

**Systems-Centered® Theory**  
**- dealing with differences differently**  
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SCiO Open Meeting  
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- Present key parts of Systems-Centered Theory
- Practise Functional Subgrouping, the core method.
- Both developed by Yvonne Agazarian (1997, 2004) for working with differences
- See if it makes sense/helps to see or do anything differently. If not, leave it behind!
- Hopefully together build an open learning climate

- Integrative theory with methods and tools for working with change
- Applicable at all system levels – individual, couple, group/team, organisational, community, country etc developed by Yvonne Agazarian (1997, 2004)
  - Lewin's (1951) field theory; von Bertalanffy's (1968) General Systems Theory; group dynamics (Bion, 1959; Foulkes, 1965; Bennis and Shepard, 1956); information theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1964); attachment theory; short-term dynamic psychotherapy (Davanloo, 1987); mind-body (Damasio, 1994; Porges, 2011); interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel, 2007)
- In use in a range of contexts e.g. organisations, mental health, social care, education in Brazil, Denmark, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, UK, US

- Heart of the theory *‘Living Human Systems survive, develop and transform by discriminating and integrating differences, differences in the apparently similar and similarities in the apparently different.’* (Agazarian 1997, 2004)
- This is a necessary and sufficient ingredient for change
- So how do we do it, when our natural tendency is to get rid of difference?

Scroll down to bottom of page to see animation

<https://www.systemscentered.com/Systems-Centered/Systems-Centered-Theory>

- *A Theory of Living Human Systems defines a hierarchy of isomorphic systems that are energy organizing, goal directed and system correcting (Agazarian 1997, 2004)*

# THE THEORY OF LIVING HUMAN SYSTEMS

***A theory of living human systems defines a hierarchy of isomorphic systems: energy-organizing, goal-directed and system-correcting***

## THEORETICAL DEFINITIONS

<b>HIERARCHY</b>	<b>ISOMORPHY</b>		
<p>Systems come in threes. Every system exists in the context of the system above and is the context for the system below.</p>	<p>Systems are similar in structure and function and different in different contexts. There is an interdependent relationship between the dynamics of structure, function and energy at all levels of the systems hierarchy.</p>		
<p><b>Context</b> System-centered contexts define a recursive triad of isomorphic systems in a defined hierarchy.</p>	<p><b>Structure</b> Systems-centered structure defines boundaries in space, time and context that are potentially permeable to energy / information.</p>	<p><b>Energy</b> Systems-centered flow of energy and information is defined as a force field of vectors approaching or avoiding system goals.</p>	<p><b>Function</b> Systems-centered function is to survive, develop and transform by discriminating and integrating differences and similarities.</p>

*Developed by Yvonne M. Agazarian (2013).  
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**CONTEXT****STRUCTURE****ENERGY****FUNCTION****SYSTEMS-CENTERED METHODS****Contextualizing:**

Activating the researcher role to perceive the isomorphy in the systems-centered hierarchy.

**System-as-a-whole roles:**

Survive develop and transform within the context of the defined hierarchy.

**Member system roles:**

Direct energy into subsystems. Discriminate and integrate information.

**Person system-as-a-whole:**

Source of primary energy /information flow.

**Boundaryng:**

organizing system boundaries.

Survival: managing the permeability of system boundaries (in the hierarchy of systems) by reducing noise in the communications within and between all systems and sub-systems.

**Vectoring:**

directing energy & information flow.

Development: directing information-energy towards the primary goals of survival, development and transformation as well as the goals of the context.

**Subgrouping:**

correcting energy & information flow.

Transformation: containing, discriminating and integrating differences in the apparently similar and similarities in the apparently different at all system levels.

**SYSTEMS-CENTERED TECHNIQUES**

Eliciting the SCT group requires developing the exploratory drive and establishing the person, member, subgroup and group-as-a-whole system roles by reducing the restraining forces inherent to each phase of system development.

SCT methods weaken the restraining forces to the flow of energy/information in the communications across the boundaries of the system hierarchy.

The "fork-in-the-road" techniques free the energy contained in the restraining forces which releases the developmental driving forces.

The SCT conflict-resolution technique of Functional Subgrouping contains explores and integrates differences instead of stereotyping or scapegoating them.

**INSTRUMENTS FOR DATA COLLECTION**

**Observations** of the relationship between contextualizing, boundaryng, vectoring and subgrouping interventions and Role Functions in crossing system boundaries. (Role, goal & context).

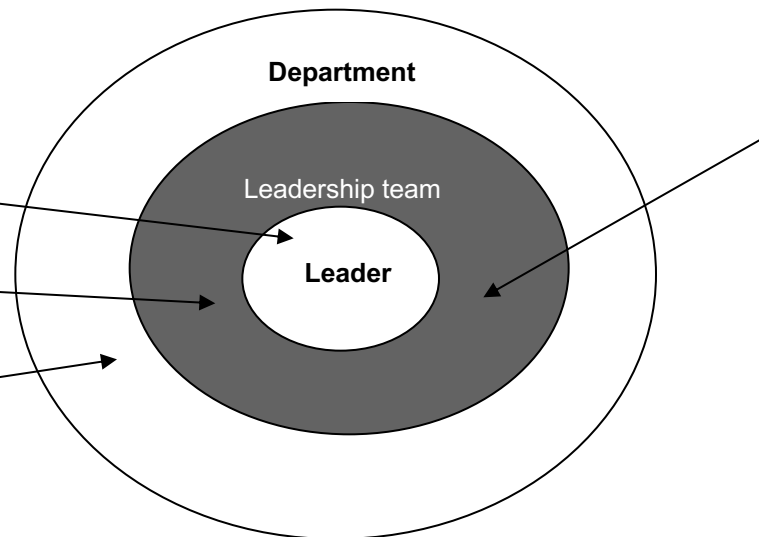
**Map** of past, present & future reality / irreality  
**Phases** of system development  
Hierarchy of Defense Modification

**The Force Field SAVI:** System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction  
**Fork-in-the-road Protocols**

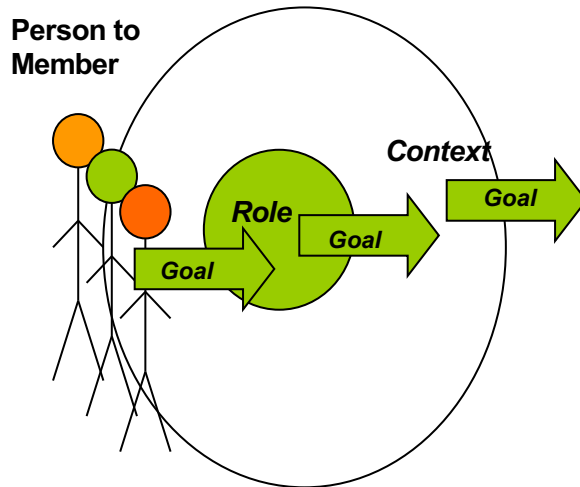
**Functional subgrouping**  
Joining and attuning and building  
**SAVI**

- Start by mapping the system/context & decide where to focus depending on your goals and roles
- What's driving and restraining toward to the goal?

**There are often similarities between different levels – what you learn about one, gives clues about the others**



**The middle or sub-group system is likely to be where you can effect most influence as it has boundaries with the system above and below**



- Lots of behaviours in our Person, not all appropriate for a given context
- Mindfully shift from Person to Member each time we take up a role
- Ask 4 questions:
  - What is the context? e.g. team meeting
  - What is the goal of context? e.g. create a plan
  - What is my role? e.g. leader / member
  - What behaviours can I bring in to take up my role functionally & help build the system? e.g. ask/answer questions; bring in data
- Can also be used to map Roles, Goals & Contexts of different players/levels in systems

- All systems go through predictable phases of development, *each time there is a change*
  - 1. Authority – Flight, Fight, Role Locks with Peers, Role Locks with Leader
  - 2. Collaboration
  - 3. Interdependent work
- Collaboration & Interdependent Work phases are more productive & satisfying (Wheelan, 2005)
- It takes time & energy to build a working system; it rarely ‘just happens’
- Map helps identify how to build the system, diagnose phase & weaken restraining forces sequentially so system moves toward goals with higher satisfaction/productivity

**Phases of Development in Work Groups – Driving & Restraining Forces to Survival, Development & Transformation**

AUTHORITY PHASE	
FLIGHT SUBPHASE	
<b>DEVELOPMENT GOAL: Create a reality testing culture</b>	<b>IMPLICIT GOAL: Keep things as they are, play it safe</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Form functional subgroups, asking 'Anyone else?' →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Be specific &amp; concise →</li> <li>Ask and answer questions →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Share factual information →</li> <li>Explore what one knows / develop new ideas →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Begin to clarify context, goals &amp; roles →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Normalise restraining behaviours →</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>← Stereotyped/social communication</li> <li>← Be vague, redundant</li> <li>← Don't ask questions/don't clarify</li> <li>← Mind-read, speculate, treat negative or positive predictions as facts</li> <li>← Only explain/work with what's already known</li> <li>← Ignore the context, set unrealistic goals, assign roles on first impressions or stereotypes</li> </ul>
FIGHT SUBPHASE	
<b>DEVELOPMENT GOAL: Use differences as resources</b>	<b>IMPLICIT GOAL: Get rid of differences, do it my way</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>See differences as potentially useful information &amp; explore →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">them one at a time</li> <li>Acknowledge/normalise frustration, use frustration energy →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">for work, make proposals</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Collect data about hesitations →</li> <li>Join person being criticised so no-one works alone →</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>← Dismiss, interrupt, Yes-But and/or attack differences</li> <li>← Personalise frustration &amp; discharge it in outrage, indignation, sarcasm, gossip</li> <li>← Keep one's hesitations to oneself</li> <li>← Complain, blame/scapegoat self &amp; others</li> </ul>
ROLE LOCKS WITH PEERS SUBPHASE	
<b>DEVELOPMENT GOAL: Build functional role relationships with peers</b>	<b>IMPLICIT GOAL: Manage issues of dominance/submission &amp; control</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the trigger into a Survivor Role, centre to →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">reorient to one's member role, goals &amp; context in the present</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Use descriptive language →</li> <li>Open up to information from the context →</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>← Ignore Role, Goal &amp; Context, relate to the present from a Survivor Role, create one up/one down relationships/personal feuds</li> <li>← Use opinion/personalising language</li> <li>← Close off to information from the context</li> </ul>
ROLE LOCKS WITH LEADER SUBPHASE	
<b>DEVELOPMENT GOAL: Make a working relationship with one's leader / team &amp; discover one's own authority</b>	<b>IMPLICIT GOAL: Sabotage authority &amp; avoid responsibility</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bring in data &amp; negotiate with one's leader / team →</li> <li>Work with the leader, team &amp; organisation one has →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Give &amp; take authority →</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>← Comply with or defy the leader / team, overtly or covertly</li> <li>← Blame or make a case against the leader, team or organisation</li> <li>← Deny one's own or others' authority &amp; competence</li> </ul>
COLLABORATION PHASE	
<b>DEVELOPMENT GOAL: Use differential resources of members</b>	<b>IMPLICIT GOAL: Personal preference at the expense of teamwork or wider context</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Differentiate oneself/one's subgroup while →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">staying open to others' differences &amp; similarities</li> <li>See both the positive and negative →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Hold self &amp; others accountable →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Revisit goals, roles &amp; context →</li> <li>Delegate meaningful tasks to sub-groups →</li> <li>Review progress &amp; refine how to make decisions →</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>← Focus on friendship, ignore differences, idealise oneself/team</li> <li>← Work alone, deny similarities, despair about oneself/team</li> <li>← Only see the positive or the negative</li> <li>← Avoid accountability</li> <li>← Carry on as if goals, roles or context are unchanged</li> <li>← Try to do everything together</li> <li>← Avoid reviewing progress &amp; learning from experience</li> </ul>
WORK / HIGH PERFORMANCE PHASE	
<b>DEVELOPMENT GOAL: Work in Role, Goal &amp; Context with common sense &amp; emotional intelligence</b>	<b>IMPLICIT GOAL: Self-focus at expense of system focus, thinking at the expense of emotional intelligence</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work in role &amp; contribute to goals of the context →</li> <li>Use thinking &amp; feeling in decision-making →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Use affectionate humour →</li> <li>Apply the spirit of the law, use common-sense reality testing →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">Put one's heart into the work →</li> <li style="padding-left: 20px;">80/20 task to climate focus →</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>← Focus on self-centred goals</li> <li>← Overuse either thinking or feeling</li> <li>← Lose affectionate humour</li> <li>← Apply letter of the law/work on auto-pilot, lose common sense</li> <li>← Make decisions without heart &amp; implement half-heartedly</li> <li>← Focus only on task at expense of climate building</li> </ul>

- Living human systems S, D, T through d,i of differences
- Functional sub-grouping
- Role, goal & context
- Force-field
- Phases of system development **and** emergence
- Using emotional intelligence and curiosity to explore reality *at the edge of the unknown*
- Experiential learning / using self as instrument
- Interplay between context, structure, function and energy
- Action learning

- Theory-driven practice *'There is nothing as practical as a good theory'*  
Kurt Lewin
- Seeing systems, not just people, to build more functional systems & achieve goals more easily
- Differences as information - key to survival & development
  - Methods & tools for working with differences
- Focuses on gathering energy/information to get into reality & achieve goals
- Acknowledges emergent nature of living human systems with maps (e.g. Phases of Development) for making sense of what's happening
- Focuses on staying curious at the edge of the unknown, in current reality, using emotional intelligence to problem-solve

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