

Discussant Commentary

# Realizing Collective Capacities to Navigate Complexity:

## Topological Sensing Works, but We Know Not How and Why

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### Action Research Holds a Unique Promise for Today's Crises

The myth of modernity is powerfully underscored by the singular theology of rationality—feeling (emotions) and sensing (sensations, intuitions) are regarded as suspect and banished from social discourse and knowledge: solely valid are logical reasoning and linear connection. The display of emotions is highly regimented: many emotions are permitted expression only in specific private spaces and must be managed privately by the individual to meet this boundary objective. Emotions may otherwise find passive or channelized expression in the Arts. Classical, first-order Science posits an objective reality and assigns the agency, ingenuity and technological skills of the scientist to the decoding of reality (Latour, 1993; Müller, 2016; Rajagopalan, 2020).

If we are living in a post-positivist era, why am I referring to the traditional positivist construct? It is because this remains the dominant force in all the key

fields of human endeavor: politics, economics, technology, and management; it remains the dominant paradigm in science too. For example, there is a disproportionate and unwarranted enthusiasm about systems thinking (or systems science) as *the* framework to solve all our current problems of complexity, such as healthcare in the pandemic season or the climate issue. Notwithstanding that ambition, the sobering fact is that all extant methods and practices in systems thinking are very much embedded in a rationalistic frame (Rajagopalan, 2020); although newly emerging and as yet, marginal systems literature is enlarging this canvas (e.g., Bateson 2016a; 2016b). Also, sophisticated theories, methods and practices looking at systems in specialized areas of application—for example, psychotherapy (e.g., Grof, 1988) or action research (e.g., Heron, 1996)—are not adequately assimilated into the mainstream of this fledgling discipline; while newer findings from the sciences, e.g., the neurosciences or cognitive studies (e.g., Seth, 2018), have also not percolated in.

In this scenario, words like sensing and sensemaking are typically consigned to artistic preoccupations like fine art or film-making. They are not yet seen as valid or valuable in the fields like science, technology, management, economics etc., where the new mantra everywhere is “evidence-based” (MacKewn, 2008).

I make this detour to situate action research as an extremely important and valuable discipline. In the modern context, I believe there are only *three* extant approaches to inquiry or knowledge that acknowledge sensing as a useful tool. These are (i) action research (e.g., Heron, 1996); (ii) healing methods including psychotherapeutic and group therapy approaches (amongst which I draw in particular on a tradition recently developed in India called human process inquiry, (Sumedhas, 2012); and (iii) Indigenous inquiry traditions which survive (e.g., Somé, 1993). Amongst these three, the highest possibility for finding universal acceptance seems to reside in Action Research, which can develop the theoretical wherewithal soon. Alternative healing methods cannot easily justify their potential when subject to research within the allopathic model of disease, health and treatment protocols. It should be possible to develop research protocols that show their efficacy when studied within their own paradigms and diagnostic and treatment protocols, but such research has not been attempted. There is interest in Indigenous inquiry traditions in some parts of the world, but whether the attempt is to mainstream and integrate their wisdom or whether the Indigenous people are permitted to exercise power and agency over certain domains is a moot question.

The challenge action research faces, is to bridge the gap to what is considered as “Science”, as “rational” and therefore of universal acceptability. Fortunately, the impregnability of these defenses of the modernity project about what is acceptable is crumbling quite rapidly, with two-fold developments: i) advancements in science in fields like neurosciences and cognitive studies (Seth, 2018); animal behavior; and theories of science in terms of second-order science and third-order cybernetics (Mueller, 2016); ii) the failure of the modernity

project along key vaunted dimensions such as the idea of nation-states and electoral democracies; capitalism; food security and healthcare systems, etc.

The recognition that a paradigm shift in thinking is required, the key to which is an epistemic shift (represented by extended ways of knowing harnessed by the three approaches mentioned earlier), is acquiring dim recognition (Rajagopalan & Midgley, 2015; Rajagopalan, 2022). Such an epistemic shift must correspond to an ontological shift, which sees the human mind and its processes as embedded in nature and a larger intelligence, not standing apart from and looking at nature from the outside. Modernity arrogates complete agency to the individual; the alternate onto-epistemologies accept a co-evolving, co-emergent nature of reality. This corresponds to the new understanding of the nature of mind and consciousness emerging in all the new developments in science mentioned in the last paragraph.

I can relate powerfully to the methods and examples/case studies of action research, although I have not practiced it in terms of any specific or recognized approaches, because they mirror my experience in adapting human process inquiry (Sumedhas, 2012) mixed with other tools to organizational development (Rajagopalan, 2022). One other tool I have used often is a topological approach. Herein, we map opposing perceptions/positions in an organizational context on the floor of the room. We then invite members to explore the space by relating to this map and taking up positions on it (Rajagopalan, 2022). So, my commentary that follows relies heavily on my personal experience with these modalities; and I am less acquainted with the range of theory corresponding to these aspects of action research.

## Touching and Seeing System Configurations

The article from *Collective Transitions* describes a pilot study that explored how systems sensing and systemic constellations can contribute to complexity leadership. “Systemic constellations” refers to a specific methodology which is a practice of collectively creating a dynamic model of a particular system—identifying elements of a system and sensing into the relational and dynamic aspects that constellate them into typical behavioral patterns. The study was divided into 3 phases—Phase 1 prepared the ground by identifying the “elements” and fashioning/articulating a “calling question” that would focus the actual inquiry in the second phase. This was related to the challenge faced by a specific social organization (case givers) in its ambition to grow. In phase 2, the actual systemic constellation practice activity used the inputs about the organization under study for co-researchers from three other organizations of a similar nature to sense into the dynamic patterns of the relations between these elements and the tensions/potentials inhering in them (some co-researchers assumed the roles of the elements from Phase 1 while others acted as witnesses). In Phase 3, the experience of the activity and practice of Phase 2 and the emergent voices and movements it entailed, was reflected to the case givers and

witnesses, adding to the insights and aiding assimilation and closure of the experiential inquiry.

I consider the article's primary contribution to the literature on awareness of systems as offering testimony about collective sensing. There is a ring of truth about the narrative and the testimony in the form of actual quotes of statements shared by the researchers at various stages.

This case study indicates a successful intervention for the transformation of an organization using the systemic constellation technique. It identifies three key areas in complexity leadership theory and organizational change practice that the method can impact: expanding members' perspectives using extended epistemologies; developing this into a collective sensing capability; and the value of cross-organizational spaces to engage with such collective sensing applied to navigating complexity.

I love the way co-operative inquiry has been extended and adapted in this pilot study, and how a technique of sensing has been adapted to the virtual reality of a Zoom meeting. There are clear research goals, and the reporting is focused.

Certain emergent responses and developments in the narrative seem to have been pivotal in the stages of sensing and sensemaking leading to a transformation towards successful navigation of the growth challenges by the case giver organization over a period. The brief reporting and allusion to these key shift points are tantalizing and beg key questions in my mind, chiefly:

The choice of elements is curious—they do not form a logical set of items at the same level or category of analysis, and this might seem capricious. Since this is a key part of the method, further detailed explanation of the way these were arrived at, and the logic for elements at disparate levels of aggregation forming this shortlist, would have helped.

The most powerful aspect of the narration of the systemic constellation technique is from one of the co-researchers who felt drawn to enact the role in phase 2, who says that despite a very limited brief and no contextual information about the case giver organization, she found the practice fascinating, as she could sense into the element and voice statements about “qualities I felt were quite specific and are not things I usually feel present in me”. All the co-researchers in phase 2 were able to step into the different elements and embody things that seemed to belong to the case giver organization. Case givers were often struck by the deep resonance of the words and statements from role takers in the constellating activity with their sense and feelings associated with their organization.

My description of the systemic constellation practice is an imaginative extrapolation from the study report which does not elaborate on this activity. It may sound theatrical because that resonance sits deeply with me—I frequently use forms of theatre exercises in my organizational change practice. Just as an

actor feels into her character in theatre, the role takers in phase 2 assumed the character of the elements they were given. Exactly as an actor can summon a flowing, dynamic knowing about that character's weave through the drama, in a similar vein, feelings, sensations and words were evoked in the role-holders that were not part of their intrinsic personality. A lay perspective on such altered sensing and knowing might hold it as a mere affectation—indeed, a fair deal of commercial acting in cinema and theatre might be just that.

On the other hand, there are plenty of testimonials that such sensing and knowing discern real patterns of relatedness and “constellation”—which I interpret as the degree and nature of entanglement between any two elements. I have encountered this routinely, and found testimonials to its working in several human activities. A powerful example of its presence in theatre is found in Seeley & Reason (2008). This example underscores what many users of applied theatre frequently encounter: that role holders enacting real-life situations/events from another protagonist's life stumble upon information that was not previously shared with them. I have included several examples from my use of theatre (Rajagopalan, 2020). Precisely the same phenomenon operates in various forms of alternative healing that uses sensing methods. I know this from my practice of Pranic Healing (akin to Reiki, which is better known in the West). I also know from the experience of several colleagues who are yoga adepts that they can routinely and confidently “suss out” the states of mind and the topics of worry of people near them, through bodily sensations that the other person transmits to them. While I have no first-hand experience, again it seems that this is also the case with several Indigenous forms of inquiry into aspects other than health, such as ecological or climate questions, or the search for food while hunting (Brody, 1981), etc. Frequently, the transmission of such knowing is apprehended or described as having to do with energy. This has also become the language with which Action Research seeks to theorize such experience.

Such sensing by individuals can be treated as a mystical experience, which cannot be confirmed or validated, and is thus mumbo-jumbo or voodoo to rationalists. However, many such practices are frequently collective—where the sensing by one member is confirmed by the others. This is generally true for the healing cluster of practices as well as the Indigenous inquiry cluster. I have personally experienced this concordance in Pranic Healing, witnessed it among yoga adepts and ayurvedic doctors, and the palpable sense of “clear as daylight” concordance is frequent in theatre and in group process work from the human process inquiry tradition of the Sumedhas academy in India which I am a part of. The article under discussion describes the development and use of a tool to confirm its validity in collective inquiry within action research traditions.

## Topology and Sensing

What remains a mystery in a most fundamental sense is how this sensing is topologically adapted. In practicing Pranic Healing from a distance, where the person being healed may be anywhere else on the planet; the technique involves

imagining/conjuring a small image of the person like a doll in front of one's eyes and sensing the aura or energies across the regions of the body. In my organization development practice, an imaginary map of perspectival positions is superimposed on the floor of the room, and participants sense energies and tensions as they walk through this space. In Ayurveda, there is a technique that can be translated as a three-pulse technique, where the pulse at the wrist is sensed using three fingers corresponding to three key qualities that determine health: this maps on to an accurate diagnosis of the precise organ which may be malfunctioning. In all indigenous traditions, places on the earth carry significant energies which communicate to their peoples.

Such sensing is *not idiosyncratic or mere fantasy or imagination*; because practitioners often find *strong concord/congruence/concurrence* in their sensing when comparing notes after independently performing the sensing.

Ghosh (2021) has provided several instances to buttress the fact that “[a] landscape was [is] capable of making its own meanings, and of narrating its own stories. This is completely different from a situation in which humans create a cultural construction of a place, investing it with myths and meanings of their own invention” (Ghosh, 2021, p. 220). He researches the Banda, an Indonesian island where the entire original population was exterminated during colonization by the Dutch and several mixed populations brought in to repopulate the land. Current inhabitants identify themselves with common myths about sacred places and spirits on the island, even as they aver and acknowledge that they are not indigenous to the place, but have mixed origins from several other lands. The vitality of a landscape, or a space, he says, can create bonds of connection to itself and between people who come to dwell there (Ghosh, 2021, p. 221). So, there is much to be said about the mysterious vitality and energy that inheres in places and things, and about sensing as a way of knowing about these.

From my own experience, there is no dilution of the sensing capacity with distance, or representation, as when a doll-sized imaginary stands in for the person to be healed; or a floor map, or a diagram, is substituted for the actual object of concern.

## Deeply Precious Valuable Knowing

This brings us to the basic questions of validity and reliability—the totem poles of Science that distinguish modernity from past cultures. There is no space to go into these questions in detail, which has been done in detail and severally elsewhere (for one example, see Rajagopalan, 2020). When multiple persons can “sense” the same/identical aspect, then it becomes verifiable, even if it is not measurable by a scientific instrument. Again, if these “sensing’s” routinely bring succor—whether in healing, organizational change, or ecology/other fundamental aspects of indigenous inquiry, then that demonstrates reliability. A lot of these alternate forms of inquiry have failed to repudiate themselves because we have frequently not undertaken the effort to precisely measure and record the numbers and degree (percentages) of accuracy in cross-validation by multiple

researchers taking “readings” of the same “samples” or recording the numbers and percentages of cases with “successful outcomes” from the application of the same technique. One might contrast this with pharmacology where drugs are approved when success in achieving 50% of remission in a symptom is observed in merely 30% of the tested population, where the mechanism of action may have been hypothesized, or it may be completely unknown. Again, when the recent explosion of interest in psychedelic drugs like psilocybin is driven by the statement that users experience an alternate reality—one where their sense of separation of individual self from the rest of the world is dissolved—science has no method of validating such an observation. But it has found acceptance. This strikes at the very foundational roots of the onto-epistemology of the modernity project.

We need more studies like this one, building an adequate critical mass of “evidence” to fuel the needed shift in ways of knowing and doing, which action research splendidly pioneers.

## **Surrendering, Connecting, Unlocking Transformation and Growth**

What the psilocybin story tells us is this: The fundamental distinction between the modernity project and other cultures and epistemologies is the fragmentations of reality involved in the former. The subject-object divide is unassailable: the mind of the agent Self (subject) is contemplating the inert reality of the Other: it is an instrumental approach, frequently themed as war and conquest. In all the other approaches which involve sensing, the mind of the Self has to be emptied to receive the “sense” of the mind of the Other (person, place or thing); it is a generative, receptive, creative meeting—a trusting surrender, not a war!

A frequent refrain across all the various domains that utilize sensing to connect with reality is that if the mind is completely emptied to receive the “sensing” with fidelity, then whatever needs to be healed, corrected or aligned immediately begins to auto-correct (once such a sensing connect is made and the disjunct aspect imaged with fidelity in the sensing). No other further corrective action is required from the human agent, and the correction will emerge and flow of its own accord (if it is not trammled again by egoistic intervention).

What might this imply for our current crises and the “battle” to save the planet—are we COPping out, just COPing, or being sensible at all?

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