

From Getting It Right to Getting It Human: Reclaiming Imprecise Interpretations for Being and Knowing in the World

L. Kuhn PhD and R. Woog PhD

Centre for Systemic Development and Faculty of Social Inquiry, University of Western Sydney,
Richmond, NSW Australia, 2753

E-mail: l.kuhn@uws.edu.au, r.woog@uws.edu.au

ABSTRACT: *A dominant conversation among systems theorists centres on ‘getting it right’, on methodological purity. The explicitness of the interpretation and the correct use of the methodology are emphasised. This presumes objectivity associated with systems methods and systems thinking. In this regard, systems theorists may resemble such groups whose identity is reliant upon shared and, at times, narrowly defined ontological and epistemological similarity; for example, some forms of feminism, fundamentalist religionists or political conservatives. Doctrinaire use of theory, it is argued, is profoundly disrespectful of the human being as knowledge constructor, a subjective I/we in the world. This paper makes a plea for bringing more balance between humans as knowledge constructors and users of particular systems methodology. Such a balance will allow enhanced liberation of thought and thus more creative practical intervention. A particular style of systemic exploration, one that is less preoccupied with getting it theoretically right, and more on getting it coherently human, will result.*

Keywords: systems theory, organisational management, knowledge construction, creativity, humanness.

INTRODUCTION

‘We burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereupon to build a tower reaching to the infinite. But our groundwork cracks...’ (Blaise Pascal in ‘The Two Infinities’)

It is in everyone’s interest to accord ‘magic’ – that special, certain, expert and sure-to-succeed knowledge – to theories and programs introduced into management situations. Those working in organisations who are concerned with better management are predisposed to look towards using particular theories precisely because of what they believe, or others have led them to believe, are the benefits of the theory. Why else would they bother to pay for expensive consultants or copyrighted programs?

In recent times, systems theory, in various formulations, has been utilised in management practice (Beer 1985, Flood and Jackson 1991, Flood 1996). The hope is that this expertise, variously titled systemic thinking, or a systems methodology, will deliver; it will ‘improve’ the situation in some way. Thus, for those investing in this form of improvement, to feel they have made the right and wise decision, the theory must be seen to deliver. On the other hand, for those offering systems expertise, it is important they be viewed as holding some superior knowledge by which they bring salvational remedy to the organisation. How else may they ‘sell’ their usefulness to the organisation?

We have experienced this mindset frequently, through our postgraduate teaching and through consulting. In discussing their own and other’s work, practitioners privilege ‘purity of theory’ over ‘theory as a modifiable construct’. They accord the authoritative knowledge as residing with a particular systems theory per se, while questioning their appropriate interpretation and correct use of it. Little veracity is given to their ability to modify the theoretical construct, let alone act as generators of new forms of systems theory.

Reflection on the use (by others as well as ourselves) of systems theory in organisational management requires deliberation on the assumptions held regarding the knowledge generated. Concomitantly, the sense of ourselves as knowledge producers that these frameworks engender (or attract) must also be thought through. A reflective philosophical perspective, which is not usually emphasised in bringing systems to organisational management situations, is however a significant property of the system, when observer, the observed, as well as the nature of the observation, are included within the system. The validity of the theory cannot be decided without recourse to thinking from outside the system in question: hence the nature of humanness and human knowing becomes inescapably important.

A REFLECTIVE PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

It would appear that the mindset of systems is largely one of analysis and interpretation within the ‘rules’ of the theoretical framework utilised. Focus on the use of a systems approach, be it as a methodological framework or

an explicit model-forming activity, as 'correct use' and 'right interpretation', presupposes that objective, and pre-decided meaning is somehow attached to such systems ideas. In this way, the frail and infallible human is removed from focus. The systems ideas are treated as external phenomena, free of social, place, scale and time implications. Human meaning-making becomes likewise narrowed and stripped of agency. Meaning is presupposed to be invariable: the same for all people at all times and in all places. This assumption of the invariance of meaning, in turn, leads to the belief that new knowledge, that is legitimate and secure, will not be invented by practitioners, but must await discovery through adherence to authoritative and self-regulating methodologies. In short – a reliance on humanly constructed criteria that has lost its visible attachment to the very humanity from which it owes its genesis. For now, the authority resides with the technology, in the form of codification for modes of operation that, just like systems ideas, have indeed evolved out of the historicity and creativity of human experience.

Holding up for scrutiny this common attitude towards the utilisation of systems theory raises serious concerns regarding the nature of humans as creative, aspiring and self-directing beings. Of relevance to organisational management interests are questions relating to a loss of innovative potential in practical intervention.

REGARDING HUMANNESS

To clarify our perspective on the nature of humanness, it is illuminating to turn to two philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt.

(1) Heidegger's Distinction between Meditative and Calculative Thinking

Martin Heidegger contends that human life is situated within and characterised by mystery. Heidegger viewed life as essentially mysterious: 'the essential trait of what we call mystery [is] that which shows itself and at the same time withdraws' (1966:55). This perspective can be taken as understanding that the nature of existence co-arises with understanding of the world – a philosophic parallel to the notion of observer influencing the observed and vice versa. For Heidegger, authentic human living involves 'being open', that is, having a meditative attitude (he calls this 'releasement') to the mystery. Such a meditative stance allows the possibility of existing in the world in a totally different way. Heidegger states that fundamentally we are:

Meditative being[s] ... [who] stand at once within the realm of that which hides itself from us, and hides itself just in approaching us. That which shows itself and at the same time withdraws is the essential trait of what we call mystery. (Ibid pp.55f.)

To be open to the mystery, in turn, requires that people be conceived as capable of original and spontaneous response; in other words, self-directed and autonomous.

Heidegger is concerned that when people do not have the potential to engage in contemplative or meditative thinking, but instead become habitually 'calculative' thinkers, they come as a result to take a singular view of life. They become caught up in planning and calculation, caught in a rut of limited vision and thus increasingly surrounded by cultural artefacts (understandings and phenomena arising from similar, narrowly constructed activity) which further promote only 'calculative' thinking. Without 'thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is' (Ibid. p.46) it is easy to assume life is simpler than it is. Such singularity of thinking, according to Heidegger, does not value ambiguity, unknowing or conflict. With calculative thinking, all meditative thinking (which is inherent in the rise of calculation) is removed by those who initially do the enumeration or modelling. The end result of this spiral, Heidegger contends, is that meditative thinking as a normative mode of being may cease, and people would lose precisely that aspect of their humanness that distinguishes humans from other forms of life.

Systems theory owes its existence to a meditative style of thinking. The emergence of new theoretical constructs represents the freedom of thought previously not thought. In our utilisation of systems, we have the potential to move from openness to the possibility of seeing things differently, to a calculative stance, where focus is entirely upon what may be achieved by our 'correct' use of the theory. In Heidegger's terms, this represents an unauthentic way of dealing with the theory. There can, however, be meditative ways of incorporating calculative inputs (that is, theoretical frameworks designed for specific gains) where practitioners creatively engage with the theories. Such ways would accord greater significance to the human as autopoietic knowledge constructor, a user and modifier of theories.

(2) Arendt's Distinction between Action and Making

Following on from Heidegger, Arendt's conceptualisation of humanness involves a distinction between 'action' and 'making'. For Arendt, 'action' depicts the highest manner of being human. 'Action' relates to a person's

revealing of himself or herself as unique and distinct. It is through action, according to Arendt, that people 'reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world' (Arendt 1958:179). She sees circularity occurring here – the actions form the very means by which a person is constituted. In this sense people cannot be viewed as sole creators of their lives – for they are actors and sufferers, responders within in it. For her, 'the real story in which we are engaged as long as we live has no visible or invisible maker because it is not made' (Arendt 1958:186). Individual's actions occur in a web of relationships, where there is an inevitable conflicting of wills and intentions. As a consequence of these interactions, individuals are neither able to exercise sovereignty over their own lives, nor the lives of others.

However, people can fall from 'action' as their primary mode of being, to 'making' where they passively adapt to society, and for Arendt, to society's emphasis on making artefacts and utilities, in the interest of survival. Arendt argues that, in doing this, the idea of usefulness comes to dominate as the prime criterion for meaning, and that this leads to meaninglessness: 'in other words, utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness' (Arendt, 1958:154).

When we give our dynamis of action over to particular theoretical frameworks, although we might not immediately see ourselves as caught up in 'making' we are just as caught up in a form of passivity, as someone more overtly working towards other forms of technocratic efficiency. We have given over our spark of distinction. In our theorising, rather than engage in the playing out of conflicting wills – here alternative, perhaps original conceptions – we put the theory into a position of sovereignty. By deferring to the theory, we defer to utility – the presumed utilitarian benefit of the theory – rather than human evanescence and ingenuity.

In summary these philosophers stress:

1. The ultimate mystery and complexity of the world, humans and the relationship between humans and our knowing of the world.
2. The importance of living with a deep awareness of this mysteriousness and protecting our ability to think differently.
3. That humans can have a lower mode of being that undermines originality, denies human ingenuity and creativity, and that condenses the world to one dimensional terms (a fall from 'meditative thinking' and from 'action' to 'calculative thinking' and 'making').
4. That meaninglessness is the inevitable outcome of existence given over to others conceptions and purposes of life.
5. That in taking on the lower mode of being we deny our essential humanness and the complexity of the world.

HOORAH FOR THE HUMAN

Utilising systems theory in management practice involves practitioners as actors exercising judicious judgements in a flexible manner. Application of a systems approach may usefully be divided into a series of four stages – issue identification and delineation, design of systems application, systemic intervention and systemic evaluation. Each of these stages involve us as thoughtful beings, making subjective judgements.

For example, identification and delineation of issues requires that the practical setting and the issues focussed upon must be chosen. There needs to be development through discussion, a sense enough of a common mindset, that a systems intervention may be agreed to by those judged to be involved. Working with others towards a shared mindset requires a meditative style of being – some awareness of alternatives, of ways of positively engaging with others, and a means of developing satisfactory collaboration.

Our intention is not to deny that other systems theorists have drawn attention to systems as a profoundly human enterprise. Critical Systems Theory is quite explicit in this regard. The three fundamental commitments that CST (Midgley 1996, Flood and Romm 1996, Jackson 1991) has consistently identified as characteristic of this approach to systems attests to its commitment to viewing systemic work as inescapably human, namely:

- critical awareness – consideration of taken-for-granted assumptions;
- emancipation – focus on 'improvement' in temporal and local terms;
- methodological pluralism – utilising multiple research methods in a theoretically coherent manner.

These commitments necessarily implicate recourse to what might be termed 'epistemic awareness' or 'meta-mental assent' – having the capacity to reflect on others' and one's own ways of knowing and construing the world.

And yet, despite such emphasis and insight, so often it is 'the theory' that is equated with expertise in management settings.

It is interesting then to explore, in terms of systems theory, what is claimed specifically or by inference as an inherent foundational characteristic of the theory that allows it to be used to interpret social complexity pertaining to management.

The proposition may be advanced that this theory is claimed as having an interpretive and methodological relevance, which it does not possess, and which may be more rightfully attributed to generic, unspecified human

attributes such as ingenuity and insight. This may appear as somewhat of an intellectual proposition with nothing more than curiosity value. The argument may be given more social relevance and stature if a corollary proposition is advanced.

The corollary may be that some forms of use of systems theory can actually rob humans both of awareness and application of their full potential. Under the guise of being a powerful intellectual lever the theory becomes disempowering in detracting from the status and popularity of use of such of the human traits as insight, consonance, abduction, hope and dreaming.

Is our greatest intellectual aptitude the freedom of thought not thought?

Referring to insights from systems theory as 'laws' or scientific laws, strengthens the security of the knowledge presumed to be held by the theory, while concomitantly disempowering/weakening the role of the person referring to the theory/law, in questioning or creatively approaching the ideas (theories) in question. We do well to remember that scientific laws, in this regard, are 'thought laws' and not 'natural laws' (Butz, Chamberlain and McCown 1997:41).

Often too there are powerful social organisations surrounding and acting in gate-keeping roles that serve to reinforce a sense of the presumed authoritativeness of the theory. Perhaps it is useful to view a theory as a hypothesis 'that by consensus has greater heuristic potential than others' (Ibid). Viewing theory in this way stresses its social origins – that the theory owes its existence to the consensual agreement of a particular group of humans. This stance emphasises the finiteness of theories: that they may be replaced as more comprehensive and useful sets of ideas gain acceptance.

When the theories are applied to various domains it is commonplace to have direct connections ascribed between the theory and the social domain of application, with little regard for the ingenuity and creativity of those suggesting the application. In this way it seems more that the theory is telling authoritatively about the domain, rather than that it is a theoretical construct developed in one situation and is now being creatively applied to another.

To move from 'making' to 'action' in our theorising requires a more cautious approach to the interpretative and methodological power of the theory, along with greater emphasis on human creativity.

Conceptualising humans and social phenomena as autopoietic places the locus of impetus with the system (the individual, or various social groupings). Viewing the individual-as-observer as an autopoietic system allows emphasis to be placed on the sense-making activity of the researcher rather than requiring adherence to a particular, deterministic, fundamental body of knowledge. Knowledge itself can be viewed as emergent, as open to revisions and re-thinking. Recognition of autopoiesis also sets a framework for viewing individuals, as well as various social groupings, as not ultimately being within the sovereign control of others, (here systems experts) – a concern expressed by Arendt.

A WARNING

It is a small step from using theory to bowing to it as dogma; from holding to it as doctrine, to becoming doctrinaire in our allegiance to it. At one level, exacting systemic theory can be seen as representative of precision, clarity of mind and disciplined thinking. However, this may very soon lead to exclusivity because of associated uniqueness and privilege in knowing – a warning against ontological shackling under the guise of precision and rigour of thinking. Instead, rigour can be associated with the interaction of critical and creative thought with theory, applied with attention to appropriateness in particular practical contexts. Such an approach resembles Max Delbruck's principle of limited sloppiness, wherein new, important and unexpected results may occur in scientific research (Grinnell 2000).

CONCLUSION

This paper makes a plea for bringing more balance between humans as 'knowledge constructors' and as 'users of particular systems methodology'. When people engage in Heidegger's contemplative or meditative thinking, or in Arendt's 'action', they are liberating their creativity and ability to think differently; a position from which new theories, modifications and applications spring. By keeping in mind that the strength and relevance of a theory or hypothesis is simply a consensus among practitioners of its greater heuristic potential, we can avoid the pitfall of giving a theory such power and sovereignty that it robs us of our confidence in our own insight, consonance, abduction, hope and dreaming as humans.

A balance between humans as knowledge constructors and as users of a particular theory would enhance liberation of thought and, thus, enable more creative, practical intervention while holding provisionally to a theory.

In the very human world of management, to give sovereignty to systems theory, for instance, could be interpreted as falling from a position of Arendt's 'action' to that of 'making', of having given up our uniqueness and distinctiveness as interpreters, sense-makers and knowledge constructors to that of automatons of the theory's implementation.

Impetus and responsibility for innovation and improvement in management could be placed back on to the human being as a subjective I/we in the world, rather than on the precise and expert application of any particular theory. Returning emphasis from the pure application of theory to the human component of knowledge construction would lead to systemic exploration that is less preoccupied with getting it right, and more with getting it coherently human.

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