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Institute for Systems Engineering  
and Automation



# Proceedings of the **Twelfth Fuschl Conversation**

**G. Chroust, C. Hofer, C. Hoyer**  
(editors)

**April 18- 23, 2004**  
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**(Austria)**

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## Fuschl 2004: The 12<sup>th</sup> Fuschl Conversation, April 2004

On April 18, 2004 23 systems scientists from 10 countries (see “ List of Participants of Fuschl 2004”) assembled in the restaurant of the Seehotel Schlick on Lake Fuschl, near Salzburg (Austria), for the 12th Fuschl Conversation (see “Conversations, why, what and how?”). A first pleasant was the completely re-furbished rooms at Hotel Schlick.

These proceedings present a record of the process and the outcome of this 12<sup>th</sup> Fuschl Conversation. A short version was already published in the IFSR Newsletter vol. 22, No. 1. They contain the reports of the five teams which made up Fuschl 2004. Additionally some additional papers, related to the team’s discussion, are included.

On Sunday, April 18 the Fuschl Conversation started in the late afternoon. Gordon Dyer explained some details of the Conversation and Christian Hofer pointed out some technical details. Both the set-up and the remained as it was in the previous years.

Starting on Monday morning the team discussions (‘the Learning Phase of the Conversation’) went on until Thursday evening. On Monday and Tuesday evening we had a plenary session where the groups reported on their initial progress.

For Wednesday afternoon a special treat had been organized: We had booked a bus to bring the whole group to Salzburg, giving the participants a few hours to enjoy this lovely city.



*Fig. 1 - Kumkum Prasad admiring Salzburg*



*Fig. 2 - Gordon Dyer, Anthoneta Doncheva, Gerhard Chroust*

The dinner also was taken in Salzburg in a very nice, typical quaint restaurant with excellent food. The bus then brought everyone back to our hotel.

Thursday evening - the last evening – traditionally was devoted to singing, a custom which goes back at least until 1994. It brought out diverse talents of the participants: more than one of the otherwise serene participants suddenly came into the limelight as a show master, entertainer or singer.

Friday morning was used for final reports by the individual teams and by discussion in the plenary. The Conversation ended Friday at noon, as usual.

In retrospect there were several highlights in the Conversation. One highlight definitely were the dinners served at Hotel Schlick. The hotel is famous for its fish dishes, with fish right out of the Lake Fuschl. And every evening we were able to enjoy a different fish from Lake Fuschl, differently prepared, too, by Mr. Idinger. It was a gastronomic delicatessen.

Looking back at the scientific side of the Conversation we noticed that an unusual large percentage of potential and even registered participants were not able to come for various last minute reasons.



*Fig. 3 -Günther Ossimitz*



*Fig. 4 - Mrs. Idinger, our host, and Gordon Dyer*

Especially **Team 1** was hit by a steak of bad luck. The originally designated team leader could not come and his stand-in fell severely ill just a few days before the start of the conversation. Angela Espinoza took it on her, to stand in as a team leader for team 1 – and she did a bravado job at that. She was the only one who had taken part in the Agora-team in Fuschl 2002. But the new ideas brought in by the newcomers made for lively discussion, challenging some of the basic assumptions and gauging the ideas on an (assumed) life example.

**Team 2** (led by Arne Collen) continued essentially with the theme from past years with the goal of deepening the understanding of bettering, particularly the relation between designing systems and globalization. Based on two overarching questions (What are the implications of globalization in designing systems? What are the implications of designing systems on globalization?) various considerations of this dynamics were discussed intensively during the conversation.

Also **Team 3** (led by Søren Brier) suffered from early and late cancellations. Only Søren remained from Fuschl 2002, but based on early warnings a new team was established based on previous co-operation. The last minute arrival of a good research colleague added more breadth to the group's knowledge base.

The team made tremendous progress based on and on previous cooperation of team members and by building on the 2002 results, which were known to some of the group members. Thus a continuation in knowledge production was possible in spite of the change in members of the group.

The group then enjoyed a spontaneous creative synergy and an informal dynamic way of sharing knowledge and taking responsibility of different specialized functions in mutual respect. They felt great enthusiasm about the result accomplished that was clearly beyond what they could have done individually

**Team 4** (led by Gary Metcalf and Charles Francois) was able to rely on three continuing members who had participated in both previous conversations in which the topic was initiated (2000 and 2002.) The three new members added both depth and variety, allowing the team to reach an unexpected level of understanding about active participation in social systems. Having participants with both depth of understanding about systems, and with life experiences in a variety of realms (professionally and geographically) seemed important to the progress that was made.

**Team 5** (led by Gordon Dyer) had equal problems with membership. Two expected new members of the group had to drop out at the last minute having both contributed the preparation phase. In one case this was due to personal illness ;in the other due to illness of their Head of Department which necessitated them being required to remain home to provide cover. Two new members were recruited at very short notice from Kingston University, UK. In the event one of these arrived late due to a severe cold. It is somewhat surprising that the Group was able to make some good progress, which it did. This was because the late comers were able to bring some new thinking to the Y3K topic relating to their own specialities.

The details of the outcome are presented in the individual team reports included in these proceedings.

It remains the pleasant task to thank on behalf of the IFSR and of all participants in the Fuschl Conversation 2004.

- foremost Gordon Dyer for his guidance and
- the other team leaders.
- And we should not forget one of the most important person – Christian Hofer who organised and provided the logistics and the infrastructure of this event.
- Special thanks to Günther Ossimitz for providing beautiful the pictures of the Fuschl Conversation 2004 (see <http://www.uni-klu.ac.at/~gossimit/ifs/fuschl2004fotos/> )

Gerhard Chroust  
Organising Chairperson and  
Secretary Treasure of the IFSR

# Conversations, why, what and how?

The origin of Conversations dates back into the year 1982. In 1982 several systems scientists, led by the late Bela H. Banathy were dissatisfied with the classical, conventional style of conferences: An individual writes a paper, has 20 minutes to present it and then 10 minutes of questions. After that the conference is virtually over for the individual. Clearly, this format is not the most effective way to progress in the exchange and development of subtle ideas on pressing major issues. This was the starting point for the Fuschl Conversations: They picked a small hotel on the shore of Lake Fuschl where they held their first Conversation. The procedure was later refined and followed on many occasions. By now some 50 Conversations must have taken place all over the world.

To a scientist the experience during the week in the Fuschl Conversation is quite different from other scientific events. It is in the form of a *conversation*. Bela Banathy defined a conversation as follows:

*A Conversation is*

- *a collectively guided disciplined inquiry,*
- *an exploration of issues of social/societal significance,*
- *engaged by scholarly practitioners in self-organized teams,*
- *who select a theme for their conversation,*

*this is initiated in the course of a preparation phase that leads to an intensive learning phase.*  
[From Be. Banathy's Presentation to the ISI Conversation on Social Systems Design, Asilomarconference, Asilomar, California, November 1996]

For the Fuschl Conversations (as organised these days) four major phases can be distinguished:

**Forming Phase:** A Conference Leader plus 4 to 5 further team leaders are selected by the Fuschl Committee. This choice is based on leadership in previous Fuschl Conversations, on the topics at hand and by consensus with the other team leaders. By publishing a call for papers and by word of mouths potential participants are encouraged to submit a very short input paper (1 – 4 pagers), indicating a direction for the Conversation, the individual potential contribution to the Conversation and some related trigger questions for their team to start the Conversation. From the applications the participants are selected, taking into account the quality of the input paper but also geographic and ethnic distribution of participants. Unfortunately due to limitations in space and funding only teams of four to 6 participants can be accomplished.

**Preparation Phase:** In the preparation phase the teams work together mostly via e-mail in order to refine the topics toward a set of agreed upon trigger questions for their conversation. Based on the interaction with their team the Team Leaders prepare a short summary of key ideas from the input papers, including the selection of a coherent range of trigger questions from the suggested ones. This draft summary is sent to members of the team inviting their comment and/or endorsement. The final version is an important part of the conversation process. It is the collective effort of preparation and will hopefully provide a firm basis on which the team's conversation (learning phase) at Fuschl can proceed.

**Learning Phase - the Conversation.** This is the face-to-face high interaction part of the Conversation. At the on-set of the Conversation in Fuschl the teams review their agenda and choose specific triggering questions that guide their conversation. At the end of each day, the teams report on their progress. The team members follow their course of Conversation, performing their discussions, and finally prepare an initial document of the outcome of their conversation. On Friday morning the teams present their findings in plenary to all participants

**Dissemination Phase:**

It is the duty of scientist and the explicit wish of the IFSR that the outcome of the Conversations be disseminated to a wider audience. This will be done by publishing a preliminary report in the IFSR Newsletter and by later by issuing proceedings of the Conversation as a Technical Report of the Institute for Systems Engineering and Automaton of the Kepler University Linz. Besides the Team Report, Members of a team may, with the consent of the Team Leader, also add individual papers, either expanding the team's topic or supplying additional views.





## Fuschl – 24 years of history

The first Fuschl conversation was held in 1982 in Fuschl, a beautiful, romantic little Austrian village on a small lake (Lake Fuschl) near Salzburg in the lovely Salzkammergut, Austria, (see [www.fuschlseeregion.com/de/orte/fuschl.shtml](http://www.fuschlseeregion.com/de/orte/fuschl.shtml)). today a major tourist attraction It is surrounded by mountains of approx. 1600m height, In summer it is beaming with life and tourists, in April its is quiet and sleepy, a good place to speak, to listen and not to be disturbed by hectic, sightseeing tourists.

The Fuschl Conversations are traditionally held in the week following the European Meeting on Cybernetics and Systems Research (EMCSR) which takes place every even year starting with the Tuesday after Easter and continues through Friday of that week.

Traditionally the Fuschl Conversation starts on the first Sunday after Easter in the late afternoon and continues through Friday lunch. The event is almost fully sponsored by the IFSR, asking only a token contribution from the participants.

Since 1982 some 50 Fuschl-style Conversations, with some variations, have been performed, in many parts of the world and various alternative methods derived from it.



*Fig. 5 - Gordon Dyer with our hostess, Ms. Idinger*

## List of Participants of Fuschl 2004

Heiner Benking	D
Soeren Brier	DK
Gerhard Chroust	AT
Arne Collen	US
Anthoanet Doncheva	BLG
Gordon Dyer	UK
Angela Espinosa	COL
Charles Francois	ARG
Christian Fuchs	AT
Petros Gelephthis	GR
Ernesto Grun	ARG
Günther Hamza,	AT
David Hawk,	USA
Christian Hofer	AT
Wolfgang Hofkirchner	AT
Yoshihide Horiuchi	JP
David Ing	USA
Farah Lenser	D
Gary Metcalf	US
Marilyn Metcalf	US
Günther Ossimitz	AT
Kumkum Prasad	UK
Gottfried Stockinger	AT





## Team 4: “Being” Social Systems: Awareness and Enactment

### Team Coordinator:

Gary Metcalf (USA)  
Charles Francois (ARG)

### Team Members:

David Hawk (USA)  
David Ing (USA)  
Marilyn Metcalf (USA)  
Guenther Ossimitz (AT)



Gary Metcalf, Charles Francois, Marilyn Metcalf



Charles Francois, David Ing



## Team Report: Being Social Systems

This paper is a summary of the processes and outcomes of a Conversation held in Fuschl, Austria from April 18 to 23, 2004. It was part of a larger meeting sponsored by the International Federation for Systems Research, which is held every two years. Five teams were involved in separate Conversations this meeting.

This Fuschl Conversation continued a theme that was begun at the 2000 meeting. Its intent was to build upon and further the possibilities for social systems design, which is the core theme of the Conversations as introduced by Bela H. Banathy. (The Conversations were developed as an alternative to conferences, where typically a great deal of information is presented but little true knowledge is developed or gained amongst participants.)

While the goals of social systems design through Conversation are admirable, the systems communities as a whole have yet to articulate any meaningful and coherent understanding of human social systems, as such. Efforts to affect systems, from family units to international economic and political systems, tend to borrow from an array of disciplines for theory and insight, but typically fall short or fail at the point of implementation.

The goal of this Conversation team was to continue to explore human social systems specifically, including the emerging realm of "virtual" systems, in an effort to understand how we as individuals participate in them (consciously or not) and to search for means by which we might affect them purposefully and positively.

The conversation began around the triggering question, "How are we social systems?" Ultimately, human social systems only exist to the degree that we, as humans, perpetuate them through our participation. Most of our activities on any given day, though, involve habitual routines to which we pay little attention. It would seem that changing them should require little effort – that we could simply choose to act differently. Just being aware of our actions, much less how they fit into the social systems of which we are parts, though, is more difficult and complex than might be assumed.

An agreed understanding at the beginning was that the point of the Conversation was not the debate of theories, or even the building of theory per se, but an increased awareness of how we create and participate in social systems. While the team encountered all of the mental / rational / theoretical difficulties in understanding social systems that would be expected, in the end we used the opportunity of Fuschl to speak from our own personal experiences. In other settings, we might have focused more on "model-building", as that type of knowledge is more transportable or replicable to external parties, but since we had the luxury of a week to experience "becoming" a social system, we took advantage of that.

## Beginning

Like all conversation groups, the first step involved establishing a basis for communication, which is more than just understanding of words. In this case, the goal (recognized in hindsight and reflection) was that of creating a sense of symmetry between the members, in order to allow for the possibility of a deeper level of communication. (Symmetry was discussed in terms of the transition from states of dependence to independence to interdependence.)

As is also common of most introductions, there was a sharing of both ideas and stories of personal experiences. Charles shared his stories of living through several social crises: the Nazi invasion of his home country; the fall of the Belgian Congo, and; the social and economic crises of Argentina, where he now lives. There is a great deal to be learned from others' experiences, and these were quite relevant to the Conversation topic. The difficulty was finding a common understanding and sense of meaning about them, since they had not been experienced by the group as a whole.

The discussion migrated between stories, theories and concepts, trying to find a common frame of reference by which the team could truly begin its work. Human social systems certainly share some characteristics with social systems in the greater animal world, including insects. More complex neurology and language allow for systems of meaning, which obviously create distinctions in human social systems, though. Behavior seems to follow patterns, but is clearly not always logical or rational. Finding ways to talk about the experience of social systems, as opposed to talking about theories or related topics, was difficult, to say the least.

As a way of attempting to bring the focus of the team to present experience, an exercise was introduced in which numerous random, small objects (markers, tools, a harmonica, etc.) were presented, and the team was asked to spend 17 minutes – in silence – just “making something.” Significant discomfort appeared, and after about 12 minutes the team decided to abandon the exercise. One member simply put his head down on a table, remarking that he was not interested. When probed further, the explanation was, “I don’t understand, so I’m not interested, and I don’t feel any connection.” This proved to be a very useful insight about relationships within social systems, in general. Additionally, the importance of order and predictability for people was noted.

## **Making Movement**

The first movement towards an initial sense of symmetry within the team occurred through an exchange between two members that could have been conflict-oriented (one member being facetious about something another had said.) Instead, it resulted in the two taking a risk of sharing more personal information than was anticipated. Because this was treated respectfully, it ended with an increased sense of trust in the team, as a whole. (This was later interpreted as an exploration of how authentic the individuals in the group could be, as part of the larger collective.) This was the first point in the Conversation at which a shared experience made a difference in the interactions, and perceived connections, between the team members.

Inevitably, though, there was a need to continue searching for common ways of describing and understanding the concepts that were being introduced. Questions of how choices operate within social systems were raised and discussed. A framework from A. L. Hirschman was introduced, describing three alternatives for participation: exit, voice, and loyalty. Essentially, people may participate in organizations and larger social systems in a variety of ways, including as customers, members, citizens, etc. If they become dissatisfied with the system, the simplest option is to leave it – to quit participating in whatever ways they have been. (How easily this is done, of course, depends upon many factors, including what one gets from the system and whether other options are readily available.) The more difficult option is to stay and voice one’s displeasure, in hope of improving things. The notion of loyalty helps to create the likelihood that people will stay and exercise voice, as opposed to leaving and therefore diminishing the system. This proved to be a very useful framework, through which the team was able to talk at a deeper and more common level about issues of active participation in social systems.

An effort was made to explore traits that might be considered “most fundamental” for humans, by looking at recent archaeological findings, and how these have been speculated to relate to language, technology, etc. (It has been proposed, for instance, that the drawing of symbols coincided with the presence of language, which could date back almost 100,000 years.) This led instead to more discussions of theories, including those of Korzybski (time-binding); Ernst Becker (human evil); and Buddhist notions of “clinging” and its relation to human suffering.

Issues of risk and conflict within social systems were explored, along with examples of cultural patterns and stereotypes. Within a culture, for instance, people can be expected to respond to issues in relatively similar and predictable ways, depending upon what is normal, acceptable, important, and so on, for them. Knowing these expectations, they can be used as leverage or for manipulation, to some extent.

This eventually led to a discussion about identity and its meaning within social systems (e.g., individual identity, organizational identity, etc.) Questions were raised about the singularity of identity, and whether individual entities had or could have multiple identities. The conversation gravitated to incorporate the power of double-binds and paradoxes within systems, and the Conflict Theory of Gerhard Schwarz.

By the end of the first day, a surprising level of initial cohesion had been reached with the group itself, but with this also came a sense that this group seemed to be seeking different guiding principles than the other Conversation Teams. The contrast appeared in the late afternoon session of the first day, when all the teams gathered to report on their initial progress. The sense was that the other teams were generally involved in just the things that this team was trying to avoid, which was the discussion of theories and ideas in an abstract sense. This, in turn, helped to clarify this team’s own focus and sense of symmetry even further.

The increased sense of symmetry and trust allowed for more risk-taking and more exploration and creativity at both the individual and group levels.

## Day Two

By the second morning, an identity seemed to be developing for the group as a whole, at the collective level, and a sense of identification by the individuals with this larger identity. The team used this as an opportunity to continue exploring identities. While all seemed to agree that a surprising amount of progress had been made on the first day, participants were (understandably) reluctant to declare any sense of membership or commitment to the team, as such. There was tentative agreement that the team had begun to form some identity, and that there was some sense of identification with the team by its participants. This allowed further discussion about sub-groups, and core and periphery within social systems.

Issues of contrast and conflicts (distinctions) were raised. The notion of identity continued to be explored, including questions of individual vs. group or organizational identity. The concept of covenant relationships was introduced, with discussions about how these might differ from other types of relationships, and how they might affect individual identities. Hierarchy and structure, along with purpose and order, were considered, as well.

Just before lunch, it was suggested that the team take a short walk together into the village of Fuschl am See (a very small fishing / resort village with restaurants, shops, inns, and a cathedral near the center.) The thought was to investigate what if anything could be noticed or understood about social systems simply from observing them. The team first visited a small cemetery, and a plaque just outside the cathedral honoring the soldiers of two successive generations from the village, members of the same families who had died in WW I and II. Individually, the team members briefly walked around the plaza in the town center and then converged on a restaurant for lunch together.

After lunch, there was a very simple debriefing of the experience. (There was no formal method of data collection or analysis used, and therefore no common frame of reference for observation established in advance.) There was some discussion about the simple repetition of patterns that people repeat daily, with little or no notice. As actors and participants in these patterns, it's extremely difficult to understand their relationship to social systems on a more abstract basis.

The conversation gravitated to questions of symbols and their meanings, and to story-telling and other activities that perpetuate patterns in social systems, and that reinforce their identities. It shifted to the relationships between individuals, in terms of power, symmetry, and dependence versus independence, and then expanded to include questions of arrogance and learning, trust, patriotism, and cynicism.

Despite the fact that the topics of the Conversation shifted regularly and varied widely, the team at this point was beginning to address issues very central to the formation of social systems. How do individuals participate in the creation of collective entities, and how do the identities of individual persons and social systems relate to each other? Just what types of participation are required in order to create and maintain social systems, and how much diversity can be allowed or tolerated?

By the end of the second afternoon, a belief in the importance of the team's work by its members had developed to the point that the team felt it necessary to express these ideas actively. Given the brief time in which the team members had even known each other, collectively, this sense of internal cohesion appeared as an increased distinction between this team and the others in the larger Fuschl Conversation. By attempting to develop its own sense of norms, the team found itself somewhat distanced from those of the other teams – a process that is probably both common and necessary.

## Day Three

The third morning, individuals engaged in the use of metaphors and the telling of personal stories and examples. Prior days had involved fairly complete presentations of models and viewpoints, but the use of stories allowed for deeper and more implicit understandings. A central story of the morning was that of the "101<sup>st</sup> Cow" (a variation of the Tragedy of the Commons.) In brief, the story is about a common pasture available to all 100 families in a village, but limited to one cow per family. A farmer notices that his neighbor begins to sneak in an extra cow each day to graze. This farmer then begins sending an extra cow of his own. Other farmers notice and do the same, and soon the pasture is overgrazed.

In the context of this Conversation, the story raised questions about many of the topics covered earlier: patterns that form social systems and how closely these must be maintained; tolerance for differences by individuals; trust, etc. The questions were carried into other examples and stories in

order to clarify them further. This eventually led to a discussion of the differences and / or separation between biology and human social systems.

A proposal was made that human social systems might be quite different than others found in nature, if they are based primarily in language and other symbolic forms (as opposed to more physical connections, such as scent, used by other animals or insects.) The team found it hard, though, to talk about social systems without referring to biological systems. Most likely, this was out of need for creating distinctions (defining “what is” by contrasting with “what is not.”) Examples included insect colonies, human-pet interactions, similarities with early childhood behavior, use of sign language by primates, and so on. It became clear that the topic area was far too broad, and too indefinite so far, to be covered in the Conversation. Discussion returned to what could be known and addressed in this context.

All groups had the afternoon off, which allowed a time for more informal discussions and reflections.

## **Day Four – Glimpses of Clarity**

The morning of the fourth day began with more personal reflections and stories of past experiences. The theme that emerged was one of chaos and order. Previous topics were brought back in new ways as well, as new relationships became clearer in light of further discussions. Part of the focus fell on the ways in which repetitious patterns of human behaviors, and the symmetry between individuals, work to create identities and a sense of order in human social systems. These, in turn, seem to create a sense of predictability about both individuals and group identities (e.g., “I know who you really are,” or “I know what to expect of you.”) The concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty were also reconsidered and incorporated into the emerging understanding.

## **Conflict, Distinction and Symmetry**

At the break during the fourth morning it was suggested that all teams convene again in a large group meeting to try to regain some focus on the Fuschl Conversation as a whole. The large group sessions in the late afternoons, intended for sharing information and updates between the teams, had been much less productive than desired.

Originally, all teams participating in the Fuschl Conversation had been focused, to some degree, on the social systems design process described by Bela H. Banathy. For most of the Conversations, Bela had been in attendance to “shepherd” the teams as they met. Over the years, though, both the team topics and their processes had evolved. Bela’s inability to travel to the Conversations after 1996, and then his death in 2003, had exacerbated the changes further. There was now less clarity about the concept of a Conversation, and less of a foundation for understanding across the teams.

The potential value of an all-team meeting was well taken, but the probability of being able to accomplish what was needed and intended in the given time-frame, and in light of previous all-team meetings that week, was minimal at best. Since this was the last working day of the week (the next morning being only for reports of results in an all-team meeting), members of this team were given the freedom by its facilitator to opt out of the larger meeting and to continue their work, which was seen as a more valuable use of the time under the current circumstances. The team facilitator would attend the larger meeting on behalf of the team, in order to have input into the process.

In essence, the team – rather consciously – chose to exhibit the sense of voice that it had been exploring and developing. The patterns around which the other teams appeared to be operating were not those of this team. (This did not make them wrong for the other teams – they were simply not authentic for this team.) Clearly, the members could have demonstrated loyalty in a different way to the larger group, but not without relinquishing a sense of loyalty to themselves, and to their own sense of purpose at that point.

Not surprisingly, expressing voice resulted in conflict. The choice of the team members to remain involved in their own Conversation rather than joining the larger group process was taken as an affront. For this and other reasons, the larger group abandoned the idea of meeting and returned to the individual teams. There was unfortunately no way to explain the team’s actions to the larger group at that point, and probably no words by which it would have been understood.

The team’s conversation for the rest of the morning centered on the ideas of Emery and Trist, with respect to systems and their environments. In our current age, the environment is considered an active actor rather than a passive context for systems. Emery and Trist describe five different



environmental types, ranging from the most simple and stable to the most complex and turbulent. This framework was explored in terms of its application to our experience of systems, and through additional stories and examples from which the ideas could be better clarified and understood. A key example involved the recent social turmoil in Argentina.

The afternoon of the fourth day was spent in collective reflection about what had been learned through the week, for purposes of developing a summary. The initial attempt was to categorize the team's outcomes in a model or framework of some sort. Attempting to capture this in traditional, theoretical terms, though, proved problematic for the group. As soon as the process was begun, the energy within the team diminished noticeably. It worked in opposition to the process agreed upon by the team the entire week, to stay away from the debate about existing theories.

Moving to abstract theory disconnected the individuals from a sense of meaning about what they had experienced. Capturing the process in a narrative format seemed to preserve more of its authenticity, while still providing information that might be shared with others (though not in the way that it was actually experienced by its participants.)

The "being" of social systems is apparently something that is experienced -- that we experienced -- but is difficult to describe (at a deep level) in an asynchronous way, after the fact. "You had to be there". In a more general sense, everyone is involved in social systems everyday, and is constantly negotiating their way into new social situations. A key learning was that we need to come to new situations with open minds and a willingness to learn, and, if things work well, the social system can become cohesive. Cohesive doesn't imply that we agree on everything, or that we fall into a mutual codependence, but that we become interdependent, and create behaviors in the group as a whole that are not inconsistent with the beliefs of the individuals.

The uniqueness of this Conversation was its focus on the lived experience of a social system. As small an example as it was -- one week of six people coming together for the purpose of a common exploration -- it allowed for a sampling of issues with much broader application and meaning. Though no absolute conclusions can be drawn, with confidence about generalizability, a great deal of learning and insight did take place. As intended at the beginning, the point was not to develop theory for purposes of informing other people, but for the individuals involved to experience, in some small way, what it is to be consciously a part of a social system.



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