Metaphors of systemic change[1]

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Between the extant and the possible: for a social ecology and a social semiosis

Within the framework of the new paradigms (Fried Schnitman, 1991), therapy incorporates an ecology of virtuality, of that which does not exist yet and can be viewed as a meaning –and practice– generating endeavor, in the hiatus that opens between what is and what could be. The opening up of this space generates a context of freedom to create and perceive interconnections, project possible trajectories into the future, explore bifurcations, multiply possibilities and make use of randomness and fluctuations to create newness. Life horizons become hypertextual networks instead of linear sequences or chains of events.

Thus, therapy works on the development of emerging ideas and practices; it allows ideas to grow, change and struggle against a background of information and dialogues that is active in shaping the process through which participants rethink their perspectives and actions. Experimenting and testing potentialities in action, monitoring and evaluating their progressive implementation are part of the project of therapy. New possibilities emerge by linking traces of different dialogues, by connecting lines between the defined plan – intention– of therapy and the actual realization of this plan, by weaving in the resonance and perspectives of the evolving subjects and their dialogic voices.

The self becomes an evolving process, a bridge, diverse, multifaceted, a product of reciprocal experiences between myself and others, myself for myself, myself for others, others for myself.

Systemic metaphors

From its start, at the end of the 1950's, the systemic approach in therapy has evolved in conjunction with other disciplines. During its development it maintained a particular interest in both the conditions of the production of knowledge, and in the implications of the implementation of its models.

The impact of the systemic concepts in the social sciences has frequently been seen as a paradigm shift. During the 50's the concepts of different systemic sciences were initially introduced for the study of human interactions and communication. Cybernetics and general systems theory proved to be attractive to those researchers interested in the relations between individuals and human groups. They became the theoretical base of an emerging field, which later turned into family therapy: the study of the interactions and communication in stable and recurrent relationships. Gregory Bateson and his research group in Palo Alto played a fundamental role in these developments.

The history of systemic family therapy can be understood as a slow process of legitimization of a clinical and scientific practice which, incorporating the ecology of

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human relationships and family, generated a new field of study and developed models concerning communication, interpersonal processes, organization and family change.

The systemic-cybernetic models were central axes in these early developments. Until the beginning of the 1980's, the units of study were patterns of interaction and family structures. This focus on patterns and structures expanded during the 80's to include the transversality of signification, social semiosis and communicative generativity in the construction of frames of meaning and practice, in this way opening up the boundaries of systems.

Although the metaphors of systemics have been changing throughout this half-century, this chapter proposes that the common framework was a questioning of the linear, disjunctive determinist models, and an active examination of the links, the recursiveness, the organization and the complexity in human relationships.

Systemics, therefore, progressively centered itself around: 1) the study of communicative and interactive contexts, with an emphasis on the pragmatic; 2) the study of interfaces between contexts expanding into networks, multi-generational cascades, organizations, communities; 3) the study of narrative constructions using textual and hermeneutic models; 4) the study of therapy as hypertext with open, dialogic, and multidimensional metaphors.[2]

Dialogic: maintenance and transformation

The propositions of early cybernetics were centered around the self-organization and self-regulation of systems, that is to say, the study of the maintenance of its systemic unity and its identity through dynamic and complex processes. The confluent developments in systemic therapy stemmed from the need to understand said processes in social organization, their stabilization and maintenance through continuous change.

A growing interest in change, as well as in the construction of models designed to understand the organization of new forms, marked the passage from first cybernetics to second cybernetics during the 1970's. With the role of deviation, diversity, and fluctuations as potential sources of new transformations, the move was made from the systemics of the 70's to that of the 80's. Thus, the work of Prigogine on systems away from equilibrium, and his notion of order through fluctuations were incorporated into systemics to describe clinical and evolutionary observations of families. Crisis and change were understood in terms of thresholds of instability and a passageway into new dynamic orders by means of an amplification of fluctuations. Crisis, instability, change, innovation: these axes that articulate thought and systemic practice took the paradigmatic form of an evolutionary model.[3]

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[2]   Perspectives on the transformations of models and metaphors in systemic therapy can be found in Anderson, Goolishian, Pullinam, and Winderman (1986); Anderson and Goolishian (1990); Fried Schnitman (1983, 1986, 1987, 1991, 1993, 1994a); Hoffman (1981, 1986, 1990, 1992); White and Epston (1990). On systemic therapy and community psychology cf. Fried Schnitman and Fuks (1994).

[3]   References to the stability-change dynamic and to the emphasis on evolutionary conceptualizations during the 80's can be found in Buckley (1968); Dell (1982),

Systemic perspectives since the 80's from cybernetic loops to text and dialogue

What has shaped the systemic perspectives since the 80's? Above all, the contributions of second-order cybernetics, or of the cybernetics of observing systems (Foerster, 1984); but also the co-constructivist and social constructionist approaches, the refining of communication models, the incorporation of hermeneutics, semiotics and literary criticism, and the paradigms of systems away from equilibrium, of chaos and of complexity.

These new tendencies are characterized by: a) the questioning of the observer as outside the system; b) the emergence of multidimensional and complex perspectives; c) plurality; d) an increase in sensitivity to the social construction of reality; e) a revision of the notion of authority; f) the interest in creativity and the emergence of the new; g) reflexivity; h) the abandonment of deficit models.

Given that postmodern and post-structuralist ideas were formulated by persons coming out of the fields of semiotics and literary criticism, introducing the ideas into the social disciplines resulted in an increasingly frequent use of narrative or textual metaphors. Within this context, a group of systemic family therapists, including Harlene Anderson and Harold Goolishian (1988), left behind the metaphor of cybernetics to adopt that of *hermeneutics*.

Hermeneutics, which has occasionally been described as "an interpretative turn," is a branch of textual interpretation. The family therapists that have adhered to this approach have replaced the feedback circuits of cybernetic systems for intersubjective circuits of dialogue. The central metaphor for therapy, then, becomes conversation, reinforced by the circumstance that its basic medium is also conversation.

Despite the frequency with which Constructivism (Glasersfeld, 1984) has been confused with Social Constructionism (Gergen, 1985), the two positions differ from one another in certain key aspects. There is a common base in that both confront the modernist idea which asserts the existence of a "real world" that can be known with objective certainty, as well as the notion of language as representation. Both positions agree on the constructive role of knowledge and language. We construct reality and, for this reason, we can never find an exterior space from which to observe it: self-reference and reflexivity run through the construction of knowledge.

However, the two positions also have different focuses and concerns. For Constructivism, with its interest in the problem of knowledge from the perspective of the biology of knowledge and learning, precepts and constructs are formed through the encounter (the "collision") between the organism and the environment. Knowledge is not received passively nor by means of the senses or communication, rather it is actively constructed by the cognizant subject. The function of cognition is adaptative and serves to organize the experiential world of the subject, but not to discover an objective ontological

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Dell and Goolishian (1979); Elkaïm (1980, 1981, 1983, 1989); Elkaïm, Goldbeter, A and Goldbeter, E. (1980); Elkaïm, Prigogine, Guattari, Stengers, & Deneubourg (1980); Fried Schnitman (1983, chapters 1 and 8, 1986, 1987, 1989); Hoffman (1971, 1980, 1981); Jantsch (1980); Jantsch and Waddington (1976), Keeney (1983); Prigogine and Stengers (1984); Reiss (1981).

reality. From the constructivist perspective, knowledge is equivalent to a map of pathways of action and thoughts which, at the moment of experience, have been converted into viabilities. What is interesting is that they fit together well enough so as to guarantee this viability. In this sense, knowledge amounts to a function of survival and is not a description of the outside world.

In contrast, the theoreticians of Social Constructionism consider that ideas, concepts and memories arise in social interchange and are expressed in language and dialogue. The social constructionists maintain that all knowledge, that of the world as much as that of oneself, develops in interpersonal spaces, in the sphere of the "common world," the "common dance." Only through participation in social games, through continual conversation with those close to oneself, can the individual develop a sense of identity or an inner voice.

The theoreticians of Social Constructionism owe much to the textual criticism, and philosophical and political tradition of the deconstructionists (Derrida, 1978) and the Frankfurt School, as well as to the writings of Wittgenstein and some North American pragmatists. Some of these developments converge with the approaches of ethnomethodology, anthropology, and postmodern ethnography as carried out by authors such as Geertz, Clifford and Marcus, and the Hermeneutic school. To this intellectual context must be added the writings of Michel Foucault (1979), who re-positions the term "power" in a prominent place with his revision of the ways in which relationships of domination and submission are implicit in social discourse.

In this ecology of ideas and practices, the systemic metaphors changed.[4] Families and communities were no longer viewed as objects of study or treatment, existing independently of an observer, and they began to be approached as a flexible social design, made up of persons that share meanings.

The therapeutic process, understood as the construction of a context for a collaborative re-creation, permits family members to question themselves, to challenge, and to disentangle themselves from, versions of life stories that are problem-saturated and

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[4]   It is worth mentioning that some articulators of these transformations were: the concepts of *assemblage,* intersections and resonances, as set forth by Elkaïm (1989); the Batesonian view of the notion of "mind" in therapy presented by Keeney (1983); the contributions of Goolishian and Anderson (1987, 1990); Anderson and Goolishian (1988) on human systems as linguistic systems; the work of Andersen (1989, 1991, 1992) on social semiosis of reflexive groups; the contributions coming from the Milan group and posterior developments on circular questioning (Cecchin, 1987; Penn, 1982, 1985; Selvini et al, 1980; Tomm, 1987, 1988); the notion of communicative generativity (cf. Pearce and Cronen, 1980; Cronen, Pearce and Tomm, 1989; Fried Schnitman, 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Fruggeri, 1992; Hoffman, 1992); multivocality as proposed by Hoffman (1992); the incorporation of textual models and narrative transformations carried out by authors such as White and Epston (Epston et al, 1992; White and Epston, 1990) and Sluzki (1992); the perspective based on the ideas of complexity, multiplicity, emergent selves and possible worlds as proposed by Fried Schnitman and Fuks (Fried Schnitman, 1990, 1995, 1996; Fried Schnitman and Fuks, 1995).

deficit-oriented, and to work on the generation and recuperation of alternatives experienced as liberating and tranformative.

The notion of the *assemblage* (assembling) of foci of meaning and interpretation, a product of communicative social reflexivity, organize transversal designs, webs, networks of meaning that join together or separate.

The generative relationship between context and meaning, which is central to systemics, grew into a model of multiple levels through the work of researchers in communication. Pearce, Cronen and other associates presented a theory which maintains that reflexivity is a natural and necessary feature of systems of signification. According to this outlook, words and actions not only derive their meaning from the context in which they occur, but they create contexts as well. While the pre-existing networks of (contextual) meaning create a sense of pertinence, the specific acts and episodes have the potential power to transform patterns of social relations from within: they create meaning. (Cronen, Johnson, and Lannamann, 1982; Pearce and Cronen, 1980)

In addition, the therapeutic models progressively introduce differences and diversity, becoming dialogic and polyphonic. That which is constructed is not homogeneous nor is it the result of a single consciousness, but rather it is a field of meaning formed by multiple interactions, by "multiple voices": culture, gender, locality, singularity —all of which contributed to that polyphony. The voices join together; they are constructed and emerge as constructors.

The normative models that proposed pre-designed organizing foci of experience are replaced by metaphors of local processes, in which these organizing foci of practices and frameworks of meaning became temporary, re-centerable, provisional and dependent on the construction of social actors. A single center, dictated by a normative model of person or family, a model in relation to which deviations must be corrected, gives way to "local" centers that can function as organizers at specific moments.

This does not mean that persons or families can function without centers of meaning that organize subjectivity and interpersonal relations, but rather that these centers are a function, a process. They are not an *a priori* entity, but rather a constructed entity, maintained and questioned in communication and social coordination. This emergent perspective in the development of systemic therapy over the past decade allows the crossing over to complex and hypertextual metaphors.

In a therapeutic process, this perspective allows those who generate the version of that singular process —the therapist and those who have sought consultation— to become authors: the authorities in the construction of these centers. The dislocation of a system, "crisis," the de-centering of narratives and practices —beyond their privileged locus, their practices/cultures or contexts of action/interpretation of reference— allows innovation to emerge.

The reflexive forms of therapy initiated by the reflexive teams —the procedure of asking the family to listen while the group of therapists discuss them and then asking the family to comment— consolidated the change. This procedure modified the therapist power position, the professional's place was no longer a protected space from where he or she observed pathological families or spoke about them; also it questioned the assumption of a normative social science that held that the expert occupied a superior place from which he or she could make a correct evaluation. (Hoffman, 1992)

From models of closed evolution to models of open —or constantly changing— evolution

Along with the new directions in the social sciences and psychology, the systemic perspective leaves behind the models of alternation between stability and change. Recent research, which questions the existing notions of self and family as fixed entities proposes open models of constant transformation which result from our participation in dialogues and social activities.

These contemporary evolutionary understandings lead to a reconsideration of the notion of history itself, in order to not only privilege a perspective based on regularities, but to also prioritize singularities and the complex emergence of the new. Thus, a shift is produced: from the concern with constrictions and regularities to new openings in the context of evolutionary cycles. An ecology of creation emerges.

"History" is re-evaluated, in its plurality and in its potentiality, to generate multiple narratives and interpretative contexts, without returning to the illusion of a master narrative. History begins to be seen as a space for the construction of new universes and for the deconstruction of others.

Therapy can be described in light of these shifts as the co-creation of contexts that make possible the expansion of affective, cognitive, and performative territories, and their enactment.

Self in context, self in action: a process

The inclusion of the observer in the field and the new perspectives on self-reference and reflexivity allowed systemic therapy to focus on subjectivity and the subject in context, giving rise to a clinical practice interested in the simultaneous emergence of the self and social relations.

Thus, an essentialist perspective of the self, of identity, is rejected, and those processes of *construction* of subjects which *construct* themselves by *constructing* practices, knowledge, culture and social dynamics become of central interest for therapy.

This metaphor of "the self as process", the self in action, allows for the conceptualization of a qualitative change in the way we think about therapy which incorporates a dimension of searching and creativity. This creativity has ethical and perhaps even political implications. The departures from previous perspectives involve generativity, uncertainty, options, choices and responsibility. An approach of this sort requires metaphors of virtuality, of that which can be, of that which does not yet exist.

Possibilities in the realms of the cognitive, of affect, and of action are rebuilt when they can be incorporated into frameworks that generate meaning and new practices. From deconstruction/construction, from the tension between the expressed and the unexpressed, between the present and the possible, from the recognition of new alternatives arise, finally, unexpected perspectives.

The emergence of the self and of "possible worlds" can in this way become the center of a process of exception in therapy, articulated around the consideration of the processes which bring about this emergence. This perspective recovers the "appropriation"

of an active space (that of the subject in context), from which one can work on the circumstances themselves in the dissolution of problems.

In this way each therapy —each case— can be understood as a local and singular process, without losing the globalness of the construction of patterns and models. Therapists and those who seek consultation co-construct the therapy and become producers of the emerging qualities of selves and possible worlds, and at the same time they construct epistemologies in action and local "theories." The opening up of this space generates a context of freedom to create and perceive interconnections. Co-lateral metaphors, metaphors of alternation, for the co-construction of shared meaning replace the hegemonic metaphors of center/periphery based on the therapist's authority or knowledge.

Dialogic creation in therapy: An ecology of the possible

Taking as a point of departure the emphasis placed on the understanding of human systems as generators of signification, therapy can be understood as a social practice that offers families, couples, persons or communities an opportunity to actively involve themselves in the construction and design of their own existential reality. There, an ecology of the virtual, of the possible, emerges. The ability to move the coordinates, to explore unforeseen qualities, introduces a dimension of nascent creation to the construction of the context, as much as of the process of therapy. This involves freedom and responsibility, as well as constrictions.

The unforeseen qualities emerge then, in these processes where persons and families, by constructing their possibilities, reconstruct themselves. Through reflection on these resulting qualities, options and choices unfold which can turn into new realities/worlds. Putting these possibilities into action turns them into existential territories, into horizons whose exploration will lead to new discoveries.

The restoration of a recursive circuit, organized around an existential appropriation of the self in action <—> intention <—> action <—> reflection, substantially modifies the notion of therapy and the place of the therapist. It is no longer a matter of correcting a deficit, but rather of restoring for the person/ persons the possibilities of existential appropriation, of locating themselves in the position of co-author in their own life in context, and of being enabled to act competently in the face of problematic dilemmas and the uncertainty of the new.

The possibility to create alternatives, to choose some paths or to discard others, is based on the notion of dynamic subjects and knowledge as well as on the re-establishment of our creative and constructive ability as human beings within the frame of our own cultural history. This emerging sensibility links reality and representation with human initiative and action. It involves new self-perspectives of subjects as empowered authors of knowledge. New images of self, of subjectivities, images of the world and images of sciences that diversify feelings, languages, and cultures, becoming an alternative for being, acting and belonging different from the hegemonic and homogeneous universals.

Contemporary psychotherapeutic, scientific, and cultural spaces have expanded knowledge to encompass esthetic creative dimensions of experience beyond a territorialized focus in the arts thus questioning traditional distinctions between the arts and the sciences. The possibility to engender qualities of being unheard, unseen, unthought of, of transforming potentialities (possible worlds and selves) into actualities (actual

enactment) of new existential realities brings the experience of systemic therapy closer to the open and unfinished metaphors of creativity and learning rather than the engineering machine-like ones than once characterized the field of systemic thinking.

Without loosing its pragmatic approach and its roots in contexts, systemic psychotherapy can be viewed as a process of creation and re-creation of meaning and practices in collaborative discourse, a process in which new (alternative) ways of narrating events and life possibilities emerge and are transformed.

These perspectives invite new theoretical and clinical perspectives and points of departure in therapy, which informed by the new paradigms lead to: 1) developmental models that underscore emerging possibilities; 2) non-linear models of change; 3) non-deficit clinical practices; 4) co-participative designs for therapy and training; 5) ethnic, gender, class, and cultural diversity in therapy; 6) multidimensional views of human experience.

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