

## **Celebrating the Legacy of Gianfranco Cecchin in the Fifth Province**

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### **Meeting Gianfranco**

This celebratory article weaves my story of engagements with Gianfranco Cecchin in person and in my practice, past and present. My first meeting with Gianfranco was in the summer of 1982 when he visited Dublin as part of a holiday in Ireland with his daughter. My colleague, Nollaig Byrne had met him previously at the Ackerman Institute in New York where, she was introduced to him by our mutual friend Monica McGoldrick. During that first brief interlude in Ireland, he visited our Fifth province team in the Department of Child and Family Psychiatry at the Mater Misericordiae Hospital in Dublin. We were in the process of reviewing a videotape of a family we referred to as ‘the Royal Family’ (Byrne and McCarthy, 1995).

After a few introductions and explanations, we settled back to watch. Minutes later Gianfranco was asleep, not understanding one word of our Dublin vernacular. Shortly afterwards, we adjourned to the nearest hostelry to introduce Gianfranco to something he might enjoy - a pint of Guinness! This was my first exposure to the genius of Gianfranco. As we talked, his ideas somersaulted and pirouetted across the stage of his mind. I was captivated and became henceforth an ardent fan and subsequently a friend of this unique man.

There would be many more meetings over the next twenty years, at conferences, large and small. My favourite meetings were in my own home when he came to stay. My learning of the Milan Approach and more particularly Gianfranco’s version was honed in large part through knowing him well, watching him work and lastly reading his works.

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## **Milan and The Fifth Province Approach**

Subsequent to both the visit of Lynn Hoffman and Gianfranco Cecchin in the summer of 1982, Nollaig Byrne, Philip Kearney and I set out to fashion our team after the Milan team. This move had occurred primarily as a result of a strong suggestion by Lynn. We henceforth transformed ourselves from a team involved in peer supervision to a non-hierarchical team premised on such concepts and practices as circularity, fit, team mind, hypothesizing, attention to language and the five part session (Palazzoli et al., 1980).

Neutrality was the sole concept we never really took on. As we were soon to begin to meet with families where father-daughter sexualized abuse was disclosed, the concept of neutrality did not sit with us well. Instead we coined the term Ambivalent Dis-Position. The concept of 'ambivalence' was an indigenous concept, the Irish being well celebrated for their literary and narrative uses of ambiguity. Ambivalence in our usage related to an ability to have 'two-thinks', (Joyce, 1980) a both/and perspective on the often either/or presentations of families and attending professionals. We knew early on that we had to listen to all sides of the tragic story of abuse in families if we were not to engage in symmetrical battles around disclosure and denial. This ambivalence did not speak to confusion or a lack of clarity about who did what to whom and the issue of responsibility. Rather it allowed us to open space for non-antagonistic encounters, which did not cement denial and other processes of fracture and disconnection.

The Irish, known for their propensity for fantastic stories and story telling was a potential fertile ground for tall stories of denial and abrogation of responsibility to occur. Harnessing this potential, through a celebration of ambivalence and ambiguity, perpetrators were more likely to recalibrate their stories towards a more believable 'truth'. Ambiguous discussions allowed us to address issues through metaphors, which were initially hard to verbalise. A "mystery and real severe physical problem" became the entry point for a young girl hospitalized for stomach pains. The girl had said that if her abuse was discussed in public or with her parents she would strongly deny it. This took place in Ireland at a time when child protective services were thin on the ground. The parents had then been informed that the pains were psychosomatic which the father strongly rejected saying her pain was "real".

Accepting father's version as a metaphor for her abuse, we began to ask circular questions about the consequences of understanding the cause of the pain. "What would mother do if she knew what caused the pain, was behind the pain", "what would father do if mother knew the cause of the pain?" "Who could she tell?" and so on. A week later the young girl disclosed her abuse to her mother while father acknowledged his behaviour. She later moved to her maternal grandmother's home with the help of Social Services.

### **From Future Questions to Questioning at the Extremes**

As we developed our practices based on the Milan Approach future questioning became an important tool. Families seemed more ready to speak about a future than a painful past. As one mother put it, "I can't learn to ride a bicycle standing at the kitchen sink". Using our stance of ambivalent positioning and ambiguous, metaphoric talk we went on to develop a form of questioning which we called, 'questioning at the Extremes'. This was further developed through my own PhD Dissertation (Colgan, F.I. 1991). This questioning was very tightly linked to the logic of the stories being told and of the conversation that was taking place. Tracking words very carefully for hints of relevant metaphors, two things emerged. It was as if the family members were giving us a hidden permission for extreme discussions to take place. The 'questions at the extremes' always followed these hints logically and carefully. They were never plucked out of the air. One such example was when a father who denied that he had sexually abused his daughter said that his wife was very forgiving. The therapist then asked if there was anything he would not be forgiven for. "No" he answered, "She would forgive me for anything". Next followed the question at the extreme, "would your wife forgive you if you made your daughter pregnant?" "Yes", said father "but that would never happen, maybe something went on but not that". From here on in the denial dissolved into a conversation of what needed to happen to protect his daughter. Throughout this conversation the young daughter's child protection worker's observed.

### **The Verb to 'Show'**

The attention to language developed by the Milan associates from their earliest days together was grist to our mill. Coupled with Maturana's notions of 'structure' and 'organisation' we were enabled to conduct conversations not premised on the ontology of family members. We stopped using the popular description of the time, 'Incestuous families'. Instead, we spoke of families in which a father abused his daughter or children. Rather than use the term 'victim' we preferred the more positive term 'heroine' for our young clients who courageously disclosed the abuse they were experiencing (McCarthy & Byrne, 2001). Perpetrators became fathers who abused. We deconstructed totalizing descriptions for those based on particular behaviours. In one interview, when the distinction was made between a 'perpetrating father' and the man, as 'father in the family' acknowledgement of responsibility for abuse followed closely. It was as if when the identity of abuser was secondary to the identity as 'father' in the family the man could participate in becoming responsible for his abusive behaviours.

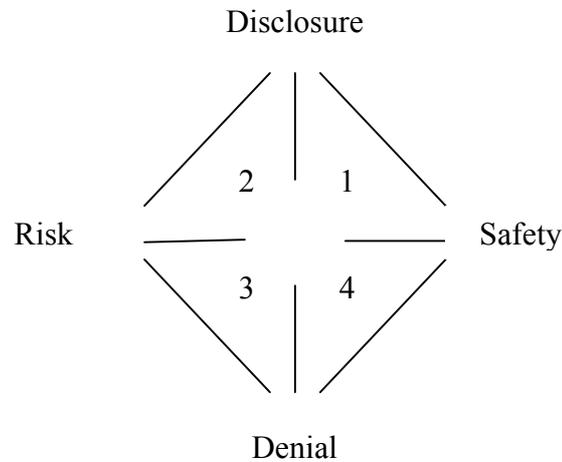
### **Don't fall in love with your hypothesis**

To this day I can hear Gianfranco's mischievous voice call us away from a hasty wedlock to a favoured or 'obvious' hypothesis. However, always liking to be pro-active in our sessions and fond of inserting our own ideas, this premise/'dictate' assumed an in between status. Now, we talked of holding our ideas lightly. They became a loose scaffold on which to build conversations. These scaffolds we referred to as 'Diamonds'.

Diamonds were of three kinds and related directly to the themes or relational configurations emerging in conversation. Special attention was given to the words or metaphors that family members used. Taking these together with our own resonating intuition we co-constructed diamonds as an aid to hypothesizing and planning for sessions and therapeutic conversations. The forms of the diamond followed Bateson's (1980) notions of Symmetry and Complementarity as will be outlined below.

*Fig 1: Rough Diamond.*

In the rough diamond words and metaphors were taken and contrasted with their opposites on two intersection axes.



The intersecting axes held the related pairs of opposites. From these four related quadrants or provinces, as we called them, questions were generated in relation to: disclosure and denial, risk and safety. An example of that would be the metaphoric conversation outlined above in relation to the young girl with the stomach pains.

We have found over the years that by linking questions across the four provinces, new ideas or solutions presented themselves. These were often unforeseen such as the young girl's disclosure having said she would deny the abuse. Hence we referred to the central space where the four provinces intersected as the 'Fifth Province' or the province of possibilities and imagination.

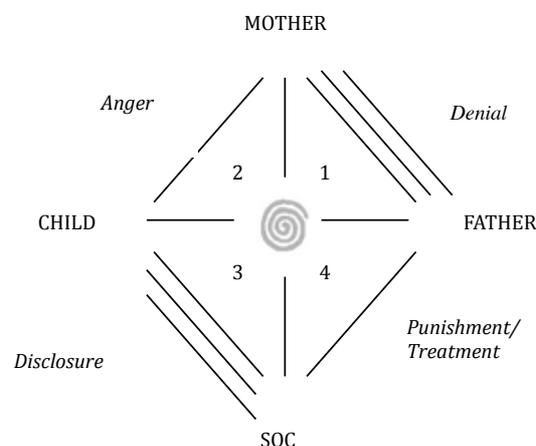
The other two diamond types were predominantly used in tracking and hypothesizing relational alliances, discursive stances and positions. These diamonds were referred to as (1) the *symmetrical or competitive diamond* and (2) *the complementary or co-operative diamond*.

The notions of symmetry and complementarity were taken from the work of Bateson (1980) who was also one of the principle sources of inspiration for Gianfranco and the Milan team. In our configuration of these concepts we also imported some indigenous symbols in creating loose frames for therapeutic conversations. These frames or diamonds were holding devices for the complex relationships generated in the abuse disclosure drama. They allowed us to follow the spirit of Bateson and Milan while also responding to the

particularities of the Irish context. The diamond shape itself owes its inspiration from ancient rock carvings outside Dublin while the traditional Celtic spiral re-presented for us the aliveness and possibilities of conversations. The centre of the diamond, which also reached out into the other quadrants or provinces we referred to as the *'fifth province'* - a place apart and a place which was a part of all the other provinces. It was a space of possibility and imagination. Here conversants could cut loose from pre-fixed attributes, views and characterizations and assume their full responsibilities.

Following Maturana, (1985) Gianfranco (1987) and our Swedish colleagues, Mia Andersson, the late Klas Grevelius and Ernst Salamon (1987) we embraced love as curiosity and attempted to open space when presented with relationships based on symmetry and complementarity. Within the abuse scenario, they frequently formed in the following contours.

*Fig 2: Symmetrical Competitive Diamond*

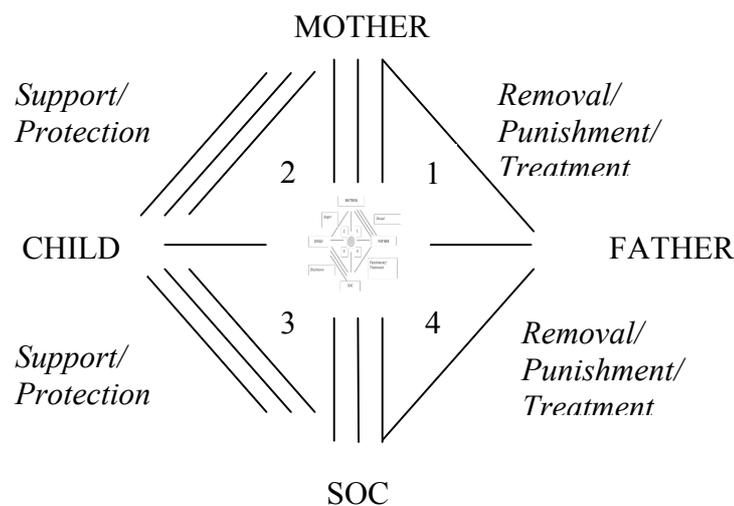


**NB** (Triple lines refer to relationships of Alliance while single lines denote relationships of distance or no-alliance).

In the symmetrical competitive presentation in sexualized abuse disclosure we typically encountered situations where the non-abusing parent (mother in most cases) was allying with a father or father figure who had abused one or more of the children. This alliance was generally in relation to support and denial of the abuse. In taking up such a position the parents were

then structurally in opposition to the alliance, which their child or children had with representatives of Social Services (SOC). This latter alliance was initiated through the abuse disclosure and was in the interests of protection and support. Unchecked such oppositional relationships tended towards competition and escalation which rarely served the long-term interests of the young people or their families.

*Figure 3: The Complementary Co-Operative Diamond*



Unlike the symmetrical system outlined in figure 2, the Complementary system was brought forth when the child or children’s mother supported her children’s disclosure of abuse and further sought the assistance and support of Social Services (SOC). In this scenario, father generally moved or was legally moved out of the family home. While this system is often cited as the most desirable situation for children disclosing abuse we had found that it was not without its difficulties. In our experience the gaze of suspicion almost inevitably fell on mother as questions were asked about her protection during the years or episodes of abuse. Also while the child or children had protected the family in keeping the abuse secret, they were now the responsible agents in the breakdown of the family. In spite of every effort to assure children that neither the abuse nor the aftermath of disclosure was their “fault” they nevertheless continuously voiced their sense of responsibility.

As I said previously, *Fifth Province* conversations attempted to elicit each participant’s viewpoint in an atmosphere of curiosity and acceptance. The eluding of fixed positions and pre-judgments facilitated in turn the co-

creating of a space for different stories to emerge through circular questioning and questioning at the extremes. In this interweave of stories and viewpoints, it was our experience that the field of relating and conversing became less divisive and solutions emerged, almost spontaneously. The field became one of inter-acting, inter-viewing and inter-being as it were (McCarthy 2004). There were no individual doers per se but a group coming into greater synergy in the generating of possible solutions not based on divisive cut-offs.

### **Current Activities and traces of the past: Therapy and Meditation**

These days I have become interested in the overlap of systemic social constructionist thinking and practice with spirituality (McCarthy, 2004, 2003, 2010). Gianfranco and Luigi's interviews always seemed to produce synergistic experiences and over the years as I became involved in meditation practices I began to see links. Gianfranco was often puzzled by this newfound practice on my part and he would frequently ask Nollaig if Imelda was 'better' yet! However, as I reviewed the two practices of therapy and meditation it became clear that, therapy conversations had often seemed meditative to me as clients and I moved towards greater levels of observation or witnessing in sessions. From this a deep connection or communion as I call it with clients emerged and in this the magic of therapy happened (McCarthy 2010). This was sometimes experienced within a field of relationships, where the whole truly became more than the sum of its parts. At other times it was in the one to one connection with an individual where the conversation took on aspects of a field where problems were dissolved and solutions co-created. These experiences linked me right back to the practices in Milan. Their conversational or method of inquiry that incorporated Gregory Bateson's ideas of circularity had always fascinated me as I saw the whole system or field become an observing system by way of their way of questioning or 'gossiping in the presence'. As observation was built upon observation through their reflexive questioning the answers, solutions, possibilities seemed to emerge in and from the systemic field as the collective mind appeared to expand. From such ideas as, "the system knows how to self correct", "the system is perfect" and "the system is autopoietic" came an idea, which underpins my current practice, 'in Being we are free'. No matter how bad things appear

there is always a part of us that 'observes' and knows how to 'be' without problems. Out of that part there also emerges surprising and creative leaps. In this way of seeing the 'problem' becomes a kind of unique outcome of particular circumstances and contexts, rather than a category of 'being'. As James Joyce (1980) might have said in *Finnegan's Wake* that this brings us by a circular route back to the Milan idea of the 'tyranny of linguistic conditioning' (Palazolli et al, 1981).

As I have outlined above and following Milan's genius for 'showing' systems in relationship through their model of questioning left me to this day with a profound trust in the relationships between clients and myself in co-creating ways forward. Over my many years in the practice of therapy I have been struck time and time again with the 'field-like' quality of the therapeutic relationship and by the intelligence of this field. Therefore these days I like to talk about therapists co-creating in an intelligent field of infinite possibilities. When I remember Gianfranco's words about curiosity, I think that he too was referring in some way to such an intelligent field. He may not have called it that but it continually points me to possibilities which I could not dream of in advance. Consequently, his inspiration is like a tracing along the path leading me towards wonder at the resilience and wisdom of the human spirit.

Since completing my PhD thesis over 20 years ago, I have never strayed far from the wonders that Gianfranco opened up for me both in my thinking and in my practice. Today, everything he said and practice rings as 'true' and as fresh as it was when I heard and saw them for the first time. I think it is the hallmark of geniuses that there is such a universal and infinite quality to their work. It traverses boundaries of place and time, cultures and peoples. I remember, when we would meet as teams during the eighties that there was a kind of fingerprint quality to the approaches that were emerging. By this I mean that even though the practices were becoming more diverse there was a recognizable signature from the origins or relationship to the Milan approach of Boscolo and Cecchin (Bateson & McCarthy, in press). This might show itself through a development of circular questioning, different kinds of reflections that still bore the hallmark of 'Milan' and an appreciation of language and how we might use it to liberate ideas and ways of living.

In 2014 none of this has changed for me and as I said I still marvel at the breadth of Gianfranco's thinking and his on going capacity for out of the box practices that were always fresh and in the moment responses to significant systemic dilemmas in a family or organization. Particularly, I still hold the wonder and awe at the intelligence of each systemic field I enter, knowing that what needs to happen will emerge in and through our deep connection or communion together in a constantly 'informing' context.

Thank you Gianfranco for who you were and for how you practiced.

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