

## Celebration of Newness

To allow for a new situation, I have to step back from my knowing position

Kerstin Hopstadius

Navn: **Kerstin Hopstadius**

Titel: **leg psykolog, leg psykoterapeut**

Nasjonalitet: **svensk**

E-post: **kerstin@hopstadius.se**

Arbeitssted: **Privat praktik Dendron AB, Heden Brändavägen 9, SE-793 92 Leksand, Sverige**

## Celebration of Newness

To allow for a new situation, I have to step back from my knowing position

Kerstin Hopstadius

To be present, to be open for the newness, the ever changing conditions of life often requires taking a step back in our professional approach, allowing room for doubt, confusion and silence.

This workshop deals with ideas about how to allow for that step back. With inspiration from Harlene Anderson and John Shotter and many others we look at some practices that in different ways have met that challenge, particularly practices involving children.

Jonathan, a five year old with a severe handicap was coming back to his special school after the summer vacation. His teacher had prepared a lot of material that she thought that he would like and which possibly could help him to start to speak. When he came, she heard him talking, and talking a lot! She shed tears of joy, exclaiming, "I have prepared all these things, and I'll throw all of it in the waste basket!" How Jonathan had got things together and figured out how to talk we don't know, but quite likely the caring and encouragement around him had played a big part. Unfortunately, through the years his parent had heard several experts telling them things about what was *not* to be expected from Jonathan due to his brain damage. Among the things that they should not expect from him was speech. Right now that mattered little in the joy they could share with the teacher.

I recently heard of Jonathan from a friend of his family. I started to think about how we as professionals know, think that we know, and pretend that we know, things about life and the living. In the delicate balance between hope and despair that parents with a handicapped child live in, it is within easy reach for the professional people involved to think that they must not give false hope. With less assertive parents than Jonathan's the result of the information can be a feeling of no hope at all for their relationship with their child. The professional knowledge that is so much needed in a difficult human situation, why is it so often misleading or misinterpreted or simply irrelevant?

The unexpected does not always arrive as obvious as it was to Jonathan's teacher. She was immediately ready to rearrange her work and expectations to the new situation. However, am I ready to throw parts of my wise and elaborated positions and suggestions in the waste basket as soon as I realize that a situation is demanding something else of me? Too often the pre-understanding of a problematic situation is formed by the knowing of some deficit and the demand for action to relieve the burden. As reliable professionals we have heavy expectations from others, and from ourselves, to stay on track and not ignore the possible complications of the presented dilemma and the demands for an evidence based practice. To step back and realize that there might be a world of unknown possibilities, and barriers, that influence the situation in front of me, can be a way of opening a door to new knowledge. These new things might not announce their arrival beforehand. To be open for the newness, the ever changing conditions of life is a kind of professional approach that requires taking a step back. At times that means allowing

room for doubt, confusion and silence. To start from a not knowing position, to allow for the newness of the moment, is not always comfortable, but to me it has become more and more vital as I meet changes and unknown situations (Anderson, 2006).

## Language as tools

At Harlene Anderson's Summer Institute in Mexico in 2006 I had a presentation, *Language as tools, tools as language*. It included some ideas from Ludwig Wittgenstein that has inspired my own thinking and work, and some thoughts, and tools, from "play conversation" with children and their families.

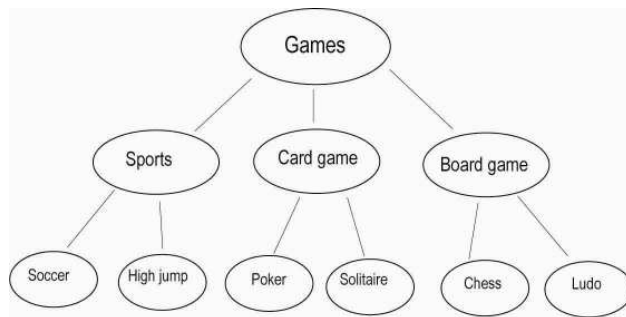
I wanted to highlight Wittgenstein's expression "language as tools" and have a look at the language that is created in play, specifically the way of playing with children and parents together in psychotherapy that the Norwegian psychologist Martin Soltvedt has developed (Soltvedt, 2005). In my own work I had found helpful to go back and forth between these two mindsets. Now I wanted to know if it also could create an interesting conversation at the Summer Institute.

Through the years I have made several attempts to approach the enigmatic utterances from Wittgenstein that I stumbled upon here and there in the therapy literature. Several authors had been able to find something that fit their specific brand. Something that they all seemed to have in common was a desire to get away from the traditional way of looking at language as a property of the individual speaker and a word as a representation of a phenomenon, a package going back and forth between people. Instead they wanted to see language as something between people that is actively forming ideas and phenomena.

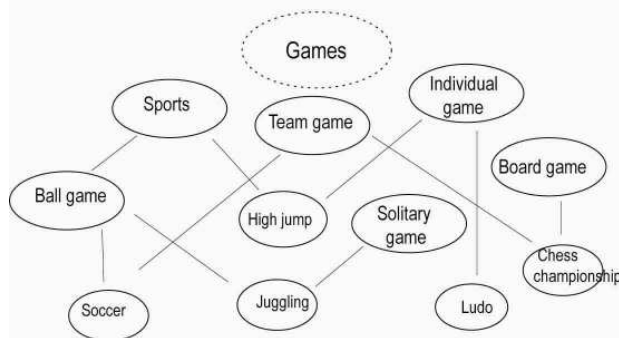
I guess that once you cross the border and no longer limit yourself to seeing language as representation; talking "about" things, but rather seeing language as action, you get a whole array of new questions. If these people earlier on had thought about their theoretical work as a road map, where you needed to know the distances and crossings, now Wittgenstein had them plunging into the forest to start orienteering.

For my own part John Shotter's book *Cultural politics of everyday life* spoke to actual dilemmas in my work. When he quoted Wittgenstein, "We must do away with explanation, and description alone must take its place" (Wittgenstein, 1953 no.109) and "A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of our use of words (ibid no.122) I could let go of a lot of preconceived ideas and be more present with the people I met at work. That is to say, I have done the same thing as everybody else, run away with some sentences that fit my needs at my work. Not until lately have I really wondered how Ludwig Wittgenstein actually looked upon the role of language in life and in science.

## Family resemblances



Logical order – categories and subcategories on several levels



Family resemblances – no common features shared by all

One of Wittgenstein’s ideas that many therapists have used, is to question the importance of logical hierarchical order in our thinking, and replace that with what he named “family resemblances”. (Cronen & Lang, 1994). He takes the concept *game* as an example:

“...board games, card games, ball games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? Don’t say ‘They must have something in common, or they would not be called games’ – but look and see whether they have anything common to all. For if you look, you will see not something that is common to all, but rather, similarities and relationships [between elements], and a whole series of them...”

(P I # 66)

*Look and see* – that is the way children learn. Children of all ages spend a lot of their time in an intense active sorting of impressions and testing what effect their own expressions can have on their environment at the moment. Play gives infinite possibilities for that kind of testing. And all kind of cultural learning can rather be thought of as family resemblances rather than hierarchical categories. Imagine that you have been to a multicultural party, and the day after you want to describe the menu to a friend. It is hard to do that in terms of logical order. Not to mention how an experienced therapist meets a new client and gets an idea: “what I hear now reminds me of...” and might try a question that fits with that hunch.

The simple picture of family resemblances has helped me a lot. I am thoroughly trained in the hierarchical model and in conversations I tend to listen for “the most important stuff” or try to sort what I hear in the boxes I already have in my mind. When training in Life Studies I found a way of listening that helps me when people tell me things from their lives (Riessman, 1993). Things that I would not see as connected become connected in the fabric of a story with many threads.

## Tools as language

A few years ago I was translating a unique book. The author, Martin Soltvedt, was not at ease with how children were met in the therapy that supposedly should make things better for them. In psychoanalytical work with children, he felt that the therapists and theorists ascribed, or sometimes almost prescribed, attitudes and feelings to the child which were modeled on analysis with adults with psychological problems. The family therapy that he saw often included a child

squirring around adults sitting on chairs, literally talking over the head of the child. The elaborate techniques of shaping desired behavior in children by means of rewards etc. in behavioral therapy he found unnatural and sometimes even destructively stifling for a child that needs to have a range of expressions relevant for age and personality.

Soltvedt calls his approach Child oriented family therapy (the abbreviation of this approach in Norwegian and Swedish is BOF). He has been very creative in adapting the therapy situation to involve both therapist and parent to enter the arena of the child, whether it involves all sitting around the sand tray, playing games together or adults being in tough confrontation with a desperate child. Often small wooden dolls in a sand tray are used, but there are numerous variations and applications, and no manual or standard procedure. In the centre of the work, which is inspired from psychodynamic, behavioral and systemic thinking, is play. Play in this context means a shared action where all parties contribute. The professional task is to play with child and parents together, to create a shared action in a way that allows the child to take part in a playful way.

I was eager to do justice to an approach with many years of experience behind it. Barbro Sjölin Nilsson, a Swedish psychologist, who for more than a decade had been leading therapist training together with the author, generously invited me to take part in her program. (Barbro also did a huge amount of proofreading and suggestions for translation and editing, I am very much obliged to her for the final text). Thus I was given a welcome opportunity to use their ideas and tools in my own work.

Through all my years as a therapist I have wanted to be more involved with children in families. Starting out with ideas of client as expert and multiple realities implies that a lot of built-in obstacles of other therapies can be avoided, but is no guarantee for the child actually feeling OK in the room. Encountering the BOF-practice gave me new inspiration.

I bought some prefabricated wooden dolls and asked two granddaughters of mine, Johanna and Beatrice, then 12 and 13 years of age, to do the painting. They made some more flamboyant designs than I had planned, and I have found people often liking them the most. I have mainly used them in supervision, but also in some sessions with clients.



## BOF and Wittgenstein

When Wittgenstein talks about language as tools, he states that words are not neat packages ready to open up to show their meaning, in their use they are floating forces of impact. Among other fruitful possibilities, I also saw that as a door to children's worlds of language. When we let ourselves be challenged by Wittgenstein's thinking, we come closer to the position of the child. We no longer have so much power as we did think before, not so much power over our own means of thinking and expressing our thoughts.

Children's language is more provisional than grown up's language. Children's language is action oriented. Both these aspects connect to "Language as tools"; you try a tool and notice the result of using it. If it doesn't seem to work you try another one, another tone of voice or another word etc. This is what small children are doing all the time, both with language and with other tools.

A basic concept in BOF-work is co-action, give and take. In the play, children and adults are doing things together. From this action new possibilities of thinking and acting can emerge. I often use John Shotter's distinction "joint action" as a philosophical starting point (Shotter, 1993). Shotter is highlighting the kind of responsiveness that characterizes us as human beings. The co-action in the play involves that the therapist or the parent, in playing with the child is letting the responses from the child inform their own responses, taking the responsibility as adult to respond in a way that is possible for the child to grasp.

## Working with BOF-ideas

John, ten years old, I met, together with his parents, as a consultant at his school. The parents were divorced and John was moving between their places once a week. The concern that both the school and the parents expressed was that he lately had become troublesome in class, not doing well at school and that he often looked sad. Both parents expressed that they thought that John could benefit from having somebody outside the family to talk to. We had a few sessions where he did not talk about any particular concern. In one of our talks I asked him if he could use the wooden figures to show me where the people of his family lived. He chose carefully one at a time and placed them within masking tape in three places: his father's home, his mother's home and the home of his father's former wife, where his older sister lived. He placed himself at his father's side and in the home of the mother he put her new husband, John's baby brother and the grandfather. I had not heard of the grandfather before, but now I was told that not long ago he had arrived from the mother's country of origin, and been given John's room, so now John slept on the couch in the living room. He said that he liked his grandpa, but he found it difficult not to have a room at his mother's place.

A simple arrangement on the table made a new conversation possible where John could express his own concerns.

## Bewitchment

One of the most frequently quoted sentences from Wittgenstein is: Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* #109). The bewitchment occurs when the words are used in what he calls a metaphysical way, the idling that occurs when words become disengaged from the actual use in verbal communication and lead a life of their own in the brains of the philosopher (von Wright, 2000).

The most interesting comment on that sentence I have found in the little booklet *Wittgenstein and psychoanalysis* (Heaton, 2000).

The key word here is 'means', which is a translation of *Mittel*, which can also be rendered 'remedy' and 'resources'. It is by calling upon the resources of language that we recover a remedy for our bewitchment. Language is not a mere means. Wittgenstein uses the alchemy of the word, for words are potential magic with a power that can transform experience. This can be creative as in literature, but it also has a delusive power.

Direction is sought without the guidance of doctrine. Doubt and despair are essential in finding our way. For the difficulty is not an intellectual one but requires a change of attitude, of restraint of feeling. We must beware of the temptation of soothing explanations, a voice that seeks necessities outside of the conversation, to govern thought and behavior. The autonomy of discourse and its dialogical character are to be respected. It is this groundlessness that allows subjects to 'be themselves'.

Clarity in therapy would have the same effect as sunlight on the growth of potato shoots – in a dark cellar they grow long. Clarity could make therapists more aware of the alchemy of the word, and less concerned with the discovery of new methods and theories with their rival claim to truth.

John M. Heaton. *Wittgenstein and psychoanalysis* p. 28

The philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright was Wittgenstein's successor at Cambridge. Several years ago I listened to an interview with him and his wife on Swedish television. Mrs von Wright talked about the situation that they moved into the house where Wittgenstein was still living on the top floor. He was very indignant about their two sons' behavior and told their mother, "Your 'No' should be a wall and not a door!" In the interview she commented, "I decided not to say no very often." Wittgenstein for sure was into his own thinking of words as tools, and a No should be connected to a relevant mindset and action – the mother of these two boys was first of all thinking about the consequences if the children would be enclosed by far too many shut doors! I guess that she felt that philosophy has its use, but ideas are not all there is in life.

### Summing up

I am thinking of my own work: what obstacles are there to pass before I can achieve a meeting that will do justice to the people and the dilemmas involved? To be involved with a four-year-old might require quite a bit of preparation. The task of the grown up person is to be flexible with things that the four-year-old cannot figure out ahead of time.

The story about Jonathan asked me the question, am I willing to let go of comfortable ideas and secure positions when the situation calls for something else?

The seriousness in Wittgenstein's challenge to look and see, instead of speculate and build theoretical ivory towers is worth going back to, even if I sometimes go astray in his utterances.

The BOF work challenges the all-too-serious-talking-talking and asks me to eagerly look for possibilities to play and to find ways of being together in tough situations.

## References

- Anderson, H., Goolishian, H. (1992) *Från påverkan till medverkan*. Stockholm: Mareld.
- Anderson, H. (2006) *Collaborative Therapy: Relationships And Conversations That Make a Difference*. New York: Routledge.
- Heaton, J. M. (2000). *Wittgenstein and psychoanalysis*. Cambridge: Icon books.
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). Narrative analysis. *Qualitative Research Methods Series (30)* Newbury Park: Sage
- Soltvedt, M. (2005) *BOF–Barnorienterad familjeterapi*. Stockholm: Mareld
- Shotter, J. (1993) *Cultural politics of everyday life*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Wright, Georg Henrik von, (2000) *Myten om framsteget : tankar 1987-1992 : med en intellektuell självbiografi*. Stockholm: Bonnier
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*. trans. G.G. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.