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Inventing Hypotheses

Alice laughed

“There’s no use trying,” she said.

“One can’t believe impossible things.”

“I dare say you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen.

“When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day.

*Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things
before breakfast. There goes the shawl again.”*

Lewis Carroll, “Through the Looking Glass”

Hypotheses are assumptions, ideas, concepts, prejudices and insinuations about relationships, causes, effects, developments, people, objects and situations.

Hypotheses arouse our curiosity, encourage responses, i.e. encourage us to question, confirm and refute things.

There is nothing particularly special about putting forward hypotheses; they are part and parcel of our daily lives. We cannot avoid creating them. And ... there are no actions without hypotheses.

The range and nature of the hypotheses, which come to mind, is closely connected to our biography, our culture, and our daily experiences, but also to the theoretical models we have adopted.

Nevertheless, we are capable of influencing the direction of our hypotheses by consciously endeavouring to come up with new ideas, concepts and hypotheses: with regard to the past/the future, problems/solutions, deficits/resources, etc.

In the field of systemic work, the creation of hypotheses is a methodical tool for enlarging everyone’s scope for action. The more hypotheses, the more perspectives, the more options for actions

The best way to deal with hypotheses is in an experimental and playful way: “Come up with at least 7 (different) hypotheses!”

Consciously formed hypotheses do not need to be valid for a long period of time.

When we consciously invent hypotheses, we should ensure that many of them are solution-focused, resource-oriented and respectful – and some of them are somewhat unusual (absurd, unfounded or strange).

Thus, in this sense, “correct” hypotheses are *useful* rather than being true. By testing them out in a respectful way, one discovers where they might prove to be of real use.

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Mind Jogging

Mind jogging, also called “the circle” is a very simple, straightforward and time-effective method of team consultation: myriad hypotheses are created and suggestions or compliments are made. After clarification of the client’s questions and various of comments, an initial formulation for responses should be specified .

Hypotheses may be turned into causes and reasons (“Why is the situation like this?” “How could this possibly happen?”), but they can also have an effect on possible future developments (“How may the young person be living in two years’ time?”).

Formulation: “A hypothesis might be ...”

Suggestions refer to the clients’ range of responses...

Formulation: “I would advise you to ...”

‘Ideas which worsen the situation’ are ideas which aggravate the whole situation and make it more difficult to organize than is normally the case: “It can only get worse!”).

Formulation: “You might aggravate the matter/ situation by...”

Compliments may be made to both colleagues and clients reporting on a success story, a disaster or a routine matter. The idea and the reason for making a compliment may come from the client or from a member of the team.

Formulation: “I would like to compliment you on the fact that...”

Everyone should be given the chance to answer in turn (the exertion of obvious ‘gentle pressure’ is not allowed). Anyone who does not want to answer, simply says, “Next one.” Previous ideas may be mentioned again – as far as possible in one’s own words – without any direct connection.

Statements should be addressed to the facilitator to ensure that the client does not have to respond – and your colleagues do not need to respond to the client. If necessary, the client may sit with his or her back to the team.

Contributions are not commented on, discussed or evaluated.

Quantity instead of quality /diversity instead of exclusivity: here the aim is to come up with as many different ideas as possible (i.e. there is no such thing as a “correct” answer) in order to have a wide range of ideas: the best thing is for the participants to try to make as many different, contradictory but also absurd and / or funny contributions as possible.

The ‘training’ element is the stamina which is built up: Engaging in several rounds is recommended, a little longer than planned and then “three more” contributions at the end.

If a client doesn’t like an idea, it is simply discarded.

cf. Johannes Herwig-Lempp (2009), Ressourcenorientierte Teamarbeit – Systemische Praxis der Kollegialen Beratung, 2. Aufl., Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht)



The Use of Inventing Hypotheses

We are constantly creating hypotheses and usually we are completely oblivious to the process. However, it is possible to consciously create hypotheses and to reflect upon them; in order to invent new ideas, to be better prepared for unexpected situations, to arouse more curiosity and intensify excitement, and to allay fears in order to guarantee a greater range of response.

Prior to making initial contact with someone, we try to come up with as many different hypotheses as possible. We consider with whom we are dealing, why he/she is coming to us, and how the relationship might develop.

Prior to a conversation, appointment, an outing, we try to come up with as many hypotheses as possible concerning how things will proceed.

In the course of a conversation, we take turns with our partner to come up with as many hypotheses as possible concerning a specific question.

In teams, we ask our colleagues to put forward as many hypotheses as possible about a particular question: to find possible reasons for a particular situation, possible intentions behind a certain type of behaviour, potential developments ...

A Few More Suggestions:

Try to create as many hypotheses as possible (and even when you appear to have run out of ideas, try to find 'three' more) – “mind jogging” builds up your stamina.

Ensure that you come up with a wide range of hypotheses and allow yourselves to come up with unusual and unexpected hypotheses.

If you are alone, it may help to make a quick note of them.

Once you have collected your ideas, you might ask yourselves, for example:

- Which hypotheses do I like most?
- Which hypotheses do I want to pay special attention to?
- Which hypotheses do we want to discuss?
- Which hypotheses can we work best with?

“Not to say hypothesis, still less theory, but rather way of thinking.” (J 2093)

“To invent new errors.” (L 886)

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799)

