

Response to Lane: ‘What we talk about when we talk about “Systems Thinking”’

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In response to viewpoint

Exploring the role of supplier relationship management for sustainable operations: an OR perspective (Sharif et al., 2014, Issue 65, pp. 963–978)

We thank David Lane for his support through both public and private (personal communication to us) means in terms of the overall contribution of our paper, and would also like to thank *JORS* for the opportunity to respond.

In short, the authors of the original paper wish to note that the intention of this work was to apply a technique to explore the behaviours and precedents involved in Supplier Relationship Management (SRM). Through introducing the topic and the application approach that we employed, our intention was (and remains) to reaffirm the complementarities and commonalities between different systems modelling perspectives—hence the approach we have used is in terms of the third definition of ST provided (ie ‘Systems Thinking means the qualitative parts of System Dynamics Modelling’). We were interested in applying the ethos and principles that are the foundations of Systems Dynamics (SD), Systems Thinking (ST), Operational Research (OR) and Problem Structuring Methods (PSM), using Systems Archetypes (SA) as a tool to explore the SRM relationships in the case context.

We would also like to offer several clarifications to the points raised. First when it was stated in our paper that we agree with Lane (1995), we may have not been clear enough to say that we were agreeing with specific comments he made in that paper—namely, that there needs to be a dialogue between SD and soft OR; it is important to engage with other systems techniques where appropriate; the SD community needs to engage with alternative views of modelling systems; and that experimentation should be done using different tools aligned to SD.

We interpreted the wider debate along these lines of modelling behaviours as well as the dynamics of the system.

Second we feel it important to note that in terms of our published paper, we have no issue, polarity or specific allegiance with any camp in the SD, OR, ST or PSM debate. The author team are advocates of systems and OR approaches to be used in the business and management field *in general* and are seeking to apply a tool and technique to explore the research topic in question using a diagramming technique which we believe lends itself well to the context presented (which is justifiable in order to visually represent complexity, as also highlighted in Lane, 2008). We are not attempting—nor wish to—be reformists or in opposition to the wider SD, OR, ST or PSM agenda as a result.

Third, and to confirm, our research thrust and intentions have and always will remain to be to use complimentary techniques from the systems, OR and associated communities that are suited to the fields of application in which we are interested. We are minded to remember George Box’s epithet here, and to paraphrase: how ‘wrong’ do models have to be, to not be useful? The confluence of the systems and OR fields is such that whatever interpretation or basis is taken, we believe there is ultimately some utility in attempting to construct models of the reality we are seeking to understand. And that, we understand, should be the common and shared root of all of the systems philosophies that have been developed to date.

References

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Brunel Business School, Brunel University Amir M Sharif
London Sarmad Alshawi
Muhammad M Kamal
Tillal Eldabi
Aiyaz Mazhar