

## **From Milan to the Fifth Province: The Legacy of Gianfranco Cecchin**

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### **Introduction**

On the 3rd February, 2004 as I was walking through Heathrow Airport on my way to catch a flight home to Dublin after a family therapy trip to Sweden and England, I turned on my mobile phone. I was certainly unprepared for the sad message that I would receive from my Fifth Province friend and colleague, Nollaig Byrne. I could hardly take it in that our dear friend Gianfranco Cecchin of the Milan Team was no more. Was it possible that this great character, this great rogue, this great therapeutic genius would no longer regale us with whatever novel idea was consuming and amusing him at the time. It just did not seem possible.

My very first meeting with Gianfranco was in the summer of 1982 when he visited Dublin as part of a holiday in Ireland with his daughter. My colleague, Nollaig Byrne had met him previously at the Ackerman Institute in New York. They had been by Monica McGoldrick, our mutual friend. During his first brief interlude in Ireland he visited our Fifth province team in the Department of Child and Family Psychiatry at the Mater Misericordiae Hospital in Dublin. We were in the process of reviewing a videotape of a family we referred to as ‘the Royal Family’. (Byrne and McCarthy, 1995)

After a few introductions and explanations, we settled back to watch. Minutes later Gianfranco was asleep, not understanding one word of our Dublin vernacular. Shortly afterwards, we adjourned to the nearest hostelry to introduce Gianfranco to something he might enjoy – a pint of Guinness! This was my first exposure to the genius of Gianfranco. As we talked his ideas somersaulted and pirouetted across the stage of his mind. I was captivated and became henceforth an ardent fan and subsequently a friend of this unique man. For his part, he became a kind of ‘behind the scenes mentor’ and with Luigi and the Bologna team, invited us to present at the Milan Centres during the eighties and nineties.

Apart from these invitations there would be many more meetings over the next twenty years, at conferences, large and small. The favourite meetings were in my own home when he came to stay. Our learning of the Milan Approach and more particularly Gianfranco’s version was in large part through knowing him well, watching him work and lastly reading his works.

### **Milan and The Fifth Province Approach**

In 1982 Nollaig Byrne, Philip Kearney and I set out to fashion our team after the Milan team. This move had occurred primarily as a result of a strong suggestion by Lynn Hoffman. We transformed ourselves from a team in peer supervision to a non-hierarchical team premised on such concepts and practices as circularity, fit, team mind, hypothesizing, attention to language and the five part session. Neutrality was the sole concept we never really took on. As we were to soon begin to meet with families where father-daughter sexualized abuse was disclosed, neutrality did not sit with us well. Instead we coined the term Ambivalent Dis-Position. The concept of ‘ambivalence’ was an indigenous concept, the Irish being well celebrated for their literacy and narrative uses of ambiguity. Ambivalence in our usage related to an ability to have ‘two-thinks’, a both/and perspective on the often either/or presentations of families and attending professionals. We knew early on that we had to listen to all sides of the tragic story of abuse in families if we were not to engage in symmetrical battles around disclosure and denial. This ambivalence did not speak to a confusion or a lack of clarity about who did what to whom and the issue of responsibility. Rather it allowed us to open space for non-antagonistic encounters, which did not cement denial and other processes of disconnection. The hyphenated word, ‘dis-position’ was our attempt to infer a pragmatic and temporary positionality that was never fixed.

The Irish, known for their propensity for fantastic stories and story telling was a potential fertile ground for tall stories of denial and abrogation of responsibility to occur. Harnessing this potential, through a celebration of ambivalence and ambiguity, perpetrators were more likely to recalibrate their stories towards a more believable ‘truth’. Ambiguous discussions allowed us to address issues through metaphors, which were initially hard to verbalise. A “mystery and real severe physical problem” became the entry point for a young girl hospitalized for stomach pains. The girl had said that if her abuse was discussed in public or with her parents she would strongly deny it. This took place at a time when child protective services were thin on the ground in Ireland. The parents had earlier been informed that the pains were psychosomatic which the father strongly rejected insisting that her pain was “real”. Accepting father’s version as a metaphor for her abuse, we began to ask circular questions about the consequences of understanding the cause of the pain. “What would mother do if she knew what caused the pain, was behind the pain”, “what would father do if mother knew the cause of the pain?” “Who could she tell?” and so on. A week later the young girl disclosed her abuse to her mother while father acknowledged his abusive behaviour. She later moved to her maternal grandmother’s home with the help of Social Services.

### **From Future Questions to Questioning at the Extremes**

As we developed our practices based on the Milan Approach future questioning became an important tool. Families seemed more ready to speak only about a future than a painful past. As one mother put it, “I can’t learn to ride a bicycle standing at the kitchen sink”. Using our stance of ambivalent dis-positioning and ambiguous metaphoric talk we went on to develop a form of questioning which we called, ‘questioning at the Extremes’. This questioning was very tightly linked to the logic of the stories being told and the conversation that was taking place. Tracking words very carefully for hints of relevant metaphors, an interesting phenomenon emerged! It was as if the family members were giving us a subtle, almost hidden permission for extreme discussions to take place. The questions at the extremes always followed these hints logically and carefully. They were never plucked out of thin air. One such example was a father who continually denied that he had abused his daughter whilst simultaneously adding that his wife was very forgiving. The therapist then asked if there was anything he would not be forgiven for. “No” father answered, “She would forgive me for anything”. Next followed a question at the extreme, “would your wife forgive you if you made your daughter pregnant?” “Yes” said father “but that would never happen ..... maybe something went on but not that”. From here on in his previous denial dissolved into a conversation of what needed to happen to protect his daughter. Throughout this conversation the young daughter’s child protection worker’s observed.

### **The Verb to ‘Show’**

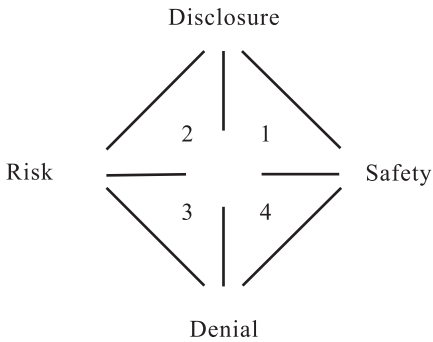
The attention to language developed by the Milan associates from their earliest days together was grist to our mill. Coupled with Maturana’s notions of ‘structure’ and ‘organisation’ we were enabled to conduct conversations not premised on the ontology of family members. (Maturana & Varela, 1987) We stopped using the popular description of the time, ‘Incestuous families’. Instead, we spoke of families in which a father abused his daughter or children. Rather than use the term ‘victim’ we preferred the more positive term ‘heroine’ for our young clients who courageously disclosed the abuse they were experiencing (McCarthy & Byrne, 2001) . Perpetrators became fathers who abused. We deconstructed totalizing descriptions for those based on particular behaviours. The verb, ‘to show’ became a basic operational tool for our team. In one interview, when the distinction was made between a ‘perpetrating father’ and the man, as ‘father in the family’ acknowledgement of responsibility for abuse followed closely.

### **Don’t fall in love with your hypothesis**

To this day I can hear Gianfranco’s mischievous voice call us away from a hasty wedlock to a favoured or ‘obvious’ hypothesis. However, always liking to be pro-active in our sessions and fond of inserting our own ideas, this premise/’dictate’ assumed an in between status. Now, we talked of holding our ideas lightly. They became a loose scaffold on which to build conversations. These scaffolds we referred to as ‘Diamonds’.

Fig 1: *Rough Diamond*.

In the rough diamond words and metaphors were taken and contrasted with their opposites on two intersection axes.



The intersecting axes held the related pairs of opposites. From these four related quadrants or provinces, as we called them, questions were generated in relation to : disclosure and denial: risk and safety.

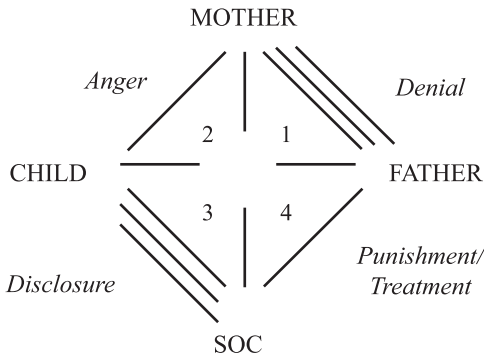
We have found over the years that by linking questions across the four provinces, new ideas or solutions presented themselves. These were often unforeseen. Hence we referred to the central space where the four provinces intersected as the 'Fifth Province' or the province of possibilities and imagination.

The other two diamond types were predominantly used in tracking and hypothesizing relational alliances, discursive stances and positions. These diamonds were referred to as (1) the *symmetrical or competitive diamond* and (2) the *complementary or co-operative diamond*.

The notions of symmetry and complementarity were taken from the work of Bateson (1980) who was also one of the principle sources of inspiration for Gianfranco and the Milan team. In our configuration of these concepts we also imported some indigenous symbols in creating loose frames for therapeutic conversations. These frames or diamonds were holding devices for the complex relationships generated in the abuse disclosure drama. They allowed us to follow the spirit of Bateson and Milan while also responding to the particularities of the Irish context. The diamond shape itself owes its inspiration from ancient rock carvings outside Dublin while the traditional Celtic spiral re-presented for us the aliveness and possibilities of conversations. The centre of the diamond, which also reached out into the other quadrants or provinces, we referred to as the '*fifth province*' – a place apart and a place which was a part of all the other provinces. It was a space of possibility and imagination. Here conversants could cut loose from pre-fixed attributes, views and characterizations and assume their full response-abilities.

Following Maturana, (1985) Gianfranco (198) and our Swedish colleagues, Mia Andersson, the late Klas Grevelius and Ernst Salamon (1987) we embraced love as curiosity and attempted to open space when presented with relationships based on symmetry and complementarity. Within the abuse scenario, they frequently formed in the following contours.

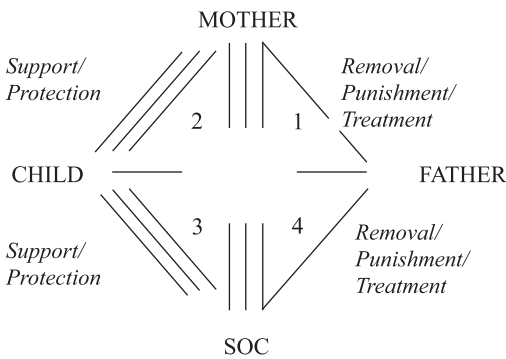
*Fig 2: Symmetrical Competitive Diamond.*



**NB** (Tripple lines refer to relationships of Alliance while single lines denote relationships of distance or no-alliance.)

In the symmetrical competitive presentation in sexualized abuse disclosure we typically encountered situations where the non-abusing parent (mother in most cases) was allying with a father or father figure who had abused one or more of the children. This alliance was generally in relation to support and denial of the abuse. In taking up such a position the parents were then structurally in opposition to the alliance, which their child or children had with representatives of Social Services (SOC). This latter alliance was initiated through the abuse disclosure and was in the interests of protection and support. Unchecked, such oppositional relationships tended towards competition and escalation which rarely served the long-term interests of the young people or their families.

*Fig 3: The Complementary Co-Operative Diamond*



Unlike the symmetrical system outlined in figure 2, the Complementary system was brought forth when the child or children’s mother supported her children’s disclosure of abuse and further

sought the assistance and support of Social Services (SOC). In this scenario, father generally moved or was legally moved out of the family home. While this system is often cited as the most desirable situation for children disclosing abuse we had found that it was not without its difficulties. In our experience the gaze of suspicion almost inevitably fell on mother as questions were asked about her protection during the years or episodes of abuse. Also while the child or children had protected the family in keeping the abuse secret, they were now the responsible agents in the breakdown of the family. In spite of every effort to assure children that neither the abuse nor the aftermath of disclosure was their “fault” they nevertheless continuously voiced their sense of responsibility.

As I said previously, *Fifth Province* conversations attempted to elicit each participant’s viewpoint in an atmosphere of curiosity and acceptance. The eluding of fixed positions and pre-judgments facilitated in turn the co-creating of a space for different stories to emerge through circular questioning and questioning at the extremes. In this interweave of stories and viewpoints, it was our experience that the field of relating and conversing became less divisive and solutions emerged, almost spontaneously. The field became one of inter-acting, inter-viewing and inter-being as it were. (McCarthy 2004) There were no individual doers per se but a group coming into greater synergy in the generating of possible solutions not based on divisive cut-offs.

### **Current Activities and traces of the past**

These days I have become interested in the overlap of systemic social constructionist thinking and practice with spirituality. (McCarthy, 2004, 2003) Gianfranco and Luigi’s interviews always seemed to produce synergistic experiences and over the years as I became involved in meditation practices I began to see links. Gianfranco was often puzzled by this new-found practice on my part and he would frequently ask Nollaig if Imelda was ‘better’ yet! However, therapy conversations had often seemed meditative to me as clients and I moved towards greater levels of observation or witnessing in sessions. From this a deep connection with clients emerged. In this connection the magic of therapy happened. This was sometimes experienced within a field of relationships, where the whole truly became more than the sum of its parts. At other times it was in the one to one connection with an individual where the conversation took on aspects of a field where problems were dissolved and solutions co-created. From such ideas as, “the system knows how to self correct”, “the system is perfect” and “the system is autopoietic” came an idea which underpins my current practice, ‘in the Being we are free’. No matter how bad things appear there is always a part of us that ‘observes’ and knows how to ‘be’ without problems. Out of that part also emerges surprising and creative leaps. We may also call these times of ‘being’ (problem) free, unique outcomes or exceptions.

Following Milan’s genius for ‘showing’ systems in relationship through their model of questioning has left me to this day with a profound trust in the relationships between clients and myself in co-creating ways forward. Over my many years in the practice of therapy I have been struck time and time again with the field-like quality of the therapeutic relationship and by

the intelligence of this field. Therefore these days I like to talk about therapists co-creating in an intelligent field of infinite possibilities. When I remember Gianfranco's words about curiosity, I think that he too was referring in some way to such an intelligent field. He may not have called it that but it continually points me to possibilities which I could not dream of in advance. Consequently, his inspiration is like a tracing along the path leading me towards wonder at the resilience and wisdom of the human spirit.

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