

## **‘It helps to untangle really complicated situations: ‘AS IF’ supervision for working with complexity.**

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### **Abstract**

Working effectively with people with learning disabilities may well involve negotiating complex systems of relationships. Negotiating a network – particularly in the context of risk, anxiety and conflict – is a common task for clinical psychologists and systemic psychotherapists in Community Learning Disability Teams (CLDT’s). In this paper we describe our use of the ‘AS IF’ consultation exercise (Anderson, 1997) as a tool for addressing complexity and stuck-ness. We have employed ‘AS IF’ in peer supervision, workshops and training. This paper provides a brief guide to undertaking an ‘AS IF’ and then reports on a particular use of ‘AS IF’ in a peer supervision meeting. Following the meeting team members responded to an e-questionnaire aimed at capturing of the experiences and outcomes of an ‘AS IF’ process. The responses to the e-questionnaire are thematically presented as; *reducing stuck-ness and creating new possibilities; hearing the voice of the person with learning disabilities in complex systems; empathy and emotion; and speaking ‘as if’ to our colleagues.* ‘AS IF’s listening and speaking practices have enabled us to gain a deeper experience of how meanings are constructed in complex networks of relationships.

### **Introduction: The ‘AS IF’ Consultation**

Working effectively with people with learning disabilities can involve negotiating complex systems of relationships. This may include the person, their family members, friends, support workers in provider services and professionals from our own and other agencies in health and social care. This paper describes the use of ‘AS IF’ when working with such complexity. We have used this practice in peer

supervision, workshops and other trainings. We have employed it most often when there are more than three of us present. The process has been experienced as transformational however there is relatively little written on the practice. We describe what happens in an 'AS IF' and share our experiences of it.

The AS IF consultation (Anderson, 1997) offers a format for reflection that appears particularly adept at developing our understanding of and possibilities for action within complex relational systems. Anderson (1997) created 'AS IF' as part of her development of Collaborative Therapy. Collaborative Therapy draws upon metaphors of monologue and dialogue (Anderson, 1997). Dialogical theories of communication characterise our social worlds as being made up of a play of multiple voices. These voices are constitutive – that is constructing of - our social worlds (Baxter, 2006). The multiply voiced, world making nature of this view of communication transcends the mere sending and decoding of information characterised by what is known as the transmission model of communication (Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom & Siddiquee, 2011). It also suggests that what is created; selves; relationships; possibilities for action; are not synonymous with any one person's intentions. They are created through dialogue.

We have choices about the quality of communication we engage in. A monological style of communication treats others as if they were objects to be manipulated, observed, studied and acted upon. A dialogical style of communication treats others as if they are subjects and attempts to act with them rather than upon them (Pearce, 1994). Anderson's (1997) collaborative therapy accepts the premise of dialogical theories of communication and asks the therapist to engage in a dialogical style of communication with the client; to be open, curious, to support the fostering of a process that may create new meanings and new possibilities for action. The process of conversation and the generative nature of language itself create the possibility for new meanings to emerge.

*'it is not necessary to strive for a product; rather the shifts, transformations, and possibilities (i.e. in meanings, perspectives, actions) that emerge from the process are spontaneous and endless.'* (Anderson, 2010, p. 1)

'As IF' is designed to facilitate such a dialogical conversational space.

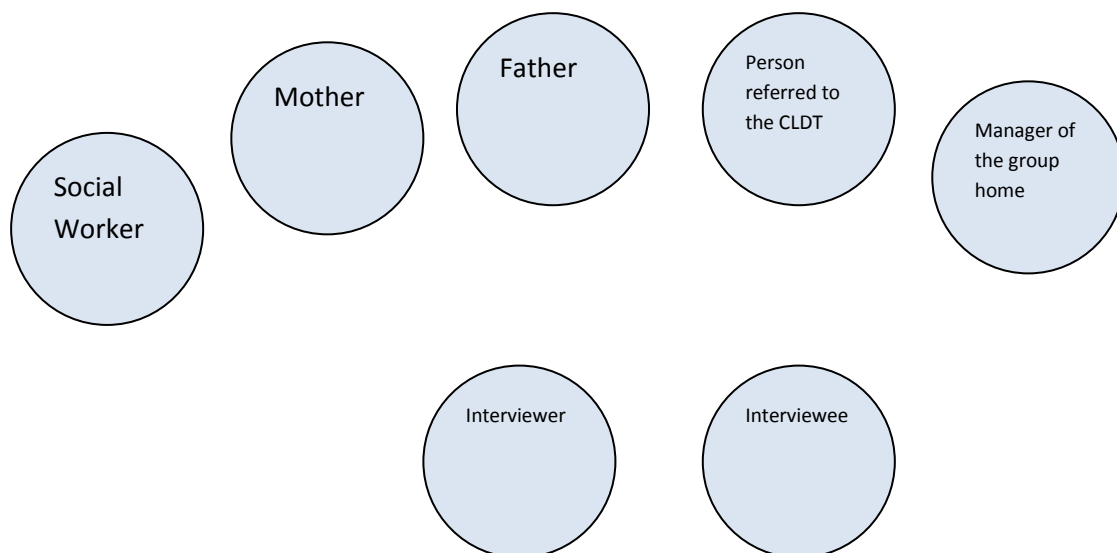
### **How is an AS IF undertaken?**

There is not one formula for undertaking an AS IF however, simply because it has been useful to us, we have often stayed quite close to the format described in Anderson (1997).

Someone brings a dilemma to the meeting. One person takes the role of interviewer. She interviews the person or persons with the dilemma. The interviewees are firstly asked to list the people they think are significant in the system

in which she is engaged. These are listed – usually written onto a flip chart. These will be the people that the other participants will be listening ‘as if’ they were those people. When this list has been populated to the satisfaction of the interviewees, the AS IF listeners are then chosen. If there is a large number of people in the meeting (such as in a training context) we may have groups or clusters of people listening as a single system member (e.g. three people listen as the person with learning disability referred to the service, three listen as the persons mother, three listen as a social worker, three as the interviewee and so on). If we have a small number we may have only one person listen in each position. AS IF listeners are asked to listen as the person and informed that they will be asked to feedback in the first person. The interview then begins.

Figure 1: As IF listeners attending to an interview



AS IF listeners listen to the interviewer speak with the person or persons with the dilemma. They listen silently, having been asked to hold onto any questions, ideas, comments they may have. We find this supports interviewees focus on elaborating a fuller, richer account of their dilemma. The interviewer asks questions that explore the dilemma of the interviewees and their ideas about others in the relational network. The interviewer asks questions that focus on the connections between the members of the system; including those assigned to being AS IF listeners. For example:

<b>Table 1: Guide interview questions</b>
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<i>‘What do we need to know in order to be useful in this conversation?’</i>
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<i>'Who is in conversation about this issue?'</i>
<i>'Who is most concerned about this issue?'</i>
<i>'Who sees this differently?'</i>
<i>'How have you responded to this so far, who do you talk to, what do you do and say?'</i>
<i>'What would you be most interested to hear about from the listeners?'</i>

These interviews generally last from 10 to 20 minutes and at this point the interviewer and interviewee(s) sit side by side and listen to feedback from the AS IF listeners.

In large workshops, groups listening from the same position may talk together first for a few minutes, choose a spokesperson and feedback. Alternatively they may talk as a group as the interviewee and interviewer listen in. In peer supervision with fewer people present it is more usual for us that there is one AS IF listener per system member. The AS IF listeners are reminded to feedback their experience of listening as a system member in the first person. The AS IF listener of the person referred might begin by reflecting that:

*'I didn't ask to be seen by a Psychologist, I wondered who had referred me, maybe I had done something wrong.'*

'AS IF' listeners are freed from the position of having to speak *about* others and temporarily speak as if they *were* them. We have found it's important that AS IF listeners do not speak directly to interviewees but rather to each other if they are clustered in a group or to the interviewer if they are single listeners. This provides the interviewee with the opportunity to focus on listening rather than on responding, verbally or otherwise, to the listener's feedback. Once the AS IF listeners have finished their feedback the interviewer and interviewee may then have a conversation about the experience of listening to the feedback. What were they most struck by? What interested them? Were there some 'shy' stories – voices, views, aspects of the situation that have not been a central part of conversations so far – that we caught a glimpse of? What possibilities might have emerged for the interviewee as she listened in on the AS IF listeners speak?

At the end of this discussion AS IF listeners step out of their positions and all are invited to discuss the process together<sup>1</sup>. At this point we step back into our

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<sup>1</sup> A common reflection at this point is listeners noting the surprise they felt as they heard others in different AS IF positions respond to the story of the interviewee. They point out differences in what was attended to, what meanings were made of this, emotions communicated, language used and stories told by the individual listeners. These disparate responses/feelings/moral orders and so on emerge from attending that the 'same'

professional positions and access the resources that these provide. Our professional understandings add to the knowledge we have already developed. Our use of AS IF does not involve taking a dogmatic non-expert position – the experiences, skills and theoretical frameworks we bring as professionals are also potential resources.

### **When might one undertake an AS IF?**

*Ah wad some power the giftie gie us*

*To see ourselves as others see us.*

*(Robert Burns)*

Like a good novel AS IF invites us to inhabit the world as another might do – to see it with fresh eyes. In particular we might consider using the AS IF exercise rather than, for example, a reflecting conversation (Andersen, 1987) when the following are in play:

*When the dilemma being discussed has many characters and we wish to include as many as we can.*

*When we wish to focus on a mapping of relations in a system.*

*Listeners feel they might be useful by purposefully taking up a new listening position.*

Anderson (1997) also has a pedagogical agenda and finds the exercise a way of supporting practitioners in noticing how knowing *too soon* can close down the potential richness of our stories, as well as an opportunity to experience the transformative power of conversation characterised by dialogue. In training and workshop settings we have used AS IF to deepen participant's experience of engagement with the stories that presenters or participants bring.

### **Experiences of participating in an AS IF Consultation.**

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story/information. In our workshops this allows participants to experience how persons in a network, the person, parents, support workers, health professionals, social care professionals, commissioners and so on may be acting out of differing meanings connected to their differing positions – whilst perhaps assuming others are making similar meanings – making the actions of others appear – well, interesting at best - with often problematic results.

One of us (Mark Haydon - Laurelut) devised a series of questions for the members of the current peer supervision group. The questions were either sent via email or in one case used in a face to face interview. The questions sought to gain information about the experiences of using this approach in a recent supervision session. The supervision had focused on work undertaken by two psychologists with a person with learning disability and the staff at their residential home.

<b>Table 2: Questions to AS IF participants</b>
How was it listening and hearing as another?
What did you notice about your 'inner conversations' as you listened?
What did you detect in how you connected emotionally to the material and to the people involved in the system?
How was it to speak as the other? What were your outer and inner conversations?
How did you find yourself speaking? With what tone, emphasis, focus and so on?
How were you affected by hearing yourself speak as another?
What did you think was created in this session – process and outcome?
What were the affordances and what were the constraints for you?
Does this method of supervision/consultation have a particular relevance to work in LD services? If so in what way?
Any other comments/suggestions/questions...

The responses gathered are presented here under several themed headings.

### ***Reducing Stuck-ness and creating new possibilities***

Stuck-ness (Beaudoin, 2008) names the experiences we might have of seeing no useful ways for us to act into a situation – we are stuck. One participant (interviewee) commented that she brought the material to the meeting with the hope of reducing Stuck-ness.

*‘it was with a sense of our own thought processes and ideas being exhausted, with a hope that this new group might help us to make sense and move forward.’*

What happened to Stuck-ness for this clinician?

*'It was "as if" I had actually had the chance to interview the different people in the system and find out what they "really" felt, needed and wanted, and this made me feel more in touch with them, less anxious about them and somehow freer to allow the forthcoming work to flow, rather than feeling that we need to be very much in control of it.'*

'AS IF' participants reflected on how situations experienced as stuck came to be experienced differently as new meanings, possibilities and plans for action were created.

*'You create more possibilities – a different narrative or explanation of what's going on – I felt they (the AS IF interviewees) went away with ideas about what they might do.'*

*'My confidence in managing the upcoming meeting with the team (from a provider service) changed, as I became clearer in my thinking through hearing the AS IF listeners feedback'.*

And also:

*'We work in particularly complicated systems in learning disability... we work with people who are often in residential services or have several people supporting them. Because of the way we work it (AS IF) helps to untangle really complicated situations...'*

Listening from a new position in the system can lead to a richer understanding of complex system patterns. The quote below illustrates the constellations of influences in complex systems and how 'AS IF' may help in making them visible and therefore more available for reflection, scrutiny and reflective action. One participant reflects on network pressures for certain kinds of input from her – in this case to work individually with the referred person.

*'There are big pressures and expectations to do so, by carers, by managers, by teams. This pressure may lead us to feel a bit press ganged into continuing with an approach'*

We can make visible and explore these influences in a safe environment.

***Hearing the voice of the person with learning disabilities in complex systems***

A concern about systemic practice in general is that it may lose sight of the individual<sup>2</sup>; our experience of AS IF has been contrary. Hearing about the system - including ourselves and others perceptions of us – as well as the person - led us to a deeper understanding of the person as well as the wider network. Our understanding(s) of the person with learning disability and the way in which their voice is heard is, after all, being constructed in communication.

*'I was able to gain a sense of the powerlessness the person must be feeling in the system, and just to have a much more rounded sense of her.'*

*'People don't always have a voice – if your thinking about the person... work(ing) with several different agencies can get very messy – voices can be lost... ('AS IF' is) a way of giving people a voice.'*

### **Empathy & Emotion**

In the listener position participants gained a new understanding of the person and their relationship to others in the wider system. Participants also heard about how they - as Psychologists and Psychotherapists - might be experienced. Listening as a person who receives services is to experience professional actions from a novel perspective.

*'I was listening as if I was a woman with a learning disability who was thought to be in need of help by my staff at a service. I found it quite emotive to try to place myself in the shoes of this person. .. and imagine how she felt having this psychologist coming to visit her... 'I' felt confused by who this person was, what she wanted from me... I was in trouble of some kind, and perhaps that there was something wrong with me.'*

To listen and speak as another can be a powerful experience. The quote below is from an interviewee, reflecting on being interviewed and then on listening to the AS IF listeners feedback their experiences.

*'It was helpful to be questioned about the situation, and for issues and concerns to be drawn out, particularly given that my colleague was also present. However, the experience of subsequently hearing members of the supervision group speak "as if" they were members of the network was somehow transformational. Even though I had tried to imagine how different people might be experiencing the dilemmas (and some of what supervision group members said echoed my own conclusions) there were other aspects of what people said that I had not thought of. It reminds me of the "Johari window" and the parts of ourselves that we cannot see but others can.'*

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<sup>2</sup> See Rivett & Street (2009) chapter 12 for a corrective to this view.



## ***Speaking 'as if' to our colleagues***

Listeners expressed concern for colleagues who, as interviewees, were hearing them speak from their AS IF positions.

*'I was also aware that it was my colleagues who I was directing this at, and this led to dilemmas about what I should feedback. It could have been experienced as criticising (of colleagues interviewed).*

This dilemma has added complexity as the listener is wondering how she is being heard. Heard as a colleague; heard as speaking from another's position; heard as both...?

*'Because they were listening to me as a fellow psychologist, and trying to imagine (them) listening to me as the client.'*

Interviewees were cogniscent of this issue of criticism and vulnerability.

*'Hearing the AS IF listeners speak was a fascinating experience. Not only because they were echoing what I had hypothesised (without me directly sharing my hypothesis) but that they were able to say things that in other environments I might have felt I needed to defend myself against, in a way that I was able to hear calmly and without feeling criticised.'*

## **Conclusion: A Social Laboratory**

Psychologists and Systemic Psychotherapists are expected to work with the most complex referrals to CLDT's and the 'AS IF' consultation method offers a valuable tool in this context. We have found this practice to be useful in a variety of ways. Stuck-ness has been reduced as we have an opportunity to explore the relational context of our work in a safe setting where new hypotheses may be generated. AS IF interviewees have experienced their 'inner conversations' as 'outer conversations' voiced by colleagues in the room. Perspectives on our actions become available that may otherwise remain obscured and we have a richer picture of the positions of others. We are reminded that our understandings are always partial.<sup>3</sup> Any person, event, moment or relationship at which we choose to punctuate as a beginning, a cause, a problem, is just that - a choice. This choice has consequences for our abilities - how we might feel, how we might think, how we might act and the stories we can tell about our work. Our interpretations of complex systems are moral choices. AS IF can be thought of as a kind of social laboratory where there is the

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<sup>3</sup> And of course remain partial following an As If.

possibility of gaining a deeper understanding of how meanings are being constructed in communication.

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