



Title: Systemic Reflexivity  
Building theory for organizational consultancy

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# Systemic Reflexivity

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Building theory for organisational consultancy

**Christine Oliver**

## **Abstract**

This dissertation argues for the value of the concept of systemic reflexivity in sense making, orientation and action in systemic practice, and in organisational practice in particular. The concept emerges as a theme through the development of two specific strands of published work from 1992 to 2013, that of Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory (CMM) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Both lines of inquiry highlight the moral dimension of practitioners' conceptualisation and practice. Systemic reflexivity alerts us to the opportunities and constraints system participants make for the system in focus, facilitating exploration of a system's coherence, through a detailed framework for systemic thinking which links patterns of communication to their narratives of influence and narrative consequences. It provides the conditions for enabling individual and collective responsibility for the ways that communication shapes our social worlds. The concept is illustrated in practice through a range of case studies within the published works.

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## Introduction

This dissertation will present the interconnecting themes of the publications from 1992-2012 selected for submission for this thesis for a PhD by published work , showing original contribution to the field of systemic theory, with impact on the practice of organisational consultancy.

Oliver, C. (1992) A Focus on Moral Story Making in Therapy using Coordinated Management of Meaning. <i>Human Systems: The Journal of Systemic Consultation and management</i> , 3, 217-231.
Oliver, C. (1996) Systemic Eloquence. <i>Human Systems: The Journal of Systemic Consultation and Management</i> , 7 (4), 247-264.
Oliver, C. & Barge, J.K. (2002) Appreciative Inquiry as Aesthetic Sensitivity: Coordination of Meaning, Purpose and Reflexivity in Dalsgaard, C., Voetmann, K. & Meisner, T. (eds.), <i>Change: Appreciative Conversations in Theory and Practice</i> , Denmark: Psykologisk Forlag.
Barge, J.K. & Oliver, C. (2003) Working with Appreciation in Managerial Practice, <i>Academy of Management Review</i> , 28 (1), 124-142.
Oliver, C., Herasymowych, M. & Senko, H. (2003) <i>Complexity, Relationships and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide</i> , Canada: MHA Institute.
Oliver, C. (2004a) Critical Appreciative Inquiry: Reworking a Consultancy Discourse, paper for the conference on organisational discourse, Kings College; chapter in Peck, E. (2005) <i>An Introduction to Organisational Development in Healthcare</i> , Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press.
Oliver, C. (2005) <i>Reflexive Inquiry</i> , London: Karnac.
Oliver, C. (2008) The Collapsed Chair Consultation: Making Moments of Significance Work, in Campbell, D., & Huffington, C. (eds.) <i>Organisations Connected: A Handbook of Systemic Consultation</i> , London: Karnac.
Fitzgerald, S., Oliver, C. & Hoxsey, J. (2010) Appreciative Inquiry as a Shadow Process, <i>Journal of Management Inquiry</i> , 19 (3), 220-233.
Oliver, C. (2010) Reflexive Coaching in McDowell, A. & Parker, S. (eds.) <i>The Coaching Relationship</i> , London: Routledge.
Oliver, C., Fitzgerald, S. And Hoxsey, J. (2011) Critical Appreciation of Appreciative Inquiry: Reflexive Choices for Shadow Dancing, <i>Review of Business Research</i> , 11 (2), 45-59.
Oliver, C. (2013?) Coordinating Logics of Meaning and Action: Developing a Vocabulary for (Un)consciousness, in Littlejohn, S.W. (ed.) <i>The Coordinated Management of Meaning: A Festschrift in Honour of W. Barnett Pearce</i> , Madison, N.J: Farleigh Dickinson University Press.

**Figure 1: Table of Publications**

The rationale for developing the two strands of inquiry in this dissertation, Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory (CMM) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is complex (and partially unknown) but it relates to a desire to make theory work in practice. I would argue that it is ethically important within a community of practice to develop shared theoretical and ethical reference points to justify decision making in practice and to be able to give an account of those linkages. While I would acknowledge that the narratives we tell can never fit or match our lived practices completely, it is pragmatically useful to aspire to coherence between theory and practice and to encourage a relationship of reciprocity and authenticity, so that in giving an account of what we do, we develop that account to focus and improve practice. My own experience with CMM and AI has been that I have found myself feeling incoherence between theory as it has been presented, and my experience of lived practice. I have grown to realise the usefulness of experiences of dissonance and have attempted to cultivate my ability to notice points of disconnection, developing and transforming theoretical frames in the process.

The structure of the dissertation is as follows:

- a brief introduction to core definitions and features of the work;
- the development of conceptualisation traced through the contribution of each publication, highlighting in particular two main bodies of work, that of Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory and Appreciative Inquiry, placing the work in the context of other researchers in the field;
- discussion and drawing together of the contribution to systemic practical theory;
- conclusion.

### **Introducing systemic reflexivity**

A running theme through my publications has been the development of a theoretical narrative for reflexivity in communicative systems. The notion of *systemic reflexivity* has emerged in an original form from these developments and this dissertation traces its increasingly complex and integrative conceptualisation. Although many writers have discussed reflexivity (for instance, Burnham, 2005; Cunliffe, 2002; Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004; Dallos & Draper, 2005), *systemic reflexivity* has not previously been offered as a concept in the systemic psychotherapy field or indeed in writings on systemic approaches to organisational consultancy. However, it has emerged as a concept in some work on decision making in the shifting landscapes of career development (Tams & Marshall, 2011).

The authors define *systemic reflexivity* as a subjective meaning making process facilitated by the observation of contradiction and incoherence in social systems and the consideration of personal impact on those social systems. This description represents a fit with the characterisation of adult development as an ability to recognise and question paradoxes, contradictions and assumptions, proposed by writers about adult learning such as Kegan (1994).

It also speaks to my own evolving learning process, identifying gaps and inconsistencies in systemic theory and practice, employing insight from my own practice as a systemic psychotherapist, consultant and teacher with the consequence of the development of theory and ultimately novel conceptualisation.

My own use of the term *systemic reflexivity* is inclusive of such systemic observation, taking seriously the idea that the ways that we think, feel, talk, listen, act, and construct narratives about those interactions, have consequences for self and others in the systems of meaning and action within which we participate. However, it not only invites consideration and inquiry of those systems of meaning and action but assumes a (partial) moral responsibility for their outcomes and for facilitating *systemic reflexivity* for and with other participants of the system. Further, if advocating systemic observation, evaluation and recalibration, the notion of *system* itself needs specification, a task not undertaken by Tams & Marshall (2011).

My conceptualisation of *systemic reflexivity* articulates a complex view of *system* extending previous usage (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Keeney, 1983; Boscolo et al, 1987; Dallos & Draper, 2005; Campbell et al, 1989; Campbell & Huffington, 2008, Watzlawick et al, 2011). My specific contribution is made through the unique detailing of a framework for thinking about what counts as a *system*, comprising hypothesised patterns of feeling, meaning and action shaping and shaped by narratives of culture, relationship and identity (see particularly Oliver et al, 2003; Oliver, 2005; 2008; 2010). I also give reflexivity a more centred role in meaning making and action than previously identified in systemic work. This will be elaborated in the thesis.

The notion of *system* has taken many forms (Pearce, 1997) and indeed, has developed in meaning over time within the systemic psychotherapy literature. It is useful in the explication of my own thesis, to trace something of that development.

Early systems theory, based on first order cybernetics, assuming the objectivity of the 'outside' observer, treats the system in modernist, mechanistic terms but does have some application for human interaction, expressing some principles that are relevant (von Bertalanffy, 1968). For instance, the notion that any action within a system stimulates a response which becomes feedback



to the system, implies the possibility of reflexive learning, containing the idea that system participants can reflect on their behaviours and the consequences of those behaviours for future action.

Bateson (1972) highlights the significance of feedback in conceptualising a system as a unit structured on feedback with its interacting parts exerting mutual influence and connected to each other in observable and coherent patterns. The characteristics and patterns of a system are seen as evolving and not possible to predict or control (unlike earlier mechanistic notions of system which were based on the possibility of control). Actions, in these terms, are always responses to what has gone before and responses are actions, in circular relationship.

The innovative work of Watzlawick et al (2011) in the 1960s, building on Bateson's contribution, places communication at the heart of the systemic enterprise and links it to context and interaction. They identify the vicious circles that emerge when discrepant punctuations of communication become repeated patterns, and highlight the role of meta-communication in resolving such difficulties. They make the point that 'the ability to meta-communicate appropriately is not only the *conditio sine qua non* of successful communication but is intimately linked with the enormous problem of awareness of self and others' (34). They define the concept of pattern in communication as shown by 'repetition or redundancy of events' (99).

While my thesis develops the concept of pattern in relation to awareness of self and others, hypothesising connections between behaviour, thought, emotional responses and their narratives of influence and consequence, the focus for Watzlawick et al (2011) is only patterns of observable behaviour, as symbolic meaning is 'objectively undecidable' (26). The claim in my thesis is not for 'objectivity' but for a framework that facilitates orientation, hypothesis and action.

Dallos & Draper (2005) make the point that what counts as a system is always a hypothesis of the observer. They suggest that communication feedback can either lead to change or stability of existing patterns depending on how open or closed to information (and learning) the system is. Communicative systems need both patterns for healthy survival and development. My own thesis offers language for detailing the interaction of 'open' and 'closed' systems and the opportunities they provide for reflexivity (see p. 17).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Milan group, less overtly behaviourist than early systems approaches, building on Bateson's work (1972), highlight the significance of the co-creation of shared meaning in relationships through communication processes, in their efforts to treat families suffering complex mental health problems (Palazzoli et al, 1978; Palazzoli et al, 1980; Cecchin, 1987; Boscolo et al,

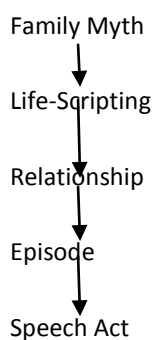
1987). Their work draws attention to how pathological patterns of identity and relationship are constructed interpersonally and have interpersonal effects. Their work shifts attention towards second order cybernetics where the systemic practitioner is invited into a position of reflexivity, less an expert stance, more one of collaboration in conversation. The Milan approach encourages curiosity and challenge towards one's own beliefs, not assuming that this stance will inevitably lead to productive outcomes but stimulating conditions for greater choice in decision making and action (Cecchin, 1987).

Campbell et al (1989), applying Milan thinking to the organisational consultancy context, suggest that patterns of meaning/belief and behaviour develop in relation to organisational tasks which affect communication and relationships. Consultants using a systemic approach stimulate conversations that facilitate development of these beliefs and behaviours, with a central aim of increased systemic awareness. They speak of consultants facilitating a self-reflective position in relation to beliefs and behaviour of organisational participants. It is notable that there is no vocabulary for feelings in this approach to thinking about systems; the emphasis is on beliefs and behaviours. The notion of *systemic reflexivity* developed in this thesis offers a vocabulary for linking feeling responses of system participants to thinking and action and the narratives shaping those responses (see for instance, Oliver, 2004b; 2005; 2013; Oliver et al, 2003).

Van der Haar and Hosking (2004) helpfully connect the notion of reflexivity to two different theoretical traditions. A constructivist approach focuses on the curious inquiry of the individual to their own discourse, a meta-cognitive activity. A constructionist approach has a socio-relational focus, where the individual treats their actions as constitutive of social and political realities. The concept of *systemic reflexivity* incorporates both approaches to reflexivity, emphasising the ability to act consciously, with purpose, towards the systemic provenances and effects of one's actions. This approach fits with and extends that of Frosh and Barraitser (2008) who define reflexivity as "an interactively critical practice that is constantly reflected back on itself and is always suspicious of the productions of its own knowledge" (350). *Systemic reflexivity* is less concerned with 'suspicion' but more, aspires to participate consciously in the construction of the system with commitment to accountability for one's part in that construction.

Co-ordinated Management of Meaning Theory (CMM), developing in the late 1970s, by a group of academics within the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst), has provided a rich context for a social constructionist reshaping of the notion of system (Pearce & Cronen, 1980). CMM is a systemic and social constructionist framework for making meaning of communication and for guiding action within the communicative system. It has had a profound

influence on systemic thinking and practice, particularly in its elaboration of the meaning and performance of context. A systemic framework in these terms, building on Bateson (1972) is represented by a contextual model which shows how communication patterns of interaction between self and others and the meanings or narratives we individually and collectively make of that experience link together in a hierarchical relationship. Bateson (1972) offers two levels of hierarchy (digital and analogic) in making sense of communication whereas CMM offers a model of multiple levels (Cronen & Pearce, 1985). These hierarchical levels are constructed by the observer to facilitate systemic hypothesising (see figure 2). The model assumes the individual practitioner is a participant observer of and in the narratives and patterns of interaction at different levels of context, with the consequence of the moral obligation to inquire into the social worlds that are made, and the commitment to play a part in developing those social worlds for the better, through engaged communication practice, which has the critical purpose of constructing opportunities for social transformation in therapeutic, organisational and other group and community contexts.



**Figure 2: an example of multiple levels of context (Cronen & Pearce, 1985: 72)**

Having spent a year within the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts in 1987, involved in communication research, I was able to return to the UK and develop and apply CMM to the emergent systemic field in both psychotherapy and organisational studies. My publications with this focus, tightly link reflexivity to systemic development, and in the process, my voice has become significant in the development of CMM theory (Oliver, 1992; 1996; 2004a; 2004b; 2005; 2008; 2010; Oliver & Lang, 1994; Oliver et al, 2003). One specific theoretical development, with practical consequences for consultancy (and psychotherapy), has emerged from an interest in how communication can create muddles, confusions and paradoxes with often disturbing effects on system participants. Building on the work by Bateson (1972) on the double bind, Watzlawick et al (2011) on paradox and Cronen et al (1982) on strange loops, much of my work has offered ways to articulate such communication confusions and fragmentations with greater accessibility for the practitioner and indeed for other system participants (see particularly Oliver et al, 2003). In this

work I have identified opportunities, from a position of *systemic reflexivity*, for facilitating emergence from paradox when it maintains an unproductive dynamic and systemic transformation of fragmentation and polarisation.

Another significant vehicle for the development of *systemic reflexivity* has been my critical exploration with colleagues, of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology (Oliver & Barge, 2002; Barge & Oliver, 2003; Oliver, 2004a; 2004b; 2005; Fitzgerald et al, 2010; Oliver et al, 2011), a prevalent consultancy model for systemic and social constructionist practice. My work has critiqued conventional models of AI through a reflexive lens, generating a new model of practice called Reflexive Inquiry (Oliver, 2005).

Organisational consultancy in this developing theoretical account, is treated as a socially constructed communication process with organisational narratives mediated through communicative interaction, recognising that knowledge of such processes is discursively produced, its status provisional, contingent and local (Gergen, 1989; Stacey, 2000; Shotter, 2003). Within this framework, *systemic reflexivity* enables the organisational consultant to acknowledge their part in the system, to take partial responsibility for the possibilities and constraints created through communication and to help others to do the same (Oliver, 2005). The aim of consultancy in these terms is to facilitate the powers of critical systemic interpretation and action for organisational members as well as for the consultant herself in order to conjointly inquire into and transform the communicative system.

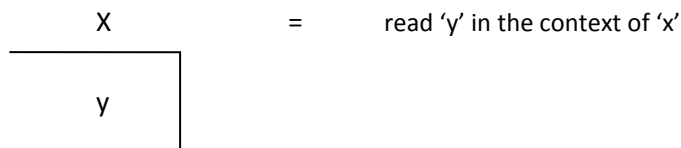
I further propose that the systemic literature has, on the whole, shown a tendency to 'skirt' the 'unconscious' in describing organisational and consultancy communication processes and that a nascent theme of my writing has been to explore the role of the 'unconscious' through a focus on mechanisms in the development of communication patterns such as the strange loop and through a focus on Shadow processes in organisations (Oliver et al, 2003, Oliver, 2004b, Oliver, 2005). In these terms the 'unconscious' refers to those aspects of experience that have not been given sufficient narrative form. This dissertation elaborates on its role in communicative systems further, arguing that a commitment to *systemic reflexivity* requires an attitude of openness to what might be reflexively revealed, consciously and unconsciously, in consultancy conversations.

### **Building the foundations of systemic reflexivity through developing CMM theory**

My first paper (Oliver, 1992) with its focus on moral story and decision making, brings CMM into the practical world of systemic psychotherapy, attempting to articulate the use of CMM in therapeutic

conversations. In the process, CMM is introduced to a wider British audience. Previous descriptions of CMM had held theoretical value and promised practical value but the links were not easy to make for the practitioner, given the almost algebraic form that CMM took (e.g. Cronen & Pearce, 1985).

For instance (see figure 3):



**Figure 3: A description of a relationship between two contexts (Cronen & Pearce, 1985: 78).**

In deciding to write the 1992 paper, I saw the particular value of CMM at that time, as in providing a structure for highlighting the moral imperatives, partly unconscious, that govern our action, when in interactions with others. CMM expressed these ideas through the notion of deontic logic which identifies and differentiates forms of moral logic in human interaction such as legitimation or obligation (Cronen & Pearce, 1985). My own paper employs these ideas to facilitate a moral perspective for systemic hypothesising. For systemic practitioners, the process of hypothesising or systemic sense making orientates us as participant-actors in the system (Cecchin, 1987). In placing the moral nature of our stories and decision making as central to hypothesising, an important dimension is made relevant in constructing systemic narratives by exploring the practical-moral implications of how communicative participants construct action, identities and relationships:

“all action is seen through a moral lens; language itself is seen as imbued with connotations of rights, duties, obligations, criticism, responsibilities, justification, privilege and the like” (Oliver, 1992: 221).

In emphasising moral imperatives in interaction, our reflexive responsibilities are also implied. Our actions have moral outcomes, constructing opportunities and constraints in meaning making and consequences for action. Whereas this paper (Oliver, 1992) highlights the role of the individual in shaping interaction, acknowledging how the individual is themselves shaped by interaction, systemic thinking can sometimes show a tendency to ‘lose’ and undervalue the place of the individual, placing the ‘we’ in hierarchical relationship ‘above’ the ‘I’ in too linear a relationship (see Gergen, 1987). This paper “considers how wider social forces shape individual perceptions and how the individual as agent shapes the world” (Oliver, 1992: 219). This focus is useful for therapists and consultants working with organisational members as ultimately the exploration of how an individual shapes the system has empowering potential. It highlights how we not only develop story telling

abilities throughout life but also how we develop abilities to tell stories about our stories, for instance to be able to treat stories of self as emergent; to appreciate that our stories do not equate with our patterns of living; abilities to see our actions as purposive and choiceful. Such abilities imply *systemic reflexivity* though as a concept this was not articulated at this stage of writing. This attention to the moral decisions within our stories heralds the beginnings of my interest in reflexivity, seeing it as an ability to position ourselves in our storytelling with an appreciation that our narrative resources and practices are temporary, partial and emergent, and active decision making is possible and desirable for shaping those resources and practices.

The paper *Systemic Eloquence* (Oliver, 1996), extends the exploration of reflexive responsibility for system participants by focusing on 'social accountability', a theme initially developed by Shotter (1989) but elaborated on here by linking CMM explicitly with the original Milan systemic psychotherapy principles of hypothesising, circularity and neutrality, a connection previously not made (Cecchin, 1987). It explores the parts social actors play in shaping the meanings, choices and actions of themselves and others. It challenges the binary of "a world of objectivity or a world of nothing real", (Oliver, 1996: 248), establishing criteria within systemic practice for assessing claims for justifying actions. It foregrounds the critical responsibilities intrinsic to our powers to think and act through using the language of *relational ethical commitments*: humility, discernment, responsibility, courage and generosity.... "we co-construct in the pulls and pushes of dialogue with others, conditions of obligation for our own and others' actions" (Oliver, 1996: 253).

In early systemic vocabulary, the prescribed stance of *neutrality* means a relativistic avoidance of moral judgement; an "alliance with everyone and no-one" (Oliver, 1996: 256). Cecchin (1987), reframing *neutrality* to *curiosity*, expresses a more post modern view about the political implications of language. His conclusion is to give up "the attempt to direct people" (408). Later, with his concept of *irreverence*, he shows an appreciation of the potentially paralysing effects of non instrumentality and argues for the rejection of any belief or position that constrains therapeutic movement (Cecchin et al, 1992). This stance begins to encourage consciousness about, and responsibility for, our beliefs rather than avoidance, encouraging a form of self awareness that invites us to identify our prejudices.

However, *systemic eloquence* (Oliver, 1996) challenges implicit binaries in Cecchin's developing narrative...truth/irreverence; believe in your ideas/don't; therapy or social control. The binaries of belieflessness/objectivity, the moral/the useful, are problematic for the systemic practitioner as they provide no account about how the individual connects with purpose to their own goals and values and that of others while continuing to maintain systemic commitments. *Systemic eloquence* takes us

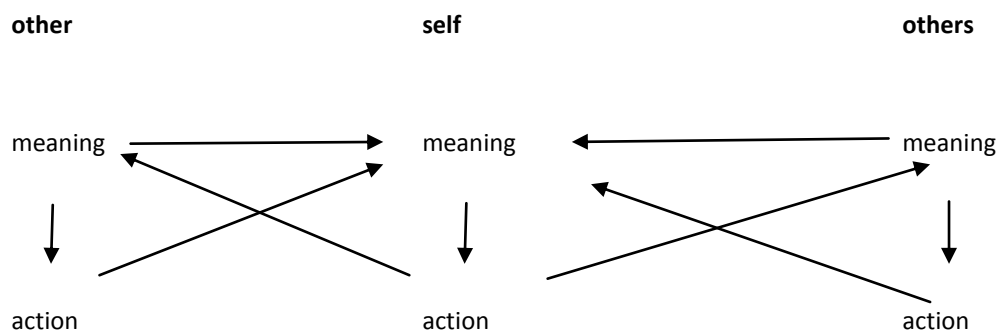
further in 'allowing' the systemic actor to communicate with passion, conviction and persuasiveness in the pursuit of therapeutic and consultancy goals, employing strategies of rhetorical and social<sup>1</sup> eloquence (Pearce, 1989) with the ultimate purpose of *systemic* eloquence. It advocates developing the ability to distinguish, negotiate and communicate meaning about the communication act, for instance clarifying whether it is a request, preference, invitation, demand, requirement, legitimation, obligation, prohibition and so on. In this frame, the task is not to avoid instruction but to reflexively "observe, name and make judgements about the dimensions of instruction, obligation, legitimation that we create as we communicate" (Oliver, 1996: 258). This argument repositions systemic practice as moral engagement contextualised by relational ethical commitments. The stance of neutrality (Cecchin, 1987) while useful for some therapeutic purposes is not the determining principle governing moral positioning. *Systemic eloquence* facilitates situated prioritisation of social or rhetorical eloquence, two different styles of dialogue in contextual relationship with each other. Social eloquence is descriptive of behaviour motivated by exploration and opening up of language and experience while rhetorical eloquence is behaviour motivated by a therapeutic desire to bring structure, to push for meaning, even to bring closure to exploration.

Oliver (1996) provides a sense making framework so we don't become de-moralised and de-contextualised participants in the systemic dialogue. Utility and morality are in contextual relationship, not dichotomised.

A significant contribution of the *systemic eloquence* paper is to reframe the focus of the *system* for the consultant as "the connections and distinctions between an individual's emergent logic of meaning and action and the logic of interaction between self and others" (261). A model for systemic inquiry is offered that links meaning/meaning; meaning/action; action/action and can be seen to represent a contribution to an emerging conceptualisation of *systemic reflexivity* for both consultant and organisational members, by providing a systemic model for reflexive analysis (see figure 4).

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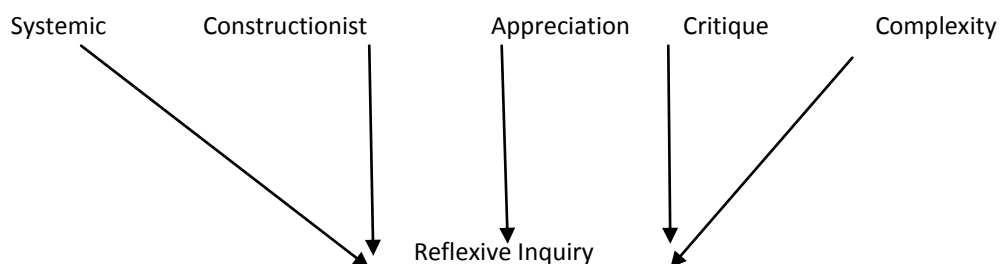
<sup>1</sup> Social eloquence privileges the other's voice and 'logic' for interpreting social interaction; rhetorical eloquence privileges the voice and 'logic' of self.



**Figure 4: Template for Linking Questions, Stories and Openings for Action (Oliver, 1996: 261).**

Creating the concept of *systemic eloquence* represents an attempt to help systemic practitioners move from a dichotomised systemic narrative to one that is more contextual and reflexively situated. Feedback over twenty years from systemic psychotherapy trainees and students on an MSc in Systemic Management and Organisation at KCC Foundation, indicates that this endeavour facilitates a greater freedom of action and positioning while the reflexive ethical criteria articulated in the paper provide a secure base from which to make exploratory and rhetorical judgements (Oliver, 1996).

While the concept of *systemic eloquence* arguably facilitates a more liberated practice for therapists, managers and consultants, I wished, following its publication, to provide a more robust theoretical justification and platform for the centralising of reflexivity, specifically within an organizational consultancy context. This wish manifested itself in the book *Reflexive Inquiry* (2005), synthesising five conceptual strands, influential on reflexive practice, but not previously linked conceptually, brought alive through organisational case study (see figure 5).



**Figure 5: Five Conceptual Strands Shaping Reflexive Inquiry (from Oliver, 2005)**

The book emphasises, as do all the publications submitted, how we create the social realities within which we live through the detail of daily interactive practices. These practices are shaped by local, historical and cultural social processes. Self, relational and cultural examination is invited through the



design and facilitation of generative consultancy dialogue. Thus organisational members are invited to critically evaluate their own actions; the coordination of those actions and their relational and cultural effects on their working systems ...“we become responsible and accountable for our choices, our actions, and our contributions to a relational system” (Oliver, 2005: 3). My notion of the *interpretive act* is introduced, a metaphorical place or space for the exercise of critical choice making, where connections between feeling, meaning, action and the narratives shaping and shaped by interactions can be made by taking a position of (systemic) reflexivity (see figure 6, reproduced from Oliver, 2005)

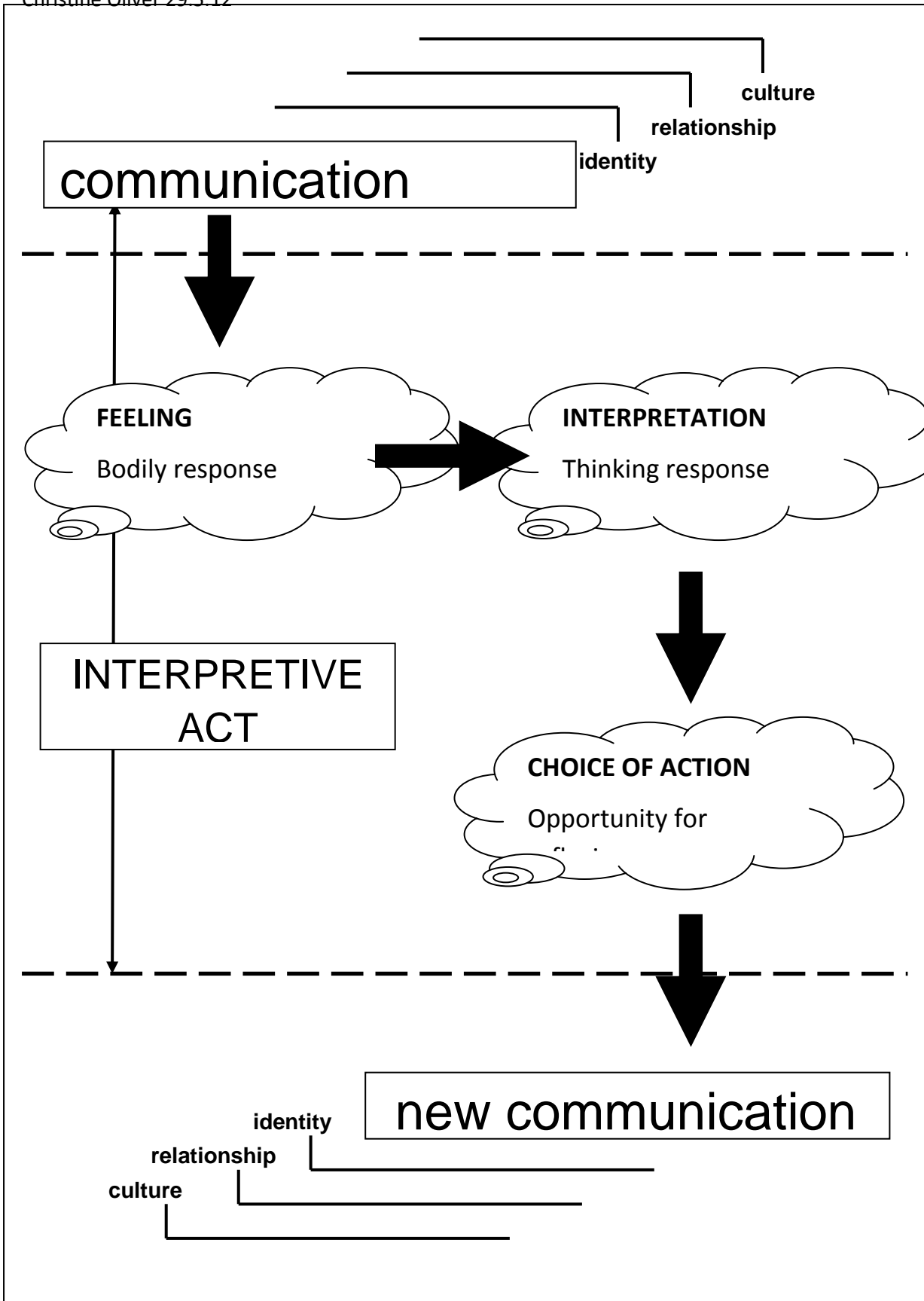


Figure 6: The Interpretive Act Shaping and Shaped by Communicative Interactions (Oliver, 2005).

In juxtaposing *systemic, constructionist, appreciative, complexity* and *critical* theory, within a reflexive frame, the participant in a system is positioned strategically, to notice and identify their interpretive and communicative acts and to take responsibility for how they contribute to organisational and individual alignment. The introduction of critical theory legitimises inquiry into the workings of constraint, opportunity, voice and interest, made through systemic interaction (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). I develop the notion of levels of critique to help to integrate critique into systemic practice in a more explicit way and to challenge naive notions of appreciation which run the danger of undermining robust inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). Critique becomes a more complex, contextual and multi-dimensional notion depending on its focus, its purpose and its quality of *systemic reflexivity*. The aim of developing this notion is to help consultants appreciate that different forms of critique create different opportunities and constraints. First order critique takes a linear and fragmented form; behaviour, feeling, thought and narrative seem disconnected. A lack of awareness is shown of the place of behaviour of an individual or group within the wider patterns of organisation; either self or other is critiqued without reference to reflexive, contextual understandings. Second order critique involves recognising the part one (and/or other) plays in a pattern but lack of wider contextual awareness. Third order critique involves recognition of contribution to the systemic context, enabling reflexive evaluation of the system by organizational members .... “and challenge to naïve and simplistic stories of equality and hierarchy while maintaining systemic integrity” (Oliver, 2005: 14). Third order critique can be said to represent *systemic reflexivity*.

The argument is made that a mix of conscious and unconscious strategies and behaviours of polarisation and fragmentation are linked to poor reflexivity. Potential patterns of fragmentation and polarisation are identified and described, which relate to particular fears (for instance, of failure, responsibility, loss, conflict) setting in motion polarisation and paradox. Reflexive strategies are offered to change the context. These include: examining the pattern; exiting the relationship; and developing a charmed loop which enables a more sustained reflexivity to the patterns we participate in (Oliver, 2005).

My work linking patterns of polarisation and reflexivity and their potential consequences, is developed more fully in a book written with colleagues (Oliver et al, 2003). This book is unique in the way it offers a practical guide to reflexivity for organisational members.

The book explores organisational development in a complex world, offering a tool to organisational consultants in addressing organisational members, attempting the challenge of facilitating reflexive action, arguing its importance for organisational efficiency and effectiveness. It highlights the

significance of relationships for effective functioning and offers a framework for sense making and action that facilitates relational resilience. While the valuing of relationships in organisational life is not new (McNamee & Gergen, 1999), what is new is the detail of language for thinking about a reflexive relationship to behavioural patterns, their contexts and consequences, within relational systems.

Reflexive practice is presented as including: critical consciousness about the patterns of meaning and action within an organisational system; a combination of consciousness, curiosity and empathy; an appreciation that identities, relationships and cultural practices are interconnected to our and others' actions; commitment to making choices about how we think and act; responsibility and accountability for our choices, actions and contributions to the system.

Building on the notion of the *interpretive act* (Oliver, 2005), the book emphasizes the significance of *choice points* in communication that shape how the system evolves. It explores how patterns can be unconsciously driven and how we can experience a feeling of 'no choice' within a communication pattern. "The notion of choice arises in the context of reflexivity when we are aware or conscious that we are operating in a pattern" (Oliver et al, 2003: 3). The idea that we have choice about how we act undermines common organisational stories about helplessness in the face of top-down actions, thus potentially empowers individuals and groups to act constructively through discussion and through identifying leverage points within the patterns within which organisational members (and consultants) participate.

My co-authors and I develop the notion of over-connected or under-connected patterned reactions as compared with reflexive actions. Over-connected reactions are those that act out an unconscious feeling without thought; under-connected reactions are those where action is divorced from the information that arises from emotional responses. Unwelcome patterns often occur because we oversimplify the complexity of communication. Reflexivity is characterised by skills in noticing and appreciating the complexity of the system, inquiring into and challenging our and others thinking and actions, creating more purposeful and conscious relational systems.

It is argued in Oliver et al (2003) that the strategy of polarisation simplifies understanding of the system, shown in either/or thinking or in the more unconscious form of splitting whereas a systemic approach respects the complexity of the system; acknowledging the partiality of our own and others' perspectives; assuming that patterns of meaning and action are emergent; mindful of role and relational responsibilities. While these are common practices for a systemic practitioner, the highlighting and indexing of strategies of polarisation as an important focus for reflexivity is new,

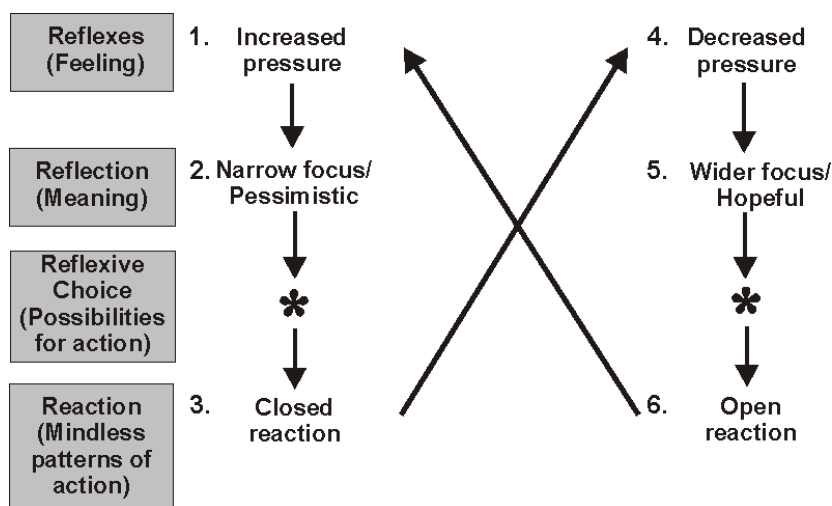
helping organisational members to grasp, in accessible language, the value of developing reflexive understandings about the patterns of communication they participate in, demonstrating how problems and dilemmas are connected to the relationships they are embedded within. In particular, the book develops the notion of the *strange loop*, building on the work of Cronen et al (1982) showing how paradoxical patterns can develop. A strange loop represents an illusion of movement but always comes back to the same place. Apparent movement in the pattern is polarised, paradoxical and contradictory. Cronen et al (1982) show the strange loop as a paradoxical form of hierarchy of contexts as developed by CMM theory. This book adds to their work by suggesting that a strange loop is a linear, self-limiting defensive response to challenge or pressure, allowing only temporary relief, designed to control or fix the challenge but instead exacerbating it. Thus, the strange loop is treated as having meaning and purpose for the system and, by implication, can be a tool in hypothesising.

Each side in the strange loop is disconnected from the other, predicated on the unconscious mechanism of splitting. It is not easy for participants in a system to form a pattern of meaning that allows contradictory opposites to make sense. The introduction of the unconscious mechanisms of splitting and polarisation as strategies is not identified in the original work on the strange loop (Cronen et al, 1982). The 2003 work also alters the structure of the strange loop pattern, suggesting that it is most use as a tool for making sense and guiding action, if higher order contexts such as culture, relationship and identity are shown to contextualise an episodic pattern of interaction which in turn shapes the contexts of culture, relationship and identity. The original strange loop (Cronen et al, 1982) represented contexts in any order; the episode could be a context for making sense of relationship, for instance. Whereas the ordering of contexts, when hypothesising, is flexible, the structuring of the strange loop with the higher order contexts shaping the episode which in turn shapes the higher order contexts, helps to distinguish between narratives shaping action and action shaping narratives.

Oliver et al (2003) show that there is a tendency for participants to relate to contradictory behaviours as if they are separate and fragmented, not connected to a lived pattern. The paradoxical pattern is thus experienced without understanding, without creating a pattern of meaning that makes sense and shows its logic. Creating a narrative about a strange loop experience enables us to see a relationship between the fragmented parts, thus setting a context for *systemic reflexivity* and transformation.

The work further offers detailed conceptualisation about different potential forms the paradox might take in organisational life and facilitates thinking about leverage for action (Oliver, 2005).

Such conceptualisation is generative and becomes a tool for organisational consultant and members, providing a container for complex information and a frame for making sense, creating the aesthetics of pattern in a relational situation that feels chaotic and unstable. It shows a pattern of connection between apparently fragmented elements, detoxifying interaction so that it becomes collectively owned, potentially enhancing systemic reflexive agency, situated judgement and choice making.



**Figure 7: Strange loop pattern (Oliver et al, 2003: 31)**

The (2003) book further hypothesises the conditions for the emergence of strange loops: polarised attempts to ‘resolve’ complexity; fragmented approaches to problem solving; the inability to connect events and behaviours in a systemic pattern; acting as if our narratives equate with reality, with poor abilities in allowing the existence of other narratives; self worth requiring an over identification with our own narratives, contingent on being ‘right’.

Descriptions are provided in detail of the workings of a strange loop which shows how we can fragment personal responsibility at times of stress. This provides some linkage with the notions of open and closed systems (Dallos & Draper, 1985) in that such fragmentation stimulates systemically *closed* reactions such as blaming others, dehumanizing others motivations, difficulty in seeing the other as separate and thinking ‘our way’ is best, complaining or gossiping. Our closed reactions have homeostatic ripple effects on others in the system. The model challenges participants in a communication system to act as if they have choice and facilitates the emergence of choice. The work shows how there is a paradoxical tension at the core of reflexivity – the ability to hold optimistic and pessimistic feelings and thoughts and not feel the urge to resolve them through action.

In these terms, *systemic reflexivity* and transformation involve: creating a patterned narrative and seeing that pattern as one of multiple patterns i.e. part of a wider picture or narrative; recognizing potential patterns; challenging the narratives that maintain the patterns; making reflexive choices in relation to thinking and acting.

Defining the strange loop pattern is useful because it enables seeing the polarised pattern in an externalised systemic form. It provides a narrative structure for making sense of a communicative system and for focusing action. It enables a different relationship and potentially a different responsibility towards action. The choices made become more available for review and challenge. Change can be prioritised at a meaning or action level; patterns of behaviour are linked to emotions in a way that is mediated by reflection rather than through behavioural enactment.

While some of the publications submitted focus on reflexivity for system participants (Oliver, 1992; 2005; Oliver et al, 2003), other work emphasises the process for the consultant (for instance, Oliver 1996). A chapter in a book on systemic approaches to organisation (Oliver, 2008) takes up the task of describing key moments of a consultation, examining the consultant's choices in detail and the ways those choices and actions are enhanced by a commitment to *moral reflexivity*, attempting to recognize the implicit rules for legitimate behaviour in a system. In the account of an organisation where decision-making and communication have broken down, a key moment is defined as where the choice point within the *interpretive act* is considered of significance in determining future opportunities and constraints for system participants – challenging or maintaining communication patterns.

The work explores the significance of context in facilitating meaning and the moral implications of the interpretation and labeling of a communication. Bateson (1972) argues that the interpretation of a communication is contingent on the contexts of time, place and relationship. He also distinguishes between the content and process of a communication, arguing that where there is a felt incongruity between content and process, the effect can be disturbing, especially where there are no implicit rules in a relational system legitimising meta-communication, disabling participants from identifying a communication as incongruous. He calls this form of pattern a double bind.

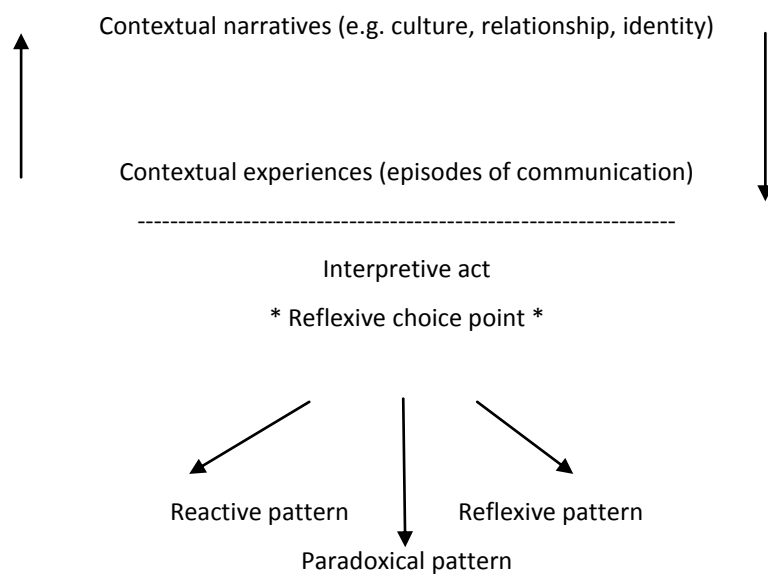
In Oliver (2008) a linkage is articulated between double bind theory and CMM and it is shown how CMM extends double bind theory through the provision of a frame of *multiple* contexts and through the connection of micro and macro communication contexts. This highlights the *interpretive act*, originally developed in the work on Reflexive Inquiry (Oliver, 2005) as a metaphorical (micro) place for exercising moral reflexivity, thus exposing the individual's responsibility for positioning others and themselves in a discourse. The work shows the mutual influence of *systemic* behaviours and

meanings, highlighting and developing the role of reflexive meta-communication in a double bind process. Thus the consultant shows a preparedness to make sense of muddles, dilemmas, confusions and unwanted patterns in consultancy systems.

The editors, Campbell & Huffington (2008: 39) note how Oliver “draws our attention to her alertness as a consultant to ‘incongruity between felt experience and verbal language’ and how important this is to signaling areas of conflict or difficulty that cannot be voiced...”, adding that “Oliver’s special contribution to the book is to highlight and link micro and macro aspects of the communication process and to provide a framework for making sense of it” (40).

While the latter focuses on the reflexive leadership of the consultant, a chapter from a book on “The Coaching Relationship” (Oliver, 2010) provides an opportunity to show how the stance of reflexivity can facilitate leadership action from the perspective of the organisational coach. In this reflexive approach to coaching, leadership beliefs, assumptions and expectations, in the form of narratives, are linked to behaviour and to the effects of behaviour on others in the system. The meaning and practice of *reflexive agency* is developed and the term *communication system* is employed to facilitate a contemporary understanding of the notion of system – the “network of business concern, conversation and relationship” (Oliver, 2009: 101). The chapter links systemic and social constructionist thinking to the work of the coach, treating language, narrative and conversation as significant for the coachee in influencing their system of interest and concern. Leadership action (and conversation) takes on a moral dimension as the leader is positioned in these terms to enable and constrain powers to act for self and others, thus is obliged to develop reflexive abilities to notice their internal dialogue and narrative and imagine and note the potential effects of their behaviour. “A coach, with the aim of facilitating *reflexive agency*, encourages a coachee to make conscious, situated choices and decisions that reflect and develop the complexity of business contexts that are being acted out of and into” (102). A reflexive leadership model is provided that treats the action of the coach as inquiry, formulation and decision about contextual narratives and communication, enabling reflexive evaluation “when one can become more conscious of the partiality and multiplicity of possibilities for interpretation and action” (105) (see figure 8).





**Figure 8: Reflexive leadership model, (Oliver, 2010).**

The system in the organisational literature is conventionally thought of in terms of *people in relationship*. For instance, O’Neill (2007) advocates the coach focus on “the system of human beings caught in a dilemma” (13). In her terms *system* is represented by nested spheres – from leadership traits and motivations to strategic alliances, global environment and the economy. This representation of *system* is not sufficiently tightly drawn in that there is no common ingredient and insufficient distinction is drawn between experience and narrative. In contrast, the common ingredient in CMM is communication which shows itself at different levels of context, offering a more cogent and coherent framework of interlinked and recursive contexts. The word *system* is used in this chapter (Oliver, 2010), developing CMM, to refer to an interconnecting network of patterns of experience and narratives of those experiences, constructed through social communication processes relating to the sphere of influence of the coachee/leadership.

A detailed vocabulary is provided for the *interpretive act*, as a tool for the coach, comprised of emotional response, interpretation and action. The *interpretive act* concept enables reflexive evaluation “when one can become more conscious of the partiality and multiplicity of possibilities for interpretation and action” (105). This metaphorical space for exercising *systemic reflexivity* optimises the potential for making conscious choice for systemic benefit. *Interpretive acts* can become patterns over time and the chapter goes on to describe three forms of communication patterns, relevant for the organizational consultant: reactive, reflexive and paradoxical (see figure 8). “In drawing attention to the reflexive opportunities in a communication, the aim is to encourage

conscious purposeful communication and to develop effective patterns of leadership and team action through encouraging a reflexive relationship to past, present and anticipated future patterns” (Oliver, 2010: 108). The chapter goes on to illustrate how inquiry into *interpretive acts* and contextual narratives might work (see figures 9 & 10).

	<b>Emotion</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>Self</b>	When you received x communication from the team member, what did you feel? Have you felt that before in the team? What effect does your emotional response have on your ability to act? When have you noticed a different feeling?	How do feelings connect to thoughts? What choice do you have in how you are interpreting the situation? Where does your sense of obligation come from? How did your stories about the relationship affect the way you interpreted it?	How did your interpretation shape your action? When you act in that way, how does it affect the team member? What would you like to create? What new interpretation could enable different action? What interaction could help the organization?
<b>Other(s)</b>	What did you notice about your team member’s body language? How did that affect your response? How might the cultural pressures in the organisation have shaped his feelings? If he were more open about his feelings, how might you be affected?	If you thought of him as vulnerable and acting out of a sense of obligation, how would you make sense of what happened? How do you think he interpreted your response? What choices might you say he had in his response?	How did your subordinate respond to your response? Was that the response you hoped for? How might you have acted differently if you felt you had more choice in creating the response that was best for the relationship (and the organization).

**Figure 9: Reflexive Leadership Model: Inquiry into the Interpretive Act (Oliver, 2010: 110)**

<b>Context:</b>	<b>culture</b>	<b>relationship</b>	<b>identity</b>
<b>Self</b>	“How does the team <i>culture</i> provide possibilities for open and specific feedback and how do you influence that culture as leader?”	“In this <i>relationship</i> , where do you experience clarity and where is there confusion in your understanding of when it is appropriate to critique and when it is appropriate to offer some other form of leadership intervention?”	“When did you first experience <i>yourself</i> as finding critique a challenge with this particular member of your team?”  “What might this say about your ideas about what counts as good leadership?”
<b>Other(s)</b>	“How might the team member describe significant <i>cultural</i> patterns in the organization that affect the ways he feels able to relate to you as leader?”	“How might the team member say you respond to his feedback to you on the impact of your leadership on the <i>relationship</i> and his ability to perform?”	“How might the team member describe his <i>role</i> and task?”

**Figure 10: Reflexive Leadership Model: Inquiry into Contextual Narratives (Oliver, 2010: 109)**

The explication in this first part of the dissertation has set a theoretical and ethical developmental context for the concept of *systemic reflexivity*. In doing so it provides a platform for the description below of critical development of a specific organisational consultancy movement and methodology known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI). It should be assumed that the theoretical and ethical commitments elaborated above are relevant to the critique and development below of AI as a change methodology. The following narrative will provide a concretisation of *systemic reflexivity* within consultancy discourse.

### **The relationship of Appreciative Inquiry to systemic reflexivity**

Cziarnowska (2001) has set consultants the challenge of making social constructionist theory meaningful for their work. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) presents itself as rising to that challenge, claiming to represent social constructionism in action, defined as “a positive revolution in organisational change work” (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999: 7). Thousands of managers and

consultants have attended Appreciative Inquiry courses over recent years with the result that this approach to organisational change has entered the corporate mainstream (Bushe, 2012). For Cooperrider & Whitney:

“Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential” (2000: 5).

AI has been described as having a range of principles but in summary it could be said to have three basic assumptions underlying its approach (Hammond, 1998, Zemke, 1999):

1. Organisations are socially constructed and can be understood through the narratives of organisational members.
2. Inquiry is intervention.
3. Inquiry should be into the affirmative narratives of organisational life, thus positive experience.

Polarisation, in these terms, is consciously set up by proponents of AI, allocating ‘problem solving methodologies’ to the negative and AI to the positive (Hammond, 1998). As Bushe (2012) points out “... the idea that inquiry into deficit experiences is rarely generative is foundational to the birth of AI” (16). Problem solving is linked to confrontation, criticism and deficit whereas the task of AI is to identify and build on the ‘positive change core’ (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999: 8). Thus AI is presented as superior to and disqualifying of ‘negative’ discourse and emotion ... “by polarizing AI and problem solving, an either/or dynamic was set that continues to manifest in descriptions of AI” (Bushe, 2012: 16). Bushe traces three waves of critique of AI. While he identifies the first and second waves as providing an insufficiently complex account of AI, the third wave, where Bushe places my publications (some co-authored), are described as both showing some understanding and sympathy with AI, and a grounded awareness of its limitations.

“Christine Oliver (Barge & Oliver, 2003, Fitzgerald et al, 2010, Oliver, 2005a, 2005b) has provided a series of cogent arguments for thinking of AI as more than just studying ‘the best of’ and bringing greater reflexivity to AI practice.... Oliver’s critique of AI’s habit of talking about positive and negative as having intrinsic meaning, instead of acknowledging that what is positive for some, may be negative for others, goes to the heart of the matter. Social constructionists argue that such meanings can’t be pre-assigned by a third party; they only

emerge in relationship, and even then, such meanings are multiple, partial and dynamic. It is hard to argue that such polarisation doesn't show up with regularity in descriptions of AI..." (15).

The papers on AI that comprise partial submission of this dissertation, challenge the binaries of conventional AI discourse for organisational consultancy, arguing for a reframing of AI to incorporate all aspects of emotional experience, not just so called 'positive' emotion (Oliver & Barge, 2002; Barge & Oliver, 2003; Oliver, 2004; Fitzgerald et al, 2010; Oliver et al, 2011). These papers are considered below. This contribution has been aided by the centering of purposeful *systemic reflexivity* in that a critical commitment to observing one's contribution to a social system facilitates consciousness for the consultant about the consequences for the consultancy and organizational process of the frames one adopts, polarised or otherwise. In the same way, one's contribution to a community of scholar-practitioners is reflexively assessed in the sense that the critique offered has included the authors practice in its development and has not been offered from a position 'outside' the AI discourse but from within.

The initial attempt at critiquing the implied polarisation in AI literature takes the form of a chapter in a Danish book on organisational change (Dalsgaard et al, 2002). The chapter acknowledges the emphasis on 'affirmative competence' in contemporary approaches to organisational development, defined as a communicative ability to create life enhancing moments (Barrett, 1995). Methods such as Future Search (Weisboard and Janoff, 1995), Open Space Technology, (Harrison, 1997) and AI (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999) all offer forms of dialogue that enable a collective and constructive focus on the future. For instance, AI characteristically uses the 4D model, a dialogue design that facilitates a conversation about the highlights of organisational or community life. Its conversational structures determine the content, sequence and rules for engagement of the consultancy dialogue. It typically takes the following form:

1. Grounded observation to discover the best of what is
2. Vision and logic to discover the vision of what might be
3. Collaborative dialogue and choice to achieve consent about what should be
4. Collective experimentation to discover what can be (Bushe, 2012).

Oliver & Barge (2002) address an aspect of the dialogue process that has been given insufficient attention so far. There has been little guidance offered about the criteria for making judgments about the actions one takes *within* an inquiry process. Oliver & Barge (2002) use the language of *aesthetic sensitivity* to refer to abilities in situated decision making within the conversational flow of

an inquiry or consultancy process. The injunction to avoid the 'negative' characterising much of AI literature inevitably shapes such micro decision making. Kelm (1998) has pointed out how some AI practitioners advise against giving attention to 'negative' expressions of hurt, betrayal, injustice, seeing such expressions as 'life-draining'. This chapter argues ... "such simplistic admonitions do not fully account for the complexity of the situation; rather they run the risk of alienating organisational members and silencing their voices" (Oliver & Barge, 2002: 2).

In addition it is argued that obedience to such injunctions can mean that the organisation does not take up potential opportunities for learning. For instance, the organisation may benefit from understanding the contexts and effects of experiences of injustice so that processes of healing and forgiveness may occur. Oliver & Barge (2002) argue that the management of difficult and challenging communications should be an intrinsic part of AI methodology and experience and treated with respect and authenticity. Attention can be given to "what gets made in the flow of conversation" and for those choices to be "elegant, aesthetic and fit the emerging context" (4). They also highlight the importance of giving attention to relational definitions, commitments and agreements within AI structures and processes so that people are enabled to act within complex and difficult conversations.

AI practitioners have tended to focus on the form and sequence of episodes (as manifested by the 4D model) rather than situated choices within them. As noted, the one criterion that has been advocated to guide facilitator behaviour has been the *positive principle*, "suppressing voices of criticism, negativity and evaluation" (5). However, voicing challenges and fragilities can arguably be life enhancing for the organisation if managed aesthetically with consciousness about potential effects. The resources for aesthetic practice come from systemic and social constructionist approaches, facilitating a "knowing from within" (Shotter, 1993), paying attention to the way communicative behaviour forms the linguistic landscape. Conversational choices in this context need to be purposive, meaningful and reflexive; meaning becomes contextual, emergent and contested with care taken about what communication creates in moral terms. Oliver & Barge (2002) argue that the meaning of 'positive' cannot be prejudged without situated knowledge of relational and cultural contexts. They suggest treating AI more as coordination of aesthetic abilities in a way that respects and attends to dilemmas of relationship and task. They suggest the following abilities enable the management of challenging conversational moments:

- 1) Facilitating the articulation of life generating stories of purpose relating to the consultancy.
- 2) Shaping relational accountabilities by encouraging reflexive attention to the ways participants treat each other in the dialogue, encouraging people to connect to their hopes

and to the imperative of change, with purpose and responsibility, encouraging “a heightened consciousness of the connection between the form and content of talk and its consequences for the development of self, relationship and task rather than pre-judging whether a message contains a positive or negative meaning” (16).

- 3) Creating conversational ‘edges’ by providing frames within frames. Boundaries for the dialogue are offered, for example, in the *discovery* phase of the 4D model, showing how robustness and fragility can contextualise each other enables an experience of wholeness rather than the schism of positive and negative, helping people beyond dualistic thinking which can provide a balanced and purposeful context for building realistically informed plans.
- 4) Coordinating energies in the conversational moment involves making the most of openings for development and transformation; attending to moral and emotional energies and the meanings associated with them; treating “challenging energies” (20) as valued voices not yet heard.

A second paper from Barge & Oliver (2003) further links appreciation and reflexivity, treating the meaning of appreciation as contested and emergent, developing a set of guiding principles as criteria for judging the *focus* for appreciation within an organisational learning process. The paper suggests that *what* needs to be appreciated and *how* it should be appreciated is a matter more complex than ‘conventional’ AI has claimed (for instance, Hammond, 1998; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

It argues for the development of appreciative ‘spirit’ a metaphor for valuing reflexivity in the endeavour of facilitating what is life-enhancing for a system, and highlighting the connection between reflexivity and technique. It emphasizes how organisation is produced in “contextually embedded social discourse” (Boje et al, 1996: 2) and positions *conversation* and its associated behaviours as significant in shaping identities, rationalities and emotions. Thus the management of conversation becomes an obvious focus in the project of enabling organisational learning and change. The paper argues that the challenge for creating *appreciative* conversation is:

“to augment, rather than limit, expression of individual and group differences and conflict within the organisation...strengthen the mutual understanding of these differences and action on the basis of this understanding, including separation from the organisation...”  
(Barge & Oliver, 2003: 380).

Appreciative conversation in these terms means employing reflexivity to the knowledge(s) and subjectivities that are encouraged and discouraged. This requires sensitivity towards the ways that

communicative choices influence the direction and social outcomes of conversation. The point is made that organisational cultures are necessarily conflicted environments, “sites of multiple meanings engaged in a constant struggle for interpretive control”. (Barge & Oliver, 2003: 142). Facilitating the reflexivity of others involves inviting inquiry into conversational positioning and how that positioning enables and constrains patterns of relationship and connection.

The alternative reading of AI offered in the paper is as a phenomenon that is “contextual, unstable, and particular to persons in embodied social situations. What needs to be appreciated, when, where, and how is contingent on the set of meanings operating in a particular moment” (17).

Barge & Oliver (2003) go on to argue that the development of life enhancing practices requires an appreciation of the multiple and conflicted meanings of those practices. Because we operate within multiple layers of context, with multiple stakeholders, multiple goals and experiences, there is a need for discernment within the conversation about *what counts* as appreciative. The paper links this process of (conjoint) discernment to that of making moral judgments. Such discernment requires decision makers to pay attention to macro contracts (shared principles that inform moral rationality) and micro contracts (agreements within specific interactions). Barge & Oliver (2003) advocate individuals experiment in making such choices, employing the value of usefulness to relevant purposes and concerns and allow diverse viewpoints to co-exist, creating new vocabularies for what counts as life-enhancing. The meaning of appreciation is reframed in the paper so it becomes more contingent on the abilities of participants to coordinate meaning in ways that make sense and allowing for a range of emotional and linguistic communications, facilitated by reflexive positioning.

An insight that develops from this paper is that AI theory and practice are structured by discourse but that discourse and practice are not necessarily coherent. In a chapter in a book on organisational health care (Oliver, 2004a), I go further and attempt to critique AI from a discourse perspective, based on the belief that treating AI itself as a discourse can facilitate insight into its functions, inconsistencies and repertoires. This chapter argues that conventional AI presents a confused theory and a dualistic practice. Rather than creating a dualism, the chapter juxtaposes *critical* and *appreciative*, arguing that the linkage will create more coherent outputs. In arguing for a discourse approach, the chapter advocates that relational dynamics, including dynamics of power, be made more explicit and open to critique in consultancy practices, and in particular AI practices. When AI discourse privileges the positive principle constructing the obligation to engage in positive talk, spirit, emotion (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; 2000), participants’ challenges are positioned as



things to be overcome. Conversational participants are then deliberately shifted from a negative to a positive position through appreciative questions.

“The professional malcontents have to be tolerated and given the chance to be committed...They need to be heard, to be given the chance to speak – if necessary to be critical and even destructive – not least because their negativities may have within them the germ of something that the organisation can learn from and work with, especially if it can be subsequently reframed in an appreciative way” (Elliot, 1999: 26).

Elliot’s plea for toleration is typical of many AI writers (e.g. Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; 2000). Hierarchy is treated as problematic and power differences transcended. There is no idea presented that people should negotiate and speak from their own role and voice, wherever they are in the functional hierarchy. Leaders “recognise that their greatest job is to get out of the way” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999: 19). Such an idealised framing and hiding of hierarchical difference is arguably problematic in complex consultancy situations where the benefits and constraints of the use of power require sense making and inquiry. In this book chapter (Oliver, 2004a), the question is addressed: what contexts of form and content could and perhaps should be created in the management of consultancy conversation, including rather than avoiding the management of differential hierarchical roles? The CMM device of layers of context is invoked as a discourse method for structuring a social constructionist analysis and critique. The argument is made that each utterance can be perceived as a turning point in conversation. The contexts invoked include:

*Culture of power:* the idea that inequalities of power constrain opportunities for dialogue is insufficiently complex and potentially creates poor democracy, confusion and lost opportunities for organisational development.

*Relational accountabilities:* it is suggested that being positive may have the opposite effect on quality of relationship than intended.

*Subject position:* the most common positioning becomes that of appreciator or problem talker/spoiler if ‘negative’ talk develops. However, this chapter suggests that a more desired positioning is that of an individual who with others is learning about the organisational system.

In conventional AI, the rules prescribed for the communication episode become: do affirmative talk; do not blame therefore do not evaluate or critique (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). However, this chapter suggests that the social commitments for constructing episodes should be less rule bound at the level of content and more at the level of process, advocating a critical-appreciative relationship to one's own and others' communication.

“Otherwise there is a risk that what is discussed becomes incongruent with how it is discussed and good intentions will not have the desired outcomes. When *critical-appreciative* are joined, the intention is to invite a critical consciousness about how communication creates powers, opportunities and constraints for action in the dialogue.” (10).

Another paper offered as part of this submission (Fitzgerald et al, 2010) further develops a framework of critique for reflexive conceptualisation and practice of AI through making use of the Shadow as a generative metaphor. This work hypothesises in some detail the consequences of a consultancy approach based on a dichotomy. The metaphor of the Shadow enables richer insights into these consequences than have previously been published. Three relationships between AI and the Shadow are articulated: firstly, AI as generating Shadow; secondly, AI as intervention into the Shadow; thirdly, AI as a Shadow process itself.

As has been noted, AI is often characterised by polarities – strength/deficit; mysteries to be embraced/problems to be solved; life enhancing/deadening; positive/negative. Polarities are also in focus for Jung's conception of the Shadow (Kolodziejcki, 2004). This paper argues that in viewing AI as a Shadow process, the potential is created for transcending polarities, developing reflexivity for organisational members and enriching AI.

Fitzgerald et al (2010) reframe the Shadow to mean: “any conscious or unconscious regulation of emotion and/or cognition by self and/or others where their experience and/or expression is judged to not fit with acceptable cultural or group norms” (6).

AI generates Shadow in a number of ways: Firstly it can be generated unintentionally through a focus on the 'light', inadvertently highlighting contrasting Shadow, thus a focus on the 'positive' can bring the 'negative' into play. Secondly, Shadow can be generated through the censoring effect of polarised norms: cultural and group norms are mechanisms for legitimising and delegitimising the expression of emotion, cognition and behavior. Fitzgerald et al (2010) argue that as a norm's polarity and strength increases, censorship and thus individual and collective Shadow increases. Positivity permeates AI discourse and shows itself in the language used to describe principles, values,

processes and models. It is positioned in opposition to negativity with a call for censure of the latter. However, no guidance is provided for deciding how the meaning of positive should be determined and who should determine it. Fitzgerald et al (2010) suggest that the imposition of a normative positive discourse will promote the Shadow.

AI can also be thought of as an intervention (intended or unintended) into the Shadow. For instance, where stories of strength and capacity are not linguistic resources in an organisation or community, those dimensions of discourse will be relegated to the Shadow. Thus conventional AI processes which highlight the 'positive' aspects of group culture can be thought of as interventions into the Shadow. It is also possible to intervene intentionally into the Shadow e.g. in asking 'what are the subjects in this group that are difficult to talk about?' – thus recognising and valuing the expression of shadowed organisational frailties and vulnerabilities.

Thirdly, in considering AI itself as a Shadow process Fitzgerald et al (2010) argue that in so far as AI is equated with positivity, it manifests as an expression of American socio-cultural Shadow, the right to happiness enshrined in the 1776 Declaration of Independence. This dominant American expectation "makes feelings of sadness and despair more pathological in this culture than anywhere else" (Kotchemidova, 2005: 25).

In summary, the paper argues for the importance of cultivating a reflexive awareness of Shadow content and process within organisational consultancy and for reflexive decision making about recognition, inclusion, expression and making sense of such material.

Extending this thinking, facilitating greater practicality, Oliver et al (2011) take a narrative approach, decoupling the positivity principle from AI, *replacing* it with a reflexivity narrative for shaping consultancy inquiry processes. Reflexive criteria are generated for assisting in an inquiry process, achieving greater congruency with the original aims of AI and facilitating a more coherent consultancy practice with the positivity principle removed. Reflexivity is promoted through the development of awareness of mechanisms for exclusion of AI content, promoting Shadow behaviour, and for inclusion of AI content, promoting reflexive awareness. These mechanisms are identified and their implications explored for description and conceptualization of AI design and process. Strategic choice points within AI consultancy processes are identified and illustrated through case study. This paper enhances previous work in its examination of the micro detail of mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within the process of choice and decision making of the consultant.

## Discussion

Peck (2005) has argued that the aim of organisational consultancy is to facilitate coherence of organisational behaviour, organisational values and environment, and that organisational performance should be evaluated according to whether it enhances the effectiveness of the 'changing organisation'. He convincingly proposes that robust reflexive process needs to be built into organisational practices for this to occur. My work, in developing the concept of *systemic reflexivity*, through the expansion of CMM and AI theory, positions both the consultant and the organisational actor as being jointly responsible for organisational performance and experience, facilitating the development of a vocabulary to describe the complex, moral, intersubjective process that is the organisation, and, equally complex, the organisational consultancy process.

The utility of the notion of *systemic reflexivity* for systemic theory with impact on organisational consultancy (and other practical contexts) has arguably been demonstrated through the development of CMM and AI conceptualization. The unique detailing of the communicative system, highlighting the significance of reflexive practice within that, facilitates an integration and development of systemic theory through creating a vocabulary about the links between the detailed performance of episodes of communication and the contexts creating and created by them. The notion of *systemic reflexivity* links the detail of moments of interpretation, choice and strategic action, framing the system itself in communicative and reflexive language, augmenting a language of persons or relationships (for instance as described by O'Neill, 2007), which, alone, is too partial a representation of what might usefully be called a system. Cunliffe (2002) argues that typically, critical approaches to organisation focus on systems existing *independently* of our own personal involvement. This thesis proposes that the discernment of critical points in our patterns of communication is aided by a commitment to *systemic reflexivity*. Further, the specificity of the language of pattern developed in my writing helps to structure hypothesising and intervention in consultancy work.

Cunliffe advocates that critique should become more situated within our practices, "... competent practitioners rely on a tacit-knowing-in-action' to help them act within circumstances" (36). She goes as far as saying that "learning occurs as we reflexively engage in internal and/or external dialogue in an attempt to make sense of our experience" (36), necessitating finding ways to account for our actions, identities and relationships through examining micro practices. My work developing CMM and AI supports the idea that through such examination, consultants and organisational members are helped to become effective, moral practitioners. However, while Cunliffe talks about *self* reflexivity as awareness of the discursive structures within our conversations and challenge to

our ways of making sense of the world, the employment of *systemic* reflexivity, a broader concept than *self* reflexivity, enables the endeavour to become a little less solipsistic with the aim more explicitly to connect macro and micro practices and narratives.

Historically, most writing on AI infers poor *systemic reflexivity* in relation to a polarised and polarising discourse (Fitzgerald et al, 2010; Oliver et al, 2011). Bushe (2012) points out some of the dangers of a dichotomised representation of AI, arguing, "AI is described as a method of change that doesn't focus on problems but research suggests transformational change will not occur from AI unless it addresses problems of real concern to organisational members" ( 16).

A reactive, destructive pattern can be the consequence of such polarisation, characterised by a culture of unconscious defense, mistrust and poor reflective and reflexive capacity (Oliver et al, 2003; Oliver, 2005). The relational dynamic in such a culture shows a tendency to competitive relationships where the 'other' is delegitimised, undermining discernment for collaborative choice, decision and action. Paradoxical patterns or strange loops can also be a consequence of dichotomisation, expressing cultures of splitting and fragmentation where relational and identity narratives show a tendency to be polarised, ambivalent or contradictory.

However, my work with colleagues on AI and the Shadow shows how such patterns can be transcended through *systemic reflexivity* (Fitzgerald et al, 2010; Oliver et al, 2011). Further, the idea that consultants might reflexively engage with their own and others' Shadow processes, begins to challenge the avoidance of *unconscious* processes that systemic vocabulary and conceptualisation has shown a tendency to promote (Flaskas, 2005). *Reflexive patterns* are, in these terms, characterised by abilities of individuals and groups to show a preparedness to reflect on and evaluate the ways their own (conscious and unconscious) narratives and patterns contribute to the complexities of organisational life.

Such a culture of reflective and reflexive learning sets a context for relational dynamics of self/other legitimisation and individual narratives of partial legitimisation, i.e. the individual takes a critical position of humility in relation to their own views and experiences and is curious about those of the 'other', arguably creating conditions for organisational dialogue where differences can be thought about and worked through.

The published work submitted for this doctoral thesis offers a range of case study material that constitutes pro-active based evidence for the validity and utility of *systemic reflexivity*, implying a frame of practice based evidence rather than evidence based practice. The principles underlying such an approach are consistent with aspects of qualitative research. For instance, Alvesson & Deetz (2000) propose the goals of insight, critique and transformation for qualitative research and these

goals are intrinsic to a commitment to *systemic reflexivity*. From a systemic position however, it is important to clarify that in the research context, the development of insight and critique are usually goals at a higher contextual level than the goal of transformation. It is acknowledged that research conversations have consequences for the research participants, and that the researcher is accountable for their contribution to those implicative effects, but development of narratives and patterns of communication is not usually the primary task of the researcher, but is more a secondary commitment, whereas transformation is more usually the higher order context shaping sense making for other systemic practitioners such as therapists and consultants. For the consultant, the evidence for transformation is manifest in the detailed changes in systemic narratives, patterns of communication and interpretive acts that system participants report and demonstrate.

There are two particular strands of interest for developing future work. Firstly, my aim is to articulate a more explicit research frame for *systemic reflexivity*, explicating in detail the process of inviting and interpreting data through this lens. Secondly, I wish to develop practicality in the ways that language is used to describe narratives and patterns of communication, widening the audience potential for this work, particularly within the organisational development community, emphasising *systemic reflexivity* as a dialogical approach.

## **Conclusion**

*Systemic reflexivity* has been presented as a core concept for social constructionist and systemic organisational practice, enabling ongoing engagement and learning in organisational life. It means that we recognise that we are part of larger systems, our behaviour contributes to the creation, maintenance and transformation of those systems and we have a language for observation, evaluation and recalibration of our behaviours. The theoretical narrative constructed enables systemic practitioners to enact behaviours that link a systemic ethical positioning, with language for understanding patterns of communication, with methods and techniques for transformative intervention.

The work submitted for this thesis enables organisational members and consultants to manage the tensions, dramas and dilemmas of organisational life, comprising communication, procedures, relationships, policies, structures, cultures, with confidence and humility, alongside others. Pearce (2005) in his endorsement of my book 'Reflexive Inquiry' describes the work as offering 'maturity'... 'it both extends the work of the community of practice in which it is located and is accessible to those not already involved in it' (Pearce, 2005). The work on AI submitted for this thesis (Oliver &

Barge, 2002; Barge & Oliver, 2003; Oliver, 2004a; Fitzgerald et al, 2010; Oliver et al, 2011) similarly attempts to offer a 'mature' concept for the field, encouraging and supporting a new, holistic, and complex approach to the conceptualisation and practice of *appreciation* in which our understanding of AI is deepened through exploring the potential of the provocative metaphor of the Shadow in relation to AI practice. Jamieson (2010), in fact, in his editor's introduction to the paper by Fitzgerald et al (2010) describes our work as 'one of the highest forms of integrating scholarship and practice'.

However, a limitation of the published work submitted, while drawing attention to unconscious dynamics and beginning to provide a vocabulary, is that it does not, as yet, offer a sufficiently robust integration of 'the unconscious' for a consultant to act with systemic confidence. There are indications here for further research, focusing on exploring and identifying a systemic vocabulary that includes the unconscious dimension of motivation and communication and their logics of meaning and action in multiple social systems. Arguably, such exploration could enhance CMM theory, facilitating sense making and action, and enhance conceptualisation of the mechanisms of neglect, discounting and reframing that are involved in AI processes that polarise the positive and negative. While narratives of the unconscious have historically shown a tendency to speak from an expert and individualist position, there has been a growing understanding in the psychoanalytic literature that self narratives need to be understood within the relational and communication contexts of larger social systems (Mitchell, 2000). Barge (2004) has pointed out that previous expansions of CMM have tended to emerge from theory rather than practice. I would advocate a development of vocabulary enhancing understanding of the mechanisms of our communication systems, emerging from consultancy practice, including the systemically reflexive reflections of the organisational consultant herself as a focus for understanding. A paper in press (Oliver, 2013) is one contribution to such understanding but written in the context of systemic therapy with a couple and not an examination of the complex world of organisations. A central offering of the paper is the idea that apparently incommensurate realities are often usefully thought about as contextualised by unconscious *commensurate* logics of meaning and action. This vocabulary begins to integrate the unconscious into our narratives and patterns of interaction but needs further research and development in an organisational consultancy context.

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