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Challenging Organisations and Society

reflective hybrids®

Positive Deviance Dynamics in Social Systems

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Alice MacGillivray

Consulting on the Edge: Use of Strategies Rooted in Nature

Abstract

One under-explored element of positive deviance is that of boundary work. In this paper, I use Midgley's Theory of Boundary Critique to look at the importance of boundaries and boundary decisions as choices with ethical and practical implications. I go on to explore three of many boundary-related strategies inspired by natural systems for positive deviance work, which can be powerful for work in complex systems: hybrid vigour, mutualism and the edge-effect. The paper concludes with observations about strategies for change.

Keywords: boundaries, nature, complex systems, organisations, positive deviance

1. Introduction

A critical action for project buy-in is ignored because it is out of scope. Police destroy homes because the "homes" are the tents of homeless people[1].A woman does not get an interview because of her foreign name[2]. The brilliant introvert in the group is never invited into the conversation. A community of practice avoids an opportunity for innovation, because it might cross into the mandate of a government department. A child dies outside a hospital because his "friends were unable to drag him through the door and the health care providers refused to go out to help him.[3]" These are all fragments of North American boundary stories. Boundary choices and work with boundaries can

1 CBC News. (2014); Site staff. (2014).

2 See Edo et al. (2014).

3 Harte. (2002, 185).

cause damage or hinder innovation. And as described in this paper, boundary strategies can be the source of positive deviance.

1.1 The Nature and Importance of Boundaries in Complex Systems

If someone asked me: "How would a man with degrees in physics, space engineering and astronautics, and a doctorate in physics and engineering think about boundaries?" I might answer: "he probably sees boundaries through scientific lenses, considers them valuable, real and often prescriptive." That would show how little I know about physics, or perhaps about Kurt Richardson before we met. For practical purposes, he views boundaries as social constructs, which are too often treated as real and unworthy of reflection. Most of us work in complex, nested, social, environmental and economic systems. Even if our jobs seem straightforward (perhaps being a computer hardware installer) the straightforwardness is confounded by social complexity. And boundaries in complex systems are emergent and temporary social constructs.[4] Yet in the examples above, such as the death of the child in Chicago, people treated boundaries as real, and perhaps as ethically neutral.

1.2 Boundary Critique

I am fascinated by boundary work: a fascination that began when I was a child observing the dynamics of boundaries in nature. Systems scientists[5] speak of boundaries as critical systems thinking concepts. As part of his passion for improvement, Churchman introduced new ways of thinking about systems. Previously, systems thinkers considered boundaries as given elements of reality, whereas he considered them "personal and social constructs that define the limits of the knowledge that is to be taken as pertinent[6]" and he advocated sweeping in as many perspectives as possible to decision-making

4 Richardson. (2005).

5 For example, Gerald Midgley (2000) considers boundary as the central concept.

6 Midgley (2000 p.137)

processes. This “sweeping in” influences the power to make decisions and in what frame those decisions are made. We rarely foreground the boundary choices we make daily. The boundary between core and margin, as depicted in Figure 1, is value-laden. It is not simply that one country, race, class, organisation, epistemology or worldview is in the core and others are in the margins. If perspectives from the margins (perhaps from the homeless or immigrants or introverts) are not valued—or are made *profane*, to use the term Midgley adopted from Mary Douglas—the primary boundary around the core is reinforced and values of the core are emphasised for decision-making.

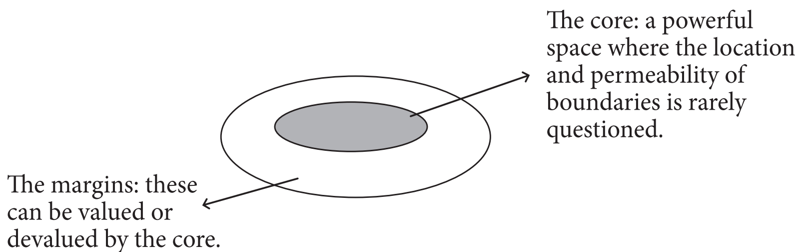

Figure 1: A Simplified Version of Midgley’s Theory of Boundary Critique (2000)

Boundary critique can be used to explore ideas from scholarship, such as empiricism. All scholars might agree that empiricism refers to knowledge derived from experience. However, in Western culture, many would privilege the kind of experience that fits into a natural or social science framework of hypothesis generation, experimentation, testing and measurement. Others value and privilege the deep learning that comes from lived experience, observation, and reflexivity. Some consider ethnography the most empirical of the methodologies[7]. This journal—by definition—takes a pluralistic stance. Using Midgley’s theory, if the scientific method lens is within the primary boundary, the ethnographic lens in the margins is valued (or made sacred,

7 Matt Hamabata, pers. comm.

using Midgley's term) so that both perspectives can be woven into reflective hybrids. The granting of a status to the margins can stabilise rituals, but there are still bound to be adaptive tensions amongst scholars coming to the journal from different disciplines and backgrounds.

One example of boundary critique from practice is the human/nature divide. Especially in industrial, economic and political arenas[8], we often separate humans from other animals and from nature. We make anthropocentric decisions. This mindset increasingly divorces us from our connection with the earth and a sense of stewardship. Even with our use of metaphor in organisations, we may treat the inanimate as valued/sacred (consider leverage, putting on brakes, greasing wheels, replacing employees) while we are slower to value references to the living world, such as cross-pollination, intellectual estuaries, knowledge ecosystems, or symbiosis. The word business is about being busy; by contrast, the Swedish equivalent—Narings-Liv—translates as "nourishment or nurturance of life." If we marginalise principles from the natural world in which we have evolved, we miss opportunities for innovation.

1.3 Boundaries and Nature

When leaders need help with boundary issues, I often draw on my background in biology and ecology. Relatively simple boundaries in nature divide the territories of animals competing for resources, much like organisational silos. But boundary activity can be more complex. Three examples are hybrid vigour, mutualism or symbiosis, and edge-effect. Each of these is a rich source of metaphor—and perhaps science[9]—for reframing our work in organisations. When we work through natural systems lenses, our approaches are different than with mechanistic lenses. Given the preponderance of mechanical

8 Midgley (2001).

9 Tom Petzinger (2002, p. 245) tells a story of theorist Ralph Stacey's responding to the debate of metaphor vs. science by saying "I am sick and tired of hearing people asking, Is it just a metaphor? My inclination is to counter by saying, Is it just more science? Metaphor precedes science."

thinking in our culture, the likelihood of positive deviance increases when we draw on nature.

1.3.1 Hybrid Vigour

If two different types of plants interbreed, offspring from that boundary spanning may show the strengths of hybrid vigour. Through analysis of maize genomes, scientists at Rutgers found that factors contributing to hybrid vigour include redundancy and diversity. "Most theories of planning and management are enamored with organizational efficiency. They place a great deal of emphasis on coordinating, reducing, or eliminating what is perceived to be unnecessary redundancy.[10]" If organisation resembles machine, we streamline, grease the wheels of efficiency, and eliminate resource-wasting duplication. We talk about diversity as a value in a human resources context, yet we ignore biases such as homophily, and screen out diversity in hiring processes. Beyond human resources, we tend to fall back on mechanistic mindsets in our structures and practices. Managers are rewarded for progress in their units at the expense of other units. Managers may be criticised for including staff from other sections in plans without special permissions, even if potential benefits are apparent. Employees who ask about impacts of a decision will be listened to if the impacts are in the core, but may be told their question is irrelevant or out of scope if impacts are in the margins. We aim for alignment more than coherence and efficiency more than effectiveness.

I witnessed a simple, effective hybrid vigour strategy where typical tensions had been at play between headquarters and field offices of a public sector organisation. Their organisational cultures and perspectives were very different. A director became a positive deviant through a governance model that had never been used in this government. He formed small teams with rotating members to make decisions. Each team was responsible for an aspect of business and included one headquarters and two field members. Their interactions yielded a form of hybrid vigour. Field perspectives were incorporated

10 Streeter (1995).

strongly into every conversation and decision, making for timely, informed and strongly supported decisions.

1.3.2 Symbiosis

Symbiosis or mutualism is a boundary phenomenon of growing interest: citations to papers with symbiosis in the title have increased exponentially since the 1960s.[11] Some animals and plants move into close, symbiotic associations for mutual benefit. Some better known examples of symbiosis include insects pollinating plants, the nitrogen fixing nodules on roots appreciated by gardeners, birds picking insects from the backs of grazing animals and ants farming aphids: moving them from "pasture" to "pasture" and drinking some of the honeydew produced by the ants as they feed. One less-known example illustrates the intricacies of symbiotic relationships. The bobtail squid has developed a strong association with specific bacteria. The bacteria are harmful to humans but benefit—and receive benefits in the form of food and protection—from the squid. The bacteria are bioluminescent and the squid can control the amount of light they emit, thereby camouflaging the squid and its tiny resident partners as it swims by daylight or moonlight.

Organisations bring together different entities through mergers and acquisitions. But are they planned with the goal of a net benefit for both? And how often do we look to nature, which is so rich with examples of connections and collaborations, for inspiration, metaphor or science? Perhaps ironically[12] microbiologist McFall-Ngai, who has studied the bobtail squid extensively, has bridged scientific and social lexicons with phrases such as "Deciphering the language of diplomacy: give and take in the study of the squid-vibrio symbiosis[13]". In organisations, we are slowly adopting the language of nature

11 McFall-Ngai, (2008 p.789).

12 Karin Knorr Cetina studied the "epistemic cultures" of different scientific fields and found that microbiologists tended to work in more insular and less collaborative ways than some scientists in other fields.

13 McFall-Ngai, M.J. and Ruby, E.G. (2012 p. 173).

with terms such as cross-pollination and ecosystem but we have a long way to go in our language, thinking and practice.

Industrial symbiosis—a subset of industrial ecology—is the best-known adoption of this concept in the industrial world. In the 1990s, positive deviance was discovered in Kalendborg, Denmark, where underutilised resources were shared in an industrial complex for mutual benefit. Since then, the field has grown, examples are increasing and industrial symbiosis now spans: "innovation, green growth, and economic development in addition to the traditional focus on resource efficiency.[14]" The UK has pioneered a national industrial symbiosis programme.

My most rewarding personal experience with mutualism came with the design of an online graduate course about communities of practice. Mid-career students at Royal Roads University produced extraordinary work and several considered it the most powerful formal education experience of their lives. Students initially compared Wenger's social learning theory with work by Bandura, Habermas and others. But for the next seven weeks, they went on a virtual field trip to an international Foundations Workshop about communities of practice originally launched by Etienne Wenger. Workshop facilitator John D. Smith and I collaborated from the edges of our organisations—a not-for-profit and an accredited university—to develop this partnership. Students designed their own assignments, let me know which competencies they wanted to use for assessment, and decided whether to work individually, in Royal Roads groups and/or in concert with participants in the Foundations Workshop. In the final weeks of the course they completed their assignments. The university and the not-for-profit were very different entities but cared about authentic learning and derived mutual benefit.

When we reduce diversity in nature, we reduce resilience and adaptability. Add symbiosis to this picture and you realise: "when an animal or plant becomes extinct, it is likely that some subset of the microbial world—the co-evolved

14 Lombardi et al. (2012).

partners of that multicellular organism—will also become extinct.[15]" This sheds light on fragmented perspectives in organisations. For example, we talk about "replacing" an employee with little thought to the less visible knowledge, relationships and networks intimately connected to that person.

1.3.3. Edge-Effect

Edge-effect results from community interactions across boundaries. Where rivers, meadows, ponds and forests bump up against each other there are transition zones. For example, between a forest and the ocean, there is an intertidal zone. Forest animals such as deer and snakes will venture into this zone; fish and sea lions will do the same. Other animals, such as barnacles, are permanent residents. This diversity fosters an even greater diversity of interactions and enhanced productivity referred to as the edge-effect. A healthy estuary (where land meets salt and fresh water) has more productivity than any of the surrounding habitats in the ocean, river, or adjacent land. One of the original studies[16] found that estuaries produced 10 tons of dry organic matter per acre per year. If an organisation were anywhere near this productive in relative terms, the CEO would be on the cover of every business magazine.

Complex system leaders intuitively understand what I have termed the edge-effect for organisations. When exploration of new possibilities is needed, one strategy is to create space for an "intellectual estuary." People from diverse backgrounds gather—in person or virtually—to explore ideas and co-create. This can go against the grain of siloed organisations.

Two examples illustrate the emergence of edge-effect. In the1990s, Scandia became interested in the new concept of Intellectual Capital and provided seed money for a gathering of about twelve individuals from different countries and fields. The group included Karl-Erik Sveiby from Scandia and was hosted by Juanita Brown in California, who cared about knowledge sharing for social justice. This weekend of dialogue was the birthplace of The World

15 McFall-Ngai, (2008 p.791).

16 Odum, cited by Schelske and Odum (1962).

Café.[17] Similarly, Xerox PARC's intellectually challenging and diverse Institute for Research on Learning spawned the Community of Practice concept.[18]

2. What Next?

If we are to draw on our knowledge of nature in meaningful, systemic ways, we need to challenge, unlearn and reframe much of what we have been taught about good organisational practices: practices which can actually hinder progress and morale[19] Table 1 shows shifts I envision to enable positive deviance.

Table 1: Perceptions of Boundaries

Common Views at Present Boundaries as:	Sample Views From Nature for Positive Deviance Boundaries as:
real	social constructs
neutral	ethical choices
fixed	negotiable
impermeable	permeable
predetermined	elastic
ends	beginnings
protective	protective and restraining
dividers in mechanical systems	meeting places in organic systems

17 Brown, J. pers. comm.

18 Wenger, E. pers. comm.: Describing work with anthropologist Jean Lave and others.

19 MacGillivray (2010).

Common Views at Present Boundaries as:	Sample Views From Nature for Positive Deviance Boundaries as:
ways of making things manageable	helpful for framing
lines, walls and dividers	intersections, ecotones and edges
part of seeing the world in pieces	part of seeing the world as systems

As one success story, while researching leadership and knowledge management in a counterterrorism network, I met a woman we'll call Kathie. The network included several threat-related communities of practice: groups of professionals who voluntarily connected to learn, collaborate and apply for project funding. One community was especially successful and members felt good about their work. I will refer to them as the A-team. I watched the A-team in action, interviewed members, and wrote about the experience. Kathie was in the A-team, yet felt her interests were marginalised. Most community members cared about tools, scientific measurements and mitigation of impacts. Kathie cared about the prevention and mitigation of human health issues. She is not a complainer; she's a positive deviant. So what did she do?

In the context of Table 1, Kathie saw an ethical issue: if she did not adapt the boundary to include human health issues, people might die. She saw the boundary as elastic or permeable; she treated it as a meeting place. The A-team was about to experience a realistic field exercise to test their abilities in the face of an attack. Although they did not know the details of the exercise, they envisioned the kind of diagnostic work and standard operating procedures they would likely use. What they had not envisioned was Kathie's injection of 50 potentially contaminated rowdies. Her strategy caused just the right amount of chaos to get experts reframing their work and rapidly learning about new facets of preparedness and positive deviance. Including crowds in exercises has now become common practice[20].

20 Susan McIntyre pers. comm. Dec. 3 2014.

3. Summary

Every day, we make boundary judgements. Those judgements are easily shaped by the cultures in which we live, and we may not even be conscious of their practical and ethical implications. We can develop the habits of surfacing and questioning those judgements in our own development and in our relationships with others. Furthermore, we can acknowledge we are part of the natural world, where there are many types of boundaries from which we can adopt and adapt boundary strategies. In an industrialised culture, strategies such as striving for hybrid vigour and edge-effect may enable the emergence of positive deviance. Until we can speak *machine* and *nature* with equal fluency, those who draw successfully on principles from nature in their boundary work are almost guaranteed to be positive deviants.

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