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Lessons from a Hippie Paradise Glimpsed Through a Keyhole (1)

Abstract

The need to make meaningful comparisons between different subcultural groups existing in various social contexts, which are being studied by different researchers, requires correspondingly meaningful communications between those researchers. This paper proposes an approach that introduces a sufficiently systematic structure to the observations to make comparisons possible without constraining individual researchers in their interpretations.[5]

Keywords: Dynamical system theory, comparative study, research methods, qualitative data, subcultural group

Introduction

This article proposes original ways for researchers dealing with a multitude of different social information, use of varied research methods and work in different research contexts to communicate for mutual benefit. The goal is to achieve helpful communications without imposing uniformity which may make the whole enterprise not only monotonous but may hide significant information. Nevertheless, if communication is to occur, some common vocabulary needs to develop, if only to be able to recognise when we are failing in our goals. As a step in that direction, below, we describe what we are doing by using our own vocabulary, without implying that necessarily everyone should be doing exactly likewise. The expectation is that, by informing the other researchers of what we are doing, it would help them to share descriptions of their own activities and that, in this way, we would all jointly adapt our activities to mutual benefit in this research enterprise.[6] The points made here are

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5   This article was written while participating in the EU FP6, SAL research project, *Society and Lifestyles. Towards Enhancing Social Harmonization through Knowledge of Subcultural Communities* (2007).

6   SAL research project included 15 partners from 10 countries of Europe. Over 30 subcultural groups were investigated.

based on our experiences as we analysed and structured our research on Lithuanian hippies. In what follows, we present the transferable methodology rather than the information about this group.[7]

There are two extreme ways to explain a process, and different persons tend to prefer one over the other. One can describe the goal one is trying to reach, with some suggestions about possible ways of getting there, leaving the tactical decisions to the discretion of a researcher. Alternatively one can give step-by-step directions for each step connecting the starting point and the end point. We took the first approach for this presentation. Undoubtedly we recognise that this may not be the best approach for those who are accustomed to explanations in the second manner. Whenever possible we tried to use examples, but a certain amount of abstraction could not be avoided.

General Approach

In the above spirit, we define our goals: to organise the information we collected about a group (in our case about Lithuanian hippies) in a way that would help us to understand them as a subcultural group and to compare this group's behaviour and development with other groups functioning in the same or different environments. The raw information sources are interviews and observations of individual group members (rather than, say, statistical studies).

To achieve these goals, it is necessary to organise the empirical information we have about our group, as well as about the society in which the group finds itself, in suitable ways. There are numerous approaches that could be used. We chose to use the knowledge structures associated with the dynamical system theory approach. There are several reasons for doing so. One, the group we study is, in fact, quite complex, and the eventual comparative study we aim for adds to the complexity; it is necessary to manage this equally complex information. Two, the environments in which the groups of interest to us function are also complex and, in addition, they are varied, so that again we face a complexity problem. Three, for meaningful comparisons of groups and their environments, we need clear, unambiguous and comparable descriptions of what is to be compared. Fourth, the obtained information is not about the whole group but about some of this group's members, or parts of the group. The dynamical systems approach provides a suitable framework for doing what we wish to do by encouraging single valued and unambiguous descriptions

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7   The detailed analysis of a small hippies' subgroup presented in the article "Pamokos, įgytos pažvelgus pro rakto skylutę į Lietuvos hipių rojų (2)" by E. Ramanauskaitė and J. R. Vaišnys, p. 69 of this volume (English version: Lessons from a Hippie Paradise Glimpsed Through a Keyhole // *Subcultures and New Religious Movements in Russia and East-Central Europe* (ed. by McKay, G. et al.). Oxford, Bern, Berlin: Peter Lang, p. 141–164).

and specifications of what is being studied. Below we outline those features of the approach that define both the form and the content of the information that needs to be obtained from the empirical studies.

First, we comment on the overall generic structure (Luenberger, 1979) used in the systems approach in a schematic form:

1a system – environment – interactions
Universe is made up of System, Environment and Interactions.

$y = g[s]$
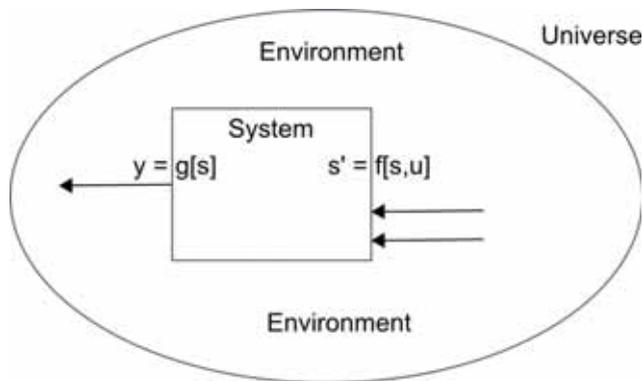
$s' = f[s,u]$

y – outputs from system to environment

u – inputs to system from environment

s – state of system

f[.] and g[.] are functions (correspondences between the values of one variable and the values of other variables)

s, y, u are variables (or collections of variables)

This may be expressed with the help of a diagram as shown below:

Note that we use the term *system* to denote that which is of specific interest to us, that is, that which we study as researchers. These concepts are very general, apparently devised for the Universe. If they are to be useful, they must apply in different situations and to multiple specific and concrete systems. In this approach that we are introducing, two distinct situations will differ in terms of what is unique to each: in the internal structure or behaviour of the given system, in terms of the environment in which the system finds itself or in terms of the interactions in which the system participates. If we have two distinct systems of interest, the requisite descriptions would be of the same general structure but would differ in the specifics as indicated in the following outline and diagrams:
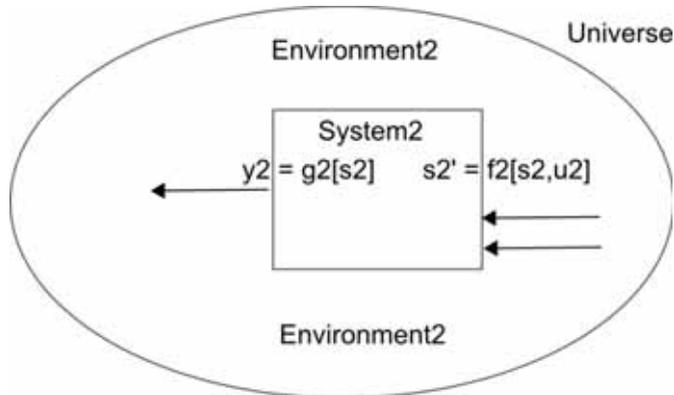
2a system1 – environment1 – interactions1
This may be expressed with the help of the next diagram:

Universe

Environment1

System1

$y1 = g1[s1]$ $s1' = f1[s1,u1]$
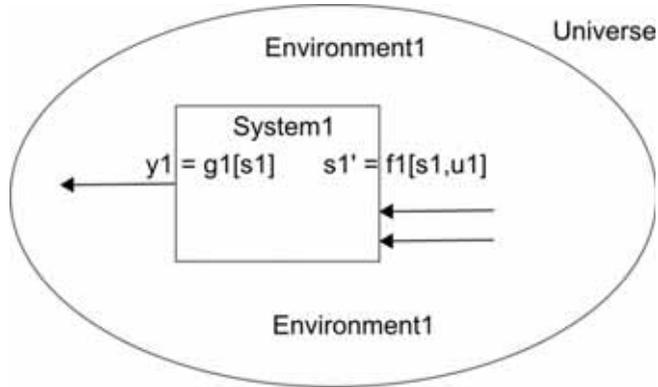
Environment1

3a system2 – environment2 – interactions2
This may be expressed with the help of the next diagram:

Universe

Environment2

System2

$y2 = g2[s2]$ $s2' = f2[s2,u2]$

Environment2

We reiterate that systems can be chosen for the sake of interest or convenience but we must also emphasise that their environment and interaction choices are seriously constrained by the need to be consistent with the choice of system. For managing complexity, one would like to choose simple systems, but life requires that we deal with systems as we find them (usually complex ones). These conflicting demands are reconciled, because we can build up a description of complex systems from the descriptions of simpler systems by matching the interactions in a consistent way. This process is illustrated in the next three steps:

First, we show how two distinct systems are coupled in terms of relevant interactions with due attention to a self-consistent environment. In outline form we have:

4a system1 – system2 – environment12 – interactions12
This may be expressed with the help of this diagram:
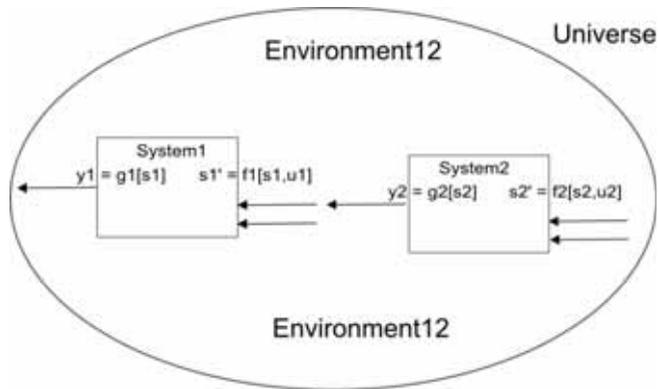
On the basis of the above structure, we can define a new system which encloses the smaller systems. Note that the new system requires a newly defined environment as well, if the description is to remain self-consistent. What we have done is to compose descriptions of simpler systems into a description of a more complex system. In outline form, we can represent this as follows:

5a system0 – environment0 – interactions0/ system1 – system2 – environment12 – interactions12
This may be expressed with the help of the next diagram:
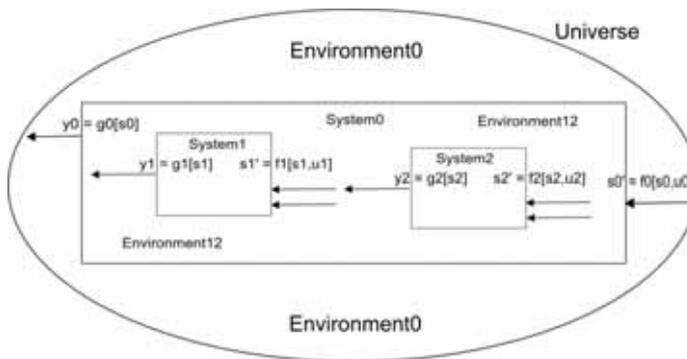
If carried out properly, the above step integrates, in a consistent way, the information about simpler situations which are usually easier to study and characterise into a characterisation of the more complex situation without losing any information. The process would be of little practical value, if we had to maintain all the detailed descriptions in their full complexity. Fortunately, if we carry out the

above steps correctly and with due attention to the changes that must occur in the environmental interactions, we can get rid of all the unnecessary detail and get a well-defined single, simpler system (in the spirit of the initial system definition). In outline form we have:

6a system0 – environment0 – interactions0
This may be expressed with the help of this next diagram:
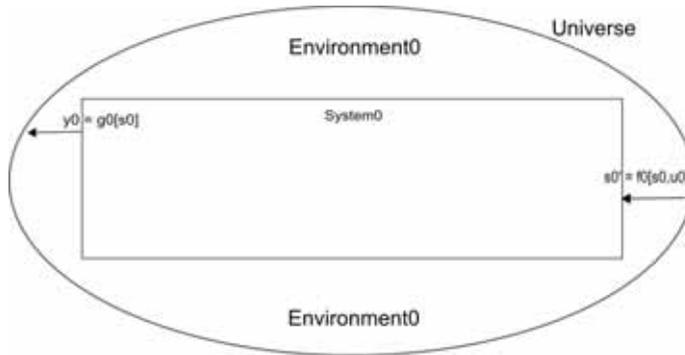
Implementation Specifics

We presented a broad and primarily conceptual picture of those facets of the systems approach that could be used in doing research with any group, but the connection to what goes on in specific field work needs elaboration. While, as we mentioned, what we propose came about while researching Lithuanian hippies, there are two arguments for not using the observations from this group. One, the work is not finished yet, and, two, the specific constructions would need extensive elaborations branching from the basic generalisations that we wish to emphasise. Thus we took a closer look at this connection through some simple and hypothetical examples.

When we recall the form of the system description given above in the very first diagram and the accompanying outline, we note that all information about the system is encoded in system variables, environmental variables and interaction variables as well as the functions f[,] and g[,]. This defines what must be done in the field: one must observe so that one defines the needed variables and indicated functions and assigns appropriate values to these variables. To give operational meaning to this process, we recall some definitions and illustrate the process through simplified examples.

A variable is a set or collection of distinguishable elements, preferably related, mutually exclusive and exhaustive. The elements are often called values (Mitin,

Romanov, Polis, 2001), e.g. x = {1,2,3,4, ., ., ...}:

Gender = {female, male, other}

Ideology = {Socialist, Environmentalist, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Republican, Democrat, Feminists}

Religious ideology = {Christian, Jew, Buddhist}

Political ideology = {Socialist, Republican, Democrat}

Other ideology = {Socialist, Feminist}

Persons = {Andrew, Birute, Jonas, Mary, Ona}

Most of us are introduced to numerical variables, but verbal variables (Galor, 2007) are more appropriate in the characterisation of individuals and groups in the context of our project. In our approach to groups, empirical work leads to the identification of appropriate variables and assignment of their values in specific real situations. If we are not to get lost in details, we need systematic ways of building more complicated (and so probably more real) descriptions than those illustrated above. There are accepted and systematic methods for doing so, and we illustrate the process of generating the more complicated informational structures schematically as follows:

Ideology = {religious ideology, political ideology, other ideology}

Gender and religious ideology = {{female, Christian}, {female, Jew}, {female, Buddhist}, {male, Christian}, {male, Jew}, {male, Buddhist}, {other, Christian}, {other, Jew}, {other, Buddhist}}

Persons and gender = {{Andrew, female},{Andrew, male},{Andrew, other},{Birute, female},{Birute, male},{Birute, other},{Jonas, female},{Jonas, male},{Jonas, other},{Mary, female},{Mary, male},{Mary, other},{Ona, female},{Ona, male},{Ona, other}}

The basic informational structures illustrated above are in the nature of more or less complicated variables.

Once variables are defined and field observations provide values for them in specific contexts, we will need to look for functions (or more generally relations) which describe how the various variables are interrelated. It is on the basis of such functions that predictions and explanations become possible. Examination of the structure of functions shows that their construction requires a large amount of information. We can indicate the "flavour" of the informational structure if not the information itself, once again, in the spirit of the previous steps, in terms of simple function examples:

Persons and gender = {{Andrew, male}, {Birute, female}, {Jonas, male}, {Mary, other}, {Ona, female}}

Gender and persons = {{female, (Birute, Ona)}, {male, (Andrew, Jonas)}, {other, (Mary)}}

We remind the reader that the steps outlined above are intended to indicate how empirical information will need to be structured when it becomes available in a concrete situation.

In Conclusion

The presentation outlined above how information about a group and its environment might be structured when all the work, both empirical and theoretical, has been done. We emphasise that, even when the important variables are concept sets (as we already see in our ongoing studies of the Lithuanian hippies) rather than the more traditional sociological variables we used in the illustrations above, the structure of the information remains the same. Keeping the end structure in mind can help in organising and starting the necessary work as follows:

1) We define our system and the resulting environment and interactions. This encourages us to identify the nature and structure of the accessible information.

2) We construct variables of three sorts consisting of variables which describe how the environment acts on or influences the system, variables which describe how the system acts on or influences the environment and variables which describe the system state. This encourages us to confront the key issue of what it means to describe something in a well-defined way.

3) We construct two kinds of functions – g[.], f[.,.]. This encourages us to identify the causal pathways operating in the situation of interest which, in many cases, can lead to increased understanding and appreciation of whatever it is that we are investigating.

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Pamokos, įgytos pažvelgus pro rakto skylutę į hipių rojų (1)

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje pristatoma sisteminė tyrimo ir duomenų analizės metodologija, tinkama visuomenės grupių bei įvairių socialinių procesų tyrimams ir lyginamajai analizei. Tai naujas metodas, kaip galima struktūruoti sukauptus lauko tyrimų duomenis (stebėjimo, interviu ir kitus tekstinius duomenis) apie grupę ir jos aplinkas, kai duomenys renkami taikant dinaminės sistemų teorijos prieigą. Pažymima, kad net ir tuo atveju, jeigu svarbiais kintamaisiais tampa sąvokų rinkiniai (kaip mes jau matėme analizuodami hipių grupės duomenis)[8], o ne tradiciniai sociologiniai kintamieji (kurių pavyzdžiai pateikti šiame straipsnyje), duomenų struktūra išlieka ta pati. Ji tinka bet kurios grupės elgesio analizei.

Straipsnyje pateikiami trys duomenų struktūravimo žingsniai:

1) Apibrėžiama tyrimo sistema (kurią laisvai pasirenka tyrėjas) ir su ja susijusios aplinkos bei sistemos sąveikos su šiomis aplinkomis. Visa tai padeda nustatyti gaunamos informacijos pobūdį ir turinį.

2) Suformuojami trijų rūšių kintamieji: kintamieji, nusakantys, kaip aplinka veikia sistemą; kintamieji, nusakantys, kaip sistema veikia aplinką; kintamieji, nusakantys sistemos būseną. Šių kintamųjų rūšių suformavimas padeda suprasti, ką reiškia išsamiai apibūdinti analizuojamą medžiagą.

3) Suformuojamos dvi funkcijų rūšys: g[.], f[.,.], kurios padeda tyrėjui nustatyti priežastinius ryšius, tyrinėjant pasirinktą situaciją, ir daugeliu atvejų gali padėti giliau suprasti tyrinėjamą reiškinį.

Naudodami šį metodą, galime lyginti įvairias grupes, veikiančias skirtinguose socialiniuose kontekstuose. Jei grupes tyrinėja skirtingi tyrėjai, svarbus tyrimo sėkmės kriterijus yra jų tarpusavio bendradarbiavimas įvairiose tyrimo pakopose.

Čia aprašyta lauko tyrimo duomenų sisteminimo struktūra leidžia atlikti lyginimą, nesuvaržant individualių tyrėjų interpretacijų.

Raktiniai žodžiai: dinaminių sistemų teorija, lyginamoji analizė, tyrimo metodai, kokybiniai duomenys, subkultūrinė grupė.

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8   Žr. E. Ramanauskaitės ir J. R. Vaišnio straipsnį „Pamokos, įgytos pažvelgus pro rakto skylutę į Lietuvos hipių rojų (2)" šio leidinio p. 69.