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# From Applied Narratives to Systemic Inquiry

Human system inquiry in action

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**Systemic Excellence Group**

Independent Think Tank for Leading Practice

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## Introduction

Systemic Inquiry (SI) highlights the impact the recognition of the observer had on the practice of organisational development and systemic intervention. Based on Applied Narratives (AN) Systemic Inquiry presents a different approach for understanding organisations and facilitating change. Being a methodology for effective and sustainable change SI gained relevance for management and consultancy not only in the very heart of the economy but as well in politics, administration and even the church.

Recognition of the observer on OD and Systemic Intervention

Heinz von Foerster's cybernetics of cybernetics (Foerster 1974) gave way for a profound change in the perception of organisations and the nature of interventions. This connects to what we are used to call a paradigm shift towards constructivism. However, the most challenging concept of sociological Systems Theory and sociocybernetics is the recognition of the observer. Today we have already explored these implications to a certain extent. Nevertheless, we presume that we are still far from realizing how far this concept will guide us.

Systemic Inquiry shall illustrate the consequences of the recognition of the observer for the practice of organisational development and systemic intervention. The focus will be on the change in the perception of organisations and the nature of interventions. SI comprises the implications and opens up an interesting realm of possibilities for management as well as for consultants.

We will start with a short tour into theory. Applied Narratives comprises the theoretical implications of the recognition of the observer for the perception of the organisation. This focuses the question: "What can an organisation know about itself and what does this imply?".

Accordingly Systemic Inquiry is a methodology for organisational development on the basis of Applied Narratives. SI incorporates the change in the perception of the nature of interventions. What if, "You cannot not intervene."<sup>1</sup> was true or at least an appropriate description of the nature of intervention. SI takes this into account and organises a methodology that in its reflection is always one step ahead.

SI organises a methodology that is one step ahead of desired change

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01\_ „You cannot not communicate“ is one of Watzlawick's most famous quotes (Watzlawick 1978). Regarding social systems communication is intervention (Klein 2002, Willke 1994).

Two cases from the consultancy practice will allow a glimpse into SI applications. One case will deal with genuine organisational change, the other case shows the broader application in the contexts of corporate branding.

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# 1. Applied Narratives – the theory

The issue that organises Applied Narratives<sup>2</sup> is the question of the possibilities of observing enterprises, firms, companies or organisations in general. Based on the differentiation of the whole and its parts, the managerial practice articulated a critic of the analysis based on the so called scientific management. The logic of the economy payment|not payment is a one-eyed, a so to speak cyclonical perspective<sup>3</sup>. It is based on only one distinction. This may be the most important one for an enterprise, but it renders the company blind for all other perspectives. The idea was to switch to a somehow **holistic perspective**. Yet, even the most prominent models, e.g. the St. Gallen Management Model (Bleicher 1991), came with a not completely satisfying taste. The Model was rich and brought a lot of benefits. However, it gained no real access to the whole<sup>4</sup>. Referring to Heinz von Foerster cybernetics of cybernetics and the recognition of the observer, the sociological **Systems Theory** is nowadays said to be the most promising offer to solve the problem. It is a holistic theory with an according claim for universality.

Scientific Management and the St Gallen Management Model

However, choosing the Social Systems Theory as a reference implies a fundamental challenge, namely the **observability of organisations**. According to the Theory of Social Systems, organisations exist of communication, and only of communication. You may observe people walking around or sitting in their offices, you may see production sites and products and logos etc. Yet, what fundamentally makes a specific enterprise, is the coherence of its communication. And if you observe communications you need to observe something volatile, something that in the very moment it comes to existence will be gone. The trick is that social systems organise their self-observation in the form of **describing themselves as action systems** (Luhmann 1984). Facing an action system you can tell stories, stories about its history, about the state of affairs, about strategies and futures. In the form of an action system organisations gain observability for themselves as well as for external observers.

Social Systems Theory: the coherence of the organisation`s communication

Organisations gain for observability

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02\_ Applied Narratives as the idea of systematically utilising narratives as a leverage for systemic intervention became more and more known in the recent years (Czarniawska 1998), (Boje 2001), (Lissack/Letiche 2002) and (Hjorth/Steyaert 2004).

03\_ In the functional differentiation of society the economy is described as encoded by the payment|not payment differentiation (Luhmann 1984). Being an operationally closed system, the economy overemphasises the coding and becomes blind for any other perspective (Willke 2001).

04\_ The implications for the management sciences are far beyond what the St. Gallen model dreamt of. Systems theory is a challenge not only for holistic models within the discipline, but for the whole discipline as such (Beyes 2003, Winter 1999).

This idea of observability relates to methodologies of **Storytelling** (Frenzel/Müller/Sottong 2000). The most prominent are Sense making (Weick 1979), Rich Pictures (Checkland 1981, Wilson 1984) and Learning Histories (Kleiner/Roth 1997). All these approaches believe in understanding organisations as a collage of stories. They as well share a broader understanding of stories which does not only take into account the official story of an organisation as described in the balance sheet, the accounting, the commercials on TV or the recruitment brochures. They take into account as well the implicit pictures, the gossip, the talks in the canteen and the off line discussion, to name but a few. That is how the observation of an organisation is possible.

Storytelling etc. understand organisations as a collage of stories ...

... also taking implicit pictures, gossip, into account

We can analyse these stories in which organisations observe themselves according to their specifics and their relevance. The **specifics** manifest in **semantics** (Luhmann 1980). It is a very specific language spoken inside organisations. It varies from the common language. As you may have experienced as a newcomer in an organisation you will realize that specific words carry a specific meaning for an organisation. The usage of that word is sometimes slightly, sometimes strongly different from what you know from outside the company. It is that surplus of meaning that indicates where you are. And this aspect of language inside a company knowing itself from a language outside the company is only the top of the iceberg of possibilities of a semantic analysis<sup>5</sup>.

Organisational specifics manifest in the used semantics

The **relevance** of the stories told crystallise around **foci of attention** (Franck 1998). This foci of attention are attractors for the stories processed inside an organisation. We find two aspects to that relevance. First, there is the overall, official relevance. This is the company's history, the present change programme or the strategic initiatives of the top management. And second there is the burning relevance of issues pressing at the moment. This is the atmosphere in our department, what my boss said last week and what happened this morning. According to the organisational issue leading to the collection of stories, especially the category of burning relevance provides deeper insights into an organisation.

Organisational relevance crystallises around foci of attention

Systems Theory comes with an even further analysis of social systems. This is the analysis of the founding set of differentiations. This combines the idea of **guiding differences** with the aspect of the coding of a specific social system<sup>6</sup>. This is very fundamental for functional systems of a society, e.g. the economy of a society coded by the guiding differences payment/not payment. Within organisations we find the structural coupling of more than one ratio, which is very evident with a closer look on administrations which surely process the guiding differences payment/not payment, but are even more focussed on the coding of the politics power/not power. Combinations of these guiding differences can be comprised in complex observational arrangements of guiding differences<sup>7</sup>. In these **arrangements of differentiations** we find information about the status of an organisation, the components of its identity, the dimensions of its possibilities.

The arrangement of differentiations reveal the status of an organisation

05\_ Analysing semantics became a mayor issue for the theory and practice of social sciences as highlighted in constructivism, semiotics, de-constructivism etc. (Luhmann 1980, 1984).

06\_ Bateson's understanding of information (Bateson 1972), Spencer-Brown's "Draw a distinction"-concept (Spencer-Brown 1969) and Luhmann's Systems Theory (Luhmann 1984) allow a perspective on social systems with differentiated communication through a specific coding. Communication operating along a specific coding generates operationally closed functional systems of society with all consequences of autopoiesis (Maturana/Varela 1980).

07\_ Baecker (Baecker 2001) suggested to use Spencer-Brown's marker (Spencer-Brown 1969) as a tool to describe social systems. More complex observational arrangements proved to be a strong approach for analysing foci of attention and semantics of social systems (Klein 2002).

Applied Narratives describe the organisational analysis as a cascade of stories, semantics and guiding differences (Klein 2002). Applied Narratives compose a holistic picture of the organisation, of the parameters of organisational identity and explores the realms of the organisation's possibilities. Reading the Applied Narratives cascade from stories to guiding differences proves to be a powerful analytical tool diagnosing the system. Reading it from guiding differences back to stories, Applied Narratives suggests to be an intelligent blueprint for systemic intervention designing the system.

The holistic picture:  
a cascade of stories,  
semantics and guiding  
differentiations

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## 2. Systemic Inquiry – the methodology

It was the recognition of the observer we marked as the fundamental impact of cybernetics on organisational development and systemic intervention. Applied Narratives focuses on the change in the perception of organisations. Systemic Inquiry combines this with the changed perception of intervention as we find it elaborated in the **Systemic Intervention** concepts (Willke 1994, Königswieser/Exner 1998). This alternative view of intervention overcomes the ideas of objectivity and external observers. As you cannot not communicate you cannot not intervene facing a social system consisting of communications. Any observation is intervention! This is the first implication which however leads to a problem rather than to a solution. Therefore, the second implication is of even more interest to the community of practice. Concepts of observation and intervention can take that into account and organise processes and structures of self-observation. A systemic intervention is an intervention that is in contact with itself by means of **self-observation**. This implies a good sense for the **cybernetics of interventions**. Everything you do will come back to you and social systems are non-trivial machines (Foerster 1985, 1993). Giving way for such a broader, recursive understanding of interventions, what comes into sight is that any methodology can only be a meta-methodology. One size fits all is a myth when it comes to intervention in social systems. Systemic Inquiry is such a **meta-methodology** that gives an outline for tailor-made intervention. It highlights implications of the Systems Theory perspective and comprises the critical edges of any management of organisations.

Starting point of Systemic Inquiry in action is a clear **organisational issue** such as organisational change or corporate branding. This needs to be clearly formulated by the according process owner. The experience is that at this initial stage we find the flaw in most of the not so successful managerial practice and consultancy. What shall be accomplished and why? What is the strategic objective and the direction of further development? If that is not clear we must state that an organisation is not in good contact with itself. It needs a loop of clarification to be able to move on.

The organisational issue becomes the reference for any process architecture and intervention design. From the organisational issue we can derive the relevant

Applied Narratives focuses the change in perception of organisations ...

... SI combines this with a changed perception of intervention

A systemic intervention is in contact with itself

Starting point: sound clearance of the organisational issues

participants of the Systemic Inquiry process. **Inquiry** does not mean to sample a few stories to approach an objective truth. If you want to know something about an organisation it is like a hologram. Every single piece resembles the whole thing however blur. With every additional piece the picture becomes clearer and very soon the surplus of additional pieces will be marginal. However, that is not the point. Relevance for an organisational issue leads to participation. You better do not find yourself in a situation where you have to explain to someone why you believe that he or she is relevant to the organisational issue but not included in the process. It's a question of appreciation.

Inquiry as an organisational hologram

Any process intentionally intervening in social systems needs to have a clear and visible start and an clear and visible end. Any process is a deliberate segmentation of an ongoing organisational development. Organisations cannot not develop in the same way that they cannot not have a culture. Any intervention or change process is only highlighting, is only focussing organisational attention on a specific organisational issue for a certain time. And this period should never exceed nine months for organisational attention's matters. It may be less than that yet you cannot effectively focus **organisational attention** for too long. Things become tiring and the impetus you gain through focussing will be gambled. You will get one of these unpleasant worn out, muddy endings which are so typical for overdone change ambitions.

Time as a relevant factor for organisational attention

Systemic Inquiry means exploring an organisation. Looking for the genuine stories. This implies **open interviews in a qualitative style**. With a rigid set of questions like recommended in the tradition of quantitative social research you will only receive what you were looking for. However, not a single surprise. Questions tend to suggest a somehow right answer and an experienced interviewee will give you that right answer you were looking for. SI has no questioners. All that is provided in the interviews is a translation of the organisational issue. For the SI based reengineering process of a Quality Management (QM) organisation linking five different plants we had only three questions: What is QM?, What does it mean to do a good job in QM? and What is a proper setup for a QM organisation? That was all. The answers were surprising and led to a more effective QM than the process owner initially thought possible.

Exploration of the organisation by qualitative interviews

The actual benefit of the SI interviews however lies not in the scientific analysis and the feedback to the organisation. It is the interview itself that is of greater value to the organisation and its issues. According to the Systemic Evaluation methodology (Klein 2002) the SI interviews create a **unity of analysis, concept and implementation**. The interviews focus organisational attention and generate awareness and participation. They pass on a certain sense of direction and objectives. Furthermore, the SI interview setting integrates the virtues of the Appreciate Inquiry methodology (Cooperrider/Srivastva 1999, Bensen/Maleh 2001). The according technique of inquiry creates an atmosphere of appreciation. It facilitates the search for solution and activates personal potentials and resources. Imagine the situation where a middle manager faces an interviewer asking for his or her views on a the specific organisational issue, be it change, development or branding. Imagine an atmosphere of appreciation and an interviewer who instead of working his way to a rigid questionnaire really listens<sup>8</sup>. You will meet a happy person, completely delighted telling stories

Benefit of SI: unity of analysis, concept and implementation

SI interviews: atmosphere of appreciation

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08\_ While storytelling broaden up a concept of understanding organisations, Story-management (Löbber 2003) and in particular Story-listening (Liebl/Rughase 2002) brought forward concepts that reach on an operational level far beyond the mere notion of participation.

for definitely longer than the initially agreed time. So you better schedule interviews without time restrictions through following appointments.

The **analysis** of the interviews follows the **AN cascade**. This is first of all the collection of the stories and the reorganisation of the results according to the foci of attention. This brings about something like a top ten of the most prominent stories. Therein, the organisation recognises itself. It is not always necessary and sometimes even not recommendable to go into the very depth of the arrangements of differentiations. This can be of higher value if the going gets tough or the organisational issue is more fundamental and challenging to the organisations identity.

An analysis follows the AN cascade

**Feeding back** the results of an analysis is usually regarded as a critical point. The experience with SI however shows that feeding back the foci of attention and the stories and findings coming with them is not critical at all. The interviewees identify themselves with their stories. The actual feedback setting depends on the organisational issue. Different settings ranging from issuing a written report to a big bang with a bigger group, workshops, parties, role-plays, arts, artistic, happenings etc. can be taken into account.

The feedback setting depends on the organisational issue.

The SI process brings an organisation in contact with itself, with its identity and its realms of possibilities. The SI generates an embracing participation and integrates everybody with his or her responsible contribution for greater organisational issues.

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### 3. Organisational Development – a case

The client is a political institution of the church. This lobby institution consists of a steering committee, a central office and issue driven expert committees. The steering committee gathers the representatives of the different member organisations. The steering committee is represented by a president, who would like to retreat after more than 20 year from his position. The process owners were the institutions president and the head of the central office.

The starting point was characterized by an overload situation for the central office. The office had severe difficulties to cope with its tasks and workload. The quality of the work was described as being not at all satisfactory. The atmosphere amongst the office staff, the head, two managers, two secretaries and one apprentice was rather bad. The steering committee however started a so called vision-search process. Identifying the problems in the central office the steering committee recommended an organisational development process for the office and agreed on hiring a consultancy to assist.

Problem offer: Overload situation

The consultants hypothesis after the first meetings with the process owner was as follows: The central office does not know what tasks there are to be fulfilled. The stakeholders are unknown. This relates to the institution itself which either has no shared sense of tasks, stakeholders, and volumes.

Hypothesis: insufficient clearance of tasks, stakeholders and volumes

The proposed solution: A SI process will bring the institution into contact with itself and its stakeholders. This should provide the basis for an organisational development process with the central office.

The SI process architecture:

- \_\_\_ Clarification and sharpening of the organisational issue with the process owner, i.e. president and head of the central office.
- \_\_\_ Interview set with stakeholders, with all members of the steering committee, members of the expert committee, and the central office.
- \_\_\_ Analysing the stories told according to the organisational issue.
- \_\_\_ Feed the results back first to the process owners and second to the steering committee.

Reactions:

\_\_\_ The central office agrees on an organisational development process along the lines of goal clarification (workshop), negotiation of roles (moderated talks of the head with the single employees) and review of business processes (workshop).

\_\_\_ A few members of the steering committee founded a special team dedicated to development issues of their institution. The team meets frequently in-between the actual board meetings working out suggestions for the further development of their institution.

\_\_\_ Setting an architecture for the retiring of the president.

The mayor result of the SI process was to bring the organisation in contact with itself on different levels. This fostered an understanding for the responsibility of the single person for the development of their institution beyond a strong president. The further development of the institution is now based in the co-operation of the development team and the steering committee. In this context the central office now has a good chance for its own goal-oriented development.

Result: Clarification of tasks between development team and steering committee

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## 4. Corporate Branding – another case

The client was a global enterprise after a major merger which formed under the old company name a new corporation. In the sense of corporate branding, the new self-perception should be communicated internally and externally. For this purpose, an internal task force with participants from the various business areas was formed. An external branding agency was assigned to support the process. After a while, the situation of the task force was described as a deadlock. The task force and the external supporter got stuck. A lot of conflict was at hand. Discussions were focussing on conflict rather than further development.

Problem offer: Integration task force got stuck in conflicts

The consultants hypothesis was that the new company did not know who it was. The new situation was not acknowledged. The strategic directions of the board were politically not accepted from the perspective of the business areas. The difference between the actual situation and the espoused strategy was too broad. The conflict was escalated along the central | de-central line.

Hypothesis: Lack of acknowledging the new situation

The solution: Based on a SI process the company is proposed to be brought into contact with its actual situation. The goal is to illustrate the different facets of the corporate identity to facilitate a sound corporate branding.

Solution: Illustrate the facets of the CI and base it on actual stories

SI process architecture:

- \_\_\_ Sparring with the external branding agency.
- \_\_\_ Clarification of the organisational issue with the Internal Communication department in charge of the task force and the branding process.
- \_\_\_ Interview setting wherein the representatives of the different business areas acted as story collectors.
- \_\_\_ Analysis of the gathered stories based on the differentiation stories-told|stories-tested. Collection of attributes for a sound corporate brand.
- \_\_\_ Feedback of the results to the task force.

Reactions:

\_\_\_ The further branding process was oriented on the collection of attributes derived from their stories-tested. Conflicting political dimensions could be separated from the branding process.

\_\_\_ In the different business areas the story collection was continued on the clients` account. The idea was to write-on the business area identity and to facilitate knowledge transfer in the sense of a best practice sharing and learning history.

The final result of the SI process was to create a good understanding and description of the actual situation of the company beyond strategy papers. The sensitivity for organisational stories was sustainable, not only in the Internal Communications department. Especially in the different business areas the idea of story management was perceived as an opportunity for effective knowledge transfer and a solid basis for identity and business development.

Result: a better understanding of the actual situation

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## 5. Conclusion and further development

The recognition of the observer changed a lot for the practice of organisational development. It moves on to a certain self-awareness of the observer, be it a manager or a consultant. It changes the whole attitude. As the good experiences with Systemic Inquiry show, it is possible to intervene into social systems on the basis of human system inquiry and it is possible to facilitate a certain direction for the system's further development. However that is not social system engineering. The direction of developments might be clear, the actual performance however will be directed by the system's dynamics, not by an omnipotent controller. And it is more important to facilitate an organisation's chances to come into contact with itself than having a thorough analysis. It is always the organisation that knows best which course to steer.

SI serves as a possible social system's intervention

With the self-awareness of the observer another notion comes into sight, which is the distinction between the person and the organisation, between the psyche system and the social system. We are used to think of observers as being persons. The concept of the observer however reaches far beyond that. Organisations being observers of themselves, being communications observing themselves, this is an understanding that cannot be underestimated in its consequences for any social practice, may it be planning or action, may it be in corporations, institutions or administrations.

Organisations observe themselves and their communication

We are on the verge towards new formats of management and consulting. However, prior to that is a further development of the theory of social systems which takes into account all facets of possibilities and limitations to a self-observing communication. And this is not only on the level of structures and processes but on the level of launching topics within the communication and placing contributions to a certain discourse. Probably, we are already much closer to such a political practice of managing communication and discourses than we might be aware of.

Future step: a political practise of managing communication and discourse?

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