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TRACKING AN EPISODE

How small a thought it takes to fill someone's life. If you want to go deep down you do not need to travel far; indeed, you don't have to leave your most immediate and familiar surroundings

Wittgenstein (1980)

All the best therapy is done in detailed episodes

Bowlby (1971)

Like the tortoise I get there faster by going slower

Harlene Anderson (1997)

Jeanette had come to a training workshop with the idea that systemic therapy was not 'deep' in the way that psychodynamic therapy was. But after I had 'tracked an episode' with her, she said that it had felt surprisingly 'deep and powerful'.

There is a misconception that in systemic therapy one does not do 'deep' work. Systemic therapy is seen as being strong on working with networks of relationships and the interactions between significant people. And some think that 'depth' is sacrificed for 'breadth', implying that this is a 'superficial' way of working. But, contrasting 'deep' with 'superficial' creates a false dichotomy. Both are simply metaphors; although extremely powerful in our lives, we must not confuse a metaphor with 'reality'. The metaphor 'deep' suggests 'subterranean', 'buried', implying 'the unconscious' that a therapist must 'dig down' to 'uncover'. However, Shotter (2003: 12) drawing on Wittgenstein, writes, 'I call "depth" a relational dimension', 'it is to do with seeing relations between things . . . when we call a conversation . . . "deep" we use the word . . . to indicate the fact that we are in a circumstance with many cross connections present within it.' Working in this detailed way feels 'deep' because we begin to notice more connections or 'criss-crossings'.

The quote from Wittgenstein at the head of this chapter shows us that exploring the minutiae of the 'grammar' used in every moment gives us 'depth', since 'everything is in plain view'; 'Nothing is concealed . . . but it all goes by so quick, and I should like to see it as it were laid open to view' (Wittgenstein 1953: no. 435). So we slow things down by 'exploring the unique moments' (Lang 2003). In this way we create the future together with our clients since we explore the taken-for-granted stories which inform the actions of all those involved.

In this chapter I use two examples from practice. In the first one I continue with Jeanette to set the context. In the second, I track a more complex episode with Patrick, who connected to an influential voice from the past, which enabled him to review his actions and make important changes.

The communication model that informs us when we track an episode with a client is the Coordinated Management of Meaning, or CMM (Cronen 1990; Cronen and Pearce 1991). This model enables us to explore the details of an episode, the effects of the context on those involved and make connections with the multiple stories, the thoughts, feelings and actions and the powerful voices that were influencing the client at that time. 'When we communicate', writes Pearce, 'we are not just talking about the world, we are literally participating in the creation of the social universe' (1994: p. 75). This is a highly practical model that views 'persons in conversation . . . as material beings in a real world' (Cronen 2003). 'Activities performed by persons in conversations are themselves real' says Pearce (1995: pp. 95-6). We are embodied, our activities are real and the actions by which we make things real have consequences.

A metaphor from the world of cinema could be helpful in describing what we do when we track an episode. Sometimes it is useful to be like a camera that pans over the landscape of the action noticing and mapping patterns of meanings and communications (stories about the future, the past and the present). However, at other times it is invaluable to zoom in on a tiny piece of action or interaction (an 'episode'). This is a bit like using the slow-motion frame-by-frame facility that some video recorders have, with the added facility of being able to explore moment by moment unique meanings that are influencing each person's thoughts, feelings and actions and reactions. And by exploring the minutiae of an episode we make links with each person's important stories and voices from the past, in the present, and their wishes or worries about the future. By making connections in this way we create breadth, which in the dictionary is, interestingly, a synonym of 'deep'. 'Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else

in their life we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness' (Geertz 1986: 373 in Epston 1998: p. 10). 'Deep' can also imply intensity, profundity, richness and mystery. And if we use this latter constellation of meanings then good systemic work is certainly 'deep'. This is never more so than when we 'track' the minutiae of thoughts, feelings and actions within a significant piece of interaction in a person's life.

Jeanette wanted to talk about a distressing conversation that she had had with her manager during which she had become confused, fearful and unable to speak coherently. As I helped her to track the episode in detail she suddenly said 'I don't want to get another job.'

I become curious: whose voice, or what story, had she connected with that made her contemplate the possibility of losing her job? Stories we tell about what is happening in the present can powerfully affect how we think, feel and talk about ourselves. And this can influence our view of the past and the future as well as the present context. Another misconception is that systemic therapists give precedence to a person's relationships in the present rather than the past, unlike traditional models that work primarily with the past and therefore 'go deeper'. However, in a systemic constructionist approach there is no simple distinction between present, past and future.

I wondered: was there something about Jeanette's relationship with her manager, or their conversation that had connected her to a familiar story from the past and made her fear for the future? Maybe there was a current story in the organisation (the context) that that made Jeanette believe that she would have to start job-hunting?

'What gave you the idea that this could lead to you having to find another job?' I asked. Jeanette told me that in a previous job her manager had made life so intolerable that she was compelled to leave. This (past) story had made the episode feel frightening and overwhelming.

But was this the whole explanation? Was there something else in the current context that could help to make sense of her distress and fear about the future?

'When you said just now that you didn't want to get another job, what connections were you making?' I asked. Jeanette explained that a long-serving colleague had recently left the organisation after being 'harassed' by her

manager. Jeanette also had the idea that she was too old to apply for another job.

This tiny episode shows the complexity of stories that can influence us in a brief interchange. In the context of the relationship with her manager, Jeanette connected to an 'organisational' story about another colleague (maybe this organisation allows harassment to flourish and does not value loyalty); a story about age (wisdom and experience are not appreciated in our society); and a professional story from her past. There may also be a personal identity story that she had not, so far, identified.

When we de-briefed afterwards Jeanette told me that she was amazed by the powerful emotions that she had connected with in such a short time. In these few minutes the past, the present and the future had coalesced.

Metaphors

When we contrast 'deep' with 'shallow' or 'superficial' we are using metaphors. Metaphors, says Bruner (1986: p. 48) 'are crutches to help us get up the abstract mountain'.

After no more than ten minutes of tracking the episode, Jeanette had seemed visibly relieved. 'Things opened up' she said. The problem 'didn't feel so cumbersome'.

Jeanette used the metaphor 'cumbersome' to describe how her problem originally felt, and 'opening up' to show the effect after the tracking process. Her words made me feel more hopeful and her non-verbal communication (more relaxed body posture and facial expression) seemed to bear this out. But I was interested in her description of this process, since we can never assume that the meaning we give to a metaphor will chime exactly with the client's unique local meanings. Bruner writes about the way in which, once utilised, the metaphors that permeate our speech are either discarded or hidden from view. I resisted the urge to understand Jeanette's metaphors too quickly. 'If we always see and hear things as we are accustomed to, then we will miss, neither see nor hear, that which is different and unique' (Anderson 1997: p. 133).

'Does "opening up" make you feel more hopeful, freer, or something different?' I asked. 'Hopeful, yes, I feel so much better' she replied smiling.

It is also crucial that we explore and question our own metaphors, particularly those that we use in our everyday therapeutic work, since they will have major implications for the way the conversation is co-constructed. For example if we use the metaphor 'deep' this connects us with a *specific* professional therapeutic discourse and vivid images, evoking powerful emotions. But as Bruner says, every metaphor is still based on 'a model, a theory about *kinds* of people, *kinds* of problems, *kinds* of human conditions'. And all metaphors '... are more likely to come from the folk wisdom of the culture in which we grow up' (p. 49).

Jeanette went on to say that her experience of our brief conversation was that she 'felt held'.

Jeanette's metaphor 'feeling held' made me wonder about the discourse in which she worked or lived, or had 'grown up'. This language comes from a traditional therapeutic culture created by theorists and practitioners at a particular historical time and is used to denote particular kinds of ideas. But, as Bruner (1986: p. 49) warns us, 'folk narrative of this kind has as much claim to "reality" as any theory we may construct in psychology by the use of our most stringent scientific methods.' Difficulties arise, he continues, when these 'folk theories about the human condition remain embedded in metaphor', invisible, unexplored and used unthinkingly in our therapeutic conversations.

When I explored what the metaphor 'held' meant for her, Jeanette said 'there was a oneness, a complete flow; it was like you were not separate or different from me.' It seemed that by working at this micro-level Jeanette felt that I had been following her meanings closely.

However, metaphors are immensely useful in helping us make vivid connections with clients. Aristotle wrote 'The greatest thing by far is to be master of metaphor . . . it is a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars' (*Poetics* XXII 1459a9 in Finch 1995: pp. 167–8).

Slowing down: not understanding too quickly

When we track an episode we are interrupting the sequence, slowing the pace and impeding the normal flow in order to make different sense of things and co-create new meanings. This takes patience and many therapists who

are not used to working in this slow micro-level way become 'bewitched' by the client's normal pace and the episode goes by too quickly (Wittgenstein 1953: no. 435). It is understandable that clients want to tell us their stories in a familiar way. Stories have their own internal logic and often there seems to be only one way of telling them. In a 'Western culture' Harlene Anderson (1997: p. 214) says, 'we organise our stories temporally, with beginnings, middles and ends. They relate to the past, present, and future. And they both connect in sequential fashion and intertwine over time.'

Jeanette was initially keen to push ahead with her account of things, but I asked questions to show that I did not understand too quickly. 'Let me see if I've got this bit right . . . What did your manager do or say that gave you that idea?' This helped us to slow things down. I then asked questions that explored the details of her thoughts, feelings and actions: 'When she frowned, how did you respond?' 'What gave you the idea that she did not respect you?' This helped both of us to become fascinated about – and then question – the idea that her job was in peril.

'Knowing', Anderson (1997) says, 'is the culprit that speeds us up or steers us in a direction that may be too different from our clients' (p. 160). I did not want to understand too quickly so I interrupted the pace of Jeanette's story. And I wanted to know what effect this had had on her.

'When I explored what led up to that conversation with your manager what effect did that have on you?' I asked afterwards. 'I was a bit irritated at first' she replied. 'I wanted to get on with telling you about what she had said and how unfair that was. But then the conversation became engrossing, fascinating.'

The language of the non-verbal

Throughout my brief conversation with Jeanette I was 'watching like mad' (Lang 2003), to see what effect my questions and responses were having on her. Word language is only one of many possible kinds of language says Wittgenstein (1953). The whole gamut of body language: gestures, facial expressions and so on constitutes language. Indeed Wittgenstein goes so far as to say 'The human body is the best picture of the human soul' (1953: Part 2, iv). Social constructionist approaches explore the way *all* these languages co-create meaning. I will attempt to convey the vividness of the non-verbal cues that Jeanette gave me.

When I first met her, I observed that Jeanette was a woman in her mid 30s with an olive complexion. This made me curious about her family origins. She was of medium height, smartly dressed and spoke clearly. I made assumptions about her class and economic status. She wore no rings and I made assumptions about her marital status. She perched on the edge of the chair; her hands were slightly clenched. She had a slight frown that alternated with a warm smile and she spoke rather rapidly. I noticed that her breathing was rather shallow and fast.

Was Jeanette responding in her habitual way or was there something about me and/or the context and/or the episode we were tracking that made her act in these ways? I was curious: what, if anything, did her communications signify? We do not know until (unless) we explore them, or they become 'clear' during the conversation.

Her body posture seemed to show that she was nervous (if so, was this to do with the context, the issue she wanted to discuss, or something else?). Maybe she was simply keen? Did the frown show that she was worried, was she concentrating, or was this habitual? Did the fast speech show that she was in a hurry to tell me the whole story? And if so, what was the reason? Or was this her familiar pace?

'Sometimes a shade crosses the talker's face, the hands can be closed or opened, there comes a cough, a tear can appear, the person pauses . . .' says Tom Anderson (1991). He brings the body fully into the therapeutic frame and says a great deal can be learned by observing clients' breathing patterns (Anderson 1990).

Towards the end of our conversation I noticed that she held her hands loosely in her lap (previously they had been clenched); she held my gaze easily (before she had been glancing 'nervously' around the room); her breathing seemed slower (before it had been rapid and shallow). These bodily cues fitted my idea that she had relaxed and had found the conversation useful. Afterwards, when I asked Jeanette to reflect on the meaning of her body language, she told me that, although she had volunteered, she was concerned about revealing 'too much' to her fellow trainees. This made sense of what I had described as 'nervousness'.

As well as noticing the many languages that our clients speak in, it is crucial that we are self-reflexive about what *our* gestures, clothing, accent, tone of

voice and so on may be communicating: they will create their own unique meanings about what we are 'saying'.

A trainee therapist did not appreciate the possible effect that her expensive designer clothes and perfume could have on clients with limited funds. Another therapist was so keen to ensure that her client felt at ease that she smiled broadly even when the client began to speak about a sad and serious topic.

We also track and change our own stories, perspectives and ways of responding to the client and in this way as the client changes, so do we; we are changing together (Lang 2004).

Noticing

As we have seen, by carefully tracking an episode we notice aspects of the client's story that *are there* but had been previously overlooked. Wittgenstein (1953) says 'The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes). The real foundations of his inquiry do not strike a man [sic] at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him. – And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful' (no. 129).

The episode with her manager had confused and upset Jeanette. But she did not understand why. However, noticing her comment about getting another job (and her distressed facial expression) helped me to be curious about the connections she could be making.

This drawing of attention to previously unnoticed aspects of our own ongoing behaviour is one of Wittgenstein's central methods says Shotter (1994: p. 5). When we track an episode we begin to notice the infinitesimal ways of communicating that had been 'hidden' because of their sheer mundanity; we 'look in the places that we would not normally look and ask questions about things we do not normally ask about' says Lang (2003). As well as the words they use, a person's bodily communications can also give us vital information about the meaning of a specific moment in the episode.

I noticed that when we got the idea that your manager actually appreciates your work, you relaxed back in the chair. I wonder if this means that

you feel more hopeful, or does it mean something else?' I asked Jeanette. 'I didn't think of looking at it like that before . . . mmmm . . . yes, I do feel a bit better now' she said.

And, most importantly, by noticing abilities that have been overlooked, we begin to co-construct new and more hopeful stories with the client.

During the brief conversation with Jeanette I noticed that she had done something quite remarkable: she had been able to state her opinion clearly in a way that did not fit her previous description of herself. This was an exciting moment for both of us.

What do we mean by 'an episode'?

Turning now to something more complex, I explore how tracking an episode with Patrick, an Irish man in his 40s, enabled him to understand why he had felt 'compelled' to act in a violent way towards his partner. Although couple therapy would have been preferable, neither Patrick nor his partner Beryl wanted this, so I worked with Patrick on his own.

Patrick worked as a care assistant in a residential home for elderly people. What was most difficult in his life, he said, was his volatile relationship with Beryl. Although they loved each other, whenever they argued they would doubt this.

'When we are in conversations' Pearce (1994) says, 'we are always playing the guessing game "What episode are we doing?"' and are 'always confronted by the question "What is it that's going on here?"' (p. 155). 'We interpret what's going on based on the other person's actions and we interpret the meaning of what people say in terms of the episode we *think* we are enacting' (p. 160).

Patrick said he would describe their arguments as 'something that kept happening' in an otherwise good relationship. But Beryl, he thought, would describe the arguments as showing that they were 'not suited'.

Formal definitions of the term 'episode' can be misleading says Pearce (1994); 'they are not "found things" but the result of activity of conversants' (p. 154). All conversations are made with others, through 'joint action' (Shotter 1993, 1995).

How did Patrick and Beryl make their relationship – what did each of them do to co-construct the happy times as well as the arguments? What stories did they draw on, what meanings did they give to each other's actions?

This is an ongoing process, which means that episodes are always unfinished: even years later we can reappraise an episode and imbue it with different meaning.

If, in two years' time, both Patrick and Beryl were now happily married to other people, they may describe their arguments as a sign that the relationship was not right. However, if the therapy had helped them resolve difficulties in the relationship, they may describe the arguments as 'a bad patch'.

Episodes are co-created through punctuations

'Disagreement about how to punctuate the sequence of events is at the root of countless relationship struggles' say Bateson and Jackson (in Watzlawick et al. 1967: p. 56). Therefore, 'any punctuation in the sense of before and after, cause and effect, can only be arbitrary' (Selvini et al. 1978: p. 40).

Episodes are made by a process called punctuation, in which each of us imposes a set of distinctions on an ongoing stream of events. 'Our social worlds are too complex for us to perceive . . . all at once, (so) we chunk them into smaller units called episodes' says Pearce (1994: pp. 166–72). Bateson (1972) uses the idea of a 'frame' to show how we punctuate episodes, giving them a beginning and an end. Just like a picture frame, some things are seen to be within the frame and some things are outside it. Frames make 'what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful' (Goffman 1974: p. 21).

Patrick punctuated his relationship with Beryl into clear 'frames': getting on well, having an argument, splitting up, missing each other, getting back together. This seemed like a repeated 'pattern'.

'To an outside observer, a series of communications can be viewed as an uninterrupted sequence of interchanges' write Watzlawick et al. (1967) but 'the participants in the interaction always introduce a punctuation'. People 'will set up between them patterns of interchange (about which they may or may not be in agreement) . . . which perpetuate and reinforce the other's actions' (p. 54).

Patrick and Beryl did not agree about how the last episode of arguing had started: in Patrick's view he became angry when Beryl criticised him. However, Beryl would say (if she were there) that if Patrick had kept his word about when he would come home, she would not have 'had a go' at him.

Three concepts: time, boundaries and structure are important in how we chunk our social worlds into episodes. Time: 'deciding when an episode began; when it is considered to be over'. Boundaries: 'the act of deciding what is "inside" and what is "outside" the episode'. Structure: 'the act of deciding what fits the pattern of the episode and what does not' (Pearce 1994: p. 160).

In making sense of the arguments that appeared to disrupt their happy life, I asked Patrick about:

- (1) *the length of time of a typical argument;*
- (2) *when each of them believed it had started and when they believed it was over (what was inside and what was outside the argument);*
- (3) *what they considered to be the typical pattern of an argument.*

Patrick thought the actual episode of an argument would last five or ten minutes, although the repercussions could last for hours, days and even weeks. It would usually begin when Beryl was upset about something he had done, or not done (such as coming home late). There was a typical pattern of Beryl showing displeasure by being silent; she would then 'have a go' at him, and he would shout back. At some stage Beryl would go to stay with her daughter.

He was clear about how they normally 'performed' the episode 'having an argument'. When we enact episodes, says Pearce (1994) we have to juggle several things: 'among these are the cultural or social *scripts* that describe how certain things should be done, (our) own *goals* . . . and the rules that prescribe patterns . . .'. Scripts are standard sequences of actions, they are 'what "everybody knows" about how to do certain things, for example ordering dinner at elegant restaurant' (p. 184). We may experience difficulties when there are dilemmas between, for example, cultural and social scripts and our personal goals.

Patrick wanted a tranquil relationship with Beryl but, as we shall see, there were dilemmas between this goal and 'scripts' such as 'how to be a man' and 'how to be a good colleague'.

Episodes are multi-layered

When we track an episode we must remain alert to the various stories to which a person connects during the episode. Bateson (1972) says that every communication is multi-layered; every episode has 'multiples layers of context, each of which functions as a frame . . . That is, at one level we know that the monster in the movie is not real, but at another level we react as if it is' (Pearce 1994: p. 171). The CMM model is useful in making sense of how these multiple contexts can affect an episode (see Cronen and Pearce 1991/92; Cronen 1990, 2000 for a more thorough discussion). These contexts, or frames, can involve:

- stories about the (current) relationship;
- stories related to the client's family (what is 'normal' in this family);
- personal identity stories (how 'a person like me' *must act*);
- religious stories;
- gender stories;
- cultural, ethnicity, race, colour stories;
- cultural and societal stories;
- many others.

Only one or two contexts (stories) may be relevant within an episode, but some contexts may have many influential stories that are so intertwined that they cannot be separated. Patrick's work/professional story may also involve an education story of not achieving his potential.

Choosing an episode

We always negotiate with clients before we track an episode. This could be a key event, something extraordinary that the client has done, or a repeated or puzzling interaction, what is called an URP: an unwanted repetitive pattern (Pearce 1994).

As soon as Patrick arrived for his third meeting he said 'I've done a dreadful thing.' The previous weekend, during yet another argument, he had actually hit Beryl. He was deeply ashamed and bewildered about why he had done it. He did not want to lose her but Beryl had said that she would not stay with a man who was violent. His view was that he was not a violent man, but Beryl had 'made him' hit her.

A well-formed narrative has an end-point and the events recounted are relevant to and serve that end-point and will affect all the events described within the narrative (Gergen 1999).

Patrick wanted to tell me the 'end-point', which organised the whole episode (striking Beryl) and wanted to describe what had led up to it. So I listened. Briefly, he had been delayed at work and had got home at 6.45 instead of 6.00; Beryl had been 'nasty'; 'one thing had led to another'; he had 'seen red', 'I 'didn't know what had come over me' and had hit her. This seemed to be a potent episode to explore in detail.

However, a word of caution: what we focus on can expand. Our intention is *not* to encourage the client to re-experience episodes of pain or distress as a form of catharsis. 'People have already suffered enough pain' says Lang (2003) 'it is unethical to make them suffer further pain in the therapy room.' We track an episode in order to find new, more hopeful, stories.

My idea was that the most important 'chunk' of narrative began when he got home and ended just after he hit Beryl.

A tiny episode yields such riches that, although we may be curious about earlier events or conversations, these can be explored later. Harlene Anderson (1997) writes 'I aim to stay close to the understanding of the moment, work within and slowly outside the parameter, and make only small shifts in the conversation' (p. 160).

'Where was Beryl when you got home?' I asked. 'In the kitchen' he replied. 'What did you do?' 'I called out to say I was home' he said. He had used a cheerful tone. She did not reply. He went into the kitchen. Beryl was washing up, her back to him.

As we have seen in Chapter 6, circular (relationship) questions provide a natural tool to: (1) locate each person *bodily* in relation to each other; (2) chart the sequence of events and (3) understand the *meanings* each person gives to their actions. However, as we are exploring things from Patrick's perspective in this vignette, Beryl's stories will take a secondary position.

'What were you thinking and feeling as you came through the door?' Smelling the food he had felt 'bad' about having stayed late to help a colleague deal with a crisis, and he resented Beryl's displeasure.

The meaning Patrick gave to Beryl's actions was informed by what had happened with her before. We listen from a position, we anticipate what others mean based on previous episodes.

The expression she had on her face was 'grim', he said. Although Patrick 'knew' (based on previous arguments) that this 'meant' that Beryl was annoyed with him, this might mean something entirely different; she might feel undervalued.

Patrick's *relationship goal* was to get on well with Beryl, yet his *professional* script meant that he must stay to help his colleague in a crisis. These two contexts created a dilemma for him.

She had put, or 'slammed', his tea on the table. 'What did you do?' I asked. He had walked out of the kitchen saying 'You never trust me' to which she replied 'nastily' 'Why should I? You never, ever, keep your word.'

I noticed that Patrick had '*invited*' Beryl to agree with the description that he she did not trust him and she, in turn, had complied.

'What was your intention in walking out of the kitchen?' 'Um, I wanted to get away' he said. 'What would getting away do?' He said this would prevent a 'head-to-head battle'.

I kept other questions in reserve:

- What were their domestic arrangements?
- What meaning would Beryl give to him walking away from the meal?
- How come he had not explained why he was late, nor phoned in advance?

Exploring the client's 'grammar'

When we track an episode with a client we stay close to, and explore, their 'grammar' (the way they *use* words, phrases and non-verbal language).

Patrick used the term 'trust' ('you - Beryl - never trust me'). I was curious about the 'rules' and conventions he drew on in order to say this; in which contexts and relationships did he develop that idea?

The concept 'grammar' comes from Wittgenstein who, says Finch (1995), does not mean anything different from the normal meaning of grammar. 'Just as in the grammar of a language there are rules, conventions and patterns for how words, sentences, paragraphs are put together, so in living there are "rules", conventions or patterns for how emotions, stories, intellect and relationship are put together' write Lang and McAdam (1995: 73).

Exploring the rules of Patrick's 'grammar' I asked respectfully and playfully: 'What gave you the idea that Beryl didn't trust you?' 'Have you tried this idea on Beryl before?' 'Where does she see you as being trustworthy?' 'How did you hope Beryl would respond?' Where (and in which relationships) did he learn to respond in that way?

Importantly, Cronen (2000: 6) says, the grammar a person uses includes how they 'create possibilities for the future with others'.

I could also ask Patrick 'When did you first get the idea that Beryl did not trust you?' 'Did you get this idea in other relationships?' (with whom and in which contexts?) 'Do other people trust you, at work, your friends, your family?' 'Where else are you trustworthy?' 'Who would be surprised/not surprised that you described yourself in this way?'

Patrick had 'walked away' to 'prevent a 'head-to-head battle'. However, Beryl, who connected to her own rules, conventions and grammar had interpreted this in quite a different way.

'Rules' and moral force

We act as if the descriptions we use have moral force says Pearce (1994). What moral force had induced Patrick to strike Beryl, I wondered?

Beryl had followed him into the hall. After shouting at him she had scorned him: 'You're useless, good for nothing.' It was at this point that 'something had come over him' and he 'saw red'. Then he had struck her across the face. 'I couldn't stop myself' he said.

People often say that they acted in a certain way because that was the only thing 'a person like me' could do says Pearce (1994: 252). However, the study of communication rules, developed 'as an alternative to the idea that something "causes" (us) . . . to act in the ways that (we) do', helps us to

make sense of people's actions (Pearce 1994: p. 182). Being interested in rules means exploring people's intentions and what they feel they 'ought to' do in certain situations.

Patrick had given me a great deal of information and I was curious about the 'rules' that he had 'made him' 'see red' and strike Beryl, despite this going against everything that he believed in.

The substance of our social worlds is moral; when we act we are responding to 'patterns of felt moral obligation' says Pearce (1994: p. 182). This is particularly useful in helping us to understand how people get into unwanted repetitive patterns (URPs). What moral obligations inform people's actions? Pearce (1994: p. 15) quotes Phillipson's (1975) Chicago studies that describe this very well: a man repeatedly promised his priest that he would not get into fights in a bar, yet repeatedly broke his word. It seemed that a particular 'deontic logic' (how he believed he 'ought to' act) informed his actions. This was as follows: 'If another man insults your wife, you are obliged to fight him.' Despite sincerely vowing not to get into a brawl, if another man insulted his wife, like Patrick, he 'could not stop himself' from striking out.

The phrases 'something came over me' and 'I couldn't stop myself' showed me that some deontic logic, or moral force, had made Patrick act as he did. 'What made you feel you should (must, ought to) act in that way?' I asked him. 'What was happening that you saw red?' Patrick recalled that Beryl had said he was 'useless, good for nothing'.

'Rules' says Pearce (1994: p. 182) 'are not just descriptions of what people usually do, they are prescriptions for what people should do' (or what people believe they must do at the time).

He had reached out to stop her running upstairs, she had pushed him out of the way. 'What was happening to you then, what voice, or idea came to you then?' Suddenly he made an important connection: he was five years old, and it was his first week at school. In the playground he was first taunted and then punched by an older boy. At the end of the day he had run home to his mother sobbing, and rushed into her arms saying that a nasty boy had hit him. He fully expected her to comfort him as she usually did. But she had told him very clearly that now he was at school he had to take care of himself. 'Big boys don't cry' she said, 'big boys hit back'. It was this voice that had come to him at the moment that Beryl had pushed him

out of the way. He had wanted to cry, to ask her to stay. But he was 'a big boy'. He 'had to' hit out.

Now the rules, the grammar, the moral force of his bewildering actions became clear.

Patrick realised that he had shown violence towards Beryl instead of the fear and sadness he actually felt. Now, in order to make sense of his mother's 'grammar' I explored her cultural stories.

'The binding norms of a language show us the meanings of a culture' says Finch (1995: p. 44). Patrick's mother was using the logic of her culture/community to prepare her five-year-old son for life.

It seems that she was teaching him how to act so that he would not be perceived as a 'mummy's boy', or a wimp, which could lead to more bullying. Local wisdom in her family/community/culture was that a boy who 'stands up for himself' is respected. She was preparing him for the rough and tumble of the world by saying 'Big boys hit back.'

Fortunately, 'rules are not universal laws, we can break them and negotiate new ones' says Pearce (1994: p. 182).

We talked about how (and why) his mother, whom he loved and respected, had taught him never to cry. This powerful voice of authority had fitted the context then, but was not appropriate in his current relationship with Beryl.

Tracking the episode patiently with Patrick helped him make connections with the 'grammatical rules' that guided his actions; he then questioned their appropriateness; the next time he felt like crying he would not automatically hit out.

Tracking an episode

- Choose a *small* (in time scale) piece of interaction that encapsulates the client's issues or difficulties.
- Negotiate with the client whether to explore this episode.
- Take time to explore the minutiae of the episode chronologically.
- Follow the client's 'grammar' closely – their language (words, gestures and so on).
- Explore the meaning and logic of their words and actions.
- Explore all the relevant 'voices' and influences involved.
- Explore the meaning and logic of the words and actions of anyone else involved.
- Notice and explore the important stories linked to the client's gender, age, religion, class, culture, ethnicity race and/or colour.
- Notice and explore important stories linked to the client's personal identity, stories from their family, and/or peer group.
- Notice and explore any other relevant stories that appear to be influencing the client (and other people).