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READING #35

Mis-taken Love: Conversations on the Problem of Incest in an Irish Context.*

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An emotive consciousness of the issues surrounding incest frequently calls forth revulsion, outrage, fear, concern, and competition. Such responses often legitimate a range of actions that include the protection of children, the blaming of mothers, and the punishment of fathers. This article explores a "systemic" disposition¹ in conversations on father-daughter incest. The notion of a "Fifth Province" (from Celtic mythology) is invoked wherein all emotions, judgments, and descriptions can find acceptance, and whereby a language of control and competition, implicitly negating individuals and their relationships, is suspended as a rationale for action.

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¹ Hyphenations will be used throughout the text to emphasize certain words and their usage, as well as the simultaneous movements between sundering and re-membering inherent in all creative processes.

The acceptance of the other without demands is the enemy of tyranny and abuse because it opens a space for co-operation. Love is the enemy of appropriation.

—Maturana (23, p. 4)

For behold, there has been no marriage of humanity since time began. Men have but coupled with their own shadows. The desire that sprang from their heads they pursued, and no man has yet known the love of a woman. And women have mated with the shadows of their own hearts, thinking fondly that the arms of men were about them.

—Stephens (32, p. 112)

THE CONTEXT in which we have developed this team project on incestuously defined systems is a department of child psychiatry in a large, general university hospital in Dublin. Families in which sexual abuse has been disclosed and investigated are placed in the jurisdiction of the Health Board Community Social Services that assumes statutory responsibilities for issues of control and protection. From time to time, a small number of cases are referred to our team for "family therapy." This process of referral has enabled the team to generate a "systemic" approach to client systems. Unconstrained by mandates of social control and protection, we have had the luxury of a broader canvas on which to explore and facilitate the emer-

gence of latent possibilities and nonabusive caring in the total treatment system. The treatment-problem system that we define has a membership of the family, our team, and other involved professionals. As Anderson and colleagues (1) have pointed out, the distinction that an observer makes in defining a problem are the actions that mark a problem-defined system and, therefore, the membership of the system to be considered for treatment. The system involves all those who interact around a common cognitive theme that has been mutually defined as a problem or mandate for change.

Cultural Premises and Myths

In undertaking this project to generate a systemic perspective in situations of alleged sexual abuse, we have had to confront our own implicit premises and prejudices. In addition, curiosity, moral outrage, impulses to protect, rescue or abandon family members, or to expropriate "the problem" from social control agents have had to be tempered continually. Because it is a mental health issue with rapidly expanding political and ethical dimensions, any professional attachment addressing it runs the risk of being overrun with these concerns. It is no trivial issue for mental health professionals that the family who discloses incest as a problem may be challenged to defend and validate the tenuous social organization that permits its existence. Beleaguered and facing the threat of dis-memberment and dis-integration, it struggles to compensate by oppressively invoking the themes of sacrifice, love, and loyalty between its members in order to conserve its organization. Exposed and self-liberated, the family becomes the scapegoat for societal paranoia fed on myths of carnal contagion and carnal addiction, the twin streams that run deep and pervasively in the cultural mind.

In countering descriptions of carnality for the problem of incest, we have held

aloof from inquiries that create it. An assumption is made that the body contact involved in a sexual act first exists in the domain of sensory experience. It cannot, as a phenomenon, as "a happening of living," exist in the domains of observation and conceptualization, although the experience may be retrospectively inferred and explained within these domains. "The phenomenon to be explained is not replaced by the explanation" (22). Incest between father and daughter can and does occur precisely because the participants do not attribute to their emotions and actions the specific meaning it may have in other situations (3).

Treatment Premises: Restoration and Ruin

We believe that treatment based on a restorative ideology is a confusion of phenomenal and explanatory domains. The sexually abused daughter and her family are forced to take on a system of attributions about the family, which the family could not generate itself and of which it previously was innocent. A "restorative ideology" carries with it attributions of damage and ruin. Within this description, ruin and restoration are the complementary attributions in which the family and treatment mind can remain captively engaged. In particular, a restorative ideology can create a system of attributions for the girl within which she views herself and is viewed as a sacrificial victim and as a heroine. To accept that one is ruined before one can be restored is a heavy burden!

AMBIVALENT SOCIAL RELATIONS AND GENERATION OF INCEST: A HYPOTHESIS

It is tempting, if alarming, to propose that the phenomenon of incest is the inevitable feature of profound structural changes in the social relations of the modern family. The modern family often

appears as a historically anomalous, social institution whose traditional functions have been progressively abrogated by an increasingly parental "State." Cut off from channels of social enrichment, expansion, and regulation, its organization is now sustained by the pursuit of proximity, the meeting of emotional needs, and the consumption of goods. The primacy of the "love relationship" in the modern family inevitably carries a nearly unbearable burden. Like the Joycean motherland, it has become "the old sow who eats her own farrow" (18, p. 524).

In the light of these impressions, it seems as if the increased occurrence and disclosure of father-daughter incest is a "socially situated" phenomenon reflecting the confusion at the heart of the modern family. It is an apparent paradox that this phenomenon is a particular family's somatic expression of its struggle to be child-centered, to shift its gender roles, and to value emotionality, proximity, and nonhierarchical social relations. These values in turn create and are generated through the maximization of ambiguous, novel, and uncertain social interactions.

The modern family has become a potentially unstable, emotional field that, under special circumstances, negotiates (a) proximity in extremely oscillating patterns of fusion and distance and (b) control in escalating patterns of competition. In these circumstances of unstable proximity and unstable control, the phenomenon of father-daughter incest and other familial mis-alliances may be generated. A low threshold in sustaining the ambivalence proper to issues of love and proximity and the patterning of social dynamics may "weave" the incestuous leitmotiv. In the shaping of an incestuous organization, a daughter captively participates in unstable coalitions of affirmation and negation. Incest becomes the concrete event whereby oscillations and escalations are stilled and a consensual domain for protection of the

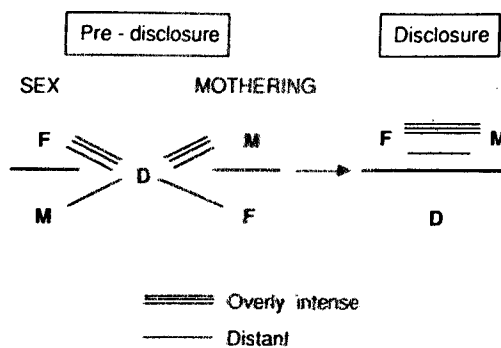


FIG. 1. A daughter's mediation in an incongruent hierarchical arrangement.

family emerges (see Figure 1; F = father, M = mother, D = daughter).

DISCLOSURE: PROBLEM CREATION AND RESOLUTION—THREE PHENOMENA

The Emergence of Women

Although the self-consuming family generates the phenomenon of incest, it is the emergence of women from a solitary description of victimization that generates its disclosure. All manner of disclosures about the intimate lives of family members is a product of this emergence. To regard disclosures of sexual abuse as cathartic, confessional, and a plea for protection, is to remain deaf to the desires of women (9, 10). Abuse and protection are but a reversible shroud in which victims are lain. The description of women in incestuously defined families as victims "colluding" in the male sovereignty myth is a caricature that does not fit with our observations. Women are in step with their cultural contemporaries in their familiarity with women's issues. They are in tune with personal issues, for example, health, work, questioning a total commitment to child care, and openly challenging husbands in regard to issues of status and authority. All hold marital separation to be an option for them. (Legal divorce is not available within the Irish Republic.) In all cases we have seen, it is the mother's confrontation of

social issues that appears to trigger the daughter's disclosure.

After disclosure, mothers caught in protective prescriptions are faced with "Hobson's choice" of a responsibility to their marriage and to motherhood, and guilt is inevitable. By choosing their marriage, they are perceived to be conspiratorial in the abuse of their daughters. It is the professionally imposed protection of both motherhood and childhood that all too often becomes the desired solution, and mothers guiltily resume their "solitary description" of victimization and solitary responsibility for families.

Quest for a Scapegoat

Others (8, 11) have described how disclosing the incest secret to other systems becomes the occasion for these issues to expand across family and professional interfaces. In our experience, disclosing the incest secret to other systems expands the escalatory debates and oscillatory cycles in which the polarity of ethical themes are submerged, forgotten, or overlooked. Such oversight often leads to fragmentation, hostility, and continuing sexual and social abuse. The issues thus exit from the special circumstances of the "incestuous" family to enter the general circumstances of public morals. Here it becomes the exemplary perturbation for the reallocation of private and public spaces. Exposed and vulnerable, the family is required to compensate primarily to reduce public anxiety and, only secondarily, to protect itself. The private world of the family is delivered to a public morality in which the ethics of punishment are masked and unmasked (24). In view of the ongoing public debate in this country at present about the safety of children in child-care settings (day and residential), with babysitters, in foster families, adoptive families, and step-families, it is interesting that in situations of father-daughter incest it is the mother-daughter relationship that is called into question and criti-

cally examined (33). Such examination reflects the public debate on appropriate places of safety for children. Apparently the only safe places for children are in their own homes with their "monitored" mothers. Attendant on this, the father's role within the private domain of the family becomes more ambiguous at best and undesired at worst. The safe conduct of fathers perhaps belongs within the public domain, while women are once again returned and return to the private domain of family.

The Dis-integration of Family Coalitions

We have observed that a daughter's disclosure occurs in tandem with significant changes in the parental relationship, which allows her to exit from previously structured coalitions (see Figure 1). The event of disclosure holds within it the further possibility for the dissolution of the incestuous organization and involves major structural couplings and uncouplings. As the parents undertake to redefine their marriage, the coalitional structure in which it was anchored collapses (see Figure 2): (a) An emergent wife/mother no longer participates in agendas for victimization; (b) an emergent daughter coupled to broader social domains finds herself no longer fitting in the marital coalition; (c) father fits with mother's agenda for renegotiation of the marriage or its demise; (d) father increases coupling attempts with daughter, and (e) daughter's disclosure within or outside the family indicates her liberation from agendas of protection, and it becomes her "mission" (2) to support and amplify changes. In this scenario, father's changing behavior is largely unknown; but our hypothesis, somewhat borne out, is that his behavior may have become so excessive in relation to both wife and daughter that it triggered one of them to disclose the incest.

In our cases, after disclosure, the daughters expressed concern for their par-

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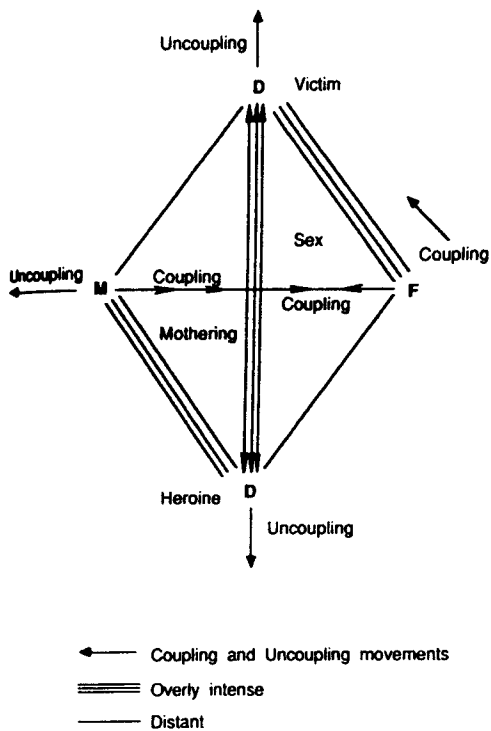


FIG. 2. Structural changes: The dis-solution of the "incestuous" organization in the family.

ents' marital relationship and reported that they felt caught and had to mediate actively in an unending, symmetrical battle between their parents. On this battlefield, they were simultaneously victims and heroines. As the parental pair began to behave in a way that brought their marriage into sharper focus, in terms of its continuation or demise, the young girl was freed of her responsibility to define the marriage, but she was also relegated (in the "power" hierarchy) as the family protector. These factors, combined with her increasing contact with peers, seemed to present a context in which she was likely to reveal her secret outside of the family.

DISCLOSURE: AGENDA FOR SOCIAL CONTROL AND PROTECTION

Tracking the major structural changes, the particular relational alignments and nonalignments (couplings and uncouplings) generated by disclosure has become

a major focus of the work described in this article. Typically, disclosure is seen as a happening between a daughter as a member of a family and an adult as a member of some societal institution. However, it is the content of the disclosure (of incest) that guarantees the rapid coupling of this anomalous child-adult dyad. It becomes an exemplar of descriptions whereby organization of "family" and organization of "incestuous family" are indistinguishable.

Within this description, the family system either behaves in a way that accentuates its definition or disintegrates in the face of a voluntary or enforced fracture. We have observed that it is the mother's mediation of systems of avowal and disavowal (disclosure and denial) that generates subsequent, crucial alignments. The designation, social agents, stands for the whole array of professional and nonprofessional personnel who take their place in the expanded social domain of the identified "victim" and her family.

In elaborating the notion of the problem-created system (see 1, 6, 14), it is the disclosure of incest, a distinction drawn by a daughter, as an observer or "mission-giver" (2), that brings forth a new social organization.² This new social organization subtends the problem so that the family is no longer the prime locus for conversation. In this expanded social domain, a daughter's conversation on her own behalf and that of her family becomes the fuel to keep afloat society's "missionary" mandates.

By way of illustration in the following diagrams, the four parties to the discourse, Father (F), Mother (M), Daughter (D), and Social Agents (Soc), are represented by four points on a diamond figure. By highlighting alignments (==) and nonalign-

² The notions of "mission" and "mission-giving" in team-client consultation are borrowed from the work of our Swedish colleagues, Ernst Salamon, Mia Andersson, and Klas Grevelius of the Institute for Systemic Behavioral Science, Stockholm.

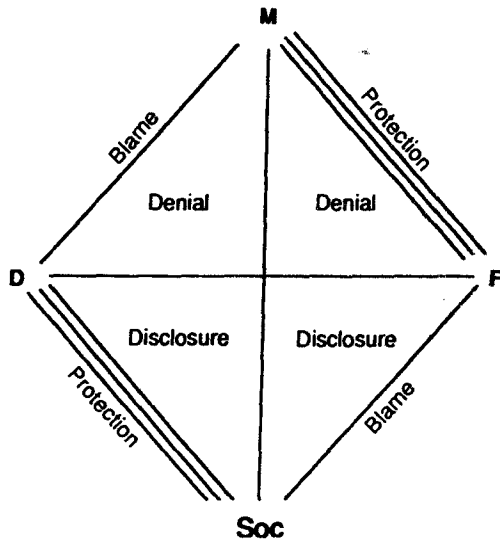


FIG. 3. A paranoid symmetrical system of protection and blame.

ments (—), this mediation process can be mapped around two typical punctuations—enforced protection and enforced banishment.

In Figure 3, mother's induction into an aligned relationship with father resonates with the alignment of social agents with the girl. Alignments embody themes of protection, loyalty, and rescue. Nonalignments embody themes of blame and punishment. As these embodiments echo and re-echo across the aligned/nonaligned subsystems, a paranoid symmetrical system (26, 34) is created, leading to heroic, competitive struggles for the possession of the abused.

As parents invoke marriage and family, a daughter's distinction of sexual abuse may be implicitly repudiated. A matching repudiation of marriage and family is the authoritative base for the protection of daughter and her removal from the family by social agents. An endless symmetry is created around these confused distinctions in which a protective "State" fragments a family's social world into damaged daughters, conspiratorial mothers, and dangerous fathers. Unchecked, such a scenario

creates little space for the emergence of a consensual, cooperative domain.

Figure 4 highlights a situation in which mother aligns herself with her daughter and cooperates with social agents in enforcing father's banishment. Social agents enjoin mother to continue her protection of her daughter while mother enjoins the social agents to secure punishment or banishment of the father. Mother and social agents are thus aligned in a cooperative quid pro quo, that is, in order to continue her entitlement as a parent, mother must revoke her entitlement to her marriage. For some couples, the incest comes to be the defining event in the rupture of the marriage (30).

Perhaps it is peculiar to Ireland, where marital separation is a calamitous event, that disclosure of incest is a more acceptable option because it may bring about a welcomed and socially sanctioned closure to a marriage long dead. In these situations, the mother-daughter alignment leaves both of them as indistinguishable, injured parties in the incest trauma and the failed marriage. The mother's overwhelming guilt about her responsibility in the incest event is matched only by that of her daughter's about the rupture of the marriage. Outrage

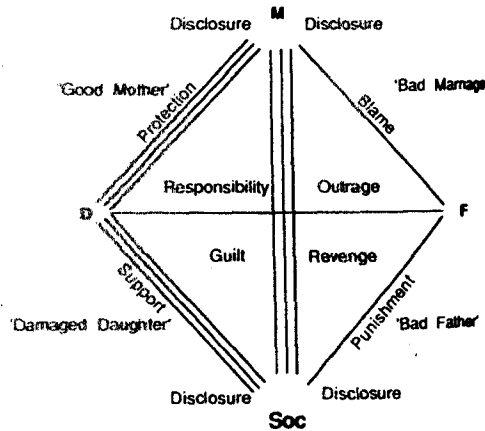


FIG. 4. A cooperative complementary system of protection and punishment.

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and revenge, however and wherever consciously cultivated, become the polar, offsetting emotions for guilt and responsibility. Unchecked, "Revenge is the vilest passion known to life. It has made Law possible and by doing so it gave to intellect the first grip at that universal dominion, which is its ambition" (32, p. 93).

As mother, daughter, and social agents cooperate in an organization for protection, the identity of father as spouse and parent dissolves. In cases where mothers had been considering separation (prior to disclosure), their daughters were once again in a position of providing "solutions" for an unsatisfactory marital engagement/disengagement. For their part, the mothers were deprived and deprived themselves of negotiating, on their own behalf, a different relationship with their spouses, which may or may not have included separation.

TREATMENT INTERVENTIONS IN ABUSING SYSTEMS

By and large, established programs proceed by investigation and confirmation of the event, procurement of protection and

treatment of the abused, and prosecution, punishment, incarceration and/or "treatment" of the abuser and other family members. Within this framework, "treatment" remains but a component of this security operation.

In figures 5 and 6, one can identify two coalitional alignments that structure the treatment "quest." In this new organization (see Figure 5), the addition of "treatment" to social control induces a compensatory weighting in the parental alignment and evokes an increasing paranoia across subsystems. The treatment component does not alter the existing organization—it merely cements it. In this paranoid struggle, treatment and social control remain as interminable components of a self-producing, self-maintaining organization. Parents are regarded as an illicit couple, and the daughter is expropriated from the family. In our experience, this remains true even in the face of custodial solutions.

Treatment added to the protection/support triangles elaborates a consensual domain among participants of a world forever and absolutely divided. Descriptions of "good mother," "bad father," "bad marriage," "damaged daughter," "strong social agents," and "supportive therapists" are the inevitable rationalizations that unite and divide. Mother and daughter have bargained themselves into a new social organization that defines them as injured and innocent—ruined. Treatment in the service of protection secures the abandonment of father and heightens the description of mother and daughter as victims. Protection and restoration are the interminable surrounds for such victims.

The social organization depicted in Figure 6 also indicates a massive disempowerment and negation of father's fatherhood. In some contexts, this can be generalized into the negation of all fathers (men) and invoke a false empowerment of all mothers (women).

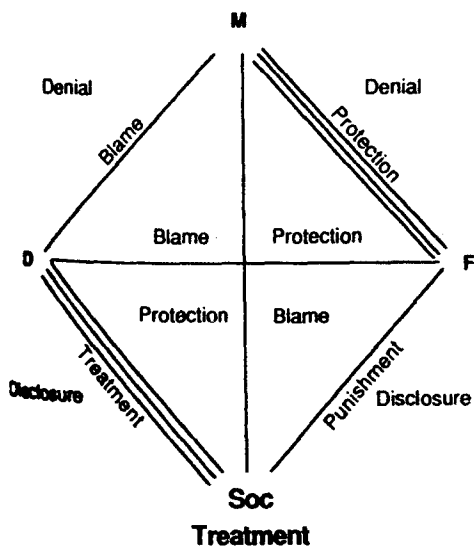


FIG. 5. The paranoid symmetrical system.

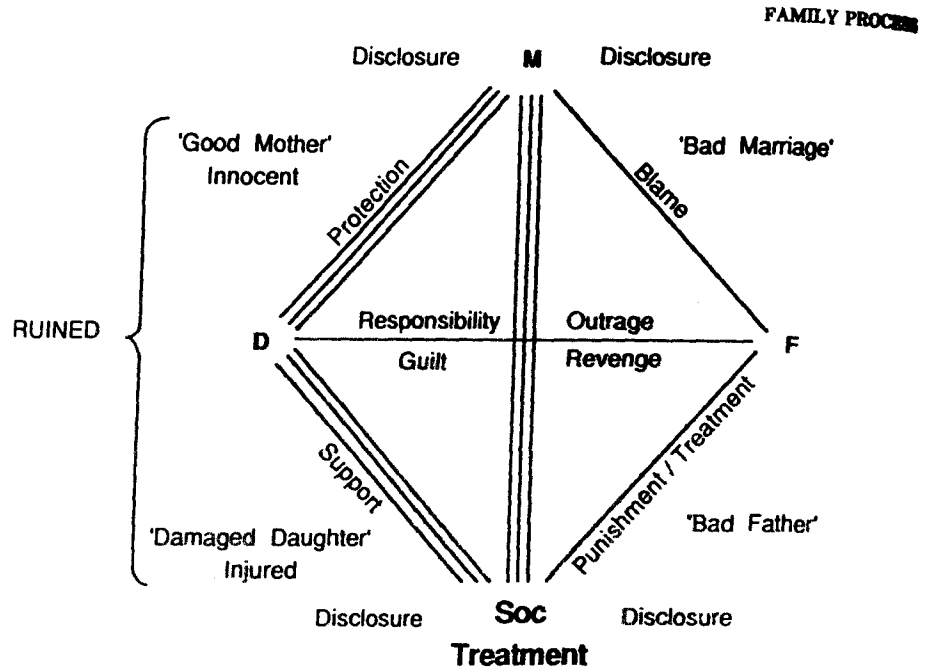


FIG. 6. The cooperative complementary system.

In redressing the “good”/“bad” divisions of the system indicated in these triangular formations, treatment that attempts to move toward an understanding of father’s position is perceived by the “good” triangle (and society at large) as naive if not perverse. Called forth by this move is a re-statement of the divided “truths” of goodness and badness, innocence and guilt.

A Systemic Question

Given the climate of disqualification that invariably occurs around the disclosure of incest, we began to question how systemic therapists might position themselves differently within the therapeutic domain. Initially having succumbed to competition and division, we began to wonder if it would be possible to affirm all participants (including ourselves) so that a domain of consensual understanding might replace a discourse embodying themes of blame, punishment, and negation. Being part of an organization that included the family and social agents, it was not possible for us to leave the field. However, given the

potential for competition, disqualification, and negation, would it be possible to construct a space in which a language of love might emerge?

Family Therapy

Although many treatment programs assume that family members must be engaged at different times in different aspects of treatment (4, 12, 16, 29, 31), it is considered inadvisable to convene the whole family for therapy at the outset (12). To do so flies in the face of established solutions of social control and protection.

Family therapy, if undertaken, often proceeds with the usual coalitional difficulties outlined in figures 5 and 6. However, there is the added difficulty that family therapists, by reason of their “sensitivity” to a family view, may unwittingly form coalitions with family members against social control and protection. Competition and blame between professionals may quickly ensue and inevitably disqualify family therapy. As systemic therapists, we struggled to find a position between con-

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sensus and conflict in order to elaborate a nonaligned treatment approach. Making a distinction between the notions of both organization of family and organization of the "problem defined-defining system" enabled the emergence of a therapeutic dis-position not necessarily aimed at family dis-solution but at problem dis-solution. Such a position, by eluding coalitions and implicitly validating the descriptions of all participants, might become the medium in which a discourse of consensus is evoked (see 27). Anderson et al. (1) have stated that the challenge of therapy is to produce a context in which the concerned membership of the problem-determined system can think of their shared problems differently, and through this process can achieve change and the disintegration of the system bounded by the problem definition (pp. 36-37).

In this case we chose to situate ourselves at the center of a paradox in which each half of the cognitive linguistic system recursively proposed the contradiction. Based on Maturana's (23) description of love as a social fundament, we imagined that giving voice to the "heart" of the problem might bring forth the cybernetic

balance for a system in pursuit of linear control.

An Ambivalent Dis-position: The Route to the Fifth Province

In Irish mythology, the existence of a "Fifth Province" refers to an archetypal, imaginary meeting place:

It was a place where even the most ordinary things can be seen in an unusual light. There must be a neutral ground where things can detach themselves from all partisan and prejudiced connection and show themselves for what they really are. . . . This province, this place, this centre is not a political or geographical position, it is more like a disposition." [13, pp. 10-11]

"Excavating the Fifth Province" (13, p. 11) is a metaphorical phrase that has been borrowed to describe the ambivalent confluence (centeredness) in a systemic viewpoint (see 27). Caught in webs of conflict and competition from which there appeared to be no exit, this metaphor struck a deep chord in us and has been fashioned into a preferred blueprint for eluding coalitions while embracing all provincial divisions and disputes. In the domain of language, secreting the ambiguous discourse of an ambivalent "two-thinks" (17, p. 583) provides entry points to the "elusivity" of the Fifth Province.

In the scenario presented in Figure 7, the team initially found itself roiled along axes of competition by tides of disqualification and constant negation of "family," "parenthood," and "therapy." When we mistakenly stressed "family," it merely served to activate even more monitoring, control, and vigilance of the family. However, if there was an unqualified acceptance of these actions, then the family's definition of itself as a unity was lost. If we affirmed the parents, the young girls and their "protectors" were angered; if we sided with the daughters, we undermined any possible

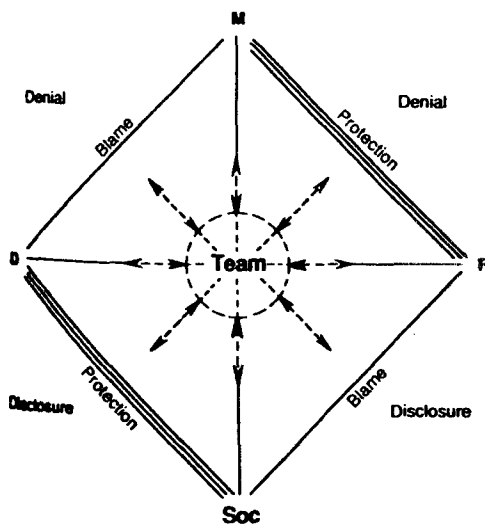


FIG. 7. Exploring the Fifth Province—first scenario.

affirmation and understanding of the parents and the circumstances that had made it "necessary" or possible for them to act as they had.

In the scenario presented in Figure 8, there also were traps for an unsuspecting team. If the notions of "good mother" and "bad father" were accepted, the team found temporary comfort in cooperation with other professionals, but at the expense of massive disqualification of one of the main actors in the drama. In other words, the major oscillations experienced within the team, between the team and family, and between the team, family, and social agents, were between cooperation/competition; treatment/punishment; affirmation/disqualification; fusion/distance; goodness/badness; and understanding/revulsion.

Sheltering in this imaginary place, we invoked the notion of a dynamically still vigilance for our observations. We wished to bring forth in language the complementary silence to a system forged in strident dogma (see 28, p. 226). This silent stillness can only find voice in descriptions devoid of quest or request, imposition or exposition. These descriptions couple within an

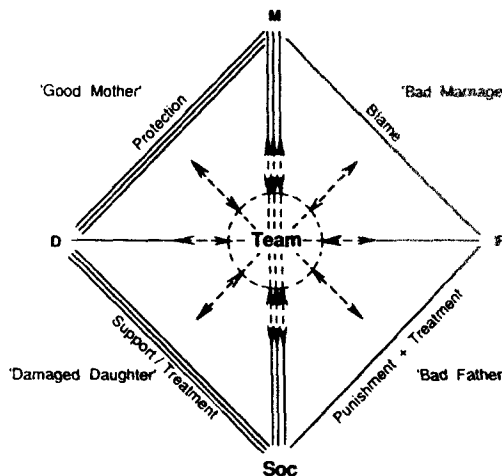


FIG. 8. Exploring the Fifth Province—second scenario.

explosively expanding problem system constructed in language in an imploding discourse. By a continual amplification, reflection, and juxtapositioning of divisions that pull "taut the nerves of insight" (20, p. 136), a re-membered organizational domain is constructed and the old organizations dissolved. Created is a circular discourse, a Ulyssean procession in which the story is told and retold by many subjects, a discourse that turns around in circles without beginning or end. In this new space, night and day polarities encounter and oppose. Proclamations of love and hate, revenge and forgiveness, innocence and guilt are the echoes that create the silence in ambiguity, the stillness in ambivalence—The Fifth Province. As Maturana and Varela (25) have claimed,

such a society is necessarily a non-hierarchical society for which all relations of order are constitutively transitory and circumstantial to that creation of relations that continuously negate the institutionalisation of human abuse. Such a society is in its essence an anarchist society, a society made for and by observers that would not surrender their condition of observers as their only claim to social freedom and mutual respect." [pp. xxiv-xxv]

Our work has allowed us to be survivors in the Fifth Province in a way that excites and connects us. Initially, it was a connection that excluded others and engendered possessiveness. But our work with families and professionals around issues of father-daughter incest has taught us to be less excluding, less possessive, and more loving toward one another.

Languaging in the Fifth Province

The following extracts are taken from work with two families. In the first family (Family A), the mother and father are tightly united around denial of the incest and blame of the daughter, who is in foster

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care. In the second family (Family B), there are sixteen children, ten of whom have disclosed incest; mother and father have separated, and the mother supports her daughters.

At issue in family A is a definition of incest, its denial, and blame of the girl and her foster family. Ambiguity reigns, with the therapist amplifying the ambiguity while simultaneously juxtaposing this with the consequences for father of his "crime." A small segment of a subsequent session reveals a sadder family trying to deal with despair over family rupture and father's crime—which the family has now defined.

The issues emerging in family B were whether father needed treatment or punishment, whether he was "sick" or just "sinful." Each side of the debate is highlighted so that the family itself may "find" its own solution. The solution was that father would remain away from home and that family members would handle their lives without more (outside!) interference.

Family A

There was a simultaneity in Maura's³ disclosure and her mother's acknowledgment of parental irresponsibility because of her alcohol abuse, explosive outbursts of rage, physical aggression, and unpredictable absences from the home (see Figure 1). Maura's "mission" was to expand the problem definition of the family by exposing the incest secret, and to "inverse" her parent-like position in the family by including both parents in the ledger of accountability (5).

In the co-creation of this consciousness, the new logic within the family system (15) mandated a further simultaneity in the emergence of responsible parenthood and the dissipation of Maura's "mission." However, in this case, a move (called for by

social control agendas) to take control of the "mission" inevitably shaped it into an explosive expansion of protecting social services and a further subversion of childhood and parenthood. Within this subversive organization, all manner of subversive conversations found their implicative (7) existence in a paranoid symmetry.

The therapeutic team includes Philip, who meets with the family, and his colleagues who are observing the session from behind a one-way mirror. The transcript illustrates the team's disposition when all attempts at clarification and definition of both problem and familial/supra-familial relationships have failed. Up to this point, the parents had refused to recognize that incest had occurred even though the young girl insisted on its occurrence. The situation had spiralled into one where the more the parents defended themselves, the more the young girl and social agents blamed the parents and pressed for punishment of the parents—an example of the paranoid symmetrical system.

In this session, we see the team moving from a position of instruction to a disposition that attempts to facilitate a discourse around major themes (which often appear contradictory) for family, social agents, and the therapy itself.

Philip: There is a possibility, as I understand it, that a court case could end up in jail, not just hospital. Maybe he [father] could have a psychiatrist in jail?

Father: (scratching his head) Well this is the point.

Maura: Well Daddy never had an intercourse.

Father: Yeh, I know I hadn't. I said I hadn't.

Mother: Then why did you bring up incest there a minute ago.

Maura: Because it is incest!

³ All family names have been changed throughout the transcripts.

- Mother:* Well incest happens to be an intercourse.
- Maura:* It happens to be when a brother or father is *interfering* with a daughter or whatever.
- Parents:* (simultaneously) No!
- Maura:* It is!
- Parents:* (simultaneously) Incest is intercourse!
- Philip:* Maybe we should look it up in the dictionary.
- Mother:* Well you needn't. I have it from high-class that is what incest is. Intercourse. Right?
- Father:* I told you it's the [foster family] confused her.
- Philip:* It's not in the dictionary?
- Mother:* Well that's what it is. Any doctor will tell you. That's what it is. A doctor told me. She is bringing up the word "incest," which is wrong. That's out!
- Philip:* I'm getting more and more confused. Maura, you were under this impression that Vivienne is at risk, right? Now I have heard something to suggest that maybe she is not at risk as you thought. Also from you, I have seen your relationship [with parents]. You are back together, you told me.
- Mother:* That child is not at risk.
- Philip:* [The therapist, fearful of escalating confusion, falters and attempts to introduce clarity.] You now have a sexual relationship?
- Father:* (confused) Where? What?
- Philip:* (indicating with his hands the parents) A sexual relationship.
- Mother:* That child is not at risk. There's no way anybody can say she is.
- Philip:* That's one part, and the other is whether this should lead to hospital or jail or what. The law does tend to take a very serious view of these things.
- Mother:* Well the fact and point blank is *any* sexual assault. Now she's pushing it with incest. She doesn't even know the meaning of the word "incest."
- Maura:* Of course I do.
- Mother:* What is it?
- Maura:* I just gave it to you.
- Mother:* No you didn't give it to me.
- Philip:* Check it. (Goes to the 'phone to ask his colleagues to look up the word.)
- Mother:* You didn't.
- Father:* It was read out from the paper by them [foster parents].
- Maura:* (shouting) I read it on my own!
- Mother:* What is incest, Maura?
- Maura:* Someone in the family (mother shakes her head) is *interfering!*
- Father:* That's just assault, Maura!
- Mother:* It's direct intercourse. (Philip still on the phone and looking puzzled) Are you looking it up too, Martin [son]? (Martin is consulting a dictionary.)
- Martin:* It's not here.
- Philip:* (hangs up the phone) Not there either. Well I think you definitely should look this up.
- Mother:* Well that's what it is.
- Philip:* (to parents) Well you are talking about one thing. I am totally confused. (to Maura) You are talking about another. No wonder we are not making any progress.
- Mother:* Well the point is Maura hasn't got the full facts of the situation. She made . . .
- Philip:* Who has?
- Mother:* . . . several allegations.
- Philip:* (to Vivienne, age 7) Have you any suggestions?

With a matching subterfuge, the conversation of the therapist was a camouflaged erection onto which crossfire was emptied and all oppositions exposed. On this

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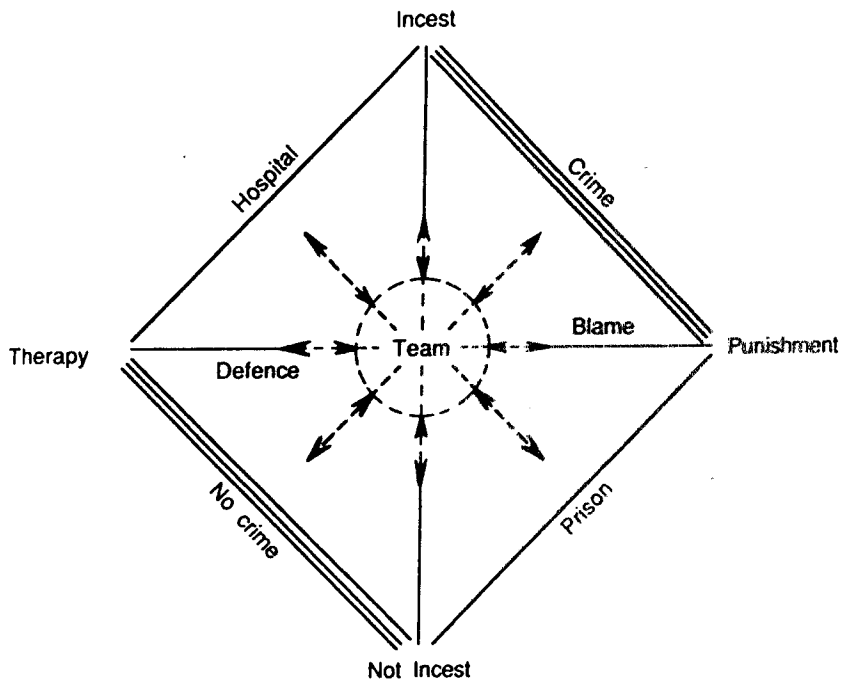


FIG. 9. Incest or not-incest: jail or hospital?

imploded mind-field, the wounded and wounding reappeared as conversant casualties (see Figure 9).

Maura did not attend the next session, but she sent a letter to say how much she loved her parents even though she felt she could not be with them at this time. The other members of the family presented a different picture than before. They were now preoccupied with feelings of guilt and grief. They had finally defined the problem as a crime and were beginning to process the implications of this.

Philip: Is [father] more likely to kill himself than you are?

Mother: Naturally.

Philip: Naturally?

Mother: He has an awful problem. He thinks this is a terrible crime, and even the psychiatrist said to him that he could get seven years.

Philip: Would he kill himself because of the guilt?

Mother: Yeah.

Philip: What do you think is likely to happen?

Mother: (sighs) Sometimes I worry. Will he come back? Will he do damage to [foster parents], or will he drive the car into the Liffey [river]?

Philip: Which of those do you think is most likely, Martin?

Martin: (nervously) Kill himself.

Philip: Kill himself. How does he try to do it?

Martin: Knives.

Philip: How does he do it?

Martin: He'd take it out and run off with it somewhere.

Philip: Somewhere, and who would intervene?

Martin: The whole lot of us.

Philip: [intervention] Martin and Vivienne, this is particularly for the two of you. (to Martin) Are you

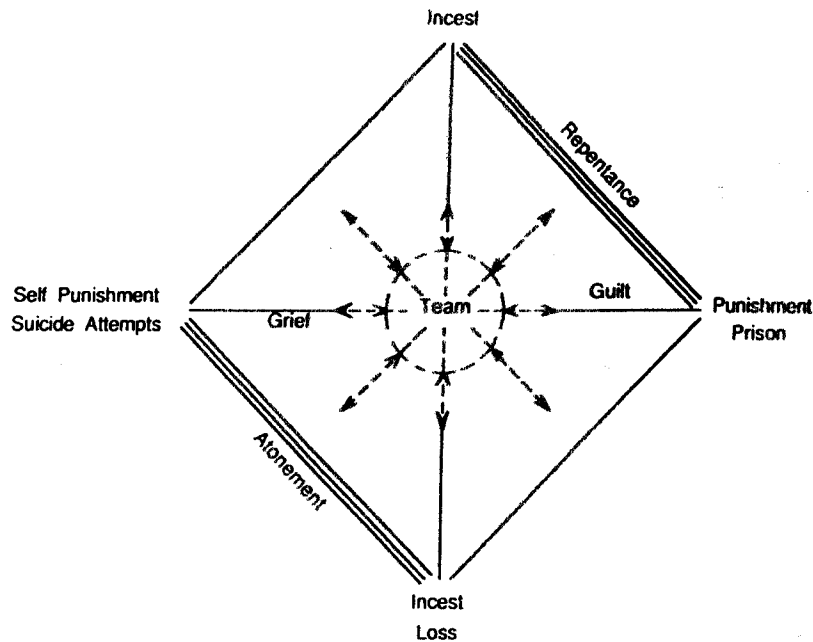


FIG. 10. Guilt or grief: repentance or atonement?

worried about what I am going to say?

Martin: No

Philip: What I am going to say to you is that we feel that you don't have to be so concerned when your mother becomes physically aggressive and threatening, because we see that as the way in which she is protecting your father from doing something because of the despair that he has been feeling recently. The family is going through a very dark period and a difficult one, and your mother is doing her best to support your father who feels very badly about what he has done. But we think it's working.

After a short period, Maura sought and gained permission from the protective services to return home.

When they were able to realise of what they had been guilty, they were very sorry indeed, and endeavoured to publish their repentance in many ways; lacking atonement, repentance

is only a post mortem virtue which is good for nothing but burial. [32, p. 94]

Family B

In this family, mother had protected her daughters and banished father from the family home with the help of her older children. The therapy segments are intended to highlight a therapeutic disposition by which the therapist (Imelda) attempts to elude the polarization the family offers. The family will be seen to move through various polarized positions that include punishment-prison/treatment-hospital; exile, atonement/banishment, and security; reparation/treatment; and, finally, sickness or sinfulness/therapy or transformation (see Figure 11).

Imelda: (to mother) Do you think it would be better to go to the law, for example, to get help for your husband, yourself, or your family?

Mother: They don't want help for me or any of them. They just want him behind bars . . .

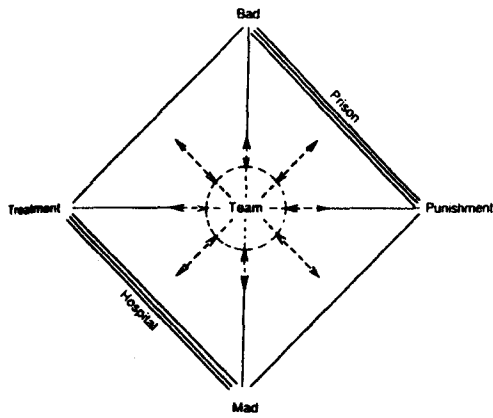


FIG. 11. Treatment or punishment: hospital or prison?

Girl 4: That's not so.

Mother: They feel that he is going to do it outside, that he is going to molest other children or other girls. So they feel that he needs help, that he should be taken in. They want him to be taken in somewhere. Day-help they don't feel is any good.

Imelda: So they think the best help he can get is inside?

Mother: Inside. Yes.

Girl 4: In an institution.

Mother: In an institution. Yes, somewhere like that.

Imelda: Would that be in a prison or a hospital?

Girl 3: I went to see a solicitor, and he said he would have to be certified as mentally insane to have him put in somewhere.

Son 1: That is right, is it?

Mother: In prison or a hospital?

Girl 4: Somewhere he is away from people where he can . . .

Son 3: In an institution?

Girl 1: You are not saying prison. You are saying a hospital?

Girl 4: Oh not a prison. Prison would be the last thing I'd think of. If the only thing open was prison or him out on the streets, I'd say prison.

Girl 1: Even though, regardless . . . more than likely he would be out in two years, and you could do nothing then.

Girl 4: He'd be older then.

Girl 1: He'd be older. That wouldn't make any difference him being older.

Girl 4: The girls [her younger sisters] would be older.

Imelda: So would you be afraid, for example, if you did take it to law or get your husband certified, that that would split the family?

Mother: I wouldn't get him certified, not unless he is mental.

Imelda: Yes. But if the people in the family . . .

Mother: Well if they want it, that's up to them. One of them can sign it.

Imelda: Do you think that would split the family more?

Mother: No. I don't think that would split the family.

Imelda: I see. You wouldn't like to see him certified.

Mother: No I wouldn't

Son 1: To qualify that, hold on a second, Mam. You don't want to see him in prison if at the end of the day he came along and he was told he would have to be put away for three or four years.

Mother: (trying to interrupt) Not in prison.

Son 1: No, into a mental institution. You wouldn't have him in there?

Mother: No I wouldn't, unless he's found really insane.

Girl 1: You are not convinced then at all?

Mother: I wouldn't like to sign him in at all.

Son 4: Do you think he is mad?

Son 1: There must be something wrong with him.

Mother: He definitely needs help. There is something wrong.

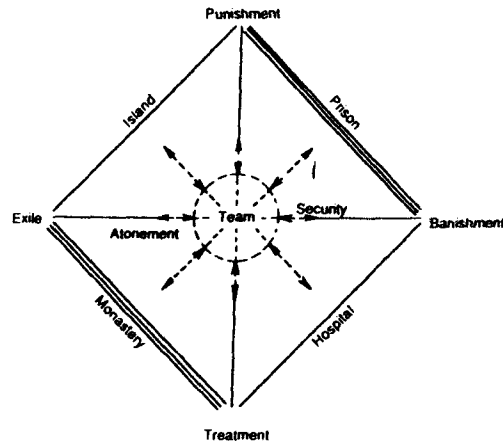


FIG. 12. Exile or banishment?

As the family moves toward considering a treatment option that would include banishment from the family (to insure its and the father's security) rather than punishment, father begins to talk of atonement and self-exile (see Figure 12).

Imelda: My colleagues are interested in your solution there, that you would be prepared to go off to a sort of an island and isolate yourself for the good of the girls.

Father: Well if it would keep the family from breaking up and my wife happy.

Imelda: And they were wondering is this an imaginary place, or really would you leave Ireland and how far away would you go.

Father: No, I don't know whether I'd leave Ireland.

Imelda: Where would this island be?

Father: I don't know. A monastery or something. I thought a monastery for six months. Well I'd have to find out. I had in mind—isn't there some of these priest counselors?

Imelda: Uhm, uhm . . .

Father: That's what I have in mind. Now I haven't been able to confide in anyone, and that's exactly what I was

going to ask this psychiatrist about. I will be going there [gives date].

Imelda: How about that in terms of solutions—psychiatric treatment or your dad going off into this . . . isolating himself? One of the things you were worried about was that other young girls might be at risk. For Dad, which would be better?

Girl 3: I don't think so. Well I think whatever his psychiatrist recommends.

Imelda: So you think staying with the psychiatrist rather than doing this extreme thing?

Girl 3: Well I think the psychiatrist . . . surely they must be doing a good job or something.

Imelda: (to father) Do you think the family thinks that you would be better staying with the psychiatrist and getting psychiatric help on a regular basis for yourself?

Father: Personally, I don't think that I need any help now at all.

Imelda: Would you think your family would agree with that?

Father: Well I'll . . . I'll . . . I'll do it. I'll do it for the next twelve months even, if it makes them all feel happier about it. (Father and Imelda bend forward, heads turned toward each other.) Well, I'll attend the psychiatrist.

Imelda: (to family) What do you make of this?

Girl 3: Well the most important issue was that they were worried that Da would be a threat on the street, but seemingly the psychiatrist didn't think so anyway.

Father: There's girls going around in their nightdress. And in the other house I'm in, for God's sake . . .

Imelda: But in a monastery you wouldn't have girls going around in their nightdresses.

Mother: Exactly, exactly.

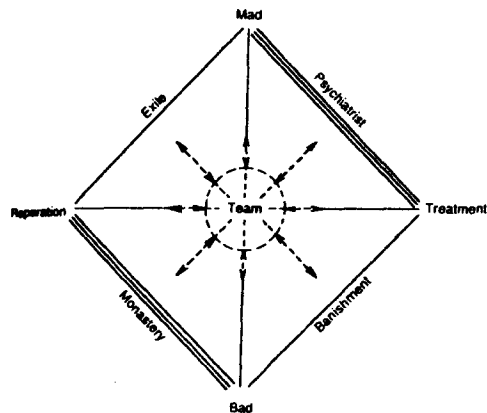


FIG. 13. Reparation or treatment?

Girl 3: (to therapist) What do you mean by an isolated place? Like what do you mean when you say that?

Son 1: Imelda doesn't mean anything specific. She is only using the term.

Imelda: Yes, my colleagues are saying that in fact what you are saying is that you don't need help, you don't need treatment. But in a sense what you are saying is that you need to punish yourself for your family so that they can be happy, and they are wondering how far you are prepared to go with that punishment. Exactly what are you prepared to do with yourself so that your family can be happy and repaired? Like you know, there has been a lot of extensive crimes, and you are saying "I need to punish myself for this." That's what my colleagues say.

Father: Yes, that is correct.

Imelda: They are wondering what is it that you feel you have to do to make reparation for the crimes that you have committed. One of the things you said . . . is isolating yourself if that would make your family happy. They are wondering how far do you think you have to go to punish yourself for your family.

Girl 2: Six or twelve months.

Father: Yes, six or twelve months.

Imelda: And you mean away? Is that what you're are talking about?

Father: No. In a monastery.

Imelda: But what would you be prepared to do to yourself in that six or twelve months?

Father: Any hard labor they would ask me to do. (Turns toward family and everybody laughs.) What are they laughing at?

Girl 3: I think we are getting off track. You see, I think you are working toward a reconciliation. If Da punishes himself for twelve months (girls laugh), then everything is okay, and he'll come back with mammy, and that sort of thing.

Father: Imelda, I don't mind work. I'm not afraid of work.

Imelda: But that wouldn't be a punishment, you see. . .

Imelda: But anyway, we were talking about a religious solution—in some way a spiritual transformation, as opposed to maybe therapy. Now your father is talking about a severe atonement, and my colleagues were suggesting maybe Croagh Patrick or Lough Derg,⁴ but they are not sure if that would be severe enough. (everybody laughs uproariously)

Son 1: Lough Derg?

Father: He (indicates Son 1) did Lough Derg three years ago, and it nearly killed him.

Son 1: No, I don't think it would serve any purpose, seriously. If he wants to run up and down to Mass, okay, but it's only himself he'll need sorting out.

⁴Croagh Patrick and Lough Derg are places of pilgrimage and penitance in Ireland. Pilgrims undertake a regimen that includes fasting, praying, not sleeping, and going barefooted.

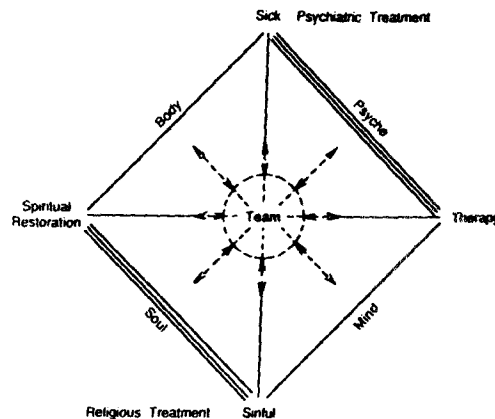


FIG. 14. Sickness or sinfulness: therapy or transformation?

Imelda: The debate is between that or the one you suggested, therapy.

Mother: Yeah.

Imelda: Individual therapy. On one hand, some people say that, and on the other . . .

Son 1: What suits the individual.

Mother: Yes, I know.

Father: Well, I could combine therapy and . . .

Imelda: I just want to say something about your Mam. (to father) It's not only you who is talking about atonement. I think she is talking about this [separation] as a sacrifice.

Son 1: We'll send her up to Lough Derg.

[The family goes on to discuss whether father is sick or sinful and what needs to happen, while the team has a discussion.]

Imelda: (to father) The interesting thing when we were inside listening to you, you were talking about whether you were sick or sinful.

Son 1: Sinful. Oh Jesus! Yeah. Definitely.

Imelda: And it's interesting, and maybe we should think about this . . . maybe we are prescribing psychiatric treatment for somebody who is sinful. Maybe your Dad needs religious treatment?

Transgressions against culture expose the savage man. Transgressions against nature expose the sinful man. It follows, therefore, that while culture may attempt to recuperate the savage, only the sinner can save himself!

Women and men in bare feet turn again
To the iron crosses and the rutted Beds,
Their feet are swollen and their bellies empty—

But something that is Ireland's secret leads
These petty mean people.

For here's the day of a poor soul freed
To a marvellous beauty above its head. [19, pp. 345-346]

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