Name It: Notes on the theory and orientation to the topic
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 "Naming It" should really be called, Bringing the Problem into the Room. It is basically about taking the patterns and issues that the therapist sees, as we worked on in "Seeing It", and finding a way to make them a working conversation with the patient or family. Two of the main tasks for any family therapist (FT) are to **make the invisible visible**, and to **say the unsayable.** The way we bring the problem into the room (BTPITR) is how we accomplish those goals.

BTPITR is mainly about **developing and solidifying your view of the problem, based mostly on how you talk about it**. By beginning to find a way to talk about what you see, and make it available and comfortable to the family, you both share and develop your view. It doesn't do any good to see it if it cannot be discussed and worked on directly with the family. In general **SFT is a very transparent therapy** and we work out in the open; BTPITR is part of that, as we often share our observations with the family in a way that makes them common property.

Imagine you are seeing a family where the mother is obviously very close to the 10 year old only child, and the father is quite left out and marginal. You see it right away, in setting up the first session and then getting the family in: in the first session the mother sits with the boy in her lap and the father sits 2 chairs away looking uncomfortable and disengaged. What are 5 or 6 ways that you might bring that problem into the room fairly quickly, without scaring them? How do you share your observation in a way that makes it able to be discussed with the family? In a way that **increases your understanding of the pattern?**

 Find multiple ways to name it – at least 5 – to remind yourself that there are **many different ways and no "right" ones**. This also gives you a chance to think about whether you tend to use excessive gentleness or sarcasm or aggression.
Do the same exercise with the following scenarios:

> A very angry father that everyone is scared of
> Kids ignoring their parents' directives
> One child looking angry and dropped out
> One child sucking up to you and/or a parent a lot

Two kids dropped out in cahoots, whispering to each other
A mom that looks defeated and depressed and can't take charge
Mom and dad clearly alienated from each other, not communicating
One or both parents that are clearly not wanting to be there

The goal is to bring the problem into the room in a way that the family can **understand, accept and deal with**. Too soon, too strong, too weak, too judgmental, too pathologizing, too bland –all of these are mistakes. Notice the direction of your mistakes clearly and practice until it feels easy and comes naturally.

The most useful basic voice in one of curiosity, observation, neutrality; it gives you a chance to see how the family deals with the input, how defensive, how anxious or hostile, and to fit your BTPITR to them. "I notice he's not doing what you say", "She feels free to be harsh with you – is that normal, or is she taking advantage of being here?" "You've asked her 3 nice questions and gotten nothing – what's going on?" are non-judgmental interventions that give you a lot of data about how to proceed.

We almost always enter in a way that is supportive of the parent(s) and enter through them, to form and build an alliance with them. Parents get the benefit of the doubt. So we are more apt to say, "She's ignoring you – why is that?" than to say "You can't get her to do anything, can you?" You can btpitr without insulting anyone or forcing a showdown. There may need to be a showdown, but you have to have some relationship with them for that; it's not where you start. There are plenty of ways to btpitr that don't alienate, and that can actually strengthen joining and relationship.

Part of the process of naming the pattern is spelling it out, which is usually done via **TRACKING**. Tracking means **verbally following a behavioral sequence, in the room or out of the room**. In the room: "So if you ask him again, will he do it?" M: No, probably not. "And what do you do then?" M: I give up. "And what does he do then?" OR: "I notice you don't ask your husband to help here – what would happen if you did?" M: He wouldn't help, he never does. "And what do you do when he doesn't help?" M: I just go back to doing it myself. "Do you say anything to him about it?" M: No. "If you did?" M: I can't ask him, I'm afraid of him. (This is where one might do an enactment, actively altering the sequence in the room; but **tracking is a way of seeing the sequence without doing an enactment if you're not ready to or they couldn't manage it at all**.)

TRACKING, <u>Out of the room (i.e., a behavior you have heard about but haven't seen directly):</u> "So what happens when you tell him to go to bed?" He ignores me. "And what do you do then?" I guess I just give up. "And then what happens?" He just watches TV til he falls asleep. "And then?" I carry him up to bed. "And the next night? Is anything different?" No – same deal every night. It drives me crazy!

The basic process of tracking is delightfully simple: the question "and then?" until you see the end of the loop, or it starts to recur. One of the nice things about tracking is that it **indirectly shows the parent that they are in a loop, having the same problem over and over; suggests their part in maintaining it; and it highlights the pattern in much the same way that btpitr verbally does**. Indeed tracking often allows the parent to be the one that names the pattern, and their frustration over it, which allows you to join them in their frustration and readiness to do something. But do not allow tracking to become a passive process where you avoid btpitr verbally and clearly; don't hide behind tracking and not tackle the problem directly. Tracking should set the stage for btpitr, not replace it.

Tracking also allows you to **show the systemic properties of what the family often sees as an individual problem.** This family presents with the belief that Bobby not doing the dishes is a sign of his laziness or rebellion; tracking it shows a different reality that they may be able to start to get.
Th: So what happens when he doesn't do the dishes? What do you 2 say?
M: Nothing – he says he'll do them later, but he doesn't.
Th: And you wouldn't challenge that and say, 'Do them now'?
M: No – he just talks back.
Th: Dad, Where are you in this sequence?
F: I just watch it like a train wreck.
Th: Why wouldn't you step in and help your wife?
F: If I try to help she gets mad at <u>me.</u>
Th: Interesting – she protects him instead of you, yes? So to avoid that you let the train wreck happen. He's trained the whole family to let this go down over and over?
F: What can I do? It's a bind.
Th: So this is amazing: this little 9 year old has taught you 2 capable people to feel totally inadequate about a normal request of family life? How did he get so strong and powerful?
M: Well, he has a temper, like his father, and I hate to get him going.

Th: So you kind of live in fear of these tempers, and it makes you give up on a healthy, normal request where you need help, and it keeps you from getting help from your husband?
M: Yes, I guess so.
Th: (to F) And you stand back and let your wife feel bad, but you feel bad too – unable to get your son to do a normal task – and you unintentionally teach him to blow off the 2 most important people in his life.
F: Yeah, I guess that's true.
Th: So it's really a family affair – everyone is playing a part to perfection.

This sequence might very well lead to an enactment, once you are firmly allied with the parents about the necessity of changing this "outrageous" (your word) treatment of his parents; but for a start the tracking process gets the problem into the room nicely. **Tracking assumes there is a repetitive pattern with a recursive end point.** Don't drop tracking until that loop is clear, or you have seen this issue to be a one-time non-recursive event that they have resources to handle, which sometimes happens.

Developmental Themes

The process of btpitr also involves bringing an eye to developmental issues, which are always an issue to be considered. One of the things you want to name as you go is **where people are developmentally, whether they are on track, and how parents see the process.**

"Has she always had problems in school, or is this new? What do you think is the problem?"

"What's your assessment of Tom's ability – do you think he is trying and just in over his head? Or is he not trying, best you can tell?"

"Dad, you clearly shy away from pushing Billy – what's your thinking about that?" "Mom, do you agree with your husband's idea?"

"Sarah seems really, really shy – is that true? Is she always this shy, or is it about me and a new place? Has she always been that way? Are either of you 2 very shy in new situations?"

You often frame developmental questions in normal terms to start: stubborn instead of oppositional, shy instead of Asperger's, timid about her answers instead of cognitively overwhelmed. There is time to get more precise, and you often need to learn the family's sensitivity to these variables – parents are often extremely protective of their kids' weak spots, and often have a very protective cover story that needs to be unwound slowly, since they may have no defenses but denial for what is obvious to you, and painful to them.

So btpitr includes tracking developmental problems, and those come in 2 types: individual and family. Included in the handout are some pages about family developmental themes, and how family development proceeds, and it is important to see it and name it as part of the larger picture: "It sounds like you guys are still trying to get your own relationship established, in the middle of everything else that's going on"; or, "It looks to me like you're mourning the loss of your kids as they leave home – am I right?" Individual child developmental variables, as mentioned above, are also important to name. We always have to think in a **developmental context** to make sense of things, and it **should be brought into the room directly and be part of the conversation. It is one of the ways we teach families to think about themselves sensibly and in context;** families are often quite unaware of the developmental context they are in. You will often blend the developmental with the larger systemic pattern, as well, in a question like, "Does he not know how hard you are working to run this family, with all that is going on? Or does he just not feel like he should have to help?"

Not everything has to be named, and certainly not right away, but you want to practice moving fairly quickly from seeing a pattern to naming it. Naming things is a way of joining the family in the therapeutic undertaking, with statements like   "here's what I see – am I right?"
                              "help me understand why he does that"
                              "why does he think you'll put up with that?"
Parents are often very relieved to have the problem(s) named in a direct but non-threatening way. It tells them you are on the job, you get the issues, and will not attack about those issues, but make them more comfortable to work with – even though the work itself sometimes gets uncomfortable.
It's not a one-time thing, just at the start. **Naming things as they happen will be a part of the ongoing work, and will always help you to keep the problem in the room, visible and discussable.** It is also an ongoing skill that allows you to deal with surprises as they come along, by getting in the

habit of naming them as they come up, thereby undermining the family patterns that don't get named but control the action. "Wow, did I just hear what I thought I did?" "Did you guys know that she has been sneaking out, or is she zapping you with a new fact?" Etc., etc. Naming it, finally, reminds people how we are different: <u>we (therapists) play by our own rules, and break family rules (nicely)</u> whenever we need to, in the service of honest communication. The therapist's skill at naming things as they happen is a very important contribution to the family, also, because it gives other people permission to do the same. So much **family pathology thrives on secrecy and denial** that if we can change a culture to make room for honest observations and clear statements we have contributed a major change to family functioning. Getting good at naming things as you see them in a way that does not cause undue defensiveness but creates a more open and honest family culture is a significant skill. And it is often – not always – an important precedent to the next stage: changing the pattern.

Some other issues we will deal with:
1) Naming It is often where you encounter major defensiveness from the family – they don't want to see it, can't stand to face it, have a million reasons why it is not what it seems. Working with that defensiveness is very important. It doesn't work to just break it down and force your theme through – they'll exclude you or make you wrong. The task is to accept and work with their defensiveness and reframe it positively, so that they can see that your point is not "what's wrong with you and your family", but "how things have gotten out of kilter, as you've tried to manage this problem." **Remember that most problems are solutions gone wrong**: mom is overinvolved because she cares too much and wants the best for her kids; dad is tense and angry because he wants to see the kids succeed but doesn't know anything but what his father did; a boy cheats because he can't bear to have his parents see him fail. Helping people see things in that light can make them much more amenable to naming it. **Finding the way to name it that engages them is crucial – but it must be honest and real.** You can't make up a way of looking at the problem that isn't real to make them comfortable.
2) Establishing the pattern as a useful, shared focus is important, and you will usually have to come back to it many times. **Do not fear repetition: it is the soul of change.** People don't get a pattern and change it on just one iteration; they get closer to it and more comfortable with it, but pattern change is difficult and will come up

over and over. The better you have named and addressed the problem, the better the family will be at getting it quickly as it surfaces. When you hear one or more of them say, "I'm doing it again!" or, "Dad, you're doing your pattern again", you know it's working.

3) Taking responsibility for one's pattern is a really important process in therapy. It helps people do this if you are clear, and they can learn, that **responsibility has nothing to do with fault or blame.** Taking responsibility for your part of the pattern means **connecting the dots**: being able to track and make sense of your contribution to the dysfunction or tangle. Blame sounds like, "So I guess I screwed everybody up by trying too hard, and it's my fault you guys are a mess." Responsibility sounds like, "I can see that I tried too hard to make you guys be who I thought you should be, and that kept me from learning who you really are. I did it for a good reason, but it wasn't good for you, and I need to learn to do it differently." Blame is built around shame and failure; responsibility is built around accepting your mistakes honestly and moving to change them.

4) Sometimes naming something is itself a healing operation. That is, sometimes the very act of a parent or child "getting" what you are naming, and working with it, has a huge impact. Example: If a father can come to see that he has been using his anger to avoid feeling things and keep the kids away from him, his merely seeing that and accepting it is a huge step forward. This is one of several reasons that we generally name things in a positive, appreciative way that encourages people to embrace them and see them as having a purpose, rather than seeing them as criticism. Criticism is inherently disempowering, and people accordingly duck it the best they can. The best naming of things seldom sounds like a criticism.