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Editorial

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Editorial to Issue 41(1)

This is the first edition of a new look *Systemist*, and my first as Managing Editor. I am excited and energised by the potential of this journal in its renewed mission to publish Systems ideas and, especially, to promote dialogue between those ideas and their use in practical settings. As Immanuel Kant is reported to have said: '*Experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere intellectual play*'[1]. It has long been a problem in academic life that scholars have tended to surround themselves with screens, marking off one area of understanding from another and in the process narrowing their focus. Systems, as a lens for looking at the World, enables as to look beyond these divisions among forms of knowledge. Our stance is interdisciplinary, looking for interconnectedness within and among the phenomena we observe and experience, rather than opportunities to isolate and classify. Interdisciplinarity '*interlocks with the concerns of epistemology ... and tends to be centred around problems and issues that cannot be addressed or solved within the existing disciplines, rather than a quest for an all-inclusive synthesis*' (Moran, 2002).

It is unfortunate that the exigencies of academic life have driven even Systemists into a tendency to divide and classify. I once encountered a colleague as I was about to enter a seminar on Modelling and Simulation. He said 'What are you doing here? You are a soft Systems person.' Well, yes, I have used soft Systems ideas but that does not mean I cannot appreciate that there is a role for hard methods in tackling real world issues and problems; a role that is complementary, and not in conflict with other Systems approaches. Our choices among systemic approaches should be determined by context, interests and perspectives on problem spaces and the ways in which we perceive systems of interest. Methods become more or less useful, singly or in plurality, depending upon the context of use - always assuming that choice is logical and use is epistemologically sound. Reflecting upon the future of interdisciplinarity, Graff (2015, p.215) suggests '*What is at stake is nothing less than the framing of efforts to make progress on major intellectual and social problems; issues of public policy; expectations and anticipations; the allocation of resources, including the time and efforts of people and institutions; the articulation of organizations and structures; and professional careers and human lives*.' This also resonates in relation for Systems research.

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[1] Society for the Advancement of General Systems, Vol. 7-8 (1962), p. 11, by the Society for the Advancement of General Systems Theory.

As Gibbons, et al (1994) pointed out, production of new knowledge may come from two directions. 'Discovery mode' may be the province of scholars and experts. It is curiosity-driven and validated within officially-sanctioned institutions, through peer scrutiny. In the second mode, inquiry is context-related and progress is non-linear. Exploration relates to resolution of shared problems/issues. Often, this second mode of knowing is intended to be exploited for the benefit of some (specific) stakeholders, and it is validated through (ad hoc) communities of practice that espouse shared values and understandings. In our own field, it is vital that these two strands are brought together to harmonise and re-energise one another in developing tools and techniques to tackle 21st Century problems. This journal welcomes contributions from every area of Systems thinking and practice.

In this issue, there are six papers that serve to represent the broad church that is 'Systems'. The first paper, from Lucia Urbani Ulivi and Primavera Fisogni, discusses the concept of individual identity, long the subject of discussion within the realms of philosophy and psychology. These authors bring a Systems lens to bear on the issue. Considering identity as a 'whole', they use the concept of constraint from the field of biology to view identity as a result of process within particular constraints. It is then suggested that consciousness can be interpreted as an emergent property of continuous interactions between processes and constraints. With the second paper in this issue, we move from this very specific focus to a broader view as Prof. Emeritus Michael C Jackson looks back over the development of Critical Systemic Thinking, its impact in many fields of social endeavour and the work that still remains to be done. He comments that, at the end of the 1970s, some authors pointed to a Kuhnian crisis in Management Science, in which systems analysis and systems engineering were no longer perceived to be adequate to the challenges posed by management, and that CST arose in the context of this lacuna, taking a philosophical turn inspired by the work of the Frankfurt school. Reading these first two papers reminded me that Systems thinking can always be seen as an exercise in practical philosophy, since it frequently takes us on a journey that touches on ethics, decision theory, value theory, reflective practice, and so on. It requires that we question our own assumptions, as well as those of others. The next paper is from Prof. Frank Stowell, who also draws upon the Frankfurt school, taking a phenomenological stance to consider how the ideas underpinning a soft systems approach could help us to manage the constant stream of 'information' that threatens to overwhelm us in the 21st Century. He highlights the importance of subjectivity in shaping our thinking and influencing our behaviour, suggesting that recognising this may help us to put into context and critically evaluate the 'information' we receive. The fourth paper also considers

information, but from a content perspective. Xioping Shen, Lishuan Qin and Junkang Feng discuss the nature of modern Information Systems, perceiving that the notion of Information Content is rarely defined. They consider this to be unsatisfactory and seek for a better approach, drawing upon a number of qualitative theories in order to highlight a conceptual framework consisting of source, bearer and receiver. They use this as a framework to formulate proposals for information content mapping for information integration. In the fifth paper of the Issue, Petia Sice, Garry Elvin, Lee Walton, Chirine Riachy, Corinna Zink, Laurie Rauch, and Yilun Shang report on an impact study for a lung benefitting and strengthening exercise based on a practice from traditional Chinese medicine. These authors draw upon autopoietic theory of self-organization in living systems to inform their evaluation and ensure data reliability. They suggest that data quality is enhanced by focusing patient's awareness in their immediate embodied experience. In complete contrast, the final paper in the Issue from Christine Welch, Tammi Sinha and Christopher Milner is concerned with readiness for change within business organisations. These authors consider the nature of organisations as dynamic open systems, seeking to maintain viable relations with wider systems and the environment. The endemic and accelerating nature of change in the business environment is discussed, with the resultant need for continual innovation. The paper goes on to consider whether Beer's Viable Systems Model can be used as a vehicle for reflection by managers seeking to maintain viability during periods of rapid and continuing transformation.

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I look forward to receiving and processing contributions for the next edition of this journal from Systemists of all traditions and a wide range of contexts and disciplines. I would also be glad to hear from anyone who would like to review for the journal. I sincerely hope by the time I write the next Editorial, means will have been found to bring the pandemic under control and permit normal life to resume.

Christine Welch

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