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■ Research Paper

Whether to Design and Plan a Life

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The individual human being is the point of reference from which the design and plan of a life take shape. This paper examines the essential idea of design and plan as they may be applied to lifelong learning, with special attention given to individuation and lifestyle. Further, it discusses the idea of a personal guidance system for one's learning, professional and social development, which centers on a value base for organizing one's designing and planning activities. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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The human lifespan may be described as a cumulative record of decisions. In the words of Churchman (1982, p. 10), 'we humans were born into a world where decisions to act cut off the realization of all sorts of possible designs of human living, finally and forever'. Broadly conceptualized, designs of living are part of idealized lifestyles. A lifestyle comes about through many decisions the individual makes to construct as much as possible one's context, relationships with others, accomplishments, and aspirations. A lifestyle represents a way of living and relating to life and other human beings.

An examination of the idea of design and plan of a life, hereafter designated by the acronym DPL, must take into consideration its essential relation to lifestyle. At the outset of this paper, I must presume that, in any society which cherishes freedom, democracy, and participative governance, this relationship is importantly placed at the center of inquiry for the purpose

of personal individuation, else one may be led astray whereby DPL becomes just another form for others to control human behavior of the likes of authoritarianism, automation, and standardization. Certainly this is possible, but it is not the thrust of this paper.

This inquiry gains meaning when an individual becomes sufficiently self-conscious, whereby the nexus of constructs discussed in this paper enables one to pose the following kinds of questions:

- What kind of a life do I live and what kind of a life would be better for me?
- What do I want to know and do, and how do I go about it?
- Who am I and what shall become of me?

Conversely, a complementary set of questions is posed:

- What kind of lifestyle do I want?
- What kind of life enables me to live, learn, relate, love, and prosper?

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- In what ways does my life now reflect who I am, and what kind of a life do I want in the future?

These questions take various forms as one goes through one's lifespan. For example, parents of a young family are likely to dwell on the question: what kind of a life do I want for my children? And grandparents often think about: what can I pass on to my children and grandchildren to help them attain/have/make a better life for themselves? In short, herein lies the core set of our most fundamental personal questioning of our existence and our relation to it. A basic tenet of this paper is that such a question set is one of the key methodological ingredients available to the individual to provoke, focus, and guide inquiry for DPL.

One may not have much choice in what one is and becomes prior to sufficient self-awareness to engage proactively in DPL, but certainly the constructs of choice, decision, design, and plan are inseparably bound together in the accretion of what — in retrospect — becomes one's space and time in this life. Having the choices to make decisions, making decisions, and the consciousness and knowledge of choices, decision making, designing, planning and lifestyle are all fundamental ingredients in any meaningful starting equation whether to design and plan a life.

The unfolding nexus of constructs provides the point of departure of inquiry. The discussion to follow is a modest attempt to describe some of their interrelations, and their extensions to citizenry, education, and lifelong learning.

CHOICE, DECISION, AND DECISION MAKING

To decide means to 'cut', in this case to cut one's choices from the others. Such actions occur a myriad of times each day, day after day, until eventually one accumulates a lifetime. For the moderate to well-to-do living in the cornucopia of a consumer-oriented society, whether to wear the gray or the blue suit for business with clients in the morning, and whether to bake fish or fowl for dinner in the evening, one may consider

typical of the smaller pedestrian decisions of everyday life. They are superseded by more complicated and difficult determinations, such as the decision to invite friends to dinner, which undoubtedly may involve accounting for who to invite, when to invite them, what to serve, what to wear, and what to get ready for house guests. Although most decisions may appear rather mundane in respect to DPL, there are more superordinate level decisions that require many days filled with lower-level decisions, in effect moving one toward completion of a higher-order decision-making process. These more abstract decisions, for example, involve deciding to marry, accept a job offer, buy or rent a home. At the highest level are those decisions which may take a substantial portion of one's lifetime. Projecting one's imagination into the future, one attempts to decide upon an ideal mate, family, career, and type of home, which is in the United States what is called the 'American dream'.

One develops a sense of hierarchy — a hierarchy of decisions and decision-making. One's decision hierarchy also represents one's interests, desires, and priorities that stand invisibly behind one's actions. Again, these actions fill up one's day, day after day, to accumulate a lifetime. Although a conceptual and perhaps intellectual scheme, nevertheless, one's sense and implicit use of the hierarchy are invaluable to the conduct of life. More complex decisions require the supportive coordination and sequential integration of simpler decisions. Lower-level decisions sustain higher-level decision-making. The decision hierarchy is complementary to and likely a related form of Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs.

However, in fairness, to question and take a critical stance toward even the idea of DPL, it is evident that even the more difficult and abstract decisions, such as occupation, marriage, and residence, occur suddenly without lengthy deliberation for thousands of people. The turn of events and circumstance can throw a person like a cork bobbing on the sea to some undeterming end for which the alternatives range from unfeasible to non-existent. Consequently, elements of rationality, objectivity, and luxury in one's space and time appear necessary to

exercise, in order to enable sound decision-making. Moreover, the rationalist approach, for example, is only one of several personal approaches to decision-making (Kinston and Algie, 1989), and all of them will likely pertain to some degree to one's individuation of DPL. These preferred decision-making paths and styles rest upon underlying philosophical and ethical assumptions that merit self-study for constructively critical application to not only organizational settings (Snow and Bloom, 1992), but also one's DPL. Furthermore, accessibility to the knowledge and information pertinent to a decision (e.g., choices, costs, consequences) remains essential, hence the increasing importance of communication technologies in designing and planning activities.

TO DESIGN AND TO PLAN

Designing and planning are often taken-for-granted activities occupationally and personally in daily life. These terms are often assumed to be synonymous in everyday contexts; however, they are not equivalent but complementary in their artistic, scientific, and technical applications. Each construct emphasizes a different kind of activity traced to a different underlying conceptual base. For example, an architect as designer produces the architectural plans enabling the systematic construction of a building. An external organizational consultant may temporarily be employed by a corporation to assist and guide a strategic planning process that helps bring about the delimited redesign of the organization. The chef conceptualizes the culinary configuration of the banquet filled with assorted plates and tastes, and orchestrates the various stages of its preparation so that all courses are served esthetically pleasing and delicious at the appointed time and place. The do-it-yourself gardener and carpenter may formulate a kind of cognitive map, 'mental blueprints' if you will, for his/her ideal garden and remodeling project, respectively, and with the aid of the proper tools, materials, and know-how, he/she attempts to actualize and materialize the ideal. The gist of these examples is that

designing is more laden with meanings associated with space, and planning with meanings associated with time.

The space-time distinction may be enhanced in formal applications to disciplined inquiry, specifically human science research methodology (Collen, 1995), which may provide important means to DPL. At the heart of every human science research method is the research design and the research plan. It is the combined representation of both the design and plan that gives a method its pragmatic appeal. These complementary reciprocal constructs are like the two sides of the same coin.

In the sense of its application to research, one can design a conceptual pattern, a *spatial* configuration of the elements desired for one's ideal lifestyle. The design shows the resources (persons, contexts, materials, sources) required to pursue the ideal. And in the complementary vein, one can plan a conceptual pattern also, but it is a *temporal* configuration of the same elements contained in the design. The plan serves to direct sequentially one's activities, in the analogous fashion that the scientist executes his/her plan in the orderly collection and processing of data, observations, and information sources. The plan represents the step by step sequence to consume and utilize the resources specified in the design.

It must be stressed that designing and planning activities that yield DPL provide one with focus, direction, guidance, and perspective — all necessary aspects to obtain viable choices and make sound decisions. But the design and plan as a set has an ephemeral character with which one is always tinkering. It must be obvious that in practice the vicissitudes of life provide little guarantee that one's ideal is realistic and reachable. Furthermore, a person's interests may change substantially over the course of one's lifespan.

SPACE AND TIME

Since the centrality of designing and planning is the human being, initially it may be helpful to obtain a rough map of the here-and-now of a person's existence, thereby acquiring some sense

of the space-time reality as one conceptualizes it. In this regard, one will likely find it beneficial to consult recent literature on cognitive maps, for example, Laszlo and Masulli (1993), Stein (1987), and Tuan (1977).

Naturally, the person is part of a whole — a cultural, geographical, and social context that may be mapped. One kind of cognitive map may be pictured as various elements in spatial relation irrespective of time. For the imprecisely defined present, one can represent as a spatial configuration one's lifestyle, consisting of the significant persons, places, and qualities of one's space in society. To illustrate this point, Figure 1 shows the life space of a fictitious college student. Note that this map is not a design, but it does suggest one methodological tool for designing.

Time may be considered in terms of the customary linear conception across the human lifespan, illustrated in Figure 2. For the imprecisely defined whereabouts of oneself, one can represent as a temporal configuration one's life path, consisting of the significant events that comprise one's life history (story). Figure 2 shows the life path of the fictitious college

student presented in Figure 1. Note that this map is not a plan, but it does suggest one methodological tool for planning.

DESIGN AND PLAN OF A LIFE

A few decades ago, DPL would have seemed like an absurdity, but today it is an emergent reality for the increasingly ambitious who become pre-occupied with monetary wealth building, social status, physical health, local-to-global ecology, and the survival of humanity.

As suggestive in Figure 1, the design of a life may be pictured in terms of various elements in spatial relation irrespective of time, but this depiction is about the future, not the present. Figure 3 takes once more our fictitious college student and shows an imagined future of relations among those persons and places that he projects would be his ideal future space.

The plan of a life may be pictured in terms of various events in temporal relation irrespective of space, but this complement of design in the

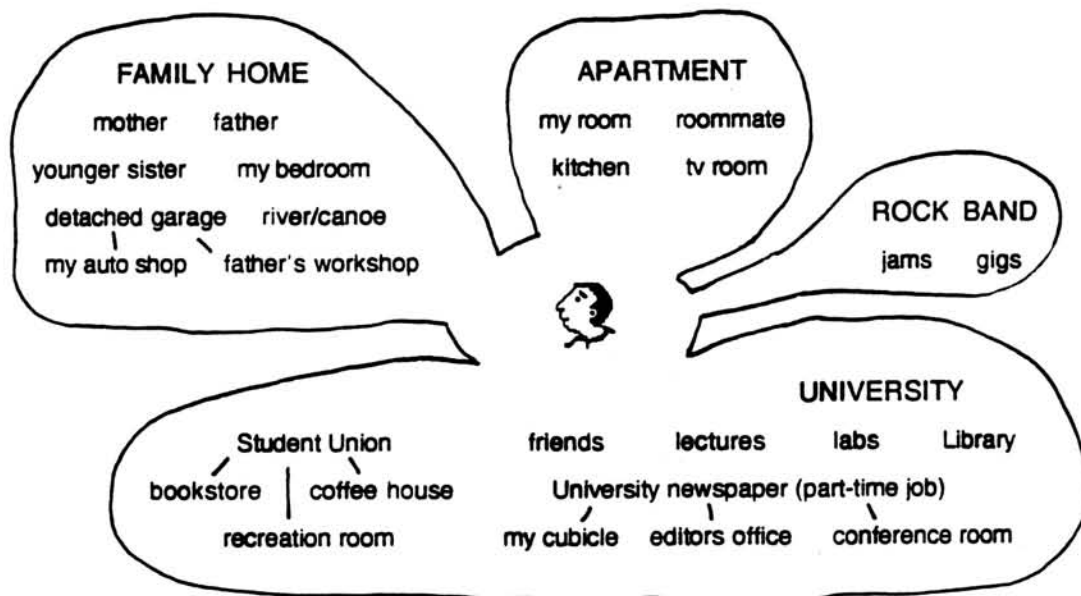


Figure 1. The space of a person's life

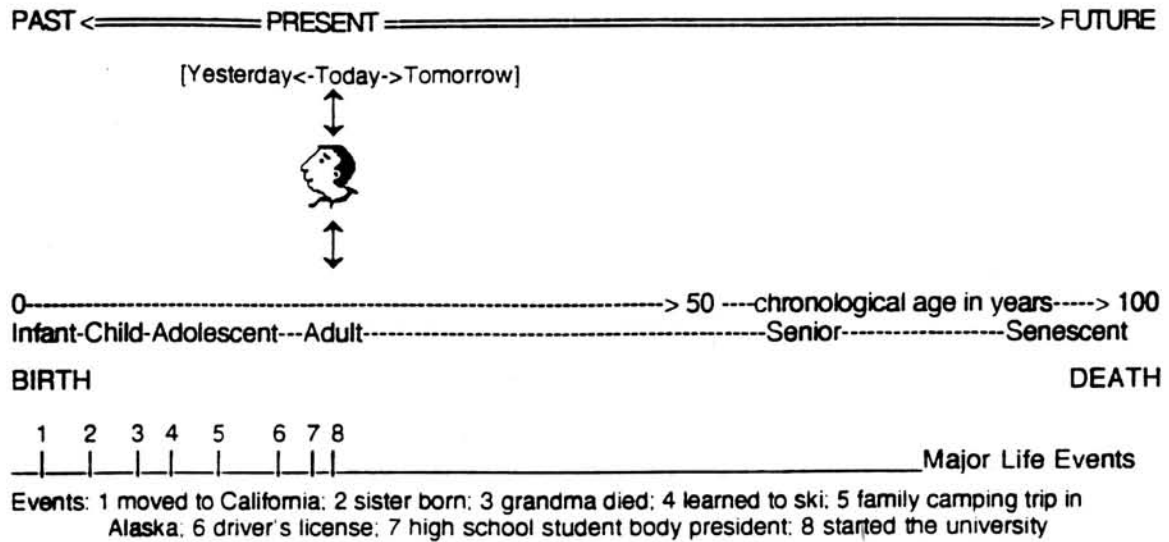


Figure 2. The time of a person's life

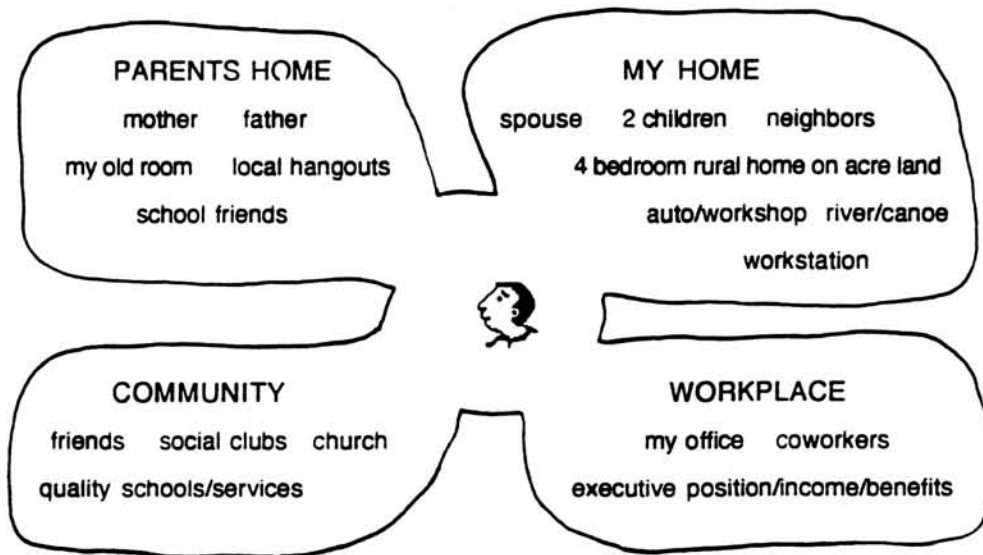


Figure 3. The design of a person's life

DPL is also about the future, not the present. It is useful to designate various time-frames for planning purposes. Those apparently most pertinent to human affairs seem to range from decades, such as space travel and family finances on the one hand, to media air time and athletic contest on the other hand. Figure 4 represents a temporal projection that directs the actions of our

fictional college student through the sequence of steps (objectives, subgoals) which he imagines will make his DPL his reality.

In sum, DPL is both product and process. I prefer to emphasize more the process aspects, because the mapping activities of designing and planning engrosses one in a form of inquiry around and about DPL.

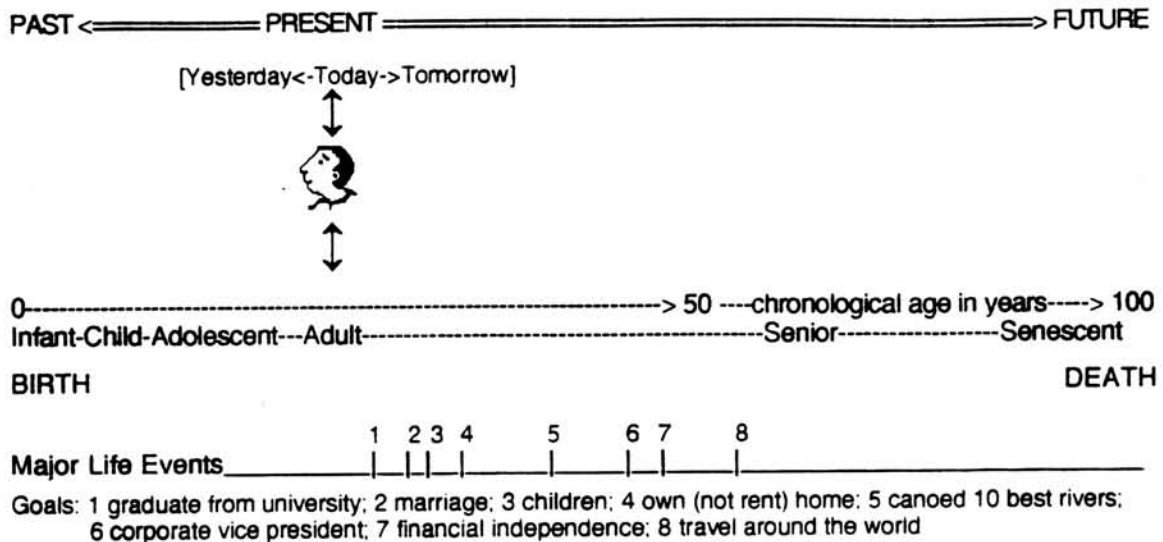


Figure 4. The plan of a person's life

TOWARD MORE SYSTEMIC RESEARCH

The constructs discussed to this point comprise in part the methodological means to take a more proactive and disciplined stance toward incorporating designing and planning activities into one's daily life. While purposes, goals, and visions of lifestyle *draw*, one's underlying interests, motivations, perceptions, and values *drive* one's journey through life. Decisions and decision-making processes are embedded in this personal pull and push dynamic, and they can be intentionally configured in space-time, hence the relevance of research design and research plan. To the extent desired, one can integrate and construct for oneself the critical components that bring perspective for the orderly guidance and movement toward life fulfillment.

The metaphor of the book (Figure 5), a special kind of autobiography, may help to communicate the idea of DPL. If the book is stretched like an accordion to see its pages, the image may convey the idea of the space-time of a person's life. Each page is a manifestation of the perceived and imagined space conveyed in Figures 1 and 3, respectively; and from any given series of pages, one can make the perceived and imagined time visible, conveyed in Figures 2 and 4, respectively.

In other words, Figure 5 suggests the integration of the previous necessarily oversimplified figures into autobiographical forms that describe DPL. Importantly, such a book completed in the process of disciplined inquiry represents an innovation on autobiographical method. Specifically, the method need not be limited by retrospection; it can incorporate prospective aspects into the accounting, interpreting, and reporting.

DPL connotes one conceptual focus for the convergence of human science research methodology constructs (Collen, 1995). This focus may provide a useful application for the methodology family that produces a rich tapestry, or text, which the researcher tries to communicate — albeit inadequately — in oral, written, or electronic forms (e.g., type of autobiography, ethnography, psychobiography, oral history, grounded theory, life story). The form the 'book' eventually takes is analogous to the formal research design and research plan of these methods, which it must be emphasized involves not only the product (research report) of the inquiry process, but also the process of formulating, implementing, and writing up the inquiry itself.

From the more traditional approaches to lifespan research, such as Baltes *et al.* (1977), the methodological applications of DPL become

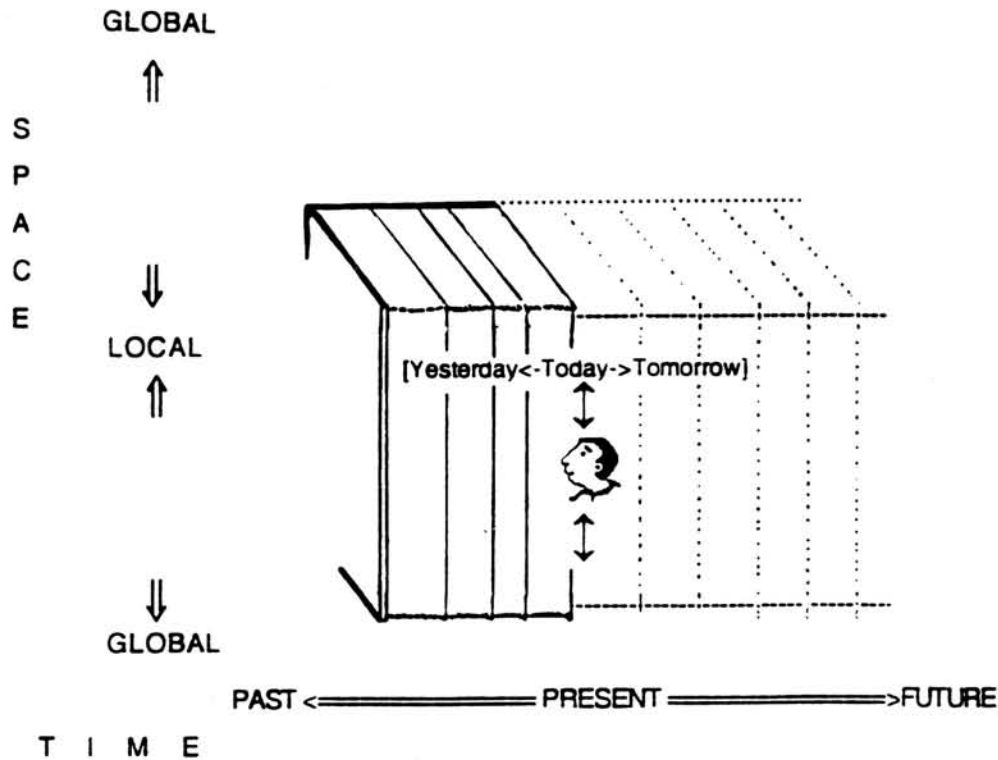


Figure 5. The space-time of a person's life

more systemic not in becoming more systematic, but in incorporating more perspectives and viewpoints that reveal the comprehensiveness, complexity, and system-wide influences central to explanation, understanding, and amelioration of the subject of study.

Some directions that more systemic research may take in DPL tend to bring into the foreground the developmental aspects of human inquiry. Attention to the cognitive, social, and emotional processes of human development, for example, means lifespan research. Given the avoidance of war, pestilence and life-threatening disease, coupled with scientific and medical means lengthening longevity, increasing numbers of human beings have a lifespan comfortably spanning four generations of their offspring. Figure 6 suggests the importance of studying and describing generational relations as basic to DPL.

But variations in design may stress not just generational relations; the researcher may prefer

sibling order and relations, parental and mentor relations, major life events, and combinations thereof. As part of the process of inquiry, the researcher alias autobiographer-designer-planner must tinker, discover, and decide the more valid and useful means whether and how to design and plan a life.

Even though DPL tends to make research more disciplined by applying methodology for decision-making, designing and planning, DPL becomes more systemic to the extent that the research incorporates the multiple perspectives, complexity, and system-wide nature of the human life into the inquiry. Furthermore, it becomes more systemic in encompassing multiple levels of awareness and meta-level conceptualizations into the inquiry; see specifically Smith (1989). The centrality of the human being is paramount in all cases. Whether to design and plan a life informs the focus. The nexus of constructs provides substance for ongoing guidance.

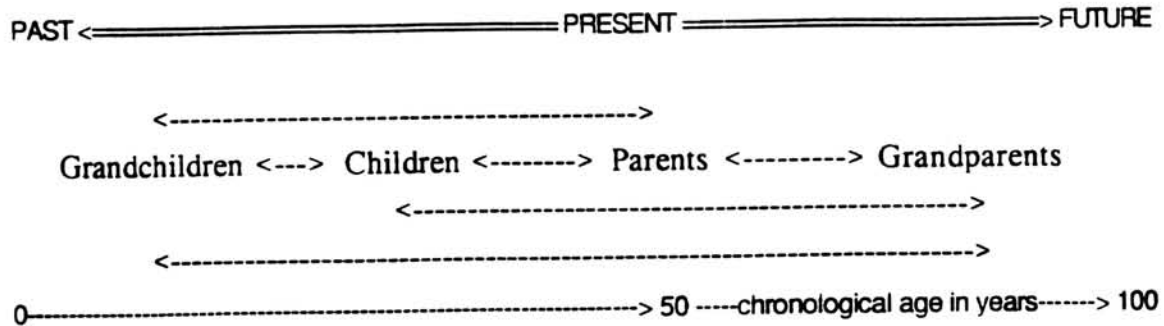


Figure 6. Relations across four generations

A PERSONAL GUIDANCE SYSTEM

Systemic inquiry in DPL can take a visionary turn with the formulation and application of one's Personal Guidance System (PGS) as part of the inquiry process. The impetus for guidance comes from Banathy (1988), who proposed that a small group of persons could be supportive and advisory for design inquiry. The group is a specialized human activity system (Checkland, 1981), in which its members work together over time toward some agreed upon end, being to bring into reality an idealized future. The special nature of this group involves the definition and specification of eight vital dimensions that undergird human activity over the course of their inquiry. Collen *et al.* (1990) infer that these dimensions comprise a value base for healthy change, development, and transformation of the group (Figure 7).

The PGS value base is comprised of those cherished beliefs that one holds most dear, stands for, and asserts to be most worthy of emulation. See for example, the applications of Dyer (1995), Frantz (1991), and McGee (1990). The addition of a value base has profound possibilities for application to DPL, whether (1) the individual instrumentally conceives one's PGS in relation to those who sustain one's lifestyle and/or idealized future; (2) the members comprising a family operate as a collective to design actively their life together, a Family Guidance System; and (3) the organization (business, church, corporation, school) implements organizational design inquiry

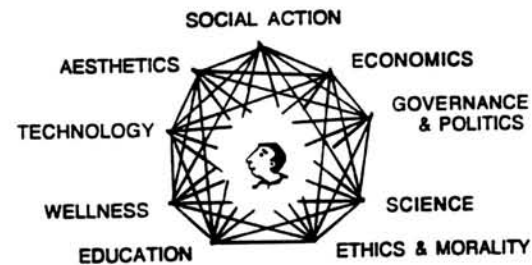


Figure 7. Value base for a personal guidance system

through member teams representing the various constituent interests within the organization, specifically through an Organization Guidance System.

Even though the core systemic notion is that the group decides what and in what form and proportion the vital dimensions are represented in the guidance system, it is presumed that the person him/herself must come to a personal decision, thereby taking responsibility for one's PGS. However, this possible dictum is not intended to become ideological. Perhaps the application of PGS is more systemic to the extent it is conceptualized around the focal person of interest much like a patriarch, matriarch, president, chief executive officer, charismatic leader, and the like, who must consult and receive advice from surrounding significant others in making sound decisions. Further, ideally PGS would demonstrate several constructs often associated with systemics, namely collaboration, complexity, cooperation, embeddedness, holism, interdependency, openness, perspectivism, and requisite variety.

A PGS for DPL may be epitomized by bringing into the space-time of one inquiry designing and planning activities with significant others to establish with the focal person of interest an appropriate value base and to model that base through action, while drawing praxiologically upon all available resources (Figure 8). The praxiological aspects here refer to designing and planning activities with respect to their efficiency, effectiveness, efficacy, and ethicality (Gasparski, 1993).

SOCIAL SYSTEMS DESIGN

The controversial side of whether to design and plan a life clearly centers on who is doing the designing and planning. A myriad of decisions must occur, which may impact on the lives of those for whom one might presume to design and plan. From a legal viewpoint, the state places upon the shoulders of parents the responsibility for designing and planning the lives of their children until they reach a legal age, after which they are expected to transfer this role to their children, now young adults, who are expected to be contributing members of society and parents of the subsequent generation. In extrapolation, parental and authoritarian control by those who are entrusted to run our societal institutions surely stifle the more creative, ameliorative, healthy developmental processes of adults. Activities characterized as participative, collaborative, and democratic at the collective level tend to provide more flexibility for personal development at the individual level. Thus, we come back to the points and questions

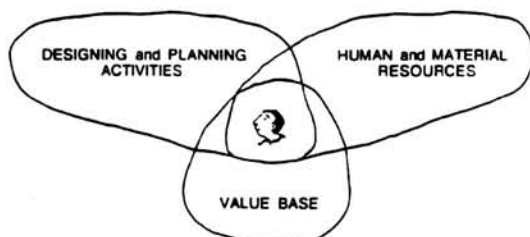


Figure 8. Foundational arenas of a personal guidance system

introducing this paper. The concern for parents and adults may be better situated in human relations that foster human development, thereby enabling the less mature to participate and assume responsibility through collaborative mentoring activities of designing and planning which contribute to both personal and collective interests.

The challenge for social systems design is to juggle equitably the above propensities of human nature. Such a balance inevitably comes to mean: allow/aid each child to mature and assume his/her rightful place in the human family, and allow/aid each human being and the collectivities in which he/she is a member to exercise stewardship for their time and place on the planet.

DPL, therefore, depends on many contextual aspects that must be assumed in order to sustain the numerous decisions one makes to attain one's ideal lifestyle. Though for the person, the immediate focus may be a local preoccupation, it has become ever mandatory that one's actions include taking responsibility for the impact of them on others, minimizing their aversive consequences on macro-level organizations of humanity and ecology, and incorporating the notion of ecological amelioration of the quality of life for yet unborn generations. Moreover, societal expectations are rising that design/plan-type decisions must include ethics and praxiology; note, for example, Churchman (1982), Collen (1994, 1996), Collen and Minati (1993), and Gasparski *et al.* (1996).

CONCLUSION

Designing and planning in daily life we all do, but rarely do we direct them squarely at one's own lifespan. Nevertheless, it is becoming inevitable for more persons that one's decisions and actions bear proactively on DPL as well as the lives of others. Ideally, one would hope that through a deepened understanding of the nexus of constructs used in this paper, one becomes more conscious and willfully engaged in proactive and responsible contributions to self, society, humanity, and biosphere.

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