



## Open Research Online

### Citation

Bell, Simon (2005). Editorial. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 18(4) pp. 335–337.

### URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/107/>

### License

None Specified

### Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

### Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

---

*Editorial*

---

Editorials of all kinds offer the author an opportunity to explore the themes of the journal and their linkage to the experience of recent events. In edition 18.2, I suggested that I would like to see systems people more widely recognised, their work and methods more widely practiced and their output more widely appreciated. To this end I suggested that systems approaches needed to move into the mainstream and yet retain that unique value that sets them apart from the hum-drum and often plain uninspiring ‘solutions’ that clutter much of that broad river. To this end I discussed the value of the papers in this journal that showed a diverse and inspiring series of approaches to problem solving in what I called the SEDC contexts; contexts where issues of sustainable development, environmental change, democratising agencies and conflict are paramount. The SEDC contexts are, for me, some of the defining contexts of our age; and if we are to show the value of our methods to the wider world I argued that we must be seen to be of value in these contexts.

This set of thoughts has encouraged me to think of the purpose of a journal—other than to allow academics to meet the stringent needs of their various research assessment exercises (but don’t get me going on that!). Surely we don’t merely cater to a need to ‘speak to ourselves’ or (even more merely) prove to our bosses that we are busy and worth the salary! Surely our journal needs to be meaningful and to meet and express the burning issues of the day?

All this musing on the nature of journals led me to think about the purpose of other media and events for self-expression . . . In pursuit of inspiration I recently responded to an invitation to attend the conference on Research in Sustainable Development held in Helsinki. At this event I was asked with some other participants to sit on a panel and give my assessment of the world, the conference and everything—as markers prior to the outset of the main deliberations of one strand dealing with trans-disciplinary methods. My colleagues on the panel made wise and sagacious scholarly comment, but I was at a loss. I had made one or two notes, but looking at them in the context of the expectant faces looking at me, it seemed facile to come out with some ‘standard spiel’. I had two crises in the following moments, both of which I shared with my colleagues in Helsinki, and that I would like to now share with you.

First, I felt over-whelmingly depressed. I came to this point by a mental response to a simple question: ‘when did you last feel inspired, really inspired by

the work being undertaken by those presenting at a conference?’ With a shudder, the answer came back, ‘never.’ Now maybe I am just a sad-act who cannot rise to the towering illuminate around me, but maybe not. Maybe the feeling is more widely spread?

Secondly, and building on the first emotion, I succumbed to a sense of frustration. If the world is going to hell in a handcart and we, the scholarly and practitioner community are merely counting the degrees of slope and assessing the impact velocity, then surely we need to show a bit of leadership? If the answer to mendacious mediocrity and pernicious pusillanimousness is not evolution, then it must be revolution!

In conversations with other participants at the conference I found a surprisingly large amount of agreement to my attempt at being the archetypal ‘grumpy old man.’ Yet, with the resulting conversations came another and more emergent thought. Knowing you know something is interesting, but knowing that you know that something is wrong, missing or could be improved upon is the beginning of the solution—the real solution.

In conversation, and these were some of the best I have had in recent years, my colleagues and I realised that what we missed was more evidence of thinkers and practitioners standing on the edge of eternity and looking out, then telling stories of the view and meaning, not, not, NOT more papers that counted the beans or provided another (yet another?) method for assessing the evidence. No, what we wanted was inspiration.

To that end and this is a tall order, we have another edition of *Systemic Practice and Action Research* and this edition offers more vistas and insights. In ‘Refocusing Systems Analysis of Organisations Through a Semiotic Lens: Interpretive Framework and Method’ Stephen Corea sets out to provide a novel and thought provoking interpretative means to comprehend organisational complexity in a manner that is both systemic and insightful. Tain-Sue Jan and Hsing-Hsiung Chen in: ‘Systems Approaches for the Industrial Development of a Developing Country’ bring together three key components of conventional development—development, industry and ecological systems as an heuristic. The paper provides ideas for the valuable use of systems practice and suggestions going forward.

Cheng Hua Chen sets out another innovative application for systemic application in ‘Case Study Application of VSM to Transfer Pricing.’ In this paper Cheng provides what for me appears an unlikely setting for the use of VSM, but demonstrates that it can be a successful means to make the process of transfer pricing both more holistic and more accountable to stakeholders. Taking this theme of stakeholders and accountability forward, ‘From Cybernetics and VSD to Management and Action’ by J.R. Stephens and T. Haslett applies style as well as content in an attempt to make the transferability of useful theory more likely and valuable. Focusing on the value of systems approaches such as Stafford Beer’s Viable Systems

Diagnosis, they provide a valuable means to make obscure, though, useful ideas both more actionable and less opaque.

Finally, my colleague Stephen Morse and I present our own perspective on the use of systems approaches in sustainable development projects in 'Holism, and Understanding Sustainability.' We attempt to make links both to ancient and diverse inspirations as well as potentially deeper and more recondite—eternal-traditions.

This issue is rounded off by the Book Review section compiled by Jennifer Wilby.

Simon Bell, *Deputy Editor*  
*Open University*  
*Milton Keynes, UK*  
*S.G.Bell@open.ac.uk*