Guest Editorial

Interpretive Systemology and Systemic Practice

About two years ago, during his visit to the Department of Interpretive Systemology in Mérida[1], Gerald Midgley made the point that interpretive systemologists' *systemic practice* had not been widely exposed to public debate and that it would be academically "healthy" for us to do so. He suggested that we approach the editor of SPAR, Professor Robert. L. Flood, and propose to him a special issue on this subject. We accepted Gerald's challenge and submitted such a proposal to Bob. After careful consideration, he decided to give the green light to the project. Thanks to him and his strong support we are now presenting this special issue to the select audience of SPAR.

Meeting Gerald's challenge has been far from easy. As one might expect of a research community, interpretive systemologists have no standard definition of what they understand by *systemic practice*. And the reasons for this are varied, and some of them are complex. One reason is that the meaning of systems thinking in our times is inextricably bonded with the meaning of our epoch of fragmentation (Fuenmayor, 1997). Hence, as long as the meaning of the latter is not clear, then our systemic practice and its meaning are not clear either. In fact, our practice and research agendas are defined in some ways by this fact. This is no excuse, however, for eluding the matter. There are some substantive things we can say at this stage of our research with regard to our practice. In this respect, the three case studies to be presented in this special issue (one on public health institutions, one on prisons and one on public social protection organizations) purport to illustrate not only interpretive systemologists' systemic practice, but also to share with the readers our current reflections about it. As we shall see, *these reflections go beyond the scope of public institutions in Latin America and have global implications*. Therefore, our readers must be prepared for a wider message.

However, in order to have a better understanding of these studies, the reader not familiar with interpretive systemology needs a basic framework. Following, I will present such a framework. At its core is the issue of what we have called *schizophrenic institutional behavior*.

In fact, over the past 15 years, the contributors to this special issue have

---

[1] As part of a research link supported by the British Council, Universidad de Los Andes and the University of Hull.

become gradually involved with public institutions in Latin American countries, particularly in Venezuela. Our research was triggered by the observation of this "schizophrenic" phenomenon. Our starting point was the realization that most of our public institutions are generally the outcome of the "transplantation" of institutions from Modern Europe to Latin America. Such organizational "transplants" have often resulted in institutions whose social role is quite contrary to their original role in the Western project of modernity. Furthermore, we have observed that the formal discourse of government officials and civil servants shows their clear intention to make our institutions function like the original models from which they were copied.

As said before, it is precisely this remarkably "schizophrenic" behavior (i.e., split behavior: wanting to be *a* and *not-a* at the same time), which attracted our attention. However, we soon realized that we could not research this phenomenon from a mechanistic conceptual stand, which considers these institutions to be machines. What we are calling schizophrenic behavior would be defined as a problem of finding the causes for the malfunctioning of the institutions, in order to make them work *effectively* and *efficiently*.

Contrary to this mechanistic approach, our *systemic practice* (both researching, acting [or "intervention"[2]] and reflecting) with regard to our institutions was guided, at least initially, by an organic metaphor, namely, that lack of success in the transplant of an organ cannot be imputed merely to some internal problem of the organ itself. Likewise consideration of the relationship between the organ and the "environment" where the former is to be transplanted and between the two environments (donor and recipient) is paramount.

Although this metaphor did not actually express the meaning we intended, it helped us to open our thinking to another idea: What we really wanted was to explain *what conditions have made it possible for our transplanted institutions to "flourish" in our "environment" in the particular way in which they have* (that is, as *schizophrenic*). By 1991, we had already stated that this our intention was and that the problem demanded "...an interpretive approach which could open the rich interpretive variety hidden beneath this apparent 'schizophrenia'..." (Fuenmayor & López-Garay, 1991, p.411)

The question arises: What have we learned about institutional "schizophrenia" and about our systemic practice since this "declaration" of purpose seven years ago? Based on the articles presented in this special issue, I will proceed to answer these interrelated questions, according to *my own "reading"[3]* of them, and in so doing, I will suggest a way of interpreting the articles, display their interrelationships and even suggest a form of underlying unity.

---

[2] The notion of intervention will be illustrated in the papers by Fuenmayor & Fuenmayor. It will also be discussed in the paper by López-Garay and Suárez.

[3] The interpretation of the articles in this special issue I am about to offer is mine and hence does not necessarily represent the views of the contributors (other than myself) to this special issue.

1.   THE "ENVIRONMENT" OF TRANSPLANTED INSTITUTIONS: A FIRST DISCLOSURE

According to the onto-epistemological principles of Interpretive Systemology (Fuenmayor 1991a,b; López-Garay & Suárez, 1998, sect. 4.1), phenomena in general and institutions in particular may be considered *distinctions* made on a *background*. To approach their study systemically one has to *understand* and *comprehend* the unity *distinction-background*. For reasons developed in the articles in this issue, understanding the nature of a given distinction requires "opening" the background of the distinction. Such "opening" demands, in turn, the design of different interpretive contexts from whose perspectives desirable, undesirable and current meanings of the institution under study can be debated. Notice how different this systems approach is from a mechanistic one. In the latter, for instance, the notions of system and its environment are completely different. Witness, for example, this notion of a system's environment: "...a set of elements and their relevant properties, which elements are not part of the system but a change in any of which can produce a change in the state of the system." (Ackoff, 1976, p.106).

The three case studies to be presented illustrate a notion of a system's environment as *a sociocultural, dynamic, "unarticulated" sediment*. In other words, these studies do not see the institution's environment as composed of "elements" (be they cultural products, other institutions, values, ideas, etc.) and their relevant properties. Nor is it seen as something that affects the system but does not constitute it, as for instance, when we draw the circumference of a circle. Notice that in the same act we bring forth the circle and its outside, and the two are inextricably related: one cannot exist without the other and vice versa. The same is true when we *distinguish* (i.e., we perform the act of "drawing a boundary" and calling) an institution as "schizophrenic". This *figure-background* relationship is at the core of our notion of system and its environment.

Keeping these ideas in mind, let us now see how each case study deals with the "environment" of transplanted institutions.

Contributions to this special issue of SPAR begin with an article by **Jorge Dávila** and **Alejandro Ochoa** about social protection organizations. In this article, the authors disclose how an organization's "environment" actually constitutes itself and the organization, by showing how different conceptions of social protection have historically given rise to different interpretations of the modern notion of social protection. These interpretations, in turn, have been embodied in different forms of social protection organizations, which have helped to change the very notions that gave rise to them. The article concludes by showing the need to go into a deeper uncovering of the "background" of such institutions.

Next, **Ramsés Fuenmayor** and **Akbar Fuenmayor** continue with two articles (a "duology") on public health services. In the first article, research on the schizophrenic behavior of public health institutions is undertaken with the intention of opening the rich interpretive variety hidden beneath their apparent

"schizophrenia". The opening or disclosure of the institution's background starts with some basic commonsense considerations, which are then developed in what the authors call "logical" interpretive contexts. As stated in the abstract, these are general conceptual contexts, which correspond to four different theories about the socioeconomic mission of the state in a modern society. Guided by these interpretive contexts, the role of the state in health services is examined. However, the authors find that these contexts are too general (in fact they could be used to discuss the social role of public services in any modern state) and are not able by themselves to bring forth what seems to be most specific about public health services in Venezuela at present. A deeper disclosure of the background is then required in order to understand the socio-historical situation which has given rise to these specific public health institutions. The authors warn the reader, however, that they are not seeking the true particular historical situation of Venezuela. According to interpretive systemology's theoretical foundations, there is no such thing. An historical account is always an interpretation. So, what they pursue is the construction of two historical interpretive contexts which, using the "logical" contexts, allow a richer discussion about public health services in Venezuela. In their second paper, the disclosure of the background continues, as we shall explain in the next sections.

Finally, **Roldan Tomasz Suárez** and **Hernán López-Garay** present a trilogy on the prison phenomenon in Venezuela. In their research, they attempt to disclose the *scene* (or unfold the background) of the distinction of prisons as "schizophrenic" institutions, their efforts being guided by two fundamental questions: A. What conditions have made it possible (i.e., *conditions of possibility*) for prisons to "flourish" in our environment in the particular way they have (i.e., as schizophrenic)? B. What are the conditions of possibility of our discomfort with the current situation of prisons in Venezuela?

These questions are successively tackled in the first and second articles. As the reader will see, the authors are not asking what it is in the socio-cultural environment that is causing prisons and the state to be perceived as schizophrenic or as problematical. They are asking about contexts of meaning where such behavior makes sense. It is as though they wanted to find a ground where the phenomenon could "speak" for itself and tell the story of how it has become what it currently is.

After opening the "background" by means of several interpretive contexts, the two questions are contemplated in the light of those contexts. Further courses to continue unfolding the prison phenomenon are explored in the third article.

What is common to the three case studies is that the process of disclosure starts at one level of basic intuitions and then gradually acquires a dynamic of its own that demands further disclosures in order to be able to bring forth what seems to be both most essential to the phenomenon and hidden deeper.

2. THE UNITY OF THE PHENOMENON: DEEP DISCLOSURE OF THE "BACKGROUND" BRINGS US AGAIN TO THE "FIGURE"

Opening the "background" and bringing forth the rich interpretive variety of social phenomena (by designing contexts of meaning or interpretive contexts and debating different interpretations from these contexts) is but half of the task. *Pursuing the underlying unity in this variety* ---and hence being able to reveal the unity of the "figure"--- is the other half (in reality they are one and the same task). And this task, as the reader will see in the contributions to this special issue, is of a very special nature, since unity is not something separate from the interpretive systemic research process itself. The public health and the prison case studies serve as illustrations of this point.

In both cases, *the research process and the object of research continuously merged*: As the research path unfolded, the object of the research was unfolded, too! And vice versa. They formed a researching-researched or *researching-object* unit. In other words, both studies pointed to a very unconventional type of systemic research. In more classical scientific research, the research process is one thing, and the object of research is quite another. In fact, the researcher must take great care and not contaminate one with the other (i.e., he should set up experimental measures in the laboratory in such a manner that no distortion of the object of research is produced). Section 4, Part III of the prison article illustrates clearly the researching-object nature of interpretive systemic research.

Another interesting characteristic of the research process that comes out of these two cases is that research and action are not seen as separate and distinct activities. They are more like *researching-acting* cycles. The dash in researching-acting means that there is in fact no separation between acting and researching. Action generates knowledge, researching generates action. No clear boundaries can be established. For instance, the contextual frameworks researched in the public health care study led one of the authors to a kind of "enriched political consciousness" that conditioned his political actions in a particular way. In turn, the intervention he developed in his community provided him and his fellow researcher with the conditions to search for a deeper unity of public health phenomena. By bringing forth a deeper layer of the "background", i.e., a historical context of meaning, they were able to provide a context where different interpretations of the failure of public health institutions could be comprehended (a failure manifested as a continuous *lack of becoming modern*). The researching-acting cycle also helped them to see completely new courses for future intervention.

In sum, both case studies (i.e., prison and public health) indicate, although in different ways and through different interventions (in the prison study there was one year of continuous participant observation in a prison in Mérida), that interpretive systemic research "...*consist[s] in an inquisitive path of gradual problemization of both the phenomenon under study and the way of studying it*. Each step on this path is taken thanks to a critical examination of the entire previous course. [And in the

process the unity of the phenomenon is unfolded]. (López-Garay & Suárez, 1998, sect. 4.2, this issue).

Before ending this point, it is important to emphasize that we are not saying that the research process just mentioned will give us greater visibility of the "background" or a better articulation of the sense [unity] of the phenomenon. When we say that the articulation of sense (or unity) is not better, we mean that the unity of a phenomenon is not something static and predefined waiting to be uncovered by successive approximations, each one "better" than the previous one.

Let us now see what lessons we can draw from the case studies regarding the nature of schizophrenic institutions and whether or not there is some underlying common unity behind them.

3. PARADOXES AND "SCHIZOPHRENIC" INSTITUTIONS

Both the prison and the public health studies argue, from different interpretive contexts, that the key to "schizophrenic" institutions in Latin America lies in becoming aware of the paradoxical or double-bind situations we are in. Also, both studies point a way out of this situation through what I would like to call *holistic reframing*. Let me explain this idea by making use of a conceptual framework taken from the field of clinical treatment of mental disorders.

In their studies of human communication and its "pathologies", Watzlawick et al. (1967) find that paradoxes play an important role. They define a paradox as a "*...contradiction that follows correct deduction from consistent premises.*" (p.188). Paradoxes are not foreign to human interaction, and in fact "... the most frequent form in which paradox enters into the pragmatics of human communication is through an injunction demanding specific behavior, which by its very nature can only be spontaneous. The prototype of this message is, therefore, "*Be spontaneous!*" Anybody confronted with this injunction is in an untenable position, for to comply he would have to be spontaneous within a frame of compliance, of non-spontaneity." (pp. 199-200).

A form of paradoxical situation that is widely exploited in the world of clinical practice is what Bateson (1978, pp.178-79) has called *double-bind situations*. These are situations in which two (or even more) persons persistently have a pattern of interactions roughly characterized as follows: one person is the "victim". He/she is constantly exposed to two different and contradictory injunctions from the other person. The injunctions are of the following kind: "If you do not do this, you will be 'punished' ". "If you do it, you will also be 'punished' ". The "victim" is put in an untenable situation because he/she does not want to be "punished" (he/she feels strongly committed to the other person: i.e., he/she is afraid of losing their love, or whatever the victim values highly in the relationship) and, therefore, feels forced to do both things. However, since this is impossible, the "victim" then searches for alternatives that may be completely perplexing to the observer.

Studying this type of human interactions, Bateson developed a non-causal theory, which relates double-bind situations with schizophrenia. The theory argues that a person persistently exposed from birth to situations of this kind is prone to develop behaviors, which may clinically be labeled as schizophrenic (e.g., showing perplexing behaviors, responses that seem to be inconsistent or even paradoxical to a "normal" observer).

The interesting thing about this theory, for the matter of concern here, is that it allows us to see schizophrenia not as an illness of the mind but as a strategy for the possible solution of double bind situations!! To get out of such untenable situations, the "victim" usually re-*frames* his/her situation. By *re-framing*, the victim breaks the spell of the double bind. For instance, the victim may claim to be invisible or loudly announce that he/she is another person, or he/she can even create another double-bind situation as a response. More about reframing a little further on. First, an interpretation of the two aforementioned case studies within this "clinical" framework follows.

3.1. The Paradox of Transplanting Modernity to Non-Modern Cultures

In the last two centuries, a contradictory message has persistently been sent from the Western cultures to the so-called "underdeveloped" or "developing" world. Its contradiction has been covered up by the guise of "let the underdeveloped become modernized". In their second article, Akbar and Ramsés Fuenmayor bring clearly to light what is contradictory about this message. In my own words, this message is: "Be modern". This is similar to "Be spontaneous".

Akbar and Ramsés Fuenmayor convincingly argue, from the interpretive contexts unfolded by their research, that such an injunction is paradoxical. The reason is that the modernizing project launched by the Europeans in the 18th century was driven by the ideal of "freedom" to invent a new social way of being. They wanted to free themselves from tradition and religion and to transform their existing social order. According to Akbar and Ramsés Fuenmayor, what was essential to modernity was this *will to invent* a new order. The reader can now infer why, when this project was transplanted to and imposed on our culture, the conditions were given for a double-bind situation. To really be modern we would have to be free to invent our own social way of being. Copying the outcome of the European project of modernity is far from being the spirit of this project. Hence, we have a double-bind situation. Couldn't this situation be at the root of the schizophrenic behavior of our institutions?

3.2. Transplanting Paradoxes: Post-Modern Liberalism in Non-Post-Modern Cultures

Suárez argues something similar in his article. The general message of Postmodernity to humanity as a whole is: "Let people of all kinds and cultures be free to organize themselves, within a nation, in as many interest groups as they want

and to walk as many different walks of life as they wish. Let us not impose any particular way of life on anyone". This injunction explicitly incites people, on the one hand, to generate various and completely different social ways of being. On the other hand, it tells people to adopt one and only one form of life (that preached by Post-Modern Liberalism). As Suárez puts it, the Post-Modern Liberal order is contradictory because it attempts to establish the lack of universality and legitimacy as universally legitimate. (Sect. 5).

Now, the question arises: How is the message "Be Post-Modern" received by the "underdeveloped" (or developing) nations? Something interesting happens upon comparing this message with modernity's message. First, the message is invariant, i.e., the injunction is exactly the same for the developed and for the underdeveloped nations. Second, this distinction, which is appropriate for modernity, ceases to be meaningful under Post-Modernism. Now all cultures are significantly equal. There are no longer backward or advanced cultures on this planet. As a result, the rush to become modern, like the developed nations, loses its significance, since we are invited to be original, to be creative, to invent our own social way of being.

3.3. Relation between the First and the Second Paradoxes: Is the Second Creating the Conditions of Possibility for Breaking the Spell of the First?

Inasmuch as modernity is ending in the "developed" Western countries, and Postmodernity is inviting us to be original, the spell of the first paradox is beginning to fade in the developing nations. The article by Suárez and the one by the Fuenmayors seem to agree: this historical event (the fading of modernity and the rising of Postmodernity are one and the same phenomenon!) might be setting up the conditions for us to rethink the entire meaning of the present and of our place in it. We can no longer run to the European cultures to copy or to ask what can we do, because they themselves are embarked on the same process of rethinking what to do. Ironically, the Post-Modern paradox is helping us to reveal the true essence of modernity, perhaps too late. Couldn't it be that now the conditions are actually given for the authentic realization of modernity on a global scale? Then we might be at the dawn of a real modern era. But things are not so easy. One more riddle has to be solved before understanding the real nature of modernity. We have to break loose from the spell of the second paradox.

4. DOUBLE BINDS AND *REFRAMING*

The articles by the Fuenmayors and by Suárez previously referred to have something substantial to say about this question, particularly the Fuenmayors' second article. I shall say in advance only that the answer lies in what I call *holistic reframing*. In the clinical metaphor used before, reframing means "...to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the 'facts' of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby *changes its entire*

meaning." (Watzlawick, et al., 1974, p.95, my italics). In this higher level context of meaning, the paradox is dissolved and the unity of being is recovered. Within the new "frame" (context of meaning) we are able to see not only why we were trapped but also to infuse our previous and future actions with a completely different meaning.

In this sense, we can interpret the final words in Suárez's article: "The institutional 'schizophrenia' present in our societies is merely a manifestation of these basic contradictions [generated by a paradoxical command: Be free but not be free]. Accordingly, the only possibility of solving the prison problem [which in some ways may be taken as the metaphor of our times] lies in *the remaking of a unitary holistic sense of ourselves as a society*." (Conclusion part II, prisons case study).

And something similar can be said of the conclusion of the Fuenmayors' paper: " This story [the *regressive* narrative of progress of the Enlightenment project and its idea of progress] that we are telling, and which today is seen by European philosophers and thinkers as closer to the truth, is, we believe, the narrative that if told throughout the world, could break the spell, the paradox of the modernization of the non-modern countries."

The research on schizophrenic institutions seems to have opened the door to a more complex and fundamental issue, that of the meaning of our times, and the future of humanity. With it, the meaning of systems thinking and systemic practice is inextricably bonded!

It is now time to end this rather long editorial and go on to our acknowledgments of those whose work and support made this special issue possible. The list is long and space is short, we, therefore, ask the forgiveness of those who could not be included here.

special issue. Last, but not least, thanks to Louis Flood, assistant editor of SPAR, for his help and flexibility with the deadlines, and to Marilyn Bertorelli for her good work in translating and proofreading all the manuscripts.

REFERENCES

Ackoff, R. L. (1976). Toward a System of Systems Concepts, in John Beishon and Geoff Peters, *Systems Behaviour*, The Open University Press,   London.

Bateson, G. (1978). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Paladin, London.

Fuenmayor, R. and López-Garay, H. (1991). The Scene for Interpretive Systemology. *Systems Practice* 4, 401-418.

Fuenmayor, R. (1991a). The Self-Referential Structure of an Everyday-   Living Situation: A Phenomenological Ontology for Interpretive   Systemology. *Systems Practice*, vol.4, n.5, Plenum Press, New York.

Fuenmayor, R. (1991b). Truth and Openness: An Epistemology for Interpretive Systemology. *Systems Practice*, vol.4, n.5, Plenum   Press, New York.

Fuenmayor, R (1997). The Historical Meaning of Present Systems Thinking. *Syst. Res. Behav. Sci*, **14**, 235-248.

López-Garay and Suárez, R.T. (1998). The Holistic Sense of Prison Phenomena in Venezuela: III. The Unity of the Research. In this special issue of   *SPAR*.

Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H. and Jackson, D. D. (1967). *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Norton, New York.

Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. and Fisch, R. (1974). *Change*, Norton, N.Y.

Hernán López-Garay
Guest Editor
Departamento de
Sistemología Interpretativa
Escuela de Sistemas
ULA, Mérida, Venezuela