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Abstracts

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Identity Within Constraints

Processes of Systemic Anthropology

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Primavera Fisogni, La Provincia

What makes the identity of a person at a time or through time has been an open question for philosophy since the very idea of the individual Self failed the scrutiny of Hume (A Treatise of Human Nature, 1739). If we accept Humean skepticism, we are forced to reject the strong confidence we have of being an individual, and if we refuse the denial made by Hume we must find reasons to support our view. Since traditional conceptual patterns explored by philosophers have proved unable to find any valuable answer to Hume's challenge, our first move is to introduce new concepts, better suited for this task. Human identity deserves any renewed comprehension efforts since what we think we are will not remain an academic exercise, but will strongly influence the way we behave in our community.

In this paper we focus upon identity according to System Thinking (Bertalanffy, 1967; Urbani Ulivi, ed. 2019 a; 2019 b), that drafts attention to whole entities and to their properties, and inclined the research to the concept of "system", which is valuably applied across the disciplines.

We also introduce the concept of "constraint" developed mainly in biology (Bizzarri, 2020) suggesting that identity is the result of an individual process moving within particular constraints. In this frame consciousness – intended as a conscious and explicit thought – can be interpreted as an emergence (or a systemic property) of continuous interactions between (stable) constraints and (fluid) processes, where unity is allowed by coherence, which maintains stability despite systemic perturbations. Hence identity can be framed into a new philosophical perspective, where traditional concepts, considered as worn and inadequate, are fully rewritten. In the light of this investigation it will be argued that 1) consciousness stimulates top-down changes on both the body and the tacit thought and 2) the enlargement of consciousness is highly encouraged to accomplish harmonic interactions among inferior/superior levels of the human beings. On this basis it will be possible to sketch some main traits of ethics as an emergent collective phenomenon.

Keywords: identity, process, constraints, system thinking, ethics

Critical systems thinking and practice: what has been done and what needs doing

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Critical systems thinking and practice began in the 1980s and is now an established part of the systems thinking tradition. Nearly 40 years later, it is possible to look back at what it has achieved in its lifetime and at what still needs doing if it is to fulfil its potential. To reach its conclusions, this review considers both the theory and principles underpinning the approach and the translation of those into practice.

Keywords: systems thinking, critical systems thinking, critical systems practice

Soft Systems Thinking in the ‘Information Age’

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“Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.”
Marcus Aurelius 161 to 180 AD.

Many of us are in a state of information overload. We are overwhelmed with ‘information’ in all its forms each day. Information overload prevents us from thinking about it in a rational way. In this paper I consider if the ideas underpinning soft systems can help to create a ‘firewall ’ between being subsumed by the sheer weight of information and evaluating what it contains. To do this I return to the notion of phenomenology that underpins soft systems thinking. Phenomenology is that realm of intentional consciousness that enables the phenomenologist to develop a radically unprejudiced justification of their basic views on the world and of himself and explore their rational interconnections. Similarly, in soft systems we acknowledge that reality is formed by sensation and fashioned by experience. It is not exclusively a process of thought, (although this may shape how we process our experience), for us the world exists as the result of a subjective appreciation of it. In this paper I explore how soft systems thinking through the ‘method’ of phenomenology might be a valuable skill in coping with information overload.

Key Words: Soft Systems; Phenomenology; Information overload.

Exploring the Notion of *Information Content* for Information Systems

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*In studies of information systems, the notion of **information content** is not always explicitly defined. For example, in the field of information integration there are two major approaches namely structural and semantic. However, neither defines the crucial concept ‘information’. For another example, in the field of databases, the information content of a database is seen as all possible instances of the database. We believe that this is not satisfactory. In this paper, we explore how we may approach and formulate the notion of information content of an information system. However, there does not seem to be consensus about the ways of thinking about information. We therefore draw on a particular stream in the study of information in the literature, namely qualitative information theories including Dretske’s semantic theory of information and Devlin’s ‘infor’ theory, whereby we construct a conceptual framework consisting of information source, bearer and receiver. We use this framework to look at information systems and explore the notion of information content of them. Then we show how this approach may be applied to formulating information content mapping for information integration. Our work presented here is an attempt to find out whether the qualitative information theories that we follow are enlightening and helpful for exploring the notion of information content for information systems, and we find that they are.*

Keywords: Qualitative information theories, Information System, Information Content, Infor Theory

An autopoietic approach to assessing the impact of TCM Qigong exercise on wellbeing: A feasibility study

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Research suggests that Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Qigong practice leads to stress reduction, emotion regulation and enhanced immune function. This paper presents a feasibility study of impact of a Lung Benefiting and Strengthening Qigong Exercise (健肺复原导引法) on wellbeing. A wellbeing model grounded in autopoietic theory of self-organisation in living systems is used to inform the evaluation of impact and ensure reliability of the data. More specifically, data quality is enhanced by focusing the participants' awareness on their immediate embodied experience of physical, emotional and relational wellbeing, sense of meaning, kindness, valence and activation. Statistically significant differences for physical wellbeing with a large effect size ($p=0.001$, $r=0.645$), emotional wellbeing with a large effect size ($p=0.003$, $r=0.598$), sense of connection with a large effect size ($p=0.007$, $r=0.525$), sense of meaning with a medium effect size ($p=0.013$, $r=0.475$), kindness with a medium effect size ($p=0.019$, $r=0.441$), valence with a large effect size ($p=0.002$, $r=0.600$), and a decrease in activation with a medium effect size ($p=0.020$, $r=-0.436$), were observed. It is concluded that TCM Qigong exercise may lead to positive relaxation or activation states or indeed to positive mood change that may have health benefits.

Keywords: qigong, wellbeing, self-awareness, autopoiesis, valence, activation, pyramid-K

Variety, innovation and readiness for change in organizations

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This paper considers organizations as dynamic open systems, seeking to maintain viable relationships with their environments. It recognizes the endemic nature of change and how modern organizations must respond by innovating in order to remain sustainable and progress, and must promote a culture of readiness. The possible tension between continuous improvement for efficiency in processes and a holistic perspective for innovation is noted, taking into account a need to capture contextual knowledge from all levels in the business. The authors suggest that the Viable Systems Model (Beer, 1985) may be a useful tool for reflection on design of effective management in a balanced and flexible organization. This model attempts to balance variety between organizations and their environments, and between operational units and management, through recursive levels of autonomy.

Keywords: Viable Systems; Requisite Variety; Innovation; Business Process Improvement.

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