Circular Questioning

PEGGY PENN, M.S.W.†

The plan of this paper is to explore the question: Does a model that includes the principles of double description, circularity, and coevolutionary change, all accounting for shifts in family coalitions over time and the emergence of problems in connection with these shifts, allow the family therapist to design better methods for the understanding and practice of family therapy?

Concepts of double description, coevolution, and circularity from Gregory Bateson's writing and the research of other scientists describe the translation of these ideas from pure epistemology to the pragmatics of family therapy. Circular questioning developed by the Milan Associates is presented as a practice method exemplifying how these notions of circularity and coevolutionary change—especially changes in family patterns—are used during actual family sessions.

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† Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy, 149 East 78th Street, New York, New York 10021.

Double Description

BATESON'S PRINCIPLE of double description simply means that "in order to get from one level of description to another, an act of double description is required, or, views from every side of the relationship must be juxtaposed to generate a sense of the relationship as a whole. Double description is, according to Bateson, the relationship." (7) As we will see, nothing more aptly describes the "sense of" circular questioning.

Take the old conundrum, if a tree fell in a forest and no one was there to hear it, would it make a sound? If the question is an indication of contextural structure, organized by relationships of difference, the answer would be no. However, altering this bafflement and asking, if a tree fell in a forest and only a deaf man were present would it make a sound, the answer might be yes—for a relational system, a double description should exist giving the event context and meaning. Perhaps the deaf man sees the tree fall, or his feet feel the vibrations and a sound is "created."

The relational context, the double description of man and tree, provides a fitting systemic register. In this regard, double descriptions are not static principles, they are descriptions of relationships. The process view of double description suggests that we may use language in a coevolutionary way in which new orders of difference, relationship, and context may emerge.

Coevolutionary Change

One of the most interesting new developments in the field of family therapy is the emergence of what I choose to call, a coevolutionary model.[1] In the last ten years the idea that living ecologies progress toward higher orders of complexity in a coevolutionary fashion has been dramatically utilized by researchers in the biological sciences. More unusual is the fit of this idea in the social sciences, family therapy in particular, where it is encouraging new thinking about families as well as new methods for the practice of family therapy.

The coevolutionary model includes both the pattern of discontinuous change as well as continuous change as an observer's punctuation of the reorganization of living systems. Gregory Bateson in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* prefigured a coevolutionary epistemology for living systems when he wrote, " . . . in 1935 I certainly had not clearly grasped the central importance of 'context.' I thought that the processes of Schismogenesis were important and nontrivial because in them I seemed to see evolution at work: if interaction between persons could undergo progressive qualitative change as intensity increased, then surely this could be the very stuff of cultural evolution. It followed that all directional change even in biological evolution and phylogeny might or must be due to progressive interaction between organisms" (1, p. 155). Bateson's observations led him to identify "interaction" as the unit of evolu-

tion, rather than any one side of a relationship. As biologists began to see this larger pattern of evolution, made possible through a process of double description, the term "coevolution" evolved in their vocabulary.

Family researchers influenced by a sociological view of general system theory have historically described two important potentials of a system that organizes its structure: morphogenesis, the potential of the system to change, and morphostasis (homeostasis), the potential of the system to stay the same, or maintain the status quo. As contemporary cyberneticians argue, this dualistic view obscures a more parsimonious description of living process. If we consider feedback as a recursive process that can generate different orders of circularity, a new understanding of the organization of living systems dawns. This understanding of feedback arises from a tradition of thinking von Forester terms, the "cybernetics of cybernetics." One of the implications of this view is that any change that "is only a fluctuation in a system at one time can suddenly become the basis for an entirely new arrangement of the system at another time" (6, p. 341). To illustrate, a father dies of a heart attack shortly after he and his wife separate, leaving two young sons. During their adolescence the boys engage their mother in a struggle around trying to leave home. They fail and return after each attempt. The younger boy, more his mother's companion, returns home after several drug episodes and decides to stay at home and work in the area. His older brother (who was away at school and for whom his father's clothes were saved) returns home shortly thereafter in the middle of the night, bearded, hallucinating, and dressed in his dead father's clothes. His psychosis possibly reincarnated the father, perhaps to disturb the inappropriate marriage between his mother and brother. It was as if the clothes had been laid aside for the time it would be necessary for the oldest son to stand in for his father, breaking the pattern and allowing both boys to leave. Saving the

[1] This model emerged from clinical work and discussion with Lynn Hoffman.

clothes for the oldest son seems a small and sympathetic fluctuation in the system at the time of the father's death. As time passed, however, it became the basis for an entirely new arrangement of the system. Following Mony Elkaïm, Hoffman (6) writes that the inclusion of coevolutionary change concepts in the thinking of the family therapist encourages him or her to recognize the self-reorganizing properties of the system (6, p. 341) knowing that each system will choose new forms congruent with its own potential. Although the therapist provides the push away from its present form of stability, it is the family that figures out its next pattern of organization. These changes of pattern may be discerned as discontinuous or continuous transformations, dependent upon the observer's frame of reference. Whatever the case, family and therapist attempt to relate in a way that coevolves the therapist-family ecology. This coevolutionary perspective enables family therapists to be relieved of the following postures toward families:

1. that we the therapists make the changes in families—if we do this, they'll do that. Nothing is predictable, including predictability;

2. that the family in question is suffering from "stagestuckness," a lineal developmental point of view that too closely prescribes when families should change without respecting their continuous patterns of temporal unfolding. For example, some families may take longer than others with their rites of passage. Some therapists may regard this difference from the cultural stereotype as a failure. Needless to say, the perceived "failure" is often presented to the family as a moralistic or pathological punctuation;

3. that if only this unfair accidental event had not befallen the family, all would be well. Crediting natural accidents, the family therapists must view the family's pattern of organization as also creating

the potential for organic or physical problems. The growing identification of families with certain illnesses (cancer, heart attack, ulcer, etc.), does not allow us to continue to regard system stress as having only "accidental" outcomes.

This last point directly attacks a linear epistemology that sees families as continuous, stable systems and views crises and catastrophes as mistakes or irregularities. Carried to extremes, it presupposes we could take families, rid them of "defective" members, and look to the remaining members as those who represent the "real" or "normal" family. Instead, these "different" relatives add to the rich repertory of patterns families can draw upon. Following Bateson, these "carriers of deviance" may provide a source of the random stuff of which new patterns may be evolved.

Another example. In a family in which two parents and an older child were deaf, the younger child was born hearing. At the age of three this son had an accident. Playing around a construction site, a metal pipe hit him on the head leaving him, like the others, totally deaf. If one sees the world in terms of conventional regularities, this seems a terrible accident, an act of God and out of tune with the family's own natural laws. However, one who espouses a world view encompassing a diversity of regularities, including the lawfulness of irregularities, may consider this event, despite its chance nature, as representing not only chance but possibly also congruence with the organizational demands of that particular family system. The frame or epistemological point of view the therapist sets for himself or herself will determine how he or she respectfully intervenes in this progressive interaction between organisms that Bateson calls the "very stuff of evolution."

Circularity

The major difference between earlier scientific explanations of the world and cir-

cular, systemic concepts is as simple, on the one hand, as understanding the difference between a line and a circle. It is also as difficult as choosing to believe in God, free will, or in the idea that the treacherous loop of the auditory nerve to the brain is formally similar to how you grew up in your family.

Teleology, the oldest of scientific explanatory philosophies posits that all things in nature were made to fulfill a purpose—an idea that says A leads to D, and D has a purpose to which A is causal. During the nineteenth century, teleology was, if not supplanted, at least joined by determinism; purpose as such was deemphasized, and the same actions and events were believed to be the necessary outcomes of antecedent causes. The idea still common to both teleology and determinism, however, was that causal A led to result D in a continuous line (12, p. 30).

Out of the development of cybernetics a process essential to the performance of both organic and nonorganic systems was spotlighted. This circular process was understood as feedback and witnessed in so-called feedback loops. Feedback meant that "part of the system's output is reintroduced into the system as information about the output" (12, p. 31). This is accomplished in a loop, or D loops, and is fed back to A. The feedback loop that brings D circling back to A makes a continuous line or event impossible. Events that exchange information in a system or context could no longer be viewed as sequential or lineal deterministic chains of events. The feedback loop describes a circular or spiraling information process in which D circles back to A and has an effect on A that, of course, includes the information distributions from B and C. A now has a context (A, B, C, and D) and is a part of a system in which it both acts and is acted upon by the components of its system.

Circularity is described by the Milan Associates as an active process in the conduction of the session, taking place in the su-

prasystem between the therapist and the family. In their paper, "Hypothesizing, Circularity and Neutrality" (107), they define circularity as follows, "By circularity we mean the capacity of the therapist to conduct his investigation on the basis of feedback from the family in response to the information he solicits about relationship and, therefore, about difference and change" (11, p. 8). Defining circularity is a disquieting task, rather like trying to rope a constellation while standing in Montana. What is interesting about the Milan Associates' definition is that it delineates an information-producing process between the therapist and the family and includes an epistemological premise about circularity that is on a different level from a process description.

Keeney's (7) explanation of circularity sheds light on the epistemological premise contained in the Milan Associates' process definition. Keeney, following Bateson, speaks of the circularity of a system being made up of patterned circuits and populated by differences that produce information. A circuit can loop in many directions including more or less components depending upon whether it is a lower or higher level circuit, i.e., a simple or complex cybernetic loop. It can be as simple a loop as a man out for a stroll or as complex as the "corrective loop," consisting of the therapist, family, symptom, and intervention. Keeney writes:

In therapy the sociofeedback loop which emerges between the therapist and client can also be characterized in this way. This circuit is therefore a "unit of mind" (author's quotes) and is structured in terms of difference which can be triggered by information. This cybernetic view does not consider any part of the system to have unilateral control. The behavior of each part is determined by the behavior of other parts as well as its own previous behavior. [7]

Keeney explains a corrective loop that includes the symptom and intervention

within the therapist/family loop from the perspective of cybernetic epistemology:

> To see a symptom as part of a cybernetic circuit means identifying a circular sequence of events having feedback structure which includes the event called "symptom." Similarly, to see an intervention systemically requires constructing a cybernetic circuit which includes the intervention as inside the loop. [7]

If the circuit is a "unit of mind" with a sequence of events having feedback structure and triggered by information, then circularity means that wherever the loop is drawn there is a potential for everything inside the loop to change or restructure itself when information is introduced. The unit of mind or loop could be a family, the man on his walk, the therapist/family/symptom/intervention, society/cults/religion, etc. Holding a clear epistemological premise demands that the circuit, the loop, the unit of mind be identified so that the "rules of operation governing one's thinking are set out" (7, p. 8). The Milan Associates' process definition of circularity also describes this epistemological premise because it includes the therapist within the loop triggering the information that permits everything within the loop to restructure itself or change. The idea of circularity is analogous to observing a colony of dividing protozoa. To introduce a probe (light, pointer, chemical, etc.) is to change the loop; it is now a "system" of protozoa colony, plus observer, plus probe, all in relationships of difference to each other, having feedback structure, subject to information restructuring, and therefore "circular." In any healthy ecology, both sides of a relationship must evolve. We therefore speak of coevolution, rather than the lineal notion of evolution. The view of circularity that connects therapist and family can therefore be seen as a consequence of the coevolutionary paradigm (or vice versa).

In the pragmatics of therapy there is one important and particular effect the circular questions have on the family. Naturally, all family members feel themselves to be individuals with individual peceptions of the family dilemma. Responding to the circular questions compels them to experience the circularity of their family system, the family "current," if you will, and abandon more linear stances. In short, they perceive everyone within the loop. For example, when a question of relationship and difference is asked, "Who in the family is the first to notice when your sister is depressed?" or, "Who worries with mother when she worries?"—one cannot *not* give a relational description as an answer. Shared and alternative epistemologies about the family emerge, and perceived membership in the problem or dilemma increases. Again, this model is best considered as a coevolutionary model, for once joined in therapy, the therapist and the family coevolve together, forming a new context that is wholly subject to change. The circular questions act as context markers delimiting and classifying the relationships over time. It is important to remember that contexts evolve over time. I find the following quote from Bateson both an elegant description and reminder of this process.

> The progressive increase in size and armament of the dinosaurs was, as I saw it, simply an interactive armaments race—a schismogenic process. But I could not then see that the evolution of the horse from Eohippus was not a one-sided adjustment to life on the grassy plains. Surely the grassy plains themselves were evolved pari passu with the evolution of the teeth and hooves of the horses and other ungulates. Turf was the evolving *response* of the vegetation to the evolution of the horse. It is the context which evolves. [1, p. 155]

The Pattern of Circular Questioning

The word "pattern" summons notions of repetition, similitude, and match. Specifically I will use pattern to describe a characteristic arrangement, a model of information gathering, representing the conceptual structure of *the circular interview* de-

veloped by the Milan Associates (11). The flexibility of this pattern will be emphasized rather than its characteristic sequence. I offer the Random House Dictionary's sixth definition of pattern as most representative of the meaning I intend: "an original or model considered for or deserving imitation."

In general the pattern of circular questioning can be used in different orders, beginning in the present and moving to the past, or beginning in the past and moving to the present. It is as though an *arc* were drawn with one point in the present and the other point in the past. Characteristically, these drawn patterns will follow the feedback or responses the circular questions elicit from the family.

The patterns that circular questioning punctuates in conducting the session become isomorphic to, or a structural equivalent of, the ontogeny of the problem in the family. The aim of circular questioning is to fix the point in the history of the system when important coalitions underwent a shift and the consequent adaptation to that shift became problematic for the family. The information sought by circular questions are the differences in relationships the family has experienced before and after the problem began. I will describe nine categories of circular questioning used to move across the arc from now to then, or then to now. These various forms of "patterns which connect" (Bateson) should always be seen as bridges that relate symptom, intervention, family, and therapist as parts of a larger coevolutionary process.

Category 1: Verbal and Analogic Information

The information gathered from the family in the session is a combination of verbal and nonverbal, or analogic information.[2] In

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[2] *Author's Note:* This interview excerpt and case comments by the Milan Associates were recorded by the author in a notebook. No tape recorder was used, so they are not exact. All family names have been changed. Permission to reprint the excerpt has been granted by Dr. Luigi Boscolo, Milan Associates.

regard to verbal information, it is useful to note the "cue" words used by the family. In the problem definition stage the family offers cue words embedded in their problem sentence. Father: "Her sickness makes her mother *guilty*," or, Mother: "No one in this family *communicates*," or, Wife: "We have no *sex life*," or, Husband: "Our children are *rebellious*." For the therapist to have a problem definition about relationships, these "cue" words must be transposed into statements about relationships and differences in relationships. "Who worries most when mother is guilty, who communicates least in the family, who is more worried about your sex life, etc.?"

Throughout the session a subtext is going on between the therapist and the family. The therapist and team observe the analogic behavior or redundancies in the family, their eye messages, postural shifts, tone, timing of interruptions, etc., and contrasts and compares that information with the verbal information. The family, too, has a subtext; they notice the therapist noticing. The "edge" the family presents in the interview is an accumulation of this subtext exchange and the verbal information. This combination of information exchange constitutes a coevolutionary loop, i.e., therapist plus family.

Category 2: Problem Definition

The first question, "What is the problem in the family *now*?" establishes one end of the *arc*[3] that will later connect the problem in the present to a time in the past, usually around the onset of the problem, when relationships in the family were different. After the relationships around the problem in the present are defined by the family, one end of the arc is secured.

Category 3: Coalition Alignments in the Present

The next task, after the family defines the problem, is to discern the coalition alignment around that problem in the pres-

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[3] The arc is only a "map" to guide the therapist.

ent. The questions, "Who is upset when ... (problem definition), or, who feels more helpless when ... (problem definition), or, who notices first when ... (problem definition)," establish for the therapist and team a confirmation or modification of their original hypothesis.[4] The answer to the question from any family member will perforce define a relationship; "Mother is most upset when her daughter is depressed, father feels more hopeless when mother is guilty, grandmother notices first when our sex life suffers."

Category 4: A Different Sequence

In most strategic therapies, tracking the sequence of behavior around the problem provides a detailed scenario of all family actions that serve the performance of the problem. A fully tracked sequence discloses a repeated cycle of behavior that the family are unable to change. The change theorists (13) identify this sequence as a "solution" (to the family's original problem) that has itself become the "problem" (13). Their interventions are designed to interrupt that sequence so that it can no longer be performed in the same way. Altering the family's solution by disrupting the sequence they believe, changes the problem.

The Milan Associates use similar questions in tracking a sequence. They ask what different members of the family *do* when the problem occurs. Their rationale is to produce a "gradual enlargement of the field of observation" (11, p. 19) by understanding the family's behavior and the differences in that behavior over time. Questions of classification (ranking, who reacts first, who next, etc.) often accompany tracking the sequence for they reveal the coalition positions of family members in the family

"game" (11, p. 19). The sequence is tracked with a strong appreciation of its *end*, in effect, seeing how the sequence holds special members of the family together. "What does father do when mother stays crying in her room?" may begin a sequence. Further questions reveal that father fails to comfort mother and is rescued by his son who is a better comforter. More subtly, a sequence that reveals a coalition (either overt or covert) does not require the other members of the coalition always to be present. For example, a woman who felt hopeless and depressed when she experienced rejection at her job expressed this to her husband at night but would receive no comforting from him since it could lead to intimacy. The danger of intimacy with her husband was its disruption of the intimacy she was feeling with her mother, who was three thousand miles away but present in her mind. In the Milan model, sequence questions track the family's alignments in the present and their differences over time. The family pattern is revealed when the changed or changing alignments in the family are understood.

Category 5: Questions of Classification and Comparison

Hypothesis validation about changes in relational patterns in the family is advanced through both classification and comparison questions. Comparison: "Is your parents' intimate life better or worse lately?" Classification: "Who is closest to mother now, who next, who next, etc.?" Comparison: "Who is more able now to cheer up father when he is depressed?" "Is your father more on your side now than he was in the past?" "Have you felt more like a daughter or more like a wife this month?" Combination of both: "Who was most pleased with your former therapy, who next, who next?" Classification and comparison questions are constructed to follow the changes in the family's coalition alignments. Once a classification has been established, the therapist asks, "Was that always true, was it ever different, or, is it different now?"

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[4] In this model the therapist has a tentative hypothesis when he or she first sees the family based on intake information. These early questions are formed from that hypothesis. If the hypothesis is invalid another is made based on the feedback to the questions about the first hypothesis (11). The task of the first interview is to select the most important hypothesis about the system in order to make a therapeutic intervention (10).

Category 6: Agreement questions

Agreement questions provide an opportunity for the therapist/team to rank coalitions in terms of their strength and priority; mother is closest to son, and then father to grandmother, and finally, the two sisters to each other, etc. The therapist asks sister, "Who in the family agrees with you that mother is closest to your brother." The sister's response may be, "My father agrees." Following that the therapist will ask father, "Do you agree with your daughter that your son is closer to your wife when you quarrel?" A yes answer confirms the triadic position of brother and his coalition with mother, but if father answers no, further validation is needed.

Category 7: Gossiping in the presence

If additional triadic information is required, "gossiping in the presence"[5] questions are asked. Gossiping asks one member in the family to comment on the relationship of another two. This is balanced by asking each of the other two to comment on the relationship of the remaining dyads.

Category 8: Subsystem Comparisons

Subsystem comparisons serve a variety of purposes. If a mother states that the problem is communication between her and her husband, the therapist may ask which one of them communicates better with the children. This exchange elicits comparison between subsystems, since the therapist knows in advance there has been an incest attempt in the family. The mother has denied the cross-generational coalition, and the therapist is asking that the problem pair be represented in the problem definition.

Comparisons within subsystems as well as between subsystems are outlined. "How would your parents get along without you?"

"Do any of the other children have a problem?" "Which one of you (children) will always stay home with your parents?" "Which one of you (parents) will live with your (learning disabled) daughter when you are divorced?"

Subsystem comparisons both between subsystems and within subsystems draw finer distinctions about relationships. A special category of subsystem comparisons are questions that begin with *if*. "If John were to get along better with mother, would you and he improve?" "If Joan were not here, would things be better for you and your husband?" These *if* questions are used as preparations for interventions. They are testing the consequences of change in the family and therefore have exceptional interventional powers of their own. This is dramatically understood if the answer to the above question, "If Joan were not here, would things be better for you and your husband?" were to be yes.

Category 9: Explanation Questions

Explanation questions illuminate former, past relationships in the family. Depending upon the feedback from the family, the therapist will begin the pattern with explanation questions and work toward the present, or if he or she has begun in the present, he or she will work toward the past.

The explanation question is a simple one: "What is your explanation for . . . ?" (a) the problem definition, or (b) a comparison question (what is your explanation that grandmother notices first when mother is depressed), or (c) an agreement question, or (d) a subsystem comparison question, etc. It is largely an investigation of the onset of the family dilemma, that time when the coalitions changed and the adaptation to that change placed the family in a problem context. The other end of the arc—from now to then—is secured, and this completion signals that a working hypothesis can be generated and a therapeutic intervention composed.

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[5] For a complete description of "gossiping in the presence" see the paper, "Hypothesizing—Circularity—Neutrality" (11).

The S. Family

Following is an analysis of an excerpt from an interview by the Milan Associates. Mr. and Mrs. S. have been married ten years and have two daughters, Diane, 9, and Nancy, 8. Mrs. S. brought Joan, now age 18, into the family from a former marriage. The presenting problem when the family began treatment was Diane's failing school performance over the last year. The father had intermittently agreed to be present in the sessions, amounting to one-third of the time. The therapist was told by Mrs. S. that she would not agree to a consultation unless he promised that the consultant would not ask about "the family secret." The secret, already communicated to the therapist by Mrs. S. (secretly), was that Joan's stepfather had made several sexual advances toward her, harassing her further by cutting holes in her bedroom wall to peek at her.

Mrs. S. is afraid that the revelation of this "secret" would force her husband to leave the family. The therapist has agreed to advise the consultant, Dr. Luigi Boscolo, not to mention the secret, although he, Boscolo, was informed of it.

The consultant does not wish to know the content of the secret, only the value it holds for the family. Secrets are not treated as real information by the Milan Associates. They are treated as information about coalitions.[6] Because of the severity of the problem—attempted incest—and the injunction against collecting information about this event, the therapist's pattern of collecting information remains flexible. This interview is characterized by both analogic as well as verbal feedback constructed to prevent the therapist from seeing the change of coalition patterns in the family.[7]

[6] Boscolo and Cecchin, Seminar on Family Therapy, Rutgers University, 1980.

[7] Father remains absolutely silent during first half of the interview.

Ther: What is the problem in the family *now*?	Therapist begins the *arc* between *now* and *then*.
Mo: The problem is communication.	A diffuse problem definition, a blocking feedback.
Ther: Between whom?	Therapist attempts to specify the problem, asking for a relationship definition. This is a coalition question about the family structure *now*, in the present.
Mo: Between my husband and myself.	Another blocking feedback. Since the therapist knows the "secret," mother's representation of the problem between herself and her husband does not yet specify, indeed conceals, the *problem pair*, her husband and Joan.
Ther: How is communication with your daughters?	Therapist attempts to include the other generation in the problem definition, addressing the child subsystem at large.
Mo: Between parents and children?	
Ther: (*Pointing*) Between them.	
Mo: The two little ones are O.K. Not Joan; she fights with Diane.	The importance of this information is not clear: that the two little sisters do not choose to fight with each other is the first articulation of difference, and it is important. The two little girls communicate without fighting. They are a tight subsystem and different from the other subsystems in the family.

Ther: Girls communicate better between themselves than you and your husband? Who communicates better with the girls?

Therapist tries again to elicit cross-generational coalition information.

Mo: No one.

Ther: With whom does your husband communicate best?

Therapist has established that he is talking about the child subsystem and is banking on the family's feeling safe enough to designate that father communicates best with one of the three girls.

Mo: With Diane. Used to.

This is an important feedback. The therapist can change *now* and gather information about the past, thereby securing the *then* part of the arc, and move into the present, the *now.* A beginning *hypothesis* can be constructed. If Diane *used* to be closer with her father, Joan's fighting with her *could be* in protection of mother. This is a tentative hypothesis and must be tested further. Though the fighting is a small behavioral expression, it could represent the tip of the iceberg, with Joan and her stepfather's interaction lying underneath.

Ther: What changed? What explanation do you give for that?

Explanation questions illuminate past coalitions.

Mo: Don't know, she's hostile to his negative attitude.

Question in therapist's mind: Since this is a description of a coalition that underwent change, how and to whom is it different?

Ther: (*to Nancy*) Do you agree with mother that father communicates best with Diane, more than with you or Mother?

Solicits agreement about earlier coalition.

Nancy: It's Joan who doesn't communicate well with mother.

Addition to the former hypothesis: If Joan is protecting her mother, it must be kept "secret." Question: Is this another "secret" or the real "secret?"

Ther: Why?

Nancy: "I don't know; about six months ago, something changed.

Ther: What happened? (*Both girls are silent.*)

The family is too close to the "secret."

Ther: Nancy, if Diane were to answer, what would she say?

The Milan Associates often use this technique of asking one person what another would say (particularly children). The answer can always be corrected by the one not talking, or the therapist can ask if the one not talking agrees with what has been said about them.

Mo: They don't want to be here.

A block in protection of father.

Ther: Who wants to be here least?

A comparison question and also a circular question about the coalition structure in the present.

Mo: Mainly Joan.

Ther: What is your explanation for that?

The explanation may be in the present or in the past. A neutral demand for a time designation.

Mo: I don't know; she doesn't feel she would be of any use.

This is a highly charged, affective statement *shown to be* mother's perception of Joan but is also one of those comments that barely covers mother's instruction, "You are of no use here, go away."

These last three questions have elicited an exchange that is metaphoric and filled with subtextural meanings about Joan's "leaving." The therapist accepts the information, Joan's leaving, as a statement about the survival of the marriage. His next question takes a secure position, *the past,* when Diane and father were close, and is an *if* question, addressing the metaphoric subtext—Joan's leaving.

Ther: If Diane were to get along better with father, would you and father get along better then?

Mo: No, he babies her and said she could do nothing wrong. She is a favorite. Joan is picked on by him and Nancy gets nothing. It was a sudden thing, Diane becoming the enemy.

The answer to this *if* question is: "Even if Joan left, I'm (mother) afraid there would not be a place for me with my husband. Diane takes too much space." This confirms the hypothesis that Joan's behavior is secretly protecting mother. Even mother's wish for Joan to leave double binds her in that she must also stay and fight with father's favorite, Diane.

Ther: If Diane was close to father, who was close to you?

The therapist's assumption is that Joan was closest to mother. Mother will probably deny this but how she does is important information.

Mo: In the beginning, I was close to my marriage. In the beginning, the marriage worked because I did all the work, he doesn't show feelings.

This answer can be understood as, "When I wasn't willing to do all the work in the marriage, Joan was closest to me." The fact that mother's husband has shown "feelings" for Joan double binds her further—both to leave and to stay. Which protection of mother is more correct remains muddled, and Joan is punished for perceiving either option openly or correctly.

Mo: I feel overworked and neglected.

Ther: If Joan were not there, would not have been there, would things have been better?

The therapist has openly stated the covered message of the double bind: "You never should have been here, but now that you're here you must both leave and stay to fight for mother."

Mo: Yes, I wouldn't feel he disliked her so much.

Mother confirms the double-bind statement from the therapist but places the blame on father. The hypothesis is now: When the marriage showed strain, i.e., when mother had to "express all the feelings," the coalitions were mother and Joan (covert), and father and Diane (overt). Nancy was safe to stay out for the time being. The nature of the secret coalition between mother and Joan, however, was that Joan was to have two roles: the daughter who protects the mother through fighting with her sister, father's favorite, and shows herself ready to leave in order to protect the marriage, and the wife who "takes care" of father because mother is too angry to do so. Mother may be using Joan to keep father home in the following manner: instead of giving Joan the

message, I need a husband and you need a father, she says in effect, I want you to have a father because I need a husband.

Ther: Which side is Nancy on?

The therapist's hunch is that Nancy is allied with Diane. The danger is that if she moves into Diane's former place, will the "favorite" be free from incestuous overtures or prepared for them?

Nancy: No one's, I'm just there, on no one's side.

Nancy blocks the question. (*Note:* The therapist has observed that not talking and holding secrets is probably a form of cooperation in the entire family (not just on Nancy's part). Also, the therapist has silently observed that whenever Joan talks, mother moves her own mouth, mouthing the same words, though she does not look at Joan when she does this.)

Ther: Joan looks sad. (*The youngest girls laugh.*)

The therapist addresses the analogic content, that Joan has become in fact, mother's puppet.

Ther: Why are the girls laughing?

Mo: They are afraid to talk to each other.

The "secret" reappears, as well as mother's attempt to blame father.

Ther: Do you have any idea what they are afraid to talk about?

Joan: They hide the truth, but I don't want to say it either.

The family is reacting *as though* the "secret" had been revealed and lost its danger. My hunch is that once the coalition pattern is clear, the "secret" is indeed "out."

Ther: Just here, or at home?

The two sisters are whispering and laughing about how sad and lonely Joan is. By now it is clear there is an alliance between the two younger sisters and Joan is triangled between mother and father, though secretly closer to mother. The danger is, if she moves too far toward either parent, the other one is "out."

Joan: (*crying*) It would have been better if I hadn't been born.

Joan indicates she understands her "instruction" from the family. Later information revealed she cut her wrists when she ran away to a friend's house. She was returned home.

Ther: You always feel alone? (*to mother*) Why is she so alone?"

Mo: Father is against her; we fight over her all the time, and I feel to blame. I tried to stay neutral. I said, "Do what your dad says; if he says jump, jump! If he says lay down, lay down!

Hypothesis confirmed.

The therapist continues to address the edge of the secret, asking the two little girls if they knew why Joan had moved out to a friend's house. Joan replies that she cannot discuss why she left. The girls remark they knew "a tiny bit" about why she left. The questioning ends with the therapist asking mother why it is so hard for Joan and her

stepfather to have a good rapport, and mother answers, "He was mean to her and they had to reconcile."

This provides information for the elaboration of the hypothesis: Father might leave if Joan didn't reconcile with him. Father finally volunteers his first remark saying, "I catch hell no matter what I do."

Boscolo's and Cecchin's Comments

Boscolo and Cecchin say that when incest is threatened, you get a sicker family, possibly one with a schizophrenic member. If the incest is consummated, there is at least a clear definition of the relationship. In this family, the game keeps Joan depressed and isolated, but she is not schizophrenic. She carefully uses her punctuation to keep the family together. They observe that mother resents father's closeness with the girls. The little girls don't care about separations because they are married to each other.

Intervention

The consultants give Joan and mother a ritual. They offer the rationale that there is a deep relationship between mother and Joan that has been true over the years. They never openly manifested their affection for one another, however, and somehow they have gotten separated. If they were strong and happy, they would worry that everyone else would feel left out. So, one day a week they should stay together because they are lonely for each other. Whatever they do on that day they must keep a secret. The three girls should meet for one-half hour each week, and each one should talk for ten minutes about anything she chooses.

Wording of the Intervention

"The team is impressed by the strong bond between mother and Joan. We have discussed how come it has not been manifested openly over the years. Mother and Joan thought of not manifesting their bond

for the sake of the other members of the family. Others would have been excluded; the girls and father would have become second class. Joan and mother were not satisfied with that. They could not have made such a strong positive relationship together leaving out the others. The others should thank them for not manifesting their love. But we think they went too far in avoiding their strong bond. We recommend that one day a week they are together, and father and the girls must understand this and cooperate. We mean they do everything together on that day because they went too far for the sake of the others. Joan and mother, you are to keep it a secret; don't tell anyone what you do on that day."

Rationale of Intervention

The intervention defines an acceptable "incest," or intimacy, between mother and Joan, which comments indirectly on the incest attempt by father with Joan. In addition, it protects the younger girls from being seduced by either parent in the service of the marriage.

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