

Interviewing Peter Lang

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Introduction

This interview took place 15 years ago on 26th January, 2007 when Peter Lang was visiting Smaro Markou's centre in Athens.

It was originally published in **Metalogos, The Greek Systemic Therapy Journal** and we thank Fany Triantafillou and team for their generosity in allowing us to re-produce it here. The interview has a new introduction and conclusion by Smaro Markou in which she offers some context and recent reflections on this meeting and on Peter's contribution to the systemic field.

Peter Lang co-founded KCC in London with Martin Little in 1984. They were determined to create an independent space in which creative ethics-led systemic practice could flourish. The training courses they established were cutting edge, internationally connected and committed to re-thinking what systemic practice could be. Peter was more than an institute director with a vision, he was an important contributor to the systemic field. He was widely read and interested in more than systemic theory. He brought philosophy, cultural and political theory, social construction and communication theory, warmth, daring and playfulness into systemic practice training. Along with John Shotter, he led a systemic practice doctorate at KCC in 2006. He was awarded an honorary doctorate for services to the systemic communities in 2015. Sadly, he died in 2016 after living with and despite Parkinson's disease. We are grateful to Smaro Markou for sharing this meeting in memory of Peter Lang.

A personal introduction

It was winter of 2007, Peter was coming to our centre since 2000, three times every year, always with a heavy suitcase, late at night, flying from Sweden or Denmark.

He was coming to teach us, trainees, and trainers, how to become systemic appreciative therapists and consultants, how to develop a moral stance as practitioners in our field, exercising relational responsibility from a not-

knowing position among other exciting ideas. The idea of an interview was in my mind from the beginning, but it took us seven years for him to find the time to do it. His time was limited between his travelling around Europe.

What was impressive from the very first moment when the interview started was that we entered in a flow, as if the yellow afternoon light and the burning sounds of the fireplace created the appropriate atmosphere where ideas, memories, history, images were included aesthetically in his story telling.

During the interview I had the sense that something important was happening: to keep his words in our old tape recorder, to have him speak about his long-life journey, meeting all these new ideas and so many well-known people, to co-create with them lived theory and shared experience.

All his stories were dialogical, relational. He was in conversation with the voices of all the others and with his own internal voices as well. The room was full of ideas and of the spirit of important “others” that Peter had invited in this talking. This interview was one of the unforgettable moments in the “meeting with Peter Lang” experience.



Smaro Markou: Peter, after the conversations we have had for the last seven years about almost everything, the questions that I have prepared for this interview sound to me rather naïve. So maybe you can help me with the questions, in order to co-create them?

Peter Lang: The naïve questions are often the ones that make the difference.

Smaro: Thank you Peter. We can maybe start with some history. The Greek people that have been trained by you here, in Athens, and also participated in the KCC summer schools in England, have personal experience of your work as a forum that invites and includes systemic thinkers and practitioners from all over the world. To my understanding, your long collaboration also with the Milan team and some of the founders of family therapy, involved you in the creation of the post-Milan ideas in therapy, consultation and training, which led the field to the social constructionism theories and practice. Could you tell us how these ideas have evolved, what this meant for you and the KCC from the 1980s until now?

Peter: I was thinking... everything happens in relationships between people. And one of the big, really important people in this process was John Burnham in Birmingham and his colleague, Queenie Harris. Because Martin Little and I were at the Tavistock, as part of a kind of training that they did, and what had just come out was "Paradox and Counter Paradox", this book written by the Milan group about their work with schizophrenics in families. And John and his colleague, Queenie Harris, invited Luigi (Boscolo) and Gianfranco (Cecchin) to Birmingham for a... I think we had a week's seminar, and there were about twenty people, and we were lucky to get places in that seminar. And it was fantastic, because we were sitting behind the screen and the first day, John brought two families. One family was interviewed by Luigi and the other by Gianfranco. And it was just fantastic to watch Luigi talking to the family! He was talking to, I think, a five-year-old little girl and her eight-year-old brother, and just the way this guy talked to the family, talked to the children, that was like... "Aaaah...this is what we've been dreaming about!"

And it was an important difference. Because before, we had seen Minuchin and Virginia Satir and all these people, but we, for the first time, met two people who just asked questions, didn't try and move people around, didn't have ideas about normality, but had ideas about people finding their own way, and not wanting to use therapy to make somebody become something in the normal world, but used therapy so as people co-evolve totally new things for the first time. And all that and looking at the way they were developing their questioning was a big thrill.

And then what we worked with was to ask them, "How did you develop this questioning?" Everything was connecting with Gregory Bateson; like this idea that Gregory Bateson talks about that everything communities do are part of their coherence and their culture. So, it might look strange to outsiders. What was fascinating was the four in Milan had taken things from Bateson, and they would read about it, meet together, I think on Tuesday and Wednesday each week and begin to use Bateson's ideas to create practice.

And this idea about hypothesising, which everybody criticises but it was a brilliant idea, since what they used were these ideas from Bateson, that everything is cohered in the culture. And then they began to look at - this is my phrase - the "symptoms as a co-evolutionary process in the system". And from that I've got the idea: look at the symptoms as part of the wisdom of the system. So the symptoms they are not dysfunctionality, they are a form of life, which is part of the wisdom of the system. So, that's how they grew the hypothesising idea, but it was not to test the hypothesis, it was

to change the way we emotionally connect with families when they come. Because, if we think this is dysfunctional, then everybody in the family will experience and will think of themselves as dysfunctional. If we think “this is amazing... What is the wisdom in this system that created this symptom?” then we approach families in a positive way.

This is *more than* Appreciative Inquiry; it’s re-formulating, and looking at other things, outside of the “pathology creating” notion. And I still think that this idea of hypothesising is one of the most important and exciting things that anybody can learn. Because we developed it further of course. When we got in the post-Milan stuff and we met Vernon Cronen and Barnett Pearce and their idea about stories. So, what are the stories people are living that create this coherence? And that got us connecting with people in ways that families would say “that is right...! We’ve been living it but we didn’t realise that we were”. And the same applied to organisations. Be able to look at the stories that create the coherence.

Because they developed this way of questioning and you can take all the things Bateson said, and you can look at what techniques and skills the Milan group developed to do that. And one thing is the idea of looking at patterns that connect. And at the same time, looking at exceptions that don’t connect. But out of these they created a process of interviewing, when and how to use it, what your perspective on this is if we look into the future. And then there were some of the first in the therapeutic world that began to get this idea, the future questions made changes in the moment of asking them. And within a couple of years in their work they became very clear. The future questions have created the biggest change. So there are some fantastic ideas, which they are much bigger than being just appreciative. And a much bigger idea is the questioning. I could go on... because the questioning is very sophisticated and has lots of variety about it; it wasn’t just one idea, but lots of ideas, and asking these future hypothetical questions was very important.

There are probably other things to talk about. Then, Barnett and Cronen gave us lots of ideas and they were already being social constructionists. So, my experience of being social constructionist, included the Milan stuff we had learned. Because they used this idea from Bateson, “we exist in the communication. We don’t just communicate, we are the communication”.

And then, the next thing we had was this influence from Maturana. And the academic world likes to create difference. So, did Maturana! They called him the “radical constructivist,” not the social constructionist. I am not sure who decided that, but it created a difference. And it was interesting, because Maturana kept on saying: “I speak as a biologist. As a biologist, I would say...” so and so. So, we got Maturana’s book, “The Biology of Cognition”. We couldn’t understand any of it. But Lynn Hoffman said, “this guy is interesting”. So, we invited Maturana to London, in one of the first summer schools in Oxford. And he talked for a week and we kind of developed a lot of thinking... elaborating the idea of the symptom being the wisdom of the system. Because he had this idea about us being closed systems. And we could only act according to our structure. And that was an exciting idea; because he took us further in our emotional attitude to the people we work with.

Because this idea of resistance, which is so popular in therapeutic circles, what became clear from what Maturana was saying was that when you’re saying someone is resistant, you are saying “I don’t know how to work with them and how to go further”, you are not saying anything about them, you are talking about what’s troubling you. So, if we say this is a difficult group to work with, what you’re doing is you are saying “I am finding them difficult”. Because everybody is perfect in relation to their stories at that moment in time...

So, we were integrating a lot of Bateson, Cronen and Pearce and Maturana from different perspectives. Putting together a kind of kaleidoscope of practices. Because one of the things that attracted me to this systemic Milan was... I remember Luigi in that first seminar saying: "Systemic theory is a meta- theory, not a better one, but it looks at the connections between other theories and other ways of working. So we don't fall in love with this way of working". Like the usual fight: "I am systemic and you are psychodynamic" that never happened in the Milan group, because they said, "what we are looking at is connections. So, we can use some ideas and some practices from psychodynamics or whatever"; but the question was an ethical question, "what are you doing?", and the ethical question became "what is it that we are creating through our questioning with families?" and "what power are we using, and how do we make power transparent?" And all those kinds of things...

So, lots of little bits connecting together...

Smaro: So, I understand that this year's summer school has this theme, "Ethics and Aesthetics" ...

Peter: Yes.

Smaro: So, it is connecting, I think, with what you have said just now as an evolution of thinking up to today.

Peter: And it has always been... because this idea of hypothesising fits with what I was saying before. Why should we try changing the way we/other people want it to be? We then become just like manipulators. I can remember Boscolo and Cecchin saying that we have no right to decide what is a good way of living. We have to work with people so they create something that links to them. Very exciting.

Smaro: Fantastic! Isn't it strange? You have covered many of my questions anyway already!

I would like to know how you experienced your work as a therapist and as a consultant in organisations. How are these two areas interconnected and interrelated? How have you experienced this? For some people, these are two different practices. But what are their interrelations?

Peter: It's interesting to think about it. Because I can remember we had an interview with Gianfranco when we were starting to work with organisations and we interviewed him about working with organisations and he made some nice quotable quotes. He said: "When in families, people are talking about relationships, they are really talking about money. When in organisations people talk about money, they talk about relationships". Mind you, Gianfranco was always a bit ironical to this organisational work. He said: "As a consultant, don't try and be successful. Because the organisations don't care about what you do as a consultant. They just have a budget of money, which they have to spend on consultants to save tax. So, they don't care what you do; so, don't try to be successful. Have some nice time there"! That was one ironical thing to say. And then the other ironical thing I remember he said: "When you go in, you see everything as an outsider. You can see why this is not working, blah, blah, blah... Don't tell them. Because if you tell them, then the manager director will think "the consultant saw this in one day, what's wrong with my managers that they have been here for two-three years and they didn't see this"? So, if you know too much too quickly, then you negatively connect with the managers". I think that's an interesting ironical little twist. So, he said, be careful not to become an expert in the situation. But it was very nice, because it was again, looking about how to co-evolve in a situation, working with them, rather than working against them.

And the therapy world I think has some similarities, because of this idea of being in neutrality. Of course, you can't be neutral, but what they talked about was how you hop in and out of neutrality, so you are neutral to the outcome. To take away the pressure of creating change. But I think it's interesting because there are a lot of similarities. And in organisations what one looks at is some boundary of what you cannot talk about, like to talk about people's personal lives. Like if someone is not functioning very well and they are going through divorce, for example. Then the manager says, "the secretary is not up to it, she is going through her divorce". But I remember thinking to myself when in one of those situations, what right do we have to say the cause of her not functioning well is the divorce? What if instead of asking questions about the divorce, you asked questions about what is happening in the work situation which makes it difficult for her to function as well as she could in this situation. So what I have, as an important part of my input, is, "don't talk about people's personal private lives. Talk about their personal professional lives". So, that was one big difference and making some boundary to what we didn't go into.

Smaro: Can I come back a little bit to this neutrality idea? Is it connecting with what we called the "not-knowing position" later?

Peter: Yes, I make that connection. And probably you've been getting some similar ideas. I think it's interesting because when Harlene Anderson was in London last year, 2006, she said "I never use the idea of the not-knowing position as a total idea in therapy". This emerged when we were asked to consult with a family that had a big network and we thought when we brought this family and the network together, if we behave as if we know, then the other professionals will feel, who are you to come as a professional to know everything all of a sudden? So, the not-knowing position was a way to take a step into the arena and to share what values the professionals and the family already saw, so as not to come up with some answers, when they had been trying for many years. That fits for me with some of the ideas about neutrality. Go neutral, have this not-knowing position.

Smaro: Then can we use this not-knowing position in a similar way when working in organisations?

Peter: Yes. And I find that a very interesting way. Because if you say: "I know lots of things. But I don't know what will fit you in the organisation, so let's work with how it fits you. I've got some ideas about some conversations we can have. Let's explore how these conversations will give you a way forward". So, the not-knowing position is a very good position, because it keeps the idea of respect for the uniqueness of the system.

Smaro: And also, we have seen you many times to speak from that position, the not knowing, in training.

Peter: Yes. Because again, what we could say using Maturana, "you can't teach, but learning can happen". So, what one is looking at is, what ways do these people learn? How can I connect with them? And of course, we can't know. Because every teacher says, you cannot know every child's unique way of learning, but you can know every child has a unique way of learning. So, the task is, how do we connect? And then we can ask some questions, we can give some advice, we can give a task, whatever. But we don't know how it is going to work out. So, what I say is this, the not-knowing position is a kind of statement of a fact, we don't know how it will work, we've got ideas about how we connect, and what is new in the situation. And that is very important to connect with.

Smaro: Probably you have already mentioned it, but I feel I want to pose this question again. What

do you consider as the “heart” of the Systemic Appreciative Approach? Which is the strongest element that energises people? Probably you have already answered, but if there is something more...

Peter: I think it is this ethical part of the neutrality and not knowing. Because keeping this kind of humility in relation to what people have created, I think that’s very important. And keeping alive the idea of being transparent, describing the way you are working. Remember what was popular in the 1960s: “Freud said ...”. So, supervisors and therapists said, “Don’t tell the patients in psychoanalysis what your methods are. Because if you tell the patients what your methods are, then they can resist you”. So, it was a little paranoid idea. But we think, if we really trust that people are experts in their own lives, you say, “I would like to ask some questions, is that ok? Any questions I ask which don’t fit for you, you can tell me and we move on”. So lots of talk about talk and doing conversations. “What questions have you got for me?” This kind of idea. And ask them, “the questions I have been asking, did they fit you, are they useful, should we be talking about something else?” And really listening to what people say. So, we get into what they say and the grammar of their words, we don’t come with our expertise. So, I think that this ethical question is a big part of this way of working.

Smaro: Ok. You have already spoken about change and different approaches, but if you have something to add about what creates change in human systems, families, communities, and about the role of the practitioner...

Peter: This is kind of interesting. What I become aware of in working a lot in organisations is two bits. When people say, they want to change something, then they reveal *they have hope*. So, when people come to see us, and we ask them “do you want to change something”, “yes, we want to change this and that”. “So, you have some hope, that’s why you came to talk about wanting the change”. That’s a way to grow hope in the system. I think that’s very interesting.

Then the other thing is, people are experts in change. Because all of us have been through lots of changes throughout our life. So why do we find it hard to change? We can say “how did you make the changes you’ve been making throughout your life, what are the biggest changes you’ve made, how did you do it?” And then they will describe their ways of making change. What made that possible? So, I think to connect with the idea of people’s ways of changing, often that they are unaware of, and when you begin to question and they say, “I did this and actually I did that”, then they become aware of how they made the change and what skills they used. So we tune into people’s expertise, in their own words, in their own life.

Smaro: Through questioning.

Peter: Yes. How did you manage when you went through that experience? When you left the university and you didn’t have a job, and you had to find a job, and made change from being a student to something else. Because all of us are experts on change. How to change planes and not get lost! Was there something else you were thinking about change, Smaro?

Smaro: No, it was an open issue. We know that there is this approach saying that people that come to us, have already been in a changing process, probably they are in a phase of their lives, things happen, so taking the decision to come and ask for help, families or organisations, they are already being in a process of change, so the only thing is to actualise it. But I would like to listen to your ideas on that, that’s why I asked the question.

Peter: And probably one thing we could ask is: “When did you change to think that you could change, or to think that I want this change?” And I would ask that question before. I was thinking now, because when they come and she says, “I want to change my way of living...” “So, when did you get the idea to make a change? And what happened in that situation that gave you this brilliant idea, ‘I want to make a change’? That would be interesting to explore. What did you give hope in that moment?” That’s a fascinating part.

Smaro: Yes. And again, you are connecting to my next question that has to do with details, focusing on the details of the system. And I must say that when I first started my training in KCC and with you, this was something strange, because we were used to thinking about systems, not analysing details! And this was very revolutionary for me. Would you say something about this detail part?

Peter: It’s interesting; the detail idea is one that goes through all my therapeutic practice. Because when I had John Bowlby as my supervisor, he used to say to me “Peter, get into the details of the stories that people live”. He said that all the best therapy is based on the new details of what people live in those stories. And that was interesting. And one of the first experiences I had, I had a man in therapy, and he had no memories before he was five; so, I had this idea, from Freud about repression and the unconscious and all these kind of ideas. So, I talked to Bowlby about it in supervision. And he said to me, “I wouldn’t worry about that idea about repression. Just ask him... (because five is the age of going to school in England), so ask this man, ‘Was there a story in your family when you were five and went to school?’ Don’t talk about what happens in the family, keep that private?” Because, Bowlby said, maybe he learnt to forget if there was some story in his family. So, I asked this man the next time he came to see me, “Was there some story...?” “Oh!” he said, “there was a big story, we lived in a little town in the North of England and my father was a priest and my mother was a doctor. And they said, ‘don’t you dare to talk to other children about what happens at home, because we must keep our privacy’”. So, I said, “so it was a way of learning to forget or not?” “That’s right,” he said. “I hadn’t thought about that before, I’ve been living it”. But if I had not got into the detail, we wouldn’t have made that connection. So the detail is important, the more detail the better - generally speaking.

Smaro: You mention John Bowlby was your supervisor? John Bowlby, of the attachment theory”?

Peter: Yes.

Smaro: And he has influenced your thinking from the beginning you said.

Peter: Yes.

Smaro: Because my next question is about individual and the system.

Peter: It’s interesting. This idea of individuality is a very important part of western culture. And what we could say is the idea of individuality, the way we talk about it these days, is a huge achievement of western culture. And developing that idea of individuality is something that we learn to do and we create through time. But what’s interesting about it is you can’t be an individual unless you are in relationship with somebody. So, one can look at, what relationships has the individuality story created? There are a lot of different things to think about it in connection to that individuality; because it brings with it a sense of moral responsibility that we become agents of our actions. And that’s kind of a controversial idea. But it gives us a very important way forward.

Smaro: Controversial to what?

Peter: Well, I don't know about Ken Gergen now, but when we first met, he said, "I don't like to talk about agency, and I don't think we should talk about the individual. Because the individual takes us too far into 'my feelings, my rights'." And he was right. Because that is taking individuality out of context. And so we say it's a part of life, which we achieve in context. So, what I'm saying is, in therapy we meet the individual, but we are working with the system.

Smaro: We meet with the individual...

Peter: Yes. We can never not work with the system. Because the moment the persons finish the interviews with us they walk out, they have made some changes within the interview, so what about everybody else in their family? How do they connect with the changes and where this person has become different? This kind of thing...

We had some big experiences of that in the 1970s, when they were developing marriage guidance counselling in England which was totally based on volunteers, and they trained volunteers as counsellors, and we discovered they insisted the volunteers had some group personal awareness development and so on. So, most of these counsellors were married women, they had been working with the couples, they had supervision, they had group work, and then they got all sorts of new ideas about feelings, about the ways we think - and their husbands were never part of that. And they outgrew their husbands in a particular way and that resulted in a lot of divorces. And somehow that focusing on the individual outside of the system, left other people, children, husbands and others, bewildered on how to connect with the person. So I think when we work with individuals we need to develop ways of talking about, like "when you walk out of here and you feel different, who will notice? How would you help them to notice?"

Smaro: To bring the system into the conversation and work with the system.

Peter: Absolutely. And that's why it's often more useful to have couples together and families and networks. Because that's the way to have everybody participating in the change that happens. Because they can take it further. So, I think that's very important. In Eastern cultures, it's different because a lot of eastern countries, for example in Japan, and I think in Korea too; they don't have the "I" pronoun. We can become individuals, because we have the "I" pronoun. We then talk about how is the "we-dividual". But in the East, especially in Japan and Korea, if you say, "are you feeling self-confident?" - if you ask this to a western person he can say to you "I am feeling very self-confident today". If you ask this to a Japanese, they will look at you as if this has no meaning. They would say: "When I am with my mother, self- confidence comes on me". So, it's always a relational description. And I think that's interesting.

So, it is fascinating working with individuals, one can do lots of different things, but it is part of the ethics and how you work to keep alive how the system outside copes with this change. I can remember some years ago, when I was a priest, one of the women on my staff went to psychoanalysis. And I remember visiting her mother, and her mother said to me, "I don't know what's happened to her, she feels like a stranger, she is not the daughter I once knew". And I remember visiting a mother of a 40-year-old, the mother of the mother was in her seventies, she said: "I had a horrible dream that somebody has taken away my daughter, a big dark spirit, and I would never get my daughter back again". I was just thinking about that story now, the mother knew she was

changing, but was not part of understanding some of this changing. So, I think the ethics of how we keep alive other people in the relationship.

Smaro: You said before, though, that as a meta-theory it can create coherence with other theoretical paradigms, including psychodynamics. It must be something that connects, but how can it happen, because you spoke about differences.

Peter: Yes. And I was remembering a situation where we were discussing a case with Gianfranco Cecchin. Then he said - I can't remember details but let's make it up - "it sounds like this young man is really in love with his mother, he really cares for his mother and the father does not interfere in their relationship, so somehow, he has destroyed the father" - we had this Oedipus idea by his connecting with the mother. So let's think, what is the father doing to participate in this drama in this way?

So, there are lots of good metaphors in this psychodynamic and psychoanalytic idea; like the metaphor, when you supervise people who had some psychodynamic training. They have one solution to supervision, to everything: "This is a parallel process". The therapist is avoiding the death of her father, so the family is doing the same. And it's a parallel process; the therapist is colluding; the family is in denial. That's a kind of standard hypothesis that everybody brings out. So, why do we connote it negatively? That's interesting. So, the therapist has something she feels she wants to avoid. The family avoids it too. So, let's work together, how the therapist can create some learning for herself and how the family can create some learning. I think it's very nice to use this differently.

And we can also say, in psychoanalysis one sits and listens for a long time. And we had one of the course participants on a doctoral programme, she's from Norway, and her husband had to move to England, so she came to KCC to train. It was very interesting because she said, "I couldn't ask all these quick questions the way the Milan group did, because my English was not good enough to be sure I would be understood. So I had to listen for a long time to be sure I understood". So to sit there thinking "now I am listening because I am understanding", is also another thing we can use from the psychoanalytic point of view.

Smaro: Every time we meet you always have some stories that connect us with all the other practitioners you meet in your travels, and with what is happening in KCC and in England. You mention often things about "stories lived, stories told", "language is action", "we live in language", "there is no translation". So could you please tell us some of your thoughts about the meaning of narratives in life, in therapy, in consultation and training? How to use metaphors?

Peter: The words that get into the practice of therapy and the practice of consultation are an interesting topic. Because there are lots of words from lots of different people. Using the "text" metaphor (and that comes from some of social constructionist starters) when they say, let's look at what people say as "text". And I think using Derrida, they talk about how to analyse the text for what's hidden in the text that you would miss otherwise. So, that's one way of connecting with people's talk. Probably we could say all these are metaphors to connect with people's talk. So, "text" would be one metaphor. And then we could do some Derridean de-construction, what is in the text. But instead of the deconstruction, I like the idea of "thin stories and thick stories", which come from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. He got the idea of thin stories and thick stories from an English moral philosopher called Gilbert Ryle, who put that together for the first time. So we look at what are the riches when we take a bit of interaction and people tell their story; what are the riches, what's

happening around it, what's non-verbal, what does it say about relationships, what is it trying to influence and so on. And that's a very useful way of questioning.

So, one way to connect with people's talk is the metaphor "text" and the other way to connect is to connect with this idea of stories lived and stories told. Because people live a hugely rich story, they tell very small parts of it, so again, how do we create a thick story looking at the riches that are around? And I like sticking with the "story", not the "narrative", because the "text" is like a technical word, the story note keeps open for us what we do together telling each other the story. But people always try to elaborate on that.

There is an organisational consultant called David Boje, and what he does is he talks about "ante-narrative". What is it that goes before the narrative? He says the narrative is a developed form made up of lots of little things, which we say that are put together to create the story. So, that's another way of looking for the richness. "Ante" not as "anti", being against, but as "before in time".

So, what are the little bits that put together the story?

Again, that's an idea. Let's look at the stories, which are getting woven into the story. David Boje talks about ante-narrative. Barnett Pearce talks about anecdotes; what are the anecdotes that people tell as part of the story, which gets way into their story? I've just been working with John Shotter for two days, with the management programme in Gothenburg, and what we started talking about was "giving accounts". In English, this means to give an account, to tell a story and describe what you did, and to do it in a way that you are aware of the responsibility you owe people for what you do. Somebody says, what did you do in that meeting, and then you begin to tell a story "I did this, and I did that" - in English this is called "giving an account". But giving an account is an interesting story, because it is always connected with what you did entrust me with, when you gave me that task. And did I honour the trust that you placed in me when you gave me that task? So, it is always a relational story where you are justifying what you did, in relation to what was expected and how you chose to do it. It is why I did that. It's also telling stories about trust, what you trusted in me, what I trust in you.

So, there are lots of metaphors that one can use in relation to this whole process. Then, some people talk about narrative, it's very interesting, so what they do again, is create a technical term. We don't over lunch just talk about "oh, that was an interesting narrative!"; we say: "It was an interesting story". So, I think one of the things is, which metaphor to use, which metaphor opens up something new, what are the anecdotes that went into this. That's kind of interesting to play with.

And now suddenly there's a big interest in kind of Michael White narrative; he travels a lot and he has developed a lot in his centre. I think it is very interesting because he has lots of nice metaphors, which come out of this metaphor of narrative. And he talks about "experience near and experience distant", but again that comes from Clifford Geertz who was using the terms in the 1970s. So, these terms have a good history. Michael has taken it and developed it further to talking about horizons and so and so. Different people developed it I think in an interesting way.

Smaro: Thank you. Would you like us to speak a little bit about Systemic Appreciative Approach and Appreciative Inquiry, which is something that we've been trained in by you, and I understand that it is a little bit different from the A.I. the way people know it all over. It is something much more open, an extended idea. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Peter: Diana Whitney who was one of the original people of A.I., came for the summer school this year, and half way through the summer school she said: “Peter can you please help me understand what the “systemic” is, because I know I am A.I., but what’s the “systemic”?” So, I talked about taking into account the richness of the system, this idea we talked about the coherence of the system, the idea that it is eco- systemic, just what Bateson does, look at the whole riches of the stories in the system of people who we are talking about. So, what this does is not just looking for positive stories, it’s also looking at what are the other stories that people tell and through them talk about emotions, which I do a lot. What are the moralities and the emotions, which people want us to honour, so that they can move on? One idea, then, is to look at the other stories in the ecology, other people in the ecology, what would they say if they got to hear about this? And it’s kind of interesting; John Dewey has a thing he says, “if you are doing something in private, and it seems OK in private, ask yourself the question, if it became public, would it look OK then?” Because, he said, “if it wouldn’t, then it is not an OK private story”. This is an interesting way to work with people in organisations, as well as people in families.

I had a case where a woman said to the man: “The moment you got into bed with that woman for the first time, you knew that you were going to end this relationship. You might not have thought about it, but you *knew* that it would change the relationship. You thought it was private, but once it came to me, it was no longer a private act”. I think this is really fascinating. So, what one is looking at is people’s morality and how people make choices and looking at what seems to be negative or something to be honoured. And I think that’s different from the appreciative approach.

Smaro: In what way is it different?

Peter: We could say that the “eco-systemic appreciative approach” is to look at the ecology. Who else do we need to include in, what would their reactions be to what is happening? How can they collaborate to make this a better way of working? I think it offers a lot of richness and variety. And like working with people in therapy, working with people in organisations, you can’t ignore - we talked already about the individual - you can’t ignore the ecology. Bateson says if you ignore any part of the ecology it might come to haunt you later. So I think it’s a very interesting thing...

Smaro: There is one more concept, the idea of reflexivity. Would you like to say a few words and how it is connected with this whole concept?

Peter: It is interesting, when Vernon Cronen teaches some of the students in KCC about research, he talks about some physicists, probably earlier, but in 1902, who said: “The moment we begin to observe the system, it changes; it is no longer the same system”. So, as early as that the idea emerges: we influence what happens in the situation just through observing. And I think that’s fascinating.

I can remember some years ago working with a child guidance clinic, and the psychiatrist who was in charge said, “what if we just observe the child in the classroom with no questioning, then we can really see how the child thinks and behaves”. And I said, I don’t think that’s possible; because the child sees you watching him, and the child begins to think “what is she watching?”, and then the child begins to act. So even if you are behind the screen the child works in that way. Very interesting.

So, the idea of reflexivity is a kind of moral posture, I think. How do I observe what’s happening? What do I look for? Like this appreciative idea, looking for people’s resources, listen to what they have achieved, then they immediately change and it becomes something different. So reflexivity is

kind of keeping an eye on what we do and what we create by what we do and what we say, in that co-created process and making choices about what we do. There's a nice extra bit, which I got in the last couple of years, from this Swiss psychologist, Daniel Stern, because he talks about "mirror neurones"; and if we approach somebody positively, then the mirror neurones begin to organise it in response to the positivity. So, it is even greater than the conscious part. And that idea of creating the reflexive loop; I do this, somebody does that, then I do this, and how I try and examine what I do, because of what it could create.

Smaro: Even physically, in the body?

Peter: That's right. But it is interesting, because if we look at somebody with positive eyes, they just respond. Like Elspeth McAdam says, "if you keep on smiling at somebody, they have to smile after a while, they can't resist you". So, I like this moral psychoanalytic if we call it, about how we influence each other. So this reflexivity, what do I do, and how does the person experience that, and the way they experience it, is what we connect with (so they are affecting us too). Because if we connect again to try to change them, then it doesn't work, so we have to work with their responses.

So, I think that kind of reflexivity is kind of that story I tell about the doctors. There was a group of doctors and they were in conflict. And then one of the doctors, every time the group becomes a little positive, he bangs the table and becomes even more negative, as I see it. And I start saying, "every time we become a bit more positive..." and I am going to say, "you become a bit more negative". And instead my little third eye is watching and says, "Peter, don't say that, or you're dead"; so, I say, "every time somebody says something positive, you bring our attention to something else important which we must have missed. And I think you only do that because you really want to make a really good clinic, you really love this clinic". And it created a totally different outcome. I think that's the kind of reflexivity I am talking about. So, it's developing an awareness of how we can change things and what we can do in that changing process. Sticking with the idea of Maturana: "The meaning of message is given by the receiver, not the sender", that is a guideline of how we position ourselves in relation to what is created.

Smaro: Do you think that a European identity of the A.I. practice is being created? Is it different from the American way of doing this practice?

Peter: I think, it is a bit. It is something different. Because there has always been the kind of family therapy movements, Virginia Satir and Minuchin, Boscolo and Cecchin, Selvini and Prata, and that has been a tradition which has really grown in Europe, the kind of systems thinking and systemic family therapy. It has not grown so much in the States. I hear very little of teams working together with families in the States, because they are not having the same social system where government is paying. In Europe, because we have these social systems where governments pay, we could do all these systemic ways of working and that has been well established throughout Europe, maybe not so much in France, it is increasing in France, but in all the other countries in Europe.

I discovered, I thought there was very little systemic work in Germany, but I was talking to somebody who was training in Germany, and he said there's not much systemic stuff in psychiatry, psychiatry is controlled by the Universities. But in the pastoral care programmes, which are created in the Universities by the Catholic Church, they train systemic family therapists. So, there's a huge movement in Germany, which we have just been unaware of, because we always look at the Universities, and it is in a different place. So, I think all over Europe, and in Athens in Greece, we have

a number of centres, where people are trained, so these systemic ways of looking and the things that we talk about Bateson and Maturana, that's in our blood, in a way, that it isn't in America. So, it is a different kind of appreciation, which gets created in Europe really bringing all these different approaches to connect with them.

Smaro: You have been training many people in the Scandinavian countries many years. They were more open than others to new ideas, or does their health system also support this type of training?

Peter: I think both. Particularly Swedish people often tell me, we are a very small country so where do we learn from? We bring lots of others, with new ideas, new practices and new ways of working. In all forums of the Nordic countries, they have a similar culture story, how they brought everything together. So, I think there's a strong body of systemic work, which includes also Solution Focused work.

And those are all kind of appreciative ways of working. The Americans, Cooperrider and Shrivastra created the appreciative approach, out of consultation to organisations, but they didn't have this whole rich idea of the systemic world.

Smaro: And the family therapy background also.

Peter: Yes, that's right. And all these people like Virginia Satir, who brought the whole family into the room; that was revolution. Minuchin looked at the structure of the family and got some clarity in the family, who is responsible for what and so on. And the solution focused: don't keep people in therapy forever, look for the solutions, look for the exceptions. And then the Milan and post-Milan. Some of it has come from the States, but it's very much picked up by the East, in Europe. Because we have this situation where the state can pay to have four therapists working with one client and I think that has to affect the situation and make some difference.

Smaro: Would you like to reflect on your biographical elements? Your own story. I mean how you started...

Peter: Some personal stories about me...

Smaro: Yes, biography. Would you like to speak a little bit about personal stories, from Africa, or whatever you want, biographical stuff?

Peter: You'd better ask me some questions, Smaro.

Smaro: Autobiography. Do you want questions on that? O.K. there is a question. How has this richness of your personal story influenced your view in working with people? The richness of different countries you were born, lived and all this...

Peter: It's interesting... I was discussing with John Shotter over dinner two nights ago, because he was telling me some of his background, and he was just a working-class boy. Where did he get the interest for language and all the rest? And I was saying it is a great mystery. Where did I get this from? So probably the idea of where we get this from is not such a good idea.

Like me being born in Zambia. And it's interesting growing up in a culture where there were Black people and white people and that's a fascinating idea of living in a culture where there are lots of other cultures. Because most of my life I spent on my grandparents' farm and the children I played with were all Black. I didn't have so many white friends, some in school. We could pop in through each other's door. So I grew in a kind of context where one doesn't settle only in one culture. And it was interesting the other culture, because my grandmother was from a half German and half Dutch culture. My grandfather from French Huguenots, and then my father, was from Scottish tradition. And my grandmother being blinded in one eye by a British soldier in the concentration camps in Boer war, hating the British, and then my mother marries a Scot! So there are all sorts of kinds of interesting cultures. One grows up with all these stories being lived in the situation.

And then living in a majority Black culture. So, when I was, I can't remember, five years old or something, my mother said, "you have to stop playing with the Black children". And I say "why?" and she says, "because they're Black. Wow! "Really? But they are my friends". "Yes, but you can't grow up and play with them". "I just play with them because they are my friends". So, it is interesting negotiating. I think probably a lot of the practice I've got at being able to join in different cultures I learned some of those skills on how to do it, when I was a boy. And deciding interesting things, like when I was 12, I stopped going to the white church and I went to the Black church, because I said we shouldn't be having this kind of privilege. It was interesting.

And there was this fascination for languages, surrounded by different languages; me and my family we talked English and Afrikaans and one of the African languages. So, when you grow up talking in a different way then you develop skills and abilities for how to talk in different cultural settings. And this facility to be in a language, to be able to describe it, to be able to tell stories with people. How did I get into that? I don't know! It is a great mystery.

But working with the idea of language changing reality, and those kinds of things in organisations and in families, probably I got that kind of ideas as a child. Because if you say it in English one thing happens, if you say it in Afrikaans another thing happens. So, I guess lots of kind of things like that...

And living in a passionate family, passionate about politics, so they were always being dramatic emotional discussions. Fascinating. It's interesting, the tutor I had when I was at the Tavistock doing a training there, said to me "Peter you are a person who always has one foot in one culture and another foot in another. And they are contradictory cultures. But what's interesting is that you don't try to resolve the contradiction. You just live with it". And she said "that's very interesting; because that enables other people to be creative. Because when they say something, you are not going to connect with it exclusively in one way, you are going to connect with it in another way, and then people automatically can be creative, because that's a part of their multi-layer looking at things". I think it is interesting for us to explore, probably that many of us have always been connecting different cultures and having the kind of contradictions. But that's no problem, like Wittgenstein said, "don't worry about contradictions, ask people how they live them".

And then, I had this idea, from very young, to be a priest, to somehow save the world. Very omnipotent, this 12-year-old going to the Black church to change the world.

Smaro: Has this idea changed over the years?

Peter: Probably I want to say that now we need more active systemic work in order to begin to

change the world. Because with George Bush and Tony Blair, you could say the world took a wrong turn. Now it has got into a hell of a mess. It's interesting that what it has done for the first time is the Western world has to take Islam into account, and to respect Islam. It was our Archbishop of Canterbury (who just misses the boat all the time) that made a speech sometime before Christmas saying: "Islam must learn that the violent way is not the way to solve the problems". And I thought, Islam must learn? Who has killed more people in the 20th century than anybody else? Not Islam, but Christians! Like Hitler, Stalin, these are all Christians. So why did he not say, "we *all* have to find new ways to live together, we *all* have to find a non-violent way."

I think that's the challenge for us. For the first time in the history of the world, Christianity has had to take account of Islam as something to take seriously and to respect and to honour. Rather than think, "they are savages that must convert to Christianity". So, it creates a new opportunity for us, to engage in a way with Islamic people and to see how we can come together and create now. But the question is for us to search for who is telling these stories and saying the things that can make the difference; and getting those people heard. I don't know how does this sound?

Smaro: You have answered my last question, about what is happening globally from our perspective, the systemic practitioner's perspective. So, thank you very much.

Peter: Did you hear about this big controversy in England?

Smaro: No.

Peter: With this television programme, Big Brother. They got a number of celebrities and put them in the Big Brother house. In this series, one of the people was an Indian woman, very successful in Bollywood, has five films, and then this other white English celebrity, I don't know her because I don't follow celebrities, and I do not know how she got into the house. But she is just an ordinary working class girl, with very little education, but became famous, I think because she was in a previous Big Brother house. She started making racist comments about the Indian woman, and within twelve hours it was in all the news in the English world. Because what people said was, we don't tolerate racist remarks. And there were like 40,000 telephone calls to the telephone company and to the television company. We have an official body in England, if you want to complain about something that is on television, they had, I don't know, about 50,000 letters and e mails, and the programme had just to stop and they had to take this white English woman out, because of this huge reaction with people turning off their television.

So, it became very interesting, suddenly in British culture, which has had a lot of racism, there was a whole movement "we don't tolerate this, this is not allowed in England". So, the television company had to stop and take this woman off, the white English woman. And as a celebrity, there was lots of make-up in shops with her name, perfumes in shops with her name etc., all taken off the shelves within two or three hours after what she said. And that's very fascinating. It kind of both says, in England we are this kind of society where we don't tolerate and we don't say these things; but it creates a new context which would take us further in such a way. So, it has been very interesting and exciting two weeks, because it really has established a different story about the culture. So, those kinds of things, we need to look for them.

Smaro: We need to look for those kinds of things...

Peter: Yes. Very interesting.

Smaro: Thank you very much, Peter.

Peter: My pleasure, Smaro. I am just an old man telling stories.

Smaro: I hope we will do it again, because all these discussions have created a lot more questions! Okay?

Peter: It is very interesting looking at what's happening in the world. And try to think, how do we position ourselves?

Smaro: That's very important.

Smaro: Ok... Thank you very much. It has been an honour as well as a pleasure...

Peter: Thank you.



Past, present and the future in dialogue: reflections on the interview 15 years later

Looking back at 2007, I realise today that Peter's spirit stays with us in our everyday professional and personal activities. Every time I mention his name in supervision, training or therapy, the flow comes back, and an aesthetic inclusion is created in the supervision group or in couple therapy. It is as if the burning sounds of the fireplace and the yellow afternoon light comes again in the room. The art of connecting all the elements of the systems is exhibited in the relationships where we live and work. Peter stays in our systems alive as well. The respect is experienced in language, the invitation of co-creation the same.

I can deeply connect with Peter's wishes and hopes that maybe someday all the authorities of the churches and also the politicians will speak from within the difficult issues and will stop showing the different as the enemy. I wish that maybe this can create a difference which will be the beginning of new resources in our planet.

I want to end this short story, by remembering a phrase he used to say: "There is always time for celebration". I remember his celebrating unexpected situations, like a snowstorm in Athens, or me driving by mistake in an opposite line of an avenue, or a water attack in a tavern by a disturbed neighbour. He used to laugh, giving every time a new meaning to the unexpected.



Peter Lang and Smaro Markou, Athens, 2007

Author

Smaro Markou has been a social worker since 1967 and a family therapist since 1986. Smaro created the Center for Systemic Therapy with a group of colleagues in 1994 which is an Associate Member of EFTA. In 2018 the center became a non-profit organisation named THESYS Center for Systemic Therapy that offers systemic therapy to families and couples, training and supervision to mental health practitioners, consultation and training for companies, organisations and communities. In the year 1999, Smaro met Peter Lang and KCC and a very creative collaboration started from 2000 until 2010 when KCC ended. Since that time and until now they have introduced to Greek therapists, consultants and educators to the Systemic Appreciative Approach in therapy, consultation, training and supervision. THESYS Center organises training opportunities in theory, practice and philosophy. Over the years, more than a hundred practitioners in Greece have been trained in the appreciative approach.

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