

# Relationship overviews



Engaging Stimulating Facilitating

# My mission

To show how the use of figures and objects can contribute to constructive dialogue about relationships

Why?

I found them extremely useful wherever I worked  
Many counsellors and therapists don't consider them

Some do, but they do not talk or write about them

No one is considering how and why they contribute

There is a lack of 'tools' suitable for this work

# What is a relationship overview?

An arrangement of figures and objects that show the people in a person's life

A form of professional communication that is very effective in engaging people and facilitating dialogue about relationships

It transcends theoretical barriers and can be employed with children, adults, families and groups

# The first figures in family therapy

Symbolic figure placement techniques  
(Kuethe)

Family sculpting, developed at the  
Boston Family Institute (Duhl, Kantor,  
Duhl)

Norwegian pioneer: David Kvebæk at  
Modum Bad



# All kinds of figures and objects



# Kvebæks sculpture test

Used wooden figures to demonstrate family dynamics to his colleagues

Began using them in family sessions

Object relations theory - A visualisation of a person's inner reality

Used as an assessment and research instrument (Cromwell, Solem, Nøvik, Vanvik, Eckblad, Gehring)

Available from Julie Thorsheim in USA



# Play of Life

Dr Carlos Raimundo in Australia

'Le petit psychodrama'

A set of Playmobil figures

A variety of methods within-line  
training programs

Digital version

John Barton's - Small figures in  
counselling and psychotherapy



# Family Dialogue Set

Figures in systemic therapy

Problem systems approach  
(Goolishian & Anderson)

Including other people actively  
involved in defining a problem

Required more differentiated figures

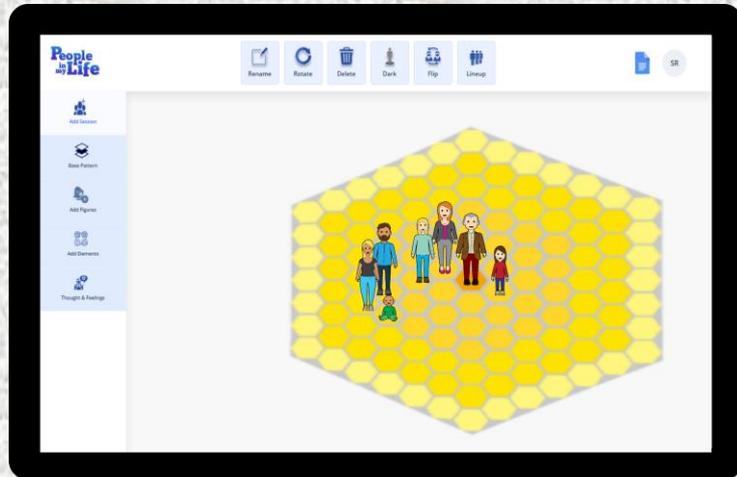
Used Playmobil placed on boards

Focus on dialogue and narrative



# People in my Life

More comprehensive  
Figure set and  
Digital app (soon)



# Relationship Overviews and Dialogue

Areas of dialogue  
Influences on  
conversation





# Dialogue

Dialogue is a form of conversation where two or more people exchange information, opinions and differences in points of view.

The various implications, pros and cons, are aired, with the intention of gaining better understanding and closer agreement

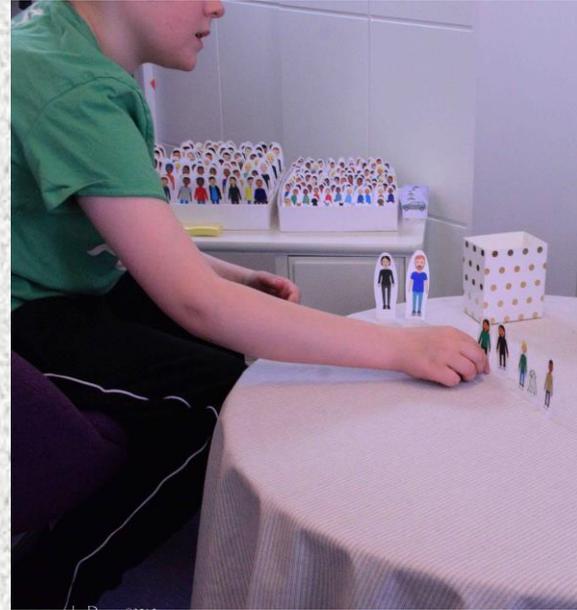
Moving from monologue to dialogue is central to systemic approaches

The inner ring:  
**Areas of dialogue**

---



# Choosing Arranging Surveying



Dialogues around choosing and placing figures to form a relationship overview



As soon as someone chooses their own figure they can begin by talking about how they see themselves  
When they choose figures for other people they can talk about the way they get on with them and with each other – how they stand together



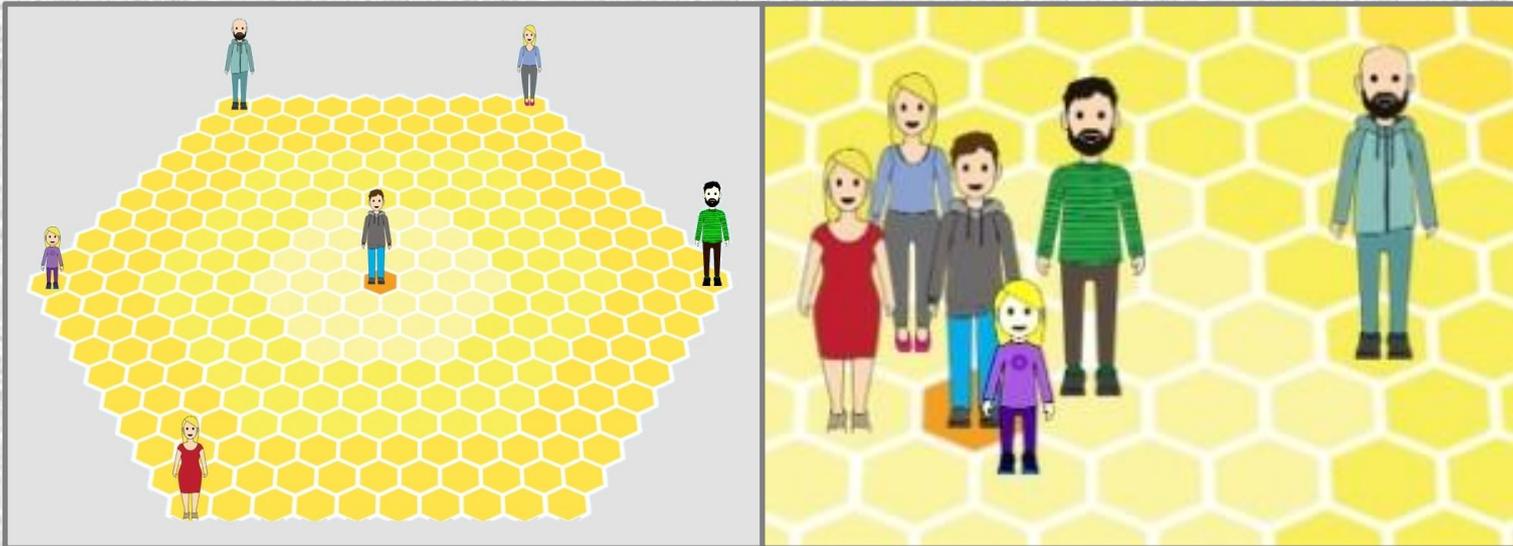
Surveying the whole arrangement and gaining an elevated perspective with impressions of how things are related to each other – distances and groupings

Brings a sense of order to a 'chaotic' situation

Identifying resources that have been overlooked

# Comparing

Re-arranging the figures and to compare alternative aspects of the situation



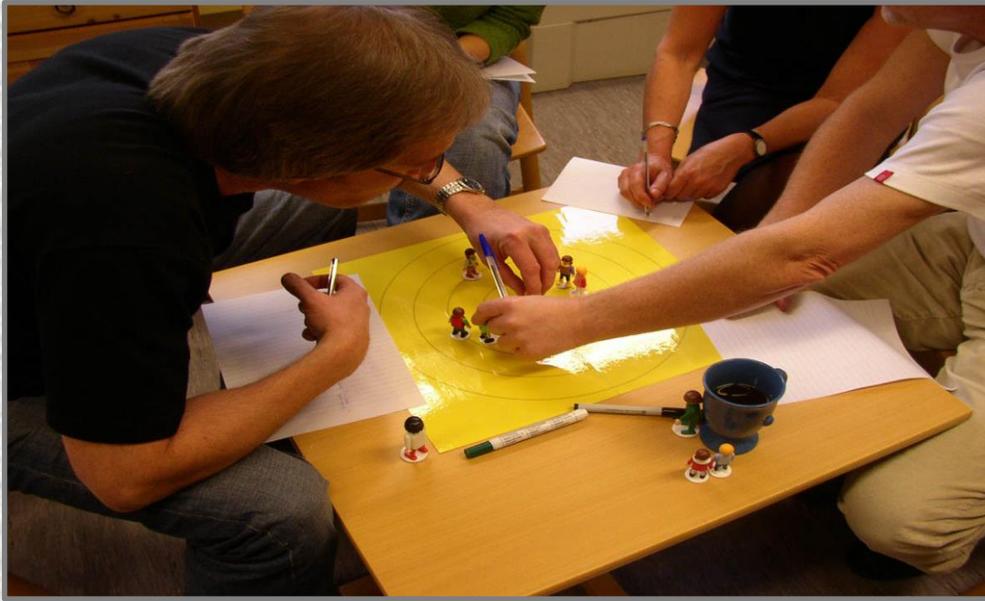
How things look **now** and how they appeared **then**

How I **hope** things will turn out and how I am **worried** they will turn out. What will make a difference?

**My** perspective and **your** perspective - family members compare and discuss

How I **think** s/he sees these things and how s/he sees things

On a good day and on a bad day



Visual comparisons help people gain fresh insight

They help people to see another person's point of view

They are a rich source for conversations about alternative understanding and the possibility for change

# Exploring

Family generation map – genogram

Social network chart

Attitudes

Emotional awareness

Mentalising

Joint decision making



Genogram



Social network chart



Placing figures on a line from 'Very Little' to 'Very Much'



Emotional awareness



I have messed up and they are all really angry with me

It wasn't my fault. I don't care. We have insurance.

Sad, guilty, ashamed

Tense, shakey, headache

The day Emma put a dent in the new car

How I think s/he thinks and feels - mentalising



Joint decision making

## Playing out

Illustrating an incident and discussing how it was experienced by the people involved

Setting out a scene where a problem has disappeared, talking about what has changed, and how it was possible to arrive here (solution-focus)

Playing out the narrative of an externalised problem and how to regain control



Defeating an externalised problem



Solution focus



Back in the playground

# Preparing

What to do and how to do it - what changes to make and what can empower them

How to deal with the results of changes

When and how quickly to make changes.

Supports and hinderances. What are the risks

Awareness of strengths and influence, together with the people around them

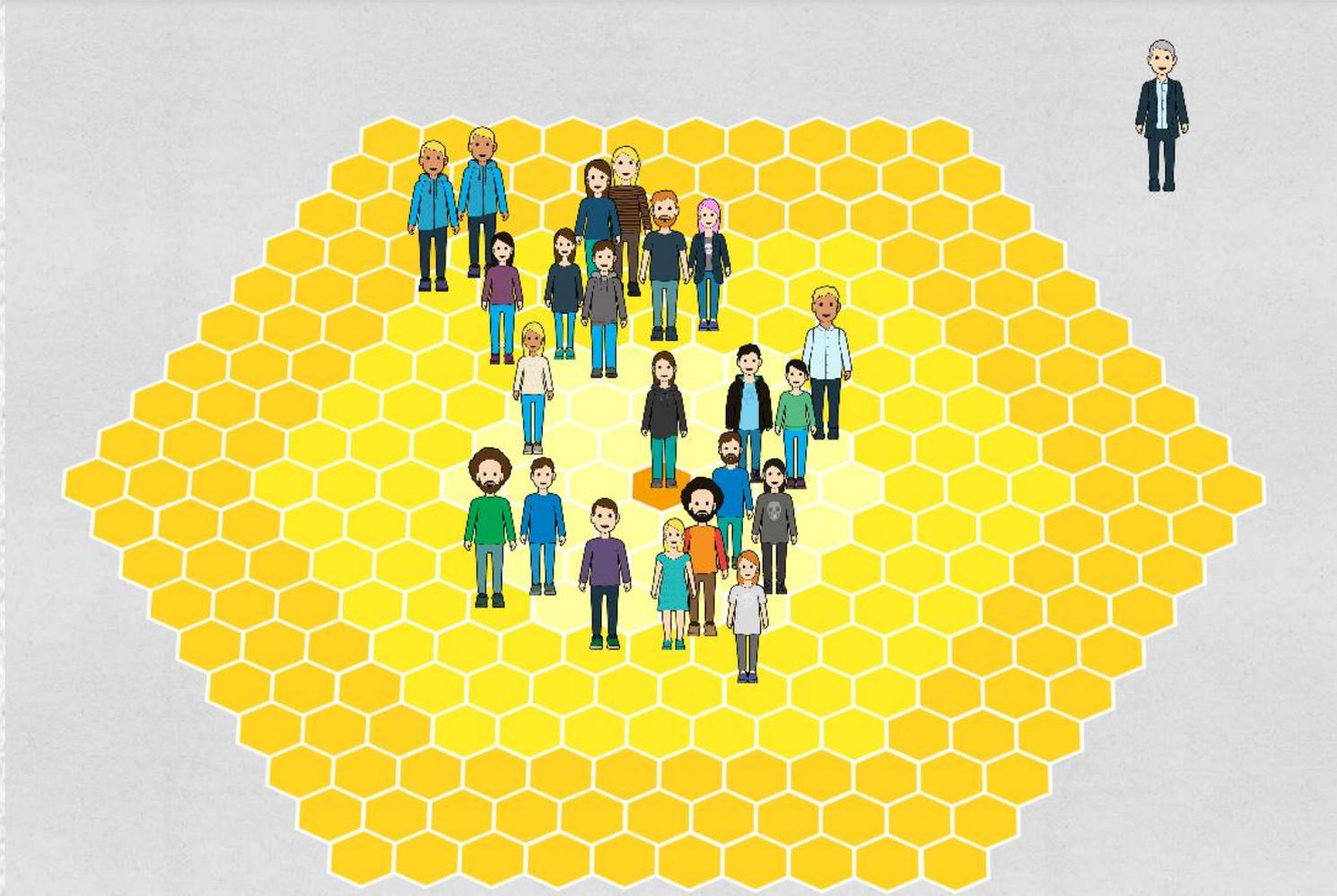


# Re-viewing

Reconsidered relationship overviews in the light of new information

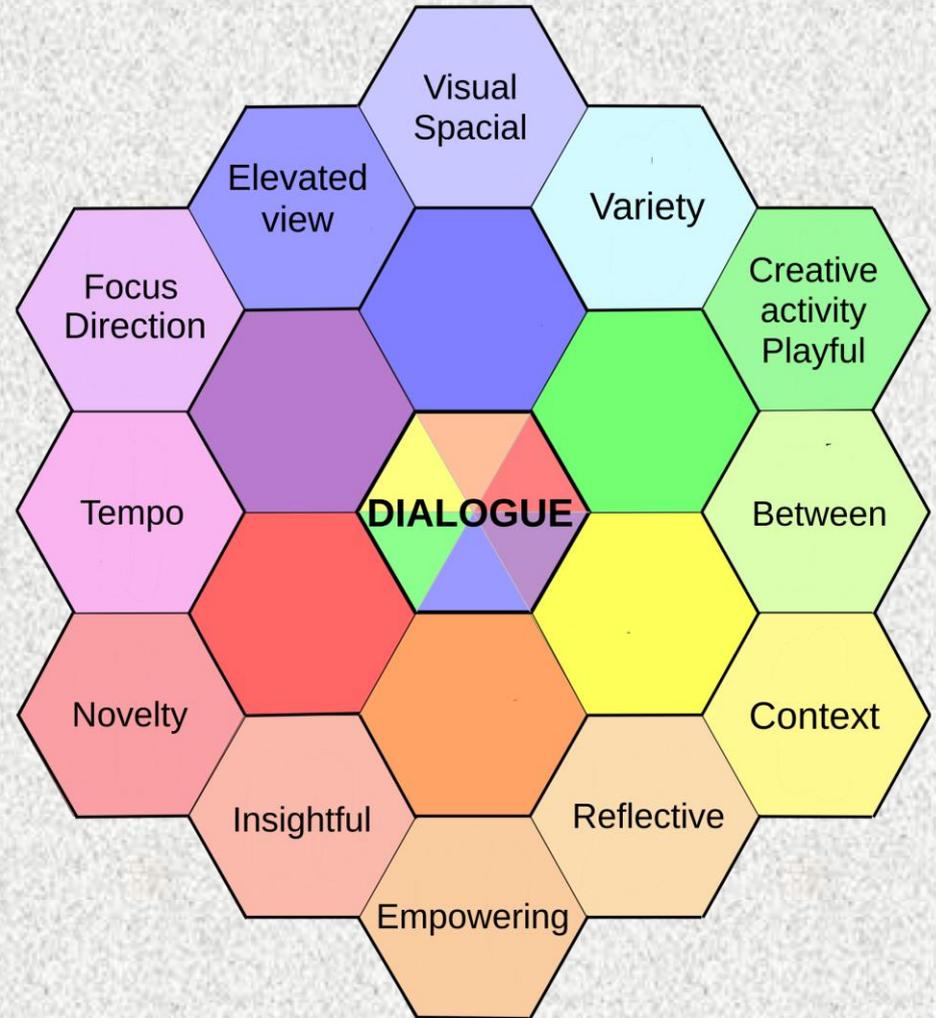
Discussing what aspects of the situation to accept as they are and which ones need to change.

Setting out a relationship overview at a later date and discussing how things have changed



The outer ring:  
**Influences**

---

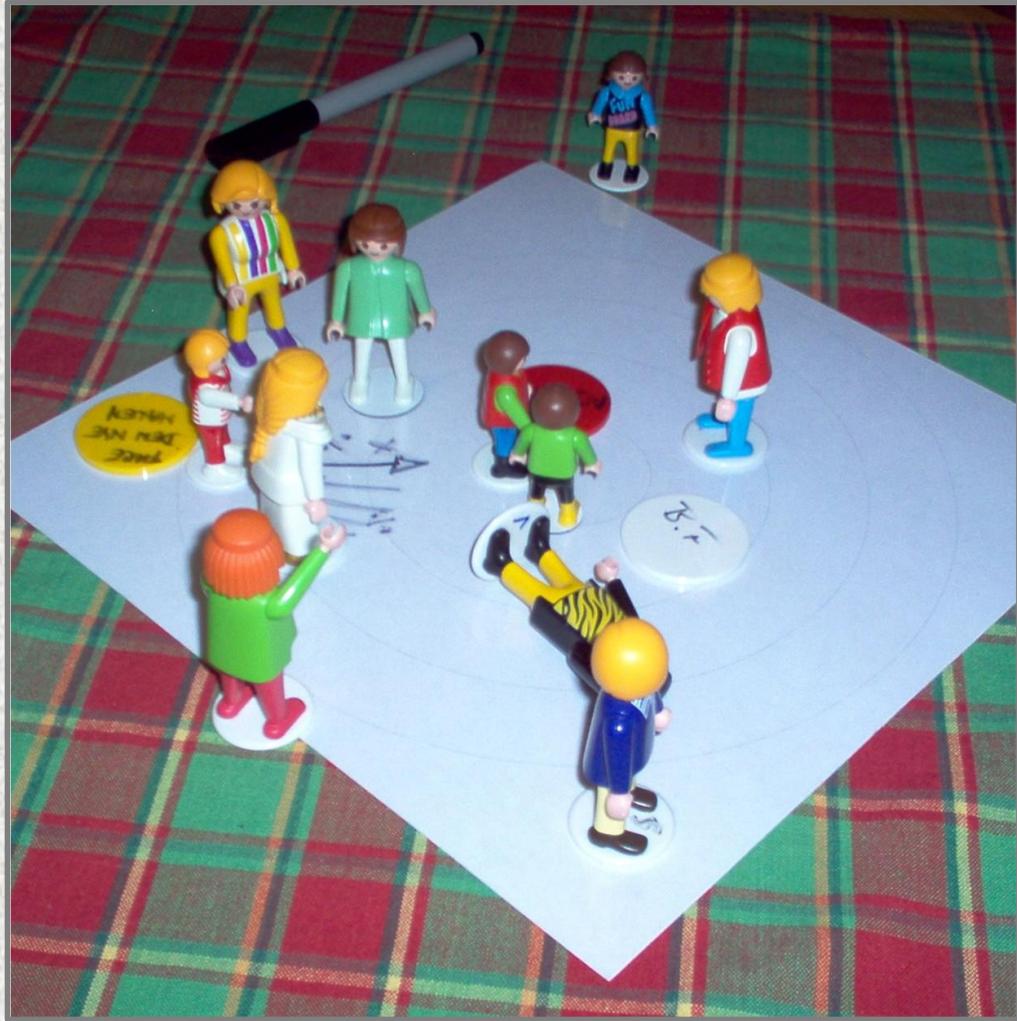


# Visual & spatial

A relationship overview is a visual and spatial mode of communication that is a supplement to speech

It provides additional information to a conversation

I am curious about your point of view, please show me and we can talk about it



## Elevated view

Observing from an elevated position, a short distance away and slightly above - a birds-eye view.

The distance of observing a visual display, together with the emotional engagement of dealing with matters salient to my life and the lives of the people I am involved with.

Combining observation and participation facilitates reconsideration.



# Variety and plurality

Figures can easily be moved, rearranged to compare and contrast different perceptions

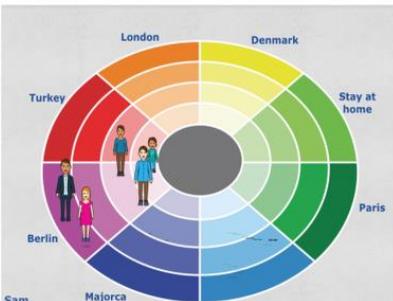
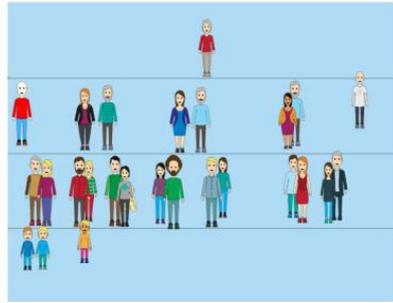
Visual methods like genograms and network maps are brought to life and become very flexible

Relationship overviews can be used in accord with different approaches, in various settings



Plurality: Relationships overviews enhance the idea that situations can be understood in various ways and that differing points of view and opinions have relevance and validity

Surveying situations, comparing and contrasting perspectives and exploring possibilities challenges over-simplified understandings



## **Focus and direction**

The conversation has a clearer structure where it is easier to speak without interruptions

Something visual and concrete helps children to talk about themselves and their situation

It gives focus and direction to the therapist's questions

Relationship overviews tend to lead quickly to central issues



# Creative Active Playful

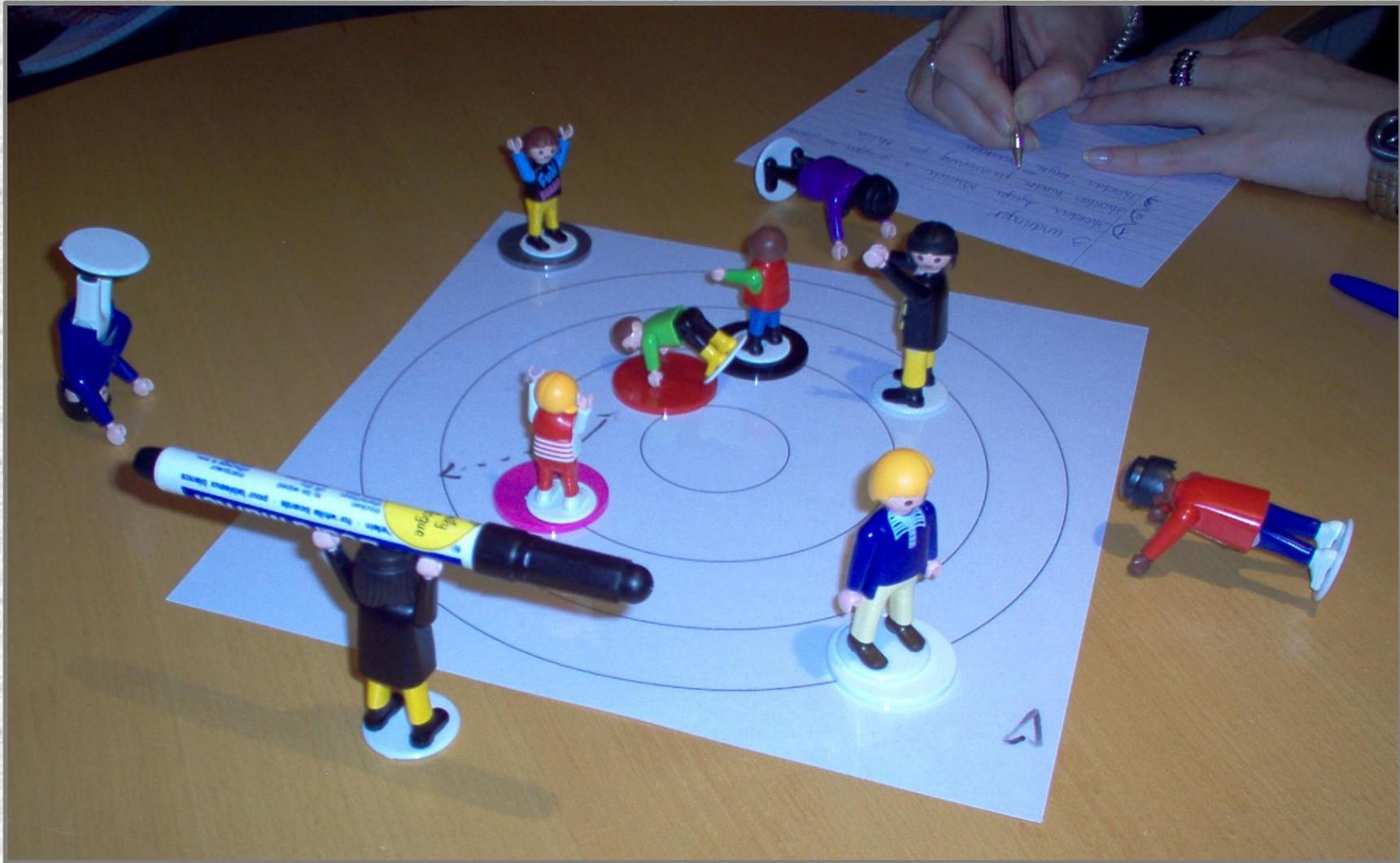
It is a creative activity which can liberate constructive thinking about difficulties

Making it fosters a sense of accomplishment

The result can be surprising as aspects come forward that have previously been overlooked

Although this is not a game, there is usually an element of playfulness in using figures in conversation





Handwritten notes on a piece of paper in the upper right corner of the image. The text is partially obscured but appears to be a list of items or instructions, possibly related to the activity. Some legible words include "Handwritten", "Handwritten", "Handwritten", and "Handwritten".



A small handwritten symbol or mark, possibly a triangle or the number '4', located in the bottom right corner of the white paper.

Forming a relationship overview is an active process

A person is bodily engaged through purposeful movement

Other people present watch as spectators, as with a sport and can become eager to participate

Possible synergic effect from actively involving several senses?



# Tempo and Rhythm

The pace and rhythm of the conversation is different

It takes a little time to select and place figures, and so there are pauses in the conversation

The spaces give room for reflection and curiosity

The directness of visual spatial expression tends to lead dialogue to central issues of relationships



# In between

A relationship overview is created between the participants in the conversation and the mutual visual area of focus draws them together

It emphasises the principle that problems exist between people rather than within people

This promotes a constructive attitude concerned with looking for resources and the opportunity for making positive change



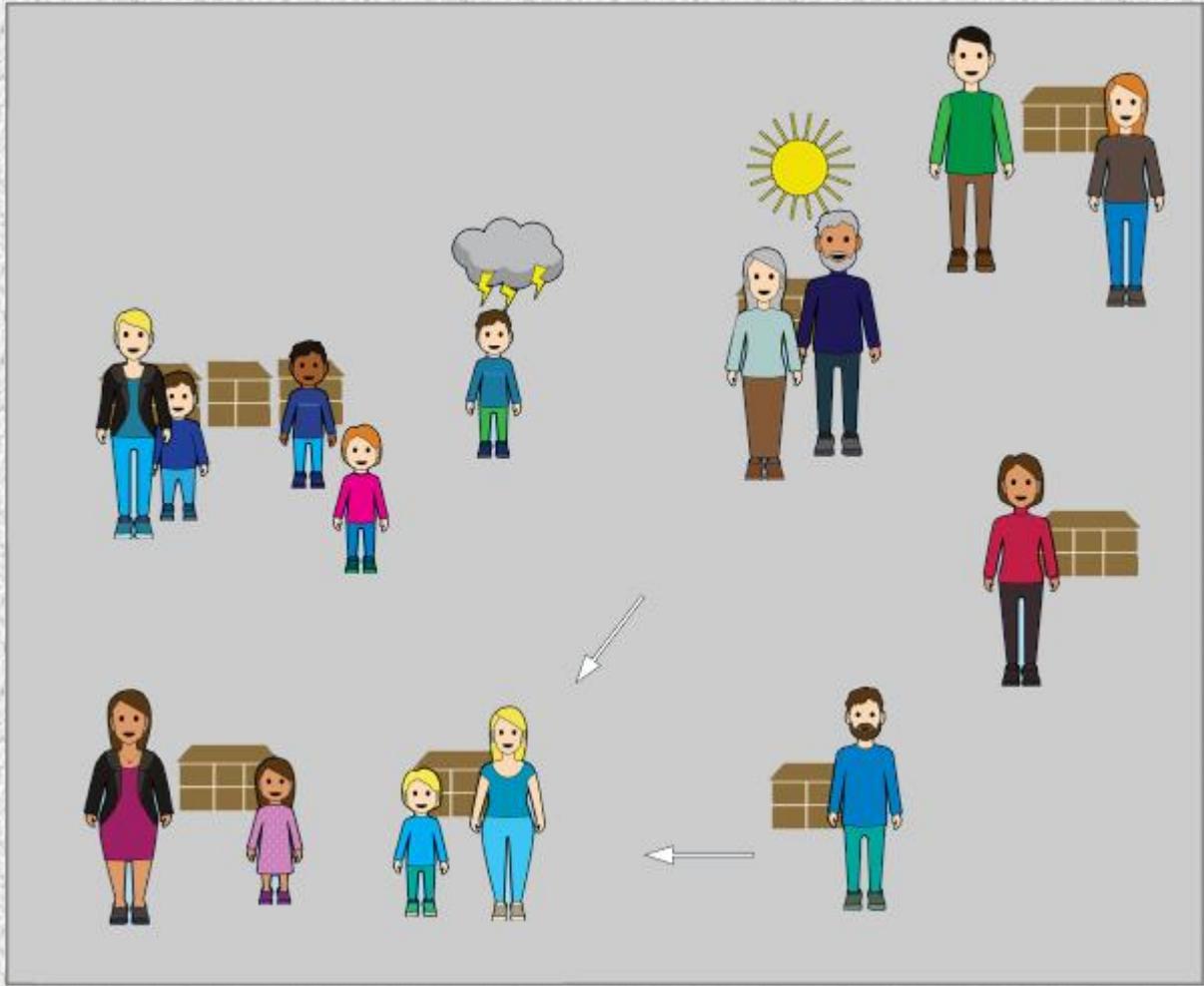
# Insightful

Dialogue around a relationship overview can reveal aspects of a situation previously overlooked

A relationship overview gives fresh information on perceptions of relationships

Families often gain fresh insights into one another's perceptions

Parents often express surprise at the way their children understand things



# Context

Situations can be shown in detail and within their wider context which easily leads the dialogue to the interchange between them  
The contexts of time, intention, attitudes, biases can be talked about in a fairly neutral way when they are related to the figures on the table

# Novelty

Making a relationship overview and conversing using figures in an unusual activity that can bring out new ideas

The novelty of making a relationship overview gives a conversation a high degree of spontaneity

It is an unprepared, innovatory, expression that belongs to the here-and-now



# Reflective

Using figures is a highly reflective form of conversation

Reflections over who is who 'in my life'

People are invited to reconsider their own point of view, attitudes and opinions and to consider alternatives

It encourages mentalizing



# Empowering

Relationship overviews can help people to review their understanding of alliances, values, resources

They can help a person to see where to focus their energy constructively.

They enhance awareness of personal power and influence

They contribute to discussing resources, network, opportunity, support, agency, collaboration



This was an exercise where each family member was asked to select a figure to represent themselves. One at a time we placed the figures representing the whole family on a board to show where we perceived ourselves in relation to the other family members.

Then each family member was asked to place a figure (a Trouble Troll) representing the uninvited guest (anorexia), based on their own understanding.

They were given the opportunity to discuss what they observed and explain their choices and understandings.

There were several things I will point to as positive about this exercise:

1. It gave us a good overview over the 'status' of the family: how each person perceives themselves and their situation and, not least, how they stand in relation to the others.

Discussing and clarifying why each person perceives themselves in this way helped us to undo misunderstandings and ambiguities, providing a correction for oneself and the others.

One gets to see the family from above, something that gives a better understanding of the whole picture.

2. We found that the exercise easily visualised who stood closest to whom, who perceived themselves as at the periphery, who stood in the way and hindered dialogue and who did not listen (stood with their back turned).

This visualising was crucial for us being able to identify and discuss where our challenges lay, together with suggestions for solutions, especially concerning the communicative aspects of dealing with an eating disorder.

3. As this kind of visualising makes a lasting impression it is easier for us to refer back to what we have seen and experienced from this exercise.

We can bring it up later - not least when conflicts and challenges occur - also in further treatment work.

4. With the therapist present in an active, observing role, we received good input and correctives along the way.

NB: The presence of a therapist was important for ensuring that we did not end up in a situation where everyone was defensive and blaming of each other.

This is a balancing act. It is important that family members are open, constructive and can be self-critical to re-evaluate their own situation and reflect about their actions and perceptions.

It is also important that there is a suitably 'wide spectrum' of figures, so that everyone can find and choose a figure to represent themselves that they feel they can identify with.

# Show me! Using digital figures to facilitate conversations in systemic therapy

Steven M Balmbra & Carlos A Raimundo  
Journal of Family Therapy v.43/2 april 2021

Special edition on digital practice



# People in my Life



## Login

Email

Password

LOGIN

With my figurative respects to:

**David Kvebæk**

Stein Hardeng, Julie Thorsheim  
Carlos A Raimundo, John Barton,  
my colleagues in Bodø and elsewhere  
and to you for being here today

[www.relationshipoverviews.org](http://www.relationshipoverviews.org)

[www.peopleinmylife.org](http://www.peopleinmylife.org)

