

# MOVING BETWEEN DIALOGIC REFLEXIVE PROCESSES IN SYSTEMIC FAMILY THERAPY TRAINING: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TRAINEES' EXPERIENCE

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*In this article, we present a qualitative research study concerning the ways that systemic family therapy trainees experience reflexivity while in training. There is inadequate theorizing and limited research concerning reflexivity in family therapy, particularly from trainees' perspective. In our study, we used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to analyse transcripts of semistructured interviews with 10 systemic family therapy trainees. Here, we present one of the four superordinate analytic themes, entitled "Moving between reflexive processes". Our analysis suggests that trainees seem to experience reflexivity as a multifaceted, dialogic process, which occurs both at an inner and at an outer space and both synchronically but also subsequently to the therapeutic/training process. We conclude by raising implications for family therapy training.*

"I must find myself in another by finding another in myself (in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance)"

Bakhtin (1984, p. 287)

Our aim in this article is to explore the notion of reflexivity from the perspective of systemic family therapy trainees, while they experience its development in the context of their training. The quest for reflexivity is not unique to the family therapy field, but seems to broadly characterize contemporary, interdisciplinary discussion (Berger, 2015). Various counseling and psychotherapeutic models have placed diverse emphasis on the therapist's ability to reflect upon choices and interventions while in interaction with individuals or families and have theorized reflexivity in different ways (e. g. Stedmon & Dallos, 2009). In the field of systemic family therapy, the discussion about reflexive processes in therapy and in training (Andersen, 1987; Burnham, 2005; Rober, 1999, 2005, 2010, 2016) seems to parallel the fields' move toward second-order and constructionist perspectives (Sutherland, Fine, & Ashbourne, 2013). Overall, such discussion mostly focuses on issues of therapeutic practice and to a lesser extent on issues concerning the development of reflexivity in training. Furthermore, reflexivity comes across as a developing concept for the field in the sense that there is

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limited theorizing (Neden, 2012; Tseliou, 2014) and scarce empirically grounded knowledge concerning its facets as well as its development in training contexts. Even less is known about trainees' perspectives and experiences and the ways in which they seem to decode reflexivity while in training. By building on the contributions of the few existing studies (McCandless & Eatough, 2012; Neden, 2012), our article aims at further enhancing the understanding of reflexivity in training contexts by giving voice to trainees. In particular, we draw from an exploratory, qualitative research study (Givropoulou, 2015) in which we deployed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2008) to explore how systemic family therapy trainees experience reflexivity and its development in the context of related learning processes in their training. In this article, we present one aspect of trainees' experience that is the way(s) they seem to connote reflexivity.

## BACKGROUND

Following the rise of constructionist, feminist, and postmodern ideas, there has been extensive, transdisciplinary discussion about reflexivity, e.g. in qualitative research (Allen & Piercy, 2005; Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2003) but also in psychology and counseling practice (Stedmon & Dallos, 2009). Such discussion has mostly highlighted the impossibility to separate the "object of knowledge" from the "knowing" subject in any process of inquiry (Shotter, 2014) as well as the constitutive role that the cultural, the historical and the socio-political context play in it (see e.g. Butler, 2005; see also Wilkinson, 1988 for a feminist perspective). Thus, the notion of reflexivity has been broadly connoted as an activity where any participant observer reflects upon his/her participation on the construction of the phenomenon or interactional context in which he/she participates (Tseliou, 2014) or else as a process of "knowing about knowing" (Laitila & Oranen, 2013, p. 600). Myerhoff and Ruby (1982) have differentiated the notion of reflexivity from the related notion of reflection. Reflection denotes a process of thinking about one's own activity or self, whereas reflexivity further entails an aspect of self-reference, a kind of critical, introspective, recursive activity where one acknowledges the inseparability of his/her self from the phenomenon/activity in which he/she participates. Finlay (2003) has introduced a further distinction between the two notions, in her discussion of reflexivity from a qualitative research methodology perspective. She argued that reflexivity points to a rather dynamic process which occurs simultaneously with the action upon which one reflects, whereas reflection denotes an activity more distant from the experience of the event/phenomenon. This is similar to Donald Schön's (1987) distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Schön developed the notion of reflective practice out of his interest in how professionals conduct their moment-by moment decisions about what to do next (Dallos & Stedmon, 2009). He described the reflective practitioner as someone who "allows himself [*sic*] to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he [*sic*] finds uncertain or unique. He [*sic*] reflects on the phenomena before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his [*sic*] behavior" (Schön, 1983; p. 68). According to Schön (1987), reflection in action takes place when a professional deliberately reflects on what he/she is doing while doing it. This process enables him/her to modify practice immediately, if necessary. Reflection on action takes place after the action. Therefore, it can help professionals to gain a better understanding of their practice and thus to improve it in the future. Schön's proposal has inspired counselors and psychotherapists like Dallos and Stedmon (2009) who have argued that the uniqueness and the unpredictability of clinical practice resemble what Schön (1987, p. 3) refers to as "the swampy lowlands of practice". Accordingly, the concept of reflective practice has been considered an essential component of counsellor/therapist supervision and training (e.g. Schmidt & Adkins, 2012).

### *Reflexivity in Systemic Family Therapy and Training*

Under the influence of theoretical and epistemological developments, like constructionism (Gergen, 1999; Shotter, 2014) and the dialogic approach (Bakhtin, 1984), the field of systemic family therapy welcomed the idea that reflexivity should be considered a "sine qua non" of the therapeutic endeavor and consequently a prerequisite in training (Sutherland et al., 2013). Perhaps, one can trace early attempts for theorizing and practicing reflexivity in the Milan model and its subsequent developments like for example, in Cecchin's notion of prejudices (Cecchin, Lane, & Ray, 1992; see also, Krause, 2012; Flaskas, 2012). He argued that the therapist should reflexively

appraise the ways in which his/her hypotheses, ideas, values, personal history, gender, etc. may shape his/her meeting with family members (Cecchin et al., 1992). Furthermore, the therapeutic team format of the Milan style of therapy allowed for the team members' in-session and postsession reflexive conversation about the session and this somehow located reflexivity at an outer, dialogic space.

Post-Milan approaches like Andersen's (1987) reflecting teams, collaborative postmodern approaches (Anderson & Jensen, 2007) and dialogic approaches like the open dialogue approach (Seikkula & Olson, 2003) placed a further emphasis on reflexivity and the therapist's inner and outer reflexive conversations. For example, in the context of Tom Andersen's advent of the reflecting team format (Andersen, 1987) reflexivity acquired the quality of a multilayered, transparent, collaborative, dialogic activity. Family members were invited to listen to the therapeutic team members' reflections about the session and comment on them, without the barrier of the one-way screen. In this way, both the team members and the family members were invited to alternate between the position of a listener and of a speaker, thus shifting from an inner to an outer dialogic space where inner reflections could be shared in the context of a dialogue with an "Other" and vice versa. In his proposal for a dialogical therapist, Bertrando (2007) similarly argued that the therapist should openly share the contents of his/her inner, reflexive dialogue by making his/her hypotheses or prejudices explicit to family members and thus argued for reflexivity as a transparent, interactional, dialogic activity. In that sense, the field's gradual shift towards a constructionist perspective on reflexivity seemed to locate it on a more dynamic, relational and collaborative basis (Tseliou, 2007, 2010, 2014) as compared to proposals like Schön's which seemed to approach reflective practice as a kind of a cognitive, conceptual activity of an "individual mind" in isolation from a conversational context (Strong, 2003). In parallel, the discussion about reflexivity forwarded a broader discussion concerning the therapist's self or else the person of the therapist (Rober, 2016). This was argued as indicative of the field's affiliation with second-order cybernetic ideas and also of its rapprochement with psychoanalysis (Rhodes, Nge, Wallis, & Hunt, 2011). In his proposal for a dialogic therapist's self, Rober (1999, 2005; see also, Rober, Elliott, Buysse, Loots, and De Corte, 2008) discussed reflexivity as a form of therapist's inner dialogue and argued that inner conversations open up a space for reflection about the therapist's position in relation to family members.

Similarly, the discussion about trainees' development of self seems to mostly contextualize the discussion concerning reflexivity in family therapy training. McCandless and Eatough (2012) argued that reflexivity is in fact the systemic notion, which corresponds, to what is usually defined as personal and professional development processes in the context of training. Against the multifacet background of the various family therapy models, which have shaped family therapy training (Karam, Blow, Sprenkle, & Davis, 2015), the inclusion of personal and professional development aspects in family therapy training has gained varying degrees of emphasis and takes various forms. For example, trainees explore their family-of-origin history in relation to therapeutic practice, by means of genogram construction (e.g. Aponte, 1994). In training programs influenced by the Milan approach, trainees engage in reflexive group processes in the context of either live or indirect supervision. This allows the trainee under supervision to "step out" of an inner reflexive dialogue and "step into" a relationally reflexive space, as the supervisor and the trainee group engage in a reflexive conversation about the session (Burnham, 2005). Furthermore, the setting of direct supervision allows for reflexive activity during the session as compared to the postsession activity in the case of indirect supervision, a distinction similar to the one Schön has drawn between reflection in action and reflection on action (Senediak, 2014). The influence of post-Milan developments brought about the use of reflecting team formats in training and supervision (Neden & Burnham, 2007; Tseliou, 2010) whereas dialogic approaches to therapy seem to have inspired training in the dialogic self of the therapist (Rober, 2010). Against such a polymorphic background, the proposals for incorporating the development of reflexive awareness and reflexive skills in family therapy training extend from nonsystematic suggestions (Neden & Burnham, 2007; Tseliou, 2010) to systematic proposals of models like the development of the Person Of the Therapist Training program (POTT) (Aponte & Kissil, 2014; Niño, Kissil, & Cooke, 2016).

Overall, the existing discussion about reflexivity mostly focuses on therapy process and therapeutic practice and less on training processes (Laitila & Oranen, 2013). Furthermore, there is scarcity of research concerning the development of reflexivity in training contexts. The few existing

studies mostly originate in the field of counselor education and mostly utilize Schön's notion of reflective practice (e.g., Wong-Wylie, 2007; Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). To our knowledge, only Neden (2012) and McCandless and Eatough (2012) explored reflexivity in the context of systemic family therapy training. A recent study by Frediani and Rober (2016) had a somehow related but different focus on the content of novice therapists' experience during a therapy session. Neden (2012) designed a collaborative research project with family therapy trainees and supervisors and broadly aimed at exploring how reflexivity is constructed in training contexts. Her findings suggest that trainees construct reflexivity as a process, which takes place both at an inner and at an outer dialogic space (see also, Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). McCandless and Eatough (2012) investigated the supervisors' experience of their attempt to foster the development of reflexivity in the context of live supervision. Their study highlighted the importance that supervisors seem to place on the creation of a safe group setting.

In conclusion, it looks like we know little about reflexivity and its development in family therapy training settings and even less from the perspective of trainees, despite the urge to investigate trainees' experience of training in order to improve training practice (Piercy et al., 2016). The existing studies have shed light mostly to aspects concerning the supervisory relationship and supervisors' related experiences (McCandless & Eatough, 2012) and less to trainees' constructions concerning reflexivity (Neden, 2012).

Thus, in our study, we aimed at contributing to the scarcity of research concerning trainees' experience of reflexive processes while in training. To that aim, we designed an exploratory qualitative research study in which we deployed IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008) to explore the ways that systemic family therapy trainees experience the development of reflexivity in their training. In particular, we aimed to explore the ways that trainees seem to understand the notion of reflexivity/reflexive processes, the particular processes in training that trainees themselves link to the development of reflexivity as well as the particular ways in which they seem to understand and experience such a connection. In this article, we particularly focus on the first axis that is on how trainees seem to connote the notion of reflexivity on the basis of their experience.

## METHOD

### *Research Methodology*

IPA is an inductive and idiographic method of qualitative research, which allows in depth exploration of the subjective experience of participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Thus, due to our interest in exploring the experiences of systemic family therapy trainees regarding the development of their reflexive abilities, we considered IPA an optimal choice. Moreover, we followed suggestions concerning the suitability of IPA for studying unexplored fields (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005), as is the case with reflexivity in systemic family therapy training. Also, we followed suggestions concerning its suitability for studying processes (Smith & Osborn, 2008), since we were interested in training processes relevant to reflexivity development.

### *Participants and Setting*

Participants comprised ten mental health professionals enrolled in a 4-year systemic family therapy training program at a private training Institute in Greece, who were in the third year of their studies. Nine were women and one man. Their age ranged from 24 to 42 years and their psychotherapy experience ranged from 2 months to 10 years. Seven were psychologists, one was a psychiatrist, one speech therapist, and one social worker.

IPA is usually conducted with small, purposive samples selected for their suitability to illuminate specific areas under investigation (Smith & Osborn, 2008). For this study we were interested to recruit a group of systemic family therapy trainees, who would have experienced reflexive processes in their training. Therefore, we purposefully selected the setting of a 4-year systemic family therapy training program run by a private training Institute, which follows the premises of Milan and post-Milan approaches and explicitly incorporates reflexive processes in training. The program includes theoretical seminars and workshops, direct and indirect supervision as well as personal and professional development groups. In the context of the latter, trainees engage in reflexive

processes concerning their personal/family history and its intersection with their educational and clinical experience as trainees.

### *Data Collection*

In order to collect data, we developed a semistructured interview schedule, which covered the following areas: participants' frame of reference regarding systemic family therapy practice and training, their understanding of therapist's reflexivity and their experiences related to developing reflexivity throughout training. A final question invited them to discuss their experience of the interview process. Prior to the interview each participant signed a written informed consent. The interviews lasted approximately 50 min, were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim by the first author. All interviews were conducted in Greek. For the purposes of this presentation, we translated the included excerpts into English. We secured anonymity by removing all participants' identifying information. Within 3 weeks of the interviews we returned the transcripts to the participants for confirmation, a practice founded in diverse epistemological traditions in qualitative research (Willig, 2013). Rather than aiming to secure a "real" version of participants' talk, by giving them the opportunity to revise their accounts, we primarily aimed to promote a collaborative, relationally responsive aspect in "data collection" (Thomas, 2017). Collaborative aspects in data collection and analysis entail a variety of practices like engaging into a dialogue with participants and inviting their reflections at various stages of the research process (see e.g. Tracey, 2010). In a similar vein, we asked participants to produce a short written response after reading the transcript of their interview. The instruction was to write down anything that made some impression to them, anything that appeared to have a particular meaning for them, or anything they would like to elaborate on. In this way, we aimed to obtain richer data as we analyzed their written responses alongside the interview transcripts. All participants responded that they did not wish to modify their accounts and nine of them sent a written response.

### *Procedure*

The first author made an initial contact with the scientific committee of the training Institute and obtained permission to contact the Institutes' trainees. We then e-mailed a participant information sheet to the third and the fourth-year trainees. One of the trainers of the fourth year trainees, who acted as a contact person for us, informed us that they would not participate in the study due to heavy workload and time constraints. So, from the 13 trainees of the third-year cohort, 10 agreed to participate in the study.

### *Method of Analysis*

Overall, we took into account that IPA is an idiographic mode of inquiry (Smith & Osborn, 2008) relying on small samples to enable detailed "case by case" analysis. According to Smith et al. (2009), when working with more than six participants the analyst places the emphasis on the emerging themes representing the group as a whole, rather than each individual case. Thus, following Smith et al. (2009), we first read each interview transcript several times, in order to get an overall sense of participants' accounts. We examined the transcripts line by line and we noted down descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Based on these comments we identified emerging themes, which we grouped to master themes and subthemes. We completed this process for each interview transcript before moving on to the next case. Finally, we conducted a cross case analysis by looking for patterns between cases. This process, along with a constant checking with the transcripts of participants' accounts, led us to rename or rearrange some themes. Thus, we devised a final, unified list of themes and subthemes, representing the common experience of participants. Finally, both of us were involved in the process of analysis. Although such practice is reminiscent of triangulation, our aim was to add variability in interpretation rather than secure objectivity (Diorinou & Tseliou, 2014).

### *A Note on Researchers' Reflexivity*

We would like to acknowledge that our experience as systemic family therapists and our engagement with adult education as well as our preference for a social constructionist epistemological perspective inevitably shaped the whole mode of our inquiry. For example, this background

has probably shaped our decision to “give voice” to systemic family therapy trainees. It also shaped particular methodological choices, like the invitation to participants to reflect on their interviews. Furthermore, it accounts for our choice to approach analysis as a process of co-construction between the participant trainees and us and for our choice to include a balanced amount of both participant’s quotes as well as our interpretations in the analysis section.

## ANALYSIS

Our analysis yielded four superordinate themes. The first theme, “Moving between reflexive processes”, illustrates how participants’ experience seems to entail an understanding of reflexivity as a multifaceted process in the form of a dialogue that can be either inner or outer, concurrent or retrospective. The second theme, “A conditional reflexive space within the training group”, contains participants’ accounts about the role of contextual factors in developing reflexivity such as trusting relationships, freedom of expression and opportunities to assume therapeutic responsibility (“this is when it makes sense to be actively reflexive”). The third theme, “Self and reflexive processes: encountering the dynamics of identity”, highlights participants’ experiences regarding shifts in their identity by means of viewing themselves through others, valuing multiple perspectives (“they unblocked me from a stuck position”) and seeing things in a different light. The last theme, “Developing reflexivity through challenges and rewards”, presents participants’ struggles while trying to get to grips with reflexivity, as well as rewarding experiences like dealing with difficult emotions and having a sense of empowerment (“reflexivity makes us stronger”).

In this article, we choose to focus only on the first superordinate theme and its subthemes for two reasons. First, our aim here is to provide an in-depth analysis of the way(s) that trainees connote reflexivity, in a way consistent with our choice of method, i.e. IPA (see also, McCandless & Eatough, 2012). IPA necessitates an extensive use of participants’ quotes along with the analyst’s interpretations (Reid et al., 2005) and this would have been impossible to achieve for all four themes, given the space limitations of journal articles. Secondly, we approach the first theme as constituting a discrete area of focus, in the sense that it highlights the way(s) in which trainees seem to connote reflexivity on the basis of their experience, whereas the other three themes seem to highlight how participants experience reflexivity as a developmental process constructed at the interface of group and self-processes. The presented superordinate theme (“Moving between reflexive processes”) includes four subthemes (see Figure 1). The presentation of the themes below includes excerpts from participants’ discourse. As concerns notation, P stands for participant (the number next to P indicates participant’s identifying number), the next number indicates the page number of the interview transcript and the last number indicates the line numbers where the excerpt appears.

### *Reflexivity as Inner Dialogue*

This subtheme includes participants’ reports about reflexivity as an internal dialogue, which is not (or not yet) shared, either in the context of therapy or in the context of training/supervision. Participants highlight that the point of such an activity is to gain a better understanding of themselves as therapists. They seem to consider this aspect of reflexivity as an opportunity to bring into awareness their own taken for granted (or “non-negotiable”) beliefs and values, which would otherwise remain unnoticed. They also seem to propose that as therapists they ought to be aware of the way(s) in which they influence the therapeutic process. One participant explains how a training exercise in which she constructed her own genogram initiated an inner dialogue enabling her to identify connections between her personal history and the stories clients bring to therapy.

Some things come out of the genogram and help you to gain this awareness and to draw some connections with your own stuff . . . To find out what resonates with you from all that is said during the session. And, when it happens, it’s like bells ringing in your head, like “hold on, does this remind you of your own family, or what?”. (P2, 5: 116–123).

In the quote below, another participant describes how she is trying to make sense of her choices during the therapeutic session, while engaged in a form of inner dialogue.



Figure 1. Superordinate theme and subthemes.

It is about looking at my own position as a therapist, the way I connect with clients, looking at whatever can make a difference. I mean, whatever from the things they say . . . how come I pay attention to some points, how come something gets to trouble me or how come I get to listen to something and not to something else. (P8, 7: 163–173).

This exploration seems to bring forth a series of questions concerning the way her personal life integrates into her professional life. Still one might wonder whether participants in their inner dialogues frame such questions explicitly or whether they formulate explicit answers. This issue is somehow addressed in the context of the next subtheme, which refers to reflexivity as outer dialogue.

#### *Reflexivity as Outer Dialogue*

Participants' responses suggest that reflexivity, apart from being an internal process, can (and should) be expressed, or shared. Reflexivity as outer dialogue seems to occur in a context of dialogic engagement where the trainees offer their input and accept input from others. Some participants highlight that this process originates from their inner dialogues which, when externalized, they become public and initiate a process of co-creation of meaning. They also propose that alternative perspectives, which may be offered in this dialogic context, have the potential to alter their way of thinking. For example, one participant suggests that the variability of expressed perspectives and the polyphony of the different voices are useful for her in order to deal with her own perceptual or even emotional limitations.

I think reflexivity is possible at the personal level. I mean, even if I sit alone after the session and reflect on it. But I think it is extremely important to speak with at least one more person who will be able to give you an idea, to shed some light at something you may not have thought because it is something more difficult for you, or just something that didn't cross your mind. (P8, 16: 367–375).

Participants frequently mentioned that the presence of others with whom they are expected to share their ideas, like the group of fellow trainees, is itself a favorable condition for reflexive thinking. As one participant points out it was the therapeutic team that helped her to transform her abstract thoughts into concrete, spoken words.

It was something vague in my mind, something I didn't see . . . I didn't think of . . . and the team behind [the screen] helped me, so we turned it into words. (*P5, 12: 264–369*).

What is actually described in the above excerpt is a process of making the implicit explicit. This might insinuate that spoken language brings inner dialogues into existence, which possibly offers the potential to elaborate on them and make better sense of them:

Maybe when you share it with others you realize what you are saying. (*P10, 25: 577*)

The wealth of participants' reports regarding reflexivity performed in outer dialogues seems to highlight their vivid interest in what comes across as a relational aspect of reflexivity. Interestingly, however, their accounts focus almost exclusively in the training/supervision context rather than the therapeutic context.

### *Retrospective Reflexivity*

This subtheme presents participants' accounts regarding reflexivity performed outside the immediate context of action. As they put it, this aspect of reflexivity is a valuable component of their training, allowing them to examine their practice thoroughly. It seems that participants consider retrospective reflexivity as a chance to see their clinical practice under a new light and to find out what could have been done differently. Consequently, it looks like they are willing to renegotiate their practice. It appears that they find it extremely helpful to be able to gain a broader perspective of their practice as therapists, reflecting on it at their own pace, away from the stresses of immediate action:

You have the time to think, to identify some things you wouldn't notice during the session, because time is running and you have the responsibility for what is happening. (*P9, 25: 592–596*).

It is suggested here that the heightened sense of responsibility together with time constraints might hinder the potential of being reflexive in the therapy room and the option of retrospective reflexivity presumably compensates for that.

The issue of therapeutic responsibility comes up for another participant as well. She argues that the training exercise in which she watched and transcribed one of her videotaped sessions created a safe space to observe herself. It sounds particularly important for her to be able to do so, without putting the therapeutic relationship at risk.

It gives me the right and the capability to take an observer's position, to examine myself better, because when I am in the session this is difficult. During the transcription, emotions arise more easily for me than in therapy. I am in my own place where I can observe emotions better and maybe they will not affect the client. It is a more protected space for emotions. (*P6, 14: 326–336*).

What is interesting here is the use of the rather intense expression: "Gives me the right". Perhaps the meaning of this uttering is that the trainee feels she has the right to stay with the position of a trainee, as opposed to the necessity of being a therapist during the session. Issues concerning the simultaneous, dual position of being both a trainee and a therapist also come up in the next subtheme regarding concurrent reflexivity.

### *Concurrent Reflexivity*

This subordinate theme presents the issues and concerns that participants raise regarding their ability to be reflexive while engaged in the therapeutic encounter. They seem to consider that the point of such an activity is to effectively manage all the voices participating in therapy (their own, the family members', their supervisor's, and/or their fellow trainees'). One participant highlights



the complexity of concurrent reflexivity and the difficulty she experiences as a novice family therapist to manage this complexity.

During the session, the therapist needs to have his ears open to everybody and to himself. This is a particularly difficult process for me, as I think about it, because you have to do many things at the same time. (*P6, 5: 115–126*).

In a context that appears quite demanding, she goes on to point out that she finds it hard to trust her own voice, so she is more likely to turn to the expertise of her supervisors.

... time was pressing us and we had to move fast and to decide what to explore. It was very difficult for me to see myself there. And, the way I think of it, I must listen even more to my supervisors because I am very new to this and they have more things to tell me, maybe more right things. (*P6, 17: 378–387*).

Somehow it looks as if this situation brings to the surface her vulnerabilities and anxieties as a novice therapist. Another participant also raises this issue as she indicates that concurrent reflexivity brings to the fore the challenge of the dual process of therapy and training.

A difficulty in following all these procedures for our training is that we meet with families as therapists. These families are coming to us with specific requests and we are expected to accomplish something besides training. So, sometimes, maybe due to the lack of time, maybe due to our concern to accomplish something, we cannot concentrate on the processes that might facilitate us. (*P3, 8: 229–237*).

She seems to think that each process has separate goals and it is difficult for one to jointly accomplish them. Possibly, implicit here is the idea that one should prioritize the therapeutic task over the educational.

Although participants highlight that concurrent reflexivity includes several layers of complexity and presents multiple challenges, they acknowledge that as therapists they are expected to be able to perform reflexivity in action. While for most participants “action” represents therapy, one of them points out that concurrent reflexivity can also be performed in training activities, when the training group dialogically examines its own relational processes.

## DISCUSSION

Following our methodological and epistemological choices, we avoided to provide trainees with preunderstandings regarding the notion of reflexivity. Our findings suggest that participants identify a series of distinct reflexive processes at play throughout their training. One distinction they seem to make is between reflexivity performed as both inner and outer dialogue, whereas another is between concurrent and retrospective reflexivity. Nevertheless, they seem to acknowledge that these processes are interrelated and complementary.

When it comes to reflexivity as inner dialogue, participants discuss it in relation to the therapist’s self. This is reminiscent of the existing discussion concerning the self of the therapist in systemic family therapy training and supervision, which often highlights family of origin issues and their interference with clinical practice (Johnson, Campbell, & Masters, 1992; Rhodes et al., 2011). Furthermore, it resonates with Rober’s (1999, 2005; see also Rober et al., 2008) discussion concerning the therapist’s inner conversations. However, the content of such inner dialogues was not the focus of this study and is discussed in detail elsewhere (Frediani & Rober, 2016). Rober (2010) proposes that therapists seldom explicitly articulate the answers to the questions posed in such inner dialogues. Yet, these answers seem to influence the therapists’ thoughts and actions. Furthermore, according to Rober (2005; see also, Frediani & Rober, 2016) when one externalizes this inner conversation, this can trigger mutual exploration and common understanding. A similar idea is evident in participants’ responses regarding reflexivity as outer dialogue. Furthermore, participant trainees seem to construct the notion and the experience of reflexivity as a constant, fluctuating move between internal and external dialogues, similar to Andersen’s idea concerning reflecting team processes (Andersen, 1987).

Participants' descriptions about retrospective and concurrent reflexivity present notable resemblance with Schön's (1983) notions of reflection "in and on" action. Although Schön (1987) emphasized the contribution of reflection in action in professional artistry, participants highlight the value of retrospective reflexivity. What they seem to consider important is the potential of reprocessing and renegotiating their clinical practice. This may point to the importance of including indirect supervision along with live supervision in training, a practice undertaken in family therapy training despite the field's preference for live supervision (McCollum & Wetchler, 1995). Such a practice may create a space for an organized and thoughtful process, which can allow for the handling of broader issues concerning the "architecture" of therapy. Moreover, as Burck (2010) notes, even live supervision groups need to have some time afterwards in order to reflect upon their processes.

Further to the resonance with theoretical ideas, our findings seem to render further support on the existing scarce empirical evidence about reflexive processes in training. Neden's (2012) findings also suggest that according to trainees and supervisors, reflexivity emerges within relationships and takes place in internal and external dialogues, and in the interaction between them. Interestingly enough, however, our participants argued that a prerequisite for learning in training is the practice of an explicit expression of reflexivity. To that aim, they stressed the importance of educational methods such as the construction of their genogram, the writing of reflexive notes and the performance of external dialogues. Such educational practices are consistent with suggestions for enhancing reflexivity in training (Senediak, 2014; Strong, 2003; Tseliou, 2010). This fluctuation between inner and outer processes as concerns the experience of reflexivity in training also seems consistent with research on reflective processes in counseling (Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). Finally, our findings suggest that according to participants concurrent reflexivity brings to the surface trainees' anxieties and vulnerabilities. This is also a constant finding in research regarding family therapy trainees' experiences (Kaiser, McAdams, & Foster, 2012; Lee, Eppler, Kendal, & Latty, 2001; Nel, 2006).

#### *A Reflexive Appraisal of Limitations and Implications*

We would like to acknowledge that our choice to sample trainees enrolled in one particular systemic family therapy training program inevitably limits the transferability of our findings, as often reported for qualitative studies of this type (Willig, 2013). Furthermore, IPA constitutes a hermeneutic methodology and therefore admits to the shaping of the research process by the researcher-participant observer (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Thus, we do acknowledge the hermeneutic nature of our claims concerning participants' accounts. In that sense, we do not approach them as an ontology of how reflexive processes "really are". Moreover, our choice to approach participants' experience of reflexivity by means of their discourse about reflexivity raises another issue concerning our study. There is extensive discussion and critique of IPA for not thoroughly addressing the relationship between language and experience, in the sense that IPA seems to approach language as a means for representing the "reality" of participants' experience and seems to equate "talk about experience" with experience (Willig, 2013). Nevertheless, we think that our findings highlight the complexity of the experience of reflexive processes in systemic family therapy training and supervision. In that sense they could possibly inform training practice but also future research which we think we definitely need if we want to further explore reflexivity in systemic family therapy training.

Our participant trainees' voices seem to echo their struggle for a delicate balance concerning their dual role as both trainees and therapists, while they "step in" and "out" of inner and outer reflexive dialogic spaces at the interface of therapeutic and educational, self and group processes. Thus, in terms of training practice, as educators we may need to rework our training "methods", if we want to be attentive to their voices and take into consideration their accounts that distinct reflexive processes present certain opportunities and challenges for them. A first step might be to welcome reflexivity concerning our training methods and practices by creating a space for listening to our trainees' voices. This could entail engaging them into joint, collaborative, reflexive dialogues about particular aspects of their experience with training processes, including the development of reflexivity, in a process of practicing "reflexivity about reflexivity". Furthermore, we could aim to address trainees' anxieties concerning the very process of training in reflexivity, by securing a space

for their expression. This could take place either in indirect supervision where we could encourage reflexive discussions about the experience of direct supervision and of the dual role of the therapist and the trainee or in direct supervision, at a special “space” saved in postsession reflections. Finally, we could experiment with dialogic and reflexive training formats, like the use of reflecting teams in group supervision (Paré, 2016) or the use of training exercises to promote inner dialogue (Paré & Lysack, 2006; Rober, 2010).

Research-wise, we could aim for a better understanding of how systemic family therapy training addresses the reported complexity concerning reflexive processes. Such an exploration might also benefit from the deployment of research methodologies like Discourse and Conversation Analysis (see Tseliou, 2013 for a review of CA and DA studies of family therapy). This could facilitate the study of reflexivity in the “here and now” of actual discursive contexts like supervision dialogues (Gaete & Strong, 2016) or personal and professional development group discussions.

### Conclusion

By undertaking this research project we sought to explore systemic family therapy trainees’ understanding of reflexivity, while they experience its development in training. Reflexivity in systemic family therapy training comes across as an evolving concept, in resonance with developments in the field. Yet, it is mostly theorized and researched in the context of therapy. Assuming that training and supervision are “primary vehicles through which a field evolves” (Liddle, Breunlin, & Schwartz, 1988, p. 4), we hope that our study will contribute to expanding this conversation to the context of training. Along with others (McCandless & Eatough, 2012; Piercy et al., 2016) we believe that research attentive to trainees’ voices can enhance our understanding of the complexities and the perplexities of the practice of reflexivity as well as of reflexive processes in training.

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