
BOOK REVIEW

A review of *Complexity and Management: Fad or Radical Challenge to Systems Thinking?* by Ralph D. Stacey, Douglas Griffin, and Patricia Shaw, 2000. New York: Routledge, x + 224 pp. ISBN 0-415-24761-6. \$56.95 USD.

Reviewed by BEVERLEY SIMPSON
Principal, Beverley Simpson Associates (Canada)

In recent years the complexity sciences have captured the attention of management and organizational theorists as a mental model more suited to the realities of today's organizational challenges than the industrial models of the past. As interested readers delve more deeply into organizational complexity it becomes apparent that we are at very early stages of really understanding our human organizations. This interesting work seeks to make the case that the way theorists are currently using complexity theory has the potential to render it another management fad with more new jargon to be digested. They believe that as long as complexity theory is understood and discussed within a narrow framework of systems theory, it will not survive nor provide the rich dialogue and learning that is possible.

In this text, the first in a series titled *Complexity and Emergence in Organizations*, the authors put forward the notion that theorists and practitioners must understand organizations as complex responsive processes of relating to each other, drawing on complexity principles such as emergence and self-organization as sources of analogy, and interpreting them using relationship psychology and particularly the work of Hegel, Mead and Elias. Complexity theory, they say, is a way to better understand the continual emergence of new and novel ways of everyday relating and communicating in organizational life.

Arranged into 9 tightly packed chapters and 3 appendices, this text is highly theoretical, repetitive at times and not easy reading for people not deeply schooled in the theories of relationships, relationship psychology and sociology. However, the proposed perspective and its theoretical underpinnings have merit; they have been carefully thought through and supported by the authors and as a result lead the reader

to want to tackle the rest of the series. In the series preface, the authors propose as their aim “to give expression to a particular way of speaking about complexity in organizations, one that emphasizes the self-referential, reflexive nature of humans, the essentially responsive and participative nature of human processes of relating and the radical unpredictability of their evolution”. Anyone who has spent any time in organizations working closely with others will recognize the validity of this statement and support the authors in their quest to better understand and work with the complexity of human interaction in organizations.

In this first text of the series, the opening chapter introduces the complexities involved in getting things done in organizations and the frustrations that await leaders in the current context and understanding. Being in charge but not in control is a well-known frustration for managers. The authors make the case that current ways of thinking, primarily based on engineering models and Kantian systems thinking, provide a significant deterrent to getting things done and understanding the emergent novelty that is prevalent whenever humans interact. Using complexity thinking as the mental model leads to different answers to our questions and even to different questions.

In the second and third chapters the authors discuss the balance between change and stability, and contrasting views on the nature of causality. Here they introduce the different teleological arguments inherent in the philosophies underlining current complexity thinking: Natural Law, Rationalist, Formative, Transformative, and Adaptive. Specifically, they argue that current complexity writers base their work on systems thinking as supported by Kant, Hegel and Darwin while these authors wish to make the case for the importance of the work of Hegel, Mead, and Elias. Not being schooled in teleological arguments makes this part of the text difficult reading for me and I suspect for many other readers. Wikipedia was helpful in suggesting that “teleology is the philosophical study of design and purpose. A teleological school of thought is one that holds all things to be designed for or directed toward a final result, that there is an inherent purpose or final cause for all that exists.”

In the 4th chapter, using the different teleologies, the authors offer a discussion of the limits of systems thinking and the dangers of regarding complexity theory as another strand of systems thinking. This reader appreciated the brief example on systems consulting set out in this chapter much more than the teleological arguments that were often tedious.

The 5th chapter outlines how complexity science deals with the future; the 6th chapter discusses how complex adaptive systems have a life of their own and introduces the work of Kauffman on fitness landscapes and conflicting constraints. The authors make the case, as do many complexity writers, that the number and strength of connections among agents in a complex system significantly influence agents’ ability to find their feet, overcome obstacles and accomplish their goals. It is in this chapter and the next that the authors provide a significant overview of the theoretical principles of complexity as seen by different authors reviewing their findings on the basis of different teleological arguments. It is heavy going but interesting to the reader with a commitment to better understanding theoretical complexity.

The 7th chapter provides an overview of differing views on complexity in organizations and the limits to—and illusion of—control that managers struggle with, and it introduces the argument about the importance of novelty in understanding relationships and agency.

The 8th chapter gets to the basis of the overarching argument of this text that it is all about human action and interaction and that retaining a focus here in the study of complex responsive processes will lead to the most new knowledge and its useful application. The authors provide an overview of humanistic psychology and the work of McGregor, Herzberg and Maslow. They make the case that most management complexity writers focus on the individual and his/her agency in organizational leadership.

The 9th chapter takes us back to getting things done and the need to better understand complex responsive processes. The authors ask an age-old seminal question of whether the future is knowable or rather perpetually reconstructed and fundamentally unknowable. In different words, they ask whether change can produce new and different forms or only a recycling of old forms. To attempt to answer these powerful questions they refer to the work of Kant, Hegel and others. They indicate their belief that most management complexity writers take concepts from the Formative and Rationalist schools as does systems thinking, raising the fundamental problem of nothing new under the sun. In this series these authors want to advance Transformative Teleology as a way to introduce concepts of novelty, choice and freedom in human interaction and better understand the processes of organizing as the ongoing continual interaction of human communication that is both intentional and highly relational. “Instead of understanding the organization as a tool humans design and use, we seek to understand organizing, that is, experiencing the living present.”

Three appendices deal with the origins of western notions of causality, complexity sciences as sources of analogy, and the movement of our thought. An extensive bibliography and index are included.

This text is, at times, heavy going with, for example, numerous references to different teleological arguments that this reviewer finds difficult to care about. The authors make the case that unless we identify the teleological underpinnings of complexity theories we risk being so loose that complexity becomes the latest management fad and fancy.

This reviewer is very interested in complexity and its application in organizations and therefore a motivated reader. However without that motivation getting through this book would be a real challenge. This reviewer encourages the authors to simplify their arguments whenever possible to find the widest readership because interest in the topic of organizational complexity is becoming much broader. The use of real life examples is very helpful to the average reader; wading into deeply theoretical arguments lacks usefulness for most people who want to know more about the application.

Other titles in the Complexity and Emergence in Organizations series are: *Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations*, *Changing the Conversation in Organizations*, *The Emergence of Leadership*, *Complexity and Innovation in Organizations*, and *The Paradox of*

Control in Organizations. Despite the heavy theoretical perspective and hoping that future texts are easier to comprehend, this reviewer is looking forward to tackling the next in the series.

About the Reviewer

Bev is a nurse with over 35 years in the health care system. For the past 18 years she has been actively involved in organizational consulting and leadership development. She has been exploring complexity and complex adaptive systems theory for many years, especially as they relate to teamwork and leader behaviour and relationships. For details: www.beverleysimpson.com

© Copyright 2010. The author, BEVERLEY SIMPSON, assigns to the University of Alberta and other educational and non-profit institutions a non-exclusive license to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grants a non-exclusive license to the University of Alberta to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web, and for the document to be published on mirrors on the World Wide Web. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.