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Family Systems Theory and the Form of Conference Dialogue

Louise Z. Smith

Though research on both conference dialogue and family systems began in the early 1960s (Bruffee 336-8; Bowen “The Use” 159-162; see *Family*), the former has yet to draw upon the latter.¹ I propose that the negotiations that go on in writing conferences are political acts. Conference dialogue is as much about the psychosocial relations between the participants, and between them and the larger institution, as it is about the particular reading and/or writing problem they are negotiating. My purpose now is to speculate: how might an understanding of family systems theory help us make conferences more productive?

A complete account of family systems theory would occupy many pages. Here I will sketch only the four features that best illuminate conference dialogue: the structural model of the family; interchange across the boundary between inner and outer environments; information-processing about “distance”; and roles in communication.

¹Composition researchers have examined language activity in classrooms (Searle; Green) and writing-conference groups (Gere; Walker). In studying writing groups comprised of 5th-, 8th-, and 11th-graders, Gere and Abbott found that 30% of writing groups’ “idea units” focused not upon group interactions (Gere 367-8 [see Table I, 370]) including “unselfconscious verbal confrontations” (374). Further research will show whether adults’ tutorial or small group conferences devote comparable attention to interpersonal issues. If we re-classified some of the idea units in Gere’s study within a framework of family systems theory, we could understand them as regulators of access and responsibility, as I explain these below.

Of the three family models that theorists describe (Levant viii-ix), the historical model (concerned with multi- and inter-generational relationships) and the phenomenological model (concerned with an individual family member's experience) are better suited to long-term therapeutic relationships than to relatively short-term academic ones. The third, the structural/process or "systems" model (concerned with current patterns of interaction), is the most useful for understanding conference dialogue because it emphasizes communication and behavioral change.

Family "systems," like all social systems, are characterized by "an almost continuous interchange not only within the system, but across the boundary between the inner environment and the outer environment" (Kantor *Inside* 10). The "inner environment" means the family's relations with one another, its individuals' "self-conscious" experience of how each affects relations with the rest of the family, and the "system-conscious" experience of how others in the family affect the self (178). The "outer environment," offering a wider dimension of system-consciousness, means the schools, churches, and other social institutions with which the family relates. These environments comprising a family system correspond with what we may call the conference's "inner environment" (the writer's and teacher's simultaneous negotiation of mutually acceptable solutions to particular assignments and of power relations) and the conference's "outer environment" (negotiation of participants' relations with academe). Constant interchange between "inner" and "outer" characterizes both family communications and writing conferences.

Families are *systems* which, like all "social systems, are organizationally complex, open, adaptive, and information-processing" (Kantor 10-12). "Organizationally complex" means that family systems are composed not of fixed, unchanging, sequentially or randomly ordered entities, but of changeable entities in reciprocally influencing networks of causal relations. Conferences, too, are organizationally complex, their participants able to change themselves and their relationships in response to forces in the academic environment. "Open" means not just that the family responds to changes in the outer environment but that "interchange is an *essential* factor" underlying its viability. "Adaptive" means that families grow and develop, not just dissolve, in the face of tension with the environment. Conferences are "open" and "adaptive," responding to changes in the academic environment: opportunities to revise or take a course pass/fail, changes in students' reasons for taking a course or seeking a degree, changes in tutors' workload, changes in professors' scholarly lives, and so on. "Information-processing" means that the family overcomes limitations of space and time through communication, especially "distance-regulating information," that is, information about what distances among family members, and between them and the outer world, can best achieve the family's goals. "Distance" needs further explanation.

Family theorists identify six interrelated kinds of “distance” information and arrange them in two sets, *access* dimensions (energy, time, and space) and *target* dimensions (affect, power, and meaning): “Through the transmission of matter and information via energy in time and space, family members regulate each other’s access to the targets of affect, power, and meaning” (Kantor 39). “Time” and “space” quite literally mean physical arrangements: when do family members join in common activity? when are the busy times and leisure times? how many does it take to “crowd” a room? which doors are open or closed? and so on. “Energy” means the intensity of activity, including the level of conversation and the frequency with which activities are begun and completed: does the family take on more than it can handle? less? do members equally share activity? Conferences share these dimensions: who decides how long they last? on whose turf do they take place? how much activity is attempted and completed? who does the talking? at what level of intensity? The answers to such questions provide information about the power relations both between the participants “inside” and between them and the academic world “outside.” Regulation of energy, especially students’ fluency in speaking and writing the “codes” of academic discourse which either include them within or exclude them from academic institutions (Giles and Powesland 37-46; Kutz; Ohmann; Roy), is a primary function of conference dialogue.

The target dimensions are less measurable, more complex. “Affect” means the joining and separating of individuals—the family’s ability to “satisfy its members’ needs for intimacy and nurturance” (Kantor 47), the conference’s ability to enable student and teacher to feel joined to, rather than estranged from, each other and the academic world. “Power” means various members’ status in the family’s formal hierarchy and the situations when that hierarchy will yield (as when a youngster is allowed to “persuade” a parent into postponing bedtime). In conferences, “power” is the capacity to regulate competition and cooperation, autonomy and subservience, “moving up” or “flunking out.” “Meaning” represents the identity of the family, its “[i]deas, credos, values, ideologies, world views” and morality—its sense of “us” as distinct from “them” (Kantor 50-1). Conferences regulate “meaning” when they reveal or obscure the intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual significance not only of the course assignments but also the independence and authority that are, ideally, being learned. Conferences do not transpire within any one of these six dimensions, any more than family life does. In a conference, a student who seems discouraged with overdue work (affect) may elicit a tutor’s assurance, “We’re in the same boat” (power), a rearrangement of the furniture to allow for closer collaboration (space), an extension of the normal tutorial period (time), and an increased effort on the part of the tutor (energy). A professor’s conviction that his students can all succeed through hard work (meaning) may intensify their liking for the course (affect) and the level of dialogue in class (energy). Awareness of interchanges among the six can help us avoid letting our concern for the access

dimensions usurp attention from the targets and, more important, letting concern for one of the targets obscure the importance of the others.

The roles each person plays within a particular conversation regulate access to the targets. These roles do not depend upon participants' fixed identities (as parent or child, teacher or student). The "members of . . . any social system have four basic [roles] to play: *mover*, *follower*, *opposer*, and *bystander*," and they can exchange these roles rapidly, even within sentences (Kantor 81). In a dyad, triad, quad, or larger group, the *roles* matter more than the number of speakers. Even dyadic reciprocities—overdoer/underdoer, pursuer/distancer, abandoner/engulfer—can be explained in the four-role model (Levant 30-4). All four of the roles involve authority: the mover claims it, the follower acknowledges it, the opposer resists it, and the bystanders watch it change hands until they decide to step into one of the other roles. These roles, essential to effective family communication, are unfortunately susceptible to polarization, in which an individual's maintaining or maneuvering another person into a particular role becomes more important than communication. For example, parents may seek therapy for a "problem child" whose symptoms they focus upon to avoid addressing difficulties between themselves; the presenting problem masks the actual problem (Haley 155).

Family therapists rename these four general roles to fit the triangulations that particular families engage in: tyrant/martyr/liberator; yea-sayer/ditherer/nay-sayer, and so on. "Persecutor," "victim," and "rescuer" (Ackerman) are useful terms for analyzing conference dialogue. "Bystander" works universally. I cannot over-emphasize that simplistic identifications—teacher/persecutor, student/victim, tutor/rescuer—must be avoided. Likewise, despite the refreshingly candid recognition that so-called "peer" tutors' relative expertise confers upon them authority which they often readily assume (Davis 49-50; Smulyan 43; Wolcott 25), they are not necessarily the "movers" of tutorial dialogue. In fact, teacher, student, and tutor—or any two players—can play all three roles, all in one conversation, sometimes even in one sentence! Two-person (or "dyadic") conversations are triangular: a teacher mediates between a novice writer and some standard of expertise (often a text by a professional writer the class has studied); a tutor conversing with a student plays "middleman" in all kinds of ways (Wolcott 16). Behind all three stand other important figures, like the "bystanders" of family process theory. The teacher's bystanders include mentors (silently expecting to be emulated), a personnel committee (reading course evaluations or looking for more publications), and dean (allocating resources toward measurable instructional efforts). The student's bystanders may include the spouse/child/best friend (feeling neglected, or even rejected, when the student returns to school); the student may feel, "If I succeed academically, I'm forming a coalition with my teacher against my loved ones" (Bruss; Haley 109). The tutor's bystanders include parents (proud of their child's paraprofessional status) and a supervisor (discerning the teacher's brand of

pedagogy and helping the tutor work harmoniously within it or compensate diplomatically for its shortcomings). “Bystanders” can influence the choices and exchanges of roles, dramatically influencing what is and is not said center-stage in conferences, which as we now see, involve a rather extended academic family among whom authority changes hands. Conferencing is not really teaching “one-to-one.”

As happens when family roles are manipulated, the presenting problem may mask the real one: teacher or student may seek a conference for a “problem assignment” whose challenges mask deeper tensions about their relationships to one another and to academe. Consider the following scenario:

Friday, 2 p.m. Will Wright keeps his appointment with Professor Hector Scribbly to discuss his *Hamlet* essay, due next Monday at ten:

Wright: I don’t know what to write about for my *Hamlet* paper.

Scribbly: What would you like to write about?

Wright: Gee, I dunno . . . Maybe feigned madness?

5 Scribbly: Hmmm. That might be good. What would you say that we haven’t already covered in lecture and discussion?

Wright: That’s the problem. Nothing, I guess.

Scribbly: Well, then, what interests you about the play?

Wright (pause): Nothing comes to mind. I’ve been worrying about this paper for two weeks, but I’m still stuck.

10 Scribbly: Never mind, never mind, we’ll work something out! What about the sample topics I handed out in class?

Wright: Sorry, I guess I lost the handout.

Scribbly: Never mind, I’m sure I have an extra. (Rummages through folders on desk and hands him a copy.)

15 Wright (scans): I still don’t see anything I could do.

Scribbly (sighs): OK. Let’s look at your textbook and see what you wrote in the margins or underlined.

Wright: That’s the problem. I used a library copy because I had to dip into my book budget to fix my motorcycle.

20 Scribbly: Oh. How about the notes in your reading journal?

Wright: That’s the problem. It blew off my motorcycle in the accident, and then I . . .

Scribbly: Look! We're getting nowhere. Why don't you just write on "Hamlet: Strategist or Procrastinator?"

(Aside: I'll bet he's an expert on that one!)

25 Wright: OK . . . but I'm not sure what to say.

Scribbly: You can talk about whether thinking is always advantageous or whether it's possible to think too much. For instance, you can look at the soliloquy in scene . . .

In this scenario, feigned patience, feigned effort, feigned teaching, and feigned learning add up to a feigned conference. The presenting problem is the paper assignment: Scribbly wants to help Wright discover something genuinely interesting about *Hamlet*, something that will make Wright the intellectual "mover" in negotiating with the text. Wright appears to be a "follower" and Scribbly a "mover," guiding him toward discovery of "what to write" and toward justifiable confidence in his critical reading and writing abilities.

However, the presenting problem masks a triangular struggle over responsibility and power. Despite Scribbly's responsible teaching (assigning the essay early [2], suggesting but not prescribing topics [2,7,10], showing students how to use both reading notes [16-17] and a reading journal [20], trying to reassure [10, 13]), he loses patience as Wright names one circumstance after another as "the problem," that is, when he passively refuses responsibility for learning and instead insists on being rescued. As Wright's succession of problems interferes, he becomes the passive "opposer" of Scribbly's best pedagogies. At length, Scribbly begins to feel that nothing he suggests will work, that he is wasting his time. Defeated, Scribbly ends up doing just what he tried to avoid. In providing an extra copy of the lost handout (13-14) and especially in launching into a mini-lecture that prescribes not only the topic (22-23) but also what to say about it (26-28), Scribbly does just what he tried to avoid: he becomes Wright's "follower," daring to reassert himself as "mover" only in an aside (24). He also practically guarantees Wright's cutting Monday morning's class and appearing at 2 p.m. to request an extension, which Scribbly, guilty from losing his patience and chagrined at blowing his teaching strategies last Friday, will generously grant. *Ad infinitum*. The deeper intellectual and political questions—why Wright allows circumstances constantly to interfere with his writing, perhaps indicating ambivalence about his educational responsibilities and goals, why Scribbly pretends to take Wright's excuses seriously—remain untouched in this feigned conference.

In short, within the conference's inner environment their desire for intellectual discovery and independence is frustrated and their hierarchic relationship is cemented. In the conference's outer environment, their access to institutional rewards is diminished. Triangulation defeats them on all fronts.

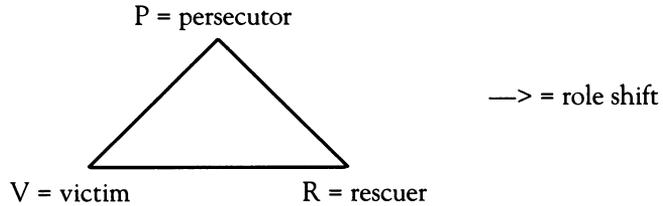
Three conversational ploys that are not limited to family communications help sustain Scribbly and Wright's self-defeating pretense: rule-driven dissemblance that prevents communication, the "double-bind," and "mystification." First, each speaker is committed to his own set of rules about what he can and cannot say to the other. Wright's rules prevent his asking, "How do you expect me to come up with something that 300 years of commentary hasn't already said about feigned madness? Why should I, anyway?" And Scribbly's rules prevent his asking, "Why are you taking this course if you can't buy the books, keep track of the assignments, or get interested in the plays?" To avoid blaming themselves or each other, they tacitly collude to blame circumstances. However, neither genuinely believes—or expects the other to believe—that circumstances are really "the problem."

Second, the double-bind (the Russellian paradox "I want you to disobey me" [Levant 54-8; Kolevzon]) operates when Wright seeks but passively resists help: "I want you to help me, but I'm going to maneuver you into dictating the topic, which isn't really helping me." The double-bind operates again when Scribbly invites but rejects dependence: "No matter how many problems you have and how carelessly you behave, I'll rescue you; but if that takes too long, I'll throw you a life jacket—a generic paper topic—instead of teaching you to swim. My patience is infinite, up to a point!"

Third, the dialogue contains "mystification" (Laing), the kind of double-bind by which one person conceals conflict from another by causing the other to doubt what is going on. It occurs when one confirms the content but disconfirms the modality of the other's experience. For example, Wright confirms Scribbly's expectation, that two weeks' notice enables him to work on the assignment gradually, but disconfirms the modality by implying, "You must have *assumed* that my two weeks' worrying about the paper entailed thinking about the play." It also occurs when one converts praxis into process, as when Wright expresses anxiety—with its resultant "loss" of the topics—and Scribbly twice denies the anxiety with "Never mind." I call mystification "The *Gaslight* Effect."

Let us suppose that Wright eventually submits his *Hamlet* essay and that Scribbly refers him to a tutor, Frank Hope, for help in generating his own topic for an essay on *The Tempest*. Objectively, Scribbly is a mover, initiating an action by relinquishing some authority over instruction, in hopes that both Wright and Hope will react as followers. But Scribbly may see himself in any of the three roles: as persecutor ("Wright is either going to come up with his own topic or flunk!"), as rescuer ("I'm making sure Wright gets Hope's expert help"), or as victim of Wright's stupidity, laziness, or recalcitrance ("I can't spend any more class time on ways of generating topics. Wright still doesn't get it, so let Hope have a try, and good luck!"). Wright and Hope too may receive the referral in several ways. The triangular permutations and variations resemble the

“vicious cycles” in family communication. Without elaborating more of the possibilities, though, let us see how a dialogue between Hope and Wright rings the changes on these roles:



- Hope: I'm glad you're here. We've got a lot to do. {R}
- Wright: Yeah, sorry I forgot to let you know I couldn't make our appointment last week. {P}
My roommate was sick, and I was just so busy. {P → V}
- 5 Hope: Yeah, I was pretty busy too. {V}
But that's OK. {V → R}
What would you like to work on today? {R}
- Wright: Well, Prof. Scribbly still hasn't returned my *Hamlet* paper, even though he's had it for a week. {V}
- 10 Hope: Well, a week's not long with 45 papers to read. {P}
Maybe we could work on the next assignment? {P → R}
- Wright: I dunno . . . *The Tempest* is pretty confusing. {V}
- Hope: Well, let's take a look at it. {R}
- Wright: My backpack was full, so I didn't bring it. {V}
- 15 Hope: Well then, let's work on revising that paper you got a "D" on three weeks ago. {R}
You can't keep putting it off forever. {R → P}
- Wright: What do you mean, putting it off? {P}
Scribbly's gonna hate it no matter what I say. {V}
- 20 Why bother? {V → P}

- Hope: No, he's not. His comments made perfect sense. {P}
You're just avoiding his criticisms! {P}
- Wright: Hey, whose paper is it, anyway? What are you {V}
getting so worked up about? {V → P}
- 25 Hope: Worked up! Listen! You stood me up, you prevented {P}
another person from using the appointment, now you {P}
didn't bring the book, and you won't work on the {P}
revision. How am I supposed to help you? {P → V}
- 30 Wright: Gee, sorry. I didn't know you cared so much. {R → V}
I mean, you get paid either way, don't you? {V → P}
- Hope: Yes, I get paid. But that's not why I work as a {V}
tutor. I'm here because I want to help you. {V → R}

In this dialogue, Hope repeatedly tries to rescue Wright just as Scribbly tried to do. But Wright steadfastly refuses to be rescued: he forgets (2), wastes Hope's time (5), pities himself (8-9), does not bring the book (14), contradicts (18-20), and challenges (23-24). His refusals frustrate Hope (as they did Scribbly), who sees his efforts being squandered (as did Scribbly); he changes from rescuer to victim in his own eyes (5, 25-28), persecuted by Wright. But in Wright's eyes, the fed-up tutor shifts from rescuer to persecutor, siding with Scribbly (10, 21). After an apologetic gesture (29), Wright retaliates by implying that Hope is interested only in getting paid; here Wright shifts rapidly from rescuer to victim to persecutor (29-30). Hope and Wright are not working "one-to-one." With Wright are his "bystanders"—a sick roommate (4), hostile Scribbly (whom Wright initially sees as the persecutor [8-9, 19]), and perhaps a parent or friend who have urged him not to let others boss him around (23). Behind Hope stand overworked Scribbly (10) (the very same person as the "hostile" one!), the student deprived of an appointment because the time was taken up by a no-show (5, 26), the writing center supervisor needing to manage tutorials efficiently (25-26), and a mentor encouraging Hope to see himself not just as an hourly wage-earner but as a para-professional (31-32). Wright and Hope can chase each other around the triangle of roles indefinitely, growing increasingly frustrated. Their dialogue, like communication in families, is an authoritarian struggle to regulate access: to affect (Wright's half-hearted apology for missing the previous session and Hope's insincere reassurance that it was OK, even though he had no time to waste [5-6]); to power (Hope's efforts to get work done [7, 11, 13, 15] and Wright's lame excuses for avoiding the critical paper comments [18-20]); and to meaning (Wright's queries about who "owns" the writing and why the reading and writing are or are not important [23-24]). The struggle crosses and re-crosses the boundary between "inner" and "outer." Every

move toward affect, power, and meaning carries ramifications both for the inner relationship between writer and tutor and for their access to affect, power, and meaning in the “outer” academic world.

Family systems theory suggests ways in which these well-meaning people can prevent rule-driven dissemblances, double-binds and mystifications, and triangulations from interfering with the real work of the conference, the student’s gradual assumption of intellectual responsibility and authority via the accomplishment of particular assignments. First, the participants can broaden their conversational rules beyond politeness; Scribbly can let Wright know it’s OK to ask the purposes of reading and writing, and Wright can reveal that factors other than his passion for Shakespeare motivated him to take Scribbly’s course. When Scribbly or Hope hears Wright’s circumstantial excuses, he can say so directly rather than collude just to save face: “Given all these non-academic problems, how realistic is it for you to be taking this course?” and, if it does seem realistic, then, “What would you like me to do to help you?” By the same token, they can listen carefully for the double-bind, especially “*The Gaslight Effect*,” and comment directly when they hear it. Scribbly and Hope can say, “You seem to want me to help you, but you evade my efforts. What would you really like me to do?” Wright can say, “You seem to expect me to say something new about feigned madness, but you know that only a Shakespearean scholar can tell if an idea about *Hamlet* is new. What can I do to be ‘original?’” Such metadiscursive comments help everyone stop feigning.

Second, they can recognize that no amount of reassurance can rescue a would-be victim. Continuation of futile rescue attempts can only prolong Wright’s dependence and transform Scribbly and Hope into his victims. They can, however, avoid minimizing Wright’s feelings, since doing so might make him think they don’t understand. Instead, they can acknowledge his feelings, thus satisfying his need for affect. Another way to do so is to observe and describe how Wright *might* feel: “You must have been very worried to have put off your paper for two weeks” or “You must be wondering what’s been happening to your *Hamlet* paper since you handed it in last week.” In doing so, of course, they must avoid assuming that Wright’s problems are identical to another student’s or to their own. Describing how a student *might* feel is different from *endorsing* those feelings (rescuing) or prescribing what they *should* be (persecuting): it avoids the judgments that call forth defenses.

To minimize triangular maneuvering, Scribbly and Hope can state rather than dramatize their feelings. Family theory borrows from communications theory the maxim, “you cannot *not* communicate.” Every word, tone, gesture, facial expression, even silence communicates something. Irony and other forms of metacommunication undercut what is said (Levant 2-5), as when Scribbly’s downcast eyes and martyr’s tone negate his move toward affect: “I’m sure I have an extra [copy of the sample topics]” (13). Dramatized exasperation will only make Wright feel more persecuted: “Now even my teacher/tutor hates me!”

Instead, Scribbly or Hope can say, “When you come to a conference completely unprepared, you and I (note: not just “I,” which would only enhance the speaker’s victim status and Wright’s guilt) have nothing to go on. That makes me feel my help is not really important to you. How can you make our conference more productive?”

They can avoid forming coalitions and instead do the do-able. Hope’s defense of the overworked Scribbly is unlikely to convince Wright that Scribbly’s troubles can ever equal his own. If instead of defending Scribbly’s paper comments, Hope were to ask, “What difference would it make to your original paper if you changed such and such?” then Wright would be more likely to respond with a substantive, positive answer. Moreover, Hope’s question would redirect attention from political maneuvering to Wright’s responses to the reading and writing problem, responses through which he will eventually attain authority.

Finally, Scribbly and Hope can help Wright assume the responsibility for writing. Instead of rescuing Wright by shouldering responsibility for his paper—especially when he clings to “victim” status—they can ask, “What would you like me to do?” Even if the answer is, “Nothing today, I guess,” Wright will choose either to return better prepared for the next conference or to handle the problem in other ways for which he bears responsibility. As long as someone else worries for students, they need not worry—or act to satisfy their own, or anyone else’s, appetite for learning. These ways of reducing triangular distractions can help teachers, tutors, and students attend more fully to the form of the conference: the creation of desire for learning in the minds of all the auditor-participants as they listen to each other and themselves, and the satisfaction of that desire, not by providing answers to assignments or places in academe, but by providing dialogical means for creating them.

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