

# CONVERSATION IN RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR HUMAN ACTIVITY SYSTEMS

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## Abstract and Keywords

Conversation is a collective form of human discourse that tends to be taken-for-granted in most systemic methods and methodologies. Several aspects of conversation that bear on the successful implementation of systemic research are discussed.

Keywords: conversation, systems methodology, human systems inquiry, human activity systems.

## 1. Introduction

Conversation is an inherent part of our social existence. It is the thread that weaves our interrelationships. Through conversation we exchange information, maintain our social status, and reaffirm and experience our humanness. But from a methodological point of view, conversation is also an important means to study many human phenomena as well as bring about amelioration in human affairs. The centrality of conversation offers the opportunity to further our understanding of others and ourselves through forms of human-oriented systemic inquiry. In fact, one does not have to look very carefully to discover that one feature common to all systemic research methods and methodologies intended for application in human activity systems is that they require conversation.

What I mean by *conversation* is in reference to research methodology. Conversation is a subset of human communication. Specifically, conversation is the exchange, transaction, and collective use of information and knowledge that is required to develop, implement, and complete a human oriented and systemic inquiry. Most human oriented methods and methodologies, deemed by their creators and users as systemic, involve a collective social group process engaged in an ongoing stream of multiple conversations to execute the methodology. A few of the many examples one can cite in this regard are Search Conferencing (Weisbord, 1992), Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1981), Strategic Assumptions Surfacing and Testing (Mason and Mitroff, 1981), Systems Design Journey (Banathy, 1992), and Viable Systems Model (Beer, 1985). This hidden, indigenous, and not discussed area at the heart of systems research methodology for human

activity systems pervades also the survey textbooks; see for examples, Flood and Jackson (1991) and Jackson (1991).

Though rarely acknowledged and appreciated, systemic oriented researchers tend to under-estimate the importance and interdependence of conversation to the success of their inquiries. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss briefly several select aspects of systems research methodology, in which an understanding of conversation is central to their success. There is no particular order to this coverage and it is not meant to be exhaustive. My intention is to highlight this key consideration in human systems inquiry and urge that more attention be given to it in systems research.

## **2. Bringing Theory to Practice**

One common characteristic of most systemic methods and methodologies is that they bring together and involve a group of people in a social group process of inquiry directed toward better understanding and improving the referent system of which they are part (Collen, 1992). Human beings are increasingly studied and understood in terms of human activity systems, human-machine interfaced systems, and natural-artificial interfaced systems, to which may be applied various concepts and principles associated with cybernetics (Weiner, 1961) and general theory of systems (von Bertalanffy, 1968).

Cybernetic and systems theories need ongoing scrutiny and updating to maintain relevance to contemporary contexts. One may view the methodologies cited in this paper as attempts to do so, that is, to apply theoretical systemic principles to present-day human activity systems. Human beings so engaged comprise human activity systems that are interdependent upon conversation to coordinate their actions toward fulfillment of whatever purpose unites group units. Systemic practitioners, be they co-workers, team members, and consultants, rely on conversation to apply what they know about cybernetics and systemics to their specific activity context (Collen, 1994a). The irony is that little attention is given to the pivotal role of conversation. Developing and implementing any collective form of systemic research method(ology) are possible only through careful consideration of conversation to the success of the inquiry.

## **3. Separating Content and Process**

It is helpful to distinguish the content of conversation, that is the subject of inquiry, from reflection about the conversation, that is meta-conversation (Bateson, 1972, 1979). The former becomes the preoccupation in the task of doing the work, and the latter usually lies in the background, ignored and implicit, as the group work proceeds. From time to time, the group focus shifts to discuss what is happening, what is progressing, and what members think about their actions. There is a tension and balance between conversations that engage members in task activities and

those that evaluate group interactions. It is the latter aspect of conversation—the process comments and evaluating discussion—that brings the participants into a more reflective mode of discourse and closer to understanding the nature and importance of conversation to the success of their systemic inquiry and the research method(ology) they have chosen to implement.

The content-process dynamic of human conversation represents a dialectic. This form of dialectics also unfolds as a hermeneutic circle of inquiry. Dialogue and hermeneutics are relevant to forms of human inquiry (Palmer, 1969). Groups have the prerogative of oscillating back and forth between the focus on content and the focus on process, and through this discourse they can come to a deeper and richer understanding of each insight and historical moment of their inquiry. Importantly, those members sensitive to this dialectic and skilled in its manipulation often serve as the chief contributors to facilitate their group process.

Any systemic method(ology) that involves a collective social group process to develop and implement the methodology has this dialectic inherently build into the methodology. It is advantageous to those participating, especially systemic researchers, to be familiar with interpersonal skills necessary to facilitate the conversation process of inquiry. There is a wide range of views and practices to explore this side of conversation in groups, which pertain to the implementation of research methodology. For examples, see Berne (1963), Glassman and Kates, (1990), and Larson and LaFasto (1989).

#### **4. Designing and Planning the Conversation**

Talking about the design of something or making plans is typically what one thinks about when the topic of conversation is that of designing and planning, respectively. But when researchers and inquirers discuss their research design and research plan in respect to their human systems inquiry, the conversation inevitably turns to the issue of whether their conversation can apply the concepts and principles of research design and plan in order to guide the course of their inquiry. These are crucial topics, because both design and plan involve the use of human resources.

Persons, materials, money, and time needed to conduct human systems inquiry are ingredients expressed in the research design and research plan. Where the design conveys the spatial configuration of relation among these resources, the plan conveys the step by step sequence expected in conducting the inquiry that will consume these resources (Collen, 1994b). Decisions of designing and planning the inquiry are products of conversation.

As the systemic method(ology) the group follows eventually has some structure, phases, and guidelines, it is expected that some discipline, rules, and procedures will be adhered to, thereby appropriately applying the method(ology) chosen. Consequently, the articulation of the research design and plan become part of the methodology of the inquiry.

Therefore, the issue of whether one can design and plan the conversation of human systems inquiry is answered in part through the conversations that lead to the specific research design and research plan for the inquiry in each case, and their

subsequent execution. Of course, it does not follow that designs and plans are religious ascriptions to a preordained future for the inquirers, for true to the systemic nature of the inquiry, the interactive dynamic of the inquiry process must allow for mid-course corrections and revisions, and the co-evolution of the group with its environment.

## **5. The Structure and Flow of Conversation**

A conversation has a beginning, middle, and ending. The development and flow of discourse are usually assumed to be very fluid, and there are seemingly an infinite number of potential paths a conversation might take (Collen, 1995). Given that it is usually assumed that there is a purpose that brings persons together to converse, be it explicit or implicit, there is a desirable end. Imagined beginnings are not all equally plausible and imagined endings are rarely achieved. However, we expect some form of accomplishment in such endeavors over prattle and gossip that can be verifiable in hindsight.

The course actually taken by a conversation is important in respect to the methodology, because some routes are more productive than others and typically human resources are at stake. The course may be mapped. Descriptions, charts, and schematics produced in the course of conversations become the recordation or narrative—data sources that tend to epitomize the configuration used among resources, like what one would expect of the research design of a scientific investigation. Minutes, diaries, memoranda, and recordings are the kinds of data sources that tend to generate the events of the conversation from which one can epitomize the general sequential structure of the inquiry, like what one would expect of the research plan of a scientific investigation. Reflection upon these abstractions as the inquiry progresses can be useful forms of assessment and guidance for and of the inquiry. This means inclusion of these more meta-conversations as part of the inquiry, which are intended to complement content and process type conversations.

Further, there are forms of group process technique, for example, brainstorming (Osborn, 1963), lateral thinking (de Bono, 1985), metaphorizing (Morgan, 1993), and modeling (Checkland and Scholes, 1990), that can be usefully incorporated into research methodology. Such techniques may help to demarcate movement from one phase of the inquiry process to the next. As group facilitators readily attest, when to use what technique is valuable to know, in order to facilitate the conversation and consequently the inquiry too.

## **6. The Psychology of Conversation**

Of equal saliency to the content/process dialectic noted earlier is the “I-ness” versus “we-ness” of conversation. It is another dialectic inherent in human discourse that certainly interacts with other perspectives. Such dialectics bring more into the foreground the place of psychology in systems research.

In conversation the psychology of conversation rapidly translates into the psychology of the participants. Though much can be made of certain personality types and aberrant behaviors in group process (Berne, 1963; Glaser and Kates, 1990; Larson and LaFasto, 1989), bringing out the more cooperative, collaborative sides of our character are typically assumed in the application of systems methodology. Should it therefore surprise us when personal politics and psychopathology distort, side track, and often defeat the successful implementation of a systemic method(ology)?

However, human propensities appear to be unknown entities in descriptions of a system method(ology). Practitioners are rarely referred to research literatures in organizational, personality, and social psychology, communication, and related fields bearing importantly on the success of any human systems inquiry.

Despite the contraindications of group dynamics, productive groups set their own ground rules for effective communication and cooperative work, and they tend to maintain them through example, outside constraints, and peer enforcement, thus discouraging pathological and counterproductive activity.

## **7. The Self-Organizing Nature of Conversation**

Although a systems research method(ology) provides some direction as a means to conduct inquiry, the actual course of events depends very much upon the self organizing nature of the group conversation process itself. Self-organizing conversations are very characteristic of systems methodology for human activity systems. The research group must discuss and decide upon its purpose, ground rules, design, plan, and numerous related matters via conversations.

The group conversation process cannot be imposed and controlled effectively from the outside. Outside intervention must be carefully considered, for it can obviously be used to inhibit as well as facilitate conversation. In practice, most conversations in the service of systems methodology occur under constraints, hence idealized conversation truly actualized is more the exception than the rule.

## **8. Metaphors for Conversation**

A helpful exercise to grasp the significance and potency of metaphor in conversation is to conduct a meta-conversation about conversation for systemic inquiry. At some point in the conversation ask the group what a conversation is like, that is to say, is it like building a house, traveling down a river, climbing a mountain, or swimming in the ocean? In the ensuing discussion look for analogies and isomorphies to connect the metaphor to human activity systems. Such conversations frequently provoke insights and jumps that facilitate the conversation serving human systems inquiry.

Metaphors are familiar to us and commonly invoked in everyday communication. To build upon the use of metaphors can be a powerful methodological adjunct in conversation. Examples of the uses of metaphor in human oriented inquiry can be seen in Collen (1996), Collen et al. (1995), and Morgan (1993).

Interestingly and somewhat paradoxically, I have found that after some preoccupation in discussion of metaphors for conversation within a systemic inquiry, shifting group discussion to focus on the idea of the design of a conversation, noted earlier in this paper, becomes less fanciful and more tangibly connected to the utilization of human resources (Collen, 1994b). Participants become intrigued with translating the metaphor into their real world context. For example, if the conversation is like climbing a mountain, what specific resource in the task at hand is the equivalent to the snow ax necessary for the group to make its ascent to the peak? Once the tool (resource) is identified, the group becomes clearer about its essential place in the inquiry, thereby improving their chances to complete their task.

### **9. Conversation as a System**

As a narrative form of human communication, conversation has content, structure, purpose, and process, which engages the participants in shared acts of constructing meaning (Watzlawick et al. 1967). Like the formation of a flowing river from the merging of several streams, it can be studied as a process in regard to its rules, courses of action, and systems dynamics. The narrative can be scrutinized through various forms of content analysis to sort out and organize the frequency and kind of terms, phrases, topics, themes, and schema that give it content, structure, and form (Silverman, 1993).

But as a developing process, rather than analytic presentations of the product only, it may be equally informative to model the process from different perspectives by means of pictorial representations (Collen, 1994b). As a system, it is desirable to grasp the sense of the conversation as a whole, to articulate the chief elements that contribute to movement of the conversation toward its end, to describe the connections and interrelations among these chief elements, and to relate the conversation as a whole to other conversations. In this fashion, conversation becomes a system to be understood in terms of the elements and interactions which give rise to it and its ties to the larger stream of discourse of which it is part.

Further, conversation also represents the space of the human activity system engaged in inquiry. Filling it in, the systems becomes visible and alive, and the process evolves. This space consists of shared worlds of meanings, perceptions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, and experiences of those who generate the conversation. Such a shared space is best characterized by such terms as experiential, perceptual, phenomenological, and hermeneutic.

Of course, there are two levels operating here: (1) the level of personal motives and interests among the participating individuals, and (2) the level of peer press and common interest which moves the group toward conformity and group cohesion. The multiplicity of communications within and between levels makes for conversation as a system. Furthermore, a third level of communication and interaction is readily seen, when one studies the various communications that occur, vital to the group's

viability, between the group and heterarchical and hierarchical groupings of the human activity system (e.g. organization, institution, association, bureaucracy, and the like).

Consequently, the considerations for systems research are complex. Research methods developed and adapted to the nature of human conversation, for example Reason and Rowan (1981) and Silverman (1993), should be considered and more often included in the study of conversation within human activity systems. Constructing a viable research methodology will entail careful integration of individual and group oriented research methods into the more molar systemic methodology (Collen, 1994b), meaning prime consideration given to other established methodological traditions specializing in human discourse, specifically hermeneutics, psycholinguistics, phenomenology, and semiotics. These possibilities represent the frontiers of systems methodology at the cusp to a new century.

### **10. Meta-Conversation on Systems Research**

In converging the constructs of conversation, systemics, and systems methodology, and human inquiry, the centrality of conversation becomes more evident. This centrality helps to give renewed respect to the meaning and humanistic quality of systems research. This renewed awareness may bring a greater sensitivity to the use of specific research procedures of methodology, as they involve human conduct, contact, conversation, and interaction.

In the course of inquiry, participants can discuss and make visible those aspects in the formulation and development of their conversations that have special methodological import. Possible candidates are 1) those types of communications that foster cooperative and collaborative work, 2) those understandings based on shared meanings, 3) those activities that promote group cohesion and productivity, and 4) those personal perspectives which bring a more collective and holistic view of the conversation.

Another emphasis of discussion is to make more visible those methodological concepts and principles relevant to the conversation as a form of systemic inquiry. Discussion of various research methods can supplement the main conversation. Experts, guests, and consultants may be brought temporarily to the group for input. Question asking may be used effectively to probe and tease out relevant methodological components, which become subsequent phases of the conversation. Theory, expertise, experience, practice, simulation, and innovation—"six arms" so to speak—that are available and bear on conversations intended to develop more human and systemic oriented research are discussed in Collen (1994a).

Finally, developing and documenting the process of inquiry itself must be viewed as part of the task of navigating the conversation for research purposes. Later, the completed documentation archives the systemic research methodology that comprised the inquiry. See for example, Collen et al. (1995). In addition, knowing that research reporting is an expected outcome tends to foster more disciplined inquiry.

## 11. Summary and Conclusion

Over the ten sections of this paper I have briefly described many aspects of methodology that bring human conversation into the foreground of human systems inquiry.

To summarize some key points to remember, conversation:

- ◇ provides the methodological core for transaction of systems methodology in human activity systems
- ◇ brings systems theory into systems practice
- ◇ draws participants into circular and oscillating dialectic forms of experience
- ◇ enables designing and planning activities to focus and shape human systems inquiry
- ◇ permits the reflexive study of its structure and flow that can facilitate inquiry
- ◇ invites its portrayal in metaphor that can facilitate inquiry
- ◇ becomes in discourse a human activity system
- ◇ accentuates the human side of human systems inquiry

To conclude, systemic inquiry is indigenously conversational. Systemic research methodology for human activity systems relies on conversation based activities that are social group and process oriented. Meta-conversations about including the careful study of conversation as a central part of any systems research method(ology) is recommended. Certainly such consideration taken seriously will bring together more frequently, and hopefully more productively, research traditions in the systems sciences and the human sciences.

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