John is almost eleven in years and has been in residential treatment for three of those years. But any meaningful assessment of John’s age depends on how you look at him. His needy and clinging behavior reflects the desperation of a much younger child, while his wiliness and ability to outmaneuver even the most sophisticated of adults are far more typical of an adult con artist. He is an acute observer of the adults in his environment and matches his behavior and expectations to what will achieve the ends he desires from each adult. In any interaction he tests out what the adult will tolerate and does not push beyond limits that he finds acceptable. He uses whatever skills are available to obtain what he needs – a virtually constant source of attention and contact. Physical contact is especially important to him and if he cannot find a way to get that contact through caring encounters, then he will solicit aggression as a way of getting touched.

Until John entered the mental health system, he was a neglected child. His mother has a history of substance abuse and depression and he has been exposed to the chaotic and violent relationships with men that his mother has been involved in. Not only has he witnessed the effect of violence perpetrated on his mother but he has also been physically abused. His older sister, with whom he maintains an attachment, has been sexually abused and he may have witnessed, if not been a party to, this abuse as well. Since this exposure began in early childhood, we can assume that John’s present understanding of himself, other people, and the world around him has been highly colored by these experiences.

To alter John’s developmental course we need to understand the view of the world that John brings into every encounter with another human being – we need to understand his mental model for dealing with reality if we are ever to understand and effectively respond to the day-to-day challenging events that John presents us with. Additionally, we need to look at the mental models that each of us brings into every encounter we have with John. As we will see, our mental models determine what information we screen out and what we let in, what choices are available to us in every situation and what choices are simply not possible because of our mental models. Because of his childhood experiences with danger and violence, we can expect that John’s choices will be limited to maintaining his present status quo. Why? Because John knows that he can survive doing whatever it is he is doing now. He has no assurance that he can survive anything else. As a living organism, John is basically conservative – he maintains equilibrium in any situation. In doing so, his behavior becomes entirely predictable within a range of behaviors. Right now, John will predictably seek attention in whatever way he can get it and will respond violently whenever it will work to re-establish his sense of equilibrium.
Mental Models

- Differences between mental models explain why two people can observe the same event and describe it differently: They are paying attention to different details.
- In any new experience, most people are drawn to take in and remember only the information that reinforces their existing mental models.
- Mental models thus limit people’s ability to change.


It doesn’t matter that we, as individuals outside of John’s consciousness, can see that there are many other options than aggression and manipulation. John’s mental model for the world and relationships with other people tells him that the methods he uses are the only ones that will maintain the stability within which he feels a relative sense of control and safety. Doing what he does is all he has ever known and so far, it has kept him alive. He has no context for truly understanding that his life could be better, that he could be loved and admired, that he could play and have fun and gain a sense of belonging, integrity and respect. These are nonexistent entities for John, not a part of the world he has lived in. He cannot see any larger picture. He only pays attention to the requirements of the immediate now, to every immediate interaction and feeling state. He has no context within which to believe that other people can ease the distress that is experienced whenever he ventures out of his established methods for maintaining equilibrium. He screens out all of the information he receives in the treatment context that contradicts his existing mental models for relationship because in doing so he is able to decrease the anxiety that is normally associated with uncertainty. To us this looks like resistance to change when it is really the only way John knows to maintain equilibrium.
Mental Models

- Two types of skills are necessary:
  - Reflection: slowing down our thinking processes to become aware of how we form our mental models
  - Inquiry: holding conversations where we openly share views and develop knowledge about each other’s assumptions.

What will it take for John to change the mental models upon which he builds his sense of reality? John will need to become aware of the fact that he has a certain representation of the world that he brings into every interaction and he will have to learn how to challenge these basic assumptions within himself and allow input from others to alter those assumptions. Most of the therapeutic work with John will need to focus on this fundamental change. This is exceedingly difficult to do when John compulsively drives other people in his environment to recreate his violent experience instead of compelling him to experience an alternative reality.
John’s mental model of the world only allows him to select certain data, ascribe certain meanings, draw certain conclusions and adopt certain beliefs about what he sees. He bases his actions on that information and then the subsequent interaction with other people goes into determining what information he selects in the next interaction. All of this goes on outside of John’s awareness just like it also goes on outside of all of our conscious awareness. It is just the way we deal with the world and is based on each of our own experience. What sets John apart is that his early formative experience has been so negative, hurtful, and damaging.

Observable data: My teacher is not noticing me today.

Selection of data (I didn’t notice the way she was looking interested an attentive earlier when I was talking. I didn’t notice that she has her hands full with another child who is very upset.)

Adding meanings: She thinks I am worthless and bad, this makes me feel bad.

Making assumptions: She is just like my mother who neglected me.

Drawing conclusions: This bad feeling won’t stop unless I take control

Adopting beliefs: I feel good when I can get her attention and I know how to do that

Taking action: I will start a fight and get sent to see Mark.
Interrupt the Ladder of Inference

- What are the observable data behind the statement?
- Does everyone agree on what the data are?
- Can you run me through your reasoning?
- How did we get from that data to these abstract assumptions?


How can this vicious cycle be interrupted? We have to get John to think differently over time through consistent and different interactions with every adult he encounters. We need him to look at the entirety of the observable data rather than consistently select the same limited information. This process will be helped by getting input from other people and this is where building community can be useful. Getting John to self-observe, although no easy task, is possible over time and will become potentially more possible as John’s brain matures further.
Thinking Systemically: Understanding the Iceberg

- Events
  - What just happened?
- Patterns / Trends
  - What’s been happening?
  - Have we been here or someplace like it before?
- Systemic Structures
  - What are the forces at play contributing to these problems?
- Mental Models
  - What about our thinking allows these situations to persist?

To enable this to happen for John, however, the entire system that deals with John must think and act in a different way. For the time being the events will remain the same – John will consistently do what he has already done in the past – protect himself by using aggression and force to maintain a sense of equilibrium. Our job is to look deeper at the patterns and trends of John’s behavior, of the systemic structures that help keep his patterns in place, and at the mental models that we employ as the underpinnings of our understanding of and response to John’s behavior.
To understand and effectively alter John, we are going to have to think and behavior “outside the box” of the present mental health system. Right now, the existing models focus on “sickness” and “badness” and in dealing with John, the staff has alternately employed both mental models to address John’s behavior. But neither of them has worked. Viewing John as mentally ill gets us nowhere. Medications appear to have limited utility. Much of John’s negative behavior appears to be deliberate, thought-out and willful and not the produce of a thought disorder in the psychiatric sense of the world. On the other hand, viewing John as a bad kid also gets us nowhere and is contradicted by other information about John and l long-held institutional view of children as salvageable. Neither punishment nor indulgence has worked. Viewing John instead as developmentally injured may be a mental model that leads us in new directions if we truly understand the impact of profound psychological injury on a child’s developmental course.

Certainly, the organization has reached the point where everyone on the staff has a recognition that what they have been doing is not working and that it is crazy to go on being ineffective. It is time for something new, not a new technique but a change in context.
John has been at the institution for over three years and in that time, the staff has employed every conceivable strategy to deal effectively with John and nothing has “worked”. However, if we were to examine every strategy it is likely that we will see that each one was based on a change effort that uses physical, psychological, social, or moral force to oppose and presumably change, John. But John is determined to survive and the only way he knows how to do that is to successfully overcome all efforts at force directed at him. John will not give in.

To help John, we are going to need to think differently about this process of change and figure out a way to use what are now John’s deficits as assets. What is on the side of change is the natural inclination of all systems to grow and change, an inclination that is currently being opposed by the influence of John’s past exposure to violence. Traumatic events have a tendency to direct growth down different pathways than those that would have been taken had the trauma not occurred. As a result, John has progressively gotten “better and better” at manipulating everyone in his environment to keep himself at the level of his “safe” because it is familiar, status quo.

So let’s think about John’s behavior in a different way using the new science of change – self-organizing systems, chaos theory, complexity. In this way of thinking about living systems, each of us “orbits” around a specific “attractor” that varies from person to person and from developmental period to developmental period. These attractors establish patterns that are predictable if we can see things from above, get a sense of the bigger picture. These attractors determine those mental models we talked about earlier. In fact, the attractors for every period of time actually determine what behavior a system can and cannot employ, regardless of whether that system is an individual or a whole organization.

Under normal circumstances, attractors change over time so that what draws the interest of a two year old is very different from that of an eight year old or a thirteen year old. Healthy children frequently make radical and sudden transformations as any parent of a teenager can tell you, seeming to change overnight from one developmental phase to another.

Trauma appears to disrupt these normal transformative growth leaps and the normal shift in attractors does not occur.

The main attractor field for John appears to be the same attractor that existed for him as a much younger child. He is clinging, demanding, needy. He continues to perceive other people as objects, not as separate individuals with their own needs, hopes and desires. He continues to insist that other people recognize and meet his needs while failing to develop a sense of social reciprocity. His moral development appears to be arrested at the stage of primitive empathy. He has minimal peer relationships and an almost exclusive preoccupation with caretaker relationships. He has little developed capacity for self-examination or for even recognizing himself as a separate entity. He uses violence and force when more subtle forms of coercion fail to work.

On several occasions, John’s behavior has been temporarily perturbed toward a different attractor. Staff offer examples of occasions upon which John began to self-reveal, showed better impulse control, and demonstrated concern for others, but then his behavior falls back into established patterns.

Everyone expresses concern about John’s sense of hopelessness and this is reflected in their own hopelessness about the outcome of their interventions with John. The present attractor appears to severely limit possibilities for this child.

Attractors

- The attractor represents how the system is organized to accomplish the tasks that are operative in that particular phase of development.
- A system’s behavior may be temporarily perturbed out of its normal behavior, but the system will eventually settle back into the prescribed behavior allowed by the attractor.
- An attractor defines the context of a system’s functioning at each demarcated phase of its evolution.
- It determines what is possible as well as what is impossible within the system at that particular phase.
Attractors

- Context is defined as the set range that determines the possibilities – it defines the limits.
- Content is what happens within those possibilities.
- Content can change but only within the defined possibilities of the context.
- To change the content permanently requires a change in the context = a shift in attractor.


The challenge of treatment is to create a different context – to redefine the range of possibilities that a child can try. In this way, changing the context can change content – although this is not predetermined. Instead it is a CHOICE. But if we do NOT change the context there is no possibility of real change in content. Somehow, we have to find a way to change the attractor field and pull John out of his present orbit. Staying two in an eleven-year-old’s body simply does not work.
Moving Beyond Resistance

- The emergence of the new attractor signifies the onset of self-organization.
- Resistance to change is merely the initial response of a system to change.
- This resistance dominates the system as long as the far-from-equilibrium conditions do not activate the system’s inherent nonlinear potential for growth.


It will require the concerted and innovative thought of the entire treatment team to figure out what and how to build another force of attraction for John. And then it will take enormous patience and perseverance to stick with it while John resists the change. What will draw John away from the benefits and safety of his present range of behavior? What can be done to minimize John’s anxiety while provoking sufficient change? What “heat” can be applied to John’s system to propel him to jump from one orbit to a higher orbit?
Resistance

- Resistance is not an inherent property of systems but a temporary condition of a system at equilibrium.
- Resistance indicates that change is perceived as a threat to a currently held and largely unconscious belief system.
- Resistance is largely unconscious, therefore, it can’t be dismissed as conscious obstinacy.


A dysfunctional child is being attracted to a set of possibilities that we define as problematic or pathological. They will resist movement from this attractor system just as planets resist being pulled out of orbit. To change behavior, we must provide a more potent attractor and then resistance can disappear. This is a far more interesting mental model with which to think about a child with “oppositional disorder” like John. He is being attracted to an experience that is incredibly powerful and the challenge for us is to find an even stronger attractor if we are to overcome the oppositional behavior. Opposing someone is the exercise of power or control. Therefore a child like John who has learned to use oppositional behaviors has to be helped to find power through compliant and healthier forms of behavior. John has no reason to believe that he can find a sense of empowerment, control and anxiety relief in any way other than to use and abuse others. Right now, according to his mental model of reality, there is no choice.
Resistance

- Resistance is an expected and crucial element in the change process and as such, is a sign of progress, not failure.
- Resistance is an attraction to an affirmative core that involves the need to survive with dignity, autonomy, and integrity.
- Resistance needs to be approached with respect and empathy.


It is possible, given this model of change, that the more John resists an intervention, the more potential that intervention has to bring about change. Resistance and opposition can mean that John’s current system is being threatened – that his carefully established equilibrium is being disrupted and that is precisely what we want to do – get him out of his current stable, but extremely limited, equilibrium.
Resistance

- Resistance simply indicates that the organizational patterns that are operating are initially and temporarily attracting the system to remain the way it is — to stay in equilibrium.
- Under equilibrium conditions, the system maintains its current means of functioning and does not allow any kind of disturbance to change its current pattern permanently.
- This basic conservatism is a survival mechanism — the system is surviving the present conditions and therefore the present equilibrium state has survival value.


Again, it is vital to understand that John will resist disturbances in his equilibrium because his current equilibrium is associated with SURVIVAL. For John, it is not really a matter of choice. In his world, if he changes, if he allows himself to love or be loved, he could die. No one has yet been able to establish enough of a safe relationship with John to enable him to really discuss his experiences so we do not yet know the details of why this is the case, what exactly are the details of John’s mental model. But we do know that with all the force of his intelligence, creativity, and will to survive he has successfully resisted all attempts at making him endanger this equilibrium. And this despite the efforts of dozens of caring, intelligent, and well-meaning adults. This tells us that this child has been through a lot, that the lessons he learned have had enormous and long-lasting impact and will not be easily disrupted.
Resistance As Attraction

- Resistance to change signifies that an organization is under the sway of an equilibrium attractor.
- An equilibrium attractor maintains its hegemony by equilibrium-seeking processes.
- Resistance to change is a way of labeling the equilibrium seeking processes in an organization.
- Resistance to change is a result of self-fulfilling prophecies in an organization.


The attractors that are currently keeping John in an earlier developmental phase are called “equilibrium attractors”. We all have equilibrium attractors that keep us from changing too rapidly as do organizations. Self-fulfilling prophecies are the mechanism that keeps those attractors in place. If an organization tells itself that it can never change, it won’t. If the staff believes that John’s situation is hopeless, it will be. If John believes that there are no other options, there won’t be.
Moving Beyond Resistance

- Transformation consists of transiting to a new attractor, which changes the context of the system’s functioning.
- Change in context signifies a transition out of an equilibrium attractor altogether and into more complex attractors.
- Transition to new attractors is already an inherent potential of the nonlinearity of the system.
- It is brought about by far-from-equilibrium conditions.


For change to occur, far-from-equilibrium conditions must be created but controlled. A nuclear power plant creates far-from-equilibrium conditions in the basic elements required for nuclear fission, but controls the conditions at the same time to produce energy. The meetings we are having regularly to discuss change in the organization are producing the “heat” required to push the organization toward far-from-equilibrium conditions while the process we are engaged in is sufficiently boundaried and contained to prevent a deterioration into chaos. The staff must figure out a way how to apply “heat” to John’s equilibrium state while keeping enough boundaries to maintain safety for John and everyone else.
Moving Beyond Resistance

- Ultimately, nonlinear systems do not seek equilibrium (death), they seek to evolve, a fundamental potential of their complex nonlinearity.
- This shifts the entire context of organizational change out of the arena of contending forces.
- Organizations don’t just seek to oppose change; they seek to develop and evolve.


Somewhere inside John is a child who wants to grow up, be accepted, loved, respected and have a more normal life. So far, no one has been able to consistently attract that child. We need to figure out the obstacles within the context of the institution that fail to produce the necessary attractions for this child. In doing so, the institution will learn how to more easily and effectively help all the children with problems like John’s.
Equilibrium-Seeking Processes

- Equilibrium-seeking organizations strive to keep new information out of the system because it has the potential to disrupt current operations.
- Equilibrium-seeking processes serve to maintain stability at all costs.
- Equilibrium-seeking processes manifest through self-fulfilling prophecies
- Disrupting equilibrium-seeking processes requires far-from-equilibrium conditions.


Let’s look for a minute at this concept of “equilibrium-seeking” since it is so much a part of how John operates. Stability maintains life and we all seek stability. The more trauma and chaos you have been exposed to, particularly during the most critical and formative years, the more you will value stability and seek stability at any cost. Self-fulfilling prophecies maintain this stability and it requires a create deal of stimuli – far-from-equilibrium conditions – to disrupt these processes.
Equilibrium-Seeking Processes

- Maintain equilibrium by eliminating any departures from the current status
- Following the attractor, they keep the behavior of the system within the accepted setting or culture, of the group by
  - Disallowing deviations from behavioral norms
  - Decision-making methods
  - Work design
  - Managerial styles
  - Etc.


In John’s case, these equilibrium-seeking processes will prevent him from establishing different behaviors and trying new things, from making different kinds of decisions, from changing the way he does things so that he can have alternative experiences.
Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

- An initial expectation (belief, assumption, or attitude) that leads to behaviors that result in a condition that confirms the original expectation.
- The nonlinear, circular structure of the SFP keeps an organization at equilibrium.
- Keeps the system isolated and closed—off to new information or new ways of interacting.
- Has the power to do this because it is self-confirming—its own beliefs reinforce themselves by way of actions congruent with those beliefs.


A self-fulfilling prophecy is exactly what it says—it fulfills itself, it makes itself happen. It is an initial expectation that leads to behaviors that result in a condition that confirms the initial expectation. No new information is let in and it keeps reinforcing itself. We also call this behavior reenactment behavior because the same scenario keeps happening over and over. John is loaded with self-fulfilling prophecies and by now the staff and the other children have a number of self-fulfilling prophecies for John because they have bought into his own.
Moving Beyond Resistance

- The self-fulfilling prophecy is the mechanism that keeps an organization under the spell of an equilibrium attractor.
- Transformation occurs when the equilibrium-seeking tendency of the self-fulfilling prophecy is disrupted.


The organizational challenge now for treating John is how to get everyone to suspend their self-fulfilling beliefs about John and thus enabling him to make other choices. There is no guarantee that he will but by now there is a certainty that he won’t as long as everyone else’s beliefs and assumptions about him support his own beliefs and assumptions about himself in relationship to the world.
Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

- The beliefs and expectations of staff lead to actions on the part of patients, which in turn, lead to results that confirm the original beliefs and expectations of the staff.
- It is a self-reinforcing interaction of belief and behavior that leads an organization into an information-tight insularity, dominates the work unit, and leads to an equilibrium-seeking state. It therefore resists change because of its circular nature.


This is the tight and congruent circle that John and the staff are trapped within. Buying into John’s view of the world and himself, the staff has come to feel he is hopeless and that all efforts to help John will fail. When he then resists a disturbance of his stable equilibrium, he confirms that he is hopeless and that all efforts to help him will fail.
Equilibrium-Seeking Processes

- In an equilibrium-seeking organization, the manager's job is to control and dampen variances. A manager is to keep the unpredictable to a bare minimum.
- The emphasis on planning, prediction, accurate anticipation, and control is the basis of the whole edifice of planned organizational change.
- Equilibrium-seeking processes insure that all of the behavior in the system conforms to the attractor.
- They keep the system isolated from environmental variations that threaten to change the system's operation.
- They keep any creative impulse toward new behavior in check.


If you carefully examine what happens, you will find that as the manager of himself, John screens out all information that would serve to contradict his assumptions about himself. It is entirely possible that every positive change in John’s behavior – according to the perspective of the staff – will be followed by a worsening or escalation in his behavior as he works to get back into equilibrium. When this occurs, the staff would normally get drawn into his equilibrium-seeking maneuvers and conclude, along with John, that he is indeed hopeless. There are members of the staff who have experiences with John that contradict the prevalent notion about him, but to a large extent that contradictory information is resisted by the larger group.

The challenge will be apply more “heat” just as John’s equilibrium-seeking behaviors are employed by somehow finding ways to out-maneuver him, continue to support him and keep him safe, while drawing him towards other kinds of behaviors. We can only do that by carefully examining the patterns and shifts in John’s behavior and that requires a true and integrated team approach. Then it will require great creativity. What we need to do is throw John off, be less predictable, not be so controlled by John’s patterns.
Self-Fulfilling Prophecy at Banks

- Fear that bank is going under leads frantic depositors to withdraw their funds.
- Run on withdrawals seriously compromises bank’s finances.
- Catastrophic downturn in bank’s financial condition confirms original fears of bank failure.
- As a result, runs on bank increase and finally bank collapses.

Here is an example of how self-fulfilling prophecies work on a social level.
As a useful exercise, have the staff draw out some of John’s self-fulfilling prophecies and how they work in interaction with the staff.
Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

- It doesn’t need any information outside its own insular structure to keep it going.
- The SFP serves as a barrier to new, disconfirming information and thereby keeps the persons caught up in the structure of the SFP from changing either behavior or their beliefs.


As you can see, the whole point of the SFP is to keep out any information that will serve to contradict and thus interfere with the automatic nature of the SFP process. Therefore a question for the staff is how do we get John information that he does not usually let in? Be creative and think about meetings, writing, movies, videotapes, audiotapes, computers – any way of getting information into what is now a closed system.
Here is another schematic for how the self-fulfilling prophecy works.
Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

- SFTs reinforce a particular mode of attitude and action in such a way that attempts to change the organization run against this entrenched way of doing things.
- The most remarkable property of the SFP as a nonlinear system is that it contains the seeds of its own transformation.
- It is the Point of Transformation.


Charting out the nature of John’s self-fulfilling prophecies can help the staff see where to intervene. Helping John to see and name the spontaneous unfolding of his own prophecies can help him summon the courage to change. Within every SFT is the seed of its own transformation. In John’s case, the staff must imagine and then imagine with him and his peers what it would look like if all of his perseverance, oppositional behavior, and strength were directed positively instead of negatively. What a lawyer he could be, a social activist, a journalist.

A change in John does not have to take another three years either. Changing from one attractor to another often occurs rapidly and suddenly – transformational change.

There is, of course danger in any changing situation. A loss of a stable adjustment means a period of instability and a potential unfolding of many different choices. So during this period, maintaining boundaries while applying “heat” is very important.

Boundaries are essential if you want to create opportunities for change, growth, and movement but avoid disruption, violence and chaos. So well-defined boundaries and limits are essential to any effort. However, the boundaries must be firm, not rigid. They must be permeable enough to let in new information, but not so permeable as to allow all information to enter and produce confusion.

Defining the proper procedure therefore, that balances far-from-equilibrium conditions with safety will require the concerted efforts of everyone even remotely involved with John, including his parents, siblings, and peers.
We do not actually know “John” so any suggestions offered here are only for the purposes of opening up the staff to new possibilities. Some guidelines”

• Prescribe the symptom – John is needy, demands attention, needs physical contact – design a treatment plan that gives it all to him enormously – under his control as much as possible – and framed as something he needs now but must outgrow. Assume that the needs are legitimate even if his timing is off. Directly show him ways to get his needs met in more appropriate ways while keeping the expression of the needs legitimate.

• Explain to him why this is normal given his abnormal and damaging experience – explain the notion of healing and repair of injury, developmental arrest, movement and growth.

• Be unpredictable – do not allow John to control staff behavior or emotions through his negative behavior but only through his positive behavior. Face him with the uncertainty of his future.

• Be more truthful and realistic with him about choices and options for his life and the narrowing of his choices because of his injuries.

• While changing the treatment plan perhaps dramatically, maintain watchful control and even institute more strict controls and boundaries in order to channel the “far-from-equilibrium” conditions you are establishing safely.
Ideas for thinking about “John” – and behaving differently towards him

- Recruit the other children in ways to “help” John get more attention rather than less.
- Let him know that you as a staff need to see him change and grow and not stay stuck. Tell him how much of a failure you all feel. Ask for his help in figuring out his own new treatment plan. Meet with him as a group.
- Recruit his father and if possible other family members to “help” in the process of getting him more attention and care as a way of helping him to grow up.
- Never shame or humiliate him – foster his pride and sense of accomplishment in achieving the goals you have set for him.
- Give him didactic and individual training in trauma theory and how it applies to him, very matter-of-factly. If he cannot stay with it or concentrate, consider making an audiotape for him to listen to repeatedly, or a videotape.
- Consider videotaping him, having him videotape himself talking to himself, i.e. about the treatment plan, his future, his behavior, his interactions with others, etc.
- Admit to him that you may have had him all wrong and been using an approach filled with error – another confusional tactic.

Bloom, S. L. "Thinking About John", 1/6/02