

# Comparing Systemic Therapy and Interactive Conflict Resolution – Commonalities, Differences and Implications for Practice

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## Introduction

Systemic thinking – in particular, constructivism within systems theory – has influenced and shaped methods of interactive conflict resolution and the way we use dialogue formats to address complex and protracted conflicts. It has also shaped systemic therapy<sup>1</sup> leaving both interactive conflict resolution and systemic therapy as ‘sisters’ of constructivism.

It was constructivism within systemic thinking that marked a paradigm shift by replacing ‘objectivity’ with ‘subjectivity’ and ‘truth’ with ‘experience’. Until the emergence of constructivism, scientific thinking had been shaped by the search for objectivity and truth. In this respect, constructivism is based on ideas such as perception, perspective, plurality and difference (Prondczynsky 2002, 106). With constructivism the idea of an objective reality was challenged by putting the emphasis on the diversity of interpretations and subjective perceptions of reality. It also opposes the concept of an unchanging reality. Reality, according to its assumption, is ‘constructed’ through the actions of subjects.

It was interactive conflict resolution that gave ‘subjectivity’ and the ‘subjective perceptions’ a place in international politics. It is based on the belief that through dialogue the perceptions and, ultimately, the actions of individuals locked in conflict can change, consequently transforming the conflictual situation.

After introducing and briefly discussing the concept of interactive conflict resolution, this article will explore some of the challenges these formats are facing. It will be shown that systemic therapy provides us with useful concepts in understanding these challenges. It provides us with a more nuanced understanding of ‘clients’ and ‘participants’, as well as a variety of methods to address these different types of ‘participants’.<sup>2</sup>

Systemic therapeutic methods cannot be simply copy-pasted into the political and social structure of an informal interactive problem-solving dialogue process. Although they are ‘sisters’ inspired by constructivism and systemic notions, they operate in very different environments. However, interactive conflict resolution methods can seek in-

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1 The understanding of systemic therapy in this article is based on the theoretical thoughts of the German psychologists/family therapists Arist von Schlippe and Jochen Schweitzer (see Schlippe/Schweitzer 1996).

2 Within this article the notion ‘client’ will be used in relation to therapeutic concepts and the notion ‘participant’ to the concept of dialogue workshops.

spiration from its therapeutic sister and needs to adapt her methods to its own context if it wants to improve.

The author will draw on the experiences of the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue process that was conducted by the Berghof Research Center between 2000 and 2006 (cf. Wolleh 2006). The article explores two tools which turned out to be particularly productive and which are related to approaches from systemic therapy. These tools are:

- speculative problem-solving, and
- graduated reciprocal initiatives for tension reduction (GRIT).

Both were applied in the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue process as a response to the challenges we were facing.

## 1. Commonalities between Systemic Therapy and Interactive Conflict Resolution

Before we explore the differences between systemic therapy and interactive problem-solving workshops, it will be worthwhile to explore the conceptual overlaps between them, thereby becoming more aware of the extent to which both have been shaped by systemic thinking, particularly constructivism (Prondczynsky 2002, 106).

- Both posit that a ‘problem’ or a ‘conflict’ can be seen as a ‘system’ that is upheld by communication and the behaviour of actors (client and conflicting parties).
- Both assume that the actors and their perceptions are participating in the creation of the ‘conflict’/‘system’.
- Both differentiate between an environment and the actual ‘problem’, seeing them as linked in dynamics of mutual influence (circularity).
- Both refrain from assigning ‘guilt’ and applying a ‘no-fault approach,’ arguing that the situation is of such a vast complexity that assigning sole ‘responsibility’ towards a single client or participant is hardly possible (Mitchell 2003).
- Both regard the persons they are working with as ‘experts’ who have the knowledge and power required to change the situation. Therefore, therapists and facilitators try to stimulate self-reflection and learning within a system.
- Both therapist and facilitator are aware that by engaging with the clients/conflict parties, they also become part of ‘the system’.

Looking at these overlaps one can truly argue that interactive conflict resolution and systemic therapy have been significantly inspired by systemic thinking and constructivism.

Nevertheless, there are some significant differences between the two concepts that will be further examined in the following, as they *have implications* on the dynamic that unfolds within an interactive conflict resolution workshop. It will be argued that one should consider making more use of methods aligned from systemic therapy within interactive conflict resolution workshops in order to address these process-related challenges.

In other words, although interactive conflict resolution, like systemic therapy, has been significantly shaped by systemic thinking, it departs from systemic thinking on

some issues. Awareness of these differences will help us to understand and overcome challenges in the dialogue process.

## 2. Analytical Problem Orientation in Interactive Conflict Resolution

Interactive conflict resolution (ICR) is usually described as an informal, facilitated dialogue process between participants from conflicting parties. It is a non-official and informal process that is usually associated with some type of confidentiality. Interactive conflict resolution is usually understood as a *complementary means* to the official negotiation process (Fisher 1997; Mitchell/Banks 1996; Ropers 1995).

It is shaped by a twofold understanding of 'success'. On the one hand, success is seen in the *process- and micro-level of a particular workshop*. This means that the third party strives for a fruitful and open dialogue that helps the participants to understand their mutual perceptions, reflect upon their interests and needs, recognize commonalities and finally develop a new understanding of the conflict. The change of participants' perceptions is the first step towards 'success'. On the other hand, success transcends the changes on the individual micro-level of the participants because interactive conflict resolution also aims for macro-political impact on the conflict and its dynamics. The participants are seen – and were therefore chosen by the organisers and facilitators – as persons that have (potential) influence on decision-makers (Mitchell 1993, 82).

Crucial issues in each dialogue process are the perceptions of the participants, their aims, hopes and human needs as representatives of a party to a conflict. The goal is that the participants of the two conflicting sides become aware of their commonalities and start to reframe what was originally perceived as the 'conflict' with very noticeable zero-sum dynamics as a 'common problem' that can be addressed cooperatively (Miall et al. 1999; Wallensteen 2000).

### 2.1 Assumptions About Change in Interactive Conflict Resolution

The process a participant in an interactive conflict resolution workshop goes through is essentially past- and problem/conflict-oriented. In contrast, the processes a client in a systemic therapy undergoes is future- and solution-oriented as we will see further down.

The past- and conflict-oriented process of interactive conflict resolution can be divided into four phases. First, the *what* phase; second, the *why* phase; third, the *solution options exploration* phase and fourth, the *agreement* phase. The dynamic in the 'analytical problem solving process' is close to the structure of effective negotiations as described by Roger Fisher and William Ury (1991).

Passing through the first two phases participants' perceptions should be transformed, making the desired re-framing possible. In the first phase, the actual conflict situation and the different perceptions of the parties are analysed. In the second phase, the underlying reasons for the conflict are explored in more detail. This analytical process may take some time, with the group moving back and forth between the phases. The basic idea of

interactive conflict resolution is that, through the process of deepened analysis, the participants/parties will develop an enhanced understanding of the complexity of the situation. They will become aware of each other's needs and fears and move step by step towards a common understanding of the problem. By recognizing the interests behind their positions, points of conversion and common interests are discovered, and the group develops a common understanding of shared problems. (Mitchell 2003)

After the development of a common understanding, participants can move into the third and fourth phases, which deal with mastering common problems. While the third phase is characterized by the collection of possible solution models for the problems, the discussion gets more and more focussed by analysing the advantages and disadvantages of every suggestion in the fourth phase. Ideally, the fourth phase will end with an agreement about what to do and what the solution model will look like.

In a 'successfully' facilitated interactive conflict resolution process, participants get a *glimpse of a possible future* and experience that they can influence it. The process could phase out once the workshop participants share these insights with top decision-makers, who then 'take over' and make use of the new insights in the official negotiation process. Or the informal ICR process continues, complementing the official negotiations, functioning as a source of inspiration and insight for negotiating decision-makers (ongoing complementarities).

A major challenge usually occurs in a facilitated interactive conflict resolution setting when the participants have to move from phase two to phase three. This is because they *are moving from the analysis of the past towards exploring the future*. However, this can only happen when the parties have come to terms with each other and developed a

- (common) understanding about their past, perceiving the situation as a
- (common) problem and moving into the next phase of exploring
- (common) options for the future.

For Interactive Problem Solving the path to the future is essentially based on an analytical process of the 'past', 'positions', 'interests' and 'needs'. This is very different from the process of change that is envisioned in a systemic therapy like the solution-oriented therapy (Stoll 2004).

### 3. Solution Orientation in Systemic Therapy

Constructivism and systems theory have left their marks on the structure and methods of systemic therapy (see Schlippe/Schweitzer 1996). Unlike psychoanalytic approaches, systemic therapy focuses on stagnant patterns of behaviour in groups of people and not on the reasons for a problem (be it due to subconscious impulses or trauma during childhood). Having abandoned the idea of root causes for problems, and drawing instead on the notion of subjectivity, multi-causality and circularity, solution-oriented therapy has created some creative methods that run counter to established linear thinking and ICR's analytical approach.

The systemic understanding of a problem is based on the assumption that a problem is *generated through the communication* about a condition that is perceived negatively. The problem manifests itself and it is 'kept alive' through the communication. Therefore,

the problem is seen as a process that needs to be upheld, a problem-sub-system within the overall system. Consequently, interventions need to focus on the behaviour and the communication that generates the problem-system. *The search for the problem's underlying reasons or root causes is not seen as relevant.* This is essentially different from the analytical approach that is employed in an interactive conflict resolution process, whereby the underlying causes and the needs of the parties are the central focus.

Steve de Shazer, Inoo Kim Berg and others developed what is called solution-oriented therapy. (Schlippe/Schweitzer 1996, 35). This type of therapy does not focus on the problem, but directs its attention towards change and a state that is perceived as a 'solution'. It is informed by the slogan "Problem talk creates problems, solution talk creates solutions" (ibid.). It concerns itself with the present and the future *but not the past* and in doing so differentiates itself significantly from the interactive conflict resolution approach. In those cases in which it does refer to past events, it focuses on moments and dynamics that are seen as 'exceptions from the problem'. In a therapeutic setting, this approach might manifest itself in the therapist's question, "Can you recall situations in the past where you felt comfortable with working with Mr. Y?"

At this point, the entire structure and process of a solution-oriented therapy cannot be described. Instead some core concepts will be introduced in order to give the reader a sense of the nature of solution-oriented therapy (De Shazer 1998). Moreover, these concepts are discussed in relation to dialogue workshops.

Defining goals together with the client is a first important step in therapy because it sets the framework for the whole therapeutic process. One can distinguish between two types of goals. The first defines what the client wants to achieve in the therapeutic sessions; the second defines the client's overall goals. It is important to note that the goal should *not be a fixed status* but has to be oriented towards *the client's own behaviour*. In addition, the goal depends on the client's behaviour and not on the behaviour of other persons. The goal should describe exactly what kind of new behaviour should be applied. It must be described in a way that specifies an alternative to one's current behaviour. It is not enough to say that a particular counter-productive behaviour should be stopped. The client needs to replace the behaviour that is being abandoned with a new alternative behaviour. One therefore speaks of a *behaviour-oriented goal definition*.

### 3.1 Assumptions About Change in Solution-oriented Therapy

In order to generate new perspectives on existing dynamics and situations, solution-oriented therapy uses methods such as *coping questions* for making the client aware of 'positive behaviour' that indicates some form of success and constitutes the resources the client already has in his hands. In addition, *questions that scale achievements* and success in the past are applied, as well as the *miracle question* (see Radatz 2003, 266). These are not single questions but rather a set of questions that might even follow a specific order (De Shazer 1991).

While the coping and scaling questions relate to the client's past and raise his *awareness of constructive dynamics*, the miracle question focuses entirely on the present and future. Relating to constructivism and systemic thinking, it draws on the idea that 'the solution has nothing to do with the problem'. The process focuses on the cli-

ent's own behaviour, taking the context and other persons' perceptions and possible reactions into consideration ("What new dynamic could unfold if you would start to act in a new way?")

However, there is a challenge – and therapists are aware of this. The focus on changing one's own behaviour instead on changes on behalf of the other can only be fully applied to clients with a specific attitude. It is therefore important to explore what kinds of persons are present in interactive conflict resolution processes and in therapies, and to see what this means for the conduct of the process, whether it be therapeutic or a series of dialogue workshops.

## 4. About Clients and Participants

### 4.1 The Concept of 'Client' in Systemic Therapy

Systemic therapy distinguishes among four types of clients – the 'visitor', the 'complainant', the 'co-adviser' and the 'true client'.

Awareness of the four types of clients makes us sensitive to the perceptions of the 'persons who are to undergo the process' and to the way in which a person assesses the overall situation and relates himself to it.

#### The four types of clients

The **visitor** is a person who is very much aware of a problem. Such a person wants change in principle, but normally wants his counterpart to change behaviour and does not want to change his or her own behaviour. The visitor usually has a clear view of the other person's guilt and failures and might suffer greatly under current conditions which make him feel helpless and hopeless and unable to change anything. Consequently, visitors do not easily engage in reflecting on their own behaviour because they feel that the 'other side/other person' should change the behaviour and that the 'problem' lies outside their control.

The second type is the **complainant**, who approaches the therapist by describing his or her suffering, expecting that the therapist will bring some kind of solution. Unlike the visitor, the complainant does not necessarily demand change from 'the other', but instead thinks that change should come through the external therapist. Complainants tend to reject suggestions with "I have tried this already" or "This is impossible due to the following reasons"

The third type is the **co-adviser**, who has a rather detailed solution model in mind and wants to make use of the therapy by testing this model. Co-advisors see themselves as experts and may start to give advice to the therapist on how to conduct subsequent meetings according to his or her already envisioned solution model. It is a challenge to convince co-advisors to explore new forms of behaviour on their behalf.

The fourth type qualifies as a **true client**. True clients are aware of a problem and demand change, but this also includes himself/herself and not just the other. Consequently, they demonstrate readiness to engage in the exploration of new behaviour on their behalf (see Radatz 2003, 137).

These notions make us aware of the dynamics that are needed to deal with the behaviours and attitudes constituent to each of the described 'types'.

The challenge for the therapist is to work with every type of client and attempt to transform him or her into a 'true client'. A therapist cannot choose his or her clients. He or she must start from where the client's mindset resides. As we will see in the analysis of the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue process, facilitators may face exactly the same challenging diversity of participants.

These different types of 'clients' within systemic therapy can be very helpful in explaining some of the dynamics amongst the 'participants' in a dialogue workshop. This is because the client and participant are not classified according to status (track 1 – track 2, or pre-influential and influential) but purely on the basis of his or her attitude *and* behaviour.

Moreover, this classification of clients can be useful for the further planning of dialogue workshops because in systemic therapy literature there *is an understanding how these different types of clients ought to be treated*. In this respect, the understanding of the 'persons who undergo the process' appears more nuanced than within the interactive conflict resolution discourse. Hence: a process-oriented and dynamic understanding of the participants.

## 4.2 The Concept of 'Participant' in ICR and Track 1,5 Workshops

The understanding of 'success' in interactive conflict resolution has consequences for the selection of participants. Generally, one can distinguish between two directions of 'success' within interactive conflict resolution: first, on the individual level, with participants changing their attitudes and, second, on the wider political level, when the participants influence their society, particularly their decision-makers. The macro-political goal of interactive conflict resolution is the transmission from the micro-dynamic dialogue group process towards the macro-political level. Therefore, the transmission is associated with the participants and their political influence.

Chris Mitchell has proposed that the 'success' of pre-negotiation dialogue projects be assessed at three levels: first, the impact on the people involved (changes in attitude, new patterns of behaviour); second, the output, such as new proposals and ideas; and third, the long-term impact on the overall conflict (Mitchell 2003, 82 ff.)<sup>3</sup> For John Burton 'success' in the wider political and social environment ought to be achieved through 'influential individuals' who usually need to have access to decision-makers (Burton 1996, 1997). Herbert Kelman coined a slightly different term by speaking of *pre-influentials* as participants and carriers of transmission to the wider political level. For him these are people who will most likely become more influential in the future, but are currently under less public scrutiny (Kelman 1997).

Although the concept of the participant can vary within the different schools of interactive conflict resolution, one can state with certainty that, unlike therapists, all schools are selective in choosing participants. Organizers generally select participants according to two criteria:

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3 Kelman's understanding is quite similar in that he sees the aims of a workshop to be, firstly, the insights the participants gain into the conflict and the other parties and, secondly, the changes on the individual level that will translate to the political level through the participants' post-workshop communication and input (Kelman 1996).

1. Potential participants should have a positive and flexible attitude, so that the dialogue process can become productive.
2. The participants should have access to the wider political context because they are either influential themselves or close to influential persons who can then become advocates for change.

Organizers hope to be effective by selecting influential persons who will generate a group that is to some extent homogeneous. With reference to the client-notion in systemic therapy, they are searching for 'true clients' with political influence.

Combining potential 'political influence' with a 'positive' attitude is essential for the success of the process.

The challenge becomes even more visible if we compare the concept of participants in the ICR approach towards dialogue (e.g. Burton or Kelman) to Harold Saunders' sustained dialogue approach. For Saunders, dialogue is

“[...] a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn. Each makes a serious effort to take others' concerns into her or his own picture, even when disagreement persists” (Saunders 2001, 82).

In Saunders' concept of *sustained dialogue*, people who are ready for change attend and have an attitude of 'enough is enough', and not because they are “formal representatives of any organisation” (Saunders 2001, 102).

ICR and the track 1,5 format would certainly like to achieve a quality of dialogue that rises to Saunders' definition; however because they are oriented towards the formal status of a participant or his/her influence, they easily integrate people who attend due to their formal positions in government or organisations. In contrast, for Saunders it is the willingness of the participants to listen and their readiness to be changed that are the ultimate criteria for invitation to a dialogue.

In relation to systemic therapy one could generalize that participants in a Saunders-inspired format are 'true clients' and that their political status is irrelevant, while Burton and Kelman, in particular track 1,5 formats, tend to have a mixture of 'true clients', 'visitors' and 'complainants', as they include representatives of governments as well.

This article is built on the assumption that the 'true and politically influential client' is a rather rare creature. In political conflict settings that are perceived as 'frozen' or 'protracted', political decision-makers with 'true client' characteristics are hard to find. Forming a homogeneous group of truly influential decision-makers who are part of the track 1 level is very unlikely. Reality will be shaped much more by a spectrum of participants that reflect the four concepts of clients from systemic therapy. Particularly if the process explicitly claims to be a track 1,5 process, the heterogeneity amongst the participants/types of clients is practically unavoidable.

## 5. Experiences from the Georgian-Abkhaz Dialogue Process

Between 1999 and 2004, the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management conducted a series of 14 Georgian-Abkhazian informal and confidential dialogue workshops. These meetings brought together six participants from each side of

the conflict. There were participants from both governmental backgrounds and civil society backgrounds and their purpose was to complement the official negotiation process which was being hosted by the UN at the time. The meetings took place in neutral places in Western Europe and were conducted by a team of international facilitators (Wolleh 2006).

With the explicit goal of complementing the official negotiations, organizers attempted to gain the regular participation of persons who were close to negotiators or even part of the negotiations. To emphasize the involvement of both Georgian and Abkhaz government representatives, the process was labelled 'track 1,5'.

Mixing representatives of track 1 and track 2 is based on the assumption that by including track 1 representatives the communication between the conflicting parties as well as within the parties can be enriched. It is further an attempt to intensify the transmission from the micro-process to the macro-process. Decision-makers who do not want to be seen participating in informal meetings with the other party can be advised by both governmental people and influential civil society participants.<sup>4</sup>

However, offering participation in informal track 1,5 dialogue meetings to governments generates a variety of challenges which are connected to the composition of the group and, ultimately, to the quality of the dialogue this group can achieve.

## 5.1 Challenge No. 1

Although a well-established facilitation team has substantial leverage in selecting the participants, when it comes to the composition of the governmental participants in the unofficial meeting the selection is at best done in a cooperative process with the authorities and the facilitators, who are making suggestions. At worst the government decides on their own who will participate on their behalf in a dialogue workshop. After all, one can argue it is legitimate for a government to decide who is participating on their behalf even in an informal dialogue setting. Consequently, by seeking a closeness with the respective governments and integrating politically relevant persons with a government background, facilitators lose partial control over the selection of participants. The likelihood of forming a group of participants that could be classified as 'positive', 'compromising', or as 'true clients' according to systemic therapy, is very much reduced.

## 5.2 Challenge No. 2

In addition, the involvement of governments from two conflicting parties may result in these governments influencing the list of participants in the track 2 contingent. This can happen in any dialogue across conflict divides because governments have the tendency to control or at least influence the dialogue, even if it is done purely on the civil

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4 The concept of track 1,5 emerged in recent years in order to describe a 'cross-track' workshop which involves the integration of so-called decision-makers with a governmental background (track 1) with people with a civil society background (track 2) who are nevertheless influential. (Ropers 2000; Wolleh 2006), see also Wolleh 2007.

society level. However, the likelihood of governments influencing the selection of the civil society representatives becomes even larger if these governments are ‘represented’ in the process and the actual meetings.

In the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue format, the following two dynamics occurred: 1) the partial loss of control over the selection of participants with a track 1 background; 2) the influence of governments on the process of selecting civil society participants.

While the first dynamic continued throughout the entire process, the second dynamic – governmental influence on the selection of civil society participants – was overcome by the organizers. After a period of about one and a half years, there remained hardly any limits to the selection of civil society persons (Wolleh 2006, 43). Consequently, there were always some people within the groups who represented the current official positions of both the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. In this respect, even if it was possible to invite some participants with a ‘true client/participant’ attitude, it was practically impossible to avoid a mixture of the previously described four types of therapy clients.

This heterogeneous mix of participants had significant consequences for the overall dynamics of the meetings. As will be explained in what follows, the participants and the group as a whole could not move beyond a certain point in the process.

### 5.3 Challenge No. 3

The Berghof Center’s informal Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue process drew on the analytical approach that was briefly described earlier as the four phase model (the *what* phase; the *why* phase; the *solution options exploration* phase and the *agreement* phase).

In order to structure the dialogue process, five guiding principles were specified: contact, mutual understanding, deepening of topics, speculative problem-solving and, finally, joint action (McCartney 1986; Wolleh 2006).

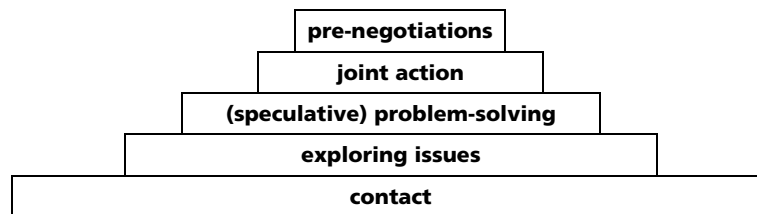


Figure 1: Levels of Interaction and Cooperation

While face-to-face contact is a prerequisite for dialogue, it was highlighted because it was already a requirement for both the participants and the organizers. ‘Mutual understanding’ and the ‘deepening of topics’ are the equivalent to the two analytical phases in the conflict resolution model (the *what* phase and the *why* phase).

However, throughout the process, a joint understanding of a problem did not emerge or manifest itself in such a way that one could start exploring a possible common future on its basis. Within the framework of the four-phase model, the discussion moved back and forth between the first two phases and did not move into the problem-solving phase.

During the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue process, a common exploration of the future did not occur group-wide and it can be argued that within a track 1,5 format, due to its heterogeneous participant structure (governmental – civil society persons/complainants – true clients), this is very difficult to achieve.

What was achieved in the overall dynamic of the process, which ran from 2000 to 2006, was that like-minded Georgian participants, who came to the conclusion that changes and reforms need to be undertaken on the Georgian side for transforming the situation, started working together to reform the Georgian constitution in order to create a dynamics that would be able to resolve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. With such an attitude, they came close to the characteristics of ‘true clients’, since the true client shows an awareness that he or she is contributing to the problem with his or her own actions.

In this respect, the workshop contributed to new types of cooperation on the Georgian side and empowered Georgians participants with a ‘true client’ attitude to generate a new project dynamic which is related to the dialogue process but cannot be considered a direct part of the process.

However, the challenge remained within the meetings that the general attitude of both sides was generally shaped by demands from the other side to introduce changes, which is the attitude of the ‘complainant-client’.

#### 5.4 Summarizing the General Conceptual Challenge

The Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue process and its structure were shaped to a large degree by the idea that politically influential participants should be included. This included an advisor to the Georgian president, several Vice-ministers, Members of Parliament, and subsequently ministers, as well as people who were directly involved in the official negotiations.

In this respect, the Berghof process was particularly vulnerable to the discussed challenges because it sought the track 1 representative.

However, this variety of attitudes in dialogue workshops is very common and can hardly be avoided if one seeks governmental representatives. The conventional analytical problem-solving dynamic is just a limited method of addressing a group that is not purely composed of ‘true clients with high political influence’. When facing these challenges during the Georgian-Abkhazian process, the facilitators started intuitively introducing tools which included crucial components of systemic therapy.

As in systemic and solution-oriented therapy, methods that lead a dialogue group to explore ‘behaviour-oriented’ goals are required.

## 6. How to Induce Change if the Participants Show Resistance? Two Methods that were Applied

“‘Ghost of the Future!’ he exclaimed, ‘I fear you more than any Spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company.’

Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*

It is worth reflecting for a moment on the transformation undertaken by Ebenezer Scrooge: from a man who does not even see the problem to a man ready for change. The moment he faces the Ghost of the Future he can be seen in the systemic therapeutic framework as a ‘true client’. He wants to see and hear and is willing to take the risk *and* opportunity to be changed. He does not want to tell others how they have to change according to his view. At this stage, Mr. Scrooge would be a perfect participant in an interactive conflict resolution workshop. He is ready for both dialogue and personal change, and he has the means to alter the course of history, and is thus influential.

It is also worth noting that Mr. Scrooge did not ask any ghost to undertake this process with him, but that he was instead practically kidnapped and subjected to an imposed treatment. Facilitators of dialogue processes who seek to work with politically influential participants but do not have a ghost with criminal tendencies on their team face the challenge of working with a group which represents all stages of Ebenezer Scrooge’s development, whether they are from civil society or government.

In order to encourage the workshop participants – both Georgian and Abkhaz – to think about their own behaviour goals and the possible desired behaviour in the future, two techniques were introduced and applied by the facilitation team. These were:

- speculative problem solving, and
- graduated reciprocal initiatives for tension reduction.

The analytical needs and fears approach that examined the dynamics of the causes for conflict did not result in any movement towards anything that could be referred to either as a common understanding of the past or a common understanding of the future.

### 6.1 The Concept of Speculative Problem-Solving

It has been mentioned that, ideally, in the course of analytical problem-solving, once the problem has been defined and its background analysed more deeply (phases 1 and 2), the parties embark on a phase in which they devise a range of possible solution models. Only when both sides understand the problem as a shared problem are they emotionally and intellectually capable of embarking on a future-oriented brainstorming phase in order to generate solution models.

Profound processes of change are necessary on both sides before the parties can be ready for re-framing the conflict or problem as a ‘common problem’. In the Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue process, the parties were not prepared to develop a common understanding about the future or about desired behaviour in the future. ‘Solutions’ were seen as the clarification of a status, in this case the status of Abkhazia either as ‘an independent state’ or as part of the ‘territorial integrity of Georgia’.

The pyramid chart addressed this challenge by using the term ‘speculative problem-solving’. The term ‘speculative’ was used in order to move the participants into a future-related mode of thinking and discussion. Calling the scenario under discussion ‘speculative’ de-linked the whole discussion from ‘reality’ – a reality in which no mutual problem-sharing evolved – to such an extent that the group could confidently shift into a common future-oriented, problem-solving mode.<sup>5</sup>

During the speculative problem-solving phase, participants were asked by the facilitators to discuss and work on political topics which challenged the boundaries of their established official positions. In practice this means that the Georgian participants were encouraged to work with the assumption of an ‘independent Abkhazia’, while the Abkhaz participants discussed the basis for ‘Abkhazia being a part of the Republic of Georgia’.

This is quite the opposite of the behaviour-oriented goal definition found in systemic therapy. It is an approach that speculatively defines the final outcome, thereby calling upon the participants’ need to think about the status issues. In comparison to the ‘miracle question’, which explores a future with desirable behaviour, this approach can be described as a ‘nightmare scenario’, since each party is being confronted with the scenario defining the status they dislike the most. However, once the groups no longer question the scenario on grounds of principle and ‘accept’ the speculative reverse-status model as given, they become creative in addressing the interests that need to be secured on their behalf in order to ease the burden of this scenario.

A speculative problem-solving scenario gives rise to intellectually stimulating arguments in which the previously ‘unthinkable’ is pondered and discussed. It encourages the parties to think about and articulate the interests they really want to secure, even under unfavourable conditions like the assumed final status. In this exercise, participants are no longer absorbed in achieving and avoiding a particular final status (e.g. Abkhaz independence and Georgian territorial integrity). The participants are encouraged to articulate their own interests even more than they would be in a group exercise asking directly about their interests. Consequently, the speculative problem scenario gives the participants, who listen to the other group discussing the details of their envisioned position, valuable insights about the dynamics and conditions that are seen to be necessary to make this assumed outcome sustainable.

Like the miracle question, the speculative problem-solving scenario is an intellectual exploration of a future. The difference lies in the nature of the assumed solution. While the client in the miracle question exercise wakes up to find his desired solution has miraculously emerged, the participants in speculative problem-solving are ‘waking up speculatively’ in a ‘nightmare scenario’. What they are fighting for is lost. Although these are two very different scenarios, the dynamic generated is shaped by similar systemic thinking. The participants in the dialogue workshop focus on *actions/behaviour* and the dynamics they consider important and want to see evolve and secured.

The speculative problem-solving scenario is open for suggestions of new behaviour by both parties. Getting a working group accustomed to the undesired status requires new forms of behaviour by them as well as by the other party, which favours this model.

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5 For more on the dynamics and challenges of speculative problem solving, see Wolleh (2006, 85).

State independence, which is the declared position of the Abkhaz side, might be one way of securing these interests. However, in the speculative problem-solving model, other means for safeguarding these interests are expressed. Like the therapist, the facilitators need to encourage the participants to become more and more specific.

Introducing a method that leads participants into a political worst-case-outcome scenario certainly arouses resistance in some of the participants (Wolleh, 2006, 85-90). When engaging in such discussions, it is imperative that the facilitation team underlines their speculative and non-committal nature.

In addition, it is important that the exercise be done in a symmetrical way; meaning that both groups – in our case, the Georgian and Abkhaz participants – engage in what appears to be their ‘worst-case-outcome’. Leading just one set of participants into this exercise will certainly be perceived as a biased intervention on behalf of the facilitators.

In a dialogue group that is composed of complainant and client participants, it is easier to initiate an exercise that gives the participants a scope within which the participants can also express demands to the other side. Self-reflection and thinking about one’s own new behaviour is encouraged, but not exclusively. With a heterogeneous group, whose members are not composed of people who are ready for personal change and who do not qualify as ‘true clients’, speculative problem solving has a bridging function into a future scenario. As in systemic therapy and the miracle question, participants start to explore and think about their own future behaviour, as well as the dynamics this new behaviour will bring about. Paradoxically, the exercise leads them into an undesired future in which the outcome is determined, but the participants who are eager to secure their interests reveal important insights about the behaviour needed in order to do so.

In its orientation toward behaviour and its focus on the future rather than the past, speculative problem-solving resembles systemic therapy. It is a step to help participants who essentially think about their own behaviour using the attitude of a complainant client.

## 6.2 Graduated Reciprocal Initiatives for Tension Reduction

The second method that was applied with the diverse group of participants in the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue process was the ‘graduated reciprocal initiatives for tension reduction’ (GRIT), a strategic tool for transforming behaviour and attitudes in conflicts.<sup>6</sup> The GRIT method is based on the following assumptions and convictions:

- In highly escalated conflicts, unilateral initiatives are necessary to overcome stalemates.
- The initiating party will produce positive power by making its own positions more flexible without giving up substantial interests.

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6 This method was developed by Charles Osgood. For further details please check Osgood (1962; 1966). For a more popular and compact description of the GRIT see [www.beyondintractability.org/essay/confidence\\_building\\_measures/](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/confidence_building_measures/) [accessed 3 August 2010].

- Unilateral moves have to be prepared carefully, should be part of a long-term strategy and be communicated clearly.

By announcing and initiating unilateral symbolic activities as a measure to improve its relationship with the other side, a party to a conflict attempts to generate positive power. The unilateral steps are connected to the hope for a positive response, but no reciprocity is demanded. Even if the addressed party does not respond, further unilateral steps are taken that do not diminish the acting parties' interests, but are intended to connect to the addressed party, making it respond positively sooner or later.

The GRIT method closely resembles systemic therapy or solution-oriented therapy in the following ways:

- It sees a party as a capable actor that never loses its capacity to act.
- It demands that participants focus on their own behaviour and not on the behaviour of the other side. Participants are encouraged to think about new patterns of behaviour, attempting to experience a new responsive pattern of interaction.

GRIT was designed as a unilateral tool of planning. Within the framework of an interactive conflict resolution workshop, it can be a powerful tool because it leads participants into a behaviour-oriented dynamic and gives them the opportunity to listen to and experience the reaction of the other side to their steps. This helps participants to develop a better understanding of how their unilateral steps are being perceived by the other side. The focus on one's own behaviour and own actions fosters the self-esteem of a party and participants, since the other side cannot block them. A response is hoped for but not demanded. The GRIT model is therefore an excellent tool for simulating the dynamics of systemic therapy within the framework of a dialogue process. Moreover, having been invented during the Cold War, it appeals to politically-minded persons who are facing the challenge of conflict and confrontation.

## Conclusions

Interactive conflict resolution and systemic therapy have been strongly influenced by systemic thinking. While systemic therapy has a broad, detailed and nuanced understanding of its clients, providing techniques on how to guide each particular type of 'client' through the therapeutic process, interactive conflict resolution limits itself to a specific set of participants which should combine political influence with psychological readiness for dialogue.

The re-definition of the 'conflict' as a common problem is the central goal of a dialogue workshop. Once this has occurred, the politically influential participants generate impact in the political sphere. This chain of transformations is only possible with the 'right' set of participants – ones that resemble the attitudes of those labelled 'true clients' in systemic therapy. In this respect, interactive conflict resolution is built on the premise that with the right selection of participants 'political impact' can be achieved.

Taking the example of the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue process, it was argued that it is a significant challenge to create a group of participants that fulfils the criteria that are needed according to interactive conflict resolution approaches. With its explicit appeal

to governmental representatives (track 1,5), the Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue reflected fundamental contradictions between the parties. The participants could be described as a mixed group of different types of 'clients' that could not transcend itself and move towards a 'common problem definition'.

This diversity amongst participants has negative consequences for the quality of dialogue as practised in the analytical approach to conflict resolution. The development of a common understanding and the re-conceptualization of the problem does not work if the group is too diverse. Discussions will then go back and forth, not approaching any group-wide understanding.

This article argues that methods of interactive conflict resolution can be enriched using experiences from the field of systemic therapy. Here therapists do not carry out any pre-selection of 'clients'. However, therapists are aware that each type of client requires a specific treatment, and the means have been developed to address any client, irrespective of his or her profile. Essentially, interactive conflict resolution lacks this level of openness. However, it is argued that this openness does much more justice to people relating to the political realities they are facing.

The behaviour-oriented goal definition that has been commonly used in systemic therapy is a good approach that makes participants reflect on their own behaviour as well as on chains of interactions (dynamics). Within the context of dialogue workshops that have the same political intent as interactive conflict resolution workshops, the behaviour-oriented approach of systemic therapy ought to be operationalized with techniques that are acceptable to politically influential participants.

The article also reflected on two techniques that were shaped by behaviour-oriented goal definition and which were applied in the Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue program. However, additional methods from Systemic Coaching should also be transferred to dialogue settings.

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