

Questioning Certainty: Tensions as an Ethical Companion

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Synopsis

In this writing, I engage with the articles, [Stories of “self”: Ideology in action \(Simon, 2024\)](#) and [Towards a heart-centred philosophy: Embracing poetry as transformative practice \(Abraham, 2024\)](#). Both pieces helped expand how I understand systemic therapy, along with broader considerations of professional responsibility. Inspired by these readings, I reflect on the tensions that arise when therapeutic theories meet lived human complexity and the pressures of neoliberal professional culture. Rather than viewing these tensions as problems to resolve, I approach them as ethical companions that invite ongoing reflexivity and relational accountability in therapeutic practice.

After completing my Master’s degree, I questioned what really meant to practice from a ‘systemic lens’. Without clarity, I was left with more questions than answers as I began my journey of learning in a doctoral program. In rooms where professors were assigned to supervise students, I often found myself sitting with this quiet resistance. I often asked myself: *What are we doing here?* It was a feeling I could sense but could not yet name or organize. These writings arrived just in time for a revision of several notions and beliefs that matter deeply to me. Although my training as a systemic practitioner was connected to more linear ways of knowing, I continued to question ideas of the self and its struggles. I found myself shaken by Simon (2024) and Abraham (2024). Together, they offered a playground of wonder, a space to practice that was not expert-based, but more responsible, creative and kind.

Throughout this past year, I had been quietly asking myself: *Am I doing therapy right?* I began to notice how neoliberal ideas had a grasp into my understanding of what professional life needed to be. I felt pressure to perform competence and to speak with “certainty.” Underneath this was a growing tension within myself - a resistance to certain ways of speaking about people and what are understood as “problems.” That resistance did not yet feel polished or confident. It felt more like discomfort, a kind of ethical friction. Still, it was there and followed me everywhere as an unrelenting companion.

Citation Link

Tensions as an Ethical Companion

Through Simon's (2024) work, I began to understand this tension as an ethical responsibility I hold to both myself and my clients: "Committing to critical thinking about the relationship between theory and human diversity requires that I stay mindful of how theories might insert themselves between me and another person, and avoid hidden values within theories colouring what I (think I) am seeing" (p. 39). This invitation to question theory was timely. It gave language to something I had already been feeling in practice: that some frameworks did not fit my worldview, and that many could too easily flatten human complexity into explanatory categories like "pursuer" and "withdrawer" (Johnson, 2019). Simon's invitations helped me notice when the metaphors I call theories no longer hold and must be reshaped for the unique contexts of the individuals, couples, and families sitting with me when life's dilemmas feel loud, tangled and misaligned.

These invitations had an influence on my practice in several meaningful ways. First, I have become more cautious about allowing theory to arrive before the person does. Earlier in my training, I often felt such an urgency to identify patterns, name the cycles, conceptualize the family structures, and even locate the intervention that fit best to specific populations – a practice that is often decontextualized from systemic work. While these moves were often framed as the most desirable outcome of my clinical training, I now see how easily these decontextualized practices become a way of protecting myself from uncertainty. I realized that theory can create the illusion of safety while in fact I may be disregarding quickly past the client's own meaning-making. The readings in *Murmurations* have influenced me to consider these ideas in a way that is unique and have taught me to stay longer with what is unfolding before trying to organize it.

In practice, this means I am more likely to ask questions that keep meaning open rather than closing it too quickly. This shift feels especially important in my work with couples and families as I continue evolving in my professional practice. In supervision, I often found myself being guided to identify interactional cycles and stages within the Emotionally Focused Therapy model (Johnson, 2019). While I can understand how these frameworks and interventions can be useful, Simon's work reminded me that even relational theories carry values and preferred ways of seeing. Without noticing, we can begin privileging manuals and fixed interventions over complexity, uncertainty, and exploration.

The risk in these moments is that clients may become positioned inside frameworks that feel organized and coherent to clinicians, but incomplete to the lived realities of the people sitting in front of us. These experiences have shifted the kinds of questions I now carry into therapy. I find myself wondering how I can take the knowledge and theories available to me and transform them into conversational questions that invite reflection rather than certainty. How can validation and compassion for a hurt partner also speak relational responsibility back into the conversation? Not as a way of correcting, reframing, or disciplining clients into more acceptable positions, but as an invitation for all of us to remain curious about the meanings, choices, and relational patterns being created between people in real time. Increasingly, I am less interested in using theory to explain clients to themselves and more interested in using dialogue to help us question together what becomes possible within their relationships.

In conjunction, Abraham's (2024) writing disrupted the neoliberal pressure I felt to embody the professional as an expert who has achieved mastery. She writes about her students' struggles in a way that deeply resonated with my own experience: "I felt that these narratives were about their fear of

being paralysed by ‘not knowing’. Whilst this might be an aspirational position for systemic practitioners, this was being experienced as limiting for these learners” (p. 107). Reading this, I could see myself in so many moments of tension during my learning. The expectation to “not know” had been presented as a value in my training, yet in practice it often felt like something I had to perform correctly, rather than something I could genuinely inhabit. Through her writing, and the clarity that “it is possible to be uncertain and highly skilled; clear and tentative; and to hold ‘not knowing’ as a virtue,” I also began to be considerate and aware that meaningful practice requires a different kind of discipline – one that may return to the origins of care for humanity. An ongoing act of engagement with thinking, observing, and learning in relationship, rather than striving toward a fixed sense of mastery.

Instead of simply following a model of interventions, this means I am more willing to stay with tension rather than rush to resolution. For example, when I am helping couples as they describe being caught in contradiction, when a family member’s pain resists easy reframing, or when I feel uncertain about what is needed, I refuse to experience that tension as evidence of failure in the same way I once did. In many ways, I have learned to treat tension as information, a sign that dominant explanations may be insufficient and incomplete. I notice that practicing from this pace, I am invited to a more human response. Tension has become an ethical companion because it interrupts the fantasy of simple knowing. I am less interested now in moving clients neatly toward predefined therapeutic outcomes and more interested in creating conditions where new meanings, new relationships, and new possibilities can emerge through active engagement. I have become more attentive to the language clients use for themselves and to how therapeutic discourse may either widen or narrow their sense of who they can be.

I have come to understand these reflections as connected to decolonising practice. For me, decolonising therapy involves questioning the assumption that professional or theoretical knowledge should automatically hold greater authority than lived experience, relational knowledge, cultural wisdom, or community understandings of suffering. It asks me to remain attentive to how therapeutic discourse can unintentionally reproduce dominant ideas about health, relationships, gender, responsibility, and emotional expression. Rather than striving to become an expert who interprets people’s lives for them, I am increasingly interested in creating conversations where meaning can be questioned, negotiated, and co-created relationally. What becomes possible when clients are not overdetermined by diagnostic culture, theory, or problem-saturated language? What becomes possible when they are met with curiosity rather than correction or “psychoeducation”?

I have also begun to understand that decolonising practice cannot exist only inside the therapy room. It asks something of me personally and relationally within the communities I belong to as well. Decolonising myself is an ongoing practice of remaining open to diverse ways of knowing, being, relating, and caring for one another beyond professionalized language or expertise. I experience this in small but meaningful ways outside of clinical work: at the dog park while exchanging stories and support with other owners navigating loneliness, stress, or change, and within the women’s jujitsu community where hardship, vulnerability, encouragement, and trust are shared through physical exertion on the mats. These spaces remind me that healing, meaning-making, and relational care are not owned by therapy. They already exist within communities, within shared struggle, and within the ways people show up for one another every day.

The greatest influence these authors had on me had been the opportunity to experience a shift of how I engage with knowledge within learning spaces. Not only as a therapist, but as a student and as a person who is still constantly evolving. I've started to resist the pressure to appear settled, to look like I know exactly what I'm doing at all times. Professionalism, in the way I had come to understand it, once felt like something I needed to perform in order to feel secure. Now, it does not offer me that same sense of stability. When I take human uniqueness seriously, expertise begins to feel different. It becomes less about having answers and more about how I show up in relationship. About how I participate and how accountable I am to what is happening between me and the people I sit with.

These readings did not offer tidy answers. However, they invited me to sit with a whole new perspective and understanding of who I want to become as a relational practitioner. Tension no longer rushes me to offer resolutions, instead tension guides my efforts in developing relationally. I am no longer interested in mastering therapeutic skills through knowledge. What I am interested in, is the opportunity to meet people with care, curiosity, and the willingness to remain present, even when things are uncertain and still unfolding...

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