



Viewpoint

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In the late 1960s, I met Russ Ackoff for the first time, when he gave a 3-day seminar at Sussex University, based on an early draft of a book¹ under the then title ‘The Systems Age: putting the pieces together again’. What I heard seemed to be in close accord with my own thinking, but I gained immensely from hearing echoes couched in a clear and logically structured form instead of their flitting around in an uncoordinated manner in my brain.

My reaction to Werner Ulrich’s paper² on critically systemic discourse is much the same. I recommend it as essential reading for all who study methodologies and I thank him for dealing with a complex subject in so clear a fashion. Despite the need to be precise, he has managed to eschew jargon to a surprising degree, so that the paper can be read rather than wrestled with.

His criticism of TSI was bound to raise hackles (Viewpoint, November 2003), although it should not really cause anyone to feel slighted. I recall that when I was chairman of the OR Methodology Study Group in the late 1970s, I put forward ideas for a 1-day conference. Owing to a non-arriving taxi, I was very late in reaching a committee meeting to discuss these. On arrival, I found Hytton Bothroyd in the chair. He told me that the committee had rejected all my ideas, but he kindly added that I had been greatly influential! The reasons for eliminating what was perceived as inadequate can indeed be useful stepping stones to a satisfactory reformulation.

I do not wish to enlarge on what Ulrich has offered, but there are two points I would like to make. Elsewhere,³ I wrote about multimethodology, implying that the concept was at best confusing and at worst meaningless. I established that Ulrich had not seen this paper, but he has now read it and fully agrees with my reservations. He particularly liked one passage in which

I hazard a guess that rather than shift between methodologies, most will choose to weave ideas which they wish to borrow into their own preferred overall pattern, especially if they are the designers of the methodology. (p. 174)

Ulrich may well wish to write further on this matter as he has done in an interesting and valued personal communication.

My second point is to urge that if there is to be, and there should be, further debate on Ulrich’s paper, it should

concentrate on whether his five principles—discourse, the role of civil society, emancipatory orientation, systemic boundary critique, and deep complementarity—are acceptable, and adequately argued, as the basis of what we seek to move towards in any study of complex societal problems. Ulrich offers an Ackoffian ideal and there will be many studies of complex societal problems. Ulrich offers an Ackoffian ideal and there will be many routes towards it; there will be no best way and each of us will choose differently, depending upon what suits our personal style and ability. We must, however, try not to follow paths that might tend to close off any subsequent advance towards the ideal.

References

- 1 Ackoff RL (1974). *Redesigning the Future: a Systems Approach to Societal Problems*. Wiley: New York.
- 2 Ulrich W (2003). Beyond methodology choice: critical systems thinking as critically systemic discourse. *J Opl Res Soc* 54: 325–342.
- 3 Bowen K (1998). Some thoughts on multimethodology. *Systemic Practice Action Res (SPAR)* 11: 169–177.

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Reply to the comments of Bowen

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It was good to receive Bowen’s¹ comments. I appreciated reading his earlier paper² and I share his reservations about prevailing conceptions of ‘multimethodology’. Like Bowen, I would emphasize the limitations that practice places on any theoretical statements about how to choose and combine methodologies.

As a basic limitation, my experience as a policy analyst and evaluation researcher in the public sector suggests to me that professional methodology is something much too personal and deep-seated to change it like one’s shirt, according to the temperature of the day (or the situation at hand). The methodological framework that we use as professionals has a lot to do with our *sense of personal competence*, which is to say that once acquired (a slow and difficult process), we cannot easily throw it overboard. As it embodies so much of our experience and thinking patterns,