

BOUNDARIES

Consider these questions

- What is the dominant way in which this situation is being understood?
- What is “in” and what is “out” of this framing? Who or what is being excluded, marginalized or made a victim by the way in which this situation is being viewed or is operating?
- What does this say about what is “valued”, by whom, in this situation?
- What are the consequences of these boundary setting decisions?

BOUNDARIES AND SYSTEMIC INQUIRY

Boundaries have always been an important systems concept, they drive how we “frame” systems. A boundary differentiates between what is “in” and what is “out”, what is deemed “relevant” and “irrelevant”, what is important and what is unimportant, what is “worthwhile” and what is not, who “benefits” and who is “disadvantaged”. Boundaries are frequently about values – they are judgments about worth.

Consequently by the mid 80s it was realized that it whilst it may be fine to acknowledge different perspectives on relationships, inevitably someone somewhere decides which of these are most important.

Furthermore people think that systemic approaches are “holistic” in the sense that they include everything. That’s a misunderstanding. No endeavor can include everything. Furthermore our “understanding” of a situation is always partial and incomplete; it is not possible to be “holistic” in the sense that we cannot consider everything.

So every endeavor implicitly or explicitly makes a choice between what it includes and what it excludes, what is deemed relevant and what is deemed not relevant. Again someone somewhere makes that decision

All these decisions are about boundaries, since they decide what is “inside” the system and what is “outside” in the environment. Somewhere in every inquiry we draw a line – a boundary. What systems approaches do is identify the most important boundaries and assess the consequences of those boundary choices.

So looking at the different ways we can perceive inter-relationships doesn’t make an inquiry systemic. We have to consider the impact of setting boundaries. There is often a lot of energy around boundaries – they are the sites where values get played out and disagreements are highlighted. A lot of power issues are bound up in boundaries – as the person with the magic marker controls what goes on the whiteboard, whose perspective dominates a project decides the boundaries. Context matters too. Boundaries do not just define difference, but are the sites where differences make a difference. Thus systems approaches take a deliberate, deliberated and often debated approach to boundary identification and boundary choice.

BOUNDARIES AND SYSTEMS METHODS

There are many methods of exploring and assessing boundaries. We do it all the time, every minute of our lives. The systems field has contributed several methods, two are described here.

Reframing and metaphors

Our understandings of situations are always incomplete and partial. They are “maps”. As always the risk confusing the ‘map’ for the ‘territory’. Maps are very useful for representing reality and *some* of the interrelationships depicted, but they must never be mistaken for the actual reality being represented. All mental maps are representations of reality and thus necessarily differ from it. But it is important to understand which processes are involved in creating these differences (e.g. generalization, distortion, deletion) and how they can be influenced so people can become open for new alternatives and solutions.

Mental maps guide the behavior of persons or organizations, but they also limit their choices and can block new insights and perceptions. Generalizations can become very powerful filters which effectively hinder the perception of any experiences other than those expected (“self-fulfilling prophesy”). This happens when experiences become detached from their original context. But since all mental maps are only valid within a specific context, these limits need to be identified and made transparent.

Reframing circumvents the conscious control of thoughts and opens minds for new tracks towards improvement and learning. A past event which is seen as problematic is put in a new frame, so it can be viewed differently: This can be done either by placing it in a different context, where other values prevail, or by changing its meaning (e.g. “the good in the bad”).

Stepping out of a dominant frame of thinking is an invitation to deliberately view a situation differently and thus facilitate change. Reframing as a communication technique dates back to the original work of the Palo Alto School in the 1960s and 70s (Watzlawick/Weakland/Fish) and was later on expanded by the founders of NLP (Bandler/Grinder), who focused primarily on profound analysis of language patterns and structures.

Reframing is particularly useful in situations where resistance against change is very strong or stakeholders are caught in “rigid loops”, repeated interaction patterns which they cannot change - even though they might consider them dysfunctional.

The use of *metaphors* is also a very effective way to facilitate reframing. It allows people to step out of their every-day boundaries and express their experience or feelings in a different, yet common language. It is also helpful to label entire sessions in metaphoric terms (e.g. the kitchen, the garden, the lab), because this creates a new collective frame for joint activities. The same goes for the use of analogous (non-verbal) communication techniques, which are very helpful when dealing with relations, as they are better suited to deal with emotions and the relational aspects of communication. The most frequent ones are the use of pictures and sculptures, cartoons, jokes or sketches.

Critical systems heuristics (CSH)

CSH draws on the substantive work and philosophy of C. West Churchman, a systems engineer who, along with Russell Ackoff during the 1950s and 1960s, helped to define Operations Research in North America. His legacy rests with signaling the importance of being alert to value-laden *boundary judgments* when designing or evaluating human activities.

The critical systems heuristic is a complex and powerful tool that digs deeply into boundary decisions often in uncomfortably challenging ways. At core it poses powerful yet simple questions around four important boundary issues :

<i>Purpose</i>	Whose interests are and are not being promoted by the way we are framing the situation?
<i>Control</i>	Who does and does not controls what resources by the way we are framing the situation?
<i>Dogma</i>	What expertise is being honored and what expertise is being ignored by the way we are framing the situation?
<i>Righteousness</i>	What or whose interests are being marginalized or harmed by the way we are framing the situation?

CSH then takes us through a process that get us to reflect deeply on the implications of these responses.

CSH and Soft Systems

CSH and soft systems are closely related to each other. For instance, Purpose = T and C, Control = O, Dogma = A, Righteousness = W All four have components of E. One way of viewing CSH is that it is a more “critical” extension of SSM, turning the C of CATWOE into B (who or what will benefit from the system) and V (who or what will be victimized, disadvantaged or marginalized by the system). Martin Reynolds and Gerald Midgley called this new mnemonic BATWOVE.

BOUNDARIES AND THE CASE STUDY

We are going to use the CSH process. The full CSH is described later in this workbook. However, we are going to a simplified version to explore the case study.

Task One

Consider the perspective you took earlier. Answer those four questions.

Whose interests are being promoted by the way we are framing the situation?

Who controls what resources by the way we are framing the situation?

What expertise is being considered essential by the way we are framing the situation?

What or whose interests are being marginalized or harmed by the way we are framing the situation?

Task Two

Critique those boundary decisions

How can we be certain that we know if the beneficiaries are truly benefiting?

What key resources lie outside the control of key decision makers?
What are the implications of that?

What false sense of security do we generate by believing that this is the key area of expertise needed?

What are the implications of marginalizing those interests? In what way should those marginalized interests be given voice?

Task Three

Repeat in “ought” mode

Whose interests ought to be promoted ?
How can we be certain that to know if the beneficiaries will truly benefit?

Who ought to control what resources?
What key resources would be outside the control of key decision makers? What are the implications of that?

What expertise ought to be considered essential? What false sense of security would be generated?

What or whose interests ought to be marginalized or harmed?
What are the implications of marginalizing those interests? In what way should those marginalized interests be given voice?

Task Four

Critique and resolve our decisions defining “is” and “ought”

	“Is” issue	“Ought” issues	Resolution
Purpose			
Control			
Dogma Expertise			
Righteousness			

Task Five

What implications are there for our understanding of the case study and any intervention we might choose to make in the future?

