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**Larger systems?  
Beyond a dualistic approach to the process of change**

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The term larger systems has been used in psychology, and in its connected disciplines to describe: 1) those interactive systems growing around a family interlaced in relationships with several external institutions, with the aim of "receiving help" towards the solution of their problems; or, more generally, 2) those interactive systems which can be termed social organizations other than the family (eg. the health service, an academic institution, etc.). It is useful to note that the term "larger systems" has been defined with regard to the family which, by definition, has been considered "the" system by the interactional view developed in the sixties (Watzlawick, et al., 1967). It may be said that the power metaphor, the control desire, and warlike language have been frequently used as a reference in the analysis and in the treatment of the so-called larger systems. Looked at more closely, the most frequent implicit premises regarding discussion of larger systems can be described as the following:

- the family/patient (or whoever is seeking help) is bad, doing everything possible not to change; and for this reason it obstructs intervention by professionals even to the point of setting them off against each other;
- the professionals are in conflict among themselves, each one trying to defeat the others in order to have control of the therapeutic situation;
- the large systems that seek help are "pathological" systems that can be "cured" by an external consultant capable of identifying the "game" and defeating it with clever manoeuvres. A consultant in this situation will have to be extremely careful not to fall into coalitions or alliances which would irremediably reduce his/her ability to act.

Apart from the use of the power metaphor, already criticized by Bateson (1976) as being non-systemic (see also Keeney, 1982 and Hoffman, 1985), the above-described position regarding larger systems is debatable. The epistemological assumptions, seeming very unsubstantial in light of the most recent elaborations of systemic thinking, allow for the emergence of a different approach to the so called larger systems.

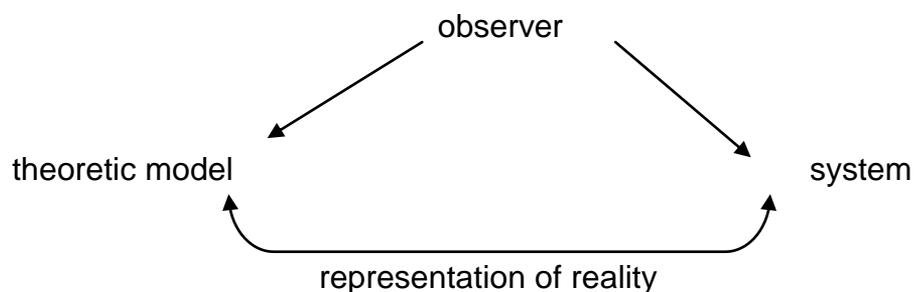
In recent years, in the field of systemic psychology there has been a tendency which is in line with general movements in the biological and social sciences. Here, we are referring to a method of study which takes into account the multidimensional character of the phenomena under study, underlining the fact that the study of an object cannot be divorced from the study of the knowing subject (Bateson, 1972, 1979; Maturana and Varela, 1980; Von Foester, 1981). This substitutes preoccupations focusing on fragmenting, isolating and defining with the desire to identify "patterns which connect" (Bateson, 1979); it redefines the many objections in

the classical sciences as interactions (Varela, 1979); it abandons the security of definite and definitive explanations in order to accept the insecurity of the "ongoing explanation" (Morin,1984); it recognises that the chance, the imbalance and the disorder are the sources of the organisation (Prigogine and Stengers, 1979; Atlan, 1979).

The systemic approach which emerges from this epistemological perspective is profoundly different from that which formed the basis, in the sixties, of interactional psychology, social systems analysis, family psychotherapy, and the theory of communication. Some of the more significant shifts will be discussed in this article.

### **The system notion: from its reification to the understanding of its constructivist matrix**

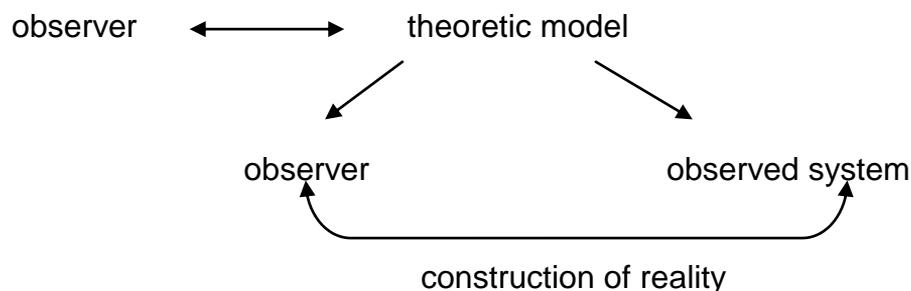
The analysis model, which refers to a system as an object, is reifying; that is, it is one which sees a system as a gathering of interactive elements inside boundaries which separate it from the environment and which are concrete, as is the system itself. In this way, the system becomes identified with some kind of social organisation (eg. the family, the psychiatric services, etc.). One of the main implications of such a perspective is that the system is always out there, it has its intrinsic characteristics and the observer (psychologist, psychotherapist, sociologist, etc.) has to discover them through a specific framework or theoretical model which becomes the key to reality. We are dealing with a paradigm which divides the elements that come into play during the process of knowledge: the observer, the theoretic model used and the system are all parts of this process which are among themselves separate and distinct, and the process thus becomes describable as follows:



In order to analyse a system, the observer uses a theoretic model, and the analysis consists of a search for connections between his/her framework and the observed phenomenon; the goal is to be as accurate as possible in matching reality out there with the chosen model. The supposed result of such a process of knowledge is the representation of reality.

Yet, "the world does not present itself to us neatly divided into systems, subsystems, environments and so on. These are divisions we make for ourselves for various purposes. It is evident that different observer communities find it convenient to divide the world in different ways and they will be interested in different systems

at different times" (Varela, 1979, 83). In this perspective the system exists only through the operation of drawing differences on the part of the observer. The system being strictly dependent on the observer, is not therefore identified with a social organisation, but it is a way of describing the phenomenon being studied: the system is not a datum, but is a way of organising the data that the observer chooses to take as elements of the system. The relationship between the observed system and the observer is a constituent part of the system notion, so much that "the very description of the system makes the system different. At each stage, the observer relates to the system through an understanding, which modifies his relationship to the system" (Varela, 1979, 57). The analysis process is therefore not representative of a reality, but it becomes constructive and can be charted as below:



The observer uses a theoretic model to analyse his/her relationship to the system. This paradigm, in contrast with the preceding one, suggests a relationship of the autoreferential type between the observer, the object observed and the theoretic model, which gives rise to a process where the observer is both at the level of the analysis and at the level of being analysed. This is the second order cybernetic perspective: the observer describes him/herself while describing the observed system.

### **From instructive to non instructive interaction**

Maturana and Varela (1980), in elaborating the concept of "autonomy" or "organisational closure" of the systems, underlined how the behaviour of a system in its environment or with regard to other systems is only a function of its structure. The formalisation of a theoretic approach which places the accent on "non instructive interactions" constituted an important premise for the initiation of a deep reflection on the systemic model applied to the study of interpersonal relationships. Beginning with the idea that an individual reacts with respect to the mental elaborations of information, his/her behaviour is not describable with regard to the objective characteristics of the environment in which s/he moves, but rather in the way in which that environment is perceived. In this sense also the interpersonal behaviour cannot be considered a simple response to whatever the others do, but a function of the meanings which s/he attributes to such actions.

These reflections bring us to another issue concerning causality models which can be adopted to describe change in systems. The difference between the linear model and the circular one is not enough to describe the shift in the epistemological

perspective which the notion of non-instructive interaction introduces. It is not difficult to see that the circular model differs from the linear one only in terms of the direction of the change, not in the nature of the process of change. While the linear model of cause-effect affirms that A is the cause of B, the adoption of the concept of circularity, by introducing reciprocity, simply adds the idea that at the same, time, B is also the cause of A. The concepts of "trivial and non trivial machines" (Von Foester, 1981) constitute instead a useful reference in the introduction of a difference between models of causality in terms of linear and complex, as expressions of two differing conceptions of the type of change process. A simple (or trivial) linear causality model is the one which corresponds to one input-one output. The complex (or non trivial) causality model is that which describes output as the result of a process which, though triggered by the input, is characterised and developed according to its own autonomy. In the first case we would say, for example, that the therapist changes the system, whereas in the second case the change is in the coevolutionary process of the system constructed through the therapeutic situation.

### **From the paradigm of equilibrium to the paradigm of non-equilibrium**

Systemic analysis based on the equilibrium paradigm favoured the homeostasis of the system, interpreting non-equilibrium as a marginal phenomenon, destructive, extraneous to the system, a phase which merely has to be overcome in order to regain the lost equilibrium. Prigogine (see Prigogine and Stenger, 1979) and Atlan's (1979) research underline the fact that non equilibrium is in fact the very source of the system organisation. This is in accordance with the findings of Maturana and Varela (1980) when they affirm that a system in order to maintain its organisation, operates a series of structural changes, and the history of such a system is the history of such structural changes. The perspective outlined by these researchers recognises the transition period as a vital phase of the system (as opposed to extraneous or destructive with regard to the model of equilibrium) and underlines its irreducibility.

The recognition of the transition phase implies the use of a non-dualistic framework of categorisation. A framework which, rather than setting change and invariance against one another, recognises that the "invariance that characterises a system can only be studied under perturbations that reveal it, and thus against a background of change. Conversely, change in a system is only in reference to that in it which stays unchanged: its identity as a system." (Varela, 1979, 261). Starting from the marriage of change and invariance, other irreducible connections of opposites emerge: among these, autonomy/dependence, individuation/union are the two which concern most directly the construction/development of interpersonal relationships. At the theoretic level the implications which derive from the recognition of the transition phase are concerned with the framework of categorisation which the observer uses in drawing the system: a framework which is based on complementarity (of the both/and type) rather than on dualism (of the either/or type).

## Two systemic perspectives

The reflections described up to now provide us with the elements with which to trace two different systemic perspectives.

The first one:

- a) reifies the system, identifying it with a specific social organisation;
- b) adopts an analysis model which separates the observer, his/her theoretic framework and the object of the observation;
- c) identifies, in the representation of reality, the aim of the process of knowledge;
- d) by reference to a linear causality model, affirms that the observer operates the system change;
- e) uses a dualistic framework of categorisation.

The second one:

- a) affirms the observer-dependent nature of the system;
- b) in recognising the constructivist matrix of the system, adopts an analysis model based on the autoreferential and constructive rapport between theoretic framework, observer and system;
- c) by reference to a complex causal model it recognises that change is a function of the system structure;
- d) uses a framework of categorisation based on complementarity.

What we are trying to say is that the analysis of the so-called large systems, as described most frequently, is within the first epistemological perspective rather than the second one. The very term large systems is an example of the reifying approach: by identifying the system with the family, everything outside the family becomes termed larger system, exactly in the same way that everything which is less than the family (the individual, the couple) is termed subsystem. The definition of the system is independent of the observer (therapist, consultant, expert) who, from the outside operates the change, from time to time, of the subsystem, the system or the larger system. S/he uses a dualistic framework of categorisation which on the one hand separates: observer/observed, system/larger system, maintained homeostasis of the system/change operated by the expert, pathology produced by the system/cure brought about by the therapy, etc.; while, on the other hand, it flattens out the different levels at the same time as it affirms the isomorphism between them. The larger system is treated by the consultant in the same way as the family is treated by the therapist, the larger system is the producer of pathological fixity deriving from the symmetrical battles among the components just as the family is pathological because of the symmetrical battles in the definition of the relationships among components. One family member is not able to see his/her own game and change it from within just as the members of the larger system cannot see their own game and have need of an external consultant who is able to change them.

The second epistemological perspective described above opens up a different approach to systems which at this point we would no longer define as larger, but complex.

This is a perspective which, starting from the recognition of the constructive matrix of the system, centres attention on the observers and thus on the way in which they construct the system in a reflective dynamic between behaviours and epistemological premises (in Bateson's sense). Seen in this light the impasse of a system becomes inseparable from the specific maps utilised by the observers in their action. In particular, the theoretic hypothesis we formulate is that the impasse of a

complex therapeutic system is connected to the dualistic nature of the presuppositions which guide the actions of the professionals in the relationships among them and with their patients. In this sense even the eventual symmetry among different helpers is not an ontological characteristics of the system, but rather an interactive pattern deriving from a framework of categorisation which constantly constructs the interventions of the individual professionals as alternatives. In the same way we can affirm that therapists' confusion regarding the operative choices to be adopted is not accountable by any incompetence, inexperience or inability on their part. Being blind in a determined situation is due to the framework of categorisation of the observer (or community of observers) allowing a system to be constructed in one way and one way only, but without allowing the observation to be clear; that is, the map they use does not allow them to be observers of their own maps.

By reference to an analytical model based on the autoreferential rapport between theoretical model, observer and system, the perspective discussed here redefines the relationship between consultant and client in a non-hierarchical and non-separate way. The position of the consultant is defined only by the different point of view that s/he holds. The consultant/counsel-seeker relationship is thus a rapport among different observers. The consultant does not analyse, as an expert in his/her field, the case under therapy, nor relationships among members of the team or between the team and the family; rather, s/he introduces a new point of view: that of the team's analysing the family, starting right from the analysis of him/herself in the consulting situation. His/her contribution, therefore, consists of the opening, by means of questions or direct comments, of the following possibilities: 1) the analysis of the reflective dynamic between professionals' premises and their interactive patterns; and 2) the construction of a new type of connections according to a complementary model of categorisation, creating new contexts of meaning within which new questions can be raised.

We shall now attempt to illustrate the elements of this new analysis and intervention model through the description of a case.

A group of professionals asked our advice and help in the case of the Rossi family, which is made up of the following: Diana, the mother; Franco, the father; and three children: Anna, 7; Mario, 5 and Giacomo, 4.

Because of the family situation (the relationship between the father and the mother was greatly perturbed, the father, an invalid, was entirely peripheral in family matters, the mother was alcoholic and promiscuous, the children were having problem of enuresis, language and social assimilation), the Court intervened and ordered that the children be placed in the care of an institution, giving the mother the choice to live with her children in the motivation due to their young ages. After a year of this situation, the mother contacted the social services and expressed her desire to attempt a reconciliation with her husband. The Court accepted the proposal and placed the children in the care of a Care Home, while maintaining the parents' visiting rights.

The professionals who requested consultation were: the psychologist, who was meeting Diana and Franco regularly, with the double aim of establishing their ability as parents and helping them to work out their problems as a couple; and the social assistants, who in the Care Home looked after the children until they could return home when the family situation was stabilised. However, the interactive situation was not restricted to these elements, since in the background there existed another key

figure, a nun who belonged to the Institute where the mother had lived until age 18. The nun had kept a close relationship with Diana, going to her house frequently, and was disliked by the husband, causing argument between the couple. She also took it upon herself to express her opinions regularly concerning the family situation to the psychologist.

The reason the professionals asked for consultation was because since the beginning of the intervention, the family situation remained the same: the children were still in the Care Home, the parents were still in conflict. The social assistants felt disoriented because, whereas their intervention had the aim of returning the children to a settled home, the parents' continuing conflict seemed to be rendering their efforts invain. The psychologist felt that she had failed her intervention with the parents, and everyone involved felt that the nun was intrusive and thus could not decide how to cope with her.

We suggested that the professionals reflect on the following question: what was the presupposition of the observers (psychologist, social assistants, court, nun and family) on which the therapeutic system was constructed? In effect, what was proposed to the professionals was not an introspective path of thought; rather, it was a recursive analysis of the different interactive behaviours which make sense in contexts of meaning which are constructed through the corresponding behaviours. The premise which emerged as system constitutive was that Diana and Franco were not fit to be parents, but that they could become so thanks to the intervention of the services. In fact, the system or any interactional behaviour within it did not make sense without this assumption.

For the next step we proposed analysing the kind of system dynamic that is built up between meanings and behaviours. Using this basis, that the parents did not know how to perform their role, but that they could learn it:

- the Court orderd the removal of the children and stated that they would return to their family only when the parents had overcome their inability; so originating the idea that the professionals could bring this improvement about;

- every decision relative to this premise that Diana and Franco could become competent in their role of parents was left to the professionals who took it upon themselves to decide if and when the children could go home; if the nun should be listened to; when to hold the meetings with the couple, and so on; thus maintaining in a non- deciding role, the parents themselves with regard to their own evolutionary process;

- a couple therapy was offered to work out their problems, but the fact that problems were expressd was the element that confirmed their incapacity and thus the correctness of the decision to keep away their children;

- the children were in a Care Home, but their relationship with their parents was maintained, by allowing them to visit home for certain periods, which though became the test-context for the incompetence of the parents;

- the social assitants talked with the children about their periods at home to underline that this was their family, but the fact that the children spoke realistically about their family (therefore also about their problems) became the confirmation of the correctness of the separation;

- the nun helped Franco and Diana like a mother would help her children: since the context which had been so created was one of affection, the family difficulties could be expressed; but once such difficulties were expressed, the

nun would shift into a context of social work by referring the parents' inability to the social services;

-the family asked for help, confirming to all the observers the idea of its inability, while not renouncing its claim to be a family which, of course, had the effect of reinforcing the idea that they could learn to be parents.

The constitutive premise of the system is thus transformed into a short circuit: it informs the interactive behaviour which reflectively confirms the premise as a game without end or evolution.

Having brought to the light the dynamics which produced the impasse in the system is not to imply that the solution would involve simply recognising the competence of the parents; this would be in fact adopting the other side of the dualistic view. Not to recognise the difficulties that this family manifests would be tantamount to not helping it by calling less upon the real functions (organisation/identity) of the professionals.

We proposed therefore, the adopting of a complementary perspective, a double description (Bateson), or imbrication of levels (Varela) and the redesigning of the system according to this. The question we introduced was this: How did these parents demonstrate their competence in their incompetence?

The answer that the group came up with was this: Parents who separate themselves from their children in order to attempt a reconciliation show responsibility towards them precisely because they choose to give priority to the reconstruction of the couple as a condition for the reconstitution of the family. By keeping them away, they protect them from the difficulties that their reconciliation process will bring.

On the principle of this new premise, the preceding behaviours did not make sense anymore. The professionals saw as coherent those behaviours which recognised the responsibility of the parents by means of a gradual restitution of parental authority. As for the nun, the professionals thought it positive to keep her openly involved in this new systemic reading, for once the checking-up context of her role had been removed, she could perform without ambiguity the part of "grandmother".

After a year had past, we did a follow up and the professionals informed us that:

- after consultation, the psychologist and the social assistants both saw "the family in a different way";
- the social assistants refrained from institutional tasks (doctor, school, etc.) regarding the children and gave back the responsibility to the parents;
- they began to come to agreement with the parents with regard to the periods the children spent at home, the periods becoming known as temporary dismissals from the Care Home; this was to underline the fact that, when the children were at home, the responsibility for them was their parents';
- the psychologist began to note in the parents a solid affective base;
- the presence of the nun, reintegrated in a non-ambiguous affective context, came to be valued as a help by the couple;
- the Court order had been revoked and the children had been at home for three months.

## **Conclusions**

In order to sum up the change process we have described, we feel it important to underline certain passages.

Initially, in the relation with the Court on the one side and the family on the other, the professionals could only maintain their sense of their own identity (seen as systemic organisation) by enacting behaviours aimed at changing the parents. With time, this premise was transformed into the idea that the parents were inadequate, since it was the only base on which the observers could form a common ground for action. As we have seen, a therapeutic system impasse grew up around this premise. The request for consultation, from a dualistic point of view could be seen as a definition of inability on the part of the professionals (who attributed to the consultant instead the ability to solve the impasse). In a complementary perspective it was a behaviour through which the professionals displayed their competence precisely because they recognised the impasse and sought help to get out of it. In their request for consultation, the professionals maintained their identity (organisation) as competent professionals, just as the family, in their request for help, showed its sense of responsibility. If we, as consultants, assumed the incapacity of the professionals, using strategic intervention techniques, or if we refused to accept the incapacity of the professionals, declaring their intervention to be adequate in the presence of an impasse, we would place ourselves in the same dualistic dimension, and our contribution would probably be to reinforce the impasse. Instead, by recognising the request for counsel as demonstration of competence, we were able to bring up in discussion with the professionals a way of getting out of the impasse through a re-reading of the system. This changeover into a constructivistic point of view produced, as a systemic result of the meeting, a community of observers who did not influence each other in a linear way, but who created the conditions through which identity and change were not placed in opposition to each other. It is this relationship with the consultant who recognises their competence, that the professionals assume their responsibility and, with the aim of maintaining their own identity, make changes at the level of the premises through which they read the system and act.

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