

REVIEW

Luigi Boscolo and Paolo Bertrando (1993) *The Times of Time: A New Perspective in Systemic Therapy and Consultation*, Norton & Co., New York/ London.

I think this is an extraordinary book in the depth and breadth of its investigation into time and in its complex application to therapy. But, before I turn to the book itself, here are two illustrations of a time perspective that are not linked to therapy.

Firstly, Peter Hoeg's novel *Borderliners*, deals with the idea of time as a constraining concept that may be used to imprison and control people. He uses by example the rigid discipline of boarding-school life, where every minute of every day is timetabled, and to step outside the timetable is to meet with punishment.

Secondly, I have recently returned from travelling in India, where I witnessed a different cultural relationship with time and a different pace through time, compared with Western culture. "The bus will be along in half an hour" was said to the impatient Westerner more as a reassurance than as an accurate prognosis. Time in India appeared to me to be open-ended. In Britain, by contrast, time has definite boundaries around which we can be early, late or on time.

These examples show the significance of time in a broader context than therapy. Similarly, Boscolo and Bertrando use examples from literature, physics, and philosophy before applying time to a therapeutic context.

As the subtitle suggests, this book is an invitation to use a different perspective within systemic therapy. A time perspective, according to the authors, invites a new and different look at one's own hypotheses and assumptions as well as one's clients'.

It also invites a fresh look at the problems explored in therapy and the solutions generated. Central to their thesis is the idea that there is more than one way of experiencing and describing time. People experience the pace, or movement, of time differently, both at different times in their lives and in relation to others. Also, people's relationship with dimensions of time: past, present and future, vary according to the way they conceptualise time. Boscolo and Bertrando add to this a cultural and social dimension, to create layers of time-related meaning. For them, a time perspective is important both in terms of allowing a space in which to explore the 'stuckness' of problems in a new light; and in terms of the therapist pacing him/herself in time alongside the family.

The book is structured clearly, with a description in the introduction of how the book came to be written, (thus placing its evolution within a time dimension), and

how it is structured. The book's first chapter describes the authors' work with a family under the heading: 'Prisoners of Time'. The authors describe them as a family with a handicapped son unable to contemplate a future which includes the son's handicap, and are thus trapped in static time, unable to allow time to evolve. They hypothesize that this family has organised itself as 'a closed system around time' to prevent change that might be painful. They work with the family by opening up ways of thinking about the future and ways of thinking about the passing of time that are different for the family.

The next three chapters focus mainly on theory: metaphors of time as found mainly in philosophy, history, geology and physics; domains of time - individual, social and cultural; and the authors' ideas of conceptualising time and applying it to systemic practice.

The following chapters detail clinical cases extensively by using thorough and detailed narrations and transcripts with commentary and explanation. They continue to develop the theme of time by examining the individual's relationship with past and with future; and by looking at the use of therapeutic rituals. They conclude with an in depth case study.

The authors stress that using a time lens 'is a complementary perspective, not an alternative, to the systemic one'. They are explicit about their loyalty to a systemic paradigm as illustrated by their referencing of Bateson, Palazzoli, Cecchin, through to Tomm, Anderson and Goolishian. An example of viewing time through a systemic lens might be their metaphor of 'the self-reflexive loop of past, present and future'. They propose that 'the therapist's task is to introduce a reflexive relationship among the three dimensions of time, what we define as a reflexive loop of the past, present and future, making time for hypothetical pasts and futures in the present'. (p.xii). To achieve such a task they use standard systemic tools; hypothesizing, circular questioning, a stance of curiosity and carefully crafted interventions and prescribed tasks.

They also borrow the language of narrative theory and social constructionism. This shows particularly in their understanding of time as a metaphor and the impossibility to know time directly; and in their premise that concepts such as time are socially and culturally constructed.

Where they are less explicit about their underlying premises and beliefs is in their psychiatric and psychoanalytical professional backgrounds. Where I suspect the influence of these backgrounds show is in their readiness to take charge of sessions,

to speak as "experts", and to prescribe tasks and therapeutic rituals. Many of the case examples are from psychiatric settings, and much of the hypothesizing has a psychoanalytic slant to it.

Ideas about time are taken from a wide breadth of knowledge: from Augustine's Confessions to Newton, Heisenberg, Prigogine, Levi-Strauss to Bateson. The wealth of ideas from a wealth of different sources serves to reinforce the premise that conceptualising time is individually and culturally relative. One client may conceptualise time as an arrow, another as a cycle. One family might believe the past has a hold on their future, another that their future is unknown and uncontrollable. The use of a time perspective opens the therapist up to an area of beliefs and premises that if explored and challenged might help unlock blocks in the family's sense of development and evolution.

This is how the book is both useful and original. Just as using a gender lens opens up new possibilities of seeing old problems and opens up new avenues to explore, so does using a time lens. In Hoeg's novel, time is perceived as both problem and solution: time entraps, but through an expectation of tomorrow one can escape today. Boscolo and Bertrando work with families who may be fearful of moving forward in time, or where members of a family are moving at different time speeds.

They give an example of a family whose rhythm of time has been disrupted by the introduction of a new member: a baby with its own rhythm. The family has to work to find a new temporal framework.

The idea of timing is one that therapists will find useful. If a therapist's timing and the client's timing are not synchronised, constraints and frustrations may occur, unnoticed if the question of time is not considered.

Time for the authors is not only a means to generate new ways of understanding old problems, but is also a construct to be challenged and re-constructed, or co-created, in the therapy room. How can a temporal horizon be changed? How can the sluggish time of a depressed person be made to move more quickly? These are the kinds of questions that the authors believe can be attended to by considering time as the focus of enquiry.

Are the authors wedded to their hypothesis? Time, like space, is a fundamental component of reality. It is possible to link all facets of existence to it, and forge a kind of logic or certainly connections. Just like the vast amount of material in the book, "everything connects", and so nothing need be left out. A book about space might be equally exciting and rich, but equally at risk of magnifying one perspective

to the detriment of others. This book is dense with knowledge and information about time from a tremendous variety of sources. However I am left with a question: what does this perspective prevent us from seeing? What does it close us off from? I wonder how the authors will think differently in 10 - 20 years about time in relation to therapy. And whether that question can be asked from a different perspective other than time?

This book is encyclopedic as a text on time. Each time I thought of what the book was missing, I would go back to the text and find it there, sandwiched between gendered time, rituals as a means of punctuating time, time and its relation to the therapist's theory of change, and various different descriptions of cultural time.

However, the book's greatest significance for me is in its raising to awareness the concept of time both in therapy and out. Time has become a live issue for me since reading *The Times of Time*, as I felt was illustrated for me by my perceptions and descriptions of journeying in India and my noticing of time differences. I am curious to know where Boscolo and Bertrando are directing their thoughts now.

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