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# Maturana and the ideology of conformity[1]

Within therapy, there has long been an argument, debated under different banners about the therapist's role in influencing the direction in which clients change The banners have been labeled at different points in time, "orthodox analysis vs. brief therapy," "directiveness vs. non directiveness," "awareness vs. behavior modification," all the way to "aesthetics vs. pragmatics." The very resilience of the debate points to its ideological rather than practical basis, the positions taken depending on philosophical and sociopolitical values, not on empirical evidence.

Enter Humberto Maturana, who allegedly puts an end to the debate by drawing us to an "inescapable" conclusion: that any "passion to change others" is not just ethically wrong but essentially impossible. The logic behind this far-reaching conclusion requires a close examination. From an epistemological point of view, Maturana follows Gregory Bateson and others in asserting that no knowledge about an objective reality is possible, because reality is "observer dependent." Although this idea is not new, Maturana espouses it more vehemently than his predecessors. He stretches it to the implication that, as the observer realizes there is no objectivity, he or she (in our case, the therapist) necessarily "loses the passion" for changing the other. This assumes, however, that passion for change is only fueled by a belief that one's perspective is absolutely true—that is, a description of "the reality out there." But the same passion may be fueled by the ethical or political conviction that some truths, however relative, are "better" (for instance, conducive to higher quality living) than others. I may try to change a husband's perception of his wife as "nagging" into "helpful," not because I think that my view is true and his is false, but because I think it will prevent a child from being clobbered.

Besides eliminating the concept of objectivity, Maturana also says that the behavior of living organisms are not, as we have grown accustomed to believing, a purposeful accommodation to their environment, but just a manifestation of their own internal structure. As living organisms ourselves, we are structure-determined, and thus our existence proceeds in an essentially autonomous way. The apparently inescapable inference would seem to be that it does not make any sense for the therapist to consciously aim interventions at encouraging the client to change in any given direction; all that can be done is to trigger mere "perturbations" ("responses," which would imply direct influence, are not even a possibility) in a system that is exclusively involved in just continuing to be itself. A closer look at Maturana's understanding of living systems, however, reveals that such inference is far from inescapable, even if we provisionally accept—for the sake of argument—that Maturana's view of biological systems can be legitimately applied to social systems like families. Maturana's distinction between organization (the characteristics that define a system as belonging to a certain class and that cannot be changed without the system ceasing to be a member of that class) and structure (each one of the many alternative ways in which a system can potentially

[1] Originally published in *the Family Therapy Networker*, May-June 1985

actualize itself without disintegrating) amounts to a recognition that a family constantly changes while remaining the same. Nothing in this formulation is incompatible with the idea that the therapist may purposefully structure the therapeutic environment to encourage a family to change in a given direction. And, since in the case of families it is impossible to differentiate a priori what is intrinsic organization from what is transient structure, it can be argued that the therapist can best help a family actualize itself by trying to change its structure as much as its organization will tolerate. From a strictly theoretical point of view, then, Maturana's work seems to support a "therapist-as-change-agent" position at least as coherently as it supports the opposite. And, when asked about our own field, he usually mentions the work of Minuchin and Haley (hardly your average "free-of-passion" therapists when it comes to changing others) as being perfectly consistent with his own philosophy. Why then is Maturana often cited as support for the stance of the cool therapist who has "freed" himself of the passion for change? In trying to answer this question, it may be useful to put Maturana's entrance into the family therapy field in historical perspective.

*Family Therapy and the American Dream*

Family therapy emerged largely as a response to the frustrations of individual therapy, and as long as it was widely believed that families fully contained the key to the understanding and/or the solution of pathology, the figure of the therapist as agent of change was a fairly popular one. This ideology of change was supported by a decent supply of public monies coupled with the spectacular successes of our videotaped masters. However, over the past decade, a couple of developments have begun to shatter family therapy's version of the American Dream.

One of these was the emphasis on technical skills in training family therapists—on the assumption that techniques alone, without an understanding of the underlying theory and ideology, would do the trick The eclecticism thus encouraged ("Let us use whatever seems to work"), coupled with the frustration of seeing it not work as well in one's own hands as in the master's, led to a demoralization among many therapists that in turn increased the quest for drastically simple answers. Renouncing "passion" à la Maturana may be the next simple answer.

The other, equally demoralizing development has been the gradual realization that there are limits to change within families—a recognition that pushed some of us to examine and maybe tackle the constraining effects of larger social contexts, while others retreated to the safer domain of the individual psyche. This return to a focus on the individual is currently receiving added stimulus from the conservative shift in public policies, with their detrimental impact on both our clients' social contexts and on the public agencies from which many of us try to reach them.

The convergence of these two developments provides a fertile ground for a non-interventionist interpretation of Maturana's theory. Amidst budget cuts and clients who do not improve, the notions of truth as relative and systems as structure-determined may be used to justify our seeming impotence. If families can only be themselves anyway, we can stop trying to change them. If we do not try to influence other people's lives, we cannot fail or be held responsible for whatever happens to them. If they do not change, it is because they were not supposed to, rather than because we did not know how to help them. We can also be more tolerant towards larger social circumstances (no matter how

inadequate, unfair or violent they may seem to be) and stop trying to affect them from our under-funded agencies. We can focus on being ourselves, look inward for coherent meanings, shed our passion to change others, live in the serene equanimity of our own customized bubbles. We can take flight from external chaos into inner stability, Walkmanize our existence, and still feel epistemologically justified.

*Taking Responsibility*

Conformity and the search for Nirvana in the face of worldwide calamity is an ethical choice. It is not the only one available, even from the point of view of Maturana's theory. We may also choose to examine critically—and take responsibility for—the ethical underpinnings of our therapeutic interventions. While accepting that there are multiple versions of reality, we may choose not to accept versions that are congruent with the perpetuation of racism, domestic violence, school dropouts, runaway teenagers, and other destructive interactions. We may still try to change uglier versions, not into truer but into better versions of reality. And we may, if unsuccessful, choose to passionately admit our impotence rather than calmly validate the enemy.

The passion to change others is—to use Maturana's terms—intrinsically constitutive of the therapist—part of his "organization." Philosophers and other observers were created to contemplate, but therapists only have a right to exist if they can contribute to transforming something bad into something better. "Bad" may stand for "enmeshment," "introjected object relations," "resistance," or "a defective conditioned reflex," but for therapists there is always an adversary to be conquered. If we lose our passion to change, we might as well disintegrate as therapists and become philosophers of biology like Maturana.

But notice that Maturana can only afford freedom from the passion to change others as a philosopher. Actually, as a presenter of his views, he is certainly trying hard to change our thinking, not hesitating to blame our occasional reluctance on our unwillingness to shift our paradigm. Far from being a conformist, Maturana the lecturer—like most therapists—is a closeted agent of change.

## *Reference*

Maturana, HR. and F.J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and cognition. The realization of the living.* Boston, D. Reidel, 1980.