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Keeping Cool in Thinking and Psychotherapy

Stephen Frosh

It is a great honour and pleasure to contribute to this *Festschrift* for David Campbell, who I knew for thirty years and who was one of the most significant influences on my thinking and therapeutic practice, supporting and supervising me in the limited clinical skills I have, and latterly helping me survive the exigencies of academic management through his careful and astute consultation. David's unflappable interest, his personal courtesy and wisdom, and his capacity to think both individually and systemically – to stay neutral and curious, as systemic therapists say – penetrated to the core of what it means to be a colleague, a teacher and a friend. In a *Festschrift* such of this, with contributions from, and also an original audience of, colleagues and students of David – both being categories into which I fall – David's capacity to generate relational warmth is obvious; so too is his immense intellectual contribution to the development of psychotherapy and systemic thinking.

The brief for this short piece is to say something about my own work and the ways in which David's ideas influenced or inspired this, rather than focus on David himself, but the two things are not that easy to prise apart. This is because amongst the large number of different ways in which David's influence operates, the most pervasive is something relatively intangible, related to but not dependent on his teaching or writing. This of course is not to underestimate the significance of the *content* of David's work. His promotion and development of systemic thinking, and particularly of the Milan model, was crucial for the flowering of theory, practice

and research in the area; and his many mainly jointly authored books and articles (for me, perhaps seminally the chapter in the second edition of Gurman and Kniskern's *Handbook of Family Therapy*¹) remain primary source material for anyone wanting to learn this approach. Most of my own understanding of systemic theory and practice has come from this particular stable, with David at the heart of it. Incidentally, or maybe centrally, the *collaborative* nature of David's writing is an important comment on the ethics of his work and its consistency. Wedded to the ideas of openness to discovery, relationality, contextualism, democratisation of expert processes and collegiality, David rarely 'sole-authored' his writings. Rather, things were worked out dialogically, in and amongst people, and often – in his workshops and teaching – this process, with all its necessary hesitancy, was made publicly available for us all to learn from.

In my own writing, despite being too impatient and probably narcissistic to work very successfully with others, I have also been drawn to this democratic principle, although I am probably less sanguine than David and many systemic workers about the means through which it can be achieved. In particular, it has fuelled my critique of a certain kind of theorising which *always finds what it seeks*, because its concepts are imposed as a grid on whatever it comes up against, in a claustrophobically 'top-down' way. This is reflected, for example, in some psychoanalytically inflected research that *before it sets out to collect data* already knows that it will find amongst its research participants a certain kind of wish, a defence against it, and an interpretation that can explain the links. I have argued recently that this kind of use of theory is itself defensive, missing the opportunities that an open engagement with material can give for

¹ Campbell, D., Draper, R. & Crutchley, E. (1991) The Milan Systemic Approach to Family Therapy. In A. Gurman & D. Kniskern (eds) *Handbook of Family Therapy, Volume II* New York: Brunner Mazel

the production of surprise; in my own sphere of work, psychosocial studies, this risks producing a new orthodoxy just when what is needed is something disruptive and uncertain.² How does one maintain this necessary uncertainty, particularly in situations of high pressure, in which as clinicians or researchers one might be required to provide answers, for example to respond quickly to the demands placed upon one by patients, referrers or funding bodies? The standard and important Kleinian-influenced Tavistock response to this is that it is managed through clinging onto the capacity to live in doubt, the cultivation of Keats' famous 'negative capability', 'that is, *when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*'³ I like, however, to relate to this slightly differently, through the oppositions outlined by Jacques Lacan in his theory of the 'four discourses'.⁴ Without going into too much detail, it is worth noting amongst the contrasts here the relationships to knowledge embedded in the 'discourse of the Hysteric', the 'discourse of the Master' and the 'discourse of the Analyst'.⁵ The first of them incessantly asks questions, pushing for the truth. The second tries to answer these questions from a position of knowledge. The third, the discourse of the Analyst, is a mode of stepping aside, a kind of judo in which the question is returned to itself, and in which the subject of that question – the one from whom it originates – discovers that no-one can claim possession of the truth, and hence that a certain kind of freedom exists. Uncertainty here becomes a mode of truthfulness. This is not an easy stance to take, in therapy or in pedagogy, because those who come to us do so wanting

² Frosh, S. and Baraitser, L. (2008) Psychoanalysis and Psychosocial Studies. *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 13, 346–365

³ letter of John Keats to his brother dated Sunday, 21 December 1817

⁴ Lacan, J. (1991) *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII*, New York: Norton, 2007

⁵ The fourth discourse, that of the University, is returned to below.

answers, investing in our knowledge, and seeing themselves as having a right to gain access to it. In this sense, the discourse of the Master is a 'lure', attracting the unwary; but rather than being seen as a way of responding adequately to people's needs (as opposed to their demands), it can better be thought of as a way of propping up one's own claims to expertise.

Despite its very different language, I think the systemic approach works along similar lines, trying to hold off from knowing too much too soon, enacting the uncertainty that should come with claims to understanding, and constantly reiterating the importance of context in determining meaning. Circular questions, paradox, reflecting teams, conversational stances, curiosity: the lexicon of systemic technical terms and practices over the last thirty years references an impulse towards the democratisation of therapy in which the therapist tries to step aside from a position of power, even in the face of resistance on the part of clients.⁶ The strong impulse here, fuelled at times by an engagement with sophisticated contemporary theories of power,⁷ is to make the therapist and the patient partners, to equalise their position in a kind of Habermasian exchange of full rationality. That is, one should speak clearly and honestly, drawing the patient into a dialogue based on open principles of exchange, modeling thoughtfulness and non-defensiveness, and so allow a new narrative of experience to emerge. Interestingly, the relational 'turn' in psychoanalysis says something similar, with important writers such as Jessica Benjamin building a notion of 'thirdness' that emphasises intersubjective

⁶ One of my PhD students, John Stancombe, showed convincingly in his thesis that the 'neutrality' of family therapists was often interpreted by family members as a failure to listen properly. Because their particular positions were not *endorsed*, they were felt to be neglected or rejected.

⁷ For instance Michael White's use of Foucauldian theory - White, M. and Epston, D. (1990) *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. NY: Norton

exchange rather than expert knowledge.⁸ My own view of it, however, is that dialogic attempts to unpick fantasies of expertise run up against both the realities of power and the intense desiring pull of the Imaginary – the wish, that is, for a master who can answer the call of the subject’s distress. The discourse of the Master needs quite radical disruption if it is to be undone, and it is difficult to do that in a context in which training regimes, academic and professional accreditation and social expectations promote the bureaucratisation of therapy and its reduction from being an ethical encounter to a *technology* of ‘treatment’. The tricks of the systemic trade are genuinely helpful here, ranging from active processes of self-disclosure to the potentially collaborative engagement of clients with therapists’ thinking through techniques such as the ‘reflecting team’; but the *institutional* context in which this takes place militates against true openness and continues to reinforce an imaginary take on therapy as an ‘answer’, which is bound to fail. This references the other ‘discourse’ of Lacanian theory, that of the University,⁹ in which knowledge is flattened and bureaucratised. Knowledge loses its capacity to radicalise, it becomes a passage to gaining credentials rather than a way of pursuing truth. As Lacan said to the students after 1968, in a phrase that seems increasingly prescient in the context of the consumer movement within universities, ‘You come here to gain credit points for yourself. You leave here stamped, “credit points”.’¹⁰ In the psychotherapies too, the movement, now very widespread, to accredit trainings with academic degrees has many

⁸ Benjamin, J. (2004) Beyond Doer and Done To: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 73, 5-46

⁹ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*.

¹⁰ Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 201

virtues, but it does raise the spectre of making one believe that a human act of encounter can be reduced to a set of qualifications.¹¹

One can say against this that at least people who come to the institution in which David worked, the Tavistock Clinic, to be seen by members of the systemic team are 'recognised' in the sense of being treated with respect – as, I believe, are all clients who come to the Tavistock, with its commitment to relational therapy of the psychoanalytic as well as systemic variety. As R.D. Laing once said, *treatment* is understood to signify 'how we treat people', how we engage with them *ethically*; and the spirit in which this is done is one in which thoughtfulness predominates over a rush to action and away from the reality of people's pain. But all institutions have their bureaucratising forces, and resisting this in order to open out our procedures in a way that challenges and interferes with the system is a problem for all of us.

But back to the task. When I wrote that the most pervasive aspect of David's influence on my work is also intangible, I was thinking not so much of his writing and teaching, but of what I think of, with great affection, as his *style*. For someone who generated so much warmth, he was remarkably cool. I mean some pretty obvious things by this, in terms of David's balance and neutrality, his capacity to question and not to be thrown, his adoption of a certain mode of deliberate *slowness* that ensures that no rushing takes place, that time to consider is built into every response. Therapy with David was done in a kind of slow motion, in which what would

¹¹ What qualifies one to be a psychoanalyst is one of the major fault lines of the Lacanian movement. See Frosh, S. (2009) *Everyone Longs for a Master: Lacan and 1968*. In G. Bhambra and I. Demir (eds) *1968 in Retrospect: History, Politics, Alterity* London: Palgrave

spread around any system he joined was a new respect for language and for what Jacqueline Rose in a very different context rather beautifully calls an 'interval of reflection',¹² which she sees as the central requirement of an ethical stance. This interval is technically between 'impulse and act', as the moment in which identification and thoughtfulness can occur, in which it becomes possible to imagine a position outside one's own, again a familiar impulse in systemic work. It is also a deliberate act of pausing, a mode of hesitancy that does not lead to a fully formed final statement, but is rather an uncertainty to be treasured against the pressure to instantly articulate a response.

What I want to trace here is how these attributes appear in a certain kind of relationship to psychotherapy that I like to think of as 'austere'; that is, as difficult and rather relentless, because it refuses to get taken up with the emotionality of the moment of encounter. One of the criticisms that might be levelled against systemic family therapy is that it is too 'cognitive' in the sense of being concerned primarily with what people *think* and with the stories they tell about themselves and their predicaments, rather than paying sufficient dues to emotionality and the affective underpinnings of psychotherapy. This links with the kind of reflexivity that distinguishes systemic from psychoanalytic approaches. In the former, the issue is primarily one of externalising the impact of the therapist on the system which she or he joins, and deploying that impact in such a way that the system can be helped to reorient itself productively.

Classically, if one can speak that way about so new an approach, the observing team allows the reflexive impact of the therapist to be brought out into the open, making it amenable as a

¹² Rose, J. (2007) *The Last Resistance* London: Verso

technique, making the system that is the 'original system plus therapist' observable by the system that is the 'team plus therapist' in one of those Venn diagrams with which systemic writers like to play. Reflexivity here involves moving outwards from the original system to dramatise the context in which it operates; as the therapist system and client system reflect on the difference they make to each other, so the adaptive propensities of each system can be explored. The psychoanalytic take on this is usually somewhat different, particularly in the Kleinian and object relations traditions and in the new modes of intersubjective and relational psychoanalysis that are increasingly influential around the world. Here, reflexivity refers to the intertwining of subjectivities, as unconscious material from each protagonist in an analytic encounter is passed to and fro, sometimes thought of as entering a space of the 'third' for contact and amelioration, but in any case reflecting an affective element in the analyst as well as in the patient. The contextualisation here is of something that *flows through* the participants in the exchange and is felt by both of them, perhaps as a movement of excitement or injury. It involves the analyst considering the impact she or he is making on the patient and taking responsibility for that as a way of authorizing the patient to move on.¹³

Both these conceptualisations are powerful and drawing them together has been one strand of work in which I have been tangentially involved.¹⁴ Both of them imply a significant level of affective engagement between therapist and client, so when I refer to 'coolness' I do not mean *coldness*. But what both of them also insist upon is the requirement to maintain a capacity not

¹³ Benjamin, J. (2009) A relational psychoanalysis perspective on the necessity of acknowledging failure in order to restore the facilitating and containing features of the intersubjective relationship (the shared third). *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 90, 441–450

¹⁴ Frosh, S. (2009) What does the Other Want? In C. Flaskas and D. Pocock (eds) *Systems And Psychoanalysis: Contemporary Integrations In Family Therapy* London: Karnac

to be drawn in by the seductiveness of the other; they are both suspicious of what can happen when one gets too close. That is, the sophisticated understanding of reflexivity present in both systemic thinking and in psychoanalysis acts as a protection against 'acting into' the relationship, against, that is, trying to be too ameliorative, too helpful, even, perhaps, too *therapeutic* in one's approach.

I am not against therapy, of course, but I am interested in a very old fashioned distinction between an *analytic* process, the purpose of which is to examine phenomena through a procedure that elsewhere is called 'deconstruction', and a *therapeutic* process that tries to integrate and make things whole. Here, I frequently draw on a quotation from Jean Laplanche that captures the difference between a perfectly legitimate and understandable impulse to make sense of things, and a more austere standing-aside that is less concerned with outcome and more with the sparking off of momentary truths. Laplanche writes, in a discussion about narrative, as follows:

The fact that we are confronted with a possibly 'normal' and in any case inevitable defence, that the narration must be correlated with the therapeutic aspect of the treatment, in no way changes the metapsychological understanding that sees in it the guarantee and seal of repression. That is to say, that the properly 'analytic' vector, that of de-translation and the questioning of narrative structures and the ideas connected to them, remains opposed in every treatment to the reconstructive, synthesising narrative vector.¹⁵

¹⁵ Laplanche, J. (2003) Narrativity and Hermeneutics: Some Propositions *New Formations*, 48, 26-29; p.29.

I have used this idea in a number of ways, particularly to offer a critique of narrative approaches both in therapy and in research, where what is given priority is the telling of some kind of integrated story of a person's experience or identity.¹⁶ For Laplanche, this approach is a defence, 'inevitable' and 'normal' maybe, but in itself not *ethical*, because it gives priority to the ameliorative tendency in therapy over the truth-seeking tendency. I am aware, of course, that this reference to 'truth' is itself disturbing and equivocal, and would probably not have been bought into by David or most proponents of systemic psychotherapy, which emphasises above all else the constructionist fabric of truth claims – how they are produced in power relations that operate socially and contextually. But what is being referred to here is the distance that has to be held from a kind of therapeutic impulse to make things better at all costs. That is, 'truth', or maybe better 'truthfulness', has to do with looking things in the eye, with not turning away from the distress and hurt one might see, with not believing that helpfulness is about wishing pain away. I recognise this as an old modernist impulse, with the added postmodern turn of emphasising the fluidity and uncertainty of meaning. More abstractly, I wonder if it is not our role to help people locate themselves within the complex network of forces that operate on us all – social forces, of course, but also those that inhere in the subject we are starting to call 'psychosocial', referring there to the network of criss-crossing relationships in which we are embedded. The 'coolness' that I am seeking, that mode of austerity, is one that satisfies itself with this, that stands aside from mastery and punctures the imaginary consolations of specious answers, that maintains what in some places is called an 'analytic attitude' and in others, meaning much the same thing, 'curiosity'.

¹⁶ Frosh, S. (2007) Disintegrating Qualitative Research *Theory and Psychology*, 17, 635–653

There is a question here about whether the critique of narrative integrationism implicit in this work applies to systemic psychotherapy, which for many years has been interested in a 'multiple voices' perspective that actively promotes the idea that adherence to any single narrative is overly constraining and may itself be the source of trouble.¹⁷ The social constructionism embedded in systemic approaches that through creative questioning, use of team discussion or other means, aim to suggest to families or organisations that there might be 'other ways of looking at things', is indeed attuned to the dangers of expert pronouncements on 'problems' and potential 'cures'. But what Laplanche is pointing to here is a limitation due not to belief in any *one* narrative as a 'master narrative', but rather to the mystification produced by narrative itself. As Judith Butler, amongst others, has argued in various places,¹⁸ it is the *interruptions* to narrative, indexing the breaks in selfhood, that are core to grasping what it might mean to be a human subject; and this is true too of what it might mean to attempt to appease the suffering of others. Writing admittedly about the position of the psychoanalyst, but with general application to all therapeutic encounters as well as other modes of 'ethical' relationality, Butler comments on what is produced in an environment in which the subject seeks narrative coherence, but is faced instead with the realisation that the 'other' (the analyst or therapist) is listening out for something else.

The other represents the prospect that the story might be given back in new form, that fragments might be linked in some way, that some part of opacity might be brought to

¹⁷ Papadopoulos, R. and Byng Hall, J. (eds) *Multiple Voices: Narrative in Systemic Family Therapy*. London: Duckworths

¹⁸ Most notably in Butler, J. (2005) *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

light. The other witnesses and registers what cannot be narrated, functioning as one who might discern a narrative thread, though mainly as one whose practice of listening enacts a receptive relation to the self that the self, in its dire straits of self-beratement, cannot offer itself.¹⁹

'The other witnesses and registers what cannot be narrated,' acting as if it might be possible to make sense of this, to 'discern a narrative thread'; but what each of us might need to learn is that forcing experience into narrative form – however many such narratives one tolerates – does a certain kind of violence to it. The multiplication of narratives that is characteristic of much systemic work does not do away with this; in its valorisation of storytelling, it still insists on the simple idea that one might find meaning in suffering, that one might be able to make it make sense. Perhaps, as an extreme response to this, one should take literally Slavoj Žižek's contention that one should take the story of Job as the appropriate response to trouble. 'The greatness of Job,' he writes, 'is not so much to protest his innocence as to insist on the meaninglessness of his calamities.'²⁰ Narrativising experience, whether through one narrative or many, is an attempt to add meaning to it, and that might well have therapeutic effects, as Laplanche clearly notes. But no narrative or multiplication of narrative can ever quite capture what is there, and the analytic task (using the term generically, not just to refer to psychoanalysis) might better be understood as to reflect back the shards of meaning without trying fully to gather them together. In therapy as well as in other spheres, like teaching, this might be a way of provoking people to move on. 'Coolness' here means being able to tolerate this non-narrativisable core, the recognition that something is always excluded from what we

¹⁹ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p.80

²⁰ Žižek, S. (2008) *Violence*. London: Profile, p.152

can understand or say. It means finding a way of being and doing in therapy or consultation or pedagogy that is not too strongly affiliated with a particular outcome, but is content to build solidarity with others through a process of waiting and, from time to time, benign interruption. I think much of this was echoed in David's style, even if it would not quite have been his language; it is, in the end, a form of humility.

This brings me to my last strand, that of 'psychosocial studies'. I define this as follows:

Psychosocial Studies takes issue with conventional distinctions between the 'psychological' and the 'social' and rejects the idea that 'inner' and 'outer' worlds are empirically or theoretically separable. Its object of study is the human subject and the wider social formation, and the affect-laden relations and processes through which each are mutually constituted. It is concerned with the inter-relation between individual subjectivities and individual and group identities, and historical and contemporary social and political formations.²¹

It will be seen that the emphasis here is on the 'unhyphenated' psychosocial, which tries to find a means and a vocabulary for theorising the 'in-between' as an entity in itself, and as such is critical of the distinctions between 'inner' and 'outer' worlds that are characteristic of much psychotherapeutic thinking, as well as of mainstream sociology. Managing this is proving to be a very difficult task, full of contention, but holding off from moving one way or the other, from knowing too soon that x causes y, is part of the needed methodology. Unexpectedly, perhaps, given the relative failure of systemic thinking to have an impact on social theory, all this seems

²¹ www.bbk.ac.uk/sps/about/

to be very congruent with the outlook adopted by David and the systemic team at the Tavistock. Whilst their endeavour always reflects the need to offer a service to families who seek psychological help, their broader context of understanding is precisely that human subjects are not individuated entities, but are rather constantly constructed and reconstructed in social contexts. The boundaries between what is often thought of as 'inner' and 'outer' are fluid; as a system shifts so does the perception and experience of these boundaries; as the lines of flow and force operate so different subjectivities are thrown up. Why then, is it, that so little of the systemic worldview has so far trickled through to psychosocial studies? In part this may be because the interest in identities and subjectivities that characterises many psychosocial researchers has led them to look primarily to psychoanalysis for a vocabulary that can intersect with the other perspectives in the psychosocial field, for example with feminist, poststructuralist and postcolonial thought. It may also be that to date very little systemic thinking has moved beyond the therapeutic setting in the way that psychoanalysis has, something which might in large part be due simply to the long history that psychoanalysis has had of doing this kind of thing (beginning a century ago with Freud's excursions into social and artistic criticism).²² But perhaps it is time to remedy this a little, and develop ways of translating systemic thinking so that it can infiltrate psychosocial studies productively, particularly perhaps in intersecting with discursive approaches that focus on how subject positions are generated through their *location* in what amount to systemic, relational fields.²³ My own work, provoked by Peter Emerson, has drawn on this a little in trying to think about

²² See Frosh, S. (2010) *Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic: Interventions in Psychosocial Studies*. London: Palgrave

²³ e.g. Wetherell, M. (2008) Subjectivity or Psycho-Discursive Practices? Investigating Complex Intersectional Identities. *Subjectivity*, 22, 73–81

'critical' narrative analysis, in which the ideas concerning fragmentary texts outlined above are brought together with a strongly relational outlook that owes a lot to systemic practice.²⁴ There is, however, a lot more to do here, with the systemic perspective on how subjectivity is *emergent* in relational contexts being the most promising way forward.

To summarise, I have been suggesting that there is something about 'coolness' that can be gleaned across a range of psychosocial, psychoanalytic and systemic work that offers a way out of a slightly sentimentalised attachment to narrative yet retains the important ideas of plurality, social construction and non-knowing. In everything we do, as therapists, teachers or social researchers, we come up against the complexity and fragmentary nature of human relations and subjecthood; and this can produce an anxious scrabbling after meaning that is best resisted. The demand for answers is, however, great, from patients, students and social institutions. In standing firm against this, there is much to learn from David's way of inserting himself into the complex multiplicities of systemic life, in which so many things happen, many of which do not seem to make any sense. His mode of being as a teacher, psychotherapist, supervisor, and consultant was to watch this occur, quizzically and hesitatingly, producing formulations only tentatively, allowing things room to shift as the context around them changed. This type of non-knowledge, of holding back, of giving space to what happens, is quite a lesson in humility and understanding, and of the contestation of mastery out of which a provocative, even subversive practice might emerge.

²⁴ Emerson, P. and Frosh, S. (2004) *Critical Narrative Analysis in Psychology*. London: Palgrave