

Review of: "[Research note] Semantic Systems Theory"

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As an initial positive, it is competently written with a good flow and suitable citations, and as a full paper would likely be publishable. However, as a research note, its novelty is not sufficiently well defined. Also, it must be said that adopting an agency approach (and I note here the important approach adopted by Bandura in social psychology) is a very effective way to explain agency contexts since it can draw on detail that other approaches may be devoid of. Since the research note introduces the concept of agency, it would be useful to maintain this terminology and adopt the term agent, creating greater generalisation, where an agent could refer to a person or a group.

The author's reply to the review by Xingsi Xue that this is not a paper but a research note suggests that there should be a header indicating that it is a research note. It should still summarise its composition. It should have an adequate abstract (it does not), an indication of structure (it does not), and an indication of what to expect in the research note that is new about the thesis, and in what way over and above existing theory (it does not).

The research is concerned with "role analysis", and one presumes (since it is not stated) that this connects with role theory. Role theory is concerned with behaviours enacted by individuals/groups, and the inferences that can be made about them, and it is interested in how observers form inferences about personality and abilities of others based on their roles.

The research note opens with the statement that "a new form of systems theory is proposed." So, is the research note about role theory, or is it a systems paper? There is insufficient explanation concerning this, nor what is new about the said "form of systems theory." While the ideas presented may be new within a clinical context (I note the references given in the research note), I am at a loss to see how it is new elsewhere. The research note should show its originality clearly, and I am not satisfied that it has done this. There is a difference between proposing a new conceptualisation that is unique to the research, and the creation of a new terminology that simply reformulates existing theory within a bounded sphere of research.

If the conceptualisations are not conceptually new, then the paper that emerges from the research note might still be publishable if it could be reformulated to align with other current theories, thereby creating synergies (e.g. linking role theory with complex adaptive systems). This would contribute towards a defragmenting of the existing spectrum of theories. Representing the conceptualisation as something quite new when it only has new terminology therefore contributes towards the fragmentation that already exists in the literature.

Thus, consider an aspect of role theory (say by Goffman in his early work), where role analysis is considered in terms of

interaction analysis. This investigates the functioning and organization of the 'actual' practice of performing a role against the background of its normative frame of reference. While this does not specifically deal with the research note conceptualisations, there is likely to be sufficient synergy that could be explored.

The same applies to complex systems theory. If the conceptualisations of the research note are new, then it will be problematic to express them through the framework of an existing theory. So, in exploring the research note a little more carefully, let me apply to it a complex adaptive system framework to see if this is the case.

Most generally, agency has a population of autonomous adaptive agents that are able to perform and interact in an environment that might include other agencies. Appreciating the nature and capacities of the agents during their interactions with other agents, either from their own population or from other populations, is therefore useful. The inter-agent interactions can be important because they can ultimately be responsible for the emergence of agency regulatory processes that in turn constrain and facilitate agent role behaviours in a given population. In the research note, agent properties are expressed in terms of roles, and it is explained that roles are adaptive in that they "embrace transient convergence." Unfortunately this term is not adequately explained. Let me suppose that this is connected with agent role boundaries. In this case it would be useful to examine from a theoretical perspective the nature of the role boundaries, how they are defined, and under what adaptive conditions they change. Another attribute might be the realisation that roles are interpreted and role function is undertaken in a way that is influenced by cognitive and affective personality, and these may themselves be subject to change. This determines the role-playing agent capability towards action according to those (perhaps fuzzy) regulations that should broadly indicate the (perhaps fuzzy) boundary of given roles, all under complexity.

The idea in the research note that "in semantic systems, resonant adaptation of a momentary role feeds back into its underpinned time-shaping potency, allowing for a new, communicatively adapted role to emerge" does not provide sufficient explanation to show that it as a conceptualisation is new, noting that emergence is an idea of complexity theory, and no adequate explanation accompanies this statement. The term used is also reflective of "resonant adaptive theory," and I wonder if this is accidental, or if there is a connection. Without sufficient explanation, it may be that the ideas in the research note are broadly reflective of the position of Bandura, perhaps in his notion of self-efficacy, and Piaget in his knowledge acquisition propositions. While neither author specifically talks of roles or role analysis, there are likely to be synergies.

I notice that Thomas has a number of publications concerning "person-centred" contexts. Are these related to the theory concerned with complex adaptive autopoietic autonomous agencies/agents? The notion of "text and context, center and periphery, inside and the outside, as co-created by the inside, form interactional pairs that only can be addressed in combination" apparently relates to the "person-centred" conceptualisation, and to interactive processes, and this appears to relate to the notions of autopoiesis. I use the word "apparently" since it is insufficiently clear in this research note what is being referred to.

It is indicated in the research note that a post-Kantian shift is needed in role analysis. It is unclear exactly what the nature

of this shift is, and whether for instance it refers to the Kantian view of judgement. This does seem to link to the statement in the research note that “the interpretative work done by each role taking part in coherent convergence has not been described systematically,” and “Text and context, center and periphery, inside and the outside, as co-created by the inside, form interactional pairs that only can be addressed in combination. They do not perform as a thesis and its antithesis, because interpretative processing is at work from all contributing players.” While I can intuit what is being said here, further elaboration is really required to provide suitable semantic support. Other theoretical positions referred to are not adequately discussed in the research note, so for instance it is unclear where “Heideggerian hermeneutical phenomenology” fits in, or why quantum mechanics is being referred to.

It would also be interesting to see how the semantic systems theory proposed in the research note “both widens the interpretative horizon in systems thinking and offers the chance to better cope with systemic challenges” beyond current theories, but this research note does not appear to adequately explain this.