

Appreciative systems*

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The concept of ‘appreciative systems’ was developed by Sir Geoffrey Vickers, a retired civil servant who spent the last twenty years of his life trying to make sense of his own life experience and whose books *The Art of Judgement* (1995), *Freedom in a Rocking Boat* (1972) and *Human Systems are Different* (1983) are all worth reading. He came into contact with Peter Checkland and the Open University Systems Group and became their ‘guru’, advising them and helping them to develop many of their ideas. He died in a suitably ‘guru-like’ way, declining painful treatment for an illness that he knew would kill him. Prior to that he had been appointed Visiting Professor of Systems at Lancaster University and elected President of the Society for General Systems Research. The Open University published a collection of his papers, suitably titled ‘The Vickers Papers’ soon after his death.

The following is a direct copy of part of a handout prepared by Peter Checkland:

SOME NOTES ON THE WORK OF G. VICKERS

Most people (and most of the writers on and of social science) believe — wrongly — that “a systems approach” entails believing the world to contain systems. That was systems thinking in the 1960s. Soft Systems Methodology transfers systemicity from the world to the process of enquiry into the world. SSM, developed experientially, maps the notion of “appreciative systems” developed by Geoffrey Vickers to make sense of his 40 years-worth of experience in the world of affairs. These notes drastically summarise Vickers’ ideas.

Vickers: “*Appreciative Systems*”

Vickers’ aim is explanation, not methodological prescription. He tried in his books to provide an account of the social process by means of which societies, professions, organisations and other cultural inventions can exist, persist and change. In his self-appointed task of trying to understand all his experiences in the world of affairs (City lawyer, senior civil servant, member of the National Coal Board, Chairman or member of numerous public bodies) he found that systems thinking was the most useful organising framework. But he was not a systematic thinker, and nowhere provides a really clear account of what he means by “appreciation”, “appreciative settings”, “appreciative systems”. He writes the elegant prose which was the product of an English upper class Classical education, but his books are like a drawer-full of gems, impossible to summarize.

The most direct account of his intellectual history is in the letter to me of 30.1.74

*Last revised 1992

- (a) *He rejects means-ends language, and the goal-seeking model of human behaviour as inadequate.*
- (b) *He next rejects the cybernetic paradigm as “equally inadequate” because the helmsman’s course is defined from outside the system while “the human regulator, personal or collective, controls a system which generates multiple and mutually inconsistent courses”.*
- (c) *He separates “metabolic relations” which preserve stability and “functional relations” which bring the system’s achievements into line with “multiple and changing standards of success”. (He fails here to distinguish between a measure of performance which defines a scale, and a particular achieved position on that scale).*
- (d) *The above yields the concept of appreciation as “a mental evaluative act”. Previous experience (and appreciative settings) fix what is perceived. What is perceived is judged according to standards (measures of performance) also deriving from previous experience. Acting as a result of the evaluation changes the perceived world and hence in the continuous operation of the cycle both what is perceived, and the standards, are themselves changed. This continuous cycle is the “appreciative system”.*
- (e) *The operation of “appreciative systems”, he concludes, makes human studies intrinsically different from the natural scientist’s game against an unchanging Nature.*

All the above he regards as “an epistemological theory”. At its core Vickers has replaced the crude idea of goal seeking with the notion of maintaining desired relationships and eluding undesired ones.

One of his metaphors is of the “two-stranded rope” of events and ideas. We can use this to model an appreciative system ...

[Here Checkland inserts an earlier outline of Figure 1.]

Vickers work can be seen as an attempt to establish the value of this model in making sense of the social processes we both observe and take part in everyday life.

...

Checkland and Casar (1986) developed Vickers’ ideas into a model of an appreciative system (Figure 1).

Vickers believed that both events and ideas are significant influences on people and that they respond to events or ideas from certain standards of fact and value. Thus the same event or idea may not only be perceived differently by different people because of different points of view (or values) but also because of different attitudes to what is a ‘fact’.

If something of interest or concern occurs among these events or ideas, people will already have a particular perception of those events or ideas derived from their existing appreciative system. They will therefore select certain ‘facts’ as relevant to their consideration of how they should behave. The outcome of any consideration will always have two elements:

- a decision on how to act in the light of their considerations, and

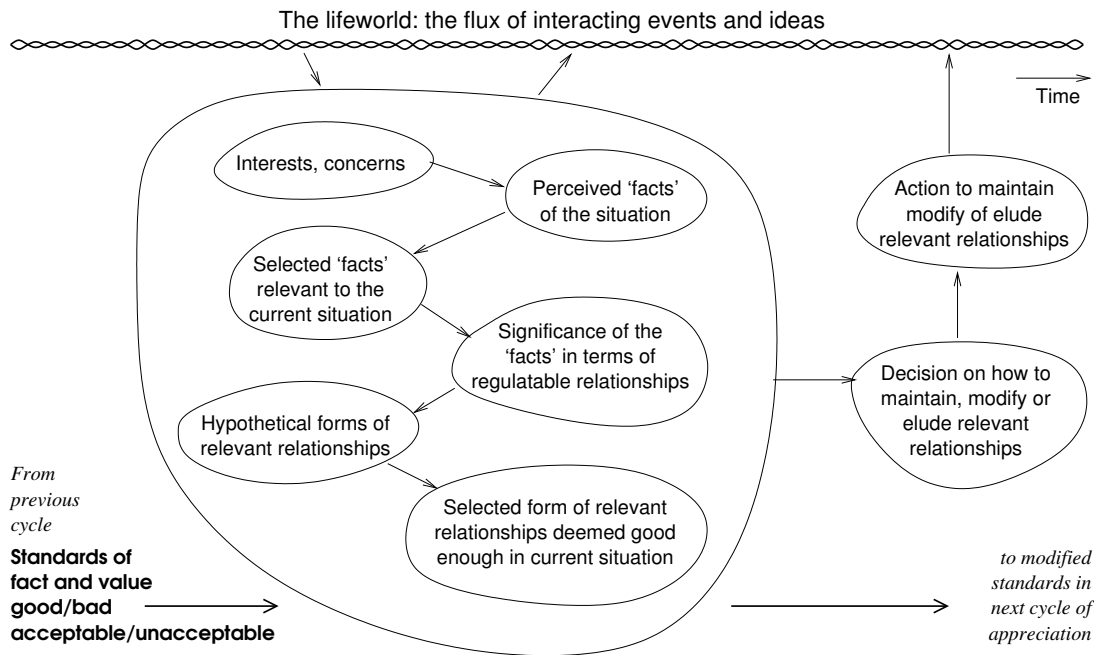


Figure 1: Vicker's model of an appreciative system

- modified standards of fact and value that will go into the consideration of the next event or idea of interest or concern.

Because Vickers believed that all our decisions are primarily about how to manage our relationships (to 'maintain, modify or elude' them, in Checkland and Casar's words), he regarded the outcome of any consideration as something that would be visible in the way we responded to new events. The modified standards of fact and value explain why our 'appreciation' of the 'same' event or idea would be different at different times.

In seeking to develop a methodology for applying systems thinking to human organisations, Checkland first conceived a fairly simple iterative cycle. Later (1986), he developed the idea that systems thinking can be applied at more than one level in an organisation.

At one level soft systems methodology concentrates on structure/ process analysis in which the key decision are: who is

- the client?
- the problem solver?
- the problem owner?

In traditional systems approaches (e.g. RAND) the first two are clearly defined as:

- the instigator of the study, and
- the analyst.

Checkland, however, regards the assignment of these roles are a matter for the analyst to explore. For example, the client may not be the problem owner and the problem solver may

not be the analyst but the client or a third party in the organisation. Equally one person may hold all three roles.

But one may also need to understand the social systems within which one is operating. So, for example, one could draw on Vickers' ideas about appreciative systems to understand why a particular structure/process analysis was 'appreciated' differently by different people in an organisation or not appreciated in the way one had expected. In a study in which I was involved, it became clear that the implementation of our structure/process recommendations could only occur if we could change the problem owners' appreciative systems.

At another level one can consider the disposition of power in an organisation. Checkland argues that changes in an organisation only come from accommodations among groups who hold power in the organisation. However the commodities of power vary between organisations. They may include formal authority, intellectual authority, personal charisma and access to important information and/or people. Checkland cites one organisation where having known the founder was a commodity of power.

Checkland argues that ultimately it is impossible to analyse all these aspects of a situation since the value of many commodities of power is that they are never acknowledged. However, analysing situations in terms of their power says something about one's own standards of fact and value and therefore about one's own appreciative system.

In the earlier descriptions of soft systems methodology, implementation was recognised as an important part of the cycle and also as a possible reason for a further iteration of the cycle. But the ideas of Vickers and the more recent thinking by Checkland suggest that those who seek to implement change could benefit from paying attention to their own appreciative systems as well as those of the people with whom they are working.

Finally, though Vickers regarded his concept of an appreciative system as one way of differentiating the study of human systems from that of natural systems, thinkers with a background in natural systems have moved in a similar direction. Prigogine and Stengers (1984), for example, have argued that classical physics' failure to account for time and for the behaviour of far-from-equilibrium systems has led people to assume that natural systems are far more determined than in fact they are.

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