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# A Reflective Commentary on Fractal Epistemology

(Commentary on Marks-Tarlow's "A Fractal Epistemology for Transpersonal Psychology")

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I begin by expressing my appreciation to Harris Friedman for inviting me to respond to this article (Marks-Tarlow, 2020). I value his contributions in the field of transpersonal psychology and consider it a privilege to be asked to do so. I also want to make note that I share Terry Marks Tarlow's initial and continuing impression of fractals as being profound. I am grateful for what she has woven together here in providing our discipline with what I imagine, and am indeed confident will grow into a fuller tapestry. My intention is to respond to those parts of the discussion that resonate most with me, and what has risen up in these places.

I find the position of integrating findings from multiple methodologies likely to grow a fuller understanding of the human experience and is personally preferable than a one way or the other take on things. I have had enough out of the box experiences in my life to know that we do not yet have methods or technologies to address certain landscapes of human experience; while I also value rigorous empirical methodologies and indeed appreciate riding the tensions between these contrasting approaches. In addition, as I understand things "to be," we cannot take ourselves out of the mix of what we are "observing" and so from the get-go I believe that we fool ourselves with illusion when we turn away from this understanding in our 'quest' for the "truth."

I am reminded of Kuhn's (1962) conversations about paradigm shifts and notably how society and the culture of science continues to ignore what Einstein (1961) suggested about time; past, present, and future existing at one emerging moment.

In a very practical sense these positions lead me toward the intentions of opening myself to being guided by curiosity in the work I do with clients and also with students. This curiosity, accompanied by a lens that opens spaces for many different perspectives, theories, and ways of making sense of

the world, are how I apply this in my work. Even in undergraduate studies, I found links between pretty much everything that I was studying and have been inclined towards studying those who integrate positions, rather than engaging in positions of polarity.

Marks Tarlow (2018) attended to these polarities and how they link in the histories of mathematics, psychology, and I dare say clinical practice in ways that I found to be clear and well founded. Her discussion reminded me of isomorphic processes within therapy, where systemic dances play out within different interpersonal systems. This actually seems rather consistent with how fractals behave, yes? Given that fractals occur throughout nature, it makes sense to me that they would apply in the psychology of the human being, humans being of the natural world. And, of course throughout multiple systems: genetics, biology, neurophysiologically, interpersonally, interpersonally, and within larger systems as well.

I was struck by Marks Tarlow's (2018) amplifying Lakoff and Nunez's (2000) argument that mathematics did not, as most would believe, arise out of objective origins, but indeed is "a fully embodied discipline, emerging from our movement of our bodies as they interact in a physical world" (Marks-Tarlow, 2019. p. 3). As I consider fractals, this reminds me of the growing evidence that supports and privileges practices involving somatic work in clinical work, particularly when engaging with clients who have experiences involving trauma.

Marks Tarlow's (2018) discussion about how when studying fractals, the closer we look, the more infinite the edges are and the fuzzier the boundaries are, has enormous implications for clinical work as I understand it. In fact, these phenomena challenge some of the core assumptions in psychology.

What rises up in me about the understanding that these "edges" are infinitely infinite as one begins to look closer and closer, involves the postmodern practice

of opening spaces for more and more possibilities when we work with clients who are experiencing the influence of very limited views about themselves and the problems that they are experiencing. If one considers that the edges of the human being may actually grow in infinite magnitude, then possibilities may also grow and be quite natural for us when we traverse these landscapes with receptivity. This has certainly been consistent with my personal and clinical experiences. The more I look closely at a client, learning more and more about them, in a multitude of ways, with curiosity, lightly tethered to "theory" and research findings, the more that I discover and the wider and deeper the expanse of this "understanding" becomes. It is in these edges that solutions and shifts towards well-being may be nourished.

Likewise, understanding the characteristics of fractals adds a deeper landscape in which to understand and view interpersonal threads within families, couples, and of course myself and the client. In fact, I see the scope of how this may influence our work as being nothing short of breathtaking and enormously important.

For starters, growing ourselves in doing the work takes on a larger thread of centrality. Although there is much in the literature outside of fractals that supports this, adding fractal understanding, and the understanding of "fuzzy boundaries" that are interpenetrating, infers a whole set of conversations about how we work and why.

As Marks-Tarlow pointed out so well in her book, *Psyche's Veil* (2008) and the article, these characteristics of fractals provides new ways of looking at what are difficult to explain phenomenon. The following are some examples:

- It is almost certain that when I ask group members to create a pass along series of scribbles that several members end up receiving drawings that have deeply personal meaning for them. I myself once received a drawing with the word "Bali" written on it a week before I was to be traveling to Bali, a place of enormous personal significance to me.
- I cannot even begin to count the times that couples or family members who I have worked with have reported "sharing dreams" dreams with one another, reminding me of Jung discussing the

landscape of "shared dreams" and the "collective unconscious."

- When I engage groups in authentic movement processes, where eyes are closed and there is no music to inspire the individuals moving, there is more often than not, shared movements, so much so that I have thought of filming these processes simply for this reason. Colleagues who engage in such group processes, report the same pattern.
- Many years back, I was beginning work with an adolescent girl who on the "face of it" had no indications of trauma or victimization. Shortly after the second session, I experienced a profoundly disturbing dream in which her father was pulling her into the shower, while she was weeping. The next time I saw her I invited her to share anything that might need to be said, but had not been said yet, and she told me that indeed, her father was doing just this.

As a clinician who fully infuses my work with play and expressive arts, I am very curious about how these practices link with the phenomenon of fractals. Fractals, Marks-Tarlow (2019) points out so clearly, bridge multiple dimensions of natural phenomenon in what might be visualized as an endless "spiders web" that is creative and emergent, while simultaneously being self organizing. She describes fractals as capturing

key features of subjective experiences, such as the endless feeling of contemplation, the boundary crossing experiences of consciousness as it leaps from inner to outer worlds, and the paradox of full engagement, such as the closer we look at something, whether inside or outside, the imagination, the more there is to see" (Marks-Tarlow, 2019, 29).

Much the same could be said about playing and expressing oneself through the arts!

Conceptualizing the self (and other natural systems I would suggest) as self-organizing can serve our work very well, though it also can challenge therapists to soften the tethers of prescribed protocols, and dive more into intuition informed engagement. I recall in a conversation about clinical work that

Terry (T. Marks Tarlow, personal communication, 3/18/2017) mentioned how she looks for tiny shifts in what clients may present, finding these ever so subtle emerging "dynamic tweaks" to be the cookie crumbs to follow, so to speak.

This reminds me of Gendlin's (1986) dreamwork where we look for what is rising up in a dream that is surprising, or not at all what might be familiar in a dream. That, Gendlin would suggest, is where the wisdom and shifts present themselves. Likewise, this reminds me of conversations in solution focused and narrative work, where exceptions or unique outcomes are gazed at and nourished with intention. These might be viewed as being, the outermost edges of the fractals in a given moment within each human being or any context/system that is made up of humans.

A radical example of exploring the edges might involve the work of Open Dialogues (1995, 2001), a narrative informed treatment approach with families where one or more members has been experiencing the influences of thoughts or visions that do not fall into what is considered to be "consensual reality." As is consistent with narrative work, all positions and thoughts are welcome and received well. This approach has produced astonishing outcomes, though from a linear, traditional psychological position, it seems to be counterintuitive.

Personally, I find that what Marks Tarlow (2019) has discussed contributes to growing my receptivity in opening up spaces for myself, my students, and my clients resting more comfortably in listening to the interior and in-between regions of ourselves and others; accompanied by nourishing the trust that I have in the body's wisdom in casting light on the edges where complexity and well-being will find its way more fully into our lives.

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### About the Author

**Deborah Armstrong, PhD**, is on the faculty of Goddard College's Psychology and Counseling program. Armstrong combines teaching and some research with her clinical practice as a licensed marriage and family therapist for over 25 years, with a specialty in expressive and play therapies. Armstrong's commentary supports the enterprise of combining findings from multiple perspectives, as she spring boards from several of Marks-Tarlow's principles to clinical examples of fractal-like processes with clients, families, and groups.

### About the Journal

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