

Coaching Today

Empathy at work

Does it have a place?

5

Deepening awareness:
a Gestalt approach

19

Adaptive capacity:
human systems
dynamics

25

Equine guided
coaching

28

In focus: online
technologies

Coaching Today is the quarterly journal for counsellors and psychotherapists who are retraining and practising as coaches, as well as coaches from a diverse range of other backgrounds.

It is published by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

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Lutterworth LE17 4HB

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The journal is distributed to members of BACP Coaching in January, April, July and October. Membership of BACP Coaching costs £20 a year for individuals, and £50 for organisations. For details, contact Julie Camfield: julie.camfield@bacp.co.uk

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www.bacp.co.uk/advertising

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Design

SteersMcGillanEves Design Ltd

T 01225 465546

Print

Newnorth Print Ltd

T 01234 341111

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ISSN 2049-1182

Editorial



Diane Parker

Editor, *Coaching Today*

The subject of empathy has been increasingly prominent in the popular psychology press in recent years, with publications by the likes of Daniel Siegel (*The Roots of Empathy*) and Paul Gilbert (*The Compassionate Mind*). We know that empathy is essential for effective relationship building and a kinder society, that a lack of empathy can result in all kinds of misunderstandings and communication breakdowns and, taken to its extreme, can be a symptom of pathological narcissism. We also know that, as coaches and therapists, an understanding of what empathy is and how to use it in relationship with our clients is fundamental to our practice. To be able to experience the world from another's point of view is, it has been suggested, an instinctive human quality, while the ability to communicate that understanding is a skill that can be

developed through the conscious employment of techniques such as mirroring and attunement, suggesting that empathy – like coaching, like therapy – is both an art and a science.

How we bring our empathic selves into relationship with others is a key aspect of our work. Having the flexibility and awareness to adapt to different contexts and circumstances is the subject of our cover feature in this edition, as Dr Anne Brockbank explores how empathy can be effectively employed in the workplace. In some business and corporate settings, empathy can still unfortunately be perceived as one of those 'woolly, touchy-feely' concepts; however, by bringing awareness of the context, the desired outcome and the kind of coaching required, she argues, we can adapt our level of empathy accordingly.

This theme of adapting in relationship with other is further echoed in Louie Gardiner's fascinating piece on human systems dynamics, as she uses her own experience of writing her article to demonstrate complex adaptive systems in action. Compassion, empathy and awareness of systems dynamics are also explored in our exclusive interview with systemic coach and constellations trainer John Whittington. And equine coach and psychotherapist Laura Gold gives us a beautiful insight into the unique relationship between horse and human, and offers another perspective on empathy and attunement as she describes how the two-way communication with the horse, a deeply instinctive animal, can help human beings get back in touch with our own instincts and subtly attune to our somatic – and empathic – selves.

Your thoughts, feedback and ideas on this and other areas covered in our journal are – as ever – more than welcome! ■

Diane Parker
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Features

Deepening awareness: a Gestalt approach to coaching	5
Christine Partridge and Juliann Spoth	

Empathy at work	10
Dr Anne Brockbank	

Adaptive capacity: looking at human systems dynamics	19
Louie Gardiner	

Regulars

Editorial	2
------------------	----------

Message from the Chair	4
-------------------------------	----------

On the coach	16
---------------------	-----------

John Whittington in conversation with Linda Aspey

A day in the life	25
--------------------------	-----------

Equine guided coach Laura Gold

In focus: spotlight on online technologies	28
---	-----------

Executive Specialist for Online Coaching Kate Anthony

On the bookshelf	31
-------------------------	-----------

What you're reading

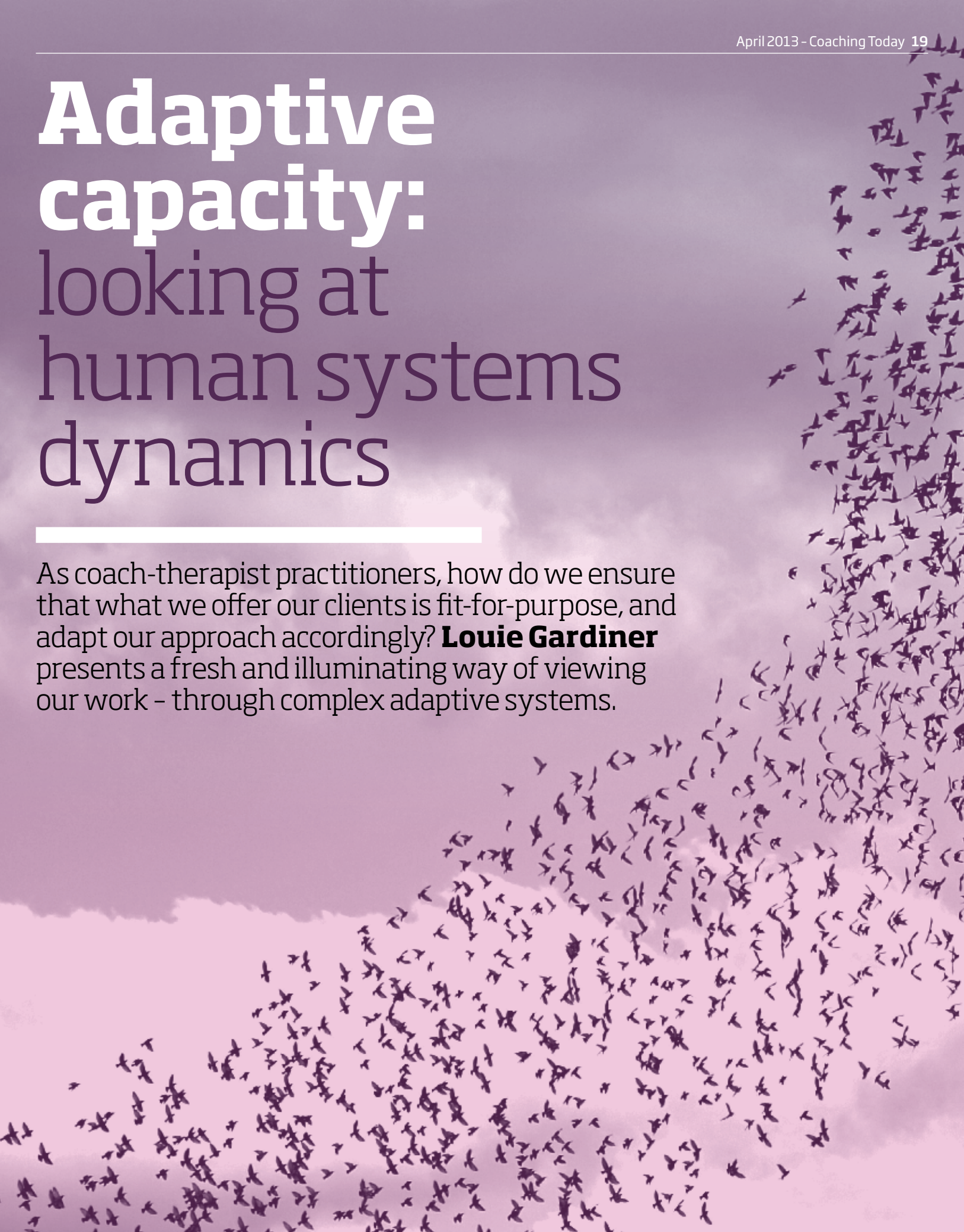
Research	34
-----------------	-----------

Network round-up	37
-------------------------	-----------

National coaching networks	39
-----------------------------------	-----------

Adaptive capacity: looking at human systems dynamics

As coach-therapist practitioners, how do we ensure that what we offer our clients is fit-for-purpose, and adapt our approach accordingly? **Louie Gardiner** presents a fresh and illuminating way of viewing our work - through complex adaptive systems.



I am starting with my stuckness. This is my second attempt at writing this piece. Finally, after a couple of days struggling through a muddy mess of words, I make the decision to pull right out of the messiness and find myself a new place to begin again. I breathe into the slight panic trapped in the centre of my chest. I give myself permission to start with where I am, how I am.

I am at my desk at home in the conservatory. My mind chatters away. I have written nearly 30 articles in the last three years. I've had great feedback in the past. But this is a journal for which I have not written before. Tension. I notice frustration and anxiety as I think about the deadline for this article, which is tomorrow. I revisit my earlier thoughts before I began writing my ditched version one. I note that I have been carrying an intention to share some insights drawing on a body of work called Human Systems Dynamics (HSD), founded by Dr Glenda Eoyang.¹ I want to do this in a way that potentially offers a new vantage point – to explore something I believe the therapy frame might hold better than the coaching frame. In illuminating the relevance of understanding complex adaptive systems (CAS), I hope you as coach-therapists will be better able to value, celebrate and articulate the extraordinariness of what it is you offer. I notice I am holding both intention (to share and illuminate) and an expectation of outcomes (expressed as 'hope') for you as readers, over which I have little or no control.

As I read what I have just written, I hear myself thinking that this all sounds rather worthy and presumptuous on my part. I can feel in my throat the heavy weight of my reaction to my judgments about my somewhat grandiose statement. Nevertheless, I give myself permission to stand by it. It matters because it showed up and I presume it wants expression. I accept that 'it' wants to be used but I am unsure why and how and even less sure of what will come of it all.

Stuck in driven-ness

So what was my problem in the aborted article? What was getting in the way of anything helpfully coherent pouring from my fingertips? I notice the familiar clench in my gut that I associate with performance anxiety. In attempting to write the article I realise I was attached to an end result rather than simply wanting to use my process of sense-making to see what might be revealed to me and others along the way. In my regular writing, usually I open an inquiry about something I want to explore. The process of beginning with what I don't know helps me discover new meaning in what is happening within and around me. And, oddly, in my first attempt at this article I found myself doing completely the opposite. I realise with somewhat perverse delight how I have fallen smack into the middle of what I would call a typical coaching trap: start with an end in mind, assume it is the solution to a problem (rather than potentially a clue to a deeper presenting issue), then force it into a form, even if that 'form' is not what was really wanting or needing to be expressed. I simply did not give myself enough time to discover what it was that I really wanted to write about.

“

As an individual, I am an example of a complex adaptive system (CAS). These exist everywhere – birds flocking and shoals of fish swimming as one; groups of people walking in 'conga-fashion' along busy streets and in train stations at peak commuter times; teams within organisations; whole organisations; even communities, cities and nations

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Landscape diagram

In the Landscape diagram we are working with two axes. The vertical refers to **Agreement** about the nature of the issue, concern, problem; the horizontal axis is about degree of **Certainty** about the way to resolve the issue.

When we are far from Agreement and Certainty we find ourselves in relative chaos – in an **unorganised** state. We may be stuck, confused, not knowing what is going on, with no idea how to get out of this place. It helps to start asking ourselves **what** we are noticing.

In the **self-organising** state, patterns and connections between events, thoughts and emotions will be revealed. It helps to ask 'So, what...?'; 'So what does all this mean... what else could it mean... what opens up with different meanings?' In the enquiry process new options for action often emerge and can be further explored.

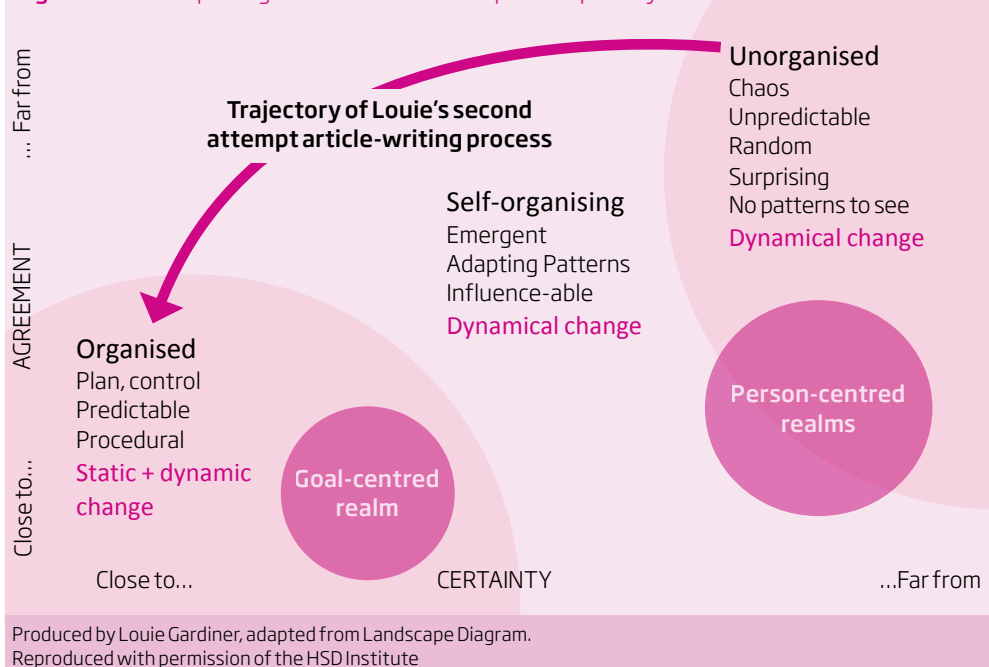
At some point in the self-organising process, there may be a natural follow-through to ask 'Now what?' This question leads us into the **organised** state where specific decisions and actions are taken. Depending on the scale of those decisions, there may be a need to consider a degree of planning and scheduling.

None of these states are better or worse. The only useful question to consider is: 'Given where the client is and what they need, what is fit-for-purpose?'

A **person-centred** practitioner is likely to be more familiar – and arguably more comfortable – with holding the unorganised and self-organising states. In contrast, a **goal-oriented** practitioner is likely to be more practised in holding a client in the organised state, focusing on the drive towards decision and action.

As HSD practitioners we seek to equip ourselves with the adaptive capacity to play with ease across the entire spectrum – to better support our clients in whatever ways are fit-for-purpose. I suggest this is also the added value that coach-therapists potentially can bring to the field.

Figure 1: Landscape Diagram: the states of Complex Adaptive Systems



Produced by Louie Gardiner, adapted from Landscape Diagram.
Reproduced with permission of the HSD Institute

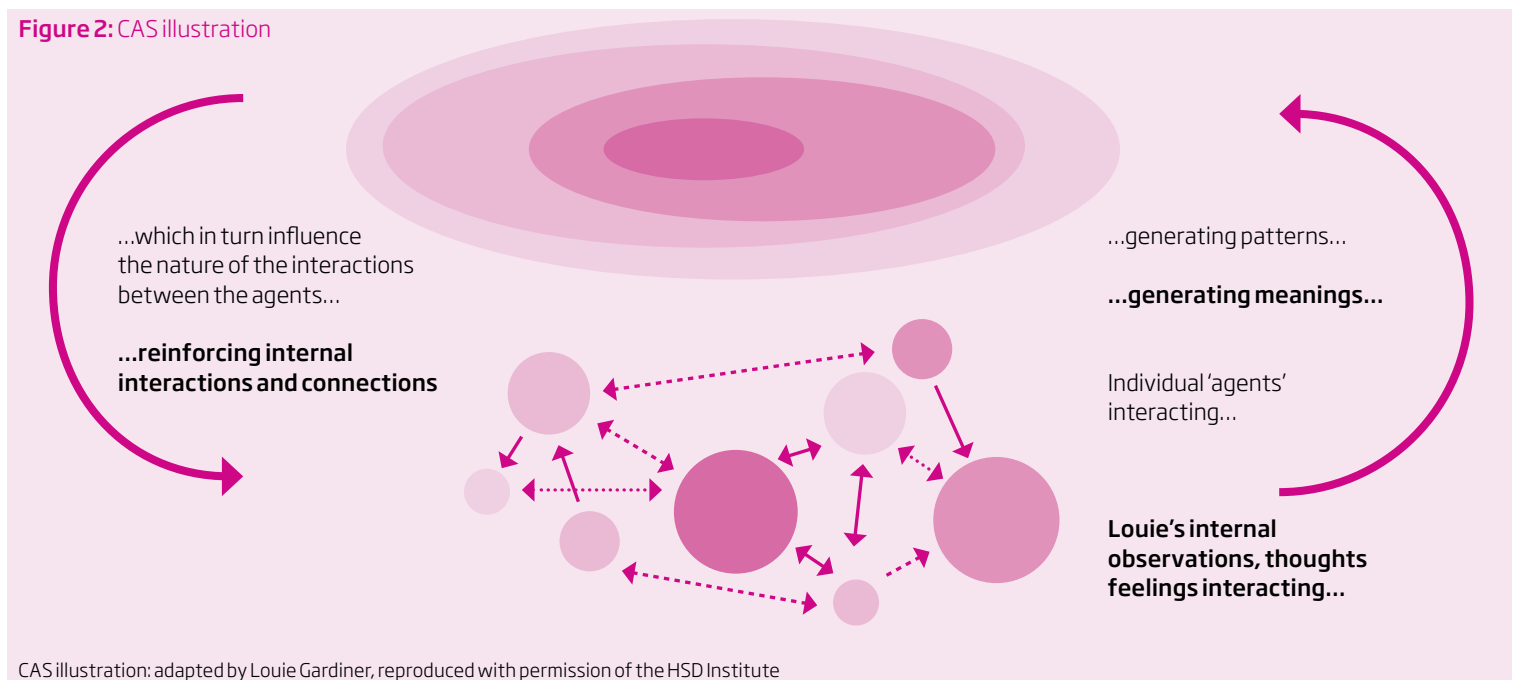
I recognise the dissonance I was experiencing as something that shows up as a stereotypical difference between an emergent therapeutic process and transactional goal-oriented coaching. The latter, using models such as GROW, presumes that things can be made to happen on demand in a planned and controllable way: it is intentionally directional in that it calls for the client to set a course from 'where they don't want to be' to 'where they do want to be'. The emphasis here is on a form of exchange between the coach asking and the client responding to questions. Methods that assume linear 'cause and effect' reside in the **organised** space on what is called the landscape diagram (see figure 1).² The matrix was created by Ralph Stacey; we use it in the field of HSD, with permission, and call it the landscape diagram because it usefully illustrates the terrain/ states that complex adaptive systems (CAS) move between.

In contrast, emergent therapeutic processes are less obviously recognisable as 'models or methods' because they focus more on creating a safe 'container' in which a client can **be**, and discover more about, themselves. The emphasis on containers is vital if a client is experiencing

chaos, uncertainty and confusion (**unorganised** zone) and needs space and time to make sense of their thoughts, feelings and experiences (**self-organising**) before personal clarity and comprehension can begin to emerge. Such disciplines are concerned more with personal coherence and congruence, trusting that movement in the individual client's personal system is likely, but not necessarily in a predictable, single, linear direction. As a result of emergent therapeutic support, the client might experience numerous personal shifts in various directions in different dimensions of his/her life, many of which simply would and could not have been anticipated.

In the context of the landscape diagram, let me continue unfolding my internal process with regard to this article. As an individual, I am an example of a CAS. These exist everywhere – birds flocking³ and shoals of fish swimming as one; groups of people walking in 'conga-fashion' along busy streets and in train stations at peak commuter times; teams within organisations; whole organisations; even communities, cities and nations.

Figure 2: CAS illustration



A CAS can be defined as a collection of individual 'agents' that have the freedom to act in unpredictable ways and whose actions are interconnected in ways that create system-wide patterns, which in turn influence the behaviour of the agents.

It is easy to conceive of a CAS involving a collection of individuals – each person is an agent capable of behaving independently and unpredictably. And we know that, when people get together, their actions aggregate into system-wide patterns, we might call such patterns 'values' or 'culture'. Cultural patterns further amplify individuals' behaviours/actions, so we might hear comments like 'That is not the way we do things round here' to bring someone sharply into line.

When I apply the CAS definition to me as an individual, then the agents mentioned in the definition refer to anything I notice, think and feel within and beyond me, as well as a whole bunch of factors (eg physiological, psychological, hormonal etc) that might be at play in my body. Many factors are likely to be completely outside my awareness. In my first attempt at trying to write this article, the interplay between what I

was unconsciously thinking and feeling created a pattern of 'stuckness' in me. I was writing words but I was not in flow; eventually I ground to a halt. Shifting from 'being stuck' to 'noticing I was stuck' was the game-changer. I used the delightfully simple, iterative enquiry process called **Adaptive Action: What? So, what? Now what?** to help myself get unstuck.

This is one the simplest and most powerful methods we use in HSD. It essentially enables us to create a conscious, observant space in which to allow meaning, options and decisions to emerge. Mindfulness and meditation are examples of other such practices that essentially create containers in which unorganised 'agents' in the form of observations, thoughts and feelings are welcomed. In accepting whatever shows up, new insights and revelations (interconnections, patterns and re-configurations) become possible, which in turn can catalyse internal and external shift in the individual.

My first cycle through these three questions was fast and, in asking myself the final question 'Now what?', I chose to dump the first article and create a new container – an empty page in a new

document. I then consciously brought my attention fully into play – once again deploying Adaptive Action to become present to **what** I was actually noticing, thinking and feeling. This helped me sit long enough in an unorganised state until new threads, connections, possibilities and patterns in my mind and being began to reveal themselves. Out of my apparent chaos emerged a more embodied sense-making process ('So, what?'). Then, without force or effort, arrived the answer to my asking 'Now what?'. It was so simple and obvious: 'Start writing from where you are!' I began tapping at the keyboard and could tell in those first few minutes of writing anew that I had found a thread that I could follow.

In my first attempt I unconsciously tried to make myself write from an organised frame: set goal and make it happen. It was not fit-for-purpose for me in this context at this time. The result was two days lost in a sea of disjointed thought patterns and an article that lacked coherence, momentum and interest. Even I got bored. Fortunately I had both the awareness and resources to help myself get unstuck.

A person-centred caricature

A client shows up and is welcomed into the space. Every seat is available and she is invited to sit where she will feel most comfortable. She picks her seat and sits for most of the session in total silence, avoiding eye contact, mostly looking at the floor. Eventually she utters a few words, a tiny opening into a vast uncharted realm. As she shares more – and only after several sessions – connections between situations, thoughts, feelings and people begin to be revealed. By sitting with the client in this space and by paying attention to what shows up, it becomes possible for the client to see patterns of relationships and interconnections between elements, situations and people present in her ‘system’. At this point, our inquiry opens into an exploration of meaning-making – gentle reflections, observations, enquiries that pick up on threads from the client. There may barely be an actual question asked; instead, there is an illumination of what the client says and does that serves to reveal old and new interconnections, patterns and interpretation, through which other possibilities and patterns emerge. The client’s personal system shifts and the potential for internal transformation is activated. The client becomes unstuck and finds it possible to once again move forward in her life.

A goal-oriented caricature

A client shows up and is invited to sit in the chair not already taken by the practitioner – made obvious by their papers on the coffee table between them. The practitioner asks: ‘What do you want to achieve out of our session today?’ The client says he doesn’t know but starts talking, trying to think his way to an answer. His leg twitches and he fidgets with the ring on his left hand. His eyes dart around as he looks up, down and to the side, rarely making eye contact with the practitioner. Within 15 minutes, he starts talking about a problem he has at work relating to his boss who has been ‘on his case’, accusing him of missing sales targets. The practitioner asks a series of questions to check out the validity of the sale performance claims and invites the client to set himself some new goals. The practitioner, with a series of questions, guides the client in devising a plan, getting him to name his first steps for action. At subsequent sessions the practitioner asks him about his progress and they explore what is getting in the way. The client moves towards his goals and relies on each session to help him stay focused.

Not quite so black and white

As HSD practitioners, we seek to operate in ways that are fit-for-purpose. This requires us to bring a systemic awareness to ourselves, our clients and our work. In so doing we grow our individual and collective capacities to see and understand how we can most usefully and appropriately influence systemic transformation. We call this adaptive capacity: being **sensitive** enough to see what is playing out in a system, **flexible** enough to **adapt** to context and needs and **robust** enough to **withstand** challenges and hold containers/boundaries. While I have been amplifying the stereotypical differences between counselling/therapy and coaching to illuminate the territory described in the landscape diagram, actually I do not believe the demarcation is clear-cut. There are many exceptional ‘transformational’ coaches working adeptly across the whole spectrum and there are many goal-oriented therapists playing mostly in the organised zone. I do admit to holding some assumptions that coach-therapists are likely to be better equipped to work across all three zones – unorganised, self-organising and organised – because of the potential overlap between therapy and coach training containers.

“

In illuminating the relevance of understanding complex adaptive systems, I hope you as coach-therapists will be better able to value, celebrate and articulate the extraordinariness of what it is you offer

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An invitation for you

So, having declared some of my assumptions and having introduced you to a few HSD concepts and models, I now have an invitation for you.

In the next and final section, I pose a series of questions for you to consider, relating to your practice. My intention is to encourage a deeper engagement with and exploration of the models and concepts. See what you make of them.

Q1: Referring to the landscape diagram, in which zones are you most and least comfortable and confident (unorganised, self-organising, organised)? So, what sense do you make of why this is so for you?

Q2: Bring a recent client session to mind. **What** do you notice about your set-up (before they arrive), your start-up (as they arrive) and your client's first reactions?

- a) Using the landscape diagram, to which zone(s) did your set-up and start-up 'take' the client? Were these congruent or in conflict? If they were in conflict, which was more fit-for-purpose? **So, what** sense do you make of what unfolded with client?
- b) Given what you knew about the client, their context and needs, which was most fit-for-purpose? **Now what** might you change for next time?

Q3: What could you do or say to influence a client out of...

- unorganised and into
 - self-organising?
 - organised?
- organised and into
 - self-organising?
 - unorganised?
- self-organising and into
 - unorganised?
 - organised?

Q4: Read the two cameo caricatures. Which caricature is closest to how you work?

- a) What about each caricature attracts and repels you?
- b) So, what does this mean to you, about you and for your developing practice?
- c) Now what do you want to do about anything you have discovered about yourself and your practice?

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References

- 1 More information at <http://www.potent6.co.uk>
<http://www.hsdinstitute.org>
- 2 See Louie explaining the Landscape Diagram
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsLqPHu6MhQ>
And Stacey ref. <http://www.change-management-toolbook.com/mod/book/view.php?id=74&chapterid=58>
- 3 See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eakKfY5aHmY&feature=fvwrel> for a breathtaking CAS example of a starling murmuration.

Louie Gardiner is an experienced leadership coach, coach supervisor and facilitator working systemically with individuals, groups and organisations. She is Director of Potent 6 and the Inspiring Leaders Foundation and trusted associate with the Human Systems Dynamics (HSD) Institute, Hope Street Centre and Intrepid Learning Solutions (US). Louie has been a regular visiting lecturer on both postgraduate and undergraduate programmes including the Roffey Park Institute and Sheffield Hallam and Cheltenham and Gloucester universities. She is one of only 300 certified professionals across the world applying and developing systems thinking and adaptive leadership capacity through the integrating field of Human Systems Dynamics (HSD).

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“Shifting from ‘being stuck’ to ‘noticing I was stuck’ was the game-changer. I used the simple enquiry process of Adaptive Action: What? So, what? Now what? to help myself get unstuck

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