Reflections: The Work of Andersen, Anderson and Goolishian

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Photo by Kimberly J. McClaflin
Introduction

In studying the work of Tom Andersen and the work of Harlene Anderson and Harry Goolishian, more similarities can be drawn than differences. This fact should not be surprising considering they were colleagues. Harlene notes Tom was a long-time friend of herself and Harry Goolishian (Anderson, 2007b). Tom Andersen served as Professor of Social Psychiatry at the Social Psychiatry Institute of Community Medicine in Norway (Malinen, Cooper & Thomas, 2012). Harlene was a founding member of the Houston Galveston Institute, Taos Institute and AccessSuccessInternational (Malinen, Cooper & Thomas, 2012). Harlene and Harry Goolishian worked closely together after their meeting in Texas in 1970 (Anderson, 2012). While Tom’s background was in medicine and then psychiatry and Harlene and Harry’s backgrounds were in psychology, they embodied similar values. Their work was passionately focused on postmodernism and social constructionism within their family therapy practices. At the heart of their work is the concept of collaboration with their clients, finding co-constructed meaning and using these thoughts as a philosophical stance rather than being concerned with creating practice methods in their work with clients. This paper will explore these ideas as they relate to the work of Andersen and the work of Anderson and Goolishian. For the purpose of this paper in an effort to alleviate confusion, the therapists will be referred to by their first names. While Tom and Harlene share a last name, the spelling is different and they are of no relation. With the sudden and unexpected passing of Tom in 2007 after a fall in the mountains of Norway and the death of Harry in 1991 at the age of 67 (McDaniel, 1993), examining the intersections of the work of these great postmodern/social constructionist therapists is a worthwhile exercise for the emerging therapist.
Local vs Universal Knowledge

The stance of the therapist is of utmost importance in the context of postmodern informed therapy. In *The Therapist and the Postmodern Therapy System: A Way of Being with Others* (2007), Harlene notes the importance of remaining skeptical and constantly questioning the concept of universal truths or grand narratives. Instead, she promotes the concepts of local knowledge created within the context of community and in which all parties contribute to meaning. She notes knowledge is not something which can be discovered and disseminated to others, but rather it is language which provides the vehicle with which we create knowledge and meaning. Truth then is something which is co-created between individuals and this relational aspect of meaning making can be termed social constructionism (Anderson, 2005). Through the act of dialogue, one interpretation invites another interpretation. In other words, interpretation is not a silent function completed by the individual, but it is rather formulated within responsiveness to the other. Harlene’s concepts of local and co-created reality mirror Tom’s concepts of local meaning which, as discussed later in this paper were very likely influenced by his early work in the far north of Norway, working in remote and isolated communities (Anderson, 2007b).

Collaboration and Good Manners

Important to both Tom and the work of Harlene and Harry is the concept of therapy being the work of collaboration between the client and the therapist. Harlene notes collaborative relationships are a way in which we orient ourselves with clients that invites mutual inquiry, shared engagement and joint action (Anderson, 2007a). She quotes Lynn Hoffman (2007) as saying Tom was, “Without rank and bypassing the hierarchy implicit in most social interactions”
(p. 413) with the therapist not leading the client to a predetermined goal but rather operating on a feeling level, creating a constant sense of justice for the client.

Language was very important to Tom. He believed when the therapist provided answers for clients, they were in effect, creating violence, or ‘slapping them’ (Andersen, 2012). By saying, ‘instead of thinking or doing this, think or do that’, we are in effect creating violence against them. Harlene echoes this when she says, “Collaborative relationship refers to doing something with, rather than to another person (Andersen, 2012). She stresses the concept of maintaining ‘good manners’ with clients. For Harlene, this means paying attention to timing, tone and attitude when introducing new ideas. She also notes it is important to present things in a tentative or provisional manner. She further notes by presenting things in this manner she is contributing to the conversations, but she is not communicating it as truth or reality. By presenting her thoughts tentatively, she is simply fostering the conversation. She also believes it is important to be willing to let go of her own ideas, as new meaning is created within the context of the conversation. In an effort to create shared meaning, Tom’s team changed their language from doing one thing ‘instead’ of another to doing it ‘in addition to’, which represented for Tom a big ideological and philosophical change (Andersen, 2012). He noted it moved them from either/or to both/and thinking, opening the door to new ways of being and thinking of themselves as a team of therapists. Similarly, Tom worked to find ideas with clients which were ‘appropriately unusual’ (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006). While more of the usual fails to bring about change in the clients life, suggesting things that are too unusual can alienate or make the client defensive. In this way he worked to stay close to the client, in effect using ‘good manners’ as Harlene would suggest.
The concept of keeping things from turning into techniques seems to be of value for both Tom and Harlene. Tom was widely respected for introducing the idea of reflecting teams and having clients listen in to what the therapy team is discussing about them. He questioned why therapists hide away their deliberations about the families and called attention to the distinction between ‘public language’ and ‘private language’ (Becvar, 2007). Instead, he suggested the client as the best resource in the therapy process thus purposing the therapist set aside their expertise and create a ‘withness’ between the client and the therapist (Becvar, 2007). Harlene also comments on ‘withness’ saying it reflects a way of being with people that is inherently more participatory and mutual and less dualistic and hierarchical (Anderson, 2007a). Tom could not articulate where the roots of these ideas regarding reflecting teams came from, rather he felt it was just the right thing to do and they felt intuitively correct (Becvar, 2007). One would wonder if his postmodern concepts and social constructionist ideas came from his early work. Harlene notes in his early life, after becoming a physician, he traveled by plane, boat, skis and on foot in hostile weather to meet with patients above the Arctic Circle (Anderson, 2007b). How could meeting patients in these remote villages not impact his ideas about alternate meanings and differing realities? Harlene notes during this time he became aware of the strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity which led him to the field of psychiatry (Anderson, 2007b). He was, however quickly critical of orthodox psychiatry, rejecting in particular the concepts of labeling people. Moving away from conventional psychiatry and finding a space in family therapy, he was sometimes described as living at the ‘centre of the edge’ (Anderson, 2007b).

Harlene believes the concept of reflecting teams spread so quickly throughout the world because of the appeal of it having no one in a hierarchical position, thus creating a more democratic process (Anderson, 2007b). She writes one of Tom’s greatest fears was having his
ideas about reflecting teams turn into techniques, ignoring the underlying concepts of open talk and shared meaning and allowing the client to choose whether to respond. Tom was reported to be pleased when Harry suggested reflection teams were more of a process with broad applicability than they were a set of techniques (Anderson, 2007b). Perhaps his desire to keep his ideas from becoming techniques played a role in his lack of published writing. Harlene notes Tom is mostly known for his presence rather than what he had published (Anderson, 2007b). She notes he devoted his time generously, criss-crossing the globe and consulting in over fifty countries (Anderson, 2007b). His stance of constantly creating new knowledge may have made the appeal of writing his thoughts down less appealing as the written word carries a certain permanence and can intimate a fixed truth. Harlene echoes this when she says, “Like Tom, I always think of my ideas and work as evolving, that I’m never in any one place too long” (Anderson, 2012, p. 63). She notes she currently refers to her work as postmodern and collaborative, but says ‘currently’ because what she calls it and how she thinks about it shifts through time. She also echoes Tom in regards to rejecting the ideas of techniques in postmodern, social constructionist work. She has said, “I do not think of the philosophical stance as a set of skills or as having techniques” (Anderson, 2012, p. 69). Both Tom and Harlene seem to embrace the philosophy and reject the idea of imposing technique’s in there teachings. They also both seem to hold meanings and ideas loosely. This can be said of Harry as well, who seemed never satisfied with the therapeutic methods of the day and continued to push the edge of innovation regarding theory and practice (McDaniel, 1993). Harry is reported to often say, “One should always be passionate about one’s theory…but never married to it” (McDaniel, 1993, p. 1).
Similar to Tom’s idea of ‘withness,’ Harlene speaks about the idea of ‘being public’ (Anderson, 2012). She discusses the word transparency, likely introduced as a concept in therapy by Carl Rogers as being the important act of being open, forthcoming, sharing your thoughts and revealing your prejudices or biases. Not wishing to keep thoughts private, for fear the therapist will then direct the conversation in a particular direction, allowing them to take up the room in the therapeutic conversation, rather than allowing the client room to be the expert (Anderson, 2012).

Listening to the Body

Tom’s work seemed to be focused not only on language, but also with the language of the body. Harlene notes Tom had the ability to connect with others on a mind-body level (Anderson, 2007b). She further notes, after working closely with two physiotherapists in Norway, Tom focused on the body during his work and was attentive to breathing, posture, and tone of voice as well as what was going on in his own body. Tom’s early work as a physician would also likely play a large roll in his interest in the body as it relates to language and communication. Harlene notes as well that language can include words, symbols, gestures, and eye movements (Anderson, 2012). Tom tuned in particularly to how certain words affected people. He noted, “That became clear in my early work, to listen to every word and to notice particularly those words that touched and moved the person, and then carefully try to see if the word can be investigated further…” (Andersen, 2012, p. 30). He stressed how crucial it is from a postmodern, social constructionist stance to listen to every word and see how the words affect the person. He further notes when he sees the story move the other person, which then touches him, it is a good time to raise a question (Andersen, 2012). Tom refers to the idea knowledge we feel in our bodies as ‘tacit knowledge’ or what John Shotter calls ‘knowledge of the third kind’ (Andersen, 2012).
Expertise

Some are critical of this style of therapy. Harlene makes note regarding the ideological shift she and Harry made, they did not intend to provoke their colleagues, but they found they were often challenged, particularly in the area of ‘not knowing’ and recognizing the client as the expert (Anderson, 2005). She further comments her colleagues seem to feel the stance of not-knowing on the therapist’s part, somehow diminishes the therapist’s contributions and downplays the mutual activity of a therapeutic relationship. Perhaps what some find disconcerting is the idea of the therapist stepping out of the expert role. Indeed, criticisms have included the idea of the ‘not-knowing’ stance as a disavowal of the therapists’ expertise which can lead to an impoverishing of therapy (Anderson, 2005). If we aren’t the expert after all, why would people come to us for help? Harlene answers this well when she explains the postmodern and social constructionist processes. While both the therapist and the client bring expertise to the encounter, the client brings expertise about his/her life while the therapist brings expertise on the process and space for collaborative relationships and dialogical conversations (Anderson, 2007a). Harlene notes the aim of therapy remains the same as with other therapies: to help the people who hire you to do so (Anderson, 1999). Using the postmodern/social constructionist approach involves helping individuals through dialogical conversation, where listening becomes less defensive and more deliberate. It could be said then, we become experts in not knowing. Harlene describes maintaining a stance of always doubting what we think and always offering ideas as food for thought and dialogue (Anderson, 1999). She further says it is making space for multiple voices, diversity, difference and collaborative relationships. Harlene offers that each member of the conversation, or ‘interpreter’ brings his or her history, including pre-understanding as well as their current linguistic practices. Each member of the dialogue then
contributes their understandings, thus creating co-created meaning (Anderson, 2005). She further notes, from a hermeneutic perspective, the process of understanding involves the process of immersing oneself in the others horizon. Making meaning thus becomes something we do together with one interpretation inviting another (Anderson, 2005).

Harlene also stresses the importance of using the client’s language, which is customary and comfortable for them (Anderson, 2005). She believes the client’s language should take precedence over the language and meaning of the therapist. Thus the therapist must enter the conversation as the learner.

Harlene speaks of the therapist having relational and conversational expertise and the capacity for creating spaces that invite dialogical conversations and collaborative relationships (Anderson, 2005). The expertise of the therapist lies then in his or her ability to create space to have dialogical conversations, to suspend judgement and to listen and respond in a way that creates meaning between those present. Tom touches on this as well when he says, “I believe strongly that each of us is generated very differently as professionals. We are much more personal than the authorities have led us to believe” (Andersen, 2012, pp. 17). He further notes his wish to stop talking about therapy and research as human techniques and rather talk about it as human art or the art to participate in the bonds of others (Andersen, 2012). One can speculate Tom is speaking of different kinds of expertness than many of his cohort prefer to embrace. His distaste for labeling clients and discomfort concerning talking about clients outside of their presence (Anderson, 2007b), further supports the idea of his uneasiness regarding traditional concepts of expertise in the therapeutic role.

Conclusion
The work of Tom Andersen and the work of Harlene Anderson and Harry Goolishian have helped form the concepts of postmodern and social constructionist therapy. This paper has examined how their theories interact on a variety of topics including local versus universal knowledge, collaboration and the importance of good manners and non-violent techniques such as using both/and language as opposed to either/or language and posing ideas to clients using tentative language. The concept of their approaches being held as a way of seeing the world, as opposed to reducing them to a set of techniques is an important concept for Tom, Harlene and Harry. The importance of body awareness as a form of language and communication were focused on by both Tom and Harlene as well. The role of the therapist as a relational and conversational expert in postmodern therapy was also discussed.

As an emerging therapist, the writing of this paper has been very enlightening and inspiring and the concepts of these great individuals will be carried forward into my future practice. Postmodern and co-constructionist concepts have provided me with a new way to be with clients. The concepts run counter to many of my previous learnings and it creates some discomfort. It feels as though embracing these concepts involves a letting go of others. Whether I embrace these concepts whole heartedly or not, they have provided me with a different way of being with clients. I will carry these concepts forward with me, but I will perhaps carry them lightly, not embracing them with a closed fist. As a wise man once said, it’s good to be passionate about ideas, but perhaps not married to them.

References


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