

FOREWORD
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A renewed emphasis on therapeutic competencies in systemic practice.

This book by Laura Fruggeri, Francesca Balestra and Elena Venturelli is a response to a growing call for a resurgence in systemic literature and trainings which emphasise therapeutic skill sets and competencies. At the outset of the systemic family therapy field there was a huge focus on ‘how to’ practice. With time and the advent of a more theoretically inclined social constructionism an emphasis on skill sets declined in favour of a more dialogically focused quality of therapeutic interactions. I am so pleased to be able to hail this work as a bringing together of both skill sets *and* the importance of relational intelligence within therapy practices. Both are necessary and urgently called for in this time of neoliberal cutbacks and questionable evidence-based tick boxes. I have long admired the work of Laura Fruggeri and her colleagues at the Centro Bolognese di Terapia della Famiglia. They have the gift of seamlessly bringing together the above concerns in the field of systemic practice. Throughout the book clear and simple case examples are offered to introduce initiates to the thinking and practice of systemic practice and as a refresher for those with long years of experience. The case examples, of course, also act as a lead in to thinking about the issues being elaborated in each of the chapters.

Complexity, rigour and imagination.

Reading the list of contents, I was excited at the prospect of so much practice wisdom alongside what I imagined would also be a strong research, theoretical and philosophical orientation. The central siting of the therapeutic relationship, the contexts of both clients and therapists together with the ‘person’ of the therapist as experienced by clients are headlined as necessary indicators of good therapy. Thus, concentrating on research of what works in co-creating positive results in therapeutic practice is highlighted as a necessity in the toolkits of therapists. This takes a multi-dimensional approach to therapeutic relationships/alliances, methods and a therapist’s way of being in the relationship. It is not an anything goes approach but one which values good training and skill but not at the expense of the quality of therapist – client/family relationship and a very human way of being in the process. Now this is what marks this book out from many others. It has all the components brought together into a coherent whole. In the 1990’s there was a movement in family therapy away from a ‘methods and techniques’ orientation in practice. Dialogue and reflexivity came to stand for method and technique except in this writer’s experience, most new therapists did not really know what that meant or how to work with it in sessions with complex client requests. In a way the new approaches seemed to both highlight complexity but at the expense of a rigorous practice approach. A systemic approach always incorporates complexity and many of the early pioneering work, including the work of Laura Fruggeri and her colleagues, showed students and workshop attendees ‘HOW TO’ hold complexity together with tried and tested systemic conversations, dialogical and communicational skills. These skills not only showed through the conversations of therapy but also in the ways of thinking about individuals and their families in the context of their relationships AND in the context of the larger socio-political policies and practices in their environments.

This makes psychotherapy a complex mix of levels which include the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, the social, the cultural and the institutional fields. Therefore, our competencies need to be honed to each of these levels, often simultaneously, within conversations with clients. Hence the skill and practice of self-reflexivity is a crucial centre piece within these therapeutic

competencies. How am I formed and ‘de-formed within the contexts I am part of and interacting with? Systemic therapy has always been about seeing the presented problem as both relationally AND contextually situated. While this might make sense, the authors point out that these competencies in self-reflexivity are not natural. They need to be learned and practiced with both imagination and rigour. I would echo strongly this assertion.

Second Order Reflexivities

The invitation of this work is to constantly think about how one is able to be a participant/observer, both WITHIN the therapeutic relationship and its context in a disposition of curiosity. Here Systemic practices (contextually reflexive observations, actions and interactions) are allied with Social Constructionism (the co-construction of change) and Dialogical approaches (stressing collaboration and negotiation). As such the concepts of ‘hypothesising’ and ‘questioning’ are redressed as intersubjective processes between clients and therapists with due attention to issues of reflective power, inequality and colonisation in the therapeutic encounter. Questions are not just a one-way street within a top-down inquiry but are also exploratory, interventive and transforming for both clients and therapists as they observe, articulate and respond.

The therapeutic alliance is seen on two levels, the quality of the relationship between therapists and clients and the co-construction of meaning within the relationship. To this I would humbly suggest that this book also elaborates a third element of the alliance, and that is the synergistic nature of the behavioural interactions in sessions. So, while co-constructing a safe environment for individuals, couples and families, a central part of synergetic intention is that “there will be no consequences for what they (clients) say during therapeutic encounters”. I wonder how many of us take this as seriously as we ought to when we as therapists engage in sessions??

The book also explores the use of the SOFTA model (the System for Observing Family Therapy Alliances) as a tool for a constant self-reflexive monitoring, observation and reporting of what is going on in therapist-client relationships and sessions. It is transtheoretical, multidimensional and interpersonal in its construction. As such this tool offers us an important if not a crucial resource on our own self reflexive journeys with clients in context. This is especially so in the context of the importance of the client’s perception of the therapeutic alliance. As with other competencies in this book, both the positives and limitations are also highlighted.

As the book progresses through relational competencies which include acknowledgement of unintended consequences, seeing topics of conversation as contexts for relational competence the authors stress that they see method and technique as being secondary to relational competence. The highlighting of the relational context as a guiding principle for therapists is important on the therapeutic path. However, this does not occlude that this too is also embedded in complex and interpenetrating socio-economic- political and cultural contexts. What I liked very much was the pointing towards possibilities of being seduced by the experience of therapy as a secure and safe space. While the systemic therapeutic relationship and space needs to build in safety in my experience given its complex nature, it also needs to maintain a healthy non-attachment to complete safety. This dilemma is nice illustrated by the client who had to maintain a problematic profile in order for the therapy to continue. Therapy had become too much of a secure base and less of a diving platform that he could launch himself into a more preferred life.

Double Vision

As the work progresses, the authors continually show how maintaining a double vision can manifest through technical and relational competencies in therapeutic practice. This double vision also

relates to the process of what Bateson might refer to as abduction. This is when we see a similar pattern or parallel process emerging in two contexts such as a couple pattern and a therapeutic pattern. The sections relating to this double vision and description towards the end of Chapter Four are a must-read for any systemic therapist. They also function as a great lead into chapters five and six on Reflexivity, intersectionalities, personal epistemologies and power.

In my own experience this is the centre of what makes us systemic practitioners – an openness to our own (potential) biases, a willingness to explore different ways of seeing the world before us and an ability to change our actions and interactions when called for. In other words, to practice complex thinking epistemologically, ontologically and relationally.

One of practices that I value highly in systemic work is what the authors refer to as ‘divergent thinking’. All therapy is offering ‘out of the box’ thinking in the service of clients (and indeed therapists) breaking free of habitual thinking or what I call default modes (redundancies). Our loyalty to our own default modes can keep us very stuck as therapists and also only serve to maintain the problem that we are all trying to solve together. Curiosity, of course, is a superb antidote to being stuck in one’s own premises or a hardened theoretical viewpoint which can in turn lead to the abuse and colonisation of a client’s life and narrative. (McCarthy, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1995). Being curious has the advantage that we can step away from our own or others’ fixed ideas. In this stepping away from habitual or rigid theoretical modes of thinking we become ‘decentred’ in the authors’ words. In this decentred mode we are more fluidly placed to follow the stream of our client’s thinking and rationale. Double description and multiple descriptions replace singular and linear prescriptions and proscriptions of a client or family’s life.

Co-Evolution and Co-Creativity

Throughout the later sections of the book, we are reminded again and again of the importance of relational contexts in the life of our clients AND in our co-creative work with them. Without this we are shown through the case examples of how unless we can co-evolve together then we risk the identified client not being able to reach their goal and transform their lives in the way that they want. However, we are also invited to see beyond the immediate relational network to the broader support systems with whom the client and family interact. Circularity, inter-dependence and co-evolution are not just seen as intra-familial processes but also ones which encompass the client, family, therapist and wider professional systems and networks of care. Time and time again we see the dangers of the lack of collaboration and co-ordination of a network of care in leading to a replication or mirroring of the patterns in the family. When this happens, we can see that fragmentation occurs with the risk of escalating symptomatology. Co-ordinated networks on the other hand recognise the complexity of the family/care systems and promote greater possibilities for the co-creation of coherent and shared treatment plans. A both/and circular frame replaces a dualistic linear frame for diagnoses, hypotheses and conversational processes at all levels of the systems that we are both acting into and out of. The Authors do not shy away from very difficult clinical scenarios which included working with clients who are refugees, torture survivors and addressing the political and social contexts of resultant traumas, social prejudices and changing population demographics. Hence, trauma is not individualised, pathologised and decontextualised. These are not insignificant issues for all clinicians especially in the light of the current pre-occupation with individualised accounts of trauma on social media and professional literature. Political, economic, social and relational violence are matters of human rights and not just individualised psychological expressions.

As we read through the book the thread of the multi-connected contextualised ‘self’ is stressed over and over again with illustrations from theory and practice. This applies to the ‘self’ of clients and

also therapists. The latter are invited into a rigorous application and demonstration of epistemology, theory and practice. As systemic therapists there is a great stress on multi-dimensional competencies for basic self-reflection through self reflexivities in ongoing interactions at all levels - individual, relational and social. The basic orientation is one of collaborative intent, where curiosity, openness, flexibility are hallmarks of a respectful and non-instructive position (except when invited by clients to be otherwise in specific situations). This of course means a constant inner and outer awareness in dialogue with each other all the time. Curiosity, respect and openness means that we are also ready to change direction and hypotheses in service of clients. In other words, while there is a call to rigour there is also a call towards imagination and co-creativity.

One of the highlights of this book for me is that it presents the material in a way that is not only useful to clinicians at all levels but also that it can be used as training material for thinking, reflecting and practicing systemic therapies. We are constantly re-minded about the importance of relational competencies, ethical practices, awareness of one's own premises in order to have a clearer view of and way of potentiating, what the authors call, a multi-processual and co-evolutionary approach. Given the multi-cultural nature of the societies that most of us live in these days such ongoing attention and diligence to our practice is of the highest ethical concern. This is no less true for all of those who live on the margins of our societies. For too long, our European and Anglo/American standards of so called 'normal' living have held sway in the face of very different cultural traditions of many of the clients and families we see. This book calls for a constant deconstruction of such potential colonial practices. This facilitates learning and illumination from the margins (McCarthy & Byrne 2019) to light our paths. Allowing clients and families to guide us into their particular life and relational spaces is both a privilege and an ethical imperative. I love the Batesonian thread running through this great text in the guises of abduction, non-instructive interaction, second order reflexivities, circularity and co-evolution. As such the genius of Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo break through constantly as a reminder of the origins of the inspiration Italian systemic authors of this book.

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