

1+(no)1=3, and more

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Abstract

A systemic mapping of binary logic clarifies the question of how attempts to counteract binary thinking fail in their intent to produce transformative change - second order change in systemic jargon. While an approach to transformational change through paradoxical thinking and the creativity of the absurd is not new, it doesn't seem to have produced *news of difference*, since binary thinking seems to persist, with ethical implications for the praxis of systemic therapy and its education and training.

Indeed, binary mapping, even when critiqued, tends to reinforce itself, creating a strange loop similar to a Moebius strip. Nonetheless, systemic ethics consists of attending to multiple possibilities beyond binary choices, advocating for relational location of responsibility, coherently with an epistemology that conceives the minimal unit of observation as including not only the constituent parts of a system, but also how these interrelate and their contexts of occurrence.

I propose, playfully, a formalisation in the form of "*1+(no)1=3, and more*" emphasising that relationships and contexts are integral to understanding systems, and the difference between relativism and relationality. I connect this differentiation with a critique of the notion of unity which can be drawn to expand interconnectedness in a totalising fashion often proposed in monotheistic traditions which some systemic therapists argue can lead to all-encompassing theories that overlook individual differences. From such stance, I discuss the ethical implications of *othering* along with limitations of inclusivity and belonging as proposed by equality and diversity in both corporate and governmental policies.

Finally, I take on Byng-Hall's notions of life scripts, suggesting that attempts to replicate or correct these scripts often lead to frustration, while improvisation is a feature of therapeutic change, as a way to respond creatively to the kind of life's challenges that are explored in therapy. I conclude moving to a wider contextual level, by emphasising the importance of acknowledging both life and decay, arguing against the idea of limitless accumulation and for a more nuanced understanding of systemic relationships.

In a nutshell

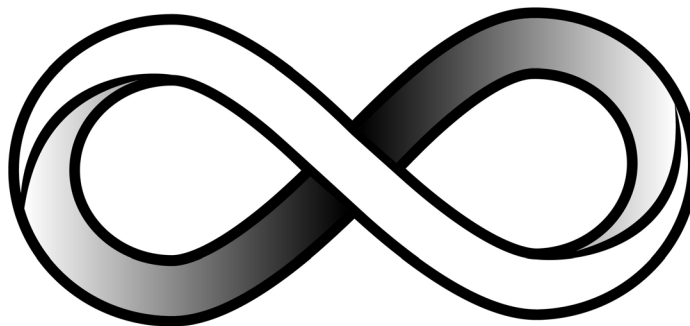
In systemic jargon, mapping has come to signify a way of making sense which reminds us that the map we use to orient ourselves in a given territory, is not the territory itself (Bateson, 2000 [1972]a; Korzybski, 1948 [1933]). However, the maps we produce and the act of producing such maps becomes critical to life in the territory mapped, for these would guide our steps on it.

Binary mapping, thus, refers to ways of making sense that put in contrast two aspects of any matter that is being understood through this filter. For example, night and day, up and down, east and west, yes and no, are binary structures we often use to refer to our experience.

Systemic mapping, on its part, refers to ways of making sense that attend not only to objects, or entities, but how these interrelate complexly, rather than exclusively in binary terms. One reason for this is that a binary logic is not sufficient to encompass systems of relationships, as well as how systems change; it reduces the complexity that systems entail.

Nonetheless, the critique and dissolution of binary mapping is often proposed from, or for, a want of unity. Insofar as such critique remains within binary terms, this exercise inevitably engenders a strange loop process (Hofstadter, 1999 [1979]) like a Moebius strip, by which further binary mapping is maintained, by the very attempts at contrasting it. For contrasting binary with non-binary, is itself a binary mapping.

Figure 1. Moebius Strip (Adobe free stock image)



A possible way of escaping this logic is via the logic of paradoxical thinking and the creativity of the absurd. Rather than negating binary logic binarily, seeing it as a moment of movement in a process, not a place to dwell in, but some kind of warning about dwelling, fixating, stabilising what is, by definition, always changing and remaining what it is, at the same time.

Systemic ethics point towards increasing the number of possibilities beyond the binary illusion of choice, towards the amplification of choice (von Foerster, 2002 [1991]) and systemic epistemology proposes that the minimal unit of observation of a system is three, including the parts in a relationship and the relationship itself as a framework for systemic observation and understanding, or mapping. A relationship implies that at least two terms are involved, and since each of these two is not sufficient to account for the relationship unilaterally, then the relationship itself needs to be accounted for in our observations. This is consistent with what is proposed as relational ethics from a postmodern

epistemological stance informing systemic therapy praxis (McNamee, 2013; McNamee and Sax, 2012). Indeed, the question of the observer's observing as constructive, rather than a representative act, and the interplay of contexts informing the observing and sense making, the feeling, and relating, in the act of observation, has been integral to systemic therapy praxis since the advent of what is today called second order cybernetics (Foerster, Muller, Muller, Rooks, and Kasenbacher, 2013; Scott, 2004; von Foerster, 2002 [1991]).

That minimal unit of observation: one plus one equals three, is not strictly speaking, minimal, as it happens in a multiplicity of ways, for there would be differences in every instance of relationship and change, and at different levels of meaning. The actual interactions in a given relationship would vary depending, for example, on the weather, or the mood, if the parts in relationship happen to be persons, or the expectations that each would have for the relationship, and so on. Not only so, but the relationship would also be different from the relationships each of these terms bear with other elements, at different times etc. A complex web of ever forming bifurcations, and trifurcations can be thus fathomed.

Notwithstanding such richness and complexity, it is often proposed as implying some form of unity of everything as interconnected, for which systemic therapy approaches and definitions of ecology have been accosted in conjunction with spiritual traditions which account for diversity in the One, as affirmation of a unity of all that is (Bateson, 1980 [1979]; Dumouchel, 2019; Rivett and Street, 2001), thus falling back into the allure of totalising theories of everything, so decried from postmodern positionings (Lyotard, 1984).

Cracking the nutshell open

1

What allows me, or anyone, to identify the notion of 1? How is this one different or similar, yet not the same, as other one? Would I be able to identify that one if it were not different from that which is not that one? In the Metalogue "Why do things have outlines?", Bateson (2000 [1972]b) - father and daughter- pay attention to how we draw distinctions to designate things, helping us question the process by which things are separate as they connect. The difference that makes the difference is a drawn difference. Hence, the problem of re-presentation in the way we make sense of the worlds we in-habit and of life as separate and/or interconnected. This epistemological question is also an ethical one, as questions such as whose drawing we go by, and how is that decided, make clear.

+(no)1

In order to identify that one, another one is needed, even if as "other than one", at the limit of what that one is, when what one is not, or begins.

=3

So, identifying what one is, denotes a relationship, a context. The moment I affirm that one is one and not that other one, I am understanding them in relationship with one another, for I cannot define the one without the other: what that one is not. However, this being other than one, rather than annulling

the one into nothing, nor affirming it as an isolated only one, it affirms it as a multiplicity that goes already beyond the one itself into a relational context of existing (or not existing!).

and more

Yes, more because that relationship between one, what one is not and the way they define one another, as different, yet perhaps similar, can be taken as a one in respect to other groups of relationships, or assemblages which are not the same as this $[1+(no)1=3]$. Thus, we could express it as $[1+(no)1=3] + (no)[1+(no)1=3] = 3$, and more.

Yet, is this bifurcating or trifurcating ad infinitum? What if the affirmation of life is also affirmation of decay and ending? Decay and life feed life, not accumulation. Is life for ever? We don't know. Can we know? What do we mean by knowing? This last question is the moment of twist in that Moebius strip with which this paper began.

What difference would make for our lives the possibility of knowing whether life is for ever? That difference would be different for different people, by necessity!

Ethics and aesthetics of being other for one another

It may be pertinent here to consider what currently is referred to as *othering* (Bhugra et al., 2023; Dervin, 2015; Rohleder, 2014), to denounce processes of marginalisation and exclusion from spheres of social influence on the way social groups are organised and operate. From a systemic perspective, though, and on the shadow of what I have been proposing thus far, this understanding of a process of becoming *other* (for one another), lucid as it might be, can be seen as reducing possibilities, rather than contrasting the oppression that some persons and groups can exercise over *others*. I am affirming here my being other and your being other, and his, her. their being other, outside of concepts of inclusivity and belonging, which can turn another twist in the reflexive loop of the ethics of living equally in difference.

These two concepts, belonging and inclusivity, are widely used in the training on equality diversity and inclusion policies delivered in private corporations, as well as governmental agencies, which in the case of the UK are a matter of compliance with the Equality Act 2010. These trainings design, with their glossary and multiple choice testing of knowledge 'acquisition', offer re-entry points into the logic of compartmentalisation and commodification of processes, converting verbs which denote actions and processes into nouns or adjectives, which can be repackaged and fitted into market logic, where everything can be challenged except that very operational and ideological logic, and so the means of force and direct coercion are no longer necessary to implant an idea of diversity as equality which is homogenised, the same for everyone (Han, 2018; Han and Hoban, 2018 [2016]).

Such policies purport to adhere to an ethics of interconnectedness and mutual respect, by erasing and making invisible the very diversity they claim to protect. We are all equal, not in our diversity, but as corporate elements, in terms of 'protected characteristics' by the state and its governmental policies organising what is common to everyone, normalising and norming diversity.

How this is problematic becomes apparent through a logic of absurdity. Let's consider Groucho Marx's quote: "I don't care to belong to any club that will have me as a member" (Marx, 2007, p. 8). The

problem of inclusivity becomes apparent when one does not want to “belong” to the group which generously is including one, on account of one’s diversity, no longer othered but belonging to the inclusive group (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000; Rober and De Haene, 2017). It is interesting that these positions are often proposed as a critical reversal of the effect and process of colonisation (Carleton-Boylan et al., 2024; Walton, 2018), and perhaps the reversing intention is where the risk of repetition lurks.

Enacting, reacting and acting - Replicating, correcting, improvising

In my work as a systemic therapist and teacher I often visit John Byng Hall’s restitution of script theory along with a systemic perspective on attachment theory, in his notions of corrective, replicative and improvisational scripts (Byng-Hall and Pittman, 1998). The analogy of script is useful from a performative perspective, and the idea that we perform our life has been explored in developmental psychology and social therapeutics (Holzman, 2003; Newman and Holzman, 2006). We can say to enact, perform, scripts available to us in different scenarios as life unfolds. We often enact “life scripts” outside of our awareness of life as scripted, and it has been proposed that it is this lack of awareness what keeps us enacting the script, as if we were destined to live “as it comes”. Indeed, the originators of what became the social institution of psychotherapy, proposed a cure towards this scripted misery that life can be, which consisted of bringing into awareness, precisely those patterns guiding us outside of our conscious awareness and, hence, control. The assumption is that once available to our conscious awareness we can find a rational explanation for phenomena that made no sense in our cultural framework of reference. Incidentally, this assumption fits with an epistemology that takes as truth all that can be rationally explained, so it is no wonder that therapy or desirable change in this cultural context would entail a move from nonsense to sense, rather than otherwise. Yet, Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice in Wonderland* and other tales of absurdity that make considerable sense, would rely in non-sense and games to show how rationality can also be an absurd game.

So life can be seen as scripted, and at the same time we can, however, take a perspective on the script we are performing, or even re-author our life scripts as narrative therapists might put it (Carey and Russell, 2003; White, 1989). Narrative approaches to therapy draw explicitly from Foucault’s (1990 [1978]) conceptualisation of social discourses organising individuals’ life with normative effect, and subjugating the uniqueness of individual scripts to acquire meaning based on societal norm through cultural devices for the production of knowledge (Besley, 2002). Nonetheless, in practice, the process of therapy of externalising the internalised subjugating self-discourses and the focus on individual agency to re-author the scripts by which we enact our lives meaningfully, can follow a strange loop pattern, entailing the very illusion of control inscribed in modern western epistemology, and embraced in the capitalist myth of the self-made hero, independent of the contextual forces that guide us towards our destiny, a destiny that we can believe possible to change.

Perhaps this confirms, paradoxically, Narrative therapists understanding of dominant societal discourses, with Foucault, as dominant and societal, rather than individually or marginally decided. In this case the social dominant discourse implicated in the practice of re-authoring would be precisely a discourse of authorship.

We can consciously or subconsciously assume that life *is what it is*, which itself can be understood as passive or active acceptance of what happens in life, and we can also be guided by an illusion that we

have agency over the scripts we perform, we can attempt to either replicate or correct the scripts we are “handed on” from former generations and the cultural milieu in which we grow up and old as we go through life. Both options of correcting and replicating denote the hubris of believing that we can decide what happens to us.

Such corrective or replicative attempts often result in frustration. It is impossible to replicate the experiences of former generations, the handed down scripts, in a context, the present, that has changed. The contexts in which we intend to replicate the script enacted by our forebearers are already different from the contexts in which these patterns of interaction were occurring. Equally, correcting cannot work ecologically speaking, as is a way of negating the value of what former generations did in response to their predicaments and joys. Severing the connection between their experiences and ours, could be understood as counter-ecological, for it misrecognises autopoiesis (Maturana and Varela, 2012 [1972]), or the positive connotation that a system does what it does, to keep making itself autonomously. This ecology of the system constructs itself in response to change.

That ecological fit is mysterious, for is not possible to understand the system’s ecology from outside, as detached observers. Such detachment is seen as an epistemological error since through the second order cybernetics turn, we assumed the notion of observing systems, the assumption that everything observed is observed by an observer (Maturana and Varela, 2012 [1972]; Maturana, 2002). We cannot observe the whole system from an observer's perspective which is always partial to the system itself (Telfener and Ticozzelli, 2023). The ecological fit in response to change is change. It is mysterious as the improvisational act of responding to the possibilities of the situation, creatively, adding to it something that is neither the same, nor the opposite to what former generations did. Improvisation is neither repetition, nor correction, and it has to do with change.

The therapeutic change is a life process of ongoing improvisation, rather than progress or lineal improvement (Keeney, 1991). Improvisation articulates on a theme, moving on from what is already there. Improvisation does not negate what it responds to, neither replicates it. Indeed, exact replication in the performance of one’s life, is not possible. If anything, we would be replicating our version of what is that we are attempting to re-produce. Moreover, it is not possible to make things anew out of nothing, for new need old to become, to be understood as new. Hence, new is not negation of old, but its continuation.

Life scripts are enacted without much thought, and can only be identified as scripts, when we reflect on them, when we self-observe. However, thinking about them cannot be sufficient to change them. If we are unsatisfied or hurt, oppressed in the enactment of particular scripts, we can react against them, oppose them, or negate them. However, negating them implies their existence. There is no way out this way. If I want to stop a habit, say, smoking, I can try and remind myself not to smoke, thus invoking the act of smoking in my mind and making it more difficult to actually stop smoking. This is another strange loop by which the more I tell myself not to smoke, the more I want to light a cigarette. Whereas, if I distract myself thinking of interesting experiences, or remembering funny occurrences, or doing something that engages me, I am more likely to not smoke, while I might too, of course.

Hence, following the infinite shape of the strange loop, what is attempted to overcome in a resolatory move, in effect returns recursively. Opposition to binary thinking becomes another binary or leads to affirming the One, where difference is annulled, dangerously for those who diverge or differ, from the unity of all that is meant to be.

A note on relativity and relationality

Relativity, widely understood as the idea that the meaning we attribute to phenomena changes according to the contexts in which these happen, or what these relate to, is often described as undesirable from a moral perspective because it does not provide a term for comparison to which refer in order to decide what something means or what may be the consequences of our decisions, not in different circumstances, but in any context of occurrence, once and for all, as true for everyone. This conundrum has preoccupied so called “western” (for they are western in relation to what north?) logicians and philosophers of language as they approach the question of how language relates to reality: Does language reflect reality? Does it construct it? and what is to speak the truth? Expanding on such and similar questions is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would like to mention at least Gödel’s infamous incompleteness theorem, which proved that mathematics, and other formal systems, are partly based on propositions not provable within the mathematical or formal system itself (Nagel and Newman, 1989). When we look for absolute proofs of the truth of our views on reality, which should be valid for everyone in every context, and hence, not relative to the viewer, or talker, we will not find it even if we searched eternally, because it is the structure of the system for finding it itself that tells us this is not decidable within the system we use to refer to, or create, what we call reality. Hence, the absolute truth of everything that is, its irrefutability, is refutable. The One that explains all, does not explain itself.

However, relativity is not absolute either, in the sense of anything being relative to anything else. Things are particularly relative to their specific contexts of occurrence, be that in language, or in whatever we consider reality to be. So, saying that the meaning of something can be located in its contexts, is not like saying “anything goes”, what is shorthand as radical relativism. Relationality refers precisely to this incompleteness. Our statements are always incomplete, because there is always another story to tell, from another perspective. But the relevance of that story to be told will depend on its relationship with the event recounted.

The implication that we are all the same in our interconnectedness can conduce, as in a strange loop, to another binary, for in order to affirm the one, I have to negate difference and start using terms of belonging and inclusivity, necessarily implying that something remains annulled outside, since that which is not in the One, is not. But who defines the terms for belonging to the group that we are being included in? The discourse of inclusivity circumvents this question, which is made redundant by not asking it.

How is such inclusive-of-diversity group defined? from the margins I want to be respected in difference, not included, not made to belong. This apparently ecological stance that sees everything as interconnected can be proposed in a totalising manner while overlooking the difference that such interconnection, necessarily entails. We are different, neither better nor worse -and here the ethical problem is formulated- but not the same. Difference does not imply hierarchy.

That is what some systemic thinkers propose when defining power as a myth (Guddemi, 2006; Palmer, 2022), not in the sense of its falsity, but in the sense of myth as an attempt to explain the mystery of complex relational processes. Instructional interaction is not feasible within a systemic view (Telfener and Ticozzelli, 2023). Power is a powerful myth indeed, and we cannot free ourselves from the governance we are subjected to by such myth, by either ignoring it as if it were unimportant, nor fighting it, for this reaction would pass through recognising, thus maintaining, its existence as power.

Affirming its possibility amongst a myriad of things possible, rather than the organising principle of life, rather than even searching for a one organising principle of life, seems a valuable creative line to follow.

The title of this paper wants to eco in the most succinct way possible the notions elaborated here: that one plus another *one* is not a binary two, but one plus other one and their relationship, are three, and more.

However, this *and more* is not intended here as a cumulative move, in an ever-growing totalising manner but in a limited and multi-particular way. Is life for ever? Does life end? Some lives do. This is not about affirming the infinity of all that is, wanting to contain infinity in a One. Neither it is to affirm that there are no limits. Life is not about accumulation without limits, that richness is deadly. And death is as possible as life. Some things do end, just like this paper ends here.

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