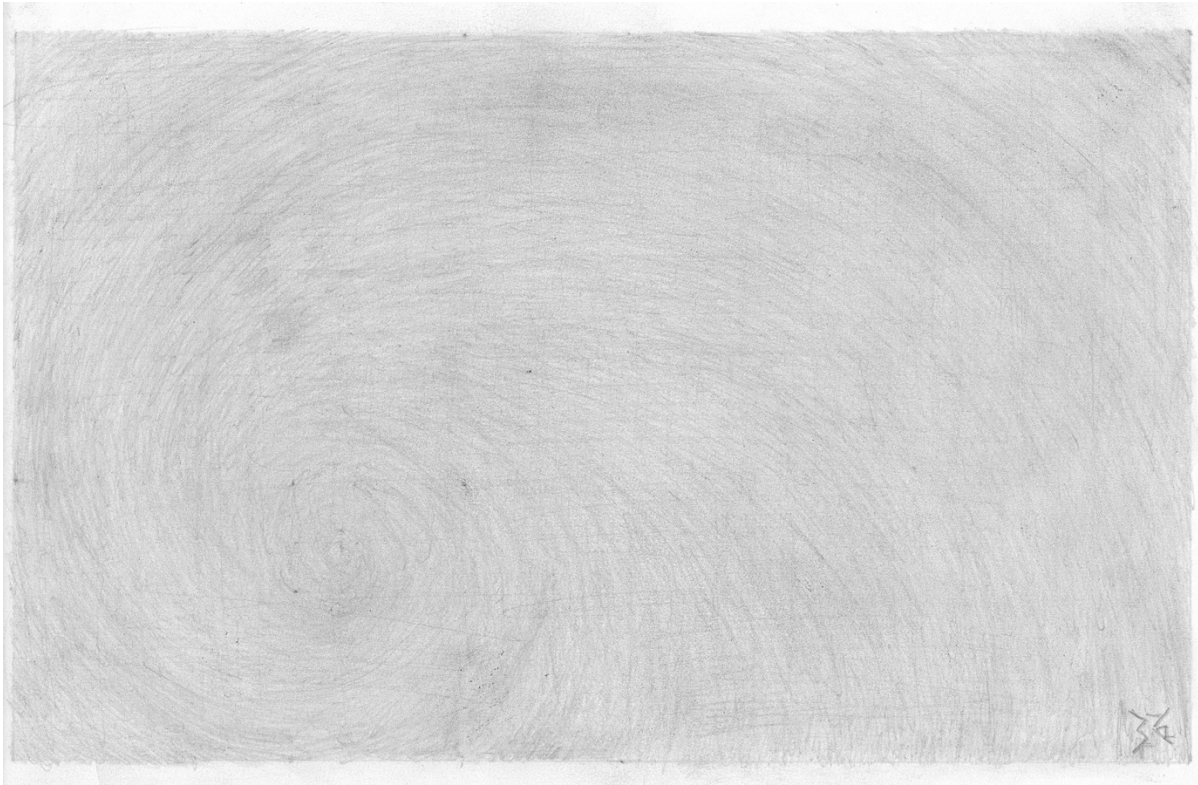




How to do things without words¹

A thesis submitted to the University of Bedfordshire, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice



Picture 1: Gray

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¹ This plays on the title of Austin's (1962) influential book "How to do things with words" that introduced the idea of speech acts

Author Declaration

I, Mark Huhnen, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;

Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;

Where I have drawn on or cited the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;

Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;

I have acknowledged all main sources of help;

Where the thesis or any part of it is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;

Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as indicated on page iii.

Publications

Smart, Oliver & Huhnen, Mark (2018). Interviews with puppets. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*. [online]

Huhnen, Mark (2019). Co-authoring better futures for children and families – Anticipation Dialogue in children’s social care networks. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 41(3): 407-420.

Karamatsouki, Marilena; Huhnen, Mark; Salter, Leah K. & Helps, Sarah (2019). Reflections on “Qualitative Research as Activism”: 3rd European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 2(1), 111–118.
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The Bodies Collective (2020). Bodyography as activism in qualitative inquiry: The Bodies Collective at ECQI19. *International Review of Qualitative Research*.
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Swift, Amarante (2022). Being Creative with Resources in Qualitative Research. In: Uwe Flick (Ed.) *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research design*. London: Sage.

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On the way there were so many interesting detours and side tracks. Some of them have been fruitful to explore others less so. Without my wonderful supervision team I would have gotten lost in the ever expanding labyrinth that we might call “knowledge”.

It was a long journey not just for myself. My closest family will know that during that time I have not been as available to them as they deserve. All the more, I am grateful for their forgiveness and encouragement. And to my partner I owe an extra thanks for proofreading and the patience of explaining the finer details of the English language to someone whose first language is not English.

I had several friends who were generous in their responses to my moaning or even worse when I thought I had found absolute gems of wisdom. To those go the credit of keeping me going and also on the ground.

The biggest thanks go to those who have given time and energy to the research workshops. Quite a few also fall into groups mentioned already. Some of you have decided that you like the idea of being acknowledged by name and you will find your name in the text. Others decided to remain anonymous. But your contributions made this research possible. I hope you got something for it in return.

Abstract

For this thesis there are two backgrounds: 1 systemic practice in social work, family therapy, training, coaching and consultancy, and 2 physical theatre, martial arts and other physical practices. As a starting point there is a suspicion or hunch from my own practice that systemic practice overly relies and focusses on verbal communication, missing out on the potential for change that non-verbal communication offers. This was suspected to be particularly the case after the linguistic turn that could be summarised in the sentence: Reality is created in language.

Three research questions were developed that build on each other:

1 Is there now a tendency to focus on the spoken and written word or verbal communication in the field of systemic practice?

2 If so, what are the consequences for practitioners of a focus on verbal aspects of communication?

3 Are there ways the practitioner can include non-verbal aspects of communication in a useful way?

Methodologically there are two main strands:

1 A review of the literature examines introductions to systemic practice and philosophical, sociological and linguistic trends that underpin and influence developments in systemic practice on the level of approach, to map the terrain of systemic practice. Ideas from communication theory are used to further investigate what is focussed on and what is meant by language. This review offers a new distinction of symbolic and dynamic action instead of

verbal and non-verbal communication. Using ideas from process philosophy and affect theory alongside ideas from physical theatre in a framework of metaphors, a new theoretical frame for both practice and the research of it is developed.

2 A series of workshops with systemic practitioners and practitioners from physical practices investigated how (social) reality is also created in dynamic action. These workshops were video recorded and followed up with verbal discussions with the practitioners. Earlier workshops were analysed within a social constructionist framework and later workshops were analysed to incorporate the arguments made when developing a new theoretical frame for both practice and the research of it.

Both the practical and theoretical investigations lead to answer the research questions: While practitioners might attend to dynamic action and are certainly influenced by it, this is not theorised much. The literature as well as practitioner interviews (as part of the workshops) indicate that after the linguistic turn in the field the central metaphor has changed from systems and feedback loops to language and meaning. If practitioners respond to dynamic action they do this mostly in symbolic action. But language in form of symbolic action can only ever approximate what it describes and there is a lot of potential for change in using dynamic action.

Beyond developing a theoretical frame for attending to and using dynamic action in systemic practice and systemic practitioner research, techniques for use in practice are developed. These ideas, by no means an exhaustive list, are offered as a catalogue of 'cards', brief descriptions with some thoughts in which circumstances these ideas might be useful and video examples.

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Mindmap

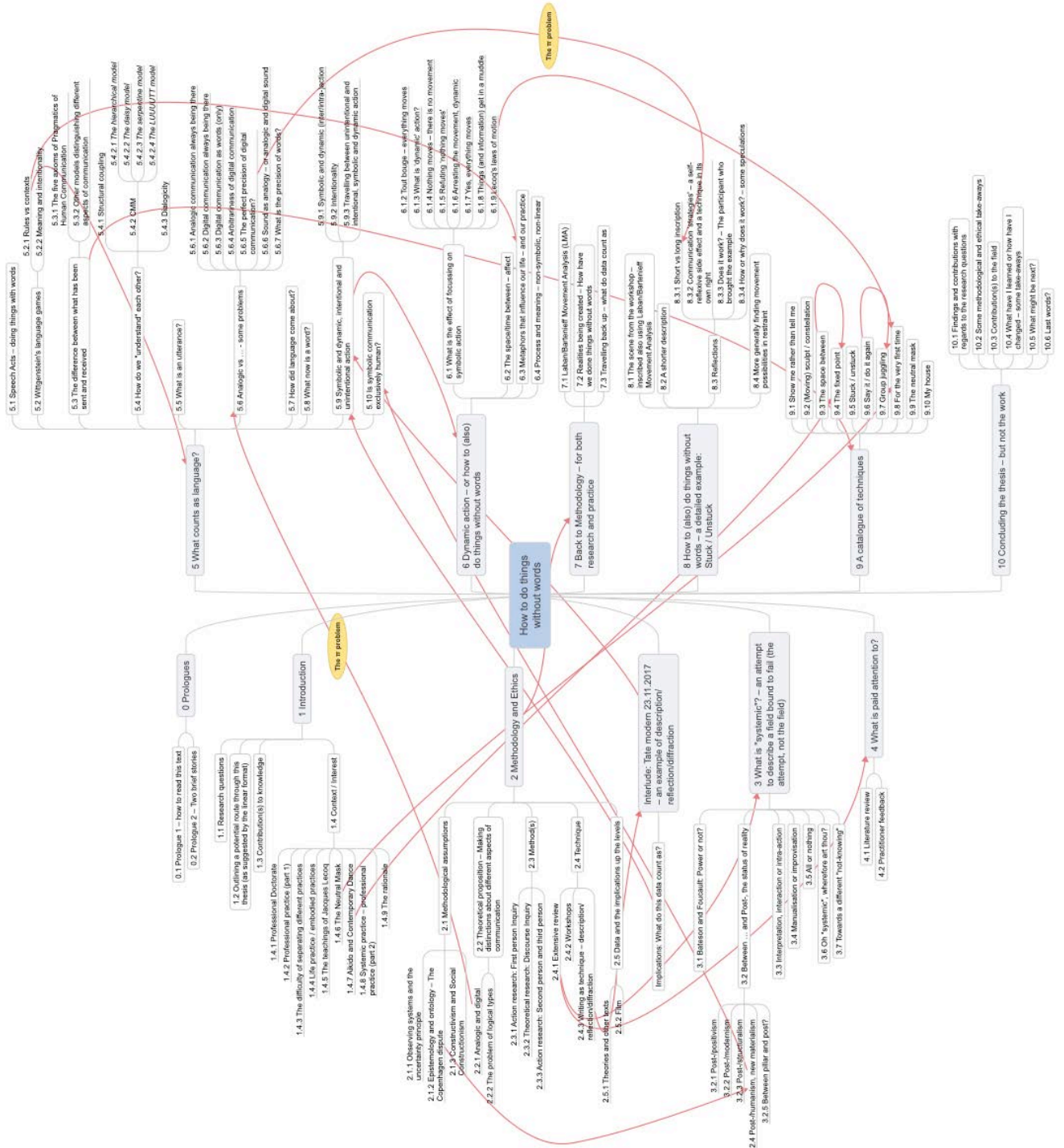


Figure 1: Mindmap

0 Prologues

0.1 Prologue 1 – how to read this text

In this thesis you will read several fragments that can be read in the order of appearance. I hope that if you do read the text in this way that there is some kind of flow to it.

However, it might be useful to point out that reading in this order suggests a chronological or logical order that could only be this way. It suggests a logical linearity that might not be there. So does the numbering of the chapters and sub-chapters. Yet, if we think of a game of sudoku, the numbers are merely symbols that in the game do not have a particular ordering apart from that they all have to be there, once in every row, column and box. The numbering here could be understood in a similar way.

The various themes might be better described as standing next to each other and interlinked with each other in a way that is synchronous, or circularly and reflexively linked². While one fragment follows (logically) from another the opposite might be just as valid.

This already points to one of my methodological assumptions: that many causal and logical relationships are circular (Bateson, 1972). Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) reject linearity and tree-like, arborescent structures. They prefer the concept of the rhizome or map “that has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back "to the same.”” (p. 12).

² See [mindmap](#), p.xiii

If you are reading this and you are holding a book in your hands, of course, you have in front of you what appears to be a linear text. The requirements of the form limit the function.

Yet another form of text, possibly by now consumed as much as the linear text written down on continuous pages, emerged in the last few decades: HTML texts, usually in form of web-pages allow for a very different reading journey. Hyperlinks, recognisable by words being underlined, allow us to jump from one node of the rhizome to another. If you are having this form of text in front of you, you can use the hyperlinks to read in a non-linear fashion, jumping from plateau to plateau to borrow from and lean on Deleuze and Guattari (1987) again (as so often in this text). In the book format I will nevertheless indicate possible jumps by indicating page numbers (in foot notes) that are also on or around the same plateau.

Acknowledging that this might negate what I just wrote, I would still recommend reading the two fragments in the second prologue first, as an introduction to this thesis.

0.2 Prologue 2 – Two brief stories

I am standing on the bus. It is “jam-packed”. It is the earlier part of rush-hour in London. It is hot. The open windows, or what counts as windows, of the bus hardly bring any relief, letting in sticky, muggy, smoggy late summer afternoon London air. We all try to not touch each other. Sweaty armpits on display because people have to hold on to railings only add to the imperative not to touch each other. It seems loud despite no-one talking to each other. Some people talk to their phones. We are together separate.

I am looking around. Most people look somewhere, many into newspapers, books and their smartphones. Some look out of the window. Nobody looks at anybody else... A young man looks back. Despite the temperature, he is wearing a hoody with the hood pulled deep over a baseball hat pulled even deeper into his face. For a moment, we look each other in the eye. He locks his gaze. His eyebrows pull together a little.

“You got a problem? What are you staring at?”

“Nothing. Sorry, mate. I was just looking around...” I break the eye contact.

“Better look somewhere else. Or you can get in trouble.”

I remember a young man I once worked with on the Isle of Wight who had just left life in gangs of London behind. I remember him squaring up to someone who had just casually looked at him. I remember him explaining that looking someone in the eye was a sign of disrespect. Only gang members higher in the hierarchy are allowed to make eye contact.

Back in the office I overhear a conversation. A social worker debriefs with her manager at the end of the day, discussing her concerns for a 12-year-old she is assessing. She says: “...and in

terms of attachment I am also a little bit worried. For example eye contact. He never looked me in the eye or could make a good eye contact.”

I lay the masks out on the stage. There they are: four Neutral Masks, unspecific with regards to most social GRACES³ and neutral with regards to all emotions. They cannot talk. But our bodies do. They create worlds – already by just being in space. As I lay them out I wonder, will this workshop work? What will participants make of it? Will they also think what I am thinking, that in our social constructionist ways of thinking, consulting, coaching, doing therapy or training, we have focussed too much on the word?

I am wondering why?

Have we systemic practitioners always focussed on the spoken or written word? Or has it to do with the “linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967)? It seems interesting to think this way as I once had the opposite turn, arriving as someone more at home in my head, to a physical theatre school, letting go of word and intellect for a while in order to focus on body and emotion. There, we would certainly experience ourselves as having created worlds. Worlds of imagination, worlds of drama, of tragedy and comedy, worlds of relationships in space. Social worlds (Pearce, 2007) with and without words.

³ This refers to John Burnham and Alison Roper-Halls abbreviation social GRRRAACCEESS. Depending on which version (for example Burnham 1993, 2013, Roper-Hall 1998, 2008) these letters stand for: Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Education, Ethnicity, Sexuality, Sexual Orientation and Spirituality (list not exhaustive).

Participants start filtering in. I take what I assume to be an inviting position. Or is it a stance? Or is it a set of gestures? A way of looking? I want to give a clue about what this workshop might be about by not speaking too much, not saying the usual “Hello. Come in. Welcome...”

Some participants feel the need to speak, say something.

“Hot today, right?”

Another participant nods but does not look up at the speaker, almost like to herself.

I explain an exercise: line of status. Everybody has to position themselves in relation to the others on a line of where they perceive their status to be between the highest and lowest, without talking. I talk at length about not talking. The exercise does not even take half as much time. I notice people’s reactions in their bodies. Some shoulders are more up than others. Interestingly, the person who ends up highest seems most tense. We talk about the exercise, how it felt. One participant remarks that they did not need to hear people say how they felt, they had just seen it.

I introduce the Neutral Masks, and introduce an exercise with them as I had been introduced in theatre school. I introduce the characteristics as described by Jacques Lecoq (2020). The Neutral Mask exists before the word, before experience. It does not have any reference or memory. It just is in the world, with the world, in and with the moment. It is curious about encounters in the here and now. As a training tool it constructs its own reality with the audience in which it acts. The world in which it lives gets created by its living, its being in space witnessed by the audience.

1 Introduction

1.1 Research questions

In this thesis I will explore the following questions:

1 Is there now a tendency to focus on the spoken and written word or verbal communication in the field of systemic practice?

2 If so, what are the consequences for practitioners of a focus on verbal aspects of communication?

3 Are there ways the practitioner can include non-verbal aspects of communication in a useful way?

The stories above already point to the first of my research questions, **is there now a tendency to focus on the spoken and written word or verbal communication in the field of systemic practice?** The “now” is important as I am aware of the attention that Watzlawick et al (1967) and Maturana and Varela (1972, 1987), for example, paid to non-verbal aspects of communication. “Now” is clearly situated after the “linguistic turn” in systemic theory. The term “linguistic turn” might have been popularised by Richard Rorty’s (1967) book with the same title. In a foot note in its introduction, Rorty credits Gustav Bergmann as having coined the term. Rorty’s (1967) book was published in the same year as Watzlawick et al’s “Pragmatics of human communication” and 5 years before Maturana and Varela’s “Autopoiesis and Cognition”. When I refer here to “the linguistic turn”, it is with regards to

systemic theory and practice embracing social constructionist ideas. I also point the reader to a chapter mapping a genealogy of different (current) practices⁴.

This first question asks whether (rather than how) a phenomenon exists. Already this provides some methodological problems. In a Kantian sense, a phenomenon exists as it is perceived, and in some ways, we can now say that if I have perceived it, it does exist. The question of whether the noumenon, the thing itself (“das Ding an sich”, Kant, 1787) exists cannot be answered. Social constructionism extends the question of perception to the social domain in that we agree on our perceptions (again in language). In this way, the question of how this phenomenon of leaning towards the spoken and written word came about is inescapably linked to whether it exists. This first question could be shortened to “What?”, as it asks for a description of a phenomenon.

The second question, in the simplest terms, is “So what?”. Maybe the phenomenon exists for many people. Maybe I perceive that we lean towards or tend to focus on the spoken and written word or verbal communication, neglecting the way in which bodies constitute reality in space. But is this a problem at all? **What are the consequences for practitioners** (like me) **of a focus on verbal aspects of communication?** Are there any options or possibilities (for example, for therapeutic or organisational change processes) lost to the (systemic) practitioner, possibilities that were there before?

If I were to find that there are possibilities lost, if there is a problem, then the third question is “Now what?” Answers aim to suggest things that could be done to bring the bodies’ physical aspects of constituting reality back into focus. **Are there ways the practitioner can include**

⁴ P. 84

non-verbal aspects of communication (and the body's physical reality) **in a useful way?** For example, are there some exercises that could attend to, or alleviate, the problem, that can be used by practitioners like me in their therapeutic, coaching or consultancy practice?

The sequence "What?", "So what?" and "Now what?" was described by Terry Borton (1970) as a model for learning processes in schools that would allow students to also learn about learning. Gregory Bateson (1972) describes this as deuterio learning. It was later used as a framework for reflective and reflexive processes in other contexts (for example Rolfe et al, 2001). This sequence describes a loop. "What?" describes a situation, "So what?" asks in what way the situation might be problematic and "Now what?" leads to actions, to do something about it. After the doings triggered by "Now what?" there would be another "What?" describing a new phenomenon. I first got acquainted with this (learning) loop during my time training social workers. In our teaching team we used it to guide students to think about their assignments and other reflexive processes: noticing a phenomenon or problem, considering if and in what way and why it is a problem, and doing something about it. We encouraged students to use it with a range of phenomena, including for example assessment tasks in their children's social care settings. Usually, a referral would describe or identify a problem, for example, drug use. This would be the "What?". The "So what?" would trigger thoughts about the impact on children and an understanding of the problem. This would include how a possible lack of supervision and maybe other aspects of neglect corresponded with a negative impact on child development but also questions about what dynamics or other problems that might make drug use appear as a solution. This in turn would lead to the planning of an intervention, the "Now what?". To emphasise the need for ongoing assessment and evaluation of interventions, the loop character was very useful. If the intervention had made

a difference, there would now be a new situation (What?). Perhaps the drug use had decreased but shouting had increased. One of my students worked with a parent who used drugs to regulate their own emotions and the services initially offered as part of a rehabilitation programme had led to a decreased use of drugs, but to an increase in shouting. Child protection services then considered whether it was safe enough for the children in the household (So what?) and if the case could be closed (Now what?) or if the student could explore with the parent their use of shouting and develop other ways to regulate their own emotions. If the intervention had not had any effect (What?) this could be considered (So what?) and another intervention could be applied.

For this thesis I remembered the structure “What?-So what?-Now what?” (Borton, 1970) as it offered a useful structure that links to the three research questions. Or it rather maps them. I did not plan this structure from the start. Using and noticing this structure is itself an outcome of a loop of research. It was during the reworking of these earlier chapters that I noticed the “What?-So what?-Now what?” structure in my research questions. The praction research model that I will introduce is characterised by loops. Embracing the “What?-So what?-Now what?” loop has also allowed me to see my research outcome, this thesis, not as a finishing point, but as temporary results that allow for a next loop. The last chapter concludes the thesis but not the work.

It is already worth noting that the “What?-So what?-Now what?” loop is akin to the loop or spiral described by Kurt Lewin (1946) for action research. While this thesis might only go once through the “What?-So what?-Now what?” loop, the loop character means that the project or inquiry continues. During the part of the bigger inquiry that led to this thesis, techniques to actively use dynamic action, such as “show me rather than tell me,” have been developed

for the use of practitioners (see chapter 9, using this technique, practitioners can ask clients to use dynamic action to express something like a feeling in movement if words fail them). I aim to make these techniques available and share these with fellow practitioners online, encouraging feedback and further development. In this way a new “What?-So what?-Now what?”-loop (Borton, 1970) will start. I will say more about this at the end of the thesis.

1.2 Outlining a potential route through this thesis (as suggested by the linear format)

Before I approach the first “what” question, “Is there now a tendency to focus on the spoken and written word or verbal communication in the field of systemic practice?” it seems to make sense to first ask a why and a how question, as Simon Sinek (2009) reminds us: Start with why before attending to how and what. The why-question might well be: Why would I or anyone ask this question and want to spend considerable time and energy exploring it?

The “I or anyone” points to two further questions. The “I” points to my background and motivation; the “anyone” to what contributions to knowledge this thesis provides. I will lay this out in the next section, attending to the question why you could be interested in this research.

But why am I interested in this research? Jürgen Habermas (1968) points out that (the production of) knowledge is inextricably linked to human interest. Attending to our own interest as researchers, those who ‘create’ or ‘produce’ knowledge, seems indicated in the name of transparency. In the section after considering the contributions to knowledge, I account for my own context and background, which illuminates my interest in this research

and situates it as personal and subjective, a starting point for self-reflexivity (as also called for by Habermas, 1968). Already for my first degree in social pedagogy my supervisor for that thesis that examined social pedagogical sailing projects encouraged me to account for my motivations in research. I acknowledged in that thesis that I had chosen the topic of sailing projects as I had been introduced to sailing in my youth through a youth project. And as a social work student I had contributed to delivering such sailing projects and had felt them to be quite transformational for the teenage participants as well as for myself. As a result, there might have been a bias towards generalising my experience and it seemed important to account for this. The loyalty I experienced towards people who offered sailing projects, who I might have felt indebted to for a great experience, seemed important for a reader to understand - in the same way as my practice and life background (including theatre) is important to understand here. I attend to this “why” for my thesis now further in this introductory chapter 1⁵.

After accounting for the why, I attend to the how (Sinek, 2009). In the context of a thesis the how-question asks about research methodologies in the next chapter, chapter 2⁶. I am aware that it is common to start with a literature review before attending to methodology. But a literature review in a wider sense is one of the main approaches to answering my research questions and needs to be considered methodologically first. For my methodological considerations, I am oriented by another set of why, how and what: Gail Simon (2012) has extended John Burnham’s (1992) Approach – Method – Technique, that asks about the why, how and what of systemic practice, into a framework to account for our methodological

⁵ P. 6

⁶ P. 31

considerations of systemic inquiry. This section shows again that there cannot be a neat linearity as suggested by an order of why – how – what. The why and how and what are recursively linked. On one hand I am writing out of current, post-linguistic turn systemic research practice and on the other hand, I am also critiquing this linguistic practice. The paradox could be described with a question: How do you use words to critique the use of words? Would using words to critique the use of words not be subject to its own critiques?⁷

There are methodological considerations that are clearly within the realm of post-linguistic turn practice, like social constructionist considerations and some that already go beyond social constructionism and need to be outlined later. While there is an argument that ethics in a wider sense are always at stake in everything we do, say or write, ethics in a narrower sense as regarding this research will also be considered in this chapter as they are most closely related to research methodologies.

I then start approaching and exploring the what-questions that are also the research questions: Is there a focus on words in the systemic field? (What?) Is there a problem with that? (So what?) And can we also include non-verbal aspects of communication more into our practice? (Now what?)

Before I can answer the first of these three questions it is necessary to indicate what I mean by the systemic field – to map it. As systemic practices have always been inspired by developments in philosophy (in a wider sense), it will be a map of ideas underpinning practices - what Burnham (1992) calls approach, answering the question why we practise in

⁷ I attend more to this later, p. 44

particular ways. This map already yields some indications towards the question of focus on words. In chapter 3, the question “what is systemic?”⁸ leads to such a map.

Building on these explorations of the thought background that indicates considerations of verbal practices then allows me to ask the opposite: Where are non-verbal aspects of communication theorised? And what are practitioners actually focussing on? The section exploring this, chapter 4, “What is paid attention to?”⁹ reviews introductions to systemic practice and curriculum information from training courses, as they are a good indication of current practice. There are also the voices of participants in workshops I have organised as part of this research that speak about what they pay attention to.

As it becomes clearer that there is a focus on language, the question arises “What counts as language?” – the headline of the next chapter. In chapter 5¹⁰ I examine different ideas about language and communication, and how communication might be possible at all. In this chapter I also attend to the influential ideas of speech/act theory by John Austin (1962) that led to the title of this thesis. I outline some other models of communication, already with a view to later exploring whether they might also apply to non-verbal communication. Different distinctions between verbal/nonverbal and digital/analogic (Watzlawick et al., 1967) affect our understanding of communication and I offer a new distinction between symbolic and dynamic action.

With this distinction in mind, the next chapter (chapter 6¹¹) explores what the problem with a narrower focus on symbolic action might be, and lays out some ideas (on the level of

⁸ P. 84

⁹ P. 125

¹⁰ P. 149

¹¹ P. 210

approach) that might underpin techniques we could use if we were to focus more on and utilise dynamic action. Using Brian Massumi's (2002) ideas on affect as something ontogenetically before linguistic meaning and symbolic action, I will attend to metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) in two ways: extending Peter Rober's (2002) critique of our central metaphor 'text' and seeing that many of our basic metaphors are physical and spatial in nature – and relatively universally so. This will be held alongside ideas from the world of physical theatre and the pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq (2020).

Chapter 7¹² returns to the “how” of this research and reviews methodology. Following the considerations of previous chapters I introduce, apply and evaluate Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis as a possibility to analyse the video material generated in the research workshops and make an argument for a simpler methodology that I call “inscription”, a shorter method to analyse or translate from dynamic into symbolic action that acknowledges the subjective nature of describing dynamic action.

Applying both Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis and Inscription, chapter 8¹³ gives an example of how the exercises and activities in the research workshops translate into descriptions of techniques. In this example I include video material from the workshop in the html version of this thesis.

Chapter 9¹⁴ forms a collection or catalogue of techniques developed in the research workshops. Each subchapter follows a format of describing the technique with considerations for when it might be useful and potential variations or extensions. It is hoped that this

¹² P. 247

¹³ P. 270

¹⁴ P. 298

catalogue will grow over time with contributions from fellow practitioners that also want to explore the use of dynamic action more.

In a last chapter (10¹⁵) I conclude this thesis. Mirroring the earlier set of questions why, how and what in reverse order, I summarising the answers to the research questions (what) before I point to methodological and ethical take-aways (how). Attending to the why I further summarise the contributions to the field and how the process has changed me. While the thesis concludes, the wider project might continue.

1.3 Contribution(s) to knowledge

With this research project I contribute to the field of systemic theory and practice, both with regards to therapeutic and organisational settings. The hypothesis corresponding to the first research question¹⁶ is that practitioners overly rely on verbal communication. In their analysis of and thinking about how families, and organisational systems are (re)creating themselves they focus on symbolic action and use it to facilitate change in these systems. Peter Rober (2002) develops a similar hypothesis in considering hesitations that might not be expressed verbally. However, he develops this further to talk about not talking about something. What he offers is a different description of what I refer to as 'now, after the linguistic turn'¹⁷. Rober has found that "[r]eading through the collaborative literature, it seems that another aspect of the family therapy practice may be obscured within a narrative paradigm: the importance of nonverbal communication" (p.191). What Rober does as a result of this reflection is to

¹⁵ P. 317

¹⁶ P. 6

¹⁷ P. 6

speak about these hesitations. His response to a nonverbal or dynamic act of communication is to explore this with verbal or symbolic communication.

If there is an over-reliance on verbal communication or neglect of nonverbal communication, then there is scope to explore how this happened, what might be problematic about it and what can be done to use nonverbal communication. This corresponds to the second and third research question.

I anticipate contributing to the field of systemic practices an exploration of whether (and if so, how) verbal communication became privileged over nonverbal communication in both theory and practice. This includes a questioning or critique of the notion of reality being created in language. In order to do so I will map the genealogy of current systemic practices. The map of differences in theories and practices itself is a contribution to the field. Of course, others have mapped out the territory, yet every map is different and lends itself to different uses.

A further contribution is a problematisation of overly relying on verbal communication or symbolic action and pointing out chances to use non-verbal communication or dynamic action. Both these contributions are not in and of themselves unique. I refer again to Peter Rober's (2002) article mentioned above as an example. Recently (2018) Hillary Palmer contributed a book about the use of music and art in family therapy. But Peter Rober moves back into symbolic action to explore dynamic action. Hillary Palmer's use of art and music certainly includes dynamic elements (as well as possibly symbolic elements). But the client uses dynamic action in very deliberate or intentional ways from the outset. What makes my contribution unique is the exploration of spontaneous or unintentional dynamic action *in*

dynamic action – allowing us to move between the intentional and unintentional and between the dynamic and symbolic.

A further unique factor is a connection to (physical) theatre work, including the use of masks by Jacques Leqoc. These form some starting points of techniques we can use with clients.

In outlining a potential route¹⁸ through this thesis, I have made the distinction with regards to the why question: Why would you want to read this or anyone want to write this? Versus: Why am I so interested in this? The first of these questions was answered with this section, I hope. The second question requires me to speak about myself and my context. The following section does this.

1.4 Context / Interest

The context of this research provides a rationale for why I want to undertake this particular research. Many practices of or in my life, particularly physical theatre, rely strongly on non-verbal communication. There is a sensing (Shotter, 2008, 2010) that reality is or can be created by non-verbal means, in dynamic action. Yet I experience myself and my colleagues relying strongly on verbal communication in our professional systemic practice, as therapists, coaches or organisational consultants. From my training I have taken a strong message that ‘reality is created in language’ and systemic practice is a ‘talking therapy’. I have embraced a focus on verbal communication in my professional practice.

¹⁸ P. 10

1.4.1 Professional Doctorate

This thesis was written in the context of a Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice (PDSP). The journey towards this academic title provides me with a chance to inquire deeply into my practice and improve it. Although this is an inquiry linked to my own practice it is worth acknowledging that practice is always relational. I cannot imagine that practice is not related to something or someone. I would hope that this work, no matter how subjective it might be, can be meaningful and useful to others, particularly participants in my research. For the time, energy and expertise that participants bring to this research I hope they also benefit for themselves and their practice.

Bateson's (1972) statement that there is no meaning without context suggests that I should say more about the different contexts in which this research is situated. Starting again from the context "Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice" I start by separating and rearranging the words slightly. This generates several questions or themes. There is a theme of professional systemic practice. What does systemic mean?¹⁹ Or in a systemic spirit, what different meanings of the word systemic are possible? In order to provide some more context for this research, to locate it, I need to provide a few thoughts and observations. I suggest some meanings that provide context, first about professional practice and then about systemic practice. One of the ideas of a professional doctorate is to research and enquire into my own practice. There is something important to be noted about my professional practice: that it is difficult to distinguish from other practices and contexts in my life.

¹⁹ I will attend in more depth to this question in chapter 3, What is "systemic"?, p. 84

1.4.2 Professional practice (part 1)

My current professional practices include working as social worker, systemic psychotherapist, coaching managers, and delivering training in systemic practice – all of these mostly within children’s social care. By no means have I exhausted the development opportunities that these practices offer. There is still enough to discover and learn in this context. But I have found myself less excited about this context than I once was, and less fulfilled. I wonder what might emerge or get created if I was working in different contexts. What would it be like to coach managers in the banking sector (to use an example that seems very different from social care)? What might be similar and what might be different?

I do not think of these questions as leading to answers that are then universalised into “differences and similarities of coaching in children’s social care and banking”. I would probably “only” generate local knowledge. (In talking about my methodological assumptions²⁰ I will talk about local knowledges). What I do feel is a great curiosity²¹ towards opening or widening the field in which I operate. This is not so much “anything but children’s social care”. I am more curious about what I might be able to offer practitioners from different disciplines who work in different sectors. In my journey, I have offered peer supervision to a colleague who is coaching people from different industries (including banking). I also take part in networks of peers experimenting with different formats and exercises they might use in their own coaching and organisational consulting practices. Although my own experience is influenced by having worked in a children’s social care context and it would be easy to assume that any knowledge generated here is localised to children’s social care, I see this research as

²⁰ P. 35

²¹ P. 24

having a wider applicability. While my professional practice might stretch across different forms of organisations (including families) I notice I draw even more material from other areas of my life.

1.4.3 The difficulty of separating different practices

Despite this writing taking place in the context of a professional doctorate, I will not focus solely on what might commonly be called professional practice, for several reasons. It might seem easy in everyday language to differentiate between work and non-work, between professional and non-professional activities. Phrases like “all work, no play” or “work hard, play hard” indicate this. Some theorists propose a similar understanding. Erving Goffman’s (1961) influential “Asylums” assumes a separation between work and private life normal in Western societies. His concept of Total Institutions contrasts with this in the lack of separation. ‘Inmates’ in such institutions find themselves in all aspect of their existence – living, working, eating, sleeping, receiving treatment and so on – in the same place. I imagine many practitioners of various disciplines have ‘worked from home’ during the various lockdowns in response to the Covid pandemic from early 2020 and have experienced the difficulties of ‘being in the same place’ for all aspects of life and would only be too happy to have more separation between private and professional life.

Still, I find there are considerable difficulties with thinking a complete separation. One difficulty is a question of status or pride in an activity. I have attended a professional theatre school. In a playback theatre (Fox, 1981) group I am part of, all members have some level of professional performing arts training but only a few would describe being an actor or performer as their main or only professional identity. Even fewer manage to earn a living

exclusively from performing. Still, we see ourselves as professional. Despite not having had formal training I find myself dancing with professional or professionally trained dancers and contributing to their research and development projects.

Another difficulty is the mutual influence between work and non-work life, and the overlap between them. Many people have the experience of socialising with colleagues outside of work and still talking about work. They might at work refer to these conversations. As indicated, recently many of us have made the experience of working from home due to Covid-restrictions. Apart from the difficulties that Erving Goffman (1961) described – an erosion of the physical and temporal boundaries around work (I am sure many researchers explore this already) – there are particular difficulties for practices like therapy, training, coaching and consulting that have moved to online platforms. As the inclusion of physical bodies in our practices has decreased to seeing maybe a head and upper part of the chest (if cameras are switched on at all), the temptation of the disembodied word has increased. For practices like supervision and coaching, Sebastian Kunert (2022) has taken a range of research into consideration to point to problems with online meetings. He reasons that the separation of non-verbal signals from information content is experienced as difficult and exhausting. In real life we might, for example, experience a moment of silence as the other person contemplating our point. Online we might find it irritating. Non-verbal signals are less available, especially if ‘cameras are off’ (Kunert, 2022). Kunert’s (2022) work and this specific period in recent time seem to highlight how important non-verbal signals are to our communication. This thesis explores what we might miss when we focus on words and when we pay less attention to non-verbal aspects of communication, possibly based on a social

constructionism that foregrounds words. With this research I address the balance between a focus on words and attention being paid to non-verbal communication.

1.4.4 Life practice / embodied practices

In my life beyond my professional practice, what we could call life practice, I find activities or hobbies including (improvised and physical) theatre, contemporary dance, and Aikido, a Japanese martial art. I am also a father to a 11-year-old and a 5-year-old girl (at the time of submitting this thesis). I might call this the life practice of being a parent. In all these practices, I find myself intrigued by what gets communicated and how. What would I miss in these activities and practices if I focussed strongly on symbolic action as occurring in verbal communication? Would some of these practices even be possible? These questions are the personalised version of the second research question: What might be the problem of focussing on symbolic action? I will briefly introduce some of my life practices.

1.4.5 The teachings of Jacques Lecoq

Once, I would have said that my main professional background was in performing arts, particularly physical theatre. My mother maintained – while her memory was still available to her – that I am a natural performer. In year 3 of primary school I took it upon myself to “copy” my favourite sketch from a famous German comedian, Loriot, for the school carnival show. I watched the sketch several times, writing down the lines and learning them and directing my friends. When I was 12, having to attend a New Year’s party with my parents and their friends, I entertained the whole crowd for two hours, facilitating the adults playing silly games. But other than these examples, I did not engage in any performing arts in my

childhood. It was only during my studies in social pedagogy that I found theatre again – or maybe it found me again?

As part of these studies there was a course in improvised theatre based on the teachings of Keith Johnstone (1979). There was also a one-week introduction workshop to the teachings of Jacques Lecoq (2020) that led me to want to explore this further. With hindsight – and with different language options – I would describe this as my having rediscovered the world of embodiment, or what Shotter (2010) calls “spontaneous, expressive responsiveness of our living bodies” (p. v of prologue), and sensings (Shotter, 2008). Since then, and even more so after a 2-year training at the London International School of Performing Arts (LISPA), I have kept this interest in what gets communicated through the body. One of the most helpful “tools” for this is the Neutral Mask. It disables speech and facial expression and thus focusses on the other expressive channels the human body has, especially those expressions we are less aware of and that could be described as dynamic action.

The pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq, and specifically the Neutral Mask, are worth introducing now. Jacques Lecoq (2020) came from a background of sports and discovered masks while in Italy. This led to his interest in movement as an expressive dimension. Something gets communicated by moving in space and it is impossible to not move at all, at least while being alive. This seems very reminiscent of Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas and Don Jackson (1967) remarking on the impossibility to not communicate.²² In his pedagogy Jacques Lecoq sees the need for performers to first achieve a physical “neutrality” (as much as this is

²² In another chapter I critique their axioms of communication, p. 181.

possible). He thinks performers need to become blank pages onto which the character (of the play) can be painted. One training tool to achieve this is the “Neutral Mask”.

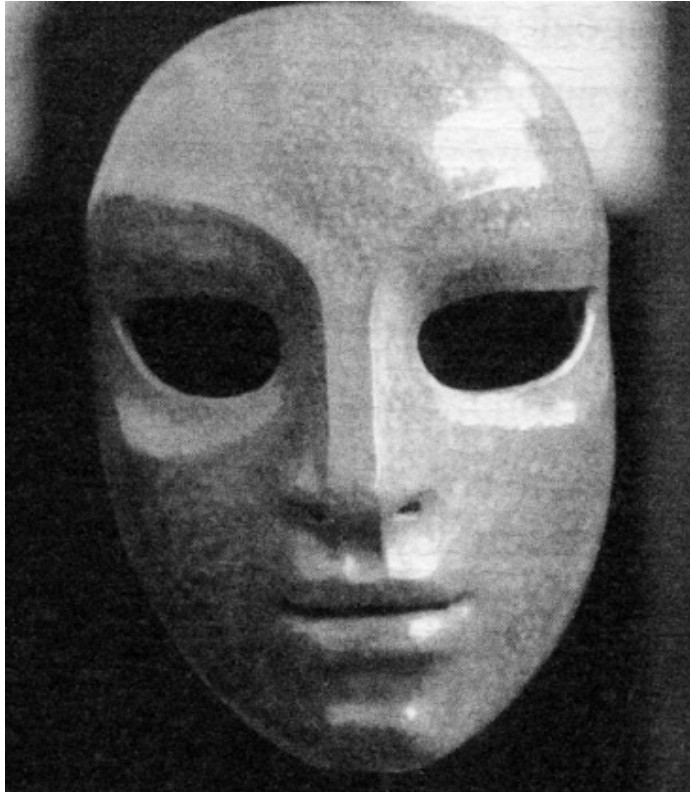
1.4.6 The Neutral Mask

Given the significance of the term “neutral” or “neutrality” in systemic practice there is a need to clarify the specific concept of the Neutral Mask in Jacques Lecoq’s (2020) pedagogy, acknowledging differences and similarities between the use of the same term in different contexts.

In the context of systemic theory and practice the term neutrality became particularly significant with the seminal paper “Hypothesizing – circularity – neutrality” by the Milan group (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1980). Here, neutrality was described as the therapist avoiding judgement, approval or disapproval, and alignment with any member or position within the system. It is particularly this idea that has been criticised from a feminist perspective (for example, Goldner, 1985 and 1988; Hare-Mustin, 1987). The criticism – somewhat summarised – is that if a therapist was trying to be neutral in the context of differences in power in any system or family then privileged positions stay privileged as they are not challenged. A lack of challenge or disapproval could also be understood as endorsement. This would no longer be neutral.

Cecchin’s further developments of the concept of neutrality, curiosity (Cecchin 1987) and irreverence (Cecchin, Lane and Ray, 1992) can be understood as responding to this critique. It becomes possible to be curious, yet irreverent, questioning and challenging towards ideas that underpin differences in power. Curiosity then is a stance of not-knowing too quickly (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988) that still allows, and is, the respectful challenge to the

existing power. Particularly curiosity is also important for the Neutral Mask as used in Lecoq's pedagogy.



Picture 2: The Neutral Mask

Lecoq clarifies the neutrality of the mask as neutral with regards to expressing or portraying a particular emotional state or character. Maybe a picture of a neutral mask can express this better than the description.

It remains a good question whether this mask can be truly neutral, not only with regards to some of the social GRACES (Burnham 1993, 2013, Roper-Hall 1998, 2008), including gender and

race or ethnicity. The masks that Lecoq used, made by Amleto Sartori, have a male and a female version. Also, the form of the mask as well as the colour or tone of the leather might suggest a particular racial or ethnic background. In fact, Lecoq (2020) critiques another mask as similar in emotional neutrality but "Japanising". One could argue that the above pictured Sartori mask is "Europeanising". A contemporary mask-maker of high-quality neutral masks, Alfredo Iriarte, now offers neutral masks in different colours that are also considered "more neutral" with regards to race or ethnicity (Prattki 2014, personal communication).

One should also remain sceptical to actual emotional neutrality. I cannot know others' perceptions²³ but it is imaginable that one reads emotion into the above picture. In one of the first exercises that we did in theatre school, we were asked to imagine that we were waking up for the very first time²⁴. With no previous knowledge or experience there would be no need or even possibility to have an emotional response to anything or anyone we would encounter. This would allow for curiosity in the encounter, something that Lecoq (2020) understood as very "alive". Again, it is possible to understand curiosity as an emotional state and therefore maybe contradicting emotional neutrality (that possibly could only be achieved by being dead).

The Neutral Mask that allows no facial expression and (at least in the instructions by Lecoq) no vocal expression directs our focus to what gets communicated through the body and its physical manifestation in space (including breath, tension, posture, movement etc.). In Lecoq's pedagogy this experience, and the (perhaps always incomplete) search for physical neutrality, forms the base for later work with character masks, including commedia dell'arte and clowning.

It is to this profound experience of using the Neutral Mask that I trace my interest in what I now call dynamic action that is probably often seen as non-verbal aspects of communication²⁵. This has strongly influenced my professional practice. In my coaching and therapeutic conversations, I attend to what can be described as "embodied" reactions. In my therapeutic practice with families as well as in facilitating training in systemic practice, I have used physical or not-talking activities. In my Master's thesis, I reflected on how my own

²³ For some further thoughts on perception see [Constructivism](#), p. 38.

²⁴ [The technique "For the very first time"](#), chapter 9.8 (p. 312) is based on this.

²⁵ There is a difficulty in separating non-verbal and verbal. Other distinctions might also be problematic.

experience of the Neutral Mask has influenced my practice. I have used the Neutral Masks in exploratory workshops with colleagues in order to bring non-verbal aspects of communication into focus and I have attended a workshop with Alfredo Iriarte making masks on his moulds.

1.4.7 Aikido and Contemporary Dance

I will briefly refer to Aikido and Contemporary Dance, even though this may not do justice to their depth and intricacies.

Aikido is a Japanese martial art. The word Aikido can be loosely translated as the way of harmony of the energies. The energy of an attack is not countered in a clash of energies. There is an attempt to use this energy and get inside the movement and steer it into a direction that is neither harmful to self nor to the opponent. As is often the case in martial arts, there is a breathing and spiritual component to this. Practising Aikido often feels to me as the more physical exploration of what my professional practice includes. I could express this in questions like: How do I position myself towards the other? How can I sense the other and experience the other in ways other than the ones I have trained for before? In what ways do we form a system together in the moment we engage with each other? How does the encounter change when I start seeing the other as partner (as is usual in Aikido) and not as opponent or adversary? I find similar questions of interest when I engage in contemporary dance. Another relationship that comes into focus here is the relationship with an audience.

I will expand on these definitions and explain the relevance of these practices more later. At this moment I will only stress one aspect that these practices have in common. They are

physical practices that can be practised without words and still create (temporary) relational realities.

1.4.8 Systemic practice – professional practice (part 2)

Whether I continue to work in a children’s social care context and / or extend my field to other industries, I continue to consider myself a systemic practitioner. What does it mean to be a systemic practitioner? Is a systemic practitioner someone who practises in a systemic way or whose practice is based on, or at least informed by, systemic ideas?²⁶

In this introduction and description of the context of this research, I only give an overview of systemic ideas that inform my practice to set the context for this inquiry into my practice, and situate this research in a discourse. Chapter 3, “What is systemic?”²⁷ maps the field in more detail.

More current systemic ideas are strongly influenced by communication theory and social constructionism. Vernon Cronen’s and Barnett Pearce’s (for example, Pearce, 1994, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007) significant contribution to this field, the coordinated management of meaning (CMM), has certainly had its impact²⁸. At its base is the “speech act” (Austin 1962)²⁹, the idea that we do things with words and say things with our actions, and that by saying and doing, meaning and reality are created.

²⁶ Discussing methodological issues I refer to Burnham’s (1992) model of Approach, Method and Technique, p. 32. There is a clear distinction between approach, the thinking behind actions or why practitioners do things, and techniques, the actions or what practitioners do. In order to be called a systemic practitioner does a practitioner’s practice need to be visibly systemic or does the approach or thinking need to be systemic?

²⁷ P. 84

²⁸ The hierarchical model, part of CMM, plays an important role for the methodology (p. 31).

²⁹ The current (working) title of this research, “How to do things without words” plays on this influential text.

There seems to be a big emphasis on what we say, possibly combined with the way we say it. The power of a sentence or notion like “We construct our reality in language” (for example, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982) is very strong, though it might not be very clear what is meant by ‘language’. Maybe this is because a differentiation into verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication is arbitrary. I explore ‘what counts as language?’ in chapter 5³⁰ offering a different distinction of symbolic and dynamic action³¹.

A separation between professional and non-professional self might be just as arbitrary. I notice myself in my practice using non-verbal activities that I know from other practices, like throwing balls or playing games that have the rule to be silent, to highlight and use non-verbal aspects of communication. This can be with the hope that new possibilities arise in an impasse in therapy or maybe to illustrate a point that I am making in training.

1.4.9 The rationale

Outlining this research, I had split the why-question in two: Why would anyone (like yourself as the reader) be interested? And: Why am I interested in undertaking this research? The first of these two questions refers to a contribution to knowledge³². With regards to the second question, my personal context provides a rationale for why I want to undertake this particular research. Many practices of or in my life, particularly physical theatre, rely strongly on non-verbal or dynamic communication. There is a sensing (Shotter, 2008, 2010) that reality is or can be created by non-verbal means. Yet I experience myself and my colleagues relying strongly on verbal communication in our professional systemic practice, as therapists or

³⁰ P. 149

³¹ P. 202

³² P. 15

organisational consultants. From my training I have taken a strong message that 'reality is created in language' and systemic practice is a 'talking therapy'. I have embraced a focus on verbal communication in my professional practice.

Of course, this might be a very local experience. Maybe (most) other practitioners pay more attention to and utilise non-verbal communication more than I do. If that is the case, then this thesis will allow me to change my practice, aligning it with existing current practice. If systemic theory and practice is generally focussing on verbal communication and not attending to nonverbal communication it seems worth exploring whether and how this is beneficial to practice and clients, or not. Either way, this thesis will contribute to a theoretical frame for using non-verbal communication or dynamic action, while maintaining advantages of a focus on verbal communication.

Having attended to both why-questions the next chapter attends to the how-question of methodological considerations.

2 Methodology and Ethics

Structuring my considerations on methodology, the model of Praction Research developed by Gail Simon (2012) seems very useful. It combines two previous models that provide a framework for exploring different levels of context, by Rozanne Leppington (1991) and John Burnham (1992). The two models fit together neatly, combining different proposed layers of hierarchical context.

In CMM, the coordinated management of meaning, one model proposed is a hierarchical model of context (Pearce 1999, 2005, 2006). In this model a speech act occurs within the context of an episode of interaction. The layers of speech act and then episode are the lowest layers of context in the hierarchy. The episode in turn occurs within several more layers of context (for example relationship, self (or identity) and culture). A higher context exerts a contextual force on a lower context. It gives meaning, as there is no meaning without context (Bateson, 1972). A lower level has an implicative force on the higher level, and can change it over time or with repetition or intensity. Often the hierarchy of these contexts is depicted like this.

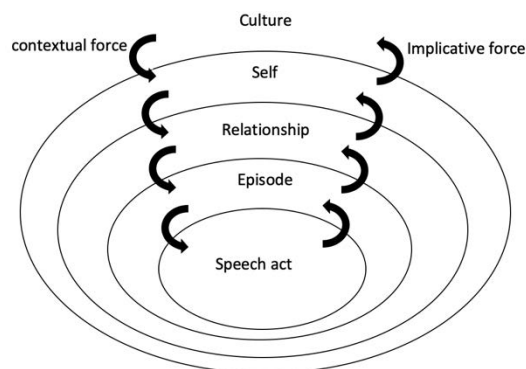


Figure 2: Hierarchical model

But apart from the speech act, the other contexts can change their position within the hierarchy (Pearce, 2005). Relationship for example can be the highest context.

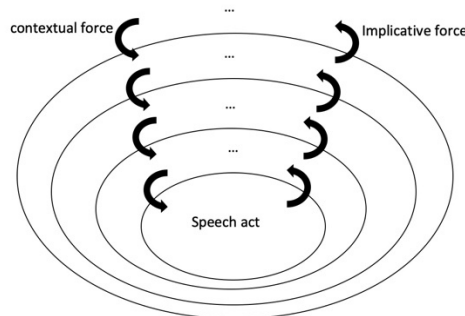


Figure 3: Hierarchical model 2

An argument (or conflictual episode), for example, in an otherwise “harmonious” or friendly relationship, might be seen as an exception that, when resolved, actually strengthens the relationship. Continuous and/or repeated and/or intense arguments might at some point raise the question of whether this is still a friendly relationship.

John Burnham (1992) applied the idea of hierarchical contexts to (systemic) practice. Techniques³³, or what we do in each moment in our practice, for example asking a circular question, is understood in the context of Method. Method³⁴, the organisational patterns or how we do things (for example the Milan group’s five-phase structure of the session where one part consists of gathering information and already invites different thinking, Selvini et al. 1978) is in turn understood in the context of Approach, or why we do it. Approach as the highest context in this model includes theoretical assumptions and theories. It is interesting to note the order of *why* as highest context of approach, *how* (method) and *what* (technique) again.

³³ P. 59

³⁴ P. 48

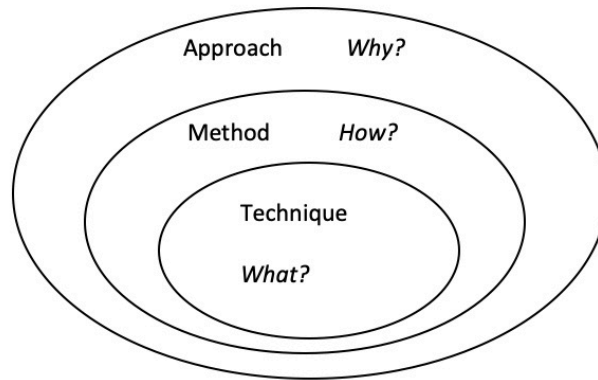


Figure 4: Approach - Method - Technique

With research as the focus, Rozanne Leppington (1991) builds on Pearce, Cronen and Harris's ideas (1982). They all critique the often synonymous use of method and methodology and define them separately.

“...Methodological Assumptions³⁵ provide the frame within which theories [later on Leppington calls them theoretical propositions³⁶] are developed; theories in turn frame the selection or invention of research methods³⁷, and the methods determine what data³⁸ are observed.” (Pearce, Cronen and Harris 1982, p. 5; Leppington 1991, p. 89)

In this model the contextual force is now characterised by the question “What counts as data?” and the implicative force by the question “What do data count as?” In this way, new data can ultimately have implications on the level of methodological assumptions and lead to a change in them. This is what Thomas Kuhn (1962) calls a paradigm transition (often referred to as paradigm shift). I would not go so far as to call what I am proposing a paradigm shift. But something similar happens within this thesis as I travel ‘down’ the contextual and ‘up’ the implicative force. My first data, the texts reviewed, impact on the methodological assumptions. Words, no matter how precise, will always be imprecise. I then travel down

³⁵ P. 35

³⁶ P. 41

³⁷ P. 48

³⁸ P. 73

again with renewed methodological considerations. With this in mind I ask the reader to bear with me, as methodological considerations are split in two; one section now and one after the extensive reviews of texts.

In Simon's (2012) model, the highest level of context is still that of methodological assumptions, followed by theoretical propositions and method. She then adds technique from Burnham's model, before the level of data. To attend to an observation that Simon makes, that ethics is often seen as an add-on to research, I refer to ethics at every level of this model of Praction Research and weave it in, as one assumption is that any choice we make might well have ethical implications. I structure the following discussion about my research design along these ideas, using the context levels as headlines.

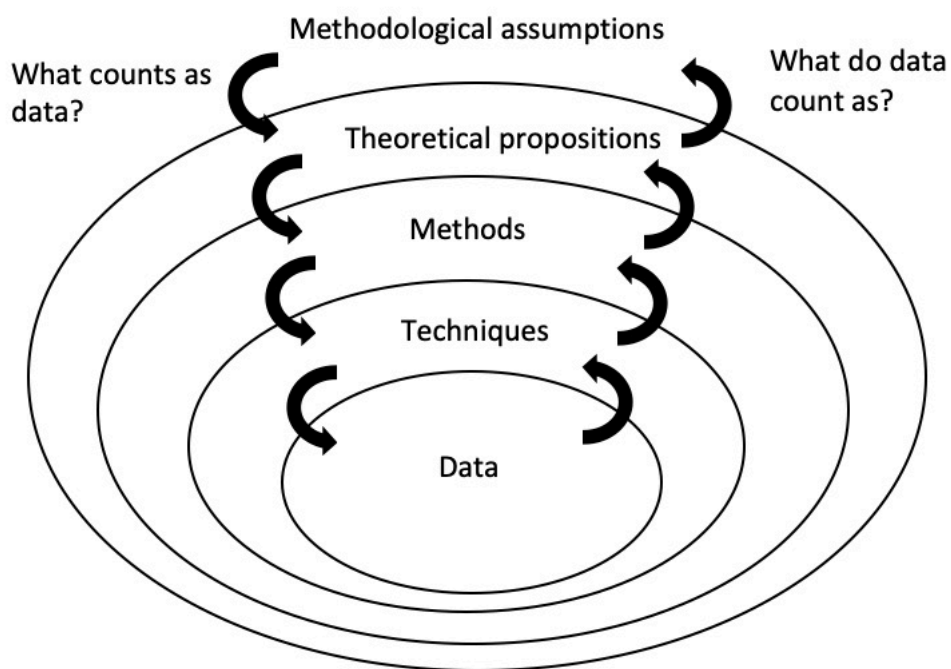


Figure 5: Praction research

I acknowledge the considerable overlap between layers and that it therefore is difficult to differentiate between them. Generally, there is an entanglement of these methodological

layers to which I will come back later³⁹ in more detail. In short, some methodological considerations *of this research* are also subject to this research.

2.1 Methodological assumptions

2.1.1 Observing systems and the uncertainty principle

In one of my professional practices, systemic therapy, there was an important historic shift. Earlier ideas that it is possible to have an outside observer to a system (first order cybernetics, for example, a therapist that can diagnose without intervening), have been refuted. Now, it is widely accepted that an observer is never just an observer, but a participant in an observing system (second order cybernetics; see for example von Foerster 1975, Hoffman 1985). If observers are not neutral with regards to what they observe,⁴⁰ but influencing or contributing to the (self-)observing system and vice versa, they are influenced together with the rest of the system. It could be suggested to see this as similar to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in particle physics. Werner Heisenberg (1927, see also Barad 2007) stipulated that a given observer cannot measure (and therefore know) the two properties of speed and position of any particle at the same time. The more exact the reading of speed, the more the reading on direction becomes uncertain, and vice versa.

This uncertainty principle is sometimes confused with the observer principle. The observer principle more generally states that an observer will influence what they observe. A thermometer, for example, will absorb or radiate some heat to the environment it measures

³⁹ P.40

⁴⁰ This does not refer to the above described concept of neutrality that the Milan Group suggested as a guideline for therapy (Selvini-Palazzoli et al. 1980).

and thereby change it. This raises questions about the positioning of the researcher towards the research. If observation from the outside is impossible, then research is only possible “from within” (Shotter, 2010). Especially in the context⁴¹ of researching practice that I am involved in, this positions me as an insider researcher (see for example Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010; Ross, 2017; Teusner 2016). Consistent with that is researching with fellow practitioners. I explore this and related ethical consideration when discussing research techniques⁴² even though it is clearly a methodological assumption that there is no possibility to be outside of *what* I am researching.

2.1.2 Epistemology and ontology – The Copenhagen dispute

Although possibly coming from different directions, the above theories all point to an impossibility of knowing reality. We can at the most know what something is like in relation to our observation. In this interpretation, universal knowledge claims seem untenable. Knowledge is situated and local, specific to knower and situation. This has further ethical consequences with regards to knowledge claims. According to Foucault (1980), knowledge produces power. While I will later attend to Bateson’s (1972) misgivings about the concept of power⁴³, I will for now think of power as part of human social reality, as something that structures it. Power in this sense gives access to resources and the chance to assert knowledge in turn. In this sense Foucault’s (1980) view of power is actually very compatible with Bateson’s. If anything, power is in interaction, localised just as knowledge.

⁴¹ p. 17

⁴² p. 59

⁴³ p. 87

Knowledge claims about things that we cannot know still contribute to generating a reality. In a very circular way it is possible that researching generates the reality that it researches. It therefore makes more sense to speak of 'knowledges'. The term implies less a representation of one reality and more an account of the creation of realities in which people are living more or less well. If knowledges are always local rather than universal, then declaring *a* knowledge like research results as universal will be an attempt to *take* power.

Niels Bohr, and following him Karen Barad (2007) dispute the interpretation that it is only that one cannot know the two properties speed and position of a particle at the same time. They hold that any given particle does not *have* the two properties of speed and position at the same time. The two properties are truly complementary, not only in measurement but in reality. They are entangled with each other. This is a more directly ontological point, with different ontological and ethical implications. It is useful to question whether there is or can be a reality at all, with seemingly conflicting, or rather complementary, values. Following this argument through it becomes clear that the way we measure brings forth one reality rather than another. Observer and observed are entangled with each other. They are not separate entities. As part of an *observing system* (von Foerster, 1981) in a second order cybernetic view, they intra-act (Barad, 2007). They are entangled with each other, even backwards in time. The way we look at a reality created in observation will determine how this reality will have been.

I experience this now, re-reworking these methodological considerations and how they have been influenced by later findings. You are likely to have a very different chronological experience to me. As a researcher it makes sense to me that my "findings at the end" cast a different light on my ideas at the beginning. And yet as a writer there is a struggle, as I feel

simultaneously caught on two timelines: the one that was at the beginning of this research (just a few paragraphs above) and the one just now as I write this paragraph. I imagine I am not alone as a researcher, especially one who undertakes praction research, in experiencing a tension between deleting, adjusting and leaving in (but maybe accounting for it). Maybe that is the blessing and curse of embracing systemic thinking and feedback loops – while we think in feedback loops going forward and backwards in time, our accounts of such feedback loops are necessarily at least somewhat chronological.

2.1.3 Constructivism and Social Constructionism

In the field there seems to be confusion with regards to similarities and differences between constructivism, social constructionism and second order cybernetics. Nichterlein (2013) asks in her PhD thesis “Yet how much substance is there actually in this distinction between SC [social constructionism], radical constructivism and SOC [second order cybernetics]?” (p. 122) and critically answers,

“If we are to be guided by Gergen’s own words, there is not a great difference. According to his well-cited paper (1985), constructivism (in the way it was articulated by Watzlawick) and constructionism is the same movement, with Gergen’s decision to use constructionism – instead of constructivism – being more a way to separate these ideas from those of cognitive psychology theoreticians.[...].

This blurring of the definitional limits of the movement and its interplay with other theories is mirrored in an ongoing confusion in the field as to the limits and distinctions between these two approaches [social constructionism and constructivism].” (Nichterlein, p. 123)

In some ways, constructivism started with Immanuel Kant’s (1787) Critique of Pure Reason. He reasons that we can only experience the world out there and all the things in it through the boundaries of our perception as phenomena. The thing itself, which he calls noumenon,

constantly evades us. This is still a rather individualised view⁴⁴. Other constructivists (for example, Maturana and Varela 1972) see this process of cognition as largely influenced by the patterns of thinking that we already have. Although they say that thinking is not dependent on language, they still consider cognition as a linguistic process, as “... cooperative consensual interactions between organisms that is natural language.” (p. 31). We might already get a glimpse of a social aspect of constructivism that emphasises the social process. David Pocock (1999) makes a similar distinction when he describes some forms of constructivism as intrapsychic while he sees the one described here by Maturana and Varela as interpsychic.

It is useful to note that Maturana and Varela speak of linguistic processes and some versions of social constructionism emphasise language. This illustrates one of the difficulties (but possible advantages) of this research. The subject of this research is at the same time the methodological assumption, namely that we construct our social reality together through interaction or communication or language (another entanglement). Apart from already pointing to the question of “what counts as language”, the strength of this might be that I remain consistent with the methodological assumption by exploring the subject “from the inside” (Shotter 2010), being and insider researcher⁴⁵.

I use the term interaction or communication here in order not to get too deeply into the terrain of the research questions yet. I shall do this under the heading below of the theoretical proposition.

⁴⁴ This might be illustrated by the above example of the Neutral Mask, p. 24 and in how far it might or might not be perceived as emotionally neutral.

⁴⁵ P. 36

Before I do this, I point out that a social constructionist assumption has consequences for ethics. How could I possibly declare this research as A) having any truth claim beyond what is constructed together locally and B) if A holds, that this is **my** research? In order to honour these two ethical considerations as much as I can I will A) continue to write using the personal “I” rather than “the author” to mark the very localised nature of the truth or knowledge claims and B) offer participants in the fieldwork part of the research the option of being acknowledged as co-researchers⁴⁶. In this case the “I” becomes a “We”.

Before moving to the next layer of context in the praction research model, I note an interesting entanglement. CMM (for example, Pearce, 1994, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007) and its hierarchical model on which the praction research model is based (Simon, 2012), is epistemologically grounded in social constructionism as a methodological assumption. But, I am also using the praction research model to investigate social constructionism. There is some kind of entanglement of using a particular perspective to look at the perspective itself. I think that the ideas of messiness and entanglement that I experience and try to make sense of in this research are similar to the entangled nature of my practice that I am researching. I experience myself and my clients questioning themselves. I question whether I influence my client in any useful way. My client often has a question or dilemma that organises why they approached me in the first place. We are observers of ourselves and each other and also observed by ourselves and each other. Questions of how much we can influence each other deliberately become directly practical when I ask a client how they would like change a relationship with another person or when they ask me how they could. At the same time, I ask myself “What am I doing here? What might I purposefully do next?” This is sometimes an

⁴⁶ This choice is a question in the consent form and [more on this later](#) (p. 56).

almost paralysing question and yet I move on in the moment because I have to and something happens, maybe my client gets a new idea. It would seem impossible to control for all factors, that a more modernist research design would require, in a similar way that it seems impossible to account for all the factors that contribute to a session with a client. With this research I am shining a bit more light on one such factor or aspect, which is non-verbal communication or what might be referred to as dynamic action. As I show that even just this aspect cannot be described with precision or in its totality, the research lends itself to a more postmodernist research design in which I feel invited to account for my own approaches and how they might have influenced my 'findings'.

2.2 Theoretical proposition – Making distinctions about different aspects of communication

In the context of the above assumptions, the research questions formulated as theoretical proposition are:

We co(construct) our reality, as far as there is a reality, in interaction or communication with each other. While language, and specifically verbal communication (what Maturana and Varela, 1972, call "our present-day languages", p. 31) can play a part in this and is well conceptualised, non-verbal aspects of communication ("natural language", *ibid*, p. 31) also contribute at least partly to our (co)construction of reality. However, this is less well conceptualised within the discourse of systemic practice, especially systemic practice that is

influenced by social constructionism and the linguistic turn⁴⁷. There might be ways of using non-verbal communication more in (my) systemic practice, so that it benefits clients.

This proposition brings with it a few questions and possible paradoxes in the exploration of non-verbal aspects of communication – of both practical and ethical nature.

The separation of verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication (as well as the earlier mentioned separation between work and non-work or professional and non-professional activities⁴⁸) is problematic. The idea that aspects of communication are either verbal or non-verbal is a good example of a binary created in language. Before I discuss the more general difficulty with these binary options, I will first consider the problem specific to the boundaries between verbal and non-verbal communication. What is included and excluded, implicitly or explicitly by words like “language” and “linguistic”. Similar to the question “What counts as data?”⁴⁹ there is now an important question: What counts as language?⁵⁰

2.2.1 Analogic and digital

Apart from a very few exceptions, like Watzlawick’s (et al 1967) behaviour and communication to which there is no opposite, words create implied opposites, or binaries. In this way, they are already relational. For adjectives this seems very obvious. I remember early on in my English classes (in highschool in Germany) there were exercises to build word pairs

⁴⁷ p. 6

⁴⁸ p. 20

⁴⁹ p. 33

⁵⁰ p. 149

like big / small, happy / sad and black / white. I remember this continued to word pairs like man / woman⁵¹. Verbal / non-verbal is another such pair.

When I lived on the Isle of Wight I observed that one of the fundamental distinctions to classify people is the word pair Islanders / Overners and the geographical distinction is made in the word pair Island / Mainland. What struck me was that both terms seemed to have equal weight, as if they referred to equally sized entities. This is similar in word pairs like self / other and us / them. The weight or importance of each part of the pairing seems less important. Maybe I can ignore for the moment which part of the word pairings work / non-work, professional / non-professional⁵² and also verbal / non-verbal seems to have more importance.

However, what these word pairs or binaries suggest is a clear division. I will refer to this as digital. The basic unit of digital communication is a binary, yes/no or 1/0.

You are either on the island or on the mainland. Between them is the Solent, a body of water that is part of neither (or part of both). You would have to be exceptionally tall to be on both at the same time! It starts to become more difficult with the corresponding people-related word pair. How are children whose one parent is an Islander and whose other parent is an Overner defined? How much time does an Overner need to stay on the Island to become an Islander? A year? A generation? Several generations?

⁵¹ It is worth acknowledging that these word pairs contribute strongly to the social construction of our social reality (for example with regards to race or gender).

⁵² p. 20

The answer to this question that shows a range, and is therefore analogue, is further digitisation. As defined by people on the island, you are an Islander if you were born there. A qualitative difference can be made for all your ancestry of the previous three generations having been born on the island. You then qualify as a caulk-head.⁵³ However, this is still a measurement that is possible to digitalise. If we have 3 distinctions (in a decimal system represented as 0, 1 and 2) this can be digitalised into binary code as

00 = Overner (0),

01 = Islander (1) and

10 = Caulk-head (2).

A good example for the problem of digitalisation is π , the number that expresses the relationship between the circumference and the diameter of a circle. We can only ever get more precise but never fully precise in translating this relationship into numbers. In a similar way it is impossible to describe behaviour or other aspects of communication exactly in words. Still, we have sensings (Shotter 2008, 2010). How can I do these sensings justice in a however generous word count?

2.2.2 The problem of logical types

Much of Gregory Bateson's (Bateson, Jackson, Hayley & Weakland 1956; Bateson 1972)

thinking is based on set theory. Set theory first described by Cantor (1874)⁵⁴ allows objects

⁵³ Supposedly workers from the Island were particularly good at caulking ships, putting seams between the leaky planks of ships and sealing them with pitch.

⁵⁴ Sometimes also now called naïve set theory because of further developments that I will touch on.

that share defined characteristics to be summarised as a class or set⁵⁵. A tree is an element of a set of trees.

Bertrand Russell (Whitehead and Russell, 1910) spotted a possible paradox within this theory. A non-tree (for example, a house) is an element of the set of non-trees. Now the set of non-trees is itself not a tree and therefore is an element of the set of non-trees, thus an element of itself. The paradox arises like this: a set has as its elements all the sets that are not also elements of themselves. By its definition it becomes an element of itself, thus contradicting the definition. Allowing for sets to be members of themselves would be a logical error.

In response to this paradox Russell developed the idea of (logical) types or increasing abstraction. There are trees. Trees are elements of the set of trees. Different sets of trees are elements of the set of set of trees and so on, each time disallowing a set to become a member of itself. Bateson (Bateson, Jackson, Hayley & Weakland, 1956; Bateson, 1972) applied these ideas of increased abstraction in logical type theory to communication. He observed how monkeys send signals to clarify the difference between fight and playfight. These signals he calls metacommunicative, or of higher logical type. From this perspective, there might be a problem differentiating between verbal and non-verbal communication.

⁵⁵ I will predominantly use the more contemporary term set.

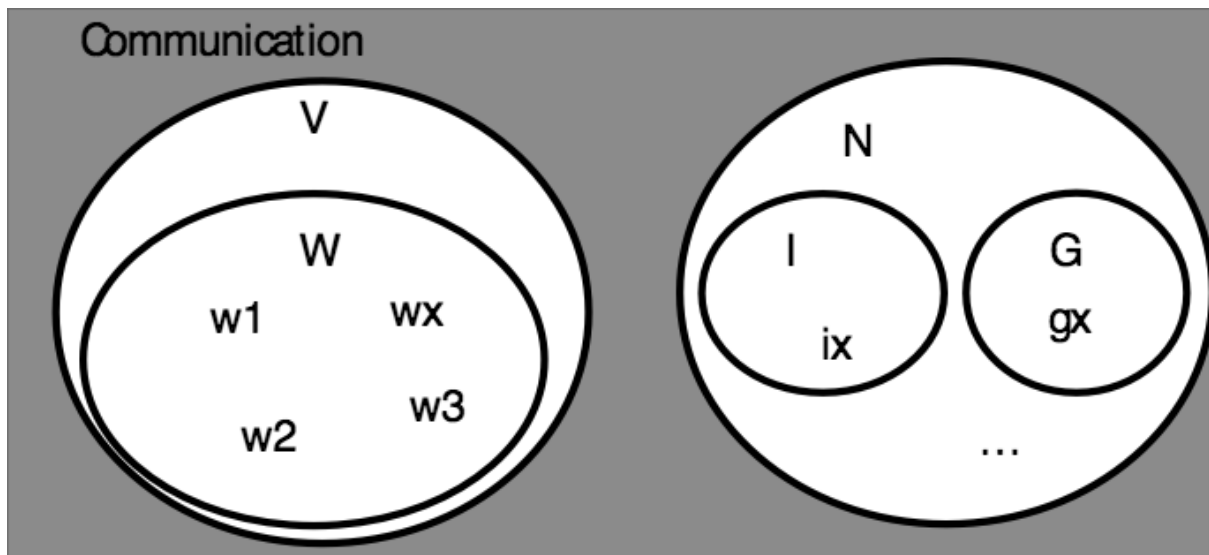


Figure 6: The set of Communication and its sub-sets

The sets verbal communication, V , and nonverbal communication, N , are different or unequal ($V \neq N$) but both themselves elements of the set of communication. They are on the same level of abstraction or logical type. Each in turn contains their elements on the next lower level of abstraction. While words and gestures are different to each other ($w_x \neq g_x$) they are on the same level of abstraction or logical type.

Speaking contains both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. The non-verbal aspects of communication often qualify the verbal aspects. The smile and wink qualify a potentially offensive remark as the speaker intends it to be understood as “banter”. This message is a meta-communicative message that is on a higher level of abstraction or logical type. By virtue of it being meta-communicative and giving context to the verbal aspects of communication, the non-verbal communication is of a higher logical type. One could say that when I write about non-verbal communication I am on a next level of abstraction or next higher logical type. This would seemingly make distinctions “about” language (verbal and non-verbal communication) impossible “within” language, while also adhering to logic.

Pearce, Cronen and Harris (1982) critique this view suggested by Bateson, Jackson, Hayley and Weakland (1956) (and Bateson 1972) about communication, and replace it with their hierarchical model of communication⁵⁶ that allows for this seemingly logic-defying recursiveness. How otherwise would we be able to communicate about communication? Or as Pearce, Cronen and Harris say:

“The human study of human communication is particularly confounded because that which is studied – for example, a communicative act – and the act of studying it are both human symbolic constructions that are “biased” by the underlying assumptions about humankind, knowledge, and the world.” (1982, p. 4)

Does this mean that (some of) my “findings about” non-verbal, analogical, dynamic communication would have to be presented in a form that remains non-verbal, analogical and dynamic and cannot (easily) be translated into verbal, digital or symbolic communication? This is a question about the level of data⁵⁷ that requires some ethical considerations.

Before “travelling down” to the next context level, Method, I will summarise the above:

It is possible that distinctions between what is language and what is not, as well as distinctions between verbal and non-verbal communication, only exist in language. Within the context of the assumption that reality is co-constructed between people, they are a socially constructed binary. The questions ‘what counts as language?’⁵⁸ and ‘what counts as communication?’ are themselves (at least on these pages, and within this research) an act of communication in language. There is possibly a muddle of abstractions about language within language and this raises the questions of how data and results are presented. Isomorphically, there is a possible

⁵⁶ P. 31

⁵⁷ P. 73

⁵⁸ P. 149

muddle or rather entanglement of different hierarchical levels of the methodology of this research that also speaks to the problem of logical types.

2.3 Method(s)

Given the above outlined assumptions and theoretical propositions, I will now outline methods for this research (as outlined under research questions⁵⁹). Research is often described as falling broadly into two categories (with mixtures in between): quantitative research and qualitative research (Becker and Bryman, 2004), each of them strongly associated with philosophical, epistemological assumptions. Quantitative research is often associated with positivism⁶⁰, roughly that there is a knowable and measurable world usually independent of the observer. In a previous subchapter⁶¹ I argued against this and declared that there are different perspectives and that the act of observation (or research) also changes the researched-researcher system. This resonates with qualitative research methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018) and might also be captured better with the term ‘inquiry’ rather than ‘research’.

I pointed to⁶² the methodological journey of this research earlier. Implications of data⁶³ on higher contexts like methodological assumptions and theoretical propositions in turn re-contextualise methods. Without giving a lot of detail, what I call the imprecision of language (or the π -problem) has an impact on the extent to which I can describe non-verbal communication (accurately). The methods described here are part of a first iteration, a first

⁵⁹ P. 6

⁶⁰ See also p. 97.

⁶¹ P. 35

⁶² P. 31

⁶³ I critique the term data later (2.5, p. 73). I use it because that is what is used in the praction research paper (Simon, 2012) that helped structure my methodological considerations.

loop so to say that yields the first “data” including texts, ideas and reflections. One thing I found is that it is impossible to accurately describe dynamic action and that it still plays a role in creating social reality. This has an impact on methodological consideration on all levels. It subtly shifts a focus on language that seems implicit in social constructionism which was one of my methodological assumptions. One way of thinking about this is that these are the implicative forces characterised by the question: “What do data count for?” – a loop upwards in contexts. My “data” have impacted and changed my methodological assumptions. Another way would be to look at this as loops forward (in time). I set out with one kind of assumption and having gone through the research loop end up with amended assumptions for further loops of research.

2.3.1 Action research

When I mention the word loop in the previous sentence, there is a reference to Action research. In his 1946 article “Action Research and Minority Problems”, in which the term is first used, Kurt Lewin describes loops of enquiry in what has become known as the Lewinian spiral. Lewin’s Action research is a “...spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action.” (Lewin, 1946: 38).

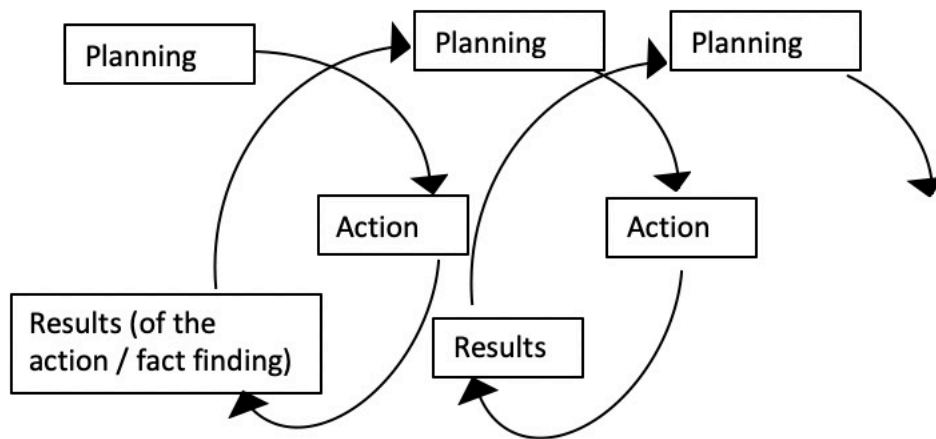


Figure 7: Lewinian spiral

It is worth noting that the initial questions *What?*, *So what?* and *Now what?* (that structure the research questions)⁶⁴ map well on this spiral.

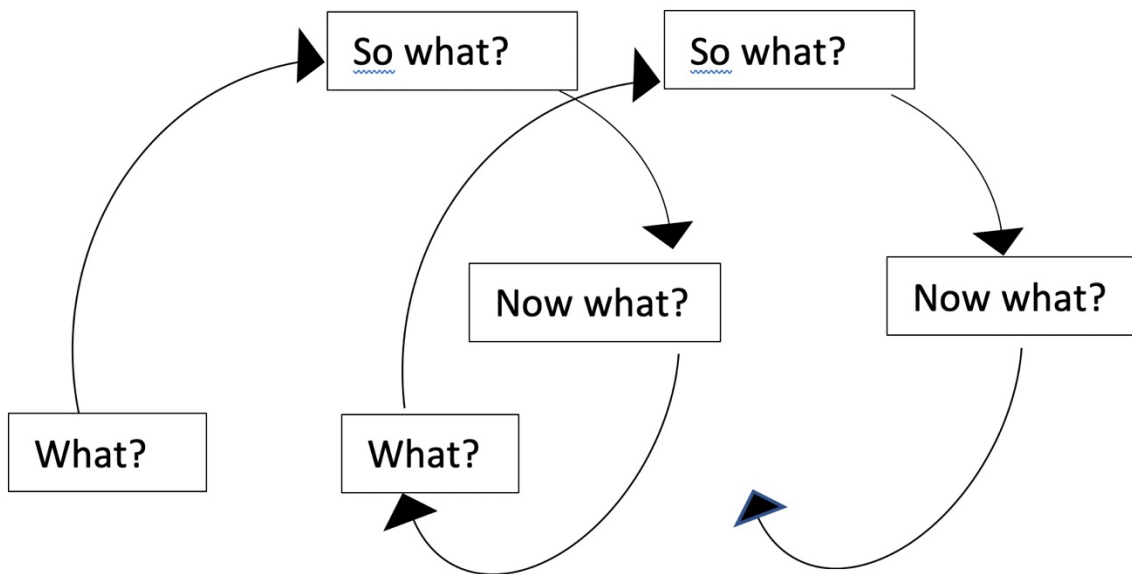


Figure 8: What - so what - now what

Framed by a *Why?*, *How?* And *What?* the three what questions are part of a particular development of my practice that is covered in this research. One way of looking at this would

⁶⁴ P. 6

be to take the *Why?* as the starting point (Sinek, 2009) and thinking of a spiral from there. The conclusions of this thesis would become merely another *What?*, a snapshot in time, that leads to further reflection and action.

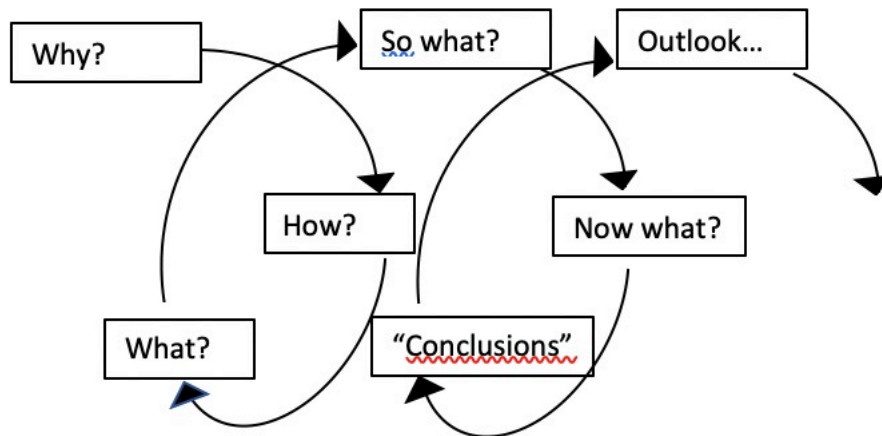


Figure 9: Structure of this research

It is probably obvious that there is a sense of time that progresses loop by loop. If this is added, what might be less obvious are the loops back in time. Taking into account what I earlier⁶⁵ and later⁶⁶ (in the linear version of the thesis) consider as complementarity and entanglements, there are entanglements where “later” loops feed back to earlier loops.

⁶⁵ P. 40
⁶⁶ P. 107

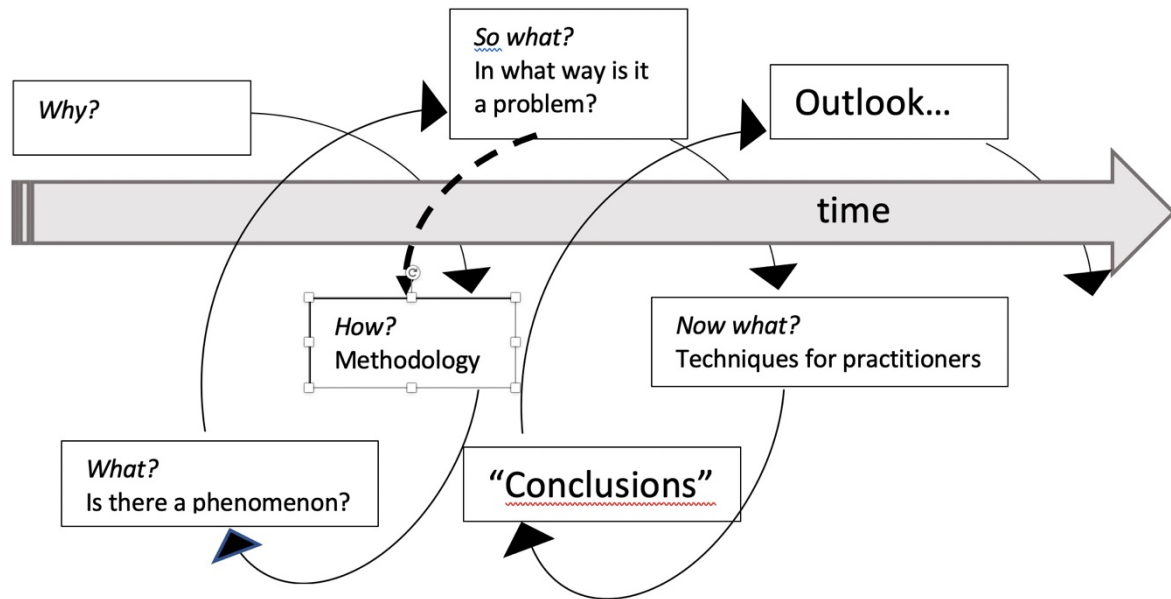


Figure 10: Research forwards and backwards in time

The dashed line between “So what?” and “How?” refers partly to there being another chapter on methodology but also to how some of the “What?” and “So what?” feed back into this chapter. This touches on the contextual and implicative forces encapsulated in the questions “What counts as data?” and “What do data count as?” (Simon, 2012 p. 113). It seems likely already that it will lead to different techniques, as happened for both research and practice.

I also notice some influences for orienting my research methods strongly towards action research: I have been involved in action learning sets (Revans, 1980) which have lots of similarities with action research (Bourner & Brook, 2019) and I have been introduced to action research during Masters degree studies in systemic psychotherapy. In the final thesis for this Masters degree, I explored how my training/experience of theatre and especially my use of the neutral mask impacted on my practice and how it might be useful to other practitioners. In some ways this doctorate is a continuation of that research and I am further exploring how dynamic action, an integral part of my theatre training and practice, can be actively used in systemic practice. The reason why action research seemed so useful was that it felt that there

was a huge similarity between action research and the practice of therapy: being confronted with a problem, making sense of it and trying something new to see what happens for the client or practitioner. Apart from the sense of familiarity, I had a sense of this being a good fit for an inquiry into my own practice as a professional doctorate would suggest. With this inquiry and with joining a professional doctorate in systemic practice, I had hoped that there would be loops of learning and that my practice would be enriched in a way that would ultimately benefit my clients. I also hoped that with this action research inquiry I could integrate and intellectually make sense of what “felt” already like an overlap between professional and life experiences such as psychotherapy and coaching on the one hand, and theatre and martial arts on the other.

So, while I have laid out an overarching theme of action research, there are elements that relate more to myself and my thinking and practice, and other elements that are strongly linked to researching and practising together with others. I am involved with various communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and for that reason I hope this research is also useful to others in these communities. In the next two sub-sections I will attend to both a focus on myself and my practice, and on practising and researching together with others.

2.3.1.1 First person Inquiry

To begin, I tell a story of how I experience myself in relation to other practitioners as well as theoreticians. To some extent I have done this telling in the introductory two brief stories⁶⁷. This could be described in a wider sense as auto-ethnography (for example Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2010, Roth 2009). I am writing a story or narrative about my own lived experience. I am accounting for my own feelings, thoughts, deliberations and choices. I am exploring. As I

⁶⁷ P. 3

scrutinised my own actions, practice and perspectives, I initially considered autoethnography as a methodology. I decided against this for two reasons:

1) I had planned to research with others. Action research offer me more possibilities to explore my own practice (first person inquiry) as well as an opportunity to conduct my research with others (second and third person inquiry).

2) In my research I am not just exploring. I am aiming to change and improve psychotherapy practice, including my own. This means that this research has elements of First Person Action Research Inquiry. Kurt Lewin (1946) describes action research as helping the practitioner in their practice, leading to improved practice that is then again subject to inquiry. Because of this, improvement of my own practice that I aim for amongst other things as part of a professional doctorate, I aim for more than exploring – whether this means letting the narrative speak for itself (in an evocative way) or analysing my own deliberations and choices. I aim for some kind of change in my practice as a therapist, coach and consultant. I think that makes it action research. But I do not want to stop there. I want to evaluate and reflect and think about why I did things and maybe why things work (or not) within these practice contexts. I reflect on the level of approach that John Burnham (1992) links to the “why” we do things. If my “why” changes, it is probable that my doings change – the next loop of action. This forms part of this self-reflexive research, where I account for my own motivations and interests and choices to the reader. I considered autoethnography, but because of the looping back into practice and because I am co-researching with others, I think of this research more as action research. I should stress that first-person inquiry is one aspect of my research methodologies, and that there is a greater focus on researching together with other practitioners.

I aim to approach my research with an attitude of inquiry (Marshall and Reason, 2007) also that acknowledges subjectivity. I aim not to be fixed to start with, and assume that I am never finished, continuing to live my life as inquiry (Marshall, 1999) including beyond this research and doctoral thesis. I aim to continuously live "...in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges, bringing things into question." (Marshall, 1999, p. 156). This also means that my inquiry will not finish with the submission of this thesis. The writing will come to an end but I will continue to develop the ideas and my practice.

In First Person Inquiry the action researcher is "...connected to and embedded in the issues and field they are studying." (Marshall & Reason 2007: 368). This highlights two things for me: (1) the field I am studying is my own practice and (2) the issues that are affecting my practice will affect my research as well as the research affecting my practice. Beyond the more general notion that an observer is entangled with what they observe, insider research is a conscious researching from the inside. It brings with it various dilemmas with regards to validity and ethical considerations. With regards to validity, Teusner (2016) suggests that it can come out of reflexivity or an accounting for one's own position and biases in a way that Barad (2007) and others suggest generally for research. Knowledge cannot be seen as independent of the observer. Generally, it is never neutral and particularly not with regards to action research. The knowledge/power nexus (Foucault, 1980) is only one aspect of ethical consideration. These considerations come with a responsibility and that raises the question: responsibility to whom – in a first person enquiry is it just to myself? If this research impacts on my practice, there is an added responsibility of this research towards my clients. But as I am researching together with other practitioners, there is also responsibility towards them and in a next step

(or in a wider circle) towards their clients. For the workshops that has meant “checking in” with participants what they and their clients noticed about their practice.

2.3.1.2 Second person and third person inquiry, community of practice

In an interview, Hilary Bradbury is asked how first person action research links to second- and third-person action research (Bradbury, Streck and Larrea, 2023). When answering, she makes several points that seem very important to my study. In her own life she seemed to have always aimed to combine theory (and its creation) with practice and action, something that I aim to do here too. I hope that there is a practical and useful outcome to this research, and useful not just to me. With regards to both impact on self and others, Hilary Bradbury foregrounds a sense of reflection and accountability on why we make what choices. This reflexivity or “consciousness raising ... [calls for] ... *praxis of reflexivity with self and one another* [italics in original]” (Bradbury, Streck and Larrea, 2023, p. 175). Among the contributing factors are the theories and approaches we use (Burnham, 1992). This might go some way towards explaining why a large part of my thesis is theoretical in nature (more on this in the next section). But this consciousness-raising inquiry also allows for different ways of collaborating. Bradbury (Bradbury, Streck and Larrea, 2023) seems to indicate it is only a small step to widen the focus to second and third person inquiry (Reason & McArdle 2004), or Co-operative Inquiry (Reason and Heron 1996, Heron 1996). The idea of different kinds of knowing, that different stages of the action research loop in Co-operative Inquiry attended to, seemed to fit with what I had in mind. This was not just about *my* knowledge and practice. With my participant I imagined us using our propositional knowing (or what we might call formal learning) to develop an inquiry that used our practical knowing to experiment in real time with new techniques. It was with Co-operative Inquiry in mind that I had started to see my research participants as co-researchers and that I wanted to offer participants to be

credited as such. This is in line with previous ideas that this research aims to have practical benefit to more people than just me. It is also in line with ideas about constructing reality together. However, as I found and will come back to soon (section 2.4.2.2)⁶⁸, the idea of Co-operative Inquiry and the idea for co-researchers did not quite fit in practice, because it was I who initiated this research and participants rejected the term co-researchers.

Seen through a different lens, I would add that another key for understanding my practice(s) and “why” I do things can be found in the different communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which I have learned my practices. Hilary Bradbury might call the members of my communities of practice my “developmental friends” (Bradbury, Streck and Larrea, 2023, p. 175).

Etienne Wenger (1998) observed that practitioners learn more from peers than their teachers or instructors for a wide range of practices. I earlier described different professional and life practices⁶⁹; each of them has its own community of practice which I am part of. In some ways this an experiment in what happens when I bring these different communities of practice together to form one learning community (Stoll and Louis, 2007) with the aim of learning from and being inspired by each other. When contacting potential participants, I emphasised that I had invited someone to join because I felt they had something to offer to the learning of others and that I hoped they would in turn also find something that would be interesting for their practice.

This seems to me coherent with the idea that the research should also lead to improvements for participants and participants having a direct impact on the next evolution of a spiral of

⁶⁸ P. 66

⁶⁹ P. 17

planning, doing and evaluating is also important for ethical considerations. In this case I notice that there are improvements for myself and my practice which by extension should benefit those I work with, both professionally and in my life-practice. In this way third persons who are not directly participants in the research project need to be considered, like my research participants' clients. If what I notice for myself, a change in practice, also holds for my participants, then their clients would notice a change in the practice that might have an impact on their outcomes. As part of this inquiry I also explored with participants the effects that changes to their practice have on the people they work with.

2.3.2 Theoretical research: Discourse Inquiry

As I mentioned, part of the reflection in the loops of action research is considering theory. Loops suggest something more chronological than it was in the reality of this research as a parallel approach to this research was looking at the history of theory and how it is spoken or written about. This attends to the question of "What counts as language?"⁷⁰, and how we might have co-constructed social constructionism, the use of language and the term "language" in our discourse in the systemic world. This can by no means be seen as objective, as a term like discourse analysis might imply. It is a possible reading and meaning-making that I can only offer from my perspective. The term inquiry seems to me more open, less suggestive of definitive results, than analysis. It seems to account for the more subjective nature of my reading, in line with the idea of local knowledges. A good term for this inquiry that lays out my reading of the theoretical discourse is discourse inquiry.

⁷⁰ P. 149

I extend my discourse inquiry to discourses ‘outside’ or beyond the ‘systemic world’, from related but different disciplines, such as drama, art and movement therapies and pedagogies. The ‘systemic world’ has generally been very open to inspiration from ‘outside’. Which of these discourses might be relevant to my research and to systemic practice?⁷¹

Reading these different discourses together with other literature that considers communication and change, I aim to develop ideas about how paying attention to non-verbal, dynamic communication can be utilised in systemic practice, which is part of answering the second and third research questions.⁷²

As mentioned,⁷³ the problems with using words and language also apply to the research itself. The discourse inquiry therefore also feeds back into the methodology.

2.4 Technique

The level above, Method⁷⁴, in answering the question of how to do things, branched out into a more theory-driven discourse inquiry and two kinds of action research, first person and second and third person enquiry, each with related techniques. Here I will describe the chosen techniques, answering the question of what I want to do, and maintaining ethical considerations.

⁷¹ (P. 6). This is of course a question about what counts as data (p. 33) in this particular research.

⁷² This is the upward movement of implicative force around the question “What do data count as?”(p. 33)

⁷³ P. 48

⁷⁴ P. 48

2.4.1 Extensive review

As one way in, I have read a series of articles from the Human Systems journal. Human Systems seems very relevant to my practice. In its first year of publication, the editor Peter Stratton (1990a+b) locates the journal within a discourse of social constructionism and systemic practice. In 2012 "...the European Family Therapy Association (EFTA) has adopted Human Systems as its official journal." (Stratton and Polychrony, 2012: 2). The subtitle of the journal changed from Journal of Systemic Consultation & Management (1990 to 2008) to the Journal of Therapy, Consultation and Training (from 2009). Both subtitles capture my practice well.

While reading this journal clearly cannot reflect the width of the discourse I am inquiring into, it did generate some useful keywords or search words and starting points:

Table 1: Search terms

Terms indicating social constructionism	Terms indicating verbal communication	Terms indicating non-verbal communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Social) (co-) construction • Construct (limited to psychology 7,420) • Attributing meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk / talking • Narrative • Words • Language (then qualified as words) • Language (qualified as speech) • Text • Conversation • Discourse • Speaking / spoken • Literacy devices • Stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactional surround (of words) • Action / interaction • Analogic communication • Behaviour • Para-verbal (communication) • Play • Violence • Experience • Moves

I used these keywords as a starting point for inquiring into the discourses within and beyond the 'systemic world'.

An initial search using these search words generated an enormous number of search results, even if another keyword was always *systemic*. To exclude, or at least limit, the inclusion of text focussing on medical conditions like systemic lupus, and texts focussing on sociological / political issues like systemic racism (both important topics but systemic is here not used in a

sense of systemic therapeutic and organisational practice), I limited the subject fields, as far as they were available for each search, to “psychotherapy”, “family psychotherapy”, “psychology”, “industrial psychology”, “counselling”, “couples therapy”, “psycholinguistics”, “pragmatics” and “business”, “management”. There were 7420 search results for “construct”, 18 613 for “language”, 4048 for “discourse”. While “analogic communication” yielded 230 results and “para-verbal” 24. The search word behaviour though yielded 29 816 results for business only - worth noting that psychology, psychotherapy etc were not available as limiters. These are just examples of looking for some of these words. It seems that words like “construct” and “behaviour” are too general by themselves. If I were to discard them we could think of as an indication of a tendency towards verbal aspects of communication. Yet the sheer number of texts that I would have to consider if I were to undertake a systematic review seems to go beyond the scope of this thesis. It also seems to be more in keeping with a more positivist paradigm of knowledge generation (Popper, 1963).

In a further step towards limiting the results, the idea that ‘Introductions’ to systemic practice are often informing practice very strongly and in turn are often good reflections or indicators of contemporary practice led to the idea to examine ‘introductions’ with regards to paying attention to and actively using non-verbal communication.

Reading these different discourses together with other literature that regards communication I aim to clarify ideas of what counts as language and what counts as verbal – versus non-verbal communication.

2.4.2 Workshops with peers from my communities of practice

I have organised a series of workshops with participants from the various practices that form my professional and life practice, including therapists, social workers, organisational consultants and coaches as well as theatre, circus, dance and Aikido practitioners. Below is a table outlining criteria for inviting to these practical research workshops:

Table 2: Criteria for potential participants

Profession / practice	Criteria for inclusion
Social workers	Social Work England registered, at least foundation level systemic practice, currently practising
Family therapists	UKCP registered, currently practising
Organisational consultants / coaches	currently practising, at least foundation level systemic practice, currently practising
Performing artists (dancers, actors, puppeteers ...)	Recent public performance (within previous year)
Aikido practitioners	At least 1 st dan, currently practising

As I am already part of these practice contexts, being an insider-researcher, I recruited participants out of and through my existing network of contacts, meaning that they were friends and colleagues. There are many issues to consider with regards to being an insider

researcher and with asking peers from the practice communities I am part of to contribute, with some of those peers being more like friends and colleagues. In the spirit of validity for insider-researchers (Teusner, 2016) I need to self-reflexively account for those issues and now seems a good moment for that. There are various tensions in which this research into my practice is situated.

2.4.2.1 Setting up groups / recruitment of participants

I asked friends and colleagues to be part of my research – as long as they fulfilled the criteria above. There were a few advantages to this. Logistically it was easier to approach people I knew fulfilled the criteria and who would be able to attend workshops. It is also true that for the people invited, my invitation would fall into a warm context (Burnham, 2005). Potential participants that I approached did already know about my research interest. With many participants I had already had informal conversations, and most knew about my studies. Many had signalled a general interest in my research, and I had asked if I could approach them. My first email starts with “As you might already know...” before outlining the doctoral course and the research project⁷⁵. It informs about a series of workshops that I would like to invite them to and why I invited them: “I am contacting you because you either practice in a systemic way and can contribute your expertise and experience of your practice to the research process or you are an experienced “physical” practitioner with a wealth of ideas and expertise in non-verbal communication – or both.”

⁷⁵ The full email series that was used to recruit is part of the appended ethics approval application pack, p. 362.

I tried to be clear about potential benefits coherent with the idea of a learning community by explaining my hope for participants' learning (to the benefit of their clients but that I was not offering a formally accredited course (see Appendix A)⁷⁶.

As I was asking friends and colleagues to participate, they might have felt obliged even if they were not interested. This is an ethical problem with regards to voluntary participation. In the recruitment process I made clear that I prioritise the existing relationship over participation in the project. It was important to find the right tone to convey the balance of wanting the addressee of the email to join this learning community but that there would not be negative consequences should the addressee not want to take part in the research (see Appendix A). In situations when I did not receive an initial response, I sent another email, reminding potential participants of the opportunity to take part in the research and reiterating that I would prioritise the relationship over participation hoping to keep both "an easy way in" as well as "an easy way out" ([see Appendix A](#))⁷⁷.

Of course, this personal connection might also have an impact on the research outcomes. Would my participants try to please me in their answers to my questions? I did indeed wonder whether participants' answers to some questions were informed by their knowing about the research project. When I asked what participants pay attention to in their practice their answers might be informed by knowing about the research into non-verbal aspects of communication. This might well be a problem even if participants had not known me before. An idea of a separate questionnaire to systemic practitioners generally without those participants knowing what the research is would not have been ethical and would not have

⁷⁶ P. 362

⁷⁷ P. 362

been approved. Of course, the choice of potential participants, who I approached and probably who decided to participate because of their interest in dynamic action, will also have had an impact on results. There is a bias already inherent in the selection criteria. For the workshops themselves this was useful with regard to forming a community of practice. There was still always a diversity of practices that led to inspiring each other and developing ideas for practice. The idea of mapping a household (9.10) for example was developed because one participant who also is a visual artist asked whether we could map it out so that they could visualise it better for themselves but the participant who mapped their own household (a physical theatre practitioner) found it really useful then to show their experience in this map.

2.4.2.2 Participant, co-researcher, community of practice / research

As I had invited people from different disciplines with a relatively high level of expertise, it felt that my participants were 'more than participants'. As I had anticipated a highly iterative action research process – the outcomes of one workshop would influence the next in line with further revolutions of the action research spiral – I had thought of my participants as active in the process, as co-researchers. One of the hoped-for positive outcomes for participants was that they would inspire each other. I thought of us as a community of practice and also a community of research.

I felt it ethical to offer that participants would be named as co-researchers and this offer was a choice for participants on the consent form: be named as co-researcher or remain anonymous. It was then in the first workshop where participants discussed the consent form and while some wanted to be named and others preferred to remain anonymous, that the term co-researcher was questioned. Participants felt that with this term would come a level of responsibility for the research outcomes that they did not want to hold. One participant

said “I do not want that responsibility for your research” to which some others signalled agreement (in a non-verbal way). This raised some questions for me with regards to my position as researcher. If my research was to be a co-construction of knowledge then any participant would automatically be a co-researcher. In some ways there is a responsibility to one’s own contribution whether one likes it or not. On the other hand, I put myself in the position of a participant and foregrounded the sense of being acknowledged. I remember at first feeling surprised. But I had to admit quickly to myself that the point they were making was a valid one. Next, I was feeling somewhat ashamed at not having considered this. It took me a moment to digest and think of a way forward. I had to consider what was agreed through the ethics approval (Appendix A). I tried to reassure participants that whether they decided to be acknowledged by name or to stay anonymous, that I would distinguish between contribution and responsibility, both for the process and the result. The responsibility would remain with me. I would be the author of the thesis. I would take care of the process within the workshops and the research processes outside of the workshops. But I tried to be clear that every participant also had some level of responsibility towards themselves and each other. My participants in this workshop said they liked the idea of being acknowledged (whether by name or not) after clarifying the level of responsibility. It became instead a question of whether a participant wanted to be named or stay anonymous. I wondered later whether the term co-researcher suggested being equal in both acknowledgement and responsibility that was not intended. I now think one reason why the term co-researcher might not have fitted is that this was not a Co-operative Inquiry as proposed by Reason and Heron (1996, Heron 1996) and where I took the term from. Especially the first stage, setting up the inquiry (using propositional knowledge) was not done in collaboration. It was *my* problem, that I wanted to research, not something we together saw as a problem.

“Co-researcher” could possibly even be seen as hiding some of the differences in power and responsibility and who wanted this research. A term that highlights contribution might be better suited, maybe a term like “contributor”.

In further workshops (attended by new participants) it did appear as a question again, as I had started to clarify the level of responsibility, commenting on the consent form using the term contribution. In future research I will not add the word co-researcher to the consent form but instead formulate the option as participants’ contributions being acknowledged by name or anonymously.

You will occasionally read names of participants and at other times the anonymous ‘participant’ when those participants chose to not be named. And yet it seems difficult for me to not see the participants as way more active in shaping the process, certainly within each workshop. In fact, you could see each workshop as consisting of smaller workshops. Often one ‘exercise’ or ‘activity’ would trigger a participant to remember and offer another ‘exercise’ or ‘activity’⁷⁸ that seemed to build naturally on the previous ‘exercise’ or ‘activity’ in the workshop. This order might also be useful with groups and families. In chapter 9⁷⁹ some techniques are arranged in such a possible order.

As my participants are friends and colleagues, I got to also meet some of them between workshops and on one occasion got to watch video material together with a participant⁸⁰ to get an understanding of how a particular exercise worked for that participant. In the workshops as well as during the informal meetings after workshops and between workshops

⁷⁸ An example of this is the technique “stuck / unstuck” (p. 306) was developed out of the previous technique “the fixed point” (p. 305).

⁷⁹ p. 298

⁸⁰ p. 290

my participant friends and colleagues offered their thoughts that were bound to have influenced me. I remember for example sitting together informally with some participants after the first workshop and we talked about a moment from the workshop where one participant offered an interaction, waving a tissue at another participant who non-verbally signalled that they did not want to engage by deliberately turning away (7.2). I cannot remember who said what, and I was not prepared at that moment to take any written notes in the informal situation after the workshop. But I do remember it influenced my thoughts. The fact that I analysed this short moment in more detail owes a lot to this informal conversation. I also remember as part of this conversation thinking that we might sometimes communicate with less conflict without words. It had struck me the conflict only really arose in the conversation in the workshop after we started talking about the moment. It made me question if it is always the best choice to talk about non-verbal aspects of communication. It triggered a memory of having heard about Henri Bergson (1911) and the idea of “arresting” a movement. This thought will feature in chapter 6.

Other influences that came about informally included thoughts and ideas from literature. This might have less influenced the literature that I ‘reviewed’ but more so the literature used to think beyond ‘systemic’ literature. I was pointed to Brian Massumi (2002) for example in conversation with a participant saying that they themselves were interested in his work and it ended up being a key piece of literature for chapter 6 (like Bergson) in which I focus on how dynamic action might communicate very directly and without words. These are examples of loops of learning in action research.

There were several participants who attended more than one workshop and one participant attended all workshops. Those participants became more closely linked to the overall

research project and often pointed out links between workshops. They probably also benefitted the most. I also collected participants' experiences of how our workshops impacted on their practice between workshops. How has their practice changed, if at all, and how have clients benefitted or not? In the second workshop I started the sessions with discussions / (semi structured) interviews that included the following questions: Have any of the exercises that have been developed so far become relevant in your practice? And if so, what effect did these have? What would you like to see us develop further? In this way third persons became part of the action research. These workshops were filmed as consent was given by participants. Working with the film material generated in the first workshop, a 'new technique I call inscription⁸¹ started to emerge that, supported by the literature reviewed for this thesis, is described and argued for in chapter 7. Some considerations are already presented in this chapter.

2.4.2.3 Fluidity, predictability, repeatability (reliability)

As a starting point, in the first workshop there was an exercise of being in space, being allowed to do anything (that is not harmful), except for using words. Participants knew this before the workshop and were reminded of it at the door. But beyond this it was not at all clear what would happen. Discussions then led to generating new exercises (or remembering known exercises) where every participant was at least potentially equally creative or taking a lead as me. In reality of course, some participants were more active in suggesting ideas than others. All this meant that this series of workshops as well as the overall research was iterative in the form of a Lewinian spiral. I could also see this as a high level of fluidity and maybe some tension with the idea of planned research. If classically one quality criterion for research is

⁸¹ P. 258

reliability so that research is repeatable with the same results, this research is far away from this. Whatever we created, whatever data we generated, it would be very situated in the situation at the moment. Too many factors would be difficult to 'control' for. I did not even know who would attend until they were there. On one occasion I received a text message from a participant after the workshop had started that they had to abandon their journey. Even if I could get the same people together again they would now know each other again and their life experience is now a different one (and includes in a small way having participated before).

While there were aims for the research project, something to be achieved and some responses to the research questions to be found, there is now of course the question whether we/I would find the same again. The answer is to a large extent no. And yet we/I found some ideas for how dynamic action can be used and some ideas for how and why this might work: an interesting tension between very situational and generalisable knowledge.

I find a metaphor in my own life practice for this. As a performer I have been more interested in improvisation. While a scripted play might be very similar from performance to performance there are no two improv shows that are the same. And yet improv shows have an outcome and a value in their performance.

2.4.3 Writing as technique – description/reflection/diffraction

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write "In short, we think that one cannot write sufficiently in the name of an outside." (p. 23). Indeed, looking at the film material created in workshops, I cannot help remembering, being influenced by my memory despite an attempt to 'objectively describe' what happens in the space or in the film. Furthermore, in line with

ideas already outlined (and to be explored further⁸²) about the digitality and therefore reductionism of a transition or translation or description of physical reality into verbal reality, it seems impossible to represent or 'treat' the data without changing them strongly. Words can be transcribed. There are attempts to translate into writing pauses and other nonverbal cues like laughter or deep breaths. But: Somebody raised their arm. How far or high did they raise it? The meaning might change drastically.

Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St.Pierre (for example, 2008) see writing as a method of inquiry. Within this framework it can be better seen as a technique, answering the question of what to do and what creates data. Within the method of First Person Inquiry⁸³ I allowed myself freedom in using creative writing as a way of creating data as Deleuze (2006) asserts, "Science and poetry are equal forms of knowledge" (p. 18). This has taken the form of journals and other 'reflections'. The quotation marks here are intended. Reflection suggests a mirroring, a true picture like a copy. It suggests sameness (Haraway, 1992; Barad, 2007). Embracing that something new and 'distorted' gets created in the processing of the film, I embrace 'diffraction' (ibid.). However, I aimed to maintain integrity as much as I could within this translation from film to written word. The text generated reads like what a more everyday language would call descriptions and maybe reflections. In this way emerges what I call for now description/reflection/diffraction.

However, my writing not only describes/reflects/diffracts with regards to the workshops, but also with regard to other situations, moments and episodes of my practice. You have already read two such examples in the prologue⁸⁴. These pieces of writing are highly personal to me,

⁸² p. 181

⁸³ p. 53

⁸⁴ p. 3

and at the same time, anonymised with regards to others who inevitable feature in my reflections.

Of course, some of these descriptions/reflections/diffractions and thoughts will be influenced by theory, and the theory that influences this research (for example, as outcome of the reviewing the literature) will be seen in the context of this research and practice (for example, the workshops described above). The boundaries between the techniques and the links to the methods are more messy than might appear here.

2.5 Data and the implications up the levels

Each of the techniques described here will generate different kinds of data. As data is generated or created it would be more honest to speak of “creata” (Brinkmann 2014, p. 721), items created, than “data”, items given. It is useful to refer here also to Ian Hacking (2012) who speaks of phenomena subject to scientific investigation invariably being created; in other words, “What is given is completely transformed in what is created” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.120). I will however continue to use the conventional term “data”. As mentioned here the data have implications further up the hierarchy in a reflexive loop of implicative force, characterised by the question “What do data count as?”.

2.5.1 Theories and other texts

The data reviewed in the literature are texts that are already written, often theories. This is an easy example of how the data might impact on the theoretical propositions (if not methodological assumptions) very directly. This in turn influenced what we worked on together in the workshops on the level of technique, as well as how the data generated in the workshops (the film material) is treated further. In this research I account in writing for the

data as well as new ideas on all the levels. While writing is a technique used to generate data, it is also one medium to which the other levels are communicated in.

Despite limiting the literature reviewing process, but given the width of discourses that I hope to cover, a huge amount of data will be generated in the form of text. It will require me to choose to exclude (whole groups of) texts further, and decide what is relevant and what is not. I will account for this as well as is possible. While this is normal for any review, even a systematic one, it does demonstrate the reflexive nature of this kind of research. It also raises the ethical question of making these decisions and then claiming universality. The term analysis would be misleading. Inquiry implies this subjectivity more honestly (and ethically).

Other texts will be generated by my (creative) writing and journaling (for example, about the films). They are even more highly personal and subjective data. Still, they are valid, generated in a context of relationships with people and other entities. An example of such a text with some considerations for its implications is an entry in my journal for this doctorate programme, referring to a visit to the Tate Modern⁸⁵.

2.5.2 Film

The data generated within the filmed workshops is obviously film material. This brings with it ethical considerations of how to keep this very personal material safe⁸⁶. More ethical considerations come when considering how to treat these data. As outlined in the section 'writing as technique'⁸⁷, spoken parts could be transcribed, but this would be inconsistent with the deliberations about digitalising analogical data, or translating dynamic action into

⁸⁵ P. 78

⁸⁶ This is explored in the ethical approval application.

⁸⁷ P. 71

symbolic action, especially the non-spoken parts. Analysing is always an act of choice – for example, what little detail, gesture or movement is noted or not. The ethical consideration will then be the question, ‘who analyses?’ - who gets to make these choices? If I were to claim to analyse, I would be taking the right of interpreting, taking people’s own voices (or movements) away from them, even if I recorded verbatim participants’ own interpretations. Instead, and additionally to my own descriptions/reflections/diffractions⁸⁸, I wanted to offer participants the opportunity to be credited for what they have contributed as co-researchers. This makes remaining anonymous difficult. The information sheet clarified this to participants and the consent form offered an option to be either explicitly credited or to contribute in an anonymised way.

I also explored together with participants how we treated the research material from the workshops (our “data”). This included the question of how we present the results. In the course of the participatory elements of the data generation, I had contemplated performative ways of creating research outputs, such as creating a film or a play at the earlier stage before the actual workshops. If the participants (and I) wished to use these outputs as part of the dissemination, I would have ensured that an opportunity to consent or withdraw consent for this was provided. The information sheet reflected this emergent nature. As it turned out, there was little appetite to be involved beyond the workshops and the discussion amongst participants about not wanting responsibility for the overall project earlier mentioned⁸⁹ reflected this. I did however ask for permission for some scenes filmed during workshops to be directly included and in one case a participant clarified that they maintained the consent

⁸⁸ p. 71

⁸⁹ p. 66

to have participated but did not wish to extend the consent to the material being used. This material is therefore not available as film when I later reflect on this⁹⁰.

While the research and its methodological considerations are emergent and I have already included some considerations that are outcomes of the research influencing the methodology, I will have to come back to methodology later. For the moment it might be a summary to provide a rough map outlining it so far.

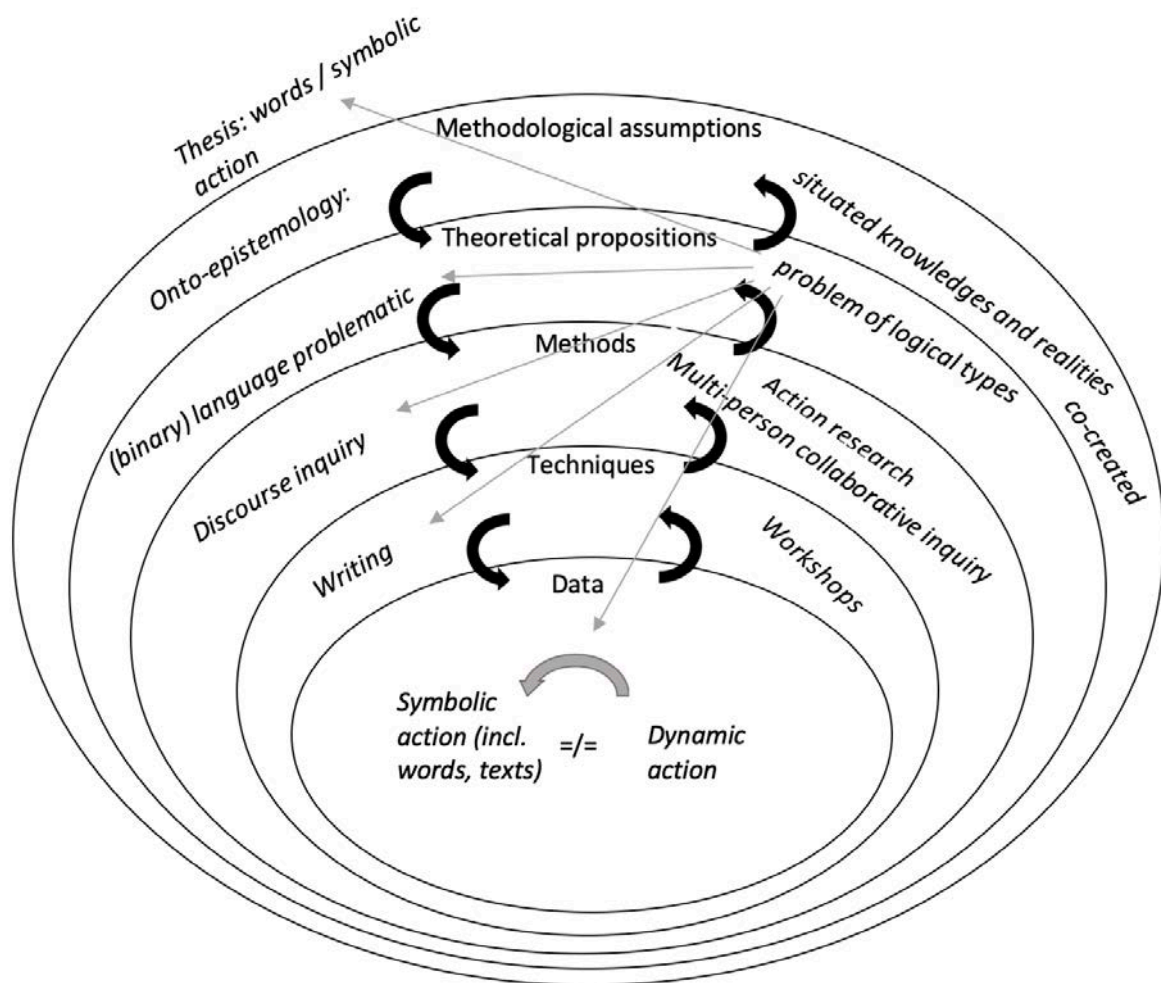


Figure 11: My praction research

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What seem the two main issues that I had to grapple with and that we as co-researchers grappled with are indicated as grey arrows. The round grey arrow is questioning a translation or transcription of dynamic into symbolic action, and the thinner straight arrows deal with the difficulty of using symbolic action to critique it.

After these methodological considerations, and having described what I called description/reflection/diffraction, what follows (at least in the more linear journey through the text) is an example of such journaled description/reflection/diffraction. It also offers another way into the distinction between symbolic and dynamic. In some ways it is an interlude, or – similar to the two stories at the beginning – intended to invite you into what is to come. In other ways it is an illustration of the up and down between the different levels of methodological considerations.

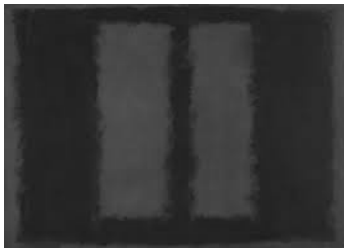
Interlude: Tate modern 23.11.2017 – an example of description/reflection/diffraction

I have been here before. Several times, again and again. René Magritte's L'Annonciation



Picture 3: René Magritte's L'Annonciation

or Mark Rothko's murals.



Picture 4: Mark Rothko's Seagram murals

I cannot decide. I love Magritte. And L'Annonciation is so full of what I am interested in. Faceless figures featuring in a landscape, in space, in relation to it and each other. It is monumental, archaic, before and after the word. L'Annonciation – the announcement – without word or gesture. Maybe with symbols.

I visit my namesake for a moment and I am taken in again. This seems just about the space itself.

There are other pieces of architectural quality. Spaces captured in canvas. 3D in 2D. Pierre Saulages



Picture 5: Pierre Saulage's Composition 3 juin 1951

is a great example of that. I cannot decide.

Go somewhere else. There is a Modigliani exhibition.

It is crowded, loud, full of people. Visitors and paintings alike.



Picture 6: Three portraits by Modigliani

People everywhere. They all seem to be talking. I appreciate the art – making the stone and the canvas come alive and talk. But it feels loud. Demanding my attention rather than inviting me. I get annoyed, feel pushed, have to get out. Is this what we do all the time we use words?...

Magritte or Rothko?

I am back there again.

I end up sitting, breathing, writing in the Rothko room.

Magritte is great. L'Annonciation gives me a sense of articulated complexity of a realm that is describable in words but extends way beyond it. It gives me a feeling I would get from reading Karen Barad, a notion of clarity of physical reality.

Rothko is different. It is an invitation into a slow space. A mystic space. A space that constantly evades description as it fades, blurs and vibrates around the borders.

He invites me in. Makes the view linger and the picture change. Nothing oppressive (as described in the sign).

This is the space beyond the words that I am interested in.

Modigliani was chatter, György Kepes' photo of a hand



Picture 7: György Kepes' Hand on black background

was gesture, Magritte was symbolic. But Rothko is pure dynamics.

Implications: What do this data count as?

These particular data, the above text, count as an implication on the level of theoretical propositions⁹¹. On that level, I speak about distinctions between different aspects of non-verbal communication. Now I generate another distinction.

There are aspects of nonverbal communication that are symbolic. A gesture – a waving hand for example – is a symbol, referring to something else, a greeting or goodbye. Some gestures include an element of metaphor. A gesture I learned during my childhood in Germany was tipping your finger at your forehead. The translation of that into words was “Bei dir piepts wohl”, loosely “you have birds in your brain” – a metaphor for being silly or stupid. Other

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aspects of nonverbal communication are dynamic. Without being symbolic or referring to something else, they still communicate something and contribute to the co-creation of meaning in that moment. A sharp intake of breath, a slight tilt of the head, a movement in the posture, can all be louder than any spoken word.

The contextual force downwards further makes it difficult to code the observations. Maybe here a sense of wonder or glow of the data (MacLure, 2013 a+b) can help to not get too worried about coding, and further the sense of co-creation of research. Giving a sense of the spiralling recursiveness in turn has consequences on the level of technique and data. Valuing ideas of the situatedness and the collaborative character of co-construction of meaning in this research, I intend to watch filmed material of the exercises and workshops together with participants and ask them to write about their experience of the exercises, the possible impact on their practice, and any ideas for further exercises. This generates a different kind of data to the raw data of film⁹² described so far, a kind of data that is already in text form and does not need further transcription before it can find its way into the research. If the film material was seen as raw data then the texts written by participants create or generate a first level of treatment of the data. I will also use these writings to develop the next workshop. In this way participants become co-researchers (in a way, different to taking responsibility for the whole research project), involved in creating the next stages, or the next evolution in the Lewinian spiral⁹³ of the (action-)research.

⁹² p. 74

⁹³ p. 57

Teusner (2016) describes some ideas aimed at tackling the possible criticism of poor validity of insider research. On a practical level she suggests keeping all materials and keeping a research diary. The latter aspect is in line with the above idea of writing as a technique⁹⁴. There will be several levels of writing and writing about my own texts. This self-reflexivity is in line with the recursive nature of the methodology and honours the situatedness of the research. This self-reflexivity is also at the core of systemic practice.

This interlude sits at the intersection between the how- question and the what-what-question. In chapter 1 I outline why I am interested in this research and also why you might want to read it. In chapter 2 I outline how I have initially approached this research. It is time to move to the what-question. One answer to what I am researching is found in the research questions:

1 Is there now a tendency to focus on the spoken and written word or verbal communication in the field of systemic practice?

2 If so, what are the consequences for practitioners of a focus on verbal aspects of communication?

3 Are there ways the practitioner can include non-verbal aspects of communication in a useful way?

Digging deeper into these questions and following some of the considerations so far, I notice that one term used deserves further definition: the field of systemic practice.

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What follows (if you follow a linear journey) is a chapter that maps the field of systemic practice. This is both a clarification of the research field and a foundation of mapping the attention paid to non-verbal communication in the theory of systemic practice.

3 What is “systemic”? – an attempt to describe a field bound to fail (the attempt, not the field)

In one of my professional activities I work as a coach for social work managers. I work for an organisation that embraces – amongst other ideas – systemic ideas. They hired me, despite not having a coaching qualification (at that time), because I am a social worker and more so because I am a systemic psychotherapist. Going to a meeting organised by the organisation to brief us for the next cohort of coachees, I board the train from London to Sheffield. To my surprise my reserved seat is right next to the organisers of the meeting, none of them systemically trained. I feel a mixture of delight and disappointment. Coming close to a deadline for some academic writing, yet I am only too ready to be distracted, in this case by genuinely nice and interesting people.

After a few polite exchanges about the weather, one of my fellow travellers asks: “Could you actually say in no more than three sentences what ‘systemic’ means?”

As this is not the first time I have heard this question, I have a repertoire of possible answers by now. This includes an elevator pitch I have developed for organisational contexts when asked why systemic: “You know Einstein said: In order to solve the problems, we cannot use the same thinking we used when we first created them. Systemic thinking is the different thinking.” I have to admit that this answer is not very satisfying and may be sufficiently vague. What counts as “systemic” seems to mean so many different things to different people. And it very much feels that the answer is dependent on the context in which the question is asked.

In this case, where the context of social work seemed very much steeped in deficit discourses (parents are not good enough), I answered as I had done often before: “You know, lots of

psychological and psychiatric ideas locate problems inside people, in their psyche. Thinking systemically, we locate the problem between people. Problems are created and maintained in their interactions.”

Apart from noticing that I can stay within three sentences despite saying unnecessarily “You know” I am not as sure about these sentences any more as I once was. For the rest of the journey, between bits of writing and talking, I had to think and that is where the start to this part of the thesis was made. For the purpose of investigating the relationship between systemic theory and practice on one side, and verbal and non-verbal communication on the other, I will map the field of systemic theory and practice.

Being aware that the map is not the territory (Korzybsky, 1996) there still seems to be some utility in maps (otherwise maybe we would have stopped drawing them). The reference here (there are others) refers to “A map *is not* the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a *similar structure* to the territory which accounts for its usefulness.” (Korzybski, 1996, p. 58, italics in original).

I hope that my thoughts below adequately, that means with similar structure, speak about the field of systemic theory and practice. A map always simplifies, but it needs to. In the text quoted, Korzybski (1996) makes reference to Bonini’s paradox, that it is not possible to represent fully and usefully. An earlier version of that thought is attributed to Paul Valery: Everything that is theoretically simple is theoretically false and everything that is complex is pragmatically useless. Korzybski goes on to explain that a word is not the object it represents. I will come back to this with regards to (post-) structuralism.

Another reason why a map seems to be the adequate choice for this chapter is expressed in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. Eschewing a linear thought or structure, or what they call a treelike or arborescent structure, they advocate seeing reality as a rhizome or network. The rhizome, they explain, "is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion." (p. 21). Therefore "the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight." (p. 21). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) see this as in line with Bateson's thinking. "Gregory Bateson uses the word "plateau" to designate something very special: a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end." (p. 22) As a systemic practitioner, I encountered Deleuze and Guattari (1987) in the early stages of working towards this research. I remember feeling that I might not intellectually (fully) understand, but that something in their ideas resonated with me. I hear myself and other practitioners talk about resonances, when they speak of something that they cannot quite put into words. And while we cannot quite put something into words it might still resonate with us, move us and influence us and our practice and our life. This thesis includes capturing mine and others' practices, some of which we might not quite be able to put into words.

So, I will attempt to map out the territory of "systemic". Not unlike other territories, the boundaries might be disputed – at least at times. Is Northern Ireland actually part of Great Britain? Geographically it is on the smaller (as opposed to greater) of the British Isles, and I will not comment on it politically in times of Brexit with regards to where the border should be drawn. Other parts of the territory are considering independence. (I wonder what the Scottish narrative would be.) In the territory there are different cultural zones surrounding

cultural centres (as plateaus of intensity) that orient people like metaphors orient practitioners. But can the boundaries of zones influenced by cultural centres as well as metaphors be very clear? From when on am I no longer in the south but in the Midlands or even North, I muse as the countryside flies by. Are the people who live here oriented towards London or Leicester?

A friend of mine once cycled on a penny farthing from Land's End in Cornwall to John O'Groats on the North Eastern tip of the Scottish mainland, the longest possible distance between two points of the British mainland. While the journey certainly was not a straight line, let alone mapped neatly on a north-south axis, it still described a territory between two extreme points or rather different plateaus of intensity with a lot of territory in between.

Following I will attempt to describe such points and the territory in between, asking questions about whether particular positions and ideas are actually still systemic. I already ask for forgiveness as I might inadvertently hurt someone's feelings of identity as practitioner, as I ask the people of Northern Ireland (and maybe Wales, the Shetlands or Jersey also) who might be irritated by a statement that a journey from Land's End to John O'Groats spanned the whole of the UK.

3.1 Bateson and Foucault: Power or not?

Just as territories like Great Britain are shaped over time, the territory of "systemic" has history and beginnings that might not be so easy to pinpoint. For the UK the mythical founding figure is King Arthur. I now find myself imagining Gregory Bateson as similar, sitting as first

among equals at the round table of the Macy conferences or in Palo Alto.⁹⁵ Yet over time new developments and splits occurred, leading to such a diverse terrain as systemic theory and practice is today. There is, for example, the well documented split of the Milan team (see for example Campbell, 2013). Following their important texts *Paradox and Counterparadox* (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1978) and *Hypothesizing – circularity - neutrality* (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1980), Mara Selvini-Palazzoli and Giuliana Prata searched for the universal prescription or invariant prescription, an intervention at the end of a session that would work for all families, whilst staying in Milan. Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo travelled and taught around the world, making links to new ideas with practitioners from a variety of backgrounds.

Both pairs however held on to the idea of circularity. Feedback loops create patterns of interaction between parts of systems. Within a family, for example, there could be a circular pattern: when a son misbehaves, his father shouts at him to enforce discipline. In response to that mother says that the father is too harsh. The son might feel close to his mother then and might be more likely to misbehave should he want to feel close to his mother. So far, that would be a fairly simple circle. It might become more complex if we then think that the father might get worried about there not being enough discipline and shouting more, which the mother possibly would want to balance out by her displaying more affection towards her son.

One of the first big and well documented splits was around power. The echoes of this split still reverberate loudly around the territory. According to Harries-Jones (1995; see also Keeney & Keeney, 2012) the research group around Gregory Bateson in Palo Alto, including Jay Hayley, Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas and Don Jackson, started to disintegrate in

⁹⁵ Beels (2002) says for example “The official history of family therapy describes its beginnings as ... inspired by the “systems thinking” of Gregory Bateson” (p. 67)

the mid 1960s when Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas and Jackson (1967) published *Pragmatics of Communication*. Bateson felt betrayed, and when Hayley (later published in 1976a) tried to rectify some of what he felt were misconceptions in “Pragmatics”, Bateson complained that Haley too had failed to understand that power was a myth (Harries-Jones, 1995). Bateson (1972) later explains that the concept or idea of power was an epistemological error and a self-validating cultural myth that would only mystify the person in power. Using Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister for propaganda, as an example, he states that even he would be relying on information supplied by others. Locating power in Goebbels would not only obscure those feedback loops, but also lead to the feeling that one could not change anything about this (see also Keeney & Keeney, 2012; Guddemi, 2006). The problem would be a rather linear view of someone “having” power. Maturana and Varela (1973) speak of the impossibility of instructive interaction⁹⁶, as no matter how much “power” (or the potential to threaten the autopoiesis of another system) a system (for example a person) has, they cannot know how the other system reacts. This is not to say that there are not social inequalities, but as Keeney and Keeney (2012) ask, what would the notion of power add to our understanding of circularly-maintained inequality.

Hayley (1976b), and similarly Minuchin (1974), who met in an exchange of ideas (Keeney and Keeney, 2012; Nichterlein, 2013), seemed to have a concept of power as something real. Most, if not all, interactions in families (or other systems) were seen as jostling for power and control. Concepts like hierarchies and executive subsystems bear witness to power being the

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organising principle of social life. The therapist then uses their power, knowledge and skills to change people's interactions⁹⁷.

Still in line with the idea that unilateral power is an illusion, the Milan team's (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1978) idea was that the family might be engaged in a game where each player is erroneously aiming to gain the unilateral power to define the relationship(s). It is like people act as if power was real and instructive interaction was possible. This is the paradox to which the therapists then "make" their intervention in the form of a prescription. Aware of the new paradox of their own illusion of power or instructive interaction, they called it the counter-paradox.

Still, this seems to be seen now as an anachronistic use of power/expertise. Victoria Dickerson (2010) formulates pointedly "In the early systemic approaches, the therapist was coach, director, master manipulator, final prescriber, or some combination or permutation of the above." (p. 353) I am not sure whether she means to include Bateson in this, as he eschewed the use of power.

A very interesting moment with regards to power is what is sometimes in shorthand named the "feminist critique" (for example Goldner, 1985, 1987) of family therapy. Here, the lack of attention to the unequal distribution of power within families, and particularly between genders, is critiqued. Being neutral to this inequality allows it to continue. Power is understood as something very real. Developments following this critique allowed for practitioners to critique inequalities while using curiosity to explore what led to (accepting)

⁹⁷ ...in what Keeney and Keeney (2012) describe as "power brokering" (p. 23).

these inequalities (Cecchin, 1987). Now power is no longer required as a metaphor, replaced by meaning (ibid.; see also Nichterlein, 2013).⁹⁸

In my practice of teaching systemic theory to social workers and social work students, the issue of power usually comes up early on when discussing circularity. Recently in a lecture, I used the somewhat extreme example of domestic violence, explaining that a circular view would suggest that the person receiving the violence would in some way contribute to the situation. After all, they (although more often, she) could do something different. Some of the more vocal students were outraged (and I am glad they were), taking a position as, for example, Goldner (1985, 1987) would take. They felt that this view would locate responsibility for the situation in the person who suffered it, victim blaming. Indeed, in many such situations that I have encountered when working in children's social care contexts, social workers suggest to the person receiving the violence that they should leave the violent partner. I explained that my aim was not to apportion blame or take away the responsibility for the violence from the person who is violent, but to develop some sense of agency, a sense of being able to do something (differently) rather than feeling just subjected to power. But by this moment I had lost some of the students. They could not quite hear it any more. After this lecture I spoke to one of my colleagues. Knowing that it had not gone so well, I found myself taking a justifying and somewhat defensive position saying "But Bateson thought of power as a myth." to which she replied "Well, I am more of a Foucauldian Girl."

With the interpretations of Foucault (for example 1980, 1982) finding their way into systemic thinking and practice – maybe most prominently through narrative ideas as (for example

⁹⁸ Following the murder of George Floyd and the increased awareness of racial inequalities (Black Lives Matter), it seems strange that the systemic community once again finds it hard to accept that there cannot be any neutrality (political or otherwise) in the face of oppression.

White, 1989, 2007) and through social constructionist ideas as proposed by Gergen (2007) - yet another set of ideas about power appeared in the territory. Nichterlein (2013) sees these understandings of Foucault as problematic. Among the differences in understanding that Nichterlein finds, are that power is seen as negative, repressive and the generative, even a pleasure-bringing aspect is neglected.

“What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.” (Foucault et al., 1980, p.119)

Further, she argues that Foucault’s (for example, Foucault and Ewald, 1984) view of the relationship between what he calls the three domains of truth (or knowledge), power and individual conduct (subjectivity), is misunderstood in social constructionism as proposed by Gergen (for example 1994, 2007), and to a lesser extent in narrative ideas. “For Foucault, it is not the case that subjects construct discourses, but that discourse provides the specific condition of emergence for a subject.” (Nichterlein, 2013, p. 184). She particularly criticises: “A second distortion Gergen makes [that] relates to his reading of knowledge formation to emphasize his interest in a language-mediated reality.” (Nichterlein, 2013, p. 185). Relevant later, when I attempt to trace understandings of “language,” is this phrase from Gergen “explorations of the relationship between knowledge (*as a body of language and associated practices*) and power” (1994, p. 413, italics added).

In her reading of Bateson through Foucault, Nichterlein (2013) goes on to create an assemblage (using Deleuze and Guattari’s, 1987, concept to underline the fluidity in similarities) of Foucault and Bateson. Referring also to Maturana and Varela (1972), she sees how both Bateson and Foucault see “power” (as far as Bateson is concerned even the use of

the term is problematic) as emergent in relations or relationships, whether they are characterised as feedback loops in an environment / ecology of mind, or discourses in the social sphere, that include the subject and knowledge. “For Foucault ... power circulates across knowledge formations creating selves.” (Nichterlein, 2013, p. 202). Power in this reading is not something that “is” by and of itself, as something that someone can “have”, or to say it as Foucault did “that something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist.” (1982, p.788). In practice, I find some of these distinctions important so as not to simply accept someone as powerful and then give up, as could sometimes be a tendency for me. One of the stories about me in my family is that I am likely to choose the path of least resistance when encountering a challenge. One example of that might have been that I did not “learn” how to ride a bike. I tried and when I failed I waited for a long time until I tried again, rather than practicing and practicing. And with regards to conflict and arguments I would often verbally agree (even when I did not agree) and then do my own thing. That might translate to an acceptance of, and maybe even collusion with, power. On the other hand, denying that some people have more chances to influence what is perceived as reality would possibly be an even bigger collusion with power. It reminds me of a saying I once heard – I cannot remember where – that the greatest trick the devil played was to convince us that he does not exist. Maybe power played a similar trick to try to convince us that it does not exist (where we were looking for it). As a researcher I could be seen to hold a lot of power but maybe I did not want to see this. Or maybe by kidding myself that I wanted to share this power with my “co-researchers” I was hiding power. Maybe I was seen as an expert and participants trusted me to create a safe space but I did not quite see myself as powerful – rejecting the notion of

power when I was holding it. I think when my participants declined being seen as co-researchers they wanted me to hold both power and responsibility for a safe space.

Another level of power comes with disseminating the research results. In a social constructionist sense, I might contribute more than my participants to shaping the reality of (future) practice. I have greater control over the final product – the thesis – I wrote it. I have tried to 'check' my results and ideas with participants⁹⁹ and I have tried to mitigate a difference of power in the moment by including participants in the creation of a safe space. I encouraged participants to ensure they kept themselves and others safe and that I regarded a participant not wanting to participate in an activity as a very respectable decision.

Similarly to Nichterlein (2013), Guddemi (2006) attempts to re-describe power in terms of Maturana and Varela's (1972) concept of auto-poiesis, the capacity of a living system to maintain itself. Two systems that are (part of) each other's environments will influence each other through structural coupling. Structural coupling is the process by which a system adapts its structure in response to changes in the environment in order to preserve its organisation or rather itself. Now, if one system has to adapt "more" (not in quantitative terms) one could see this as power, but as a relational process rather than a linear one. I find that this thought might solve to some extent my conundrum regarding the presence of power I thought about earlier. Yes, the more powerful person can force the other person to adapt more, but the less powerful also has some influence over the more powerful. And to some extent, I could see my task as helping the less "powerful" to use what influence they have, at least over their own story. In my practice as a coach, my coachees often bring up dilemmas with their line

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managers and a large part of my work is to facilitate ideas that feel safe enough for my coachees to challenge the power being exerted on them in their agencies or workplaces. Often by examining with them the dominant discourses that exist in their contexts, and deconstructing these, a client can find ways to assert their own position and challenge oppressive practices by others. In my coaching work, I have often encountered different versions of the same story, that coachees feel that their position might be at risk if they assert some boundaries, for example to finish work on time. They were often worried that their managers would not accept them leaving on time as there was a workplace culture of working late. In many of these circumstances, coachees were able to develop a more assertive yet respectful way to maintain their boundaries by pointing out a mutual advantage of working more effectively and having a lower chance of burn-out and illness if their and their organisation's work / life balance was better.

Going back to information as central metaphor might unite Batesonian trends, seeing information as the difference that makes the difference, and Foucauldian trends, if we see "power" as virtual, generative of information. Information could be used synonymously with knowledge. In Batesonian terms we could also describe the relationship that Foucault describes between power and knowledge as circular.

Power therefore cannot not be seen as an underlying structure or essence of relationships. In this sense Foucault can be seen as a post-structuralist. I will describe post-structuralism along with other Post-...isms, shifting the focus from power to language. If the critique of power has resulted more in a focus on language rather than patterns of interaction, that is an important hint with regards to the first research question. It goes some way to explaining a leaning towards verbal communication (or symbolic action).

3.2 Between ... and Post-, the status of reality

There is a well-known saying in the English language that is used to describe moving or being moved between two places without having a chance to settle, often with a negative connotation: “from pillar to post” (or at least that is what I came to understand as someone whose first language is not English). Although it was not my intention to invoke a negative connotation already, there might be some use in this saying as it points at the space and movement between, something that I have been very interested in since my theatre studies that foregrounded movement.

As indicated above, systemic thinking and practice have been influenced by various intellectual and philosophical traditions that are often distinguished from one another by the prefix “post”. The dimensions that are relevant for this thesis are post-/positivism, post-/modernism and post-/structuralism – each possibly close to the other two, yet distinct. Although each of these dimensions and their implications for the field of systemic practice deserves to be explored in-depth, this would be well beyond the scope of this work. However, a very rough sketch will help to locate the field and will later help identify some influences on the field with regards to the attention paid to nonverbal aspects of communication. I will also give a first outlook on post-/humanism as it will become important later in this thesis.

It is purely coincidental that many of the influences from what might be described as neighbouring intellectual territories were or are French, or more generally “continental”, and therefore neighbouring to the UK, which I chose as analogy. The problem that results in is twofold, and I need to clarify:

1. I do not wish to give the impression that systemic practice has been developed exclusively or even mainly in the UK.
2. As Nichterlein (2013) also points out, it is problematic to subsume and unify a diversity of thoughts and thinkers under one label: French thought.

3.2.1 Post-/positivism

Positivism as a philosophical movement goes back to the philosopher Auguste Comte (for example Comte 1907, first published 1848). It invites us to only speak of and count as knowledge “facts” that we can empirically experience (or measure through apparatus). In this way, it assumes a reality out there that is objectively knowable. Another example of this kind of positivism is the logical empiricism of the Vienna circle (Schlick, 1918). They added logical analysis to the experientially knowable reality as basic assumptions to what counts as scientific. Interestingly, they already problematised language. This is already opposed to Kant’s (1787) idea that the thing itself always eludes us (see also section about research questions¹⁰⁰ and about constructivism and social constructionism¹⁰¹), that there might be a reality out there but we cannot know it.

From the beginning of the 20th century there have been a number of different challenges to this positivism. Famously, Nietzsche (in Kaufmann, 1954) stated “Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying “there are only facts,” I should say: no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations...” (p. 458). Karl Popper’s (1963) principle of refutability to establish a theory as scientific is a different challenge. Popper did not question

¹⁰⁰ p. 6

¹⁰¹ p. 38

there being a reality that can empirically be tested and theorised. He merely critiqued the idea that theories can usefully (or scientifically) be proven or verified. In this way he is still within the realm of realism, the idea that there is a “reality out there”, independent of our ideas and concepts of it.

In my practice I notice that ‘facts’ are often much less important than the meanings that people attach to these facts. In the example where a father shouts to enforce discipline, he might attach a variety of meanings to his own and others’ actions. He might be worried that his son’s misbehaviour is making him more likely to get in trouble with other authorities. He might feel that his partner undermines his attempts to raise a good citizen and so on. Intervening with such a family I explore possible meanings, for example with questions like “When your partner says you are too harsh, do you think she wants to undermine you or that she has a different idea about how to best raise a good citizen?”

The indicated critique by Nietzsche heralded what was to come with the likes of Foucault (discussed above), and what was also already in Kant’s thinking (also discussed above), a question of knowledge and what counts as such – an epistemological question. As already indicated above, what counts as or is accepted as knowledge is negotiated in discourse and is dependent on (subjectivities and) power formations.

Strongly related to the question of what counts as knowledge is the question of what counts as data which I raise in the chapter about methodology. As described there, the idea of a “paradigm shift” by Thomas Kuhn (1962) links to this. What counts as knowledge (or data) is dependent on the current paradigm or methodological assumptions¹⁰² as Simon (2012),

¹⁰² P. 35

Leppington (1991) and Pearce, Cronen and Harris (1982) called them. In a recursive way, some data / findings / questions will have implications on the methodological assumption. Interestingly, in a self-referential way, the idea of “paradigm shifts” is itself indicative of this paradigm shift towards post-positivism and questioning that anything can be objectively known. Social constructionism (for example Gergen, 1994a; Hoffman, 1990) questions ideas of knowledge and reality in a similar way.

One of the ways in which this dimension has influenced systemic practice is through research. Different ideas about what counts as evidence (again, similar to ideas about what counts as data) are expressed in ideas ranging from “evidence-based practice” and “practice-based evidence” (see for example, Van Hennik and Hillewaere 2017) with corresponding ideas for manualisation or manualisability of practice.

Maybe a good example or expression of the range of this dimension is the following statement:

“Arguably it is the framework of logical positivist philosophy of science that leads to the apparent ambivalence about research among some family therapists. What the field perhaps needs is a debate about the nature of science rather than discussions of what is and what is not ‘systemic research’.” (Eisler, 2002, footnote p. 130)

I find this very poignant with regards to my own research. I grappled a lot with the question of what makes this science. For large parts of this thesis, I have limited myself to staying with theory, and other people’s writings, as I felt this was safer and more “scientific” than my own tacit knowledge and experience. But from engaging in this professional doctorate in systemic practice I have grown to appreciate the value of these experiences, and that these can and

should feature prominently in any practice research. This was a difficult process for me, as a student who learnt and viewed education and learning within a positivist paradigm. Part of my journey of this doctorate is to unlearn some of this and appreciate the importance of mine and others' practice in contributing to new knowledge. I have tried to do this by including more of what I and others "felt" and said. I notice now that I still struggle to give equal weight to what I and my participants think compared with renowned writers' and academics' thought. Somewhere without particular location, there is still a little voice that asks about things like evidence (in a positivist sense). I now feel that my research topic already implied a solidity of words. And I think I wanted to make the argument then as solid as possible, trapping myself in the process.

3.2.2 Post-/modernism

This dimension is very closely linked to the above and below, and it might be possible to speak of it as an overarching dimension. Modernism in this more popular view (see for example Wikipedia, n.d.) includes positivism and structuralism, while post-modernism would also include post-positivism and post-structuralism – although this could be questioned.

The term post-modernism became popular as the title of Lyotard's (1979) "report on knowledge". In this report, Lyotard not only critiques the idea of knowledge as possibly not linked to the knower, but particularly proclaims an end to hegemonic metanarratives, like the idea of an end of history (for example, proposed by Marx, 1867). Kenneth Gergen (for example 1990, 1994; see also Nichterlein, 2013) describes himself and his ideas of social constructionism as in this tradition. In her critique of Gergen's version of post-modernism, Nichterlein (2013) finds it ironic that ideas sprung out of a critique of hegemonic ideas have

become what she describes as the new hegemony in the field of family therapy. This is in line with Lyotard's (1992) own critique of the term post-modernism. Post modernism would suggest a chronological order, that we have once been modern and now we are post-modern. This itself would then become a new grand meta-narrative. However, I will attend to specific ideas of social constructionism after giving a short account of one more .../post-... dimension.

3.2.3 Post-/structuralism

Structuralism is often associated with the ideas of signs in linguistics of DeSaussure (1966). The structure of a sign refers to the connection between the signifier (for example the sound or picture of the word "dog"), and the signified (in this example the concept of dogs). Together, signifier and signified make the sign, a psychological unit, which in turn is independent of reality, or what is called referent (in this example, a particular dog). The relationship between the signified (concept) and signifier (sound scape) is arbitrary. The signified (concept of dog) will correspond to different signifiers (soundscapes) in different languages (for example "chien" in French and "Hund" in German). Nevertheless, there is what he calls a natural bond between signifier and signified; in the act of speaking the sound and the thought / concept are joined. However, he also sees meaning as difference between signs (signifier / signified pairing). De Saussure already sees language as not including any ideas that existed outside of the linguistic system.

Jacques Derrida (1967) critiques and builds on DeSaussure. In one of his critiques he accuses DeSaussure of discriminating against written words. For DeSaussure, writing is secondary to oral speech, as writing is only a graphic representation of the words. These graphic depictions are signifiers just like the sounds in spoken words, and were probably developed later. In the

course of his critique, Derrida (1967) coins the influential phrase “There is nothing outside of the text” (p. 158). In this specific translation (by Spivak) there is another possible translation of the French “il n'y a pas de hors-texte” (p. 158) mentioned: “There is no outside-text” (p.158). The difference (in this case not difference, the Derridian neo-graphism) had significant impact on systemic practices seeing themselves in this tradition. Steve deShazer (1994) for example is led to say, only minimally tentatively, “...the danger of reading between the lines is that there might be nothing there. So, you’ve got to listen to what the client says. Just stick on the lines of things.” (p. 109) in an interview with John Weakland. Interestingly, he is tempted to react positively when John Weakland says “... I have this feeling that it doesn’t just mean a simple thing, that it may mean a lot of variations on that point...” (deShazer, 1994, p.110). DeShazer’s (1994) positive affirmation of this interpretation offered by Weakland goes some way to show how difficult, perhaps impossible, it is to avoid questioning what might be said “between the lines”. Using deShazer’s (1994) own words, an entirely “text-focussed reading” (p. 36-37) might be impossible. I am of course willing to accept that I misread / misinterpreted DeShazer’s interpretation or reading of Derrida. Actually, I am supporting the notion that one can only misread (deShazer, 1994).

In my own practice I often find myself asking a client “What do you mean by [a specific word or phrase]?” Within this map of systemic practices, I assume at least some proximity to the position of words getting their meaning from relating to other words. At least I am not surprised when my clients reply with words to explain their meaning of a phrase. However, I am wondering now whether particular phrases also get expressed or rather can be expressed in different ways to which we are not very open when we focus too much on “text”. I do think that most practitioners are also attending to other ways (or phrases) of expressing something.

A practitioner might well ask “What do you mean when you wave your hand?” or “I noticed that you moved forward in your seat before answering my question.” This shows practitioners attending to expressions other than words. And in these examples words do also refer to something other than words, contrary to the idea that words only ever refer to other words.

Of similar or possibly bigger influence on the field was Wittgenstein’s thinking, notably through Pearce and Cronen’s CMM (for example Pearce, 1999, 2005) and through John Shotter’s thinking (which in turn has influenced writers/practitioners like Jim Wilson, for example, 2015). In Wittgenstein’s thinking we can see the movement from a more structural, albeit not Saussurian way of thinking about language (influential for the Vienna circle), to a more post-structuralist one (1953). In the ‘tractatus’, Wittgenstein (1961, original 1921) thought of words as representing the reality. The world was to be seen as a collection of facts that we could “picture” in words. In his later thinking, (Wittgenstein, 1953) words gain their meaning in use, similar to tools. He uses the term ‘language games’ for this. This is closer to both DeSaussure’s and Derrida’s idea of words referring to, or gaining meaning from, other words.

A different yet similar view of language is introduced into the field in the form of dialogism. Bakhtin’s ideas (1984a) have particularly influenced the dialogic ideas in therapy, like open dialogue and anticipation dialogue (for example Seikkula, Arnkil and Eriksson 2003). In any given situation there is a polyphony of possible meanings that are being elaborated in dialogue, as we can neither avoid responding, nor avoid inviting a response, whether we are writing or speaking. I would add that the same might be true for more embodied, less textual acts of communication.

John Shotter (for example 1993, 2016) brings together the thinking of Wittgenstein and Bakhtin. Meanings are not only generated by words in relation to each other. In the process of us trying to orient ourselves forward, towards a how-to-go-on in any 'living event', meanings are generated in dialogue with each other. We cannot not do this, or in John Shotter's (1999) words: "...among the many consequences of us being in the world as living, embodied beings, is the fact that we cannot not be spontaneously responsive to each other in a bodily way, prior to anything we might do deliberately and intellectually." (p. 72) This in turn is very reminiscent of Watzlawick's (et al. 1967) axiom of the impossibility of non-communication. We cannot not communicate.

The above example of me asking a client "What do you mean by...?" could also be seen as an example of this dialogical practice. Not only am I trying to explore or coordinate meaning, we are inescapably in a dialogue. My question already sets up the expectation of the other person answering. If I ask more than one client the same question I might even contribute to creating polyphony or polyvocality (or maybe a multilogue) of different possible meanings which in turn might help to develop different ways of living and being with each other.

With such dialogues we re-shape our identity and reality itself. While there is a closeness to social constructionist ideas and ideas of co-ordinating meaning (for example Pearce, 1999, 2005) John Shotter also emphasises that this dialogue also includes all "expressive actions" (2016, p. 18), again similarly to Watzlawick et al. (1967) who consider every behaviour as a form of communication. If I had asked "Could you show me (rather than tell me) what you mean by that?" different answers / speech acts become available or are anticipated.

It is important to note that post-structuralism does not only concern itself with linguistic matters, as Karan Barad (2007) says: "Poststructuralism concerns itself with a radical critique

of individual ontologies... Poststructuralism focuses on the productive nature of social practices and the discursive constitution of the subject.” (p. 410) In this way she counts Michel Foucault among the poststructuralist thinkers.

3.2.4 Post-/humanism, new materialism

In his later writing, John Shotter (2014, 2016) incorporates into his version of social constructionism the idea of “agential cuts” from Karen Barad (2007), and with it some ideas from one of the more recent movements in philosophy, the post-human (see also Braidotti, 2013). The term post-human seems fitting for ideas that bring with them a decentring of the human (or “man”). “Man” can no longer be seen as the highest or most central entity in the hierarchy of acting entities that constitute reality. Rosi Braidotti (2013) comes from a Deleuzian perspective that eschews arborescent models, the metaphor of the tree, and with it the idea of a hierarchy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In this view there is a rhizome or network of decentred, interconnected entities. As any point is a possible entry point into the rhizome, a linear roots-trunk-branches view and causality does not make sense. In many ways, (as Nichterlein, 2013, also explores,) there are strong connection points to Bateson’s (1972) non-linear thinking. In Bateson’s rejection of the concept of power, he argued for circular, feedback-organised relationships. A linear cause and effect thinking would equate to an arborescent structure of mind rather than an ecological view of mind. In practice, it seems sometimes difficult to maintain such, particularly when encountering inequalities in power and privileges. I already have spoken about the impossibility to be neutral¹⁰³. There is a linearity to someone deciding to hit someone else or use other acts of violence. This possible

¹⁰³ I think there are actually three different but interlinked arguments against neutrality, with regards to emotion (p. 26), with regards to observation (p. 35) and with regards to power/inequality/oppression (p. 90)

critique of both circularity and rhizomatic thinking seems pertinent particularly to the social worker in me – part of my understanding of my role was to use power to protect others (children) from an abuse of power by care-givers. And yet to come very quickly to the conclusion of there being one person who needs to be taken out of the equation, would mean to miss all these interconnected reasons and influences, discourses and dynamics. A more systemic view, while not excusing acts of violence, would encourage us to use our curiosity (Cecchin, 1987) when working with parts of the system and when trying to understand the dynamics of power and control where such violence can exist. I find that that position helps me view each “element” or “part” of a system as important in terms of the overall functioning (or not) of the family system.

Although Deleuze and Guattari (for example 1987) are often seen as post-structuralist, replacing the structure of the tree with an idea of a rhizome with plateaus of intensity, or post-modernist, I mention them here, seeing their decentred, rhizomatic views as foreshadowing the post-human. You will find that the “structure” of this thesis is also influenced by their idea of non-linear writing, mapping multidirectional rather than tracing one logical line. Extending Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) ideas, Rosi Braidotti (2013) challenges us also to not see the human, *Anthropos*, as central or in a more arborescent model as the top of a hierarchy, that subjugates all non-human others. This hierarchy, dominant to western thought, is the extension of a hierarchy between humans with white, middle aged, males (Vitruvian Men, as depicted by Leonardo DaVinci) seen as the pinnacle, a euro-centrism inside of anthropo-centrism.

The hierarchical step between human and non-human others is something that Braidotti is interested in. This hierarchy of othering (Braidotti sees animals for example as earth-others)

has made exploitation and ownership of living matter and information possible. One example that Braidotti uses for this is patenting and ownership of (parts of) genetic code. At the same time, we are more and more influenced by nonhuman entities. Algorithms recognise faces on social networks and make recommendations and target advertisements based on profiling of previous user (human) behaviours.

Returning to Karen Barad (2007) and what John Shotter (2014) highlighted as an important further development, is the idea of agential cuts. This concerns the question relevant to the field of what counts as subject and what counts as object. To explore this question, Barad (2007) extends on Niels Bohr's concept of apparatus.

I have described how Niels Bohr thought that a particle does not *have* the two properties speed and direction at the same time, differing from Werner Heisenberg's thought, known as uncertainty principle, that a particle's speed and direction cannot be measured at the same time. While Heisenberg remains epistemological, Bohr is clearly in ontological terrain, although both are referring to the process of measurement. According to Barad, Niels Bohr saw an entanglement between observation or measurement apparatus and the observed / measured, I think not unlike Heinz von Foerster (1975), who talks about an observing system. Another famous experiment is the double slit experiment (Barad, 2007). Depending on the experimental set-up, light behaves either like a particle or like a wave. Unlike in Kant's (1787) split between phenomena and noumena, Bohr defined phenomena as this specific entanglement of measurement apparatus and what is being measured, or in other words, the entanglement of the subject (that measures) and the object (that is being measured). This entanglement is the reality. There are no underlying entities (noumena) to our perceptions (phenomena). Bohr's realism looks at correspondence between theories and phenomena.

Theories are embodied in the apparatuses that produce the phenomena. Here is a parallel to Deleuze's (1997) assertion that "[a]bstract ideas are not dead things, they are entities that inspire powerful spatial dynamism" (1997, p. 119). There is a further similarity to Deleuze. In considering Nietzsche, Deleuze (1986) understands phenomena as signs (in the later Nietzsche's sense, entirely different to the meaning in linguistics described when I consider structuralism) of the things or forces that constitute them.

In Bohr's "proto-performative account of the production of bodies" (Barad, 2007, p. 129), reality is an "ongoing dynamism of becoming" (2007, p. 142). Phenomena are no longer merely perceptions (as Kant had described them) but real, albeit not fixed or separate, entities. At this point ontology and epistemology are united. The world / reality (ontology) becomes in the process of knowing (epistemology). In similarity to some social constructionist writing (for example Leppington, 1991), Barad sees the dichotomy between epistemology and ontology subsumed in the challenge of representationalism and the "...correspondence theory of truth, which is rooted in subject-object, culture-nature, word-world dualisms. The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of these dualisms." (p. 132)

Interestingly, according to Barad, Bohr left it open to define the boundary of the apparatus, so she now asks

"...where the apparatus "ends". Is the outside boundary of the apparatus coincident with the visual terminus of the instrumentation? What if an infrared interface (i.e., a wireless connection) exists between the measuring instrument and a computer that collects the data? Does the apparatus include the computer? ...the printer attached to the computer..?" (2007, pp. 142-143)

Barad critiques Bohr in that he saw himself outside of the apparatus.

This sequence of questions is reminiscent of Gregory Bateson (1972, p. 465) asking about the boundaries of mind with his example of a blind man moving forward, and whether the system includes the man (including his brain, nerves), the stick and the street.

I think they might simply come from different directions in their challenge of an inside / outside dichotomy. Bateson extends mind beyond the boundaries of the human, so that the blind man, the stick and the street are seen as a system of mind. Barad extends the notion of apparatus to include the experimenter.

One important difference is that Bateson (2002) continues to advocate a separation of the world of living entities or *creatura*, and non-living entities or *pleroma*. Concepts from the world of *pleroma*, like linear causation (for example impact), can usefully be applied to non-living entities (like billiard balls, Bateson, 2002) but are problematic in the world of living things. This contributed to his eschewing of the concept of power. Barad on the other hand asks exactly this question: Where is (if there is) the dividing line between living entities, or entities that are imbued with agency, and non-living entities or entities of which we assume no agency? Gregory Bateson (2002) uses the example of a (dead) crab and asks his students to collect arguments for the crab have been a living creature. While this leads to very interesting observations of patterns another interesting question would have been about this dividing line between living and not-living. When would we locate the time of death? When the crustacean's heart stopped? When the last nerve impulse – and I note that I am possibly doing the forbidden according to Bateson and starting to apply concepts of *pleroma* to a *creatura*, as does a large part of biology – was sent? Or when it stopped interacting with other living entities? When would that be? When bacteria and worms (decomposers in biology) have finished with the carcass? Or when a future fossil fuel using creature uses the oil that is

composed of the carbon molecules that were once the crab? This leads to the question of difference not only in time, but in space. Is only the crab as a whole alive, or every single cell? What about the molecules that form the cells, the atoms that form the molecules and the subatomic particles that form the atoms? Increasing the size one could ask is living confined to the crab? Or do we need to include the water around the crab, that moves it and is moved by it. This question is then similar to the question of mind.

Another difference is that Bateson thinks of interaction between pre-existing entities, while Barad describes entities, (including the subject as well as the object) as becoming or being created in the processes or actions of observation or measurement – or maybe better in the process of relating. Rather than calling them interactions – the term would suggest pre-existing entities or relata (entities that relate) – she calls these processes intra-actions. Entities are constituted inside of the process of relating to each other (for example, in observation).

It is here that Barad (2007) combines Bohr's ideas with Foucault's concept of discursive practices. She clarifies that "Discourse is not a synonym for language." (2007, p. 146) as opposed to Anglo-American linguistics:

"To think of discourse as mere spoken or written words forming descriptive statements is to enact the mistake of representationalist thinking. Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said." (p. 430).

Apparatuses in Barad's definition are:

- specific material-discursive practices (including the material setup and the human concepts),

- boundary making practices that produce difference (Here is another link to Deleuze's ideas),
- material (re-)configurations of the world rather than in the world
- themselves phenomena
- open ended
- they produce subjects and objects

This relating to, and constituting, each other in discursive practices does not necessarily need to include a human. In seeing Foucault as anthropocentric, Barad (2007) picks up the general challenge that post-humanism poses: Why would we only imbue human beings with the agency to relate? (see also Braidotti, 2013). Further, if these material-discursive practices, that apparatuses are, create in their intra-actions the boundaries (both ontologically as well as semantically) between observer and observed, between human and non-human, they cannot rely on an a priori notion of the human. It is in the intra-action inside of a matter/discourse system, that subjectivity and objectivity are generated.

While I return to these ideas when I problematise a focus on words (at the cost of non-verbal communication), I will now give an example of practice already affected by these ideas.

A mother (M) and her 15-year-old son (S) come to my therapy (I). The mother is worried about her son's "excessive playing on the play station". She worries that "he misses out on education and friendships". He states that he is achieving reasonable grades and is learning a lot on the play station and has friends through playing games over the internet together.

M: "Yes, what you learn is shouting and yelling and being aggressive. And the friends that you are having there aren't real."

S: "These friends are real. I talk to them. They respond."

M: "You don't meet them in the real world. You cannot even see them. For all I know they might not even be there, only part of the game."

I: "But the game is real?"

M and S look puzzled. S: "It's a game. What do you mean is it real?"

I: "Well, I guess the play station is real. It is there. You can touch it. The game ... I wonder. You cannot quite touch it in the same way, right? Maybe apart from if it is on a CD or DVD. But when you play it, it becomes a bit of a reality, right? You say you can learn stuff in it"

S (enthusiastically): "Yeah, absolutely?"

M (more sceptically): "Hmm."

I: "Well I guess you think it is a real problem?"

M: "Yeah, sure."

I: "Does that make the game real? Or become real or at least a real problem in your view, when he plays it?"

M: "I guess."

I: "If the game was real, would it have its own ideas of what it wants?"

M: "Well I can tell you that. It wants to be played, constantly."

We proceed to explore what the game would want for the son and the family and what effects it has. We explore unique outcomes, when S has resisted the lure of the game and when the

game has not been allowed to impact on the relationship between mother and son. I am guided by ideas of externalising conversations (White, 2007). However, the term externalising seems very inadequate. Together we explore ideas of agency of human and non-human entities, subject-object matters (pun intended).

As much as it seemed important to 'map' this new frontier of systemic practice simply for being there now, it also has implications for the research questions. If language and verbal activity, or symbolic action are something often seen as exclusive to humans¹⁰⁴, then a move to include nonhuman actors in our considerations might also widen our communication focus beyond symbolic action?

3.2.5 Between pillar and post?

As already indicated, in the field there is a variety of references and possible combinations of these .../post- ideas, especially when social constructionism is also part of the mix. Dickerson (2010) for example writes: "social constructionism and poststructuralism changed the way many thought about how the therapy process might work." In the same article she seems to equate postmodernism with social constructionism (referring also to Burr, 2003). Poststructuralism, she states, is more specific but embedded in both. However, so she argues, one could think and work in a post-modern and social constructionist way without being post-structuralist. The distinction she makes between structuralism and post-structuralism is that the former assumes fixed meanings while the latter assumes more fluid meanings. She agrees with "Vivien Burr (2003) [who] interrogates a social constructionist practice by making a distinction between a structural and a poststructural positioning...meaning is never fixed,

¹⁰⁴ p. 208

always contestable, and “up for grabs” (Burr, 2003, p. 53)” John Shotter (1999) makes a similar distinction when he says “However, the notion of underlying or hidden *representations* as providing the only link between mind (or person) and world is so central, that for many, including many social constructionists, we only come properly to know anything at all in terms of linguistically formulated representations.” (p. 73, italics in original) which would be contradicting and post-structuralist ideas.

Lynn Hoffman (1992) states that post-structuralism “... challenges any framework that posits some kind of structure internal to the entity in question, whether we are talking about a text, a family, or a play” (p.7). When Harlene Anderson (2007) declares several of her assumptions as postmodern, including about language, she reaches into the realm of post-structuralism. Barad (2007) however, reminds us that “[i]t is important not to conflate poststructuralism and postmodernism... Postmodernists are concerned with a critique of modernism.”(p.410)

If we throw into the mix a variety of other philosophical thoughts or traditions – David Pocock (2015) for example advocates Bhaskar’s Critical Realism as a realism that gets a critical edge through social constructionism – we certainly find ourselves in a territory with various intersecting fault lines going through it that is increasingly difficult to map.

Where does that leave the practitioner? Stranded between a pillar and a post? Or might we enjoy the space in-between, where we can at times act as if what clients *tell* us *represents* their reality and at times we can act as if it *constructs* it, for example when a client says that they and their partner are not having a good relationship (any more), I could have several options in how I might explore this further, depending on the context, my values or the theoretical position I hold in that moment. I could ask something like “when did you first notice it having gotten worse?” (probably assuming some kind of reality at least in perception

to what the client says). Or I could ask “who would most or least agree with you?” (probably with some idea of socially constructed reality). Or I could explore the meanings of words like “relationship” or “good” and what they meant and who had the power to define what counts as a good or bad one (probably with some post-structuralist thought).

3.3 Interpretation, interaction or intra-action

While many of the above distinctions made concern the philosophical underpinnings and assumptions for our practice (the level of approach – Burnham, 1992) I have given examples of how this might look in practice.

We could also distinguish a fault line that runs across the other fault lines in the territory. This fault line distinguishes what practitioners do. The fault line runs between interpretation and interaction or, as Karan Barad (2007) clarifies, intra-action within a system. However, in the landscape the fault line is and can only be diffuse. Positions like Harlene Anderson’s (2007), where she says that we are constantly interpreting and trying to understand each other’s communication (non-verbal as well as verbal) in a two-way or interactive process, make it difficult to draw the line in the map.

There are positions that indicate distance within the territory. Keeney and Keeney (2012) for example critique “...how cybernetics and systems theories have been misunderstood by both its proponents and critics.” (p.26) in that they “...clung to an interpretation of circular interaction...” (p.26). They further critique “...the postmodern advocates of higher order cybernetics never embodied its circularity, but favoured non-circular interpretive discourse that highlighted endless commentary, reflection, conversation, and description of observations and observations of observations.” (p. 26) As a practitioner the latter might be

useful, especially if I allow myself to combine it with embodied circularity. I could for example observe myself observing a yawn or a turning of the head or a change in the voice. I could then comment: “I noticed you ...” I could further ask about the effect of this movement on another person: “when you yawn while she was speaking, what do you think that is like for her?” While this might be common for many practitioners, it seems to have gotten lost in the theoretical discourse.

Confirming their suspicion seems to be Dickerson (2010). She observes that “[p]aradoxical interventions, symptom prescription, reframing, enactment, and positive connotation were elegant interpretive practices.” (p. 356). In this way she already locates the Milan group’s (Selvini-Palazzoli et al, 1978, 1980) ideas in that part of the territory that I have described as interpretation. Other and later approaches, “Anderson and Goolishian’s ... Collaborative Language Systems, de Shazer and Berg’s ... Solution-Focused [sic] Therapy along with O’Hanlon’s ... Solution-Oriented Therapy, Narrative Therapy as initiated by Michael White and David Epston ... and Just Therapy ... out of Wellington, New Zealand.” (Dickerson, 2010, p. 355), are seen as inspired by social constructionism and poststructuralism and therefore as interpretive or hermeneutic.

Some texts (for example, Winslade 2009) see the later thoughts of Michael White as close to or inspired by Deleuze (whom they see as post-structuralist). But Nichterlein (2013) clarifies that “Deleuze’s thought is not an exercise of interpretation – it is not herme(neu)tics – but an engagement and an experimentation with life.” (p. 233)

This seems to be another important indicator towards answering the question of whether systemic practice is tilted towards the word. Interpretation suggests words. Inter- or intra-action suggests a wider scope: a constant exchange of potentially imperceptible information.

Engagement and experimentation means not knowing beforehand. Maybe it is not too surprising that approaches focussing on words and interpretations need a stronger reminder for the practitioner to be aware of the temptation to know.

3.4 Manualisation or improvisation

An engagement and experimentation with life is what could probably be described as improvisation or Shotter's (1999) spontaneous responsiveness, a position that probably is closer to Keeney and Keeney (2012) who advocate for "allowing the circularities of interaction to guide their circular participation" (p. 26).

A different position is held by those who advocate manualising systemic therapy. Partly in the context of research and being able to justify and fund particular ways of working (see for example Van Hennik and Hillewaere, 2017), attempts at manualisation have been made. Some manualised approaches have been introduced, first in the US, for example Multi Systemic Therapy (Henggeler et al., 2002), Functional Family Therapy (Sexton and Alexander, 2003) and Multi-Dimensional Family Therapy (Liddle, 2009). In the UK, the Systemic Family Therapy Manual (Pote et al., 2000) represents an attempt to create a manual for systemic therapeutic practice and "a synthesis of techniques from the Milan, narrative and solution-focused [sic] schools" (Lorås, Bertrando and Ness, 2017, p. 143). In it they describe a range of practice principles or guidelines, including a systems focus, circularity, patterns, narratives and languages, constructivism, social constructionism and power.

There might be a few difficulties with this manual. It combines some disparate ideas and attempts to unify them. Power, for example, is described briefly with the guideline that therapists should be reflexive about power differences within both family and therapeutic

systems. This hints at an understanding of power that is somewhat away from Bateson's and Foucault's. It also seems to me difficult to unite constructivism (described as a more individual frame of reference) and social constructionism (described as meaning being generated in interaction).

Generally, there is a question of whether systemic practice can be manualised. Pote et al. (2003) give the answer that this is possible (for example for efficacy research purposes) although they do see the difficulty of creating a "modernist document" (p. 258) about practices they summarise as postmodern (including, in their understanding, social constructionist and constructivist practices). They also acknowledge that the manual cannot prescribe or reflect clinical practice. Is it then still a manual in a more common use understanding of the term (for example a repair manual for a car)?

3.5 All or nothing

Lorås, Bertrando and Ness (2017) want to go a step further. They attempt a definition of contemporary systemic therapy, following a historical review of definitions. It is not that this has not been attempted before:

In 1961 Don Jackson and Virginia Satir defined systemic practice as "(...) predicated on the necessity for viewing the symptoms of the identified patient or patients within the total family interaction, with the explicit theoretical belief that there is a relationship between the symptom of the identified patient and the total family interaction. The extent to which the therapist "believes" in family therapy will determine his emphasis on techniques that convey this orientation to the patient." (p. 30)

In 1985 Keeney and Jeffrey write similarly that “systemic family therapy is a perspective that emphasizes treating the patterns that connect the problem behavior [sic] of one person with the behavior [sic] of other people” (p. 3).

But Lorås, Bertrando and Ness (2017) think that “the systemic approach has been considerably developed throughout the years, incorporating elements from first- and second-order cybernetics, structural, strategic, narrative, solution-focussed therapy, constructivism, social constructionism, postmodernism, among others.” (p. 144).

So, they see the need for their own definition:

“Systemic therapy is based on the assumption that people’s challenges and difficulties can best be solved within the relational system and context in which they arose. Clients’ own experience and history are considered to be the best starting point for finding new ways of dealing with their problems. The basic therapeutic goal is therefore to mobilize the strengths of their relationships so as to make disturbing symptoms unnecessary or less problematic for them. The understanding of meaning as created in language also makes it a therapeutic goal to identify each client’s thoughts and beliefs, and link them to their emotions and feelings, in order to co-create new meaning and the possibility of new alternative relationships. Throughout the therapeutic process, the therapists maintain an attitude of respect and uncertainty, knowing that clients’ expertise and knowledge of their lives must be mobilized, and that the therapists’ knowledge is always provisional.” (p. 144)

Maybe this is also in the light of systemic practice being in an “identity crisis. As teachers and developers of a distinct practice and discipline, we family therapists seem to be losing ground, or at least losing definition.” (Beels, 2002, p. 67). He later says that “Family Therapy... appears to be drifting, without much protest, into a varied stream of healing practices where its unique conceptual contribution, ‘systems thinking,’ is less and less asserted or defended.”(p. 81). With reference to Lynn Hoffman (1990), he questions whether systems thinking is actually still seen as the base for family therapy. In a curious turn then, the territory that described itself (once at least) as systemic would no longer be systemic. Of course, it would

not be the first territory to undergo a name change in the course of its historical boundaries shifting.

It is in this spirit that Minuchin (1998), for example, himself already somewhat removed from Bateson's ideas, asks "where is the family in narrative family therapy?" and Keeney and Keeney (2012) ask more generally "[w]hat is systemic about systemic therapy?" The original systems thinking together with the influence of Bateson seem to have "...sunk below the horizon for many of today's family therapy trainees." (Crago, 2006, p. iv). However, one could ask, if "systemic" was synonymous with cybernetics, why would we not speak of cybernetic practices? I remember being introduced to Bateson's ideas and feedback loops and how that felt as if this truly had the potential to make the difference that makes the difference to my practice. I was a social worker. I had been introduced throughout my education up to this point to a more linear cause and effect thinking. But all of a sudden, I could make a different kind of sense of events, even in my own life. I remembered for example, how when my sister wanted to join me playing quite happily by myself with my toy bricks, that we ended up both complaining to our mother. My sister would say that I did not let her play with me, and I would complain that she was annoying. I think my mother was trying to find out what had happened first and establish some kind of sequence of events when it was probably more like simultaneously following well-established feedback loops. I cannot ask my mother anymore whether she felt she needed to find out who was to blame, but I would think of her approach as somewhat linear. I wonder what a more circular approach would look like, maybe starting with noting that we were both unhappy in that moment. At the same time, I do acknowledge that there was a difference in power. Even at that young age I was the older brother and there were certainly chances of creating a different reality. I do credit my mother though with

encouraging us to find our own solution to such conflicts, in a structural sense (Minuchin, 1974) respecting the boundaries between generations. Both my sister and I now feel that this has helped us learn how to have and resolve conflicts more successfully. So, I want to hold on to systemic ideas as a wide field with all its possibly contradictory landscape.

Pearce, Villar Concha and McAdam (1992) discuss the term or judgement “not sufficiently systemic”. A focus group of experienced practitioners that they asked felt, “...depending on context, ... anything can be systemic.” Similarly, in an interview with Charlotte Burck (Barrat, 2012) David Campbell saw this flexibility as a great strength of systemic therapy as it allowed systemic ideas to adapt to various contexts.

And still some practices and ideas (and in this discourse, people as practitioners) are excluded in the examples Pearce, Villar Concha and McAdam (1992) give when something or someone is deemed “not sufficiently systemic”. In their definitional article, Lorås, Bertrando and Ness (2017) state that “...pure dialogical approaches seem to have severed all their connections with the systemic model.” Yet the ‘systemic world’ seems to have embraced dialogic approaches (see for example Seikkula, Arnkil and Eriksson 2003). They are forming part of the landscape.

In this increasingly complex territory, constantly ‘enriched’ by new ideas, this becomes a good question: if systemic can mean anything, what use is the term then?

3.6 Oh “systemic”, wherefore art thou?

In these at times strongly held debates (which sometimes seem to become unnecessarily personal, for example in Keeney & Keeney 2012) “fault lines” or distinctions might be created that might in practice be less clear. Yet, it seems impossible to give a definition that goes

beyond 'systemic means relating to a system', as a dictionary might offer. Clearly that is now in doubt too. Could there actually be a description of a field that could be agreeable to most or even consensual to all practitioners who call themselves systemic?

Are the people grouping themselves around various centres or plateaus of central metaphors, whether this is information, feedback, narrative, text, meaning, power, etc. still meaning the same when they say systemic? It is with this in mind that I think any attempt to describe the field is bound to fail. It certainly makes it difficult to make any (generalising) statements about the territory, including answering the question of whether verbal aspects of communication are being privileged. In the next chapter I will however attempt to get a sense or sensing (Shotter, 2008, 2010) of a tendency, maybe with regards to different plateaus in the territory. Before I do that, though, one more thought.

3.7 Towards a different "not-knowing"

What I offer here might be linked more to certain metaphors than to others, and may appear to "critique" some positions more than others. I believe that all positions possible in the above outlined map can have validity in practice. Some writers in the field accuse others of misunderstanding this, that or the other theory (for example Keeney & Keeney, 2012). I feel very unsure about judging whose or what understanding is the right one. In many cases we cannot consult with the writers themselves and we have to rely on our own understandings or those of other writers who attempt to interpret them for us. In some cases (Wittgenstein seems a prominent and remarkably honest example), writers themselves think of their own previous understandings as 'wrong'. Maybe many understandings are possible with different implications for practice. It also seems entirely possible that misunderstandings or misinterpretations (if we want to hold on to such a notion) have led to useful practices. In

many cases on the level of practice, or the level of technique (Burnham, 1992), different ideas (or different approaches) might even look very similar. How could we possibly know what is a right or wrong understanding, when even the writer sometimes finds it hard to later claim what a right or wrong understanding is. Several of the thoughts presented in this chapter advocate a worldview that is less hierarchical or less linear or less arborescent. In such a view it would be difficult to maintain a binary right/wrong judgement. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer the metaphor of a plateau of intensity. This metaphor seems to fit very well with the idea of mapping a territory. I hope I have shown different plateaus of understanding. Using Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) idea that every point can be a possible entry point into a rhizome, there might be little problem with having different understandings. But it does make it more difficult to define or to know what 'systemic' is, and what is not, as indicated throughout this chapter.

"Not-knowing" has gained some prominence in collaborative approaches and often goes together with some linguistic exploration of meaning. A less linguistic "not-knowing" might possibly be better translated as "not-understanding" or not believing to understand. With this in mind, we can be more irreverent (Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1992) to all these theoretical concepts and maybe allow for more improvisation (Keeney, 1990) in our practice, using different entry points into the rhizome of systemic practice, as and when they seem indicated. Maybe we can allow for a debate that is acknowledging of different possible understandings or even not-understandings, not only in practice with families, but with regards to the whole territory of systemic practices.

Given my research questions, I do though need to consider whether these different understandings and influences have led to more or less attention being paid to language. To

stay more open the question might well be “what is paid attention to in all these ‘systemic’ approaches?”, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

4 What is paid attention to?

In chapter 3 I have mapped some dimensions of distinctions in the territory of systemic practice. It remains up to you, the reader, to decide whether this is a useful map. Accurate it certainly cannot be, but maybe having some resemblance to the territory. The question is now what is paid attention to in systemic practice (clearly remaining with the *what* question). The wider field of 'systemic practice' seems very diverse, as described in the previous chapter, despite possible doubts as to whether some areas should be considered 'systemic'. With reference to the research question there might be an equal diversity when it comes to prioritising language over other forms of communication, both with regards to observing communication in the system as well as using communication to intervene with the system. To cover both aspects, a useful question seems to be "what is paid attention to?" – both with regards to theory and practice.

Gregory Bateson (2002) would probably like us to answer that systemic practitioners pay attention to the "pattern which connects" (p. 8 and repeated). But what kind of patterns would he refer to? In the introduction to *Mind and Nature*, quoted here, he refers to a variety of living entities that might be connected by patterns of similarity and difference. Specifically, this attention to difference is what made him interesting to Deleuze (and Guattari, 1987). He asks "[w]hat is the pattern which connects all living creatures?" (p. 8). Now this is a very wide field of attention to patterns of connection or relations. Gregory Bateson talks with urgency about this being one of the existential questions of our age (and this was before climate change and other vital questions, for example concerning mass extinction or limiting biodiversity, have entered the wider public consciousness). A question that could be described as the ecological question asks about our relationships to nature or our

environment, and our interdependence with it. Indeed, the field becomes even wider if, following post-human ideas, all entities are included as potentially having agency in relation to humans and other entities living and not-living. Surely climate scientists, are looking at patterns which connect, for example between concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and temperature patterns. And it seems that this question also becomes more pertinent to therapists like me. More and more people (especially younger people) come to see me, for whom a sense of dwindling life chances for a long-term survival of our species (and many, many others) is part of the context of their diminished well-being. While Bateson's example of the cooked crab (that arts students had the task to convince him that the crab had been a living thing) illustrated a focus on patterns in form and structure for a living (although no longer living) entity, the climate scientist example here illustrates a focus on patterns of behaviour of what are usually not likely considered living entities. This use of the term behaviour could be seen as a violation of Bateson's (2002) separation of *creatura* (the world of living things) and *pleroma* (the world of non-living things), if we understand the term behaviour as belonging to the world of *creatura*. In order to explain why he thought transferring concepts from one world to the other was an epistemological error, Bateson (see for example Guddemi, 2010) uses an example: when you kick a ball, you can determine where it lands, but when you kick a living thing (say a dog) it is impossible to determine where it ends up. It might even turn around and bite you. This is another indicator to Bateson's (1972) aforementioned dislike of the use of the word "power" with regards to social systems. This seems helpful to me as a practitioner. I think that there is always an existence of some kind of power as conceptualised by Foucault (1980, 1982). But using it in a living system means unpredictable outcomes. It seems both a pragmatic as well as an ethical and aesthetic choice to try to be collaborative. Even as a social worker tasked with using the power to keep others

safe, a systemic orientation has helped me somewhat with avoiding the illusion that I could easily predict what would happen following my interventions – no matter how ‘powerful’ I might have seen myself.

I am not sure whether climate scientists consider themselves systemic practitioners, even if their practice attends to highly complex systems. For the purposes of this thesis, and in the absence of clear demarcations of what systemic practice includes, I will limit the question of ‘what is paid attention to’ to aspects of my own (professional) practice with human systems, families and organisations, allowing for increasing inclusion of non-human entities in these systems, like a play station (in the example in the previous chapter) in a family’s life, or automated processes in organisational life. The question reformulated could be ‘what do therapists, social workers and organisational consultants who consider themselves systemic pay attention to?’ One possible answer, that seems obvious following the above thoughts, is that they focus on patterns of behaviour. This however raises further questions:

- What do systemic practitioners understand by the term behaviour?
- And how do systemic practitioners attend to patterns of behaviour? What does ‘attending to patterns of behaviour’ look like?

I will approach these questions in two ways. In one approach I will ask the participants of my workshops these questions:

- What do you pay attention to in your (professional) practice?
- What do you understand as behaviour?
- What does ‘attending to patterns of behaviour’ look like?

In the other approach, presented next, I will undertake a systematic review of introductions to systemic therapeutic or organisational practices to gain an idea of what the theoretical discourse suggests. I am limiting myself to introductions as they are often very pertinent in influencing practitioners early on in their education and practice. Certainly, for me that was the case. As a social worker during my introductory training to systemic practice I often consulted an introduction. It seems impossible to systematically review all systemic literature with regards to what theory suggests practitioners should pay attention to. However, the literature found will cite works that these introductions present as important. I will include some of these works in my review, especially if they are cited to present a rationale for what is paid attention to. I have to admit a level of subjectivity as it is impossible to draw very clear lines as to which citations are relevant.

4.1 Literature review

In order to search for literature, I used the University of Bedfordshire search engine “Discover”. Discover is a meta-search engine that includes databases like SocINDEX, SCOPUS, Sage and Zetoc. An advanced search without limiters, except for limiting to English language, using the search words “introduction” and “systemic”, yields 2,301,872 results (24th May 2019). This includes introductions to systemic grammar and linguistics, systemic risk funds, systemic machine learning and many more. Limiting the search to these two search words appearing in the title brings the number down to 1,521, still including works from different disciplines (for example systemic advocacy). Adding the search word “practice” to the two search words “introduction” and “systemic” brings the number down to 111. It includes several editions of Rudi Dallos’ and Ros Draper’s (for the second edition 2005 and the fourth edition 2015) introduction and corresponding reviews. Limiting the search to only books (as

this cuts out reviews) brings the number down to 61. However, due to slight variations of titles (and authors) there are only two titles apart from the above mentioned several editions of Dallos and Draper's (2005, 2015) "Introduction to family therapy: systemic theory and practice": John Whittington's (2012) "Systemic Coaching and Constellations" and less relevant for this dissertation, an introduction to a systems perspective to policy development.

One therapist interviewed in Dallos and Draper's (2005) second edition of their introduction describes looking for patterns in structure and describes gaining insight into the connections between beliefs understandings and feelings and patterns and dynamics of actions without saying how insight is being gained. Another therapist and a client family interviewed in the same book describe talking (and thinking) as what is being done in therapy.

Dallos and Draper (2005) continue to describe historic phases of development of systemic ideas. In a first phase that includes structural and strategic ideas, they describe a form of intervention that clearly includes paying attention to, and using, non-verbal aspects of relating to each other: family sculpting developed by Frederick Duhl, David Kantor and Bunny Duhl (1973). Dallos and Draper (2005) also refer to Peggy Papp (1973) and Virginia Satir (1988) as having extensively used these interventions.

In the second historic phase, as described by Dallos and Draper (2005), which includes Milan approaches, there is still some attention being paid to non-verbal communication, but all techniques and skills that Dallos and Draper (2005) associate with that stage are entirely based on verbal communication. They clarify later that the first phase focussed on pattern and process, while the second phase emphasised beliefs and personal meanings. The third phase could well have the headline words "social constructionism" and is attending to language and its role in the collaborative construction of reality and meaning. Overall, this

describes a movement to a greater focus on verbal communication. This seems to match how I remember my journey in the first year of training in systemic practice, a journey where the focus seemed to move from dynamics and what people *did*, to the meaning of what people *said*.

In a fourth edition Dallos and Draper (2015) have added a chapter on ideas and practices emerging in the 21st century. These are largely organised along the criteria of particular conditions or situations (like eating disorders, divorce or child abuse). Practices described here are referring back to earlier (and first order cybernetic) traditions, and emphasise manualised approaches.

In his *Introduction to systemic coaching and constellations* John Whittington (2012) speaks of a “universal language of systems ... that we all know, but most of us have forgotten to speak”, (p. 6) referring to “originator” (p. 6) of constellations work, Bert Hellinger’s “natural orders” (p. 6) and “truths” (p. 6), “hidden organising forces” (p. 6) and “visceral experiences” (p. 6).

While Dan Booth Cohen (2006) sees Hellinger’s constellations in the tradition of the aforementioned sculpting, for example by Virginia Satir (1988), and systemic practice generally, he acknowledges that it is less known in the English-speaking world. I can only speculate why this might be. Apart from the language barrier to be overcome, it might also feel “too different” to many English speaking traditions. A sentence as found in Whittington (2012) “[b]ut systems and system dynamics have no interest in and are not affected by measurement, feedback, goals...” (p. 15) might seem strange, as might words like “natural order” and “truth” (see above).

Another reason might be the physicality of constellations requires few words, and indeed Bert Hellinger preferred a less cognitive and word-led approach (Hellinger, 1998, 2003; see also Cohen, 2006). Whittington (2012) also describes “a constellation [as a] a three-dimensional spatial model, sometimes described as a living map...”(p.34) and emphasises “the largely non-verbal language exchange experienced in a constellation” (p.39). Indeed, in Hellinger’s (1998, 2003) books there are many illustrations of constellations in space, resembling maps rather than transcripts of dialogues.

I remember my first year practising as a social worker after graduating. Similar to the UK there was at that time a first year of practice with enhanced support and supervision. In Germany that included being supervised by the university to guarantee reflexivity and linking theory to practice. As is often the case in practice with children and families, my own family experiences resonated strongly. My supervisor from university invited me into a group he was running that used Hellinger’s (1998, 2003) family constellations work. I remember the experience feeling quite profound and insightful. I felt my own opinions and thoughts and feelings about my own family had shifted. Before this constellation work I had not been very respectful of my parents, probably being arrogant in a way that I saw myself as a relationship specialist and thinking that they could have handled relationships (including with me) so much better (just because I had now graduated in social pedagogy). I do not think I could have put that into words at the time nor how I came out of the experience with a sense of respect for my parents. It must have had an impact on my relationships with both my parents. I experienced there to be more openness between all of us and an improved relationship with my sister. It also had an impact on my work in my early year of practice in that I put less pressure on myself “to get it right”. While I could not quite put into words what had shifted at the time I would

have struggled even more to explain how the shift had happened. I think some of my thoughts in chapter 6 might go towards explaining to myself what happened. Brian Massumi (2002) observes that we sense intensities, before they are interpreted as feelings or even without that interpretive step at all. Maybe that makes some profound experiences hard to explain. The constellation work with my supervisor seemed to have this profound but difficult to explain effect on me when the physical representation or constellation of my family changed in the session.

Ingeborg Stiefel, Poppy Harris and Andreas Zollman (2002) also emphasise the use of non-verbal communication when they see constellations work as close to Moreno's psychodrama ideas. I will return to both constellations¹⁰⁵ and Moreno's psychodrama in later chapters¹⁰⁶.

I should at this moment declare that I have practical experience of psychodrama. Through my practice of playback theatre, I have met a psychodrama practitioner, who, after retiring in the UK moved back to his country of birth. At some point he invited me to teach his students there some playback theatre and I had a chance to participate in his psychodrama workshops. I could see the connections that he made between playback theatre and psychodrama. Both seem to work with the idea of physically replaying (and expanding) a real social situation and finding new insights and ideas for doing things differently. I wondered at that time what it was that was added by physically replaying the situation. We could have just talked about it. But I was sure that would have felt different, less in some way. This is a different version of the second research question – what do we miss when we only attend to words?

¹⁰⁵ p. 302

¹⁰⁶ p. 293

Replacing the word “introduction” with “foundation” yields only one book, Alan Carr’s (1997) *Family therapy and systemic practice: readings of child protection, clinical techniques, and empirical foundations*. This book, rather than an introduction, is a compilation of otherwise published papers and foundations, and refers to empirical evidence. However, it does describe techniques to be used, but does so more in broad brush strokes. A chapter on treating elective mutism does refer – maybe not surprisingly – to nonverbal behaviour (like shouting) and techniques like play therapy, but not in detail. In another chapter, he describes a few techniques like the use of empty chairs as providing a sole therapist a “greater degree of affective involvement” (p. 225) in their hypothesising.

Using the three search words in the title “introduction systemic therapy” yields 64 books. Again, due to multiple entries for the above mentioned several editions by Dallos and Draper (maybe this is a hint to how influential this book is) there, are apart from this, only two other books, both with particular relevance to this dissertation: Fran Hedges (2005) “An Introduction to Systemic Therapy with Individuals: A Social Constructionist Approach” and John Hills’ (2012) “Introduction to systemic and family therapy: a user's guide”

In the introduction to her book “An Introduction to Systemic Therapy with Individuals” Fran Hedges (2005) refers to systemic approaches as “...ways of thinking, talking, acting and feeling” (p. 2). Having asserted that “[p]ost-Milan therapists embrace constructionism” (p. 3), she states that “... most versions [of social constructionism] concur with the idea that there is ‘no preverbal, objective reality that we can know’ ([Pearce, 1995] p. 97) and that we co-construct the world through language (verbal and non-verbal).” (p. 3) Following this, there is little reference to “verbal and non-verbal”.

“...constructionists ... see communication as a social process of creating the world...” (p. 4), “Gergen (1990)[sic, the text / text passage she refers to is from 1992] argues that *everything* [italics in original] is created through discourse...”(p. 4) Under the subheading “Language creates reality”(p. 4) there are examples of what this looks like in systemic practice: talking (or asking questions, getting answers, making statements...). Later in the book there is a short (one page) sub-chapter titled “the language of the non-verbal” (p. 143). In it, Hedges describes mainly how she notices non-verbal cues like “...body language: gestures, facial expressions and so on...” (p. 143) and that “[s]ocial constructionist approaches explore the way *all* [italics in original] these languages *co-create* [italics in original] meaning.” (p. 143)

In his introduction, John Hills (2012) describes a wealth of techniques, prominently the genogram, a visual map of family relationships with variations of using stones or (toy)-figures as placeholders for people. He describes that through the work with genograms, relationships and narratives about self and other can be explored. Many systemic practitioners who work more with families (rather than organisations) will be familiar with this mixture of using these visual maps of relationships and exploring what might be summarised as “text” (in this example, narratives). Accordingly, John Hills goes on to give example questions to ask alongside the genogram work.

Beyond this, most therapeutic interactions and examples are described or rather transcribed as dialogues, noting ‘what’ has been said but very seldomly noting ‘how’ it has been said. In a subchapter headlined “Communication” (p. 67) John Hills (2012) defines “[c]ommunication is the informational conduit...; sometimes through dialogue, sometimes through a touch or glance, meaning is conveyed.” (p. 67) and goes on to say “...it is not just about feeling the feeling but finding the language to convey them.” (p. 67)

Highlighting the importance of attachment, John Hills describes non-verbal interactions like “crying” and other actions like feeding etc. as constituting family relationships.

He asserts that “Words are the straw and clay from which language the bricks of thinking are put together...” (p. 139) but “It is not just the language that communicates but the tone and inflections in its delivery.” (p. 139/140)

Using the three search words “foundation systemic therapy” yields, apart from Alan Carr’s (1997) above mentioned work, Pinsof et al.’s (2018) chapter “The foundation of integrative systemic therapy: Fundamental assumptions about people and therapy.” In it, the authors state as one of their assumptions, and the 7th of 8 of their ontological pillars, that information or feedback is conveyed “...through various channels (e.g., verbal, nonverbal) in reaction to behaviour...”. However, in their introductory chapter preceding this chapter they give an example of their practice in vignettes of several pages, only once referring non-verbal aspect of their work.

In her *Foundations of Family Therapy*, Lynn Hoffman (1981) describes many different approaches to patterns of communication. This seems to be the focus, with many examples and pointers towards verbal communication. Only once, very briefly, does she speak explicitly about non-verbal communication (when describing the injunctions that form part of Bateson’s double bind). In this book Virginia Satir is described as predominantly talking and asking questions, which seems to give a slightly different taste than what might be suggested by Dallos and Draper (see above). However, Hoffman (1981) also finds that Virginia Satir used sculpting (inspired by Duhl, Kantor and Duhl, 1973). Like others, Hoffman links sculpting to psychodrama. She also briefly mentions Albert Scheflen “...collecting data by videotape which

would allow him to compare the use of space and territory ..." (p. 261) and "...producing some striking documentation of hidden patterns of communication...".

In 1978, Albert Scheflen described a prolonged discussion in a team about a client smiling ("in an enigmatic way", p. 59) in the session. All contributors to the discussion saw the smile as expressing either "some feeling or trait" (p. 59) or a non-verbal response to someone else's expression, or as both, as part of a more circular pattern of interaction. The interpretations happened in accordance with the contributor's favourite theory. Interestingly, this article is followed in the journal by an article about sculpting (Jefferson, 1978).

It seems worth staying with Lynn Hoffman for a while as she, beyond being the author of the above *Foundations*, is also a chronicler of systemic therapy (for example her 2002 book *Family Therapy – An Intimate History*) and may also be a living example of the development of ideas. She published "Techniques of Family Therapy" together Jay Haley in 1967 and the above mentioned *Foundations* in 1981. In 1993 she published *Exchanging Voices* following the collaborative turn.

In the introduction to *Techniques of Family Therapy*, Haley and Hoffman (1967) write about 'interaction' and give what may be a valuable hint about why certain aspects of communication are highlighted within the literature. "Part of the value of this work [the interview with practitioners that Hayley and Hoffman undertook] is that it offers verbatim transcripts of conversations ... The verbal transcripts can, of course, only suggest the complexity of the interchange between the family members as they talk with the therapist. The body communication of the participants is necessarily omitted and so is the range of vocal intonations which qualify whatever is said and done." (p. vii) In this book there is an interview with Virginia Satir in which she describes paying attention to non-verbal aspects of behaviour,

like sitting down etc. She also speaks of a sense of relationship to other family members as expressed both through words but also behaviours (and sometimes how these can be sending conflicting messages) and there is a strong sense of “intervening” rather than exploring meaning. The other interviews in this book also speak of disrupting patterns of interactions and circularity.

In “Exchanging Voices” Lynne Hoffman (1993) clearly has taken up the ideas of post-modernism. She writes explicitly “Towards the end of the 1980s, I was beginning to criticize [sic] the entire systems model, start to finish.” She goes on to describe how, together with Harlene Anderson and Harry Goolishian, she moved away from ideas of cybernetics and constructivism, moving towards social constructionism and leaving behind ideas such as feedback loops. Maybe, despite critiquing each other strongly, Hoffman and Keeney & Keeney (2012) would actually agree that practice as described by Hoffman in 1993 is not actually very systemic any more. The focus on interactions was replaced by a focus on words and meanings.

Interestingly, in her *Intimate History*, Lynne Hoffman (2012) suggests a focus on language right from the early stages of family therapy when she writes that “... instead of looking for causation and cure, they [people at the Mental Research Institute] used language and suggestion to shape a different world of meaning.” (p. xv). She describes this as a rhetorical stance (rather than an etiological one). The description “systemic” for her starts with the Milan team. Systemic, in this sense, is different to the overview I tried to give earlier, and is more narrowly defined and linked to the Milan team, rather than used as an umbrella term. In this way, Hoffman (2012) sees solution-focussed practice as its own strand that shifted from problem-talk to solution-talk (worth noting that “talk” did not shift). In one of the next developments, the metaphor of systems was replaced by the metaphor of stories, particularly

through the development of narrative practices. In many ways, Salvador Minuchin (1998) shares a similar, albeit more critical, view when he asks with his article “Where is the family in narrative family therapy?” He suggests that both White and Epston as founders of narrative therapies, and Anderson and Goolishian (as founders of collaborative language approaches), have moved to focussing on the individual and the relationship between language and meaning. Similar to Keeney & Keeney (2012) who quote him, Minuchin suggests that “...that focus decreases attention to the patterns of interaction presently being played out by the family members.” (p. 400).

Beyond this literature search, there is other literature that became part of this research through other searches and following looking up cited literature. You as reader could consider me “having stumbled upon” them. I am aware that this is not the most ‘scientific’ or systematic way of identifying texts. Nevertheless, it seemed right to include them here as they might also be considered indicators of what is paid attention to in systemic theory and practice.

In previous chapters, I cited Dickerson (2010). This quote seems to directly answer the question that forms the headline of this chapter: “What they [systemic practitioners] pay attention to varies from how people sit in the room, to communication pattern, to the family's attempted solution.” (p. 352) It remains unclear how this is paid attention to, and this points to a potential problem with the question that frames this chapter: What is paid attention to does say little about how it is paid attention to? Practitioners might for example pay attention

to how someone feels, exclusively using words, or they might also “read” non-verbal cues such as a hesitation or a smile¹⁰⁷ They might even encourage a non-verbal form of expression.

In consideration of how families might interact with the larger (helping) systems around them, Evan Imber-Black (1988) cites mainly verbal communication but does refer to non-verbal communication.

In her book that reads like an introduction, Elsa Jones (1993) focusses on Milan Systems Therapy. She speaks of interactional patterns that are being attended to, leaving it open as to whether these interactions are verbal or non-verbal. However, under the subheading “Language and Meaning”, (p. 26) she explicitly acknowledges Anderson and Goolishian’s (1988) ideas about problem systems as language systems. In her further description of social constructionism, language and symbolic action have prominent roles again.

This points to Anderson and Goolishian having made some very important contributions to the development of systemic theory and practice. Indeed, in her historic account of this development, Lynn Hoffman (2002) credits them as “[having] explained their postmodern outlook, proposing a language-based point of view instead of the systems one we had been using.” (p. 139). To some extent the question then is legitimate, whether we should actually still consider it systemic if a systems-based point of view is no longer used.

Nichterlein (2013) confirms this shift to a focus on language, albeit with a more critical undertone, when she says: “[a]t the same time that Goolishian and Anderson (1992, p. 8) made the rupture with the cybernetical metaphor, they made a reading of Bateson’s *Creatura* equating it to the world of language meaning-making.” (p. 119) Lynn Hoffman (1993) might

¹⁰⁷ P. 212

have agreed to that, saying that “they [Anderson and Goolishian] have done more than anybody to create a story based approach...” (p. 106).

Finally, in an interview for Murmurations, Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice, Desa Markovic (2019) explains her ‘MOST’ model, that has the 6 dimensions ‘Emotional’, ‘Cognitive’, ‘Cultural’, ‘Relational’, ‘Behavioural’ and ‘Physical’, and suggests that “psychotherapy tends to undermine the physical dimension, and systemic therapy privileges relational and cultural” (29:30).

So far, after this somewhat subjective literature review, indications are that the theory suggests a focus on communication, discourse and language. Often there is some acknowledgement of verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, but the description of paying attention to non-verbal communication is comparatively short in most cases. The major example for utilising non-verbal aspects of communication actively is sculpting, and its further development constellations. I will return to both when discussing suggestions of how to utilise non-verbal communication¹⁰⁸. Depending on one’s reading of the history of systemic thinking and practice, there was always an emphasis on language and meaning. But it would appear there was a shift to an even stronger emphasis on language and meaning through social constructionist approaches. Now there is a question whether these therapies and practices should actually still be considered systemic, or even relating to a family in a narrower sense. Some of the literature cited above brings up this question. Maybe it is useful to develop another umbrella term – without wanting to exclude these approaches from the wider world of systemic ideas – for practices following the ‘linguistic turn’ and the impact of

¹⁰⁸ P. 302

social constructionism: 'social constructionist inspired approaches'. These would include 'collaborative language systems' (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, 1992), solution-focused ideas (de Shazer, 1994), narrative ideas (White, 2007), and of course ideas that directly refer to social constructionism. Whether these approaches are considered systemic in a narrower sense, they are certainly influential in the world of systemic practice in a wider sense.

As one indicator for this I used the reading lists of courses that I attended or taught on. All these courses had the word "systemic" in their title and led to academic qualifications that had systemic in their title. Titles include 'graduate certificate in systemic practice', 'post-graduate certificate in systemic practice', 'Masters of sciences in systemic psychotherapy'. I cannot claim that this covers all courses that are taught under the banner 'systemic'. It is still an exercise in the spirit of interrogating my own practice and a good indicator for others' practice. (I certainly was not alone on these courses.) It might give a flavour of how 'social constructionist inspired approaches' form a large and important part of what is being taught and how "language", with an emphasis on words, is suggested as a focus for attention in practice.

Combining the reading list of four years of my own training, plus two courses for two providers that teach a foundation year training to social workers, amounts to 227 texts. Several texts seem so foundational that they appear more than once, for example, both Mara Selvini Palazzoli, Gianfranco Cecchin, Luigi Boscolo and Guliana Prata's (1980) three guidelines paper and the update on it by Gianfranco Cecchin (1987), as well as Karl Tomm's (1987, 1988) Interventive Interviewing papers, and others. Yet, it seems to make sense to keep counting them as individual readings. How often a text is mentioned indicates their importance weight.

Searching for keywords as outlined after systematically examining texts from the *Human Systems Journal*¹⁰⁹ in the texts' titles and possible subtitles and book titles, I classified the texts into categories:

- Texts / titles suggesting focus on language, discourse and words / verbal practice (54)

This category includes titles with words directly related to verbal communication like “narrative”, “text”, “talk(ing)”, “dialogue”, “discourse”, “interviewing”, “questions”. It is important to note that (only) one of these texts was explicitly critical of a focus on language and verbal practice (Bertrando, 2000). So, it might be more useful to think of 53 texts in this category.

- Texts / titles suggesting verbal but also non-verbal attention and activities (8)

This category includes titles with words relating to both verbal and non-verbal communication like “saying and doing”, “drama” or “enactment”.

- Texts / titles suggesting a focus on physicality/body/arts - non-verbal activities (3)

This category includes titles with words relating to non-verbal aspects of communication and being, like “embodiment” and “pictures”. I also included a text that related to neurology (although the title is just “Mirror – mirror”).

- Texts / titles suggesting a focus on constructionism (12)

¹⁰⁹ P. 61

Although there seems to be good reason to assume a focus on “language” in social constructionist thinking and practice, I kept this as a separate category. It includes titles with “(de-)construct(ion/ing)”.

- Texts / titles suggesting a focus on CMM (7)

Although there would be good reason to see CMM as part of social constructionist thought, and therefore suggesting a focus on “language”, this is a separate category and includes titles with “CMM” or authored by Barnett Pearce.

- Texts / titles suggesting a focus on Solution-focussed brief therapy (5)

Solution focussed brief therapy could also be seen as within a social constructionist paradigm and focussing on verbal activity but is still its own category.

The largest group (138) of texts focussed on other things, and were not easily accounted for by these categories, like Barry Mason’s (1993) “Towards positions of safe uncertainty” (appearing 4 times).

If I add to texts that (positively) suggest a focus on verbal communication and action (53), texts suggesting or about constructionism (12), CMM (7) and Solution-focussed brief therapy (5), there are 77 texts suggesting practitioners focus on verbal communication. This contrasts with 11 texts that suggest a focus or at least include attention to non-verbal communication, and one text that is critical of a focus on verbal communication.

The largest group of texts that does not – according to their title – fall into either of these categories (138). There will still be some texts that mainly suggest verbal activity, or at least use as their examples (transcripts of) verbal activity and maybe also some that (also) attend

to non-verbal communication and action – but likely much fewer. It seems likely that text explicitly attending to non-verbal communication and action would be marked as such in title or sub-title. Admitting that this exploration might only allow to see a tendency, this tendency seems relatively clear: texts used in teaching and training of systemic practice lean to a focus on language, making the answer to the first research question, “Is there now a tendency to focus on the spoken and written word or verbal communication in the field of systemic practice?” more likely a yes.

Despite some texts asserting that communication and language includes non-verbal aspects, the use of the word “language” in most texts examined in this chapter allows for multiple interpretations. This is of course in the context of “everyday” understandings of the word language. The question “What counts as language?” will form the headline of the next chapter. Before getting to this question, I will attend to what practitioners describe as their focus in a further approach to the first research question: Is there now a tendency to focus on the spoken and written word or verbal communication in the field of systemic practice?

4.2 Practitioner feedback

From the second research workshop (11th May 2019), I started by asking participants “How would you describe your practice (in three words, in the shortest possible way...)?” followed by the question “What do you pay attention to in your practice?”

In this workshop I had only four participants, two who I had invited predominantly because of their systemic practice (a social work manager who prefers to remain anonymous, and an organisational consultant, Anne Bennett) and two others who I had mainly invited due to their involvement in physical practices, an Aikido practitioner and teacher, Stan Lee (who is also a

social worker) and a contemporary dancer who for the purposes of this questionnaire opted to remain anonymous, it might however be helpful to also know that she is training to be a therapist.

The systemically trained social work manager described her practice as “social work manager” and stated that in her practice she pays attention to “relationships, risk, language”.

In describing her practice Anne used the words “complexity, social, creative” and says she pays attention to “power dynamics, authenticity & recognition, values & ethics”.

The contemporary dancer who described her practice as “embodied, relational, spiritual” stated that she pays attention to “emotion, sovereignty, experience, truth claims, culture, kindness, boundary interactions, language”. What was fascinating about this answer was that it felt to me as if it could easily have been from a systemic practitioner. I and probably many other systemic practitioners, would pay attention to emotion, experience, truth claims, culture and language. And boundary interactions echoes for me Barad’s (2007) boundary drawing practices. In many ways this points to more similarities in what I had thought of as separate communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Stan described his practice as “encompassing, martial, internal” and says he pays attention to “tension, connectivity within myself and with others in my environment, breath and generation of power”. And again, I noted that this answer sounded to me like a very relational practice. I always thought of martial arts as a relational practice (maybe all practice is necessarily relational) but particularly Aikido. In Aikido we speak of partner rather than opponent and there is a focus on co-ordination of movement conceptualised in the word Ai-Ki-Do, loosely translated as striving for a harmony of energies.

Of course, this is only a very small sample and probably does not allow for any generalisations. However, I was, given my own prejudice as expressed in my hypotheses, somewhat surprised to see a very even distribution of paying attention to language between participants who I had invited predominantly because of their systemic backgrounds, and practitioners of embodied practices. Of course, people (like I described myself in setting the context to this research) are engaging in several practices in their lives that are influencing each other to some extent.

In the third workshop (1st June 2019), of the 6 participants filling in the same form, two participants had taken part in the previous workshop and so filled in the form a second time now. This time one of them, Anne Bennett, described her practice as “Immersed (sometimes beached) in complex organisations and paradoxes” and that she pays attention to “paradoxes of power – perceptions and expectations of leaders, damaging ways workplace communities evolve”. The other person, having filled in the form before, the above-mentioned social work manager, did not fill in this part of the form again.

Two participants had strong links to the idea of Gestalt therapy. Jon described his practice as “Gestalt arts therapy” and said he paid attention to “body, breath, prosody¹¹⁰ / sound energy, figure & ground, relation to anger & grief”. A student in Gestalt therapy (in her final year) who prefers to remain anonymous described her practice as “experiential/physical/open” and describes that she pays attention to “my physical experience, the client’s physical experience, sensations, images, movements that come up, the ‘how’ of what’s being expressed”.

¹¹⁰ Prosody are the parts of speech that are not words but intonation etc. Boscolo et al. (1993) call these aspect para-verbal.

Chiara Santin, a systemic psychotherapist described her practice as “creative, ethical, respectful of difference” and pays attention to “being sensitive [sic], responsive. Body language, emotions, how people dress, how they approach me”.

Angela Cotter, a (not mainly systemically trained) psychotherapist describes her practice as “psychotherapy, research with individuals and groups” and pays attention to “the intersubjective field, intersectionality, affect, embodiment.”

Again, I felt myself (positively) surprised by how much people pay attention to nonverbal aspect of communication – maybe less so by the Gestalt therapists. The sample of course is still very small and it might be difficult to generalise.

I also started to have another suspicion: that both the way I recruited people, and the how I described my research in the information sheet (“...I am exploring how groups communicate without words – how they become or change as a group without words.”) influences the way participants describe what they do.

Coming to the end of this chapter and coming back to the question that frames this chapter, the first observation that I have is that it is not easy to answer the question of this chapter that links to the first research question “Is there now a tendency to focus on the spoken and written word or verbal communication in the field of systemic practice?” – or rather to find one answer. The answers, both in the literature and those given by practitioners, range widely. If I narrow down the question with particular regards to this study to whether we, systemic practitioners, lean towards the spoken and written word or focus on it, the answer is still not a straight forward yes or no. As a tendency I would say that both in theory and from

the answers given by systemic practitioners, the non-verbal aspects of communication are acknowledged but more emphasis is on verbal aspects.

One possible reason for the difficulty of finding an answer or even answers might be that it is not entirely clear what counts as language. In the next chapter this will be the main focus and headline.

5 What counts as language?

As the previous chapters have indicated, there seems to be an understanding within social constructionism, that systemic practice is a linguistic activity. Systemic therapy is considered one of the talking therapies. There is a sense that words matter, and that language is of very high importance. Certainly, in my own practice I use language, even focus on it. I remember clearly taking away from my training that I should attend to language. Actually, if someone asked me at that time what I focus on in my practice, I would probably say “language” meaning what is verbally spoken in a session and the meanings of what is spoken. Up to recently I probably have thought of “language” and “communication” as interchangeable words. But since attending a “physical” theatre school I also have a sense that there is more to communication than words. So, for this thesis, the question of what language is or what counts as language, and how that is different from communication seems important. I am not always clear when I hear myself or others speak of language and of communication and interaction, as if they are interchangeable, for example in supervision or training.

There are various ways into this terrain, depending on whether we ask the question as stated in the headline of this chapter or whether we use the related adjective linguistic. Beyond that, there are different possibilities, depending on whether we approach the term from a more common understanding of language, or whether we concentrate on its use in systemic theory and practice.

To start with a focus on more common understanding seems useful here, particularly as I would expect this to be the understanding that we revert to if the term ‘language’ or ‘linguistic’ is no further defined in a theoretical text we read. To start illustrating the range

that we can find in a common understanding consider the following words or phrases that put some context around the word: ‘modern foreign languages’ and ‘body language’.

In an interview with Jeremy Vine for the BBC programme “What Makes Us Human” Stephen Fry (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07f1dpx>) answers this question with one word: “Language.” He elaborates: “language, language, language; in the end it comes down to language.” In this beautiful speech one gets a sense that it is particularly words that he means when he speaks of language, of what makes us human: “words are your birth right.” However, he also says that language is what makes us us, defines our identity. One could interpret that he holds the view that identity, and social reality generally, is constructed in language.

But let us stay with the first question in the interview. Stephen Fry is not alone in thinking that it is language that sets us apart from all other life. Noam Chomsky (1957) and Steven Pinker (2007, 2013) assert that language is something innate and exclusive to human beings and that it is a precondition of cognition. By taking the position in the debate about whether great apes can use language, they do not deny that great apes communicate, but do clarify that they would not consider this to be language. In doing this they make an important distinction between language as a narrower term associated with speaking words, and communication as a much wider term. Coming from a different direction, Maturana and Varela (1987) also assert that saying something is a human activity and language is something human. However, in other texts Maturana (1978, 1987) argues that all structural coupling is a linguistic process and therefore not exclusively human.

Broadly speaking there are two poles around which our understandings of language (and related words like “linguistics”) are clustered: a narrower understanding of language relating

to words and verbal expressions, and a broader understanding that includes other modalities that communicate.

In an example from the world of systemic thought, Boscolo et al. (1993) think of language as “...the interactive verbal, para-verbal and non-verbal behaviour...” (p. 66). They state that they “...became interested in emotions and how they find expression in verbal and non-verbal (analogical) language,” (p. 66) but then go on to look for “keywords”. Before concentrating on verbal language, they make a distinction between verbal and non-verbal language, equating the latter with analogical language. The question this raises is then, what does verbal language equate to? In our world of increasing technological possibilities we have become used to seeing ‘digital’ as the opposing word to ‘analogical’. I will consider this later in this chapter¹¹¹, and in a following chapter¹¹².

Similar to Boscolo et al. (1993) DeShazer (1994) acknowledges that “[w]ords are of course part of language. So are silences, gestures, facial expressions, etc.” (p.3) only to very quickly assert that “[t]herapy happens within language...” (p. 3) and that “...therapy can be seen as an ‘interchange of words,’ a conversation.” (p. 3). Here the distinction between words on the one hand, and silences, gestures, facial expressions, etc. on the other – what Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) have called analogical language – is dissolved in the assertion that therapy happens in language and that therapy is an exchange of words. While it does not necessarily say that, one might be tempted to understand that language therefore consists mainly of words.

¹¹¹ P. 181

¹¹² P. 210

Both these examples mirror the textual examples from the previous chapter “What is paid attention to”, in that most writers assert that they are paying attention to language in a wider sense, only to narrow it down to actually paying attention to some kind of verbal activity. This can happen very quickly. In DeShazer’s case, it happens in a matter of a few sentences.

In this chapter, I explore the meanings that we attach to the word language (yes, actually in language) and whether they lean towards either the narrower or broader understanding of language, including or excluding non-verbal aspects of communication. For that I will once again examine texts that have been influential for the field of systemic practice.

5.1 Speech Acts – doing things with words

It seems a good opportunity here to return to the ideas the title of this thesis plays on, Austin’s (1962) “How to do things with words”. In this collection of lectures, Austin lays the foundations for what has become known as Speech Act theory. We could use this last sentence to illustrate the ideas. Of course, these lectures as I can access them now are a collection of written words – utterances. They were likely once spoken words. Yet, as far as I have just stated, Austin does something beyond speaking and writing. He performs something; at least two things: He makes the utterance. He lays foundations.

In turn, I have asserted / observed / described that he does so. This last sentence needs further inspection. It is Austin’s point that not all utterances are descriptions, but actions. Austin differentiates between constative and performative acts, the latter being acts with which something is done to someone or something. I think the idea that we do things with language / words is fundamental to the idea that we construct reality in language and why in turn this can serve as a justification for talking therapy or other activities like coaching and

consulting. We can change reality in speech acts. Or, as I remember one of my trainers of systemic practice saying, change is something that happens one conversation at a time. In the process of couples therapy, when a couple agrees that they are “happy”, they affirm something to each other, maybe shift their reality together. Or when a whole team agrees on what are better ways of working they are more likely to use these ways of working. Their new ways of working become their new reality. To distinguish, Austin (1962) uses the term constative to focus on ‘stating something’, finding the term ‘description’ problematic. I will come back to the problem of description. For now, one useful criterion for constative speech acts is that they can be true or false. ‘The table is round’ is false if it is actually square. However, with this sentence I also perform something. I assert for example. I act. And this action is not true or false. But it might be successful or not. I might successfully convince you that the table is round. For performative acts, success depends on circumstances and conventions. I cannot (thankfully) declare war on another country because I am not by convention in a position to do so.

The fact that some individuals not conventionally in a position to declare war have done so with some success (for example, some people referred to as terrorists) might raise questions about the stability of those conventions, or rules, as Searle (1965) would call them, and how they might change. This is one of the questions social constructionism might entertain. CMM, the coordinated management of meaning (for example Pearce, 1994, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007) offers a useful model to theorise this. We will come back to CMM with regards to its understanding language.¹¹³ Using Searle’s (1965) distinction between regulative and

¹¹³ P. 173

constitutive rules also seems useful. While regulative rules¹¹⁴ regulate how something ought to be done, constitutive rules answer the question of what counts as something. In my case, an 'ordinary' person, not a head of state or government, saying so does not constitute a declaration of war, as it does not follow the constitutive rules of what counts as a declaration of war. This distinction is an interesting one; as we trace it, it seems to have slightly different meanings or understandings attached to it. Searle (1965) himself traces the distinction back to, and bases his own distinction on, Rawls' (1955) defending utilitarian ethics. However, as a small aside, in 1912 Elijah Jordan hands in his doctoral thesis with the title 'The constitutive and regulative principles in Kant'. More importantly, we find references to this distinction in Pearce's (1982) work, and with reference to this in Karl Tomm's (1987) work, both important writers having influenced systemic practice as shown in the previous chapter. For them, with a slightly different emphasis, regulative rules guide actions, functioning like behaviour guidelines, and constitutive rules give meaning. Although both in CMM as well as with Karl Tomm, the application of these rules is not only limited to language, but all behaviour. I would note that a lot of my work, whether as a social worker, therapist, consultant or coach, has to do with ideas on social conventions (rules) – how one should behave or act, for example how one should be a "good parent" or what counts as "good parenting". It seems useful to note that the question heading this chapter is a question inquiring into a constitutive rule: What counts as language?

¹¹⁴ P. 158

In some ways this distinction between regulative and constitutive rules is one way of dealing with the problem of rules vs context in considerations about language since Wittgenstein. I will come back to this.¹¹⁵

While Austin allows that often the same act could also be done without words – denying something by shaking the head instead of saying “no” for example – his general focus is utterances of words. Austin distinguishes between phonetic acts as making any kind of utterance / sound, and what he calls phatic and rhetic acts based in vocabulary and grammar. For the latter two he does consider contextual and non-verbal aspects that influence the meaning. The last category, a rhetic act, uttering a rheme, is uttering a pheme (words) with a more or less stable reference in mind. We could think of rhetic acts as intentional. Rhetic acts can be an action, performative or at least be understood as an action, a speech act.

To think about how a speech act could be seen either as descriptive (despite Austin’s warning, I now use the more common term rather than ‘constative’) or performative; and I use another of his concepts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. A locutionary act is saying something. Austin says that every locutionary act is also an illocutionary act, the doing something or using what is said to do something. In my example above, Austin writes words (that have meaning or reasonably stable reference - locutionary act). My statement that Austin writes words can be seen as either true or false. It is constative.

Austin also lays foundations (illocutionary act). However, it is fair to say that “laying foundations” is my interpretation, maybe a reflection of getting a sense of a basic understanding as a result of receiving his locutionary act by reading the book. This is the

¹¹⁵ P. 157

perlocutionary act. He made me understand some basics of Speech Act theory. Emphasising the difference between illocution and perlocution I could say “in writing this book he explained to me” (the “in” leading to in-locution or illocution), and I could also say “by writing these words he made me understand” (the “by” leading to perlocution). The illocution focuses on the force or action towards me. The perlocution focusses on the effect.

There is some debate about whether perlocution has to be intentional (Sbisà, 2013). Scholtz (2017) equates perlocution to the aim of a speech act. Others, including Sbisà, prefer to speak of perlocutionary effects that could include unintended consequences. I could for example say “by writing these words he confused me.” This in turn might have much further consequences, for example that I become so frustrated that I decide to meet anyone interested in communication with deep hostility. Sbisà speaks of an accordion effect. I find this echoes the “afterlife” of critical moments in communication that Pearce (2007) says shape our social worlds. There are other echoes of distinctions between what is said/done and how it is received that I will consider next also with regards to how language is understood.

Although I feel I have now gone deeper down a particularly rabbit hole that might have taken away from the main path of this research, I found it useful as it shed some light on what might have gone wrong in the co-construction of a social reality that led people to seek out my help as a systemic therapist, coach or consultant. The concept of the perlocutionary effect can help me inquire into how the intended effect of a speech act may differ so drastically from the actual effect. Sometimes, particularly with non-verbal (or dynamic) acts of communication, there is not even an intention to cause an effect. I imagine many of us have heard people’s accounts in which they have said that so and so made them feel this or that way. When asked

how they knew, they say something like “It is just how they were”. I sometimes get a sense of this being a specific but indescribable set of non-verbal speech acts one could change.

With regards to Austin (1962), it is clear that his understanding of the word ‘language’ is closely linked to words in spoken or written form. The units of language are phemes, they could possibly be meaningless. For the spoken language though he does consider non-verbal features like “tone of voice, cadence, emphasis” (p. 74) and as said before, he does give examples of non-verbal acts that do the same as verbal acts. However, the emphasis is – as the title already suggests – on words and their use. Occasional mention of how a non-verbal action might say something, the other side of the coin so to say, is much less explored.

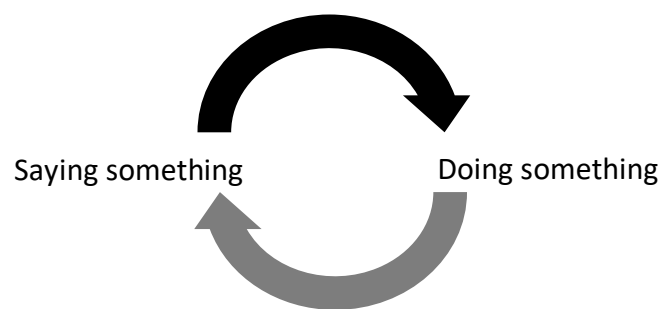


Figure 12: Speech Act 1

5.2 Wittgenstein’s language games

As indicated in another place¹¹⁶, of great importance and influence both in the world of systemic theory (for example Pearce, 1999, 2005) and beyond (for example Searle, 2016) are Wittgenstein’s thoughts on language, particularly the later thoughts expressed in the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1953) that clearly reject and contradict earlier ideas expressed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1961, original 1921). I outlined earlier that in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein had seen words as representing reality. For a statement

¹¹⁶ P. 103

to be true it has to mirror the facts. It has to have an “isomorphic structure to the fact” (Searle, 2016, p. 531). Meaning with regards to language, we could say, comes from that structure.

In his later work, Wittgenstein (1953) thinks of names for things as labels, but clarifies that not all words we use are labels or are labelling things. A series of exclamations “Water! Away! Ow! Help! Fine! No!” (§27) illustrate that we do different things with these words beyond just labelling. (We can see some parallels here with Austin’s speech act theory). Words now are becoming tools that can have different uses. Meaning arrives out of the use. And the use, like the use of a tool, might be different in different situations. With regards to language Wittgenstein calls these situations language games. Therapy, coaching and consulting can all be seen as language games. And, like other games, they have specific rules (and responsibilities). Even though I often find myself “doing” / “saying” very similar things in therapy and coaching, there are different expectations attached to each with regarding qualifications, insurance, pay and who or what it is for. And these rules seem useful for my perspective. I remember having a coaching client where we noticed some influences from their family of origin experiences on their managerial practice. We agreed that they would find a therapist for what they would like to change in her family, so as not to confuse what I would now call our language game of coaching.

5.2.1 Rules vs contexts

The term language game is advancing two potentially contradictory views of what gives meaning to words (see also Whiting, 2010): rules or context. Rules in this sense are related to knowing how to use a word properly, akin to a structure of signs I outlined in the sub-chapter

on Post-/structuralism¹¹⁷. Context, however, would give meaning to words for example by what has been said before or after. (This is a point I will further discuss when considering dialogical ideas¹¹⁸.) Intention, what one hopes to achieve (by saying something), is part of the context. I am here also reminded of Bateson's (1972) saying that there is no meaning or communication without context. It is interesting to note the wider term communication here as opposed to the potentially narrow terms 'language' or 'words'.

One argument for the idea of rules (if not sign-structures) giving meaning is the question of how, if there are not at least some rules or conventions, we are able to understand each other at all. This links back to the above introduced distinction¹¹⁹ Searle makes between regulative and constitutive rules, insisting that many difficulties in philosophy with regards to language are due to a failure to appreciate this difference. This then has implications for how many different kinds of speech acts there are. While Wittgenstein and Austin (see also Pearce, 1994) are unsure, or rather have a very large, potentially infinite number in mind, Searle (2016) identifies a limited number, namely five, based on the idea of rules that constitute different speech acts. To explain the criteria for identifying these different kinds is less important for this thesis; what is more significant is that all three criteria relate to intentionality. Somewhat shortened, the first criterium draws a distinction between propositional content and the psychological mode. Whether I fear that it rains, or I hope that it rains, or state that it rains, the propositional content is the same (rain) while the psychological mode towards it is different in this example (fear, hope, assertion). The second criterium distinguishes the direction of fit. When I assert that it rains, my words need to fit the world; when I pray that it

¹¹⁷ P. 101

¹¹⁸ P. 176

¹¹⁹ P. 153

rains I try to make the world fit the words (or rather the propositional content). The third criterium, closely related to the second, describes notions of fulfilment (of desires) and truth (of beliefs or assertions) as representations of conditions of satisfaction (of the speech act). This last criterium is interesting also because it includes a notion of representation as “an essential character of the mind” (Searle, 2016, p. 534) and as a “pervasive feature in language” (Searle, 2016, p. 534) or as Searle (2016) ascribes to Wittgenstein, as “a feature of a very large number of language games”. Representation of course is a contested issue, especially when looking back at the discussion of Post-Structuralism.

5.2.2 Meaning and intentionality

Intentionality is central to Searle’s (2016) thoughts. He writes:

“The key to understanding language and meaning is to see that human language is an extension of basic biological forms of intentionality, especially perception, belief, desire, intention, and memory. Linguistic meaning is derived intentionality.” (p. 533)

Intentionality is something that other (higher) animals also have but the difference, according to Searle (2016), is that humans have the capacity to give intentionality to sounds (speaking) and marks (writing) to arrive at social linguistic meaning. In this way Searle also makes another argument for language as an exclusively human affair. Intentionality, it seems to me, is a difficult to evaluate concept in everyday interaction. Searle uses the example of someone lifting an arm – it is worth noting this is a non-verbal speech act. If the intention was to lift an arm, then the intention is fulfilled by lifting the arm. However, if they lift their arm with the intention of voting for something, then that intention might be fulfilled if the vote is counted. We could say that an element of contextuality is part of the meaning process here. In a

situation that is not a show-of-hands-voting situation, the intention to vote would be more difficult to fulfil. But context alone also does not guarantee the correct / intended meaning is “read” (if there is any). In my own practice of teaching, I occasionally see people lifting their arm. In this particular context I am often reading this as a person wanting to speak, for example to ask something to be clarified. Mostly that is the right guess. But on occasion I get the answer “Oh no, I was just stretching my arm.” And sometimes the person does not even realise that they have lifted their arm. This raises questions about intentionality. Would we call this an unintentional speech act? Using the distinction of illocutionary act and perlocutionary effect, they might sometimes be very different. In this case, once the person has in a further exchange of speech acts realised that they unintentionally raised or stretched their arm, how are we, and particularly I, then attaching meaning to this act? Would we all see the same meaning?

This brings into focus a difference between what is sent and what is received, between the illocutionary and perlocutionary act (Austin, 1962). But before I attend to this, I need to attend to intentionality first. In the context of anti-discriminatory practice, I have sometimes heard people justifying themselves with something like “I did not mean to offend.” They might have “helped” someone who found this help patronising or disempowering. And I have also heard people responding that not having had the intention alone, does not make it inoffensive. I can see both perspectives and have been in both positions. But as a white professional non-disabled male I have a privileged position, so I have probably more often been the offending person rather than the offended one. I now think that intention matters, but it is not enough. To also consider how something might be experienced that I say or do, might be a next step I need to take.

5.3 The difference between what has been sent and received

Beyond the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, there are various models theorising the (potential) difference between the meaning that was intended and the meaning that was attached by the receiver or observer (Maturana, 1987) of a speech act.

5.3.1 The five axioms of Pragmatics of Human Communication

Maybe one of the most famous and certainly in the field of systemic thought and practice but also beyond influential works is the *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967). I remember being taught this and some of the following models in my first training as social worker in a course that included but not foregrounded systemic ideas. Not using the term “speech act”, Watzlawick and his colleagues nevertheless have a similar yet opposite starting point. While Austin’s (1962) ideas are built on the basic idea that every time we say something, we also do something, Watzlawick and his colleagues say that every time we behave or we do something, we also communicate. With the further observation that “behaviour has no opposite...one cannot not behave” (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967, p. 48) they arrive at their first axiom that “one cannot not communicate” (p. 49). Thus, they add the other half of the circle to Austin’s “speaking is doing”: doing is speaking.

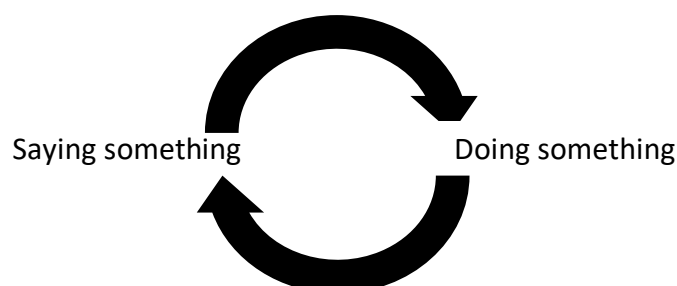


Figure 13: Speech Act 2

I find this axiom important, in that it already speaks to the intentionality. Even if I try not to communicate, I do communicate something. I behave in some way. This will be perceived, no matter how little conscious of it I am. I wonder whether this explains some of the emphasis that I already put in my social work studies on non-verbal communication, theatre and improvisation: an attempt to be more conscious and have more choices about my behaviour. In my research I am trying to extend, formalise and share with others, an understanding of the potential usefulness of such an approach within systemic practice.

Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's (1967) second axiom offers another possibility to explore the difference between what is sent and what is received, or to be more precise, the meaning intended when sending information and the meaning interpreted when receiving it. Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) differentiate a content and relationship level of communication – very reminiscent of Searle's (for example, 2016) distinction between propositional content and psychological mode. However, they see their distinction as Bateson's distinction between report (content) and command of how it is to be understood. According to Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) the latter, the command of how a message is to be understood, describes a relationship. Staying with the idea that there is a qualifying command about how the content is to be understood constitutes what can be called meta-communication – communication about communication. We could think of this as qualifying the content. An example to illustrate this is a sentence like "This is an order."

The combination of this with a non-verbal cue like a wink could indicate a joke and that it is actually not an order (like the example that I made in the opening chapters¹²⁰).

Before turning to other models to explain the difference between intended and interpreted meaning, I will briefly attend to the other axioms that will become important later in this study. A third axiom deals with punctuation that creates episodes of communication. I will discuss this more when exploring ideas of CMM. A fourth axiom, that distinguishes digital and analogic communication, will feature in a subchapter after exploring other models of explanation of difference between sent and received communication. The fifth and last axiom distinguishes symmetrical and complementary communication patterns.

5.3.2 Other models distinguishing different aspects of communication

In 1934 Karl Bühler (1982) differentiated between different aspects of speaking. Central is a sign (very much in a Saussurian sense). It is spoken by a speaker or sender and received by a listener or receiver and is about a thing or a situation. This has become known as the Organon model. Accordingly, there are three different functions happening simultaneously: a descriptive function relating to thing or situation, an expressive function relating to the sender, and an appeal function relating to the receiver. During my first studies in social pedagogy I was introduced to these ideas with a practical example: two people sitting in a car and one saying “You drive slowly.” We could easily imagine that this sentence could indicate problems of communication within a couple’s relationship. The descriptive function is just that – an expression that the other person is driving slowly. Of course, this touches on another language problem: slowly compared to what? But the expressive function might be

¹²⁰ P. 46

something like “this feels nice and safe to me” or maybe the opposite “this is too slow for me – I am worried about being late”. The third function, the appeal function, could be something like “could you please drive faster”. It seems that not only sending but also receiving a message creates relational reality. Interactions like this and how the people involved navigate these communications and seek to understand each other, are often explored in my practice, in couples or family therapy, or in (group) coaching. While this might be reminiscent of Austin’s ideas considered above – appealing for example as illocutionary act, there is another interesting similarity: Bühler (1982) views speaking as doing something. He differentiates between speech actions, any action of speaking, and speech acts that are speech actions setting the speaker in a specific social context. The question associated with speech acts for Bühler (1982) is what a speaker means in a specific context.

I do not know whether Bühler influenced Austin. According to the back-cover text of an English translation, Bühler’s (1982 – original 1934) *Sprachtheorie – Language theory* (Bühler, 1990) “resisted translation into English” for a variety of reasons. If the ideas were developed independently one could speak of a case of convergent evolution of ideas due to encountering similar questions.

Bühler (1982) most certainly influenced Jacobson (1960) who developed a model of communication that extends the three aspects of the organon model to six. Apart from the sender and receiver there is the message and three further aspects: context, including objects or situations (one of the three aspects grouped around a sign for Bühler); channel or maybe easier the communication channel or contact; and code (the meaning of a sign). This element of language, code, is important for our further investigations. Jacobson (1960) says that for a message to be operative there needs to be “...a CODE [sic] fully, or at least partially, common

to the addresser and addressee (or in other words to the encoder and decoder of the message)” (p.353).

Corresponding to these elements, there are six functions (one of which is usually dominant). The referential function (1) references the context, or situation or object. The aesthetic or poetic function (2)¹²¹ refers to the message itself and its aesthetic value. The expressive function (3) refers to the sender (like in Bühler’s ideas). The conative function (4) refers to the receiver (much like Bühler’s appeal function). The phatic function (5) prepares and maintains the channel of communication, which includes greetings. The metalingual function (6) refers to the meaning of a sign, for example a word. Coming back to my example “you drive slowly” we see a reference to the current situation, driving (1). Beyond inquiring into what the sender says about themselves (3) or what they hope for from the receiver (4) we could think about whether it could be said differently (2). At the danger of outing myself as a poor poet, it could be something like: “with what wonderful leisure we drive”. In practice, we could wonder if this change in expression or tone might make a difference to the relationship (a sentence like mine could come across as quite ironic). We could also see it as an invitation to another kind of conversation (5) or we could inquire into the meaning of words such as “slowly” (6).

It is interesting to inquire if these models could include (exclusively) non-verbal communication. Let us take Searle’s (2016) example of lifting an arm. According to Jakobson (1960) the referential function (1) is “either verbal or capable of being verbalized [sic]” (p.

¹²¹ It might be interesting to think for a moment about written words. We could think about written words as words in a “purer” form than spoken words, unadulterated by the tone and melody of the voice and any further non-verbal parts of communication. But even without paying attention to other potential non-verbal aspects like typeset, poetry can be written down and maintain its aesthetic / poetic function and we can find the words more or less beautiful. Maybe even words by themselves are sometimes more than words and bring with them their own analogic qualities.

353). This would be the case with a vote or giving the sign that one wants to speak, less so if one just wants to stretch one's arm, but is still possible. There could be an aesthetic or poetic function (2) of lifting one's arm, for example in dance. The example of stretching one's arm (and maybe yawning at the same time) would fulfil an expressive function (3). A conative function (4) could be wanting the vote to be counted. One can raise one's arm to greet someone and fulfil a phatic function (5). It becomes more difficult trying to find an example where raising one's arm could fulfil a metalingual function (6). Of course, we can enquire into the meaning of raising an arm. I do this when I ask a learner why they lifted their arm. But how do we enquire into the meaning of something, anything, by lifting an arm? If we are lifting an arm to prepare for asking the meaning of something, then the lifting of the arm is a phatic act. We could imagine that instead of asking with words when someone lifts their arm in class, I lift my arm in response and maybe have a facial expression that might signal that I do not understand. In a mixture of several functions, I would express my confusion (expressive function) appeal for clarification (conative function – appeal function in Bühler's model) and I would also enquire into meaning of the previous lifting of the arm by the learner (metalingual function). Me lifting my arm is then part of an inquiry into meaning (metalingual function). But the next difficulty is then that it is only part of a more complex act that includes my facial expression. In fact, the lifting of the arm now merely refers to the learner's lifting of the arm (referential function) and cannot not in itself fulfil a metalingual function. I will return to this problem of the relationship between meaning and speech act and speech action.

Influential in the German speaking part of the world, and influenced by Jakobson, is a communication model by Schulz von Thun (1981). He distinguishes four different aspects of communication, often referred to as four ears. This could be seen as a combination of

Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's (1967) second axiom, distinguishing content and relationship level, and Bühler's (1982) and Jakobson's (1960) models. According to this model, every message has four facets, or can be heard with four different ears. Self-revelation corresponds to the expressive function (this also includes unintended revelations). Appeal corresponds to the appeal or conative function. Factual information refers to the situation (Bühler, 1982) or referential function (Jakobson, 1960) or content (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967). Looking from a Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's (1967) perspective, Schulz von Thun (1981) splits the relationship aspect of communication further into self-revelation, appeal and relationship (in a narrower sense). For practice purposes we can inquire into the effect of "you are driving slowly" on the relationship or what it says about the relationship. With this model, we would have less of a problem with the possibility of exploring meaning using non-verbal communication, as there is no specific metalingual function enquiring into meaning. We could also see the central term 'message' as paying attention to Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's (1967) first axiom that sees all behaviour as communication or messages, thus avoiding the problem of signs, as for example contested between structuralists and post-structuralists, that Bühler's (1982) and Jakobson's (1960) models would still be open to. All behaviour, whether consciously or not, is meaningful and can be received or interpreted differently, independent of an intentional or unintentional meaning sent by the sender.

I can see an accordance with Hoffman (1985) saying: "...all communication is necessarily indirect.[...] A corollary of this position is that you can have no 'instructive interaction' in the sense of placing little packets of information into the heads of other people, or receiving such packets in turn" (p. 385, as quoted in Nichterlein, 2013, p. 94).

Given this, the potential for, or almost inevitability of, misunderstanding, it might seem surprising that we do (at least at times) successfully communicate. Beyond the chance for misunderstanding there is also the question of how different parts of a system communicate or intra-act.

This subchapter might not have directly answered the question what systemic practitioners focus on. But if “language” is a strong focus, then it is worth exploring what counts as language and what counts as communication. The question of what happens *between* two parts of a system and how they communicate is of practical importance for systemic practitioners. The models described in this subchapter can help making distinctions between what has been sent or intended to be sent and received. This applies to processes of communication that are non-verbal, too. It seems fruitful to think about how communication might work successfully, again with a view of applicability to non-verbal communication.

5.4 How do we “understand” each other?

5.4.1 Structural coupling

One possible explanation leads us back to what is already alluded to in this quote by Hoffman – Maturana and Varela’s (1972, 1987; and Maturana, 1978) structural coupling. To explore their thinking about language, it is necessary to outline their understanding of mutual influence between living unities (systems) within a wider ecological system. A good approach into their thought is the distinction between organisation and structure. Any living unity, for example a human being, is itself a system consisting of components (for example organs). These components are organised in a specific way, interacting with each other, which gives the unity its identity. This echoes the question of constitutive rules (Searle, 1965); in this case

“what counts as a living (human) being?” Autopoiesis is the capability of the system or unity to maintain its organisation or identity and prevent a loss of identity.

The structure of a biological or living system or unity on the other hand is more like the state it is in. This state can change either without a loss of identity, or with a loss of identity. Autopoietically, the unity will try to avoid a loss of identity responding to its state within the environment or an element in the environment that might trigger it. Our human being that we used as an example might be hungry. That is a state or structure. If that human being stays hungry for too long, organs might fail, changing the organisation of said human being, and it might cease to exist as a living human being – a loss of identity. When this hungry human being now sees a food source, a biscuit for example, this might trigger a response, a behaviour to take that food source and eat it. But this biscuit has only triggered that response, not determined it. If the human being was not hungry, but the opposite, in a state of being full, it would probably not have eaten the biscuit no matter how appetising it looked, even if the biscuit had “eat me” written in sugary letters on it. Our human being’s response, in the same way as any other living system’s, is structurally determined. It is impossible to instructively interact with it, in the same way as we cannot predict where a dog would go when we kick it (not so hard that it flies through the air); it might even turn around to bite us (Bateson, 1987). We can also not predict with a high level of certainty how someone reacts when we say to them “you are driving slowly”.

If we now have several (more than one) structurally determined unities as part of a wider ecological system, they interact with each other, triggering each other to respond, but each determined by their own structure, and in an attempt to maintain their organisation. A hunter might hunt prey, but even when they are hungry, they might stop unsuccessfully if they are

exhausted. The prey might try to run away and might also stop if exhausted. The predator might stop hunting if successfully able to still their hunger. Maybe both predator and prey will run away if there is an even bigger predator triggering fear in them. Clearly all these entities mutually influence each other, triggering responses in each other while being determined by their own structure or state. Of course, these example entities do not exist in empty space. They exist within a wider ecological system that itself can structurally change or is structurally plastic. As entities within the medium, and between individual entities and the medium, mutually influence each other's states, they are structurally coupled. This can establish a consensual (not necessarily in a conscious way) domain, if two entities are helping each other to maintain their organisation, for example if two predators hunt together and then share in the successfully hunted prey.

What that means for my practice, is that I feel invited to explore people's own "structure". I might for example ask "how / when / from whom did you learn to understand 'you drive slowly' in this particular way?". I might also enquire into the wider environment that might change: "has your partner saying 'you drive slowly' had a greater or lesser impact on your driving if the road is busy?" A circular question would ask them to consider how their partner might answer this question.

Maturana (1978) asserts that language "... is currently considered to be a denotative system of symbolic communication, composed of words that denote entities regardless of the domain in which these entities may exist."(p. 50) It is this denotation, the reference of a symbol to a specific something, that is troublesome, as it requires consensus already and language therefore needs to arise out of something different than denotation, and that process is structural coupling (in the consensual domain). Denotation and linguistic structure

are attempts by an observer to make sense of the linguistic behaviour between two entities that is recursive as part of their structural coupling, responding to each other, changing their structure, triggered by the other but determined by their own (previous) structure. Language, therefore, is interactional. I might ask “how did you learn to understand each other in this way?”

This sounds strongly like Wittgenstein’s (1953) assertion that there cannot be a private language. We could say that “understanding” is yet another attempt by an observer of linguistic behaviour to make distinctions about outcomes of communicative processes with regards to the structural coupling of those entities involved in the communication. Understanding, we could say, is generated within these processes. As such, it is inevitably open and open-ended; subject to ongoing structural coupling, there cannot be a fixed understanding. I am tempted to see the changing of the meaning of words (including the word “language”) in the context of ongoing structural coupling. And for that matter, all (my) practice is a form of structural coupling. How do we understand each other and make meaning of each other’s actions? As a systemic practitioner, I am aware that the success of my work depends on how much I am able to structurally couple with my client(s) in order to maximise mutual understanding (or co-ordination of meaning), and help them move towards a new, safer or more fulfilling structure (of thought or belief or relationship).

Only a few years ago, when working with a group of young people, I heard the word “sick” used in a way that surprised me. In a conversation not at all related to sickness and where I expected the speaker to be happy about something, they said “That is so sick.” Of course, I had to explore what was meant by “sick”. With some level of patience, another young person in the group explained to me that “sick” was probably the most affirmative and positive

remark possible. At the time I thought of this as coordinating our linguistic resources, achieving understanding helped us work together. This working together could be seen as helpful for our autopoiesis: understanding or rather coordination as structural coupling. In Maturana's (1978, 1987) thought structural coupling, including in a non-verbal way, is linguistic action.

5.4.2 CMM

How does this coordinating of linguistic resources work? One way of answering this question, that was to become very influential in systemic practice, is known as the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). Developed by W. Barnett and Vernon Cronen (Pearce, 1994, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007) it emphasises both context and rules, and consists of a selection of models that can be used to make sense of communication. Although Pearce (1994) clarifies that non-verbal aspects of communication play a great role in interpersonal communication, the focus, possibly because of the form of a book, is on words. We can assume that the models developed and briefly described below are intended to also help make sense of non-verbal communication.

5.4.2.1 The hierarchical model

In the hierarchical model, speech acts (Austin, 1962) are the smallest unit of meaning. They occur in episodes of social interaction that give context to the speech act. A speech act like "hello!" makes sense in a different way in an episode of greeting than in an episode of being woken up. Our social lives are happening in such episodes: greeting, waking up, a sales conversation, a personal conversation, having an argument, or driving together somewhere. Other layers that can change their order contextualise episodes of speech acts: relationship,

self and culture. Both depending on culture and relationship different speech acts are ‘making sense’ in an episode of greeting. I might greet my partner in a different way than someone I just met. And if it is someone new, the kiss on the cheek might be ok in some cultural contexts but not in others. It makes a difference whether my couple from the earlier example are driving in Germany, where large parts of the motorway have no speed restrictions, or a place where there is a general speed limit.

Typically seen as a high context, one that gives meaning or has contextual force over others is culture. Culture in this view is not just what might be captured by phrases like “cultural industry” but (a group’s shared) beliefs, values, customs and ways of doing things. Yet culture can change even if we were to see it as the highest context. Some speech acts or episodes have such strong implications that they can change higher contexts. We can easily imagine an act of violence changing the quality of a relationship or even culture. The implications of the murder of George Floyd and even more recently of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia changed culture on a global scale.

5.4.2.2 The daisy model

For the daisy model there is the assumption “...that we are never only in one conversation at a time.” (Pearce, 1999). While I am actually talking to my daughter I might also “converse” in my mind with my mother (who does not live any more) about ideas of what counts as good parenting. I might also have a conversation with a text I have read about good parenting. I might have the voice of my partner in my mind and so on. The daisy model prompts us to be mindful of these various conversations that are happening at the same time as the visible, tangible or audible speech act.

5.4.2.3 The serpentine model

The serpentine model invites us to see the interpretation of a speech act by the receiver as guided by constitutive and regulative rules (Searle, 1965; [described here](#)). For the receiver a speech act counts as something (constitutive rules) or requires a particular response (regulative rules). Either way, for the receiver there will be a sense of how to respond. This response of course will undergo the same interpretation by the first (and maybe other communication) participant(s).

5.4.2.4 The LUUUUTT model

The LUUUUTT model's central concern is storytelling (Pearce, 1999). Similar to White (1989, 2007) and Epston's narrative ideas, storytelling is being seen as the very human act of making sense of our social world in stories. But in telling stories there is usually a discrepancy between the lived experience, or stories lived and the stories told. Some stories or parts of stories might be unknown, unheard, untold or untellable. The LUUUUTT model prompts us to consider these parts of stories.

What I found a brilliant example of the application of the LUUUUTT model (and other aspects of CMM) to one of my practices is Kathleen Van de Vijver and Rebecca Harvey's (2019) article on child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child safeguarding. They describe for example, that 'our' professional stories of someone being a victim of CSE might not be 'tellable' for the victim themselves. This might be because there is a 'big untold' story. Wider society often blames victims of sexual abuse for what happened to them. On the other hand, stories of victimhood tend to take away a sense of agency. This makes the telling of the abuse story especially difficult given they are afraid, blackmailed, groomed and exploited into silence.

In my practice, I did not work with a case where CSE was an aspect (or at least I was not aware of it), but I challenge myself to wonder what I might not hear (either because I “cannot” hear it, or because it is untellable, untold or unknown (in that moment)). Maybe I do not notice or ‘hear’ stories if they are expressed differently than with words. It seems another source of tension between accepting the story as the client tells it and being aware and looking out for the possibility that a victim or survivor of oppression (any oppression, not only CSE) might not want the story to be told in that way.

With the LUUUUTT model we find the word story as very central. It would probably fall more into the category of focussing more on verbal aspects of communication. A speech act, although in Austin’s (1962) examples mainly pointing to verbal aspects, still seems to be a term that is more neutral with regards to verbal / non-verbal communication, than the word story. What all the models have in common is a focus on communication as a process.

Ongoing processes are also foregrounded by Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986), and I will now explore his ideas and what understanding of the word language (several puns, none intended) they offer.

5.4.3 Dialogicity

In his analysis of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin (1984a), a Russian thinker whose life largely coincided with the existence of the Soviet Union, critiques what he calls a monologic tradition predominant in Western thought that always tries to finalise humanity. In Dostoevsky’s writing he spots an openness and unpredictability of all the characters. Bakhtin (1984a) observes that Dostoevsky is not the omniscient, judging observer, giving preference of one

voice over another. Polyphony – any voice and corresponding point of view¹²² is of equal validity.

If there is equal validity in the different voices, then this undermines hierarchies, power and pre-set meanings. Meaning or truth is something that happens in unfinalisable dialogues. In Dostoevsky's work, according to Bakhtin (1984a), the characters are always about to make a final decision but always "...at a moment of crisis, at an unfinalizable [sic] – and unpredeterminable – turning point for his [sic] soul." (p. 61). For Bakhtin (1984a), this unfinalisability and unpredeterminability counters a reification and reifying devaluation of man.

This is linked to another important feature of Bakhtin's thinking, the carnival or rather carnivalisation in which "opposites come together, look at one another, are reflected in one another, know and understand one another" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 176). Carnival, and specifically not the official festivities but the more anarchic folk carnival, is something that Bakhtin explores more and with regards to challenging of hierarchy and power when he analyses Rabelais (Bakhtin, 1984b). Folk carnival for Bakhtin (1984b) has a very visceral embodied quality, particularly connected to food, digestion and sex. It also has a great potential to undermine hierarchy and authority, probably in a way that meant that authorities rather embraced and tamed carnival into something more containable. We will get back later to ideas of undermining pre-set meanings and truths in a very physical and possibly irreverent way¹²³.

¹²² Maturana (1978) would also have made the point that everything that is said, is said by an observer.

¹²³ p. 298

Going back to the idea of dialogue, its unfinalisability and unpredeterminability mean that dialogue is open both forwards and backwards in time. It does not really have a beginning and an end, only a series of utterances that are responsive to each other in an attempt to achieve a temporary understanding. Meanings cannot be fixed. In fact, several possible meanings co-exist. One consequence of polyphony is what in translations of Bakhtin is called heteroglossia, "... another's speech in another's language ..." (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 324). In that sense "...any utterance is crossed by the discourses of others, thus including multiple voices within itself, and at the same time is a response to others' utterance." (Haye and Larrain, 2011, p. 41).

There are then two forces with regards to heteroglossia. One, the centripetal force, aims to unify language meanings. We could see this in attempts to allow only one meaning of a word. The opposing force would be centrifugal, constantly generating new possible meanings. It is this second force, the centrifugal force, that is in many ways relied on in what became known as dialogical practices in the field of systemic practice, particularly open dialogue and the lesser-known anticipation dialogue (for example Seikkula, Arnkil & Eriksson, 2003; Huhnen, 2019). These approaches are consciously maintaining heteroglossia, as different meanings might increase options for further actions. Proponents of dialogical practices (Seikkula, Arnkil & Eriksson, 2003) have seen similarities with other systemic practices like reflecting teams that are also making use of the idea of maintaining different possible meanings voiced by different people.

In my own practice as consultant and systemic psychotherapist working in children safeguarding contexts, I often chair meetings with families and professional networks. For these I often use anticipation dialogue – or at least a version of it (Huhnen, 2019). At the

beginning of an anticipation dialogue meeting, we time-travel into an imaginary future where everything is much better and the problem has been resolved. In this imaginary future I ask all participants what they notice about this better situation. So, I might for example ask all participants of the meeting the same question “Now that we are in a much better situation, what is it that you notice that tells you things are better?” As everybody answers differently, different options for actions are generated that together might make a better future more likely. In this way I consciously facilitate heteroglossia. There is less of a perceived task to come to the same agreed meanings and conclusions, not even the same vision for the future. I find that these networks – and particularly children and their families – benefit from formats that invite multiple perspectives on and versions of a better future.

Further, at various points John Shotter (1999, 2006) brings together the thinking of Bakhtin and Wittgenstein. This influence could be seen in phrases like ‘speaking into and out of particular contexts’, indicating a context to an utterance in both what happened before and what utterances have been uttered before and what is anticipated to happen or uttered afterwards.

Different to Austin’s (1962) speech act, for Bakhtin the smallest unit of meaning is the utterance and as Bakhtin has at various places talked about words it seems important to understand what he might mean by an utterance and what meaning(s) of language this has brought into the systemic field.

5.5 What is an utterance?

Bakhtin (1986) defines an

“...utterance as a unit of speech communication [...] determined by a change of speaking subjects, that is, a change of speakers. Any utterance, from a short (single-word) rejoinder in everyday dialogue to the large novel or scientific treatise has, so to speak, an absolute beginning and an absolute end: its beginning is preceded by the utterances of others, and its end is followed by the responsive utterances of others” (p. 71)

Several things are remarkable about this definition. Bakhtin sees utterances as units of communication. At this moment we could maybe understand communication as the wider term than language (especially if we are influenced by ideas from Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967, as many in the field of systemic practice might be) that includes non-verbal communication, even if Bakhtin often uses the term “speech communication” for example as a subheading under which he makes this definition. He does, however, distinguish “...the sentence [and word] as a unit of language [...] from the utterance as a unit of speech communication.” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.73). Language is understood as consisting of words and sentences. Yet, Bakhtin’s examples of utterances in this definition are varying amounts of words, between one and very many. Importantly, an utterance’s beginning and end are marked by a change in speaker. This highlights again the dialogicity and contextualisation of an utterance by others’ utterances (that might well consist of the same words but would be different utterances).

Earlier in the same text, Bakhtin (1986) indicates that all utterances are “...sharing a common verbal (language) nature.” (p. 61) Utterances in Bakhtin’s thinking are verbal, but he does include non-verbal aspects of communication like tone in his considerations. At another point, Bakhtin (1986) states that “to a certain degree, one can speak by means of intonations alone, making the verbally expressed part of speech relative and replaceable, almost indifferent.” (p. 166). One can speak without using words? Or at least sometimes we might use a word only as “...material bearer for [...] intonation.” In some theatre exercises I use this, sometimes

quickly making up a “language” that you might call “Grummelo” or something similar, just to focus on non-verbal or para-verbal aspects (Boscolo et al., 1993) of communication. I remember my daughter before she used (more than three) words, having a few sounds that she particularly liked and experimented with – probably just like most children. She would modulate these in intonation and there were drastically different meanings one could imagine her producing in what might be an imagined scenario or play.

Maybe to Bakhtin it is less important what counts as language – whether this must include words. He seems more interested in the extra-verbal situation we might call context of other utterances that precede and succeed an utterance and inform it. And of course, as systemic practitioners, especially taking the circular nature of the conversation seriously, we think of ourselves being informed by the previous speech act, whether it is a verbal or not so verbal one. Yet the term “author” that he uses for any utterance seems to have strengthened a text metaphor in the field of systemic practice in Bakhtin’s influence on dialogical practices.

With regards to intonation, Bakhtin (1984a) describes how we “...catch the smallest shift” (p. 201). We could see Bakhtin as differentiating between verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, or as Watzlawick et al. (1967) probably independently distinguished as analogic and digital elements of communication.

5.6 Analogic vs ... - some problems

As inspiration and rationale for their fourth axiom of communication, Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967) look at how information is transferred within the body. The two main ways of transferring information or establishing feedback loops between the components in this complex system they identify are neuronal activity and humoral (or hormonal) secretion.

Neurons either fire or they do not. Neuronal activity is broadly speaking something very similar to the binary system that is underlying communication and information transfer in computers that we have become used to calling “digital”. Hormones, however, exist in the body in varying quantities, sometimes more, sometimes less, but always in a positive quantity.

However, with regards to neuronal activity, it is a little more complicated. Between neurons, in the synapses, the electric impulse leads to emitting substances from the axon terminal that transmit information to the dendrite of the receiving neuron. The receiving neuron “decides” whether a threshold is being met to send another electric impulse. We see a transforming of one kind of information (digital) into another (analogic) and back again.

As opposed to digital information that is either there or not there, there is no negation or negative of analogic information. We could identify machines that transfer, transform and store information in this manner, for example music stored on vinyl and played on record players. Indeed, music and its storage seems to offer a good analogy (no pun intended) to explore differences between “digital” and “analogic”, and some of the problems. We will come back to this.

Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) see digital information as arbitrarily encoded. It is this being encoded that leads them to see words as the digital aspects of communication and the different possible words in different languages are a possible indicator for this. At first glance, it seems random why in one language a particular animal should be a “dog”, in another a “chien” and yet in another a “Hund” (we could go on).

Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967) now equal what Boscolo et al (1993) call para-verbal communication and Bakhtin has considered too (for example with regards to intonation) with analogic communication, that is, always being there in discrete quantities and in a not arbitrarily coded way. It is true, for example, that when we say something, we have to say it with some intonation or volume, otherwise we do not say something. And even if we are not saying something we still produce sound, and certainly we still have a particular physical posture. This 'always being there' also links to not being able to not communicate. In practice, I imagine most systemic practitioners have experienced the absence of words as "telling" us something – whether someone hesitates to say something or looks in a particular way at someone. There probably cannot be an exhaustive list of examples. And some communicative acts will always be there, for example the speed with which someone breathes, who sits beside whom, who sits away from whom, who doesn't turn up for a session. All of these are also creating social reality in that moment. They might well be indicators of the Milan Team's "family game" (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1978) or some team dynamic, or clues to how they view the therapeutic or coaching relationship or something completely different that we have not even considered.

There are several other problems with Watzlawick, Beavin and Johnson's (1967) distinction, and further elaborations on this distinction and how it might have been influencing systemic theory and practice is what I will now explore.

5.6.1 Analogic communication always being there

You might have noticed my struggle to write about analogic aspects of communication always being there, for example with regards to intonation. I have been careful to note that

intonation is always there when we say something, even in a 'made up' language like Grummelo. But when we are not saying something, it would be difficult to speak of intonation. Of course, we are still producing a minimal sound by just breathing or having a heartbeat, even when we try to be as silent as possible. Yet we are unlikely to speak of that as intonation. Other analogic aspects of communication though are always there. We always hold our body in a particular way, even when we are not holding it and this does communicate something. Whether our client is "slouching" or holding themselves rigidly, "tells" us something. While not all aspects of analogic communication are there all the time, some are there all the time, or analogic communication is there all the time and therefore one can indeed not *not* communicate, even if one intended to.

This of course raises questions about intention, maybe from a different perspective than Searle's (1965, 2016). While it is perfectly possible to imagine not intending to communicate, it seems unimaginable to actually not communicate. I remember working with a lot of teenage clients as a social worker, and sometimes their way of expressing or "telling" me that they did not wish to work with me or were not ready to do so, was – or rather that is what I perceived – to try to ignore or not verbally communicate with me. But of course, even that non-verbal interaction communicated something. Whether I had always understood it right is a different matter. If intention then is not a prerequisite of communication, Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967) have also noted, we also wonder what (in a similar sense as who) is able to communicate. I will come back to exploring the notion that language is something exclusively human¹²⁴.

¹²⁴ p. 208

Some aspects of analogic communication mentioned above rely on being in the same space (with some differences at least a virtual space) at least for the communication to be received. While removing oneself from the field of communication is a message or form of communication, once removed one might have stopped communicating with a particular receiver of communication. When I finally gave up – at least for that day – to communicate with a young person, and went away this might still have communicated something to them. But once I was gone, this episode of communication was over. This does remind me of several incidents of working with older children as well as adults. It seemed that some of the most open conversations were possible while driving somewhere together in a car – I know I am not alone with this experience (Ferguson, 2010). I think it has to do with how we are arranged in space, next to each other, which may feel less pressurised and intimidating than face to face communication.

5.6.2 Digital communication always being there

While Watzlawick et al. (1967) have not said this, and I am sure never intended to be understood in this way, I have heard their fourth axiom described as “all communication is (always) digital and analogic”. One can see how one of their summarising statements of their argument for this fourth axiom could be easily misunderstood: “Human beings communicate both digitally and analogically” (p. 66).

An understanding that digital communication is always present would be particularly difficult if we follow their assertion that digital communication largely equals words. The impression given would be that if it does not include words, it is not communication, and would directly contradict the first axiom of the impossibility of non-communication. While I do not think

many practitioners would think that only words count as communication, this misunderstanding might still explain why practitioners focus on verbal / digital communication.

5.6.3 Digital communication as words (only)

Watzlawick et al. (1967) describe words as being replaceable, for example by pictures or pointing to the object the word might describe. In this sense words stand for something. Of course, the post-structuralist critique (Derrida 2016/1967) would possibly object, but words in Watzlawick and his colleague's (1967) view signify a concept. This would invite the question Searle (1965, 2016) asks about constitutive rules, here: what counts as signifying something? Searle's example of lifting one's arm to vote would signify something. Lifting one's arm to stretch, not. But in a context of voting by show-of-hands, one either votes or does not. We could be tempted to see this as a digitally encoded piece of communication, equivalent to a word. It seems to me, that in practice, it is only a small step from signifying something to significance. It is a constant question for practitioners, which "bits" of communication, if we even noticed them, do we respond to?

A further difficulty of the concept of digital communication as words is sign language. Watzlawick et al. (1967) observe that one could probably understand something watching people communicating in sign language, while one would not be able to understand anything in a foreign language on the radio. Yet, sign languages are also specifically encoded and a particular sign in a sign language (different to another sign language) refers to a particular something (or doing etc.). And still, with a sign language sign there seems to be something recognisable while "...there is nothing particularly table-like in the word table." (Bateson &

Jackson, 1964, p. 271 as quoted by Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 62). Watzlawick et al. exclude sign language from digital communication because of this lack of arbitrariness. But now there seems to be a question of how arbitrary words are, despite the quote about the table.

5.6.4 Arbitrariness of digital communication

Watzlawick et al. (1967) assert that “[w]ords are arbitrary signs...”(p. 61) and give some good examples of that, similar to my example of dog/chien/Hund. Yet there seems to be an evolution and diversification of languages (in the use of words) that has run broadly parallel to human evolution and diversification as both spread around the globe (Carvalli-Sforza, 2000). We come back to this later¹²⁵.

5.6.5 The perfect precision of digital communication?

One of the things that Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) contrast between analogic and digital communication is precision. For analogic devices, they see imprecision as “[c]ogs, gears and transmissions can never be built to perfection” (p. 64). They attest “perfect precision” (p. 64) to digital devices. On first glance one might be tempted to agree with them. A vinyl record as an analogic way of storing sound will have the tiniest scratches, and the tiniest specs of dust influence the playing back of the sound. On the other hand, there is no margin of error in how a digital device deals with digital data, which follows the principle of something being there or not, 1 or 0. Any information already existing in this format can be handled with absolute precision, using logical instructions like “101” or “on-off-on”, which stands for “five”. Leaning on (post-)structuralists’ ideas that words gain meaning from other words, we could

¹²⁵ p. 197

say that digital information gets its precise meaning from other digital information. But what about the transformation between digital and analogic information?

This seems to be an important question for practice. When I notice a gesture or movement, a sharp intake of breath or a moment of stillness, how do I make sense of it? And how would I describe it, for example when saying something like “I noticed you taking a sharp breath.” Would that be precise or maybe just a good enough transformation from analogic to digital communication? How sharp is sharp? Or when a client describes someone else’s analogic communication, how much “loss” of information do I need to take into consideration? Maybe what Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) describe as precise digital language is not so precise after all.

A movement in the opposite direction from digital to analogic communication is also interesting. What would happen if someone were told to be more relaxed, as maybe a parent might tell a child or a child might tell a parent? The word “relaxed” is digital communication according to Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) but “being” relaxed is analogic. How would the person being told to relax know that they as relaxed as the other person had imagined when they transform the word into “being relaxed”?

It seems interesting to explore what happens in these transformations between digital and analogic communication. I will explore this with an analogy of digital and analogic music.

Music, sound, exists as waves when it is produced and heard. It remains analogical information when stored on a vinyl record, with some (considerable) loss as described in the previous paragraph. But when music is recorded to be stored on a CD or to be made available on the internet, the analogical information is digitalised. Is it then still perfectly precise?

5.6.6 Sound as analogy – or analogic and digital sound

In order to manage, manipulate, store and transport sound digitally (for example on a CD) it needs to be transformed from its analogic form into a digital form, a binary form of a series of zeros and ones. But sound exists as a pressure wave. To transform a wave into digital information, the wave needs to be measured and encoded at particular intervals.

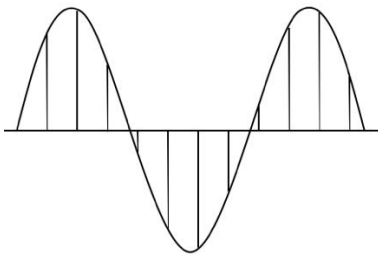


Figure 14: Sound measurement / encoding

What gets stored is only the measurement.

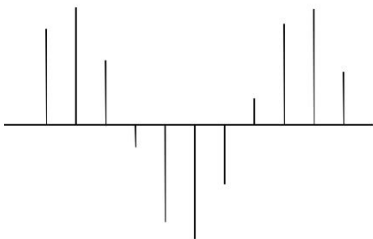


Figure 15: Sound storage

If it was to be played back in this form it would look like this.

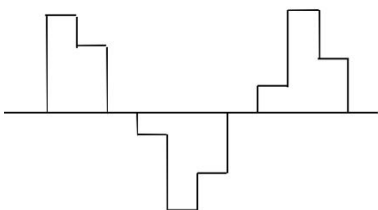


Figure 16: Sound playback

There are several things that we can already see in this rather rough explanation. The third picture looks very different from the original wave. We could imagine it being less rough if there were more horizontal and vertical lines and they could have smaller steps that are closer together. A wave is difficult to digitise for these two reasons, the horizontal and vertical lines. The level of approximation to a real wave depends on two factors: the frequency of measurement, also known as sample rate, and the precision of the measurement scale.

In a binary digital system, the second factor in turn depends on how long a chain of 1/0 pairings, or bits, is allowed per sample. If there are 2 bits available, there are 2^2 or 4 (00, 01, 10 and 11) discrete levels possible. However, at the moment of measurement, the wave is likely to be between 2 precise points.

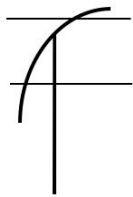


Figure 17: Between levels

Even if we have more discrete levels available it is more likely that the curve for this sample is between two levels. The closer the levels, the better the approximation but likely never quite precision. This is similar to only being able to get to a closer approximation to π , no matter how many digits after the decimal point: 3.14159 26535...

So, we see that the higher the frequency or sample rate and the higher the bits available per sample, the closer the approximation of the digitised information to the actual analogic sound.

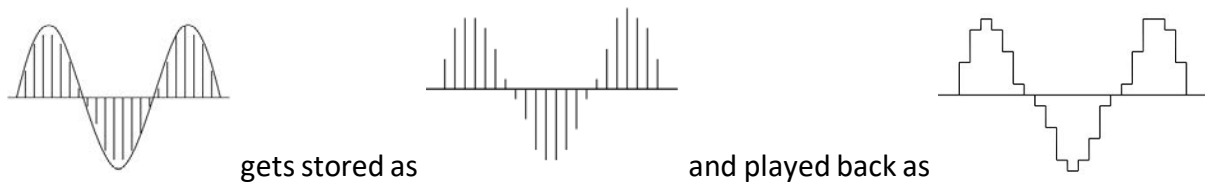


Figure 18: Finer sound measurement, storage and playback

The third picture here looks already a bit closer to the original wave than the first, rougher example. Yet, we can see that even if we increase both the frequency of samples or measurements and the discrete levels in the measurement scale, it is only ever going to be a better approximation, not a perfect precision that Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967) had in mind.

For music/sound recorded and stored on and played back from CD the sample frequency is 44.1kHz, meaning that a sample is taken roughly every 0.023 ms (milliseconds or thousands of a second) and the bits available are 16, so 2^{16} or 65536 discrete levels are available. One would think that this is “fine” enough not to be detectable, yet some people swear that they do prefer analogic music carriers (like vinyl) because of the “digital feel”, and psychoacoustic studies seem to indicate that in the mid-range, where humans are more sensitive, a higher number of bits would be preferable.

This seems also an interesting point: Even if we concede that perfect precision is not possible, certainly not when it comes to translating from analogic phenomena into digital ones, from what moment on does it become close enough for us not to perceive the difference? We will come back to this later¹²⁶.

¹²⁶ p. 286

So, after expressing doubts about the precision of digital storage of sound, what about the precision of words?

5.6.7 What is the precision of words?

When I arrived in the UK, in London to be a little bit more precise, to study theatre, I needed something custom-made. I cannot quite remember what it was and maybe that is less important.

What I do remember is asking how long it would take. As an answer I got the wonderful counter question “How long is a piece of string?”

I remember being confused for a short moment before it clicked, and I felt I had understood what my communication partner said to me. He could not give me a precise answer.

Like any immigrant shortly after arrival with an interest to “fit in”, I first incorporated new swearwords into my vocabulary – often with a poorly mimicked London accent. My vocabulary increased manifold and descended into vulgarity – I had not known before how many different terms for genitals, both female and male, the English language offered – with different degrees of offensiveness. After swearwords I adopted some phrases, again with a poor London accent: “You righ’ ma’e.”

Of course, I would sooner or later use the phrase “how long is a piece of string?” whenever it seemed appropriate. The range of responses to that was phenomenal: “Fair enough.” “31.7631 cm.” “That long [holding the two index fingers shoulder wide apart].”

What this experience might illustrate is a question about precision in coordination using words. But how might we even coordinate what a word means? The question “How long is a

piece of string?” would be an equally good reply to the question “How short is short?” “Short” might then get some meaning from its opposite, “long”. We might indeed have set up a binary that would lend itself to seeing words as digital.

When the question arises about what a particular word means, many people speaking many languages would consult a dictionary. A dictionary entry typically has the following form: [the word itself] is, or means [a collection of other words]. There are some cases where there is a high level of precision: “cop” means “police officer”. But what if we do not know what “police” or “officer” means? We can see this as another example of words relating to other words. If we take the idea suggested when discussing sound, words might have a precision with regards to other words but not necessarily with regards to non-words. The translation from analogical existing information into digital information remains difficult.

But even this precision is not there for many words. Wittgenstein (1953) provides us with another good example, or maybe thought experiment, with regards to the precision of words. In arguing exactness or precision he looks at the word “game”, that is also important to his concept of language games. What is a game? Just giving examples of games does not sufficiently explain what a game is. Consulting a dictionary with regards to the word game, we will most likely find several definitions, possibly with examples to illustrate, relating to pastime activities, sports, hunting, to name a few. We are less likely to find a definition of the word “game” used in “game theory” in a dictionary. There are countless examples of words used in particular ways not found in a dictionary. Words change meaning all the time. Can we speak of precision or exactness – especially when even exactness (and precision) is difficult to define as Wittgenstein (1953) points out? Where does that leave the person being told to relax? They might be relaxing too much or too little according to the person who told them

to relax. This can be a dynamic in abusive relationships, where the abuser might always tell the abused partner that they are 'doing it wrong'.

Maybe this points to the problem of equating words with digital transmission of information. Definitions of what is encoded in which binary code seem more stable than the meaning of words in a living language. The idea of social constructionism, deconstruction and dialogism is based on the possibility of new meanings to the same words – in some ways a direct challenge to Watzlawick and his colleagues' (1967) idea of words equating digital communication.

Yet there seems to be something that is worth saving from their analogy of digital communication. In the introduction I have already pointed to many words in our vocabulary finding an opposite: big/small, close/far, verbal/non-verbal etc. are in this sense binary. Other words follow a similar pattern. The implied opposite to dog is non-dog. Some words do not have an opposite. Behaviour as pointed out by Watzlawick et al. (1967) does not have an opposite. "Weather" would be another word from that category. Other binary pairs like male/female are currently being challenged, particularly in their binary nature. This is probably a good example of how words are influencing people's lived realities, as social constructionism suggests. In referring back to the question heading this chapter, what counts as language, language might not be equated to digital communication, and still we get a sense of a possible understanding of language in the field of systemic practice.

On the other hand, any non-verbal behaviour can be usefully seen as analogic. Someone can breathe or walk faster or slower, lean back or forward more or less. And they do this not in steps, defying any measurement scale in a similar way as π defies the decimal system. An attempt to translate this analogic behaviour into words, when trying to describe the

behaviour, encounters very similar problems to when sound is translated into digital information.

Perhaps it is impossible for all these problems described, or rather touched on in this chapter, to find a constitutive rule (Searle, 1965) of what counts as language. It seems important to address the question of how language might have come about before suggesting a different distinction of different ways of communication.

5.7 How did language come about?

I have indicated that Watzlawick et al. (1967) asserted that “...words are arbitrary signs¹²⁷.” (p. 61). Referring back to Bateson and Jackson’s observations, they argue “...there is nothing particularly table-like in the word ‘table’ ...” (p.62). With regards to analogic communication, they suggest that it was established earlier than digital or verbal communication. After all, animals can communicate, even if they are not using words or digitally encoded information. How then did words come about? How was the step made from what they call analogical information transfer, to digital or verbal information transfer? How were the first words generated (especially if we were to follow the notion that words always only relate to other words)? Was there a wise person (if so, I imagine more likely a woman than a man) that sat down by themselves or as part of a committee to define the first words – perhaps like Ben Yehuda and the Committee of the Hebrew Language coined words for use in modern Hebrew to complement the Hebrew from the Torah – and achieve a language fit for everyday life in the modern world? But even Ben Yehuda and the committee had other languages available to help this process, particularly contemporary Arabic (Blau, 1981).

¹²⁷ p. 187

Given that it is very likely that spoken language evolved before written language, there are no documents that could give us hints as to how the first words came about.

Returning to Pinker and Chomsky, who I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter as agreeing that language is something exclusively human, they agree that language is something that evolved but have differences with regards to how and why. Steven Pinker and his colleague Paul Bloom (1990) present an adaptationist view. Natural selection has led to the development of language as a specific evolutionary advantage for a species of hunter-gatherers, for example to better coordinate hunting. They refute a view held by Noam Chomsky and maybe even more so by Stephen Jay Gould (1987) that language was a by-product (or spandrel, as a metaphor from ecclesial architecture) of the evolution of a larger brain that might have evolved to allow greater usage of tools as evolutionary advantage. Indeed, a very recent discovery located a genetic or molecular switch that allows human brains to grow to three times the size of great ape brains (Sample, 2021). As Pinker and Bloom refute this theory, they also refute other theories about how words came to be, like early humans imitating animal or other natural sounds or further developments of what Watzlawick et al. (1967) would count as analogic communication, like sighs or grunts of exhaustion. As someone systemically minded and leaning to a more circular hypothesis (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1980) rather than wondering what was first, language, usage of tools, or increased brain size, I can imagine those things developing simultaneously. The more the brain grows, the more complex language and differentiated words and the more complex tools become available, and turn out to be an evolutionary advantage, further preferring a larger brain and so on.

What neither of these evolutionary ideas answers is the question of why particular words evolved. Why is a table called a table in the English language, when there is nothing particularly table-like about a table? Or is there?

When I was in theatre school, part of a very international cohort of theatre students, our teachers conducted an 'experiment' with us. Based on the pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq (2020) an important question for the school, for us was always: how do things move? When exploring words, we wanted to experience how they moved (us). What would the sound of a word translate to in bodily movement? Lecoq (2020) calls this the body of the words. Being an international cohort, we had several speakers of other languages than English. Matching a speaker of a language other than English with someone who did not understand any word from that language, the first person said the word for "sun" in their language and the other person would follow the movement this provoked. The audience saw different dynamic movements, in- and outbreaths, closing and opening or extending and contracting of bodies. We could not help but wonder what different experiences of the sun might have provoked these different dynamics encapsulated in the words. In a further experiment we had a speaker of languages that no-one else spoke (one native Japanese speaker for example, and also me as a German native speaker) read a poem, another person translating it into movement and the audience guessing what the poem was about. I remember how surprised I was at how good the guesses were, how close to the actual theme of the poem, both with regards to the emotional and relational aspects of the poem, that lend themselves to analogic parts of communication that the reader might have influenced by the sound of their voice as well as the content aspect (there was a ship, a storm or turmoil...). Maybe there is even some analogical element to the supposedly digital words themselves.

I admit that this might not stand up to the level of scientific rigour that either Pinker and Bloom, or Chomsky and Gould, would claim necessary, yet it seems to give me experiential knowledge that questions the arbitrariness of words that Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) suggest. Such an arbitrariness would also contradict an idea of evolution. If words had evolved the way they did, there must be some utility for their specific form, so that they are the best possible adaptation to the environment. This would be an application of both Darwin's (1859/1964) theory of evolution as well as Maturana's (1978) and Maturana and Varela's (1972, 1987) structural coupling on words themselves. If we are taking Maturana and Varela's structural coupling applied to words further, we could see social reality as the medium in which words exist. Both being structurally plastic – words certainly change over time as does social reality – words and social reality are therefore structurally coupled. Words, triggered by changes in the social structure and reality, including developments of new tools and techniques, develop along the lines of their social utility (according to their own structure - and with that I do not wish to dismiss post-structural ideas). The complementary movement would be that social reality is changing in accordance with its own structure triggered by words. This seems to be very close to social constructionism, a structural coupling between words and meaning. Still, we might not have a satisfactory explanation about why three (geographically, linguistically, genetically and culturally) reasonably close cultures have such vastly different words for the same animal (as a concept) as dog, chien, Hund.

A very different account of the development of language is offered by Giambattista Vico (1725/1948). He suggests three different stages of the development of language. First, the language of gods which is sacred, then the symbolic language of heroes, and finally the “vulgar language of men [sic] employing conventional signs for communicating the common needs ”

(p. 62). Particularly for the first stage, he sees two aspects that are important for its development. Natural phenomena like thunder encountered with a curiosity that want to make sense of the phenomenon (“[c]uriosity – that inborn property of man [sic], daughter of ignorance and mother of knowledge” p. 64). Whenever humans try to make sense of phenomena, they will project their own self onto them. Thus, naming the reason for the phenomenon, the gods of thunder (Zeus, Jupiter, Thor) are created.

What seems interesting to me is that in this account, the encountering of a phenomenon comes before the naming that creates a “reality” in which to make sense of the phenomenon in a way social constructionists suggest. But the latter seem to focus less on the phenomenon that triggers a need to make sense.

With regards to “thunder”, or the French “tonnerre”, or the German “Donner”, it seems to me that there is something thunder-like to the words. Now, I am aware that with that statement I would be objectionable to Pinker and Bloom’s (1990) dismissal of the idea of mimicking natural sounds, and still it might be enough to at least doubt the asserted arbitrariness of words (Watzlawick et al., 1967).

5.8 What now is a word?

In this chapter so far, in trying to see what counts as language, I have sooner or later come to words. Defining words then as units of language would only be circular in a not so useful way.

Naively, I might be tempted to see a word as representing or standing in for a real thing (if the word is a noun) or a real action (if the word is a verb) or describing a quality of something (if the word is an adjective) or some action (if the word is an adverb). This has been critiqued by a great variety of thinkers from different traditions (Austin, 1962; Barad, 2007; Derrida,

1982, 2016/1967; Rorty, 1967, 1979; Wittgenstein, 1953). Mostly they point to some kind of pragmatism: we use words to express, communicate, describe, co-ordinate, make sense, do to others, create reality. But that seems not a sufficient definition. Sign language signs can do such things, despite being excluded by Watzlawick et al. (1967). Pictures and art can do such things. Movement can do such things. We are reminded of the example of raising a hand to vote or ask for a turn to speak. What these examples have in common with words is an attempt to represent or to stand for. While maybe not being truth, it might yet be useful for the pragmatic purpose of communicating, in a similar way that a hypothesis (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1980) is not more or less true, but more or less useful. This attempting to usefully stand in for or represent in interaction can usefully be called symbolic interaction (if not intra-action, Barad, 2007).

So, words seem to be part of these symbols that are attempts at standing in for or representing some particularly encoded meaning. Of course, these meanings of words are only more or less stable. They change with time and context. Non-verbal cues can offer qualifications or instructions as to which particular meaning was meant, whether a remark is meant seriously or ironically, etc. Many words have very different meanings over time or in different cultural contexts, as do other symbols. Social constructionism and related therapeutic and consulting practices (for example CMM) work with these different potentials of meanings. We might for example explore “how do people know in your context that they are the *right* level of relaxed?”

Poetry uses further associations of words and symbols, operating on similarity between symbols and symbols – metaphors.

Words undoubtedly say something, and the argument that we do something when we say something is strong. Words communicate specific yet not stable meanings, but words are not the only things that do so. Signs in sign language do. Numbers do. Traffic signs do. They are all symbols.

As an overture to the first chapter of *Interpersonal Communication*, Barnett Pearce (1994, p.1) quotes Neil Postman (1985, p.6) saying:

“I use the word “conversation” metaphorically to refer not only to speech but to all techniques and technologies that permit people of a particular culture to exchange messages. In this sense, all culture is a conversation or, more precisely, a corporation of conversations conducted in a variety of symbolic modes.”

Language, if understood as built of symbols, would include sign language and other symbols. It would exclude what Morris (1977) has called body language, the non-verbal communication that Watzlawick et al. (1967) have called analogic.

But differentiating between symbolic and analogic seems like differentiating between apples and screws, or worse, because potentially more misleading, paired with symbolic, analogic could be understood in the sense of analogy as is done in religious or literary studies. Analogies, like fables are stories or anecdotes that operate on similarity. A rich person has supposedly a similar difficulty getting to heaven as a camel through the eye of a needle. Analogies in this sense are made up of symbols, forming together something that is akin to a metaphor. We could see analogies as part of metaphoric communication, the opposite to what Watzlawick et al. (1967) have called analogic communication. Someone might for example answer to the question of the right level of relaxed with an analogy “It is like with a dough, if it is too soft it will spread out and if it is too hard it will be like a brick when you bake it. But you will know when it is right.”

5.9 Symbolic and dynamic, intentional and unintentional action

5.9.1 Symbolic and dynamic (inter/intra-)action

If language is symbolic communication, how should we call the other aspects of communication, the ones that are referred to as body language (Morris, 1977) or analogic communication (Watzlawick et al., 1967) or para-verbal communication (Boscolo et al., 1993)?

One important aspect is that this kind of communication is always there - whether together with symbolic communication as para-verbal communication (intonation, intensity, volume, etc.), or independent of it (breathing, movement and positioning in space etc). This has been expressed well by Watzlawick et al. (1967) when they say “one cannot not communicate” (p. 49).

Another aspect is that it is difficult to measure and / or describe, in other words to translate into symbolic communication with any precision. We might still describe how often someone breathes per minute but how deeply or shallow do they breathe for it to be called deep or shallow breath? Would we measure the amount of air they breathe in or out? Yet something communicates a shallow or deep, fast or slow breath.

Related to this aspect is the relationship to space and time, or space time. Yes, words or symbols might change their meaning, sometimes even dramatically, but they relate to relatively stable meanings in the attempted representation. The other aspects of communication change constantly, sometimes almost imperceptibly, but they change. We are never from moment to moment in the same position in space together. Even if we are trying to be completely still, the tiniest movements happen.

Intensity is another aspect of non-symbolic communication that is often related to the movement in space time, for example, the intensive stare held for a long time. Or intensity is related to force, like the volume of a tone (for example as part of a word but also as part of a melody) is the force of the sound wave. In music this is called dynamics.

For Jacques Lecoq (2020, see also Kemp, 2017) dynamics are a combination of rhythm, force and space. He explores - and following his pedagogy so did many theatre students including me – dynamics in great detail, always with regards to their expressive and dramatic potential. Expression and drama of course fall into the wider realm of communication. Dynamic communication, however, might be a misleading term as it seems to suggest a value judgement: a dynamic communicator as opposed to a boring one.

What might be a better word than communication?

Leaning again on Watzlawick et al's (1967) "one cannot not communicate" (p. 49) as "one cannot not behave" (p. 48) we could equal communication with behaviour. Yet the word behaviour might suggest the expressing or sending part of a communication process. To emphasise the relational aspect, I suggest the word interaction. Taking Barad's (2007) critique regarding entanglement into account, and to emphasise the systemic character of communication as including feedback loops, it might be better to use her neologism intra-action. However, easier to read, and including both the idea of interaction between separate entities and intra-action within a system, I will use the word action.

The distinction created here is between symbolic and dynamic action.

5.9.2 Intentionality

Intentionality as an important criterion can still exist and have an influence on whether an



Picture 8: George Osborne

action might have been meant and/or understood as symbolic or dynamic. Recalling the example of someone lifting their arm, it could be a symbolic action, to vote or to request to speak, or a dynamic action, for example to stretch because one is a bit tired. With this example we might be tempted to equal dynamic action with unintentional action, and often that might be the case. We might further be tempted to think of symbolic action as intentional. Yet we can find many examples of intentional dynamic action as well as unintentional symbolic action. How often might we even have caught ourselves using a swearword unintentionally? Most

acting – even more so by actors trained by Lecoq and similar teachers – include intentional dynamic action. Mime can be described as a very pure form of intentional dynamic action; similarly dance, martial arts, and many more disciplines. At times, intentionally manipulating one's dynamic action can lead to unintended results.

In 2015, following his speech at the Conservative party conference, the then chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne, took a stance that might have been intended to communicate confidence. It might be easy to see why he was widely mocked. What this picture shows is how dynamic action, intentional or unintentional, might well also contribute to the co-creation of our social reality, as do intentional and unintentional symbolic actions.

5.9.3 Travelling between unintentional and intentional, symbolic and dynamic action

What I am arriving at is two intersecting dimensions: one dimension between dynamic and symbolic action, and the other between unintentional and intentional action. Many moves in interpersonal communication, including systemic practice, are moves between the four resulting quadrants.

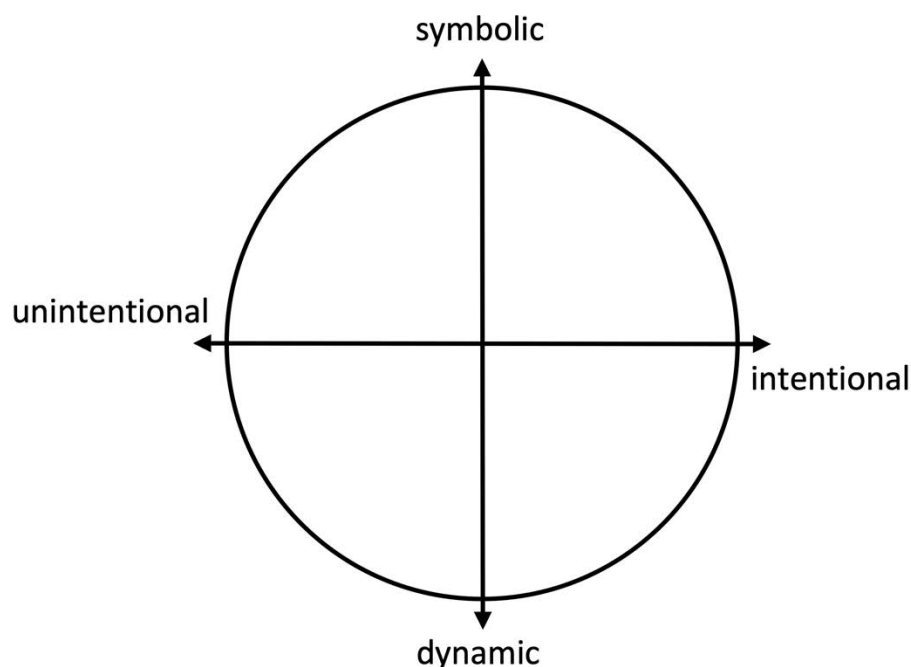


Figure 19: The co-creation of social reality in action

Verbally acknowledging someone breathing very fast is a move from a likely unintentional dynamic action to an intentional symbolic action. If the person responds by consciously slowing their breath, it would be a move to intentional dynamic action. Asking someone to express what they feel in dance is asking (intentional symbolic action) to move to intentional dynamic action. Asking another person to describe what they have seen is suggesting a move back into intentional symbolic action. When part of the response is a wide-eyed stare and a

holding of breath, this is again unintentional dynamic action. If they then say something like “oh my lord” we can see this as unintentional symbolic action.

Often many of these things happen at the same time. If someone says something but maybe as they are nervous, in a high-pitched voice, we have both intentional symbolic action and unintentional dynamic action at the same time. Maybe as practitioners examining and using interpersonal communication we miss some potential for change if we focus very strongly on symbolic action. This is what Peter Rober (2002) pointed out, when he spoke about attending to hesitations that are expressed non-verbally. Maybe we even miss potential for change when our preferred direction of travel is towards intentional symbolic action? These will be guiding questions for the next chapter and they refer back to the second research question.

In my practice I have noticed how useful it can be to be conscious of possible moves within or between these quadrants. I will later describe the idea of “show me rather than tell me” and how it can be useful when someone is trying to describe something – maybe a feeling or sensation – but cannot find the words. If I invite someone to make a movement or gesture, I invite them (speaking, using intentional symbolic action) to move from the quadrant of intentional symbolic action, that maybe currently fails them, to try the quadrant of intentional dynamic action.

In other circumstances it might be very useful to allow people to make their unintentional dynamic action more intentional, for example when they are seen by others as arrogant, timid or other such descriptions. My inner dialogue asks that I consider if the world that gets created by this unintentional dynamic action and its interpretation is one that is hoped for? I would like to stress here that of course this is not to replace other aspects of systemic practice, for example an attention to power. In this very general example of “show me rather

than tell me” it pays to attend to the potential of differences in power. It makes a big difference if the person whose unintentional dynamic action is in the spotlight is the ‘more powerful’ person or the person who says they are affected by such action. Of course, the distribution of power can be very complex. Often the person interpreting the other person’s dynamic action, when doing it intentionally (in symbolic action) does so from a position of power – at least temporarily. Saying someone is behaving in a way that seems “too something”, for example, arrogant or timid, is defining someone else’s behaviour. On a societal level we currently see the example that women from a global majority background are told that they come across as angry. I get the impression that this accusation is used in order to disallow them the power of their (collective) voice.

On the other hand, power differences can sometimes be expressed in dynamic action, for example the invasion of someone’s private space. A concept like private space, influenced by different cultural backgrounds, is itself something that defies exact measurement and can usefully be explored in dynamic action: “Could you show me the extent of your private space?”

In the workshops I experienced myself as being better able to create a safe space for participants by attending more intentionally to my own dynamic actions (see chapter 8.3.2 too) and this in turn impacted on my practice. I now tend to notice more consciously others’ unintentional dynamic actions and how I might intentionally respond to them – mostly in dynamic action but also in symbolic action. A participant I met by chance fed something similar back informally after a workshop. She said she “noticed” more. In that moment I failed to explore this further but later wondered whether she noticed her own and her clients’ unintentional dynamic actions – and whether this in turn made a difference to her clients. So,

there is for me now a question of what it is that I would miss if I paid less attention to dynamic action. And how I make sense of that. This is very much the question of the next chapter. But before that there is still one question I wish to focus on.

5.10 Is symbolic communication exclusively human?

Let me imagine for a moment that some animals, dogs or great apes for example, are able to communicate symbolically, but we simply do not understand it, just as we do not understand most words in a different language. We would possibly not recognise symbolic communication if it was there. We could then only approach the question from different angles. And these different perspectives onto the question might not be sufficient to answer the question for sure, but possibly sufficient to doubt the assertion that symbolic interaction is exclusively human.

One approach to the question examines the relationship between cognition and communication. A significant opinion (Chomsky, 1957; Pinker, 2007, 2013) is that language / symbols / words are a precondition for cognition. And historically language has been seen or assumed to have developed in parallel with the use of tools. As Wittgenstein (1953) would say, words are tools. So, if use of tools is a good indicator of use of symbols (or of an inner language that Pinker, 2007, calls *Mentalese*), how would we think of the use tools by species like crows and chimps who might use twigs to reach things like food they otherwise cannot reach?

In a video clip available on YouTube, Heinz von Foerster tells Humberto Maturana (2013) a story to do with Pavlov's well-known experiment with a dog. I often use this clip to explain the difference between first and second order cybernetics. The important aspect of the story

for the question of whether language understood as symbolic interaction is exclusively human, is that when the bell is rung and the dog salivates without there being any meat, Heinz von Foerster calls this an “act of symbolisation” (0:51).

Again, while I am not proving Chomsky and Pinker (or Stephen Fry) wrong, I might have introduced enough doubt to wonder whether my own question “is symbolic communication exclusively human?” is useful, as it invites a yes/no answer and therefore assumes a binary. It is interesting to acknowledge that this thought itself betrays how language and thought are entangled. Maybe a more useful question could be “to what extent or in what ways might humans share symbolic action with non-humans?” The impact on practice of such questions might be pertinent regarding the inclusion of family pets in therapeutic settings. It might in some ways also lead back to dynamic action or rather the boundary between symbolic and dynamic action. I remember once asking a young person to what extent they felt understood by their dog and they answered that they felt better understood by their dog than their parent. I asked how they knew and they said there was something in how the dog looked at them that told them that. I would now make sense of that dialogue as part of a boundary drawing practice (Barad, 2007) around symbolic and dynamic action, as well as around entities and their agency and capacity for understanding.

6 Dynamic action – or how to (also) do things without words

“Everything moves.
Everything develops and progresses.
Everything rebounds and resonates.
From one point to another, the line is never straight.
From harbour to harbour, a journey.
Everything moves ... as do I!
Joy and sorrow, confrontation too.
A vague point appears, hazy and confused,
A point of convergence,
The temptation of a fixed point,
In the calm of all the passions.
Point of departure and point of destination,
In what has neither beginning nor end.
Naming it,
Endowing it with life,
Giving it authority
For a better understanding of what moves
A better understanding of what movement is.”
(Lecoq, 2020)

In the previous chapter I moved towards a distinction between symbolic and dynamic (inter- / intra-) action. Influenced by philosophical and linguistic ideas described in that chapter, and by looking at understanding in systemic literature and practice, it seems very plausible that systemic practice focusses on symbolic action. Undoubtedly, a lot stands to be gained by focussing on symbolic (inter/intra-) action and its relationship with meaning. It is not my desire at all to dismiss or minimise this, even in the slightest. I have shown that many of the approaches to, and views about, symbolic action are very useful in practice. Given the incredible wealth and richness of literature (see chapter 3) I would not be able to even get close to doing justice to this rich tradition.

However, when choosing to focus on symbolic action or communication, what might get missed that might be helpful? And if we were to also attend to and work with dynamic action,

how would we theorise this, and how might we do this in practice? These will be the questions for this chapter and the following ones.

Systemic theory has positioned itself, more or less strongly, depending on the different plateaus mapped in the second chapter 'What is systemic?' as opposed to an intrapsychic view of problems and solutions. In practice I am guided by the question of, and curiosity towards, what happens between people rather than in their minds or psyche or other internal locations. How does a team, for example, create a good and productive working environment together? Posthumanism has extended such critique to question whether there can be a clear differentiation between the human and non-human and in practice I have included consideration of non-human actors in the creation of lived reality. Earlier I used an example of including the play station in the considerations¹²⁸. But peoples' material reality, a wide range of aspects including poverty, buildings in which they live or work together, as well as socially constructed aspects of society such as legal frameworks, are also part of my considerations. Of course, all of these aspects are also influenced by humans and in that sense, they are material and discursive or, as Barad (2007) would say, material-discursive.

Barad's (2007) concept of the apparatus and agential cuts (similarly to Bateson's ecological view) suggests that reality is becoming in interaction, or rather intra-action within the apparatus. Since the apparatus can (and usually does) include non-human entities, it seems difficult to maintain that reality is only created in language, often seen as the prerogative of human beings. It would mean denying non-human entities the capacity to take part in the creation of reality. This is exactly what Posthumanism critiques.

¹²⁸ P. 111

In this chapter, I will also bear this critique in mind and will explore, in what ways there might be a theoretical and practical 'fit', a consistency, between the ideas presented, the posthuman or 'new' materialist critique, and systemic principles. But first I will explore what we might miss when focussing on symbolic action, or what we might stand to gain when we add dynamic action to our attention.

6.1 What is the effect of focussing on symbolic action

In 1978, Albert Scheflen noticed that "Susan smiled". He describes this event of action as important for the meaning-making in the session. And I imagine most, if not all systemic practitioners, have noticed something like a smile or another non-verbal expression that changed how the session went and how they made sense of the relational reality of their client: someone rolling their eyes, someone looking away, or a deep breath or a sigh.

You will have noted that I have not yet written 'dynamic' action. A possible point that could be made is that a smile might have quite a strong symbolic force. Nevertheless, it is different to a word, where the word might derive different meaning from its context and the dynamic aspect of communication (like tone, etc). The smile itself can be broader and bigger or smaller, almost imperceptible, generating its own potential for meaning within its own spectrum of movement, with minute differences, potentially unmeasurable, having very different meanings. I would therefore include the smile as well as the sigh or the rolling of eyes. in dynamic action.

In 2002, almost a quarter of a century later, Peter Rober, as a therapist influenced by dialogism, dedicates another paper to the absence of words. He writes about the hesitations clients experience when deciding whether or not to tell a particular 'story', and hypothesises

that these hesitations are mostly expressed non-verbally, for example as a pause. Rober describes one such pause as 1 or 2 seconds. Undoubtedly, one could measure the length more precisely from a recording, as would possibly be done in more diligent transcripts. Yet we will never be able to measure the time precisely. This is a good example of the π -problem of being able to measure more precisely but not absolutely precisely. The hesitation is also a good example of Watzlawick et al's (1967) impossibility of non-communication. The absence of an action clearly communicates in a dynamic way.

Rober (2002) says that pauses like this easily get overlooked or missed in their subtleness:

“Paying close attention to nonverbal signs used to be self-evident in family therapy, but ever since narrative metaphors like story and conversation were used as an epistemological foundation for clinical work, the importance of nonverbal communication risks being underestimated in family therapy” (p. 190).

He then explores Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) idea of metaphors we live by¹²⁹. We will come back to this text, and the wider ideas of Lakoff and Johnson, as well as to the concept of metaphor, as it seems to have a particular relation to both dynamic and symbolic action. For now, it seems useful to remain with Rober who comes to a very similar conclusion to the one I have tentatively come to: now less attention is paid to non-verbal communication acts in systemic practice. Of course, he focusses on hesitation (as expressed in not speaking/silence). Yet he attends to the 'obscured non-verbals' more generally when he uses Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) idea to hypothesise that the predominant metaphor in systemic practice is to do with words (narrative, text, story, conversation, dialogue). This metaphor highlights the aspects of our experience that are words and / or are easy to put into words. Further to the texts I have mentioned in chapter 3¹³⁰, Rober (2002) mentions a whole list of texts that he

¹²⁹ P. 238

¹³⁰ P. 84

locates under an umbrella of collaborative therapies that focus on word metaphors and barely if at all mention non-verbal cues, while also finding examples, notably Tom Andersen, who do pay more attention to non-verbal cues and use them as starting points for further conversations or enquiries. Missing these non-verbal cues, or as I would call them dynamic actions, means possibly missing these opportunities to coordinate the process or approach important content. Actually, some dynamic action might point out that some content is important, like a client leaning in when another client speaks.

When Peter Rober (2002) notices these non-verbal or dynamic cues and then talks with his clients about these cues and what they might mean, he makes a journey from the dynamic, whether it is intentional or not, more often unintentional, into the symbolic and intentional. Of course, there are, as indicated, other options to react to dynamic cues. He could stay within the dynamic, but doing something intentional, for example consciously slowing down his breathing and holding silence himself. This would communicate something different. I remember a client once telling me that it did not work so well for them when I said things like “I notice your hesitation.” I imagine (and they indicated so) that they felt an element of judgment or being under observation. I will later describe in more detail a short scene from my first research workshop where I had invited participants to avoid using words. One participant had invited another participant to interact by offering a tissue and to explore its material quality together. The other participant had indicated that they wanted to be left alone. That was the end of the interaction in that moment. When we later talked about this situation both participants were accusing each other of being insensitive. There was a sense that a different or more judgemental interpretation arrived only when talking about the scene after the fact. The actual scene seems fairly “neutral”. Maybe these thoughts add another

option as to how to respond to important dynamic actions. Responding to someone else's dynamic action with symbolic action is not always the best way forward because it invariably involves an act of interpretation.

What Schefflen (1978) and Rober (2002) seem to agree on is how much non-verbal, or what I call dynamic aspects of communication and behaviour, influence the further development of the relationship, or what social constructionist might call our social reality. Would it be fair to say that we construct our social reality or social world (Pearce, 2007) both in symbolic and dynamic action? If that is the case – and as shown in chapter 3 and in other places many writers in the field of systemic practice suggest this – then focussing on symbolic action obscures possibly important information, as the two writers I particularly focus on in this section suggest. But neither of the two consciously or intentionally uses dynamic action as part of their own action.

But what are we doing when we attend to dynamic action and then talk about it?

6.1.1 Tout bouge – everything moves

Throughout the previous chapter, “What counts as language” I was accompanied by a sense of impossibility of translating dynamic action into symbolic action with any precision, particularly when we see a parallel with digital and analogic information. Yet we do this when we talk with our clients about dynamic actions, like Rober (2002) does when he talks with his clients about hesitations expressed in silences, and to good effect. The problem of precision, whether the silence was 1 or 2 seconds long, is maybe less pertinent for the pragmatic purposes of therapy, coaching and consultation, or for help with creating better social worlds (Pearce, 2007). I can see nothing wrong with doing what Rober does (and certainly many

others do) and there will be examples of attending to dynamic action in this way. But it is only one possible movement in a quadrant of dynamic / symbolic and intentional / unintentional action.

To approach the question of what we do when we talk about non-verbal communication, when we use symbolic action to reflect on dynamic action, we should first attend more to dynamic action. What is dynamic action?

I had earlier distinguished dynamic from symbolic action¹³¹ as the two ways in which we can act. I could say that dynamic action is all non-symbolic action. Of course, this might invite criticism that symbolic action also has particular dynamic qualities. A word, for example, can be spoken slower or faster, louder or less loud, and so on. And these dynamic aspects might impact on the intended and perceived meaning of that word. We could say the dynamic has an impact on the symbolism of the symbolic. Yet in this potential criticism, the distinction is already implicit. A word in its act of being spoken has symbolic and dynamic aspects to it that are distinguishable. These aspects are not easily separable, and we will return to how dynamic and symbolic parts of our behaving / communicating and thinking are interacting¹³².

For now, I will attempt a more positive definition of dynamic, rather than saying what it is not. Maybe the word definition is misleading, as it suggests that there is a definite meaning. It makes more sense to say that I will approach potential meanings.

¹³¹ P. 202

¹³² P. 230

6.1.2 What is 'dynamic' action?

The word “dynamic” comes from the Greek word “dunamis” that can be translated as “power” or “force”. “Dynamic” is often contrasted with “static”. In physics or engineering, “dynamic” refers to forces of bodies in motion, while “static” refers to forces with regards to non-moving bodies. “Dynamic” seems to have something to do with motion.

Rick Kemp (2017) summarises Jacques Lecoq’s idea of dynamic as a combination of “rhythm, force and space” (p. 101) and states that Lecoq used the term to “describe the situated environment that humans engage with” (p. 100). Force and space and situated environment could still be understood in a static way. Rhythm suggests some kind of change in state or movement. And it is very clear that Lecoq (2020) has movement in mind. Famously, he often said “Tout bouge” – everything moves (Murray, 2002; Lecoq, 2020).

Going back to the word “static”, for our purposes it seems useful to think of what might appear static as dynamic, as undergoing change and therefore discard a notion of “static”. After all, everything is undergoing change. Where a notion of static force is applied, for example in structural engineering, we still see change over time. The notion of static force though is good enough to calculate the stability of a building for a reasonable amount of time. But structural engineers would agree that it would be a fallacy to believe that there won’t be changes over time. In the world of living relations there is constantly some level of change. Think for example about a staring contest. Yes, it might appear as if two people might be locked in each other’s gaze, and maybe for a while not moving or changing. But they are still breathing, their eyes might start to water, and even the attempt not to move necessitates movement and change. Living systems as autopoietic systems have to change in order to stay

the same (homeostasis). As already established, words themselves are not static either with regard to their meaning. If they were, it would be more difficult to imagine how change could happen in therapy, coaching or consulting based on social constructionist ideas. But more importantly, the idea of change as something common to all living systems has implications on possible ethical stances in practice – if change is already happening, we do not need to induce it, we can help systems shape the change that they want. Our views of the possibility or inevitability of movement or change have big consequences for our practice.

6.1.3 Nothing moves – there is no movement

Another possible critique of the concept of dynamic as movement is a philosophical one – and an old one at that. It is the opposite of the position that everything moves. In the 4th century BC, the Greek philosopher Zeno created a series of paradoxes that are meant to demonstrate that motion or movement is impossible (Aristotle, 1930). In the main, they are variations around division of space: the dichotomy paradox says that if someone wants to move a certain distance, they need to first move half the distance. To do that they need to move through a quarter of the distance, an eighth and so on. So, they end up having to complete an infinite number of tasks which are impossible to complete.

Similarly, when Achilles is racing a tortoise that has a head start, Achilles needs to first run to the position where the tortoise is. By the time he arrives there, the tortoise has moved further. And even if the tortoise is now less far away, Achilles still needs to get to the tortoise's current position, but the tortoise will have moved on again. So, Achilles will never catch the tortoise as it will always have moved on when Achilles gets there.

Another paradox, the one that we will return to later, states that when an arrow is shot but looked at in any instant of time, it is not in motion in that instant. The arrow therefore cannot pass through this position because then it would be for an instant not in motion. Zeno argues that all these paradoxes show the impossibility of movement.

6.1.4 Refuting 'nothing moves'

Over time, several refutations of these paradoxes have been produced. They are often focussing on divisibility. Aristotle (1930) for example argues that while the space is divisible, the time is too. While there is a potentially infinite number of tasks (in the first two mentioned paradoxes) these tasks need a decreasing amount of time that tends towards zero as the number of tasks (or divisions) tends towards infinite. Also important for the arrow paradox, Aristotle (1930) argues that there are no indivisible instances of time.

Henri Bergson's (1911) argument is similar to Aristotle's, yet different. Bergson differentiates between the path, or trajectory of a movement, and the movement itself. The path or trajectory is a line that we could draw – actually the drawing of the line is done with a movement. And this line is limitlessly divisible (like in Zeno's paradoxes). As the line has a beginning and end point, it consists of indivisible points. But these points do not have a reality, apart from being part of the line. This line is only thought. Our senses perceive an undivided movement of a body from beginning point or a state of rest to the end point where it rests again. In our thoughts or talking about the line we could of course think about the movement as it passes through a point being halted or stopped there. But if we did that, in reality we would only have another, shorter indivisible movement. Thinking movement as its trajectory or path, or as a divisible line, 'arrests' or stops the movement in thought.

6.1.5 Arresting the movement, dynamic

With Bergson then the answer to the question of what we do when we speak about dynamic action, when we use symbolic action after the fact of dynamic action, is that we arrest the movement. Could that be a problem of focussing on symbolic action?

It seems immediately important to say that there is nothing wrong with 'arresting' a movement in thought. It might be very pragmatic to think about where to stop or intercept the next arrow (for example to prevent it from doing damage to a target). It might be similarly pragmatic to think / speak about a hesitation, expressed in silence (Rober, 2002) of a particular and (with Bergson) indivisible duration. I am not arguing to exclude 'arresting the movement in thought'. In systemic practice I would think of this as collective thought. There is an element reconstructing the movement in order to understand it. I will continue to ask for example "how did the argument come about?" In the process of reconstructing and arresting the movement of "leading to an argument" in collective thought, new tellings and meanings become available.

It is certainly a way of attending to dynamic action. Rober's (2002) example demonstrates the potential for change of talking about a hesitation. Change of course is a form of movement, and there would be good reason to think of the movement being translated from the dynamic in to the symbolic realm. As laid out, change and movement can clearly happen in the realm of symbolic action, the symbolic is not static. If it was, talking practices (like therapy, coaching or consultation) could not work. In that way, the word 'arresting' might be somewhat misleading.

In chapter 3¹³³, I used Bateson's (1972) example of the blind man to show a good fit between his ideas and Barad's (2007) ideas of apparatuses. In this blind man example, Bateson shows that information gets transformed from one type of information, for example the surface of the road, to another type of information, in the example to vibration of the cane. He speaks of transforms of information.

It might make sense for us to speak of transforms of movement. Movement in dynamic action gets transformed into movement in symbolic action. Both are consistent with the idea of information, difference and material-discursive practice.

Change or movement or information clearly will reverberate and feed forward and back (in) between dynamic and symbolic aspects of being, material and discursive aspects of being. Even if these changes might not so easily be 'captured' in symbolic action, they intra-act. Clearly, I do not view this transforming of movement/information as negative as a term like 'arresting' might suggest. But I will continue to use 'arrest' as a term, to honour Bergson's (1911) terminology that particularly fits the arrow example so well and also to indicate that in each transform from dynamic to symbolic there is some 'loss', where the form of the movement restricts it to an extent. This would be different restrictions to the ones existing in the world of physical embodied entities. So, while there are good reasons and potentials for change in transforming from dynamic to symbolic action, there is now the question: is this the only way we could pragmatically or usefully attend to dynamic action? Or likely in practice: Is our only useful response to dynamic action(s) like hesitation to speak about them?

¹³³ p. 84

Rather than ‘arresting’ one movement as we are moving (no pun intended) from dynamic action to symbolic action, and as we are transforming movement, we could also stay in dynamic action. We could move from unintentional to intentional dynamic action, like slowing our breathing down, or allowing the silence created by the hesitation to linger, until something else happens in the shared space.

6.1.6 Yes, everything moves

Of course, merely refuting the impossibility of movement is not the same as saying everything moves or all is movement. With regards to this, we could wonder about the beginning and end point of a movement that Bergson refers to. On first sight the endpoint seems the easier to deal with. The arrow shot at the target has reached its intended destination and that is the whole causality. But what triggered the beginning of the movement? This seems another question that goes back into philosophy, with particular interest in religion: the question of the unmoved mover. However, the assumption behind this question is linear causality, a kind of question for “root” causes, against which we might be warned both from a perspective of circularity (Bateson, 1972, 1979), and a rhizomatic perspective (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). There is also an assumption that everything’s normal state is stillness out of which it has to be moved, triggered by something (or someone) else, ultimately by a prime mover, that or who does not need to be moved. Again, I cannot help feeling reminded of Vico (1725/1948), and thinking that we might have “created” a deity to make sense of our experience.

Recently I stumbled over a video in the sheer endless depository of information (useful and less useful, truthful and untruthful, notwithstanding the notion of an actual truth) we call the internet. In this video a scientist is debating with a “flat earther”, someone who believes that

there is a conspiracy trying to make us falsely believe in a globe. (It is not my task to “debunk” a particular conspiracy theory, so I won’t go into detail). In it, the flat earther says, while sitting in a chair, that he is not moving. Not considering the movements he makes to speak, he speaks about his experience, one we all have, that we have to exert energy in order to move, and usually have to have the intention to move. A being moved on a spinning planet, that spins around a sun, etc. or moving unintentionally seemed less part of how he made sense of his experience.

An alternative starting point could be that nothing ever truly rests or is stable. Our flat earther experiences whole rafts of movements (maybe not consciously or intentionally) even just to maintain his own existence (breathing, heartbeat ...). He also ages. He undergoes change. And every change is a movement from one state to another.

It is hard now to imagine anything that does not undergo change. Yes, things might seem temporarily stable, but is this the norm or the exception?

Thermodynamics has provided us with the idea of entropy (Clausius, 1865). As energy flows “downhill”, heat from a warmer region (say a hot bowl of soup) flows to a colder region (the room at room temperature) towards equilibrium. As that happens the ordered state of things (hot soup, colder room) has become more disordered. Literally, the energy is “all over the place”. Entropy in this way is seen as a state of disorder. Another important aspect of entropy and thermodynamics is that if energy is transformed, some of it dissipates as heat (for example through friction). It is not lost entirely, but no longer available to do ‘work’. Take a wind turbine: wind energy is transformed first into mechanical energy, in the process there is friction, and some energy dissipates as heat and the same happens again when the mechanical energy is transformed into electrical energy. It dissipates and gets absorbed into

an environment so vast that the difference it makes to the environment is negligible. The same happens universally.

According to the idea of the heat death of the universe, all the heat (that suns/stars are generating) will at some point be evenly distributed and nothing more will happen. This balance will be ever so slightly warmer than the current temperature of empty space, but only very slightly because (empty) space is so vast compared with the regions of heat (stars). Until then, a fundamental change or movement occurring is ever increasing entropy. What happens then is anyone's guess. Maybe our systemic ideas, like homeostasis, translated as 'it has to change in order to stay the same', are only applicable while there is still an increase in universal entropy. But maybe – and some theories suggest this – we almost have a reversal of ideas of homeostasis: the universe will be so stably the same that it cannot help but change drastically (and maybe gets 'reborn'). Either way, the change from a universe of increasing entropy to one of stable maximum entropy where no 'work' or change happens, or to one that changes very drastically, is itself a very dramatic change. But as we are far away from such a point, we can assume change is constant and that extends to the problems our clients bring. The relationships between people, and the way people feel about themselves and others, even if they are always perceived as somewhat problematic, are sometimes more and sometimes less problematic, and maybe sometimes not at all. Leaning on solution focussed ideas (De Shazer, 1994) I can explore the differences between less and the more problematic. In these ideas of universal entropy, we find echoes of some of the basic assumptions of two other seemingly discreet areas, whose overlap we will explore more later: Lecoq's idea of theatre, and Bateson's ideas of cybernetics.

6.1.7 Things (and information) get in a muddle

In the first of the 'metalogues' at the beginning of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson (1972) produces a conversation between a daughter and her father. The inquisitive daughter wants to know why things get in a muddle or untidy (disordered?) and the father comes up with the idea that for everything there are many more places where it would be untidy than places where it would be tidy or ordered. Naturally, if left to themselves (or rather to the influence of people), sooner or later things find themselves in places where the owner would not expect them. It requires an effort to tidy them up.

I can easily picture my own room, where when I do not make a conscious effort to tidy the room every once in a while, things find themselves a) all over the place and b) in what appears to be some equilibrium from where they cannot further fall or naturally move. I do stand accused of cultivating floor-drobes, using the floor as wardrobe. Tidying up, decreasing entropy, requires effort. Tidying up our relational world might also require effort and that is where therapy or coaching might be useful.

Bateson (1972) distinguishes systems into energetic systems and information systems, the latter of which are (also) subject to entropy, now interestingly not in the sense of energy distribution. The application of entropy to information is essential to his view of mind encompassing a whole system of flow of information and the idea of transforms of information. I am now tempted (and imagine Gregory Bateson agreeing) that at every transform of information some bits of information dissipate. While it is not entirely lost, it is lost for our 'work' or purposes. This might yet be another reason why it is so difficult to accurately 'describe' or 'transcribe' what happens between interacting people, or rather

within an intra-acting system. In my practice, I think I should take this potential loss into consideration when I transform information from dynamic to symbolic action, for example when I “notice” someone’s hesitation. I might preface my “noticing” with something like “I might have interpreted that incorrectly.”

6.1.8 Lecoq’s laws of motion

As we have seen already, Jacques Lecoq (2020) believes that everything moves. But he elaborates and summarises some rules or laws of movement:

- “1. There is no action without reaction.
2. Motion is continuous, it never stops.
3. Movement always originates in a state of disequilibrium tending towards equilibrium.
4. Equilibrium is itself in motion.
5. There is no motion without a fixed point.
6. Motion highlights the fixed point.
7. The fixed point, too, is in motion.” (p. 94)

While all these will be interesting to us, at this moment the third law stands out. It describes, although in other – maybe more poetic – words, entropy, the off-balance that is flowing towards balance. If we were to apply his fourth law to the universal entropy, we might well think that after the universe has reached absolute entropy, something else will happen, but that is overstressing the analogy. On a more day to day level, and applied to human dynamic action (in Lecoq’s case with a particular focus on theatre) even someone who is (seemingly) not moving or is balanced, is still moving. It is a direct result of the first rule: to stand upright one resists gravity. I find this a hopeful view that I hold for myself and with clients. People are already resisting the gravity of their problems. And the conditions for change are already met.

Something similar occurs in the case of fixed points. Thinking relationally, what makes a point fixed? In the late nineties or early 2000s, Chuck-Norris-jokes made the round. One of them said: 'Chuck Norris (often the hard man hero in action films) does not do push-ups, he pushes earth to the side a little bit.' The fixed point is not earth in relation to which Chuck Norris moves, but earth is being moved in relation to the fixed point, being Chuck Norris. Of course, it is a joke, but it plays on the question of perspective and relationality. In a way, a fixed point only exists by being related to as such, as Lecoq's sixth law suggests. Again, this is offering a hopeful perspective for therapy, coaching and consulting. Even what seems unchangeable is only so because we relate to it as such. It is here that Cecchin's (1987) curiosity and irreverence (Cecchin, Lane & Ray, 1992) can help to interrogate and doubt what we take for granted.

The seventh law then says that even the fixed point is in motion. In an atom, electrons move around the core. To some extent we could see the core as a fixed point that the electrons' movement highlights. Yet this atom, core and electrons and all, is part of a bigger system, maybe a river that is in constant motion. What Lecoq so succinctly says is that a fixed point is only ever a fixed point for a specific spatiotemporal system that is itself in motion. Any pursuit of an 'ultimate fixed point' is the spatial equivalent to the idea of an unmoved mover in causality, a linear and arborescent spatiality. I think sayings like 'give me a place to stand (or a fixed point) and a long enough lever and I move the world (or universe)', supposedly going back to Archimedes, play on the impossibility of such a notion. This law seems to me to suggest considering the wider context. And a change in perspective can sometimes help move a feeling of self-blame that might hinder change.

Still, as Jacques Lecoq's (2020) poem cited at the beginning of this chapter suggests, we might be tempted to create or construct such a fixed point. And probably that is what we do when we *speak about* movement, 'arresting' it, affixing it. Yet of course this speaking is itself movement and change is possible.

At the end of this subchapter, I summarise that there are good reasons to say, "everything moves", everything is dynamic. Yet we seem to sometimes act or rather think as if we could stop the movement and trace it, like pressing the pause button on a film or taking a photo that allows us to look very closely at something that might otherwise have escaped our attention because it would have moved too quickly. I suggest that this is what we are doing any time we apply symbolic action to dynamic action, when we talk about non-verbal communication. There are great advantages to that, namely being able to zoom in and out and analyse a moment. But these advantages come at a cost that something gets lost or rather dissipates in the process of transformation. Now what is it that might dissipate? In the next subchapter I will consider affect as the 'thing' that might dissipate or not receive attention, and enquire if it is a useful concept to introduce into systemic thinking and practice.

6.2 The space/time between – affect

In this section or subchapter, I explore what we might miss when we use symbolic action to describe or attend to dynamic action, or when we stop paying attention to dynamic action altogether. This is particularly in response to the second research question: What are the consequences of a focus on symbolic action? The starting point is that what we do is arrest a movement, create a fixed point that is not 'real' or material, but nevertheless can have huge implications or effects. It is virtual in that sense.

In the tradition of Bergson, and Deleuze and Guattari, whom he translated, Brian Massumi (2002) emphasises becoming over being, process over signification and coding, ontogenesis over ontology, movement over position. The flight of Zeno's arrow gets arrested or stopped only in thought (or word) when we think about positionality. Positionality starts by taking movement out of the picture, but then has the problem of having to add it back into the picture, otherwise change becomes impossible. Yet positionality, coding and words all fix movement in thought. Massumi (2002) goes so far as to suggest to "part company with the linguistic model at the basis of the most widespread concepts of coding" (p. 4). In some ways this echoes Keeney and Keeney's (2012) warning of what we miss if systemic practice becomes interpretive.

In line with that, Massumi (2002) differentiates emotion from affect. Affect could probably best be described as the effect an event has on our body and vice versa, how it 'moves' us and we move the event, on a not (yet) conscious level. It is raw intensity and not subject to the law of excluded middle – we cannot say it is either this or that. In that sense, affect cannot be easily described or named as either this or that, while for emotions we have words.

Emotion is something more social or cultural, and more conscious. It is something that can be named but might be differently named and interpreted in different cultures. Naming a particular experience in emotional terms fixes the intensity of affect. That necessitates a process of selection. Out of the multitude of complex and sometimes 'contradictory' movements of affect, only few will be selected to be registered consciously as an emotion. He refers to other research that found that supposedly 'negative' emotions like sadness can still feel comfortable, and hypothesises that it is intensity, movement possibly without particular direction, that can explain that.

In my practice I very rarely use a question like “how does it (make you) feel?” And in my training, I have often encouraged participants not to be too reliant on that question.

Perhaps I had (potentially even wrongly) understood this in line with the Milan team’s idea of doing rather than being. Rather than saying “so and so is sad”, one should note “so and so is acting as if sad”. I had thought of emotion as rather linear and less interactional. After all, ‘emotion’ means moving out of, as if there was an internal source.

When I witnessed others (for example in a training context or in coworking with social workers) asking the feeling-question, I noted that more often than not the answer was “I don’t know”, yet there was (as often pointed out by the person asking the question) a very obvious state that could be called heightened arousal. I now think that it might well have been that what we witnessed was (undirected) intensity that has not yet been filtered and gone through the process of selection towards one or at least very few nameable emotions. Yet (in my reading) circularity might be one key to dissolving a critique of Massumi by Margaret Wetherell (2012). She seems to read Massumi as saying that affect happens chronologically before emotion. And one can read Massumi that way, certainly when he highlights ‘the missing half-second’.

Massumi refers to research that asked participants to flex a finger at any time and found brain activity half a second before fingers were flexed, and other examples of brain activity before conscious activity. Yet there are passages in which Massumi emphasises an ontological / ontogenetic priority of affect over more cultural, social, and linguistic aspects of reality / perception / meaning, rather than a chronological one. I make sense of what he says in a circle:

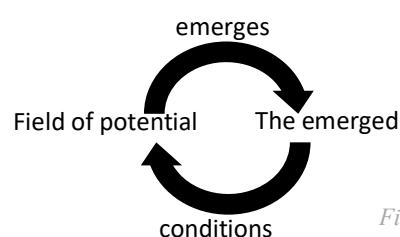


Figure 20: Emergence

Out of the field of potential emerges the emerged. The emerged conditions the field of potential. The second part of the loop is what most “post” systemic approaches in what we call systemic practice focus on: meaning making.

There is nothing wrong with that. Especially keeping in mind that any way in is a potential way in (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). What Keeney and Keeney (2012) suggest is that earlier approaches, especially those close to Bateson’s thinking, focussed more on the dynamic that I am trying to describe, with the first possible sentence inscribed in the circle above: the emerging. Massumi would suggest that this part, becoming, has ontogenetic priority over the second part, the become: movement into position before (not chronologically) positioning.

In my practice and in that of many of my colleagues, I have observed a tendency to interpret, or rather re-interpret, what has already happened. We could call that meaning making – social (co-)construction. The emerged, what has emerged out of the conversation, re-defines or conditions the field out of which it emerged. The latter is likely the ‘problem’ that brought people to look for therapy or coaching or consulting. Useful as that might be, the other part, the process of emergence directly from the field of potential, is also an option. Rather than taking the hesitation as emerged and then talking about it (reconditioning the field from which it emerged) I could let it emerge further. I could hold the silence and see what emerges next.

Wetherell’s other critique is that Massumi and others inspired by him, or otherwise emphasising affect, have actually discarded with discourse altogether. By ‘discourse’ Wetherell means what I would describe as symbolic action. She laments that a turn to affect deprives social research of some important categories and might leave aspects of and research into our social and emotional worlds unspeakable. It is precisely this that I think is

the case with many aspects of our social worlds, whether in families or organisations or wider societies, that some things remain unspeakable. But that does not mean that they are not expressible.

I am reminded of Wittgenstein's (1961) phrase: "[w]hat we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (p. 89). And I am not so sure about it. Silence seems to indicate that it needs to stay unexpressed rather than unlanguage. Wittgenstein indicated before, that if there is a question, it means that it can be answered. I can imagine several questions that people come to me with that have to do with creating a better or healthier social and material reality for themselves and whatever social system (family, organisation etc.) that cannot be answered so easily, using symbolic action. This can range from questions like "I don't know what it is that I am doing that already makes them become defensive before I even said something?" to traumas that are stored in the body (van der Kolk, 2014). But that does not mean it cannot be explored and maybe even be expressed differently. There is a good chance that the later Wittgenstein might not have been so sure about this sentence either, given that the *Philosophical Investigations* contradict the *Tractatus* in many ways.

Another reminder: CMM, heavily influenced by Wittgenstein, makes the distinction between stories lived and stories told (the LUUUUTT model; Pearce 1999, 2006). Some stories remain untold or untellable. Again, this does not necessarily mean that they remain inaccessible and inexpressible. There are stories untold and untellable about trauma. These traumas can be linked to experiences of discrimination. Beyond the body generally keeping a score of traumatic experiences (van der Kolk, 2014) there are great accounts of how (multi-generational) experiences of discrimination like racism (Fanon, 1967) and misogyny (Grosz, 1994) have been imprinted into the body and affect the way people move and hold

themselves. As these are clearly problems outside of the individual, or rather as these are dynamics in which individuals are embedded, systemic practice is well positioned to attend to these issues. But if we focus on symbolic action, are we maybe more likely to miss out on these stories and experiences?

In her critique, Wetherell suggests bringing discourse and affect together. Leaning on psychobiological research (particularly Scherer, 2005, 2009), she suggests more complex feedback loops being activated simultaneously across brain and neurological regions that steer physical responses that might be experienced as not yet directed intensity, as well as cultural and languaged aspects of reality (conscious or not, intentional or not) – what she would call discourse. I think of this as a very fruitful approach to either simultaneously attend to symbolic and dynamic action, or at least be able to travel forwards and backwards between the two.

In my reading of Massumi (2002) though, I do not understand him as mainly saying that affect comes chronologically before discourse. He speaks of loops feeding forwards and back simultaneously. Maybe the title of the first chapter (and of a previously published paper) “Autonomy of Affect” (p.23) might be a little misleading. Wetherell (2012) reads it as suggesting that “body brain responses are [...] beyond representation and cultural sense making and are hence autonomous.” (p. 61). Again, I read Massumi differently.

In another chapter Massumi suggests that terms like “body” and “culture”, as well as many other terms (and an individual human being could be seen as term) set up a field of tension¹³⁴. The metaphor that he uses is that of a football field. The terms are the goals, off the football

¹³⁴ This goes some way towards attending to the problem of binaries in language ([chapter 2.2.1, p. 42](#))

field. They are in many ways outside of the actual game of play. But they influence the play. As the ball is being played between the two goals, the goals are tendencies for the ball and all the players. Change, the ever-becoming to-ing and fro-ing of the game, happens in this field of tension.

This seems to me very well fitted to a systemic idea that problems (and solutions) are created between people, i.e. that change happens between people. It is also very fitting with Lecoq's thinking (as indicated above), that the play happens between entities. Thinking of entities: there are some further thoughts in this example that Massumi has that make it also well-fitting with post-human and "new" materialist thought. The quotation marks around new are added to express some doubt raised about the newness of "new" materialism as expressed by Wanda Pillow (2019). She notices that other writers, particularly women of colour, indigenous and postcolonial scholars, have been thinking these thoughts for decades before: theories of becoming of matter. Sylvia Wynter (McKittrick, 2015) for example has long theorised about bodies and discourses becoming together in questions of who and what matters? Who is included in "human". And how is humanity stratified? These are of course questions of social justice. I do find the idea of boundary-drawing by Barad (2007) useful. It is one of the questions I ask myself in my practice and sometimes clients too: where do we draw the boundary of what we consider as the system around the problem. I am of course not the first to ask whether appropriate responses and solutions to people's problems can be found in the smaller (sub-)system like a family, when it arose in bigger systems like society. It does raise the question of our practice potentially being too limited in its scope. How big is or should be the field of our practice? Maybe this is a question of consciousness.

Extending the metaphor of the football game, Massumi notices that in the moment of playing the game, the player being conscious of themselves might rather be a hindrance. Some less conscious but nevertheless intentional things happen when playing the ball – or rather when the ball brings out a particular movement of the player, and maybe not the whole player but their foot. In some ways one could be tempted to say that the ball plays the players. Surely the ball is the most important entity around which the game evolves. Its position on the field determines the position of the other entities (players) more than anything. Massumi thinks of the ball as a part-subject and the players as part-objects. This strongly echoes Barad's (2007) critique of the usual way of separating subject and object. She would probably be tempted to say that ball, players, field, goals etc. are all intra-acting in an apparatus or in a material-discursive practice we call "game of football".

This in turn echoes the Milan team's (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1978) idea of a family game, in which all family members are players and the 'goal' that lies unattainably outside the field of play is to define the relationship unilaterally. When we now take other part-object-part-subjects like money or the play station (described in a practice example before¹³⁵) as having agency into account, we might help create a different idea about family problems. Therapy as material-discursive practice might spread agency and correspondingly responsibility and blame more widely than just discursive practice.

Linking back to the idea of the field, Massumi observes that there are two fields. One is the physical or actual field *on* which the game is played. Of course, this field has an impact on the game. Whether it is in a good state or has become a mud field makes a difference. Whether

¹³⁵ P. 111

the building in which a coachee works is in a good state or one of disrepair (for example, due to budget cuts in the public sector) makes a difference.

But the field of tension *in* which the game is played, is above the actual field. It is real but not actual or material. It is virtual. It is constantly becoming, changing in complex movements that are in the moment eluding the discursive in a narrower sense, as Wetherell (2012) described, eluding the symbolic. This might be why it is sometimes difficult for clients to explain the problem and the relational dynamics. Not only is the field *in* which the problem exists constantly shifting in complex dynamics, it is virtual and in large parts eludes the symbolic. It is both metaphor and example of affect. Yet in it there are echoes and influences of symbolic action, for example pre-match tactics discussions. And there are rules that are written down that of course also impact on the game.

Massumi (2002) makes an interesting observation about these rules. While they are pre-written for a particular game, they themselves have emerged over time. Football in its current rule-governed form emerged from an informal precursor that needed players, a ball or something similar, and two goals or something similar. And the rules continue to emerge (for example, most recently the introduction of Video Assisted Refereeing) in response to what happens on and in the field, for example because players have adapted to and found ways to stay within the legality of the rules but still try to create an unfair advantage for themselves. But this happens after the actual game (and before the next that will be changed by it). Therapy, coaching and consulting in their more interpretive form do this. They might change the rules of the game, most blatantly when the Milan team 'prescribed' rules of behaviour between sessions. Arguably, Minuchin (1974) was more 'in the game', perhaps more like a

referee, when he 'told' people what to do. I suppose his in-game interventions, so he would hope, would lead to changes in the rules.

In fact, the game is arrested in symbolic action by the rules, and in practice by the referee literally stopping the game to enforce the rules. But what might seem to be the unmoving framework of the game, the set of rules, as we have seen emerges – an echo to Lecoq saying that even the fixpoint moves. This highlights the potential for practice that questions the taken for granted. Taking Searle's (1965) distinction¹³⁶ between regulative and constative rules into consideration, I suggest this applies to both, and makes the distinction a little less relevant. With regulative rules – how to play football fairly for example – we can easily see that they change. But for constitutive rules this is also the case. What counts as a game of football has emerged over time. And would we still recognise as football the game that is played by that name in fifty years' time? Arguably, regulative rules are also constitutive rules on a different level. How to play football fairly is defined by what counts as an infringement to this fairness, what counts as a foul – echoes of problems of logical type¹³⁷.

Summarising somewhat, according to Massumi (2012), the location with the greatest potential for change is the field, not the actual field but the virtual, the place where affect reigns supreme but not alone. Material conditions (the field, the ball...) and discursive aspects (rules, tactics discussions...) are part of the mix. But it seems to me that affective practices are the joining element between material and discursive aspects. Is it best to speak of material-affective-discursive practices? It seems a good way to combine the thoughts of Barad (2007)

¹³⁶ P. 153

¹³⁷ P. 44

and those before and after her, and the critique of Wetherell (2012, 2013) that advocates for affective-discursive practices.

Talking of practice – this seems a good moment to generally start moving back towards my (professional and life) practice and what all this might mean for it. For the moment, with regards to the second research question of the problem of focussing on symbolic action, it seems useful to summarise that we as practitioners might miss exploring and utilising a very potent locus of change.

6.3 Metaphors that influence our life – and our practice

In the first subchapter of this chapter, I have described how Peter Rober (2002) used Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) idea of 'metaphors we live by' to reflect on what gets missed in a practice that has as its central metaphor text or what I would describe as symbolic action. In this subchapter I will explore Lakoff's and Johnson's ideas further, and explore if or how they might fit with the distinction between symbolic and dynamic action.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe metaphors as concepts that map from one conceptual domain to another. One of the first conceptual metaphors they describe as an example is "argument is war": attacking (demolishing) or defending a particular point, winning or losing the argument, having a strategy, holding an indefensible position. The source domain is war that maps and structures and gives meaning to a target domain – argument in this case. This example is a more culturally specific metaphor of which they offer many more. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) do imagine how arguments would run if the central metaphor was a dance. Would it emphasize more the aspect of both parties standing to gain, learn, enjoy an argument, but emphasise less the aspect of convincing, winning and losing? A conceptual

metaphor in this way always highlights some aspect of the target domain and obscures others. Rober's (2002) observation was that the text metaphor so central now to many approaches in a field of practice that by and large considers itself systemic, highlights words and meanings or symbolic action and obscures non-verbal communication or dynamic action.

But there is another point being emphasised by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and again later by Lakoff (2012). Many basic or primary metaphors are grounded in physical spatial experience: happy, healthy, winning is *up*, unhappy, unhealthy (even dead), losing is *down*, affection and caring is warmth. These seem to be more universal and less culturally specific. And I would now add that they might even have some validity across species boundaries.

Many of these primary metaphors map emotions: rage and anger are heat, relaxed is 'cool' etc. Some others map morality (for example, uprightness, a shifty character etc). Both emotions and morality might well be considered important elements of our social worlds. Even if we were to accept that a single word is random, that there is nothing table-like about the word table (and I have explored some doubt¹³⁸), there is good reason that the relationship between words – or terms as Massumi (2002) would put it – is not random. There is something *down* about sadness or being oppressed. Bringing Massumi back in, there is a field of affect between sadness and *down* in which change can happen. One possibility, a perfectly valid one given the relationship between words, is to explore sadness and *down* as words and meaning. That is what social constructionist-inspired approaches would do. And there is also the possibility of exploring the physical experiences that influence these basic metaphors – and play around with them. There might well also be a possibility of travelling between these

¹³⁸ p. 197

approaches, of focussing on and utilising either symbolic or dynamic action. After all, symbolic and dynamic are again goals or attractors of another field of tension: and the game that is played on this field is called metaphor. It might also be called change, or therapy, or coaching, or consulting.

At this moment I cannot help but think of another analogy (or it is a metaphor again? - all the world's a stage) to theatre. After my theatre education (based on Lecoq's pedagogy) I would, when asked what was special about this particular approach, summarise that most (psychologically realist) theatre would ground itself in text first, then see how it feels, and only then consider how it would be physically expressed. I felt we worked the other way around. We used the physicality first to see how that feels and what it communicates, and then let the text arrive. Of course, it is probably more complex than that, but it does show that there are many routes into the rhizome (another important metaphor shift from a more arborescent, linear thinking; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) of social reality; many routes, including symbolic and dynamic action.

Now I seem to be in contradiction with an earlier statement that metaphors are part of the poetic domain, in a way a further step removed: dynamic action – symbolic action – metaphorical action. And this is true for particular metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observe that, particularly with regards to more complex metaphors, the source domain is not mapped on to the target domain in its entirety. "Theories are buildings", for example, uses the idea of foundations and construction (how pertinent when critiquing social constructionism, no pun intended), but we do not often hear of walls or plumbing with regards to theories. If we do, it still illustrates something, but it is not in the realm of everyday language. It is more poetic. We can imagine someone writing a critique of a particular theory,

and stretching the metaphor they might say something like: while the foundations of the theory are strong, the author seems to be obsessed with too many turrets – beautiful to look at but not very practical.

We can also easily imagine exploring such a metaphor further in therapy or coaching or consultation. If someone brought into the conversation that they have constructed a particular theory for themselves, we might ask them: in which room of the house of your theory would your partner, children, colleagues etc feel most comfortable? Arguably, narrative therapy explores the metaphor being created in the process of externalising in such a way, and in great detail.

“Theories are buildings” is also a metaphor where the source domain, buildings, is already in the symbolic or cultural realm. We could imagine the metaphor not making any sense in a culture that lives in caves. Yet, the earlier described basic or primary metaphors are often grounded in physical and spatial experience (and seem to be more universal). These metaphors are directly related to dynamic action. Maybe we can explore these metaphors in dynamic action too, in a way similar to how narrative therapy explores metaphors created in the realm of symbolic action? But then again, if our main metaphor has become, as indicated by writers as diverse as Rober (2002), Hoffman (1993) and Keeney and Keeney (2012) text, or therapy / coaching / consultation is creating new text, this might not be so obvious. With regards to the research question of the problem of focussing on symbolic action, the metaphor of text also obscures the potential of the primary, and possibly more universal ‘physical’ metaphors. But there might be some glimpses of what can be done (third research question): to consciously explore the physical metaphors in dynamic action or travel forward and backward between symbolic and dynamic action, between text and physicality.

6.4 Process and meaning – non-symbolic, non-linear

We have seen a tradition in thought, incl. Bergson (1911), Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Massumi (2002) and Barad (2007), that privileges movement over positioning, becoming over being, ontogenesis over ontology in other words it privileges process. I think that this is still the case for most if not all systemic practice, whether it maintains feedback / loops / systems as its central metaphor, or whether it has moved more towards a text metaphor. With regards to the systems metaphor, it seems more obvious. Feedback loops suggest some movement, and what moves is information (Bateson, 1972). With the text metaphor we can still assume the idea of process. Without it, change, the one thing we are working with and for and towards, would not be possible. Social constructionist influenced models like CMM (Pearce, 1994, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007) theorise change in the relationship between text and meaning in great detail. Yet the starting point seems to be current meaning, or being, rather than process. It is this interpreting of meaning that Keeney and Keeney (2012) criticise when they point out the loss of attention to dynamics in the living moment (Shotter, 1999, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2014).

I believe that paying attention to process, assuming a constant emergence and becoming, lowers the risk of becoming linear and arborescent (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). If we privilege becoming over being, we are less likely to accept that so-and-so *is* like this or that. Systemic practice offers many questions to challenge something like this: is so-and-so always like that? When is so-and-so most like that? How does so-and-so become like that?

Paying attention to becoming means we are also less likely to accept meanings as static, or at least as something that requires a practitioner (therapist, consultant, coach) to actively shift. Meanings, or rather the relationship between meaning and very temporary being, are

constantly becoming and emerging. Interpreting, no matter how not-knowing it is done, temporarily arrests that becoming in thought. One could be tempted to see a parallel to Zeno's paradox, in that therapy, coaching and consulting will never be up-to date with the becoming of meaning. By the time it has reached the point of finishing an interpretation, meaning has moved on again. After all, a question like the above might already have challenged and changed a previous meaning and interpretation. Herein lies the reason why it still works: Zeno's paradox has been refuted. Interpretation itself is an indivisible process and change happens in the field between becoming interpretation and becoming meaning: in what way do you now think or feel differently about so-and-so? And meaning has moved on again.

It seems appropriate to emphasise that there is nothing wrong with a more interpretive practice and with an attention to text. Yet there is also the possibility of being committed to the process, and being part of it, with what Lecoq would have called a provocation for the process or journey of training theatre practitioners, without having to arrest it, interpret it and then hope for a useful intersection with becoming meaning. Let meaning be an ontogenetical second that process feeds forward into and that in turn feeds back into process.

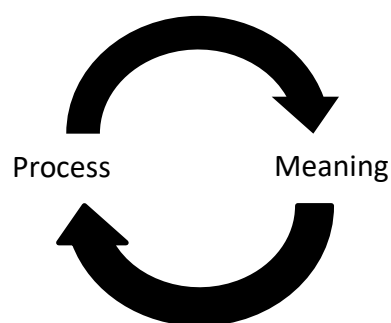


Figure 21: Process / Meaning

There is a similar relationship between dynamic and symbolic action. Ontogenetically (and epistemologically, but not necessarily chronologically), dynamic action and perception is before symbolic action. It is not that verbal aspects of communication are prioritised, and that para- and non-verbal communication (Boscolo et al., 1993) is a second. It is not that we first speak or hear the word and then the tonality of the word. Without tonality there is no word – even in its written form when we call tonality font.

Consider the following poem by Hugo Ball (1920):



Picture 9: Hugo Ball: Karawane

Ball performed it first in 1916 (picture on the right). With both the written version and with how we now can only imagine the performance, there is a sense that font and tone are inseparable from the “words” that are not actually words (not as far as I am aware in German,

the language in which Ball usually wrote). Yet something gets “said” or expressed. The dynamics can do without conventional symbolics.

It is worth remarking that both the text and the picture are already ‘arrested’ movement.

The arrow is caught in mid-flight. Yet in both we perceive the echoes of movement, an indication of the becoming before and after, a lingering dynamic.

With regards to the text, try to read it loudly! The “words” might not make sense, but sound does – in a similar way as thunder and Donner sound somewhat like the actual phenomenon of thunder, and how I earlier described how we moved the words in theatre school¹³⁹.

Movement and dynamics seem to be ontogenetically before words, and it does not seem too far-fetched to consider how we can use the processes that are happening in addition to, before, above and beyond, and often without symbolic action.

Having shown that (social) reality can be and is created also in dynamic action, and sometimes without symbolic action, I invite you to watch a video by Oliver Smart, a puppeteer and co-researcher, (if not for this thesis then for other projects). Oliver and I have collaborated on various pieces of theatre and cabaret, and to steal from Jennifer Freeman, David Epston and Dean Lobovitz’s (1997) book title to find *playful approaches to serious problems* (Smart & Huhnen, 2018).

¹³⁹ p. 197



Picture 10: Relational dynamic between two tennis balls

I hope this chapter has laid out some grounds and arguments for paying more attention to dynamic action and what we as practitioners might miss if we do not attend to it. Positively speaking, I hope this chapter has given a glimpse into what we can gain from attending to and using dynamic action: a fuller engagement with intensity and affect before the word or where words fail.

Before I give examples of how we can attend to dynamic action, with or without reverting to symbolic action and develop a few initial techniques, I need to return to the methodology of this thesis in the light of the considerations that I laid out so far.

7 Back to Methodology – for both research and practice

In the introduction I used Gail Simon’s (2012) model of Praction research to structure my thoughts on methodology (the *how* question of this research), and will return to both structure and thoughts about methodology now in the light of the thoughts I have laid out in this thesis so far. Considerations of the *what* question recursively feed back into the *how*-question. Lewin’s action research spiral takes another loop. And loops back (the dashed line).

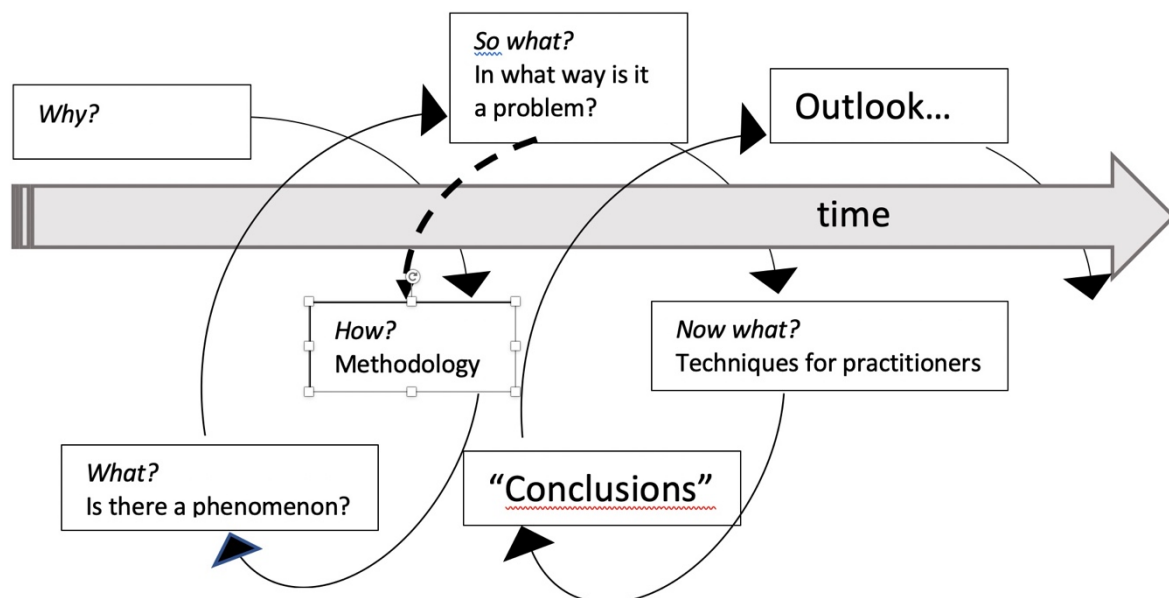


Figure 22: Research forwards and backwards in time (repeat)

To remind ourselves, the model of Praction research (Simon, 2012) leans on CMM’s hierarchical model (Pearce, 1994, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007) with a hierarchy of contexts in which data are being seen and on which data have implications. As a reminder, so far a rough outline looks like this.

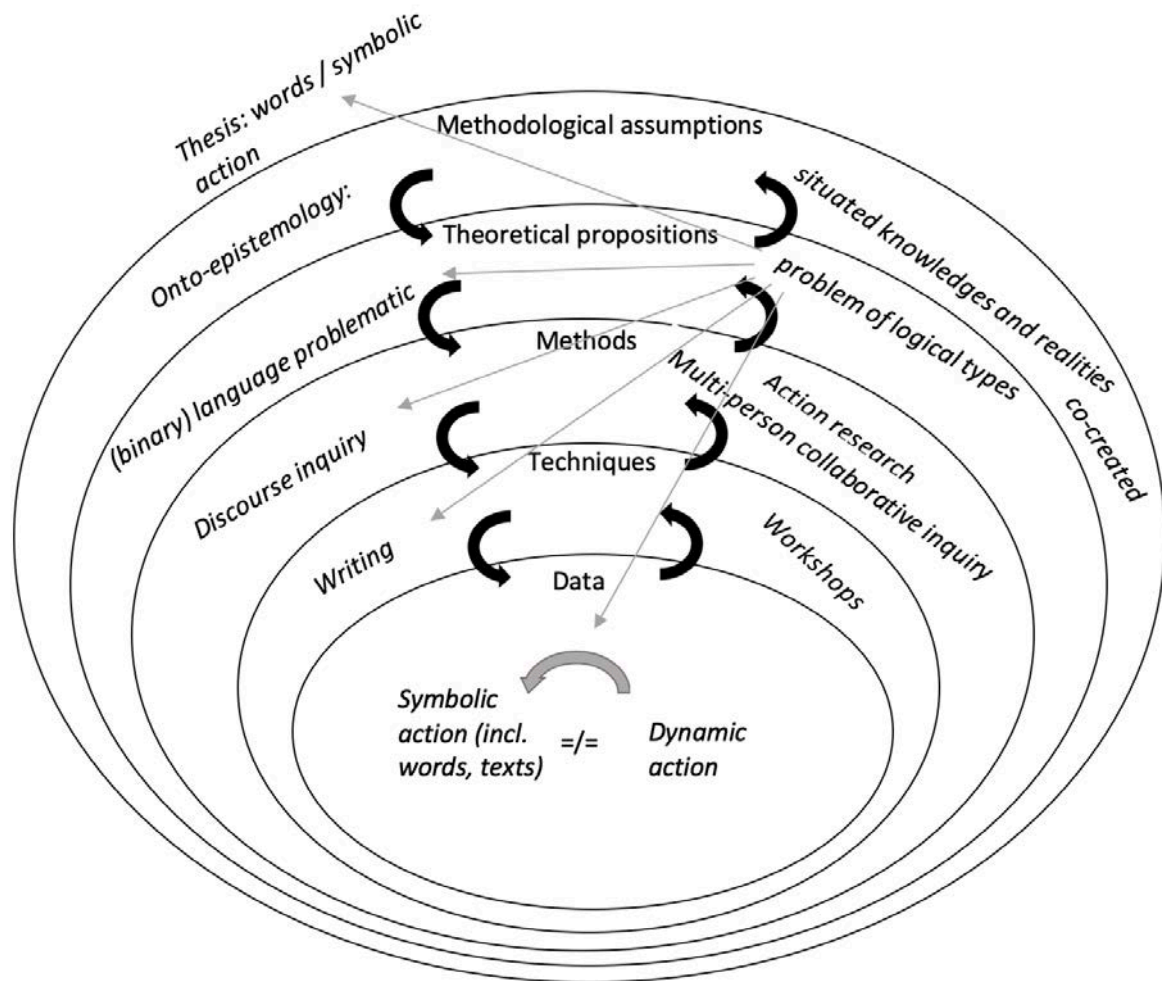


Figure 23: My praction research (repeat)

One major problem seems to be the questions of how to critique symbolic action in symbolic action: how do you critique language using language? Is the critique not subject to the critique then? The problem here is one of logical types (Bateson, 1972)¹⁴⁰. To some extent the answer is one of accepting that it is messy or confounded (Pearce, Cronen & Harris, 1982). Yet we can talk about talk. We might call it relational reflexivity (Burnham, 2005) in a therapeutic context. We might ask questions (using symbolic language) to ask what effects questions have. Why would I not ask (use symbolic action) what effect it has when we focus on symbolic action?

¹⁴⁰ p. 44

A critique of translating dynamic action, describing it into symbolic action, if valid for my practice as consultant, coach and therapist, is also valid for my practice as researcher. In this way, the previous two chapters speak strongly to methodological assumptions and – in a reflexive manner – I notice both changes, or further developments, and assumptions, that stayed the same as some what I had outlined earlier¹⁴¹. A comparison will necessarily also include a summary of the assumptions as they follow from the last chapters. In grappling with the critique some ideas need to be added to the outline of the research methodology.

I declared myself as assuming that as an observer / researcher I am influencing what I observe / research in line with the idea of second order cybernetics (von Foerster, 1975), and the uncertainty principle. This is further complicated by researching my own practice as an insider-researcher¹⁴² and researching together with friends and colleagues in the hope that our practices can be enhanced and inspired by each other. Research results are therefore highly situated in this context but hopefully resonate with readers and enhance their practice.

I have linked a further critique of knowledge as unified and one, suggesting that there are knowledges, to ideas of constructivism. A more social or interpersonal extension of this idea would be either social constructivism or social constructionism. I accepted therefore that what knowledge gets created in the process of this research is not exclusively mine, but is created from inside the research topic, and has limited truth claims.

I already extended this epistemological position into an onto-epistemological position, referring to Bohr's complementarity principle (Barad, 2007) – not only are there different knowledges but different realities. Knowledge and reality are entwined, in what Barad calls

¹⁴¹ P. 35

¹⁴² P. 63

material-discursive practices. To this I would now add that an important feature of these material discursive practices is intensity (Massumi, 2002) and the process and dynamics of this process. To describe / translate intensity, process and dynamics into words will always necessarily fail, as it arrests an ongoing movement.

On the level of theoretical propositions, I critiqued the binary that words often create, or extensions of binaries: more generally speaking, distinctions or categories. These distinctions – arbitrary as they might at first seem – can become (common) knowledge (epistemology) or actually reality (ontology). This is very much in line with a social constructionist perspective and language-focussed approaches. But my assumptions are now that language, the word or what I would now call symbolic action, is not the only thing that has this onto-epistemological potential. Intensity/affect and materiality have their role to play. Trying to put into words what might elude them arrests and limits that potential. And so, the proposition remains that when we focus on symbolic action, we miss other potentials for contributing to reality, for change and development. And the proposition is that this is the case for research too.

Particularly with regards to translating dynamic action into symbolic action I also indicated another problem with binaries and categorisations: Any measurement / description / encoding can only ever approximate the dynamic. The closer the approximation, the greater the amount symbolically encoded information produced, while there remains a loss.

In the context of both these assumptions and theoretical propositions, I will now aim to clarify the methods that I employed for this thesis. In the process I will critically evaluate some existing methods. It would go beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to evaluate all possible methods. But a selection will hopefully show some possibilities and difficulties.

7.1 Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis (LMA)

From the earlier parts of the 20th century Rudolf Laban, a not uncontroversial figure in the development of modern and contemporary dance for his involvement in the cultural sphere of Nazi-Germany, and later his student Irmgard Bartenieff (Bartenieff and Lewis, 1980) developed a system and vocabulary to analyse and describe movement. This movement analysis, known as Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis (short LMA), has strongly influenced modern and contemporary dance, and particularly Bartenieff's work has influenced dance and movement therapeutic ideas.

There are at least two initial points as to why this might be pertinent to the field of systemic practice:

1: As part of an introduction, Bartenieff (and Lewis, 1980) describes being behind the one-way mirror for a family therapy session and being able to use LMA to point out to the therapist that a young person had in fact engaged in the session and directed dynamic actions towards the therapist (and not, as the therapist had thought, been totally disengaged).

2: As the title of Bartenieff and Lewis' (1980) book *Body movement: Coping with the Environment* suggests, there is a strong relational aspect to environment, and it turns out in a wider sense to also include other actors.

Based on the assumption that movement is meaning, there is a wealth of aspects to LMA that I will try to summarise in the following sub-chapters, and apply to a short sequence from the video material of the workshops.

There are four overarching categories to LMA: body, effort, shape and space (BESS). All of them inextricably interrelated, each of them has their own terms to describe movement or changes in the movement or flow. Due to this interrelatedness they do not have to be described in the order that BESS suggests.

Body – analyses what the body is doing and the changing relationship between body parts. It asks questions like: Where does a movement start or is initiated from, and how does it travel through the body? The sequencing can be simultaneous (all parts moving at the same time), successive (where neighbouring body parts move in turn) or sequential (where non-neighbouring body parts are moving in turn). Attention is also paid to breath and the alignment of body parts.

Space – is closely related to body. Of course, any perceivable movement changes the space around it. An important starting point is the kinesphere, the maximum reach a body and its limbs can have. This kinesphere has three dimensions, and corresponding planes that each divide the kinesphere into halves. The vertical plane divides the kinesphere into front and back, the horizontal plane into upper and lower, and the sagittal plane into left and right. This can describe directions of movements, for example a foot extending to the lower left front. A movement along the vertical axis is either a rising or sinking

Shape – not described as its own category by Bartenieff and Lewis (1980), but they nevertheless talk of shape (flow) as a combination of the categories of body and space. A movement of the body with reference to itself changes the shape. A sinking of some body parts might go together with a contraction of the body.

Effort – describes several factors that appear as spectra between extremes – one more indulging the other, fighting (against). Each effort factor is associated with a particular quality. For the four effort factors it is probably easiest to order them as a table, combining two tables from Bartenieff and Lewis (1980, p. 51, p.53). For each of the indulging/fighting polarities they suggest some words to further describe these efforts.

Table 3: Bartenieff effort factors

Effort (associated question)	Indulgent	Fighting	Quality
Space (In what manner do I approach the space?)	Indirect (encompassing focus, flexible)	Direct (zeroing in, pinpointing)	Attention (thinking, orienting, specifically or generally)
Weight (What is my impact?)	Light (using fine touch, airy, delicate)	Strong (impactful, vigorous, powerful)	Intention (Asserting, Creating strong or light impact, sensing my weight, myself)
Time (When do I need to complete the act?)	Sustained (taking time, leisurely)	Sudden (urgent, hasty) (taking time, leisurely)	Decision (Urgency or non-urgency, rushing or delaying)
Flow (How do I keep going?)	Free (easy flowing, streaming out, abandoned, ready to go)	Bound (controlling the flow, streaming forward, holding back, restrained, ready to stop)	Progression (Feeling alive, how to get started and keep going, freely or carefully)

Out of the first three efforts, not considering Flow, Laban (Bartenieff and Lewis, 1980) developed 8 basic effort drives or movements. A purely indulgent effort would be Float – indirect, light and sustained and a purely fighting effort would be a punch – direct, strong, sudden. The others are combinations:

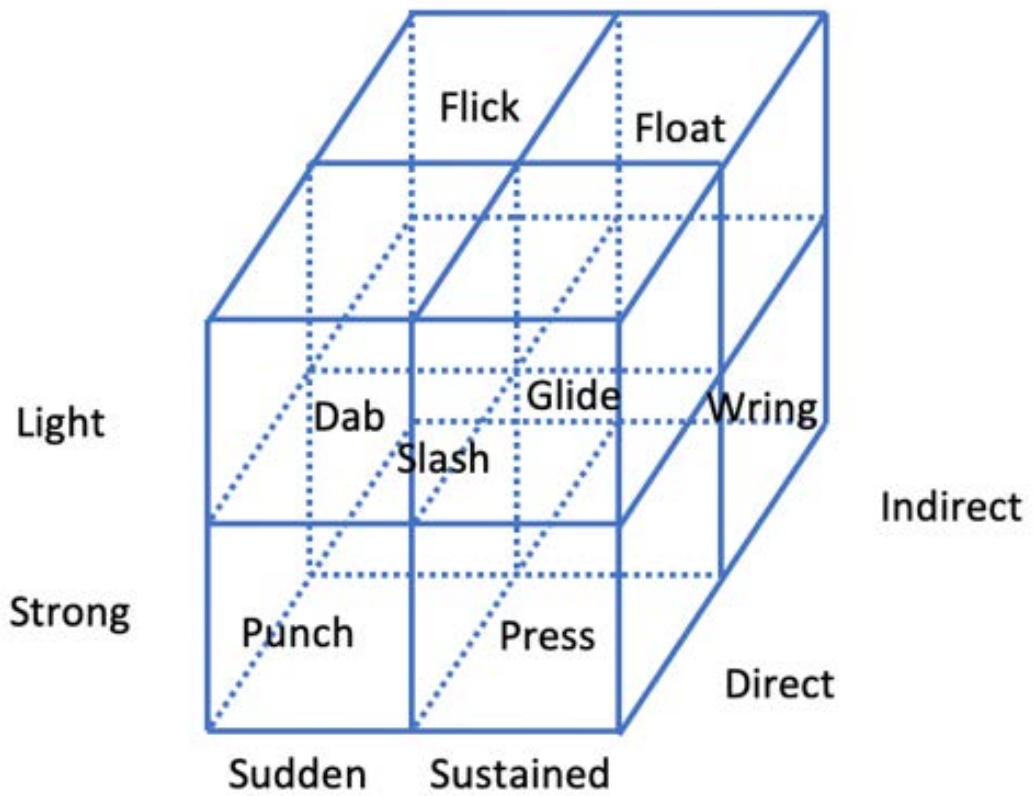
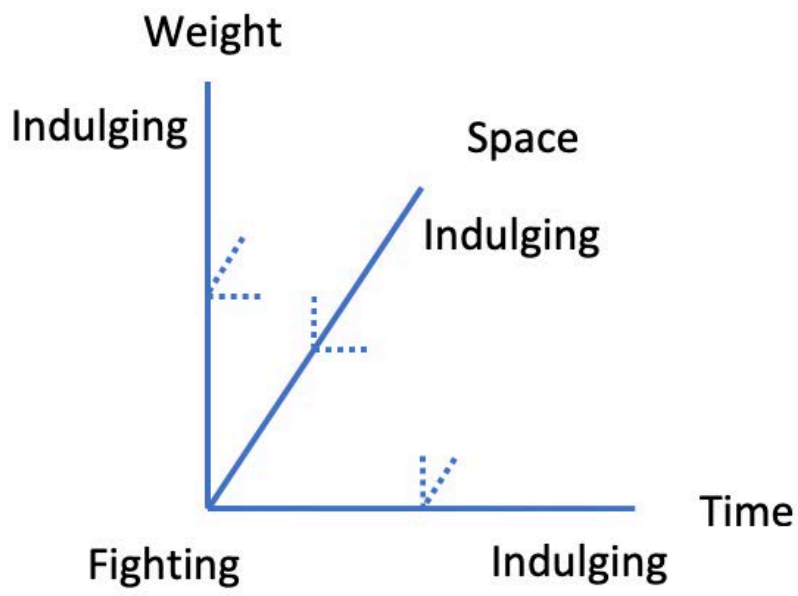


Figure 24: Bartenieff Efforts

7.2 Realities being created – How have we done things without words

With these ideas in mind, I will now try to ‘analyse’ a short movement sequence and compare this with a description I produced without a particular system of analysis in mind. The sequence is from the first workshop of this research, in which I had asked participants before the workshop to not use words for the initial part of the workshop.

00.00

Person 1 – on tiptoes – bent forward from the hip – leans forward on her arms on the windowsill, focussed attention outwards (direct). Her whole stance seems to have both weight qualities, light and strong. Time seems very sustained.

As a movement drive “press” seems most appropriate although there is a hint of “glide”.

Person 2 walks in from the left – at first strides are long and direct towards person 1. Very upright. Arms by the side. Forehead slightly forward. Stride becomes increasingly smaller and slower describing a slight arc towards person 1. Person 2 changes a tissue from her left hand to her right hand and is now positioned to the right side and behind person 1 fully focussing towards her.

At first there is a similar sense of space weight and time effort: between “press” and “glide”, gradually moving to a slightly more indirect “float” or “wring”.

00.06

Person 2 raises her left hand and “dabs” (light, quite sudden, direct) person 1 on the shoulder and raises tissue. Focus now includes the tissue too.

Person 1 brings her feet down which brings her whole body a little bit closer to the ground and turns her head – this second movement ever so slight sequential after the first. It is not a very sudden movement but, compared to the minimal movement (close to stillness) before, more sudden.

00.08

Person 2 waves the tissue at person 1. The movement seems indirect, light and sustained, floating, as Laban would say. Floating seems a very good description of the quality of the movement of the tissue. The arm moving it seems a little stronger. There is an interesting

quality of the tissue being the extension of the arm. The movement originates in the arm and travels through to the tissue.

Person 1 looks at the tissue for a moment. There is a direct moment, turning the head towards it and back towards what is outside the window. There is a sense of a very bound flow.

She goes back lifting her heels of the ground in a sustained, and strong 'pressing' movement, looking again out of the window. The focus is completely off the tissue and off person 2.

00.14

In a more sudden and synchronous movement person 1 brings her heels down and turns her head in the direction, yet not quite focussing, on person 2. She also brings her entire body upright. There is (synchronously) a more sudden movement, with the arm (grabbing a bottle that could be seen before, but is now behind person 2).

00.18

Person 1 now looks directly at person 2 who is still sustaining the waving of the tissue. Person 1 does something (presumably unscrewing the top of her bottle) and in more sudden movements, almost like in stages, turns her head away from person 2. Her head is now slightly tilting forward.

00.21

In a sustained but direct movement with some sense of bound flow, person 1 brings the bottle towards her lips, leans a little back, then forward again and takes the bottle down.

Person 2 for a short moment while person 1 has the bottle at her lips, twists to the left. It seems a slightly more sudden, light, indirect and free flowing movement.

00.27

Person 2 brings her left hand up to person 1's shoulder as before. Person 1 turns very suddenly, directly and strongly – the description of these three efforts would mean in a punch-like way. Synchronously, there is a similar but lighter quality to an arm movement (which we cannot entirely see)

00.28

Person 2 – still holding the tissue up – shakes her head and tilts it slightly. The shaking of the head has a light, sudden and indirect quality, maybe we could call it flicking the head.

00.30

Person 1 seems to raise her arm slightly and brush some hair from her face (somewhere between dabbing and flicking). She turns to “face” (seems very direct, and a very controlled bound flow) person 1.

00.34

Turning towards the window (headfirst), lifting her left arm pointing towards the window, leaning forward and bringing the right arm to support on the windowsill (in that order, in a sequential movement), person 1 focusses on what is outside the window. There seems to be a very bound flow.

Person 2 also leans forward, but supports her own weight, dropping the arm and hand holding the tissue. Overall, there seems a sense of compressing the body.

00.44

In a sustained movement, person 2 lifts her upper body again. Starting with a flick of the head, she turns to the right and walks away in a direct fashion, picking up speed.

00.50

This short sequence, less than a minute long, “transcribed” using Laban’s and Bartenieff’s (and Lewis, 1980) ideas of Laban Movement Analysis, took quite some time to analyse, write and probably even read. For contrast and comparison, I will offer a much shorter “inscription” that I wrote earlier, when I first viewed the material, closer but with some distance to the event. At the time, I was already unsure about the words “transcription” and “description”. Transcription seems to make sense with regards to words, transferring them from their spoken into a written form. The word description runs into all sorts of problems, some of which I wrote about earlier: precision, arresting the movement and therefore there is always

an element of choice on my part that might well influence the meaning. For myself I started to use “inscription” – writing something into the movement I see.

I need to say more about this term “inscription” as it usually or commonly refers to writing (to scribe) into or onto a surface, simply writing into something. With regards to (human) bodies this might also refer to body modifications like tattoos (Grosz, 1994). But there is also a writing into a space, something that is more than surface but space. Inscriptions have something to do with the question of what the visible and tangible surface says about the space it enwraps. There is some penetrating the surface in thought and word: reading / writing something into the space beyond the surface with all the problematic assumptions and biases that this employs. But so does description while trying to give the impression of objectivity. For reasons I laid out¹⁴³, transcribing and LMA are also subject to choices made by the observer. Can I always very clearly separate the punch from the press? It is not that binary.

While I try to stay with the surface and not make assumptions of something inner (like a motivation) I hope the term inscription does acknowledge that I am reading / writing into movements, and that this acknowledges the subjective nature of doing this. I hope it also acknowledges the relational and affective aspect: I am writing into the space between myself as observer and the research materials that I observe from the perspective of being affected by the data.

I still think that there is a depth to this technique. The write-up below is the result of watching and re-watching this episode and noticing different things with each repetition.

¹⁴³ P. 256

Person 2 starts to explore something with a tissue. When she approaches person 1, who is looking out of the window, they have a brief interaction.

Person 2 touches person 1's shoulder, then waves the tissue. Person 1 looks briefly then turns to look out of the window again. When person 2 does not stop waving the tissue she turns to her again, signals something, then drinks from her water bottle. Person 2's arm that is waving the tissue drops. Then she lifts it again, touches person 1's shoulder and tilts her head.

Person 1 looks at person 2's face, points out of the window and turns to look out of the window. Person 2 joins her to look out of the window. As person 1 does not turn to her again, person 2 walks away.

When I now look back at this example I am not sure whether the analysis using LMA adds much to what this shorter inscription offers but I will come back to this¹⁴⁴. Now I would also like to offer an extract of the transcript from the conversation after that workshop, where the two participants involved talked about this situation. It seems very clear that both in the situation without words, and in the talk about the situation, social reality was created or adjusted.

Person 2: I did. I tried to transact with the lavender.

Person 1: Shall I tell what was going on? Cause you seem...

Person 2: You spoke (laughter)

Person 1: There was a tree out there that I hadn't seen since I was in Australia. I can't for the life of me think of what it is, but the smell is amazing, and I had a really beautiful contact with the guys in Australia this week so that was such a powerful moment and then all of a sudden,

¹⁴⁴ P. 265

this thing arrived out of nowhere, out of context, with you just going 'look at me, look at me, I want to be seen by you'. So what? I could be three if I wanted.

...

Person 2: I didn't [know] that you were smelling your tree that you particularly loved. There is no way I could have known that.

Person 1: Correct.

Person 2: But I was watching you and I was like, I really would like to make contact with this person. I also didn't know that you were, really consistently strongly, judging me as a basically show-off, and someone with the age of three because what I am trying to do...

Person 1: I think in that moment your desire overrode ...

Person 2: ...because what I am trying to do is be adult-adult really.

Person 1: ... what the other person was experiencing. And that is the point of negotiation. And I am not trying to judge it. I am being a little bit harsh because I did feel I was being invaded. And I think if we are not to invade each other then we are going to have to find more delicate ways of moving in and out of spaces...

Person 2: But why are you more invaded if I come to you and try to make contact, and you are not invading me if I am in the room with you for two hours and feel really uncomfortable. ... 'Cause I was like fully uncomfortable. Fully uncomfortable with you.

Person 1: Yeah, and I try to manage my own discomfort.

Person 2: And I don't want to be like showing off. I don't want to have a sweetie... None of that was going on for me, whatever you think. It was literally: That woman has power. I don't know what she is capable of. I want to make some contact with her because I am feeling really

bloody uncomfortable. I just want to know that it is safe for me to be here with her. (To another participant) And I did not feel that with you. I knew that you were an introvert or being introverted in that moment, but I didn't have that unsafe feeling. So that was where that was coming from. I was like: How? How? What else is there? I don't know. Sound, no. Movement, no. No smiling, looking nothing. No, no, no. They were all nos.

A third participant: Did you have a leave-her-alone option?

Person 2: I did. But basically, I had to accept her rejection and her judgement.

Me: I wonder whether some of that judgement happens now while we verbalise it because in that moment it was actually negotiated reasonably quickly and easily. So maybe we now might talk ourselves into something that in the moment was not actually so much there.

This was a conversation that happened in the formal setting of the workshop. Similar conversations happened (as I indicated), also informally, about other scenes or episodes of workshops. Of course, they influenced me and I can find traces of conversations in my own notes. There were also notes about the space between myself and my research. I will now add some of those reflections that I made when transcribing and inscribing this scene for the first time:

The workshop was in the summer of 2018. It is now November 2020. I have done lots of other things for the doctorate, but actually have avoided work with my 'data' (or *relata* or *creata* – but I will for this section at least refer to data). Why? Partly because it is problematic and maybe I did need to undertake some theoretical work to get a sense of how to handle my data. But maybe also because I sooner or later had to relive this situation?

As I am sitting here trying to "transcribe" the audio part of the workshop I realise that it was relatively easy (at least emotionally) to 'inscribe' the video part. But now as I am approaching

the part of the conversation that I remember as tense and uncomfortable, I experience a physical reaction. Something in my belly tenses. As I take a moment to pay attention to my physical reaction, I notice more places in my body that are tense, my jaws, my neck, my shoulders.

It is more than uncomfortable. Something was wrong. I was wrong? I am trying to make sense of these sensations. I think maybe I felt guilty. Had I not been reasonably sure that this was a safe space that I would provide with this research? Would that mean I was doing unethical research?

At a further turn of the Lewinian spiral and looking back at my writing I am wondering why I chose this example. Of course there was the informal conversation with participants after the workshop, where some of the participants and I started to develop some ideas that influenced my further research. But I think it is also because it resonated with me and my experience of this research in so many ways:

- This example constitutes such a key moment early on in my research. It reminded me of ideas I had learned earlier in my studies as a social pedagogue about the difference between sender and receiver of a message¹⁴⁵.
- It gave me an initial idea of how it is not always beneficial to attend to dynamic action in symbolic action.
- It seems a good example of the various loops generated between the experience and “raw data” in workshops, the various (and not always as well documented because

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more informal) treatments of the data with participants (as co-researchers without overall responsibility) and by myself.

- Some ethical dilemmas of iterative and emerging research and fluidity: I tried to make participating (feel) safe and yet I could not predict or guarantee such safety including emotional safety.

Before “travelling back up” the hierarchical order of praction research with the implicative force of the question “What counts as data?” and starting another loop of learning, I will add another example of inspiration from the workshops that influenced other parts of the research. As previously mentioned, after this first workshop there were also informal conversations that were not recorded. As we sat informally together after the workshop, one participant reflected on the above situation and remarked that it was strange that there were many emotions (that was the word she used) during the course of the workshop that she would find difficult finding words for. Another participant asked whether that meant that those were emotions or something else. This participant indicated that they thought of emotions as something that usually had names. Someone else suggested “affects”. I think this had a large impact on me reading Brian Massumi’s (2002) work on affect again, and it became an important aspect of the more theoretical sense-making, in turn influencing the next iteration of workshops. I am wondering whether some of the more informal conversations were in some ways more influential, as power seems to be differently distributed in an informal setting. I was not positioned as “the researcher”. I was less central or the focus, so unexpected conversations were in some ways more likely to happen.

I mentioned earlier¹⁴⁶ that some participants declined the invitation to be co-researchers. One of them said “No, I do not want that responsibility for your research.” This led to me rethinking my own positioning within workshops and valuing a different position after workshops in a more informal setting. Am I still a researcher outside the official research setting? With the thought that I am living my life as inquiry (Marshall, 1999) I would say I am. Everyday life is research and everything counts as research. Every encounter influences me as a whole person and as a researcher. It influences my thinking, as this example shows.

Other examples of participants affecting various parts of the research, looping the learning, were participants feeding back on whether previous workshops with me had influenced their practice. Practitioners working with clients fed back that they had become more aware of their own and their clients’ unintentional dynamic actions like sighs, frequency of breathing, arrangement in the room. I remember one participant saying “It is quite amazing what you notice when you look more for non-verbal stuff. But what do I do with this now. I do not think even more talking is always the best way forward”. She also said that she felt that that she would possibly benefit from some kind of repository of techniques to use. Developing the catalogue in chapter 9 is one result of her feedback and my response to meeting this need in some way.

7.3 Travelling back up – what do data count as

There is a danger that this becomes a logical loop of self-evidence: surprise, surprise the data created (“creata”) in the context of the methodological assumptions confirm the methodological assumptions. Yet I do think that there is some use in trying to critically look

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at the methodological assumptions through the data; to ask myself “what do data count as” (Simon, 2012)? Maybe not so much as evidence, but as indicators of an at least somewhat consistent idea.

One of the assumptions was that transitioning dynamic action into symbolic action, as has happened in the examples of “inscription”, and the talk that is transcribed, is subject to what I would call the π -problem. It is impossible to be (absolutely) precise. The inscription using LMA is certainly more precise than the one I made without a particular method, but still not perfect. Yes, we can at least in our imagination pinpoint when what decision was maybe made. Somewhere between 00.21 and 00.27, when person 2 briefly turns her head and then goes on to touch person 1’s shoulder with her hand, she probably decided to try it one more time. Where she had the option of “leave-her-alone,” as the third participant has put it. This is just one example of the greater richness of the description using LMA. Using LMA seems certainly worthwhile. It seems to support the idea that reality is created also in dynamic action, as well as in words (symbolic action), as the transcript of the conversation shows. Here it is worth pointing out that not using words might still include symbolic action. The shaking of the head by person 1 (00.28) will require a cultural context to be understood as a “no”. Yet the tilting of the head gives it, in a more dynamic way, a question mark, and qualifies the symbolic part.

Is there a greater precision possible though like with π ¹⁴⁷? Aided by a possibly better focus of the video material, I could surely have looked in more detail at even smaller parts of movement, sequencing etc. Would that have explained in their entirety the different

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iterations of reality created in the moment, and the following moments (like the transcription and my earlier reflections? I doubt it. It seems that other factors played a role that cannot so easily be described. Apart from a historical context of previous experiences (like remembering the smell of a tree in Australia) and so on, there seems to also be something that happens in the living moment (Shotter, 2014) and that has to do with intensity and affect (Massumi, 2002), and that cannot so easily be described or explored without artificially arresting the movement.

With this in mind, I do not want to dismiss LMA as a method for analysing movement. It seems to now find good use in fields going well beyond my field of practice. In 2001, Liwei Zhao used it to animate computer generated communication, to make it feel more life-like, and in my very limited understanding, with some success. I can imagine that many have followed. I will also later suggest ways of using LMA¹⁴⁸ in systemic practice. But for the purpose of this thesis, it seems not necessary to analyse many more examples of movement to support the idea that social reality is generated also in dynamic action, without words. The example also shows that this reality can be reshaped by talking about it afterwards. Bringing back Massumi's (2002) metaphor of a football field, we could take "with words" and "without words" as the goals or tendencies that are the extremes, actually already outside of the field. A lot of exploration can happen in the field between.

With regards to methodological considerations I should now come back to the diagram roughly mapping my praction research and see what this loop back into methodology added or changed.

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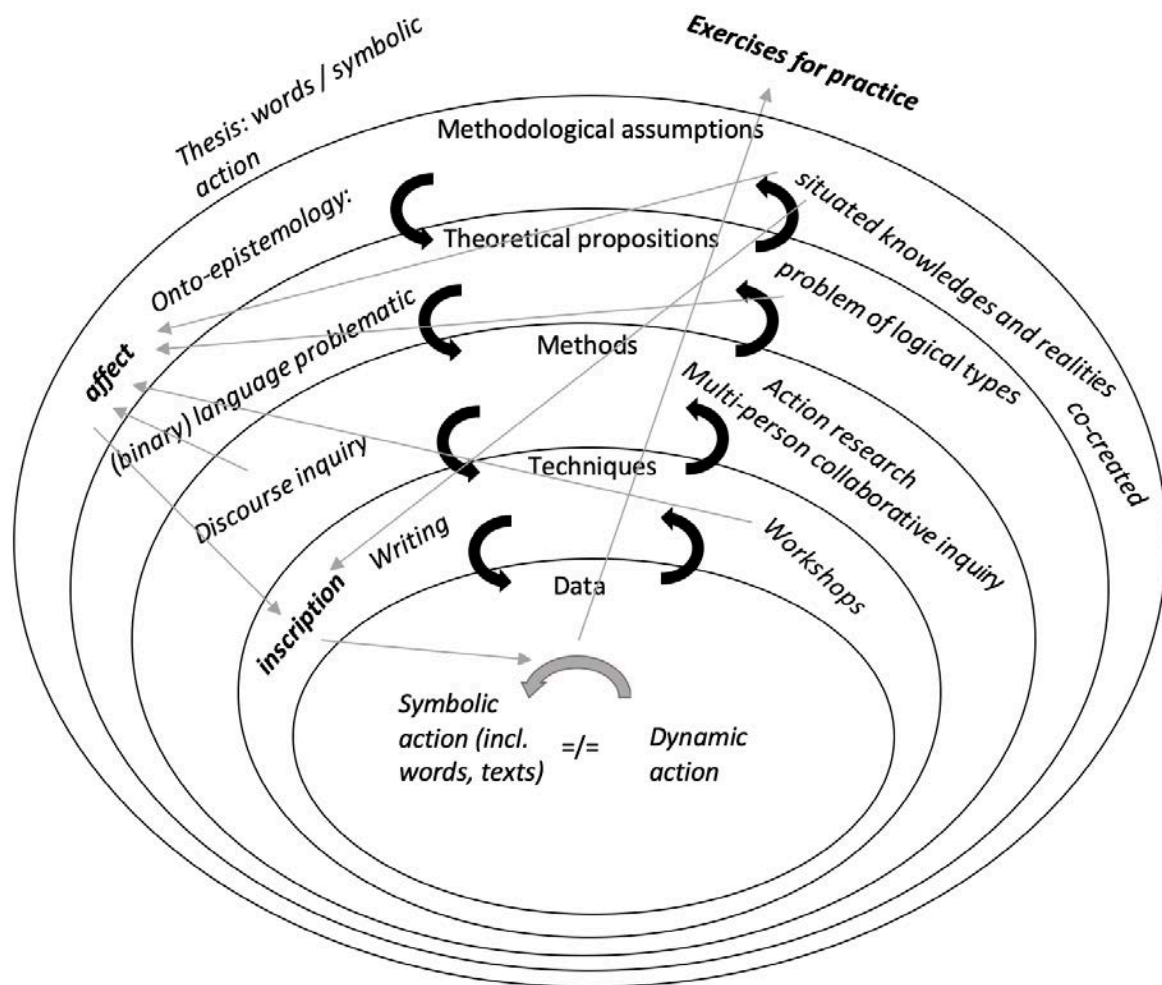


Figure 25: My praction research 2 (the thin grey lines indicate movements and developments leading towards new elements in the methodology)

At this moment the practical part of the research has illustrated another point made in theory. Although not linked to a research question directly, it seems important to note that (social) reality does get (co-)created in dynamic action too. Any claim that social reality gets (co-)created in language in a sense of symbolic actions, seems misleading.

Coming back to the research questions, it starts to get diffuse between the second and third research questions.

2 If there is a tendency to focus on symbolic communication, what are the consequences for practitioners and clients and the process of change?

3 Are there ways the practitioner can include dynamic action in a useful way?

So far, investigating the second question suggests that something gets missed, namely how, as shown, the co-creation of social reality in dynamic action happens. But can we usefully employ dynamic action for processes of (social, relational) change? How can we use dynamic action more in our systemic practice? Linked to that is how many of our techniques and tools from our practice that are more based on symbolic action (many mentioned earlier in the thesis) still apply.

For the following example, there is a good argument for examining it under this chapter's headline of methodology, as I am bringing in symbolic communication in the form of spoken words, and combining them with using dynamic action. How would that best be de-, trans- or inscribed? And so, I will go through a similar exercise as above that clearly has methodological implications. But like the example above, there is a quality of "findings" as well as methodology. Yet simply because it already points more towards answering the third research question, I will consider it as part of the next chapter (if you are reading in linear order), chapter 8.

8 How to (also) do things without words – a detailed example: Stuck / Unstuck

So far, I have attended mainly to the first two research questions, and mainly from a theoretical (or philosophical) perspective, having only in the last chapter moved more into the practical part of my research (apart from attending to the questionnaires¹⁴⁹).

Curiously, and as I have shown understandably, I have spent a lot of words talking about how we focus (too much) on words. To summarise briefly, the first question was whether systemic practitioners focus on words, or what I have come to call symbolic action, particularly after “the linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967). Having mapped the systemic field on the level of approach (Burnham, 1992), and having reviewed introductions to systemic practice and what participants in workshops said about this, I cannot give an absolute answer, but a tendency towards looking at words and their meanings became visible. If practitioners attend to dynamic action, like Rober (2002), they respond to it or explore it in words.

The second question asked was what we might miss if we focussed mainly on symbolic action or language. This question required me to clarify what counts as language and led me to the distinction between symbolic and dynamic action. Along that way I “re-discovered” communication theorists’ thinking about how we communicate. (In this chapter here, I will explore the application of these ideas to dynamic action.) I also explored ideas of affect (Massumi, 2002) as something that either eludes symbolic action or gets arrested by it, but that we nevertheless could work with.

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This chapter explores ideas of how we could work paying attention to and utilising dynamic action. That does not exclude symbolic action. It is more a question of how we can intentionally travel between symbolic and dynamic action, and into intentionality of dynamic action: how to (also) do things without words.

In the research workshops, we co-developed a few techniques that I will “show” in this thesis. This should by no means be understood as an exhaustive list, more as some initial ideas and an invitation to develop more techniques or variations of techniques.

One of these techniques that we developed in the research workshops I present in this chapter (8) in more detail, reflecting on the possibility of less detail for the presentation of further techniques. Related to these findings, there are some reflections on my own practice, feedback from the participant at the centre of this particular technique, and some further reflections on what might also ‘work’.

It is also another example of how different loops of research were created and how – ultimately – the techniques I offer in the next chapter were developed. This is one of the reasons for choosing this example for a more detailed treatment in the thesis. Another reason is that in this case I had the chance to “quickly” record and “formalise” what started as one of those informal conversations about the experience in the workshop and their afterlife with a participant. It is also an episode that triggered much reflection in me and is therefore very pertinent with regards to influencing and changing my practice.

8.1 The scene from the workshop – inscribed also using Laban/Bartenieff

Movement Analysis

Similar to how I have treated the other key scene ([chapter 7.2¹⁵⁰](#)), I have ‘inscribed’ this scene. Different to the other scene though, in this scene symbolic, verbal communication features. As you can relate from your own experience, and as has also been explored by Boscolo and his colleagues in 1993, there are para-verbal aspects of communication. Most people make sounds and in order to do so, breathe and move parts of their body. With signed communication, the other aspect of symbolic action ([as described in chapter 5.9¹⁵¹](#)), it is even clearer that something must move in order for communication to happen. [From early on in this thesis¹⁵²](#), and later in [more detail¹⁵³](#), I have also attended to dynamic action that qualifies symbolic action, like a smile. Yet there are also parts of communication that are not necessary for the communication itself, nor do they necessarily clarify the symbolic action, and yet they communicate, as this example shows. In the table below (after the embedded video clip if you read the HTML version of this thesis) symbolic and dynamic action are held next to each other. In this case, dynamic action has been inscribed as before, leaning on Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis.

Table 4: Analysing a scene using Laban/Bartenieff movement analysis

Time	Symbolic	Dynamic
00.00		

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¹⁵¹ P. 202

¹⁵² P. 46

¹⁵³ P. 212

00.00		<p>Participant 1 standing balanced, gaze directed at me, but body directed to centre of circle, head tilted forwards, hands in front of her body, legs straight but no locked knees.</p> <p>Impactful, strong self.</p> <p>Participant 2 and 3 stand similarly, body directed to centre of circle, but gaze towards participant 1. Participant 3 slightly wider stance but more turning head to face participant 1. Very sustained barely flow.</p> <p>Both hands in front of their lower body.</p> <p>Straight legs. Weight balanced.</p> <p>Participant 4 facing participant 1 through centre of the circle, hands in front of body.</p> <p>Right knee bent and heel just off floor.</p> <p>Weight balanced on left leg.</p> <p>I stand more on right leg, left pointing forward towards participant 1. Body facing towards centre of circle. Gaze directed at participant 1.</p> <p>Child behind participant 1 turns whole body in small steps (light) then squats lifting mats (heavier).</p>
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	<p>a dilemma, ahm, with my manager kind of ...</p> <p>Got into this pattern where</p> <p>we would just get ...</p>	<p>Starts to 'rock' (float) forwards and backwards.</p> <p>Participant 1 looks forward at her own hands, looks up suddenly first at participant 3 then me.</p> <p>Left hand flicks. More slowly looks at participant 2 and 4 then back at me.</p> <p>Movement slows down and seems more contained.</p> <p>Participant 1 turns towards me, directed movement, strong, weight forward.</p> <p>Back in neutral faces center.</p> <p>Turns to me hands up.</p> <p>Participant 2 tilts head briefly forward and backward (dab).</p>
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	<p>stuck (emphasis) somewhere because</p> <p>we are both working very hard</p> <p>to maintain that kind of that thing and</p> <p>actually</p> <p>it requires one of us to go along with the</p> <p>other one for a</p> <p>period of time until we get into that</p> <p>place ... until we..</p> <p>(overlap between "...until we..." and next speech act)</p>	
00.29	<p>Me:</p> <p>Let's try that out.</p>	<p>Participant 1 (being interrupted stops speaking) maintains same stance (towards me). Participant 2 and 3 turn head towards me, participant 2 drops hands, participant 3 shifts weight to left leg.</p> <p>Me straightening back, looking up strongly directing at participant 1, shifting weight forward.</p>

	<p>Where does your manager... where is the</p> <p>... where do you ...</p> <p>where do you hold each other?</p>	<p>Participant 4 shifts weight forward onto right leg, head slightly tilted forward.</p> <p>Participant 3 lifts hands and glides them from front of face backwards.</p> <p>Participant 1 bends slightly forward looks down (directly).</p> <p>Participant 2 looks down grabs. his jumper, separates it from T-shirt (dab) and takes it off (flick).</p> <p>Me moving right foot forward, even more strongly directed at participant 1.</p> <p>Moving left foot in so now more directed / open to centre of the circle. Participant 3 directs head towards participant 2 then back at participant 1 and me, shift right foot closer to left and put weight onto it, left foot and knee slightly forward.</p> <p>tilts head slightly forward and to the left.</p> <p>Me stepping back more suddenly.</p> <p>Participant 2 wrings jumper.</p>
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	<p>Where in your body if you could locate it,</p> <p>ahm,</p> <p>is the ...</p> <p>Is it shoulder to shoulder?</p> <p>Is it ...</p>	<p>Me: sudden strong direct movement of left hand (although punch does not seem to fit) towards participant 1's right shoulder.</p> <p>Participant 1 looks up.</p> <p>Sudden step left foot towards participant 1, leaning weight in, touching her right shoulder with my left shoulder.</p> <p>Participant 2 steps sideways backwards bends slightly to the side, lets jumper drop on a floor mat.</p> <p>Me shift weight to right foot, grab participant 1's right wrist with left hand.</p>
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	And, and I'm doing a lot of this, right?	Participant 1 presses me (my arms?) backwards. Participants 3 and 4 shift weight. Child gets up and starts walking, slowing down near dropped jumper.
01.07	Me: You're doing that and I'm pushing on, harder, harder...	Participant 4 shifts weight forward. I push / press weight forward strongly. Participant 1 gets pushed back puts left foot backwards, then right and left again slightly off-balance, regains her direction and press.
01.10	Participant 1: Yeah, exactly..	Both participant 1 and I strongly leaning forward, right foot forward upper body strongly pressing towards each other.
01.11	Me: So that's the problem?	
01.12	Participant 1: Yeah, exactly..	Participant 1 adjusts feet (strong indirect) to maintain upper body press.
01.12	Me:	Me still pushing forward, participant 1 steps her right foot behind her back, turning which

	Ok. Ok. So I am her now. I continue to that so...	creates an open passage for my pressing forward.
01.18	Participant 1: Yeah. So somehow I need to do something like that, yeah, yeah.	Leaning her left shoulder slightly in, participant 1 steps her left foot in front of her right turning further. I walk further in the direction of the original press. Participant 1 turns further to face the group.
01.21	Participant 2: That's perfect ... idea	I move quickly back to the circle. We all adjust to form a circle.
01.26	Participant 3: What kind of ... (inaudible)?	Participant 1 turns to her head towards participant 3, upper body a little less and lower body more directed to centre (slight twist in the body). Me more short sudden adjustment forward, flicking my clothes.
01.30	Participant 1: Not in a relationship – yet.	Participant 1 kicks her left leg and putting it back adjusts direction of her stance more towards participant 3. Places hands on her hips, head slightly tilted to the right side. Brings both her hands up fingers (at least on left hand) spread.

	<p>A very early relationship.</p> <p>So partly not having the rules of engagement a little bit –</p> <p>ahm –</p> <p>and also partly the people, the audience around as well...</p> <p>But what I think the problem is...</p>	<p>I step slightly back (hands behind my back).</p> <p>Participant 1 flicks fingers in towards herself.</p> <p>Hands flattened.</p> <p>Points finger.</p> <p>Fingers spread, palms up.</p> <p>Hands come up, float in a circular motion with emphasis pointing behind participant 1 and then sideways.</p> <p>Participant 1 flicks with her right hand and then turns in response to me pressing my right fingers, then whole hand in towards her, floating my arm to the side with her right wrist.</p>
01.46	<p>Me:</p> <p>Let's do that again. Do you think ...</p> <p>others around you would see you as weak?</p>	<p>Participant 1 drops her arm, faces me. I press.</p> <p>Participant 1 and I sustain the stance.</p> <p>With a flick of the head, I indicate at the circle.</p>

01.56	Well, what happens is. I'm actually.... So you are doing this and I got people behind me. That's how I... That's how I...	Participant 1 takes my wrist and looking towards floor in the centre of the circle steers the pairing of herself and me in a different direction so that she has other participants behind herself. As participant 3 moves out of the way to her right, participant 1 indicates with her thumbs behind her. Participant 2 and 3 position themselves behind participant 1.
02.04	Me: Ok. And you want to protect them.	Participant 2 stands neutral behind participant 1 slightly to her left, participant 3, weight more on right leg slightly to her right. Participant 1 nods (flicking head forward).
02.05	Participant 1: So if I am doing this..., right? Yeah?	(simultaneous with above) Participant 1 seems to also press towards me.
02.09	Me: Ok. What, ahhhh, with what you have learned earlier from Stan... I'm pushing. I'm getting closer to those people.	Participant 3 shifts weight to left leg. Participant 4 walks and positions herself behind participant 2 and 3, right heel slightly off the ground.
02.16	Participant 1:	Participant 2 looks slightly more to the right, participant 3 slightly more to the left

	Yeah, yeah.	(probably participant 1 gets pushed closer to them). Child is running left to right.
02.17	Me: W-W-Where can you take it? What's the, what's the way out?	Participant 2 shuffles slightly to the left. Participant 1 appears facing towards the group (she must have turned similar to before but not gotten out of the way of me). Participant 4 moves slightly to the left. I am 'hanging' over her left shoulder looking over her right. Participant 3 has left arm raised.
02.26	Participant 1: That'll be it. (laughter) I'm in it (laughter) group hug (laughter)	Participant 2 and 3 face participant 1. I remove my arm. Participant 1 turns towards her right. Participant 3 uses open palm of left hand to gently hold left shoulder of participant 1. In a sequential movement starting from me through participants 2 and 3 to 4 we link arms

		around shoulders and 'press' gently with participant 1 in the middle.
02.31	Child: Mummy, mummy, mummy...	Group releases hug.

8.2 A shorter description

A participant describes in physical terms how she got herself into a 'stuck' situation with her manager. As facilitator I take the role of that manager and the participant tries out a different dynamic. However, she describes why she could not do this out of care for other members of staff who in her example she locates behind her, as if she is shielding them from the manager. We play the scene again with me doing what the participant described her manager doing and she finds a different way of dealing with the role-played scenario, leading to a satisfying and surprising end for her.

8.3 Reflections

8.3.1 Short vs long inscription

With the headline I have set up a comparison, and of course that lends itself to look at 'pro's and con's' for either. On first glance, one of the main advantages of the shorter inscription is that it is short. If one of the aims is to provide some practical ideas of techniques using dynamic action (research question 3¹⁵⁴), then this shortness might be more practical. First, if

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I imagine myself having maybe read the book, but now working with a family or organisation wanting to look for an idea, I might not want to re-read a very long de- or inscription, especially if I am 'flicking' through a catalogue of ideas. One of the seemingly obvious disadvantages, that it is less precise might also turn out to be an advantage for this purpose. The less precise the more room for my own interpretation. But is it good enough?

An analogy used in this thesis for precision was the π -problem. Yes, we can increase the precision of π by yet another decimal but is that (always) helpful in practice? That depends on the application; for something precision-engineered I imagine greater precision to be an advantage (the name gives it away). But for my everyday life I have maybe used π roughly to know what length of laminate I need to buy to re-laminate the edge of a round table. Of course, I rounded up a bit and bought that length cutting any excess off while laminating. Had I gone to the shop asking for a length precise to the 10th decimal after the point I would have been laughed at and probably gone home finding out that the table is not perfectly round and that there are minor bumps in the surface.

So, for the purpose of providing ideas for practitioners the 'rougher', a less detailed or precise de- or inscription might work well, and I would say the idea of rounding up (erring on the side of safety) and then cutting off what is not needed in the process (negotiate with the client how far they would go or seems useful to them) applies. So, for techniques I suggest later, only a short description will be provided.

But that is not to say that the longer description is not useful. I might not have learned that much more about the exercise or technique that we could call "Stuck / Unstuck" than doing the shorter inscription, but I learned about myself in the situation of facilitating it and of being

in the group and the space beyond words. In the next section (if you are reading linearly) I will reflect on myself as facilitator.

8.3.2 Communication 'strategies' – a self-reflexive side effect and a technique in its own right

I notice that early on, when participant 1 describes her dilemma with her manager, my weight is backwards but my head tilted forwards. I might be 'properly' interpreting now, rather than de- or inscribing, but I get a sense as if I am ready to pounce. I am wondering now with hindsight whether I was very keen, perhaps too keen to interrupt and shorten the description of the dilemma in words. Yet I think I am also paying much attention to participant 1's dynamic action that goes in parallel to her telling (symbolic action), for example the flicking of her hands. I would imagine that this attention is very useful for the kind of work proposed here, as it helps utilising the physical description in the interventive part of the technique. The downside might be that I might look as if I would no longer pay attention to what is being said, and possibly the perceived risk of being interrupted made participant 1 feel that they needed to speak quickly. This would be an unintentional perlocutionary act from my side. What could I do differently? Participant 2, Stan, stands there in a more neutral position with regards to Laban's planes in the kinesphere. I imagine he still takes in all the physical dynamic acts without focussing his gaze on them. After all, he is more deeply trained and experienced in Aikido, which teaches a focus on the other's eye while still registering the other's whole body and movement.

When I do respond to participant 1's speech act, I physically move closer to her slowly, possibly tentatively; and possibly too close for participant 1 in that moment. She seems to

indicate this by looking down at the part of me closest to her, my left foot. I then move much quicker back. Did we negotiate proximity and what is acceptable in that moment, while the words were about something else? That would be yet another indicator of social reality being created in dynamic action. But in workshops and in my practice, it might be good to use symbolic action to more clearly negotiate physical distance and touch, not least with regards to consent, seeking permission and co-creating a process that works.

There are many more moments in this short clip that are worth reflecting on. I can see this as a side effect of using Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis (Bartenieff and Lewis, 1980), as these reflections might seem less pertinent to the research questions and more personal. Yet the third research question asked how we could use dynamic action as practitioners. And this section contributes to responding to that question in two ways.

1 It raises a question less about technique, but attitude or literally stance, less about what to do but *how* to do it, something that is located more in what Peter Lang, Martin Little and Vernon Cronen (1990) call the domain of aesthetics¹⁵⁵: how to most ethically and respectfully elicit and work with what is expressed in dynamic action. For myself, I found looking at this scene in greater detail has raised my attention to how my dynamic action might help or hinder the process.

¹⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that Lang, Little and Cronen's (1990) domains of action also attend to the three questions of what, how and why, that have framed this thesis in different ways. Theirs is a different emphasis. The domain of Aesthetics mentioned here maps onto a 'how' but more a how to 'be' and includes ethics they say is always a question in all praxis (as I have pointed out in earlier methodological considerations, p. 34). The domain of production links to 'what', what are outcomes and techniques but it also asks what counts as a particular praxis thus asking about what Searle (1965) would have called constitutive rules. The domain of explanation indicates an exploring of meanings and 'making sense', a possibility for a different view of 'why'. It is further interesting that with this paper, very strongly based Maturana and Varela's (1987) ideas of domains of action we can see the slight but important movement from being in the linguistic domain that encompasses all communication or interaction or intra-action between living entities to being in language, human communication and speech.

2 If I can benefit from having a vocabulary to ‘analyse’ or inscribe dynamic action, and being curious about the effect this might have on others, then looking at a segment of interaction together with a client or group of clients (a family or a team etc.) might reveal some of how clients relate to each other and inter- / intra-act as physical bodies in space. This might be helped by looking at video footage of such action together. But having a vocabulary like the one provided in Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis might also allow us to de- and inscribe each other’s dynamic action, and also change it. In this way we would move between intentionally and unintentionally, utilising symbolic and dynamic action. We would utilise the whole quadrant described at the end of the chapter 5¹⁵⁶.

Another, and in many ways similar, vocabulary that could be useful is that of Jacques Lecoq (2020) that adds a more relational view. Terms like pushing and pulling and – maybe more importantly – being pushed and being pulled, seem to suggest reference to another entity in relation to which this happens, thus creating a system of intra-actions in vocabulary that can then also be explored physically. It is this more relational aspect that can make it fit with systemic practice, and add a different perspective to other modalities that (also) employ dynamic action, like art therapy in a narrower and wider sense like dance- and movement therapy, drama-therapy and psychodrama: an attention to the space between. For systemic practice the metaphor becomes more literal: Salvador Minuchin’s (1974) dance as an actual movement sequence.

¹⁵⁶ P. 205

8.3.3 Does it work? – The participant who brought the example

After noticing a benefit to myself and for my practice – after all this is a doctorate inquiring into my own practice – the question of whether it worked for the participant comes into focus. Not only from a research ethical position – I had set out for these workshops to be beneficial to participants – is this important. It also evaluates whether this technique could be useful in practice with clients and their dilemmas.

Participant 1, Julie, who brought this real dilemma with her manager, allowed me to interview her 16th February 2022, close to 3 years after the workshop in which she had brought the dilemma on 11th May 2019.

In this interview Julie speaks of having a ‘significant’ conversation with her manager shortly after participating in the workshop in which she shared her observations of the ‘pattern of their relationship’. Although the conversation was due to happen anyway, Julie recalls that she had been able to ‘distil’ for herself ‘what some of the pattern was’, ‘see the pattern’ and ‘define the problem’. The way they interact with each other has changed as a result of that conversation in which Julie was able to suggest what each of them could do differently.

In speculating how the ‘exercise’ might have been helpful, Julie describes that it has enabled her to share an observation about both of them, her manager and herself, rather than speaking about the emotional effect the current dynamic had on her. Julie describes ‘the physical exercise’ having ‘created a metaphor’ to be clearer about the dynamic. Not employing ‘emotional language’ in her conversation has enabled a less ‘emotive’ and ‘more practical’ conversation.

When asked whether she remembered anything particular in the ‘exercise’ that might have been helpful, Julie describes ‘paradoxical reactions’, where the instinct might be to retreat (as it felt like a battle), she could instead go forward, and with regards to her manager that she could ‘hug’ them rather than push them away. When she translates ‘that metaphor’ she can accept without feeling like submitting.

After watching the short video clip of the sequence, Julie speaks about how something about the word ‘submitting’ translated well into the physical metaphor. There are several times when she moves between the physical metaphor and how it describes the actual pattern of interaction with her manager, using words like ‘pushing’ and ‘pulling’. In this interview, Julie developed some ideas about why and how this exercise worked for her.

8.3.4 How or why does it work? – some speculations

To approach the question *why* and *how*, I think specifically this technique worked for this participant, it seems a good idea to link back to the more general discussion of using dynamic action (chapter 6). To start with, we notice that with every transformation of information some information dissipates. For that reason, and for the precision problem in de- and transcribing, it is impossible to claim any correctness of what I have written about the film sequence. I am already entering a field of vagueness and imprecision: speculation, informed guessing at best. By what am I informed? By the ideas presented in this thesis and then some ideas not mentioned yet, or only touched on. I now look at the sequence through these ideas.

While explaining her situation, participant 1, Julie, creates a physical metaphor. We could say that she performs a similar task to what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have described as primary metaphors, like down is unhappy, losing etc. In this case she links the source domain of

“opposing but equal energies cancel each other out into a tense equilibrium” to a target domain “being stuck in a relationship”. The physicalised metaphor creates a field of intensity in which affect rules over cognition (Massumi, 2012), and is not yet defined as emotion (Julie describes this in the interview). It is not possible for Julie to be too conscious of herself in a way that is actually unhelpful to creating the movement, the change. Of course, this change is at that moment only in the exercise, and not yet with her manager with whom she feels in a stuck relationship. But a kind of certainty of the impossibility of movement was questioned, and an observation of the dynamic rather than declaration of emotion became possible. A change happened in the field of the game that Julie and her manager play, not so much the physical field as the virtual one. An off-balance (Lecoq, 2020) was created out of which movement / change can come. As systemic practitioners we know that a change in one part of the system (the participant) might trigger a change in another part (the manager and the other staff) as happened in the actual sequence. As with any good metaphor, there needs to be some isomorphism between source and target domain. Or, as Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland and Richard Fisch (1974) suggested, that Julie’s experience has been reframed in a way that the new frame needed to fit at least as well as the previous one.

But there are certainly more questions possible. How, for example, do the other participants and I know what to do or ‘how to be’ the manager and the other staff in their metaphorical, physical form? It is a similar question that I am sometimes asked after playback theatre performances (Fox, 1981) when we managed to give the teller of a story what they feel is a very accurate playback of the ‘story’ they told, and the other characters who populate it: how do you know so much about that character?

When developing his psychodrama ideas, Jacob Moreno (1934) encountered a similar question that led him to develop the concept of tele, some kind of affective expansiveness. Empathy, in his view, is not sufficient to describe the reciprocal affective bond between an individual and a group. Tele in his mind is more reciprocal and can have three different characteristics: positive (attraction), negative (repulsion) and neutral (indifference) and allows us to perceive the other in their subjective difference. It seems worth noting that Moreno's drama therapeutic ideas seem already quite relational. He seems to consider what happens in interaction more than the inner-psychic process that seems to be the main focus of psychoanalytic and psychodynamic ideas. It might well be worth looking at psychodrama ideas through a systemic lens, but that would go beyond the scope of this thesis. As I have already pointed to in [chapter 4.1¹⁵⁷](#), psychodrama is seen to have influenced Bert Hellinger (1998, 2003) in developing his constellations.

Another promising line of exploration could start from Maturana and Varela's (1972, 1987) ideas. Participants (including me) in the workshop are structurally coupled. We respond to each according to our own structure. Structure here includes both physical (biological) and less physical structure, like ideas and how we make sense of our (social) worlds. In the process we might adjust our structure to maintain our organisation (autopoiesis) in the light of this new information. My ideas about how to proceed with the exercise are less informed by Julie's manager but more by my idea of manager, the kind of manager I imagine when she speaks. The other participants will have ideas about the manager and the other staff and respond determined by that. All of us offer a trigger to Julie to which she responds according to her structure. But because she does not now respond to her actual manager, but to

¹⁵⁷ P. 128

different versions of that manager, she might still respond differently. In the process, she changes structurally (as she is coupled with us in the moment) and this new structure she takes with her into the conversation with her manager.

If we are not looking at any one person as a system within the workshop, but at the workshop as system itself, the boundaries that characterise an autopoietic system are less clear, both with regards to space and time. The workshop system with all the different previous structural couplings having structurally informed participants, for example with regards to the idea of managers or staff, extends beyond the participants in the room at that time. The participants in the room at that time could well be seen as autopoietic, being able to maintain their own boundary, and at the same time what Beth Dempster (2000) described as sympoietic: a system that is organisationally not closed but ajar, a sense of becoming.

Here we might make a link to Deleuze and Guattari (1987). What Julie brought was an assemblage that included the state of affairs between herself and her manager, the relationship between them (the more machinic aspect of assemblage), as well as the meaning making (collective assemblage of enunciation) that both comes from, and leads to, a state of affairs – yet another reciprocal (circular) relationship. There are re-territorialising aspects in this assemblage. Each time Julie and her manager repeat the dance they are engaged in, they confirm it. But there are de-territorialising possibilities, a line of flight to a different assemblage, in the sympoietic becoming in the workshop. But what is the medium or nature of the information that travels between the bodies and entities in the rhizome?

If we were to consider what physically or neurologically happens, that empathy or tele or structural coupling would be possible, mirror neurons seem to be a promising area of research. An article by Babette Rothschild (2004) that was part of the reading for my second

year of training as a systemic practitioner speculated that mirror neurons, neurons that get activated both when doing a particular action as well as witnessing it, were what allowed us empathy. As I am not a neurologist I cannot comment much further. What does seem interesting however, is that when witnessing an action there is not necessarily a chronological order of observing and then the mirror neuron getting activated (Kilner and Lemon, 2013). This might well link back to the idea of simultaneous activation (Scherer, 2005, 2009) that Wetherell (2012) uses to critique Massumi's (2012) ideas of affect¹⁵⁸. But affect (and intensity) seems to be a very useful construct to make sense of what happens. In a way that is not coded as emotion or cognition, participant 1 has experienced the possibility of difference. Whether the more important aspect of that was that the certainty of stuckness was questioned, or even an idea what participant 1 could do differently, seems even more speculative than an already speculative section.

8.4 More generally finding movement possibilities in restraint

To understand this particular example, it is worth introducing a more general exercise or technique I know from Aikido and that an Aikido-teacher, Stan (participant 2 in the inscript), who was part of the workshop, introduced to the other participants. In this small video sequence, you see participants being paired, where one participant holds the other so that that other participant can explore how much movement they can find in their own body despite being restricted in their movement. We could describe this exercise in one question: which options still remain?

¹⁵⁸ p. 233

An interesting aspect in this exercise is the question that Stan poses: noticing where you become stiff, which points towards two things:

1 Part of the restricted movement is not so much the other person holding you but the stiffness that in your own body that further restricts your movement.

2 This is possibly also the case with 'feeling stuck' in (social) relationships. The potential for the metaphor, the isomorphism with regards to this aspect of source domain 'physically being stuck' to the target domain 'socially being stuck' becomes clear in experience.

Extending the metaphor by physically exploring it in this case then means that movement and change can become possible when the stiff holding is not responded to by stiffening / or tensing ourselves up. This seems to be the what Julie described in the interview as what might feel 'paradoxical' but is offering another option. Responding to stiffness with stiffness in a symmetrical fashion, now seems only the physical equivalent of a social construct of expectations of how to respond.

This more general exercise from Aikido practice was then applied to a real (social) life dilemma that we could call 'participant one's manager'. We could describe the way this was developed from the general to the specific. After that we tried to generalise this idea again, inviting a participant to randomly chose a body part to 'make someone feel stuck' and for the other person to explore their options.

This generalised version could be called “stuck/unstuck”. For the purposes of creating (or at least starting to create) a catalogue of possible techniques, I imagine something similar to cards in a filing system that would for this technique look like the card in subchapter 9.5¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁹ P. 306

9 A catalogue of techniques

With the material generated or referred to so far, multiple combinations are possible, each with different foci and different movements and positions with regards to dynamic and symbolic, and intentional / unintentional. Peter Rober's (2002) description of noticing a silence could be seen as a movement from dynamic and probably unintentional to symbolic and intentional. This basic (and by that in no way do I wish to dismiss it) movement still seems one of the most common in systemic practice, and at least somewhat described in the literature. Albert Scheflen's (1978) example of Susan smiling might well be another one. With this in mind, we could then use a whole range of communication models (Watzlawick et al., 1967; Bühler, 1982; Schulz von Thun, 1981; Pearce, 1994, 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007; etc) to examine whether or how we or others 'understand' a particular dynamic act.

Examples of an intentional use of dynamic action could be seen as Minuchin's (1974) and others changing seating arrangements and the various constellations and sculpting ideas (Satir, 1988; Hellinger, 1998). Despite seeing these in the wider realm of dynamic action, they can seem somewhat static and still 'arresting' some movement. However, both can easily and have been extended into a more dynamic (moving) action.

A somewhat basic movement from intentional and symbolic action to a more dynamic (still intentional) action could be an invitation to show rather than tell, for example "Rather than describing how he walks into the room in a way that seems entitled, could you show me?". A similar invitation would be at the beginning of creating a sculpt.

Following is a collection of several potential techniques and their extensions developed in the research workshops that could be used in therapeutic or organisational systemic practice.

This is by no means suggesting any form of completeness of the possible techniques. It could never be. It could be seen as an initial collection of some ideas on which I invite the reader to build on and extend.

As the techniques have been developed in the workshops their 'value' has only really been tested within the workshops for the purpose of this research project and thesis. I can confirm though that I have used some of these techniques in my practice since – sometimes in an adapted form and sometimes extended in a direction not mentioned here. The techniques as presented here can also only be seen as situated knowledge in a particular context with a particular group of people (consisting of other practitioners). They were inspired in the moment and possible through previous practices, both my own and others (systemic therapy, coaching and organisational practice; theatre, Aikido, dance).

I am not suggesting that this catalogue is a manual or a definite instruction, but I am hopeful it will be useful to systemic practitioners. This catalogue could be an expanding repository of ideas that practitioners can go to for inspiration – ideas that they can add to and adapt in their practice. [Appendix B](#)¹⁶⁰ is a smaller-print booklet with a shorter introduction that practitioners could print and have easier access to. In the future I hope to create an online resource for practitioners to be able to 'go to' and also add their own ideas.

As reader, I hope, you rather feel inspired to develop your own techniques or adapt these to the situations you find yourself in. This means linking to your own professional and life practices and negotiating with the people you work with. Not everything is appropriate for every client.

¹⁶⁰ p. 393

Some techniques described here require materials like masks, balls, sticks, random objects. It is tempting to 'order' the techniques according to these requirements. It is equally tempting to order the exercises according to when they might be useful. Some techniques lend themselves to be used sequentially, like the more general finding options in restraint leading to Stuck/unstuck. But that might only be one of many possible ways of sequencing these techniques. With sequencing I do not wish to suggest some manualised procedure.

Following you will find the 'cards' in an order that seems to be from the more general to the more specific. Possible names make up the subchapter headlines.

9.1 Show me rather than tell me

In what situations it might be useful:

In situations when someone finds it difficult to describe in words how they feel or experience someone.

Short description:

You might notice someone struggling to find (the 'right') words to describe how they 'feel' or experience something or someone. You can invite them to find a pose, movement or gesture that shows the experience.

Potential variations / extensions:

In many ways this might well be a good starting point for many other techniques described following that could therefore be seen as extensions to this basic move from intentional symbolic to intentional dynamic.

9.2 (Moving) sculpt / constellation

Inspiration: Satir (1988), Hellinger (1998, 2003)

In what situations it might be useful: Sculpt fits very well with a structural view.

There is already plenty of literature regarding sculptures and constellations (Satir, 1988; Hellinger, 1998, 2003; Duhl, Kantor & Duhl, 1973). Family or group members arrange themselves or are being arranged by one member according to how they see the relationship. Emotional proximity or distance translates into spatial proximity and distance. This sculpture or constellation can then be manipulated.

Potential variations / extensions:

Potential variations are to have other people or even objects as placeholders for members of the system.

Sculptures could be extended into moving sculptures. Participants could be asked to either trace in movement how (they imagine) they got into this sculpture or what movements they would do to get into a different sculpture.

9.3 The space between

Inspiration: Lecoq (2020)

In what situations it might be useful:

When people are convinced that they are not “coordinating” / communicating with each other well or where it is useful to raise awareness of each other’s organisation in space.

Short description:

This works well in two steps:

- 1) With an object – a good object is a stick, not too long, not too short, and not too heavy – held between the two participants dominant hands. Ask participants to explore the movements that they can do individually and together without “dropping” the stick.
- 2) Remove the object and ask participants to do the same, just imagining the object.

Example:



Picture 11: The object between (in html document also available as video clip)

Potential variations / extensions:

You can encourage participants to use other parts of the body to “hold” the object with.

You can let more than 2 participants explore this together.

You can bring it back into symbolic action: “What was that like?” “Are there or were there times in your life / work together where it was like this?”

You can encourage noticing what is still possible despite this restraint.

This technique might further lead into “the fixed point” (9.4) and / or “Stuck/Unstuck” (9.5).

9.4 The fixed point

Inspiration: Aikido

In what situations it might be useful:

When people describe themselves as being stuck or held back.

Short description:

Enquire more into the metaphor, keeping it on a physical level: where in your body would you locate the point where you are fixed or held back? Fix this point or part of the body and ask the person to explore how much movement is still possible. Can they relax that point? Or the parts around it? Can they breathe 'into' that point?

Example:



Picture 12: The fixed point (in html document also available as video clip)

Potential variations / extensions:

This technique might further lead into "Stuck / unstuck" (9.5).

Potential variations / extensions:

There might sometimes be good reasons (other people) why a person might feel further restricted. In one case (described earlier in the book) the person wanted to protect others “behind” them. You can add people to the constellation and ask the person to further explore what is possible.

A possible good extension might be to move towards solution focussed techniques and explore further, for example: “if the relationship between you and the other person was more like how you experienced it in this exercise, what things would become possible?”

9.6 Say it / do it again

Inspirations: Lecoq (2020), Playback theatre

In what situations it might be useful:

When you get a sense that people have moved themselves physically or metaphorically into a difficult position or view of themselves.

Short description:

Ask a person to do or say something again but in a different pose / organisation of the body or with a different tone of voice.

Example:

A person might find themselves in an unhelpful position or with a limiting sense of self, where it is difficult for them to fully or proudly own an achievement. You might get a feeling that they are dismissing their own achievement from their dynamic action. You could ask them to say it louder, standing on a chair, chest pushed forward.

Potential variations / extensions:

Another group / family member can try to say or do the same thing again but also with a different pose / organisation of the body or with a different tone of voice. This way many possibilities are created.

.

You can afterwards go back to symbolic action and explore with the person and their family and group the difference.

9.7 Group juggling

Inspirations: Sheryl Malcolm (Sheryl and I worked together using theatre and play in schools and developed this.), Lakoff and Johnson (1980)

In what situations it might be useful:

When people are convinced that they are not “coordinating” / communicating with each other well. It also offers great metaphors for communication. It is also good as ice-breaker and name learning exercise. It might open up very entrenched patterns.

Short description:

With a group of people start passing a juggling ball to each other in a repeatable pattern that includes everybody once. With a group that does not know each other very well you can ask people to say their own name when receiving a ball before (staying in the same pattern) the person throwing the ball calls the receiver’s name.

At some point go to silent mode (no calling names) and introduce more balls.

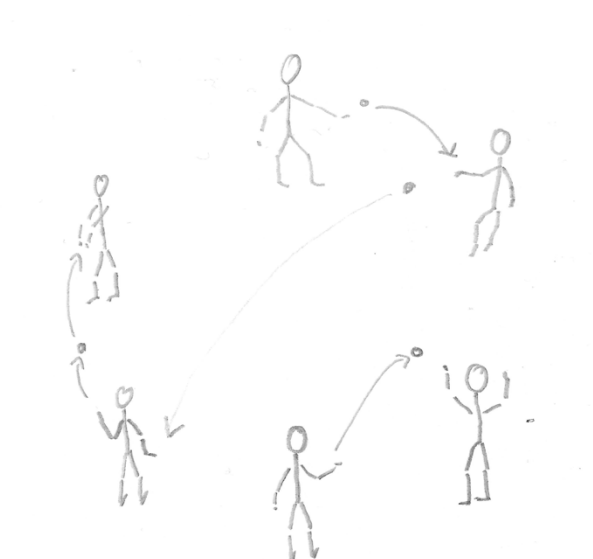


Figure 26: Group juggling

At some point ask to break the pattern. Several balls will be in the air at the same time. You might facilitate with questions like “What makes for a successful passing of the ball?” “Is throwing more important or receiving?” “How do you know the other person is ready to receive the ball?”

Potential variations / extensions:

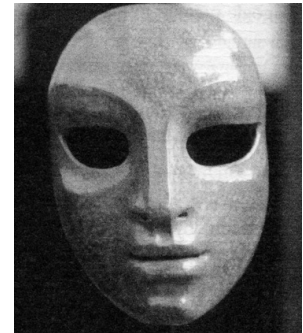
You can talk about the inherent metaphor: “What if we replace ‘ball’ with ‘message’ or ‘act of communication’?”

9.8 For the very first time

Inspirations: Lecoq (2020)

In what situations it might be useful:

Where it seems useful to find a “state” of curiosity (might also be very useful in training). Or in preparation for remembering the first time of something (the first time a couple met, the first day in a new job). It can be very useful as an introduction to focus on dynamic action and work with the Neutral Mask.



Picture 14: The Neutral Mask

Short description:



Figure 27: Waking up for the very first time with the Neutral Mask

You describe a small island, beach, and a warm ocean over which the sun rises. Everything is calm and comfortable. Clarify that the neutral mask cannot talk or use symbolic action and that there is no need to ‘add’ anything to the scenario,

just being with the island, sea and sun rise is enough. Participants put on a neutral mask and imagine that they are awakening for the very first time. It is worth spending a little more time on exploring what waking up for the very first time would mean. There is no need to be afraid,

dismissive, bored or anxious. Only curiosity makes sense. It is also important to clarify that the neutral mask cannot speak or use symbolic action.

Potential variations / extensions:

You can invite observations about when any emotion other than curiosity seems to show and what 'ideas' about curiosity or neutrality and 'habits' this might betray. There might then be joint speculation about where these ideas or habits come from (for example family scripts, Byng-Hall, 1995).

'For the very first time' might also be a good introductory exercise for other work with the neutral mask.

9.9 The neutral mask

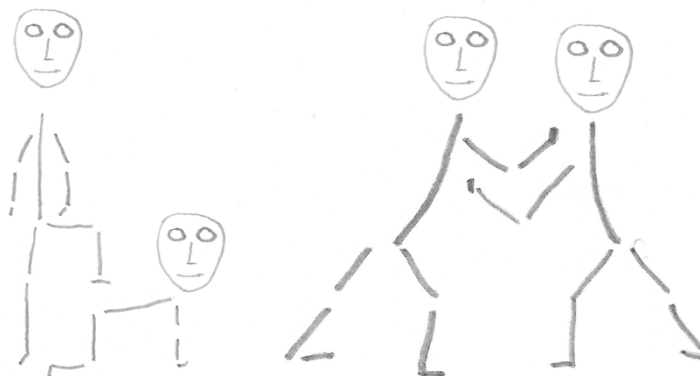
Inspirations: Lecoq (2020)

In what situations it might be useful:

Often with families and groups of colleagues not only the story or narrative (White, 1989, 2007) is very 'stuck' but also the way the story is told (Pearce, 1999). With the neutral mask's focus on dynamic action other ways of telling the story become necessary and often these narratives bring out other aspects of the relational dynamics that are less often told (subjugated discourses; White, 1989, 2007).

Short description:

After either a different exercise with the neutral mask (for example "For the very first time", 9.8) or clarifying that the neutral mask cannot talk or use symbolic action, ask participants to wear the neutral mask and retell the situation. This might be very short and participants might feel that they have been prevented from telling the story and yet you and other observers might find many points to talk about. This might take the form of an observing team and might lead to replaying the scene.



Examples:

Figure 28: Dynamic action with the Neutral Mask

Potential variations / extensions:

You could experiment with exchanging some 'actors' in the scene or ask participants to try something different.

9.10 My house

Inspirations: Lakoff and Johnson (1980)

In what situations it might be useful:

People sometimes describe the environment of their relationships with regards to people's location within a house like a family home or their organisations offices. (For example, when someone says that their boss stays in their office as probably metaphorically not being approachable.)

Short description:

Encourage a participant to describe and show how they experience their house, physically marking out areas in the space, that are standing in for the real space. Maybe they can choose other participants to play themselves or other people inhabiting these spaces. The participants interact. You can then 'coach' the participant who described the scenario with regards to how to handle conflicts or conflicting demands and needs foregrounding their positioning.

While this exercise will use symbolic action (likely words) the positioning and sequencing (. dynamic action) can be foregrounded.

Potential variations / extensions:

You could invite someone else to 'play' the person who had described their house to develop alternative possibilities.

10 Concluding the thesis – but not the work

It seems like a long time ago that I set out to explore three research questions, where the second builds on the first, and the third on the first and second. Since then I have journeyed through a territory, forwards, backwards and sideways; in circular patterns and straight lines but mainly in meandering non-geometrical pathways, in a way that is not easy to track or trace. As Bilbo warns his nephew Frodo at the beginning of the Lord of the Rings (Tolkien, 1954/1999) “It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. [...] You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.” (p. 98) It seems the same with regards to emergent research. I tried to do a bit of both, allowing myself to occasionally swept be off, explore some of the unexpected side tracks, but still keep my feet with regards to linking back to the research questions.

Although the research questions in their building on each other, suggest some linearity and ‘journey’ suggests some chrono-logicity that is linear, in experience at least, the territory in which the journey happened is everything but linear. It is messy, like most of reality, and tends to even greater mess entropically. It can maybe be mapped but not traced (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Yet for the purpose of concluding this thesis and presenting a piece of work that can stand on its own, there is a need for a conclusion or at least a summary of what I found. It can be seen as a snapshot in time, while the work on dynamic action might never end: a map that has boundaries but a territory that does not have boundaries. Other parts of this final chapter attend to the horizon beyond this map. If we think of this map here, this thesis, as an

assemblage, it brings with it its own deterritorialising lines of flight that link it to other assemblages and change this one (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

10.1 Findings and contributions with regards to the research questions

The first research question was:

1 Is there now a tendency to focus on the spoken and written word or verbal communication in the field of systemic practice?

In order to answer this research question, I first mapped the field territory of systemic practice. I see this map in itself already as a contribution to practice. Different maps trace different topics. This map particularly traces (the development/s of) systemic practice with regards to the first research question. This map, although having elements of some chronologic tracings, is more oriented towards plateaus of intensity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) or places in which the focus is on specific aspects and differences of thought and theory.

Summarising, earlier systemic approaches were outlining interaction and patterns of such interaction in form of feedback loops. They were interested in circularity, and mutual influence. What was circulating, the carrier of mutual influence, was often quite neutrally called information. As systemic practice and thought was influenced by debates, bifurcation points or forks in the road that usually had to do with post- and something, like structuralism and post-structuralism, the interest in interaction and information was increasingly narrowed and replaced by an interest in language, linguistic systems and social construction. This is indicative of a tendency of increasing focus on words. Maps usually have a particular topic – political boundaries or geological aspects etc are being mapped. The map that I contribute is one of information carriers.

An examination of introductory literature to systemic thinking and practice¹⁶¹, as well as texts used in introductory and qualifying courses¹⁶², confirms the findings above. As time progressed from earlier systemic approaches, the focus shifted increasingly towards language. In some texts, non-verbal interaction is included in the idea of 'language', yet most practice examples focus on words, perhaps because words used in practice are easier to translate and document as words in texts written about practice. There is a strong suggestion that current systemic practice focusses on language, but often without a clear definition of what counts as language¹⁶³.

An everyday understanding of language linked to words immediately links it to something exclusively human, very much in the opposite direction of what Maturana (1978, 1987) had intended, although he could also be read in passages as promoting language as human. The question of what counts as language stayed open, particularly given that mostly it was argued that meaning and language are not in a stable relationship, but remain unfinalisable and unpredictable (Bakhtin, 1984a, b). Language does something (Austin, 1962), or rather, with language people do things and each time people do things they also communicate (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967). Language can be seen as inherently social (Wittgenstein, 1953; Bakhtin, 1981). Language might be dependent on context (Bateson, 1972), or rules and intentionality (Searle, 1965). Given these thoughts on language, that are also contradictory to each other, it is surprising that we (seem to) understand each other at all. Various models (Bühler, 1982; Jakobson, 1960; Schulz von Thun, 1981; Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967) have been developed that all separate the content of a speech act from

¹⁶¹ P. 128

¹⁶² P. 141

¹⁶³ P. 149

other aspects: context, relationship, expression, appeal. All of these could also be applied to non-verbal aspects of communication – as could CMM. The coordinated management of meaning is probably one of the most comprehensive sets of models to look at communication, allowing us to explore aspects and contexts of communication acts, or speech acts. It, in a similar way to the other models, indicates that both verbal and non-verbal communication can be examined or interpreted using these models, but examples focus on verbal communication. We could see the same with dialogicity based on Bakhtin's (1984a, b, 1986). The smallest unit of meaning, equivalent to Austin's (1962) speech acts, is an utterance. Although that still allows for non-verbal communication the focus on verbal communication becomes clear. Bakhtin's thoughts could be just as well applied to non-verbal communication as responding to a previous utterance and anticipating a responding utterance. Consider this contribution as a map of meanings of language.

Instead of using the terms verbal and non-verbal communication (and para-verbal communication, Boscolo et al., 1993), Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) think of communication as being divided into digital and analogic aspects of communication. This is also problematic; for several reasons. One of the most important ones is that in Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's (1967) distinction, digital information ultimately stands for, or represents analogic information or reality in an arbitrary way, and is 100% precise. With regards to representation the post-structuralist argument applies, digital information gets its meaning from other digital information. But even as a transform of information (Bateson, 1972) it is always imprecise. There are also reasonable doubts regarding its arbitrariness.

In order to clarify different aspects of communication I suggest the distinction between symbolic action and dynamic action. Symbolic action includes language and tries to represent

or stand for with relatively stable meaning. It includes words and sign language signs as well as gestures. It is usually culturally encoded.

Dynamic action includes the aspects of communication that qualify symbolic action or appear independent of it with more fluid meaning. Generally dynamic action translates to movement (and positioning), including breathing.

Both symbolic and dynamic action can be intentional or unintentional. We might deliberately say something or we might say something unintentionally (like swearing because we hurt ourselves). We might also deliberately walk or stand in a particular way or without being aware of it. All of them contribute to (co-) creation of (social) reality.

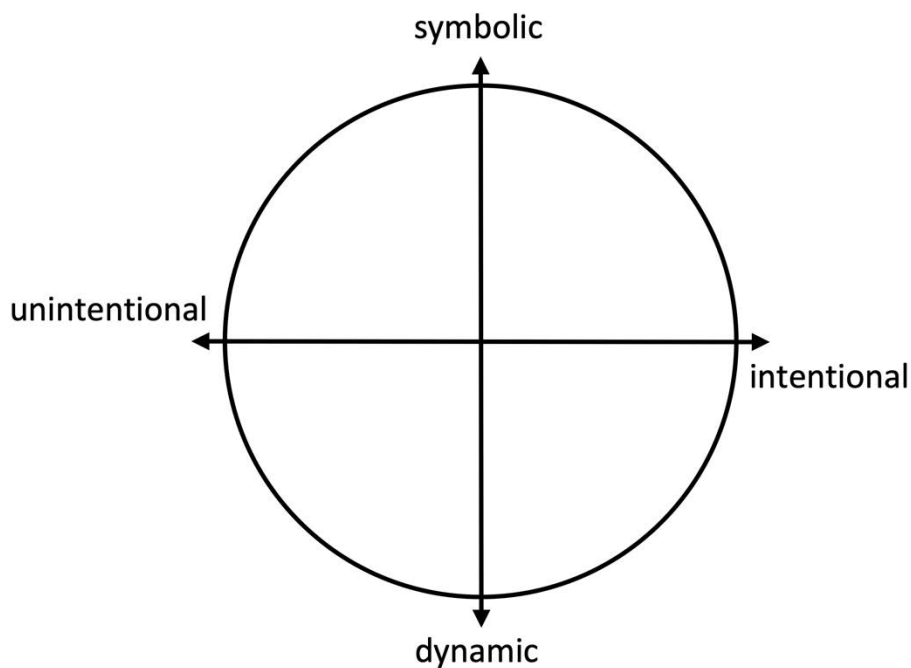


Figure 29: The co-creation of social reality in action (repeated)

With this distinction that I contribute to the discussion, I find there to be a tendency to focus on symbolic action in systemic practice. Meaning of symbolic action is explored in symbolic

action, rather than the more fluid and more elusive dynamic action. The second question builds on the first question and answer(s) found here:

2 If so, what are the consequences for practitioners of a focus on verbal aspects of communication?

Even if there is only a tendency to focus on symbolic action, I found that there are consequences. One of them is that we miss the parts of communication that are dynamic, that also contribute to creating (a) (social) reality. Schefflen (1978) noticing a smile and Rober (2002) noticing silences are good examples. Rober in particular then makes a move from dynamic into symbolic action by speaking about the silences. But that is only one possible movement from the dynamic (intentional or unintentional as it might be) into the symbolic. It is possible to stay mainly with the dynamic, or it is even be possible to move from symbolic to dynamic action.

Clarifying dynamic action, movement as change becomes foregrounded. Movement has been a contested concept since Zeno (Aristotle, 1930) denied that there is movement, something that process philosophers like Bergson (1911) have argued for. Bergson goes even further, saying that everything moves, and that to think of something as static is 'arresting' the movement in our thought. With that, he is very close to the teaching of Jacques Lecoq (2020), a theatre teacher whose main interest was to explore how movement communicates: everything moves.

We move. And we are being moved. We are affected first in a more physical, dynamic way (ontogenetically at least, if not chronologically) before cognition calls it an emotion (Masumi, 2002). This affect is a site of change. Change is movement – movement is change. Not

attending to movement / dynamic action is to miss out on these potentials for change. Out of the field of potential emerges something, and this emerged conditions the field of potential, an echo of contextual and implicative forces in CMM (Pearce, 1999, 2006).

Yet CMM relies heavily on words. One of the models, the LUUUUTT model, acknowledges that some aspects of stories remain untellable. Maybe some stories are untellable in symbolic action, but not inexpressible. We might miss these stories and might miss working with those stories and dynamics.

The dynamics and change happen within a field of tendencies towards points that are outside the field, the space between. In this 'space between', affect and intensity are more 'useful' than consciousness. Rules, usually in symbolic action, are created in response to and influencing what happens in the field. Of course, changing the rules is a potential for change, and most systemic practice attends to this. The Milan team (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1978), for example, speak explicitly of this. But we miss the potential for change in the field itself, where dynamic action trumps symbolic action and is ontogenetically before it.

Having theorised how dynamic action is also part of creating reality, and therefore what we miss if we are not using it, I offer now some ideas of how to use dynamic action. The third research question asks:

3 Are there ways the practitioner can include non-verbal aspects of communication in a useful way?

Many of our basic and more universal metaphors (down is unwell, tired, sad, dead...) are based on our physical experience of ourselves and the world. Often people illustrate what they mean using such metaphors. They express this in symbolic action based on dynamic

action. We can use this a way into the field of dynamic action, affect and intensity, or to be together at least partly in the field. In order to facilitate the field, we practitioners need to move forwards and backwards between symbolic and dynamic action, watch out for the unintentional, and make it intentional but also trust that the unintentional, untellable things happen, in the spirit of disruption of patterns no longer useful.

I have offered a (start of a) catalogue of techniques that could be used. Some techniques are based on or inspired by Aikido, a Japanese marital art. Some are based on the teachings of Jacques Lecoq (2020). And others link to the theoretical parts of this doctorate or are a combination of all these influences. Show me rather than tell me, moving sculpt or constellation, the space between, the fixed point, stuck / unstuck, say it / do it again, group juggling, for the very first time, the neutral mask, and my house – all have been tried out in the research workshops that were part of this research. It is worth pointing out (again), that there are possible combinations of these various techniques, and importantly with all the tools, models and techniques that systemic practitioners know from exploring language and meaning.

In the beginning of this thesis I thought of a structure of why, how and what, and I am returning to this structure now, but in the opposite order. Having summarised 'what' I have researched and found, the research questions and answers (however temporal-spatially limited in their validity) in this subchapter here, I proceed to the how question and return to some methodological considerations.

10.2 Some methodological and ethical take-aways

Of course, there is a considerable overlap between methodological considerations and what is being researched. It seems easy to see that what practitioners might miss when focussing on symbolic action might be very similar to what researchers might miss when they focus on symbolic action. Also, problems of loss and imprecision when translating dynamic action into symbolic action are similar for both systemic practice and research: the π -problem, or how-long-is-a-piece-of-string problem – no matter how detailed we are describing dynamic action it is always going to be imprecise. So, what is the right level of precision? This is both a pragmatic and ethical question. Pragmatically, the level of useful precision depends on the application. For describing an exercise for others to apply, a rougher precision seems useful. But I think of a rougher level of precision also as more ethical in this application. Becoming very precise runs the risk of becoming or at least seeming prescriptive and disallowing for the practitioners' own skills and creativity and the necessity of the situation. This also points to strengths and limitations of this research design. In some ways it could be regarded as a weakness that there is a lack of precision. If one of the uses of research is to be able to predict what happens and therefore be able to improve processes, this research is very imprecise. I cannot predict what will happen if you use (your own version of) the techniques developed. I cannot offer you a manual that would lend itself to a quantitative approach like a randomised control trial that could then provide a statistical likelihood of this being useful / helpful to particular client groups. Maybe that is something that at some point in the future someone wants to do. I have provided a rationale for why it might be useful to attend to and use dynamic action and some ideas for how this might be done. I surely have not provided

something that is easily repeatable (a point closely related to the purpose of prediction and quality criterion of reliability).

For the research context and my own learning, it has been useful to view dynamic action through a finer lens, and describe it with a vocabulary developed for more detailed description of dynamic action, Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis (short LMA). This vocabulary itself, and watching a video of myself and others in dynamic action, has allowed me to reflect on myself as practitioner or facilitator of workshops that use dynamic action. This vocabulary, and the act of watching oneself in action, how one's movement and physicality influences others, is something that could also be used in practice with clients. But did it add much to the research – methodologically? Given that I have argued for a rougher lens it seems less so. Even the finest analysis still will miss some details. So, there is a future for LMA in systemic practice, whenever we want to 'zoom in' on a moment to moment interaction. It might add a vocabulary for use in supervision for example, analysing a video of a session together. For the purpose of developing techniques or even just inspirations for techniques that practitioners can use, for continuing the work started with this thesis, the idea of inscription might be appropriate and even more useful. It might fit better into the idea of practitioner research, which quite often is insider research where the purpose and focus are less on reliably measuring something. To this area of research that embraces self-reflexively and the situatedness of research in specific circumstances, I might have contributed the idea of inscription in order to include dynamic action in the researcher's considerations.

What does come into focus then is a question of choice: what detail is paid attention to and to what extent and for what purpose? And who has the right to choose which detail to

emphasise or even disregard? This is of course an ethical question (and one of validity of the research). In this research I have returned to participants to ask what it was like for them and watch material together. Ethically that seems better. With regards to validity it also adds something: while it is still a construct with limited truth claims, and even more limited universality, it is now a construct that more people were involved in. But I have to accept the limitations with regards to universality. Or do I?

While some 'things' including truth and knowledge might well be constructs, there might well be some things that are relatively universal, like some of our basic metaphors, like 'down' standing for ill, tired, dead, sad etc.

An interesting question with regards to the 'how' is: would I do it again this way? I think my first research question invited me onto a path that maybe had too many branches. As I found quickly¹⁶⁴, systemic practice is such an ill-defined field by now that it is very difficult to even see a tendency towards an exclusion of dynamic action or towards another ill-defined word like language (even if there are indicators). I wonder, if I had kept that shorter would I have had more time/energy/space to develop what might be more helpful: the rationale and techniques for using dynamic action and practical techniques.

I also notice how much I struggled with allowing myself to be more guided by and give more space to our feelings and experiences within the workshops. If I were to do this again I think I would need more coaching on this at the earlier stages of the research process. That is not to say that I did not enjoy the conversations with my textual friends. And maybe this

¹⁶⁴ P. 121

theoretical perspective lays a good foundation for further work, steeped more in practical experience.

Having summarised some take-aways that were outcomes of 'how' this research was conducted, I will now return to 'why'. The 'why'-question was split in two: Why I would undertake the research and why you would have read this. The latter was included in the findings that I outlined in 10.1. But I summarise my contributions briefly in the next sub-chapter before noting in what way this research has changed me, what I take away.

10.3 Contribution(s) to the field

In the results of this research project, outlined above, there are several (beginnings of) contributions to the field. One contribution is a (non-linear) history of systemic ideas and influences that describes a tendency towards symbolic action, forgoing earlier more general central metaphors like interaction and dynamic. Another contribution is an investigation into the term 'language', often used but rarely defined. Out of this investigation comes the distinction between symbolic and dynamic action, that seems useful for theorising the use of what otherwise might be called non-verbal communication or interaction. An initial theorising of how dynamic action might contribute to the creation of social reality leads to some ideas for techniques that systemic practitioners could use if they wish to utilise dynamic action.

Even further summarised, I see this thesis, this contribution, as a guide for practitioners on why and how to utilise dynamic action and what that might look like in practice. I think there is a good level of consistency between the why, how and what, or rather between approach, method (also with regards to research methods) and technique (Burnham, 1992). But to evaluate this consistency might well be another project. For myself, I will continue to grow

the repository of possible techniques extending the catalogue outlined in chapter 9. Expanding the community of practice(s) around it I see my task as disseminating the results, inviting people to build on it and share their ideas. I hope to set up an online presence that offers a place where possible techniques can be shared and where I can share the thesis for those who are interested in the theoretical parts.

Having briefly summarised why you, the reader might have read this research, I will now return to why I embarked on this journey. This related to myself and my professional and life practice. Beyond the learning that the questions elicit, there is also learning of a less general, more personal nature.

10.4 What have I learned or how have I changed – some take-aways

There were two particular conversations that I recall and that frame these personal reflections well. The first was well before starting on this journey and the second shortly after starting the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice. As part of the first conversation a teacher from theatre school said that they had for a long time in their life felt that they were operating in different and seemingly not related professional fields or areas of their life: Psychology, theatre and others. It had paid off for them to allow themselves time and then they found what connects these areas and integrate them to their very unique own practice.

I feel that this thesis has helped me to integrate different professional and life practices: systemic practice, (physical) theatre based on the teaching of Jacques Lecoq, Aikido. I can now use techniques and ideas from parts of my life that are more to do with performing and martial arts in my professional life as therapist, coach, trainer and consultant. I notice now how I am doing this already. I do not only pay more attention to dynamic action – mine and

my clients', I actively use it. The idea of "show me rather than tell me" has become a staple in my practice – although almost all my coaching practice is online.

Even in online settings, I ask people to show me something rather than telling me: "If it is difficult to find words for this, would there be a movement that I could see here online that would express this?" Not always, but sometimes clients find this a helpful offer. And at times their gesture that expressed what they could not find words for, has become part of our 'vocabulary' or our shared and co-ordinated 'language'.

I find that in-person, I have a greater possibility to use these techniques that I developed and shared here with this thesis. I noticed that I have become very interested in the metaphorical space between people and have explored it with objects that clients can use to hold between them (9.3¹⁶⁵) while having a conversation. It helps clients and myself to notice the dynamics of leaning in, of pushing and pulling, and withdrawing. An object falling at some point in the conversation might encourage us to become collectively curious about the quality of the conversation changing in that moment.

I think using dynamic action within a systemic frame is a relatively unique offer to potential clients. And I think this difference in my own practice is resonating with first-person action research¹⁶⁶.

But from what I gather this research also had an impact on participants in the research and on my community of practice. I am still in contact with most participants and often hear in informal ways how participating has influenced practice. Participants have said that they

¹⁶⁵ P. 303

¹⁶⁶ P.53. I should emphasise "resonating" as there are only elements of first person action research but the overall project is relying much more on my community/ies of practice.

have used a technique to good effect in their practice context. One participant referring to the group juggling technique (9.7) told me “I used the balls the other day. And it really started the group off well.”

The sentiment of influencing practice was shared by members of my supervisory team who were not part of the workshops themselves, but were clearly important parts of the process of this research. One supervisor said that they pay much more attention now to the dynamic action and the movement in the room between their clients. Another felt that they would not usually feel confident using physical movement or theatrical ideas said that my work for this thesis had “demystified” dynamic action and made it “more accessible”.

At the beginning of this sub-chapter I mentioned that there were two conversations that might frame these personal reflections well. The second conversation occurred after starting the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice. The course chair, Gail Simon, said that by joining this doctoral program we were giving ourselves a treat, the treat to come into our intellectual selves. There are two aspects to this which are important for my experience: Although this project was a lot of work, it was always also a joy. Yes, there were times when the empty page looked at me and mocked me as well as other difficult moments of (self-) doubt. Confidence in ever finishing this thesis could evaporate and at other times life demanded my attention in different areas. A global pandemic provided a very interesting twist for this thesis. For about two years a practice that focusses on movement, dynamic action and the whole body was made more difficult. It makes a difference whether you can be in the same room together. At the same time, it underlined the importance of a practice of more than words when an online world promotes a focus on symbolic action, where we are not even sure whether a person is looking at us.

The second aspect was the coming into our intellectual own. Before this program I had a very vague idea that there was potential in using what I now call dynamic action. Arguably, there is still some vagueness to this. I am far from thinking that there is now a solid foundation to use the metaphor that theories are buildings. Another metaphor might be more fitting. Theories are accounts of journeys in a rhizome of different possible ways: travel guides are very similar. They never describe the only journey possible, but a journey a specific person has taken at a particular time that you as reader are very unlikely to repeat step for step. But they might still make sense and provide inspirations for similar journeys.

As with every journey, one learns something about the territory and also something about oneself. Both the river and the person stepping into it are no longer the same. In what way have I changed? Curiously, despite this being a largely intellectual exercise, I feel curiosity (Checchin, 1987), not-knowing (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988, 1993) and uncertainty (Mason, 1993; Heisenberg, 1927) now more deeply, where they were more intellectual concepts before. I think I have regained some playfulness that feels more justified now, a kind of purposeful meandering. There was a time in my life, namely at theatre school where I had to focus on the physical, affective self, but sometimes the intellectual self would rebel, not liking to be relegated to an ontogenetical second when it had for such a long time seen itself in the driving seat. Maybe my intellectual self has accepted its becoming together with my affective self. Maybe both have accepted the becoming together with the affective and intellectual selves of others of all kinds, communicated in both symbolic and dynamic action: emancipation from the enlightenment's mind and body split within an individualised self. Becoming is always something relational, movement and subsequent positioning require it.

Becoming again! Unfinalisability and unpredictability (Bakhtin, 1984a) – with the idea of conclusions again questioned there is now a question:

10.5 What might be next?

In the spirit of unpredictability and becoming, the question could not be “What is next?”, and yet our imagination and planning informs our becomings even if it does not determine it.

I can imagine that this project continues beyond this thesis. I would like to see it as an invitation to dialogue and playfulness. I would like to hear about and collect more techniques that facilitate using dynamic action with groups of people in systemic practice. This of course is based on the hope that practitioners who read this or even just parts of this feel not only troubled by the emphasis of attention on symbolic action. I hope practitioners can use their versions of the techniques developed and presented here and feel inspired to develop their own techniques that actively and consciously use dynamic action. Maybe they use inscription as a technique for their noticings. I hope I will also receive feedback and further ideas. I hope that a community of practice(s) (Wenger, 1998) might continue and further emerge and make connections across disciplines around attention and use of dynamic action. I will take it as my task to offer a platform (online) for exchanges in this community.

For the future it might also be very interesting to investigate other modalities like psychodrama, dance and movement therapy and drama therapy, improvisational theatre and in what way they might overlap with systemic practice.

But there are also other plans that I have for next steps. I have taken some of the ideas from this research to conferences where I have offered workshops on the use of neutral masks and

on attention to dynamic action in qualitative inquiry. In some ways this has also influenced my research, but I could not use it here as research material as it was not covered by ethical approval. However, through these conferences I have become part of a wider community of practice. I have become part of a group of qualitative researchers (from psychological professions) where we called ourselves the Bodies Collective. Through one of my colleagues from this group I have been invited to lead a professional development workshop presenting results of this research to clinicians and lecturers in a psychology training programme. I hope many more will come. In this workshop maybe more ideas will be generated for a growing repository of techniques. I have plans to host a web space for such a repository. And I will continue to collect ideas that might happen in the living moment in practice.

10.6 Last words?

It feels strange after all this writing and becoming to write some last words to this thesis. A way and an art of expression that I have not looked at much in this thesis might come to the rescue, in its dynamics despite being almost exclusively symbolic action. One night after (unsuccessfully) trying to summarise my research the last lines of the poem below came to me and then some more lines. I think it captures something:

Off-balance, we stumble forward
And sometimes back
 Movement a constant
 Position not fixed
The point of departure
Or that of arrival
 Are shrouded in mystery
 Outside of what is
It is and has always been
In the space between

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Appendix A: Ethics approval application pack and confirmation letter

Application for Ethical Approval

Mark Huhnen
Student number: 1611110
Date of initial registration: September 2016
Current degree registration: DProf
Intended final award: DProf
Mode of study: Part-time
Research Institute: Research Graduate School

Current working title:

How to do things without words

Supervision team:

Joanne Hill, PhD, FHEA: First supervisor, director of studies
Andreas Granhof Juhl, D. Prof.: Second supervisor
Professor Ravi Kohli, PhD: Third supervisor

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Application form



Institute of Applied Social Research

Application for Ethical Approval for a Research Project involving Primary Research

- PLEASE ATTACH A ONE PAGE SUMMARY OF YOUR PROPOSAL OR PROVIDE AS MUCH DETAIL AS YOU CAN ABOUT YOUR PROPOSED RESEARCH AT QUESTION 16
- PLEASE INCLUDE ANY OTHER RELEVANT SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION SUCH AS CONSENT FORMS AND INFORMATION SHEETS. ETHICAL APPROVAL WILL NOT BE GIVEN WITHOUT SIGHT OF SUCH DOCUMENTATION. (Draft versions ARE acceptable). PLEASE ENSURE THAT ALL SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION IS PROVIDED IN A SINGLE FILE. (All applications should therefore include just two files: the IASREC application form AND the supporting documentation)
- IF YOUR INTENTION IS TO WORK WITH SPECIFIC AGENCIES OR ESTABLISHMENTS YOU SHOULD ATTACH ANY LETTERS OF AGREEMENT YOU HAVE WITH THOSE AGENCIES/ESTABLISHMENTS
- PROVIDE AS MUCH INFORMATION AS YOU ARE ABLE TO ON THIS FORM AND ANSWER EACH QUESTION AS FULLY AS POSSIBLE
- INSTRUCTIONS FOR SUBMISSION ARE TO BE FOUND BELOW THE SIGNATURE PANEL AT THE BACK OF THE FORM
- GUIDANCE NOTES ON COMPLETING THIS FORM CAN BE FOUND ON PAGE 7 OF THIS DOCUMENT. PLEASE CONSIDER THESE CAREFULLY AND CONSULT ANY OTHER RELEVANT GUIDANCE DOCUMENTS ON THE IASR ETHICS COMMITTEE WEB PAGE PRIOR TO COMPLETION. GO TO: www.beds.ac.uk/research/iasr/ethics and follow links to relevant documents
- BEFORE COMPLETING THIS FORM YOU SHOULD CONSULT THE ETHICAL GUIDANCE OF THE SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION AT: WWW.THE-SRA.ORG.UK OR ETHICAL GUIDANCE RELEVANT TO YOUR DISCIPLINE
- UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS SHOULD COMPLETE THIS FORM IN CONSULTATION WITH THEIR SUPERVISORS

- **IF YOUR INTENDED RESEARCH INVOLVES CLIENTS OR STAFF OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES OR THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE YOU WILL NEED TO SEEK ADDITIONAL ETHICAL APPROVAL FROM THE RELEVANT LOCAL AUTHORITY RESEARCH GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE OR THE RELEVANT NHS LOCAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE THROUGH NHS PROCEDURES**
- ***ALL STAFF AND STUDENTS MUST OBTAIN ALL NECESSARY ETHICAL APPROVAL BEFORE BEGINNING ANY FIELDWORK***

UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE

When completing this form please ensure that you read and comply with the following:

Researchers must demonstrate clear understanding of an engagement with the following:

1. *Integrity* - The research has been carried out in a rigorous and professional manner and due credit has been attributed to all parties involved.
2. *Plagiarism* - Proper acknowledgement has been given to the authorship of data and ideas.
3. *Conflicts of Interest* - All financial and professional conflicts of interest have been properly identified and declared.
4. *Data Handling* - The research draws upon effective record keeping, proper storage of data in line with confidentiality, statute and University policy.
5. *Ethical Procedures* - Proper consideration has been given to all ethical issues and appropriate approval sought and received from all relevant stakeholders. In addition the research should conform to professional codes of conduct where appropriate.
6. *Supervision* - Effective management and supervision of staff and student for whom the researcher(s) is/are responsible
7. *Health and Safety*- Proper training on health and safety issues has been received and completed by all involved parties. Health and safety issues have been identified and appropriate assessment and action have been undertaken.

The **Research Institutes** are responsible for ensuring that all researchers abide by the above. It is anticipated that ethical approval will be granted by each Research Institute. Each Research Institute will give guidance and approval on ethical procedures and ensure they conform to the requirements of relevant professional bodies. As such Research Institutes are required to provide the University Research Ethics Committee with details of their procedures for ensuring adherence to relevant ethical requirements. This applies to any research whether it be, or not, likely to raise ethical issues. Research proposals involving vulnerable groups; sensitive topics; groups requiring gatekeeper permission; deception or without full informed consent; use of personal/confidential information; subjects in stress, anxiety, humiliation or intrusive interventions must be referred to the University Research Ethics Committee.

Research projects involving participants in the NHS will be submitted through the NHS National Research Ethics Service (NRES). The University Research Ethics Committee will normally accept the

judgement of NRES (it will never approve a proposal that has been rejected by NRES), however NRES approval will need to be verified before research can commence and the nature of the research will need to be verified.

Where work is conducted in collaboration with other institutions ethical approval by the University and the collaborating partner(s) will be required.

The **University Research Ethics Committee** is a sub-committee of the Academic Board and is chaired by a member of the Vice Chancellor's Executive Group, appointed by the Vice-Chancellor and includes members external to the University

Research Misconduct: Allegations of Research Misconduct against staff or post graduate (non-taught) research students should be made to the Head of the Research Graduate School.

ALL PROPOSALS:

Name:	Mark Huhnen	
Contact email/phone:	mark.huhnen@study.beds.ac.uk	
Date:		
Title of Proposal:	How we do things without words	
Anticipated Start Date:	of Project: started	Of fieldwork: March 2018
Anticipated Duration of project:	Yrs: 3 Months: 0	
Is the project to be externally funded?	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENT PROPOSALS:

Supervisor Name:	Dr Joanne Hill
Award studied for:	Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice

STAFF PROPOSALS:

Department:	n/a
Role/Job Title:	
Principal Investigator:	

What are the key aims or objectives of your research? (provide a brief summary in bullet points)

- To trace if and how social constructionist systemic practice and theory has moved towards focussing on the spoken or written word and neglected the other more physical aspects of communicating.
- To develop ideas and exercises how practitioners can utilise non-verbal aspects of communication (more) to facilitate change with their clients

What is the key question your research will address?

How do we do things without words?

Who is your target group or sample?

A mixed group of professionals from a variety of disciplines:

Profession / practice	Expected numbers	Criteria for inclusion
Social workers	2-5	HCPC registered, currently practicing, at least foundation level systemic practice, currently practicing
Family therapists	2-5	UKCP registered, currently practicing
Organisational consultants / coaches	2-5	currently practicing, at least foundation level systemic practice, currently practicing
Performing artists (dancers, actors, puppeteers ...)	4-10	Recent public performance (within previous year)
Aikido practitioners	2-5	At least 1 st dan, currently practicing
Yoga and other physical practitioners (for example shiatsu or Pilates, Tai Chi)	2-5	Current regular (at least weekly) practice for at least 3 years

What data collection methods will you use

Video recording (camera on tripod running for duration of workshops, workshops will be explained later in this document

Interviews (explained later)

Answer the following questions by checking ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and supplying any additional information as required

- 1) Does the study involve children (anyone under 18 years), vulnerable participants or those who are unable to give informed consent? *[Please consult the notes on researching with children and young people and the list of those who may be considered ‘vulnerable’ at the end of this form before completing]*

YES NO

- If YES: Explain what steps will be taken to ensure that participants understand what participation will mean

It is not anticipated that children or vulnerable people or others who might not be able to give informed consent will participate in the research. However, as the direction of the research is emergent it might become interesting to widen the above mentioned target group.

In any case the information sheet and consent form are designed to be as understandable as possible.

If children, vulnerable people or others who might not be able to give informed consent participate, the forms can be read and explained and explored in conversation.

If the research moves to involve children or vulnerable people I will reapply for ethical approval.

- If YES: Have/will researchers been DBS checked? *(obligatory)*

YES NO

As part of my practice as social worker and therapist I am regularly DBS checked.

- If you are researching with children/young people, what is your target age group?

There is no specific target group age (and see above)

- 2) From whom will consent be sought and how is consent to be given? (*it is anticipated that written consent will be sought in most circumstances*)

Written consent will be sought from all participants (see consent form attached). (This would include young people who are “Gillick competent” (if they participate, see above). For children and young people not “Gillick competent” (if they participate, see above) consent will be sought from their parents / people who hold parental responsibility.)

- 3) Is participation voluntary?

YES **NO**

- 4) Will it be necessary for participants to be involved without consent? (eg covert observation in public places)

YES **NO**

- 5) Will the study make use of gatekeeper(s) to access participants?

YES **NO**

- 6) Will the study include participants or involve accessing information or case files pertaining to those who are part of your client group, case load or with whom you are working?

YES **NO**

- If YES: How will you obtain their consent to use information about them, access their files or otherwise participate?

- 7) Will the study be exploring ‘sensitive’ topics? [*Please consult the list of what may constitute a ‘sensitive’ topic given at the end of this form*]

YES **NO**

- 8) Will the research investigate involvement in any illegal activity?

YES **NO**

- 9) Will any incentives or rewards be offered for participation?

YES **NO**

- If YES: Explain the nature of the incentives or rewards

It might count as an incentive for participants to be mentioned as co-researchers. This is offered in the information sheet and consent form. It is also hoped that participants benefit by extending / developing their practice.

10) Is the research likely to cause any distress to participants?

YES NO NOT SURE

11) Will arrangements be made to support participants after their involvement in fieldwork if necessary?

YES NO

- If YES: Please explain the nature of the arrangements

It is very unlikely that participation in the workshops will cause distress. The information sheet includes the following paragraph (also relevant for the previous and next question).

“I do not anticipate that this workshop will be dangerous or upsetting to you. Please, only do things that you feel comfortable doing. At any stage can you step back. If you do feel upset or this workshop brings back difficult memories please do talk to someone that you trust and with whom you usually talk about those things. If you do not have someone I can point you in the right direction.”

12) Will the research involve intrusive interventions? (eg provision of drugs to participants, hypnosis, physical exercise, blood or tissue sampling)

YES NO

Due to the nature of the workshops there is likely some physical activity but no particularly prescribed exercises. Participants are encouraged to stay within their comfort zone (see above).

13) Will the research involve any participants from the NHS (patients or staff)

YES NO

Some of the professionals targeted might be working in the NHS (and probably most participants will also at least have been NHS patients). However, this is not a criterion for participation and recruitment will not happen in connection to the NHS or using NHS resources.

N.B. If you have answered YES to this question you MUST additionally submit your proposal to the National Health Service Local Research Ethics Committee through NHS procedures

14) Will the study involve clients or workers of a Local Authority?

YES

NO

Some of the professionals targeted might be working for a Local Authority. However, this is not a criterion for participation and recruitment will not happen in connection to any Local Authority or using Local Authority resources.

N.B. If you have answered YES to this question you should additionally seek the permission of the relevant Local Authority Research Governance Committee

15) Will ethical approval for the project be sought from any other source? Please note that consent and ethical approval must be obtained from any organisation involved in the research.

YES

NO

If you have answered YES to this question please give details and forward the letter of approval to: CARA SENOUNI, ROOM C411, PARK SQUARE, LUTON, LU1 3JU, BEDS

16) Summarise below any ethical issues involved in your proposed research and state how you intend to address them, paying particular attention to any of the questions to which you have answered 'yes' above. Provide as much detail as you can about your project here.

Ethical considerations

Recruiting

As indicated in the research proposal (short version see appendix 1) I will organise a series of 10 to 12 day-long workshops to develop and explore exercises that might inform practice.

I will recruit participants already known to me (friends and colleagues) that fulfil the criteria set out in the table on page 4/5.

In case of no response a follow up email (A2.2 will be sent 2 weeks later).

4 weeks after the initial email I will remind potential participants (positive respondents to the previous emails) of their right to withdraw (A2.3). This allows for an initial cooling down period. This cooling down period ensures that people who might at first feel obliged to participate (based on our existing relationship) can withdraw if they have “second thoughts” and it gives me a chance to reiterate that prioritise the continuation of the relationship over the participation (A2.2 and A2.3).

5 weeks after the initial email I confirm the venue and date and time for the following week giving an idea for the initial exercise (A2.4). This email will include the information sheet and consent form. A hardcopy of both will be available at each workshop.

Gaining informed consent

As explained to participants in emails (see above and appendix 2) in each workshop I will ask participants, all of whom I expect to be adults with capacity to consent, to sign the consent form at each workshop. Participants will then receive an email after two weeks reminding them that they can withdraw consent for another week.

Confidentiality and disclosure of serious harm or illegal activity

Generally the usual rules of confidentiality apply (as long as no explicit consent has been given). This means that no personally identifiable information will be shared (except with the director of studies) unless it relates to (actual or anticipated) serious harm or criminal activity. This is clarified in email A2.5 and will be repeated in the workshops.

Informing participants about purpose and dissemination

Participants will be informed about the purpose of the research (if they have not already got a strong idea from conversations with me) in the recruitment stage via email (see appendix 2) and through the information sheet (appendix 3).

With regards to dissemination an issue arises from a methodological question or rather a question of (re)presentation. How do I present findings in words when my ideas underlying this research are the over-reliance on words? At best there would be some inconsistency and at worst research findings are falsified or lost in the process of presenting them.

This brings another ethical question into focus, that I would be taking the right of interpreting, taking peoples own voices (or movements) away from them, even if I would verbatim record participant’s own interpretations. Still I want to offer people the opportunity to be credited for what they have contributed as co-researchers. This would make remaining anonymous difficult. The information sheet clarifies this to participants and the consent form offers an option to be either explicitly credited or to contribute in an anonymised way. In either case I envisage a community of research that is being created by this research.

As the direction of the research is emergent and given that this research is partly situated in the field of arts, there might be a way of presenting our co-created findings in a less “word based” way. In the course of the participatory elements of the data generation, performative

ways of creating research outputs, such as creating a film, may be suggested. If at this stage the participants (and myself) wish to use these outputs as part of the dissemination, I will ensure that consent is provided. The information sheet reflects this emergent nature.

Risks to myself and participants

I do not anticipate participants to experience strong emotional upset or undertake any dangerous activities. However, some physical activity is anticipated. The information sheet, that will be sent to participants prior to attending a workshop, does encourage participants to only do things they feel comfortable doing (both with regards to physical and possibly upsetting activities). It also provides – and this will be reiterated in the workshops – that people can stand back from activities. The information sheet also encourages talking with trusted people about potentially upsetting experiences or that I can point participants towards help.

I do not anticipate any risk of serious harm to myself.

Withdrawal from research

It could be difficult for me to use material generated in workshops if participants withdraw consent long afterwards. To limit the withdrawal period to 3 weeks after each workshop seems like a good time for participants to consider this and allowing me time to use and analyse the data. The draft emails, information sheet and the consent form are explicit about this. They also provide for a reminder email (appendix 2, A2.5) that will be sent 2 weeks after each workshop.

Data storage deletion and handling

At least at the level of data collection I will use video recordings. Recordings made on a digital camera will be transferred to an encrypted hard-drive immediately after each workshop session. The information sheet clarifies that these video recordings will only be shared with the director of studies (Dr Joanne Hill) unless further explicit consent is given (see above) and that they will be deleted within 3 years after completion of the research (this is in order to allow time to complete the program). I provided a data handling and storage policy in appendix 5.

If your research involves fieldwork with human subjects provide details of:

- how you will gain informed consent,
- how will you ensure confidentiality and deal with disclosures of serious harm or illegal activity. (Please note that there is a presumption of a requirement of

individual and organisation confidentiality other than where disclosure is required in the event of serious harm or illegal activity. This presumption can only be overturned with the explicit and informed consent of participants and where the rationales for identification, and the potential risks, are fully addressed in the ethical application.),

- how you will inform participants about the purpose of the research and dissemination of findings, who will have access to the data,
- what risks do you see to researchers, participants and participating organisations (physical and reputational) and what steps will be taken to mitigate these risks?,
- what mechanisms you will employ to enable participants to withdraw from the research if they should wish to do so. It may in some circumstances be appropriate to impose time limitations on the right to withdraw, but in that event, you should indicate what considerations you have taken into account when determining those limits.
- how you will store the data and what you will do with it on completion of the project. Data may be retained after the completion of the project, but where it is proposed to do so, you should indicate the purpose of retention – for instance, subsequent re-analysis, as a baseline for future comparative or complementary research, or to allow other researchers in the field access to the raw data in anonymised form. In the event that you intend to retain data for such purpose. Data should only be held beyond the life of the current research project with participant consent and where such retention is intended, participants should be made aware of that possibility through information sheets and consent forms.

[NB. *If it is envisaged that data will be processed outside of the research team (e.g. external transcribers) a confidentiality agreement may be required.*]

Applicant declaration

I understand that I cannot begin any fieldwork until the application referred to in this form has been approved by all relevant parties. I agree to carry out the research in the manner specified. If I make any changes to the approved method I will seek further ethical approval for any changes

Signed (Applicant): ...  Date:
.....

Signature of Supervisor/ Director of Studies (N.B. This is **NOT** required for staff applications)

..... Date:

Note to Supervisors: Signing this form certifies that in your opinion, the project described here is ethical under Departmental and SRA guidelines. Do **NOT** sign if you are unsure or if the student has not attached complete details of the research design and methodology

SUBMISSION OF APPLICATIONS

Please save this form as word document using the following convention:

Applicantsurname_IASRECCapp_MMMYY.doc (eg Smith_IASRECCapp_NOV14)

Forward electronic copy of this form to: hemlata.naranbhai@beds.ac.uk clearly stating 'Ethical Approval Application' & includes your surname.

TURN TO PAGE 7 FOR GUIDANCE ON COMPLETING THIS FORM

Decision of the Ethics Committee

This proposal has been considered by:

The Sub-committee of IASR at Bedford Campus

IASR Ethics Committee

Approved

Returned for Amendments..

Rejected

Referred to IASREC _____ Date Referred

Referred to UREC _____ Date Referred

Please Note: This Ethical Approval may be subject to further scrutiny by the University Research Ethics Committee and any other relevant internal and/or external committees as may be required. It is the responsibility of the student/PI to ensure that such approvals are obtained and can be evidenced if and when necessary

Signature of Ethics Committee Member: *(specify which committee)*.....

Chair:

Print Name.....Signature:

.....

Vice-Chair/Counter-signatory:

Print Name:Signature:

.....

Date.....

IASREC – NOTES AND GUIDANCE FOR ETHICS COMMITTEE APPLICATIONS.

The IASREC considers proposals for primary research from all undergraduate and post-graduate students and staff within the Dept of Applied Social Studies. The Division of Psychology has its own arrangements for ethical approval of student projects at under-graduate level as does the Institute of Health Research for Postgraduate and Undergraduate Students and Staff.

The IASREC is responsible for ethical approval of all research undertaken by staff, undergraduate and post graduate students within the Department of Applied Social Studies whose research focus is Social Research

Completing the form: The IASREC form has been designed to ensure that when fully completed an application has addressed all relevant areas. This form should be able to ‘stand alone’ meaning that members of the ethics committee should not need to read your complete proposal to understand what you intend to do. Not all questions will be relevant to all projects but it is important that the information provided is sufficient for the committee to be able to gain a thorough understanding of:

- what you wish to do
- how you intend to do it and what methods you will use
- which groups of participants are to be approached
- the extent to which risk and safeguards have been considered and addressed.

If in doubt about completing any aspect of this form consult your supervisor or, where appropriate, a member of the IASR Ethics Committee

Researching with children and young people: If the child or young person is aged under 16 it may be necessary to obtain parental consent or the consent of someone acting in locus parentis to include them in your research. If the young person is aged 14-18 and is considered to be ‘Gillick Competent’ they are able to give consent on their own behalf. However, for people in this age group, please consider the notes below on groups that may be regarded as ‘vulnerable’ and who may therefore require some special considerations

Examples of groups who might be considered ‘vulnerable’ include: (this list is not exhaustive)

People with learning disabilities

People with mental health problems

People with drug/alcohol problems or addictions

People in situations of extreme powerlessness (for example, homeless people)

People with relationships to the researcher over whom the researcher may exert power or control (for example, your own client group or your own students)

People in custody

People with long-term, life threatening illnesses

People living in residential care (children, young people, elderly people, people with disabilities)

People living in extremely disadvantaging social and/or economic circumstances

People involved in situations of, or recovering from, child abuse/rape/domestic violence/sexual exploitation

People on migratory journeys (refugee groups and/or people who are seeking asylum)

‘Sensitive’ research involves researching topics that may be considered ‘taboo’, morally or legally ambiguous and/or emotionally challenging. While some topics might be considered inherently sensitive (child sexual abuse, for example) other topics are rendered sensitive by the moral or political climate that surrounds the activity being investigated. For this reason, it is difficult to provide a definitive list of topics that may be considered ‘sensitive’ but some examples might include: (this list is not exhaustive). Please use your discretion when deciding whether your topic might be considered ‘sensitive’ or not.

Sexual activity
Drug/Alcohol Misuse
Bullying
Domestic Violence
Parent/child conflict
Experiences of being looked after
Experiences of being fostered / adopted
Experiences of child abuse
Experiences of mental health problems
Experiences of eating disorders
Living with a life threatening condition (e.g. HIV/AIDS)
Involvement in criminal behaviour
Involvement in migratory processes (legal or illegal)

Appendix 1 – short version of research proposal

Title

How we do things without words

Abstract

I will trace if and how social constructionist systemic practice and theory has moved towards focussing on the spoken or written word and neglected the other more physical and non-verbal aspects of communicating and co-creating reality – how bodies manifest reality in space.

I will then explore what we miss by focussing on words, both in a theoretical way through a systematic review and practical way through a collaborative action research project. Focussing again on how we create realities without words I will present ideas developed about how such a focus can help facilitating (therapeutic or organisational) change.

Context

Fundamental to social constructionist, systemic therapeutic and organisational practice is the notion that “We construct our reality in language” (For example Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1982).

One significant theoretical contribution in this field CMM, the coordinated management of meaning (for example Pearce 1994, 2005, 2007). At its base is the “speech act” (Austin 1962), the idea that we do things with words and say things with our actions and that by saying and doing meaning and reality is created.

One of my initial ideas is that in our practice as well as in our theoretical discourses the balance is tipped towards emphasising what we say (verbal communication), occasionally combined with the way we say it (sometimes referred to para-verbal communication).

This is despite the fact that we can ‘not speak’ but “one cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick et al. 1967). Our body, its physical organisation and positioning in space already communicates and it does so before language “...arises out of consensual coordination of consensual action...” (Maturana 1991, p. 78).

With my research I aim to address this gap and contribute to redressing the balance. This may in turn contribute to increasing the practitioner's repertoire and options.

My practice that also forms part of the background to this research is that I am a qualified social pedagogue and systemic psychotherapist. Studies at a physical theatre school have led to a strong interest in what we say with our presence in space and the way we do this. Within and beyond the field of children safeguarding I have been coaching, consulting and training.

Research focus and Research Questions

The research is oriented by three questions.

- Is there now a strong leaning towards the spoken and written word or verbal communication in the field of systemic practice influenced by social constructionism?
- What are the consequences for practitioners of a focus on verbal aspects of communication?
- Are there ways the practitioner could include the body's physical reality in a useful way??

Research Methodology

Trying to understand from within (for example Shotter 2010), social constructionism is central to my methodological assumptions. With regards to the discourse in theory I will undertake a systematic review of the theoretical discourse. This will necessarily have to acknowledge the subjectivity of my reading of these discourses. It also situates the research within a wider discourse and offers a variety of opinions on the subject.

In order to capture practice I will use collaborative action research (for example Reason and Bradbury 2001) with a group of fellow practitioners. This will take the form of workshops (see below).

Research Design and timescales

The more solitary part to the research that puts me in dialogue with texts. This part of the research has already started and finish by autumn 2018.

Following ethics approval, I start planning a series of 10 to 12 day-long workshops with participants from the various practices that form my professional and life practice, therapists, social workers, organisational consultants and coaches as well as theatre, circus, dance, yoga and Aikido practitioners. I will recruit these out of and through my existing network of contacts, meaning that there will be friends and colleagues but also people who I know less well. I aim to start these workshops following ethics approval, planning and recruiting in April and run them until the end of the year (roughly every three weeks, allowing for a break in the summer). These workshops follow an action research design and are as such emergent in nature. Discussions will lead to generating new exercises. As a starting point there will be an exercise of being in space, being allowed to do anything (that is not harmful) except from using words. Participants will know this from the recruitment stage.

These workshops will be filmed (a camera on a tripod will be set up by me). The camera will run the whole time and will therefore also capture the discussions / (semi structured) interviews that will include the following questions: What did this exercise do to, for or with you? What did you notice about yourself or others during this exercise? In what way might this exercise be relevant to your practice and possibly be beneficial to the people you work with, if at all?

From the second workshop on I will start session with discussions / (semi structured) interviews that will include the following questions: Have any of the exercises that have been developed so far become relevant in your practice? And if so what effect did that have? What would you like to see us develop further?

References

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Appendix 2 – draft emails for recruitment (and reminder to withdraw consent)

A2.1 Email to initially contact potential participants:

Dear [participant name],

As you might already know, I am researching how practitioners can utilise non-verbal aspects of communication (more) to facilitate change with people they work with. This is part of a journey that I have started when I enrolled in a program called “professional doctorate in systemic practice” at the University of Bedfordshire.

As part of this research I am organising a series of workshops starting (6 weeks after this email) in which we will together develop and explore exercises that focus on the use of non-verbal communication.

I am contacting you because you either practice in a systemic way and can contribute your expertise and experience of your practice to the research process or you are an experienced “physical” practitioner with a wealth of ideas and expertise in non-verbal communication – or both.

If you decide to take part I hope that you will get some ideas for your own practice that might benefit you, your practice and the people you are working with but I cannot offer this formally as training or professional development.

While I would really like to include you in my research community I would understand that this might for whatever reason not be the right for you (at this time). As friends and/or colleagues we have a relationship that is more important to me than you being part of this research.

If the above date does not suit you but you would like to join at a later stage please let me know.

I am looking forward to your reply and initial thoughts.

Many thanks.

All the best,

Mark

A2.2 Follow up email (in case of no response)

Dear [participant name],

As I have not heard back from you with regards to my research project I wanted to follow this up in case you do want to take part. If you do want to take part please let me know within the next 2 weeks.

If however, you cannot or do not want to take part, that is absolutely fine and you do not have to do anything. Remember, as friends and/or colleagues we have a relationship that is more important to me than you being part of this research.

All the best,

Mark

A2.3 Follow up email (reminder of cooling down before participation)

Dear [participant name],

I am delighted that you are considering to take part in the upcoming workshop (if not in the whole series of workshops). I am sure you have a lot to contribute and hopefully also get something out of the workshop for yourself and your practice.

I just want to reiterate that I would not like you to feel obliged to participate and remind you that you can withdraw from this research up to 3 weeks after the workshop (I will remind you of this again).

Remember, as friends and/or colleagues we have a relationship that is more important to me than you being part of this research.

If you would like to withdraw from the research please let me know within the next week (of course you can still withdraw up to three weeks after each workshop).

All the best,

Mark

A2.4 Confirmation email (will include information sheet and consent form)

Dear [participant name],

I am looking forward to welcoming you as part of my research project.

We are meeting at [location of the workshop] on the [date of next workshop] at [time].

Please see attached the information sheet for this research and the consent form. A printed out copy will be available at the workshop and I will ask you to sign the consent form at the workshop. As you might be part only for a few and not all of the workshops I will ask you to sign a consent form for each workshop.

As a starting point and 1st “exercise” I would like us all to meet in a space without words. So please be prepared to enter the space without using any words. Otherwise you can do anything that you want (provided it does not harm anybody or is offensive). As a general rule please only engage in activities that you feel comfortable with. Please wear clothes that you feel comfortable in and that allow you to move comfortably.

As it would contradict the above exercise I will not have a chance to speak with you at the beginning of the workshop. I will assume consent by you attending until a first break after this first exercise where you can sign the form.

I will set up a video camera for the whole duration of the workshop.

I need to clarify that your contribution to the workshop and the material on the video recording will be treated with confidentiality (unless you give explicit consent otherwise) except form in circumstances where were I become aware of illegal activity or serious harm. I will only share the video with my director of studies (see information sheet).

I am really looking forward.

All the best,

Mark

A2.5 Email reminder to withdraw consent

Dear [participant name],

As I have promised in the consent form I am sending you a reminder to withdraw your consent within the following week if you wish to.

Although I do appreciate a brief confirmation, you do not have to do anything if you are happy to continue to be part of this research.

[[The following paragraph will not be included in the email after the last workshop]] I also hope to see you again at the next workshop on the [date of next workshop] at [location of the workshop].

Thank you for your contributions to my research so far.

All the best,

Mark

Appendix 3 – Information sheet

Dear participant,

Thank you for considering to take part in this series of workshops that form part of my research.

With this research for my “professional doctorate in systemic practice” at the University of Bedfordshire I am exploring how groups communicate without words – how they become or change as a group without words.

I will video record this workshop. I will not show these video recordings to anyone except my research supervisor (see below) without your explicit consent.

I will transfer these recordings to an encrypted hard-drive and will delete them from the camera immediately after this session. The recordings will be destroyed 3 years after the research project ends.

In the consent form there is an option for you to decide whether you would rather be “anonymised”, so that nobody can trace your contribution to the research back to you, or whether you would rather be explicitly named and acknowledged as co-researcher.

After signing the consent form you can still withdraw from the research for 3 weeks after the workshop. I will contact you after 2 weeks, if you provide contact details on the consent form, to remind you of your right to withdraw.

I do not anticipate that this workshop will be dangerous or upsetting to you. Please, only do things that you feel comfortable doing. At any stage can you step back. If you do feel upset or this workshop brings back difficult memories please do talk to someone that you trust and with whom you usually talk about those things. If you do not have someone, I can point you in the right direction.

I hope that you find participating in the research enjoyable and that we can generate some new ideas relevant and beneficial to your practice. However, this is not a formal professional development course and you will not obtain a certificate.

If you are unhappy with how I have conducted this research please do speak with myself. I would appreciate your feedback. If you feel uncomfortable to do so, please do contact my research supervisor and director of studies

Dr. Joanne Hill via email: Joanne.Hill@beds.ac.uk

I hope you will enjoy this workshop and thank you for taking part in my research.

Mark Huhnen

Appendix 4 – Consent form

I, _____ [please print your name here],

hereby agree to participate in the research described in the information sheet.

Yes No

I have read and understood the information sheet.

Yes No

I understand that I can withdraw my consent to any of the above at any time until 3 weeks after the workshop.

(I will be reminded via email that I can withdraw my consent 2 weeks after the workshop.)

Yes No

I agree, that this workshop will be video recorded.

Yes No

I understand that this video will be stored safely and that it will only be shared with the director of studies named in the information sheet and not used publically without further explicit consent.

Yes No

I would like my contributions to the research to be anonymised.

Yes **or**

I would like my contributions as co-researcher to be acknowledged.

Yes

[Please tick/check as appropriate.]

[signed]

[dated]

Appendix 5 – Data handling and storage policy

The workshops that form part of this research with participants will be video recorded in order to explore non-verbal aspects of communication. These video recordings together with video recordings of interviews with participants form the raw data for this research.

The purpose of this policy is to ensure this raw data is being kept safe and that participants rights to confidentiality is guaranteed.

- Video recordings will be made on a digital video camera during workshops and interviews.
- Immediately after workshops and interviews recordings will be transferred to an encrypted portable hard drive and will be deleted from the camera or any other device.
- I will keep this hard drive on myself while transporting it.
- Whilst not working on the recordings the hard drive will be kept in a lockable cabinet in my home.
- Without explicit further consent these video recordings will not be shared except with my director of studies. Sharing these recordings will be in person. No files will be send via email or other data sharing platforms (for example “dropbox”).
- No copies of the video files on the encrypted hard drive will be made.
- The video recordings will be kept for 3 years after completing the research program and then destroyed.

FAO Mark Huhnen

Ref: IASR_15/17

13th April 2018

Dear Mark

Re: IASREC Application

Project Title: How to do things without words

The Research Ethics Panel of the Institute of Applied Social Research has considered your application and are happy to inform you that the proposed research project has been approved.

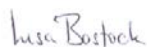
Please note that if it becomes necessary to make any substantive change to the research design, the sampling approach or the data collection methods a further application will be required.

If the proposed work involves users or providers of any local authority service (this includes some education, pre-school and care establishments) you will additionally need approval from the relevant Local Authority.

If the project involves users of providers of health services approval will also be required from the relevant NHS Research Ethics Committee.

In all cases **it is your responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of proof of all necessary authorisations before any fieldwork commences.**

Yours sincerely



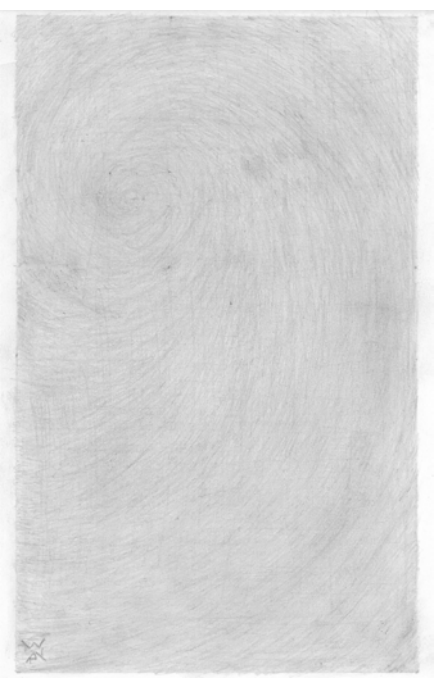
Dr Lisa Bostock
IASR Staff and PGR Ethics Co-ordinator

Appendix B: Booklet

On the following pages I have attached a booklet that you could print out and keep in a more accessible format. If you have downloaded the whole document, I recommend printing the last 10 pages (in your printer settings page 407-416) double-sided. You should then be able to just fold and staple in the middle and have your booklet ready for easier access to the techniques.

How to do things without words

A short and hopefully expanding catalogue of potentially useful ideas for systemic practitioners who want to attend to and use non-verbal communication more.



By Mark Huhten, 2024

A short introduction

For my doctoral studies I researched how systemic practitioners can use non-verbal action or what I came to call dynamic action as opposed to symbolic action more. In a series of workshops with other practitioners to whom I am very grateful the techniques in this little booklet were created.

You should be able to print just this booklet and staple it in the middle so you can have it handy.

If you are interested in the whole research project and resulting doctoral thesis, that also builds some theory around why this might work and be useful you are of course invited to read the doctoral thesis.

Please do not understand this little booklet as a manual of how to do things (even though the title says so) but more as a collection of ideas that you might use as part of your existing practice. Or you might adapt the ideas. Or you might develop new ones. Particularly in that case but generally I would like to hear from you. You might contribute to the further growth of this project. Please email me at mark.huhnen@gmail.com

I will also update this booklet (to be found on my webpage) regularly as I will continue to develop these ideas..

10 My house

Inspirations: Lakoff and Johnson (1980)

In what situations it might be useful:

People sometimes describe the environment of their relationships with regards to people's location within a house like a family home or their organisations offices. (For example, when someone says that their boss stays in their office as probably metaphorically not being approachable.)

Short description:

Encourage a participant to describe and show how they experience their house, physically marking out areas in the space, that are standing in for the real space. Maybe they can choose other participants to play themselves or other people inhabiting these spaces. The participants interact. You can then 'coach' the participant who described the scenario with regards to how to handle conflicts or conflicting demands and needs foregrounding their positioning.

While this exercise will use symbolic action (likely words) the positioning and sequencing (dynamic action) can be foregrounded.

Potential variations / extensions:

You could invite someone else to 'play' the person who had described their house to develop alternative possibilities.

You could experiment with exchanging some 'actors' in the scene or ask participants to try something different.

The ideas / techniques

1 Show me rather than tell me.....	4
2 (Moving) sculpt / constellation.....	5
3 The space between.....	6
4 The fixed point.....	8
5 Stuck / unstuck.....	9
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1 Show me rather than tell me

In what situations it might be useful:

In situations when someone finds it difficult to describe in words how they feel or experience someone.

Short description:

You might notice someone struggling to find (the 'right') words to describe how they 'feel' or experience something or someone. You can invite them to find a pose, movement or gesture that shows the experience.

Potential variations / extensions:

In many ways this might well be a good starting point for many other techniques described following that could therefore be seen as extensions to this basic move from intentional symbolic to intentional dynamic.

9 The neutral mask

Inspirations: Lecoq (2020)

In what situations it might be useful:

Often with families and groups of colleagues not only the story or narrative (White, 1989, 2007) is very 'stuck' but also the way the story is told (Pearce, 1999). With the neutral mask's focus on dynamic action other ways of telling the story become necessary and often these narratives bring out other aspects of the relational dynamics that are less often told (subjugated discourses; White, 1989, 2007).

Short description:

After either a different exercise with the neutral mask (for example "For the very first time", 9.8) or clarifying that the neutral mask cannot talk or use symbolic action, ask participants to wear the neutral mask and retell the situation. This might be very short and participants might feel that they have been prevented from telling the story and yet you and other observers might find many points to talk about. This might take the form of an observing team and might lead to replaying the scene.



Figure 3. Dynamic action with the Neutral Mask

Examples:

Potential variations / extensions:

dismissive, bored or anxious. Only curiosity makes sense. It is also important to clarify that the neutral mask cannot speak or use symbolic action.

Potential variations / extensions:

You can invite observations about when any emotion other than curiosity seems to show and what 'ideas' about curiosity or neutrality and 'habits' this might betray. There might then be joint speculation about where these ideas or habits come from (for example family scripts, Byrge-Hall, 1995).

'For the very first time' might also be a good introductory exercise for other work with the neutral mask.

2 (Moving) sculpt / constellation

Inspiration: Satir (1988), Hellinger (1998, 2003)

In what situations it might be useful: sculps fit very well with a structural view.

There is already plenty of literature regarding sculpts and constellations (Satir, 1988; Hellinger, 1998, 2003; Duhl, Kantor & Duhl, 1973). Family or group members arrange themselves or are being arranged by on member according to how they see the relationship. Emotional proximity or distance translates into spatial proximity and distance. This sculpt or constellation can then be manipulated.

Potential variations / extensions:

Potential variations are to have other people or even objects as placeholders for members of the system.

Sculpts could be extended into moving sculpts. Participants could be asked to either trace in movement how (they imagine) they got into this sculpt or what movements they would do to get into a different sculpt.

3 The space between

Inspiration: Lecoq (2020)

In what situations it might be useful:

When people are convinced that they are not “coordinating” / communicating with each other well or where it is useful to raise awareness of each other’s organisation in space.

Short description:

This works well in two steps:

- 1) With an object – a good object is a stick, not too long, not too short, and not too heavy – held between the two participants dominant hands. Ask participants to explore the movements that they can do individually and together without “dropping” the stick.
- 2) Remove the object and ask participants to do the same, just imagining the object.

Example:



Picture 1: The object between (in film document also available as video clip)

8 For the very first time

Inspirations: Lecoq (2020)

In what situations it might be useful:

Where it seems useful to find a “state” of curiosity (might also be very useful in training). Or in preparation for remembering the first time of something (the first time a couple met, the first day in a new job). It can be very useful as an introduction to focus on dynamic action and work with the Neutral Mask.

Short description:

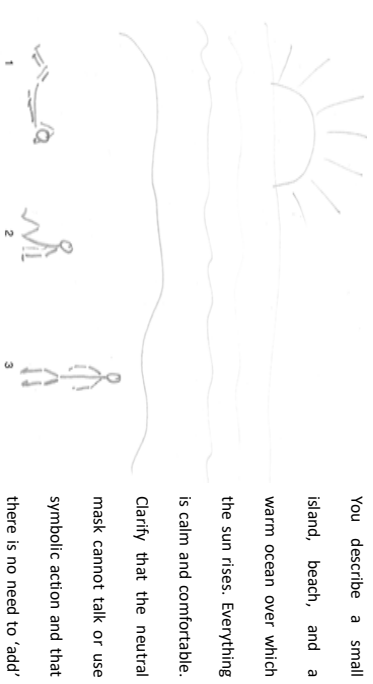


Figure 2: Waking up for the very first time with the Neutral Mask

just being with the island, sea and sun rise is enough. Participants put on a neutral mask and imagine that they are awakening for the very first time. It is worth spending a little more time on exploring what waking up for the very first time would mean. There is no need to be afraid,



Picture 4: The Neutral Mask

Potential variations / extensions:

You can talk about the inherent metaphor: "What if we replace 'ball' with 'message' or 'act of communication'?"

Potential variations / extensions:

You can encourage participants to use other parts of the body to "hold" the object with.

You can let more than 2 participants explore this together.

You can bring it back into symbolic action: "What was that like?" "Are there or were there times in your life / work together where it was like this?"

You can encourage noticing what is still possible despite this restraint.

This technique might further lead into "the fixed point" (9.4) and / or "Stuck/Unstuck" (9.5).

4 The fixed point

Inspiration: Aikido

In what situations it might be useful:

When people describe themselves as being stuck or held back.

Short description:

Enquire more into the metaphor, keeping it on a physical level: where in your body would you locate the point where you are fixed or held back? Fix this point or part of the body and ask the person to explore how much movement is still possible. Can they relax that point? Or the parts around it? Can they breathe 'into' that point?

Example:



Picture 2: The fixed point (in hand document also available as video clip)

Potential variations / extensions:

This technique might further lead into "Stuck / unstuck" (9.5).

7 Group juggling

Inspirations: Sheryl Malcolm (Sheryl and I worked together using theatre and play in schools and developed this.), Lakoff and Johnson (1980)

In what situations it might be useful:

When people are convinced that they are not "coordinating" / communicating with each other well. It also offers great metaphors for communication. It is also good as ice-breaker and name learning exercise. It might open up very entrenched patterns.

Short description:

With a group of people start passing a juggling ball to each other in a repeatable pattern that includes everybody once. With a group that does not know each other very well you can ask people to say their own name when receiving a ball before (staying in the same pattern) the person throwing the ball calls the receiver's name.

At some point go to silent mode (no calling names) and introduce more balls.



Figure 1: Group juggling

At some point ask to break the pattern.
Several balls will be in the air at the same time. You might facilitate with questions like "What makes for a successful passing of the ball?" "Is throwing more important or receiving?" "How do you know the other person is ready to receive the ball?"

You can afterwards go back to symbolic action and explore with the person and their family and group the difference.

5 Stuck / unstuck

Inspiration: Aikido

In what situations it might be useful:

When people feel an inevitability or feel stuck or feel held back or feel attacked

Short description:

You probably would first set this up carefully. "Show me rather than tell me" (9.1) might help with that. Or you could explore the metaphor, stretching it: "Where in your body do you feel held. Another participant or group or family member could hold the person as they have described and the person can then explore what options or movements are still available.

It seems less important to find an actual solution and more important that the idea of a solution, trying to do things differently is entertained.

Example:



Picture 3: Stuck/unstuck (in html document also available as video clip)

Potential variations / extensions:

There might sometimes be good reasons (other people) why a person might feel further restricted. In one case (described earlier in the book) the person wanted to protect others "behind" them. You can add people to the constellation and ask the person to further explore what is possible.

A possible good extension might be to move towards solution focussed techniques and explore further, for example: "If the relationship between you and the other person was more like how you experienced it in this exercise, what things would become possible?"

6 Say it / do it again

Inspirations: Lecocq (2020), Playback theatre

In what situations it might be useful:

When you get a sense that people have moved themselves physically or metaphorically into a difficult position or view of themselves.

Short description:

Ask a person to do or say something again but in a different pose / organisation of the body or with a different tone of voice.

Example:

A person might find themselves in an unhelpful position or with a limiting sense of self, where it is difficult for them to fully or proudly own an achievement. You might get a feeling that they are dismissing their own achievement from their dynamic action. You could ask them to say it louder, standing on a chair, chest pushed forward.

Potential variations / extensions:

Another group / family member can try to say or do the same thing again but also with a different pose / organisation of the body or with a different tone of voice. This way many possibilities are created.