

**ROUND THINGS DON'T HAVE ANY STRAIGHT LINES—
OR, LOOKING FOR THE FEMINIST REQUIRES “SYSTEMS” THINKING!
Response to the Special Issue on Women and the Creative Arts Therapies**

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In the middle third of this century, people wanting to learn more about human behavior began to apply scientific concepts borrowed from physics, such as “cybernetics” (information theory useful for computers and other information communication systems), to the therapeutic study of ordinary people’s daily lives. From this analysis emerged the implication that people’s interactions might be as valid a concern for therapeutic investigation as examining those individuals as being static entities themselves.

One consequence of this for therapeutic work was that the basic unit of pathology also then had to conceptually change from focusing on only a person’s identity and life history to a newer version wherein the pathology must be seen as originating within a larger system suggesting that people’s communications with each other are at least as therapeutically important as the people themselves. This kind of larger systems perspective clearly informs that any reality is far more in totality than just the linear summing up of its individual component parts taken discretely.

This is a paradigm shift that is not altogether alien to art and art therapy. It is similar, for example, to looking at not only objects, but also the spaces in between them, to comprehending how a change in one component facet will effect a change in not only all the others, but also in their relationships. It is why a piece of art is much more than just the combination of the parts that formed it. It is a study of how verbs

connect (and thus affect) nouns—and how people do not exist just each singularly in a vacuum, but rather are inexorably contexted by their interactive process of communication (verbally and nonverbally) throughout their lifetimes.

For several decades, this kind of systems influence has slowly made strong inroads into the previous ways of thinking about people and their problems. We are beginning to see that it also can provide a very useful model for thinking about absolutely everything in the universe, along with changing the very nature of therapeutic possibilities as therapists begin to understand that life offers more than just polarized mutually-exclusive opposites or discrete entities that are not somehow affected by anything else. We can easily begin to see how all life, from sub-atomic level to that of the entire solar system (and beyond), is actually an interwoven hierarchy of mutually interdependent systems.

It appears to be not coincidental, as people have begun to apply and accept the consequences of this major paradigm shift to all aspects of their lives in addition to those of particular therapeutic import, that recognizing such interconnectedness of all levels of life has also become a focus of numerous environmental, health, political, and other discussions. Similar enlightenment has permitted the conceptualizing of a global village model of politics (such as McLuhan predicted), and, more recently, all sorts of political and ethnic borders have begun to collapse as

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a newer way of understanding has permitted communication where there was none permissible before.

As people have begun to recognize the limitations of the old "one cause, one effect" way of thinking about problems and solutions, and instead begun to turn to a more systemic (and natural) way of understanding, there has arisen a clearer comprehension of the complicated levels of interactions of such cycles and rhythms of interrelatedness. For example, we are finally beginning to understand our interdependency with nature, with weather, with each other—and thus, a different way of looking at the world (and our place within it) has been reborn.

There are parallels to be found in all sorts of related fields: from science we hear much excitement about the "newly" discovered concepts of chaos theory (that there is an underlying pattern to all apparent chaos, perhaps not visible or able to be known because it is inseparably embedded within itself, but it is there nevertheless—and I am not necessarily implying religion here); from physics, biology, astronomy, psychology, botany, we hear about things like synchronicity, morphogenic resonance, and other concepts that inform equally well regardless of domain to open up our way of thinking about our place within the universe.

All of these indicate an awakening of the planet (and the interrelated global village its inhabitants represent) to an awareness that absolutely everything that exists is interconnected, not just genetically or geographically or historically, but also in deep structure, the continuity of its very life force, and certainly a collective unconscious. I believe that this supposedly sudden change of models cannot be separated from our evolving consciousness about what we are, how we think, and how we make sense of life.

It is this change in our thinking from the earlier assumptions of simple cause-and-effect, from simplistic Cartesian dichotomies and artificially linear problem-solving, to a more holistic approach (within a systemic perspective of emphasizing the relational interactions and nonlinear causation) that seems to me to also very closely mirror the emergence and powerful consequences of feminist influences on every facet of thinking and living, whether therapy, politics, art, government, religion, or any other domains.

This less-linear systemic way of conceptualizing may seem to be new, but it is older than written history itself. It actually pre-dates recorded time (and patriarchal-based religions), pre-dates the idea that one can conquer and own the very earth itself (as if

one is somehow separable from it), pre-dates the idea that one can act individually and selfishly without causing any consequence to others—and certainly pre-dates the idea that one could ever assume to have true controlling power over another person, rather than mutually nurturing others to the benefit of all. In short, it reflects the ancient orientations of the Goddess religions, the domain of the female-nurturing (rather than male-aggressive) nature and all the accompanying mythology thereof. The female is of regenerative cyclic rhythms intergenerationally and astronomically; the feminist is of nurturance, cooperation, nonaggression while maintaining assertion of the value of equal right to opportunity without artificial dichotomies interfering.

There is definitely a major paradigm shift at hand, and we are seeing its influences in the movement away from the either/or positions of paternalistic simplicities subsumed within theoretical absolutes and instead toward a more feminist "whole-is-interrelated- and- is- more-than- just-the- simple- sum-of parts" approach such as Gilligan's (1982) work informs (and Wadeson, 1989, suggests in using terms such as "the web of connectedness").

It is important for me to note here that I certainly believe that this shift is taking place in men as well as in women; I do not myself want in this article to imply any kind of simplistic reduction that somehow only women can understand this, or that men are incapable of desiring or adopting the more nurturing feminist approaches. The "feminist" I use here is one of philosophy and modality, of orientation and approach, and it does not preclude acceptance or practice by men. I have frequently observed quite the opposite, as many men I have encountered have obviously welcomed such a shift in perspective, recognizing that it makes such good sense and provides a more encouraging way of being in the world.

These newer, more interrelationship-oriented awakenings are visible not just within abstract theoretical philosophizings, but also in more obvious and more practical re-orientations toward communication that have produced such unanticipated and widely-divergent events as the peaceful de-stabilization of Communism in Eastern Europe, or the cross-cultural cooperation that sees Haida Indians paddling a hand-hewn canoe down the Seine to make a very loud nonverbal statement that is universally clear.

There is definitely a major global change of thinking taking place and, as far as therapy goes, I expect to see a lot more therapists abandoning sole-

model fixations (to the exclusion of all others that have their exclusionary absolutes), and taking up the larger meta-understandings that are mandated from systems thinking—with the result that a rounder, more encompassing conceptual model is synthesized that makes use of all theory to the enhancement of its component parts. This means abandoning the framework of adversarial dichotomies (where the forced polarities become opposing forces wherein one can somehow win and thus must clearly be able to be right, leaving the other only the consequence of being wrong, a loser, rather than just simply being allowed to be different), and moving on to models wherein all possibilities are encompassable although not necessarily being mutually exclusive.

Your recent issue of *The Arts in Psychotherapy* signals the question (notwithstanding the many female therapists in arts therapy practice), "Where is the feminist in the practice of the creative arts therapies?" I suggest in response that it is already at least partially here, lurking in the maturing perspectives of all therapists, male and female, who have begun to grasp the deeper philosophical implications of conceptualizing therapy (and, indeed, all of life) as consisting of interlocking hierarchical systems of meanings and communications, without which there could be no activity, movement, nor regenerative continuation of life cycles. The positing of therapists as "being able to heal even if not able to cure" is essentially a feminist-based viewpoint, and one that is not restricted to women-only in theory or practice. And it is one that is naturally resonant with the various creative arts therapies.

Far from being just some flip side of psychotherapeutic models that would somehow need to be re-written from a female knowledge base or perspective, I believe that the effects of feminist concepts and consequences on psychotherapy and art therapy will have a far larger effect on therapeutic activities and thinking once the limitations of patriarchal causality (and constraints engendered by such linear thinking) begin to be laid aside. This is already emerging, as increasing numbers of therapists, male and female, are becoming more feminist-oriented (and systemic in thinking) in our understandings and approaches to

life—and certainly also to the process and results of therapy itself!

Any psychoanalytic or developmental or psychodynamic (or any other) theory of choice can of course, by itself, be quite useful; however, we are soon approaching an age where any one thing or one theory on its own, by itself, will simply no longer be sufficient (or relevant). And, continuing the image of one big interrelatedness, when thinking about the field of art therapy itself, I further suggest, in the matriarchal sense of tradition that bands people together into community based on more than simple blood-line connections, that we can best conceptualize and represent ourselves as art therapists through the use of just this kind of systemic model, which is also very feminist by its very nature.

This model permits the component parts to be free to be themselves, and have their own unoppressed power as equal-but-different, though nevertheless understanding our interrelatedness and helping each other in awareness and appreciation of the larger family that we comprise. This model serves equally well whether describing how art therapists can work from apparently opposing models and yet still be effective art therapists or describing (at a higher level of order) how all the various creative therapies, though different, still can be seen as integrally related parts of a larger whole (which, reciprocally, informs and influences all parts).

We are a family—with diverse members, yes, but also with a common thread that permits achievement of a kind of balance-in-motion, our differences serving to enhance rather than threaten each other's existence. To adjust our thinking (or our careers) to a more feminist approach might well be as simple as reframing our thinking to go in interconnected circles instead of unidirectional straight lines!!

References

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