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Reframing “Reframing”: Another Look at “Reframing” Inspired by a Sonnet by Charles Baudelaire

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Reframing “Reframing”: Another Look at “Reframing” Inspired by a Sonnet by Charles Baudelaire

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Even if rarely discussed in the current systemic literature, “reframing” remains a key concept and technique in systemic family therapy. With reference to Baudelaire’s poem entitled “The Frame,” we attempt to highlight and revisit reframing attitudes and interventions in clinical practice with families.

LE CADRE

*Comme un beau cadre ajoute à la peinture,
Bien qu’elle soit d’un pinceau très vanté
Je ne sais quoi d’étrange et d’enchanté
En l’isolant de l’immense nature,*

*Ainsi bijoux, meubles, métaux, dorure,
S’adaptaient juste à sa rare beauté;
Rien n’offusquait sa parfaite clarté,
Et tout semblait lui servir de bordure.*

*Même on eût dit parfois qu’elle croyait
Que tout voulait l’aimer; elle noyait
Sa nudité voluptueusement*

*Dans les baisers du satin et du linge,
Et, lente ou brusque, à chaque mouvement
Montrait la grâce enfantine du singe.*

We would particularly like to thank Paulette Nandrain, Romance philologist and journalist, for reading and correcting the following pages, drawing on her knowledge of Baudelaire’s poetic works.

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THE FRAME

*A frame defines a work of art,
However talented the hand,
As if a golden no man's land
Could set all artifice apart.*

*So gems and gilded mirrors sought
To set her off and then surround
Her beauty with a vantage-ground,
A retrospect, an afterthought.*

*Often - I was to discover -
She thought all things bad to love her,
And in the sensuous embrace*

*Of satin on her naked skin,
She'd sprawl, or move from place to place,
As graceful as a capuchin.*

Baudelaire Charles, *Les Fleurs du Mal*; Spleen et Idéal, Un fantôme

INTRODUCTION

Some people call it “reframing,” others speak of “rewording” or “re-labeling” and some describe it as “redefining the problem.” More recently, others such as Neuburger who leans more towards a process (1995) have used the French term “recadrement” to describe the phenomenon.

As we shall see, there is some disagreement as to the precise meaning of the concept. Nevertheless, “reframing” is one of the cornerstones of systemic clinical intervention. This is still true today, even though the concept was developed by certain schools of thought and pioneers that appear rather obsolete or old-fashioned to some people, particularly in the light of the latest trends in systemic family psychotherapy.

The term “reframing” appears unequivocal but, in practice, it gives rise to quite different forms of intervention and is the source of various inaccuracies, although these offer a wealth of information and possible approaches.

In this article, we attempt to cast new light on the practice of reframing in systemic family therapy. We drew our inspiration from reading a sonnet by Charles Baudelaire. We feel that this approach is particularly appropriate since it is now difficult to obtain recent theoretical or technical information on exactly what systemic therapists mean when they use the word “reframing” (Janne et al., 1999).

BAUDELAIRE—A SYSTEMICIST BEFORE HIS TIME?

Introductory Remarks

To appreciate the logic of the following argument, we invite the reader to start by taking two sheets of paper and using one to cover the last two tercets

of the French version of Baudelaire's sonnet. The other should be used to hide the English translation of the poem.

In the initial (French) version of his sonnet on the frame (see above), Baudelaire succeeds in throwing the problem over to the reader in the space of two quatrains, i.e., the first eight lines. Indeed, the reader is unable to determine with any certainty whether Baudelaire is speaking of the frame or the canvas in the first two quatrains.

When we read the sonnet¹ and the development of its subject,² we find that Baudelaire has created an isomorphic sense of confusion between background and foreground throughout the first eight lines. We believe that this was his intention, since it illustrates the subject, i.e., the "frame."

Thus, when he writes in the second quatrain, "*Rien n'offusquait sa parfaite clarté, Et tout semblait lui servir de bordure,*" the reader is still unsure whether Baudelaire is referring to the canvas or the frame.

He has deliberately left us hanging—in "suspense."³

The reader then wonders about the canvas—the background—and the objects that surround it. This feeling of suspense is only gradually overcome by reading the last two tercets. Thus the reader learns (first line of the first tercet) that the subject is female ("*qu'elle croyait*"), but is still unaware whether Baudelaire is describing the "*rare beauté*" of the frame or of the canvas (second line of the second quatrain) or indeed of something else entirely. The mystery only gradually starts to clear in the last two tercets, where the reader finally realizes, thanks to the allusions [*(. . . elle noyait sa nudité voluptueusement Dans les baisers du satin et du linge, Et, lente ou brusque, à chaque mouvement Montrait la grâce enfantine du singe.)*], that Baudelaire is showering praise upon a woman.

The poem's impact is greatly weakened when the words are translated into English, as in this translation by Martin (1997). Indeed, the air of mystery that Baudelaire maintains so cleverly all through the sonnet in the original French version, i.e., what is being described, is greatly lessened because, in the English, the reader knows that it relates to a woman from the sixth line onwards (*To set her off and then surround, Her beauty with a vantage-ground*).

Compared to the English translation, it is the very imprecision of the French language ("*sa rare beauté*") that creates the poem's rich tapestry, because the reader cannot determine whether it is describing the frame, the canvas or something else altogether until he reaches the end of the last two tercets. In contrast, the precision of the English language forces the reader to understand—at a very early stage—that the subject of the poem is female, at which point much of the "suspense" is lost. The confusion between "background and foreground" is thus cleared up much sooner.

In his poem about the frame, Baudelaire brings together various elements of potential interest to the systemic therapist.

First, he shows with great panache how a "grey area" can be created and maintained, to such an extent that the reader remains in suspense, or even

disoriented, while reading the poem. Baudelaire does this by combining a series of linguistic ingredients and descriptions. This reminds us of the disorientation felt by families in distress, who have no idea “where to start in order to tackle the problem.” In the same way, when we read the poem, we have no idea where to start in order to gain an understanding of its subject.

Then, just as the reader is expecting to see one or other of the possible solutions at the start of the poem (the canvas or the frame), Baudelaire performs a masterly act of reframing: it's not a frame or a canvas after all, nor even the surrounding objects. He is describing a woman. Our aim in this paper is thus to outline some of the characteristics of reframing, using the same approach as Baudelaire:

Reframing is a source of astonishment. Reframing surprises. Reframing creates an *irreversibility of meaning*: once we have read the text through to the end, we can never again read the first two quatrains in the same way that we did on our first reading of the poem. Next time we read it we will know that Baudelaire is talking about a woman.

Finally, Baudelaire provides us with a trail to follow by inserting the statement “*Et tout semblait lui servir de bordure.*” We feel that this provides a suitable basis for certain technical aspects of intervention by “reframing.” We shall return to this trail later, when we attempt to outline the characteristics of an approach to reframing, rewording or a “reframe” that will lead us to a potential “agent” for change.

WHAT EXACTLY DO WE MEAN BY “REFRAMING”?

Before we discuss the subject further, we should first state that, in family therapy, “reframing” has only gradually become an accepted technique. It is based on language and requires the therapist to redefine a situation or a behavior by “putting it in other words” than those suggested in the initial meeting with the family to discuss the problem in question. It therefore involves modifying “the meaning” attributed to a situation or problem.

If Gladding (1998) is to be believed, although the concept of reframing has become generalized over the years, it essentially arose from and was promoted by the strategic and systemic movements in family therapy. It has branched off in two directions: the American “strategic” approach represented by Jay Haley, Cloe Madanes, Milton Erickson, Paul Wastalwick, John Weakland, Richard Fish, among others, and the movement now described as “systemic,” as propounded by Mara Selvini Palazolli, Luigi Boscolo, Ginafranco Cecchin, Guiliana Prata, Karl Tomm, Lynn Hoffman, Peggy Papp, Olga Sylverstein, Peggy Penn, Richard Rabkin, Joel Bergman, Carlos Sluzki, James Coyne, and colleagues.

If we refer to the (French) dictionary of family therapy (Miermont, 1987), the expressions of “reframing,” “rewording” or “re-labeling,” as summarized by J. Haley and D.D. Jackson, describe an attitude that the therapist adopts

when he replies to an assertion from a different angle. For example, a situation that is initially labeled negatively would be re-labeled in a positive way. The aim is to reorient the family, by reframing the reality, towards a new and more positive way of viewing its interaction, to tell them something about this subject and leave them more open to change.

Viewed in this way, reframing is quite similar to positive connotation, although it incorporates an extra meaning which arises from the therapist's analysis of the way the family functions and the meaning(s) that the symptoms assume within this organization.

If we then refer to the (French) clinical dictionary of systemic family therapies (Benoit & al., 1988), we find that the idea of reframing takes in *"everything that modifies, for a patient or family, the model used to represent reality, in terms of thoughts, behaviour or affects. It is thus an extremely wide-ranging process that is used in systemic family therapy, even though it is a therapeutic strategy that aims to modify a behaviour. Reframing is quite often carried out using positive connotation."*

If we now turn our attention to the strategic movement from whence the concept of reframing originated and consider, for example, the definition provided by P. Watzlawick (1975; p. 116; pp. 119–120), reframing consists of *"modifying the conceptual and/or emotional context of a situation, or the viewpoint from which it is experienced, by placing it in a different frame which equates just as well—or even better—to the "facts" of this specific situation. As a result, the meaning of this situation changes completely (. . .)." In abstract terms, reframing means "drawing attention to the fact that a given object belongs to a different, but equally relevant, class or, in particular, introducing the fact of belonging to a new class into the conceptual system of the people concerned."*

Reframing can therefore be regarded as a technique for bringing about change. It is important to emphasize, however, that when we reframe a situation, we modify the *meaning* assigned to that situation, rather than the specific elements from which it is composed. We introduce this idea when we discuss the concept of "wild" reframing below in the section entitled "Et tout semblait lui servir de bordure."

According to Watzlawick (1975; p. 120), reframing is just as effective as an instrument of change because, from the moment at which we perceive that something may belong to a different class, we cannot easily return to the trap and suffering associated with the old view of "reality." We thus return to the logic of Baudelaire's sonnet: from the first tercet, or after the second quatrain, the membership of a specific class gradually changes. It becomes less and less likely that the poet is describing the frame, canvas or even an object, and the meaning changes to indicate a living being.

*Même on eût dit parfois qu'elle croyait
Que tout voulait l'aimer; elle noyait
Sa nudité voluptueusement*

"Successful" reframing (Watzlawick, 1975, p. 124) must "move the problem from its 'symptomatic' frame to another type of frame that does not have the same implication of immutability. Of course, we cannot simply place in just any other frame. The frame we use must be appropriate for the subject's way of thinking and the way in which he classifies reality." Watzlawick (p.126) then refers to Wittgenstein (1961), and states that reframing does not draw attention to anything or raise awareness. It merely teaches "a new game that renders the old one obsolete."^{4,5}

In 1975, the Selvini school introduced the idea of "*paradoxical reframing of the family game currently in progress*." This technique is applied at the end of the session, and is normally based on a positive interpretation of the family game which requires each member to continue with his or her own behavior. This type of reframing, which sets out the symptom(s), automatically includes a paradoxical dimension by raising the question, "Why is cohesion within this family group only possible at the "expense" of the identified patient?"

Andolfi (1979) describes "redefining the problem" as a reframing method. He feels that this is the most creative aspect of the therapy and that it allows the family to become its own protagonist in the process of change. It is therefore necessary to analyze the structure manifested by the symptom, and to redefine the relationships that caused it. The aim is to displace the symptom, to highlight its relational content and to reveal to all family members that it plays a part in maintaining their current relationships.

Other authors suggest a person-centered approach to reframing, rather than concentrating on the problem. The therapist directly invites the patient to describe his own history, and works with him to develop a new understanding of himself in which he is regarded as strong, resourceful and full of hope, rather than as a desperate and powerless person. This technique was specifically developed for working with patients struggling to cope with a traumatic and abusive past.

In a more formal view of the practice used in Milan, there is a set time and place for opinion, which is "delivered" by the therapist at the end of the session. In contrast to strategic therapies, the therapy proposed by the Milan school aims primarily to change the models of meaning and relationship within families, rather than to change a specific behavior. A change thus means allowing different behaviors to manifest themselves, and accepting that the precise nature of such behaviors is nothing to do with the therapist. In this respect, the relationship between the behavior and the emotional experience (and its cognitive meaning) is not perceived in the same way as in strategic therapy. The meaning becomes the basis both for production of a behavior and for the way it is interpreted, rather than originating from the history—or frame—of the behavior. The meaning creates the behavior.

The therapist's skill consists of finding a means of visualizing a family "reality" that is quite close to his own views, so that he can take part,

however briefly, in a "shared reality," although from a sufficiently different perspective to allow him to bring about changes in meaning and thus changes in experience and response (Cade, 1992). Indeed, some researchers are now attempting to find a suitable metaphor for the existing myth so that we can compare it against the reframing technique developed by Cloé Madanes (1991), in which the problem to be reframed is also perceived as a metaphor.

THE RISK(S) OF REFRAMING. . . : FROM "WILD" TO "ACADEMIC" REFRAMING

There are different risks associated with the use of rewording, reframing, reframes and redefinition of the problem:

Madanes (1991), for example, reminds us that the trap of "redefining the problem" is that, if it is not done skillfully, and with the necessary respect and persuasion, the therapist may find himself acting as a rival, rather than cooperating with the family. This is an approach where confrontation is rarely helpful, and where the therapist's attitude towards the people involved must be one of respect. In other words, it is essential always to listen with care and attention to what the family members are saying. Viewed from this angle, redefining the problem does not necessarily include positive connotation or positive re-labeling of the person's behavior." According to Madanes, the aim of "redefinition" is always to reframe the problem so that it can be solved. It does not mean minimizing the problem.

In our own practice working with families and trainee psychologists and doctors, we have gradually developed the concept of "wild reframing," with reference to the idea of "wild" psychoanalysis and/or interpretation in psychoanalysis (Freud, 1953). We aim to overcome the temptation experienced by some over-enthusiastic therapists, who attempt to impose their own view of the problem on the family, even though this is not backed up by specific elements of the family history and other elements obtained over the course of the session. Viewed from this angle, we can see that "wild reframing" goes hand in hand with the "cut and paste approach" to "interpretation."

The other potentially hazardous aspect of reframing, as Madanes emphasizes, is that we will use the technique "without conviction" and, we would add, "without authenticity." Indeed, some therapists and therapeutic teams or partnerships will reword a problem for the family, even though they are not entirely convinced that this rewording is correct. They are falling into the trap of what we call "academic reframing." The intervention takes place solely in linguistic mode, by means of an assertion made without conviction, and the discordance between the digital (the content of the assertion) and the analogue (the way in which it is made) inevitably creates a sense of disquiet which prevents the therapist's words acting as an "agent" for change.⁶

Finally, one fundamental ethical aspect that should be remembered by all therapeutic teams is that the reframing should never be based on remarks made by the patient in a one-to-one session. It should relate to the comments made during the full, family therapy session, or with reference to previous sessions of the same type. Indeed, when a team approach is used, one-to-one meetings are run by one of the team members, who then collaborate with another member when the therapeutic work is broadened out to include the spouse or family. We would like to encourage all those involved to strictly maintain the different levels of intervention. The content of “one-to-one” sessions must remain just that. The other therapist must then take the active role, even at the risk of “putting his foot in it,” by circulating information among the family when the individual patient feels that he is held back by information brought out in the individual sessions.

“ET TOUT SEMBLAIT LUI SERVIR DE BORDURE. . .”

Let us now return to Baudelaire and his enigmatic (French) *line* “*Et tout semblait lui servir de bordure. . .*,” the mystery of which has not been rendered fully in Martin’s (1997) translation.

The task of reframing demands the full attention of systemic therapists. By reformulating the problem, the therapist casts the problems at hand in a *new light*, at the same time attempting to respect the elements of verbal and non-verbal communication offered by the family members. This new light cannot therefore be “wild,” since it must be based on real and concrete elements brought out during therapy sessions, rather than on the therapists’ own imaginings and interpretations. These elements must be systematically retranslated, however, in order to bring out the functions of the symptom and how they can be used to understand the dynamic and static aspects of the family’s relationships. The use of creativity in “reframing” will not be “wild” if various clear and well-founded aspects are used to bring together specific elements of the anamnesis, comments and verbal and non-verbal behavior actually expressed by the family in the session. In other words, one of the major benefits of reframing is that, once the situation has been put into words by the therapist, it is “set off” and “surrounded.” Thus, after reframing, the initial problematic situation must have been cast in a sufficiently different light—or placed in a different context or frame—that everything associated with the problem will henceforth appear to relate to the actual reframing, rather than the patient or even the problem situation.

We would therefore like to introduce the idea of the “haunting melody” to further illuminate our thoughts on the subject of reframing. In our opinion, if reframing is to act as a therapeutic “agent” of change, it must be such that, outside the sessions, in the daily life of the patient and his or her family,



FIGURE 1 "Reframing: Ringing in the Ears?", engraved by Ch. Clement, in Baudelaire Ch., *Les fleurs du mal*, *Spleen et idéal*. Avec une étude sur la vie et les œuvres de Baudelaire par Camille Vergniol. Illus. de Tony George-Roux, gravées par Ch. Clément; Paris, France: A. Lemerre, (1917).

the initial problem situation can no longer be dissociated from the reframing established by the therapist, in the same way that we are haunted by a particular tune and cannot get it out of our heads. The reframing must therefore ideally "ring" in the ears of the family, just like those tunes or songs that we can never shake off. It must haunt and follow the family, but should also have the benefit of acting as a "guardian angel" for the patient, i.e., of protecting him against himself and against certain aspects of his life

that he finds difficult to cope with and can have a detrimental effect on his family circle.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

We must first confess to have taken quite a liberty in attempting to base an element of systemic practice on one of Baudelaire's poems. It will not be appreciated by poets and Romance language specialists. Like them, we are well aware that Baudelaire probably did not explicitly set out to confuse in this way, and we have rather "misappropriated" the master's work. Nevertheless, we have to admit that it is appropriate and that the poet shows us with great skill how we can have a "warped" view of things. The gradual unrolling of the red carpet of "meaning," just like the reader's progress through the poem, represents an advance with certain irreversible aspects. Similarly, after our first, naïve reading of the poem, we can never again read it in the same light. This is essentially what takes place during the reframing process.

In general, when we attempt to precisely identify the received wisdom concerning the concept of reframing in the systemic literature, we inevitably arrive at a common root: reframing consists of casting an initial situation in a new light, after it has been labeled by the family as a symptom or even a problem.

On the other hand, according to the publications cited in this paper, which have originated from various "schools" of family therapy, we are less able to say with certainty whether reframing should or should not always comprise a degree of positive connotation. Similarly, some authors recommend that the reframing should set out the problematic symptoms and behaviors (paradoxical reframing), whereas others adopt the approach of rewording the family dynamic in metaphoric terms. Still others, in contrast, rely more on reframing with respect to the "identified" subject.

It is also difficult to precisely determine the practical methods associated with the reframing process: should it take place at a given time, i.e., at the end of the session, as most authors recommend or, in complete contrast, should it take the form of a series of interventions made over the course of one or more sessions—or are both possible? We can also see many differences between the theoretical movements and their proponents. Their approaches range from a (perhaps overly) straightforward technical position, as recommended by the strategic movement, or a more qualified approach that makes use of metaphor, as proposed by Madanes, right through to Neuburger (1995), who leans more towards a process and an attitude than a single intervention by promoting the (French) term "recadrement." From this viewpoint, reframing is just as much an "attitude" of the therapist as a one-off intervention. This is similar to the position adopted by Onnis (1996), who suggests working with metaphors suggested by the family and establishing a dialogue between

family and therapist, in order to establish a "possible alternative view of reality."

Whatever it may be, we agree with Flaskas (1992) and Cade (1992) that reframing may be regarded as a generic therapeutic process which is thus not limited to systemic family therapy or to family therapy in the broadest sense of the term. According to Brian Cade, reframing is the most important fundamental operation in a process of change and is thus an integral part of any therapy.

However, Flaskas stresses that, rather than contenting ourselves with the "therapist" aspect, it is really useful to attempt to imagine how the experience of reframing fits in with the patient's own experience. Patients are often extremely relieved to find that there is another possible interpretation of their problem and that someone else has attempted to understand the situation.

Another important point that should be mentioned relates to the trend among systemic therapists to "depersonalize" the reframing process. Reframing is not just what the therapist thinks and says: it also involves the patient's experience of therapists as people who have relationships with them.

When we examine the reframing process in detail, we find that the constructivist movement has much to offer to family therapy. We hope that such work will soon see the light of day since it will help to harmonies clinical practice, which frequently resorts to reframing, with the different forms of blindness affecting family and therapist alike, and as described by the constructivist movement.

NOTES

1. (Mechanically, and thus inevitably in a sequential linear manner, on account of the reading process)
2. i.e., "the frame"
3. In the same way that the rewording technique used by the therapist in family sessions can create a terrible feeling of "suspense" within the family. "What will he say? What will his conclusions be?"
4. We do not fully agree with this statement, apart from with respect to the utility of a new game that renders the old one obsolete. Indeed, whether we like it or not, in the family's eyes reframing will inevitably draw attention to an aspect that had previously been ignored, and as a consequence will raise awareness, particularly if the session addresses each person in turn.
5. Here we can see the highly pragmatic side of the strategic movement, and its utilitarian (or even slightly manipulative) connotations, which go some way to explaining why the reframing concept has been side-lined in recent years.
6. A recent review of the literature of family therapy processes (Friedlander et al, 1994) described how the importance of a warm and responsible approach by the therapist has been neglected by theoreticians and researchers.

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