

Chapter XXIV

Communication and Relation Building in Social Systems

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ABSTRACT

Research into human behaviour has produced much innovative modelling, some respectable instrumentation, but little empirical theory-testing. This chapter follows suit, but rather than pursuing a traditional division between abstract conceptualisation and pragmatic procedures in the analysis of systemic human behaviour, focus is on social and psychological systems defined as information-processing entities in a context of verbal organisation, communication, and control.

INTRODUCTION

The ability in man to build holistic structures from miniature data is a creative and logical competence. Although naturally occurring systems are only implicitly given in the physical world, they need to be explicitly identified before they can be studied. Checkland (1981) coined the concept *systems thinking* long after Wiener (1969, p. 31) had predicted the impact of modern technology in terms of human computer interaction (HCI): “in the future [...] messages between man and machines, between machines and man, and between machine and machine, are destined to play an

ever-increasing part.” Wiener’s prediction resulted in a strong belief in the ability in man to relate to others by means of verbal exchanges. In fact, this ability is a characterizing trait of humanity, mankind, fellowship, and togetherness. Furthermore, the innate quality in man to conceptualize comprehensive structures rather than memorizing isolated facts is a combined ontological and epistemological asset. A personal capacity to relate to sensations, perceptions, conceptions, and experiences in systemic terms, however, is different from the idea that any combination of items, things or situations make up an organized communicating structure. Such an understanding

of wholeness makes the concept system void of meaning.

Communicative behaviour materializes in global networks shared by universal religions, faiths, and belief systems. For example, *The Golden Rule* epitomizes an idealistic idea of mutuality, collectiveness, and responsibility, implying that if you treat others in the way that you are willing to be treated in the exact same situation, you verify the essence of life. Implicit contextual influences embedded in the Golden Rule verifies to the Kantian maxim that experience without theory is blind and also that theory without experience is wasted intellectual play. In commenting on the theory-practice theme of the Golden Rule, Lewin (1947) says the most practical thing is a good theory. Consequently, the most rewarding input to theory building is a good practice. As a result, the (action) researcher's values, objectives, and priorities are united in efforts at understanding group dynamics by active participation in a communicating social system (Parsons, 1951) of shared experiences.

People participate in social systems like families, institutions, communities, and nations. They interact with family members at home, peers at school, workplace colleagues on their jobs, and even as virtual agents in Web-based communities of practice. Groupings of systematically organized people are identified by age, geography, professionalism, interest, or coincidence. However, interacting, interdependent, and interrelated virtual communities like chat sessions, focus groups, or pod casts differ from traditional systems because modern technology enables constellations of people to operate in time and place dislocated contexts. Today the channels for communication are more elaborate than primal screams, smoke signals, or the telegraph. But for a long time, interactions have been constituted by verbal exchanges materializing as situated speech.

According to Bruner (1999) traditional research on education is a politically and culturally infected practice--especially research on information and

communication technology (ICT) highlights normative and technological pedagogy. For example, the introduction of software is sometimes seen as a vanguard for the elimination of educators. Still, educators try to adapt ICT interactions to teaching, studying, and learning, to combine motivational multiplayer software games with traditional curricular subjects like English, or general didactics like values. But an optimal design for studying the use of computers in education is hard to find. So rather than deploring the lack of measures for putting research on social systems right, we need to study the causal interdependencies, multiple influences, and evolving patterns of human communication.

SOCIAL SYSTEMS THEORY

The presumption of this chapter is that analysis of Web-based human systems may clarify the structure, functioning, and impact on human interactions. However, this is a difficult venture as the analyst is trapped in his own ways of thinking feeling and acting. More specifically, a Western tradition of linear Aristotelian or dualistic Cartesian thinking makes it hard for research to follow the epistemological logics of a more creative Eastern circular thinking tradition (Maruyama, 1963) with simultaneous interactions and non-sequential thinking.

Webster's Online Dictionary (2007) says that a *system* is a "regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole, which is in, or tends to be in, equilibrium." Likewise, the *Concise English Dictionary* cited in Dictionary.com (2007) says a system is a "coordinated arrangement or organized combination of things or parts, for working together, performing a particular function etc." Rowland (2004) says a system is whatever one chooses to label a system. However, such an understanding would open an unlimited space for the researcher to cultivate versus colonize human activities, processes, or

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