

Punctuating Circularity and Reflexivity: Some Reflections Following a Systemic perspective to Ethics¹

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Abstract

Systems approaches put forward an emphasis on recursive and interdependent relational contexts. Second order cybernetics as well as social constructionist approaches, necessitate the reflexive acknowledgement of the participation of the observer in any observing system, by emphasizing self-reference as well as an approach to language as a form of ‘action’. By drawing from a synthesis of these epistemological perspectives, we will attempt to reflect on Ethics by punctuating two notions: circularity and reflexivity. Following that, we will discuss Ethics as reflecting an observer’s punctuation concerning epistemology and, consequently, their way of relating on a dual contextual level; the micro-context of everyday psychotherapeutic practices, as well as that of the macro-social level of historically and politically informed discursive contexts, with the two levels approached as recursively interrelated.

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Introduction

*“It is clear that ethics cannot be articulated”
(Ludwig Wittgenstein cited by von Foerster, 1995)*

Following such a warning given by the citation above, the reader may come to wonder what might have made us attempt ‘the impossible’, that is to ‘articulate’ our thinking in respect of Ethics. The truth is that we have struggled both with the elusiveness of such a topic and with the inevitable restraints of language as a means for articulation. Our choice to nevertheless go on with this venture was ‘dictated’ by one leading thought, among others: if ethics concerns the way we relate to each other in our everyday practices - with psychotherapy constituting one of the contexts of relevance in our micro-universe - and if ethics is carried by language (von Foerster, 1995; Andersen, 2000), then it is impossible not to ‘talk’ about ethics, like “it is impossible not to communicate” as noted by the well known axiom (Watzlawick et al. 1967). We all ‘talk’ about ethics simply by existing in the context of our everyday practices in any context, from our personal relationships to our professional lives. The fact that what is ‘talked about’ is nothing but a personal preference or better, a choice, and not an objective ‘truth’ is, of course, another story, significant though as it may be for the story we are developing here.

While presenting our reflections concerning Ethics, which are inevitably revealing of our personal preferences, we will attempt to develop our idea that a systemic epistemology, informed by the developments of second-order cybernetics and social constructionism, could constitute the choice of “Relational Ethics”, both in the micro-context of everyday practices (therapist and individual / couple / family in interaction) as well as in the macro-social context of the wider Discourses of psychotherapeutic practices.

In order to explicate our thinking, we will focus our discussion across two axis, which we think of as constituting a systemic-constructionist perspective: circularity (Bateson, 1972/2000; 1979) and reflexivity (von Foerster, 1981), with the latter complemented by the notion of relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999), concerning the participant–observer psychotherapist.

At this point we would like to ‘warn’ the reader that our reflections will be restricted to an epistemological level, following a previous attempt to discuss a synthesis between the systemic perspective and social constructionism (Tseliou & Psaropoulos, 2003), as well as an attempt to introduce such a synthesis as a research methodology (Tseliou, 2003; Tseliou, in review).

However, our systemic prejudice for recursive, holistic entities ‘allows’ us only to think of *epistemology as practice* and vice versa.

Systemic Family Therapy and Ethics

The well-known debates introduced by the early criticisms raised by feminist family therapists against first-order cybernetic approaches signaled the introduction of Ethics as a topic of significance and relevance, both in theory as well as in the arena of everyday practices, in the field of systemic family therapy. Minuchin’s directive interventions as well as Haley’s and Watzlawick’s paradoxical instructions, along with the Milan neutrality and Bateson’s epistemology all ‘came under attack’ basically in respect of two axes. On one hand, criticisms were pointed against the therapist’s abuse of power. On the other, they were directed against the opposite, that is against the therapists’ neglect to address the unequal basis from which the family members participated in the system and their consequent unequal access to power, due to differences introduced by gender, race and culture (see, e.g. Goldner, 1988; Luepnitz, 1988; Hare-Mustin, 1994).

Of course there have been attempts to counter such criticisms, like for example the one made by Haley (1976) or the one introduced by Wendorf & Wendorf (1985). However, what we would like to note at this point, rather than enter the details of the debate, is the overall pattern, which we think was constructed in the context of this ‘heated discussion’ about Ethics with both sides contributing to its creation. It seems to us that such a discussion was inevitably developing and introducing a set of rules, as set of ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’, which should be followed by every systemic-family therapist, in the context of their transaction with their ‘clients’. Such a ‘politically correct’ systemic family therapist *should* respect the family system as well as the members’ individuality, *should* guard the existence of justice among family members, *should not* ignore matters of equality in relation to gender and /or culture, and should not forget about issues regarding abuse, violence, etc.

Such a pattern of introducing ‘politically correct’ behaviours to be followed by professionals, which focuses exclusively on the micro level of their interaction with their clients and follows what it seems to us as an individualistic perspective to the whole matter, is not unfamiliar to the field of psychological / psychotherapeutic practices. Traditionally, Ethics has been approached on the basis of constituting codes of ethics, which are designed to promote a set of deontological rules as well as an individually located responsibility and politically correct behaviour between the therapists’ and

their ‘clients’ (Brown, 2003). In this way it is as if we approach the field of psychological / psychotherapeutic practices as existing in a void, de-contextualised from the wider discursive, ideological and political institutional practices.

In the context of the transition from the first order era denoted by power and control to the postmodern condition of meanings and narratives, an alternative way of discussing Ethics is taken up in the writings of Anderson (2001) and Andersen (2000), which seems consistent with von Foerster’s (1995) second-order cybernetics, as well as with McNamee’s & Gergen’s (1999) social constructionist approach.

According to Anderson (2001), Ethics cannot constitute simply a set of objective rules, which direct a mental health practitioner as to what they should or should not do. If we accept that Ethics is socially constructed through the use of language or better, is carried by what connects us humans, i.e. language and conversations (Andersen, 2000), then it can constitute nothing but an elusive notion, which is impossible to ‘capture’ in the context of pre-set deontological rules by any means. In line with this notion, and also according to Anderson (2001), every action is simultaneously an ethical action and thus the ‘philosophy’ or the practices of mental health professionals can constitute no exception. She concludes by calling for a more ‘relational perspective’ on ethics, a perspective which would ‘respect’ the relational emphasis of both the systemic and social constructionist approaches.

Here, we would like to follow a similar path in our attempt to unravel our thinking concerning the approach of Ethics. Our effort will not be to approach Ethics as a universal quest for compliance with pre-set codes of ethics, but as the choice of an epistemology, and consequently, the choice of a relevant action taken by a mental health professional on the juxtaposition of two axis: the way in which one chooses to relate to their clients, as well as the way in which one chooses to participate in the construction of wider Discourses on psychological practices.

Towards ‘Relational Ethics’: The choice of a Systemic-Constructionist Epistemology

Punctuating Relationships: Circularity

Let us begin with what, in our minds, constitutes the ‘essence’ of a systemic epistemological perspective, that is, the notion of circularity. At this point,

those readers acquainted with the systemic perspective will inevitably have to endure a journey through ‘already familiar and known’ lands.

General Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) and Cybernetics (Wiener, 1948) emerged between the 1940s and the 1950s and introduced a shift towards information, patterns, relationships as well as systems, in an era dominated by the Newtonian paradigm, which was characterized by an emphasis on energy, substance, essences and monads. The epistemological shift towards the systemic vision of “the pattern which connects” (Bateson, 1979, p. 16) was punctuated by a dual shift of focus from essences towards relationships and from monads towards holons² (Tseliou & Psaropoulos, 2003).

According to Gregory Bateson (1979) we constitute parts of an interconnected holon. “Everything is connected to everything” (Willke, 1996 [1993], p. 261) or else “Systemic thinking means thinking in terms of relationships”, further adds Willke (1996 [1993], p. 260). Everything acquires its meaning and can be understood only in the context of spatial-temporally-defined relationships, of which it constitutes part or else only in relation to its context (Bateson, 1972/2000; see also, Watzlawick et al., 1967).

However, we think that this idea of connectedness acquires a certain quality in the context of a systemically oriented vision. And it is its complexity that is so difficult to put into words, with language falling short of our expectations at this point. After all, Bateson (1979) has for a long time now warned us against its linearity. Perhaps an aesthetic approach could help at this point. Let’s turn to art for a moment. The reader is invited to enter the following site and reflect for a while on M. C. Escher’s ‘Day and Night’ (1938)(http://www.artchive.com/artchive/E/escher/escher_day_night.jpg.html)

We think that any transaction, any connectedness is understood in a recursive / circular fashion, when it comes to a systemic epistemology and never as a two-way linearity, in the sense that no part can be prioritized over any other part in a lineal fashion. It is the relationship between the black and the white birds in Escher’s work, which constitutes the holon of ‘Day and Night’ and selecting one or the other part constitutes nothing but an observer’s punctuation.

If we now wanted to move to the more ‘real’ territory of everyday practices, we could even argue that the distinction between a psychotherapist

² Holon is a Greek word which means an entity which has the qualities of totality and wholeness

and a client is nothing but a punctuation, socio-politically and historically informed, which nevertheless organizes their transactions in a certain way. However, it still remains nothing more than an arbitrary punctuation, in the sense that both the 'expert' and the 'client' constitute part of an interconnected holon, in the context of which no part can exist without or independently of the other (meaning psychotherapists without clients and vice versa).

If we take systemic thinking to its end, we probably need to take into account the fact that we constitute parts of recursive relational networks, which we construct and where we get constructed within an overall context of a co-evolutionary process, where we transform and get transformed through our interaction with the environment (Wittezaele, 2004). Every time we are in a relationship or in the context of a transaction, every action we take constitutes a feedback to the action of the Other and in that sense is always part of their action and vice versa, in the context of endless circles or better spirals, since we can never return to exactly the same point.

Adopting a systemic perspective means, therefore, thinking in terms of connections, which are characterized by circularity, but it also implies the need to acknowledge that, independently of our intention to participate, whether we want it or not, we always participate as parts of recursive holons.

If we now think of Ethics as the choice of an epistemological perspective, then it seems that choosing to adopt a systemic perspective almost inevitably points to an 'Ethics of relationships and interdependent connections' and, therefore, to a way of relating, which has certain qualities. A way for relating which has the qualities of a recursive process, in which each time we try to understand what the Other's action or saying means to us as well as what our feedback to it means to Them (Inger and Inger 1994). And whether we like it or not, our action always has an effect on the Other, independently of our intentions.

If we follow such a path, then it seems as if we are left with no choice: *we can but only acknowledge, by means of the Other's feedback, the effects of our action to whoever is this Other, each time or put it otherwise, our participation to what gets constructed in the space between us or else in the context of our relationship.* To go back for a moment to the context of psychotherapy, this probably means that as therapists we need to acknowledge our 'contribution' to the failure of a therapy to relieve our clients from their symptoms, no matter whether we think that we succeeded in applying our therapeutic model or not.

Punctuating the Participant Observer I: Reflexivity and the “Epistemology of Responsibility”

Our discussion so far seems to put to the fore the idea that we constitute parts of recursive, interdependent relationships, by drawing mostly from the perspective of first order cybernetics and General Systems Theory.

The development of Cybernetics into Cybernetics of Cybernetics or Second order cybernetics comes to ‘warn’ us that this is nothing but... an idea. Or to rephrase an example by Heinz von Foerster (1995), the observation of circularities presupposes an observer who...observes circularities, and in addition to that, such an observer also needs to account for themselves and their observation. Let us turn once more to M. C. Escher’s work, this time inviting the reader to reflect for a few minutes on the ‘Print Gallery’ (1956) (http://www.artchive.com/artchive/E/escher/escher_gallery.jpg.html).

In the context of second order cybernetics (von Foerster, 1981), the observer and the observed get unified in what becomes an “observing system”, with objectivity placed in parenthesis (Maturana & Varela, 1992 [1984]) and with the act of observation itself constituting the very object of observation. According to von Foerster, such a shift further necessitates a move away from the bipolar ‘subjectivity-objectivity’, since, as he stresses, “objectivity is the delusion that observations could be made without an observer” (cited in Bröcker, 2004, p. 21). As Keeney (1983, p. 2) puts it, “the distinctions we make in order to know the human world arise from an ethical, not an objective or subjective base” and in that sense our interest and our concern with objectivity gets replaced by an interest and a concern with responsibility, in what seems a clear transition towards an ‘epistemology of responsibility’.

As von Foerster (1995) argues, the epistemological perspective of Cybernetics of Cybernetics constitutes a radical shift in the way in which we understand our relationships in the context of our everyday practices. It has to do with whether one sees themselves as an independent, external observer who discovers the way in which a world existing ‘out there’ operates, or with whether they see themselves as an active participant in the circularity of human relationships and in that sense in the formation and the invention of the world. In the second case, they also acknowledge that each time they do something, they simultaneously change themselves and the world. It is not by chance that von Foerster chooses the word ‘abyss’ to refer to the space between these two epistemological perspectives.

In his attempt to discuss them in relation to Ethics, von Foerster (1995) points out that in the first case, it is possible that one, exactly due to their

being an independent observer, they can say to the Other: 'You have to do this or that'. It is perhaps hard to miss the resonance with the case of moral orders, which simply restrict peoples' freedom, as they restrict options and therefore choices.

In the case of the perspective of 'myself as part of the world', exactly due to their interdependence, they can only tell themselves, 'I have to do this...I have to do that'. This might probably necessitate a shift towards a meta-level in relation to moral orders, which would perhaps constitute Ethics (Brier, 1993).

What could the implications be at this point, if we once more shifted to our more familiar grounds, that is psychotherapeutic practices? As a start, we could perhaps follow Andersen (2000) in his distinction between two potential positions, reflecting the two distinct epistemological orientations we have just described. The first ('myself as an observer of the world, which exists independently of me') could inform those psychotherapeutic approaches, which according to Andersen (2000) prioritize the philosophy of ontology and deal with questions of the type 'what is the problem?' Simultaneously, they seem to be seeking for answers and explanations which lay 'out there', independently of their observations. As a consequence, the therapist simply observes the Other and does something to that Other, in our case the 'client'. For example, he / she solves a problem by applying a technique.

As regards with the second perspective ('myself as part of the world'), it could be considered as informing those approaches, which prioritize the philosophy of ethics and which tend to be collaborative, in the sense that both parts, therapist and client, first of all protect each other and each other's integrity and values (Andersen, 2000).

Where does this perspective of participation leave us at this point? It seems to us that this perspective of the participant observer, almost automatically, 'inherits' to us a process of ethical questioning. A process in which we get invited to reflect on the ways in which we participate to the construction and maintenance of the world in which we live. In Keeney's (1983, p. 82) words, Ethics "... involves leaping to the position of self-reference and participation prescribed by cybernetics of cybernetics".

Therefore, in the wider context of such an 'epistemology of responsibility', the question can never be stated in the form of who is 'wrong' and who is 'right', but rather gets transformed into a process of questioning in relation to how come one chooses A or B and in which context. One is summoned to replace the statement 'I had no other choice but A' with the statement, 'I have selected A among all the potential choices'. One is, after all, almost

simultaneously summoned to accompany the freedom of choice with the taking over of the responsibility for that choice (von Foerster, 1995).

Punctuating the Participant Observer II: Relational Responsibility and Reflexivity in the macro-social context

We think that the reader who is patient enough to follow our reasoning so far must have noticed that in the context of our discussion reflexivity has been highlighted as the core activity, which a mental health professional can adopt in the context of a ‘Relational Responsibility’ perspective, in respect of choices. Let us, however, pause for a moment at one reservation. It seems to us that the constructivist perspective of second order cybernetics can be seen as introducing an individualistic perspective in relation to responsibility. What seems to be implicated is that the mental health professional, for example, is free to make a choice and then take up the responsibility for their choice. In that sense, we think what could be seen as missing at this point is a perspective of reflexivity, this time, in relation to the participation in a macro-social context. This would mean that our mental health professional, for example, would need to move beyond reflecting only on the level of their interaction with each of their clients, towards reflecting on a wider contextual level.

We would thus like at this point to attempt discussing both choice as well as responsibility as located within a relational context or else within a context which is defined by a complex set of relationships, thus moving away from what seems to us an individualistic perspective. Inevitably, this takes us down the path introduced by social constructionism.

McNamee & Gergen (1999) argue that in the overall context of an individualistic perspective, responsibility has so far been discussed as if it were a personal characteristic or a quality owned by an individual. Following that, they suggest the replacement of the notion of ‘individual responsibility’ with the notion of ‘relational responsibility’, in this way meeting with Hoffman (1992, p. 22) in her suggestion of the term ‘ethics of participation’.

According to McNamee & Gergen (1999, p. 22), the notion of ‘individual responsibility’ can be seen as leading to nearly destructive consequences in the social realm in relation to collaboration. Their argument lies in their observation that when it comes to the case of problems, then an ‘individual responsibility’ perspective can only lead to people feeling guilty rather than willing to cooperate. The latter could only arise through a perspective of acknowledging everybody’s, and mostly our own, participation.

The notion of ‘relational responsibility’, which they then counter-propose, seems consistent with their overall approach to the notion of self or individual. To them these constitute nothing but the intersection of multiple relationships (see also, Gergen, 1997). As described by McNamee & Gergen (1999), the notion of an independent self and consequently ‘individual responsibility’, both predominant in the Western culture, can have multiple negative consequences, amongst which a sort of endless individualism, accompanied by a sense of disconnection or isolation.

The perspective of Social Constructivism could at this point help us approach reflexivity not as the activity of an isolated individuality but as an activity conceptualized by a certain socio-political and historical setting.

The perspective which emphatically stressed the constitutive power of language, and approached each meaning and/or (scientific) description as a social construct always located in the context of an agreement by a certain historical and cultural community (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999; Burr, 1995) inevitably presents us with a process of questioning regarding responsibility, when it comes to a wider socio-political context.

In turning once more to the psychotherapeutic arena, one should perhaps reflect on psychotherapy this time as a political enterprise operating within an institutionalized context or better, one should perhaps reflect on psychotherapy as an activity interrelated with the social, political and financial life. In that sense, one is left to wonder to how these contribute to the wider Discourses on psychotherapeutic / psychological practices, by means of their action in the context of their everyday practices. What is our contribution as psychotherapists, when it comes to the wider context of the production of psychological knowledge? What do we contribute to when it comes to the level of psychology / psychotherapy as institutionalized practices? Finally, what sort of society we contribute by means of our activity in the context of psychological / psychotherapeutic practices, in getting constructed?

In conclusion

Let us at this point reconnect to where we have started. Our attempt has been to develop our thinking as well as our questioning in relation to Ethics by following the idea that perhaps we should replace Ethics with each one’s epistemological perspective and consequently the way in which we choose to exist in the context of our relationship to the world. We will not deny that our chosen approach has inevitably revealed, to the extent that this has been possible given the limitations of this particular context, our personal

preference for an epistemological perspective co-created by a systemic perspective and a second-order, social constructionist one.

In remaining ‘loyal’ to one of the major adherences of our selected epistemology we would like to conclude by accounting for our personal preference by means of a three-part, short commentary.

Relatedness and Interdependence in the place of Individualism and Fragmentation

First of all, it seems to us that the perspective we have so far discussed could perhaps put to the fore relatedness and interdependence in the place of individualism and fragmentation, which we consider as constituting the dominant Discourses and consequent practices both in the psychological / psychotherapeutic context as well as in a wider context.

Inger & Inger are eloquent in explicating this point (1994, p. 9): “Self-contained individualism has reigned supreme in the psychotherapy fields. Individual psychotherapies have promoted the interests of the individual over the collective and have supported self-control...”. And while citing the words of Sampson (1985, 1988 cited in Inger & Inger, 1994, p. 8), “the male characteristics of self-reliance and self containment, through successive separations represent the dominant societal metaphor for how to be a person in the world. The shorthand for the metaphor is individualism. Individualism is a social construct which celebrates individual achievement as the highest form of personal status in society. This form of individualism is characterized by the drawing of a sharp but imaginary boundary between self and other, with a reliance on the ability to be in control of one’s self”.

In that sense, we could perhaps agree with their overall conclusion that individuality, as part of the politics of psychotherapy, overall reflects the politics of the wider society (Inger & Inger, 1994). Our civilization as well as our language are mainly constituted on the basis of what we would call a linear perspective. In this context, any attempt to explain the world, either does not give any notice to relationships at all, or approaches them in a linear fashion. In that sense it simultaneously promotes a subject-observer disconnected from the transactional circularities in which he/she constitutes part of (Bateson, 1979; Wittezaele, 2004).

‘Accounting’ for one’s choice and Relational Responsibility in the place of ‘No position’ and obscuring Difference

We think that the well known motto of our postmodern era, ‘anything goes’ often reflects what at times results in promoting a no-stance or no-position perspective, often accompanied with the obscuring of differences.

In contrast to this widely circulating perspective, we think that the adoption of the perspective we have so far developed, promotes the highlighting of differences by means of taking up the responsibility for each choice or position. As we have noted elsewhere (Tseliou & Psaropoulos, 2003), a social constructionist perspective by means of not allowing us to forget the punctuation of the social context as well as by means of calling for the reflexive location of each position in its socio-political context can potentially guard against the case of relativity and of not taking a position. ‘Anything goes’ is simultaneously restricted the moment we put to the fore the particular *relationship*, in which this ‘anything’ meets with its socio-political context. This then leads us towards a way of relating which entails the taking up of a certain position and the simultaneous taking up of the responsibility for taking up such a position, exactly by means of its relational and, consequently, its circular or conceptualized understanding.

The choice of one or another psychotherapeutic approach cannot constitute an exception. It rather constitutes a choice in relation to the ways in which ones selects to position themselves and therefore act, in the context of psychological practices. If we accept the idea that every choice entails a description of its object, which says as much for it as it says for the one who makes the description, then following one or another model constitutes “a difference which can make a difference” (Bateson, 1972/2000, p. 459).

Put it otherwise, the way in which a therapist approaches, understands and describes psychological symptoms presupposes a certain preference, with a certain intention and a certain ethical basis. As Schwarz-Hirschhorn (1999) notes, the essence of one being a therapist is the ethical action of choosing a theory and then acting on the basis of this theory. In Keeney’s words (1983, p. 81), “...descriptions of clients who are institutionalized, have electrical voltage charged through their brains, or have drugs pumped into their veins give us information about their therapists” since “...any description says as much or even more about the observer as it says about the subject of description...”.

Reflexive acknowledgement of psychological practices as political and social enterprises

Finally, we think that the adoption of such a perspective, could bring to the fore a call for activity on the level of social context, by means of necessitating the reflexive acknowledgment that any form of action simultaneously constitutes a political enterprise, like in the case of psychotherapy. To extend that the development of collaborative approaches in psychotherapy ‘gives an answer’ to the quest for a reflexive acknowledgment of the way in which a psychotherapist participates in the context of their relation to their clients, what sort of an answer does it give to the quest for a reflexive acknowledgment of this very participation but this time in the macro-political level?

In an extremely interesting critical approach to postmodern and collaborative forms of psychotherapy, Guilfoyle (2002, p. 95) states a reservation which we share: “Certainly we may develop new theories in response to ethical considerations and client concerns, and in that sense alter some of our discourses. But such steps retain the therapeutic view of persons as knowledge objects...” If we take this reasoning a step further we could possibly think that the development of such approaches simply contributes to the maintenance and the empowerment of the constitution of psychotherapy as “the prototypical place, with the appropriate kind of relationship, in which human misery can be solved (Guilfoyle, 2002, p. 95).

If, therefore, on the level of the micro-context of everyday psychotherapeutic practices the development of collaborative approaches to psychotherapy responds to quests for ‘political correctness’, when it comes to the client-therapist interaction we still need to question the extent in which it can transform psychotherapy as a constitution or as a political enterprise, in a macro-social context. Perhaps we also need to question what kind of Discourses on psychotherapy does it promote from the ones already existing or even what kind of Discourses it constructs.

At this point, perhaps the reader is puzzled as to whether he/she should treat our story as another ‘moral quest’ dictating the choice of a Systemic-Social constructionist epistemology in the field of psychological / psychotherapeutic practices. Our intention could not have been more eloquently stated than what is said by von Glasersfeld (1993) in the following statement: “...my story makes no claim to be ‘true’ or to describe a ‘real’ world; it wants to illustrate a way of thinking I have found useful”.

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