

The Holistic Sense of Prison Phenomena in Venezuela: III. The Unity of the Research

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In this paper the underlying systemic unity of the research reported in the two previous articles is sought. The research journey is examined in order to draw lessons concerning our systemic practice. In addition, an effort is made to relate interpretive systemology to some strands of systems, management and action research sciences. In so doing, we expect to draw some links that could be established between interpretive systemologists and the community of researchers who compose the select audience of SPAR.

KEY WORDS: conditions of possibility, problemizing, background, complexity, “wholism”, action research, intervention, “problem-unsolving”.

1. INTRODUCTION

After reading the second article of this trilogy (Suárez, 1998), the question that necessarily comes to mind is whether or not we have succeeded in accomplishing the proposed objective of the research. Its objective, as will be remembered, consisted in unfolding the *conditions of possibility* of the prison phenomenon (equivalent to displaying the holistic meaning of the phenomenon). However, the reader will have noted at the end of the second article that the concept of *conditions of possibility* seems to have a different meaning in each article. For this reason, doubt arises concerning what the research has accomplished. Let us make this clearer. In the first article (López-Garay, 1998), the researchers understood "conditions of possibility" of the prison phenomenon as a *certain order* or *basic structure* of society which generated institutional practices such as those seen in the case of the (“schizophrenic”) prison institutions. The interpretive contexts, which were unfolded there, can then be taken as hypotheses about the structure that generates schizophrenic institutional practices. Thus, for example, the "Enlightenment" context displayed a social order involving two great opposing forces: the forces of modernity, struggling to establish a modern society, in opposition to the forces of pre-modernity. The confrontation between these two forces constitutes the entire social and institutional field. On the other hand, in the second article, "conditions of possibility" were understood as a *certain way of*

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thinking that seemed to transcend the social order, constituting it and giving it a complete meaning. In this article, the interpretive contexts attempt, to begin with, to display a certain way of thinking, which makes it possible for the prison phenomenon to be perceived as a problem.

Now, the reader must be asking what the relation is between both these researches (that is, the research reported in the first and second articles), given that not only the conditions of possibility revealed are different, but that they are on different levels. Hence the question: where are these results pointing to? It now seems clear that there is a need to identify the conducting thread that gives meaning to the research as a whole.

To be able to respond to the above, we believe it is important, first, to show what has happened behind stage, that is, to show the path the research has taken and which has led to two apparently unconnected results. The narration of the research journey will help in understanding better the origin of these results and the relation they bear to the original intention to carry out a systemic interpretive study (i.e. a search for the holistic sense) of the prison system in Venezuela.

2.THE PATH TRAVELED: THE FIRST STAGE

As will be remembered, the first stage of the research (reported in the first article) culminated in a presentation of the need to reveal the conditions which made it possible for the subject of prisons to be raised to the category of a problem. What was not shown there was the reflection that led us to this conclusion. This reflection had the principal result of having detected an apparent paradox in the research. Let us explain this. On the one hand, the interpretive contexts show that we belong to a socio-historical order that makes institutional schizophrenia possible and sustains it. On the other hand, if we are consistent with this statement, it is logical to think that we are the "children" of that same order. And to that extent, and thanks to that order, the existence of institutional schizophrenia has become a reason for concern and for the search for a holistic sense. In other words, the same order both "generates" schizophrenia and is concerned about this situation and makes it a subject of study. How is this possible? How can something (v.g. an order) *be* (a "generator" of a schizophrenic condition) and *not be* (that is, be the generator of the conditions that seek to destroy that order) at the same time?

In relation to what was shown in the first article, the reflection led us to the conclusion that this "paradox" could not be solved unless we saw things from a different perspective. From this perspective, it is thought that there is a basic background that *constitutes both* the social structure we qualify as schizophrenic and the "problemizing" concern, that is, the concern that makes the prison system a problem. This is none other than a non-causalistic view of the world.

In the second article, Suárez (1998) attempts to articulate this non-causalistic view in the following terms: "...the prison matter had to be socially "problemized" in a certain way in order to become a current issue. This "problemization", in turn,

is a phenomenon that neither pertains exclusively to what becomes a problem nor to the society that problemizes it...it is "problemization" itself that constitutes both sides of the relation: *what-is-a-problem and for-whom-it-is-a-problem*" (sec.1.2).

In this sense, the social structure neither "produces" schizophrenic prisons nor defines them as problematical. It is the other way around! Problemization *constitutes* both *the-society-that-problemizes-the-prisons* and *the-schizophrenic-and-problematical-prisons*. This statement is certainly more in agreement with the conceptual framework of Interpretive Systemology (IS for short. See Fuenmayor, 1991a,b,c; López-Garay, 1986, ch.7).

For this reason, the second part of the research (reported in the second article of the trilogy) was directed toward trying to understand the act of *problemization* of the prison phenomenon. Further on, we shall see that this change in the research did not accomplish its objective. However, we must first outline the second stage of the journey, as well as the first stage. In particular, it is necessary to understand why the first part deviated toward a kind of systemic *structuralist* study (Jackson, 1992), moving away from the features of a systemic interpretive study. Tracing the path of this deviation will help us to understand better not only how the need arose for the second part of the research, but also, and by contrast, it will make the path that the research should ideally have taken stand out.

2.1. Implicit Orienting Framework of the First Stage of the Research Journey

In retrospect, we believe that the following ideas in some way gradually shaped the course of the research. To begin with, it is clear that research on the sense of an institution has to contend, fundamentally, with the problem of the meaning of social action. What notion of social action governed the first part of the research? According to Weber (1978), an action is social "...only to the extent that its subjective meaning takes into account the behavior of others and is, consequently, oriented by its course" (p.4). Explaining social action is not then a matter of discovering the causes which impel it. The subjective meaning of social action implies that, first, it is related to the social practices in which it takes place. For example, the hurry-scurry and shouting at a stock exchange are understood in relation to the purposes of such a place and the rules and standards that govern that type of activity. Secondly, and in a more profound manner, social action is understood in relation to the conceptions (*Weltanschauungen*) or basic perspectives that guide the happenings of a society in general. For example, in a capitalist society, the exchange of goods for the purpose of obtaining the greatest profit is considered good and vital to that society.

The effect that these ideas had on the research is seen, for example, in the quotation from Foucault in section 2 of the first article, which asserts that, with respect to institutions, it is vital to ask not only what they are and what effect they have, but also what kind of "rationality" or thinking supports them. However, the first stage of the research was addressed not so much toward displaying this

rationality, or *Weltanschauungen*, but rather the order or social practices. This is the course that deviates the research from its original path.

Hence, the first article described how the search for this order began, that is, starting at the tip of the iceberg. The prison phenomenon was described as an embodiment of this order, as it was the actions taken by the reformers, the management and the "customers" of the prison institutions to bring about changes. Two hypotheses of possible orders or structures generating the phenomenon were revealed, but one of them (the hypothesis of a pre-modern order) was discarded in favor of the other (the hypothesis of an order in transition toward modernity) because the latter was more comprehensive. But, upon attempting to explain the actions of reformers and various actors in the prison world in terms of practices created by the struggle between the two forces (pre-modern and modern), we found that there were "facts" that did not fit this explanation and which forced us to conceive a different hypothesis. The liberal post-modern context was the third hypothesis. The first stage of the research ended up reifying (*hypostasizing*) these orders. For example, in the three interpretive contexts, clearly differentiated groups, which represent the pre-modern and modern forces, are discussed as being the generators of social structures that give rise to "schizophrenic" institutions. And in the post-modern context, the order is determined by the firm belief in the value of autonomy and freedom.

It is worthy of comment that although social structure and practices were at the center of these hypotheses, the deeper layer of the Weberian scheme—that of *Weltanschauung*—did not fail to show up at certain times (for example, when we spoke of autonomy and freedom).

2.2. Conclusions

It follows, then, that our systemic research stopped being interpretivist and became structuralist in nature (Jackson, 1992) upon focusing on practices or social order as independent structures and forgetting about the matrix or background constituting the meaning (*Weltanschauung*) of those practices.

Briefly, the conditions of possibility of a phenomenon were understood as a type of fundamental "structure" (genostructure) which gives rise to institutions and actions that are seen on the epiphenomenal level.

Then, to correct these "deviations" we launched the second research work, which, as already said, instead of asking about the structures or social order that generate the prison epiphenomenon, asked, to begin with, about *the way of thinking* that makes it possible to distinguish the prison subject as a problem. Actually, the most fundamental question that this research touched on was that concerning the conditions that *problemize* prisons. As we saw, this is equivalent to unfolding the background that constitutes at the same time *the-society-that-problemizes-the-prison* and *the-schizophrenic-and-problematical-prison*.

The second research sought then to supply us with a critical correction of our course that would allow us to reveal this constitutive background. Was this objective actually accomplished?

3. THE PATH TRAVELED: THE SECOND STAGE

As already mentioned, the second stage of the research started when we discovered that our eagerness to reveal the background of meaning of the prisons had led us to a structuralist study. In this study, we reified both the phenomenon itself and the social practices that sustained it, and established mechanical relationships of causality between the two. We had forgotten that the IS's interpretivist framework tells us that nothing exists in itself, but that everything is distinguished against a background. To be more precise, it is the act of distinguishing that constitutes both that which is distinguished and its background. In this respect, we had overlooked that the Venezuelan prison phenomenon was not simply given beforehand, waiting there to be studied by us. This phenomenon, as it currently appears—that is, as a “current issue”, which is in urgent need of being approached—is possible only because it has been distinguished in that way against a background. And that background could not be a type of causalistic structure like the one described in the first research, since such a structure does not allow the understanding of how the distinction as such is possible.

The task that unfolded for the second stage was, then, that of taking the interpretivist path again. It was a matter of starting from the idea that the Venezuelan prisons appear as they do due to an act of distinction. Therefore, the first question that had to be asked was: what does this act of distinguishing, which constitutes the Venezuelan prisons in the way they appear, consist of?

As already said, the prisons made their appearance in the public light of Venezuelan society simply because they were distinguished as problematical. If the prisons were not distinguished as such, they would dissolve into a homogenous background from which other things distinguished would appear. In summary, the act of distinguishing, in this case, could be understood as an act of "problemization". This problemization drew the prison phenomenon on a background that was invisible, and which it was necessary to bring to light in order to be able to give an account of the sense of such a phenomenon.

3.1. Implicit Orienting Framework of The Second Stage of the Research Journey

Once again our original interpretivist intention was deviated from. This was due to our implicit reasoning arising from the previous proposition with respect to the nature of the background that had to be revealed. Seen in retrospect, our reasoning was as follows.

According to the theoretical framework of IS, the scene or background of a phenomenon is not simply one of the "faces" of the act of distinguishing. The scene

is also the face *from which* the act of distinguishing is projected, while that which is distinguished is the face *toward which* the act of distinguishing is projected. This asymmetry is due to the fact that the act of distinguishing reflects an *intentionality* (precisely, a *pro-jection*) that seeks to unconceal *some-thing*.

Now, in our research work, it was necessary to answer the question: what was the scene for the problemization of the prisons? That is, from what was the problemization of the prisons projected? The answer was that the scene was a socially prevalent "way of thinking" that made the prisons a problem. This was precisely the step that deviated us from our original interpretivist intention and thrust us toward a kind of subjectivist framework. Let's look at this in greater detail.

The identification of the scene with the socially prevalent way of thinking obligated the second stage of the research work to consist in a process of revealing different ways of thinking about the meaning of the prisons. In this way, first, the Enlightenment comprehension of the prisons was unfolded and then the 19th century positivist comprehension; and, finally (and thanks to the contrast offered by the previous two) the way of thinking which appears to prevail at present was outlined.

In short, what all this assumes is that phenomena are constituted by our conceptions about the human being. Adopting this assumption reveals the subjectivism in which this paper incurs. And this subjectivism is apparent on two levels. The first refers to the idea that phenomena are constituted by *conceptions*. According to this, human thought is a kind of active principle that governs the world of phenomena. The second refers to the idea that those conceptions revolve around the *human being*, that is, the subject. Without the notion of subject, no meaning would be possible. At the juncture of both levels we find a world where phenomena are governed by a subjectivity centered on itself.

3.2. Conclusions

Based on the above, it could be said that the attempt to correct our course, which prompted the second stage of the research, produced ambiguous results. To the extent that it transcended the structuralism of the first stage, it was successful, but to the extent that it led to the opposite position – subjectivism – it failed. And the fact is that both ontological positions are opposite to that of IS. Moreover, this opposition is not circumstantial to IS, but rather IS is built based on this opposition. But then, what does all this mean? At this stage, the reader will probably be greatly disappointed with reading this trilogy. And this is due to three reasons. The first is that it would seem that all this research work and the effort devoted to it have been in vain. An account of the sense of the prisons consistent with the ontological principles of IS has not been accomplished. The second is that it cannot be understood how the authors of this paper, who have been working in the area for years, can make such a mistake. And finally, it seems to lack a clear and coherent

idea about the nature of that *mysterious* "scene", or "background", that should be revealed in order to give an account of the meaning of a phenomenon.

But the matter is much more complex than this. The disappointment we have just described assumes a conception of what scientific research is that precisely goes against the conceptual framework of IS. Below we will show that the consistency of a research about the sense of a phenomenon has to be asserted in a manner very different from the traditional one and that our trilogy on prisons is an example of this type of consistency.

4. THE MEANING OF THE RESEARCH JOURNEY AS A WHOLE

It is usually thought that scientific research is an activity guided by a method, which, in turn, is rooted in a series of axiomatic propositions about the nature of the phenomenon under study. These propositions define, a priori, the general form of the phenomenon while the method establishes the operations by which it is assured that such form is filled with a particular content. It should be noted that under this idea about scientific research, it becomes difficult to understand how a particular study can "deviate" from its conceptual framework as seems to have happened in our case. A method, if it has been well designed and is followed to the letter, assures beforehand that such a thing will not happen.

Nevertheless, as we shall see below, the particular nature of the conceptual framework of IS undermines this entire conception of scientific research, impeding the mechanical application of a method. To show why this is so, we must narrate briefly the path by which IS comes to define its key notions, especially the notion of "scene", or background.

4.1. The Path Toward the "Background"

The conceptual framework of IS arises from the attempt to give an account of the unitary nature —holistic or systemic— of phenomena. This attempt, in turn, is due to a dissatisfaction with the conception prevailing in the systems movement, according to which the "unity" of a phenomenon is understood as an "emerging property". What this theory advocates is summed up in the idea that the unity of a phenomenon comes from the interaction of the parts that compose it.

In fact, IS puts forward a triple critique of the theory of "emerging property". On the one hand, it should be noted that this theory merely advocates the existence of "emergence" but never succeeds in explaining the nature of this phenomenon or why or how it occurs. Furthermore, given that the parts of a unit also may be considered units composed of parts, it would have to be assumed that every unit emerges from some absolutely simple elements. But, given that every material body has parts, the original unit would be pulverized into a strange immateriality³. On the other hand, the idea that the unity of a phenomenon emerges from its parts presupposes what it is sought to explain, that is, the unity itself, because it is

³ Apparently, this is what has happened in modern physics with "matter".

possible to recognize a group of things as "parts" only when they have already been recognized as belonging to a unit. This indicates that the unit is primary with respect to its parts, and the latter appear only in an *a posteriori* analysis. Thus, we arrive at a third questioning of this theory: the notion of "emerging property" assumes that units exist in themselves, that is, they do not depend on anything beyond themselves. But if the unit is primary with respect to its parts, its existence cannot depend on its "inside", but it must depend on something "outside" itself.

Now then, this last observation constitutes, precisely, the exit door of the "emerging property" theory and the entrance door to an interpretivist conception of "unity", since a basic idea of interpretivism is that the unity of a phenomenon is possible thanks to a certain *meaning* that it has within a certain *context of meaning*. The context of meaning is the "outside" of the unit which gives it its unity. But, what are "unit", "meaning" and "context" and how are they related? This is the question that initiates the process of building the conceptual principles of IS.

The first theoretical possibility is the one that we could call "naive interpretivism", which identifies the context of meaning with the human mind, or better said, with what is usually called "mentality". According to this position, things have sense because of the fact that human minds harbor an accumulation of subjective notions with which to interpret the objects of reality. But this possibility disintegrates immediately due to a basic problem that it does not succeed in solving. This is the fact that the distinctive existence of such a thing as the "human mind" presupposes the existence of a primary, objective and non-human reality, from which the mind makes an interpretation producing a meaning. However, the preceding discussion reveals that objects cannot exist without a context of meaning. All that is *is-in-a-context*. In terms of this naive interpretivism, it should then be said that all that is is an organized realization of the human mind. But with this solipsistic change of tone, how we can refer to things as something different from ourselves stops being intelligible.

A second theoretical possibility, that could express a more refined interpretivist way of understanding unity, is the one offered by some philosophical conceptions of past epochs, those that could be grouped under the common name of "metaphysics". According to these conceptions, the unitary nature of phenomena is given to them by the ideas or concepts they correspond to. The different ideas are articulated in a universal conceptual order that makes it possible to distinguish one unit from another. It should be noted that, seen in this way, this conceptual order would be the "context of meaning", whereas the relation of correspondence between the unit and the order would be the "meaning". The "unit", in turn, would be a reflection of its corresponding idea.

But this conception turns out to be unsatisfactory for three reasons. On the one hand, according to this scheme, the meaning of the chair I am sitting in wears out in its "being a chair". This being so, why is this chair different from any other chair? On the other hand, metaphysics assumes a sole, fixed and constant order that

also gives each thing a sole, fixed and constant meaning. However, experience shows us that there is interpretive variety: what I call a chair does not have to be so for someone coming from another culture. Then, how can it be explained, under this scheme, that there can be such diversity? Both objections seem to indicate that the metaphysical scheme reduces the richness compressed in the meaning of a certain unit to only a certain aspect of it. But here a third critique is added: this scheme solves the enigma of the unitary nature of every unit only apparently, because what it does is transfer the problem from the world of phenomena to the world of ideas. The unity of each phenomenon is a reflection of the unity of its idea. But, how is the unity of each idea possible?

All the above indicates that the nature of the context of meaning cannot be that of a universal conceptual order. It cannot be "universal" because, then, there could be no interpretive variety. It cannot be "conceptual" because, on the one hand, the existence of a particular concept for each unit that appears is unconceivable, and, on the other hand, because it is not possible to give a satisfactory account of what is unitary about the phenomenon referring it to another unit (this time, conceptual). But if the context of meaning is not universal and is not composed of units, then it cannot be an "order" either. The question concerning the nature of the context has then been enlarged upon, but is still open. Now there is already certain clarity with respect to what the context of meaning is not. But to comprehend better what it is, we have to turn to our everyday experience and examine there how the richness compressed into every meaning is possible and how unity does not depend on any unit.

Upon attempting to surmise the meaning of my chair with greater attention, I discover that there are many circumstances (I am involved with) that make it be *this-particular-chair*, and different from any other chair. It is no doubt a chair. But it is, in particular, *the* chair that is in my office, in front of my computer, which was chosen by me several years ago because it was comfortable, which in the long run turned out not to be of very good quality, which I had to remove several parts from because they broke, etc., etc. Exploring these circumstances seems to reveal, above all, a certain *inexhaustibility* of their enumeration. Second, we realize that these circumstances are not usually visible, but remain as a *background* necessary for the comprehension of my chair as such. Thirdly, this background is not fixed, but flows and is constantly being renewed, giving that same characteristic to the meaning of my chair. Finally, to those who have not lived the same experiences as I have, my chair cannot be the same as it is to me. Therefore, the background is not exactly the same to me as it is to others. Consequently, what is being arrived at by this inquisitive process is the understanding of the context of meaning as a "background" (or "scene"). But let's look at the profound implications of this notion more carefully. The first thing to be emphasized is that the background is not a unit or a group of units. The background is that indistinct and homogenous "outside" that has to be co-present with what is present as a unit. Its being, therefore, is a *being-no-*

thing. Only when it is attempted to explore what it is, does it begin to be embodied into a multitude of units (for example, concepts or memories). But each one of these units appears, necessarily, founded on a new background which, in turn, would have to be explored to be able to give an exhaustive account of the first. Hence, the background of every unit is essentially elusive, and its exploration can never be exhaustive.

Next, it is important to note that the unity of the unit is not explained in terms of another unit, but in terms of an accordance of the unit with its complement: the non-unit. But this accordance does not consist in a relationship established between two independent elements, but rather both the unit and its background are like two sides of the same foundational act which brings forth both of them (like the act of drawing a circle on a plane). In other words, both the unit and the background are two opposed and necessary expressions of the act of distinguishing.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasize the flux-like nature of both sides of the act of distinguishing. The distinguishing of a unit from its background *occurs*. Every occurrence implies change. Distinguishing, then, implies the flux of its two sides (i.e., unit and background).

The above is a simplified version of the "essential recursive" conception, which IS arrives at in its attempt to give an account of the unitary nature of every phenomenon. But let's see, now, what the implications of this conceptual framework are for systemic-interpretive research.

4.2. Research on Sense as an Inquisitive Path

What does the study of a unit within the framework of this essential recursive conception imply? We have already seen that a unit can be only if it has a "meaning" in a "context of meaning". We have also seen that "context of meaning" is nothing more than the background. According to this, "meaning" should then be understood as the fitting of the unit into its background. Finally, the study of the holistic nature of a unit means studying its meaning, and studying the meaning of a unit means examining how it fits into its background. But this immediately presents a problem which we must make known.

Examining how a unit fits into its background evidently implies "revealing" the background. Only in this way is it possible to give an explicit account of the meaning of a unit. However, as already said, the nature of the background is, precisely, to remain as background. Therefore, every attempt to reveal the background faces the problem that the background is, as we have said, essentially *elusive, inexhaustible* and *mobile*. Hence, an attempt to move the *background* to the *foreground* is condemned to fail, inasmuch as the background resists being fixed to a thing or to a group of things. But does this mean that every attempt to study the holistic nature of phenomena is in vain? Must this undertaking be given up completely?

Let us first ask a question that is easier to answer: is it possible to derive a method of research from this theoretical framework? It should be noted, above all, that the metaphysical explanations of what is unitary about phenomena could now be understood as though they were based on the illusion that the background can be fixed in an immutable order of things. Seen in this manner, the different versions of metaphysics are different versions of "reification" of the background. Once the background is reified, the way is completely clear for the study of the meaning of particular phenomena, because, then, only the examination of the fitting of the phenomenon into the order of things is involved. Stated in other words, to metaphysics, the general form of every phenomenon is given and is invariable: phenomena fit into a certain conceptual order. Something similar also happens with modern science (in spite of the fact that the latter assumes that it is radically opposed to metaphysical conceptions), except that, in this case, the order that it assumes is assumed as embedded in the world of phenomena itself⁴. But also in this case, the universal order of modern science allows a general form for phenomena to be established, from which a method can be derived.

Only when the existence of a universal order that governs the world of phenomena is assumed, is it possible to outline a method of study that allows the placing of particular phenomena into that order. Only then is it possible to establish a general form for phenomena —which constitutes a basic condition of possibility for every method. But when a theoretical framework advocates that that into which phenomena fit is not a fixed order but a background, the possibility of a methodical study comes to an end, because then we lack a general form for phenomena. It is true that the essential recursivity between phenomenon and background could be called "general form", but this general form indicates only that every general form comes from a *faux pas*. Consequently, its contents are not positive, but bear a strange negativity that undermines every attempt to place the meaning of phenomena in a fixed and concrete content.

From the above, it follows that if it makes any sense to carry on research on sense based on the comprehension of the context of meaning as a background, with all certainty it cannot be thought of as following a method. At each attempt to reveal the background and examine the meaning of the phenomenon, the concept of background shouts out a critique and a warning: revelation of the background has not been accomplished. And so we return to the initial question: what is gained by the attempt to reveal the background and examine the meaning of a given phenomenon? If we compare where we were before with where we are after such an attempt, we discover that the gain appears to be fourfold. First, the possibility of examining a phenomenon in the light of a particular framework is gained. Second, insight is gained into the fact that by articulating such a framework of comprehension, revelation of the background has not been accomplished, but rather

⁴ In this way modern science succeeds in concealing the non-phenomenal nature of its key concepts: matter, force, energy, etc.

it has been reified in a certain specific way. Third, upon looking retrospectively at such an attempt to reveal, comprehension is gained of how, specifically, the background has been reified. Finally, all this allows the preceding attempt to be transcended and a new one, which is more conscious of the complexity of the problem being faced, to be launched.

The above seems to indicate that *research on sense must consist in an inquisitive path of gradual problemization of both the phenomenon under study and the way of studying it*. Each step on this path is taken thanks to a critical examination of the entire previous course. But what it becomes important to emphasize concerning this process is that neither greater visibility of the background nor a better articulation of the sense of the phenomenon is being gained. What is being gained, ultimately, is a two-sided experience: one side is composed of the *enigmatic variety and limitations* that the different ways of articulating the sense of a phenomenon have, confronted with, on the other side, the *enigmatic unity and limitlessness* of the *unarticulated* presence of that same sense. And this is what keeps the research on sense from being pointless.

It becomes easy, now, to recognize an inquisitive path of this nature in the articles in this trilogy. We will leave this task to the reader. What is certainly worthwhile emphasizing is what the unity or coherence of systemic-interpretive research on sense consists in. Such a unity, as already said, cannot be ensured by following a method based on a universal conception about the general form of phenomena. The relationship between a particular piece of research and the conceptual framework of IS is not one of *logical conformity*, but one of *dialectic opposition* thanks to which the conceptual framework plays a critical role with respect to the research, impelling it and thrusting it toward new stages. What gives unity to such research is the leading thread of this process, that is, *the narration of the journey followed by the research*. Therefore, the logical incompatibility of the different stages of the research does not lead to absolute incoherence thanks to the narration of the path upon which stepping from one stage to the next took place. The existence of such a narration at each stage of our research on the sense of the prison phenomenon in Venezuela can also be easily verified by the reader of this trilogy.

5. FINAL CONCLUSION

We would like to conclude this trilogy by hinting at some links that could be established between interpretive systemic research and the research conducted by the select audience of SPAR. The main source for establishing these links will be none other than the first issue of SPAR (February, 1998). We consider this issue to be an appropriate source because the editor and authors made a great effort in it to define the common goals and perspectives that characterize the wider community of researchers to which SPAR is addressed.

5.1. Dealing with Complexity

In the editorial of the first issue of SPAR, professor Flood (1998a) pointed out that dealing with *complexity* is the common purpose of systemic practice and action research. Complexity is, no doubt a major theme of our times. And we can add that, in some ways, the fact that our contemporary world has distinguished complexity as an important problem has given rise to systems sciences and action research (among other disciplines whose main purpose is to deal with complexity).

Below we would like to introduce two different conceptions of complexity and discuss the kinds of research that each has given rise to. As we shall indicate, interpretive systemic research is closer to the second of the two.

The first notion of complexity we shall discuss is that associated with the classical idea of system as a set of interrelated elements. In this case, complexity is usually related to the notion of systems behavior. The latter is determined not only by the number of elements and interrelationships, but also by the environment of the system. Furthermore, considerations, such as whether the elements are dynamic or static, goal-seeking or adaptive, and whether the system is in a turbulent or fixed environment, are also vital to understanding systems behavior. Hence, the more of these characteristics the system has, the more difficult it becomes to understand its behavior. Consequently, the notion of complexity is associated with degrees of *difficulty in understanding, and managing* systems behavior. It can also be characterized in terms of the amount of information required to describe the system's dynamics.

With this information or understanding, in specific situations systems researchers aim at obtaining improvement of the system, that is, making it more effective and efficient.

Nevertheless, as Flood suggests, the wider community of SPAR cannot be associated only with this notion of complexity. There are groups in that community that have a different notion of system and wholeness. For them, obtaining improvement involves primarily notions of meaningfulness and being ethically alert (p.2). We take this as meaning that the "background" or context of meaning in which a phenomenon is distinguished as complex is as vitally important to them as it is to interpretive systemic research. Said otherwise, for these practitioners, the exploration of the "background" is a major concern of their practice and reflection. Flood (1998a) provides a relevant source to back up this assertion. In describing how the systems and action research communities have influenced one another he quotes from the work of Peter Reason, a member of the action research community. Reason pleads for a holistic view of phenomena and human beings. This requires understanding that: "...phenomena as wholes can never be fully known for the very reason that we are part of them, leading us to acknowledge and respect the great *mystery* that envelops our knowing." (pp.2-3, italics added).

As we have tried to show in previous sections of this paper, the aforementioned notion of wholeness leads to a radically different way of

understanding systems, in which meaning and background play a prominent role. The notion of complexity related to this idea of system has to do with *mystery*, or that which resists being embraced or encircled. In fact, complexity comes from the Latin *complexus* which means encircling, embracing. Its common use, however, has qualified this meaning as synonymous with what is difficult to understand (stand-under!). As we saw above, the background is elusive, it can never be made explicit, i.e., we can never embrace or encircle it. Yet it is there, it lurks in the back-ground of whatever is the case, not as something fixed but as a dynamic flux. Hence its mysterious nature (“the great mystery that envelops our knowing”, to quote Reason), because it remains hidden and unknowable as a whole. Dealing with this type of complexity enters us into a dimension completely different from that of complexity of the first type. It is a second level of complexity on which the first notion is actually grounded! For what makes something complex is an act of distinction! In this lies the essence of its complexity.

In sum, our second notion of complexity is related to the *limitless* and *unarticulated* nature of the background and, hence, to the never-ending task of dealing with such background in order to articulate it and delimit it, thus gaining *systemic understanding* and *systemic comprehension*!

A similar notion of complexity is also beginning to come forward in the world of management science and systems practice usually associated with hard systems thinking. In this respect, at a recent international conference held by the System Dynamics Society in Quebec, Peter Senge (1998) explored alternative perspectives to the classical (hard) system dynamics paradigm, a paradigm that had (and still has) a great influence on the research on complex human systems in the sixties and seventies. He calls one of these new perspectives he calls “*wholism*”. It is a way of relating to reality based on the idea that the whole is primary to its parts, i.e., the “whole is in each of its parts” (p.4). The world of modern physics illustrates this idea: “...as Bortoff points out, modern physics suggests a very different viewpoint [of the Newtonian conception of mass] ...mass ‘is not an intrinsic property of a body, but it is in fact a reflection of the whole of the rest of the universe in that body’ ...”. Note here the suggestion of a notion of background which plays an important role in the manifestation and constitution of objects as such. However, Senge’s interest is not physics but human organizations. He is simply using an illustration from physics to argue for a new way of looking at social phenomena in general and organizations in particular, a way that requires from the researcher “...*dwelling in the phenomenon* instead of replacing it with a mathematical representation...” (ibid., p.6). Further on, he comments that the pursuit of mathematical representations is driven by a desire to make phenomena calculable (thus controllable), while the interest behind “wholism” is to make phenomena *visible*. Making phenomena *visible* requires unfolding them, and displaying how their local manifestation is “folded” into a background, which in turn, can never be completely encircled or embraced. In sum, the new “wholistic” attitude Senge

propounds seems to require the recognition that phenomena are dynamic *figure-background* units. Finally, in his paper Senge goes on to briefly explore some of the striking consequences for system dynamics research that the adoption of “wholism” might have.

5.2. Action Research

The second link we can establish is with Action Research (AR). Dash (1997), Flood (1998b), Romm (1998), among others, show us a panorama of AR, which clearly indicates we are in the face of a very dynamic and changing field. We would like to point out that AR has moved from its classical scientific research roots to, what we believe is, a maturer and deeper understanding of the nature of research. This move seems to match a gradual change in its dualistic positivist onto-epistemology, typical of classical science, toward a more phenomenological interpretivist one. If we are right on this shift, it is with these more recent developments in AR that IS could perhaps establish a more fruitful dialogue.

The founding fathers of AR (e.g. Lewis) identified the need for what they called *action-oriented research*, i.e., a research aimed at generating specific knowledge to solve problems arising in a specific human context. In this sense action meant *problem-solving*. Hence, from its beginnings AR was linked with the problem-solving paradigm, a paradigm also common to management and system sciences. The idea was to tackle these problems with a scientific approach. But due to the complex nature of social and organizational phenomena and the impossibility of producing “public” repeatable knowledge of these phenomena (*replicability* is a landmark of scientific knowledge, see Checkland & Holwell, 1998), the stringent requirements of scientific method had to be relaxed in order to be able to obtain knowledge of human situations. This meant giving up the aspirations to acquire universal laws of social systems and instead generating context-specific knowledge of social and organizational situations, although in such a way that at least some degree of generalization and refutation could be obtained. Checkland and Holwell make explicit what this surrogate scientific method of Action Research involves: “If we imagine an ‘ideal-type’ spectrum of processes of knowledge acquisition, from experimental natural science at one end to telling stories at the other, then along that spectrum we shall have very different criteria for judging the ‘truth value’ of their outputs or claims” (p.18). For natural science, public *repeatability* of the experimental happenings will be the criteria. For storytelling, it will be *plausibility*. AR, in its aim to be as close as possible to the natural science model, but given its limitations, will have to settle for public *recoverability* (ibid.). For AR researchers this involves not only declaring in advance the intellectual framework of ideas (F) in terms of which the research will be conducted, but also the methodology (M) derived from (F) and the area (A) of application (the problem-situation). With the explicit declaration of F, M and A, the knowledge outputs of an AR study (outputs, such as knowledge about how to change the problem situation, or knowledge about

changes in F or M) can be put to public scrutiny and critique. The critique process can be shaped following, for instance, Toulmin's account of reasoning, as Checkland and Holwell suggest.

But just as the problem-solving paradigm is yielding in organizational studies and management and systems sciences to new conceptions about social reality, AR, which has been linked to this paradigm since its beginnings, is also prone to be influenced by these changes. Thus, new objectives and new "interpretations" of the AR *method* presented above may also begin to occur. Dash (1997, p.7) suggests this might happen when, in his survey of AR he points out that to "...the extent Action Research is linked with 'problem solving' its future will be linked with the future of 'problem-solving'..." One change in the notion of "problem" conceptualizes it as something that is "...neither entirely in the objective reality nor entirely in the head of some people..." (ibid.). Note that this implies a change in the positivist ontology usually associated with the classical problem-solving paradigm. This is why Dash says that in the light of this notion of problem, AR "...may have to suggest how 'to construct a representation of an object to plan an intervention.'" (ibid.).

When problems are seen as obstacles "out there" which must be tackled, then the research effort to solve problems is focused, by force, on the means of removing the obstacle. Likewise, when problems are considered as being entirely in someone's head, then psychology is the tool to be used in order to make that someone change the definition of what he/she considers is an obstacle to his/her ends. It is an entirely different matter when one begins to see social reality from a stance which is neither positivist nor subjectivist. Again, Checkland and Holwell (1998) illustrate this point: "With the increased acceptance that 'social reality' is not a given, but is the changing product of a continual intersubjective discourse, there has been in the last decade an increased interest in qualitative research..." (p.20). The concept of researcher, which is derived from this ontological shift, is one of an individual entering a process of "co-construction" of reality, someone immersing himself/herself in a human situation and following it along whatever path it takes as it unfolds through time (p.11). What conditions a research method must fulfill in order to deal with social reality (and hence problems) thus conceived is the subject matter of their paper.

We believe our trilogy might illustrate another answer. In this regard, recall the second article where the idea of *problemization* was introduced. There we defined problemization as an act of distinction which at the same time creates both *what-is-a-problem* (i.e., something distinguished as undesirable, e.g., "schizophrenic" jails) and *for-whom-it-is-a-problem* (or the background from which such a distinction is made). These are merely a particular case of the figure-ground unity whose sides are dialectically interrelated. Accordingly, we do not solve problems; rather, we seek to understand how that which is distinguished as a problem "fits" into its background. In the same manner, we seek to *understand* (i.e., see the situation under a "stand" or context of meaning) and *comprehend* (see it

from different “stands”) *problemizations*. As we have shown with the problemization of the Venezuelan prisons, dealing with problemizations is then closer to *problem-unsolving* than problem-solving. In fact, we have argued that dealing with phenomena from the perspective provided by interpretive systemology is akin to *unfolding the enfolded nature of the mystery which surrounds being*.

In the two first articles of the trilogy we have illustrated how to go about “unfolding” the “mystery” as mystery. We find this “unfolding” process somewhat analogous to that proposed by Checkland and Holwell (1998) for Action Research. They see it as a learning cycle which starts with a declaration in advance of F, M and A. At the end of the cycle any claims of knowledge will be made in reference to this first declaration. The path followed by the researcher is then narrated as a research journey in which the initial F, M, and A were used to open the researcher’s understanding of the human situation. Now, given that human situations are not “homogeneous” through time, the researcher’s object of research changes and unfolds in ways which perhaps force him/her to change A or F or M or any combination of them. The knowledge thus obtained makes sense only in the context provided by this narrative of the research journey.

Similarly, as said before, an interpretive systemic research on sense consists in an inquisitive path of gradual problemization of both the phenomenon and the manner in which it is studied. Each step on this path demands a critical examination of the entire previous course. And the results of such research can only be understood in terms of a narrative that describes the journey. In this sense, interpretive systemic studies are akin to Action Research studies of the latter kind!

5.3. Intervention

Intervention, management and systems sciences have traditionally understood it, is a notion based on a positivist conception of reality. Social reality has its own laws and structures that the social scientist has to find. These laws are independent from the scientist. Based on them, the social scientist can design his/her intervention in a social setting. The metaphor which captures the essence of this mode of intervention is that of the physician and the patient. The expert (the physician) having a scientific approach to health, is after finding a portion of the body which can be the cause of illness and then tells the patient what to do in order to improve the condition.

Now, if ‘social reality’ is not a given, but is, as Checkland and Holwell (1998, p.20) point out, the changing product of a continual intersubjective discourse, then intervention must mean something different. It means entering a conversation, and becoming part of a “form of life”. Intervention is then related to helping to *generate new conversations* in the domain or network of “conversers” one has stepped into (Ramakrishnan, 1995). Hence, changing social reality is generating new conversations about reality, i.e., changing our way of understanding

and comprehending reality. Again, this idea of intervention is beginning to penetrate management and systems science circles (Flood, 1998b).

Now, what can be said about the notion of intervention in IS? Inasmuch as human beings are seen by IS as *historically constituted*⁵ and not as *disengaged selves* (Taylor, 1988); inasmuch as we can say with Fuenmayor, A. & Fuenmayor, R. (1998, sec.3) that “...our nature is that of engagement to a culture, that we were engaged before we were born and will be engaged throughout all our lives... to a history, to a culture, in continuous but slow transformation..” then it would seem that our notion of social reality would have to be quite different from the positivist one and closer, perhaps to that of Checkland and Holwell. (In relation to that notion one could interpret that human beings are *conversationally constituted*).

The point of the matter is that for IS our socio-cultural “background” constitutes us as individuals. To understand ourselves is then to articulate this “background”, to unfold how we have become what we presently are. It is to infuse our becoming, our life journey, with meaning, as historically constituted beings we are. Since intervention always involves some idea of change, it inevitably has to be related to disclosing the socio-cultural “background”, if our actions are to be meaningful. This is equivalent to saying that our notion of intervention is linked to the idea of *meaning-ful-action* (i.e. action full of meaning). Let us illustrate what this means by returning to a previous notion we left undeveloped. We refer to *problem-unsolving*.

We have said that IS is concerned with “problem-unsolving” rather than with “problem-solving”. This statement could suggest that IS has no interest at all in making problems disappear (and hence in some form of change, action or intervention). But this would be contradictory to the meaning of “problem”. As was presented in the second article of the trilogy, a “problem” is a current issue or situation that is annoying to us. But if this is so, it would seem that every problem, by definition, necessarily calls for some kind of “solution” (i.e., some kind of change). In short, a problem is something that is not wanted. So then, the idea of “problem-unsolving” cannot mean a simple deafness of IS with regard to the problem’s calling for a solution. It must mean that the way IS attends to that calling for a solution is very different from the traditional one.

But is there any “traditional way” of solving problems? As we know, in systems and management sciences, and in AR (Clark, 1972; Flood, 1998b; Flood & Jackson, 1991; Flood & Romm 1996; Midgley, 1997; Romm, 1998; Susman, 1983), there is a great variety of “methodologies” which are based on different “frameworks” and are applicable to different “object-areas”. Some of them are concerned with methodological variety. They are called “meta-methodologies” (see for instance Flood & Jackson, 1991; Midgley, 1997). Moreover, if we take a close look at the methodological diversity that has emerged in our time, we realize there are various methodologies that have been designed to deal with a wide spectrum of

⁵ In this connection see the notions of *be-being* and *being-previous* in Fuenmayor (1991b,c).

object-areas (such as social, theoretical, individual, local, economic, political, psychological, engineering, ecological, practical, global, instrumental, organizational, ethical, etc.). Furthermore, this methodological variety reveals that there is no one “traditional way” of solving problems.

However, these methodologies have at least one thing in common: they are based on a “framework” that defines the general form of the problems and solutions appropriate for the particular “object-area” where they claim to be applicable (see sect. 4 above, and Heidegger, 1977). This implies that each methodology is explicitly linked to a specific “object-area” and makes no claims about how to deal with other “object-areas”. What this means is that underlying the aforementioned methodological variety is a world view in which reality is fragmented into separate object-areas, each one governed according to its own rules and managed according to “appropriate” methodologies. A consequence of such an outlook is that our problem-solving actions have meaning only with respect to the particular problematical object-area or situation we are dealing with at any moment. Accordingly, we run into a paradoxical conclusion: the systems methodologies we use to solve problems help us to deal with them without *understanding* them *systemically*, i.e., *we make holistic sense neither of the problem nor of our actions!*

In sum, this way of dealing with problem-solving is a “non-sense”. However, the question may arise as to whether the critique holds for the majority of the existing methodologies but not for the “meta-methodologies”, whose primary concern seems to be to transcend specific object-areas and thus overcome the fragmentation of reality. At one level, the answer could be that the existing meta-methodologies do not actually claim to be able to manage the entire diversity of real life situations an individual or a community has to face. Meta-methodologies usually limit their scope to the kind of problems labeled as “organizational” or “social”. Nevertheless, one might ask if it could be possible for us to articulate a “total” meta-methodology, one that would be applicable to any “object-area”.

If we think about the possible ways of trying to unify fragmentation by methodological means, we find that there are only two ways. One way consists in accepting fragmentation as an ontological principle and thence trying to “manage diversity” by means of a procedure which would allow us to match the appropriate methodology with the problematical situation. But this procedure itself is meaningless if reality is fragmented, because for such a procedure to have any meaning it must make sense in the context where problematical situation appears. But if there is such a context, then reality is not ontologically fragmented! The other way consists in assuming that there is a fundamental unity in reality and from this assumption proceeding to articulate the framework which accounts for this unity, together with its correspondent methodology. But would it be possible to *en-frame* the whole realm of reality in such a way? Let us note that it would have to be a methodology which could be applicable, on the one hand, to problems like “to buy or not to buy a Color TV set” and, on the other, to problems like “shall I consent to

the application of euthanasia to my terminally ill father ?” Let us note, also, that this kind of methodology would have the status of some form of *ethics*, inasmuch as it would be concerned with the issue of *how to live life as a whole*. Both observations make us see that, at this maximum level of generalization about the appropriateness of human actions, it is impossible to formulate a methodological recipe. In fact, all philosophical accounts on ethics, insofar as they *en-frame* reality in a certain way, are prone to formulating recipes. But no one has succeeded at such a task, and it must be acknowledged that it is possible only to draw some guidelines, but their embodiment within a particular life situation is always *problematical*. And this is the point where the idea of *problem-unsolving* begins to make sense. The methodology-oriented way of attending a problem’s calling for a solution is one that cannot make holistic sense of the problem-situation. This is due to one inescapable anti-holistic feature of any methodology: it can be applicable only to particular “object-areas” of our life, disengaged from our life as a whole. Hence, *as long as we focus on methodologies, we fail to make holistic sense*. This also means that the only way to regain a holistic sense of what happens to us and of our actions is by regaining the experience of the essentially problematical nature of our becoming; our journey: in sum, our lives.

This is the reason why we talk about “problem-unsolving”. To “solve” means to release, to let go. Here to “unsolve” means to resist, to not release our will to fragment reality and deal only with fragments. Problem-unsolving is thus about paying heed to a call, a systemic (holistic) will to grasp the mystery of life in all its fullness, a call to a non-fragmented understanding of all of life’s situations. Seen in a more general light, it is a call to intervene in order to recover our sense of wholeness. Paradoxically, problem-unsolving is then a call to solve the major problem of the present: not knowing how to deal meaningfully with our never-ending life quest.

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