Calling the context: towards a systemic and cross-cultural approach to emotions

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This article offers a contribution to systemic thinking and practice in relation to emotions. It suggests that emotions are crucial in considering the relationship between individuals and social systems, patterns and relationships, including those between therapists and clients. Seeking to establish a balance between systemic and constructionist approaches, the article summarizes Bateson’s description of schismogenesis in naven. Two sequences of clinical work, which were inspired by Bateson’s ethnography and which contained strong emotions, are described. A focus on emotions, both those of clients and those of therapists, is shown to provide an opportunity for encompassing and opening up issues relating to culture, race, diachrony and experience. Culture is considered in terms of both expectations and context and emotional resonance in the therapy room used as a counterpoint to narrative emphasis.

Keywords: emotions; culture; Bateson.

Introduction

In a recent article Carlos Sluzki (2008) reminded us of a comment made by Cecchin, which points back to earlier systemic approaches, but which also, in the context of narrative and social constructionist developments during the last 20 years, suggests an agenda for the present and future development of systemic practice. Cecchin said, ‘Don’t fall in love with the story’ (quoted in Sluzki 2008, p.128). This was a warning that the content of a story may become a narrative that inhabits the therapist–family system and comes to entrap both therapist and clients into a self-organizing process, discouraging curiosity and disabling the therapist. As I read Cecchin’s comment now, I think that he may not have been warning us from paying...
attention to emotions,\(^1\) as I was warned during my training 20 years ago, but that he may have been acknowledging the existence of emotions in the therapeutic relationship and perhaps as a foundation for any system (Bertrando and Arcelloni, 2009).

With respect to the therapeutic relationship two points can be made about Cecchin’s warning. Firstly, it raises the question of how the therapist can make a distinction between what belongs to her and what belongs to the family and the family members. The danger in ignoring this distinction is that the therapist cannot destabilize the symptom–conflict sustaining narratives, as Sluzki suggests. But, secondly, the danger is also that the therapist’s own narrative, emotions and outlook take over. Conflation may become domination and perhaps even discrimination. This is always problematic, but never more so than when there are marked cultural, racial or ethnic differences in the family or between the therapist and the family members.\(^2\)

The therapeutic relationship and the therapist’s self is now emerging as a serious and important topic in the systemic field (Flaskas and Perlesz, 1996; Haber, 1990; Hoffman, 1993; Real, 1990; Rober, 1999, 2005). However, it has been easier to consider this with respect to language and cognitive processes than with reference to emotions and feelings, possibly because the latter are more revealing of a paradox that has been, and still is central to systemic thinking. The paradox is this: on the one hand and much in agreement with approaches in psychoanalysis, in the structural, systemic and strategic approaches in family therapy emotions have been considered to be universal entities or essences, generated and located in individuals and derived from a biological heritage (Krause, 1993). On the other hand, and especially in social constructionist approaches, the relational domain; the domain of interaction and communication, has been considered autonomous. As a result, the role of individuals in constituting this domain has been conceptualized in terms of biological or social reductionism. This has meant that differences such as those embedded in cultural and social patterns, which may not be immediately accessible to individuals as patterns or of which they may be unconscious, have

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\(^2\) I consider that cross-cultural differences should be seen as the far end of a continuum of differences. However, the wider the differences between the parties communicating, the more scope for the elaboration of discrimination and inequality, which often involves assuming that differences are essential.

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not been given much consideration. It has therefore been difficult to link individuals to social systems or even to systems of relationships in anything but a simplistic manner. In turn, this has left a gap in the way systemic psychotherapists think about theories, hypotheses and assumptions, a gap that is particularly evident in cross-cultural work.

Yet in the beginning of the development of family therapy there was a theory which attempted to do just that. This was Bateson’s theory of schismogenesis originating not in clinical but in ethnographic observations of the life of the Iatmul people of New Guinea and, in particular, in his writing about the naven ritual (Bateson, 1958). Emotions were central to Bateson’s understanding of this ritual and of his own participation in the description and analysis of it. In this article, I first provide a brief summary of Bateson’s thinking in his work, ‘Naven’. The Culture of the Iatmul People of New Guinea as Revealed Through a Study of the ‘Naven’ Ceremonial’, and I then present an example of clinical work in which I was inspired by Bateson’s thinking about emotions and their contexts. I have chosen sequences of clinical work in which strong emotions were communicated and I am interested in the experiences of these communications, including my own. I am therefore referring to performative rather than indexical aspects of emotions, that is to say, I am more interested in the effect the expression of an emotion has on the participants in a particular context than in the terms used to describe it (Crapanzano, 1992).

Bateson’s naven

I have provided a detailed description of naven and its significance for contemporary systemic psychotherapy elsewhere (Krause, 2007) and here a short summary will suffice. As I said Bateson’s ethnographic work focused on the naven ritual. This ritual enacts the relationship between a man and his nephew on his sister’s side (his sister’s son). When a young man had performed a task that showed that he had come of age, such as having made a canoe for the first time or, more recently, having purchased a motor boat (Silverman, 2001), men who were his mother’s brothers, dressed in dirty women’s clothes, smeared themselves with ashes, bound themselves with the string that pregnant women used and adorned themselves with large lumps of sago. These mother’s brothers then ran through the village looking for their sister’s sons, who themselves were most likely to be hiding or to have run away. If a mother’s brother found his sister’s son, he ran up to him and rubbed the cleft of his buttocks down the length of the
young man’s leg. This gesture was recognized as having sexual overtones. The sister’s son must then quickly fetch something valuable and gave it to his uncle. The whole thing was embarrassing for the sister’s son but it also took place with much hilarity and mockery. It was an occasion for having a good time. A naven could also mark the celebration of other occasions and, when women took part, they were dressed like men with feathers, headdresses and ornaments made from the bones and teeth of enemies killed in warfare.

Bateson assumed that for people to perform the ritual, it must have a function (conscious or unconscious). So why were and are the Iatmul doing this ritual? Bateson argued that naven performed an integrative function both psychologically at the level of individuals and sociologically at the level of Iatmul society, and that emotions played a central role. From the point of view of descent, inheritance and rights and obligations in law, the important relationships that connected an individual with others were those that could be traced patrilineally through men and fathers. However, relationships traced through women were also recognized so that in disputes, for example, individuals’ love and care for relatives on their mother’s side could carry more weight than those on their father’s side. One such relationship is, of course, that between a mother’s brother and his sister’s son. Thus, central to the context of naven was some notion of individual sentiments and feelings, as opposed to the laws of Iatmul society. In addition, the attitudes of men and women normally (ethos) were the opposite of what they conveyed in the naven ritual. In everyday life women were expected to be cooperative and self-effacing, whereas men were expected to be fiercely competitive and flamboyant. Bateson argued that naven, by providing opportunities for both men and women to experience emotions that were not normally an aspect of their own gendered social personhood, contributed to psychological integration. There were similar effects for relationships between groups (Krause, 2007). What is of interest here is Bateson’s linking of individuals with the social and cultural patterns that provide their contexts and his taking account of relationships between different social patterns as well as of reversals in these patterns.

As family therapists we recognize the relationship between the Iatmul mother’s brother and his sister’s son as one of schismogenesis.  

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3 Schismogenesis is a relationship between individuals in which the interaction itself generates a progressive differentiation. See also Bateson (1958) and Krause (2007) for a detailed account of this in the naven ritual.
What we may have forgotten is that an ethos or emotional outlook was central to the description of schismogenesis. This was in keeping with anthropological ideas at the time (Benedict, 1934) and schismogenesis could also be identified in other aspects of interaction and communication such as, for example, in Iatmul thought, in their kinship structures and in the relationships between groups. But this posed a question. On what criteria could bits of naven be pigeon-holed into these different aspects? Bateson decided that it was not possible to say that naven was pure emotion and concluded that where one puts any one bit of culture depends on one’s point of view. His own observations could not be presented as if they were ‘hard’ or objective data.4 Individuals can be influenced by emotions, which are standardized according to cultural and social context, but an ethos itself is not an explanation; it is a class of observations adopted by scientists. It is a hypothesis.

To these insights Bateson added another related to change and development (he called this diachrony). In the bulk of his book, Bateson had emphasized a synchronic picture, a snapshot of what was going on in a moment. By the time he wrote the second epilogue to the book in 1958 Bateson had discovered cybernetics and learning theory. With this schismogenesis came to be seen as a more complex and circular multi-circuit information system incorporating change, feedback, learning and the idea of learning to learn. For example, an individual in a symmetrical relationship with another would tend to expect such symmetry in future encounters both with this individual and perhaps with others as well, and this individual in turn would learn symmetrical behaviour. The same would be the case for complementary relationships. Schismogenesis was now defined as a two-person subsystem containing the potential for a circuit that might go into progressive change. It should therefore be described in language more general (Bateson said ‘higher’) than any language used to describe individual behaviour (Bateson 1958, p.297).

The ethnographer and the systemic psychotherapist

This is where modern family therapy began. Bateson’s immediate legacy to family therapists was not the emphasis on local details of

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4 Here Bateson used Whitehead’s notion of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, which refers to the idea that observations are presented as if they are ‘hard’ or objective data instead of being recognized as points of view (Whitehead, [1925] 1967).
meaning and symbolization in naven, it was not emotions, culture or even really the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, but talk about meta-order, meta-systems and abstractions. The early family therapists did not pay much attention to the process by which Bateson had moved from ethnographic detail to general theory. However, the outlook of systemic psychotherapy currently is much closer to the social sciences. We are now more interested in social systems than in mechanical or cybernetic ones. Our conceptual tools consist of more-or-less patterns (Krause, 2002), local knowledge (Geertz, 1973; White 1997), multiple voices (Anderson, 1997), the self of the therapist (Flaskas and Perlesz, 2005; Real, 1990; Rober, 1999) and dialogue (Bertrando, 2007; Rober, 2005; Seikulla, 2003). How, then, might we think about Bateson’s move from the specific detail of individual behaviour in Iatmul society to a general theory of relationships? And what might we find in this process, which can inform us clinically? The answers lie, I think, in the way Bateson used his own experiences, and although some say that in this regard he did not go far enough (Marcus, 1985), there are nevertheless pointers in his work as to how therapists may use reflection and their own experiences in order to understand the background and experiences of their clients.

Like most ethnographers, Bateson was aiming at understanding differences, in this case, the culturally constructed patterns of emotions, thought and social relationships among the Iatmul. Yet, in this search for diversity, he was also struck by a resonance with himself. He described how his ethnographic enquiries had produced a mass of disconnected material and how in the midst of this, one detail of the naven ritual had struck him with great force. This was the realization that the transvestite mother’s brother figure was a figure of fun. He wrote, ‘My whole mental picture of naven had been wrong, and wrong because, though I had been told what was done, I had no idea of the emotional aspect of the behaviour’ (Bateson 1958, p.259). However, this was only half of the story, because he could not simply place his own observations and resonance with the fun and buffoonery in the naven ritual into what to him was an a priori category. This would have been a fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

He had another intuition. From his ethnographic work Bateson knew that transvesticism was a normal phenomenon in Iatmul society and not

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5 Bateson himself was bitterly aware of what was left behind in this move. See Harries-Jones (1995) for an account of Bateson’s split with Watzlawick and a summary in Krause (2007).
just associated with *naven* or with the orientation of individual Iatmul. To understand this, he turned to his own experience of transvesticism, namely horse riding. In English society at the time, horse riding was a violent gendered activity with a sense of physical mastery. This contrasted with other activities deemed suitable for women. Bateson thought that this context explained the masculine emphasis in the clothes horsewomen wore (Bateson 1958, p.200) and so the explanation of transvesticism was to be found in its context and arrived at through intuition and impressionistic understanding. For the Iatmul this showed that *naven* involved a reversal between men and women and that the emotional content of a particular behaviour had to be considered against the background of a more general emotional orientation.⁶

The context, in both the English and the Iatmul case, encompasses physical bodies, gender differences between men and women and the cultural construction of these differences. It also encompasses the expectations that individuals might have of the events through which these differences are enacted and about how they might be understood and these expectations might be inside or outside awareness (Flaskas, 2009; Krause, 2009). In the Iatmul case they implicate kinship, relationships between patrilineal groups, emotional inclinations and aversions, irony and buffoonery, motherhood (Silverman, 2001), fatherhood and much else. In the British case we can identify similar themes but also different ones such as class, physical prowess, domination and domestic and sexual politics.

From Bateson the ethnographer we therefore have a method that moves back and forth between the general and the local, between similarity and differences, between the conscious seeking of detail and intuitive engagement. Bateson began by assuming differences but also found that within this frame his own experiences were relevant. In this process emotions play a dual role. On the one hand, we cannot assume that a particular form of behaviour denotes a particular emotion without first considering the general emotional outlook. On the other hand, as for the ethnographer, emotions provide an anchorage across cultures and differences for the therapist. It was as a participating observer that Bateson became aware of the resonance between his own feelings and those expressed in the *naven* ritual and this became the anchoring points in connecting, becoming attuned to and even guessing (Bateson, 1972 [1967]; Krause, 2002, 2009) the meaning of the Iatmul material.

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⁶ Bateson’s analysis has been supported by other anthropologists (see Silverman, 2001).
Case material

The family consisted of Anna, Bernard and their twin 7-year-old sons Daniel and Eric. Anna was a slight white 35-year-old British woman who had grown up in a rural area. She was close to her father, who died at the age of 73 when she was 19, and her sister, 18 months younger. Anna’s mother, 20 years younger than her husband, did not work and Anna remembers her as a cold, unsupportive woman. Anna and Bernad were married, but had been separated for the last 2 years. Bernard was 36, a tall, black African and a high ranking civil servant. He was the oldest of seven siblings, his parents both having died. He was close to his siblings and to his extended family, to whom he sent money regularly and on their side his family made extensive efforts to connect with his in-laws. Anna had had black boyfriends before, much to the embarrassment of her mother, but in the case of Bernard her attitude softened, because, so the story goes, he was charming and Anna agreed to have a white church wedding. Anna became pregnant with twins quite soon after. The twins, Daniel and Eric, lived with Anna, who had a new partner. For the last 2 years prior to the referral Anna and Bernard had had very little contact with each other, although the boys saw their father occasionally. They were not able to talk about divorce.

It was Daniel who precipitated the referral by the general practitioner. Daniel and Anna were locked in an exhausting daily tussle: Daniel found it very difficult to put on his underpants and socks when he was getting dressed to go to school in the morning. He could not tolerate his underpants being crinkled or bulging if his penis became erect. He could also not tolerate any crinkles or bulges in his socks. He did not show any signs of other obsessions. His mother had to help him get dressed in the morning and this had become a daily catastrophe with Anna losing her temper, Daniel becoming less and less able to get dressed and his brother, Eric, making helpful suggestions. Eventually they would get to school very late and sometimes not at all. Daniel and Eric were sometimes looked after by their maternal grandmother and when they stayed with her there was much less of a problem, as was the case when the boys stayed with Bernard. Eric was also finding life difficult. He was bullied at school and he worried his mother by saying he wanted to die. Anna asked us to help Daniel to be able to get his clothes on quickly and get to school on time.

I had met with Anna, Daniel and Eric for five sessions and, although we spoke about Bernard coming to the sessions, neither Anna nor Bernard seemed ready to break the impasse between them.
I had several hypotheses about what might be going on in the family but I also struggled to connect the details to some kind of overall understanding. So for example I experimented with unique outcomes (White, 1989) and this experiment told me that Anna herself was as ‘attached’ to the daily routine as was Daniel. The emotions that were communicated in the sixth session provided clues for me. This session with Anna, Daniel and Eric was filled with murderous anger that seemed to devour everyone. Anna described how the twins had been fighting each other and how the mornings were worse than ever. She said ‘I can’t cope’, ‘I feel numb’, ‘I hate tension’, ‘I feel like a rabbit stuck in the headlights’. Lying in the chair leaning back as if on her back, she said ‘I wanted a child because I wanted someone to love, but I do not want to be looking after twins. I wish I had only one child’.

Anna’s posture conveyed a pervasive sense of hopelessness but it was also provocative and hurtful. Around her the boys were fighting. A little kick from one turned into a fight on the floor with the two of them entangled, using play animals and their feet as weapons, hitting each other anywhere, on the head and on the body. In one such sequence this exchange took place:

Anna: What shall I do to make you stop?
Daniel: Put Eric out of the house . . .
Eric: Kill Daniel . . . [Eric sits on Daniel’s foot.]
Anna: [To Daniel] Just move, it would stop if you just moved . . .
Th: Eric is being very provocative. . . . How long do you think this will go on for? [Anna gets up and drags Daniel across the room and pushes him down on the chair]
Anna: Don’t do it. One of you has got to stop. One of you has to take the initiative and stop. A lot of other mothers have an older child – they can say, ‘You are the older one’ – I do not want to compare you. I am constantly stuck in this little pond of trying to be fair. Life is not fair. It is not. It never will be. . . . Just because you are twins don’t think that life is going to be fair. I am trying my best. I tell you that all the time.

The session finished soon after that, with Anna agreeing that the problem was not just Daniel and Eric but that the whole family was suffering. There followed one session with Bernard and two sessions with the whole family, in which the boys seemed much calmer, while the adults carefully avoided confrontation. We then agreed that Anna and Bernard would have the next session on their own. This session also contained some very strong emotion.

I began by saying that I was aware that this was a difficult meeting for both of them and that I appreciated that they had agreed to come
on their own. I also said that my concern was primarily the boys but because they were their parents this also extended to each of them. I wondered whether they had come with some thoughts about where they wanted to start. Anna said that they had been to couple counselling before, but Bernard did not like it. I asked whether she had some thoughts about where to begin now?

Anna: It is not something I feel easy about . . . I know that Bernard feels very cross about the situation and that he will remind me that I asked him to leave. He wants to blame me and he thinks that he has done nothing wrong – I feel differently . . .

Th: How would you translate this into what you want to achieve in this session?

Anna: If Bernard will understand – I have tried before . . . if he would ever understand here . . .

Th: [To Bernard] What are you hoping for?

Bernard: First of all – if you do not mind . . . It is sometimes good to talk and to expose someone . . . but it really shows an insecurity when someone is exposing someone again and again for no reason . . . I beg your pardon . . . I want to ask her not to expose me. . . . She said that I did not like going to counselling . . . uff . . . that is in my face . . . she will never say what happened before . . . when we went home [after the counselling session] . . . [Bernard stands up] . . . Anna! In all respect to my parents, I will not lie [Puts his hands on his heart] I swear on their grave. You came in like this [Kicks the nearest chair and waves his arms about]: ‘This will never work – I do not want you here. We need to stop. Do you not understand? I do not want you in my life. When I met you I was not in a good frame of mind’. [Silence for some moments, Bernard sits down and buries his head in his hands.]

Bernard: I went through a hard time with this family . . . what I went through I would not want anyone else to go through. . . . Anna what did I do to you? [Bernard begins to sob and moves to the door.]

Th: Please do not go, Bernard. Please stay so that we can work on this . . . [Bernard sobs for several minutes by the door]

Th: [To Anna] Did you realize that Bernard feels like this?

Anna: I have never seen him cry . . . [Eventually Bernard comes back to his seat]

Anna: Now I do not feel that I can say anything . . . I feel that Bernard has a problem with money . . . he wanted to keep his own Barclay account . . .

Th: Can I just say that I think that Bernard coming back to sit down is a sign of extraordinary good will. It is not easy for a man to break down like that and to come back to sit here with two white women.

**Emotions and meaning**

The strength of the feelings communicated in these sessions in some ways were unmistakeable and probably cross-culturally recognizable.
I myself felt stubborn and determined in the face of the aggression expressed by the twins and Anna’s inactivity. I remember reprimanding the boys sharply when they began to use items from my desk as weapons. I was shocked at Bernard breaking down in front of me and felt that I managed to help him stay in the room by the skin of my teeth. Yet these sequences involving Anna’s anger and Bernard’s vulnerability also reminded me of the naven ritual, not just because of the complementarity but also because, like the naven, the session felt a bit like a ritual space where some behaviour and some emotional communications were reversed and there were hints of other communications with other values in other details that I had observed and heard about before. For example, Bernard’s emotional outburst was forceful and I also had the image of Anna lying in the chair while the boys were fighting around her, in my mind.

At the same time, I was not going to be a heroine (Bertrando, 2007; Palazzoli et al., 1989). My aim was not to come up with some magical formulation that would set things right. Much more modestly, I saw my work as providing some understanding that I could use as a guide to what I myself, as the therapist, would do next; how I would position myself and hope that this next step might provide some new information for everybody; a type of technology of the self in the sense suggested by Bertrando (2007, pp.221–244; see also Foucault, 1982, pp.221–251) for them and me. This involved keeping in mind the local details that were unfolding in the room, Anna and Bernard’s personal histories as well as the wider sociocultural setting, both of which were implicated in the subjectivity of Anna, Bernard, Daniel and Eric as well as my own.

Most western interracial marriages between individuals who consider themselves to be white and black involve white women and black men (Killian, 2001; Tizard and Phoenix, 1993). These present partners with complex agendas implicating dominant ideologies about race and difference as well as their contestation (Killian, 2001, 2002). I had heard details of Anna’s and Bernard’s own family contexts during the first phase of the work and I had experienced them in the family sessions. I could therefore supplement the snapshot synchronic picture of schismogenesis with a diachronic one (Palazzoli et al., 1989). This material allowed me to keep cultural and family aspects in mind, to consider this in relation to what was being communicated about

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I think of this as Bateson’s ethos but I include a historical perspective, not emphasized by Bateson, probably because this was not something to which anthropologists of his generation were alert.
feelings and emotions and to set this against some aspects of a prevailing social ideology about race. That is not to say that I know everything there is to know about Anna and Bernard: rather I am trying to show a connection between what I do know and how this informed me subsequently. This is one illustration that we are never in a not-knowing position (Krause, 1998, 2002; Bertrando 2007).

Anna was brought up in an overwhelmingly white rural area of England with a cold mother and a close relationship to her father. She felt emotionally deprived (perhaps feeling that her sister was preferred over her) and believed that there was more emphasis on etiquette than on closeness, love and support in her family. There seems to have been few relatives around the family. She was anxious in school and had few friends but as she grew older she also provoked her mother with her choice of boyfriends. When Anna said that she was looking for someone she could love and someone who could give her love she sounded desolate. As she had matured with her children she seemed to have been looking for a corrective family script (Byng-Hall, 1995).

Bernard had a large family and he was the eldest living male member. Bernard’s script was more replicative (Byng-Hall, 1995). He was loyal to his family and to the memory of his parents who, together with his siblings, had embraced his in-laws with an effort to forge strong connections between the two families. He was gallant and polite and used assertive body language as opposed to Anna’s more passive style. Might Bernard remind us of the proud men in Iatmul society? Certainly Anna was not a quiet self-effacing Iatmul kind of woman but her defiance covered up a frailty. Between them an interaction seemed to have developed in which Bernard responded to Anna’s frailty and inaction with masculine control and responsibility and also a sense of what was proper. To this Anna reacted with defiance, rebellion and a lack of resolution, to which Bernard responded by more of the same or by becoming angry and removing himself from the scene. I think that these interactions were also underpinned by different egocentric and socio-centric expectations with respect to relationships between couples, parents and children, sexual relationships and intimacy.

What could I find in my own social context and my own experience that would resonate with the themes of competition, fairness and respect in this painful dynamic? And how could my social context

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8 Socio-centric versus egocentric is one way of summarizing this issue, but this is an emphasis rather than a typology.
inform me about theirs? It was obvious that in some respects Anna, Bernard and I belonged in the same social space. We all lived in a cosmopolis in multicultural English society and we all, I think, would describe ourselves as middle class. It was also obvious that Anna and I were white women and Bernard a black man and that, in the current context of British society, these social aspects had their own dynamic in which social constructions of gender and race were entangled. In this both Anna and Bernard were victims from different points of view, Anna as a woman and Bernard as a black person. There were echoes of the same conflict between similarities and differences and the meeting of needs and demands at different internal and external levels: the symmetrical and competitive fight between the two boys, their twinship, Anna’s battle with protest and fairness and Bernard’s kinship expectations.

However, at the most general socially constructed level, namely that of social categories, the shifting nature of a dilemma like this contains the risk of becoming fixed by the colour of a person’s skin. This perspective added discrimination and humiliation to the emotional content of the interactions and this was an aspect in which I participated because this is also part of my own social context. We had talked about race in previous sessions but now this was particularly manifest in the room and I punctuated this by referring to myself and Anna as ‘two white women’ and Bernard’s good will. This directed, but also opened up the session. Anna said that about 10 months previously Daniel and Eric had been preoccupied with being white but now they said that they wanted to change their own brown skin for a black skin like their father’s. Although a confusion about identity is not an inevitable outcome for children of a mixed race parentage (Tizard and Phoenix 1993), in this case the vacillation between one and the other seemed to underscore other conflicts. After this Bernard spoke about incidents in which Anna’s friends and her mother had acted in racist ways towards him, not wanting to shake his hand and mocking Islam. I felt that while Bernard expressed and communicated his humiliation, this also echoed Anna’s experiences in her family, a bit like the naven ritual in which, albeit in a distorted form, one party gained some insight into what it feels like to be the other.

Concluding thoughts: emotions in a relational perspective

There are many loose ends here, and I want to draw to a close by giving a sketch of how I see the theoretical aspects of my work with

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this family. Although it is probably in the study of emotional terms that we find the strongest evidence for cross-cultural variation in the recognition and appraisal of emotion (Harré, 1986; Lutz, 1988; Lynch, 1990), I have been referring to performative rather than indexical aspects of emotion. To be more precise, I have referred to the ‘expression of emotions’ rather than to emotions, as there is not necessarily a correspondence between the two (Dumouchel, 2002). I have also referred to the way an emotion may be received and a glossing, however imprecise, may be put on it by someone else. This is more than performance, firstly because in the expression of an emotion, it (the emotion) connects the biographical, historical and social past with the present, and secondly because in the clinical work in the therapy room, therapists and patients are also creating images of the future, images that are not already known to them (Mattingly 1998).

The gestures, language, body language and intonation of the individuals in my sessions marked the occurrence of emotions and presented an opportunity to them and to me for glossing them. In this way the emotions affected the interaction but there was nothing certain about which way this would unfold. Pocock refers to this as an emotional ecosystem (Pocock, 2008), and points out that this system contains real, remembered or fantasized relations and plays an active role in influencing these relations. It seems to me that these different dimensions of past, present and future are not so much a system as they are the context which emotions help to call (Crapanzano, 1992) and that this also was Bateson’s point about schismogenesis in the naven ritual. While there are links in this chain, I want to emphasize the uncertainty. So, for example, we may agree that one very important context that emotions help to call is the context in which an infant has learnt to mentalize (Fonegy and Target, 2003). However, I also think that it is because of the emotional tone and experience of any context that infants, children or any of us continue to learn, not just to mentalize but also the meaning of social rules and cultural premises, consciously or unconsciously. It was probably this intuition that led Bateson to connect ethos and culture methodologically.

Along with his contemporaries Bateson described ‘culture’ as a whole, but with postmodern ideas we have come to be less sure about boundaries and more interested in the role of the person as an agent of self-making. The trouble with this move has been that continuity has been lost and relationships have tended to be portrayed as
endlessly created and recreated without attending to the conditions under which these processes take place. Because culture and meaning is constantly being both reproduced and changed in interaction and communication, modern anthropologists think of culture as more illusory than the pioneers did, and as the sustained expectations of and ideas about a particular social space in which persons participate.\footnote{It is interesting that Bertrand (2007, p.225) uses the idea of ‘fencing an extension of ground in’ to refer to something similar in therapy.}

Without such expectations about spaces no actions, such as participation in a naven ritual, horse riding and a marital argument or therapy make sense, but the illusion may be realized only gradually or not at all. Furthermore, expectations may be more or less institutionalized. As Haastrup has noted ‘A society, a culture or any social space – be it a nation, state, university, conference or construction site – has no ontological status as a whole apart from what is collectively attributed to it’ (Haastrup 2007, pp.198–199). Culture, then, is another way of talking about expectations and about context as involving not just the present but also the past and the future. Expectations play a role in interactions and in any learning situation and one of Bateson’s most fascinating insights was that this may involve reversals, an idea that is also central to approaches that focus on patterns of attachment across generations in family therapy (Byng-Hall, 1995) and in attachment research with adolescents (Crittenden, 2000; Pocock, 2008).

In the family described here differences in skin colour went along with marked cultural differences. This may not always be the case. However, I maintain that cultural differences always have a high potential for opening up schisms and becoming vehicles for differences in power and authority and that skin colour and physical characteristics are the crudest and most primitive markers for such differences. Conversely, skin colour and other physical characteristics over time may also tend to become markers of social and psychological identity and therefore also become cultural symbols for different ideas and expectations about social spaces. This is why, although not all mixed race marriages, contain the interactions I have described, probably all have to face some of the same issues (Breger and Hill, 1998; Killian, 2001, 2002).

What about my own gloss of the emotions? I do not think that I fell in love with the story of this family. I felt anger and despair and tried to understand these feelings in terms of the themes of competition, fairness, authority, respect, passivity and humiliation and how these...
connect to conscious or unconscious expectations. However, I go along with Bateson in his critique of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness in acknowledging that my gloss is mine and does not necessarily correspond to the emotions experienced by Anna, Bernard, Daniel or Eric. Nor can I be certain about all the meanings of the emotions they experienced. What I do know is that the emotions were in the room and that we all had some kind of experience, which I have tried to evoke in this article. I like to think that it is this complicated relationship between experience and narrative that Sluzki and Cecchin wanted to bring to our attention. The narratives of Anna, Bernard, myself and the children were helpful, but the way these were put into play in the therapy and the experiences this evoked for all of us were far more important to the way the work unfolded. As with ethnography, the therapy proceeded as a process of moving back and forth between my own assumptions and my familiar and social context and the particular details, experiences and stories of my clients. But it was through the vehicle of emotions in the therapy room that my experience came close to theirs and where the education of my attention properly began.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Paolo Bertrando and members of Episteme, Centro di Psicoterapia Sistemica in Turin for inviting me to the Conference on Emotions and Systems and for their hospitality in Turin, 10–11 October 2008. This is a revised version of a paper delivered at that conference, I also wish to thank the two anonymous referees who read and made suggestions for this article.

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