

## The Open Systems View Of People

One of the most powerful of all OST concepts or constructs is its definition of people. It suffuses and colours virtually every aspect of the whole conceptual framework. Like all OST concepts, it is highly practical, applicable in many situations and to other concepts, both indirectly and quite directly.

One of the most obvious applications is in the necessity for our organizations to be governed by DP2. If people cannot take responsibility for their lives and their affairs, how can they express their purposefulness? Well the answer to that questions is well known because most of our organizations are not governed by DP2; therefore, people express their purposefulness, by for example, behaving maladaptively or becoming mentally ill. The design principles are covered in detail under their own heading herein. The waxing and waning of the various maladaptions over time together with the ideals summarized below, can be found in the book *Did 9/11 change the world?* also herein. We will be returning to these concepts also in future editions.

A recent additional discovery of how cooperation works in cells (Munn 2024) confirms the ubiquitous nature of DP2 as the principle that confers adaptation. Wherever we look in nature we see that adaptation is the name of the game and it is always based on DP2. It would seem that our definition of people as purposeful is congruent with the way the natural world works for health, vitality and longevity.

The definition of people as open purposeful systems has far wider implications for all our practices as well. In future articles, we will discuss other applications. Below we will review the selection of participants for a variety of different types of event. Obviously if we want our events to deliver our expected outcomes, they must be able to accommodate human needs and fit our definition.

### A three part definition

In today's world with its changing values, it is a truism that relevant uncertainty is the name of the game. However, the current nature of the environment is the consequence of people exercising their power as purposeful systems and opposing the denigration of their capabilities as ideal seeking individuals (Emery F 1977b). We are dealing with an open system and coevolution, not evolution. Here we have an image of a person "as an active, responsible agent, not simply a helpless powerless reagent" (Chein 1972: 6). Purposeful people have long been recognized as being at the heart of the open social system (Emery F 1959; Ackoff & Emery, 1972). But people are systems in their own right. No fewer than three characteristics must be taken into account when considering people - their openness and purposefulness, their needs for both autonomy and homonomy, and their potential for ideal seeking.

#### *Open, Purposefully Adaptive Systems.*

The significant elements here are consciousness and purpose as distinctively human properties defined over the ecosystem (Sommerhoff 1969; Johnston & Turvey 1980). (We will deal with consciousness later). Human learning is a phenomenological given but our learning and behaviour as learners will differ depending on the ecosystems of which we are a part. As consciousness, purposefulness and learning are axiomatic, then adaptation includes the ability to search the environment in order to choose the most appropriate learning strategy to pursuing specific purposes within that environment. Maladaptation for human systems in a Type IV environment may therefore be generally defined as a failure to search the environment, or the choice of a strategy which is inappropriate and thus ineffective in

fulfilling these purposes. But as we have learnt through Searching, normal individual people constantly note changes in the environment. They are simply not provided with opportunities to consider the implications of those changes and make meaning of them. The fault, and therefore the maladaptation, lies in the larger systems within which the people are organized.

Open systems thinking has, therefore, through extensive practical and theoretical work arrived at a rigorous conceptualisation of people as open systems in their own right. There may appear to be an incompatibility between Bohm's consideration of the individual human being as "a relatively independent subtality" (1980: 208) and their definition as purposeful systems. They are purposeful in that they can produce the same functional type of outcome in different structural ways in the same structural environment and can also produce functionally different outcomes in the same and different structural environments. A purposeful system can, therefore, change its goals in constant conditions. It selects goals as well as the means by which to pursue them. **It displays will.** (Ackoff & Emery 1972: 31) For human behaviour to be directly correlated with its environment, it must be orthogonal to it (Sommerhoff 1969) and subtalities appear not to be such independent parts. The difficulty is resolved by Sommerhoff himself in his discussion of free will and causal determination as a false antithesis. Freedom of choice may be no more than the implicit recognition that people's overt actions are orthogonal to environmental variables but that we are "a system in which arbitrary combinations of action and environmental variables are possible initial states of any chosen time-slice" (Sommerhoff as above: 197-8).

Human beings are then taken to be purposeful learning systems, capable of expressing their uniquenesses at the individual system level, within the limits laid down by their environments.

#### *Autonomous AND Homonomous*

People as one arm of the basic directive correlation display will and act on their environment but concomitantly are acted upon by that environment. They are part of the whole whether they like it or not. The degree of adaptiveness in an ecosystem will vary but people are behaving adaptively when there is perfect symmetry between the nature of the environment and our psychological state or behaviour. Our saying 'he or she is not coping' expresses a perception that the person is not behaving appropriately for the environmental circumstance, not adequately sharing control and determination of present and future. Adaptation is central to many concepts of mental health. As individuals exist in cultural ecosystems it is possible to discuss the mental health of a culture and the mental health it induces in its membership. Without such a benchmark it would be difficult to sensibly discuss and evaluate cultural transformation.

"Mental health is achieved if man develops into full maturity according to the characteristics and laws of human nature. Mental illness consists in the failure of such development. From this premise the criterion of mental health is not one of individual adjustment to a given social order, but a universal one, valid for all men, of giving a satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence". (Fromm 1963: 14) Fromm saw the current but fortunately disintegrating 'pathology of normalcy' as the result of various sorts of oppression that attempt to destroy people's ability to experience themselves as whole and purposeful. These oppressions reduce the 'productive orientation' which relates person to person and person to world. Two fundamental dimensions of human nature are commonly isolated. "Each and every man is at the same time separate from his fellows and related to them... Personal relatedness can exist only between things who are separate but who are not isolated". (Laing 1959: 25) Mental health is "the capacity both for autonomous expansion and for homonomous integration" (Angyal 1965: 254). No person is an island.

'Autonomous' means governed from inside. Without such a concept, central matters of the life process such as "selection, choice, self-regulation, adaptation, regeneration" could not be understood. (Angyal as above: 33-35) It is a concept of purposeful activity, a general systemic direction towards expansion through coherence. But "life is an autonomous dynamic event which takes place *between* the organism and the environment" (Angyal: 48, emphasis is mine). The trend towards 'homonomy' is "a trend to be in harmony with super individual units, the social group, nature ...." etc. This penetrates "the whole realm of human life" (Angyal: 173) and is visible through moves towards sharing, participation and union. "The homonomous tendency is the dominating factor in forms of inter-human relationships where the other person is recognised to be a value in himself" (Angyal: 202).

These qualities of autonomy and homonomy obviously contain elements intrinsic to the individual such as the adaptive potential for pursuing ideals which are innately attractive to all humans. Similarly they involve elements which are external to the individual such as objective conditions of life. These may or may not be under the control of the individual, but constitute specific forces toward either liberation or oppression. In other words, it is the knowledge about and control that an individual may exert over his or her subjective **and** objective conditions of life which guarantee the possibility of health and the joy of life that accrues from an integrated sense of autonomy or homonomy.

Angyal argues that autonomous behaviour is generally supported by rational logic while homonomous strivings are more deeply rooted in our non rational nature. It may however just appear this way because the tendency in the last three thousand years has been to prevent us seeing the rationality in the homonomous trend. In *The Sane Society*, the balanced integration of autonomy and homonomy results in an ever increasing expansion of self through more participation and better relatedness to superordinate wholes. People and their worlds grow together. This is a critical dimension for the concept of wisdom.

Our Western culture has encouraged autonomy to run amok and one of the aims of the new learning is to restore the balance. Autonomy without corresponding homonomy actually restricts and inhibits personal growth. There would be few people today who would disagree that dimensions of mental health reside in conditions external to the individual as well as in intrapsychic processes, in the relationships between person and environment, including the 'panorama of social ties' (Greco 1950). It is by learning to restore relationships with these external conditions that individuals can achieve the growth, self expansion and self determination that are seen as the crux of mental health problems. Focusing simultaneously on the environment (L<sub>22</sub>) and system (L<sub>11</sub>) creates the potential for adaptation. Through its design and process, the SC uses forms of learning (L<sub>21</sub>) and planning (L<sub>12</sub>) appropriate for restoring an adaptive ecosystem.

### *Potential for Ideal Seeking*

But people are not limited to being purposeful. As purposeful systems they can be confronted by choice between purposes and they may choose outcomes which are not necessarily possible in the time available, or perhaps, ever. These outcomes are the 'ideals'. They are endlessly approachable but unattainable in themselves (Emery F 1977b: 69).

This set of ideals was derived from the open systems framework. (Emery, as above) The first is **Homonomy** - from Angyal (as above), the being with others in a sense of belongingness and interdependence. It relates part to part within the whole for the benefit of the whole and all its parts. It is the opposite of selfishness.

The second is **Nurturance** - cultivating and using those means which contribute to the health and beauty of the whole and all its parts. It is the opposite to exploitation.

The third is **Humanity**, expressing what is appropriate, fitting and effective for us as people; regarding people as superordinate to institutions and putting their wellbeing and

development (spiritual as well as physical) above bureaucratic and/or material criteria of progress. It is the opposite to inhumanity.

The fourth is **Beauty**, that which is aesthetically ordered and intrinsically attractive; moving within the social and physical environments so that they become increasingly desirable, more dynamically balanced. It is the antithesis of ugliness.

Ideals are integral to the concept of learning I am developing here and it is important to recognise that the pursuit of this set of ideals has for some cultures, long been their system principle, defining their being and purpose. This is not to say that the culture itself pursues the ideals but that it is composed of systems of shared ideas and conceptual designs (Keesing & Keesing 1971) which provide an environment within which an individual can pursue the ideals through everyday life. Many ancient cultures provided Type II environments (Emery & Trist, 1965; Emery 1977) which we know now were governed by DP2. Those ideals which appear in the practices of old cultures display a consistency which is quite remarkable in human affairs. *The Dawn of Everything* (Graeber & Wengrow 2021) is a monumental tome documenting in excruciating detail the ubiquity of DP2 in the ancient world. This exemplifies the power of groups to arrive at the **highest common denominator**. Pursuing ideals appears to be an innate capacity which operates at the highest level of system function when the conditions are conducive.

The most basic condition for ideal seeking is that the organization is a purposeful system, that is an entity which can fulfil the definition above and one in which its members agree and cooperate with its purposes. In DP1 structures, the organization uses its people as instruments, reducing their variety and attempting to reduce them to goal seeking rather than purposeful systems. The dynamics of these organizations are such that they produce conflict and/or apathy reducing its capacity to act purposefully. With DP2, the purposeful organization itself becomes instrumental to the organization's purposes which includes a core of the shared purposes of its people, increasing their variety and providing for the higher system function of ideal seeking (Ackoff & Emery 1972: 31, 215).

The conscientisation of ideals produces a very special and powerful form of knowing, one that had become rarely visible or acknowledged in our society and certainly in our education systems. Our learning needs have outrun the capacities of all the formal institutions to meet them. "The task of our generation ... and the task of all education ... is metaphysical reconstruction ... to understand the present world, the world in which we live and make our choices". "More education can help us only if it produces more **wisdom**" (Schumacher 1973: 83 & 66). The SC is designed and managed as learning, to provide those conditions conducive to the elicitation of the ideals. The opportunity to make conscious and mobilise the ideals is provided by the task of collectively agreeing upon **desirable futures**. Because our new visions centre around our world and our participation in its making or restoration, the most powerful and effective vision for any of us personally will be that one we helped 'dream up' which expresses ourselves and to which we are committed. "Dream prepares the way for action; man must first dream the possible before he can do it" (Caudwell 1937: 82).

But the ritual of agreeing upon a desirable future must be an opportunity to dream a collective dream. It should be, to use Caudwell's term, an opportunity for "emotional introversion", a form of communion or subjective unity where each person returns to "the genotype, to the more or less common set of instincts", (p124) or ideals. This form of introversion achieves power as a social act because it establishes congruence between inner and outer realities. The work of establishing desirable futures is then, as with any form of art, a struggle to achieve a form of insight from which development is inspired and may proceed. To the extent that as a social act it incorporates individual experiences, it will produce a strong social organization within which participation is felt as pleasurable and exciting. Both

the insight and the reality of its means of production become a single social image of the possible. It is thus a synthesis of many levels.

Participation in such an act is a necessary element of an education for change, which by its very nature, is a step in the implementation of change through the practice of seeking ideals. The compass that guides the learning about desirable futures is that set of ideals which enter into and shape the organizations that people create in their pursuit. "Instead of following pre-determined plans, leaders and people, mutually identified, together create the guidelines of their action". (Freire 1972: 148) By recognising that organizations are indeed created by people and that once created, these organizations affect the behaviour of those who work within them, it becomes possible to begin the process of designing forms of social organization which will produce adaptive behaviour and a more stable environment. "Cultural synthesis serves the ends of organization; organization serves the ends of liberation" (Freire as above: 150). "A commitment to a desirable future must be activating or have a consequence in action which itself furthers development towards itself. If the energy poured into a vision cannot sustain the process of producing a form of social organization which positively encourages ideal seeking then the said commitment is really no commitment at all" (Etzioni 1968: 12).

## Selection of Participants

Here we see precisely how the OST definition of people is translated into the practical measure of selecting participants for any type of event as it can only be the participants who plan, or design the outcome and begin to implement it. Just to be clear here, we are *not* discussing events which do not include a component of task oriented work. In for example, a broadcasting event, one to many, such as a lecture with or without a Q and A follow up, the purpose is transmission of information only, diffusion. There is no expectation that participants will as a collective, produce any outcome other than the reception of said information.

Once the system is clearly defined in the case of the Search Conference (SC), or the outcome is decided for a Unique Design (UD), the most critical element in planning is the selection of participants.

For task oriented events, the first and most basic rule is that *only those who can take responsibility for the future of the system can be participants*. Remember that the SC and all UD's are designed on DP2 where responsibility and the work, learning and planning are collocated. Detailed selection needs to be done differently depending on whether the SC or UD, referred to as events for now on, is organizational or 'community' where the class called 'community' includes all events except the organizational.

For community events, it is best to use the *community reference system*. It is absolutely essential for the SC as the participants must engage in active adaptive planning using puzzle and ecological learning, they are chosen because they carry a piece of the jigsaw puzzle in their heads. If a major piece is missing, the puzzle solution may be inadequate or the implementation difficult. People involved in a system or community know which people have which bits of knowledge. The great advantage of this approach for geographical community, industry and issue searches is that the 'community' broadly defined determines the participants. An additional advantage is that in the process of using it, both the event and its purposes must be explained to prospective participants, thereby providing education and aiding later diffusion.

We first used the community reference system in Geelong (1974) and the process is as follows:

- First research, with residents, to draw a rough social map of the system. It should cover all relevant areas, e.g, for the future of a geographical community, large

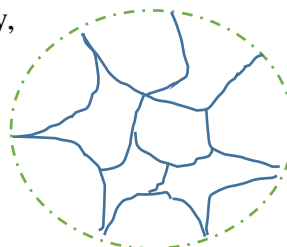
business, unemployed kids, voluntary sector, farm sector, churches, interest groups etc,

### Social Map

Each of these segments is a part of the community,

- a welfare agency or the small businesses,
- a landcare group
- the banks,
- schools

The community will know:



- Decide the relevant criteria (not just one, usually just two or three) against which people are to be judged, e.g. expertise in say tourism development, local knowledge of regulatory bodies, intention to stay in the community, covering a range of demographic variables etc. Then add one which is universally applied, namely, known to be **actively concerned about** the system or purpose of the Search.
- Pick a starting point person in each major sector of the map and ask them for two or three names that fit the criteria. This is for help only, no guarantees of invitation are given.
- Ask each of the new names to give two or three names that fit the criteria.
- After one or two iterations of the process, some of the same names should reappear. Select these from the total list and add to cover the map of the system (jigsaw puzzle).

It is absolutely critical that this process is conducted as openly as possible. In conflicted communities where suspicion and distrust are running high, not to mention the rest of the whole range of negative affects, all records must be kept immaculately. It is not unusual for somebody to ask at a briefing session or similar preparatory event how they or person X got onto the list. Those who conducted the process must be able to show exactly how those names came about so everybody will be satisfied that the process was above board.

That was the case in Geelong where a new proposed traffic solution which would split the city down the middle and destroy over a 1000 houses was bitterly opposed. The participants in this SC to determine the future of the city's road and traffic system had to be squeaky clean as many suspected the meeting would be stacked one way or another.

When considering the criteria for inclusion, it is not relevant that potential participants be educated, literate or articulate. In this way we operationalise the principle that knowledge of the whole system resides within the system of the event itself and does not require the presence of experts, external to the system, to inject specialised knowledge. All participants are experts in their own right and function as whole people. It is important to avoid designing SCs or other events based on segmentation. It has been tried with for example, students in one Search, educators in another followed by integration. The results are suboptimal as segmented events miss entirely all the interdependencies and other elements which contribute to mutual learning and community based adaptation. Even with an integration event to follow, the learning is far less than can be obtained by a properly designed event.

There are some cases which on the surface look like organizational SCs but are actually community SCs. State schools are a case in point. Small local hospitals are another. Both of these organizations belong to their communities, cannot be separated from them and must be dealt with as community SCs. Therefore, it is appropriate to include students and members of

the community because they all hold responsibility for the future of the school. This emphasizes the importance of accurately defining the system and its boundary.

This also highlights the fact that in task oriented events, participants are not there as representatives as they would be on a representative committee. They are not there to argue for and get the best deal for their constituents as happens on a committee. That representative systems do not change actual conditions or provide new futures for the great mass of people has long been documented (Emery & Thorsrud 1969). For task oriented events, participants know how they have been chosen and why. They are briefed explicitly that they attend and participate just as themselves. Representation springs from DP1 and has no place in task work. Our designs aim to be 'representative' only in the sense that collectively they cover knowledge of the system and are free of bias, *not unrepresentative*.

Selection of participants is an entirely different matter in **organizational SCs**, i.e. events that are purely about the future of the organization. Here the participants are those with the highest operational responsibilities, i.e. usually at the organizational level. If the Search outcome is to issue forth with a wide range of innovations, it must have the sanction of the existing powers and it must have the active support of those who control the operational units. For large organizational SCs, therefore, the membership consists of those who hold responsibility for the health and direction of the organization, directors and senior management. This most desirably should but may not include the union(s). An organizational SC does not include people such as customers, suppliers, distributors, etc. because they are part of the environment, not the system. This does not preclude participative events with them as part of the preparation for the event, indeed, such events may be essential. But these people are not responsible for the future of the organization. In small organizations of up to about 40 people, all may be involved. In small to medium sized organizations which are already DP2 or have always functioned as a cohesive unit, selection of participants other than those with responsibility for future direction may involve some modified form of community reference system or sortition (Emery F 1976a + b), e.g. pulling them out of a hat by functional area. Again this is a matter of collaborative judgement.

For organizations events that are less than full SCs, membership will depend on the nature of the task. If it involves a new direction for R & D for example, the participants will include people from R & D as well as those from the organizational level and others as required and or indicated by the task in that particular organization.

As most organizations today are still DP1, it is in some circumstances advisable that the boss be present only at the beginning - to sanction and brief the work of the group, and at the last session - to hear the report. This usually happens where the boss has extraordinary authority or a very dominant personality or a mixture of both, but it is rare. This alternative allows for group cohesion and the expression of more creative work than would otherwise see the light day. Most top managers can see this logic when it is explained. If this manager works constructively with the group in the last session after hearing their strategic goals and plans to implement, there is a higher probability of a better functioning management structure, as a whole.

If, on the other hand, the purpose of an event is to set up an adaptive relationship between the organization and its distributors, then participation of both parties is required as both must take responsibility for the future of the new relationship. Participation is determined by the definition and boundary of the system which is the focus of the event, or the puzzle which may become a new system.

Sometimes the purpose of the event is a fully functioning and active adaptive ecosystem consisting of the productive organization and its contributing organizations such as suppliers, distributors, ICT advisers plus a range of customers, its whole system. In this case, the community reference system is definitely the method to use as no one of any organizations in

the ecosystem will be aware of the most appropriate individuals from all the different organizations involved just as is the case for a geographical community..

The other critical dimension of preparation and planning is that all participants must understand everything about the purpose and process of the event long before they walk into it. Ideally, all participants should be as fully involved or prebriefed as possible about all aspects of the event, preferably in face to face conversation which can lead to design improvements as well as greater understanding of and commitment to the task. Fall back processes involve group meetings and failing that due to the 'tyranny of distance', telephone and written communication.

However, it has been found in some innovative work by Diemer and Alvarez in New Mexico (personal communication) that most of the work of briefing can be built into the Community Reference System at a community event. This is an ideal solution for people isolated over large distances. People were nominated at the meeting and fully briefed about the event and further nominations proceeded according to the normal sequence until the system was complete. Any tidying up and further briefing when required could be accomplished later but most of the time consuming leg work had been avoided.

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