

Conceptualising the building in of evaluative inquiry for more truly living human systems

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Thank you so much for this invitation to speak about the ideas I have developed over 38 years as a researcher and an evaluator. These ideas culminated in 2004 in my making connections between the four major disciplines – of epistemology, systems thinking, psychology and sociology – to create an integral theory that brings them together into what I hope is a coherent whole.

It was first published in 2008 as two papers and then in 2010 in Australia as a much more comprehensive book – *Building in Research and Evaluation: Human Inquiry for Living Systems* (late in 2011 published world-wide).

And now my task is to try to describe and explain it!

I hope Ian Trotman won't regret having urged more attention to the transdisciplinary in his acceptance speech for his Taumata! (An honour for which I offer my congratulations to him).

In some ways I feel like I'm on the Australian television '*Inventors*' show – bringing along my shiny new architectural model for you to examine! People are standing around it scratching their heads saying 'but what is it?' and 'what does it *do*?'

Its scope and the range of implications and applications mean it isn't always entirely self-evident at first glance. In a way it is more like learning a language and becoming familiar with it. It is also 'thinking in a new way about how we think' (and feel and value and observe and reflect), so that may be a bit strange too.

On the other hand this piece of 'mental architecture' has been painstakingly built up over 38 years of practice-based research and evaluation in fields with which you yourselves are also familiar, including here in New Zealand.

In fact it is quite nostalgic for me to be speaking to you about these ideas here in *Hamilton*, as it was in Hamilton *in 1999* I came to give another talk to human services, nursing, management and action research colleagues the year after I had first drafted the book that I am here to discuss.

I remember a particular person who – when I had described the way I was wanting to conceptualise the living organism metaphorically as 'a house of many rooms' – had strongly suggested I use the example of *an egg* instead – since this contained all the necessary properties of living systems (which is true).

In fact I ended up using the idea of bicycle-riding as a metaphor for two of the fundamental properties of a living system – those of being both dynamic *and* in equilibrium. And then in the book I ask where the bicycle riding 'system' came from, so I managed to fit in both the egg ...*and* its suitor... *and* the mother bearing it [OVERHEAD], *and* the resulting infant, [OVERHEAD] *and* that child as a grown-up bicycle rider building their own cubby house, [OVERHEAD] *and* thus the house as the inquiring self 'writ large'! [OVERHEAD]

So I did retain my use of the house as the larger metaphor after all! *And* the egg!

I never got his name, but I wish I could let him know what my own ‘inquiring human system’ did with his input to my system. And how Hamilton for me was, in this tiny way, a microcosm example of a ‘morphogenic inquiry field’ in which new ideas, new forms, and organisation did indeed come together from a chaotic field of possibilities. Our own Hadron collider and Higgs boson at work!

But since I was last here you have endured two massive – literal – chaotic upheavals in your own orderly systemic life-supporting field. In Chrys Horn’s notes in your April 2011 *ANZEA Newsletter* I detected powerful descriptions of even more of the self-organising, inquiring, evaluating living human organism that I have come here to talk about. This time illustrating also how you (and we) all do this effortlessly when need be.

Chrys describes the initial response to the earthquakes as ‘*a 100 metre sprint*’ quickly organised by ‘*a top-down military-style of command and control*’.

In other words **Plans** were quickly made and **Actions** were even more quickly taken *on the basis of whatever we already knew, thought and did* – based on previous **Observation** and **Reflection**. Here was the existing ‘program theory’ and ‘program logic’ kicking in, just as it does in almost every response to crisis that we, or any living organism, make.

Let me begin to build my mental architecture right here [OVERHEAD plan-act-observe-reflect Cycle Diagram]... To the extent you had the experience of pre-existing knowledge being applied well – chances are it might have been evaluated more or less positively/**appreciatively**. [Audit review evaluation spot at **observe, action**]

The way the building regulations had successfully applied to ensure well-built structures was a good example of this for the first 4th of September quake in 2010.

To the extent you did *not* have adequate existing knowledge – chances are things may not have gone so well, and perhaps been evaluated more negatively/**critically**. And indeed even the excellent building regulations met their match on the 22nd February in the second quake in 2011.

Then Chrys notes that for **recovery** – as opposed to **first response** – a different kind of inquiring was drawn on: one that felt more like ‘*several months of a mountaineering expedition*’.

Here it seems you had to, as the PAR facilitator and thinker Myles Horton of the USA Highlander Centre once said, ‘*make the road by walking it*’ – with what Chrys described as ‘bottom-up grassroots’ work, and I will call – drawing on the biological systems concept of ‘autopoiesis’ – or self-organising and self-re-forming by self-re-making inquiry, including through a number of sequences... [**Observe, Reflect, Plan** then **Act** experimentally, repeatedly/cyclically]

In this way the ‘mountaineering’ yields from **Reflect** more new potentially transferable knowledge, logics and yardsticks, practice wisdom and habits for new **Plans**, as a long list in the ANZEA Newsletter attests:

*‘You know you’re from Christchurch when...
you see a nice park in another city and think it would make
a good evacuation point!’* [**Observe, reflect, conclude, apply, deduce!**]

So here is a familiar action research cycle, onto which today I will gradually layer more and more ways of thinking about these apparently simple ideas of cycles of inquiry.

Some of you may have seen my building of this in my unfolding conclusions in *Do It Yourself Social Research* from the late 70s to the early 1980s [OVERHEAD of front cover DIYSR] ...and then *Everyday Evaluation on the Run* from the late 80s to the 1990s – about social research and evaluation being *cyclic* rather than *linear* [OVERHEAD wall map now on Allen & Unwin web]

And I know Delwyn Goodrick remembers my bringing some then unfamiliar ideas about systems and the *systemic* to slightly puzzled gatherings at AES seminars in the late 1990s as I came to see how ‘whole systems’ inquired during a long 10-year engagement in quality improvement through dialogic evaluation with consumers and staff in acute psychiatry. I later worked more intensively on this, reading as far as I could into the new physics and re-grasping an understanding of the biological properties of living systems.

Meanwhile I was coming to see how *psychologically* we take in information, process it, and act on it, in reliably different ways that were reflected *sociologically* and systemically in our social and cultural patterns – a real Rosetta stone key for me.

Then in 2004 I saw it *all* as facets of *the same whole*. [OVERHEAD cycle, systemically helical]

I am finding it sometimes takes a number of exchanges for me to be able to express all that I have come up with, particularly the implications and consequences of all this, however I’m hoping it might nevertheless *also* strike you as rather familiar.

Indeed I hope you might find yourself saying ‘I already knew *this!*’ and then be able to go deeper with me into the very big picture that I think is systemically created by these familiar repeated individual and collective inquiring processes.

Sometimes it particularly most comes to life regarding current puzzles, paradoxes or questions in your own practice, or things-as-they-are that can seem rather bewildering and dismaying compared to things-as-hoped-for, or just as a way of being curious about *discrepancies* of any kind. Because these discrepancies, as I will hope to show, are the starting point of all living systems’ evaluative inquiry that offers the chance of bringing greater life. So. Here are the four big areas of thinking that I will bring together... [OVERHEAD of the 4 transdisciplinary areas]

I have to say that there are both serious threats and helpful opportunities in attempting a transdisciplinary theory of any kind. [OVERHEADS incl re Fluff the cat!]

I will try and break it down into historical ‘chunks’ and then build it up again. [OVERHEAD biology, decades, living systems]

After a brief introductory glimpse at the 1st of the four disciplines – complex living systems theory – I want to start where I really started in my own work as an evaluator – with my own experience of the discrepancies or confounding puzzles and paradoxes of our best efforts in health, community and human services. I’ll look chronologically at four decades of emergence of the 2nd of these: the research and evaluation – using my own practice to illuminate key learnings I made, building towards the theory’s eventual synthesis.

In this way I hope you will see how the Very Big Theory was built as a piece of ‘mental architecture’ that sees the dynamic process of *inquiry* as the way that all living organisms accomplish life, from the smallest cell to the cosmos – *or not*, as the case may be.

I am a little daunted to do justice to all this in an hour! –

It is not just the culmination of 38 years of my own practice-based thinking, in effect my life's work, but it also rests on 400 years of philosophy of knowledge including:

- All the major paradigm wars in epistemology and science;
- The debates about the new physics and the properties of living ecosystems, the human mind and other complex systemic fields;
- The still bifurcated psychology-sociology articulation of 'the individual' and 'the social', determinism vs. free will, agency vs. structure, etc.;
- And the hundreds of years of debates and current paradigm skirmishes within each of these two huge particular disciplinary areas.

Fortunately we can explore some of the implications that interest you in questions, and I am here for the rest of the conference to continue the conversation together further if you would like!

I *am* still learning to tell this story – indeed the theory explains in a new way why *no* way that I ever present it, will ever really suit *every* member of an audience! As we are indeed inquiring differently for our differing life purposes :-)

So I may be a bit 'head down' as I focus on trying to make it as accessible as possible, although hopefully, like Goldilocks' porridge, neither *too* simplistic so as not to bring anything new, nor *so* complex as to be off-putting. Hopefully, like the conditions for life itself – 'just right'.

Finally in way of introduction, I want to say that this is 'just' a 'best invention' for how to think about being able to 'map, model, mirror, and find a directional compass' (Wadsworth in Bradbury and Reason *Handbook of Action Research* Sage, 2001) in relation to the greater fields of systemicity (physical, social, political and economic) in which we find ourselves locally and globally.

Indeed *in its own terms*, it can be seen simultaneously, as:

- *A descriptive mapping* of 'how things are' (based on observation)—while remembering 'the map is not the territory', and no observation comes without interpretation driven by theory
- *An explanatory metaphor* (from reflection) for understanding 'why things are as they are' and 'why something else would be better'—while remembering we know and understand the meaning of the worlds we mirror and model by the metaphors and other linking devices we select or create,
- *A working model* (for planning) 'how things could instead be better'—while realising the model-maker (the observer) is the human inventor and theorist of the model of the observed, and
- *A guide to life* (for action) to experiment in real life with those ideas—while noting that our compasses always construct our perspectives based on evidence and experience to date, and these in turn derive from our best and closest observations (also, to date) and are driven by our deeper and embodied value-driven feelings, hopes, purposes or intentions (also, our best to date).

Thus it is in fact a self-correcting theory – and this is its saving grace in my view – as there are immense dangers in having a Grand Theory of Everything (and my thinking I have indeed discovered the secrets of the universe! Which I do :-)

This places what I have to say conceptually in the part of the inquiry cycle that is about 'what I have learned and concluded' and thus characterised by all the dangers of my having *certainty* about *The Answers* when they can only ever be provisional and subject to trial – [**Reflect to Plan**] That is, *I* am all ready to deduce, **Plan** and **Act** on the basis of it!

On the other hand, luckily for *you*, in the context of *your* inquiring (and again in the theory's own terms) – it comes on the *opposite* side of the cycle in **Observe**, question and **Reflect** – and thus is a mere *offering* of possibility and potentiality to *your* compost heap of ideas, questions, nutrients, and resources from which *you* may or may not seek resourcing of *your* life purposes!

I offer it to you in this spirit – and I will be happy if you can glimpse even just *something* of what I am trying to convey today. Then if you wish there is the book [OVERHEAD of cover] which reveals far more than I will be able to convey in a single presentation. Indeed I hope it will be studied and savoured for many years to come.

So this is all really just a beginning to the life that this way of thinking may have. (Or may not have, if I'm wrong!)

Firstly a glimpse of the biological systems thinking

[OVERHEAD Back to some early living systems thinking – DNA]

Let me come at this big theory from firstly a reference to the biological theory of living systems I started with a long time ago when I fell in love with – including DNA ('deoxyribose nucleic acid' which I could spell at the age of 14!), and then I'll come back to this systems thread at the end.

Then some brief glimpses of the big slate of problems and challenges that inspired (and frustrated) my epistemological journey.

And then a quick journey through the three historical eras that saw the emergence and continuing development of the evaluation field, and was the practice-based context from which my thinking and this 'mental architecture' emerged.

At the World Congress of AL and PAR in Melbourne in 2010, the UK biologist Alan Rayner got up on Day 1 to give his keynote account of how 'fungi were doing action research'. Then on the Thursday I got up and said my keynote proposition was that 'all action researchers are fungi'!

[OVERHEAD of Alan's exquisite photographs of a cycle of fungi's AR]
So here is a fungus evaluating how to constantly achieve life – exploring outwards, taking things in, changing, and then moving on.

[2 OVERHEADS – 1967 Carbon cycle – and giraffes in environment]

And we too are living organisms who are achieving life just like fungi – by expanding outwards to include in our 'field' as many possibilities, diverse resources, ways of being and doing, and inputs and nutrients, and in which – when we detect discrepancies in our gestalt field – we research and evaluate and then focus on re-achieving dynamic balance by 'incorporating' them – making them part of the form of our embodiment – to ensure we can go on living, growing, flowering, replicating, fruiting, and ultimately returning to the great chaotic compost heap until new life comes in the spark of incarnation .

Now some driving paradoxes and discrepancies of the human world

While I would *not* want to assume that fungi have any less complex lives than our own species, here are some of the paradoxes and discrepancies that have inspired my own journeys through the eras of research, evaluation and systemic improvement over the past 38 years or so.

It is these which have driven me to be able to understand them and know how to respond to them. I describe them now systemically... [SLIDE SHOW from here]