Chapter 11
A Dialectical View of Personal Change

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Once one has been sensitized to it, the process of the social construction of reality presents little mystery. For example, Austin’s (1961) *How to Do Things with Words* satisfactorily demonstrates the existence of “performatives,” a category of utterances that derive their meaning from the social reality they create rather than from any sort of “referential” function. Touchdowns, marriages, debutants, saints, heros, and insults are no part of physical reality, but are social constructs. In more recent years the conception of social construction has been extended to embrace the concepts “mind” (Bateson, 1979) and “self” (Gergen, 1977; Harre, 1977). This “new paradigm” research has in effect returned to Mead’s (1934) problem of illuminating the nexus of mind, self, and society as a process of social constitution.

Social constructionist inquiry has performed a vital service of dereification. However, a “tough-minded” social theory must do more than simply repeat such demonstrations, showing this and that instance of “reality” to be a social construction. But what else can be said which is not (a) trivial—at least as a theoretical statement, or (b) incompatible with its own assumptions? What can you say after you have said that reality is socially constructed and in what form should any such knowledge claim be cast? The traditional alternative to dereification is to posit some lawlike statements about the relationships among variables, but this is the characteristic “move” of the discredited “old paradigm” and incompatible with the new paradigmatic assumptions.

The problem may be brought into clear focus by investigating the nature of radical change—change in the basic structure of a social unit. We think that a viable conception of radical change must avoid some now obvious pitfalls. The first is that of interpretivist idealism. Collins (1981) is very right to caution that staying within the confines of actors’ construct systems is the “gateway to idealistic systems,” which “ignore the reality of concrete moments in time and space” (p. 90).

A second serious pitfall is the tendency to explain change by positing social interaction as fundamental to social change but then providing an impoverished conception of the interactive processes themselves. The problem
hinges on the discontinuity of concepts at the micro- and macrosocial levels of analysis. Keat and Urry (1975) point to the fact that Marxist-oriented theory usually provides no satisfactory account of how macrosocial forces are manifest in and constituted by particular face-to-face encounters. Even Habermas (1976) who attempts to develop a conception of communication in the end provides a very traditional view of communication as consensus. Elsewhere we have discussed the inadequacy of communication theories that focus on “coorientation” or the ability of one actor to understand the meanings of another. We have shown in earlier case studies that some relationships are satisfying and derive their potential for growth precisely because of crucial differences in the interpretation of messages (Pearce & Cronen, 1980). The case study discussed in this paper is a vivid illustration of how two persons with very similar world views and modes of interpretation can create a mutually unsatisfying relationship when their highly similar perspectives meet.

A third pitfall might be called “searching for an ultimate grammar with gun and camera.” If we reject the idealistic notion that the new can be totally discontinuous with the past, what is the nature and source of continuity? The most common response has been to search for an overarching grammar of social action. The grammar that is sought is a primary substance in the classical sense of substance: one that directs and supports change and remains unchanged during change. The ethnomethodologists have sought such a substantial grammar in the social microstructure of talk but have yet to demonstrate that microbehavior is historically and culturally invariant (Collins, 1981). The orthodox Marxist conception of a deterministic dialectic has yielded anything but powerful historical prediction (Held, 1980). Finally, the biological basis of life and its physical conditions are proposed as the appropriate terrain in which to search for the substantial grammar. However, we find Harré’s (1979) argument convincing that so far data support the conclusion that biological factors should be seen as a source of problems for which social solutions must be invented, not as a source of solutions to problems.

Is it possible to provide an account of radical social change that does not assume a fixed overarching grammar that guides change but remains unchanged? Can such an account preserve the qualities of radical transformation and continuity while having as its locus of explanation actual encounters among social actors? In this chapter we want to affirm the possibility of answering both of these questions in the affirmative. The chapter presents a model of how change in socially constructed realities occurs. The model is informed by a particular new paradigm theory called the coordinated management of meaning (or CMM). In the sections that follow, we (a) introduce CMM in terms of the positions it takes on the issues stated above; (b) offer a model that we think can be used to account for change in a wide variety of situations; and (c) summarize a case study of a dramatic change
that occurred in the constructed reality of a family. The model purports to
describe a nondeterministic dialectic at the microsocial level.

The Coordinated Management of Meaning

Only the most salient aspects of the CMM theory are presented here. For a
fuller account, see Pearce and Cronen (1980) and Cronen, Johnson, and
Lannamann (1982). CMM takes communication to be the locus of processes
through which persons cocreate, manage, and transform the social reality of
which they are themselves a part. Like Williams (1980), we consider
communication to be material—the most fundamental form of making and
doing. The CMM theory account of communication differentiates between
structure and action. Structure refers to organizations of meaning and
repertoires of acts that persons possess. Action refers to conjointly produced
sequences of behaviors. The relationship of structure and action is reflexive.
Structure emerges from patterns of coordinated action and turns back upon
those patterns guiding them. The view most congenial to our own in this
regard is Giddens' (1979), who refers to this process as “structuration.” In this
kind of account self is a conception that emerges from social action and is
embedded in structure in various possible ways. In CMM theory structure and
action are conceived to be in a constant state of emergence and tension.
Structure is always open-ended, pointing beyond itself yet dependent upon an
emergent pattern of action that is conjointly created. No isomorphism of
meaning and action is possible.1 Because there can be no isomorphism of
meaning and action, and because of the variety of individual experience, all
structures, including the conception of self, is both social and to some extent
ideosyncratic (Mischel & Mischel, 1977). In addition to structure and action
we will use the term “system” to embrace the structures held by two or more
actors and the patterns of action those actors produce together.

The content and organization of any given structure are by no means
“necessary.” They emerge from social action and are potentially malleable.
We conceive of social meaning as hierarchically organized such that one level
is a context for interpreting another. For example, the words “Let’s get it on”
could, for a particular couple, count as the act “mock invitation to intimacy,”
and as such function as the initiating move in an episode of coy flirtation. The
number and nature of embedded levels of context is not fixed. In the analysis
of the case presented in the following, the structure of this family’s social

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1The impossibility of isomorphism between meaning and action is well argued by
Shorier (1981). Readers interested in this problem should see his treatment of it.
Rejection of isomorphism between concept and object is the foundation upon which
Adorno (1983) developed Negative Dialectics.
reality had five levels of embedded contexts. 1. *Speech acts* (SpAct): These are the relational meanings of verbal and nonverbal messages. Examples include “threat to my worth,” “promise,” and “conceding the point.”

2. *Episodes* (Ep): Episodes are actors’ conceptions of patterns of acts. For example, “Our usual fight over who gets to use the car.”

3. *Relationship* (R): Relationship refers to an actor’s conception of how two or more persons engage. For example, part of a relational concept might be “I’m the initiator, she (he) is the follower.”

4. *Life-scripting* (L-S): This is a person’s conception of self in social action. For example, “I am an intellectual and skeptic.”

5. *Family myth* (FM): This refers to high order general conceptions of how society, personal roles, and family relationships work. These conceptions are often, as in our case study, passed down from previous generations, and modified or intensified in the new nuclear family. We refer to the relationship among these contexts as embedded because one may be the perspective through which the next is understood. For example, a speech act may be understood from within the perspective of an episode and both from with the perspective of a certain relationship.

The patterns in which these levels are embedded are indicated by using symbols developed by Brown (1972) and Varela (1975). When a relationship (R) is the higher order context within which an episode (Ep) is understood, the situation is symbolized \[ R_{Ep} \]. Two levels of context might also be organized so that each is equally the context for and within the context of the other.

When two people are getting acquainted, the episode (“having a friendly dinner together”) is the context through which the nature of the relationship (“friends”) comes to be understood, and the emergent relationship is equally the context for understanding and guiding the enactment of episodes. Such “reciprocal embeddedness” comprises a “loop,” symbolized \[ \square{R} \]. Episodes like that in which two persons get acquainted are examples of what we call “charmed” loops. If no change in interpretation occurs regardless of which context is looked upon as “higher,” the loop is self-confirming or “charmed,” and symbolized \[ \square\bigtriangleup \]. However, sometimes contexts are looped such that treating one as “higher” leads to different and contradictory interpretations than if the other is “higher.” This pattern is a paradox or “strange” loop, and symbolized \[ \square\bigtriangleup \].

The following relationship between “life-script” and “episode” comprises a “strange loop.” The life-script contains two exclusive possibilities: “I am an alcoholic” and “I am not an alcoholic.” The episodic context also contains two exclusive patterns of action: “I refuse drinks” and “I accept drinks.” In the

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2 The reader should be cautioned that “speech act” is used here in the generic sense of what we do to each other with verbal and nonverbal messages. We do not endorse Searle’s (1969) position that there is an innate structure for any speech act nor his position on expressability. Our position is that the criteria for the production of a speech act evolve through social activity and can vary from one social unit (such as a family) to another (see Kreckel, 1981).
context of the "alcoholic" life-script, one must conduct episodes in which drinks are refused. If, however, refusing drinks is treated as the higher context, then the life-script is seen to be that of a nonalcoholic, because the person perceives themself as one who can control their drinking. If he or she now "switches" to the "nonalcoholic" life-script as the higher context, then episodes of accepting drinks—and their aftermath—may be used as context for switching back to the life-scripting of self as alcoholic. Of course, the alcoholic's strange loop is guided by a still higher order context, perhaps a family myth to the effect that alcoholism is determined by voluntary behavior rather than physical dependence. A strange loop within a larger context is symbolized \[\square\]

A crucial aspect of structure is consciousness. No social system can operate simply by affirming that "more" consciousness is better (Cornelius, in press). The management of consciousness is constructed in action along with levels of context. This management can facilitate the most beautiful and moving aspects of human life, for example, falling in love (Averill, 1980, and chapter 5 this volume). It can also perpetuate disastrous structures. The alcoholic is not in a perpetual quandary over life-scripting and drinking because he or she is conscious only of certain parts of the strange loop at a time. After refusing drinks for a period, a shift in consciousness is cued and the episodes of abstinence become the salient context for understanding life-scripting. Thus a period of being "off-the-wagon" ensues. (For a detailed account of loops in CMM theory see Cronen et al., 1982.)

CMM theory is sometimes referred to as a rule-based approach. More precisely, we use the form of two types of rules as a conceptual device for describing the way actors structure their social reality. Constitutive rules (cR) integrate the hierarchical structure of embedded contexts. For example: In the context of our relationship, the act of pouting counts as the initiating phase of a "comforting" episode. Regulative rules (rR) guide action. Their structure is that of a series of embedded and/or looped contexts with a triad of sequential speech acts. The first speech act denotes an "antecedent" condition performed by another actor. Both the interpretation of the act and the perceived obligation to perform a particular subsequent act derive from higher order contexts and anticipated events. Thus a range of actions is defined by the \(rR\) as having legitimate, obligatory, prohibited, or undetermined force. Like other aspects of structure, rules are malleable—sustained or altered in the course of action.

The regulative rules link the actions of two or more persons. Once generated they produce a pattern of sequential actions. The chosen speech act of P1 becomes the antecedent condition for P2. These patterns are not necessarily commensurate with either actors' purposes. It is easy to document the fact that P1's act may set up a condition that obligates P2 to perform just the act P1 does not want to elicit, and vice versa. The result might be a sequence of ramifying unintended consequences.

Broad contexts such as life-scripting and family myth perform two
important functions. (a) They provide a telic principle, a preferred state or condition for the sake of which other meanings exist. Chein (1972) argued that higher levels of organization operate as motives for lower ones. Consider placing a letter in a mailbox. The behavioral sequence can be decomposed into a seemingly discrete set of acts, such as sealing the envelope, walking, opening the box, extending one's arm, and so on, all of which have as their "telos" the actual depositing of the letter in the box. However, this string of acts is not done for itself, but only when there is some higher order idea, such as sustaining a relationship with an adult son by inviting him to visit. (b) They generate parameters of form that rule out certain "grammatically acceptable" sequences of meaning or action as nonsense. In modern English, it is sensible to talk about ideas as some colors but not others. This parameter of form makes nonsense the concept "green ideas." Yet there is no "necessary" reason why ideas could not be discussed using colorful metaphors. If thoughts can be black, why can't they be green?

The A Family: A Case Study

Our approach to change is grounded in an analysis of a dramatic instance of successful therapeutic change that occurred in the Family Therapy Program, University of Calgary Medical School. That program utilizes the Milan approach to family therapy (Palazzoli, Cecchin, Boscolo, & Prata, 1978), which shares many of the metatheoretical commitments of CMM. The selection of a case of therapeutic change does raise the question of whether there is a strong analog between change in the clinic and outside it. Although there are some obvious dissimilarities, we suspect that the phases of our change model represent not the "tools" for achieving higher order change, but social achievements, which together facilitate change.

The A family was seen over a 14-month period by Calgary Medical School therapists: a follow-up interview was conducted by telephone a year after therapy was discontinued. The data for the study come from the Calgary team and videotapes of therapy sessions.

The family was characterized at the level of action by ubiquitous, unresolved arguments that distressed the family to the point of threats of separation and the development of psychosomatic symptoms (anxiety, panic, insomnia) requiring medication. The case is particularly interesting because both Mr. and Mrs. A have very similar conceptions of the family myth and similar life-scripting: their high level of "coorientation"—not some misunderstanding, as might be expected—is part of their problem.3

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3At first glance it appears as if family myth (FM) is the only level that is not general to all social situations. However, life-scripting may be peculiar to those social order which evolve something like the modern conception of self and thus may not be universal. The reader should consult Harré. (1984) for a fascinating discussion of the distinction
Synopsis of the Change Model

The model includes a number of phases, 0–7, each of which is conceived to be the achievement of a reconfiguration of structure. With the exception of phases 0 and 1 no necessary temporal order is proposed; numbering only facilitates reference. One therapeutic technique may initiate action toward several reconfigurations. Moreover, the phases are interdependent, one phase facilitating others. The phases of the model are:

Phase 0: The system prior to change.
Phase 1: Clarification and vivification of the original system.
Phase 2: Blocking action required by the telos of the original system.
Phase 3: Lower order resolution facilitating action but resulting in profound contradiction within the system.
Phase 4: Exploration of new possibilities through inversion of the hierarchical ordering of the system.
Phase 5: Tension between the old and new system.
Phase 6: Altering patterns of consciousness thus obstructing the reconstitution of the old system.
Phase 7: Legitimation of the new system in social action.

Phase 0: The System Prior to Intervention

The family myth shared by both Mr. and Mrs. A seems to be a common inheritance from their respective families of origin. The theme can be paraphrased thus: “The world is made up of worthwhile and worthless persons. Worth is fragile and one constantly struggles to maintain it. Worth is won by being right; the struggle to be right is the basic enterprise of life.” The family myth also has implicit in it two basic definitional principles (DP) that describe “rightness” and “worth.” They are: DP 1—Differences among ideas are due to the position of ideas along a simple right-wrong continuum; and DP 2—the worth of a person is determined by he or she having an idea that is “more right” than that of someone he or she encounters. “Worth” is the telos of the family myth. It is achieved in one crucial way—by being right.

These principles impose important parameters of form that limit legitimate ways in which the family myth can be elaborated into lower order conceptions. DP 1 renders the following kind of statement nonsense within the system: “They differ but each is right in their own way.” DP 2 renders this kind of statement nonsensical: “He or she is a very valuable contributor although they rarely make the final synthesis to which the group assest.”

between “person” and “self.” The “family myth” has social analogs in such constructions as “our work group” or “our gang.” It must not be assumed that because there is a legal entity we call a family that there necessarily has evolved a conception of the family that actors hold and which guides their interpretations and actions. A family myth may evolve that includes persons not legally or genetically related.
It is important to examine in some detail how the family myth is manifest in lower level contexts, particularly, life-scriptings, relationship definitions, and episodes.

The family myth is manifest in both husband and wife's life-scripting through two constitutive rules (cR) which describe important connections among "rightness," "worth," and "selfhood."

\[ cR_1: \text{In any episode of disagreement, if other is more right, self is worthless and other is worthy.} \]
\[ cR_2: \text{In any episode of disagreement, if self is more right, self is worthy and other is worthless.} \]

The implications of family myth and life-scriptings seem to overdetermine the way the relationship is defined. The next two constitutive rules define how family myth and life-scripting are manifest in Mr. and Mrs. A's relationship definition:

\[ cR_3: \text{In any disagreement, if self destroys the worth of their spouse, then self is worthless.} \]
\[ cR_4: \text{In any disagreement, if self is shown worthless, then he or she are unworthy of their spouse.} \]

These four rules mean that to be worthy of the other self must win, but other must not lose. This situation is especially difficult because of the meaning of rightness and worth that both persons hold. The two definitional principles are strongly manifest in episodic patterns and choices of action within those patterns. Being right is not an abstraction. Instead, for this couple being right is by definition prevailing over the other when disagreement occurs. Clinical data suggest the existence of these additional constitutive rules that define episodes of action and particular speech acts in light of the broader contexts:

\[ cR_5: \text{In any encounter, when someone else presents an idea that act initiates an episode testing who is right.} \]
\[ cR_6: \text{In any disagreement, if other's idea is acted upon, that concession establishes one's own wrongness (and thus worthlessness).} \]

The connections among worth, rightness, and concession bear comment. For some persons, concession by others is only a symptom that self is right, but for this couple concession is not a symptom, and rightness is not an abstraction. Other's concession makes you right by definition, and makes other wrong. Rightness and wrongness are not signs, symptoms, or evidence of worth; rightness is worth, and the struggle to preserve worth is what life is all about.

The clinical data obtained from this family were also cast into the form of regulative rules. These regulative rules (rR) describe the bind created when they differ:

\[ rR_1: \text{Given the embedded contexts (myth, life-scripting, relationship, episode): If other expresses an idea self does not hold, then it is obligatory to attack that idea in order to elicit a concession from other.} \]
Examine \( rR_1 \) it is important to bear in mind the definitional relationship between other’s concession (the desired response) and self-definition. Just as the life-scripting of a “worthy person” requires the attack on other’s idea, the concession of other must be elicited in order to sustain the life-scripting. In the next regulative rule we find the same features: high level contexts strongly prefigure the choice of action, and particular responses must be obtained to sustain those contexts:

\[ rR_2: \text{ Given the embedded contexts: If spouse is about to concede then it is} \]
\[ \text{obligatory to terminate the episode in order to avoid a concession from} \]
\[ \text{the other.} \]

If our analysis of the case is correct there is a reflexive loop among the levels of context that Mr. and Mrs. A use. The life-scripting of “worthy person” provides the context in which obtaining other’s concession is required. However, obtaining the concession is the necessary context through which they perceive the self as worthy. When these clients deal with subordinates, therapists, or their children, the life-scripting (worthy person) and the speech act (other conceives) form a charmed loop (\( \Box \)). “Worthy person” is the context in which getting other to concede as obligatory, and concession is the context in which the self if seen to be worthy. However, when conflict is between the spouses, the constitutive rules (\( cR_3 \) and \( cR_4 \)) that pertain to the destruction of other’s worth come into play. Life-scripting requires spouse’s concession because failure to triumph over other makes self worthless and unworthy of other (\( cR_3 \) and \( cR_4 \)). Yet, success in destroying spouse’s worth is the context in which the self is seen to be worthless and once again unworthy of other (\( cR_3 \) and \( cR_4 \)).

Neither husband nor wife is conscious of the whole loop at one point in time. Thus in spite of the strange loop neither spouse is confused about what to do next. In the course of a conflict when Mrs. A starts to cry, that cues a shift of consciousness for Mr. A. In their episodes of conflict, the husband typically takes an assertive, forceful role while the wife acts quiet and submissive. Yet Mrs. A will never concede. As husband’s style becomes more forceful she says less but does not back down. The act of crying serves as a cue for husband to take cognizance of the fact her concession would define him as worthless and unworthy of her, while at the same time defining her as worthless and unworthy of him. At that point Mr. A would move to terminate the episode and Mrs. A would agree to terminating it with no decision made.

Phase 1: Clarification/Vivification

Our analysis of these rules and embedded contexts contains more interpretive material than the family or the therapist had available at the beginning of therapy. A “conversational analysis” of the interaction between the couple suggests an asymmetry of power in which the husband dominates and this was the interpretation initially made by the therapist and the family. Early in therapy, the couple was asked “Who has the most power in this family?” and
both replied that the husband did (he attributed 80% to himself; she said that he had 75%). Like the husband, and following cultural convention, the therapist interpreted the wife’s crying as a sign of weakness and taught her “assertiveness skills.”

The result was unexpected. Rather than reducing the arguments, or leading to the resolution of them, the wife’s new assertiveness skills made the arguments longer. The unnoticed phenomenon was that the wife did not now, nor had she previously, conceded during these arguments with her husband. Her crying, despite its conventional interpretation as a sign of weakness, functioned in this system as a powerful social “move” that obligated Mr. A to terminate the episode without resolution (see rR4).

In one sense, the assertiveness training was a “mistake” as a therapeutic intervention, because prior to therapy power was equally distributed between husband and wife. However, it was a fortuitously necessary step because it clarified the nature of the couple’s relationship for both the clients and the therapist. The therapist realized that he had become enmeshed in the system (siding with the wife with the result of exacerbating the conflicts) and asked for consultation with the therapy team observing the sessions behind a one-way mirror. When he presented the case, the symmetrical nature of the relationship was apparent to the team. The team decided to extract the therapist from the conflict by using a therapeutic strange loop. The effects of the intervention, however, went well beyond that limited goal. The strange loop was presented by the clinic director acting as a consultant. It was presented in the presence of both the family and the therapist. The consultant’s action and its consequences will be presented in our discussion of Phase 2.

Phase 2: Blocking Action Required by a Higher-Order Telos

The task for the consultant was to extricate the therapist from the conflict by blocking the normal way of acting within the social reality of the family; the difficulty in doing this was that virtually anything he said or did would be interpreted as a “test of who’s right” and lead to an argumentative episode. The consultant’s decision was to place the family in a position that forced them to act in ways inconsistent with their rules.

Slouching in the chair and in a voice of tired bewilderment, the consultant told the family that the therapeutic team knew what was happening in the family but we could not agree whether to tell you. Some members of the team felt that we should not tell you because it would be impossible for you to accept what we have to say . . . [that] would just discourage you and wouldn’t be helpful. Some of the other staff members thought we should tell you. We owe it to the family since they are coming here for therapy. . . . So we decided to ask you what you would like us to do. Whether you would like us to share our views with you or not? And, whether you would like us to do this today or whether you would like to go home and think about the decision.
The immediate reaction was annoyance. The consultant did not respond to the anger, but clarified that he was willing to do whatever the family decided, but that he did not know if the family was ready for "such discouraging news." Although he suggested they could leave without making a decision, the family refused to go and engaged in a discussion trying to get the therapist to decide for them and admonishing him for "only dropping one shoe."

The power of this intervention does not originate with the statement made by the consultant. Rather, it sets the family into a position where they are likely to make a decision that is inconsistent with the parameters of form. The consultant's willingness to do whatever they decide creates a "strange loop" with materials of the clients' social reality (See Figure 11-1). If they ask for the team's diagnosis, they acknowledge that the consultant might be right (because he said that the family should decide (see Arrow 1). If the consultant is right, then the consultant should be making the decisions (Arrow 2). However, the consultant's decision was that the family knows better and should decide (Arrow 3). If the family is right, then they ought to decide (Arrow 4), but, of course, that is what the consultant said and that means that the consultant is right (Arrow 5). Choosing not to ask implies the consultant was right that they cannot handle the information, and initiates the whole loop again (Arrow 6). Whether they ask or do not ask for information, the decision throws their social reality into a strange loop. If no action can be chosen to produce the appropriate episode, then their self-conceptions as worthy persons and their fulfillment of the family myth are threatened (Arrow 7).

![Figure 11-1. Therapeutic strange loop blocking action and fulfillment of higher order telos.](image-url)
They cannot even provoke a struggle! Neither the family nor the consultant can be defined as unworthy under these conditions.

This particular intervention would be ineffective for families with other social realities. This family might use Scarlett O'Hara's solution—"I'll think about that tomorrow"—except for the fact that for them "rightness" must be established in this concrete social circumstance (cR₁ and cR₂). To fail here would not be just evidence of worthlessness but the definition of it.

Phase 3: Lower Order Resolution and Higher Order Contradiction

The third phase is initiated at the same session as Phase 2. Two crucial discoveries were made by Mr. and Mrs. A as they brought their creative powers to bear on their situation. They invented a straightforward, but uncharacteristic way to resolve the strange loop, and they were soon to discover a serious contradiction in the structure of their social reality because that resolution contradicted their life-scriptings and family myth.

The family decided that they wanted to hear the information. But that only they and not the children should hear it. After the children left the room the husband asked, "So what's the deal, we want to hear it now?" His wife replied, "I said I would. I didn't hear you say anything!", to which her husband replied, "Yep, I want to hear it now." The family reached an implicit agreement that is rather obvious in other social realities. At the level of relationship the therapist is right to empower the family to make some decisions, and the family right to empower the therapist to make others. An episode ensues in which the family empowers the therapist to present an analysis. This theme of being right by knowing when to empower others later becomes a crucial feature of new family myth and life-scriptings.

The new relationship and episode are obviously nonsense in light of the parameters of form entailed by the current family myth and life-scripting, but they do permit a choice of action and they permit a sort of being right—though not rightness as defined by their old system. How could Mr. and Mrs. A settle for a resolution that is incompatible with higher level meanings? We doubt that the whole system changed at once. It is much more likely that they tried a jerry-built reconstruction of lower order notions that allowed a choice of action and seemed to permit being right in some sense. Raush (personal communication, 1983) suggested a non-Freudian notion of "anxiety" as an explanation of how this could happen. Anxiety appears to narrow the range of self-conscious awareness. In this case, that means that Mr. and Mrs. A focused on lower order tangles (SpAct, Ep, and R levels) and their immediate solution.

Phase 4: Exploration Through Inversion of Hierarchical Order

When the family left the therapy session, they took with them the problem of contradiction within their system of meanings. They were not brought back
for five weeks, giving them time to grapple with this problem. In the intervening time we think that they used the lower order resolutions as contexts within which to reexamine and reconstruct life-scriptings and family myth. What legitimates the inversion of hierarchical ordering of contexts? The answer lies in the family myth itself. The myth commands the preservation of worth through being right. Being right in a specific situation is the context in which one can see the life-scripting and family myth sustained—the levels of context form a loop. Thus, to examine higher level conceptions in the context of a particular episode and relationship is hardly unusual for this couple. Moreover, the myth commands that one's resources must be mobilized in order to be right/worthy. The naturalness of "flipping" contextual perspectives, the success of the lower order resolutions, and the obligation to avoid being wrong justify using the new relational and episodic constructions as contexts within which to reconsider the family myth and life-scriptings.

Phase 5: The Tension Between Old and New Constructions

Before the family is sent home to grapple with the contradiction in their system, the consultant employed another Milan technique, that of positively connoting the old pattern of action and warning the couple against trying to change it. The immediate effect of this was to generate resistance to the idea that they should not change. The latent effect was to set up a dialectical tension between the old structure and an alternative that the couple will create. That tension has the form of a strange loop.

After agreeing to tell the couple what the team knew, the consultant described in lay terms the family system at Phase 0 indicating how they produced a system in which they must struggle with each other to be right, but struggle endlessly without resolution. Then the consultant warned against change saying:

Now our feeling is that this [struggle] is such an essential aspect of your relationship, since before you were married, that we think it may be dangerous to try to stop, because it is the core, the heart of the family in a sense. And the family has been coping with it fine. The kids have learned to stay out of it. Father and mother have been able to manage all these years. I am not saying it is comfortable but I am saying that it is worrisome in terms of what would happen if you didn't have this basic important campaign. A lot of time, I am sure, you are thinking of how you can improve the relationship, of how it could be better. Each of you has your ideas of how you would like it to be better and you probably invest a lot of energy in thinking about it. This keeps you involved with each other and holds it all together. So I think that if you didn't have that, I don't know what you would have... so what we think we can do is perhaps to follow up and discuss from time to time how things are going in a general sense whether it is getting out of line or not.

The couple seemed stunned. Then the husband asked his wife, "Is that news to you?" "No." "It's not news to me. (Pause.) Is it shocking to you?" "No." "It's not shocking to me." After a further pause the husband asked the
therapist: “Does this imply in your mind that there is no love in our relationship?” “No, not at all.” “Does it imply that there is no hope?” “Well, it implies that this process will continue and that there is no hope in stopping because the more you try to stop it the more you keep it going.” “And you’re saying that’s the main cause of all the fighting?” “I think it is a necessary part of the marriage, yes. It’s the way you have structured it, ... so those were our views ... we should let you think about it and perhaps have a follow up to discuss how things are from time to time.”

Interview data indicate that during the five weeks between therapy sessions Mr. and Mrs. A developed alternative conceptions of family myth and life-scriptings. The details of these new conceptions we do not know. It is clear that being right by knowing how and when to empower others is a central feature of life-scripting particularly for Mr. A. The myth of life as constant struggle for fragile worth was rejected along with the principles that all differences stem from degrees of “rightness” and that worth is a matter of being more right than others.

The therapist’s admonition against change and the emerging alternative view form a strange loop in which the two views of self and society both legitimate and deny each other. The strange loop connecting the old and new perspectives is shown in Figure 11-2. The loop can be described, from their perspective, like this: In the context of the old family myth we encounter a strange loop just as we did with the consultant (Arrow 1). In the context of that bind we cannot choose an action that will establish us as right and we go on fighting without resolution indefinitely (Arrow 2). If we cannot be right, we must in that context consider an alternative way to look at things so we can be right (Arrow 3). In the context of the new family myth there is no paradox (Arrow 4) and thus we can be right (see Arrow 5). If we can be right, then the old family myth is, in a sense, being enacted and legitimated (see Arrow 6) because we have struggled through a knotty problem and established a kind of rightness and worth. The relationship of the new conception of worth and rightness to the old one conforms to Hegel’s description of what emerges as the result of dialectic. The new structure “contains what it results from, absorbed into itself and made part of its own nature” (Hegel, 1969). The clinical data show that Mr. A is still very concerned with being acknowledged as right by others, but he comes to a totally revised conception of rightness that gives him his sense of worth.

Phase 6: Altering Patterns of Consciousness

It is a well-documented phenomenon that persons can process their cognitions from a “field” perspective or an “observers” perspective (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). A “field” perspective is that of an enmeshed participant—a first- or second-person position in a grammatical metaphor. An observer’s perspective is one in which our experiences have the character of looking over our own shoulder—a third-person position. Shotter (1983) has argued that different
Figure 11-2. The strange loop between old and new.

rights and duties come to be associated with different person positions. Nigro and Neisser's (1983) data indicate that people recall different aspects of a situation depending on whether they are in a field or observer position, thus giving them access to different kinds of information for future use. To construct an emotional role one remains unaware of their participation in creating that role (Averill, 1980) and Nigro and Neisser's (1983) data show that this enmeshment in an emotional role is usually associated with a participant position.

From the perspective of CMM, connections between types of perspective and consciousness of certain aspects of social reality are constructed in the course of social action. No particular position is inherently superior, but different kinds of data are available and different activities facilitated by different perspectives.

The activity of investigating new perspectives on the family myth in the context of a particular social experience is likely enhanced by factors related to consciousness. The ability to reflect on a situation without enmeshment in old patterns of emotional behavior is usually associated with higher order change (Harris, 1979). To move to a third-person position is not to “step out” of the social system into objectivity. It is a position within the system from which one deepens their awareness of and operates upon different aspects of
the system (Hofstadter, 1979). The Milan therapeutic approach includes a
technique called circular questioning (Palazzoli, et al., 1978) in which clients
are shifted to person positions that they do not usually occupy. Father might
be asked “When you fight with mother who shows the most anger: your son
watching you, your wife, your daughter, or yourself?” The son, usually a
third-person observer of these fights, might be asked “What are you feeling
when father fights with mother—does it make you frightened, angry? How
upset do you get?” This shifting of position provides information clients
usually do not attend to in their habitual roles.

The possibilities of reassembling the family myth within the context of a
recent episodic construction are also enhanced if persons come to perceive
their habitual responses as choices rather than as reactions caused by others.
When the consultant told the couple about their system and required them to
maintain it he used words designed to call into question whether behaviors are
reactions “caused” by external factors, or choices made by actors who, by
implication, could act otherwise. This is also a characteristic of Milan therapy.
For example, “Father makes mother angry” is recast as “Mother shows father
her anger.” CMM theory makes a comparable distinction between subjective
feelings of reactivity and purposive choice (Cronen, Pearce, & Snively, 1979).
CMM does not say that persons are ever passive victims of “stimuli,” but does
acknowledge that people report “I could not do otherwise” or “he (or she)
made me angry.” These reports indicate the state of persons’ awareness of
their own participation in the creation of emotional roles and social realities. In
CMM theory, the experience of reactivity is referred to as prefigurative force.
The experience of articulating one’s choice of speech acts to the goal of
eliciting a certain kind of response from another is termed practical force. To
facilitate change in real action it may be necessary to produce a shift in
consciousness so that persons perceive certain behaviors as within their
control—as purposive—not as natural or totally prefigured reactions. The
consultant wanted to generate doubt in the minds of Mr. and Mrs. A about
whether rejecting other’s position and insisting on one’s own is something that
is prefigured (what they must do) or something that is purposive (what they
have chosen to do). The consultant uses statements such as “There is no hope
in stopping it . . .,” “It is a necessary part of the marriage . . .,” as well as: “It
is the way you have structured it.”

One final method of shifting patterns of consciousness deserves comment.
Every pattern of social structure and action is associated with unique patterns
of consciousness (see Chein, 1972). In Phase 0 we gave a brief account of how
the A family manages their convoluted system without realizing that it is a
game without end. They do so by being conscious of only certain aspects of
the structure at a time. As we noted, Mrs. A’s crying is a cue for one of the
shifts in consciousness. When a consultant presents the whole of a system with
the admonition to be sure to perpetuate it he is attempting to disrupt the
patterns of consciousness that facilitate the conduct of disagreements. Thus
the alternations in patterns of consciousness both reduce enmeshment in old
patterns of activity and disrupt those patterns by interferring with the management of consciousness upon which the old episodes depend.

Phase 7: Legitimation in Social Action

The new life-scripting and family myth seem to be organized around the theme of empowering others. Knowing when to do this and when to offer one’s own opinion become ways of being worthy and right. This seminal idea does not emerge into full-blown life-scripting through solitary contemplation alone. The possibilities of the new idea must be elaborated into relationships, episodes, and actions in the course of social activity with others. As part of the new structures there must also evolve new ways of managing consciousness. Exactly what these elaborations are is unknown. The therapy team had no wish to make them objects of study in a therapeutic context so long as the couple was satisfied.

The new concepts that evolved bear the marks of the material circumstances that led to a quest for new approaches. In this case those include the nature of therapeutic strange loop used to block action, the family’s past, and the social milieu in which the couple lives. But the nature of the elaborations is not fully determined by that history. Structural changes are more like evolutionary changes in the biological world wherein the advent of a new structure is not only the solution of a survival problem but also an open-ended set of possibilities (Gould, 1982). Nor is the new structure fully determined by the social conditions in which it is elaborated and tested. We hold with Harré (1980) that meanings are always to some extent idiosyncratic and that those idiosyncracies influence the social reality that is created.

The process of legitimation also entails the problem of how to avoid seeing the relationship between old and new structures as a strange loop forbidding any real choice between them. Without some resolution of the strange loop in Figure 11-2, the couple is left with abandoning worth and rightness in order to save them. (A Vietnam era slogan about having to destroy a village in order to save it comes readily to mind.) Cronen et al. (1982) have observed that one way persons transform strange loops into charmed loops is to think about the conceptions in the loop as a time-extended sequence rather than as a time-static relationship. If Mr. and Mrs. A see their old structure as part of an evolution the strange loop in Figure 11-2 might become a time-extended charmed loop like this:

The old conception of worth and rightness led us to a trap sprung on us by the therapist who showed us that the same trap exists in our relationship. In the context of that trap we could not be right so we explored new ways to be right and worthy. Our pursuit of rightness and worth was not mistaken. It led eventually to a better way to organize our lives and be worthy.

There is little doubt that the A family did change. When the couple was next interviewed five weeks later they reported no fighting since the last therapy
session, Mr. A tried out his new conception of empowerment publicly at a business convention and his ideas were well received. Mrs. A said that when he returned home he “kept walking around saying ‘I’ve changed!’ And I guess he had.” Interestingly; a week after the convention she had her own crisis; presumably as a reaction to and a test of his change. A relatively trivial argument about preparing dinner on a Friday night escalated to the point where the wife announced that she was going to leave, this time for certain. The whole family was extremely upset; including the children. Mr. A believed she was going to leave but he did not try to force her to stay. He indicated that he wanted her to stay but that she would have to decide for herself. On Monday morning he stayed home from work and “somehow things got worked out.” The wife changed her mind. She said “I’ll never do that again . . . It’s just too upsetting for everybody . . . and besides, I like it where I am! I guess I have matured a lot.” Mr. A described his experience this way: “You just can’t force people to do things. All you can do is tell them what you think, but let them decide what they want to do for themselves.” He emphasized that at work his relationship with his colleagues had changed. “People come to me now and ask for my opinion. They never used to do that. They warm up to me now. It’s been an astounding revelation!”

One year later in a telephone follow-up interview, the father reported that things were going very well. There had been no further contact with other professionals.

Conclusion and Implications

We began by raising the possibility of providing an account of high order social change without positing a fixed overarching grammar that guides change. We required that such an account meet certain additional criteria. It must preserve the qualities of both radical transformation and continuity while having its explanatory locus in actual social encounters. The foregoing model and case study suggest that an account that meets these criteria within the framework of CMM theory can be offered.

The key to explaining continuity and radical change lies in Phase 4 where an inversion of hierarchical order takes place. Constructions formerly at lower order levels of organization become context within which to reexamine very broad conceptions such as life-scriptings and family myths. In our case study an encounter with a clinical consultant develops into a paradoxical situation. Within the context of that episode with its “we’re right that you’ll be right” turn of events, the A family creates certain lower order resolutions. The resolutions were subsequently used as a high order contexts. Those resolutions were not consistent with high order aspects of structure, but neither were they unrelated to the high order conceptions. They must resolve an impasse that comes in part from the unique character of the original high order contexts.
Another family might find nothing very disturbing about the “We’re right that you’ll be right” situation. The consultant’s participation in generating the impasse is influenced by the kind of episodes the family has heretofore engaged in creating with therapists. Moreover, the resolutions were also attempts to fulfill some sense of the original telos.

The A family was not selected for analysis because we think its rapid transformation typifies all clients response to Milan techniques. The A family is interesting because their long-standing structures and patterns of action were so vulnerable. Examining their vulnerability suggests it is possible to identify those structures that have a potential for change. The clarity of the parameters of the original A family system that emerged in Phase 1 is clearly an important factor. In a chaotic system it is impossible to perceive the existence of paradox (Bronowski, 1971). A second factor that helps account for the impact of the first therapeutic strange loop (see Figure 11-1) is the definitional (Wittgenstein (1958) would say “criterial”) connection between a particular outcome in a specific social situation (who concedes) and the telos of life-scripting and family myth. The definitional tie means that the A family cannot ignore the situation. They must be able to decide what to do and come out more correct in the episode with the consultant. Their ability to sustain their life-scriptings within the mythos is at risk at that moment. If the relationship between the higher relatos and rightness was only a loose evidentiary one, the A family could discount the strange loop that blocked action, perhaps thinking “Well, we usually win and this is a strange situation.” If they did this no unique short-term resolution would emerge to function as a high-level context. Some systems are so poorly formed that it is impossible to identify failures. Such social systems are much harder to change.

We suspect that the definitional tie also facilitated the inversion of hierarchical perspective. The A family is habituated to examining their life-scripting and place in the family myth within the context of each particular social encounter. By way of contrast we are reminded of Barbara Tuchman’s (1978) discussion of 14th century French knights who would not rethink their tactics no matter how disastrously they were defeated by the English. The myth of knighthood formed a context in which all defeats were God’s will, and the religious component of the myth was specific as to what must always remain higher order context.

Social change is often associated with the subjective experience of alienation yet the A family does not report that kind of experience. Using the CMM change model it is possible to begin illuminating some possible sources of alienation within the process and to describe how Mr. and Mrs. A avoided the problem. Our guess is that alienation would be most pronounced under the following combination of conditions: (a) Action needed to fulfill a high level telos is blocked, (b) The locus of consciousness is shifted to a third-person perspective, and (c) There is either failure to use short-term resolutions as a high order context leaving unresolved contradiction or failure to validate new
perspectives in social action. The effect of a lingering contradiction in the A family’s system would have left a gap between what they do (episodic level) and how they relate to others on one hand, and their life-scripting and family myth on the other. The separation of self and action would then have been intensified by the third-person position and the break up of those patterns of consciousness necessary to return to the old system.

Space does not permit a detailed account of nonclinical analogs to this process of change but we do wish simply to note some similarities in a very different realm—change in the paradigms guiding scientific communities. The analog to Phase 1 is obvious. Scientific perspectives require sufficient clarity to know when they ought to be abandoned. Indeed, those with ill-defined constructs tend to outlive their usefulness. The staying power of cognitive dissonance theory is partially attributable to the fact that “dissonance” remained an ill-defined hypothetical construct. Blocking scientific activity through a strange loop intervention is vividly described by Kuhn (1981). Kuhn cites Galileo’s attack on Aristotle’s concept of speed. In Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, Galileo presented a paradoxical loop blocking the ability of the physicist to make very elementary judgments.

Kuhn’s (1970) view of science as a series revolutionary paradigm shifts requires a new way to manage consciousness. The neophyte scientist must disattend to the fact that the more a system is clarified and elaborated the more probable paradox becomes. We are all too familiar with the student whose reaction to first reading Kuhn is “why work on a current theory, if it will ultimately be discarded and my own work will lose its relevance?” The justification we usually give is to pose the strange loop of old and new and show how it can be resolved. For example, we sometimes cite how Newtonian physics is both preserved (as an explanation of local space-time) yet destroyed—transcended by the Einsteinian view. Indeed, the goals of physical science explanation that were part of the Newtonian view commanded that alternatives be explored in order to fulfill some sense of purpose for which we do physics.

Before leaving the topic of analogs to the case study we want to reemphasize that the phases of the CMM change model need not follow a fixed progression. One phase may trigger another in ways quite different from the progression that occurred for the A family. For example, breakup in the patterns of consciousness needed for conduct of the original system may be sufficient to important block patterns of action. Conversely, blocking a crucial pattern of action could trigger a shift in the management of consciousness.

A final word about the nature of the knowledge claims made herein. The account we have given is not in the form of deterministic or probabilistic laws of change. What we have offered is a set of claims about the various ways that structure and action create one another. To do so we provide a way of modeling higher order change using a set of principles about consciousness, time, action, hierarchy, and recursivity.
References


