The nature of human systems

'How can a systemic perspective bring ease to families and groups?'

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The starting place for working creatively with a systemic approach is to understand the nature of wholes, and how parts and wholes inter-relate. Conventional western thinking encourages us to focus on the parts, often in the form of people, concepts and events, as individual components, discrete entities separate in the world. At best we are encouraged to see 'context' as a collection of those parts – rather like the assembly of parts in a car engine or clockwork. Indeed the prominence of a machine metaphor in the worldview of western organisational culture is testimony to this – and underpins much of the educational systems we have exported around the world.

As a new point of view, we are acutely aware as writers that we are elbowing our way into the field of educational and therapeutic theory and practice, and as such we are bound to meet with resistance from the more established paradigm that dominates conventional thinking.

The holistic and systemic perspective advocated by **ecl**, invites us to re-think many of the tenets and assumptions we hold almost unquestioningly about the development and care of children and young people – and by doing so opens up a wealth of fresh approaches that enable them to meet the challenges of new and unfamiliar circumstances in the future.

This concept paper explores the nature of human systems. It is an area which is fundamental to any change in education and care, not only because the perspective enables effective change and supports radical innovation, but it also shifts how we see ourselves as human beings – in particular the nature of self and our motivations – our view of knowledge and hopefully leads to more collaborative ways of teaching and parenting.

It is not yet another new thing to be added to the list of things to do but instead offers a new lens to look at organisations, behaviours and actions – and inevitably points to solutions to what are considered to be seemingly intractable problems. To borrow from Proust, we are looking with fresh eyes rather than travelling new landscapes.

The paper is divided into four 'bite-sized' chunks. It begins with a brief overview of a philosophical debate that has ebbed and flowed for two millennia, it takes a closer look at what is meant by a systemic perspective and ends with an identification of ten of the practical features of a human system.

Reductionist versus holistic

Our definition of ourselves is essentially a reductionist view which has many limitations and consequences when considering the nature of human beings and the groups or systems in which we live – such as organisations, schools, partnerships, communities and of course families. By it we tend to focus on the parts rather than the whole; on the individual rather than the collective.

It is a philosophical argument that has been running for over two thousand years about how best to view the natural world. One view is essentially holistic and Platonic; the other reductionist and Aristotelian. We are in good company!

According to Peterson (2007), Aristotle's views took a strong root in the Enlightenment movement which propagated theories of living organisms as being nothing but machines, completely explicable using the laws of mechanics, physics and chemistry. Citing Lewin, she says Platonics, or the vitalists of the 19th Century, *'agreed that living organisms obeyed these physical laws, but insisted that the essence of life itself was something extra, a vital force breathed into the mere material'.* Peterson 2007:29-30

A reductionist view encourages educationalists and caring professionals to take a view of behaviour and performance as residing more in the individual rather than in the relationships between individuals, that is in the linkages, interactions and spaces between. By it contends Abbott (2010), we have become highly specialised, focusing on manageable un-joined up sub-parts of an issue. We have lost the skill to see things in their entirety. We lead our organisations in his way – and we teach our children in this dominant mindset, structuring the day in secondary schools in timetabled teachable parts of separate subjects. For him, reductionism conditions us into thinking small.

McTaggart also traces the genesis of this mindset back to the Age of Enlightenment and the two Industrial Revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

> *'The Scientific Revolution launched a relentless march toward atomization, as scientists believed they could understand the whole of the universe by studying individual components.'*
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> *McTaggart 2010:xix*

Whilst not denying the profound sense of existential isolation we all carry, a systemic perspective turns this reductionist view through 180 degrees. In Spinelli's words, it challenges *'the persistent assumption held by Western culture in general, that the person is a self contained unit, understandable within his or her own set of subjectively derived meanings and behaviours.' (Spinelli, 2010:95)*

Adopting a holistic and systemic perspective allows us to see a living, dynamic, relational world of networks and interconnections with each part a fractal of the whole, rather than as separate elements able to act independently from one another. Social theorist and organisational developer Peter Senge described this type of holistic phenomena succinctly:

> *'The whole exists through continually manifesting in the parts, and the parts exist as embodiments of the whole.'*
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> *(Senge et al: 2004)*

A systemic perspective unpacked

Building on Checkland's (1981) definition, at its simplest a human system is a set of interacting, highly connected elements functioning as a whole to serve a specific purpose. A system is distinguishable from its surrounding by recognisable boundaries and exhibits properties of the whole rather than of its component parts.

Importantly, for McMasters (1995) it is a way of breaking the grip that the dominant Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm has had on Western minds for centuries, enabling us *'to create a new relationship with what occurs within and around us.'* McMasters 1995: xviii

The type of system we are exploring here are living or human systems, but they are not simply made up of groups of people. They also include other 'parts' such as events, concepts, and objects all of which have an influence and impact directly on how people think, feel and behave often in quite unexpected and hidden ways.

A systemic perspective thus recognises that the impact of the groups or human systems we live and work in – with their whole range of beliefs, values, attitudes, assumptions, affects and behaviours – all contribute to the maintenance and wellbeing of the individual as well as the group. Whether we are aware of it or not, these factors make up and maintain the group's identity and existence in ways that often take primacy over being an individual.

New insights arising from the convergence of physics and philosophy back up this view. Again speaking about organisations, McMaster states:

> *'An organisation is a phenomenon that emerges from the interaction of individuals within various social environments. Organisations have an intelligence of their own, they have the ability to learn and they have the ability to embody knowledge that cannot be found in any one individual. Reductionist ways of thinking are incapable of grasping this notion'*
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> *(McMaster 1995:xx)*

From this premise, the impact of a systemic view on how people and their organisations learn and perform is immense. Traditional western philosophical and psychological views of self are fundamentally challenged as we shift to seeing people, along with their actions, designs and products, as profoundly interconnected. People gain identity and develop through their connectedness and context, both immediate and historical, and not through their heroic individual actions and personality alone.

McTaggart also uses recent scientific evidence emerging from the fields of quantum physics, cultural neuroscience and biology to demonstrate that, *'not one single cell in your body is capable of any function without receiving a signal from outside itself'* (2010:30). In her view, it points to us living in a *'sphere of collective influence'* where environment and culture carry a greater importance than genes, and where the quality of our interaction with *'agents outside ourselves'* shape who we are. Our urge to merge and connect with others makes us *'desperate to be team players'*. It is the essence of the African term 'Ubuntu', *'a person is a person through other people'*

For educators and carers this view has far reaching implications but it raises the question, how do we work with this in practice, both organisationally and with individuals?

Making the complex simple

It is clear that we are part of families, peer groups, communities as well as organisational systems, and that these systems are all interconnected with permeable, often overlapping boundaries, and each having a crucial impact on others. But for people, and especially system leaders such as chief executives, trustees, governors, school principals and project leaders, trying to hold and work with all of the information from a system can lead to an overwhelming sense of complexity – and even confusion. Indeed the school of 'systems thinking' is also referred to as 'complexity theory' (McMasters 1995, Capra: 1996).

Systems thinking is an approach that maps complex, intricate connections within systems using 'feedback loops' to identify patterns within 'the whole'. It recognises the non-linear nature and peculiar behaviours of living systems, and places an emphasis on form and pattern over separate elements and substance. As an approach, it works conceptually with visible data to build the bigger picture. Peterson (2007) suggests that, *'complexity theory, like much of modern science, postulates that there are essential "rules" that create the complex surface behavior we observe say in a flock of birds.'* (2007:97}

But how can we come to an understanding of those rules?

ecl's approach to understanding systems, builds on ideas developed initially by the German philosopher and therapist Hellinger (1998, 1999). It provides leaders and their change agents with a range of simple tools and processes, as well as frameworks of the key underpinning rules or principles that govern systems. An understanding of these principles help to make the complex simpler and get to the essence of living systems. His approach to 'seeing systems' encourages a break with linearity advocating mapping techniques to augment dialogue. Mapping provides a space to consider things from a number of different angles and perspectives. So rather than focus on presenting issues or stated goals, we are able to work with a different, broader landscape.

By identifying the important elements of the system under scrutiny, and applying a knowledge of the principles that govern systems, people can see and sense the whole – including their place in it from the outside in – and, importantly, the dynamics that exist in the relationship between the various parts. This last point is crucial because these dynamics are usually hidden if not invisible.

At the core of the **ecl** approach is the notion that systems are governed by hidden laws of relationship. This can seem strange if viewed from a rational and reductionist perspective. We can experience and understand the natural laws of gravity or centrifugal force acting on a physical system, but find it more difficult to appreciate the invisible dynamics acting in human systems. We experience the impact of these laws every day but cannot readily identify them. The **ecl** approach is grounded in the conviction that all human systems are influenced by four specific organising forces, namely belonging, place, exchange and time. If they are understood and respected in practice, they greatly enable leaders and practitioners to enhance learning, performance, innovation and change.

Understanding these hidden forces requires people to use, not just cognition, but also a range of senses including, using Gendlin's term, 'an inner felt sense'. It is this embodied knowing that enables us to fully utilise Hellinger's principles relating to *'conscience'* and *'ordering forces'*. The body knows what the mind, by itself, cannot grasp about relationships. Working with these two principles enables leaders, catalysts and practitioners to restore health and give cohesion to organisations, groups and individuals by removing blocks and resolving issues, many of which seem complex and unsolvable. With practise they are also able to anticipate or prevent issues occurring in the first instance.

Below are ten features of human systems that we can look out for as leaders and practitioners thereby ensuring there is 'an ease' within and between systems, improving the conditions for people to learn and work creatively.

Ten features of human systems

We have identified ten important aspects of the nature of human systems that influence and govern the behaviour and performance of the people within them, which can be used as a guide when attending to the emotional wellbeing, creativity and learning of children and adults. They are:

- All systems, human or otherwise, consist of many and various elements that are connected to one another in continuously changing relationships. A human system can be seen as a type of living organism where the health of the individual is influenced by, and strongly influences, the health of the whole

- Such is the level of interconnection that any change in one element of a system will bring about change in all the others

- Altering the system can bring about a change for an individual, and a change in the system can also come about by changing the individual

- There is always a cost and a consequence with any change made in a system

- Systems have a natural tendency to move towards balance. Moving towards balance is a constant and continual process. Like walking it is a dynamic

phenomena. Finding balance in an organisation is more about 'the art of the nudge' rather than making bold and dramatic moves – homeopathic rather than surgical

- All elements of a system, either current or historical, have significance and influence, whether they are acknowledged or not. Identifying and acknowledging 'what is' is a crucial first step in bringing ease to a system

- There is a basic order of elements in a system, which if achieved, allows all members to feel at ease. This order involves acknowledging the loyalty or 'conscience' that guards our many kinds of belonging, respecting the hierarchy of time, achieving a balance in giving and receiving, and finding our right place in a structure

- We belong to multiple systems and our loyalty to any one system affects our ability to belong to another

- The capacity to belong and the attendant degree of loyalty gets weaker as a system gets larger or the members acquire maturity and autonomy. As such family is the primary system, followed by the organistions we belong to and then our social networks.

- Knowledge about systems is held in 'the field' and can be accessed through the body more so than through the mind. Presence or embodied knowing is a critical skill in using a systemic approach.

So in conclusion, by bringing a knowledge of human systems, leaders, practitioners, parents and catalysts can develop a capacity in themselves, as well as in the teams and organisations they work with, to create positive environments for learning and creativity. Systemic working is about creating and maintaining the optimal conditions for people to find an ease and balance both in themselves and the cultures they work in. It leaves everyone in a much better place to release their own and others creative potential.

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