The first 30 years of the story of the Journal of Human Systems

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Abstract
We are writing this story of Human Systems with excitement and an eye to the future. Rudi Dallas and Becky Stancer took on the editing of the Journal but also joined with Peter Stratton and Helga Hanks in looking for a new base for the Journal. They succeeded in having Sage Publications include the Journal in their publications in internet form with Rudi Dallas and Becky Stancer as editors. This is a fantastic new beginning, in a contemporary format and with a new orientation of Therapy, Culture and Attachment. Peter Stratton and Helga Hanks have undertaken to give context to this new beginning by writing about the previous thirty-year history of Human Systems.

Keywords
History, journal, human, systems, articles

1. The origins—how did it all begin?
During the 1980s, the then Kensington Consultation Centre (KCC) in London and the Leeds Family Therapy and Research Centre (LFTRC) in Leeds University had been collaborating and had also made important links with the Milan Centre in Italy. One area of collaboration was of discussions between KCC and LFTRC about new theories that were being developed. We felt that it was important that these new techniques, theories, and concepts of systemic thinking and their applications in practice should have a forum where ideas could be shared. The idea of a Journal was born. During one of the KCC Oxford...
conferences, Peter Lang persuaded Peter Stratton and Barnett Pearce to go off to a nearby pub to plan the journal *Human Systems* and so it all started. Peter Stratton became editor and KCC through Peter Lang with Susan Lang and Martin Little took on the production of the Journal in earnest, while Barnett Pearce became the North American Associate Editor. Helga Hanks, Martin Little, Peter Lang, and Karen Partridge formed the Editorial Board and participated in the creation of the journal from then on.

Volume 1 was produced in 1990 with an impressive list of support from many people joining us and so forming the Advisory Panel. Equally, many authors joined to write for this first issue setting the trend of exciting articles. In 1995, Philippa Seligman joined the Journal as Joint Editor and she continued until 1998. Her contribution strengthened the wider outlook of the journal. She was followed as Joint Editor by John Burnham, who made his own unique contribution to the developing style of our journal. Susan Lang was an absolute and indispensible figure in the history of *Human Systems*. Her teaching and organizational skills were exemplary. Many professionals in the field came to teach in KCC and contributed to the Journal both from Europe and across the pond.

2. The second phase of the history

This is the time when our fruitful collaboration with Kyriaki Polychroni and Petros Polychronis and the Athenian Institute of Anthopos (AIA) in Athens, Greece, began.

During the decade of 2000-2010, *Human Systems* became increasingly involved with the Training Institutes Chamber of the European Family Therapy Association (EFTA), especially through the involvement of Kyriaki Polychroni who was elected President of EFTA from 2010 to 2013. In 2008, Kyriaki became a Joint Editor, and with KCC no longer in a position to continue its role, publication of *Human Systems* was taken up by the AIA, Athens, Greece. We owe an enormous debt to Kyriaki Polychroni and Petros Polychronis and for the ongoing commitment of AIA to generously supporting *Human Systems* throughout its progress to the current relaunch. They also supported Zoe Avouri, Editorial Assistant, throughout this period to edit and format the articles and generally liaise with the editors through to the final stages of publication. Sincere thanks go to Zoe for her superb work, skilled communication, and patience with us. Several new innovations came into being during this time (to be discussed later). Also during this time, the Department of Family Therapy at Bedford University, United Kingdom, with Michael Preston-Shoot as Dean and followed by Gail Simon as Head of the Department supported the journal through to this day. Gail Simon has started a new Journal called “Murmurations” which brings another perspective with particular recognition of John Shotter’s inspiring work.

3. The hopes and orientation

*Human Systems* became a vehicle for publishing the material of innovators, especially those who had been brought to KCC by Peter Lang. As KCC progressively developed its unique form of constructionist thinking, *Human Systems* became the source that practitioners could turn to for current formulations of leaders such as Gianfranco Cecchin and Luigi Boscolo representing the close associations of KCC and LFTRC with the Milan
Centre. Vernon Cronen and Barnett Pearce brought their theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning while many others contributed their successively developing theory and practice in KCC and so to *Human Systems*. They included Humberto Maturana, John Shotter, Tom Andersen, John Burnham, Ken Gergen, Pat Crittenden, Monica McGoldrick, Sara Cobb, and Peggy Penn. Peter Lang and Martin Little had not only taught in Scandinavian countries but also had made an immense impact in South America with Eduardo Villar at the center of teaching in Columbia and with Elspeth McAdam in the United Kingdom and Africa.

At the same time, the privileging of the training experience was supported by a policy of actively encouraging recent graduates to publish for the first time. “The mission of the journal was to bring together, and if possible juxtapose, material from an exceptionally wide range. From authors at all stages of their careers; from the widest range of forms and applications of systemics; reporting the full range of research methods, and above all, from theory to practice and practice to theory” (Stratton, 2017: 2).

4. Initial and continuing philosophy

Our original thinking was set out in the Editorials in Volume 1 in 1990. The orientations formulated at this time are indicative of the 30 years’ history of the Journal of *Human Systems* up to this point and also still very relevant to current issues in systemic therapies. We offer an edited version here as we feel that these aspirations shaped the journal throughout the past 30 years and are still relevant today.

5. Introductory editorial: “Why a new journal in 1990?”

*In 1990, we wrote:* 

*Human Systems* is an entirely new international journal formed with the intention of fostering and extending systemic consultation. It was conceived out of a shared perception that emerged during discussions between the KCC and the LFTRC. We discern radical changes taking place in the ways that practitioners conceptualize their work. There are two aspects to this: the areas of application and the theoretical base.

Progressively, systemic family therapists have come to see themselves as systems consultants. In part, this is a re-conceptualizing of the role that we play with families both in questioning the label of therapy and in recognizing that the system concerned is not necessarily the family. It may be a household; a family plus therapists; or a part family with or without professionals such as social workers. Then, we see a progression to consulting directly with other systems. Initially, this was most commonly with the professional systems that deal with families by calling this loosely connected system together in a format very similar to that used with families. Progressively, systems consultants have widened their scope to consult to all kinds of organizations and to subsystems within larger state, professional, commercial, and industrial businesses.

One tendency that is emerging at this time is to attempt to overwrite the orthodoxies of the recent past. While the literature of other fields (e.g. psychotherapy and developmental psychology) is becoming positive in its evaluation of systemic consultation, the literature within our own field is becoming increasingly critical, often in negative ways. Quite often
when a new approach is promoted, the originator supports it by claiming that it means we can now dispense with all the accumulated systemic wisdom that has accrued up to that point. Biological organisms, as they develop, do not usually destroy their previous morphology and adaptations. These have been functional in the earlier life, and they become incorporated into the new system. The old orthodoxies of systemic family therapy also worked. There was much in them to value and much that can usefully be incorporated into the next phase. Any polarization into an old guard, resisting change, versus "young Turks" who want a radical overthrow of everything to do with the past in which they did not participate will inevitably damage the effectiveness and the future of the systemic therapies.

So, our objective in the Journal is to build constructively on the substantial past achievements of systemic understanding and practice to extend the range and credibility of the field. We believe that an essential requirement for further productive development is a solid research base. For a field that grew out of a variety of research ventures, there is a remarkable paucity of effective research reported in the family therapy literature. We have enough studies of outcome to support our personal experience that systemic consultation works, but beyond this, the field seems to have failed to tackle the problem of developing a style of research which will give reliable form to its theoretical and practice prescriptions. Individual creativity, inspired by concepts developed in other fields, has always been one of the strongest and most exciting features of systemic thinking. But research findings in their various forms can provide an important alternative kind of input, and Human Systems intends to provide a lead in making up the existing deficit.

We know that many practitioners are venturing into new areas of application, but as yet, there is no established set of principles to guide them and no published forum in which to share experience. So, in neither research nor application is the Journal tapping an existing and well-developed body of material. Our intentions are much more reflexive than that. Through the success of the Journal in providing a forum for ideas, experiences, and rigorous study at the leading edge of developments in systemic consultation, we hope to play a role in fostering, coordinating, and disseminating those developments. We have no plans for Human Systems to become a passive repository of information; it will become a fully interactive part of the system.

Concretely, these objectives will be fostered by the kinds of material we publish. The core process for any journal is the selection of material. Refereeing will be rigorous but more interactive than in most journals. The stance we ask our referees to take is to place a high premium on the ability of the article to open up new perspectives, excite curiosity, and be useful to the practitioner. As with our systemic consultation, we will also be careful to ensure that we do not mislead, insult, confuse by unnecessary obscurity, and so on. Prospective authors are invited to write and request the detailed instructions that we provide for referees.

As indicated, we are particularly keen to publish work which extends the range of systemic consultation and research studies. The former may take the form of case reports; accounts of particular forms of practice; systemic analyses of aspects of management or of the work of management consultants; illustration of the application of principles derived from other areas of systemic consultation; accounts of the particular requirements of specific kinds of system; issues raised by cross-national operation; and so on. They may
range from full-scale descriptions of practice to very brief vignettes or simple discoveries; we will particularly want to report indicators of outcome, whether these have been collected in a formally structured way or can be provided by simple external indicators (“the firm went bankrupt 6 months later,” for example).

Systemic work has its own rhythms and it is unlikely that research paradigms, and research criteria, developed within linear, positivistic science will provide a suitable framework. Part of the task of the Journal will be to help develop an understanding of the needs and specifications of productive research within the systemic paradigm. Again, the instructions to referees are a starting point, but it is the Journal which will provide the forum within which the issues are explored and developed.

As already discussed, we see an essential contribution to healthy growth coming from the inventive development of existing ideas as well as the identification of new concepts. As we extend the range of systemic thinking and practice, we want to stay securely in touch with our base in systemic family therapy and to publish new ideas and information about issues that reach back to our roots as well as into the future.

In order to have a developing debate, we will encourage responses to articles. These responses may or may not take issue with what has been published, but the essential requirement is that they take the topic further. To increase topicality, we will also commission commentaries to appear concurrently with the article, and where possible, we will give the original author a chance to reply in the same issue.

The present stage of development of systemic consultation offers a unique opportunity to anticipate radical developments in the form and scope of the field. Our conviction is that a Journal which brings together the best of current thinking, and which does so in a framework of actively searching for implications which extend our scope, can substantially influence that process. Human Systems has been launched at an exciting time of widening recognition of the practical utility of a systemic approach to consultation and management. We hope you will want to participate with us in its development.

6. From 2009: The Athens and European connection as a major development

As mentioned above, Human Systems entered the realm of Europe in the form of EFTA, the European Family Therapy Association. European Family Therapy Association was by then a well-established body with the impressive, well-loved, and legendary Moni Elkaim at the helm, as President, and we had been working within the Association particularly in the Training Section. Many writers and practitioners from that period supported the Journal of Human Systems. Added to the Milan Centre came important actors in the Systemic Field. To mention but a few who were active in supporting Human Systems: Lynn Hoffman, Valeria Ugazio, Paolo Bertrando, Rodolfo de Bernart, Mony Elkaim, Umberta Telfener, Luigi Onnis, Annette Kreuz, Per Jensen, Phil Kearney, Jaakko Seikkula, Mauro Mariotti, Pietro Barbeta, Arlene Vetere, Maria Borcsa, Angela Abela, Nevena Calovska-Herzog, Alan Carr, Laura Fruggeri, Peter Rober, Elida Romano, Celia Sales, and Slavica Gajdaczis-Knezhevikj. Sadly, some of these immensely creative people
have passed away, but their contribution to the journal is much remembered and appreciated.

As part of our collaboration with EFTA, we published two Special Issues based on its conferences, the 8th EFTA Congress (held in Istanbul, 2013) in Volumes 24 and 25 and the Training Institutes Chamber (held in Athens, 2016) in Volume 28. We hope that the connections with EFTA will continue and continue to bring about close collaboration between cultures and people within different lands. A major innovation at Kyriaki’s initiative was to add to each issue translations of the Abstracts of each article, beginning in 2010. We have heard people commenting and expressing great appreciation on this fantastic addition which made the content more easily available in so many European languages.

It is also important to recognize, with our thanks, the Printers of the Journal in Bulgaria and the Graphic designer who introduced differently colored and visible covers during this period.

A website was created under the guidance of Kyriaki, Petros, and AIA, which made the Journal through EFTA visible. It is possible through the website to order past articles, and many articles have been made available without charge.

The Web page also gave information for previous material and articles on what we wanted for the Journal. It includes the objectives, early editorials, and advice for authors in “Notes for articles” for telling authors how to prepare the kinds of articles we want to publish.

The work of the people supporting the Journal continued until we reached 2020 with the wonderful news of Rudi Dallas and Becky Stancer becoming the Editors, with Sage Publications having taken on the publishing in internet form. Both Peter Stratton and Helga Hanks are immensely proud to be able to hand on the Journal to such experienced and well-known editors as Rudi and Becky and also to the expert work of Lisa Johnstone who made representation of the Journal in Sage and achieved its acceptance by Sage Publications.

7. Examples of areas of focus

The best indicator of how well we fulfilled our objectives must come from what we have published. First, we offer articles from the first set of volumes which we wanted to highlight as they are still influential and used in training today. Among those that exemplified the aspirations of Human Systems were:

- Lynn Hoffman, From System to Discourse (Hoffman, 1990)
- Peter Lang Domains from Maturana via Aristotle “The Systemic Professional: Domains of Action and the Question of Neutrality” (Lang et al., 1990)
- John Burnham “Approach – Method – Technique: Making Distinctions and Creating Connections” (Burnham, 1992)
- Barry Mason “Towards positions of safe uncertainty” (Mason, 1993)

Other influential articles that exemplify developments in KCC and LFTRC were Stratton and Hanks (1991) on child maltreatment; Cecchin and Stratton (1991)
consultation to management; Hanks and Saradjian (1992) women who sexually abuse children; Lang and Cronen (1994) applications from Wittgenstein and Dewey; Lang and McAdam (1997), Future Dreams in Present Living; Stratton and Hanks (2008) therapeutic skills transferred to research competence; McAdam and Lang (2009) Appreciative Work in Schools; Stratton (2016) incorporating ideas from current systemic sciences; and Lang and Markou (2017) current ideas from Peter Lang.

Our new title specifically recognizes the importance of attachment theory in systemic therapy but this is not a new direction for Human Systems. A concern with attachment has been a feature of the journal from its earliest issues and throughout, from Pat Crittenden’s (1991) application of her evolving attachment theory as part of a systemic approach to treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect and Stratton (1991) Perspective: Back to the Basics of Attachment Theory, through to recent articles by Rudi Dallos: on Systemic Practice and Narratives of Attachment (Dallos and Vetere, 2017) and a detailed case study of Using an Attachment and Discursive Framework to Make Sense of How a Mother and Daughter Make Sense of Psychosis (Byrne and Dallos, 2017).

Our Special Issues are also a good indication of how our hopes and objectives worked out during the first years of the journal. Some examples that explored issues that are still relevant today are as follows:

1. Systemic approaches to child maltreatment, Vol 2, 1991, H. Hanks & E. McAdam
2. Concepts and applications of social constructionism, Vol 3, 1992, W. B. Pearce & V Cronen
3. Voices from the training context, Vol. 4, 1993, J. Burnham
4. Poverty and social exclusion, Vol 5, 1994, I. McCarthy
5. Hearing the voice of the child, Vol 6, 1995, P. Stratton
6. Changing organisations; Clinicians as agents of change, Vol 7, 1996, A. Cooklin
7. Appreciation of 25 years systemic influence by Centro Milanesi, Vol 8, 1997, P. Stratton and P. Seligman
8. Private pain, Public entertainment, Vol 8, S. Cobb
9. Culture in systemic practice, Vol 9, 1998, P. Stratton
10. Coordinated management of meaning, Vol 15, 2004, W. B. Pearce
11. Tom Andersen Vol 9, 1998 and following his death, Vol 18, 2007, H. Hanks
12. Qualitative methods and systemic research, Vol 21, 2010, C. Glasscoe
13. Migration, Vol 27, 2016, K. Polychroni

8. Appreciation of AIA, Kyriaki Polychroni, and Petros Polychronis

We were fortunate to be closely associated through Kyriaki Polychroni and Petros Polychronis with one of the major institutes in Europe, the AIA in Athens, Greece. While Petros as Director of AIA facilitated the full range of institutional support that was essential to keep Human Systems published, Kyriaki as Joint Editor played a major part in producing each issue while progressively promoting the journal in EFTA as Vice Chair of the Training Institutes Chamber and especially during her time as President from 2010 to
2013. More broadly, she promoted the journal during her extensive provision of training in many countries, particularly in Eastern Europe and her positions as a Member of the American Family Therapy Academy, former Vice President of the national branch of the European Association of Psychotherapists and founding Member of the Hellenic Association of Systemic Therapy.

It was Kyriaki’s initiative to make the journal more accessible in these countries by including in every issue translations of all of the articles’ Abstracts into up to 14 languages. Readers could then judge from an Abstract in their first language whether to follow-up the full article. This was highly valued by all for its innovation and practical assistance to learning in many countries.

We feel that the unique orientation of AIA (Polemi Todoulou, 2018) and Kyriaki’s particular contributions (Polychroni et al., 2008) formed a significant part of how the Journal of Human Systems developed during the past decade.

We want to express our deep appreciation to the Institute, its whole Board, and of course to Kyriaki and Petros. The Journal has been enriched by their significant presence including their theoretical stance, their training achievements, philosophy, and social perspective in caring for human beings and family in particular.

Thank you to you all.

Peter Stratton and Helga Hanks.

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