Praction Research: A Model of Systemic Inquiry

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When teaching research to systemic practitioners, I come across an assumption that systemic theory must be sidelined for new ways of doing, being and speaking in order to conduct research. I have found it useful for my own research and for teaching purposes to develop a description of systemic inquiry which is coherent with collaborative-dialogical-social constructionist-systemic practice. In this paper, I make links between systemic methodology, ideological influences, theoretical propositions and the doing of systemic practice. I reorganise these levels of context into spheres of influence and propose a model for systemic therapy and research. This model lends itself to a form of action research for reflexive practice which I am calling Praction Research. I connect local and global reflexivity in making a case for praction research as a form of activism and explore how the reflexive activities of listening out for and acting with the novel and the ethical take systemic practice into continual paradigmatic movement which make for transformation within and of the model.

Keywords: systemic practice, systemic inquiry, practice research, qualitative, reflexivity, methodology.

A sentence, a luminous argument, a compelling paper, a personal incident—any of these can create a breach between what we practised previously and what we can no longer practice, what we believed about the world and what we can no longer hold onto.

Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1116
Introduction
In teaching research to systemic practitioners, I have found there is a common assumption that they will need to sideline systemic theory and learn a new way of doing, being and speaking in order to conduct an inquiry. This can be deskilling for experienced practitioners and unnecessary given systemic therapy’s strong relationship with reflexive inquiry. It has been useful in my own research and for teaching purposes to develop a systemic description of a model of systemic practice and systemic inquiry which is coherent with collaborative-dialogical-social constructionist-systemic practice.
In this paper, I start by describing the interconnections in systemic methodology between ideological influences, theoretical propositions and the doing of systemic practice. I reorganise these levels of context and rename them *spheres of influence* and then propose a model for therapy and research which reflects collaborative-dialogical-social constructionist-systemic practice. The reflexive activities of listening out for and acting with the novel and the ethical take systemic practice into continual paradigmatic movement which make for transformation within and of the model. This has implications for the re-describability of systemic practice and systemic research.

This model lends itself to a form of action research for reflexive practice for which I have created the *portmanteau* term *Praction Research*. If one thinks of Practice Research as reflection in, on and as *activity*, and Action Research, as it was originally intended (Freire 1972; Parker 2005), as a form of *activism*, then in the doing of systemic practice *or research* I see both as having a part to play in systemic practitioner-research. The term *Praction Research* helps me stay mindful of the relationships between practice and research and between activity and activism. This is further supported through the introduction of some distinctions and connections between *local reflexivity* and *global reflexivity* which encourage respectful and irreverent movement across and between ideology, theory and practice. I look for a “pink thread” (a political colour for me) which helps me stay aware of the place and influence of power and injustice in a wider socio-political world, how this may influence what happens in systemic practice relationships and how systemic practice can play a part in challenging unjust practices of power “out there”.

**Reflexive Collaboration in Systemic Inquiry**
I am thinking of systemic inquiry as an activity in which the practitioner and their conversational partners move between self and relational reflexivity in attempts to work out how to usefully go on in a process of inquiry (Burnham 1993; 2005).
Contemporary systemic practice includes the relational activities of therapy, supervision, training, professional and organisational consultancy, coaching, leadership, writing and research which draw on the rich history of developing ways of inquiring into relationships between people, between people and their stories (Andersen 1987, Anderson & Goolishian 1987, 1992; Burnham 1992, 2011; Cecchin 1987; Selvini et al 1980; Penn 1985; de Shazer 1985, Tomm 1987, 1988; White & Epston 1990). Systemic inquiry has moved with a postmodern critique of professional narratives which objectify or generalise or which try to construct a static knowledge base. Instead, many systemic practitioners have found ethical coherence in embracing a reflexive and transparent acknowledgement of one’s own prejudices. This has led to a stronger foregrounding of reflexivity and ethics-led practice which privileges the unique learning arising out of each piece of conversation rather than trying to create a scientifically sound method. The move to co-creating collaborative, dialogical relationships with our conversational partners is also characterised by the systemic practitioner’s attention to the power of narratives and to narratives of power and how they may get played out in the working relationship and beyond.

**Reflexive Practice and Reflexive Research**

There has been some discussion as to whether all reflexive practice, all systemic inquiry is a form of research (Hosking & McNamee 2012, McNamee 2004, 2000, Oliver 2005, Steier 1991, Stronach 2007, Tootal 2004). Using the following example from my therapy practice, I offer a distinction between what I consider to be reflexive practice and reflexive research.

In a session with Susan, I read aloud what she has written and then we talk about it. Mostly she listens and thinks while I respond with wondering aloud. Then we reflect on my wonderings. This is the format she prefers. I am comfortable with that. It is something we have learned to do well together. But on this occasion I do something different. I find myself sharing some of my emerging thoughts about how I see Susan as a writer and suggest she might write an autobiography.

After the session I write an account of our conversation for me to reflect on. After a while of writing with my inner dialogue, the exercise feels too solitary. I send Susan these reflections and ask for her thoughts about the conversations at the time and since. She writes back with her responses and tells me that she enjoys this written exchange and finds it useful. The next time we meet, Susan comments that she hasn’t realised how much I notice
and wonder about how she feels. She wants to hear more of what I notice and wonder about. So now I find ways of sharing my noticings and wondering with her. I notice that our talking style is changing. We seem to be speaking more like we do when we write to each other.

At a later date, I discuss with Susan my hope that we might write about aspects of our work together for the benefit of other practitioners and the people with whom they work. Susan is keen for me to include and co-edit our conversations in a publishable paper and she writes something specially for it. She finds the writing we do together and separately interesting and it extends our therapeutic conversations which in turn add to the content of the paper for publication and so on.

We have created a full circle in the activities of our therapy conversation:
- she writes and hands me what she has written to read, to respond and reflect on
- now I hand her my writing and ask her to read it, to respond and reflect on

But there is a third reflexive movement which both embraces us and extends beyond us:
- we talk and write interchangeably about these exchanges and their impact on our conversations, on conversations with others and anticipate conversations with others we haven’t yet had.

Am I describing the reflexive practice of systemic therapy? I think so: a collaborative way of being in relation to someone, an interest in the relationship between inner and outer dialogue, acting with a mindfulness about stories which open up possibilities, and stories which close them down and the use of reflexivity to learn and change in response to feedback from the other in working out how to go on with someone or something.

But is this practice research? I think of practice “research” as a public sharing of private conversations. It becomes practice research when introducing another level of relational context with the reader in which the writer(s) develops a richly transparent, reflexive account of something with and for others, when the writer(s) enters into conversations with other writers, practitioners and readers. In this example, I am describing more than a technique and the consequences of its application. In the presentation of my reflexive writing in a paper for publication, I can render visible to the reader i) my own influence in the relational process, ii) the mutuality of influence between the client and
myself, iii) how inner and outer conversations shape my learning and practice, iv) how I might share learning from practice with colleagues in a manner which is coherent with my practice. I am also treating writing research as an act of communication with another which requires an anticipatory appreciation of the reader. I draw on values and practices from collaborative, dialogical and reflexive thinking to guide me in how I might take the reader of this research into account in the writing of it (Ellis 2004; Gergen 2009). Reflexive research is then not only the act of being reflexively involved in practice relationships: it must also involve a reflexive and transparent approach to the selection and presentation of material, a reflexive commentary and a relational approach to the style of communicating about it - as opposed to reporting on it as if from a “without” position (Shotter 2010).

**Reflexivity as a Relational Activity**

Much has been written about reflexivity and its uses in the area of qualitative research (Finlay & Gough 2003; Etherington 2004; Ellis 2004). The distinctions systemic therapists have made between self-reflexivity and relational reflexivity (Burnham 1992; 1993; 2005; 2011; Hedges, 2010) have helped practitioners be sensitive to the influence of narratives in relationships and how we coordinate with others in ways which students, supervisees and people coming for therapy find useful.

The term “self-reflexivity” can be confusing and misleading in a systemic world which acknowledges the presence of multiple, competing narratives or voices (Penn & Frankfurt, 2004; White, 1990), which pays attention to the polyvocality in inner dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981; Pare, 2006; Vygotsky, 1986), which borrows from postmodern notions of many, fragmented, partial selves (Gergen, 2008). I propose that all reflexivity is relational. The constructivist notion of “a thought” isolates the thing from the interactivity which creates it. Social Constructionism reframes “thought” as a product of an interactional relational context (Leppington, 1991; 2011). Systemic Social Constructionism can appreciate that inner dialogue is not “thought” so much as conversation between interacting voices. The term “voice” draws attention to the connection between articulation and that which is articulated. Inner dialogue – an activity commonly described as “thinking” - is not merely a biological or cognitive process. Bakhtin’s idea of striving to “find one’s own voice” from within a polyvocal mix (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 239) is quite an essentialist idea and could be extended to recognise a co-constructionist approach to contextually emergent “selves”. I find it useful to treat inner
dialogue as an exchange of views which are attached to voices with their own fixed (monological) or fluidly responsive (dialogical) character and as a series of relational responses between the voices influenced by the context they are acting in to and out of.

The difference in the tone accompanying an utterance could involve, for example, degrees of passion, a sense of danger, a certain sort of humour, impatience, fear, guesswork, conviction, knowledge of specialist language etc. It might sound like a chaotic interaction. But with a relational reflexive inquiry systemic practitioners work with the textual fabric of our lives. We have developed some kind of skills to manage the coordination of these voices and operate separate volume controls for each of the voices. Sometimes, when teaching, I notice people staring into space. For a moment I wonder if their concentration is drifting away from the subject. But it can only drift. Dialogical teaching invites the student into a reflexive space which requires much listening (Hibel & Polanco, 2010; Penn, 2009). In hearing a comment, they are reminded of something by another voice. By really listening – sometimes we call this concentrating – they are engaging with curiosity, rigour and reflexivity i) to witness how they are being moved by the different voices and why and with what possible consequences and ii) to listen out for what Michael White describes as other voices not yet heard but also present (White, 1992).

Local and Global Reflexivity

Several things lead me to describe systemic research as a form of practice-based action research motivated by the desire to create political and social change or movement in communities:

i) the inevitability of sound and movement (and sound as relational movement) in human interaction

ii) the perpetual reflexivity in systemic practice or research driven by the preoccupation with ethics-led practice and an openness to being moved by the novel

iii) a transparently stated recognition that some discourses dominate, discredit and silence others

iv) a mindfulness that some voices carry more weight and meet the needs of the advantaged rather than the disadvantaged.

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 & Walters, 1996, p. 10)

Freire always intended action research as a form of activism (Freire, 1972). Parker suggests a model of Radical Action Research which, he says, “is not a method as such; rather it is the transformation of research into a prefigurative political practice” (Parker, 2005, p.123). Kenneth Gergen has said how important it is to state one’s political aims clearly when doing research (Gergen, 2007). Patti Lather cites the philosophy of Audrey Lorde’s 1984 work “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House.” as an example of a need for research methodologies to use “sub-altern ways of knowing” and which step outside of and challenge dominant stories of knowledge and ways of knowing (Lather, 1994, p.36). Narrative Therapy has made an explicit commitment to challenge oppressive discourses and practices and to recognise injustice from the past and in the present and has built practice methods to support this commitment (White, 1988; 1990; 1992).

These ideas sit very comfortably with me as a systemic practitioner. I have always thought of systemic practice as an opportunity for people to cha(lle)nge the narratives and power structures in their lives (Simon, 1998; 2010). So many of the people I have met through work at The Pink Practice, a systemic therapy service in London working with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and genderqueer communities, have arrived in therapy with narratives which have been influenced by populist, self-deprecating ideas about themselves and the communities they belong to. To treat this as “internalised homophobia” further individualises a problem caused by prejudice on a wider socio-political scale. When speaking with individuals, couples and families in The Pink Practice, my colleagues and I have been aware that we are speaking with community members. “Clients” and “supervisees” are members of larger communities and they take the language of systemic practice back into those communities. This is another level of systemic intervention and one which I actively subscribe to if it encourages a reflexive curiosity from community members about which narratives they are subscribing to and for whom those narratives are working and what the alternatives might be.

I want to introduce the idea of local reflexivity and global reflexivity to systemic practice and practice research. Psycho-/socio-therapists, social workers, counsellors and educators might have a primary agenda which may turn on local reflexivity – meaning, the focus of their work may be on a localised
problem - but their work is influenced by and influencing of a critique of the broader social and political environment in which the people they work with live. This adds a dimension of global reflexivity.

With local reflexivity, the practitioner is moving
→ between the voices of their inner dialogue
→ with their inner dialogue into outer dialogue
→ in response to others and the polyvocality in outer conversation
→ with emergent ideas and actions within the moment
→ in response to reflections on the moment in the moment
→ with a sensitivity to the context one is acting into and out of

With global reflexivity, movement occurs
→ in reflecting on the reflections on, in and after the moment
→ when we find something new to say about movement in practice
→ in finding ways of describing this movement to others
→ when using learning from practice to cha(lle)nge socio-economic power structures
→ when inquiring into what counts as professional practice
→ when addressing an audience with a mindfulness about relational communication choices and possible consequences of those choices for self and others
→ when there is a stretching of the boundary of what counts as knowledge or knowing

By making the connections between local and global reflexivity, we are staying alert to the limits, possibilities and responsibilities in co-creating activities which have repercussions for the people with whom we are immediately working and the various communities in which we all live.

The Quest for Ethics-led Practice and the use of the Novel
Collaborative - dialogical - social constructionist - systemic practice involves reflexive activities which encourage transformation at every level of context through its attention to the novel, to the specific needs in that moment. This has huge implications for learning, teaching and researching practice.

Kuhn observed that science appeared to progress through the elimination of significant anomalies and unsolved puzzles, that problem solving would lead to a scientific revolution - a paradigm shift (Kuhn 1962). This contrasts with the valuing and utilisation in systemic therapy of exceptions (De Shazer,
unique outcomes (White & Epston, 1990), contradictions (Bateson, 1972; Cecchin et al 1993; Oliver, 1996; Pearce, 1989; White & Epston, 1992), differences (Burnham et al 2008; White & Epston, 1992), the unexpected, the novel - things that Kuhn referred to as anomalies.

In a post-paradigmatic culture (Lather, 1994), the emphasis is perhaps on evolution over revolution (Denzin, 2000), on evolving structures, evolving discourses, evolving activities, going with ontological drift (Law, 2007; Lather, 2007). The “anomaly” in systemic therapy is not so much connected with the matter of success or failure of the profession or professional discourse, as Kuhn might have suggested, so much as with aesthetics. I am using the term aesthetics here to encompass ethics. I understand aesthetic (Lang et al, 1990), in a systemic context, as being less concerned with personal perception so much as the shared doing of a relationship in which power is negotiated, held in critical abeyance and where ways of seeing shift from second to second. Change is driven less by a need to find out anything but by a need for moral coherence, respect and a critique of power against a backdrop of political and social shifts.

By addressing “novel” data during and as part of the process, by reflexively questioning one’s ideological attachments and their influence on what is noticed and acted on, one is questioning each paradigm at every turn. In focusing on our attachment to unspoken, tacit assumptions, practices and how to go on with people over truth-out-there, systemic therapy becomes a fast science changing its model by the moment in the doing of the activities.

Kuhn’s suggestion that an anomaly appears only against the background provided by its paradigm makes me wonder how we notice the unexpected against a backdrop of theory which is ordered so as to show up some things but not others. In effect, it is the expectation of order, the search for pattern which allows us to spot an exception, a variation. The normative production of order can provide a contrasting backdrop for the noticing of difference (Bateson, 1978).

This noticing is not possible without a lively epistemological reflexivity: What am I / are we noticing? How do I (or we) know what I am (or we are) noticing? What else might I (or we) not be noticing? How is what I am (or we are) noticing affecting what we focus on and what gets brought forth? Which stories are having a more organising effect on our conversation? How do I or we demonstrate and
live respect for the other(s) in this exchange while remaining critically in relation to my /our preferred ideas and beliefs? Perhaps we can also ask how we might extend our curiosity to ensure that in focusing on anomalies, we don’t overlook possible useful aspects of stasis and other patterns.

**Models of Systemic Practice - Descriptions in Theory for a Moving Practice**

I have wondered how to talk about practice, relational practices, without panning out so far as to render the moving relationships between these moving parts meaningless? But I have also found it useful to have available descriptions of systemic practice which transcend and connect a range of different systemic practices.

So to start with, I want to revisit two important diagrammatic models of postmodern systemic practice from 1991 and 1992 and then propose a development on them which I suggest lends itself more to a contemporary model for dialogical systemic practice and systemic research.

All of these *models* (read “descriptions”) place Social Constructionism as the highest ideological level of context. By Social Constructionism, I mean that we live in languages which are much more than an attempt at representation. Language activities and the stories we generate with and for each other shape our realities, help or hinder meaningful connections with others and with our environment. Our awareness that language both reveals and conceals cultural narratives often surfaces through attempts to translate to another person from outside the culture.

Leppington (1991) offered a framework for identifying and critiquing the relationships which connect ideology with practice, exposing the hidden influences of deeply held beliefs, values and choices practitioners make when selecting a particular theoretical orientation and its treatment or teaching methods (Fig. 1). More modernist attempts at describing scientific process have left the highest level of context as Method or perhaps a Theoretical Proposition where the direction of influence is top down only - a form of monological accounting (Shotter, 2011). But what has been important to systemic practice is how these models demonstrate reflexivity-in-action between all and any levels of context and constitutes more of a dialogical process.
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Fig. 1: Levels of Context in Systemic Practice

The inclusion of ideology into a reframing of methodology in postmodern systemic therapy corresponds to a similar development in the social sciences, the arts, literary criticism all of which have engaged with a feminist and postmodern critique of subject-object relations (Butler, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Lather, 1994; Etherington, 2004).

I have found it particularly useful when teaching, to use the Leppington diagram to describe different schools of therapy. In revealing hidden ideologies, coherences and incoherences within a theoretical approach, trainees can make more discriminating choices about their relationship with theory, with the professional discourses embodied by institutions and how these play out in practice relationships. For example, therapies which teach normative ideas about sexuality may be influenced by traditional scientific or religious ideologies. Post-structuralist and postmodern writers have suggested that we cannot separate out what we do from what we “find” (Gergen, 2008; Leppington, 1991; 2011). Whatever we do and how we do those things will influence what we seem to “find”. There is no “finding” outside of particular social, political, cultural contexts and know-how is reflexively constructed in the moment of “finding”.

Like Leppington, Burnham’s model of Approach – Method – Technique (Burnham, 1992; 2011) borrows from Co-ordinated Management of Meaning theory (Cronen & Pearce, 1985; Pearce, 1989) in demonstrating ways of
developing coherent accounts of different practices by exploring and linking levels of influencing contexts (Fig. 2). This is particularly useful in training and supervision when practitioners might be concerned with apparent incoherence between different levels of context.

**Fig. 2: Approach Method Technique**

![Diagram showing the relationship between Approach, Method, and Technique.]

Burnham collapses ideology and theoretical propositions into a single level of context of *Approach*. Although the level of *Approach* includes the personal passions and prejudices of the therapist / person, I find this conflation obscures the influence of the therapist and other participants in relation to their leaning towards some theoretical stories over others. The systemic practitioner or researcher moves between these levels of context and has a significant shaping influence on which ideas predominate. On the other hand, Burnham’s decision to separate out Method from Techniques can be helpful in generating opportunities to talk about a range of identifiable activities such as different kinds of questions, games or ways of talking which are characteristic of systemic practice.

When working with systemic trainees it has been useful to combine (Fig. 3) the Leppington and Burnham diagrams to utilise Leppington’s important distinction between hidden ideology in the methodology and the theory arising out of those ideological assumptions while at the same time including the level of Technique which Leppington deliberately omits.
In drawing out a model of systemic inquiry, “technique” is useful in drawing attention to the use of different systemic questions (Burnham, 1992; 1993; 2005; 2011; McCarthy & Byrne, 1988; Penn, 1985; Selvini et al, 1980; de Shazer, 1985; Tomm, 1987; White, 1988). Leppington avoids the use of words like “technique” because she says it sounds like the sort of thing an expert would use to work on something considered to be separate from him- or herself. Post-Milan systemic therapy situated the therapist as part of the system, not so much working on the system but with it and dialogical collaborative therapy has moved the therapist into a more alongside position (Andersen, 1987; Anderson, 1997; Seikkula, 2002; Shotter, 2011). Leppington suggests the notion of therapeutic tools is incoherent with a collaborative practice of inquiry and suggests we could think rather in terms of discursive practices. She proposes a shift from knowledge to ethics (Leppington, 1991; 2011) and foregrounds relational know-how over objective knowledge.

Similarly, I have noticed that the place of ethics in research often appears as an add-on, as a hurdle to be managed. Modernist research discourses encourage an awareness of ethics in research (Hudson, 1992) but this is different to a more incorporative notion of ethical research. I suggest that ethics in research is an idea closer to tools and that ethical research is a discursive practice.

The ethics-led practice of collaborative-dialogic working in practice or research is not subject to shaping by a pre-existing method provided by one
party in the relationship. Instead it involves continuous and mutual shaping and reshaping between any levels of context through discursive practices, through spontaneous responsivity (Anderson, 2007; Shotter, 2011).

This un-pre-scribed but attentive and attuned unfolding in relational activity can be connected to radical action research. “There is no method that can be applied in action research. The application of a “method” in research is always fraught with difficulties, for it presupposes that you can fix what there is that will be of interest to you…. If you are really following through your decision to let your co-researchers determine the issues that are relevant to them, then the “method” itself is likely to be something that will emerge in the course of the research.” (Parker, 2005, p.125). John Burnham has amended the first line of Ian Parker’s to “There is no pre-scribed method that can be applied in action research.” (Burnham, 2010). “Method” may become apparent after the activity of research has taken place and while describing the research process.

The doing of collaborative-dialogical-social constructionist-systemic therapy, supervision, training or consultation in a practice action research model allows for the evolution of the research focus to come about in response to guidance from the participants including that of the practitioner-researchers and their consultants and, in so doing, takes on its own evolving or emergent shape and set of activities.

The absence of a level of “data” in the Burnham diagram renders the movements and outcomes of the therapeutic relationship less visible than in the Leppington model which, through the inclusion of the level of “data”, shows the reflexive relationships between what we find (create with one another) and what we do, theorise and believe. While it may be important to include another sphere of influence (level of context in CMM terms) to acknowledge this set of relationships, “data” is perhaps not such a useful term in co-constructionist systemic therapy. If, within a systemic and dialogic context, we take “data” to stand for a range of relational activities based on discursive practices this sphere of activity describes “joint action” (Shotter, 2011).

The following model of systemic practice action research (Fig. 4), removes the levels of context representing “Method”, “Techniques” and “Data”. Instead they are replaced by a sphere of influence called “Discursive Activities” which is made up of a systemic anthology of Discursive Practices.

This model maps a picture of reflexive practice and action research in practice. It includes reflexive movement between spheres of influence and within each sphere of influence. The meta-contexts of Collaborative Inquiry and Reflexive Inner
Dialogue are an attempt to make present the dialogical self of the practitioner and the relationship between the people in conversation with each other. It is a way of describing dialogue between different voices, heard and not heard. But the major difference between this model and the previous models discussed above, is the removal of “method” and “data” in favour of descriptions which situate all discursive activities within an emergent and generative collaboration.

Fig. 4: Praction Research - A Model of Systemic Inquiry
In the realm of “Discursive Activities”, all movements in the practice relationship or research relationship can be understood as discursive practices and as forms of spontaneous responsivity between people (Shotter, 2011). This stands in contrast to a notion of static, pre-existing and individualised method-led know-how. The realm of Discursive Activities still allows for a systemic practitioner to use “techniques” but my hope is that they are thought of and treated as discursive practices within a respectful collaboration than as an isolated practice to perfect. But these activities do not “exist” in this sphere alone. Movement from within these activities, no matter how apparently small or large, can and does act into and out of global and local networks of reflexive influences linking different spheres of influence in a hierarchical or non-hierarchical manner. The dotted lines of reflexive movement indicate ongoing movement between these spheres and, if one can imagine, within each sphere of influence.

Let’s return to connect the example of reflexive systemic inquiry I gave at the beginning of this paper with this model of Praction Research.

**Systemic Therapy**
In my conversation with Susan, we extended the range of our discursive practices to include different reflexive writing processes, to move spontaneously, interchangeably between talk, writing and reflection on this process. And in so doing, we experienced what Shotter might call a “unique, never before encountered, ‘first-time’ event” (Shotter, 2009). I noticed Susan’s abilities as a writer, as someone who can communicate well instead of us being organised by a story of individualised difficulty. Ken Gergen (2007) has said “If you change the language you change the activities.” The shift in the language created the conditions for us to foreground abilities over struggles. We found a way of moving our conversation into new forms of “joint action” (Shotter, 2010). By questioning a common therapeutic assumption (a theoretical proposition) that talking is the most useful means through which to communicate with adults in therapy, the “we” in the dialogue start to invent the rules (meaning, rules-for-now) and so create further opportunities for articulating the forbidden, the silenced, the private into witness-able, respond-able-to accounts. There is a discussion about using this learning with others and writing for others.

**Systemic Research**
In moving from attempting to generate a retrospective account of what (really) happened in our conversation, I hold the pen at an angle to let the ink run with new and emergent thoughts, responses, knowings, questions. I move through
different reflexive stages: i) writing for myself; ii) writing for and within the relationship being described; iii) deciding to share our experiences with others so those others can benefit from our experience; iv) writing for and within my professional community. All involve an honest reflecting process, a sharing of resonances with personal and professional narratives prompting further questions about what counts as ethical practice; stories of how I have been changed by practice relationships, by reading, by inquiry; how my practice relationships have changed in the course of these inquiries. It is this final reflexive stage of sharing stories from systemic practice relationships which transforms systemic practice into practitioner research. In reviewing the conversation and extending it to include others (members of the public, theorists, practitioners and so on), I generate a publicly sharable account which both tries to anticipate the reader and offers a transparent account of content, reflections, reflexive process and ultimately a review of practice and its reporting.

Summary
This model of systemic inquiry describes a reflexive, emergent process which reframes systemic practice and presents it as a framework for systemic research.

The critique of power in postmodern systemic practice has led to an interest in a collaborative and dialogical way of being in relationship with people. Systemic practitioners are encouraged to review our subscriptions to hidden ideological influences, theories and values at every turn and how they play out in practice relationships. That can make for many more – sometimes dizzying – “turns” than one might have found in a modernist methodology.

The shift from “knowledge” to ethics invites us to shift the emphasis away from “thoughts”, “tools” and “ethics-as-add-on” to re-describe our practices as relational, textual activities, as discursive practices. With this in mind, I have found it useful to replace the levels of context representing method, techniques and data, as highlighted in previous models for systemic practice, with one inclusive and reflexive “sphere of influence”: Discursive Activities.

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References


