

Through the haziness of what is systemic: *A critical self-reflexive question*

Chiara Santin

The question, “*What is systemic?*” is an on-going one for me, particularly at transition points in my systemic life cycle; such as during my training or when I am the only systemic thinker and practitioner working in a *non-systemic* context and professional network. It is a crucial, self-reflexive question, which we should all engage with to make sure we question and nourish our systemic identity as we grow and evolve over time, and move across work contexts.

I remember being on my certificate year and experiencing a sort of haziness around my head as I tried to understand how all the different systemic ideas may fit together into a coherent and ‘clear sky’ systemic view of the world; more specifically in my own practice within social care at the time.

As I was preparing for my diploma viva, I had to look for a video extract of my work with a family and highlight any systemic intervention. I felt a bit lost asking, once again, the crucial question: “*Was I being systemic?*” I was aware that I was not consciously “*thinking systemically*” in responding to the family; I was mainly reflecting afterwards whether I had done anything ‘systemic’ at all in order to demonstrate my learning and my clinical skills.

At the beginning of my fourth year of the systemic training, it was disconcerting that I found myself asking the same question to my supervisor: “*What is systemic?*” It felt like a public failure on my learning journey. At the same time, it was comforting that my fellow colleagues too were in the same ‘boat’ of uncertainty, navigating the same systemic haziness I experienced at the very beginning of my training. Nevertheless, I thought that, by this stage in my training, I should have clear answers and a more reassuring sense of competence and confidence



in my systemic knowledge and skills. I wonder whether supervisors, in their dual role as assessors and supporters, might privilege certainty and confidence over ‘not knowing’ and irreverence as evidence of systemic competence. This becomes a bit of a paradoxical learning conundrum for students and supervisors alike. Once again, as I was preparing for my clinical viva, I went through endless clips looking for the most systemic one to impress the panelists. I ended up choosing and then asking myself, “*What was systemic?*” and “*How could I have been more systemic?*”

I remember going to my first AFT conference with a few fellow-newly-qualified colleagues, and opening a bottle of champagne at the cheer: “*We are family therapists now!*” It felt like a rite of initiation into the systemic world, as we were now able to call ourselves ‘family therapists’ with a newly-gained sense of pride and entitlement (even though we were no different to a few months before!). We were all

experiencing a sense of freedom and relief that ‘we had made it’ and were looking forward to having our ‘normal life’ back after such an intense training.

Finally, during my viva at the end of my supervision course, the focus of my presentation was on making sense of my personal journey *through the systemic haziness*. The questions from the panel were, once again, about what it meant to be a systemic therapist and a systemic supervisor. This additional layer of my training made me much more aware that “*being systemic*” becomes so much part of who we are, an inner embodied identity rather than a clothing that we wear to give us a sense of purpose and justify our existence in the systemic world out there.

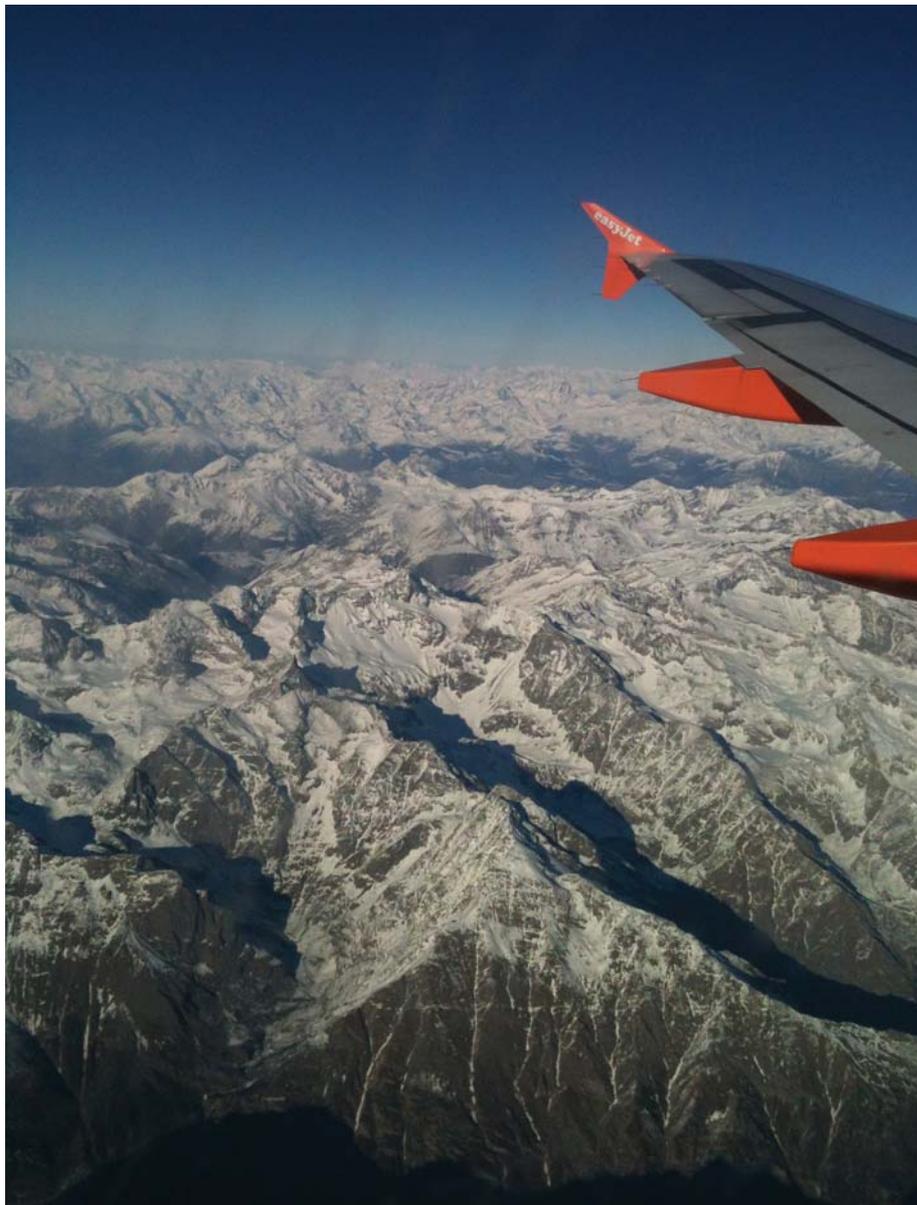
However, the question, “*Am I being and doing systemic?*” never stops popping into my mind. In my clinical practice within social care, currently with adoptive families as an independent therapist, once again I am confronted with the very same question as I navigate the complex

landscape of professional networks where systemic thinking and practice is often not recognised as a clear, evidence-based therapeutic modality.

I often think that, perhaps, thinking and questioning my systemic identity is linked to my life script of living across boundaries and coming to terms with my cultural difference since I moved to UK. I am aware I am no ordinary, traditional, stereotypical Italian woman, either in England or Italy, sometimes desperately trying to fit in and conform. Yet, in recent years I felt the need to claim some of my "Italianness" after so much effort in "fitting in", "integrating", striving for an "English voice" with a "nowhere accent" so that people would not necessarily know I am Italian. At some other times, I am trying to hold on to my difference with pride and to my rebellious and irreverent stance against assumptions and stereotyping, a typically systemic stance (Cecchin *et al.*, 1992).

Having taught on the systemic foundation course for five years, I have been in the privileged position of continuously grappling with systemic ideas, old and new, and seeing students engaging creatively with the very same question: "What is systemic?" This is when I feel most at home; that is, trying to grapple with defining and re-defining our relationship to systemic ideas and using them to make sense of our family of origin, our past experiences and professional practice. I often asked students what personal and professional resonance was triggered by a particular systemic idea or model. A critical appraisal of what fits with personal and professional contexts, and what becomes naturally (not without consistent efforts!) part of our embedded and embodied (Hardman, 1996) professional self, is at the core of our systemic training.

In recent years, the systemic field has hugely invested in trying to promote systemic and family psychotherapy as a recognised discipline and therapeutic modality, a valid and effective response to complex mental health issues. I think this inward search for evidence within our own field has led to drawing clearer boundaries for systemic therapies to be seen as "different from" others, having to highlight differences rather than commonalities. This is not new,



as early family therapy also had to try to differentiate itself from prevalent, well-established psychodynamic and psychoanalytic thinking and clinical interventions.

Once again, I think that the question, "What is systemic?" can help us to position ourselves along the continuum of being *exclusively systemic*; that is, when emphasising differences from other therapeutic modalities versus being *inclusive* or *integrative*; for example, when incorporating different modalities and ideas into our practice. An example of this is the inclusion of other significant bodies of knowledge and skills such as mindfulness, attachment and trauma theory in recent years.

It is useful to think about the continuum of similarities and differences with other modalities in a relational way; that is, what we

might have in common; for example, the importance of the therapeutic relationship, how we can mutually influence and to be influenced by other therapists, and what defines us as systemic practitioners in their uniqueness.

Positioning ourselves along the continuum can help us to ask ourselves what it is that we could not possibly give up in our thinking and practice for us to call ourselves "systemic". Where do we draw our "minimum systemic line of practice?" To what extent do we think we are systemic by our similarity to or by our difference from colleagues in a specific context?

Personally, I would not be or feel "sufficiently systemic" if I did not challenge the tendency to pathologise people, to pursue individualistic and linear explanations and formulations of

the problem/s; if I simplify complexity by accepting one narrow perspective; if I did not use different lenses; if I did not consider different layers of context; if I didn't use curiosity (Cecchin, 1987) to look for unexpected answers.

All the systemic and family therapy models we now learn, teach and use in practice originated from clinicians as preferred ways of being with clients, in a specific culture, trying to explain and use their theories to make sense of their

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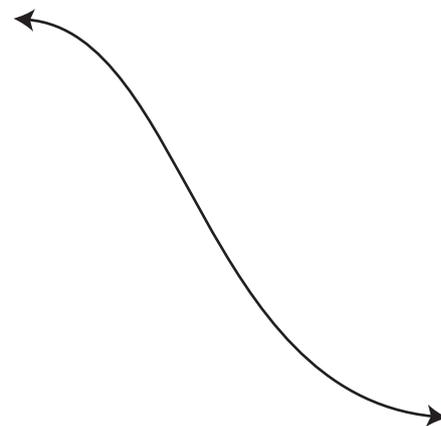
I find the idea of positioning a useful reflexive tool in asking ourselves how we are being "systemic" amidst considering the many levels of contexts, personal and professional aspects – for example, our personal style as a therapist, the fit with clients, the best fit with our personal and professional belief system, the best fit (or misfit) with our own specific work context, local practices and professional networks, AFT requirements, UKCP frameworks, our specific systemic training, (more specifically embedded into a training institution and their lecturers, tutors and supervisors), what has worked in the past with particular clients, our mindfulness and use of self in the moment, the quality of the therapeutic relationship, and many more.

Our position will reflect our preferred way of "being systemic", our preferred theories and techniques, the beliefs we hold about others and ourselves, and how we develop our knowledge and skills in our practice. We all carry with us in each moment a variety of systemic voices according to personal and professional resonance in specific work contexts, which can be heard or silenced in our inner conversation (Rober, 1999). Ultimately, it is "Who we are in relation to others?" using relational reflexivity (Burnham, 2005), what we do in the moment, and to what extent we are able to perform reflection in action (Schön, 1987) which we can define as systemic.

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Being systemic can be exhausting. I sometimes fantasise that, one day, systemic will mean one perspective rather than multiple perspectives, either/or rather than both/and, simplicity instead of complexity, certainty instead of uncertainty, owning knowledge without being endlessly curious, or feeling an expert or being directive without a sense of guilt. At the same time, when I engage myself in this wishful thinking I then experience my loyalty and excitement about being "systemic", in spite of the challenges of constantly living in a multiverse of ideas and perspectives. Even in my daily life, I now cannot help being systemic all around!

Let's all engage in systemic conversations to re-visit, re-define, nurture and challenge our systemic identity or multiple identities during our shared personal and professional journey in an ever-changing professional and socio-political landscape. I would like to end my article asking the reader the question: "What makes you a systemic practitioner at this point in your systemic life cycle?" Where do you draw your minimum systemic line?"



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