
Research Note

“By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them”: A Reply to Jackson, Green, and Midgley

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1. INTRODUCTION

The preceding replies of Jackson, Green, and Midgley reminded me of some of my high-school teachers who, faced with persistent questioning from their pupils about God, would reply by repeating yet again their favorite cliches from the Bible. No further arguments would be advanced, just the old familiar quotes would be recycled, as if repetition automatically enhanced understanding!

In my paper (Tsoukas, 1993) I posed a number of what I thought were important questions to the supporters of Total Systems Intervention, and I challenged them to come up with some answers. By and large, they have regurgitated the same old arguments. Jackson's reply can be captured by the phrase "TSI is good because I helped develop it"; Green's reply is summarized in the aphorism "TSI is useful because I have used it"; and as for Midgley, I am not so sure what his reply was about apart from the implicit complaint, "You left me out!" In case you may think that I am unduly harsh to my critics let me take you through their replies once again and see how they have tackled the questions posed in my paper.

2. HOW IS SYSM SUPPOSED TO BE USED?

I asked in my paper which version of the System of Systems Methodologies (SYSM) we should believe: the one that views SYSM as a typology for classifying problem situations (thus being at the meta-level) or for classifying assumptions about problem situations made by various methods (thus being at the meta-meta-level). I must admit that Jackson's response to this is unequivocal: SYSM, we are told, is used solely to classify the assumptions made by problem-solving methods. Jackson maintains that the way SYSM is to be used has been made "eminently clear" in *Creative Problem Solving*, and by implication, he

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seems to wonder how anybody could have misunderstood him. A couple of quotations from his book are provided to persuade the unfaithful Thomases.

If, however, Jackson takes another look at his book, he will see that there are several occasions in which he uses SYSM at the meta-level to classify problem situations and match them to problem-solving methods. In my paper (Tsoukas, 1993, p. 59) I listed two occasions on which precisely such a use of SYSM had been made. Jackson, however, chooses to say nothing substantive about these instances except to dismiss them as shorthand expressions intending to describe ideal-type classifications. He says (p. 3), "Of course unearthing the assumptions of systems methodologies as to 'systems' and 'participants' does produce an 'ideal-type' classification of problem contexts to which the methodologies can be related."

In this statement Jackson displays precisely the kind of logical confusion I criticized in my paper. You will see why this is so if you compare SYSM to one of the most popular typologies in organization theory, namely, that of Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 22). Burrell and Morgan sought to classify several theories and perspectives in organization theory along two dimensions: their assumptions about the nature of social science (subjectivism vs objectivism) and assumptions about the nature of society (regulation vs radical change). Note that Burrell and Morgan did not classify societies, but assumptions *about* societies, and did not classify social science methodologies, but assumptions *about* social science methodologies. Consequently, their typology is a discourse *on* organizational theories, and not a classification of the empirical contexts in which those theories apply. Observing this subtle difference is crucial in avoiding logical problems.

By analogy, therefore, if Jackson wants to "[unearth] the assumptions of systems methodologies as to 'systems' and 'participants'" (p. 3), that is fine and laudable, and the outcome will be a discourse on problem-solving methods. Such an exercise, however, will *not* "produce an 'ideal-type' classification of problem contexts" (p. 3) as he erroneously contends, for problem contexts and assumptions about problem contexts belong to two separate logical types.

What Jackson, in effect, does is to proclaim the theoretical validity of his typology at the meta-meta-level (see Fig. 1, of Tsoukas, 1993) but apply it at the meta-level. It is this unclear status of SYSM and the implications it entails that I criticized in my paper. This confusion is also reflected in Green's reply (p. 6), in which he says: "[TSI] goes on to offer a framework of logic within which a thorough appreciation of the problem situation can be developed and a properly informed choice of methodologies can be made." I repeat the question in a different form: Does it not, using TSI in the manner Green has just suggested, conflict with Jackson's claim about SYSM (and consequently TSI) being used to classify assumptions made by problem-solving methods?

I must admit that Green's response to my claim about the unclear status of

SYSM baffles me. He contends that, in his experience, SYSM is used at *all* three levels. As he puts it (p. 3), “The consultant must consider the problem context, the methodologies to be used *and* the classification of those methodologies according to their underlying assumptions. . . . In considering each of those aspects, the System of Systems Methodologies has proved to be an ideal gateway through which to enter all three levels of logic.” Well, well. This is the first time I ever heard anyone say that a humble typology can do all these things at the same time! Surely, such intellectual ambition would have been envied by Russell, Wittgenstein, Godel, Bateson, and several other intellectual giants who spent a great deal of their time demonstrating the limits to human knowledge, and the curious paradoxes that keep creeping up in language as soon as we try to make it reflexive. Perhaps Green knows something the rest of us do not; pity he has not spelled out more clearly what it is. But then vagueness may be a virtue: “Perhaps the light will prove another tyranny. Who knows what new things it will expose?” (Cavafy, 1984).

3. WHAT IS THE BASIS OF COMPLEMENTARISM?

Jackson and Green maintain that although different problem-solving methods are embedded in different paradigms, they are nonetheless complementary. I have been eagerly looking for some additional justification of this claim in their replies, but I found, instead, a litany of unsubstantiated assertions. Green (p. 4), for example, says: “The positivist, interpretivist and critical perspectives are all fundamentally different but each can be used in a complementary fashion provided that their separateness is respected and that the strengths and limitations of each are fully recognised.” Notice that Green does not substantiate his claim by exploring the cognitive basis of complementarity; he merely qualifies its use. (These qualifications, incidentally, happen to be of a psychologistic kind—in the end it depends on the intellectual qualities, even the personality, of the user, how these three perspectives are to be combined!)

To justify the complementary use of problem-solving methods, Jackson chooses to remind us of Habermas’s three “human interests.” The real issues, however, begin to surface precisely where he stops. Different paradigms constitute different realities, and as such, they provide answers, either explicitly or implicitly, to *all* three human interests. Positivist problem-solving, for example, is not simply useful for achieving technical mastery over social processes. In attempting to do so, it also provides answers to the inextricably interwoven questions of interaction and power. Jackson and Green advise us to play to positivism’s (primarily technical) strengths while minimizing its weaknesses. Reality-shaping paradigms, however, are not *a la carte* menus; you don’t just pick whatever suits you at any time. If Jackson, Green, and Midgley believe, as they seem to, that problem-solving methods are not mere instruments but

have deep paradigmatic roots, then they must tell us how their complementary use is epistemologically possible. In their replies they merely assert that complementarity is possible, but they do not try to show how this is so—they do not argue for it. Psychologistic exhortations about “sociological awareness,” “informed use,” “respect of methodological separateness,” etc., will not do. Anybody can claim to have these qualities; what we need is conceptual analysis as to how complementarity, from an epistemological point of view, is possible.

Midgley has lost me on the issue of complementarity. While he agrees with me that complementarity is conceptually problematic, he also maintains that complementarity is defensible if we view the critical systems perspective as a paradigm on its own. That is a peculiar view of paradigms; he seems to conceive of the latter as recipes which can be concocted at will provided that certain psychologistic conditions are maintained. As if the willingness to create a new recipe magically resolves the question of what ingredients to use and how to mix them. Like Jackson and Green, he does not demonstrate *how* several ingredients could indeed be used in a complementary manner—he merely asserts the feasibility of the task!

4. ARE METAPHORS NECESSARY IN TSI, AND WHY?

In my paper I raised several questions with respect to the necessity and status of metaphors in TSI. I cited an example in which metaphors appeared to have been utterly redundant and confirming the obvious. As if we didn't know, Jackson, in his reply, repeats the old familiar clichés about using metaphors to view a problem situation from several points of view. He and Green and Midgley sidestep my questions about the cognitive necessity of metaphors to make sense of familiar phenomena. In my paper I discussed Flood's (1991) use of metaphors in his application of TSI to a Singaporean company, and I questioned the value that had been added to the resultant diagnosis from using certain metaphors which merely confirmed commonsense problems. My critics choose to ignore this, and instead, they reaffirm their belief in the values of metaphors. When in doubt, stick to the old tune!

What about the prioritization of metaphors? I raised this question in my paper, and Jackson and Green's reply is to reassure us that this is, indeed, possible. Yes, gentlemen, this may be possible, but would you be kind enough to tell us *how* this is so? If I wanted to assess the current predicament of British Coal or General Motors how would I know which of your metaphors accounted for most of the problems at hand? Should I take British Coal's argument about efficiency and shrinking markets for coal seriously (i.e., the machine and biological metaphors) or should I pay more attention to the political aspects of pit closures (i.e., the political metaphor)? How could I decide which metaphor is the dominant one? You must surely realize that if you offer practitioners a

checklist of all potential problems you are hardly telling them anything informative. Our cognitive schemata are more powerful the more discriminating they are; and the “creativity phase” of TSI is anything but discriminating.

5. IS TSI INTRINSICALLY RELATED TO THE CRITICAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE?

Interestingly enough, while Green (p. 6) dismisses my thought experiment as “[bearing] no resemblance whatsoever to TSI and, indeed, [as] exactly the ill-informed fumbling that Flood and Jackson are attempting to avoid,” Jackson (p. 8) provides two readings of it which “in [his] opinion speak for TSI.” My judgment on whose interpretation is correct would not exactly be unbiased, and therefore, I would prefer to leave it to Jackson and Green to sort out their “family” differences as to what exactly TSI consists of and how it might be recognized in practice.

I would like, however, to spend a bit more time on Midgley’s critique of my position regarding the practical relevance of the critical systems perspective and the extent to which critical systems thinkers ought to accept dominant rationalities if they want to be useful. I would like to make two points. First, Midgley has underplayed my emphasis on *applied* problem management [see Tsoukas 1993, p. 69; I even italicized the word in the original paper]. Yes, for a discipline to be applied, it ought to *engage* with the currently dominant rationalities of those who it purports to help. The key verb here is “engage,” not reject or (uncritically) accept. You cannot exit current social typifications and dominant conceptions, and this is, after all, what problem management is supposed to be about: managing problems which you may not have caused or desired but are somehow here with you. Even world-shaping events such as social revolutions inescapably perpetuate conceptual structures and ways of thinking of the societies they have sought to transform radically (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1974).

On a more mundane level, you may wish to select the problems you want to manage on ideological or other grounds, but it does not mean that all other problems (and their owners, of course) will go away because you have chosen not to pay attention to them. So if you want to help your clients, you must be able to connect with them, which means you must be able to speak their language and accept the legitimacy of their social existence, although you may disagree with it. I have yet to see a consultant, with Flood and Jackson not being an exception, who would challenge the notion of, say, for-profit organization while at the same time trying to help for-profit organizations.

Second, it does not matter in the least whether I believe that “if TSI is to be practically useful, *it will inevitably be the case* that the concerns of Critical Systems Thinking will remain mere ‘ornaments’” (Midgley). What is more important, very important indeed, is that in their consultancies, the gurus of

critical systems thinking behave as any other consultant, or at least, they have not provided evidence that critical systems thinking—which, lest we forget, is supposed to be about emancipation, liberation, and all that stuff—has been carried over into their consultancy assignments.

Jackson and Flood have spent much ink on writing about “coercive contexts,” “exploitation,” “oppression,” and the rest, and how the positivist and interpretive problem-solving methods fail to tackle them, but I have not seen a definition of what and where these contexts are, nor have I observed them using some discriminatory criteria in picking their consultancy assignments and their clients. Some prominent critical systems thinkers seem to have found it equally comfortable to work in both community OR projects and for-profit organizations, while they do not seem to have been particularly bothered about working with organizations such as the police (I would love to see what an “emancipated police” would look like), nor have some of them been reluctant to offer their advice to companies based in countries which have yet a lot to learn about respecting human rights.

In *Creative Problem Solving*, Flood and Jackson have openly advertised their consultancy credentials, and I do not recall seeing uncompromisingly strong preferences as to with whom they might like to work. The language of their book, as well as the very name *Total Systems Intervention*, is designed to enhance indiscriminately the appeal of their method (or is it “meta-methodology”?) by evoking implicit associations with currently popular management fads such as Total Quality Management. (Incidentally, the modernist cult of “totality” is uncritically reproduced by those who proclaim to be critical of current notions of management.) It is not clear to me what the differences are *in practice* (not in radical rhetoric) between, say, Peters’ (1992) “liberation management” and Flood and Jackson’s (1991) interest in “human well being and emancipation.” Why might the former be accused of managerialism and of supporting the status quo, while the latter might be praised (and occasionally self-congratulated) for undermining the status quo?

In conclusion, to the question, “Are the concerns and concepts of critical systems thinking mere ornaments to TSI?” the answer is best inferred by observing those who claim to *practice* critical systems thinking: “by their fruits ye shall know them.” As far as I am concerned, I have made no secret what I think these “fruits” are.

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