

Learning to See Group Patterns

by Jackie Sherman,
in conversation with Trish Perry

I asked Jackie to talk about patterns – what got her interested, how she has been thinking about teaching them, and what about the ability to see patterns is valuable from her point of view.

First of all, seeing patterns seems to be how my brain works. I see them everywhere! I think some people are really wired to see patterns and some less so. As an intervener steeped in the Cape Cod Model (CCM), I was trained to observe for behaviors (patterns) that show up repeatedly. When we teach the CCM we suggest that you sit back and observe a group, couple or family, looking first for what is well developed. We say, *“When you see something three times, it’s probably a pattern.”*

As faculty in **Applying the Cape Cod Model in Organizations**, I watched people struggle with seeing patterns (any pattern) in a group and sharing back their observations. Having been trained first as an economist, I learned to look for what jumped out in the context of numbers or in economic behaviors. That is one of the lenses I have on the world. As therapists, leaders, or organization consultants our lenses help us see different patterns – relationship and communication patterns that exist in interactions in, between or among people. Some people come to CCM with eyes that are already finely tuned to see these types of patterns;

for some it is something new to learn.

Observing this challenge, I began to wonder how to help participants learn what to look for. Tunde Horvath (who was shadow-faculty in the Cape Cod Training Program), observed something similar during CCTP. During the past year my thinking has evolved as a result of talking with her. When we spoke with other faculty members about this, I heard a distinction that has become important to me ... the difference between looking “for” something, vs. just seeing what is there. There is understandable reluctance to give people a formula or a set of things to look for. Thinking about my own learning related to seeing and being able to describe patterns in groups, I know that the more understanding or experience I have with what patterns might be there, or what they might look like, the more I am able to actually see different behavior patterns in a group. We don’t all have the same “command over distinctions”.

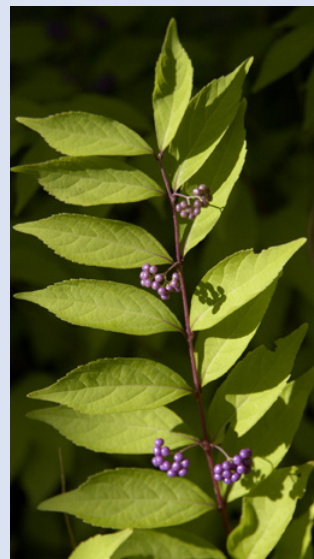
There seem to be two big factors that affect how easily we can see patterns: how we’re wired, and our knowledge of working with / experience observing groups/ couples/families. There’s nothing we can do about how someone is wired. But I do think we can support people to learn to see different patterns in groups and also to learn how to

describe what they are seeing or experiencing. And I believe that hearing what others are seeing can expand our awareness of what sorts of things we can observe. (A perfect example for me is when I learned the Cycle of Experience – at first it was pretty foreign to me ... I was taught to see the Cycle, and over time it has become a part of me...in such a way that now I almost can’t “not see it”.) There are really two different steps for the therapist / consultant: 1. seeing a pattern; and 2. naming or describing it in a way that can be useful to the client. We can and need to teach both. But let me stay focused on seeing patterns.

“There are so many different ways to see patterns.” Some people naturally focus on energy patterns, where it is in a group, how it rises and falls, who generates it, what lessens it, while other interveners focus on sound patterns (volume, quickness of speech), influence patterns, relational patterns (who “feeds” and who receives, who moves close and who pulls away, when this happens),

the balance between intimate and strategic patterns of interaction, patterns related to hierarchy, and many more. Since there are so many different kinds of patterns to “see” (hear/ feel), I believe that learning about what other interveners see can increase my own ability to observe – actually it HAS for me.

There are several other





lenses that can be used for seeing or recognizing patterns. One involves looking at resistances – what we might call the patterns of interruption to contact. For example, if I were to think about “deflection”, one of the patterns I might see in a system that embodies deflection would be that a person says something to someone and that person doesn’t respond to what he’s heard but changes the subject. Or another group member interjects a different idea and the group follows. What I’m seeing is a system that may be well developed at moving through topics, but is less well developed at staying with one topic long enough to explore it in depth. Whether the pattern serves them well depends on what they are trying to accomplish.

Another lens is the Cycle of Experience. In businesses, it’s not unusual to see a team that is very well developed at moving from data to action, spending little time in awareness. That’s a pattern that jumps out to me really quickly. The opposite often is true in non-profit organizations, where they have a great ability to build awareness and are less developed at moving to action. Keeping the Cycle in the background and paying attention to how the group works in relation to the Cycle, helps me see some of its patterns.

In talking about this and thinking about the value of teaching patterns, it seems clear that sharing the patterns we observe is a way of raising awareness, which supports change. It is a way of revealing the system to itself, of giving it data about what happens in the system over and over and the potential impact of those repetitions. It is a way to support the system by increasing the choices it has to produce the results that are important to it.

As for where this interest is heading, the faculty is talking about how we think about patterns, how we “see” them, and how we might teach them. The critical point is finding ways that do not impose a particular set of patterns, but rather increase the range of possibilities of what students can see. I’d love to see us have an opportunity to work with videos, where all the students in a class could observe a group interacting and identify all the patterns that they see – the benefit of a video is that we can replay it, giving us an opportunity to really “see what you saw” and thus increasing our ability to see more different types of patterns. At the same time, I want to continue experimenting with ways to use our workshop practice sessions to maximize the opportunities for students. This means both encouraging them to look for the patterns that jump out at them as well as having a chance to see the many different kinds of patterns that other practitioners might observe. Of course it’s also helpful to hear how others describe the same pattern that I saw...but that’s for another article.

Something that excites me about GISC is that we are always redesigning the workshops with the goal of finding more effective ways to teach. And of course by teaching, I expand my learning.

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Published by

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