Systemic Intervention: Philosophy, Methodology, and Practice

MIDGLEY, G. (2000)

Kluwer Academic / Plenum, New York. pp. 461. £28.00 ISBN 0-306-46488-8
(hardback)

Consider these questions: 1) How might a community psychologist select appropriate intervention methods? 2) Who should be included in groups that plan and monitor community based interventions? 3) How can complex systems, with their hidden and dynamic nature be best understood? 4) How can we minimise the negative effects of community interventions and other attempts at social change? 5) How can we give a voice to the marginalised and those whose voices can't be heard?

Now consider these ones: 6) What is the nature of knowledge? 7) What metaphors might be best used to describe social systems? 8) Can we transcend paradigm clashes (e.g. between phenomenological and functionalist social theory, or between experimentalist and action research methodologies), or are we doomed to inhabit mutually incomprehensible intellectual traditions? 9) What is the relevance of philosophical debate to intervention in the community?

These probably look like two entirely different kinds of consideration, but in this book Gerald Midgley addresses both types of question, in a way that integrates

metaphysical analysis with the methodology of practical intervention for social change in organisations, communities and social systems. However, the book might require some sustained work for community and applied social psychologists to appreciate it. Although there is a close relationship between the problem contexts addressed by Midgley and those familiar to readers of this journal, Midgley is starting from a different place. While he originally studied psychology, he writes from within a distinct community of 'critical systems thinking', most of whose practitioners are based in management schools (Midgley himself is based at the University of Hull Business School, in the Centre for Systems Studies).

Systems theory, as Midgley implies is quite difficult to pin down, but the following key ideas are shared by all schools of systems thinkers. 1) Complex systems involve interconnected parts. 2) The organisation of complex systems can be understood in terms of a series of levels, where elements of one level may be dependent on the superior and inferior levels. 3) The properties of systems are emergent, that is, they cannot be predicted from the properties of individual elements in themselves. 4) Systems are characterised by feedback, recursion, boundaries, nested subsystems, and responsiveness to the environment in which the system is located.

Critical systems thinkers like Midgley identify three waves of systems thinking over the last 50 years or so. Early systems theorists (e.g. Bertalanffy) described systems in physical terms, resorting to metaphors from electronic computation or biology. This 'hard systems' tradition still has its advocates and practitioners (see for example the Journal of the Operational Research Society) and finds application in areas such as production engineering.

Subsequently the limits of the physical metaphor (and for Midgley, the non-systemic traces of reductionism and mechanism) were reached, and the second

wave of systems thinking developed. This 'soft systems thinking' employed social metaphors to develop appropriate systems approaches for human systems. The move to a more phenomenological, interpretative understanding of human systems, where meaning is central and is negotiated intersubjectively, parallels the new paradigm / crisis of social psychology of the 1970s.

The Third wave, or critical systems school, in which Midgley locates himself, has drawn on the critical theory of Habermas, particularly in relation to theories of knowledge and of communicative rationality, and on the work of Foucault and followers on the nature of power. For critical systems thinkers, emancipation or liberation have been a central concern, with a commitment to addressing past naivety about power imbalances. A second emphasis has been the development of methodology, in the sense of a set of tools for choosing between different methods that bring differing, and perhaps incompatible philosophical assumptions about the nature of social reality, knowledge, action, and so on, while committing to a broad repertoire of methods.

This hurried tour of systems theory also identifies some of Midgley's key concerns:-a) The interconnectedness of things (an ecological sensibility is never far away). b) The socially negotiated, or constructed nature of reality, or our premises for action (and those of the people we would work with, for, or against). c) The problem of those affected, both by existing social systems, and by attempts to make social improvements - what these days is often called 'social exclusion'. e) Linked with these is a problematisation of questions of values in relation to (social) (scientific) knowledge.

Midgley sets himself a very ambitious task which is in three parts. He wants to formulate a new approach to some persistent, seemingly intractable philosophical questions (namely, subject/object dualism, the nature of knowledge, and the realism

versus idealism debate), to establish a methodology for choosing between and designing interventions, and to present some of his own practice as a systems consultant in various 'social improvement' projects. Each of these areas could fill one book alone. Each, however, is intimately linked with the others.

If the ambition of the book is big, the scholarship is impressive: rarely have I seen such a wide ranging bibliography, ranging from Adorno to Argyris, Marx to Maturana, Merleau-Ponty to CS Myers, Whitehead to Wolfensberger (in 22 pages of very small print), but this is not just a jackdaw collection of rhetorical citations, the issues adressed by each writer are carefully explored and addressed in relation to Midgley's scheme of exposition, and the reader is provided with signposts to help delve deeper. Community psychologists may embrace an interdisciplinary approach, but Midgley exemplifies it.

This breadth makes it difficult to do justice to the book in a review, but it is appropriate to try and explain the central concept that integrates the book as a whole. Midgley's key idea is the deceptively simple one of 'boundary critique'. The concept is not original to him (having been first used by CW Churchman, and subsequently elaborated by W Ulrich), but he takes it into new territory. Midgley is concerned with two kinds of boundary. The first concerns the boundary around the system in focus, demarcating the system from its environment. In any consideration of 'what is to be done' a boundary is set up between those elements that are going to be considered, and those that are not. Community psychology itself could be seen as the product of a boundary critique orientated at individual psychology - the system for community psychology being the individual-in-context, not the individual in isolation. But Midgley is also interested in a second kind of boundary, that between those who are involved, or who benefit, and those who are affected, but who might not benefit, or who are likely to suffer. (A connection could be made with a similar central concern in Latin

American liberation thought with its emphasis on the oppressed, the poor, or the victims.)

Midgley's key notion then is that such boundaries (of what and who to consider or involve) are contestable, should be contested, and that through an explicit and transparent consideration of this question (what he calls 'process philosophy'), many of the classical philosophical problems dissolve (e.g. the fight between realism, idealism, and social constructionism depends on the boundaries being chosen). Moreover, he makes boundary critique central to his methodological pluralist recommendations, that advocate the 'creative design of methods', drawing on the various systems methods developed by workers within the second and third waves of systems theory.

In the third section of the book Midgley describes a number of interventions in fields such as disaster planning, diversion of mentally disordered offenders from custody, homelessness of young people. All these could have been community psychology interventions, and even if they did not digest all the philosophical and methodological underpinnings, community psychologists could learn something from this work.

Does Midgley deliver what he sets out to achieve? In many ways I think so. However, I have the following two areas of doubt:

Firstly, is process philosophy really the solution to the philosophical debates about subject/object dualism, realism/relativism, and so on? It depends a bit on where you stand. As a critical realist, I have difficulty adopting other positions that set down different boundaries and wonder whether Midgley is, in effect, letting in relativism through the back door.

Secondly, are the 'creative design of methods' and Midgley's methodological pluralism creative and pluralistic enough? When faced with the various types of system practice, my impression is that they are unnecessarily restricted to a small set of methods deriving from a few writer / practitioners. This sits uneasily with the intellectual scope of Midgley's work and I would suggest that his creative design of methods and methodological pluralism should lead well beyond systems practice and the existing systems schools to embrace art, drama, storytelling, film, direct action, and as the various action research approaches familiar to community and applied social psychologists, as well the formal techniques that Midgley describes.

Nevertheless I would strongly recommend this impressive, coherent, and principled book and the effort that it will require to read it. It could broaden community psychologists' horizons and suggest some solutions to the kinds of dilemmas and problems that can bog us down so much.

Mark Burton

Manchester Learning Disability Partnership

Social Services Office

102 Manchester Rd

Chorlton

Manchester

M21 6SZ

mark.burton@mcr1.poptel.org.uk

Mark Burton has responsibilities for service development, practice governance and research and in a large public sector service for people disabled through intellectual difference. He has used a community social psychological

approach to social inclusion, and employed systems methodologies in organisational

development. More of his work can be found at http://publications.compsy.org.uk/