# Reflexivity 3. Breaking Out of Reflexive Loops to Decolonise Practice

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**Citation Link**

**Abstract**

Reflexivity guides our everyday relational ethics but always takes place within a cultural loop. We find what we recognise. Reflexive practice is a commitment to ethical practice but it isn't a safety net which stops us from reproducing the same dominant discourses of who or what counts and structures which maintain inequalities.

In this paper I explore the question, "How can systemic therapists develop reflexivity in their practice to intentionally change and connect personal struggle with wider systems which reproduce power and inequality?" I describe some differences between what I call Reflexivity 1, Reflexivity 2 and Reflexivity 3 to show the impact of ideology on theory, method and what we (think we) notice and act on.

I share some reflexive questions, stories from practice and research and examples of wider systemic activism. These working ideas are a response to concerns that the clinic and the organisations which host them are oppressive, colonial structures which limit the progress members of the public can make within them and restrict opportunities to develop practice-theory which takes into account and challenges social, historic and material inequalites and injustice.

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## Introduction

Reflexivity matters - meaning, it is part of how we make our worlds. It improves the quality of our practice. Reflexivity guides our everyday relational ethics. Or is it the other way round, that our ethics influence how we are reflexive? Either way, reflexivity takes place within a cultural loop. We find what we recognise - or what we are expected to value. But then how do we position ourselves to be open enough to not stop there, to get beyond what we have learned to notice? If we land at the first base of "home territory", existing theory or "normal" ways of talking for example, we may enact and reinforce dominant cultural ideas about who or what matters, who or what is acceptable or worthy. We may see and act in ways

which don't take into account the cultural contexts and knowing of others. We can become part of the problem! Reflexivity is not a safety net preventing us from reproducing particular cultural bubbles and their values.

As a white/off-white, Jewish lesbian woman with varying professional status and privilege, as the daughter of a holocaust survivor, I came to critical thinking before meeting reflexivity. Critical thinking was easy. I grew up with stories of rabbis arguing about different interpretations of the Torah, the old testament, the Mishnah and the Talmud. As a child, I developed an awareness and critique of who counted more or less in terms of social status in my non-Jewish and Jewish communities where there were values placed upon gender, wealth, employment, marital status, academic ability, English or European heritage. I felt annoyed at how my family and I were treated. Later, as a feminist and lesbian, I found a sense of sanity in reading feminist writers, felt calmed by the critique of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) and articulation of queer injustice through the community power of the Gay Liberation Front and the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. When studying sociology at college in the late 70s, I learned critical thinking more formally where the lecturers, like the rabbis, argued passionately with each other about Marxist theory, social work and social control. In 1989, Gwyn Whitfield and I co-founded The Pink Practice, a LGBTQIA+ counselling practice in London. It was a response to widespread homophobia in the psychotherapy profession. We were aware that establishing the first out queer counselling practice in London was an act of resistance and social justice. Our practice theory was based on critical thinking, feminism, queer theory, queer lives and that the queer people we were in conversation with, like us, were not only lesbian or gay or bisexual or transgender, we were also members of many communities in which we experienced and challenged imbalances in power. Presenting at conferences was always a problem. Diversity was desired but not desirable. Our critical thinking disturbed power relations, unexpectedly, intentionally, responsibly and without responsibility except to our own communities.

Reflexivity was a core part of Gwyn's and my systemic training at KCC in London in the late 1980s, early 1990s. It offered a way to see connections between the hidden influence of ideology and practice (Leppington, 1991; Burnham, 1992, 1993). But even then, we could see-feel the influence of white, heteronormative, gender-normative culture within the training and theory. We pointed to hidden liberal humanist values at work in systemic social constructionist reflexivity and I wrote my dissertation on this in 1993 (Simon, 1998). In some ways, this paper is a continuation or development on these concerns but elaborated against the backdrop of another era. While some communities are better off, the suffering of others has barely been recognised. Furthermore, we are living in an era of extreme and widespread crisis (Simon, 2021a) where to practice therapy solely with local small systems in mind feels systemically incoherent and as a systemic profession, we may be part of perpetuating a wider systemic problem.

Reflexivity has been the core guiding light within systemic practice. Covering the range of contributions on reflexivity is beyond the scope and purpose of this paper but it has been extensively researched and documented (for example, Burnham, 1992, 1993, 2005; Hedges, 2010; McCarthy and Byrne, 2007; Krause et al., 2011; Oliver, 1996, 2005; Tomm, 1987). Let me quickly summarise some different types of reflexivity as I envisage them. Actually, I will start with an idea about reflection.

*Reflection* is a noticing or thought about something that one may or may not be aware of going on. There may be no expectation of change or ethics. There may not be any question or contextual wondering.

*Reflexivity 1* is based on self-awareness and/or contextual awareness. It is a conscious and conscientious attempt to rebalance bias by adding additional information usually retrospectively. This is 1st order ontological accounting in response to a question such as, "What's going on and what would improve it?"

*Reflexivity 2* is practical reflexivity *in* action, *as* action and *on* action. It occurs in the moment of relating to take into account live feedback to influence joint action (Shotter, 1995). It can also be retrospective to inform further joint action. These involve 2nd order epistemological systemic accounting responding to a question such as, "Which ideas are affecting what is happening between participants and what can I do with my learning-in-context?"

*Reflexivity 3* involves breaking out of reflexive loops governed by culturally specific ideas and values which may sustain material and discursive inequalities. This is 3rd order ethico-onto-epistemological (Barad, 2007) accounting and activism. Reflexivity 3 asks "How can systemic therapists develop reflexivity in their practice to intentionally change and connect personal struggle with wider systems that reproduce power and inequality?"

## Cultural Lenses

Systemic professionals are committed to understanding how practice and practice theory can be decolonised to play a part in undoing pathologising discourses and social inequalities. To break out of everyday cultural expectations informing our reflexive loops, we have to work out how to get beyond finding what we expect to find.

When we think of ourselves as not only professionals but also as members of different communities - perhaps privileged, perhaps oppressed, perhaps these descriptions change depending on the contexts we are in – we can see how the overlapping histories and discourses of our own communities act as lenses, and influence our language practices and material responses. Pillow (2019) discusses the need for *lenticularity* as part of the decolonising project. She proposes we try to hold multiple lenses in view at the same time so that many things are present – more than we would normally expect to see. Pillow terms these attempts to engage with what has been obscured from our view or as acts of "epistemic witnessing" (Pillow 2019) – going beyond our normal experiential and epistemological territories. For example, this might include becoming aware of current events, relatives alive, missing or dead, spirits, gods, community histories and possible futures, lands and landed knowing, theory, images, hurt and joy, dread and belief. These lenses are also temporal so that past, present and future can move in and out of focus. Perhaps these contextual lenses might intersect or overlay, creating new shapes or shadows, offering new readings. We cannot know or see or hear or feel all of what perhaps needs sensing when we meet someone; we cannot know what is there, but we can open ourselves to what may be present, what may be of influence – and quieten our professional narratives or institutionalised expectations. A big challenge for many professionals involves managing the loud, impositional culture of prescribed policies and practices which embody unacknowledged colonial relations.

## Crises in wider systems

Wider, remote systems impact us every moment of every day as well as the rest of the world. And many of these vital systems in the world are in panmorphic crisis (Simon, 2021a). They are changing at such an incredible speed that the changes in and between these systems are hard to understand and hard to know how to change. Sometimes it feels easier to focus on the people right in front of us. At the same time, there are calls from within communities for urgent action to connect personal struggle with wider systems of influence. The systemic field is bouncing between discursive trends of behavioural, emotional, narrative, trauma and so on. So professionals are changing – learning new approaches – but they are ones which keep us focused on the small system in front of us. We are agreeing to be good employees, have a great skill set and not trouble the balance of power in the world. In effect, a homeostatic invitation to not think or act with wider systemic consciousness so as not to unbalance the status quo.

The world is simultaneously melting and on fire. Do we continue practice as usual with this as a backdrop? Are we going to work with local small systems while the planet becomes more contaminated as a result of wars between other competing systems? Perhaps we need to understand the world as a material-discursive (Barad, 2007), made up of transmaterial systems and co-inhabitants (Simon and Salter, 2019, 2020), as at war, with many systems fighting each other for truth in narrative wars, for gain in efficiency wars, for superiority in supremacist wars, for profit anthropocentric wars, and territorial control in remote techno wars (Braidotti, 2013). Perhaps we are running up against the limits of language and methodological trends on how to fix local units for treatment.

Crises arise because what normally works doesn't in a particular instance. So, for example, dialogical etiquette may not be effective when interacting with those invested in maintaining an imbalance of power relations. Nizami proposes critical thinking is needed at critical times to get us off our normal track of thinking and action (Nizami, 2023). "Critical thinking is not the same as reflexivity so much as a commitment to keep looking at a situation from different angles and through different eyes and from the perspectives of different communities" (Nizami, 2023). This connects with Pillow's call for exercising "epistemic responsibilities" (Pillow, 2019) which I interpret as a need for us to examine how we are hearing information and meeting people as individuals *and* as members of communities and wider systems.

## Reflexivity 1

In many areas of reflexive practice, including professional or academic research, reflexivity can be understood as retrospective reflection on action. For example, it might involve consideration of whether or how to render transparent aspects of the self of the researcher/writer/practitioner and how our influences coloured or shaped the work we produced. Medical and academic culture centre the individual or team as the unit of knowledge production. Reflexivity takes the forms of positioning statements, critical reflection; a thing not a process; a reflection on, confessional, a statement of bias, an act of transparency (Pillow, 2003). *Reflexivity 1* attends to small local systems.

Here are two examples of *Reflexivity 1* in action. One is from an academic researcher and another from a therapist. These anecdotes show how Black professionals used reflexivity to recognise and resist the implicit or explicit pressure from white westernised institutions to reproduce dominant cultural ideology and practices.

## Story 1

An African American doctoral researcher shared his experience of interviewing African American women in their homes on their experience of having breast cancer. He was startled when one of the participants, who happened to be a college professor, realised that his carefulness as a researcher made her tense and she gave him some advice. She suggested that he might get further in his research interviews if he brought more of his African American self into the research and spoke more like an African American man with African American women, using, for example, the language of "titties" over "breasts". The researcher realised that he had fallen into the trap of aspiring to be a "proper researcher" - meaning who would be approved by his advisory committee for performing compulsory enwhitening of himself and his research participants and leaving his Blackness outside of his research. He experimented with integrating his academic and culturally grounded selves and found that the conversations with research participants were more productive. The process of becoming an academic researcher risked alienating him from his community and diminished his pre-existing culturally grounded relational know-how. He described having to re-construct himself in terms of clothing, posture and ways of speaking to re-align himself as a community member and bring this methodological learning back into his academy (Gregg, 2016).

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## Story 2

A Black British therapist approached me as his supervisor for supervision in a therapy organisation immediately after a session with a Black British man who had been cautious about getting therapy for himself.

"I just want to check something with you," said the therapist as he sat down.

*"Okay," I said. "What's up?"*

"Well, it's not that anything is wrong. It's more that I don't want anything to, um, be taken the wrong way."

*"Say more?"*

"Well, the walls here are a bit thin, so if anyone was walking down the corridor, they may have heard me speaking in a way that might not have sounded professional to their ears so I want to explain myself."

*"Okay…"*

"It's just that there was no way this man was going to open up to me – well to anyone who looked or sounded establishment. He's from the same part of town to me, same Caribbean family background. He knows who I am. Not me personally. But if I were to speak like I'm doing now, he'd realise this wasn't a place where he could be himself. I knew I had one shot to engage him and that meant being real. So we spoke in patois and he relaxed and opened up a lot."

*"Sounds like that was a good decision on your part. So what's the worry?"*

"Well, on the one hand, I knew it was the right thing to do for the client, totally, but another part of my body was really tense throughout the whole session. I couldn't relax into the relationship because I was so worried that I'd be overheard and criticised for not talking like, er, well…"

*"Like white people, like what a therapist should apparently talk/sound like?"*

"It will have sounded like banter, street talk. We ended up talking loudly and laughing a lot. I just knew that it was the right thing to do."

*"We need to have a think about what we can do in this organisation to create the conditions for therapists from different cultures, communities and life experiences to bring their whole selves to work and feel safe exercising their cultural know-how?"*

"Totally," he said. "This would be a good example to bring because that man went away in a much better place."

The organisation realised it wasn't enough to recruit therapists from diverse backgrounds, different cultural experience and know-how needed to be overtly acknowledged as a resource to the work and recognised as bringing value and built this into team discussions. This reduced stress for practitioners who felt they didn't have to work as fitting in to a dominant culture of generic white English ways of speaking.

In these examples of Reflexivity 1, there is clear value in the retrospective reflection on episodes which results in personal authorising and organisational change. What would also be interesting to hear is detailed description of the inner workings of both practitioners. That too is important information as it would show us how they changed their thinking and whose voices they called on to re-authorise their practice in keeping with their cultural values and know-how. This leads us to Reflexivity 2.

## Reflexivity 2

In systemic practice, we exercise *practical reflexivity*. Reflexivity is something we do as a part of our practice. It's an activity running in the background of our practice like an ethical red thread, guiding almost everything we do, say, feel or think. Reflexivity is always relational. Reflexivity takes place in our busy inner conversation between different voices and ideas, between inner and outer dialogue, in our embodied knowing, attempts to physically coordinate, in our hunches, hesitations, feelings of different sorts, understanding and constant repositioning.

Since the shift into postmodern thinking, systemic practitioners have been interested in the second order epistemological question, "how do (we think) we know what we know?" - an ethical and philosophical extension of the first order epistemological question, "how do we know?" We are committed to checking our assumptions about what we are part of co-creating as fact or narrative. With *Reflexivity 1*, questions are seen as tools to reveal what is, assumedly, already there. In *Reflexivity 2,* questions are understood as interventions (Selvini et al., 1980; Tomm, 1987). They have

consequences. What we ask, how we ask, with which parts of our bodies we listen for answers, with whom present, in which contexts or spaces we meet, will invite very different styles of talking and bring forth different responses. Questions, our postures and the spaces in which we work open up or close down possibilities for stories to emerge. We don't always know what effect our questions or approach or setting will have on others. We check our *understandings* with our conversational partners and prepare to be corrected in our understandings but we rarely negotiate the space in which we meet or who-what can be present.

*Reflexivity 2* questions are systemic questions which pay attention to relational co-ordinations both in outer movements and talk (which others could have witnessed) and in inner talk (which others could not have had access to). These are important distinctions because not everything that happens is accessible to an observer. If we are only studying that which is easily and immediately shareable (audible or visible) then a huge amount of information which is needed to understand therapeutic, training, research or supervisory relationships goes missing. Only some of what actually takes place finds its way into data sets, evidence or opportunities for learning. Furthermore, the practitioner-trainer-supervisor-manager-researcher is schooled into the implicit idea that their hidden inner workings, their judgment calls, their professional and cultural know-how do not count as worthy of sharing. These questions do more than attempt to extract hidden information. They explore power relations. They surface stories of resistance. They showcase good practice in action – sometimes despite professional or organisational ethics. And they foreground culturally specific relational know-how.

If you, reader friend, were writing about a similar episode to the stories described above – thinking about yourself as a member of one or more communities, with shared characteristics or experience as your conversational partners, how might you describe that episode with rich details using these questions as prompts to engage in *Reflexivity 2*?

- How did do you prepare yourself to create a way of being in relation to people who are members of the same community/ies or with similar experiences to yours?

- How did you create the conditions to immerse yourself in the professional relationship despite internalised cultural regulation or a sense of being scrutinised by outsider eyes? Describe your inner dialogue that enabled this? How did it run in the background during the work?

- Was there a critical moment when you made an important decision on how to speak, relate or be? Write into that moment with all the thoughts that went on for you, what you noticed and what you did. What are your reflections on that now?

- How did you arrange your embodied mind / mindful body to coordinate with your conversational partner(s)?

- How were you changed by your conversational partner, at which points and how did that happen? Did you experience conflict with institutional policies?

- What cultural or organisational narratives might you and your conversational partners value or not value about the pacing, spacing, volume, musicality in your talk?

- Looking back, how might you have negotiated the meeting space, place or things and people

present that might have made the conversational setting more relevant or comfortable to your conversational partner(s)?

- What kind of opportunities do you need to make to reflect with a sense of safely on your meetings with people which can honour the cultural know-how and elevate it so it has status as therapeutic knowledge?

- What learning from this episode do you need to carry with you into future working relationships? And who are your supports and allies?

As professionals, we have an ethical obligation to account for our actions. Professional training prepares us to study and articulate the flow between feelings, ideas, bias and openness, hearing and not hearing, readings of responsivity and movement in the moments of interaction. Things are rarely straightforward and are therefore difficult to describe for reasons of speed, confusion, misunderstanding, miscoordination or not knowing. Writing is not simply a matter of describing what happened but is a reflexive accounting practice. Writing about and from within practice needs to show reflexivity-in-action. "Writing up" one's research or practice is a form of first order reporting. Writing from within research or practice is a form of practical reflexivity, *Reflexivity 2*, which allows new learning to emerge as one writes.

I want to jump to a classic example of *Reflexivity 2* offered by systemic practitioner and reflexivity pioneer, John Burnham which shows the transformative impact of practical reflexivity.

After a number of sessions I began to be influenced by the idea that the woman I was working with was 'avoiding' the issue she said she wanted to work on (her childhood experience of sexual abuse). I wondered how to explore this idea as sensitively as I could, given our gendered differences, and my wish to create and maintain the relationship as therapeutic. I, self-reflexively, began to *think* of a question... *'Every time we approach that issue, you seem to change the subject… I am wondering why?'*  As I began to *speak* the question I changed it to, *'Every time we approach that issue, the conversation seems to go somewhere else.  Who do you think avoids it more … me or you?'*  My thinking was still influenced by the idea that she was 'avoiding', but I wanted to be 'kinder' by including myself in the question.  She replied… '*You do.'*  I was taken aback, but eventually 'recovered' my curiosity to enquire, '*How?  What do I do …How do you notice me doing that?'* Thankfully she replied. '*Well, whenever I am close to talking about what happened you will say something like.... "It doesn't have to be now… take your time and so on".*  In my wish to be 'sensitive' I had acted 'superficially.'  The ways that I expressed my intention to be 'non- impositional' meant that I had imposed my 'non-impositional' stance. My desire to be 'respectful' had led me to be 'reluctant' to take any risks in the relationship, always looking to be safe and certain (Mason 1993).  By engaging the client in the process of working the relationship out we were both able to change (*me to take more risks in asking about the abuse, she in commenting on how I was in the session)* and increase the likelihood that the relationship would become/continue to be therapeutic.

John Burnham (2005, p. 16)

The conversation is clearly more than an exchange of information - though you could say it is that too. It is an example of a practitioner showing us the transformative impact of practical reflexivity. It is an example of reflexivity-in-action and reflexivity-as-action. The dialogue involves mutual learning, and

transforms not only understanding and talking practices but shifts the power relations and therefore the possibilities of what can be shared. Burnham positions himself in a way that could be described as "a fluid and imperfect ally" (Reynolds, 2010). He holds a loose attachment to ideas: he is always checking his positioning, his agenda, his use of language, his ways of speaking, his openness to reflect on the unanticipated consequences of his actions. He uses reflexive thinking – and not just thinking, feeling too, for reflexivity is far from being simply a cognitive process – to check his bias, to honour the inevitable presence of power imbalances and how they can be played out. He quickly re-positions himself, aware that the language he is about to use is awash with bias. Then, in the asking of a rebalancing question to limit any inherent assumptions he has, Burnham creates the conditions to be surprised by his conversational partner and invited into another level of reflection which alters his practice and extends his learning.

Had John Burnham not questioned his own gendered assumptions, the woman may not have been able to use her voice in the way she did, so replaying a power dynamic commonly found in situations where sexual abuse has taken place. This isn't confessional reflexivity (Pillow, 2003) and it does more than show workings out on the page. John Burnham attempts to *story inner and outer relational process.* The storying shows *reflexivity as relational movement* in a collaborative process of developing knowledge and relational know-how. And furthermore, this learning process is then critically written up for the learning of others. It is a commitment to practical and theoretical learning and to social, professional, personal change.

I recognise, and I expect you do too, that moment when you start to say something and stop because you sense something is wrong with your thinking or wording. These are not simply interesting "ums" and "ers" to note for for quantitative research but are important to register as critical instants of orientational activity. The crises of interruption in fluid delivery in thought-speech are a response from within a rich, loud and chaotic inner dialogue in which many voices are in play, with their own relationships to power and entitlement to be heard. We are acting out of tensions between differently situated positions, ethical, empathic, theory-led, legal or organisational rules, cultural know-how and so on.

## Mapping cultural and ideological influence

In this section, I show how systemic social construction needs developing to take into account a changing world. I show the shift from *Reflexivity 2* (Social Construction) into *Reflexivity 3* (Transmaterial Worlding) and offer some reflections on why ideologies matter. For those of you who like visuals, there are some illustrations mapping the impact of ideology on our practice. But if you are not a diagram person, then just read the text. It should tell you the same story.

What has drawn me to social construction is that it isn't just another ideology. It is a meta theory – a theory of theorising, a way of showing the reflexive relationship between our core values and beliefs and the theories we're attracted to. However brilliant the theory or effective the method, they are not accidental discoveries. Theories and approaches are products arising out of culture, place, fashion, an era, and, as such, are steeped in bias and power relations (Simon, 2012). Theory is never without

context. Since the late 1980s, many systemic practitioners have valued the political critique offered by social construction (Anderson and Goolishian, 1987; Burr, 1995; Burnham, 1992; McCarthy, 2001; McNamee and Gergen, 1992; White, 1988; White and Epston, 1990). The *ideological premise* that people make social worlds together through language, over time and across cultures was the ideological influence for systemic social constructionist therapy and narrative therapy. *The theoretical propositions* outlined how people's problems, for example, were affected by the imposed or limited narratives available to them. Systemic *methods* explored how those narratives had come about and what other stories or storytelling practices or audiences would be more enabling. The *data*, such as learning or narratives of change, appeared to confirm that social construction was a helpful and politicised ideological frame for systemic therapy.

Imelda McCarthy connects the influence of local and global systems in explaining how the relationship works between macro-discourses and micro-narratives.

> Through our living together in our families and other groupings, at a micro level, social, political, religious and media discourses (among others), which embody ideological traces are often expressed through the narratives people tell about others and about themselves in their day-to-day lives. In their turn such narratives or stories are recited many times over and so hold the potential for situating people in particular ways. Their social situation at the micro social level is further maintained and engendered through their participation and recitation of those privileged or preferred social, political, religious and media discourses, at a macro social level. As such, one could say that there is a recursive interaction between discourses at a macro-social level and narratives at micro-social levels. This recursion is humorously captured by Rachel Hare-Mustin (1997) in her statement that, "ideology is a little like sand on the sea shore, it gets into everything".
>
> McCarthy, 2001, p. 257

Let's imagine ideology as an invisible floating cloud sitting high above everything. The gravitational weight of its ideas sinks through the atmosphere affecting all we see, do and think. The theories we are attracted to appear like innocent finds, like "common sense".  The "contextual force" of our ideology (Pearce, 2002) shapes our theoretical propositions, which shape our method, and all of that filters what we think we see or find or make. Ideological beliefs hold some deeply embedded assumptions and values. They may be ones we are attached to or have been coerced into believing. But they influence who-what counts as more or less useful or worthy, guiding how we behave. This contextual influence is shown via the *downward arrows* in Figure 1 showing *Reflexivity 2*. It is based on Leppington's model (1991).

*Figure 1. Mapping ideological influence through Social Construction*
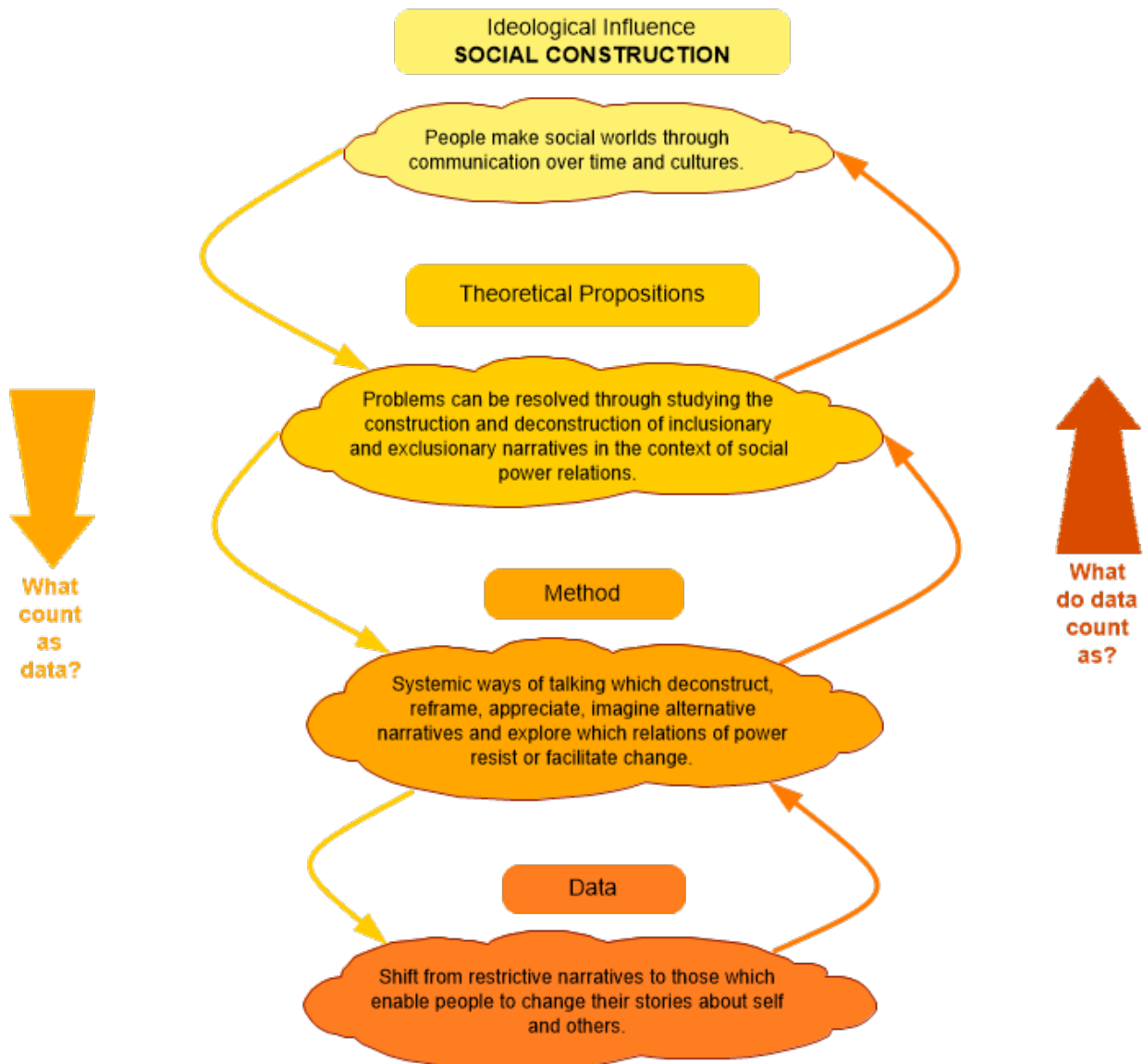


But now let's look at the *upward arrows*. They show an "implicative force" (Pearce, 2002) which is where reflexivity comes in. Reflexivity commits us to study how we allow what we witness, what we think we find or co-create *to change us at any level of context* – even if that means we have to let go of some of the things we most value, feel we recognise or trust. This is the invitation to reflexivity: to be open and questioning enough to break out of our self-contained cultural loops of what we expect to see, what counts, what should be done, in what way, with whom, and to what end. By going with that upward flow from data to method to theoretical propositions and ultimately to ideological premise, we agree, in principle, to relinquish any loyalty to any single idea or practice. Instead, we commit to an ongoing ethical examination of how our taken-for-granteds might influence our ways of working, our narratives, how we position ourselves or each other, and what change we are committed to. However, while this upward movement has refined and developed methods and theoretical propositions, it has, in my view, reinforced the ideological premise of social constructionist ideology.

**Reflexivity 3**

What I explore in this section is how we can also question our ideological premises and break out of cultural bubbles that may be restrictive of seeing and responding to crises.

The word *reflex* means to go back on itself. In everyday systemic parlance, reflexivity has come to mean a fresh revisiting of one's ideas, narrative or perspective on something. Rosanne Leppington (1991) used a **woodcut by Escher of ants** going round in a twisted figure of eight to demonstrate reflexivity. This was the one element of the paper I took exception to because the ants stay within the same track, always ending up where they started. Escher's ants show how we can get stuck in cultural tramlines: we are moving, we are changing, we are seeing things from different perspectives but actually we are going round and round within our own cultural frameworks.

Reflexivity 3 is Reflexivity 2 but with some additions. You can read and see how this develops in the next diagram (Figure 2). Here are the key differences in *Reflexivity 3*.

1. There are now *two upward implicative arrows*. The inner arrow shows what is changing in small local settings such as families, teams etc. The outer arrow shows an intention to create wider influence out of local practice. The inclusion of a second upward arrow marks an intention to connect or change the circumstances of the immediate system with wider systemic change.

2. *Professional systemic practice is social activism.* It includes the intention to work for social justice and rejects political or professional neutrality. Many psychotherapies have encouraged political neutrality in practice but many therapists felt this to be an unethical stance and challenged their professional bodies to not hide behind the status of being a charity and connect professional practice with political realities. Systemic thinkers feel a moral obligation to live the critique arising out of our understanding of how systems work and connect local experience with wider systems of influence. Being a systemic thinker and seeing systemically is inevitably a form of activism and has clear social justice intent to connect and challenge transgenerational, discursive, economic, material, social and political inequalities.

3. *Reflexivity 3 is more of a spiral than a reflexive loop with a decolonising agenda*. In this era, we may understand breaking out of a reflexive loop as necessary work in the move to decolonise ourselves, our practice, our institutions, theories and communities. In the second diagram you can see an imaginary overlay to show the potential for spirals of change to evolve over time. We may or may not be able to predict what future ideologies will be or what they may generate. But the reflexivity we commit to is to ensure all types of reflexivity are in play so we can step back and disrupt imbalances in power which create social or planetary injustice. We live in a state of preparedness to be able to respond to contemporary matters.

The overarching concern of Reflexivity 3 is that we question the things which are precious or fundamental to us, for us to recognise these gifts *and* their limitations for us, for other people, other lifeforces, and critically explore what we do, how we see and what we change or reproduce. We open ourselves to what comes next. We read the impact of how ideology plays out and commit to challenge social injustice.

In the second diagram, I show a different ideological premise to Social Construction which has been developed to suit this era. In this development, the ideological premise is Transmaterial Worlding (Simon and Salter, 2019, 2020), a systems theory that includes all living matter, and all matter is considered as living, having rights and creating an interconnected ecological system. Transmaterial Worlding builds on Barad's concept of "worlding" which proposes we live in a material-discursive world, that we make the world as we do-learn-become – described as ethico-onto-epistemology by Barad (2007). What we say, think and do has material consequences for human and non-human life. But importantly, not every human is accorded rights or opportunities to get heard or even to be treated as human (Wynter, 1994). Inequalities between human beings, and between human and non-human lifeforms are sustained by material inequalities that discursive strategies alone cannot shift. Large scale industrial, technological and political systems are invested in maintaining and extending unconscionable inequalities and have appropriated communication practices to sustain material and health inequalities. Transmaterial worlding makes a clear shift in a statement of intent to address wider systems when working in local smaller systems. This is a big shift away from a human-centred communication theory and the focus on human systems alone.

*Fig. 2   Reflexivity 3 - Ideological influence, social change and professional practice as ethically responsive*
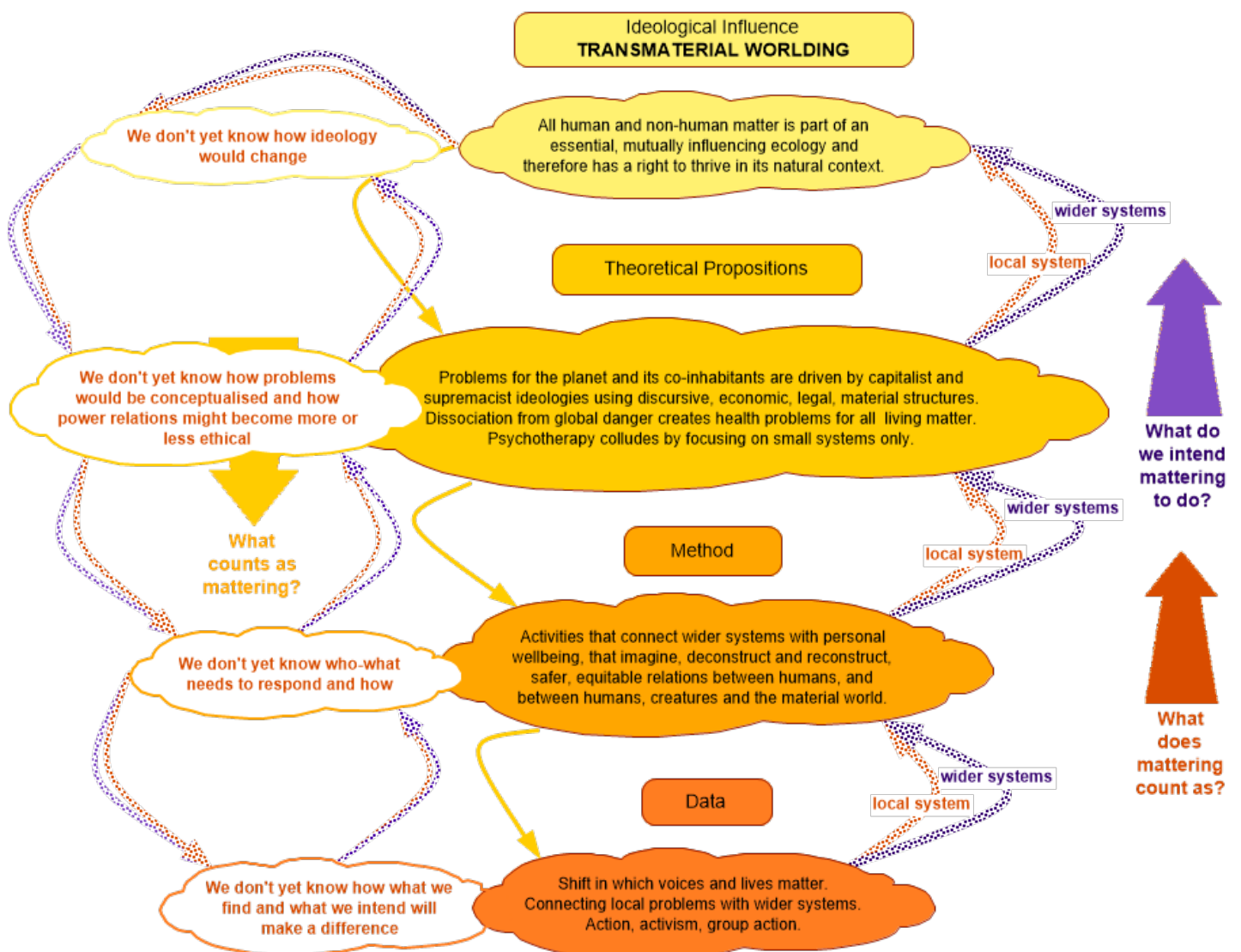
Given the planet faces multiple immediate dangers of climate disaster and life-threatening inequalities between peoples, perhaps it is necessary to stand back and ask:

- Can we really just do therapy-as-normal with individuals, couples and families as if treating discreet local systems in itself will be enough?

- Are we systemic thinkers separating off the problems of the local site for treatment in therapy from the bigger remote systems as if they are not impacting on people's wellbeing, as if this isn't our remit?

- Is the wellbeing of the planet, of communities and political systems outside of our systemic brief? Are we only thinkers for human systems? Why is that?

- What are the contextual influences that encourage systemic thinkers to stay focused on who/what is in front of us?

- Who would be affected if we stretched our remit to include wider systems and non-human lifeforms?

- What difference might we make to the small local systems we work with and to wider systems of influence if we act intentionally in relation to both?

## Extending systemic practice

I'm ending this paper with just a few examples of systemic practice which stretches into spaces beyond the confines of the small local unit or clinical settings. It is not intended as a complete list so much as instances of systemic action/activism which inspire me (and sincere apologies for those that escaped my mind in this moment of writing).

**Documentary making** repositions participants from being therapeutic subjects to being agents and architects for change in their own communities, authoring what matters and situating personal experience within political and community tensions. (See Taiwo Afuape, 2016; Afuape and Hughes, 2016; Charlotte Burck, 2018, 2021).

**EcoSystemic therapy** abandons the four walls of the clinic to create new opportunities for connecting personal change with climate and environmental change, be it decline or growth, natural cycles or human generated loss. Walks in nature and reclaimed industrial sites bring forth different stories than in professionally created clinical spaces; stories emerge about personal engagement in a wider multifaceted world, relationships with non-human lifeforms, past community histories, community resilience, migration and industrial transformation, changing patterns of health and wellbeing (For example, Santin, 2021; Salter, 2020; Edwards et al., 2022).

**Reconfiguring therapy spaces** extends binary of indoors and outdoors to include technological opportunities. By agreeing to join people for therapy in Virtual or Extended Reality, we decolonise expectations of ownership and design of space, and work in spaces configured by our conversational partners. Gender and ability, appearance and senses can also be designed to suit people who are neurodivergent, non-binary or trans or feel at home in online spaces (Simon, 2021b; Urbistondo Cano and Simon, 2024).

**Witnessing and support collectives** have made themselves available to act as witnesses, as support, to offer solidarity to refugees and oppressed peoples at tribunals or in refugee camps (For example, Burck and Hughes, 2018; Burck at al., 2022).

**Poverty initiatives** using systemic practice values have been documented and developed by systemic practitioners. For example, Fifth Province School of Systemic Therapy in Ireland (McCarthy, 2001) and the Poverty Truth Commission (Oates, 2021).

**Community initiatives** can be found in the growth of independent and community Black and Global Majority, LGTBTQIA+, religious, neurodiverse, disability initiatives. Not only are there are many freedoms that arise in the independent or third sector to develop good community-relevant practice that statutory services do not often seem to be able to offer but they can reinforce or surface community trust, pride, knowledge and voice. Guidance for what counts as good practice arising from these settings needs to influence what statutory provision could do and run by the communities themselves.

**Leadership changes** based on systemic values result in collaborative and representative leadership clusters which create different organisational cultures. Cultural shift in organisations is easier to effect in the independent sector relying on a shift into a more rule creating culture than the rule-bound culture of statutory organisations. Independent sector organisations need to trust their community and cultural knowledge to resist western hierarchical management structures which separate power and knowledge and disable the ability to respond fluidly to meeting and representing community need.

**Publishing and broadcasting initiatives** which are community led. These create appropriate ways of showcasing systemic practice and systemic lives, unrestrained by traditional forms, financial regulation, institutional anxiety, or profit incentives. For example, The Systemic Way Podcast, self-published books, Murmurations: Journal of Systemic Transformative Practice, Everything is Connected Press, the Systemic Practice YouTube Channel.

**Training initiatives** which reject the constraints of professional bodies unable to drop colonial thinking and resist the demands of university profiteering to offer community based systemic trainings which meet the needs of trainees and the communities they serve.


## Final thoughts for now

As practitioners, as members of society, we need to find ways of breaking out of culturally informed reflexive loops to decolonise practice. Reflexivity 3 has twofold intentionality to recognise and challenge culturally taken-for-granted ideas and ways of being which maintain imbalances of power. We can develop reflexivity to render visible culturally or professionally informed discourses that surround us and break with pathologising, colonising and anthropomorphic theory and practice.

Few psychotherapy training institutes have committed to linking personal reflexivity with a commitment to systemic change; nor have many included non-human lifeforms and systems; nor have many re-imagined what therapeutic space could be. As systemic practitioners, as community members and neighbours we have responsibilities for how we use our powers and create

opportunities to support community power and overcome oppression. Is advocacy or allyship is an essential part of being a systemic practitioner? What makes systemic practice a form of activism?

Decolonising our practice will not involve learning a new technique. It requires a reorganisation of the voices that are in play and real permission to draw on their experience and wisdom to confront the different systems in play. Some may be more likely to come from trainees than training institutes. Part of breaking out of culturally bound reflexive loops means listening out for what trainees and clients want, notice, bring and experience - this can feed into true systemic change. There is little resistance to this within the systemic community but as a professional community, we need to theorise and support each other in developing politically coherent practice and find new ways of re-authoring and authorising necessary ethical developments.

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