

# My journey across systemic training: From ugly duckling to elegant swan

Chiara Santin

## From start to finish: ugly duckling or elegant swan?

My systemic journey started when I was at university and one of my tutors (a client-centred counsellor) suggested I should read about family therapy to analyse an interaction with another student (mock therapy). Interestingly, this was not even one of the psychological perspectives we were meant to choose from.... I still wonder: "What did she see in me, what was I saying or doing for her to suggest family therapy?" Maybe the systemic seeds were already planted in me! She also commented afterwards that I "looked like an elegant swan paddling hard under the water". This metaphor has stayed with me since and inspired me at difficult times when I felt more like the ugly duckling than a swan during my training.

I am now a fully-qualified systemic therapist. I somehow still find it hard to believe that I have been able to paddle across many waters, some of them quite rough and scary and I am now paddling in quiet and tranquil lake waters. This somehow brings it home to me as my origins are around Italian lakes and mountains.

When I started reading systemic literature at university, its emphasis on difference and culture gave me some tools and new lenses to start making sense of my new life in England, my interactions with people, as well as my past. At the time, I had been in the UK for about two years and was still struggling to find the language and make sense of my family history and life in a different culture.

As I moved through the four-year training, many encounters with systemic ideas have helped me to make sense of my past as well as my present and have made this journey very exciting and challenging at the same time.

## What a difference in landscape!

One of Bateson's fundamentals that became a central tenet of systemic thinking, "the difference which makes a difference" (1973) has resonated with me since the beginning of my systemic journey. It all felt "different" to me in a seaside town in England; I seemed to have lost my coordinates in a completely unfamiliar territory. I was used to lakes and mountains, not sea and cliffs! Yes, I found myself having to learn to sail through rough seas and climb steep cliffs.

## Culture and race and cultural borderlands

I first met "culture and race" as I was reading and learning about the *Social GRRACCES* (Burnham, 1993) highlighting the importance of including all the dimensions of differences in training and therapy, e.g. gender, race, religion, age, ability, class, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, disability. These differences were regarded as socially-constructed realities and I soon learned to recognise the influence of "context" in systemic literature, therapy and my life! Yes, I could not make sense of my life without framing it within this cultural context and the cultural context I was from i.e. Italy. Initially, I seemed to think that, once I had learned to have an English voice (still trying!!), I would just be able to pass the test as "a competent

practitioner and therapist". In fact, I was convinced that getting rid of my Italian accent and having an "English voice" would discourage people (often professionals) from questioning my competence and ability to think and express my thoughts through language, without inevitably giving away my cultural difference as a disabling label.

Learning about my Italian culture within the English multicultural context was to be one of the most challenging experiences for me (and still is!). It was certainly much more complex than I had ever imagined as I was slowly uncovering more and more layers to it without ever feeling again "at home" either in England, or in Italy when visiting. However, this would all fit well with the multi-perspective multiverse that the systemic literature advocates. When I read about "cultural borderlands" i.e. multiple memberships to dimensions of difference intersecting simultaneously in many complex ways (Falicov, 1995), I found the language to express what I was experiencing. Yes, I was becoming increasingly aware that my old binary thinking and belief that "one day I will feel at home in England" was slowly changing into "belonging to two or more cultural worlds". I slowly began to think differently, seeing myself as



having two homes and two hearts, rather than one home and one divided heart (Falicov, 2005).

### Family scripts

I also started to realise how my "gender scripts" (Byng-Hall, 1995), culturally rooted in my Italian upbringing as well as experienced in England in different ways, were very powerful in my way of relating to clients and my use of self in therapy. I was a woman with a certain experience of men originating from my family history, rooted in the Italian culture. At the same time, I was now becoming more aware of being White and European and certainly privileged compared to other ethnic-minority women. I was also a woman pursuing a career, which would be more culturally acceptable in a multicultural and English context than a more traditional Italian culture with less flexible gender roles.

This experience of difference within difference made me often feel disadvantaged as I would have to work harder to show and prove my competence, e.g. in learning the English language and the "English ways". I started believing that the underlying expectation was that I was to *adapt* rather than *be*. However, this assumption was somehow misleading. I became increasingly aware that I could no longer be myself as I knew it in Italy, carrying out a "battle to preserve my identity against" a different culture. In fact, new relationships, being exposed to new cultural values and traditions, would inevitably influence me. So, my new frame of mind was to become myself again within a different culture rather than preserving my old (Italian) self or find a new (English) self. So yes, the context was influencing me but not in a deterministic and constraining way; I was discovering or using or adding new layers to my newly found

identity. During my clinical Masters training in particular, I became extremely aware of this mutual influence, another fundamental tenet in systemic thinking. This led to my thinking and my identity becoming more circular and fluid as I realised that I was also influencing the context by bringing to therapy my own cultural biases, traditions, values and life experiences.

### My inner multiple voices and self-reflexivity

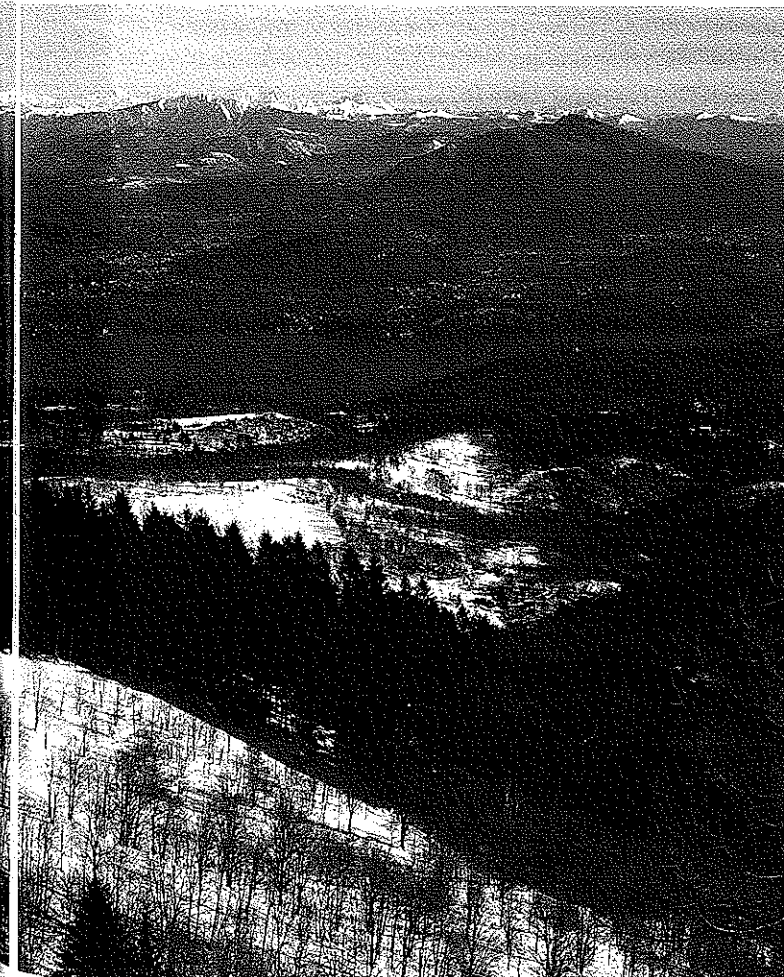
A constant soul-searching tension has always been my companion in this journey, what in systemic terms is called self-reflexivity. In order to enhance my self-reflexivity, I found particularly inspiring Rober's idea that "the therapeutic conversation is a circle of meaning" emerging from two ongoing conversations, the "inner conversation" and the "outer conversation" (1999, p. 209). The "inner conversation" refers to the negotiation between the self of the therapist and his/her role. The "outer conversation" refers to therapists' choice of using their own thoughts, emotions, associations, as well as hypotheses and theoretical knowledge being evoked during the therapeutic conversation. Rober (2005) also uses Bakhtin's idea of "dialogical self" to describe the self of the therapist, i.e. multiple inner-voices as an ongoing dialogue between the experiencing self and the professional self. These ideas were like a mirror in which I could truly reflect myself and have been crucially important in helping increase my awareness of where my inner conversation was originating from, e.g. was it from my family of origin experiences, my Italian cultural beliefs and assumptions; from my relationships in Italy or in the UK; from my professional knowledge gained in UK, my degree, social work practice or family therapy training?

It has also been particularly useful thinking about my cultural background and experiences as resources that can be activated in therapy with different families in a way that connects and fits with them, hence the importance of this constant dialogue and negotiation between the inner and outer conversation and listening to all these different "inner voices". Furthermore, becoming increasingly able to listen to my inner conversation during sessions gave me space to respond more congruently to clients' feedback and think about the next question. It has also helped me to maintain some flexibility in my positioning when feeling stuck and experiencing an impasse.

During my systemic training, I noticed that my ability to be more or less attuned to my inner conversation differed in relation to different contexts. Paying attention to the inner conversation has been particularly challenging at times, for example in the training context, where I experienced a constant pressure and anxiety to perform. I was sometimes not able to access my inner conversation, I could not listen to it, running the risk of being also disconnected from the outer conversation, hence the importance of working in a team. In fact, sometimes my inner conversation was not accessible and became available only afterwards through self-reflexivity or through team members' observations and perspectives.

### From unsafe certainty to safe uncertainty and a secure base

Along my bumpy journey I sometimes felt completely overwhelmed by self-reflexivity, for example when challenging any form of certainty, so "safe uncertainty" (Mason, 1993) became an important idea. During the training, I found myself often operating within "unsafe certainty", i.e. using my familiar way of trying to be



'helpful' to people by becoming the 'expert of the problem', 'doing something to' the family system to promote change, taking on the role of *directing the dance* in therapy, hence replicating my role in my family of origin and my family script of 'being the problem solver'.

"Doubting as a state of irreverence" (Cecchin *et al.*, 1992, p. 5) and questioning my assumptions, fears and ideas, however, became almost unbearable uncertainty when feeling paralysed by doubts about my skills and my resources as a therapist and dismissing my knowledge and life experiences in the process. It often felt like *walking the tightrope* when trying to explore new ways of being without yet having established a secure base as a therapist.

My secure base was my motivation to grow into an elegant swan (in spite of some people seeing only the ugly duckling!) through my determination to learn, commitment to ethical practice, engagement skills and my ability to connect emotionally with clients, adults and children. Knowing and believing that I had a secure base from which to explore and improvise new scripts helped me enormously through the challenges of the clinical Masters training where the common experience of feeling de-skilled often undermined my confidence. I realised that it was OK, sometimes, to operate from my "default position" (Reimers, 2006) and rely on my own previous skills, for example sometimes using my usual way of asking questions and gathering information (in my role as social worker) to be able to have enough confidence to explore more unfamiliar and scary territory for me as well as for clients.

As I became increasingly aware of the powerful influence of my family scripts as well as a more secure base as a therapist, I felt increasingly able to take risks beyond my comfort zone (lakes and mountains!), e.g. trying to take a different position, imagine myself as providing the background music rather than being the *director of the dance*. This image helped me keep a more flexible and fluid position, moving from "unsafe certainty" (first-order position) across "safe certainty" (relying on my previous personal and professional skills) towards "safe uncertainty" (second-order position). I still see "safe uncertainty" as my final destination and my ongoing tension and challenge as a therapist, towards a more collaborative stance, e.g. being alongside clients in co-constructing new meanings, promoting them as experts of their own life and re-writing family scripts using their own resources.

I also realised that this experience of "unsafe uncertainty" was a familiar experience for me, particularly in relation to my childhood, e.g. not having secure attachments with my parents, or coming to live in a different country, struggling to make sense of a new world and constantly preoccupied in my social interactions. "Unsafe uncertainty" was also reflected in the enormous structural changes in my workplace, which seemed at odds with the reality of social work practices aimed at "certainty" through regulations, child protection and legal frameworks. Self-reflexivity became an essential antidote to unsafe or even abusive practices, developing systemic skills through allowing the possibility for clients to re-story their lives within a complex landscape of multiple systems and often oppressive wider social and professional discourses.

I became increasingly aware that a similar experience of uncertainty was sometimes replicated in therapy and would paralyse my movements; yet this also challenged me and made me reflect on how some people crossing our pathways in life may become a temporary secure base, helping us to feel "secure enough to improvise" (Byng-Hall, 1995). This seems reflected in my progressive understanding and belief in "therapy as a secure base" (Byng-Hall,



1995) since clients, at times of distress and difficult life transitions, may also need a secure base from which to explore unknown and scary territory e.g. conflict, painful past experiences or new ways of being within wider social discourses and allow multiple meanings and new connections to emerge.

### Final reflections

My systemic journey has been full of encounters for which I am grateful, from my university lecturer who unwittingly spotted or planted the systemic seeds in me, to all the great systemic thinkers and ideas I have come across, and to many precious companions on my journey who have inspired me, supported me and believed in my same dream. They have all contributed in many different and unexpected ways to my transformation from an ugly duckling to a swan, now paddling in much calmer waters, enjoying the landscape of new territories, new clients, and .... mountains to climb. This is my next challenge: How can a swan climb a mountain? What I have learnt so far reassures me that in a systemic multiverse everything is possible as long as I keep paddling!

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Chiara Santin is a systemic and family psychotherapis senior family resource worker in a statutory agency, F Centre, Eastbourne, Children's Services of East Sussex Council. She is teaching/tutoring at the Institute of Fa in London's systemic practice course (first year couple Email: chiara.santin@btinternet.com