

A Critical Systems Metamethodology for Problem Situation Structuring

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ABSTRACT

The increasing complexity and diversity of management problem situations in organizations, as well as the increasing variety of theories, methodologies, methods, techniques, and models that can be employed in problem situation structuring and solving, must be considered as relevant aspects of management process in contemporary circumstances. Creative holism in management problem situations in organizations is enabled by means of Critical Systems Thinking (CST) as well as Critical Systems Practice (CSP), as the resulting metamethodology. In other words, through CST and CSP, it can be significantly contributed to the management of the increasing diversity and variety of methodologies, methods, techniques, and models, with the aim of improving the management of problem situations in organizations.

Keywords: Business Management, Creative Holism, Critical Systems Practice (CSP), Critical Systems Thinking (CST), Management Problem Situations, Metamethodology

INTRODUCTION

As a general rule most management problems in organizations are characterized by high complexity, dynamics, and interactivity. Also, they involve many different stakeholders with various interests and values, various powers, various perceptions and interpretations of the problem in question. Therefore, such problems have to be considered as the corresponding *problem situations*, i.e., as the systems of complex, dynamic, interactive, ambiguous problems.

In contemporary circumstances, the following can be distinguished as

- An increasing complexity and diversity of the management problem situations, and
- An increasing variety of theories, methodologies, methods, techniques, models for dealing with the problem situations in organizations.

The key issue in this context of consideration can be formulated as follows: How to manage with the increasing diversity and variety of theories, methodologies, methods, techniques, and models in order to improve managing the increasing complexity, dynamics and diversity of the problem situations in organizations (Petrovic, 2008)?

Addressing this issue in a creative manner implies the employment of *Critical Systems*

DOI: 10.4018/jdsst.2012010101

Thinking (CST) (Flood & Jackson, 1991; Jackson, 2000, 2003). As one of the main developments within the systems movement, critical systems thinking seeks to support the processes of structuring problem situations and solving problems in theoretically informed, socially responsible and practically useful ways.

Generally, critical systems thinking can be considered from many different points of view. One of the most important refers to the main commitments of critical systems thinking. Another is related to *Critical Systems Practice* (CSP) (Jackson, 2003, 2006b, 2010). As a *metamethodology* for creative and holistic management of problem situations, critical systems practice is based on critical systems thinking and consists of four phases: creativity, choice, implementation and reflection.

CRITICAL SYSTEMS THINKING IN CREATIVELY TACKLING MANAGEMENT PROBLEM SITUATIONS

Critical awareness, social awareness, human emancipation, the complementary development of various systems approaches and the complementary employment of the different systems methodologies in practice have been preliminarily recognized as the five key commitments of critical systems thinking (Jackson, 1991).

Today, in critical Management Science, the three commitments of critical systems thinking to:

- *Critical awareness*,
- *Improvement*, and
- *Pluralism*

are identified as the most important ones (Jackson, 2000, 2003).

Each of these critical systems thinking commitments ought to be seen and explored as a significant dimension of an endeavour to underpin a creative management of the problem situations in organizations.

Critical Awareness

The first key commitment of critical systems thinking is critical awareness (Jackson, 2000, 2003). The decisively important aspects of critical awareness relate to:

- A critique of the theoretical foundations of the available systems methodologies for structuring the problem situations,
- An identification of the strengths and weaknesses of these methodologies, and
- An exploration of the usefulness of the variety of systems models, methods, techniques in service of diverse methodologies.

In fact, critical systems thinking began its own development with critical awareness of the limitations of the particular systems methodologies.

First of all, hard systems thinking was criticized, whose main representatives are traditional Operational Research, Systems Analysis, Systems Engineering. In accordance with the *functionalist* (ontological and epistemological) assumptions of hard systems thinking, the world consists of systems which, in addition to the purposes that can be easily identified, can be objectively understood, modelled, and optimized. However, according to the soft systems thinking advocates, the hard systems methodologies are ineffective in most of the real-world problems because of their own ontological and epistemological assumptions. In other words, the hard systems methodologies, as a rule, distort seriously the management problem situations under consideration, when seek to adapt them to themselves.

On the other hand, the topic that has also come under strong critique pertains to the methodologies of soft systems thinking. Based on the appropriate *interpretive* - ontological, epistemological and axiological - assumptions, these methodologies shift the focus from the attempts to model the problem situation/system onto the employment of the models of the system in order to embrace different perceptions and interpretations of the real-world problem

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