

Editorial

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When assembling this issue of the journal, the backdrop of February 2021 is of a world simultaneously swirling and steadying, in progress and decline, swinging between optimism and worry. It is a crazy time. Crazy in that there is no status quo. We hear ourselves and others describing continuous disorientation. Everything feels or is in motion. Governments amend regulations in response to the corona virus; we grapple with incoherence between science and political agendas; while we track these changes, we are startled by gaps between stories told and the stories lived where the evidence shows that not all lives are treated equally. To speak of the virus not discriminating between people of different races and colours is to separate out the virus from the social, political and economic conditions of the human environment in which it has come to live. The experience of living with daily, transcontextual prejudice is in addition to the broader landscape of lives turned upside down by loss of people, income, food, friendship, routines, innocence, play, trust and love.

It is hard to stay steady while the field-in-view changes frequently to depict a different national or global drama: racism and other manifestations of systemic prejudice in their many ubiquitous forms, Brexit, ecological decline of our poorly, poisoned planet, natural disasters, social injustices robbing people and places of resources rights. And, as if on a big dipper, back up into another wave of this pandemic. These scenes are not sequential. It is like being on a carousel and watching spinning objects at the same time.

In the 1950s, Gregory Bateson made an unusual attempt to reframe the “split mind” theory of schizophrenia of that era into more of a relational dynamic. This writing has been heavily criticised for its sexist bias in blaming mothers. What remains of interest, perhaps, in this moment of fast and ever-changing relational expectations, is the impact on individuals and their social systems. His theory proposed that sustained contradictory messages created an unstable ground which might cause enough stress for a person to enact splitting into many selves or become paralysed to avoid making the incorrect response or maybe protect others or parts of themselves.

Bateson may have been interested to see many national examples of similarly problematic conditions during this era. The “splits” of today seem

to manifest in a fragmented society. “Incorrect” knowledge or responses become located in another person or in another group of people. The power to be able to point to another person or group and characterise them as in some way lacking is to use the other as a relational anchor. One becomes a signpost, so enjoying temporary fixity of position - a point from which one can navigate uncharted and constantly moving waters.

I’m reminded of a finger post I made when at Central St Martins Art School on location in the Lea Valley Park in north London. The park proudly claimed to have a section of the Greenwich meridian running through it. I was enjoying the advent of social constructionist theory at the time and this influenced my art installations. In my Greenwich Meridian project, I made a finger post but the arrows blew around with the wind, countering the expectation that fingerposts offered directions to concrete places. The fingers were engraved with four words: *punctuation, splice, threshold* and *context*. What might we put on this whirling signpost today?

Many of us feel that centripetal pull towards truth, collaboration, stability and reassurance while the effect of so many changes creates more of a feeling of a centrifugal force, throwing one outward. It is hard to acknowledge that reassurance is not arriving any time soon, vaccine or not. The planet cannot be inoculated against human destruction. And “we” is such a dishonest term when used too loosely as it masks the persistent local and global, systemic inequalities which are a necessary foundation for the success of advanced capitalism.

But this can be a time when we can revisit systemic theory and also make connections with other forms of systemic thinking and relational ethics. It is hard to make a case for systemic practitioners staying focused solely on the human systems immediately in view. The world cannot be sustained this way. To simply apply systemic ideas in therapy or organisational practice is an epistemological error with catastrophic consequences.

One way to approach the papers in this issue is to consider what systemic thinking can contribute during these extraordinary times, and what other theories and values might enhance it. Robert van Hennik offers us further understanding on his earlier paper of what it means to become a systemic nomad. In part two, proposes a systemic “ecosophy” and knits earlier systemic theory with the multi-disciplinary critique by new materialist writers who connect the human, the post human and our material world. Mark Huhnen also develops connections between new materialism and systemic theory by examining the “life” of a virus and how humans conceptualise non-human matter. In a news section on Research and Practice Notes, Leah Salter reflects on the need to develop ways of working which address social inequality in the methodology at the heart of community-based health projects in Wales. In her description of establishing pandemic related support project and research into it, she deconstructs the separations of researcher, practitioner and service user to create projects where mutual learning and relational ethics are foregrounded. Karen Partridge also writes about mutual learning when she offers a reflexive account of long-term systemic therapy - a subject worthy of more attention in our field. She weaves the ideas of Imelda McCarthy and Glenda Fredman in with her own *Bundle of Treasures* to create a moving story which considers how to undertake ethical relational risk taking. Bev Meakin, inspired by landscape, shares two things: first, a practical exercise, Patchwork of Practice, that she has developed to support practitioners, especially trainees, to help them find ways of integrating their many selves and the many different parts of their lives; and second, she demonstrates the use of the patchwork exercise by writing autoethnographically to map her own stories within patches. Karen Leonard, in her research notes, also addresses work with students and

offers an encouraging description of her doctoral research journey. She discusses her research on the design and delivery of a new approach to teaching reflexivity to social care students. She illustrates the relationships in her research process, discussing the themes of layers and mess, emergence and planning in her research.

The revival paper for this issue is a 1994 chapter from a book on Gregory Bateson and originally published in Italian. This is its first view in English, freshly translated by its author, Laura Fruggeri. In this paper, she addressed the need for there to be a more critical and in-depth understanding of the different uses of constructivism and constructionism. The paper is followed by contemporary reflections by Sharon Bond, Sheila McNamee, Hugh Palmer and Gail Simon.

Finally, there is always a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes by reviewers, the deputy editors, friends of the journal, all of whom deserve our appreciation.

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