

## Editorial

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Welcome to the third issue of *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*!

In this issue, we straddle the tensions of fractures and joins, of *I* and *we*. Are these terms really binaries or do they slide on spectral plains depending on the intersections of contexts? Are they part of a library of static and fluid narratives? Under what conditions do fractures allow us to move on, feel whole or at peace? When do they make us feel crazy, angry, robbed or confused?

The papers in this issue are written against the backdrop of debates about what matters and who matters in the current discursive power wars over truth. This struggle is played out in climate change, migration, evidence-based practice and so on. Social construction is no longer a theory put to use by those of the left. It has been malevolently appropriated by those invested in social fracture, in a return to fundamentalist beliefs about what works and how, to hide personal gain behind screens of apparent benevolence. Young people are demanding action now to prevent further damage to the planet. They want conscientious action and they want truthfulness. With their whole lives before them, they recognise they are short on time. They are exchanging disbelief for action, and inevitably, action must be activism.

In one of the *M Talks* in this issue, Vikki Reynolds and Leah Salter discuss the urgency of bringing a political critique to our work as systemic practitioners, to transition to becoming allies, to get alongside people experiencing oppression, to understand action-in-context as activism and to challenge power structures that restrict people's wellbeing. Leah Salter extends these themes in her paper by discussing some of her own experiences in her personal and professional worlds, at home in Wales, and through discussing the themes of belonging, solidarity and more, she breaks down some of the narratives of *them* and *us*.

Justine van Lawick advocates joined up thinking about an unequal, de-spirited and fractured world. She tracks her own journey through split values, discourses and group memberships and shares her alarm at the current state of the world. But she also cites an example of a powerful movement, a way forward and comes up with a fascinating and necessary proposal for our professional community.

It is 30 years since a wave of revolutions swept the Eastern Bloc in Europe. In 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. There were pro-democracy rallies in Tiananmen Square. Poland held free elections and Solidarity came to power. Brazil held its first presidential election in 29 years. The presidents of the Soviet Union and the United States of America met to discuss the end of the Cold War. The Exxon Valdez oil tanker spilled eleven million gallons of crude oil into the Alaskan seas. The World Wide Web came into being and AOL launched Instant Messenger. Well, of course many other things happened for people and communities during this era.

1989 also saw the publication of a book called "Texts of Identity" edited by John Shotter and Kenneth Gergen as part of the Sage Inquiries in Social Construction Series. The book explored the role of linguistic practices in creating identity and challenged the psychological notion of identity as something innate or fixed, suggesting instead it was something fluid, dependent on contextual possibilities and relationships.

Our *Revivals* paper in this issue is a chapter from this book by John Shotter. *Social Accountability and the Social Construction of 'You'* is one of John Shotter's most quoted and quotable texts. It is a classic for its pivotal place in showing rich practical and philosophical detail of how we make each other in relationship. For me, as for many others, it was where I first really "got" social construction. I have used this paper many times over in my writing and in my daily practice.

Thirty years on, we include reflections on this paper from some of John's colleagues: Kenneth Gergen, Ann Cunliffe, Justine van Lawick, Jim Wilson, Sheila McNamee, Mary Gergen, Andy Lock, and John Burnham.

John Shotter's 1989 articulations have helped me frame the difficulties I and others experience as we attempt to walk through everyday life and encounter social, political, economic and cultural constraints.

I act not simply 'out of' my own plans and desires, unrestricted by the social circumstances of my performances, but in some sense also 'in to' the opportunities offered to me to act, or else my attempts to communicate will fail or be sanctioned in some way.

(Shotter, p.72<sup>1</sup>)

John Shotter would have nodded with raised eyebrows at Mark Huhnen's *M Talk*, an interview with characters from *Folded Feather*. The puppets open up to Mark and share how their identity is dependent on the audience in front of them. It is smart, funny and moving. Mark Huhnen and Oli Smart demonstrate practice-in-action, talking at a higher level of abstraction about what goes on in systemic talk so people have opportunities to perform different selves.

Ann Jinks shows us how language is bigger than the spoken word alone. It involves finding new ways of being with people and sustaining one's empathy in particularly difficult situations. Ann invites us take a ride with her. She shows us ways of being alongside fifteen year old Liam, Ann and Paul's autistic son, so they become more than a collection of individuals together in a car. Music, love and the flatlands of Lincolnshire show attunement-in-action.

When one person acts 'into' a jointly constructed setting rather than 'out of' his or her own plans or desires, an outcome is produced which is

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<sup>1</sup> Page numbers reference this issue.

independent of any of the individuals involved and 'belongs' only to the collectivity they constitute.

(Shotter, p.77)

Tahereh Barati de-centres the child-as-problem in her family therapy work and instead prompts a community of dialogue between parents in the local community to refocus attention onto organisational choices within a school in Toronto.

Craig Whisker and colleagues speak to the importance for the person-of-the-helping-professions to attend to their own needs given the nature of the work we do. These writers share their experiences from being on a retreat in New Zealand with the aim of creating space to recognise the person behind the practitioner and demonstrate ways in which we can de-isolate the individual practitioner.

Alys Mendus also counters isolationist traditions, this time of a traditional PhD with alternative methodologies. She invited others to dance her PhD with her and here, shows two films connecting to this invitation and her life on the road as a doctoral scholar. I am reminded why the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice at the University of Bedfordshire recruits in cohorts.

Chiara Santin also invites others into her world and creates something more than just herself out of her writing. Chiara goes on holiday to China, finds she is living her systemic values as a tourist, comes home, and writes about this experience to discuss with her systemic trainees. In this paper, she broadens the canvas from just showing her own experience by extending an invitation to others to act as a reflecting co-respondent (Charlotte Chiu) or offer what became a kind of internalised other poetry (Freda McEwen) and then Chiara produces a diffractive collage of the different participant-observer reflections.

The current state of the world requires more than manualised practices at this point. Something more radical. Something we commit to. Practices which do not constrain our humanity and creativity. And it surely necessitates engaging across levels of context, between spheres of influence to embrace practical responses motivated by empathic understanding of our material and creature world, to find new ways of being in tune, attuned, part of, influencing of a bigger whole than "we" can ever understand on our own. The importance of New Materialist thinkers is showing in these papers and building on the work of Gregory Bateson and others in understanding how everything is connected, and to what effect. I am struck too by the writings in this paper having strong sense of being situated in or alongside personal experience.

A challenge facing us as a profession drawn to philosophy, theory and sources of inspiration from outside of method-led culture, is to keep storying practice. We need more writing on how practice inspires theory as well as the other way around. We are also innovators and co-innovators.

This reminds me of the importance of practitioner writing. Writing is a form of research. Or can be when it isn't simply reporting. Our next **dialogical writing retreat** is taking place in June. Wherever you would like to be published, do find a way of telling your stories to a community waiting to hear what you have to say.

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