

# Systemic Inquiry as a form of Qualitative Inquiry

# 1

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## Introduction

There are some striking ‘family resemblances’ between Systemic Inquiry and research methodologies gathering under the umbrella of Qualitative Inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, 2011). In this chapter I draw out areas of commonality in qualitative and systemic inquiry in practice research and propose Systemic Inquiry as a form of Qualitative Inquiry.

Common interests include:

- a reflexive and emergent shaping of methodology, focus and participation
- a relational emphasis
- a critique of power in the social world
- a social justice agenda
- ethics-led practice
- fluidity
- asking what counts as ‘knowledge’, with whose authority and with what consequences for others
- a concern with the politics of description and with the creation of narratives
- relationships in inner dialogue and outer talk
- social accountability: speaking from within the first person, transparency, showing context
- reflexivity
- a critical approach to ‘professionalism’ and ‘methods’
- collaborative participation
- irreverence and respect
- practice as an art

In this opening chapter, I invite you to consider two main areas which I see as challenging to systemic practitioner researchers. Firstly, there is the debate of what counts as method in practice and in research.

Postmodern systemic practitioner researchers have treated method as a fluid development in response to context. In other words, methodology evolves, inspired by a reflexive movement between emergent theory and practice. Secondly, in practitioner research, *relationality* is foregrounded. Ethics, know-how and reflexivity are not seen as stand-alone things. Instead we tend to speak of relational ethics, relational know-how, and relational reflexivity. After exploring connections between the postmodern movements of Qualitative Inquiry and Systemic Practice, I show how Systemic Inquiry is a form of Qualitative Inquiry in which methodology is treated as an emergent and ethical activity. This ethics-led, relational model of practice research incorporates room for spontaneous, emergent and collaborative responses to power and decision making in research practices.

## The Evolution of Systemic Methodology

*“... there is always a kind of developmental continuity involved in the unfolding of all living activities.”* (Shotter 2005, p.26).

As a systemic practitioner researcher, I have been concerned to find ways of creating accounts of my practice which reflect and respect the collaborative, conversational relationships of systemic-social constructionist practice. Finding or developing a model and a language for research which can be woven into the careful co-ordinations of therapeutic, consultancy, supervisory and learning conversations is not just a practical decision but an ethical one too.

In this chapter, I invite systemic practitioner-researchers to approach the problem of choosing a research methodology with some degree of irreverence and with a social constructionist critique to ensure that we initiate an ethical and an ideological fit with our practice. Markovic has spoken of the rule creating culture of systemic practice and encouraged a stance of *positive delinquency* to our theoretical heritage in the interest of usefulness in practice relationships (Markovic, then Radovanovic 1993). Harlene Anderson invites practitioners to question the relevance of inherited rules created by our profession (Anderson 2007, cited in Simon 2010) and Betty St Pierre comments, “I’m tired of old research designs being repeated so many times that we think they are real – we forget we made them up!” (St Pierre 2010). Sheila McNamee extends Cecchin’s concern with *irreverence* (Cecchin 1987) in showing how *promiscuity* in systemic practice allows practitioners to treat theories as discursive options which open up or close down relational possibilities (McNamee 2004).

We are reminded that, like all theories, research methodologies are products of time, place and culture. Research methodologies are not items on a shelf which one takes down and uses as ready-made products. It can be more useful and in keeping with a systemic approach to think about research as a process of mutual shaping in which researchers and co-researchers are changed by each other and by the activities; in turn, the research methods and activities also evolve through the influence of researchers and co-researchers. By accepting the inevitable mutual shaping in practice and research relationships, by fostering space for new and unanticipated stories to emerge, we privilege the ethics of methodological openness and move away from a notion of *choosing a research method to engaging with and shaping a research process*.

*“when someone acts, their activity cannot be accounted as wholly their own activity – for a person’s acts are inevitably ‘shaped’ in the course of their performance partly by the acts of the others around them, i.e., each individual’s action is a joint creation, not the product of a sole author – this is where all the seeming strangeness of the dialogical begins.”* (Shotter 2011, p.32)

## The Development of Systemic Inquiry

### *Types and Uses of Questions*

The early Milan School developed a method of inquiry as a response to a finding: they noticed that people did not maintain any improvements gained in psychiatric hospital when discharged to their family (Boscolo et al 1987). This observation formed a premise for their work and, inspired by the work of Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979), Maturana & Varela (1980, 1987, 1988) and others, they developed a theory of family systems which developed innovative questioning techniques to explore how a family system organised itself in response to actual or imagined change, and how information could be obtained and used by the therapy team. The international systems community soon realised that the Milan approach was not simply a matter of using questions to understand the workings of a particular human system and explore a hypothesis; they recognised that their questions also had an impact on parts of the family system and that the relational act of asking questions of people is inevitably an intervention on the system (Selvini Palazzoli et al. 1980; Tomm 1987a).

This inspired a blossoming of interest in inquiry and in theorising what inquiry does. Systemic questions were developed to create opportunities for new tellings of old stories, for imagining alternative futures and for reconfigurations in relationships between people, their narratives and

actions. Karl Tomm developed a range of practical interventive questions in his collection of papers on interventive interviewing (Tomm 1987a, 1987b, 1987c). Peggy Penn emphasised a need for a temporal dimension by introducing future oriented questions (Penn 1985). Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer proposed questions within a brief solution focused model (de Shazer 1985, 1988). Later, through a postmodern lens, John Burnham introduced questions which invited self reflexivity and relational reflexivity (Burnham 1992, 1993, 2005). Michael White and David Epston developed questions to identify problematic dominant narratives and inquire into their influence. They showed how questions could uncover and strengthen alternative, preferred narratives which created opportunities for overturning an unhappy status quo (White 1988; White & Epston 1990).

The concern in systemic practice to re-evaluate power in therapeutic and management relationships and in the storying of management and therapeutic practices, led to questions which enquired into the clients' strengths, abilities, dreams and hopes (Combs & Freedman 1990; Flaska et al 2007; O'Hanlon et al 1998; Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987). The recognition of wider systems in which people were living influenced the development of questions which reframed the individual as members of different community groups (for example, McCarthy & Byrne, 1988; Burnham & Harris 1996; Simon 1998). These power and culture sensitive questions reframed the professional relationship so that knowledge of the systemic practitioner shifted from 'conductor' (Selvini Palazzoli et al. 1980) or expert knower (Anderson & Goolishian 1992) to curious respondent which foregrounded the expertise of the people with whom they are working.

## Theorising practices of inquiry and the influence of context

Vernon Cronen's and Barnett Pearce's Coordinated Management of Meaning theory (CMM) invited us to question how the different contexts we are acting out of and into influence the direction, content and shaping of meaning in the professional relationship (Pearce 1989; Oliver 1996). The model of CMM invites us to question the range of narratives, theories and practices which influence a person's or team's systemic practice through the centring of *reflexivity* as an ethical response. This continuous reflexive influence between theory and practice makes for a continual methodological evolution of *and as* systemic practice (Leppington 1991; Burnham 1992; Simon 2012a).

The Milan team's advice not to marry one's hypothesis was further developed by Cecchin by encouraging curiosity and irreverence in systemic practice (Cecchin 1987). John Burnham demonstrated the art of irreverence despite and, perhaps, because of the constant movement between creativity and respectful co-ordination in his work (Burnham 1992, 1993, 2005). In mapping out the relationships between approach, method and techniques Burnham used the model of interlinked levels of context from CMM to upturn and re-contextualise stories of power and influence (Burnham 1992, 1993, 2011). He suggests practical ways in which ideas can influence and re-shape systemic practice.

In both Leppington's (1991) and Burnham's (1992) descriptions of reflexive practice cycles, practitioners are invited to question their ideological influences: their most deeply held beliefs, their most cherished assumptions, cultural stories operating at a less mindful level but having an impact on practice choices and findings. The shift in postmodern systemic practice away from a model based on a one-sided embodiment of professional expertise to a model of collaborative inquiry (Anderson & Goolishian 1992), a shared process of reflection (Andersen 1987) invited systemic practitioners into a reflexive process in which all theories, personal, professional, cultural beliefs etc. are open to review. To actively engage in critical reflexivity about practices and the theories supporting them, to be aware of one's preferences and how they can serve to turn away countering voices and alternative narratives (White & Epston 1990) opens up possibilities for ethical consideration of the relationships between theory, practice and ideology (Leppington 1991).

By including ideology within methodology, Leppington advocates for the socio-political-philosophical contextualising of method and theory. This requires us to transparently reveal and own the ideological influences at work in our choice of any one research 'method'. By asking not only '*What counts as data?*' but the ethics-led question of '*What can data count as?*' Leppington proposes that we allow ourselves to be changed by what we find – our methods, theories and most deeply held beliefs - and not simply impose our own meaning on material with the risk of reproducing existing values and power relations. For these reasons, I suggest the term *research methodology*, as opposed to research method, is more coherent with an ethics-led approach to systemic practice.

Systemic practice has gone through many significant theoretical shifts – some in the name of a scientific attempt to perfect an approach, others arising out of ethical concerns. Emphasis has turned away from how we can 'really' understand systems to how we generate useful

stories about people and relationships (Hoffman 1993; White & Epston 1990). This move away from generalising theory to contextually specific knowing is a more ethically comfortable fit with relationships involved in collaborative inquiry (Anderson 1997). In recognising that theory almost never works as a one-size-fits-all without exclusionary and dangerous consequences (Lather 1994), systemic practice has gone on to encourage dialogue about the differences in knowledge and knowing and know-how (Andersen 1997; Anderson & Goolishian 1992; Seikkula 2002). This ethical shift invited systemic practitioners to consider how to work collaboratively with people (Anderson & Gerhart 2006). Anne Hedvig Vedeler builds on Cecchin's idea of curiosity (Cecchin 1987) preferring the term *benevolent curiosity* which she feels better reflects a respectful dialogical and collaborative approach in consultation, teaching, supervision and therapy. Vedeler reinterprets fellow Norwegian, Tom Andersen's reflecting team as Resonance Groups and frames them as a means of embodied dialogical inquiry (Vedeler 2010).

Systemic practice has foregrounded the place of *inquiry* in a number of ways. In addition to our vast and extraordinary library of questions, systemic inquiry can be understood as technique, as method, as ethical, reflexive and collaborative ways of being with people, as reflexive inner and outer dialogue, as reflexive writing in training contexts. So why, when we have developed such rich and sophisticated theory about the emergent and co-constructionist nature of inquiry, would we look to a positivist research model advocating a prescribed model with one person extracting information from another or interpreting material without involving our co-researchers?

Certainly, the trend in economy-led public and private services encourages practitioners to employ positivist ways of measuring decontextualised improvement and overlook relational consequences of change and the meaningfulness of professional interaction. Practitioners are often bullied into stepping into a different language to co-ordinate with positivist discourses at the expense of developing professional knowledge and know-how. Opportunities need to be created for inquiry which is coherent with, for example, the coordination with micro-movements at bodily and emotional and temporal levels in the improvisational practice of systemic dialogue, practices which do not necessarily lend themselves, nor should they, to any form of categorisation or results tables.

Systemic inquiry is not intended to be a reproducible solution so much as a stance of methodological irreverence which abandons any modernist attempt to achieve and impose a streamlined scientific method. Instead, it advocates a form of inquiry which emphasises a shift

from knowledge to ethics (Leppington 1991), in which we have a loose attachment to precious, hard come by theories and practices and one which is powered by self and relational reflexivity. Systemic inquiry is a form of research and professional practice which will always evolve as a reflexive response to news of difference (Bateson 1979).

### *Example*

After a conversation with a supervisee, I feel a residue of conflicting feelings: an attachment to an idea and some discomfort about the degree of that attachment. I use reflexive writing as a form of inquiry (Richardson 1994) to create opportunities for further stories to emerge from my inner dialogue about the conversation with the supervisee. After a while of writing, I feel I am missing the voice of the supervisee. I share my writings with the supervisee and in the spirit of collaboration, I invite her responses. At our next meeting, she brings a lengthy written response and reads it aloud to me. As I listen, I am shocked by my misunderstanding of something she has said. I hear her voice and what she is saying in quite a different way. I hear my own listening and talking differently too. How I listen and what I hear, have been changed by this experience. I listen with a broader range of conversing voices in my mind akin to bringing the reflecting team into the room (Andersen 1997) and with more attempts at resonance (Vedeler 2010). The talk between us changes and my listening starts to feel more alongside her than about her.

This example demonstrates how the constant acting on one's noticings in an attempt to co-ordinate with the interests of the other, describes a model of practice which is not working towards refining a theoretical model with a static, scientifically 'accurate' body of knowledge to compete in acquiring academic and professional status and a secure identity. Instead, it is characterised by an ethics-led agenda which decentres the practitioner / researcher (Lather 2007; Tootell 2004) and, in improvisational reflexive inquiry, weaves narratives and relational responses.

Our attempts to communicate are inevitably not only flawed but messy. We ask, and expect to be asked, questions which help us know how to go in conversation with writers, colleagues, clients, research participants and so on. As we leave a fixed way of talking behind, our communications spring from spontaneous responsiveness (Shotter & Katz 1998), improvisation (Burnham 1992; Keeney 1990) and emotional openness (Anderson & Jensen 2007) which, as often seen and heard through video reviews or through transcriptions, appear chaotic and unpredictable. The *apparently* disorderly passages of interaction

between people or within our inner dialogue may not require or lend themselves to examination through a methodology with a repeatable, re-describable method – something you learn to roll out and find ways of teaching to others for them to perform. Research with people, as with most relationships, professional or otherwise, can be an unpredictable process generating what some describe as ‘messy texts’ (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Lather 2007; Law 2007; Marcus 2007). Most forms of text analysis (for example, grounded theory, Charmaz 2012; Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Smith et al 2009; conversational analysis, Woolfitt 2005; discourse analysis, Woolfitt 2005) exclude opportunities to enter into learning from within the hub of systemic activity and have not addressed the complex inner and outer workings of *relational processes* (and the relationship between inner and outer).

Additionally, there are ethical dilemmas for systemic researchers concerned with the practice of co-creating of meaning. Despite an increasing interest in relational ethics, such methods still position the researcher in an about-ness position (Shotter 2011) in relation to ‘the material’ as if it is a thing in itself apart from the relational processes. This attempt at objectivity counters the situated collaborative and reflexive inquiry at the heart of systemic practice and often promotes a confused assumption that objectivity coupled with a prescribed method is synonymous with rigour.

## Accounting Practices and Legitimacy

Michael White encourages an exploration of relationships between stories, storytellers and audience and he situates narratives in the relational context of texts. He says the “*text analogy introduces us to an intertextual world. In the first sense, it proposes that persons’ lives are situated in texts within texts. In the second sense, every telling or retelling of a story, through its performance, is a new telling that encapsulates, and expands upon the previous telling*” (White & Epston 1990, p.13). White’s suggestion that there is no ultimate truth to be told corresponds with Barnett Pearce’s advice that we should “*treat all stories, your own as well as others, as incomplete, unfinished, biased and inconsistent.*” (Pearce 2004, p.50). Their ideas help us understand why systemic inquiry needs to challenge ‘research’ as an attempt to make objective, decontextualised knowledge claims and offer instead a relational and reflexive understanding of research as producing of narratives-in-progress. White (1992) invited us to be curious about which narratives dominate people, families and the communities in



which they live, to understand the contexts in which these narratives have established their dominance and he invites practitioners to look at how other accounts or descriptions of people or events have been lost or silenced. White draws on Foucault's idea of *subjugated knowledges* "that survive only at the margins of society and are lowly ranked-considered insufficient and exiled from the legitimate domain of the formal knowledges and the accepted sciences" and goes on to quote Foucault as saying these knowledges are the "naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (White & Epston 1990, p.26).

Denzin and Lincoln point to the political backdrop for this methodologically dilemmic era as a climate which is dominated by narrow ideas about what counts as 'evidence' and research projects struggling to influence policies driven by economics over social need. They describe this time as the "*methodologically contested present*" and how it is "*a time of great tension, substantial conflict, methodological retrenchment in some quarters ... and the disciplining and regulation of inquiry practices to conform with conservative, neoliberal programs and regimes that make claims regarding Truth.*" (Lincoln & Denzin 2005, p.1116).

## The Narrative of Method

If we understand social constructionism as treating all theories as stories, we can also recognise methods as narrative products and as producing of narratives. The narratives people bring to their workplace or social life are co-constructed, shaped between people and subject to interpretation (Anderson & Goolishian 1988; Burr 1995). Our theoretical narratives arise out of our ideological beliefs, values and most taken for granted deeply held assumptions. Methods and techniques sit more or less neatly on the back of these ideologically influenced narrative structures but can easily appear as stand-alone entities without prejudice, without social underpinnings.

The more dominant stories of professional practice and research about methods suggest a clearly signposted order of events to be carried out by a trained individual or team who 'knows' what they are doing. This 'knowing' mostly corresponds to a learned technique or process. Case examples from many recent leaders in narrative and systemic practice often perpetuate an idea of a clean, reproducible method in their writings or presentations with an emphasis on what was *said*. There is little attention in most professional texts to the times between the

sparkling moments which is probably 99% of time. In amongst the gems are messy, clumsy attempts to co-ordinate, half-finished sentences and retracted questions, mm's and aha's and a range of physical responses such as nods, eyebrow movements, outer and inner twitches. I have noticed through my work as a systemic therapist and as a supervisor that when a practitioner isn't using a particular technique, she or he is trying to co-ordinate with the client(s). Is this time wasted or does it set a context for the moments identified as important by the practitioner or their conversational partners?

We are hoping our attempts to communicate and understand the communications of the other will count as something important to participants in the conversation. We know, for example, that just coming up with a miracle question (de Shazer 1988) at any moment will not have as much impact as if the client feels the practitioner has been paying attention to what they have been saying and responding empathically. The human element in the work may count for more than we realise and this is supported by much research (Sexton & Whiston 1994) and more is being written about the relational activities in the professional relationship (Anderson & Gehart 2007; Flaskas 2002; Flaskas et al 2004).

The shift in systemic practice towards the dialogical and the collaborative brings an expectation of improvisational coordination between participants. John Burnham (Burnham 1993) has embraced the inevitability of chaos and confusion arising in conversation and taken an approach to not-knowing (Anderson & Goolishian 1992) how to go on with people as part of the negotiation about how to go on. He has given many examples of his practice in which he demonstrates meaningfulness arising out of the random. He advocates a model of therapy, supervision or consultation in which any governing level of context can be upturned and reviewed at any moment in time (Burnham 1992, 1993, 2005). This approach is not led by some theory about the importance of the random (though random choices can be very generative of useful connections) so much as by an ethical concern to be client-led or supervisee-led and by a pragmatic approach to find a way forward. Burnham tries to co-ordinate with people in recognising any meaningful elements in exchanges however bizarre or unexpected they may be. This model of ethics-led systemic practice involves a negotiation with the people with whom one is working throughout the process otherwise the practitioner stance is that of imposing a method on others. In engaging in a practice-research process, it is often important and fruitful to mirror this commitment to spontaneous, relational co-ordination.

## A Relational Focus

### *Social Justice: Inspiration for Practices of Inquiry*

*Critical researchers start from an ethical principle and do research designed to emancipate people from patterns of social relations prejudged to be oppressive, to expose patterns of exploitation, or to subvert structures of power that allow some people to be dominated by others. (Pearce and Walters 1996, p.10).*

An overarching link between Systemic Inquiry with Qualitative Inquiry is the commitment to open up space for a multiverse with polyvocal participation across all parts of a research process concerned with beneficial consequences for participants of research intervention (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, 2011; Lather 1994; Parker 2005; Pearce and Walters 1996; Tuhivai Smith 2005; Visweswaran 1994; Reynolds 2010, 2013 and elsewhere in this book).

Social constructionist-systemic-collaborative-dialogical therapy has moved away from normative and pathologising discourses. Narrative therapy invites therapists and community workers to allow themselves to be moved to action by the stories they hear, become activists in trying to overturn injustices and experiment with creative, socially inclusive, relational practices. (White & Denborough 2005). Sheila McNamee shows the significance of women taking hold of research and responding in a way which privileges finding their own ways of researching (McNamee 1994). Tom Andersen encouraged practitioners to be moved by the circumstances of the people whose story one was hearing (Shotter 2007). Jaakko Seikkula suggests that if a person is drowning, one has to jump in the water too in order to try and save them even if that puts the practitioner in some degree of risk (Seikkula 2002). Reynolds speaks of the practitioner researcher as a “fluid, imperfect ally” in describing the importance of ethics led alliances in getting beyond the constraints of colonial professional positioning (Reynolds 2013).

We can frame the practice of systemic inquiry as caring, as involvement in the lives and communities of others, as an openness to be changed by the words and feelings of others, as a preparedness to be moved to action in and beyond the consulting room or classroom. Both Systemic Inquiry and Qualitative Inquiry encourage experimentation with useful and user-friendly ways of inquiring into the lives of people and communities. Qualitative Inquiry methodologies try to amplify the voices of research participants over those of researchers (for example, Lather & Smithies 1997) and position the researcher as a reflexive

research participant (Etherington 2004). There are many echoes some of the understanding in postmodern systemic therapies about the reflexive positioning of the practitioner (Amundson et al 1993; Andersen 1987; Anderson and Goolishian 1988, 1992; Anderson 1997; Burnham 2011; Reynolds 2013; Rober 2005; Shotter & Katz 1998; Seikkula & Arnkil 2006).

## Working the Prejudicial Turn

*Producing ‘things’ always involves value—what to produce, what to name the productions, and what the relationship between the producers and the named things will be. Writing ‘things’ is no exception. No textual staging is ever innocent (including this one). Styles of writing are neither fixed nor neutral but reflect the historically shifting domination of particular schools or paradigms. (Richardson 1994, p.518).*

Systemic practitioners drawing on a postmodern critique recognise that it is impossible to be value free and that we work with our prejudice in a mindful manner through reflexive inner and outer dialogue. When it comes to *researching* our work, we may feel the pull of ‘objectivity’ to depict process and outcomes ‘fairly’.

It is, in this moment, that the language of systemic practice is often assumed by systemic practitioners to be redundant. There is a strong story of expertise from other professional academic discourses which teach us to evaluate our work ‘fairly’ or ‘accurately’ and without prejudice. We are keen to be fair and rigorous but we are already trained in methods of inquiry. And we are prejudiced because we value the stories people tell us, we recognise their uniqueness, we want to be moved by people and perhaps show people how we are moved – and we want this movement between us to count as something. We hear stories which many people do not get to hear but which are worth hearing; stories which will have taken their time to choose a suitable platform to speak from and audience to speak with. We use selective hearing to influence our ways forward because we allow ourselves to be moved by our conversational partners. We work with people so they can hear what it is they want to say and find ways of saying it to themselves, to us and to others who matter. Systemic practitioners have dialogical, communicating abilities which help to create the circumstances for the performances of other selves, alternative narratives and we want to be supportive of those preferred stories or more useful ideas and life choices. We are far from

neutral in our work and the intricacies of our co-ordinations do not lend themselves to a system of measurement.

*Value-neutrality elaborates the disinterested aspect of objectivity: the conviction that knowers have no vested interest in the objects of their knowledge; that they have no reasons other than the pursuit of 'pure' inquiry to seek knowledge. These ideals are best suited to regulate the knowledge making of people who believe in the possibility of achieving a 'view from nowhere' – of performing what Donna Harway calls 'the god trick'. (Code 1995, p.15)*

And then there is the question of whether just anyone or any systemic practitioner or researcher can ask and get the same answer. We know that not to be true. Why? Because the systemic community has reclaimed the importance of the working relationship and we have recognised how different relationships and contexts bring out different parts of us, different stories resulting in different tellings, hearings and meanings. Lorraine Code challenges the idea that:

*“knowers are substitutable for one another in the sense that they can act as ‘surrogate knowers’ who can put themselves in anyone’s place and know exactly what she or he would know.” (Code 1995, p.16)*

Cronen makes a suggestion for systemic inquiry:

*“It would be better to say that in the process of inquiry we make determinations of what related elements need to be included for any purpose of inquiry and call that the ‘situation-in-view’. Identifying the situation-in-view is a provisional judgment. Further inquiry may lead to including new elements and disregarding others. [.....] Situations-in-view must be understood to include the inquirer. The inquirer cannot be outside the system. **The only choice to make is what kind(s) of relationship(s) one chooses for the purposes of inquiry.**” (Cronen 2000) [my emboldening of last sentence.]*

Leppington emphasised the importance of *relational know-how* and provided a way of contextualising which stories and which voices had more prominence (Leppington 1991). In proposing a move away from a method-led model of systemic practice which advocated training therapists and consultants to learn the theory and the application of techniques, Leppington described systemic practice as ‘discursive practice’. She emphasised a significant paradigmatic movement which she referred to as the shift ‘*from knowledge to ethics*’.

These methodological differences link qualitative inquiry with postmodern systemic practice in confronting the ethics of method-led versus client-led or research participant-led practice. In a systemic practice context, theory and ethics merge to suggest the word ***theoretical*** which may be useful in highlighting the integrated and reflexive relationship between theory and ethics.

Both systemic practice and qualitative inquiry have adopted social constructionism as a *theoretical* context of influence. My intention is to see theory and ethics as one in order to highlight the ethics-led choices we make about selecting which practices to employ and how.

## Relational Ethics

Relational ethics has been at the heart of systemic practice since the linguistic turn in the late nineteen eighties (Anderson and Goolishian 1988; Andersen 1987; Goldner et al 1990; Lang et al 1990; McCarthy & Byrne 1988; White 1992).

It is not uncommon in quantitative research and positivist qualitative research for the area of ethics to constitute a task which is *additional* to the research. Applications to research ethics committees or research advisory boards are often experienced by researchers as an irritating but necessary authoritative hurdle to overcome in order for the real thing – the research activity - to commence. Like systemic practice, qualitative inquiry is an ethics led activity. The research design has participants in mind and involved in consultation from the start. ‘Warming the context’ activities (Burnham 2005) make it comfortable for people to participate in research but are not simply a prelude to the ‘real’ research so much as an opportunity to create a culture of collaborative inquiry, exploring and generating practices together.

Systemic practice is an ethics-led way of being and doing with others. Ethics is not an add-on: it is our guiding light, whatever the area of relational practice. As such, systemic inquiry is an ethics-led practice and can proudly offer this approach to the broader field of qualitative research.

A systemic approach to research brings something unique and useful to the qualitative inquiry movement. Our preoccupation with *relational ethics* requires us to address:

- how we coordinate fairly in conversation with each other
- how we critically approach, acknowledge or challenge power in the relationship or in broader socio-political contexts

- how we manage the relationship between the polyvocality of our inner dialogue with the polyvocality in our outer dialogue
- which of our many selves we use and how
- how we reflexively question our attachments with theories, hypotheses, methods and other taken-for-granted values
- how we offer transparent accounts to others as to which stories we privilege and which we discard
- how we re-view what we have done together, what it means for now and what else we might have done
- how we acknowledge the value of the exchange between us and co-researchers

The reflections of qualitative researchers Ellis (2008), Bochner (2000), Richardson (1994, 1997), Gergen & Gergen (2002) include criteria for qualitative inquiry which address relational ethics. Mary and Kenneth Gergen remind us of how modernist research has positioned researcher and researched: *“the traditional treatment of research ‘subjects’ was inclined to be alienating, demeaning, exploitative..... We are now highly sensitized to the ‘politics of representation’, the ways in which we as researchers construct – for good or ill – those whose lives we attempt to illuminate. A new array of collaborative, polyvocal, and self-reflexive methodologies has thus been given birth (see, for example, Denzin and Lincoln 2005).”* (Gergen & Gergen 2002, p.13).

In reviewing her work as an autoethnographer, Carolyn Ellis addresses relationships with research participants:

*“Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work focuses on the changing relationship between researcher and research participants.”* (Ellis 2008, p.308)

*“Relational ethics draws attention to how our relationships with our research participants can change over time..... How can we act in a humane, nonexploitative way while being mindful of our role as researchers?”* (Ellis 2008, p.308)

*“Relational ethics requires us as researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and to initiate and maintain conversations (Bergum, 1998; Slattery & Rapp, 2003). The concept of relational ethics is closely related to an ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984), communication*

*ethics (Arnett, 2002), feminist and feminist communitarian ethics (see Christians, 2000; Denzin, 1997, 2003; Dougherty & Atkinson, 2006; Olesen, 2000; Punch, 1994)* (Ellis 2008, p.308)

The points Ellis raises and the questions she encourages researchers to ask themselves and discuss with their co-researchers and colleagues, bear a strong linguistic and ethical resemblance to the in-the-moment-of-the-relationship questions systemic practitioners might ask themselves.

There is also another research relationship to take into account with regard to ethics – the relationship between writer and reader. Researchers are expected to produce research in a format designed to be accessible to an audience, and more, meaningful. A challenge inherent in critical reflexive practice is to make transparent to the reader the range and extent of inner dialogue in either the application of method or in the apparently spontaneous responses between people. Bochner's vision of poetic social science and alternative ethnography requires that research should allow space for interpretation and use language in a way that allows readers (and writers) to extract meaning from experience, *"rather than depict experience exactly as it was lived"* (Bochner 2000, p.270).

Mary and Kenneth Gergen draw attention to the researcher-audience relationship:

*"Yet, there is one relational domain that has received little attention to date, that is, the relationship between the rhetor and reader, researcher and audience. As deeply engaged social scientists, the way we represent the world to our colleagues and related audiences contributes to our ongoing relationships within these life worlds (see Shotter 1997). Our words constitute forms of action that invite others into certain forms of relationships as opposed to others. Thus our manner of writing and speaking contributes to life forms that may be extended throughout the educational sphere and into public modes of existence."* (Gergen & Gergen 2002, p.13)

## The Place of the Researcher in the Research: the Question of Transparency

*"The writer has a theory about how the world works, and this theory is never far from the surface of the text."* (Denzin 2003, p.117)

One of the main principles in qualitative inquiry is to render oneself visible as the researcher – both in the doing of research with participants *and* in the writing of the research for the reader - to make some sense



of who is doing the inquiry and the reporting. In the same way that participants can decide how to participate in the research, readers can make choices about how to engage with the text.

This challenge has been taken up in different ways within qualitative inquiry where, to a large extent, the choices have been influenced by the researcher's story of the 'self': single, contextually varied, or polyvocal. Qualitative researchers are interested in establishing a 'real' relationship with co-researchers so they become relaxed and give fuller responses. A woman researcher hoped that using an interpreter in interviews would strengthen her understanding of what research participants were saying. However, she noticed that they were more engaged with the interpreter than with her. So she decided to stop using the interpreter and privilege connection over accuracy. This generated an unexpected richness which she had not been able to access using an interpreter (Quiros 2010).

I was struck by a story told by an African American man who was conducting research interviews with women who had had breast cancer in the southern states of the USA. He described how one research participant, an African American woman, told him that she was alienated by his professional veneer at a research interview. She advised him to act and sound like the southern African American man he was so that she and other women would find it easier to open up to him about quite personal experiences. He reflected that while he was trying to fade himself out to foreground the research questions and be a 'good' (meaning unobtrusive) researcher, he wasn't allowing for how others saw him. (Gregg 2010)

*"A crucial first step in developing an adequately sensitive feminist methodology is learning to see what is not there and hear what is not being said. Donna Harway urges feminists to 'become answerable for what we learn how to see'. To be thus accountable, feminists have to see what is systematically and systemically screened from view by the most basic assumptions about how people know the world; and they have to understand the power structures that effect these erasures."* (Code 1995, p.19)

In ethnography, sharing stories about their own experience is something researchers are expected to be open to; to be themselves in the research as a context for the conversation so as to level the conversational playing field. In the case of autoethnography or performance ethnography, there is an expectation of extended openness to make space for any difficult, unlikely, taken for granted, unthinkable, normally unsayable things which are around in our lives and which could go

unnoticed unless described against a backdrop which render them visible. This involves 'relational risk-taking' (Mason 2005) as part of an ethical attempt to connect with readers and audience as well as with research participants. In systemic practice, we have learned to become the kind of conversational partner who is not only emotionally present but also, where useful, with intentionally visible life experience (Roberts 2005).

Some things touch us more than others and it is perhaps rarely a coincidence that we choose to work with a particular client group or do research on a particular subject or find some theoretical ideas more attractive than others. In a traditional research context, there is little expectation of the researcher 'outing' themselves as having an investment in the subject under investigation. In qualitative inquiry, there is an ethics-led expectation that the researcher will express their interest - not to counter any idea of bias but to illuminate the inevitability of prejudice and minimise any power imbalance in *knowing* between researcher and research participant (Etherington 2004) and to lend weight to one's conviction that something is worthy of investigation and public sharing.

In systemic practice, we also recognise the impossibility of neutrality and objectivity. We own our prejudices and work with them. How we use our own experiences, how we share them and discuss them with people with whom we work, varies. We are careful not to burden people with whom we are working with what might be experienced as troublesome information, particularly vulnerable clients. On the other hand, perhaps we have something to learn from practitioners whose starting point can involve some personal disclosure to conversational partners, research participants. This would make an interesting area to research.

## Relational Reflexivity in Relational Know-How

Visweswaran criticises the normative ethnographic approach that presumes an observer and a subject with stable identities. She contrasts this stance with deconstructive ethnography, where the observer refuses to presume a stable identity for self or other (Visweswaran 1994). Denzin suggests "*Deconstructive reflexivity is post-modern, confessional, critical, and intertextual.*" (Denzin 2003, p.236). In the field of qualitative inquiry tends to treat reflexivity as a form of *self-reflexivity* for the researcher.

Through a social constructionist-systemic-collaborative-dialogical lens, reflexivity is an ethical processing in and of research or practice activities. Reflexivity is always relational in that there is polyphonic

responsivity in both inner dialogue and outer dialogue, be it of a cognitive, emotional, neurological or environmental source (Simon 2012b).

The actions arising out of continual relational reflexivity in our practice as consultants, leaders, therapists, supervisors, trainers, researchers and writers might be described as a dance which requires attention to certain themes: a sensibility to any externally imposed tempo and other environmental demands and influences; a sensibility to a relational tempo in which dancers respectfully share the directorship of pace, challenge and movement; a responsivity to the invitations of other(s) and a selectivity about the choices offered and taken up. Relational reflexivity is not only something which can be observed with the eye. To observe only visible movements would overlook the drama of the inner movements of self and partners in the dance: emotional, embodied, cognitive and theoretical responses, fluent and jerky. We negotiate context, agenda, roles, language and a moment to moment focus. We exercise reflexivity in our co-ordinations with the other; we ask, check levels of comfort, understanding and meaning.

Reflexivity is also a form of self-supervision driven by a desire to coordinate with others in an ethical manner:

- What choices I am making and with what possible consequences for me, for them, for others not present?
- What is informing those choices?
- What other choices am I overlooking?
- Where are those guiding values/prejudices coming from?

We find ways of creating space to recognise the less mindful processes at work: embodied, emotional, cognitive, normative discourses, desire, personal gain, for example. A significant offering from systemic practitioners to the field of qualitative inquiry is a sophisticated understanding and articulation of relationally reflexive activities in researching practice.

## Emergent Collaborations

The social sciences have been engaging in a paradigm shift which is being hailed as *the relational turn*. It invites an interest into ethics-led co-ordinations of co-researchers and into the micro-detail of how those co-ordinations take place.

In discussing possible directions for qualitative inquiry, Betty St Pierre's reluctance "to accept the 'I' in Qualitative Inquiry" could be

understood as a signpost indicating a need for more of a relational emphasis in research (St Pierre 2010). The field of qualitative research has embraced the concept of reflexivity with a significant contribution by practitioners within the field of counselling. The field of systemic practice has something to contribute to the place of *relationality* in research, research relationships, writing research for a readership and specifically on the subject of relational reflexivity. This is perhaps the area where systemic practice has most to bring to the field of qualitative research. Much has been written about Self and Other but there appears, to my systemic eye, to be some space in the research field to explore the dynamic elements in relationships between researcher and research participants. Descriptions of this relationship are either minimal, or sound as if participants are separate static entities. So whilst there is acknowledgement of social constructionism and the power of language and narratives, there is room for more understanding of co-creative activity in the development of those narratives.

Diane Gehart, Margarita Tarragona and Saliha Bava promote a model of research based on collaborative practices:

*“Collaborative inquiry is a way of practising a philosophical stance of respect, curiosity, polyphony and social meaning making. More than the methods used, it is the intentions and the assumptions that inform the research process that constitute the collaborative nature of inquiries.”* (Gehart et al 2007, p.385).

Mary and Kenneth Gergen open an invitation to experiment with relational space:

*“Alternative ethnographers break away from the conventions of social science inscription to experiment with polyvocality, poetry, pastiche, performance, and more. These experiments open new territories of expression; they also offer new spaces of relationship. They take different stances toward readers, describing them in new ways, calling into being alternative possibilities for going on together.”* (Gergen & Gergen 2002, p.14)

In this suggestion, Mary and Kenneth Gergen are suggesting a means of doing research more akin to the improvisational response to not-knowing (Anderson & Goolishian 1992; Anderson 1997) that we come up with in the doing of systemic practice. Shotter and Katz describe the interactions between participants involved in any human interaction, be it professional practice or research, as involving spontaneous attempts at responding and coordinating with another (Shotter & Katz 1998).

This attention to improvisational and relational know-how casts ethical doubt on a stance of technological 'knowledge' and the rolling out of predictable practice or research method. All research constitutes an intervention in the lives of the researcher, the research participants and the audiences or witnesses to this research. Each act of inquiry invites, mindfully or otherwise, the possibility of an implicative force which changes lives.

## Summary

In this opening chapter, I hope to have shown how much systemic practice research has in common with our cousins in qualitative inquiry. This familial culture provides an existing and sympathetic *theoretical* context for the systemic practice communities to develop ways of inquiring into our practice which are coherent with systemic values, ethics and theory. By engaging in a collaborative and reflexive process of inquiry with relational ethics to guide our movements in inner and outer conversation, we are inviting change for ourselves and others and creating new relational spaces and know-how in which we can inquire into the movements of practice/research relationships.

Qualitative inquiry has much to support a systemic model of practice research but systemic inquiry also has many useful offerings to bring to qualitative inquiry including:

- a rich seam of theories and stories about relational practice
- a critical history of diverse methods of inquiry and the place of the inquirer in a system
- a critique of power and culture in relationships
- in-depth studies of reflexivity in relationships
- access to many styles of inquiry
- attention to relational ethics

Systemic inquiry is already an integral part of social constructionist systemic practice in therapy, organisational consultancy, education, leadership and community work. It informs and shapes the activities of a reflexive research process which comfortably overlap with key features of qualitative inquiry. Systemic Inquiry finds an ethical, theoretical and practical home in the playing fields of Qualitative Inquiry.

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