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SEARCHING FOR FAMILY THERAPY IN THE ROCKIES: FAMILY THERAPISTS MEET A PALEONTOLOGIST

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ABSTRACT: Family therapists use concepts germane to other academic disciplines. We recount four notions—context, explanatory metaphors, language conventions, and persistently refining knowledge—that family therapists and paleontologists each utilize. Revisiting family therapy's foundational concepts through the lens of another discipline reminds us of our theoretical beginnings, highlights those professional adaptations that we have made over the years, and offers us an opportunity to reinvigorate and expand our central organizing principles.

KEY WORDS: paleontology; context; metaphors; language; family therapy.

As family therapists, we have found that many of our most momentous events with clients have occurred unexpectedly. Similarly, this article is the product of a serendipitous set of circumstances that led to an eye-opening conversation among three family therapists and a noted paleontologist, Jack Horner.

We often become absorbed in our professional disciplines (with their accompanying ways of thinking and speaking) to an extent that we fail to read and consider work done by professionals in related and unrelated fields of study. In this paper, we are privileged to discuss some of the wisdom we found within a natural science field that vali-

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dates and sharpens our thinking in our social science field. We will focus specifically upon (a) the indispensable value of considering context, (b) using explanatory metaphors as creative guides to discovery and invention, (c) the prescriptive and proscriptive qualities of language conventions, and (d) the life-giving quality available to any profession that continuously challenges its own set of foundational ideas. We will look at each from a paleontological frame and from a family therapy perspective.

We will highlight similarities between constructs used both in paleontology and family therapy, allowing the ideas as they are understood and used in paleontology to stimulate those of us who are family therapists to see those ideas in our field with a fresh perspective.

We met Jack Horner at the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana. Each of us found Horner's explanations of paleontological constructs to be clear and understandable—the more we listened, the more these ideas resonated with ideas we use in family therapy practice and research. Hearing about constructs with which we were already familiar spoken about in another professional dialect allowed us to consider those constructs with new insight and appreciation. We were able to see aspects of our conceptual frameworks that we had forgotten about or discarded, and also some of the implications of our ways of thinking that we had never seriously considered before.

The following key notions in family therapy appeared to us as one's hometown appears after a considerable absence—a place with which you are very familiar but see with new eyes by virtue of having been away for a while. This new perspective is not necessarily superior but it reveals things that were not visible when your hometown composed your whole world. Observing or listening from a context other than our own preferred or customary positions opens doors to understanding that were previously unavailable and therefore unknown to us.

THE CONTEXT

Horner discussed the importance of the context in which the dinosaur bones are discovered. In addition to the fossils themselves, the location and surrounding conditions at the excavation site provide crucial scientific information that is used to piece together what life during that geologic time period was like (which is the focus of paleontology). To a paleontologist, understanding past geologic periods through an assessment of climate, geography, and food supply reveals more about

the life of the dinosaur than focusing only on the scientific examination of the physical characteristics of the fossil remains. These environmental conditions are best estimated from a careful analysis of the local environment in which the dinosaur bones are discovered. Therefore in order to best understand dinosaurs, a paleontologist needs to direct his/her attention to studying the characteristics of the environs for the fossil location.

Like dinosaur bones, families come to us framed in a unique context. As family therapists, we understand that families are engulfed in a social and physical environment in which intimate contact and continuous exchange occur (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). Families are shaped by the exigencies of their day-to-day contexts—they make choices from and move within the bounds of the conditions in which they live and work.

Our conversation with Horner led us to reconsider the original paradigmatic shift made by family therapy years ago to privilege the interactional contexts of behavior. Interactional contexts go beyond the interpersonal actions among family members to include race, gender, socioeconomic status, spirituality, community life, and the dominant discourses of families' worlds. Certainly, we are obliged to think and act in terms of the larger and overlapping forces on families. Discussions are emerging that call upon family therapists to go beyond just recognizing and understanding the larger system influences; we must work to impact our communities beyond the specific instances where community systems negatively affect our clients (Doherty & Beaton, 2000).

The family's context is not the only one to consider. With the introduction of the "observing system" concept from physics (Becvar & Becvar, 1996), we developed the means by which to understand how we, as therapists, are joined with our client families in the therapy process. Our influence on families is now overtly acknowledged (i.e., how we ask questions, what we ask, whom we ask), thereby factoring in the context of therapy as relevant in understanding and working with families.

Horner's comments about the salience of contexts also reminded us about our own professional work contexts. The environments we work within (e.g., agencies, hospitals, universities, private practice) significantly shape how we work and necessitate that we carefully examine our rights and responsibilities within our professional work structures as they impact our clients and their care. Seeing our profession as the focal system and its environment as the interactional field should help us thoughtfully examine our specialized professional prac-

tices. Deconstructing our professional practices can assist us in developing innovative alternative approaches that will maintain our field's responsiveness to our clients.

EXPLANATORY METAPHORS

Horner was a proponent of the initially outrageous theory that dinosaurs may have had greater similarity to birds than to reptiles (Horner & Gorman, 1988). This theory is based upon the observation that certain nasal structures in dinosaurs were similar to the nasal structures of birds, providing physical evidence of a possible link between dinosaurs and birds.

Without getting into the scientific arguments and counter-arguments, this idea has served as a heuristic device guiding paleontologists to the locations of dinosaur remains. If the paleontologist uses a dinosaur-as-bird metaphor, he or she can envision dinosaurs engaging in activities and behaviors typical of birds. First of all, they could fly. If they could fly, their remains could be discovered in high places during that prehistoric time, locations where one would not expect to find them if dinosaurs were considered to be reptilian. Reptiles would necessarily be found near the sites of ancient seas while birds would not be limited to those locations; they could be found in places only accessible through flight. Thus new explanatory metaphors create pathways to other ideas that are opened up by use of the metaphor.

When Horner talked about the metaphor shift of seeing dinosaurs as more bird-like than reptile-like, we were reminded of the metaphor shift that launched the field of family therapy in the first place. Family therapy conceptualized human problems as relational—we were more interested in the spaces between people than in the characterological makeup of the individual.

Our choice of metaphors is important. All metaphors help us to see certain things while at the same time they prevent us from seeing other things, so we must carefully choose our metaphors. If one understands problems as the outgrowth of individual character flaws or traits, problems provide the stimulus to examine individual behaviors, individual thoughts, and individual feelings. Such ways of understanding problems have the remedies implicit in them. If, on the other hand, we see human problems as reflective of relational patterns, examining relationships and multiple contributing factors to problems will ensue.

A metaphor that is still emerging in the field considers systems

not as social systems, but as language systems or problem-determined systems (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). In the social systems framework, a system is determined by family membership or affiliation. Language systems are collectivities of persons who are united in being concerned with or affected by a problem. This variation on the systems idea opens the door for us to understand others beyond the family as fundamentally related to the problem, not simply as outside influences.

For example, consider those family therapists who are working with families embroiled in custody disputes among extended family members or ex-spouses. In using the language systems metaphor it is important to work with all involved. This could include extended family, ex-spouses, foster parents, residential treatment center personnel, social workers, or court representatives. Seeing the focal system as all those involved in the life of a given “problematic” person is a metaphor that is generative of new therapeutic ideas beyond nuclear family dynamics.

LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

One of the emerging ideas in paleontology that Horner sketched out for us had to do with the taxonomic system used to classify animals, specifically the category of species. Historically, the Linnaean system of classification which is the foundation for today’s biological classification system, was developed at a point when the earth had not yet been completely explored—1758; hence, no animal could be conclusively considered extinct (Biological Sciences Curriculum Study, 1963).

In particular, the term species is “thought of as a group of organisms that can, within their own population, produce fertile offspring but that cannot produce viable hybrids with related forms. In other words, species is a reproductive entity” (Bonner, 1962, p. 49). With an extinct animal, we have no ability to observe or verify the reproductive tendencies. Paleontologists have located fossils of adult dinosaurs, juvenile dinosaurs, and dinosaur eggs that seem related, but we have no incontrovertible evidence of reproduction; this does not confirm evidence of a species. Therefore, the species classification cannot technically be applied to groups of dinosaurs, or any other now-extinct animal, that was not observed and documented while alive and reproducing.

An alternative system needed to be invented to manage the classifying of extinct collections of animals. Horner suggested that the species grouping system give way to a classification system that is based on

the assumption that each dinosaur is considered to be one of a kind. Each dinosaur fossil is approached as unique—an “n” of one. However, describing each fossil as unique rather than as part of a class, is disruptive of a long-standing taken-for-granted language convention.

What does this have to do with family therapy? Of all the decisions we make regarding how to help clients, none is more influential in organizing our work than the language we use in talking about our clients and their issues (Andersen, 1996). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) is a system of categorizing individual behavior that has been adopted by many practitioners who work with couples, families, and groups.

When Horner explained the inappropriateness of using the term species to refer to dinosaurs, we revisited the DSM-IV taxonomy and questioned anew the appropriateness of a system constructed for classifying individual behavior in context of the relational world. This predicament seems akin to Horner’s effort to avoid “forcing a fit” into a system inappropriate for the task.

The ways in which we refer to the subjects of our work (families, dinosaurs, individuals) are literally defining moments. Our choice of descriptors in working with families reflects and guides our work. Kaslow (1996) devised a systematic procedure designed to classify relationships, not individuals. Critics of this effort insist that the act of diagnosing is itself antithetical to family therapy (Gergen, Hoffman, & Anderson, 1996). Lynn Hoffman states: “only by remaining the one health industry that does not give people labels or diagnose conditions can family therapy represent an important stream of evolution in the field” (p. 104).

Like Horner, we too wonder how our work with families would be affected if we saw each family as an “n of one,” in fundamental ways unique from all other families?

REFINING OUR KNOWLEDGE

Horner discussed his work as controversial and like all rigorous scientific work, open to continual testing or falsifying efforts (Popper, 1982). If Horner’s theories will one day be bypassed for another theory that serves a more informative function in the field, and certainly history indicates that it will, Horner wants to be the one who accomplishes this. There is something refreshing and energizing about this scientist’s single-minded pursuit of understanding a phenomenon,

rather than his resorting to a defensive posture of protecting his own theory from those who would challenge it.

Because Horner's propositions represented a tremendous divergence from what was acceptable within his field, his ideas and his academic qualifications were greatly criticized by others in the field who disagreed with him. If he had succumbed to these pressures and abandoned his hypothesis, the field would not have had the benefit of considering these ideas, at least in the way he presented them. His ideas, which were considered outrageous at the time enlivened the field of paleontology and disabled the complacency of mainstream viewpoints. The scientific method seeks to discover patterns in our universe and is always involved in revising understandings to better fit our world as we experience it.

In family therapy, we design interventions based upon our ways of envisioning clients. These operating plans may or may not prove to be effective. If family therapists could view conceptualizations and interventions as heuristic devices in helping to alleviate a family's concerns, perhaps we, too, could catch Horner's scientific spirit. Each therapist would strive to be effective by working to disconfirm, rather than to affirm, his/her own ideas. Too often, we become over-committed to our assessments, asking questions and designing therapy with the principal goal of confirming the correctness of our assessments (Furman & Ahola, 1992).

Paleontology and family therapy are each well-served to the degree that various theories stir the imaginations and emotions of the discipline's membership. Singular or dominant theories/ideologies tend to reify what is popular practice, reducing the field's readiness to adjust in changing circumstances. Family therapy has undergone numerous professional shifts over the course of its existence; it depends upon lively debate and innovation to insure its continued vitality.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Looking at paleontology, we discovered (or perhaps rediscovered) some useful ideas that we also embrace in family therapy. It was encouraging to see how those ideas at work in paleontology create professional excitement and innovation. Our talk with Horner revitalized our attitude about our work and what has made it special for us. As we have made comparisons between family therapy and paleontology, similar relationships could be drawn with other scientific fields (e.g., physics) as well as within the humanities (e.g., literature, art, music). Different

fields of interest will spark connections with certain readers that can lead to fruitful and expanded ideas and applications.

In a professional climate that often rewards the flashiest methods or the quick-fix practices, it is vital for family therapists to take stock of what has made the profession unique within the helping arena. Theoretical beginnings are not just historical markers at the side of the road. We need to regularly devise ways of revisiting the constitutive nature of our profession and examining where we are headed. Knowing that some of the ideas Horner discussed have been and still are challenging to prevailing thinking emboldens us to continue critically evaluating our work as family therapists. We should neither blindly follow nor reject ideas simply because they are “new.”

Professional discourse, as exemplified in journals and conferences, is increasingly focused on professional organization issues, in particular our status within the mental health marketplace. However, we must never forget that we are laborers in an ongoing effort to effectively and respectfully help those we call our clients.

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