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Knowing Systemic Rules: From Stages of Disorder to Second Order Towards Positive Delinquency.   A True Story

Desa Markovic

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It is preceded here by a contemporary reflection by Desa Markovic written in 2019 on the original context of her writing this paper. In it, she addresses her initial encounters with systemic social construction during a revolutionary period in systemic thinking when Desa was first a student and then a tutor at the Kensington Consultation Centre (KCC) in London.

At the end of this paper are two further reflections. One is by Gianfranco Cecchin, another is by Desa Markovic both of which were published with the original paper in 1993.

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Abstract

This paper proposes a Model of Stages to describe the processes of learning and understanding the systemic approach. Six hypothetical stages are constructed as different positions to be taken in relation to 'knowing systemic rules'.

Stages are suggested as a heuristic device, as one possible way of telling the story of what happens on the journey of becoming systemic. (Do not believe that it is more or less true than any other true story!)

The relationships between stages are not based on a paradigm of linear development. The Stages Model is proposed as ever evolving through the circular, spiralling patterns and processes which last beyond any training course.

Remembering some original contexts for writing this paper

Desa Markovic (2019)

The invitation of Murmurations editor, Gail Simon to reflect on this paper took me back to the beginning of my systemic training at KCC in 1991, the study of which resulted in my unanticipated migration from Yugoslavia, a radical change of scene and a need to rearrange many context levels, as well as to embrace a real epistemological revolution in my life.

Entering a systemic world was at first liberating in that it opened up a dormant space within me ready for an awakening. However, over time, it also brought forth challenges, dilemmas and puzzlements that I describe in this paper using the format of "stages", a way of depicting the process of engaging with systemic ideas.

Coming from a strongly psychoanalytic background, I had been deeply immersed in that world, but started feeling somewhat claustrophobic after years of practice. Claustrophobia is my vulnerability anyway and it shows itself in many situations, including in relation to ideas; I feel uncomfortable being locked in a confined set of theories and practice possibilities. It is exactly the opposite with those who tend to suffer from agoraphobia; I noticed this in systemic trainees who react as if they have been thrown into the universe and plea for answers, structure and certainty, trying to hold onto something concrete. Exposure to the systemic world can raise the worst anxieties often manifesting as anger, complaints, frustration and demands: *tell us the answers… tell us what to do…* Some teachers did not do justice to the systemic / social constructionist philosophy when they responded with: "*There are no answers*", "*There is no truth*", "*There is no right or wrong*" - which only brought forth more anxiety and anger. As a trainee at KCC between 1991-1992 I reacted "badly" to such input too.

Many models I believe were created out of frustration, and there is a strong element of it in my model here, a protest against such misleading advice. It took me some time to figure out that a more coherent and helpful, and indeed a more accurate, way of responding is along the lines of: "*There are many answers*"; "*There are plentiful truths*"; "*It is possible to create numerous 'rights' and 'wrongs'*"… I tell my trainees today there is nothing wrong with holding certain answers, so long as you are mindful, open to allowing different perspectives, and to continuous self-examining. Didn't Gianfranco Cecchin already say this long ago? Where did this notion come from, that there are no answers? Gianfranco's view is exactly the opposite, he talked about *"polyphony of views", "multiplicity of stories", "multitude of views"*… And the wonderful concept of "temporary certainty" that he brought to systemic thinking, a reassurance that it is okay to hold strong views, to believe in your hypothesis, as long as it is not fixed and unquestionable.

However, some unique systemic contradictions are not necessarily easy to grasp. Systemic thinking can be confusing and even infuriating: *"Believe in your hypothesis but do not marry*

it", "Only flirt with it"… "If you have a hypothesis you believe in, it is useful to have another, possibly opposite one, so you don't get too attached and start believing it is true…" How non-committal is that? One can wonder. Or is it…? Is it not a true commitment to social constructionism in fact? Wait a minute. True commitment to social constructionism is not committing to any particular views? But no, it is not really so, as commitment to social constructionism means there are favoured ideas: reality is socially constructed through communication and language, knowledges are local, relative, and situated in history and culture; gender, class, race, sexualities and other "social graces" create a complex multilayered web through which we navigate in our systemic explorations, as everything is context dependent… this sounds like a series of "truths"…? And so the circle of confusion goes on…

Of course, we should never forget how the systemic approach became truly social constructionist through feminist voices coming in the middle of these dilemmas, debates and controversies, to enrich it with even more complexity, raising its polemic profile by eliciting questions about gender inequality, issues of power, love and violence… The words of Michael White spoken during one of his visits to KCC, "*I like the field of psychotherapy because there is no consensus…*" resonated with me.

But then, just the idea that everything depends on and relates to everything else can easily become confusing and I have certainly witnessed it in my peers and colleagues at KCC. Peter Lang used to ask these wonderfully simple-complex questions when trainees would bring "gender" into the conversation trying to be good trainees and do the right thing systemically, he would ask, *"When you talk about gender, from which cultural perspective is that?"* Wow, that one question would throw some into a deep-thinking space, while some others might at that point give up. Gianfranco used to say, we need to say to some trainees, this kind of approach is not for you, maybe look for CBT or similar training, a structured approach with a set of guidelines and goals, with a clear pathway and so on.

I thought of both Peter and John Burnham as "Why not" persons at those times. I remember approaching them with different ideas that whizzed through my mind on occasions, sparked by the liberating, inspiring, exciting KCC context, and they would each, every time, as a rule, respond by "*Why not*?"

I talked to John a lot those days as my tutor, and later employer, and a most inspirational systemic thinker at that time (which he continues to be today). I shared some puzzlement over some prominent systemic principles, such as "Both/And"; a fundamental, so crucially embedded in the systemic philosophy, opening many doors and unlocking so many hidden treasures… yet, a paradoxical and confusing concept, and from a certain perspective, not all-embracing at all, because, simply, it excludes the "Either/Or"; it privileges all-inclusiveness to the point of extraction of difference, of linear, straightforward, right/wrong possibilities. John's thinking very much resonated with mine, and he encouraged me to be inquisitive. There was this impatience in me, intrigued by what I saw as inconsistency, incoherence. I kept hearing the voices of the gurus in the systemic approach, Peter Lang, for example, frequently talked about elegance, coherence, systemic fit… and at the same time I was bumping into the wall of incoherence, misfit, a bewildering contradiction. Then, how does this make sense, that

Maturana found major "evidence" for his constructivist theory in experiments with frogs? What could be more perplexing than the message: *"There is no objective reality, and I have an objective proof for that*!"

On the other hand, Maturana's idea on Domains pretty much put to rest the "Both/And" versus "Either/Or" quandary for me: in the Domain of Production there are things right and wrong, and socially accepted truths, we can say socially constructed if we dare attribute social constructionist ideas to Maturana…; and in the Domain of Explanation all stories are possible…

Do we still talk about Domains? It seems to me this should be a fundamental teaching session in the systemic training. That, in connection with Helm Stierlin's distinction between "hard reality" (views that people are most likely to reach consensus on) and "soft reality" (views that people are most likely to have different perspectives on). The idea of "hard" and "soft" realities introduced a most helpful distinction to me; it is curious how the concept does not seem to have become a more prominent story within the social constructionist /systemic world. After Stierlin gave this talk at KCC, I feel I have been the only one who remembered what he said, to the point that I started doubting whether it was a "hard" reality, did he really say this, or was it a "soft" one, something I heard or I thought I heard and others heard differently, or it seems, did not hear at all!

The problem with the systemic approach as I was taught it in the 1990's, and throughout my time of teaching at KCC, over the first decade of the 21st century, is that it was clearly biased towards social constructionism, whereby "all stories were valid" so long as they were based on the CMM theory and certain social constructionist views. Psychoanalysis was severely rejected; students were taught to criticise it having never even read any of the original writings. The stance then taken was very much as I see it, a perspective that could be called Radical Social Constructionism – if there is such thing as Radical Constructivism, then there is Radical Social Constructionism too.

"Both/And" came to my life as a most welcome visitor that soon became a best friend, a guide to "all things systemic". Bateson's wisdom was a source of further creativity, in particular his ability to build bridges, surmount the insurmountable, and connect the incommensurable; as a result of which, in 2004 I created a model bridging the medical approach of sexology and the systemic social constructionist views. I feel that bridge (the MOST model, which stands for Multidimensional Open Systemic Sex Therapy - but more importantly, 'most' in Serbian, my native language, means "bridge") helped me make sense of how to approach working with sexual issues in the systemic psychotherapy, addressing and treating various concerns that have physical symptoms but also contain psychological, relational and social components. This model requires one to continually balance amongst linear, circular and reflexive; between named diagnostic conditions and a non-pathologising approach; between appreciating physical facts and holding a non-objectivist frame of reference, and so on. This is where the idea of embracing contradiction can be helpful and enrich theories and practices.

Many developments have happened within the systemic approach since my KCC days and the pull towards "positive delinquency": a radical shift towards opening up to psychoanalytic

ideas, talking about emotions (in a wonderful contribution of Glenda Fredman in particular); the concept of therapeutic relationship promoted by Flaskas and Perlez now became a crucial ingredient of systemic practice; and the applicability of systemic ideas to specific contexts felt a necessary move. However, in some ways it went too far and led to a creation of structured manuals for treatment, which resemble systemic ideas less and less. Perhaps Gianfranco's prediction from my interview with him in 1994 is coming true, systemic ideas will disappear!

I recently participated in a Friends of KCC workshop organised by Jo Bownas, Glenda Fredman, and Adriana Penalosa where we were reminding ourselves of what the basic systemic concepts were and making a map on the flipchart as if commemorating a dear friend whom we haven't seen for a while: circularity… neutrality… curiosity… irreverence, then: questioning, questioning, questioning. It reminded me of Bradbury's novel "Fahrenheit 451", set in a world where books are forbidden, so people keep their memories alive by coming together and verbally repeating their content.

I hope systemic approach does not disappear! Even having "married it" with the medical model, I am a true believer in systemic ideas and a loyal follower of the social constructionist thinking. If I were to study it all over again, I would choose exactly the same path, with all its inconsistencies and challenges, turbulences and paradoxes, for me it was a perfect-imperfect place I remember most fondly.

Knowing Systemic Rules: From Stages of Disorder to Second Order Towards Positive Delinquency.   A True Story

Desa Markovic

Introduction

This essay is a story created out of my experience of learning the systemic approach on the Diploma course in Systemic Therapy at Kensington Consultation Centre (London) since I came in 1991 from my country of origin, Yugoslavia. In conversations with my colleagues during the training we[1] constructed the idea that learning the systemic approach has been a unique experience for us, often accompanied by puzzlement, confusion and feelings of perturbed identity. In search of some possible explanations for what happens in the process of becoming a systemic practitioner, I created this story about a kind of regularity or pattern of processes one may experience on a systemic venture.

The use of the notions 'knowing' and 'rules' can be compared to how one might describe a theory of the major branches of philosophy: epistemology (processes of knowing the world) and ontology (the nature of the world). The concept of the 'rules' in this paper represents what can be called the ontological condition of the systemic approach, or the body, matter, substance that constitutes it. 'Knowing' refers to epistemological, that is cognitive processes or ideas through which the rules of the 'reality of the systemic approach' is being understood.

The choice of focusing on the link between 'knowing' and 'rules' corresponds with Bateson's thesis (1972) that epistemology and ontology are inseparable and intertwined.

I am talking about rules on two levels; one is the level of patterns as to how learning, thinking and knowing what to be systemic is about develops, changes over time, stays alive and awake. These patterns are represented here by what I call stages.

The other level is an elaboration on the theme of what it is that is called 'systemic'; how do we know what is systemic; how is it shown etc . . . In developing ideas about this, I refer to some aspects of the social construction theories:

- James Averill (1986) sets out some rules of emotions, one of which is the constitutive rule. He uses a metaphor of game to describe it:

"If there were no king, if pawns could move backward, and if rooks could be checkmated, then the game would no longer be chess." (p106)

- Pearce and Cronen (1980) the creators of the Co-ordinated Management of Meaning Theory (CMM): a 'rule based theory', state there are rules governing the management of meaning (constitutive rules) and action (regulative rules) in human communication.

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[1]As I believe the only experience I can refer to is my own, I tend to write mainly in the first person. However, sometimes I relate to my experience of conjoint experiences and then I use the term "we" meaning trainees on the KCC course and/or systemic practitioners.

With the help of these theories I tried to apply the idea of rules in the context of the systemic approach. The question became: What would be the systemic rules? Or, following CMM:

- What set of constitutive rules govern our ideas about the meaning of 'systemic'?
- What set of regulative rules govern our action so that it is recognised as 'systemic'?

Following Averill, the question is:

What are the rules in the absence of which the 'game' would no longer by 'systemic'?

The six stages elaborated in the essay (see also: Table in the Appendix) are briefly:

STAGE ONE: enter systemic training with expectations of learning systemic rules in order to understand the approach to be able to conduct systemic therapy;

STAGE TWO: having experienced a kind of learning not as expected, we come to believe that systemic rules don't exist and ...;

STAGE THREE: begin to wonder is it systemic to have systemic rules? and so from here ...

STAGE FOUR: we begin to question the meaning of systemic ideas in ways which allow space for the coexistence of a multiplicity of meanings of systemic rules and .....

STAGE FIVE: begin to comprehend the idea of rules as being socially constructed and start to develop our own style of choosing how to participate in the construction of rules in various contexts over time and in ......

STAGE SIX: we use systemic rules for challenging the same rules and for creating some new meanings for those rules and their implications. This is the stage of positive delinquency when we challenge the stories about the rules that govern rule creation.

The stages are presented from an earlier position of my thinking as a student on the final year of the KCC course. In the Discussion I reflect on the Model two years after having created it.

Stage One: "What are the rules?"

Great Expectations/Search for Certainty

I believe that at the beginning of a systemic course each of us trainees is already different, with our ideas about learning coming from diverse cultural, professional, family and other social contexts. If I speculate about our commonalties at this first stage, it would be that our general expectations are to learn what the systemic approach **is** and how it is applied in practice.

Cecchin (1987) connects such linear ideas about learning with cultural beliefs:

". . . we have been raised in cultural contexts in which the common belief is that teachers know more than students. We tend to have respect for 'what is'. It is difficult to develop a stance of curiosity within this kind of context." (p411)

One of the ways in which I have heard the ideas about the systemic approach expressed at this first stage was in questions such as: "What is the main idea of this paper?" "What is the author really saying?" Or comments like: "This idea is/is not valid" . . . and similar judgmental, normative remarks.

At this first stage I knew that I didn't know but my wish to know was like a linear, first order curiosity to know about circularity and second order cybernetics. I had great expectations of discovering some Universal truths about Multiverse and, of course, I wasn't aware that I wasn't aware of my part in the creation of that contradiction.

At the beginning it is likely that we will be linear, judgmental, blaming and violent saying: "This is good"/"This is bad" . . etc. It is much less probable that a beginner would reflexively say: "What is this idea telling me?" "How come I feel angry when reading this?" "What if I try to accept this idea, how would that affect my action?" "How can I use it even if I disagree with it?"

These kinds of questions would create chaos if they were to appear at the first stage. If we were to abandon our preferences, strong beliefs and pre-existing views very easily, we would probably soon feel lost among the multiple systemic options and connections.

However, one cannot avoid the stage of chaos; and it follows just after this one, when its certainty becomes disappointed.

Stage Two: "There are no rules!"

Chaos, Disorder

My first impressions of learning the systemic approach were very different from how I had experienced any other learning context. I heard so many different ideas about basic principles, even about what 'systemic' meant and I understood these as signs of chaos and confusion 'out there'. I was thinking how I have never heard in any other professional context such constant wondering as to how to explain ourselves and say clearly and smoothly who and what we systemic therapists are!

It seemed to me that what we knew clearly was who and what systemic therapists are not! The ideas about 'No reality', 'no truth', 'no right/wrong' and such, I heard only as a negation, the 'No' position. I was also acting as if wanting to abandon my previous expertise, by trying to 'FORGET IT INTENTIONALLY', thus creating a paradoxical message for myself. Of course, the more I tried to forget it in such a deliberate way, the more I was aware of its presence.

Maybe that is why the rules I heard proclaimed as systemic, had a déjà vu effect on me. I was recognising them as the 'old well known stories' from other psychotherapeutic approaches, from philosophy, psychology, literature or elsewhere. Recognising similarities is the most reassuring ability at this stage whereas changes within the approach are mostly regarded as additional evidence of the absence of rules. Recently I heard a student's comment which illustrates a kind of uncertainty from this stage which I would call '**anxious uncertainty**' (as opposed to '**creative uncertainty**' of some later stages): "A few years ago systemic therapists didn't ask about emotions, and now they have started asking about emotions again! When will the systemic approach make up its mind?"

At this stage in our clinical work we often believed (at least I did) that what clients tell us should have a certain order, focus and specificity. If they don't 'obey these rules', we tend to pathologise either them or the therapeutic situation. Sometimes we expect certain answers from clients and if we think they are 'not answering our questions', we act in a frustrated way and believe we have a good reason to feel stuck.

For example, I ask a client: "Who knows that you are coming here?" and the client says: "It's half past three". If I operate within a frame that there must be a certain order, I would think: "The client is not answering me!" and I might get cross and begin pushing, insisting on particular answers.

At a different stage I might become curious as to how come the client has made that connection? I may ask: "Who do you usually meet at half past three?" (stage four)

From a self-reflexive position, I would be interested in what we have co-created in our conversation that has led the client to respond in such a way which I experience as puzzling? I might ask: "What is your idea about how come I keep thinking that you are not answering my questions?" (stage five)

However, these latter questions are not likely to be asked here. I see stage two as one in which trainees' responses are influenced by anger and complaints, mostly. We were angry either because we believed that there is no 'systemic order' and 'no systemic rules' or because we believed that there must be some rules but 'they' (whoever *they* are) wouldn't tell us!

At times, the answers we were getting we didn't hear and/or couldn't accept because what we expected was something more firm and certain. Maybe this happens if the students experience differences that are too different to their educational experience.

My anger at this stage eventually led me to take the decisive action against this idea 'There is no right/wrong', which I at this stage understood as absence of rules. So, the frustration of this 'No' position at the same time has enabled me to move from it, by saying 'No' to this 'No'.

Stage Three: "There can be no rules!"

Either/Or Position

Equipped with such rebelliousness I came to this stage to fight the 'wrong' rules. Instead, I found myself in various 'paradoxes, double binds and loops' (Cronen et al, 1982). The rules I could hear sounded paradoxical such as 'You shouldn't say should', or 'It's wrong to say wrong', or 'There is no answer' - the statement I saw as rhetorical.

For me, the main Either/Or dilemma here was forming a strange loop (Cronen and Pearce 1985) based on the strong ideas about 'rules' - 'no rules', 'systemic' - 'not systemic' existing as strictly separate. In my clinical work I showed this polarity as an attitude which I later formulated as **'imposing neutrality'**. The transcript of a part of the session with couple 'T' illustrates this:

Wife:	He's the wrong person for me! I can't go on like this . . . Everybody can see that!
Th:	Who will be most disappointed if you separate?
Wife:	My friends all say I should have divorced him long ago!
Husband:	Don't lie!
Wife:	You don't lie! See, it's recording!
Th:	So everybody expects you to divorce?
Wife:	Everybody!
Th:	So will they be disappointed if you don't divorce?
Wife:	Let me explain. The thing is he is not a responsible person . . .
Husband:	No, no, and what about you! You see, the problem is she feeds him with a bottle, can you believe it?
Th:	If you decide to separate, what will you miss the most from your relationship?
Husband:	She doesn't understand family life! She doesn't listen, she doesn't respect me…

Wife:	He should be listening! But he isn't. They say he is driving me to my grave! (cries) Everybody can see my face!
Th:	What do you think keeps him in the marriage?
Wife:	Let me explain to you. The thing is he is a dictator. He is exploiting me . . .

Although the content might have been 'systemic questions', on the level of process I was isomorphic with the couple by trying to change them according to my perspective.

Stage Four: "What do I mean by rules?"

Both/And, Second Order Cybernetics

I see this stage as one where questions about meanings are asked involving a shift to a 'Both/And' position, facilitated by Second order cybernetics, Observing Systems, Objectivity in parenthesis and Multiverse. These ideas are often seen as a trade mark of Radical Constructivism.

The 'Observing systems' ideas invited me to look at different meanings ascribed to the idea of rules and to differentiate this from the 'Observed systems' perspective where I used to put myself on one side and the world of systemic rules on the other, as if the rules existed 'out there' for me to pick them up like the pieces of stones on the way.

This transition could be compared to 'stories told' and 'stories lived' (Pearce, 1989). In this continuous process of becoming systemic we can be seen as developing abilities to take many positions: therapist, client, consultant, interviewee, team, presenter, audience, etc. Reading systemic literature, attending teaching sessions, are knowledge as a 'story told' by somebody else and enables learning level I (rote learning). This knowledge reaches learning level II (learning to learn, Bateson, 1972) and stage four by becoming 'story lived' through our changing positions in the learning context.

In this stage when I heard different meanings given to systemic rules I didn't experience confusion, since I was not searching for the single, 'ultimate' set of rules. The lived experience of Multiverse has opened a space for me to see the richness of systemic rules, once the meaning of these rules changed for me from rules as a '**mono-meaningful must**' to '**rules in parenthesis**'.

If the aforementioned 'T' couple had come to me at this stage, I could have acted from this position by accepting their stories told and challenging the observed incoherence between the levels of descriptions, explanations and attributions of meaning Fruggeri, (1990) of their storied experience.

The use of Reflecting team (Andersen, 1987) could also facilitate transitions in the clients' thinking in a similar way to which we experienced this is a transition in our lived story of the observer dependant reality.

Stage Five: "Which rules fit for me?"

Self Reflexivity

Just as stage four was a necessary passage to the next one, I would have not achieved this shift to stage five without questioning and challenging some aspects of the stage four.

A Constructivist position was a significant turning point, however it created a particular dichotomy. In presenting the story of 'Both/And' which allows for the multiple realities to co-exist, an 'Either/Or' had

been embedded: a polarity between 'Universe' and 'Multiverse', as two isolated worlds that seemed to be governed by mutually exclusive sets of rules.

This mystical approach to reality, the idea of ". . . our inability to distinguish in the experience between perception and illusion . . . " (Maturana, 1988, p30) and a suggestion of the ". . . complete abandonment of the notion of objective reality itself . . . " (Mendez et al, 1988, p147), could have prompted me to respond by showing anger, criticism or inhibition again, if I had chosen to. *This time I decided not to accept the invitation to such 'angry confusion' but rather to look at which ideas and rules of the multiple realities that I have only now started to experience, fit for me.*

This I construe as an emerging self reflexive position at stage five evolving from the experience of Second order cybernetic perspective.

My understanding of a constructivist position at stages three and four influenced me to create and reinforce dichotomies rather than make connections and bridges which is how I understand a systemic conversation at stage five.

In the next session with couple 'T', when asked what they would be doing in the same life situation in their country of origin, India, they responded that there would be a meeting of both their extended families in order to judge who is right, wrong and what decision should be taken.

This cultural perspective opened up possibilities for me to connect with the clients' language and use it, showing an active attention to their socially constructed meanings. Then in the session we co-created different narratives about various possible judgements made by their families and how would those affect the couple's options for action.

At this stage, some of my ideas of how a therapist might act to contribute to generating different patterns and stories made me think "would that be systemic if I were to apply them?". My further questioning of these ideas and an intuition that the clients might benefit from them, led me to the next stage to search for the possibilities to connect with some rules differently and still be systemic.

Stage Six: Challenging the Rules

Positive Delinquency

If stage five can be seen as the one in which we begin to build our own professional style as to what fits for us out of the repertoire of rules available, here at stage six we begin to change the repertoire itself.

Why did I decide to call this stage 'positive delinquency'? Some of the usual descriptions of delinquency: rebelliousness, disobedience, disrespect, unpredictability, breaking the rules, are words of no meaning on their own. It is in the context of LOW ETHICAL STANDARDS and DESTRUCTIVE that they acquire the usual meaning of delinquency. However, if the same words are put in the context of HIGH ETHICAL STANDARDS and CONSTRUCTIVE, then the picture of what I intend to convey by positive delinquency begins to emerge.

The positive delinquent act is not meant to be necessarily a creation of something completely new and unique. It can be an activity of making explicit some implicit rules that may govern our action and meaning attribution.

This process of the explication of the rules can be facilitated by adopting the 'APPROACH - METHOD - TECHNIQUE' [AMT], (Burnham, 1992), a Model of distinctions and connections between theory and practice. The AMT Model opens up possibilities for the rules to be brought forth to language out of the unsaid knowing. It also provides an invitational context for the new connections to be created. This Model sets a clear distinction of three connected levels: APPROACH refers to theoretical lenses, concepts

and ideas; METHOD refers to the organisational patterns of setting and bringing forth aspects of the approach; and TECHNIQUE is represented by specific activities used in performing the ideas of the approach, such as for example circular questioning, interventive statements, 'Observer aware tentative statements' (Penalosa, 1992) etc.

What each of these levels refers to can be regarded as types of rules. I believe that the list of these rules at each level of the systemic AMT Model can never be definite. Positive delinquent action I see as broadening the list by: formulating, giving names and explanation to already existing practice (as I see Tomm's work 1987, 1988); making new connections between different levels; creating some new rules which leads to the enrichment and changes of concepts and practices.

As well as challenging, explicating or creating the new rules, I construe *positive delinquency as a position from which a practitioner becomes interested in the processes that organise rule creation, rule adherence and rule questioning.*

Positive delinquency is not necessarily:

> changes that produce great novelties all the time;

> an ageist idea to imply that only what is new is best;

> a separately existing stage on the top of a scale.

I believe that there is a drop of positive delinquency in each stage and I imagine that it is positive delinquent action that enables transitions from one stage to another. Moreover, a decision to do systemic training in itself can be seen as a positive delinquent action. Knowing the epistemology of professional and agency contexts I came from, I would say that to begin systemic training for me was already a stage of positive delinquency. And I believe it is the case with many students.

Positive Delinquency – A Clinical Example

I first realised the idea of deliberately challenging some systemic rules for the benefit of clients after my third session with the 'C' family, when I experienced the clients and myself as stuck in some 'unwanted repetitive patterns' (Pearce, 1989).

With my team we developed an idea that, according to their descriptions they were caught in such patterns: father and daughter fight, mother who takes much responsibility acts as a mediator, father then withdraws and son observes the whole process with no comments, daughter then goes out and gets into a trouble and when she comes back fights with father . . . We experienced all family members as very concerned about their communication, worried that the family unit was falling apart and confused as to what to do so not to let that happen.

Team discussions were much more lively and creative than my conversations with this family. In the room I kept struggling to find a way of using these ideas.

Then I decided to tell the clients about this experience. I made a list of our ideas, including the observation about the repetitive patterns we saw them in. That particular point I formulated as follows: "We saw each of you as having a fixed role: father as a withdrawn silent one, mother as a mediator, responsible one, daughter as a trouble maker and son as an observer. How would it be if you keep the same pattern but shift the roles?"

With the clients' consent I started the fourth session by reading the ideas for them to comment on afterwards. While I was reading they decided to take some notes. Then I suggested to them to spend about 10 minutes discussing in parents/children pairs and to try to agree on which particular ideas they found most/least interesting and most puzzling. The time frame was set as an orientation and I invited

them to take a decision themselves as to when they were ready to call me in. After about 15 minutes father knocked on the observing room door.

Considered in the context of the AMT Model:

I **both** respected a systemic idea **and** challenged some rules on the level of systemic method. While I followed the rule of introducing clarity into a confused system (Cronen and Pearce, 1985) I introduced it in an unusual way. The exercise for the clients is a method borrowed from another systemic context that is training and teaching. Also, it was unusual to begin the session with our ideas.

Reconstructed a 'structural intervention' of creating boundaries between parents/children 'sub-systems' coherent with the systemic approach.   Within a structural approach this structural method may have been done in a way that was more normative/confrontational than invitational as I think I did it here.

Created, what I am inclined to see as an empowering move by inviting the clients to knock on the team's door. Hoffman (1991), talking about some systemic methods and the ONE WAY screen, says: "There was never a two way street . . . " (p 10). This invitation to the clients to call the therapist out could be seen as an attempt towards a more collaborative premise (The Approach level).

This family came to session five with very different stories. Mother had decided to be less responsible. Everyone observed how father became less withdrawn and daughter decided not to make any trouble. Son made observer aware statements and started to share his observations.

At the end of the session I said that I myself was feeling less responsible towards them. I understood their immediate humorous responses as a sign of the family's developing ability to express their playfulness which, being an important aspect of positive delinquency, assured me that they were ready to take care of themselves without therapeutic help.

There are other examples from my sessions that I like to believe were positively delinquent acts, most of them on the level of method. In my mind I played with some other ideas about challenging the five part session ritual. A particular positive delinquent idea began to interest me, that of offering clients the option of listening to postsessions, almost routinely, after the session has been clearly finished. I am also interested in developing more flexibility in using the Reflecting team, such as finding different ways for therapists and clients participating in it. Some of my colleagues were shaking their heads with a look of suspicion that I read as the question: "Is it systemic?"

Some Implications of the Model of Stages

The process of passing through and being in these stages is both linear and circular. I respect its linear sequential order without thinking that the journey from step one to six happens in a straightforward, unidirectional line. I see the process being open to many directions at the same time since in our systemic explorations we search for "patterns that connect" (Bateson, 1972) between persons, events, actions, beliefs, ideas, "beginnings and endings" (Wilson, 1990), in interconnected or recursive processes. Thus, the experience of one stage reflexively influences the meaning of the other stages.

Even when the 'cycle' or the 'spiral' is rotated once, we come back to step one asking some of the same questions again and creating different answers. For, when a stage is revisited, the past experience changes its meaning each time. For example, when Peter Lang says to his clients (Teaching tapes KCC): "I think I'm stuck. I'm going to consult my team" it seems to me a reflection of stage five on stage one, a self reflexive position, **a competent "I don't know"** rather than the one that I described as linear curiosity when at stage one for the first time.

In a way we operate in all of the stages all the time. Each one provides us with different perspectives, each has its affordances/constraints, some of which are more/less useful at certain points in time, for example:

Stage One: "What are the rules?"

Affordances: Not knowing, a condition necessary for learning, and generating systemic curiosity (a position of 'challenging the obvious' (Johnson 1992).

Constraints: Rules may be taken rigidly, as truths and the reality of 'what is'…

Stage Two: "There are no rules!"

Affordances: Systemic doubt; a guardian of what Cecchin et al (1991) call "Irreverence in Systemic Practice": not to let any one model or idea singularly govern our action.

Constraints: We can believe in a 'no rules' idea as strongly as in the idea of rules, truth, reality as objectively existing. If we do, there is a risk of losing our orientation and getting lost. Clear rules can then 'bring us back'.

Stage Three: "There can be no rules!"

Affordances: This stage revives the rules lost in stage two. Brings order, understanding and sensitivity into a system confused through loops and binds.

Constraints: A risk of becoming stuck in a rigidly either/or position which on its own is counterproductive to systemic wisdom.

Stage Four: "What do I mean by rules?"

Affordances: Opportunity of making more connections and experiencing a richness of rules in a Multiversal world.

Constraints: Tendency towards disorder and confusion. Undermining a Universal world may widen the gap between either/or by separating the world of meaning from it.

Stage Five: "Which rules fit for me?"

Affordances: Self reflexivity is its greatest strength, and a sensitivity to the interconnectedness of meaning and action in various social contexts.

Constraints: Too much reflexivity is what Johnson (1992) calls a "spaghetti state", a condition where everything depends on everything else and all these multiple intertwined connections can paralyse us to the point of being just as stuck here as at the stage three.

Stage Six: Challenging the rules

Affordances: Opens up new space for creative playfulness to produce innovations and improvement of theory and practice.

Constraints: Risk of losing the higher context of ethical standards in which case positive delinquency loses its positive aspect. Without respecting some established rules there is a risk of losing fit and elegance, creating chaos and becoming destructive.

The Stages model itself has its affordances and constraints depending on how we decide to relate to it. As with any kind of typology or categorisation, I suppose, it can produce somewhat limited and simplified effects.

We may decide to play with this Model in various ways:

> regard the stages as aspects of our self image and ask: with which ideas am I angry? which invite me to rebel? which do I prefer to believe in? at which times?

> treat the Model as an instrument for exercising Self reflexivity borrowing some questions from the mind of Michael White (1988), for example: "Can you recall an occasion when you were nearly overtaken by one stage, but instead managed to overcome it?" "How did you manage to take this step?" "What aspects of these stages do you think your colleagues are finding most arresting?" "Can you recall a positive delinquent idea that you decided to escape from but you still feel its invitation and now you are ready to take the step of trying it out?" Etc.

> relate to the stages through a slightly modified use of the 'Internalised Other' Interview, originally developed by David Epston and Karl Tomm (Tomm, 1991): "Hello, Stage Two!" "I haven't heard from you for st/ages!" "Do you feel neglected or did you withdraw voluntarily?" "Who would most welcome your coming back?" "Which of the stages would first notice if you did something unexpected?" And so on…

Discussion 1

I believe that a story about understanding the systemic approach can be told in many different ways and that many other stages of knowing systemic rules could be created. Writing this paper I was also aware of numerous 'exceptions to the rule' of this Model and constraints I was setting myself by separating some processes into specific stages in order to classify them. Simultaneously, I was aware of affordances those same constraints offered by enabling me to clarify some of my thoughts as a result of the discipline of writing.

At this point the story can be developed to explore more fully the implications of the Model. For example, how the Model can be put into an interactional context to construct the kinds of patterns that emerge in conversations between people taking positions related to different stages.

I don't believe that there can be fixed rules (is this said from the stage three now?) about patterns but perhaps hypothesising about these patterns may facilitate reflexive therapeutic processes.

Another area for further exploration would be connecting the perspectives of different cultural, racial and other social contexts. This raises the question: Are there any rules (am I at stage one here?) or observable patterns that connect how students and systemic practitioners from different social contexts experience the process of knowing systemic rules?

Recently I was told that in some parts of India there is a belief that you shouldn't say "I don't know". I wonder how somebody from that culture would experience the first stage of this Model. What they say instead is a mystery to me. And mystery, I believe, is as valid part of life as clearly knowing the rules.

I construe this process of knowing systemic rules as a continuous, ongoing search for an order, for the answers, clues, principles and ways of dissolving mysteries. It doesn't stop at the end of a course or at a graduation ceremony or after a certain time of systemic practice. It doesn't stop fortunately even when we abandon a belief that it is possible to find the answers whether they exist or not. Since this process is ever evolving with no clear beginning or ending, this may not be the end of the story.

Discussion 2: Two years later

The original paper was written from the position of a student in my final year (1991) of training. Here I have reproduced the main points in a somewhat different form. (Hmm. . . What are the main points of this paper really?) Over the past two years I have mostly been reminded of the Stages Model in situations where I was repeatedly hearing comments or questions made by trainees or family/systemic therapists with various levels of expertise. Here is a selection of those:

- The systemic approach is immoral because it never takes any position;

- There is nothing new in the systemic approach;

- Systemic ideas are completely new and unique;

- The systemic approach claims that nothing really exists;

- Systemic therapy is based on the idea that any particular intervention is as good as any other one, since in the systemic approach there exist no criteria for any particular action;

- It is not systemic to examine and assess people;

- To be neutral means to be distant, silent, paralysed, absent or dead whenever possible;

- The second order cybernetic position is exactly the same as counter transference;

- Self reflexivity is exactly the same as the client centred counselling, the only difference being that the systemic approach totally ignores emotions;

- Mind is an unnecessary concept;

- Social constructionism and radical Constructivism are incommensurable;

- The systemic approach doesn't exist.[2]

From the position of a trainer, I found myself trying to resist the temptation of rescuing the students from falling into traps of chaos, disorder, loops, nihilism or confusion. When I recall the occasions in which I accepted the invitation of this rescuing temptation, the effects of it proved to me once more:

- that rescuing, protection and other forms of control never work systemically;

- that going through the stages is a process that naturally happens over time, like the life cycle.

So, over time I learned to be 'less responsible' in order to be a more useful systemic trainer.

I can construe the process of learning/developing a practical understanding of ways of teaching the systemic approach as going through similar stages. There was the time when it seemed as if I searched for the rules to learn in order to be a 'proper trainer'. There was also the time when it looked impossible to be a trainer of the approach which doesn't believe in truth, objective knowledge and possibilities of knowing the reality . . .

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[2]Readers may wish to make their own lists of rules about rules of the systemic approach as they may have heard them, and to organise them either in stages or some other kind of epistemological framework. Perhaps one can invent some tunes that go with particular ideas, or some gestures or dance that could express the ideas in a form other than in verbal language. Maybe some games could also be created, based on role plays of people in conversation, starting with the same opening sentences and then inventing a variety of possible continuations: dramatic, tragic, funny, tense, etc.

I experienced some apparently intractable questions, some similar loops and dilemmas working as a systemic practitioner. I was thinking, for example: What can I say about my work? That I am becoming more expert in a non-expert position, that I know more and more about not knowing, my uncertainty has become more refined and profound and my positive delinquency has been enriched . . . ? Although I am pleased with these professional achievements of mine, I sometimes wonder how it may sound to somebody else!

Some of my colleagues have commented that the Stages Model idea has been helpful for them at the times of feeling stuck and blocked by a 'no way to go' experience. Thinking about the stages they were at, put them in a different position which in itself created a way out.

Some trainees said they were encouraged to be more daring and creative having been aware of the notion of 'positive delinquency'.

Some others were deeply insulted and offended with the whole idea of rules and stages.

I still find the idea amusingly provocative, when I recall it at odd moments. If I were to seriously believe in it, I would probably be noticing it all around me. However, one systemic rule I don't want to break is 'not to fall in love with ideas' (Boscolo to Cornwell, 1989). If I gave up this rule, I would probably lose the capacity for positive delinquency and then systemic work would not make much sense to me. The main reason for choosing this profession was to fulfil my greatest wish to be a delinquent 'when I grow up'. I chose to be a delinquent in a socially acceptable way and that is to do all these non-normative activities such as asking circular questions, mind reading questions, gossiping in the presence, being neutral, irreverent and so on, actions which are contradictory to the usual social practices.

In some ways, people may say it was 'systemically antisocial' to create the Stages Model. I would partially agree with that and at the same time think it is systemic not to be systemic sometimes. Exclusively linear epistemology, I believe, leads to destruction and exclusively systemic epistemology leads to nihilism, that is why I prefer to see them entwined.

Appendix

"Knowing Systemic Rules: From Stages of Disorder to Second Order Towards Positive Delinquency"

STAGE/ POSITION	STAGE ONE	STAGE TWO	STAGE THREE	STAGE FOUR	STAGE FIVE	STAGE SIX
ONTOLOGICAL	What are the rules?	There are no rules!	There can be no rules!	What do I mean by rules?	Which rules fit for me?	Challenging Rules
PERSONAL	Great Expectations	Chaos, Disorder	Either/or position	Both/and Second Order	Self Reflexivity	Positive Delinquency
EPISTEMOLOGICAL	Objectivity without Parenthesis	Anything goes	Binds, loops	Multiverse Multiple Realities	My Own Choices	Rules about the Rules
KNOWLEDGE	I know I don't know I want to know their knowing	I don't know because there is no knowing	To know systemic rules is a paradoxical statement	Many knowings	If I didn't know this what would I know?	What do I have to believe so as to think that I know?
LEARNING	Privileged knowledge	NO!	Observer perspective	Richness of various rules	Context & Meaning & Action	Which rules guide exceptions?

Acknowledgements

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A COMMENT IN THREE MOVEMENTS ON THE PAPER

'KNOWING SYSTEMIC RULES...'

Gianfranco Cecchin

Centro per lo terapia della famiglia

After I read your essay, I talked to some students in Milan and had them read it. They liked it very much and said that they went through the same experience. The students began to remind me about the moments when they went through the initial experience of confusion, depression and then elation when they had a sense of having found some 'truth' which subsequently revealed itself as elusive. They also experienced the pleasure of what you nicely call 'positive delinquency'.

Hearing them talking I suddenly realised that I, from the position of a teacher had a very different experience. This was the beginning of 'my' experience of confusion, when I became aware of the difference of experiences between my students and myself as a teacher.

I came to realise that often, when I thought I had found some good idea, for example an encompassing hypothesis that would clearly put everything together, I had a 'high' feeling. At such a moment the students would experience confusion and have a 'low' feeling.

What kind of a strange loop is operating here which I do not understand?

The same would happen when the students appeared contented with an idea or became comfortable with some sense of 'reality'or 'truth'. In those moments I would often begin to question myself as a teacher about the usefulness of what I was doing.

Perhaps in the interplay between apparently opposite ideas 'in the heads' of teachers and students the liveliness of teaching and learning is created. It could be the same when we refer to therapy. We may say that in any type of human conversation there is a continuous interplay between different realities and this is highlighted in therapy and training.

It is almost funny, but when I am in the position of a teacher and try to help others to make sense of what we see in clinical practice, this attempt to make a particular sense of reality enhances confusion in others. Both parties are frustrated.

Sometimes students and teachers reach the same conclusions but for different reasons. Probably the logic each one uses to reach a sense of reality follows different paths. The logic that a systemic teacher follows is a logic based on the lens of aesthetics and curiosity and she or he avoids carefully any form of deterministic logic. It is assumed, perhaps wrongly, that students who come for training are more versed in the traditional deterministic logic.

Using your framework of stages, let us make a scheme of what movements might be happening and hypothesize about the relative constructions 'in the heads' of teachers and students during these movements.

MOVEMENT 1: From stage I (What are the rules?) to stage II (There are no rules!):

In the 'head of the teacher':
"I have been explaining to the students the rules of aesthetic reading. They seem to understand the new logic and seem very eager to apply the new lenses to discover another form of reality, the systemic reality, which is what we construct in the conversations with others. The lenses of curiosity and aesthetics will

help them to be cured from the inevitable confusion and contradictions inherent in a lineal epistemology."

In the 'head of the student':
"There are no rules! There is only confusion!"

MOVEMENT 2: From stage III (There can be no rules!) moving to stage IV (What do *I* mean by rules?):

In the 'head of the student':
"I begin to discover something. Some new rules begin to appear: for example, I don't fall in the trap of 'either/or' epistemology. I learn how to put myself in the observer position, I learn how to use the reflection between observing and observed."

In the 'head of the teacher':
At this moment the teacher becomes conservative and thinks: "There is no problem with lineal thinking as long as you use it temporarily and know what you are doing. Don't be afraid of your prejudices as long as you can discuss them with your peers."

MOVEMENT 3: From stage V (Which rules fit for me?) moving to VI (I can challenge the rules from a position of positive delinquency):

In the 'head of the student':
"Now I know there are some ideas that fit me in a particular way and I can be original and creative in clinical situations. From the position of positive delinquency I can take risks and challenge many principles, the social, familial and personal."

In the 'head of the teacher':
"Perhaps now the student needs some rules! S/he has become too independent! S/he trust too much her/his own feeling or ideas as instruments of connection in the therapeutic context. "

At this moment the teachers, in order not to 'lose their mind', begin to lay out a set of rules to which they are holding onto firmly and to which they are not willing to be irreverent. Like, for example, the following rules:

- The only reliable instrument we have are our own lenses, through which we examine the world.
- Lenses are developed, created and organised by our past history, tradition, training and the experience of living in continuous conversations with other people;
- Our view of the world influences our action and our actions influence our views;
- Lineal explanations in human affairs usually limit or even stop the conversation the result of which can be that people are brought to violent actions;
- We are responsible for how we see the world and therefore for the actions that are connected with our views.

I believe that we need some set of rules that can form a kind of umbrella under which one can maintain a systemic orientation and still be accepted by colleagues and institutions which follow different orientation. Usually, however, when the teachers are at that point of explaining these rules, the students listen without a real interest, just to be polite.

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"OPENING MOVEMENTS OF THE FOURTH KIND":

A REPLY TO DR GIANFRANCO CECCHIN-

Desa Markovic Radovanovic

Tutor, Kensington Consultation Centre

I found your comments extremely clear, almost transparent, very concise, direct and explicit. They were so straightforward, it was a complete mystery to me. The more you went on to explain misunderstandings, to dissolve the confusion, the more puzzled I was getting. By the end of reading I felt confronted by a great enigma.

Thinking about your commentary and formulating my response was a process that went through, I am tempted to say stages. My initial reaction to what you propose was comparable to your students experience of discovering some sort of a truth, which then makes you question what you have done so as to contribute to the creation of such effects. My second reaction connects with your self-questioning posture very well. It re-minds me of a repetitive pattern which becomes more and more uncomfortable to me over time. It is when people react as if they heard a kind of a truth from me. Whenever a client or a student of mine tells me: "You are right!" "That is true what you are saying!" "I agree with you entirely!"...and so on, it makes me wonder what I have done wrong!

Something similar happened to me after having read your comments on my paper. I was thinking: "What have I written so that Cecchin agreed with it too quickly, started believing in it so assuredly and taking it with an almost scientific seriousness? What is it about the topic, the idea, the way I presented it that invited one of the creators of the systemic approach, of systemic neutrality, curiosity and irreverence to shut the doors of his Magic Playland and start speaking with a voice that appeals to reason?

I found myself curious to ask questions such as: Why would he want to disentangle misunderstandings and explain obscure processes? What were the implicative force that influenced the very Irrev'd. Dr Cecchin to perform as the one who will set the ultimate contextual rules and feel obligated to create the 'schemes that correct'?

I shall first take the position of a good systemic student and make sense of your comments by applying some systemic principles, the best of which after all I learned from you.

The first idea that comes to mind I will reject immediately. It seems too improbable that **you** (as you present the students doing) would accept some stories without any real interest, 'just to be polite'. It would be too fictitious a story applied to you and so I will look for some other possible explanations.

Was it the influence of the response of the Milan Centre students that convinced you about the story of stages? Maybe you chose to be convinced in order to make sense of your students' experiences and to understand the logic that creates some patterns of communication between them and you? So perhaps you decided to treat their experiences with respect by acknowledging the story, by accepting the system as perfect in the way it is, without interfering with the attempts to change or fix it.

From that perspective, I then wondered why it would be a problem for me if you went along with the story, using it as a premise to construct your own perspective?

However, I could challenge my assumption that you were convinced by the story of stages. Perhaps you intentionally took that position, temporarily, in order to explore a particular story told, or to consciously live it in a way yourself. I believe many systemic practitioners would similarly take a certain stance for the time being, or enter the system at the level of its own logic before introducing some difference.

In order for me to be able to understand your story as a tentative possibility, as a hypothetical position, I would want to see a hint of a systemic doubt in it.

Maybe I have stayed in the position of 'good student' too long and have become bound by the assumption that a creator of the systemic approach has to be always ingeniously systemic and irreverent. As if by always being a 'good student' I imprison him in the identity of a 'great teacher'? I admit, I do expect him to be exceptionally brilliant, creatively provocative, humorous and challenging all the time. And I can see how annoying such an expectation could become! Is this how he rebels against the pressure of some expectations on him? Is this how he fights for his right to be lineal sometimes, for his freedom to be at stage one and enjoy its comfort for a while?

Am I being lineal in trying to find out whether you were really, truly convinced or not? Maybe I am the one who is convinced that you 'bought' the story. So how can I begin the 'fourth movement' and move from here? What if I choose to understand your response as a way of creating your story in the context of your relationship **both** with the ideas from the paper **and** your students' responses to it?

Perhaps my paper emphasises what happens 'in the head of the students'. I believe it describes the process of how our personal/professional epistemology develops over time in the context of systemic practice, through conversations and communication with others. But still the focus is on a student or a systemic practitioner and their professional identity. What you are bringing into the story is an aspect of the reflexive relationship between the students and trainers and how in the context of their mutual influences each party makes sense of what is going on at different stages of training.

How come it didn't occur to me earlier, instead of wondering why you haven't lucidly challenged my construction, to be pleased that you showed an appreciation of my story without trying to change or correct it and certainly without trying to make something more exciting and irreverent!

Or, is this a 'Master's' second order irreverence, by being irreverent to irreverence itself? Is this how you 'do' positive delinquency, by breaking the rule 'A Master can always be expected to challenge the rules'? Are you being most unpredictable and aesthetically positively delinquent when you choose to move from your usual position of positive delinquent?

What is the case I making here? Am I being obedient to the pattern that when an 'ordinary mortal' says something straightforward and direct, people say: "Oh, how lineal... First stage, undoubtedly..." And when 'a Master' does the same, the audience is fascinated and exclaim: "What courage!" "What skill!" "Not only that he is irreverent but he is irreverent to irreverence!" "How does he do it?"

So, I am stuck here. Am I constructing a Masters positive delinquency or a Master's "New Clothes"? According to the first rule that you say you would not become irreverent to: "*The only reliable instrument we have are our own lenses, through which we examine the world.*", the answer is easy, it all depends on the lenses we adopt. And I can heartily agree with that.

<p align="center">**********************</p>

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