Relationship, Language and Pre-Understanding in the Reflecting Processes

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This article discusses whether the concepts 'relationship', 'expressing oneself' and 'pre-understanding' might be better starting points to describe and understand 'the therapeutic process' than the traditional concepts 'theory' and 'method'. The discussion has emerged from participation in, and will itself clarify, the so-called "reflecting processes".

ENTRANCE

The reflecting team has also been called "a reflecting process" or "conversations about conversations" (Andersen, 1987; 1990; 1991). Participating in various reflecting processes over the last few years has brought about some changes in my own professional thinking and priorities. To put last things first, I can say that theories and methods have been relegated to the back seat whereas relationships, language and prior assumptions have been given more attention. "Relationship" refers to the inter-action between client(s) and professional(s); "language" refers to the way we express ourselves whether talking to self or others. "Assumption" is synonymous with Hans Georg Gadamer's concept "prejudice" (Warnke, 1987). It indicates that a person, for instance a professional, under-stands something specific, for example a particular client, through the lenses of this professional's general under-standing of human beings.

A BRIEF HISTORY

One of the sources of the reflecting team is the Milan approach, with which I assume the reade is acquainted (Selvini-Palazzoli *et al*, 1980; Boscolo *et al.*, 1987). According to the Milan approach, there periods in a session when the family and the team have a firm boundary between them — for instance when the team makes an intervention in the family. During the reflecting processes, this firm boundary is not drawn; the family and the team are together all the time and all that is spoken is spoken openly.

In hindsight, I can see that before we introduced the reflecting team in March 1985, two issues had been worked on and one question wrestled with. The first of these issues concerned Gregory Bateson's idea about the difference

that makes the difference (Bateson, 1972), which was modified by what I learned from watching the Norwegian physiotherapist Aadel Bülow-Hansen work (Øvreberg *et al.*, 1986). In her attempts to help people release their bodily tension she induces pain by massaging one of the tense muscles. The pain stimulates increased breathing, both inhalation and exhalation, which in its turn relieves the muscular tension. If the massage produces insufficient discomfort, there is no increase in breathing. If the massage induces an appropriate level of pain, there is increased breathing, but if she causes too much discomfort, patients respond by inhaling deeply and then by holding their breath. These new insights were applied to our therapeutic conversations so that we sought to be "appropriately unusual" when choosing what to talk about and how to talk about it. Conversations tended to stop and the clients tended to be less engaged if the content or the manner of our talking became too different from daily life. We became more sensitive to the flow of the conversation and to our clients' feelings of comfort and discomfort.

The second issue was related to the presentation of inter-ventions, w ˙ h our teams started to treat differently in the late part o₁ ˙34. Originally we used to say: "This is what we have understood" or "This is what you ought to do". We changed this to "In addition to what you saw (or under-stood) we saw (or understood) this." I see this now as a shift from an either-or stance to a both-and stance. We experienced this shift as both significant and freeing. Those who consulted us often said: "We have a problem, but we can't know what to do." We asked ourselves: 'Why do we,

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when we are trying to find something else that our consultees can do, separate from them and leave them?'' Maybe we should invite the family to watch and listen to our discussion? Maybe that might give them ideas for ways they might act differently in relation to their problem?

THE REFLECTING TEAM

We had had the idea of "talking in the open" back in 1981, but a fear of seeming to be impolite or hurtful in our discussion kept us from such "public talk" until March 1985. When we began to talk in front of the families we found it surprisingly easy to talk without connoting their behaviour negatively.

This is the way we organised the procedure initially. One of the professionals and the family (together they made up the family-system) talked together while the rest of the professionals (the team) listened to that discussion from behind a one-way screen. After a while, either the team behind the screen offered to talk about their ideas or the family-system asked for the team's ideas. The team then talked about their reactions to the discussion they had just heard, and the family-system listened to what they had to say. Next, the family-system described their reactions to what the team had just said. Shortly after we started making the talks open like this, the team found it natural to share different ideas about what they had heard. This fits in well with the belief that any event can be described and understood differently according to the point of view of the observer. This reflecting procedure often made the families see something they had not seen before, or understand a problem differently from the way in which they had understood it before.

"INNER" AND "OUTER" CONVERSATIONS

The reflecting process itself could be described as formalising the shifts that the various participants make between talking and listening. When participants talk with others, they are engaged in an "outer" dialogue. When they are listening, they are talking to themselves in an "inner" dialogue. Each of the participants is engaged on the same issue from those two different perspectives: talking and listening, the outer and inner dialogue respectively. Having that understanding of the reflecting process one can easily find many ways to organise it — the use of the team and one way screen is only one of them. One does not necessarily have to have a one-way screen; one does not even need a team to alternate talking and listening roles.

FOUR CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

Since the reflecting processes felt more democratic, there were increased attempts to make our relationship with the clients as egalitarian as possible. The crucial questions emerged from that, but there had been another question we had wrestled with before these: "Is what we are talking about in our conversation with our clients appropriately unusual or too unusual for them?" "Is the way we talk about this appropriately unusual or too unusual?" "Are the circumstances (team, therapy room, etc.) appropriately unusual or too unusual — should we be meeting at their home instead?"

The two other questions were: "What led up to your decision to come to this meeting?" and "How would you like to use this meeting?" The former of these two questions could be subdivided: "Who first had the idea of asking for this meeting?" "How did the others react to this idea?"

"Who of you (who are present today) particularly liked the idea, and who were more wary about it?" "If the person who first suggested the meeting had not done so, would someone else here have suggested it?" The idea behind these questions is to clarify who is ready to talk in this meeting and who is less ready. I myself prefer to avoid questioning the more hesitant ones at the beginning, as I prefer to use my intuition about when I can eventually invite them into the conversation.

The other of the two questions: "How would you like to use this meeting?" is addressed to all present. Those who were strongly in favour of such a meeting always have an answer to this question; those who are more hesitant about the meeting often do not have any answers. The answers given by those who were strongly in favour of the meeting always receive a lot of my attention, as these answers reflect the expectations of the meeting. The question contains two sub-questions: "What kind of format might this meeting have?" and "What would you like to talk about?". The former of these two sub-questions might deal with: where it would be best to talk (e.g. here, or at home); whether to use the team; if the decision was not to use the team, should there be one or two professionals in the room, or not? There may be other questions to ask. The idea behind these kinds of questions is to be sure that the meeting avoids a format that is uncomfortable for those present. It is hard to talk when you feel uncomfortable. The fourth question is: "Who might/could/ought/should talk with whom about which issue in which way at which point in time?" One should not take it for granted that everybody present is ready to talk about everything that is brought up during a meeting. If a new issue is brought up during the conversation one might ask: "How often have you (who are here today) talked about this?" If the answer is that they have not talked together about it, one might ask that person who brought the issue up: "As far as you can judge, is everybody here ready to talk about it or are there are some that would not like to talk about it?" If the answer is that some are more reluctant, a new question might be: "How could we organise this so that those who want to talk about it can do so, and those who are not so much in favour of talking about it do not have to do so? Could we rearrange the meeting? Could we meet again on another day, with only those present who want to discuss the issue?"

The main idea here is to ensure that our conversations can proceed in such a way that everyone is comfortable, or at least not uncomfortable. In thinking about this, we have been much influenced by a concept from the Houston-Galveston Family Institute, namely the problem-creating and the problem-dissolving system (Anderson *et al*, 1986). This concept focusses on what happens when a problem arises; many people give the problem their attention and by so doing they create meanings about how the problem can be understood and how it can be solved. If those who

create meanings have produced meanings that have just the right amount of divergence from one another, they might be able to accept one another's ideas. However, if these explanations are very different the participants stop listening to one another and the conversation comes to a halt, and this in itself becomes the next problem. People then tend to defend their theories and build on them when someone else tells them to give them up. Such meetings that encourage people who cannot talk to one another to exchange their views will probably only increase the difficulties. This famous Galveston concept not only sets up guidelines for clinical work, but also challenges other ideas in the field of family therapy. One of family therapy's cherished beliefs is that the system (for instance the family) creates the problem. According to the Galveston concept, the problem creates the system! This concept also makes it appear that we have been too narrow when we think about "the family" because the problem-created system often comprises more people than those who come from one family. There are often, in fact, professionals in such a problem-created system.

FEELING UNCOMFORTABLE

Speaking for myself I can say that my contributions to the four questions mentioned above, the shift from the either-or to both-and stance, and the decision to hold all our conversations in the open, have all emerged from situations which felt uncomfortable. Now, in hindsight, I also understand that I felt uncomfortable about the relationship I had with the client families. I felt increasingly uncomfortable with acting as if I knew better than our clients what we should talk about, how we should talk, what they should understand and even what they should do. It is interesting that the feeling that I was participating in relationships that were uncomfortable for me has stimulated changes in my work, and that it was not theories or the reading of books or journals that made me change. Rather, the feeling of discomfort stimulated changes in my practice which in turn changed my theories, or what I would prefer to say: my assumptions or my attitudes.

FOCUS ON CONVERSATIONS

In many respects the conversations became focused. When the team suggested to the family that they might offer their reflections they said: "We have some ideas that might contribute something to your conversation." Part of the question, "How would you like to use this meeting?" is: "What kind of conversation might we have together?" After we talked about various issues that came up during a conversation, we often went on to questions like: "Who have you been talking to about this?" and "Who would you like to talk with (whom you have not yet talked with)?" It was obvious that talking to one or more people offers the opportunity to exchange different descriptions and understandings of a problem and that this increased the possibility of finding new descriptions and new under-. standings. The therapy conversation started to become a focus of interest in itself. One way of finding out more of what a conversation is all about was to think of it as listening and talking: one listens to another's talk. Then the

question arises: "What is the listener's understanding of what talking itself is about?"

EXPRESSING ONESELF

Talking gives information. Others learn what the speaker is thinking — and so does the speaker him/herself. When we observe someone attempting to express him/herself, we can easily experience that attempt as a *search* for the right words. Words have personal meanings for us all. We often use them metaphorically, that is to say, in ways that carry meanings *meta* to the basic sense of the words. We cannot *not* talk in metaphors (Lakoff *et al.*, 1980). We extend our ideas by using words that catch something similar to what we are thinking of but also contain something more. If one follows the speaker carefully, one will also notice that the person chooses a certain speed, rhythm and volume and that there are shifts of pitch. One will also notice that there are small pauses now and then that interrupt the flow. Let me relate that to what Aadel Bülow-Hansen has taught me (Øvreberg *et al*, 1986). She says that it is as we breathe out that we speak, and it is also as we breathe out that we experience emotion. And as we exhale it is not just the words and the emotions that are released, but also some bodily tension. With inhalation we build up some tension within the body; with exhalation we let it go. The act of talking therefore also has built into it the constant increase and decrease of tension. When we breathe in we tense slightly as we stretch and open up the body.

The words accompany the air stream. Expressing oneself through speaking is a physical activity. We cannot separate the spoken word from the release of emotions, nor from the way the body moves during this process. And when one expresses oneself one is in the process of realising one's identity. Talking, which is part of self-expression, is therefore much more than information — it is also formation.

I have noticed in my own practice that this understanding of what talking is has stimulated me to let people talk as long as they want, in the way they want, because this process of talking is both informative and formative. I don't want them to disturb that process. Actually, the process does not stop when the talking stops; there is always a short pause after a person finishes talking, as if the person talks to her/himself about what she or he just said. So I prefer to wait until the person has finished talking and has finished the short thoughtful pause before I ask my question.

I see that talking, to oneself and to others, is constantly going on, and it is a person's constant search to understand self and circumstances, and to understand how to relate to those circumstances. Maybe the crucial human project is to understand *how not to relate* to one's circumstances, and then to avoid making the errors.

If it is agreed that talking is formative as well as informative, we should remind ourselves that we express ourselves through language in at least four different ways: in dreams, in inner dialogues, in outer dialogues and in writing. Those four ways of talking constitute four different formative influences upon us.

ASSUMPTIONS

My assumptions about human thinking and human activities have changed a lot over time. At first, as a young medical doctor, I understood thinking and action, broadly speaking, as outcomes of the person's biological structures. My ideas were extended first of all by including psychological, and later, social structures, which contributed to a person's thinking and activity. Later, when I focussed in my professional work more on conversations and language, I have become much more aware of studies of language and the formative role of talking (cf. Gergen, 1984 and 1989; Potter *et al.*, 1987; Anderson *et al.*, 1988; Shotter, 1989). And certainly, as I have been saying, the discussions I have had with Harry Goolishian and the wisdom I have absorbed from Aadel Bülow-Hansen have contributed much to my "new" understanding of human thinking and activity.

Our general assumptions about what humans are will strongly influence *how* we understand the particular people we meet. This *how* comprises *what* we are going to understand and *how* we go about reaching that understanding. Hans Georg Gadamer says that we have already started to understand even before we have encountered what we are going to try to understand (Warnke, 1987). Our assumptions draw from many sources, including culture, tradition, personal experiences, theories, art, and those formless thoughts of ours that I prefer to call intuition. What we understand in the new situation will be what tallies with our prior knowledge. The things that we become acquainted with for the first time and do not fully understand, but come to understand through talking, will feed back into our assumptions, broadening those assumptions for the future. Our assumptions give us the basis from which we can attain understanding; the dynamic process of our understanding changes our assumptions. That is called the hermeneutic circle (Heidegger, 1990; Warnke, 1987). Every time we understand something, we have the chance to re-examine and re-order our assumptions and prejudices about the things we are trying to understand. Because of this, the person *who* is aware of the hermeneutic circle both *searches* (to understand him/herself, circumstances and how to relate to those circumstances) and *researches* his/her own act of understanding. The clinician who is aware of this becomes at the one time a practitioner and a researcher.

UNCOMFORTABLE RELATIONSHIPS

My attempts to understand the various changes in my clinical work have given me the opportunity to re-search my assumptions about its evolution and change. I can see that I have made changes in practice that have transformed uncomfortable relationships to less uncomfortable relationships. A relationship is not uncomfortable in itself, but is *experienced as* uncomfortable. I believe that these feelings of discomfort emerge when something is going on that is *not* compatible with one's ethical or aesthetic standards, or both. Everything we say and do to one another contributes before all else to the forming and reforming of relationships. When a professional is preoccupied with a method or a technique, this method or technique may itself become a primary determinant of the ongoing relationship. For me, the time has come to ask these questions: If I want to apply a method in my work with clients, will it be compatible with the relationship I want to have with them? Or will it form the sort of relationship I don't want to have? Maybe the time has come to let our ethics and our aesthetics form our relationships, and let those relationships allow for possible activities (including our way of working). In their turn, we could try to understand them within the frames of existing assumptions (including theories) or let them be the basis for the emergence of new assumptions (including theories)? Relationships where one does something *together with* the other seem more comfortable than relationships where one does something *to the other, about the other, for the other* or *on the other.*

KNOWING, THINKING AND EXPRESSING or EXPRESSING, THINKING AND KNOWING?

I have for most of my life believed that we think before we talk; talking is the result of thinking and thinking precedes expressing oneself. I have also long thought that one must know (understand) what to express before one expresses oneself.

Knowledge of a particular situation comes from what we say about it and how. What we talk about and how we talk about it will be bounded by our assumptions. What we come to know is therefore much connected to the language we are *in*. I do not say the language we use, but the language we are *in*. The language we are in is part of the expressing of ourselves which makes us the persons we become. "Knowledge" in these terms becomes pretty much person-bound and less generalizeable. This knowledge is *useful* for understanding oneself, one's circumstances and how to relate to them. It is different from apodictic (certain) knowledge; what we *know* is true, which Plato called *episteme* (*epi*: upon; *steme* (derived from *(hi)stamai*): To stand = stand upon), and also different from what Plato called *doxa*: what we believe is true (Polkinghorne, 1983). The knowledge I have been writing about here is not an active searching after truth — this knowledge is either true or believed to be so. The knowledge I have been writing about here is *useful* knowledge. When someone consults me and says: "I don't know what to do", I say to myself: "What she or he understood about the problem was not helpful. Maybe in talking together we could try to find another understanding that might be more useful?"

This understanding of knowledge challenges my old understanding. I used to think that there is always something "behind" what is happening. When a person talked I often thought of what they "meant" by what they said. Harry Goolishian has often reminded us to "listen to what they say!" It follows from that reminder that we should continue the conversation from what people say and *not* from what we believe they mean by what they say.

By writing that knowing follows talking, I can paradoxically suggest that talking is "behind" knowing. There is nothing "behind" talking. Talking is taking part in life, and in taking part in life, one is constantly expressing oneself. So, should there be something "behind" talking, that must be life itself.

A NEW QUESTION

In observing my own practice I notice that I now *never* ask: "I heard you say this (or that). What do you mean by that?" A more recent variation on this is: "I heard you say this (or that). Can you say what you were thinking when you said that?" (Since this question appears so often it has become a challenge to find as many variations of it as possible.)

REFOCUSING ON THE CONVERSATION AND MY PART IN IT

Being the *other* in a conversation I will partly understand and partly not understand; I will partly listen and partly talk. This raises some questions: How can I come to understand what I can't understand? Particularly, how can I reach such understanding when I don't even know what I don't understand? May the answer be a new question: Could I listen and talk in new ways in addition to the ways I listen and talk today?

LISTENING AND TALKING

Not only does Aadel Bülow-Hansen "talk" and "listen" like everybody else, her hands also "talk" and "listen". The working hand, the one that massages a person's body, "talks". The other hand lies quietly somewhere on the body and "listens" carefully to the body's responses to the "talking" hand. Her eyes "talk" and "listen". They "listen" to all the small signs of response to her "talking" hand. When they convey the nearness of her support, consideration and warmth, they "talk".

Maybe we would understand more or understand differently if we let our eyes and hands be more focused when we are thinking about talking and listening? Would it make us listen more intuitively? To listen intuitively means (for me) to be open to the small "touches" which are almost invisible and almost inaudible, and vanish so quietly and so quickly that they are in most cases hard to detect? If we listened differently would we talk differently? Is there something to learn from art and artists?

Could that make us hear differently? Could we, as an experiment, listen to talking as we listen to music? Think of Mozart's *Requiem* — for instance, the section that begins "Confutatis maledictis . . .". The men sing first, fortissimo *"Confutatis maledictis//flammis acribus addictis* (When the dammed are cast away/ and consigned to the searing flames). Then the women sing: first the sopranos and then the altos as a shadow-choir, all *piano*: *voca me cum benedictis* (call me to be with the blessed). Both men and women sing in fear and despair and one wonders, is there any hope in their voices? Then men and women sing softly in unison, begging for mercy and fervently praying for deliverance. One wonders, is there any hope? How do they form their hope? And how do their hopes form them? Can other questions be asked? If so, what might they be?

EXIT

In Richard Rorty's critique of epistemology he refers to the dispute between Cardinal Bellarmine and Galileo. Galileo made a distinction between rational knowledge and faith and meant that science could deal only with the former. Bellarmine, who lost the dispute, was not able to make such a distinction (Warnke, 1987).

Maybe the time has come to recognise the potential truth of Bellarmine's view by stating that our listening comprises the spiritual and emotional in addition to the rational?

Maybe also the time has come to let what we have to say take its shape more from what comes from ourselves and feels natural, rather than just from what the theories and techniques tell us?

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