

MANIFESTO FOR IDEAS INTO PRINT: *SYSTEMIC PRACTICE AND ACTION* *RESEARCH SPAR*

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The Journal Systemic Practice and Action Research aims to encourage authors and practitioners into print.

This article describes both the publishing world into which SPAR has emerged and the systemic and inclusive thinking behind the journals policy.

The paper sets out a manifesto for a fair and open system of academic publishing.

“A rich and diverse set of potential bibliometric and scientometric predictors of research performance quality and importance are emerging today — from the classic metrics (publication counts, journal impact factors and individual article/author citation counts) to promising new online metrics such as download counts, hub/authority scores and growth/decay chronometrics. In and of themselves, however, metrics are circular: They need to be jointly tested and validated against what it is that they purport to measure and predict, with each metric weighted according to its contribution to their joint predictive power. The natural criterion against which to validate metrics is expert evaluation by peers; a unique opportunity to do this is offered by the 2008 UK Research Assessment Exercise, in which a full spectrum of metrics can be jointly tested, field by field, against peer rankings.” (Harnard 2008).

1. Background and Futureground

People working in organisational and societal settings are today experiencing complexity unknown by past generations – yet in part, and in unforeseen ways, shaped by those generations. Equally, our attempts to tackle modern-day complexity will shape, in unforeseen ways, complexity future generations will face. How unforeseen future events turn out to be will depend to some extent on how systemic modern-day thinking is.

By complexity we mean issues and dilemmas people face in their lives. It is tempting to see complexity as a modern phenomenon consistent with the culture of ‘Now’, however, it rarely presents ‘fresh’, but rather, complexity emerges from developments of yesteryear. Scientific and technological progress rooted in past generations’ inventiveness enables increased volume, speed, and penetration of information, which in principle make possible efficient and reliable processes by which to get things done. As the way particular things get done has changed, so too has thinking about design of effective social arrangements to manage the processes: tall, flat, circular, compartmental, network, and various cybernetic solutions. However, the wider impact of science and technology on organisational and societal change always leverages into people’s working and everyday lives cultural and ethical issues and

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dilemmas, perhaps not experienced by our predecessors to the same level of intensity. We need to appreciate these issues as a whole.

2. A contemporary journal and a mission

Systemic practice and action research in concept and approach encourages people to appreciate the wholeness of situations through their experiences and suggest, from that perspective, how to improve things. Improvements may involve greater efficiency and effectiveness, after all, nobody wants to work or live in arrangements that frustrate people. But a systemic approach to improvement will always involve meaningfulness to those involved and affected by change, and being ethically alert. It will seek well-informed and relevant choices that are meaningful to people most likely to live out the consequences of choices made.

These are the fundamental issues that SPAR addresses through a programme of critically reflective practice and principles. But these principles also apply to SPAR.

When the journal changed its name in 1998 from *Systems Practice* it also transformed its values and approach. We recognised that the readership and authorship of SPAR is and will continue to be key to its success in every respect and is of great concern to us. So, we reassessed the way we handle our relationship with readers and authors. A strong view surfaced that the journal must make every effort to operate according to the principles it claims to support. In particular, concern was expressed that the traditional review of submissions goes against the journal's principles.

Traditional journal review of articles employs referees as experts to judge the worth of a contribution. Judgement is normally made anonymously. Referees are protected by anonymity. To protect contributors against biased judgement arising from anonymous review, some journals white-out the author(s)' names; but an author(s)' identity may be detected from one or a combination of topic, writing style, and (self-)referencing.

Why might bias occur in the conventional journal process? There are a number of plausible explanations:

- As stated, the referee is protected by anonymity.
- The contribution hits a philosophical nerve ending of the referee.
- The referee does not feel that her/his work is sufficiently acknowledged.
- The referee feels that her/his work is unfairly criticised.
- The referee does not subscribe to the writing style (e.g. first person).
- The referee emphasises major problems with the piece rather than recognising the nugget of a good idea that could be developed.
- Theoreticians think a contribution is too pragmatic; practitioners think a contribution is too theoretical.
- A piece cuts against the values of the journal ... even if these values are contested.
- And so on...

Without doubt, journals operate procedures that attempt to triangulate referees' comments by sending submissions to two or three of them. But how does this protect authors who are not in the mainstream, who have 'naïve' concepts of a journal's implicit values, who challenge conventional wisdom, who make painful observations from the outside/in, or all of the above? These points are of great concern to many systemic thinkers and action researchers –

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and come to that, of great concern to many contemporary academics ‘looking on’ at the direction of travel of many current journals. The likelihood is that the majority of any panel of judges will represent conventional wisdom and judgement is made accordingly. Editors tend to come down on the side of the dominant view. Traditional review tends to be conservative – this is a point that we made previously in this journal and elsewhere (Bell 1998; Flood 1999a,b).

If the editor is not led or of a mind to reject outright, then the contributor may be offered a chance to make alterations and invited to resubmit. However, this is rather like setting out corrections to be made (not improvements as such) and then judging whether corrections have been correctly done. Authors may be faced with the prospect of rejection or compromise. Other pressures on authors, such as research assessment exercises, encourage ‘success’ to be seen as publishing in the ‘good’ journals. These journals invariably conform to conventional strictures of the dominant administrative mindset of these dominant ‘good’ journals. This may persuade some authors to ‘give in’ to convention. Giving in often results in original and progressive research findings of young, out of line, and alternative academic contributors to be essentially lost to the thought-world, but surely academic journals are intended to foster originality?

So, in the application of the conventional refereeing system there may be significant limitations on learning for all involved: author, referee, and editor. The editor’s role and tasks in the process are made unnecessarily difficult. Editors are not experts across the scope of the journal they manage. They rely on the quality in exchange of ideas between author and reviewers. With traditional review, an editor may be fed restricted or distorted reflective dialogue. Exchange is sometimes simply antagonistic, where two parties talk past each other.

That is not to say that all or even a great majority of submissions to journals are handled in this way. There are many referees who are painstaking in their efforts to produce fair and balanced reviews. There are many editors who give authors every conceivable help they can muster up. Yet, with a paucity of reflective dialogue, can the editor or reviewer ‘see’ mind traps that may be in operation, shaping what is considered to be valid knowledge? The danger is clear and present.

Some potential authors may find the review process off-putting. It may prevent some people from making submissions. Practitioners are particularly vulnerable. For the purposes of this article we differentiate between purely academic contributors to journals and practitioners. A practitioner will generally be a ‘field worker’, not or only partially connected to a conventional research institution like a University, but, nevertheless applying the practice of systemic approaches on a daily basis as a means to pursue a valuable professional livelihood. Practitioners have, in our experience, a vast amount to offer the academic community in terms of insights and reflections on research in practice but they may feel intimidated by the threat of an expert academic ‘panel’ judging their work. Yet, we emphasise, the experiences of practitioners are sorely needed in an endeavour such as ours.

3. SPAR Mentor/ Review process

For these and other reasons, we have tried to move away from the traditional review process by introducing mentor/reviewing as and where appropriate. Mentoring is not just a change of language, but a change of intent, meaning, and effect. Implicit in the idea is working with and supporting a contributor in an ‘equal’ partnership. The mentor shares her/his knowledge and understanding, explains issues that arise, and listens and learns from the contributor. Advice

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and guidance in principle develop the contributor, the written piece, and the mentor. An example of the preamble sent to all authors by one of our mentor/reviewers is set out in Box 1 below.

Box 1. Preamble from a mentor/reviewer to a potential SPAR author

In undertaking a review, I try to apply the following mentoring guidelines.

To be honest, but to always temper my honesty with a degree of kindness. I try to apply a self-guard of “How would I feel if I received this review?”

To be constructive. I try to take the attitude that any paper, developed over time with effort and representing the thoughts of a dedicated practitioner or academic should be read with sympathy and honour.

To be fair. To comment on what I like as well as what I have more problems with.

To be humble. To say when I do not understand something and not to present my self as a world authority on a subject.

And so to see myself as a co-worker with the author, trying if possible to improve upon what is and contribute to a wiser and more exciting script.

In this spirit I try to say:

If I like the text.

If I would publish the text.

If I think changes could be made to make the text more enjoyable.

If I think the author needs to adapt/change/re-assess the text in some more challenging manner.

Mentoring/reviewing does not mean that the journal will publish everything. At times it will be the task of the mentor to help the contributor by locating major fundamental problems with the written piece. The contributor is made aware that her/his ideas can be developed. The underlying ethos is that, if you have an idea or an experience to write about, then it is valid. The paper may need substantial reworking, but the idea or experience is valid and the mentor is here to support the contributor to express the idea in a meaningful and understandable way, and more generally to improve the paper.

The process of mentoring/reviewing, then, promises to provide a narrative to guide contributors and editors. It aims to be a review without boxes. In the spirit of C. West Churchman, mentors pose (and receive) open-ended questions that encourage, for example, consideration about how well the submission illustrates critical reflexivity in practice. The process encourages a dialectic between theory and practice and does not rely solely on conventional models of academic review.

Mentoring, however, does not solve all the dilemmas of the review process. In fact, it may introduce new dilemmas. There is no guarantee of enriching dialogue. There may still be conflict. It may not always be possible to have open review. It cannot be expected that

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everyone will agree to open review, so it is necessary to consult with authors and potential mentors. Authors might not want to know who their mentors are. Some reviewers might not want the responsibility of mentoring because it is too daunting, perhaps ambiguous in terms of time required and extent of commitment. Achieving mentoring in SPAR, then, has been a learning experience for the editorial team.

SPAR, furthermore, is not limited to knowledge defined as valid by scientific tradition. The journal encourages all sorts of writing and different forms of representation, and actively discourages disembodied objectivist language seeing this as often a mannerism, falsely imposed on a research 'story' in order to meet the appearance needs of conventional academia. It seeks accounts of people's struggles with organisational and societal issues and dilemmas, how they choose to handle them, and what was learned by so doing. The journal wants to animate the effects and impact of actions on participants and their environment.

4. In conclusion

We aspire to run SPAR as a reputable journal that offers a challenging, systemic and interdisciplinary angle on organisational and societal improvement. It redefines the role of the researcher as a presenter of information. It redefines the role of the reviewer from the conventional gatekeeper to a more charitable role of fellow-traveller and advisor. It challenges traditional notions of valid presentations of knowledge. SPAR is thus a journal that is run for people who have, or care for, innovative ideas challenging issues and dilemmas that tired traditional approaches have failed to get to grips with. SPAR actively seeks and by its practice encourages, ground breaking views, experiences and research conclusions. It is a 'safe place' for the divergent thinkers/actors and it is not tied by tradition, in either issues and dilemmas to be handled, or approaches by which we may address them. All the journal asks for is intelligible accounts of action research that offer both systemic and reflective qualities, which, after all, asks for nothing more than authentic practice. It is an authentic practice seeking learning, understanding, and improvement.

References

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