

# Hypothesizing, Circularity, and Neutrality Revisited: An Invitation to Curiosity

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*This essay examines the systemic guiding principles of neutrality, hypothesizing, and circularity, historically developed by the Milan Team of Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata (12, 13). With the reorganization of these team members (see 11 for a summary of the distinctions between the work of the Selvini-Palazzoli and Prata research team and the Cecchin and Boscolo training team), different reconstructions of the original systemic principles have evolved. New understanding of the concepts of circularity, hypothesizing, and neutrality are now possible, given the systemic epistemology on which the early Milan model was based. It should be emphasized, however, that the ideas presented in this essay are most associated with the systemic work of the Cecchin and Boscolo team.*

Numerous discussions over the years have convincingly pointed out that it is impossible to be neutral with regard to language. All behavior, including language, is politically laden. Any particular action helps to organize and constrain the possible patterns of social interaction (15). Stated differently, behavior is always in relation to the behavior of others—we "act in relation."

## Neutrality

Accepting our inability to act in neutral or nonpolitical ways, the term was originally used to express the idea of actively avoiding the acceptance of any one position as more correct than another. In this way, neutrality has been used to help orient the therapist toward a systemic epistemology. The result, however, has been that for many therapists neutrality has been regarded as the cultivation of a position of noninvolvement, of not having strong opinions, and of not taking responsibility when necessary—the cultivation of the cold and aloof position of a relativist.

In order to avoid the trap of oversimplifying the idea of neutrality, I propose that we describe neutrality as the creation of a state of curiosity in the mind of a therapist. Curiosity leads to exploration and invention of alternative views and moves, and different moves and views breed curiosity. In this recursive fashion, neutrality and curiosity contextualize one another in a commitment to evolving differences, with a concomitant nonattachment to any particular position.

Using some of Maturana's central concepts can assist in this linguistic revision of the meaning of neutrality. Teaching, training, and therapy are language-using contexts that create and orchestrate descriptions (see 8). Sometimes our descriptions suggest a linear explanation that takes the form of "cause and effect." These linear descriptions have become the everyday way to look at the world. This is not necessarily problematic; we easily recognize that linear thinking can be useful in the appropriate situation.

For example, each time we try to explain our behavior, we typically find causal descriptions the most satisfying: "I was late for our appointment because I was angry with you." Whether this statement is true or false is of little concern to most of us in our daily interaction. The criterion we generally apply in these situations is one of utility. At a pragmatic level, we are usually more interested in how useful our explanations of behavior are than in their value as truth.

Here, utility refers to the potential for an explanation to help our world (our interactions) make sense to us, perhaps to help us change or at least to understand change or lack of change. The problem, however, is that we have historically blurred the distinction between utility and truth. What is useful is what a community comes to believe is true.

As clinicians, we should accept linear explanations as long as we do not believe them, because this kind of cause and effect, descriptive orientation to the world does not help us to construct a frame of curiosity. Linear explanations, as Bateson (1) has demonstrated, have the effect of terminating dialogue and conversations. "Why does the apple fall?" "Because of gravity." The description of a falling apple is explained away, constricted within the frame of causality. When we assume that we have an explanation, we often give up looking for other descriptions. Thus, we give up a stance of curiosity because we believe we have "discovered" a description that "fits"; description tends to help us *avoid* a neutral stance in that it does not enhance our curiosity.

One conclusion to be drawn from this observation is that we should avoid descriptions altogether. This, of course, is impossible. In practice, descriptions and explanations are repetitively intertwined and confounded. For example, a family therapist's efforts to *explain* the process that organizes a couple's heated argument typically relies on *describing* how the wife acted in one manner while her husband acted in another. Similarly, a behaviorist's *description* of human behavior is in terms of stimuli and response, which subsequently become *explanations* for behavior (5).

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An explanation is not necessarily problematic. When we believe our explanations are *either* true or false, however, we easily drift toward believing that certain causal connections are more correct than others. This, unfortunately, leads to the overarching conclusion that complex human interaction can be reduced and trivialized to a few simple, procedural postulates.

The alternative perspective is one that celebrates the complexity of interaction and invites a polyphonic orientation to the description and explanation of interaction. If we adopt this frame of frames, we abandon trying to determine whether explanations are true or false. Instead, an evolving process of inventing multiple punctuations of a behavior, interpretation, event, relationship, and so on, helps build a more systemic view (3).

What encourages the development of multiple perspectives and voices? We again return to the idea that curiosity facilitates the development of multiplicity and polyphony. In this systemic orientation, we generate descriptions within a frame of curiosity rather than within a frame of true and false explanations.

## Esthetics/Patterns

Another idea central to developing a stance of curiosity is the concept of esthetics. In describing the artists he was teaching in the California School of Fine Arts, Bateson recognized that they were "responsive to *the pattern which connects*" (2, p. 8). An orientation toward pattern, as opposed to an orientation toward discrete entities, is more suggestive of the realm of art. Science, on the other hand, has been historically characterized as emphasizing quantitative comparison of discrete entities.

The shift to esthetics in therapy underscores our sensitivity to pattern. "An aesthetic base ... requires that we have the courage to construct and encounter difference" (6, p. 198), and it provides "a contextual frame for practical action" (p. 8). This proposal connects with the previous discussion of curiosity. To adopt an esthetic orientation toward the study of interaction not only shifts our focus toward pattern but also emphasizes the multiplicity of possible patterns. As long as there is a plurality of alternatives, we are able to maintain a stance of curiosity. This curiosity is enhanced by the excitement of entertaining the myriad of applicable "stories" describing one interaction. Through the myriad of stories, we begin to see description, and subsequent explanation, in more neutral ways.

Assume that we are conducting an initial interview with a family that has defined itself as in need of therapy. If we believe there is a description of the interaction that will explain the family's problem, we are likely to look for the best description provided by family members. This might mean accepting one member's description over others. Or, it could mean combining all or some family members' descriptions to form the correct description. Finally, it could mean that the therapist provides his or her own description (perhaps using parts of one/some/all family members' descriptions). In this situation, our curiosity centers on which description provides the most logical explanation. This kind of curiosity might more appropriately be called "scientific explanation" in the traditional sense.

On the other hand, if we accept an esthetic orientation, we lose interest in discovering the best description and/or explanation of the family's problem. Instead, our focus on pattern generates a kind of curiosity about how all these family members' descriptions fit together. How do they fit with our own (clinical) descriptions? How is it that these particular descriptions are similar? How is it that these particular descriptions are different? Why these descriptions at this point in time? What descriptions were provided at earlier points in the family's history? What descriptions might be constructed in the future? And so on. Notice the high level of curiosity generated from an esthetic frame. We are not selecting the best description. Rather, we are looking for a pattern of how these descriptions fit together. The more curious we are about the possible array of patterning, the more esthetically pleasing our analysis.

Here we can see that patterns create a state of mind that we can call "neutrality." Neutrality, in turn, is best described as a state of curiosity. If we are curious, we act in certain ways toward the system we are studying. It is this way of acting that has come to be defined as neutral. When we are curious about the patterns or relationships of ideas, people, events, and behaviors, we perturb (8) the system with which we are interacting in ways that are different from perturbations based on our attempts to discover a correct description/explanation (that is, causal connections).

Specifically, drawing on the work of Maturana (8), the kind of curiosity produced from a causal frame incorporates the notion of "instructive interaction"; curiosity within an esthetic frame does not. Instructive interaction can be described as acting "as if some individuals 'instruct' other individuals about what to do and how to do what they do" (4, p. 246).

If we believe in instructive interaction, we attempt to change people by directing them. This can be accomplished only when we have an "accurate" description of a problem. This is the orientation of traditional linear science and engineering. An esthetic science, on the other hand, with a focus on curiosity, "gives up" the attempt to direct people.

In addition, we might note that curiosity and an esthetic concern for pattern generate respect in much the same way as respect generates a sense of curiosity and esthetics. In everyday life, most people are not curious (in the neutral sense) about people, events, ideas, or behaviors for which they have no respect. And, recursively, we typically do not have respect for people, events, ideas, or behaviors about which we are not curious. Certainly, it may be possible to identify ourselves as

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curious about the behavior of a person we do not respect. However, there we have curiosity in the linear sense whereby our curiosity is directed toward "discovering" and consequently "explaining" why this person acted in such a way. In these situations, we are typically interested in "discovering" more and more evidence that our lack of respect is "correct" and "well-founded."

On the other hand, curiosity from an esthetic perspective (which is the kind of curiosity we are interested in from a systemic approach) is based on the notion that each system has a logic to its interaction. This logic is neither good nor bad, right nor wrong. It is simply operative. From this perspective, we respect the integrity of the system. And, recursively, our respect of the system enhances our curiosity about how ideas, behaviors, and events participate in creating and maintaining the integrity of the system. Respecting a system means that you act toward a system with the recursive understanding that the system is simply doing what it does, and that this doing is the it that does it.

It is also necessary to recognize the limits of what we know about human systems. Specifically, social situations and family life styles change over time. We know only what has happened in the past; we do not know what future cultural patterns will be. Therefore, we cannot teach, for example, a couple how to be a couple, a parent how to be a parent, and a child how to be a son or daughter.

As family therapists, we cannot invent a family. What we do best is the bringing forth of patterns through interacting with a family. We cannot think of ourselves as teachers instructing families in better scripts for being families. Yet, because we do not know what specific script will be successful for a specific family, we are left to interact in a way that will perhaps perturb the system such that it finds its own new (or rewritten) script. Thus, there is a need for an esthetic frame within which curiosity may be enhanced.

From this perspective, respect for a system is not a position of social control (although we certainly should recognize and accept our legal obligation to play such a role) but a position lacking in social control and in instructive interaction. Rather than focusing on teaching, we can focus on learning in the sense that, through interaction (interviewing in the clinical context), we generate more curiosity that enhances learning.

## **Responsibility and Social Control**

Unfortunately, most of us have been raised in a social context in which responsibility becomes confused with social control. In therapeutic practice, we are requested to focus on behaviors that are deemed immoral and/or illegal by society. For example, if we suspect or know of incest in a family we are treating, it is our social responsibility to be organized by this information and act as a social controller. Accepting a request to serve as a social controller puts us in a position in which it is difficult to remain neutral because we too easily lose our sense of curiosity. We lose our esthetic perspective. We stop looking for patterns and we stop entertaining a multiplicity of patterns. We regress to lazy explanations of discrete behaviors as bad, wrong, immoral, and so on.

Unfortunately, we cannot fully ignore the social constructions imposed by legalistic, societal, and cultural systems. Incest is denoted as a crime. When we are limited to working with the social construction of crime, we must recognize that we cannot act therapeutically but, rather, we are constrained to act legally. We are in a different position vis à vis the system.

If we accept the legal position, how can we address the need to be therapeutic? To restate our previous argument, we must co-develop a sense of curiosity that is different from a sense of linear morality. In many cases, working with a therapeutic team can help us to act both legally and therapeutically. The team, being removed from direct family interaction, is free to hypothesize and question the family's premises and beliefs. In conferring with his or her team, the therapist's curiosity can be developed. For those of us who do not have the luxury of working with a team, friends and colleagues become important in helping us to construct a neutral therapeutic context. Friends, colleagues, and team members can help free the clinician to act in multiple ways that include being legal and moral, and that enhance his or her curiosity.

## **Symptoms of Nonneutrality**

When the therapist drifts from a position of being systemic, he or she experiences less curiosity. Fortunately, there are several symptoms that indicate slippage from an esthetic, systemic, polyphonic frame to a linear, monophonic frame. The following discussion presents two classes of symptom: boredom and psychosomatic experience.

### **Boredom**

Boredom often occurs when we feel as if we readily know what is happening. Clinical cases become clichés rather than exhilarating metaphors. In other words, there is no new information that makes a difference to the therapist. For example, imagine playing a simple card game with a child. As an adult, it is easy to become bored with the simplicity of the game because we already know all the strategies. In addition, children often expose their cards to their opponents when they are learning a game because they have not learned the strategy of concealment. Thus, there is no new information being offered to the adult. The game becomes interesting only when the child tries to make up new rules as she or he plays, and we would

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feel less bored because there is new information being introduced into the system.

A similar situation is often found in the clinical context. We often feel as if we "know" what family members are doing, how they think, or how they got to be in the current situation. At such a point, we feel that any information being provided in the stories and descriptions family members give is redundant. We stop listening. We identify ourselves as bored by the family and, if we are bored by the family, it is natural to feel worthless in our profession and, consequently, with our lives. Sometimes the persisting fantasy-symptom takes the form of, "How nice if I were a plumber," or "How nice if I were a waitress."

We can also define boredom as a symptom of nonneutrality. If remaining neutral means maintaining a stance of curiosity and delighting in the invention and discovery of multiple patterns, then lack of neutrality implies abandoning our curiosity, believing we have discovered a correct interpretation and ignoring the alternative patterns to be known. In this scenario, we act like "trivialized" workers in a factory. We sacrifice the esthetics of therapy on the altar of one simplistic view of the human condition.

## **Psychosomatic Symptoms**

The second class of symptoms is that of psychosomatic experience. These again are related to nonneutrality. Headaches are probably the most common expression, although perspiration, high blood pressure, and back pain are also frequent complaints. Each therapist should learn to recognize his or her psychosomatic responses. A typical sequence might include conflict between the therapist and the context in which she or he works. If therapists work for an agency that is legally mandated to treat only families that need social control (for example, incest and substance abuse), it is easy for them to lose their therapeutic position, thus becoming a nonentity in terms of what they have been trained to do. If therapists feel that they cannot be therapeutic, they likely will feel worthless. At the same time, however, by virtue of their profession, they must defend the family against society and often against itself.

In such a context, the agency is in direct contradiction to the idea of an esthetic frame. The therapist's sense of curiosity easily becomes smothered. Colleagues and/or friends sometimes help regenerate the therapist's curiosity in these cases by simply asking why she or he looks so awful. Such questions, when experienced as concern, help a therapist initiate new questions and a renewed curiosity to find new patterns.

One strategy for dealing with this symptom of nonneutrality is to do what the context demands—that is, to act as a social control agent but, simultaneously, avoid taking all responsibility for controlling the problem. To take full responsibility for controlling the family's problem is to assume that the therapist's job is to instruct. Taking full charge of the problem is limiting; it masks the ability to be curious about the context. Taking charge and acting therapeutically responsible are not the same thing. Therapeutic responsibility begins with seeing your own position in the system. Many times this simply means recognizing what little power you have and, at the same time, maintaining respect for the system. Curiosity, again, helps to straddle these distinct recognitions.

Consider the position of trying to take full charge of a problem. Too often this carries with it a feeling of moral indignation. In order to have the right to control people, we must feel morally superior. That is, we must feel like someone who knows best, who knows good from bad, and who can point out the right way. Families often expect us to act that way (for example, families that are in treatment for incest expect a therapist to frown upon such behavior). Yet, by feeling morally indignant, we take on the responsibility of intervening so that this immoral behavior will not be repeated. Instead of looking for resources (which is what a therapist traditionally attempts to do), we spend our time trying to control the family. We stop looking for resources inside the family because we are too busy labeling the pattern as wrong or incorrect.

We are still confronted with a dilemma. If we do not deter the behavior in the family, who will? One way to deal with the issue of social control is to begin from the assumption that we live in a world full of violence. This is, obviously, a moralistic position. On the other hand, if we begin from a perspective of curiosity, we make two important observations: (a) the system we are dealing with is alive and therefore something must be working; and (b) if there is violence in the family, it does not necessarily mean that the therapist has the right to be violent toward the family in turn. Violence may not be esthetic in and of itself, but it certainly is a pattern. Not all patterns are esthetically pleasing.<sup>1</sup>

The therapist's job is to help the family system to evolve more esthetic patterns. Our job, as therapists, includes helping systems appear logical. First of all, this requires accepting them the way they are. This does not mean that we do not hope for change—particularly in patterns identified as immoral or illegal by our culture. We must remember that expecting change is an inevitable consequence of living in a culture that has created the profession of "therapist." Change, from an esthetic perspective, is more likely to take place when a system is not directly instructed but, rather, given different options. Demonstrating the logic of a system, including those that are violent, can only be achieved through a stance of curiosity and an esthetic approach to observing a wide variety of patterns. Confirmation of a system's logic, based on a stance of neutrality, is a different strategy than rigid judgment and subsequent efforts at correction.

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## Hypothesizing

Curiosity helps us to continue looking for different descriptions and explanations, even when we can not immediately imagine the possibility of another one. In this sense, hypothesizing is connected to curiosity. Hypothesizing has more to do with technique. Curiosity is a stance, whereas hypothesizing is what we do to try to maintain this stance.

One way to generate useful hypotheses is the use of the metaphor of story telling. Families are wonderful story tellers because they have such interesting scripts to describe. They come to therapy with these scripts tightly written. Their problem is that their scripts do not help them function in a way that *they* find useful. As clinicians, we offer the family new scripts (based on our hypotheses) to which the family responds by adjusting its script that, in turn, helps us alter our scripts, and so on. When we feel unable to develop hypotheses, we know we have accepted the family's script and, thus, have lost our sense of curiosity.

Yet clinical treatment of families is not the only context in which it is difficult to generate hypotheses. We notice that it is often difficult for students to grasp the idea of hypothesizing or to hypothesize about a system. This is probably because we have been raised in cultural contexts in which the common belief is that teachers know more than students. We tend to have respect for "what is." It is difficult to develop a stance of curiosity within this kind of context. Respect for authority, to the extent that we feel incapable of influencing or questioning the authority's position, is a sign of linear thinking that is additionally marked by believing what a family says. It is impossible to be curious when we are "true believers."

The history of the Western world is characterized by our pursuit for accurate explanations. With such a history, it is no surprise that we all find it difficult to generate hypotheses, which requires suspending the search for one explanation. In the work of the earlier Milan Team (12), the "tyranny of linguistic conditioning" was suggested as part of this heritage. Avoiding the use of the authoritative verb "to be" has been suggested to help us overcome linear explanations. When we describe people, events, beliefs as "being," we tend to stop looking for hypotheses instead of acting in a dialogical manner: constantly challenging the family's stories/hypotheses and our own previous stories/hypotheses.

## Circularity

Circularity, along with hypothesizing, is a technique nurtured by curiosity. It is a technique used in the development of hypotheses and the sustaining of neutrality. There are many fine discussions about the technique of circular questioning and kinds of circular questions (7, 9, 10, 14). In line with the present discussion, circular questioning can be understood as a method by which a clinician creates curiosity within the family system and therapy system. There are interesting consequences of constructing a context through a questioning process whereby the family itself may become somewhat neutral toward its own hypotheses.

Circular questioning provides the possibility of undermining the family belief system that is based on "truths" and the heavy usage of the verb "to be" ("My son is lazy"; "My daughter is stubborn"; "My father is alcoholic"). Circular questions undermine the family's belief system by using the language of relationship, not of "what is." This may be done by "if" questions and by future-oriented questions (for example, "If your mother decided to stop worrying about you, what would your father do"?). These questions imply patterns, not facts. The moment a question undermines the belief system, it creates opportunities for new stories.

In summary, these three principles of hypothesizing, circularity, and neutrality can be seen as recursively interlinked such that neutrality provides the context for constructing multiple hypotheses. Multiple hypotheses, in turn, provide a context for seeing circular patterns (as opposed to linear, cause-effect relations) and asking circular questions. The technique of circular questioning is used to develop, refine, and discard hypotheses about the family, which helps construct a context of curiosity and neutrality.

Seeing the relationships among these guiding principles suggests that when circular questions do not help generate hypotheses, we have moved to the realm of technique and lost our sense of curiosity. Similarly, when hypotheses stop helping us to construct circular questions or do not help us to maintain a sense of curiosity, we have very likely stumbled upon a hypothesis that we are too willing to believe and accept (as we usually say, we "marry" our own hypotheses)—a troubling sign for a systemic therapist! And finally, when our neutral position ceases to help us generate hypotheses, we have, no doubt, lost our curiosity and become social controllers.

If we are curious, we question premises—our own and those of the family we are treating. A family's interactions with us should facilitate questioning our own premises. Not only are we intervening in their systems, but families are also intervening in our systems—helping us to become better systemic thinkers. The idea of a recursive relationship among neutrality, hypothesizing, and circularity, as guiding principles, proposes a framework that invites us to be more curious about symptoms in therapy—those of families as well as of therapists.

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<sup>1</sup>From this perspective, therapeutic violence is defined as the therapist's attempt to instruct the family in his or her own pattern. This is consistent with Maturana's (8) definition of violence: holding an opinion to be true such that another's opinion is untrue and must change.

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