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Systemic Intervention

Philosophy, Methodology, and Practice

This book aims to rethink systemic intervention to enhance its relevance for supporting social change in the 21st Century. Section One focuses on the *philosophy* of systemic intervention; Section Two on *methodology*; and Section Three on *practice*. Throughout the book, arguments are provided for why philosophy, methodology and practice all have a role to play in our thinking about systemic intervention.

Section One introduces the notion of systems philosophy, concentrating on the preoccupation of systems thinkers with undertaking 'holistic' or 'comprehensive' analyses. Of course, there is no such thing as a genuinely comprehensive analysis, so the defining feature of systems thinking is reflection on the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. A new path is mapped out for the development of systems philosophy, which dissolves the supposedly 'fundamental' dualism between subject and object that is commonly found in the philosophy of science.

Section Two of the book then goes on to examine the methodological consequences of taking this new approach. First, the concept of intervention is introduced. This is defined as purposeful action by an agent to create change, and is contrasted with observation. It is argued that observation, as undertaken in science, should actually be seen as a 'special case' of intervention, not as distinct from it. Next, the systems philosophy outlined in Section One is related to the methodology of intervention, and it is suggested that 'systemic intervention' is purposeful action by an agent to create change *in relation to reflection on boundaries*. This leads to the exposition of a theory of 'boundary critique', which deepens our understanding of what it means to reflect on boundaries in the context of intervention. Each of the following are discussed as part of this theory: the relationship between boundary and value judgements; the extension of the concept of boundary judgement to encompass concerns about how things ought to be (as well as what actually exists); the importance of wide-spread stakeholder participation in systemic intervention; and the need for agents to deal with the marginalisation of particular issues and stakeholders within social contexts.

Then the case is made for theoretical pluralism. This follows on logically from the theory of boundary critique because every theory is based on either implicit or explicit assumptions about the appropriate boundaries for analysis. Therefore, if it is possible to explore and use a variety of different boundaries during intervention, it is also possible to draw upon a variety of different theories. Of course, if theoretical pluralism is possible, and if different theories can be linked into different methodologies and methods, then methodological pluralism must be possible too. An argument for methodological pluralism is presented, and the emphasis is placed on the value of this in terms of optimising flexibility and responsiveness to stakeholder concerns during intervention. A review of intervention methods and methodologies is also provided.

Finally, **Section Three** of this book starts with some background to the author's own intervention practice in Community Operational Research (dealing with problematic issues in community contexts). Four examples of systemic intervention are provided, each of which is used to illustrate a different aspect of the methodology outlined in Section Two.

The book then ends with an invitation to the reader to begin to practice systemic intervention and contribute to its further development.

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"This book is a very special gift to the systems community. It was hard for me to put it down. And when I did, the rich insights I gained from it continued to inspire me to work out new understandings. Then, I picked up the book again and continued my rewarding learning journey. The work projects a fascinating landscape of systems inquiry and its potentials for the new century. The author paints this emerging landscape on the largest possible canvas. It is a masterpiece. It integrates in dynamic recursive interaction systems philosophy, theory, methodology, and their application for the improvement of the human condition. It opens up our thinking and invites us to take part in the evolution of systems inquiry and create it as an ever changing, dynamically unfolding process".

Bela H. Banathy, Professor Emeritus at the Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, San Francisco, CA, USA. President of the International Systems Institute; Past-President of the International Society for the Systems Sciences.

"Comprehensive and accessible in approach, well grounded in excellent examples and transdisciplinary analysis, this book promises to become a classic sourcebook for academics and practitioners seeking to better understand intervention and change in complex systems. The author makes significant connections between the philosophy, methodology and practice of systemic intervention. He brilliantly demonstrates how principles of boundary critique enable us to work with a major paradox of our time: how to stay dynamically attuned to the moral, ethical and systemic implications of intervention choices while enabling coordinated inquiry and action that can support sustainable community improvement. An important book!"

Professor Susan Weil, Director, SOLAR Centre, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK.

"C. West Churchman in the 1960s recognised that systems thinking at its core is concerned with bounded and value laden judgements that people make in coping with everyday life. Somehow this message became all but lost in subsequent conversations about systems models and methodologies. How refreshing, then, that Gerald Midgley, from a new generation of systems researchers, makes boundary and value judgements pivotal to his thesis. **I feel certain that the reader who grasps the importance of Midgley's development of Churchman's work will experience a new window of thought opening and, through this window, will see a new exciting terrain for systems thinking"**.

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