to go explore the world so that I don’t repeat his life’s mistakes. If I want to stay and I do, I am repeating his drama, and I don’t want to frustrate him”. I think that the alliance between the two of you is extremely intense and strong and loving.

(...)  
Father: And I can tell you more: the problem that I told you about was that my brothers were working in the capital city, while I, who was the oldest, didn’t earn anything at home.  
Mother: Well, the problem...your son has the same problem, he doesn’t earn anything.  
Consultant: Even more parallels.

The interview closed with comments about the usefulness of continuing this conversation in subsequent sessions, and with expressions of appreciation and gratitude to and by the family.  

Discussion

As occurs with any interview, this text can be analyzed from many perspectives. From among them I will choose to comment on two, namely, the locus of my effort and the specific processes that were fostered...

As a consultant, my “clients” are the therapists that bring the family to the consultation. In the presentation that therapists make of a family I take for granted (how could it be otherwise!) that their description contains their own prejudices and difficulties, and their request is, in a generic way, that I help them to see the family differently, that I broaden their repertoire of alternative plausible narratives and, as a result, I help them generate different corollaries. The therapists involved in this consultation had already treated this patient in an institutional setting for a long time with an individual focus and with one goal in mind, namely, his independence--which represented the father’s proposal that his son should go away to work, and which unavoidably ascribed negativity to the alternative, namely, to stay at home.
Given this description, what they were trying to do was very logical, namely, to help the patient to achieve independence by means of enticing him to seek work in the city. And when the results didn’t reward their efforts, they did what we all tend to do in those circumstances, namely, more of the same. A hypothesis derived from these brave efforts was that there was something in the family that was working against their goals. And when the family was interviewed, the therapeutic team found that the description they held of the problem tended to be confirmed, as the family “didn’t cooperate”: it was a “rigid” family.

As mentioned before, my responsibility as a consultant is to help in the consensual development of alternate descriptions that could be different enough to generate, among other attributes, different therapeutic corollaries. The description that the therapists made entailed a polarized battle between a son that was trying to become independent and parents who were retaining him, sabotaging his efforts to become self-sufficient. This description derived from premises that probably guided the therapists even before the first family interview. In consonance with that first description, my own first view of the parents, especially of the father, was, I would say, two dimensional, poor, without texture. My first contact with them, in fact, corroborated that description: the father appeared to be closed up, inexpressive, primitive, insensitive; the mother, on the contrary, with vivacious eyes, was connected, expressive, the willing spokesperson for both parents and for the son. Hence, good part of my own actions during the first part of the interview were guided by my interest in multidimensionalizing within myself the image of the father, enriching it, making it more attractive to my own eyes, while disengaging from the story that had colonized them and me, one in which the son wanted to leave home to work outside but couldn’t (a plot that defined him as pathological) or wasn’t allowed (a plot that defined the parents as pathological). In fact, to disengage myself meant to disengage us, in other words, my supposition was that my changes could only occur in conversation, through collectively generating change in the unfolding and enacted story about the nature of the problem.

As I hope became clear in the example, once the story was destabilized, once it passed a “point of bifurcation”, it tended to reorganize itself quickly around new attractors loaded both with familiarity and novelty: familiarity because it emerged from material provided by themselves, and novelty because it is qualitatively different from the “official story” offered by the therapists and described/enacted by the family in the first part of the interview. The qualities of the novel story were sufficient to predict its survival: it contained dramatic
contextualized elements of the family history, and was therefore recognizable by the family; contained ethical values that were consonant with those of the family; it defines central players as capable, responsible people with good intentions; it presupposes in the participants self-respect and respect for the other, the desire to favor the evolution and to avoid the suffering of the other; and it opens the possibilities for solutions that the previous story didn't contain.

My daily clinical experience continues, after all these years, to leave me in awe: we converse in a certain way with the people who consult with us (and that “certain way” is, indeed, the subject of this and so many other books!), and desirable qualitative transformations take place in the dominant stories and behaviors of the participants--myself included--: the complex system of which we become an active part during a consultation may it evolve in idiosyncratic fashions, but the result of our participation is all too frequently a story with an elegant design, and with liberating and empowering effects for all the participants.

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REFERENCES


1 Director of Psychiatric Services, Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital, Santa Barbara, California 93102-0689, U.S.A. e-mail: csluzki@sbch.org

2 The boundary of the consulting system is, in fact, arbitrary. For practical purposes we may define a consultation as individual-centered (but, with whom does this individual share his/her reality?); as a couple session (but, in what other social and meaning-sharing systems are these two people involved?); as a family interview (but, what about the teacher who suggested the consultation because of the behavior of a child and has already proposed a diagnostic label to the family or assigned responsibility to the parents?); or as another social network consultation (such as family + therapists, like the consultation that will be discussed below or any other meaningful network).

3 **Denotes a pause in the transcription.

4 In Spanish, “Nacemos con un escapulario puesto”, meaning that we are born already with a pre-ordained fate or life pathway.

5 This paradigmatic question (“How, of all the millions of people in the world, did the two of you get together?”), systematically posed since 1957 by the Bateson team and by researchers and clinicians at the Mental Research Institute, Palo Alto (see Watzlawick (1966). Each time I chose to pose it I re-discover its strong evocative power.

6 Because of an artifact derived from the choice of fragments, Virgilio’s three siblings appear only as silent participants in the interview. That was not the case, since they were actively included at several moments. All in all, however, the position of the three tended to be relatively marginal, offering few interesting opinions and indicating (explicitly and through their body language) their desire to be left out of the discussion.

7 It could be analyzed, for example, from the structural point of view, identifying three subsystems: intergenerational alliance mother-Virgilio, the subsystem composed by the three autonomous siblings, and the father as an isolated individual although occasionally protected by the mother. Maintaining that view, it could be described that the centrality of the mother, such as it unfolds at the beginning of the interview, was progressively reduced through a valorization of the relationship father-Virgilio and the enhancement in the protagonist position of the father. It could also be analyzed from a tri-generational view, defining that the process that took place in the
session was one of discovery and denunciation of a sequence of “destiny without alternatives” transmitted from generation to generation against which both father and son fought in vain, while they perpetuated it with their ambivalence. It could also be explained as a paradigmatic double bind situation, and assume that the paralysis of Virgilio is the effect of a double message-in-context, (“Do what you want”, but “Don’t repeat my mistakes”, “You are free”, but “Obey me”; “You are the oldest son, the chosen one, and this condemns you”); the therapeutic exorcism would therefore consist in challenging the rules that prohibit metacommunication. And so on. (“Do what you want”, but “Don’t repeat my mistakes”, “You are free”, but “Obey me”; “You are the oldest son, the chosen one, and this condemns you”); the therapeutic exorcism would therefore consist in challenging the rules that prohibit metacommunication. And so on.