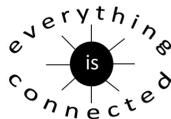


# Systemic Therapy as Transformative Practice

Edited by  
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## Preface

“What is happening with this word ‘systemic’?” someone asks at a workshop, in supervision, over coffee. “Isn’t it enough to just say, ‘relational’ or ‘dialogical’ or ‘collaborative’ or ‘eco-systemic’?” These are questions of our time. So how come the word ‘systemic’ survives – or even thrives? These other terms are all important and, while often used by the same people, are not interchangeable. The interest in relational ethics and relational aesthetics has become deeply important to many practitioners. And sometimes, the critical understanding of language as a social construction can be taken as meaning, we made up all these words so does it matter which of them we use? There are, as we see it, wider contexts which warrant continued and conscious use of the term “systemic” For example, the influence of liberal humanism, while an understandable response to dehumanising practices on a global scale, distracts our attention away from systemic contextualising to individualising discourses. In these times of systemic global crises, we need to situate our understanding of small systems and local exchanges within wider, national or global, and transdisciplinary systems so we can see how everything is connected, so we can make visible and critique power relations and watch how they play out in the world – and with what consequences for different peoples.

As we see it, systemic practice is not simply an approach but a movement. The systemic movement is a community of critical thinkers about change and stasis in systems and the power relations influencing both. It is imbued with the ethic of wellbeing for all. Systemic practitioners are trained to pay attention to where and how power relations play out at different levels of context in society and impact of the wellbeing of all people – not simply within our teams and the clients with whom we are working. When we come across signs of what could be regarded as “illness”, we reframe the struggles of an individual as an understandable response to problems in wider social and political systems, not simply within their intimate relationships. When we watch the news or struggle to participate in the world, we do not put our systemic thinking to one side.

The scientific search for a fixed, reproducible one-size-fits-all method uses individualising discourses to justify the backgrounding of context. This renders invisible people’s membership of community, their knowledge and contributions, the links between personal, social and political.

This approach not only isolates individuals coming for therapy it defines change as movement towards a notion of better health occurring within a limited biological or social system. In systemic practice, the emphasis is on collaborative re-search, where the “re-” denotes looking again at familiar and old ways of being, doing, talking and performing. One of the things which struck us in each of these chapters is how the writers describe how they are moved (on) in response to what they see, hear, feel, realise. They describe movement in and between people. They describe improvisational practices arising out of a reflexive openness and collaboration with all those involved in the conversation.

This is often difficult in a world in which public services are increasingly dominated by market-led forces, method-led practices and a determination to situate expertise within decontextualised therapeutic practices. Such practices are dependent on the generation of a certain kind of data to defend the methods used to justify particular economic models. However, this means i) only certain mono-cultural practices count as therapy or counselling; ii) practitioners have less power to provide ways of working which respond to local need; and iii) there is proportionately little research being conducted into innovative systemic practice. The systemic movement has rejected fixed methods and theories seeing them as products of time, place, culture and economic investment. Rather, it has developed a philosophical curiosity in dialogical artistry, in improvisational ways of working through difficulties and exploring how change in one part of a system has transformational influence in unexpected ways and places immediately and/or elsewhere.

We are using the word “systemic” to portray fluidly responsive practices with an ethical preoccupation about what makes a difference, for whom and how. Working descriptions of “systemic” emphasise which values, theories and practices it might include and promote rather than what shape it must take. We see “systemic” as inclusive of a contextually, relationally and personally reflexive collective of working practices, ethical positionings, and a metaphor about how our world works. “Systemic” involves practitioners being committed to exploring the critically reflexive movements in the relationships between context, ideology, theoretical propositions, methods and relational activities. This allows the systemic movement to be open to new theoretical and ethical punctuations of practice, to change ourselves and ways of being and doing in the world to fit with or influence the multiple and overlapping local and global systems within which we live and work as systemic activists. Reflexivity is our ethical guiding light. Self and relational reflexivity, local

and global reflexivity encourage situated and joined up ethical thinking about the contexts we are each acting out of and acting into.

This book arises in response to the creeping shift towards reproducibility and the shadowing by formulaic ways of working of practice knowledge and know-how. It is an attempt to redress the side-lining by market led forces of professional knowledge. Each of the twenty-six chapters showcases creative systemic practice with different groups of people in very different places of work. Writers make new connections with theories and philosophies, tell old stories new ways, tell us new stories old ways! Throughout these chapters this community of practitioners address socio-political, familial and discursive contexts which reflexively inform, deform, reform our thinking, our comfort, our beliefs and our practices. Writers elegantly show robust systemic practice which is transformative, co-creative, collaborative and deeply sensitive to contexts which can promote social justice and critical of contexts which effectively stifle it.

We invited the writers in this book to write what they consider to be contemporary systemic practice in changing times. What we have is a collection of chapters with different and connected aspects of contemporary systemic practice. The title arose out of the content. On reading early drafts, the themes of movement and transformation, and critical thinking about the influence of wider contexts were jumping out at us from the texts. It became clear to us that writers were emphasising the transformative aspects of our work and our worlds.

These chapters are written from within the moral, existential, and creative challenges and opportunities presented by our turbulent times: a historical and evolutionary moment in which a “perfect storm” of an unprecedented number of global crises is brewing. Our political, social, economic, financial, cultural, agricultural, and religious dynamics – as well as healthcare, education, media, and other institutions and infrastructure – are all in serious crisis *simultaneously*. For many years in Europe, North America and many other parts of the world there has been a reduction and contraction of public services justified under the rhetoric that our societies could no longer support the most needy. Before our eyes, the unbelievable is happening. Social progress is deliberately confused with economic growth and stability and economics used to justify the systematic undoing of social values of care and care provision. Refugees, people with additional needs, those on the margins are left to fend for themselves in dangerous circumstances. Alongside the demise of social infra-structure, there is evidence that while the poor are getting

poorer, the rich are getting richer. Instead of downward redistribution we are witnessing upward redistribution.

If we see ourselves as participant-observers, as opposed to simply observers or victims in this global crisis, then systemic practice can create opportunities to navigate with consciousness of our power in the global crisis. In subscribing to a systemic worldview, it becomes incoherent to defer responsibility for the world crisis to political, corporate, and celebrity “masters of the universe”. Systemic thinking unlocks opportunities to generate transformation of human culture and human services.

Our systemic movement is always working towards a more collective, inter-related, interactive and cooperative coherence and game change. This way of being and thinking in the world is inevitably not only transformative but transgressive in that we take a stand against the systematic, intentional maintenance of poverty, persecution, displacement and inequality. Having a systemic critique enables us to resist the “consensus trance” of neoliberal discourses intended to numb and dumb people down into disconnection, separation and self-interest at the expense of communal and environmental wellbeing and interconnection. Systemic irreverence towards any theories, our own or those of others, is helpful in creating out of the box thinking and action for responding creatively and sensitively to need. The ethical stance of theoretical and structural irreverence supports the conviction to continuing identifying and responding to need, to continue to think, to articulate, while still retaining an aesthetics of care in relationships and in our writings. It generates the vigour, humour, verve, and penetrating clarity that the systemic movement brings to finding ways forward together. These chapters provide some shade and light to further nurture the green shoots of systemic sensibility and action. They echo the surge of renewed interest systemic practice.

The book is divided into two main sections, the first called *Times of Change and Solidarity*, while the second section is entitled *Transformative Conversations*. When we received the rich diversity of material for the book, it seemed to us that these two headlines seemed to best way of speaking of the content.

The enthusiasm of the contributors to this book working alongside us on this venture has strengthened a sense of a contextually innovative systemic community in which we feel honoured to participate.