

AN HEURISTIC FOR SYSTEMIC INQUIRY

In the book “Systems Concepts in Action; A Practitioner’s Toolkit” we suggested that a systemic inquiry can be considered to have three basic components (inter-relationships, perspectives and boundaries) out of which flow a range of questions.

Inter-relationships

- What is the structure of the interrelationships within the situation?
- What are the processes between elements of that structure?
- What is the nature of the interrelationships (e.g., strong, weak, fast, slow, conflicted, collaborative, direct, indirect)?
- What are the patterns that emerge from these interrelationships in action, with what consequences and for whom?
- Why do these structures, processes and patterns matter? To whom? In what context?

Perspectives

- Who or what are the key stakeholders within the situation?
- What are the key stakes?
- What are the different ways in which the situation can be understood or framed? By whom?
- How are these different framings going to affect the way in which stakeholders act, especially when things go wrong from their perspective?

Boundaries

- Which interrelationships are privileged and which are marginalized? With what effect on whom?
- What perspectives (i.e., stakeholders, stakes, framings) are privileged and which are marginalized? With what effect on whom?
- What are and how can the ethical, political, and practical consequences of these decisions be managed, especially those that cause harm or have the potential to cause harm because they exclude an interrelationship or perspective?

These three components are closely inter-twined and overlapping. A systemic inquiry is unlikely to go through these questions in sequence and there will inevitably be some iteration between them. There is no one right way, but here a sequence that I think makes good sense on the ground:

Step 1: Construct a “rich picture” of the situation of interest

The process of constructing a “rich picture” of the situation of interest draws from Soft Systems Methodology, although many systems approaches have similar concepts. The following two perspective questions offer a good place to start with constructing the picture:

- Who or what are the key stakeholders within the situation?
- What are the key stakes?

The responses will give you information for three interrelationship questions:

- What is the structure of the interrelationships within the situation?

- What are the processes between elements of that structure?
- What is the nature of the interrelationships (e.g., strong, weak, fast, slow, conflicted, collaborative, direct, indirect)?

In essence, this first step provides the ingredients for the remaining three steps. This “rich picture” will be messy and overly detailed, and it will contain multiple perspectives and unidentified boundaries. Because of the risk of getting lost in this “noise,” at this stage, you might consider drawing on established systems methods.

Step 2: Frame the situation

Having completed Step One, the task now is to consolidate the large range of possible ways of framing the situation.

- What are the different ways in which you can understand or frame this situation?

This step marks the first attempt to make sense of the emerging picture and to break the task down into manageable chunks. For instance, if the situation your rich picture is concerned with aspects of a rock concert do you frame the situation in terms of entertainment, income generation, expressing solidarity, drug dealing, marketing, or event management? These framings will determine how you address the particular aspects of the situations that interests you or is problematic (e.g., crowd violence).

Step 3: Consider the ethical and pragmatic consequences of these framings

Framings imply value judgments about what is relevant and what is to be ignored. These boundary decisions have ethical and pragmatic dimensions that practitioners need to make explicit and deliberate on.

- Which interrelationships are privileged and which are marginalized? With what effect on whom?
- What perspectives (i.e., stakes, stakeholders, framings) are privileged and which are marginalized? With what effect on whom?
- How can we manage the ethical and practical consequences of these boundary choices and decisions, especially those that cause harm or have the potential to cause harm?

In essence, this step challenges you to deliberate on and critique your framing of the situation. In a subsequent iteration, it might force you to reconsider ways of addressing the situation (e.g., how we can prevent or handle crowd violence at rock concerts).

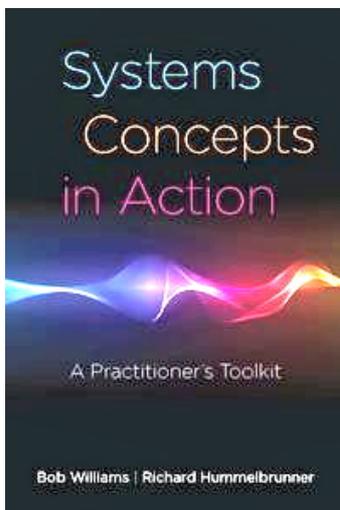
Step 4: Assess the dynamics of the situation

Having assessed and critiqued the way in which you understand the situation, the next step is to understand the behavior taking place and to assess the reality of the framings and boundary choices on how the situation actually develops and behaves.

- How are these different framings and boundary choices going to affect the way in which people act within the situation, especially when things go wrong from their perspective?

- How will these individual behaviors affect the overall behavior of the situation? With what result and significance?
- What are the patterns that emerge from these processes? With what consequences for whom?
- Why does this matter? To whom? In what context?

These last two questions effectively steer you back toward reconsidering Steps 1, 2, and 3; especially Steps 2 and 3. The task is to see if certain negative aspects of the situation can be “swept in” to the system as now defined in a way that continues to serve its positive aspects (which of course is a matter of perspective and boundary setting).



<http://www.sup.org/book.cgi?isbn=080477062X>