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The Athenian Institute of Anthropos



Mina Polemi-Todoulou
Scientific Council Member
The Athenian Institute of Anthropos,
Athens, Greece

The AIA has been functioning for over 50 years as a **collective professional coevolving process**, as an **international interdisciplinary meeting point and incubator of theory development**, and as a **base for launching collaborative community-oriented projects**.

Name

The Athenian Institute of Anthropos (AIA).

Introduction

The **Athenian Institute of Anthropos (AIA)** – the first center for family therapy, group therapy, community interventions, and systemic practice in Europe – was founded in **1963 in Greece**, by **George and Vasso Vassiliou**, as a **center for training, therapy, prevention, consultation, research, and development of systemic applications to the systems of *Anthropos*** (meaning the whole human being, in Greek).

The AIA logo, with the **image of a lantern**, accompanied by the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes' quote **"For Anthropos I search,"** symbolizes the **vision of its founders for a world where cooperation and humanness would prevail over antagonism and exploitation**.

The Scope and Character

Developing an Approach

Since the beginning, the ongoing contact with innovative movements across the world kept the AIA community constantly fertilized with new ideas. Associates getting their academic training abroad brought back influences and acquaintances from different schools of thought. A strong feeling was generated throughout that of being part of an open process contributing to the creation of a new field.

The basic theoretical frame for AIA's work is the **"systemic-dialectic multilevel-multifocal approach"**: Anthropos is conceptualized as a **bio-psycho-social-economic-cultural, open system, spiraling toward more organized complexity through its interaction with other systems in the wider context**.

The model addresses the **self-leading aspects of the whole system**, as it emerges through the **interconnectedness, transaction, and coevolution of processes at different levels of complexity** – the individual, the family, the group, the community, and the culture. These

levels are utilized, in varied ways, in all interventions, training, and family or group therapy.

Priority is given to (a) **forming and keeping throughout a secure relational context**, (b) **acknowledging the coevolution among the interrelated systems as a primary factor in therapy and learning**, (c) **fostering the development of dialogue within and among members** holding different roles or points of view within or around each system, and (d) **appreciatively reflecting the unique contribution of each different viewpoint**.

The development of this approach and intervention model constitutes a primary contribution of the AIA to the therapeutic community. Along with this are two related techniques introduced by the Vassiliou in the late 1950s and extensively applied for five decades by the AIA network of professionals in a wide range of contexts, populations, and enriched variations: the **Synallactic** (meaning changing together in Greek) **Collective Image Technique (SCIT)** that utilizes the group or family members' interaction on a common stimulus and the **Sequence Analysis (SA)** of their contributions that provides the group or family theme as the frame for therapy (Vassiliou 1968).

Developing the Activities: Rationale and Target Groups

The AIA therapeutic and health promoting interventions and training programs have been developing around the following axes:

1. **Activities encompass the whole family life cycle:** children, adolescents, young adults, couples, parents, and families from pregnancy to the "empty nest." Activities address **the needs of the particular developmental phase** (e.g., for teens and young adults, programs aim at *autopoiesis* (i.e., self-forming) and *creating viable relationships while* for older adults at *the road to maturity*). They are carried out separately or in combination (e.g., parallel as well as mixed parent-children groups or daughters-mothers-grandmothers).
2. **A primary goal has been the sensitization of a wide spectrum of professionals** – related directly or indirectly with family functioning – **in the systemic approach and applications for the promotion of functioning of the Anthropos systems.** Included are all mental health practitioners, child carers and educators, as well as family physicians, human resource managers, organizational consultants, cultural mediators or animators, etc.
3. **The AIA activities are largely carried outside its murals, within the community, in collaboration with a wide range of institutions** relevant to family, welfare, mental health, and the challenges arising from crisis: public and private schools, childcare centers, welfare agencies, universities, hospital clinics, mental health and child psychiatry institutions, community centers, drug addiction institutions, rescue teams, institutions for children from broken homes, professional associations, municipal agencies, and Ministries (Education, Health, Culture, or Work) – the list includes almost every section of the societal structure. The collaboration encompasses staff training, consultation, supervision, and relevant research.
4. **Large-scale projects have frequently been the product of these collaborations.** For example:
 - (a) In the early days, in collaboration *with the University of Illinois*, a large-scale research was carried out comparing *subjective culture data* from different countries (Vassiliou and Vassiliou 1973).
 - (b) In the mid-1990s, responding to an invitation by the *Organization Against Drugs* (OKANA), the AIA designed and materialized a large-scale community program *Preparing Anthropos for the 2000* in six municipalities (population ranging from 28,000 to 85,000). The main goal was to introduce systemic training for parents, teachers, adolescents, young couples, and professionals working in the community, sensitizing them to the changing social realities and the new required skills, thus creating the ground work to be further developed by the newly created public Prevention Centers (Gournas et al. 1995).

- (c) In 2011, in the context of the *Major Foundation Program for Educators of the Ministry of Education*, AIA Associates designed and implemented an *Experiential Training Program on Developing Human Relations in the School Community*, addressed to about 16,000 school teachers in various parts of Greece (Polemi-Todoulou 2010).
5. **Interprofessional consultation programs** are regularly offered for the interdisciplinary teams of institutions, such as the drug prevention community centers in various parts of Greece, family therapy or child-guidance clinics, rural community psychiatry programs, substance addiction institutions, mental health centers for immigrants and refugees, welfare programs, and schools, in response to their own requests for help with bullying, substance abuse, or relationship difficulties, often leading to whole school community interventions utilizing the systemic-dialectic multilevel-multifocal methodology.
 6. **Interventions are tailor-made and interactional:** Rather than following a predetermined plan, an attempt is made to acknowledge the needs of the system as they emerge from the interactions unfolding during the course of intervention and to redesign step by step accordingly. Therefore, the outline of the intervention course, rather than existing beforehand, usually emerges as the process develops.
 7. **Therapy utilizes a combination of different contexts:** In order to effect a more holistic approach to a particular family case, for example, the therapists may flexibly combine sessions with the family, group therapy for one member over a period of time, couples group, children's group, genogram exploration, and family reconstruction, even experiential training addressing role or developmental phase challenges. Likewise, **professionals are encouraged to understand in depth more than one system** – not only the family but the therapeutic process in a group, the individual's inner dialogue, the large group process dynamics, and at least one broader system, e.g., a school community or a large organization, in order to better understand complex systems.
 8. As a living system, **the AIA is actively responding to the changes happening in the wider context, and the prioritization of its activities reflects this.** For example, in recent years, the activities addressed to adolescents need to take into account the reduced opportunities for autonomous face-to-face peer-grouping socialization (Polychronis 2018). The challenges arising from the widespread socioeconomic, political, and cultural crisis have urged the AIA associates to initiate or participate in programs addressing refugees, immigrants, or families with reduced financial viability, as well as school – mental health – or social welfare institutions that need to accommodate members from these populations. New elaboration of the approach and the techniques is necessitated to handle new emerging roles as the *cultural mediators* or the much needed cooperation among the many institutions (governmental/nongovernmental/private, local/international) that address refugees with different approaches and methods.
 9. **The AIA has developed its own guiding value system** as any organization in the course of its history: commitment to teamwork, meeting the challenges of cooperative over antagonistic orientation, utilizing differences within or among groups through open dialogue, acknowledging what is valuable in every member's contribution, seeking meaning in life though responsible and creative community membership, responding to changes affecting society, and taking leadership for community welfare. The G. Vassiliou's motto "**Autonomy through and for Interdependence**" and the AIA's logo "**For Anthropos I search**" reflect these values.

Training Program

The AIA basic **training** in family and group therapy and systemic thinking and applications **involves four cycles.** The first two are offered to a wider body of professionals; for therapists and

system process specialists, the completion of all four is required:

- A. **Introductory cycle:** Sensitization to the systemic-dialectic multilevel-multifocal approach
- B. **Intermediate cycle:** Systemic-dialectic epistemology and personal professional development
- C. **Advanced in-depth training cycle:** Family therapy, group therapy, multilevel group process interventions in broader systems
- D. **Supervised practice:** On family and group therapy and systemic interventions in and outside the institute

Examples of other seminars offered: Systemic diagnostic methodology, children's animation programs, sequence analysis, systemic applications in education, professional role dynamics, etc.

All training is experiential, actualizing the personal experiences of the participants in the context of a developing group process (Polychroni et al. 2008).

The course of training for each participant is personalized in collaboration with the Scientific Consultative Committee, and his/her unique professional profile is encouraged, along with cooperative peer relations, leading to lifelong collaborations.

Apart from the formal training, the trainee commits to a personal therapeutic process, including **didactic group therapy** and **family of origin exploration and reconstruction**. *Therapy for the therapist*, including family members, is encouraged.

With all the above, skills in both **autonomy** and **interdependence** and awareness of both **self** and **context** are targeted.

Yearly, on the average, about 150 professionals participate in the AIA seminars.

Impact

The AIA since its inception has had a **leading presence in the systemic field of family and**

group therapy and community interventions for the promotion of mental health in Greece and abroad.

It has extensively contributed to the **development of systemic theory and applications in therapy, prevention, and training**. Over 300 texts by AIA Associates are presented at the **AIA Communication Series**: chapters in books, articles in journals, technical reports and presented papers, books, and research monographs.

It has **provided the context for pioneer discussions on family therapy and systemic ideas** through the **Delphic Symposia** it organized, along with a wide range of international meetings and a rich schedule of **visiting and hosting leaders in the field** up to current times: Virginia Satir, Paul Watzlawick, Salvador Minuchin, Yvonne Agazarian, Mony Elkaim, Karl Tomm, Kenneth Gergen, Carlos Sluzki, Luigi Boscolo, Maurizio Andolfi, Luigi Onnis, Peter Lang, Elspeth McAdam, and Sue Johnson.

The AIA Newsletter was sent quarterly till the mid-1980s to an international network of about 600 professionals in 55 countries (*The AIA Newsletters: 1963–1988*).

AIA Associates have been serving in the **editorial board of many journals and book series**. Since 2008, the AIA is a joint publisher of *Human Systems*, the journal of systemic consultation and management, in collaboration with Leeds Family Therapy and Research Centre of the UK (K. Polychroni and P. Stratton (Eds)).

Over its 55-year course, more than **500 mental health professionals have completed the Institute's training cycle**, who in turn have expanded the field, **founding new systemic therapy and training institutions**, disseminating systemic ideas, and widening the spectrum of applications. Many leaders of the systemic and family therapy institutions in Greece and elsewhere, as well as university professors, have been trained or associated with the AIA and continue their collaboration.

The AIA Associates have played a leading role in the **formation of the professional scene of family therapy and systemic practice** by participating as founders, chairs, and board members of many Greek, European, and International

associations, e.g., EFTA (European Family Therapy Association), WASP (World Association of Social Psychiatry), MESPA (Mediterranean Sociopsychiatric Association), NORG (National Organization for Psychotherapy in Greece), ETHOS (Hellenic Federation of Family and Systemic Therapy), and HELASYTH (Hellenic Association for Systemic Therapy).

They have been actively involved in various **policy-making committees on social welfare, mental health, educational issues, and professional certification**, or in **task forces preparing reforms relevant to family functioning** (e.g., preschool childcare reform or the process of deinstitutionalization in the 1990s), leaving an impact on important institutions.

Locally and internationally, through an extensive involvement in collaborative projects and scientific meetings, **the AIA has contributed to an ever-growing network of systemic professionals** working and cooperating in a wide spectrum of different **fields and sectors of the society**, private and public, addressing different populations and challenges in a turbulent society that requires more than ever a holistic, cooperative, process-oriented, dynamic approach. The large community of systemic therapists that practice today in various parts of Greece to a large extent see their roots in the pioneering work of the AIA and its founders.

The AIA has been awarded by the World Association of Social Psychiatry (WASP) in 1974, in Athens, for *Organizing a Congress Pioneering Structure Content and Spiritwise* and by the Mediterranean Sociopsychiatric Association (MESPA) in 1980 in Dubrovnic for its *Outstanding Contributions to the Prevention of Malfunctioning and Promotion of Functioning of the Anthropos Systems in the Mediterranean Region and the World Over*.

Operation

The AIA functions in the frame of the professional, nonprofit, self-financed **Society for the Advancement of Human Relations Research (SAHRR)**, with the **goal of catalyzing**

cooperation in the sciences of Anthropos, both nationally and transnationally. The interdisciplinary body of SAHRR includes prominent figures in the society, who support the shared AIA vision. For many years it has been chaired by **Dr C. Spinellis**, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Athens University.

The AIA has been directed for 38 years by the Vassilios couple; since 2001 it is being operated by a team of long-standing Associates, consisting of **Petros Polychronis**, Child Psychiatrist, **AIA Director**, and the **AIA Scientific Consultative Committee Members: Giorgos Gournas**, Ph. D., Psychiatrist; **Mina Polemi-Todoulou**, Ph.D., Psychologist; **Kyriaki Protopsalti-Polychroni**, M.A., Psychologist; and **Dionyssis Sakkas**, Ph. D., Psychiatrist, all psychotherapists, members of the European Family Therapy Association, certified by the European Association of Psychotherapy and The American Group Psychotherapy Association.

Currently, about 20 professionals are regularly involved as AIA trainers, therapists, and supervisors, while the wider AIA project-supporting network includes more than 80 AIA-trained associates.

The AIA is an accredited member of the European Family Therapy Association-Training Institutes' Chamber (**EFTA-TIC**) of the European Association for Psychotherapy (**EAP**) and of the National Organization for Psychotherapy of Greece (**NOPG**).

Cross-References

- ▶ [EFTA](#)
- ▶ [Human Systems \(Journal\)](#)
- ▶ [Systemic-Dialectic-Multilevel-Multifocal Approach](#)
- ▶ [Vassiliou, George and Vasso](#)

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