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PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS IN RELATION TO THEIR PURPOSES

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Abstract
At one of the early founding meetings of what would become the International Society for the Systems Sciences, the noted anthropologist Margaret Mead suggested that the society apply general systems theory to the society itself. This intervention, according to Mead, had little impact at the time. Nevertheless, Mead's challenge has been returned to several times, by Mead and by others, and has gone on to exert a significant influence. In this paper, I return once again to Mead's story, reviewing some of the ways in which it has been reinterpreted, while also investigating Mead's indication that her proposal was related to earlier correspondence between her and Gregory Bateson. I emphasize how Mead's story has moved through generations and between discourses, carrying with it a capacity to challenge conventions and prompt new responses and new stories in turn.

Keywords
Margaret Mead, Cybernetics, Purpose, Organizations, Conferences.

1 | Introduction

The International Society for the Systems Sciences (ISSS) was founded during a series of meetings between 1954 and 1956, initially as the Society for the Advancement of General Systems Theory. It was renamed (by 1957) as the Society for General Systems Research (SGSR) in order to avoid "the impression that a theory already existed and merely needed propagation" (Weinberg, 1963, p. 1295; refer also to Meier, 1957). The society adopted its present name during the 1980s.

The noted anthropologist Margaret Mead would sometimes tell a story from one of the initial meetings, in Atlanta, Georgia, which took place in December, 1955 (https://www.isss.org/meeting-history/). According to Mead (1968), this meeting was "going through a perfectly stereotyped, conventional, and uninspired rigmarole" (p. 9) about the founding of the society. Mead suggested a less conventional approach. The society might apply the ideas of general systems theory to the organization of the society itself:

> I suggested that, instead of founding just another society, they give a little thought to how they could use their theory to predict the kind and size of society they wanted, what its laws of growth and articulation with other parts of the scientific community should be. (Mead, 1968, p. 10)

> I proposed at the time that we do a little general systems thinking about ourselves, and before we formed the society, we take everything we knew—which was not much—that had come out of cybernetics, and all we knew about the properties of systems and boundaries and things of that sort, and apply them to the society. (Mead, 1974/2005, p. 292)

This intervention was dismissed out of hand: "Of all the silly ideas, to apply the ideas on the basis of which a society was being formed to ITSELF" (Mead, 1968, p. 10); "they only laughed and said: 'You mean, that we should think about ourselves?'" (Mead, 1974/2005, p. 293). Nevertheless, Mead's challenge has been returned to several times in the decades since, by Mead and by others, both within and beyond the SGSR/ISSS.

In this paper, I return once again to Mead's story. I review some of the ways in which it has been reinterpreted by others, while also investigating Mead's indication that her proposal at Atlanta was related to earlier correspondence between her and (her then husband) Gregory Bateson. I emphasize how Mead's story has moved through generations and between discourses, carrying with it a capacity to challenge conventions and prompt new responses and new stories in turn.

2 | Growing Things

Mead used the story from the Atlanta meeting as a way of challenging the SGSR and other societies. In the version that is shared in the pages of *Co-Evolution Quarterly* in 1976 (Brand, Bateson, & Mead, 1976, p. 44), Mead notes that she had been encouraging Dick (Richard F.) Ericson, the then SGSR Vice President and Managing Director ([Masthead], 1976), to support less conventional approaches to how the society was organized. Ericson became President of the SGSR in 1978, the year of Mead's death. In his presidential address the following year, Ericson referred to Mead's story and noted how she had continued to promote the idea in the society's board meetings. According to Ericson, Mead "believed that we in this society [the SGSR] could find better and more emancipating organizational designs than those that typify our bureaucracies" (Ericson, 1979, p. 226).

The *Co-Evolution Quarterly* version of Mead's story is set within a dialogue between Mead, Bateson, and Stewart Brand. Mead notes that her intervention at Atlanta was influenced by an earlier exchange with Bateson, who "had proposed that we plan an organization in relation to its purposes" (Brand et al., 1976, p. 44). While some authors have referred to this remark in passing (e.g. Glanville, 2012, p. 200), the correspondence in question has not previously been identified. According to Mead, this exchange occurred "before the cybernetics meetings, while you [Bateson] were overseas" (Brand et al., 1976, p. 44). The "cybernetics meetings" are the Macy conferences through which the field became formalized, the first taking place in 1946. The correspondence that Mead was referring to may have been a 1944 exchange with Bateson "on the subject of the future training of students of culture and personality," of which typed extracts are filed in Mead's archived correspondence (*Extracts*, 1944, p. 1). The letter was written while Bateson was stationed in Ceylon, serving with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during the Second World War (regarding Bateson and the OSS, refer to Price, 1998). The themes of the letter fit with Mead's later remarks, and she evidently regarded these passages to be significant enough to type them up.

Bateson's letter is concerned with setting up an educational program in the culture and personality school of anthropology. The goals of this initiative were not only to educate students but also to "integrate the social sciences around culture and personality approaches," to "make sure that within the 20 year period these insights shall become the stock in trade of international relations," and to ensure "that our stuff is applied by the men of good will faster than by the bastards" despite it being the case that "the bastards are quicker on the uptake" (*Extracts*, 1944, p. 1). Bateson strikes a notably purposeful tone in these remarks in comparison to his later work in which he would develop a deep skepticism towards "conscious purpose," worrying not only about "the bastards" but also those with "the very best of conscious intentions" (G. Bateson, 2000a, p. 452).

Bateson approached the initiative by thinking about it in terms of growth: "Planning an organization for growth is – so far as I know – a new idea. The usual method is to make it grow until it becomes unstable and then reorganize on entirely new lines" (*Extracts*, 1944, p. 2). The extracts are principally concerned with the ratios between different aspects of the proposed educational institution as it expands, including the proportional relationships between academics and students; undergraduates and postgraduates; teaching and fieldwork; new members and existing ones; and between "really good" students and "moderate ones who will end up by doing spade work or in administrative functions" (p. 1).

Bateson's letter can be interpreted as setting out how to design the organization to follow what Mead (1942), in earlier work, had referred to as a "direction" in contrast to setting out "finished blue prints of the future" (p. 67). Mead had noted the need to proceed slowly to maintain a direction in the interaction between institutions and individuals (p. 67). Similarly, it was important for Bateson that new members come in only gradually so that they do not disrupt the culture of the organization. In this, Bateson was deploying a type of culture and personality approach, recognizing that the culture of the organization would

be formative of individual members who would in turn be formative of the culture they were part of. Although Bateson does not draw attention to this aspect, his planning therefore took the sort of recursive form to which Mead would later point. Despite the need for the organization to develop gradually, Bateson had expressed an uncharacteristic hurry towards the beginning of the letter. Worrying about the potential for the culture and personality approach to be misused, he speculates that it might be necessary to popularize its insights as quickly as possible by pushing "the stuff down the throats of the men [*sic*] of good will so fast that the bastards don't have too much of an advantage" (p. 1). Further on, he worries instead whether his proposal involved the organization growing too fast (p. 2). He also noted that there will be "factors to slow the process of growth as we approach an upper equilibrium," making analogies with "organisms, and other growing, [*sic*] things" (p. 2) (cf. the "S" curve progressions described by Henshaw, 2023).

The extracts make several references to the need to "grow along Galilean lines" and to the importance of the influx of new members not destroying the "tradition of Galilean thinking" of the organization (*Extracts*, 1944, p. 1). I am not certain from the extracts themselves how to interpret this reference. One possibility is that it is referring to the comparison between Aristotelean and Galilean modes of thought made by Kurt Lewin (1931), which Bateson references in subsequent work (Ruesch & Bateson, 1951, p. 260). In a 1959 lecture, Bateson (2000b, pp. 264-269) discusses a similar distinction, mentioning Galileo amongst others, and references changes in his understanding from "fifteen years ago" (p. 264), i.e. from the same year as the letter to Mead. In this interpretation, the references to "Galilean" in the letter are to the modes of thought in the proposed organization—in Mead's terms, the "direction" that needs to be preserved when new members join.

The adjacency between the references to Galilean and concerns about proportion and growth (e.g. "a growing institution whose growth is planned on Galilean lines" [*Extracts*, 1944, p. 2]) has another possible resonance, which may or may not be intentional. One of Galileo's scientific contributions regards laws of scaling (Peterson, 2002). Increasing the linear dimensions of an object while keeping the same proportion between its parts leads to greater increases in its volume and surface area. Galileo pointed to consequences for built structures and, also, for organisms:

> It would be impossible to build up the bony structures of men, horses, or other animals so as to hold together and perform their normal functions if these animals were to be increased enormously in height; for this increase in height can be accomplished only by employing a material which is harder and stronger than usual, or by enlarging the size of the bones, thus changing their shape until the form and appearance of the animals suggest a monstrosity. (Galileo Galilei, 1638/2000, Second Day)

Additional biological aspects such as blood circulation were discussed in the essay "On Being the Right Size" by J. B. S. Haldane (1926) and, decades later, Bateson would further illustrate this principle with his "Tale of the Polyploid Horse" (G. Bateson, 1979/1985, pp. 65-69). Because increasing the height of an organism increases its volume by a greater proportion, beyond a certain size an organism's ability to hold itself up and to maintain its internal processes is compromised. Haldane concluded his essay by asserting that similar questions applied to institutions and political systems. Democracy, for instance, has different size limits that occur depending on its forms of communication (Haldane, 1926, p. 427). Similarly, Bateson's planning of an educational program as a growing thing meant that he had to attend to its proportions as it enlarged and take note of its "upper equilibrium."

The topic of growth features prominently in the version of the Atlanta story that Mead (1967, 1968) told to the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC) at its inaugural conference in 1967. Noting the challenges of cultural and geopolitical divisions, ecological disasters, technological automation, and increasing specialization in science, Mead concluded by calling on the ASC to organize itself in response, echoing the challenge she had previously delivered to the SGSR: "Why can't we look at this society [the ASC] systematically as a system with certain requirements, certain possibilities of growth, and certain constraints, in a world which is making demands, to some of which this society is to be responsive?" (p. 10). Mead proposes that the ASC consider the desired number of members and from which groups they

should and should not come. She stresses the question of how to "keep from getting steadily older" as a group and the challenges this would bring in terms of communication between newer and older members. Recognizing the shifting contexts of "new and possibly transient fields," she also suggests considering whether to "plan for the society to die in ten years" to bring focus to its activity.

Ericson (1979) made similar observations about the SGSR but from a different point in that society's timeline:

> It has long since been observed and demonstrated that human organizations, like biological organisms, tend to evolve through a secular trend of development, maturation, and decline. Now that this Society has reached the quarter-century mark, it seems appropriate to speculate where we are in our "life cycle." (p. 228)

For Ericson, the SGSR was "in considerable need of self-renewal" (p. 236) and needed to "take a hard look at its own internal dynamics and its ecological relationships" (p. 235). Ericson suggested that the society should respond to Mead's challenge by re-orienting itself around a heuristic program of action research, mobilizing its own concepts and techniques in its organizational relationships.

What Ericson was advocating aligns with significant changes in the frameworks of systems thinking that were already underway at that time, with the abstractions and generality of earlier approaches giving way to a greater focus on participation and specificity. However, Ericson's proposal is not simply that the SGSR switch from promoting one research paradigm to another:

> Orientation to an action research agenda provides concurrently both a new means of organizational development for the Society itself and a new mode of organizational outreach. I have indicated that our lack of success in evolving ways of bringing new organizational vitality may to some extent at least be attributable to an insufficiently systemic approach. Apparently there simply has not been an adequate basis for self-sustaining activity. If, however, there is now a sense of challenge and accomplishment rather than simply an opportunity to exchange ideas and theories, I believe that a totally different set of motivating forces are unleashed. (Ericson, 1979, p. 236)

Ericson suggests pairing parts of the society with external organizations to form "richly interactive work groups with real goals and confronted by real challenges" (p. 236), noting how the origins of operations research were in contexts such as these. It is possible to point to many such projects throughout the various histories of the systems sciences and Ericson was right, I think, to suggest that an action research approach could "capture a new sense of excitement and verve" (p. 237). It might be added, however, that such efforts can themselves be hard to sustain, for reasons of identity and size as per Bateson's letter.

Reflecting on Mead's story, Ericson's interpretation of it, and Mead and Bateson's correspondence, what was being pointed to in each case was not only the content to be focused on, even if these protagonists all had clear preferences in this regard. Nor was it a concern with organizational form for its own sake, even if there are better and worse ways to run an educational organization or a scholarly society. Rather, what these various episodes draw attention to are questions of how organization and purpose, form and content, and individuals and cultures are to be related; how these relations may persist over time in living organizations; and what possibilities and dilemmas arise as a result. These questions remain relevant to think with today.

3 | Consistency

Mead's 1967 challenge to the ASC is a tangible example of the sort of reflexive and recursive circularity with which cybernetics is often concerned. Of the various ways in which Mead's presentation has been influential, the most prominent is the second-order cybernetics of Heinz von Foerster, who credited how Mead was "speaking about cybernetics in a cybernetical way" as a key inspiration (Foerster, 2003, p. 302). Mead had not given a title to her remarks and Foerster, who was editing the proceedings of the conference for publication, could not reach Mead as she was away conducting fieldwork. Foerster himself provided

the title "Cybernetics of Cybernetics," reflecting his interpretation and emphasis. Foerster used this title twice again: for the 1974 book produced by students at the Biological Computer Laboratory (Foerster, 1974) and a short paper in which he proposed that "social cybernetics must be a second-order cybernetics" so that "the observer who enters the system shall be allowed to stipulate his [*sic*] own purpose" (Foerster, 1979, p. 8) (cf. similar sentiments already present in Mead's work of the early 1940s [Mead, 1942, p. 66]). These three namesake publications have much in common and are often cited together. However, what Mead was proposing is broader in conception and more practically grounded than the focus on individual cognition and observation in Foerster's subsequent work.

Klaus Krippendorff, who was in the audience for Mead's 1967 ASC presentation (Krippendorff, 2008, p. 180) and was editor of the collection in which Foerster's short paper appeared, has emphasized Mead's overall argument rather than the challenge to the ASC with which she concluded. Krippendorff (2008) stresses the way that Mead drew attention to "how society becomes organized as a result of implementing cybernetic systems," interpreting her as "calling on cyberneticians to assume responsibilities for how these systems are changing society in unprecedented ways" (p. 181). Krippendorff contrasts Mead's reflexivity with that of Foerster, whose commitments to cognitivism, the primacy of observation, and descriptive language (albeit of individual experience) keep "one foot in the enlightenment project for a positive science" (p. 175) even while Foerster is so critical of that project's objectivism (p. 174).

Whereas Krippendorff's interpretation of Mead is theoretical in character, Paul Pangaro (2016) has responded to Mead's challenge with a call to action that is not unlike that of Ericson. Pangaro stresses the need to "operate effectively in the world itself not just in the world of societies" (p. 10):

> If we want societies for systems and cybernetics and we wish to converse across societies and seek comities, let's do that. But let's not just talk amongst ourselves, let's pick a focusing problem or question and try to nail that, as a start. Together. Do it. Design something. Act in the world. Now. (p. 16)

On becoming ASC President in 2021, Pangaro did indeed focus on such an agenda, developing an approach to a number of "wicked challenges" in collaboration with Kate Doyle and many others (Doyle & Pangaro, 2022, p. 175).

A direct response to Mead's challenge as it applies specifically to the ASC has come from Ranulph Glanville's tenure as ASC President (2009-2014). Most prominently, a series of experimental, conversational formats were adopted for ASC conferences during this period, beginning with *Cybernetics: Art, Design, Mathematics* at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, in 2010 (Glanville, 2010, 2011; Glanville & Sweeting, 2011; Westermann, 2010). Glanville also took this ethos into the inner workings of the society and its administration, including to activities such as updating the by-laws (Fischer, 2016, p. 89). As conversation is a prominent example of a cybernetic process, the conferences were concerned with cybernetics in their form as well as their content. This approach also made the conference agenda adaptive and flexible, allowing for a kind of cybernetic steering of the program in response to topics and questions as they arose (Glanville, 2010, pp. 12-13).

Glanville (2010, p. 108) contextualized this conversational approach to conferences in relation to many precedents from the history of cybernetics and systems research. Amongst those he referenced were an "anti-conference" organized by Stafford Beer and Gordon Pask and the conference on *The Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation* chaired by Gregory Bateson in 1968, which is recorded in narrative form in the book *Our Own Metaphor* by Mary Catherine Bateson (1972/2005). One could add many other examples beyond those Glanville lists, including Mead and Paul Byers' (1968) study of small conferences, the various other conferences that Gregory Bateson was involved with following on from *Effects* (refer to Perera et al., 2025), and, more recently, the Roundtable model developed by Sue Gabriele (2002), a regular feature of ISSS conferences that is an emancipating organizational design if ever there was one.

Glanville's interpretation of Mead's challenge to the ASC seems inward looking in comparison to those of Krippendorff, Pangaro, and Ericson. In another sense, however, Glanville is also pointing to

something very general about cybernetics, for which the ASC is one example. For Glanville, the lesson to take from Mead's challenge is the importance of consistency (Glanville, 2007, pp. 182-183; 2015; refer also to Baron, 2015). There are two layers to Glanville's point. First, if cyberneticians and their societies are to be consistent, they should communicate and organize in the same ways that they advocate others to communicate and organize. They should do as they say. Running conferences in conversational forms is one possible manifestation of this. Second, more subtly, the issue of consistency goes to the heart of what cybernetics is, or what it should be. Amongst the feedback loops that cybernetics describes are those between acting and understanding (and back again, and so on). To be self-consistent with their own theories, cyberneticians must therefore understand these theories as being part of the same type of loop structures that they describe, relating understanding to action and back again. For Glanville, a cybernetic relation between theory and action was different to conventional ideas about application. Application is implicitly linear (applying this to that) and so an inconsistent way to put cybernetics into practice (Glanville, 2015, pp. 1176, 1177; cf. Sweeting, 2015). Rather, more radically, Glanville centres "doing" or "living" cybernetics: "Cybernetics is not just a study, it's a way of acting. …This is what I understand Mead to have asked us to do" (p. 1175).

Glanville places his consistency argument primarily in relation to individuals. It can, I think, also be understood in terms of the broader social, cultural, and ecological systems of which individuals are part, relating this argument more closely to the rest of Mead's 1967 address, to the interpretations of Mead given by Krippendorff and Pangaro, and to the 1944 Mead-Bateson correspondence. There is also a potential parallel with the criticisms of conscious purpose that Bateson (1967, 1968) developed the same year as Mead's ASC address. For Bateson, there is a formal mismatch, an *inconsistency*, between the self-corrective loop structures of natural ecosystems and the linearity and selective focus of applied science and rational planning—an inconsistency that, he argued, leads to distortions in ecological relationships.

There is a sense in which the sort of consistency between form and content with which Glanville, Mead, and Bateson are all concerned leads to various possibilities of modelling, metaphor, and performance as approaches to practice and action that contrast with application, conscious purpose, and "blue prints of the future." Mead (1968) had opened her remarks to the ASC by stressing her anthropological expertise with small groups:

> The competence I had—and have—comes from the intensive analysis of very small, relatively isolated, and intimately known communities which serve as living models from which one can sometimes develop larger, more formal models. (p. 1)

An organization, whether a conference, a scholarly society, or an educational program, can be a living model because it is a living, growing thing. At the ASC conferences under Glanville's tenure, the prominent performance of cybernetic processes was effective in demonstrating cybernetic principles much more effectively than conventional expositions of them. Show don't tell. The experience, as you might imagine, was both frustrating and exciting, requiring the unlearning of the habits of being at an academic conference. Similarly, Mary Catherine Bateson (1972/2005) stressed how, at *Effects*, the conference group, including their various tensions, acted as their own metaphor for the topics under discussion. While these precedents are far from perfect, they are helpful to return to when thinking through possible relations between form and content in organizations. As Mead (1974/2005) put it in one version of her Atlanta story, "organized science has a very definite relationship to the forms in which it expresses itself" (p. 293).

4 | Conclusion

Mead's story has generated multiple interpretations through its telling and retelling, reflecting different aspects of her concerns as well as the varied interests of those doing the retelling. Some of these interpretations, while not incommensurable, are in tension with each other. The story is both a call to action and a warning about linear application, for instance. The layer that I have added here, in my own retelling, is to treat the story itself as a growing thing, a living story, which becomes elaborated as it is retold by others. Mead's story gets at something that is worth returning to. The purpose of doing so is not so much

to repeat the intentions of Mead or any of the other protagonists but to use the story and its various interpretations as something to think with. For me, the thread that connects the various tellings together is the task of relating form and content, which, as with the interpretations of others, reflects my own interests and does not exclude there being other possible stories to tell.

Thinking of the story as a story forefronts form and content in another sense. It is notable that Mead's original suggestion to the SGSR was dismissed but her story about this idea being dismissed became influential. No doubt there are other factors. The cybernetics of 1967 was ready for a story of recursion and reflexivity in a way that the general systems theory of 1955 was not. Mead also had the benefit of being one of the speakers at the ASC, whereas she noted "no one knew who I was" at the Atlanta meeting (Mead, 1968, p. 9). Nevertheless, one of the things to take from the story is that stories are a valuable format. Bateson (1979/1985) commented that a story was "a little knot or complex of that species of connectedness which we call *relevance*…. I would assume that any A is relevant to any B if both A and B are parts or components of the same 'story'" (p. 22). Part of what is significant in Mead's story is how it passes across several generations, from the 1940s to today; across the boundaries of discourses, between cybernetics and general systems; and between those discourses and the worlds they are situated in. It connects these episodes and makes them relevant to each other. A narrative thread such as this is a different way of organizing a field than as a series of categories or chronological stages. What will happen in the next chapters? What other stories like this might be told alongside? In a final twist between form and content and back again, the sort of communication between generations and across disciplinary and cultural boundaries that Mead's story facilitates is part of what Mead's story was about. *The story does what the story is about.*

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