Social/Interpersonal Context
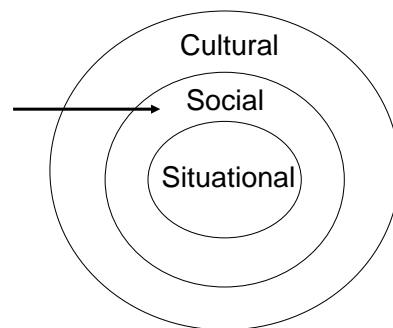## SPHSC 308 Winter 2010

Professor Olswang

Context

- Situational
- Social/Interpersonal
- Cultural

Social/Interpersonal Context

- The manner in which interpersonal relationships influence communication
  - Structure of relationship
    - Family, friends, professional, etc.
  - Nature of the relationship
    - Roles of the individuals in the relationship
      - Oldest, youngest, clown, responsible one etc.
      - How you regard each other
    - Personality type
      - Shy, outgoing, talkative, etc.

Why is this important?

- The structure of the relationship will impact the way people communicate. Examples?
- The nature of the relationship will impact the way people communication. Examples?

Social/Interpersonal Context

Two main topics:

- **Systems Theory** – our framework for examining social context (i.e., relationships)
- **Phenomenology – Interviewing –** our methodology for examining social context

Systems Theory

- A framework by which one can analyze and/or describe any group of "objects" that work in concert to produce some result.
  - This could be a single organism, any organization, or any electro-mechanical or informational artifact.

Systems

- A system has interrelated parts. If parts are related in an orderly way, the system is said to be highly organized or predictable.
- Usually thought of as a group of people (e.g., nuclear family, extended family, roommates)
  - Systems could apply across species (e.g., ants)

Systems Theory

Views systems as <u>purposeful</u> and <u>goal-directed</u>

- Purposeful--remaining viable-- self-regulating, self-directing, self-organizing
- Goal Directed--maybe not logical or rational, but discernible and based on internal rules

- Understanding a system will lead to insight about communication
- So how do we analyze systems?

Systems –
What's yours?
What's theirs?

- Writing Assignment #1
- In-class example:
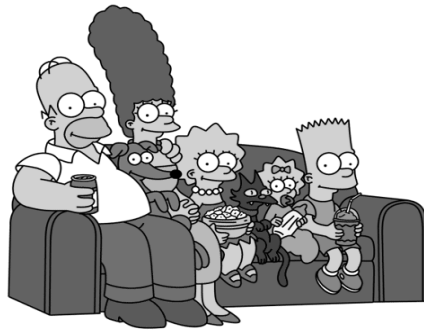
Systems Defining Properties

How do you know a system is a system?

Five Defining Properties

- Organization
- Mutual Causality
- Constancy
- Spatiality
- Boundary

Defining Properties

Organization-defined by
- Participants
  - functional roles
  - psychological/emotional roles
- Goals shaped by values, beliefs
- Rules defined by how participants behave in order to implement goals
****
- Systems and Subsystems

Organization - Simpsons

- Participants: Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, Maggie
  - system/subsystem
  - functional roles
  - psychological/emotional roles
- Goals:
- Rules:

Defining Properties

- Mutual Causality- interdependence of parts*: events that happen to one part of a system influence all parts, directly or indirectly

*parts refers to people, events, etc.
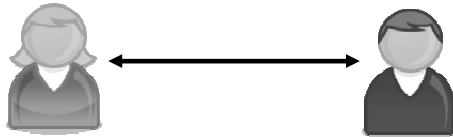
Mutual Causality - Simpsons

Constancy

- Systems endure even though they may experience change

Spatiality

- Systems are concrete phenomena rather than abstractions
- They take up physical space and can be observed
  - family of origin
  - nuclear family

Constancy and Spatiality - Simpsons

Boundaries

- Perimeter of the system
- Sets off the system from other systems and from environment
- **Individual has boundaries**
  – Consider your boundaries
- **Systems have boundaries**
  – Consider the boundaries of your family system

Boundaries

- Systems' boundaries should be viewed along a continuum:

 Rigid…………………Diffuse

- Rigid = Completely Closed System- Accepts No Input- Gives No Output
- Diffuse = Completely Open System - Accepts and Gives All
- Ends of Continuum-- Dysfunctional
- Middle of Continuum -- Healthy

Boundaries

- Boundaries -- Closed to Open ultimately determine whether a system **takes in new** information, **lets out** information
- Boundaries -- Closed to Open ultimately determines nature of systems

Open Systems and Healthy Boundaries

- Healthy Boundaries-protect without isolating, contain without imprisoning, and preserve identity while permitting external connections

Boundaries - Simpsons

Systems

Besides the five defining properties – other concepts to consider:

- Communication
- Hierarchical structure
- Change

Communication

- Within the system
- Outside the system
- Consider openness and intensity (handout)

Hierarchical Structure (Organization & Constraints)

Organization
- Systems are arranged in order of inclusiveness (or ranks) of organization
- Higher levels include and are more complex than lower levels
- Applies to different systems
- Applies to systems and their subsystems

(See handout)

Hierarchical Structure (Organization & Constraints)

Constraints

- The hierarchical structure by definition creates possibilities of constraints.
- Systems above influence (may constrain) systems below.

Example:

Change in Systems

- **Desire for homeostasis**
- Initiation of change
  - Emergent properties
    - individual vs. systems coupling
- Source of change
  - Normative - life cycle (time)/developmental vs. crises
- Type of change
  - First vs. second order

Initiation of Change: Emergent Properties

- Cultural and social phenomena that emerge from the interactions and exchanges of the members of a social system AND exchanges between systems
- (e.g., group roles, goals, rules, vocabularies, and viewpoints, etc.)
 – Example:

Source of Change: Normative vs. Crises

- Normative – change that is expected as one develops – life changes that typically occur
  – (e.g., walking, talking…how do these change a system?)
- Crises – change that is unexpected
  – (e.g., major illness...how might this change a system?)

Type of Change: First vs. Second Order

- First Order---behavioral---impact on the individual
  - (e.g., oldest child goes off to college – middle child is left at home)
- Second Order---analog--impact on the system
  - (e.g., shift in roles-older child now more independent, middle child now in role of responsibility)

Change Requires

- Adaptation-process
- Adjustment-outcome
- Energy
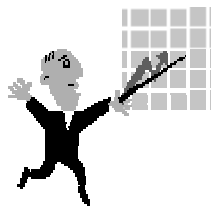
Writing Assignment #1
Consider Your System

- Who are the members of your system?
- What are your roles in your system (functional and psychological/emotional)?
- What are the goals of your system?
- What are the boundaries of your system? Are they open?

Consider Your System

- What is the communication like between members of your system? (consider intensity of involvement)
- What other systems influence your system?

Examining Social Context

- Recall – Qualitative (vs. quantitative) approach
  - Human behavior is viewed in context – understanding behavior is based on how humans interact and how context influences the interaction

Qualitative Tools and Methods

- **Observation** – Field Notes (primary method of Ethnography) – situational context
- **Interviews** (primary method of Phenomenology) – social context
  - Why would interviewing be a better methodology for examining social context than observation?
  - Does observation have a place?

Reading - Phenomenology

- **Yorkston, Klasner, & Swanson (2001), Communication in context: A qualitative study of the experiences of individuals with Multiple Schlerosis**

This article utilizes the elements of phenomenology to document the insider's view of having MS

Yorkston, Klasner & Swanson
Discussion Questions

- What was the purpose of the study?
- What was the methodology?
- Why was this a good methodology?
- What were the procedures for collecting and analyzing data?
- What did you learn about MS?

Phenomenologic Interview

- Opportunity to learn about person's beliefs, values, expectations, that goes beyond observation
- Insider's view of a phenomenon
- Emphasizes the human experience and meaning

Interview

(A technique commonly applied to Phenomenology)

Start Open-ended—Become More Specific

- "Grand Tour" questions – open ended questions
  - What is it like to live with Huntington's Disease?
- Follow-up Questions – discrete questions
  - Tell me about your family.
  - How have your relationships changed?

Interview

- Transcribe what is said—objective
  - Note: the order of the questions allows you to follow the interviewee's perspective (insider's perspective) – starting with his/her own words. As you become discrete in your questioning, your perspective emerges
- Interpret the comments-look for themes (similar to ethnography)
- Reach conclusions about the phenomenon

Interview

- Interview may be the only way of gathering certain types of information
  - Social system's information
- Interview is often an ideal way of substantiating, validating observational data

Interviewing

- Challenges (as with observational data)
  - Controlling biases
  - Avoiding "leading" the interviewee and what he/she says ("Do you like therapy")
  - Noticing important information
  - Verifying interpretations and conclusions

Summary – Social Context

- Described through systems theory
  - How people relate to each other
  - How this relationship influences communication
- Discovered through interviewing
  - Open-ended but system directed
  - Following interviewee lead