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Dialogue and Systems Thinking: Building a Bridge for the Practitioner

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The following paper was presented as part of a workshop entitled “**The Contexts of Dialogue**” at the 2004 National Conference on Dialogue & Deliberation.

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Introduction

Systems thinking is a way of mapping diverse opinions and exploring that territory. The tools of systemic thinking therefore provide a way to mark the breadcrumb trail on the dialogical practitioner's journey. This journey is a process that happens within a complex self-organizing system that enables people's multi-modal engagement, in multiple ways on multiple levels.

Dialogue is a space in which groups of individuals are both validated and learn to change. Dialogue is an intentional practice that cherishes complex individuals within complex groups that exist within an intricate and complicated world. Systems thinking is about relationships which are validated and which the individuals learn to change. Systems thinking points out that the individuals together are more than they are apart. Systems thinking helps the practitioner focus on the matrix of relationships between individuals, groups and cultures. Together, this is self-organized co-intelligence.

Both the systems thinker and the dialogician can see they are part of an inescapable pattern of complex relationships that is larger than the individual participants.

The tools of dialogue imply a practice, the practice implies a worldview. The dialogical practice and the practice of systems thinking are different, but dialogue and systems thinking express both systemic and wholistic worldviews. Therefore, the tools and practice of systems thinking are aligned with the practice of dialogue. It's not the tools or the practice that are the most important element. It's sufficient to use the tools and practice, but that would miss the essential point that there is a world-view. This is a way of being in the world, not a way of doing.

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Dr Marsha Linehan points out that in order to help patients create positive change for themselves, the therapist must both unconditionally validate the patient as they are and also strongly push the patient to change. However, these two cannot be done at the same time. Unconditional validation will not motivate a patient to change and pushing a patient to change will not be viewed as validation. The therapist must create an environment for the patient that enables change through an ongoing relationship that includes both validation and motivation. (1993)

Dialogue is a process that re-humanizes and validates the participants. Systems thinking is a process that looks for ways to create sustained positive change. Linehan's work suggests that validation and motivation must coexist within ongoing social change projects. Both dialogue, as a process of validation, and systems thinking, as a process of motivation, are necessary elements to the ongoing project to create sustained positive change within situations of ingrained and longstanding social conflict.

What is systems thinking?

Systems thinking provides a specific heuristic for describing dynamic and complex relationships with an eye to creative change. The importance of the relationships is key. A system is an organized collection of interdependent relationships that has emergent properties. A collection without important relationships is merely a heap, which either has as yet unsurfaced relationships in desperate need of a shave with Occam's Razor or does not function as a system.

A system exists within an environment and is comprised of parts. These parts are in particular and important communicative relationships and the system is in communication with its environment. The selection of a systemic boundary, the division

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between a system and its environment, is an important step in the heuristic. A system can be a significant collection of subsystems, and the environment is a collection of systems. The selection of systemic boundary is an exercise in focus to foreground significant relationships. It is vitally important to recognize that the selection of systemic boundary is not static. Unexpected results when attempting to implement change within a system would suggest that the systemic boundary has not been drawn broadly enough.

A collection of subsystems or a collection of systems are both wholes that have properties that cannot be reduced to the parts, but exist due to the particular collection of relationships. A quality that arises from particular systemic relationships is an emergent property of that system. Emergent properties are the necessary and sufficient result of a system. If necessary parts of a system are removed or added, then the emergent property is lost. An Occam's Razor test for the boundary of systems would be that the emergent property sustains when apparent elements are removed.

Systems are communication loops between parts, and are also participants in their environment. Communication within systems is in the form of reinforcing or balancing loops. Communication between a system and the environment is in the the form of inputs and outputs. The difference is where one draws the systemic boundary.

Systems, through their communication loops, tend to be self-organizing. This is a process called autopoiesis. Complex systems tend to both maintain and adapt which means that attempts to change meet systemic resistance unless systemic relationship are taken into account. Atlee (2003) mentions Hock's idea of chaordic process (1999) which includes the self-organizing autopoiesis within elements of both order and chaos.

Changing a system means applying leverage to the relationships or developing

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tactics that address the sustainability of the parts. A system can be dismantled if the parts are disabled, however this is a gross way of changing systems. A more subtle approach to creating change within a system would be to alter the relationships to create new results. Intervention in a system must be recognized as a complex art, and one which requires an ongoing relationship with the system. The process of creating systemic change is itself a system, a feedback loop from the system to the change practitioner which alters the behaviour of both. A single intervention in a system cannot itself be systemic if it is not part of an ongoing relationship and communication.

Systemic change is also not sufficient if it merely perpetuates the existing function of a system. Change which does not alter the relationships in a system is 1st order change. Change which alters the relationships of the system itself is 2nd order change. Senge speaks of this distinction as adaptive versus generative learning. Argyris and Schön speak of single and double loop learning. (1992)

Worldviews

Systems thinking is focused on interrelationships and communication between events, people, places and things as a way to understand change. Systemic tools and the practice of systems thinking point to a more systemic worldview. These tools and this worldview provide a theory of practical change. Within the systemic worldview, the whole is also greater than the sum of its parts and relationships. This is significantly different than mechanistically seeing the whole as merely the sum of its parts, or that the whole can be understood by merely understanding the components from which it is comprised. Systems thinking is also not fulfilled by seeing the synergistic whole while failing to examining the relationships between the parts. Through systems thinking one

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can gain an appreciation and understanding of the parts, their relationship to each other, and of the whole. Systems thinking helps the dialogical practitioner focus on the dynamic matrix of relationships between individuals, groups and cultures.

Dialogue is a space in which groups of individuals are first validated, and then can be transformed through this validation. Dialogue is an intentional practice that cherishes complex individuals within complex groups that exist within an intricate and complicated world. Dialogue can also facilitate change within individuals and groups.

Systems thinking points out that the individuals together are more than they are apart because of the relationships between the individuals. Dialogue points out that every participant is part of the whole, and collectively we make up more than all of us as unconnected parts. The systemic worldview is focusing on the relationships and the impact of those relationships. The systemic worldview also focuses on making and observing changes in systems. The wholistic worldview focuses on observing and cherishing the whole, and pushing towards a unified vision of everything being connected. Through systems thinking and dialogue, we can begin to understand and balance systemic and wholistic worldviews in an attempt to engage in and stimulate co-intelligence.

Within dialogue there is a distinction between reality and truth. The canonical process for dialogue is to create an environment from which natural dialogue can emerge. Further, from natural dialogue a new reality that is neither one or another previously present nor merely a sum created from the participants can emerge. During dialogue something new, a *tertium quid* – the third thing – is possible. *Tertium Quid* is the emergent property that is created through the synergy of two or more individuals coming

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together in genuine dialogue. Senge explains:

“In a discussion, decisions are made. In a dialogue, complex issues are explored...When they are productive, discussions converge on a conclusion or course of action. On the other hand, dialogues are diverging; they do not seek agreement, but a richer grasp of complex issues. Both dialogue and discussion can lead to new courses of action; but actions are often the focus of discussion, whereas new action emerges as a by-product of dialogue.” (1994, p 247)
Not only is this new reality, the *teritum quid*, an emergent property of the

dialogue but the dialogue itself is an emergent property of the enabling environment.

These two are results of an inherently systemic process that espouses a wholistic worldview.

Dialogue also serves as a way for us to see a slice of our society’s interactions.

Bohm describes dialogue as a microcosm: “As a microcosm of the large culture, Dialogue allows a wide spectrum of possible relationships to be revealed...But it is most deeply concerned with understanding the dynamics of how thought conceives such connections.” (Bohm, et al.,1991)

But not all dialogue is a good representation of a society. For a dialogue to be a microcosm, Bohm states, the group must be the right size.

“But a group that is too small doesn’t work very well. If five or six people get together, they can usually adjust to each other so that they don’t say the things that upset each other – they get a ‘cozy adjustment.’ ... In a larger group, we may well start our politely. After a while, though, people can seldom continue to avoid all the issues that would be troublesome. ... So when you raise the number to about twenty, something different begins to happen. And forty people is about as many as you can conveniently arrange in a circle...In that size group, you begin to get what may be called a ‘microculture.’ You have enough people coming in from different sub-cultures so that they are a sort of microcosm of the whole culture.” (Bohm, 1996)

Atlee also writes about the importance of a selection of people representing a whole society. He calls these groups Citizen’s Councils. “It taps into one of the most mysterious characteristics of wholeness – that the whole can be contained within a part of

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itself. Just as you can taste a soup with one spoonful, you can tap the wisdom of a whole community through *the thoughtful dialogue of a properly diverse group of its citizens.*” (2003)

For both Bohm and Atlee, dialogue must be wholistically representative. Facilitators also help to create the dialogical space by more actively and consciously maintaining a balanced dialogical environment. Facilitators achieve this by maintaining the ground rules of dialogue and by modeling the wholistic worldview. By enforcing conversation styles that are more wholistic, the possibility for an emerging natural dialogue becomes more likely.

At the same time, dialogue enriches the relationships between the participants, and the communication that takes place is a complex systemic loop. Dialogue is a systemic process that leads to an increasingly wholistic awareness.

Why combine Dialogue and Systems Thinking?

It is possible to use the tools of either systems thinking or dialogue without holding the worldviews they indicate, but the worldviews are there. The thoughtful practitioner will eventually hear the call to them and this will become a position call to the practitioner. The clients will be exposed to the worldviews through the thoughtful practitioner, and this will act as a position call for the client. While it's possible for the client or the practitioner to miss the worldview, the worldviews may not be divorced from practice. Authentic practice of dialogue or systems thinking will repeatedly call these worldviews to the attention of the practitioner as their practice deepens. However, unless the practitioner is conscientious about representing these worldviews, they may become lost to the client.

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There isn't even an entry in the index for systems thinking in Atlee's book. (2003) Despite the importance Senge places on his Fifth Discipline, systems thinking, he also seems confused about the difference between the systemic and wholistic worldviews when he states:

“David Bohm's work on dialogue is informed throughout by a systemic perspective. In fact, an integrating thread throughout Bohm's work has been to continue to advance the perspective of 'wholeness' in physics.” (1994, p.266) These worldviews are complementary but distinct. Dialogue cherishes and validates people in an increasingly wholistic way. Systems thinking is about relationships and works to create sustained positive change. Dialogue and systems thinking together offer a subtle but essential paradigmatic switch from viewing the self as participating in community, to seeing the collective experience of individuals – this is the combined world-view that is common to the tools of mediation, dialogue and democracy.

To see the other as trying to do good, even when that act appears as evil to ourselves is a worthy endeavor. To see the divinity in others, in essence to remind the self of the meaning of the greeting *Namaste*, is one way, but there's also the very practical observation that everyone acts on the best information they have available to make the best choices they are able to make. The project of constantly widening circles of compassion is in response to what Albert Einstein calls an “optical delusion of our consciousness.” Einstein further points out that:

“This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” (Miejan, 2004) Sam Keen's *The Faces of the Enemy* speaks to the function of dehumanizing the enemy. (1991) When the Other is dehumanized, all kinds of horrific acts against them become possible. However, subtle acts of violence and alienation also become possible.

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The process of wholistically re-humanizing human relationships becomes a cure and an imperative to reverse the socialization of soldiers into killers of other humans and to address the fundamental personal alienation that comes from all levels of conflict.

Another way to think of this is to remember, originally from the Roman playwright Terrence, that “nothing human is alien to me.”

Michael Learner’s *What it Means to Open Our Hearts to the Other* says that the “absolute prerequisite for making peace” is to “reconnect with what it means in the Torah when it tells us categorically ‘Thou shalt love the stranger.’” (n.d.) On one level, “Thou” and the “stranger” have to be recognized as diverse and complex social beings which collectively work against themselves as pluralities of opinion and motives. On a deeper level, the polarity between the self and other must be recognized as only being artificially distinct from each other because of a fundamental interdependent relationship that becomes apparent when viewed from a more wholistic perspective. When the distinction collapses the two are both re-humanized from the alienation and illusion of isolated pain, and come to realize that hurting one is a collective act that hurts both. In the famous words of Walt Kelly’s Pogo, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” (White, n.d.) (*Walt Kelly Biography*, n.d.)

The idea of a balance between the mind and heart is the fundamental principle from which this follows naturally. Robin Kelly from the Nov '02 edition of the *New Internationalist* reflects this idea:

“Despite having spent a decade and a half writing about radical social movements, I am only just beginning to see what has animated, motivated, and knitted together those gatherings of aggrieved folks. I have come to realize that once we strip radical social movements down to their bare essence and understand the collective desires of people in motion, freedom and love lie at the very heart of the matter.” (2002)

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From this fundamental principle, creative tension pulls people toward love of each other and the environment where they live, generates an impulse toward the complimentary worldviews of systems and wholism. An image that sings deeply of this melding of systemic and wholistic worldviews comes from Thich Nhat Hanh's *Peace is Every Step*. Hanh says, “Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.” (1992)

In the *Tao of Democracy* the push is to create change. In order to create change, one must validate and motivate, within the context of a long-term relationship. One must be intentionally both wholistic and systemic, because our highly polarized world will not change unless it is both valued and encouraged by change agents engaged in a long-term project.

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