JOINING WITH ALL MEMBERS OF A FAMILY SYSTEM: THE RHETORIC OF ANTILOGIC IN FAMILY THERAPY DIALOGUE*

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ABSTRACT: Family therapists face a significant rhetorical challenge in working with families that disagree about the problematic life-situation which brought them to therapy. Therapists must find a way to join with disagreeing family members and then find a way to engage in a therapeutically useful conversation with them. Thus, they must deal resourcefully with contradictions. This article explores the ways that the Sophistic rhetorical concept of antilogic may be employed in helping therapists join and then engage in a therapeutically useful conversation with families who hold contradictory views concerning the problem that brought them to therapy.

KEY WORDS: family therapy; communication; rhetoric; antilogic.

Although little attention has been focused on the rhetorical aspects of family therapy, recently several writers have specifically named and addressed rhetorical concepts that are employed in family therapy dialogue. Bertram (1993) focuses on the enthymeme as a useful rhetorical process in family therapy dialogue. Bertram, Hale, and Frusha (1993) discuss the usage of several rhetorical devices such as syncrisis and the parastasis catalogue in family therapy conversations and also mention how differing views of persuasive intention-

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ality will shape the ways that therapists situate themselves rhetorically with families. Chenail (Rambo, Heath, & Chenail, 1993) specifically mentions four types of rhetorical devices, without labeling them as rhetorical. The fact that the rhetorical aspects of family therapy dialogue have not been widely explored and discussed is puzzling for two reasons: First, the field has embraced metaphors of communication, language, and narrative which all seem implicitly to invite an exploration of the rhetorical aspects of family therapy conversations, and, second, family therapists seemingly face a more difficult rhetorical task than do politicians, editorial writers, and others that are more traditionally identified with rhetorical activity. For example, politicians only interested in swaying the majority to win an election direct a message calculated to appeal to majority opinion. Editorial writers interested in persuading the reader that their views are the “correct” ones are not interested in talking about the issues in a way that will receive acceptance by all readers, regardless of their political stance on the issues.

Systemic family therapists, on the other hand, do not approach therapy from the standpoint that they have a correct view of the family’s problem that they are going to persuade the family members to believe. They also face the task of not just trying to hear the privileged story, but of hearing the stories of each participant in the session. Each family member’s story is considered important and a concerted effort is made to join with each family member.

Sometimes, hearing multiple perspectives concerning the problematic life-situation that brought a family to therapy can provide a number of challenges which are not present in the more traditional rhetorical situations mentioned above. For example, how does a therapist talk to one family member about that family member’s particular view of the problem without simultaneously alienating another family member? How does a family therapist find a language for talking about the problematic life-situation in a way that addresses the concerns of all? Once having joined, how is a family therapist able to enter a therapeutic discussion with the family members without alienating some? All of these are rhetorical issues surrounding the family therapy joining process that have heretofore not been addressed from a rhetorical perspective. Further, these questions do not just address the process of joining, but also how therapists use language as a tool to bring about change.

In this article the ancient rhetorical concept known as antilogic is offered as a process description of the rhetorical aspects of joining and