
Systemic Constructivist TA applied to Organisational Consulting

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Kreyenberg (2005) quotes Bolling during a seminar (2001, no reference given) as explaining the difference between living and mechanical systems as like kicking a dog versus kicking a stone. You can predict the likely outcome with the stone but with the dog you can only estimate probabilities.

She goes on to reference Vester (1988) and Dörner (1997) for a list of the characteristics of using systems:

- ◆ Unpredictable because there is too much information to process
- ◆ Networked and have to know where or how things connect
- ◆ Dynamic and hence changing even as you analyse
- ◆ Invisible in places
- ◆ Indeterminate, with chaotic effects rather than linear, casual relationships

Proposing the need, therefore, for systemic constructivist thinking, Kreyenberg

comments on how transactional analysis is already such an approach. She explains that, even though Berne focused on humans as units and sought to show linear processes such as his game formula (Berne 1964), he was also clear on interdependencies among society, culture, families, groups and organisations. She also points out that later writers have added much about constructivist transactional analysis (e.g. Allen 1993, Loria 1995, Kenny 1997).

Kreyenberg goes on to list seven key issues that can help us “understand the phenomena we observe in organisations” (p. 302).

1. Holistic Thinking – TA is a “holistic, teleological approach that looks at the whole mosaic of the system, including the context” (p. 302). It connects empirical with phenomenological, and rational with intuition; we also take into account that the TA practitioner becomes part of the whole and hence impacts on the organisation.

2. Self Similarity – social systems have fractals, whereby the same pattern recurs on many levels; TA models are also fractals, allowing us to hypothesise about wider issues from an analysis of elements such as transactions to games to culture.

3. *Circularity* – as when social systems operate as closed systems (chicken and egg); TA concepts are often explanations of just such circularity, such as how scripts play out, how the racket system is a cycle, etc.

4. *Subjectivity* – we construct our reality, through words, language, metaphors, and hence can change our reality; in TA application our focus is on helping others to change their frames of reference and hence their subjective ‘realities’. Autonomy includes awareness of our subjectivity and the capacity to choose from a full range of options (what Berne called spontaneity).

5. *From Structure to Process* – which Kreyenberg illustrates with the example that to understand a river, you must analyse how it flows as well as the water, ground, sand and stones. TA picks up this theme through its focus on energetic and structural patterns; for instance, ego states are a theory of energy distribution.

6. *Focus on Effects* – is necessary because it is often impossible to determine cause and effect, so it can be hard to identify where leverage exists. When TA is applied pragmatically and in a constructivist mode, its relevance “derives from the usefulness of specific assumptions with specific clients in specific situations” (p. 306) – it is not necessary, or possible, to prove the truth of a construct.

7. *Logical Level* – refers to solutions, as when Wilber (2001) “differentiates between homeostasis (a system remains stable), translation (a system varies within its boundaries), and transformation (a system changes itself) (p. 306). TA enables us to take into account levels such as individual, group, organisation and to switch between microanalysis and metaperspective.

Kreyenberg provides a table (p. 308) that summarises the characteristics of the

systemic constructivist approach to organisational consulting aligned to TA, and includes some metaphors, for each of her seven key points.

She concludes with three factors to consider before any organisational interventions, which she attributes to another personal communication with Balling, in 1997:

1. *Metaconcept* – how our actions are influenced by our attitudes and values within the ethical and cultural frameworks of TA.
2. *Self-reflective Process* – how we observe – diagnose – plan – intervene – evaluate through a largely internal process.
3. *Contact with the Client* – the TA style and the ease with which we can share TA concepts with clients.

References

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