Emerging Systems Approaches:

Indigenous Ways of Knowing + Root Metaphor Theory

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SFIN-6011 Understanding Systems
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Image CC-BY Mike Cassano (2009) *Most Interesting Pothole*

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Circa 1964,
Gravenhurst, Ontario, Canada

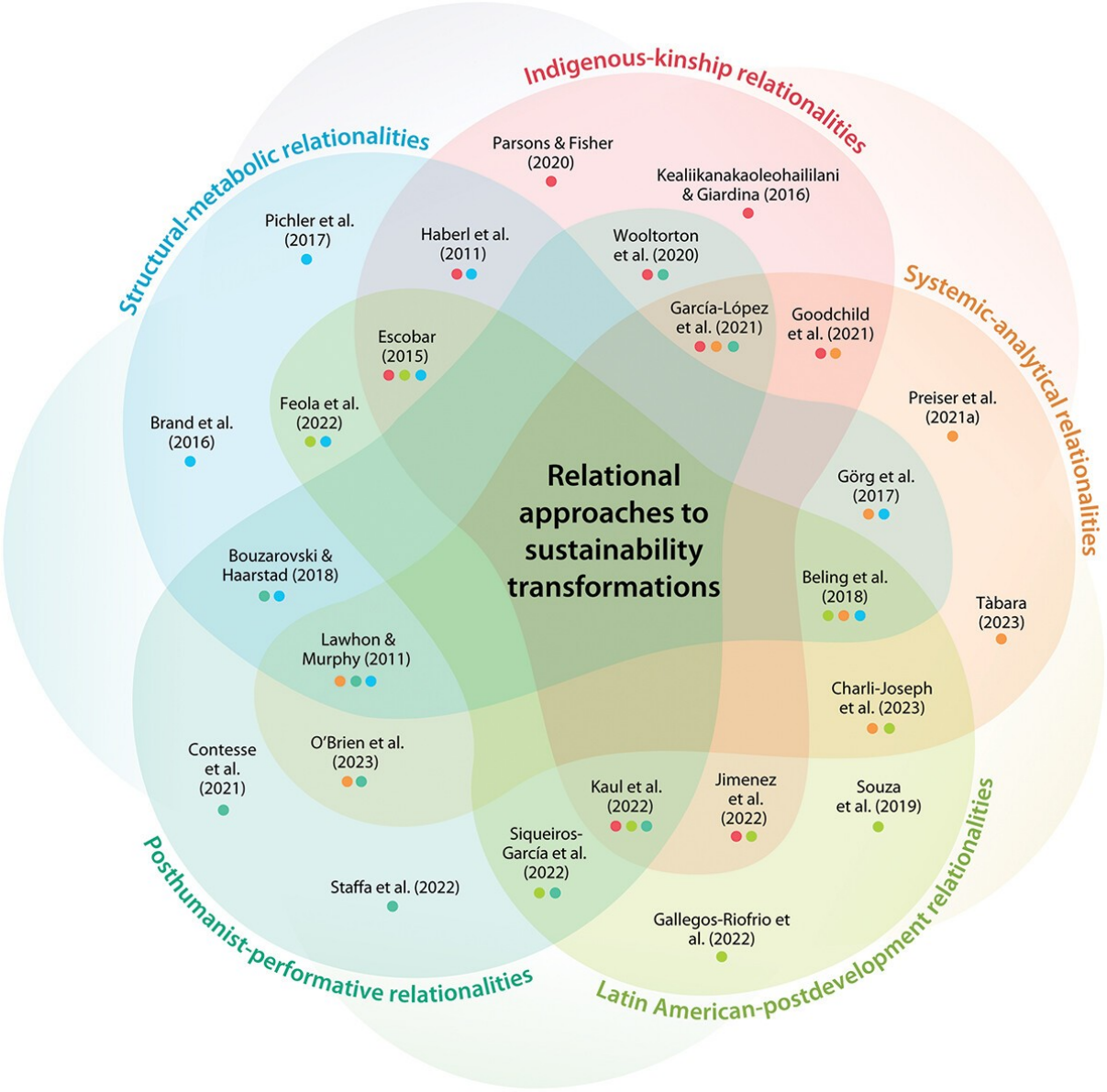


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Agenda

A.	Emerging Processual-Relational Approach
B.	Root Metaphor Theory
C.	(Con)textural-Dyadic Thinking
D.	Visualizing Implications with ↑ Systems Changes
E.	Future Research: Ways That Meaning Comes Together

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A. Emerging Processual-Relational Approach (page 1 of 5) …

Sustainability transformations may involve many ways of knowing, being, and doing

"… **relational approaches** enact alternatives to **separable categories of society and nature**, emphasise unfolding relations between **human and non-human beings**, and highlight the importance of **ethical responsibilities and care** for these relationships"

West, Simon, et al. "Relational Approaches to Sustainability Transformations: Walking Together in a World of Many Worlds." *Ecosystems and People*, vol. 20, no. 1, Dec. 2024, p. 2370539. https://doi.org/10.1080/26395916.2024.2370539 .

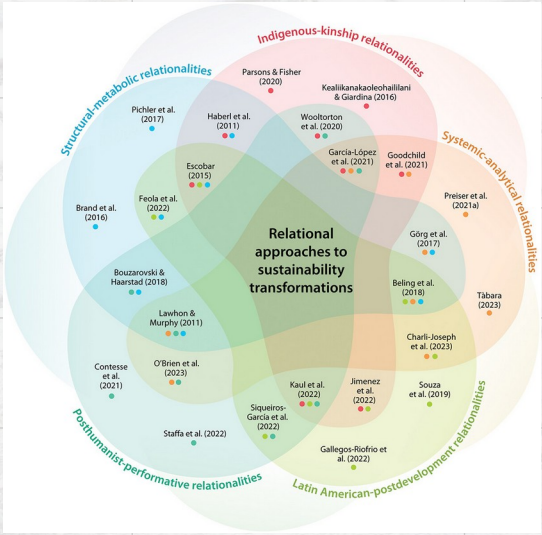
March 2026

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A. Emerging Processual-Relational Approach (page 2 of 5) …

Clusters on “relational” and “relationality” alongside “transformations” and “sustainability” were interpreted in 5 conceptual groupings inductively

	Indigenous-kinship relationalities	Systemic-analytical relationalities	Posthumanist-performative relationalities	Structural-metabolic relationalities	Latin American-postdevelopment relationalities
Human-nature connectedness					
Agency and leadership					
Scale and scaling					
Time and change					
Knowledge and action					



“We recognise that because of our inductive approach rooted in our own experiences and positionality, and the inherently interpretive nature of conceptual groupings, these five relationalities are only one way of making sense of a complex set of discussions, and that there are many other ways of doing so.”

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Approaches to systems of interest have traditions via (i) Human Social Systems Theory, or (ii) General Systems Theory

Systems	Stakeholders: Unitary	Stakeholders: Pluralist	Stakeholders: Coercive
Complex	• Complexity Theory • Network Analysis	• Multi-methodology • Critical Systems Practice	• Critical Systems Heuristics • Total Systems Intervention
Complicated	• System Dynamics • Viable Systems Model • Org Cybernetics	• Soft Systems Methodology	• Emancipatory Systems Approaches
Simple	• Operations Research • Systems Engineering • Systems Analysis	• Interactive Planning • Strategic Assumption Surfacing and Testing	• Social Systems Design • Social Cybernetics

Jackson, Michael C. 2019. *Critical Systems Thinking and the Management of Complexity*. John Wiley & Sons.

9. **Transcendental**: unknowables
8. **Social Orgs**: symbolic images
7. **Humans**: self-consciousness
6. **Animals**: mobility, teleology
5. **Plants**: genetic-social
4. **Cells**: self-maintaining life
3. **Thermostats**: control mechanism
2. **Clockworks**: predetermined motion
1. **Frameworks**: static structures

Boulding, Kenneth E. 1956. "General Systems Theory -- The Skeleton of Science." *Management Science* 2 (3): 197–208. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2.3.197.

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Future research could compare a variety of alternative epistemologies and ontologies on appreciating systems in each world

	Ways that Meaning Comes Together							
	20th Century Systems Thinking	Relational Systems Thinking (Anishinaabe, First Nations)	Native Science (Hózhǫ́, Navajo-Hopi)	Autochthous (Ubuntu, African)	Nordic + Inuit (Animic ontology)	Chinese Classical School of Naturalists (Yinyang)	Islamic Civilizational Epistemology	Process-Relational Social Ecological Systems
	Churchman, Ackoff, Mitroff, Linstone, Britton	Goodchild, West et al.	Haskie, Kahn-John, Koithan, Cajete	Chibvongodze, Chilisa, Adyanga, Romm, Ijatuyi	Ingold, Anderson et al.	Feng, Lee, Maciocia, Jullien	Sardar, Bakar	Mancilla García, Hertz, Schlüter

Note from David Ing: This proposed list of alternative ways of appreciating systems in the world is non-exhaustive.

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A. Emerging Processual-Relational Approach (page 5 of 5) …

This approach adopts features based in the metaphilosophy of Root Metaphor Theory constructed by Stephen C. Pepper

	Ways that Meaning Comes Together							
Feature								
Root Metaphor								
Criteria of Adequacy / Validity (Theory of Truth)								
Primary Distinctions (Categories)								
Nature of Time								
Research Sources								

Note from David Ing: "Ways that Meaning Comes Together" might also be expressed by William James as "Ways that Phenomena Hang Together". This might have been called "Modes of Appreciation", or "Styles of Coherence across Experiences" by Stephen C. Pepper, that may or may not be less helpful that the "World Hypotheses" that he chose.

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American pragmatism, a theory of knowledge based in doubt, builds adequate evidence as a *World Hypothesis* approaches a *Theory*

What I call the **root metaphor theory** is the theory that **a world hypothesis** to cover all facts is **framed** in the first instance on the basis of **a rather small set of facts** and **then expanded** in reference so as to cover all facts.
The set of facts which inspired the hypothesis is the original root metaphor (p. 369).

This root metaphor theory, "**whether the theory be correct in fact or not**", was offered "as **a useful instrument for the clarification of a confused field**" in metaphysics (p. 374).

Pepper, Stephen C. "The Root of Metaphor Theory of Metaphysics." *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 32, no. 14, 1935, pp. 365–74. https://doi.org/10.2307/2016759.

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Each world hypothesis is a system of knowledge, with a root metaphor at its core, built on four maxims (principles)

Maxim I:
A world hypothesis is determined by its root metaphor.
In application, several systems theories could be based on a shared root metaphor.

Maxim II:
Each world hypothesis is autonomous.
A systems theory should be independently judged on adequacy by the reliability in its corroboration of evidence within. A systems theory should stand on its own evidence, and not on the shortcomings of an alternative theory.

Maxim III:
Eclecticism is confusing.
Systems theories are mutually exclusive from each other, based on different root metaphors. Mixing metaphors can introduce conflicting facts, leading to contradiction and a reduction of reliability.

Maxim IV:
Concepts which have lost contact with their root metaphors are empty abstractions.
A systems theory can grow old, so that associated abstractions get taken for granted. Rejuvenation comes through tracing evidence back to the root metaphor.

Pepper, Stephen C. “Root Metaphors.” *World Hypotheses*, University of California Press, 1942, pp. 84–114, https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520341869.

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Pepper described six world hypotheses, of which four were judged to be relatively adequate with sufficient precision and scope

	Dispersive manner for organizing evidence	***Integrative*** manner for organizing evidence
Analytic mode of reasoning	**Formism** *Root metaphor*: **Similarity**, as recurrence or recognizable features *Example*: An oak tree, while conditions may vary so each is distorted from the norm	**Mechanism** *Root metaphor*: **Machine**, where exerting force or energy produces predictable outcomes *Example*: A tree stump puller, with a lever (bar with fulcrum)
Synthetic mode of reasoning	**Contextualism** *Root metaphor*: **Situation**, as a historic event in its living actuality *Example*: A live performance with a solo improvisation by a musician with band members co-responding	**Organicism** *Root metaphor*: **Constructive Development**, with orderliness of changes from stage to stage *Example*: A living being with a progressive experience continuing as an integrated whole

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The features of the four world hypotheses underscore distinctiveness in the appreciation of coherent systems types

	Dispersive manner for organizing evidence	***Integrative*** manner for organizing evidence
Analytic mode of reasoning	**Formism** *Root metaphor*: **Similarity**, as recurrence or recognizable features *Theory of truth*: **Correspondence** between (an) instance(s) and a likened ideal *Categories*: **Characterizations** (of qualities and relations) *Nature of time*: **Universal or irrelevant**.	**Mechanism** *Root metaphor*: **Machine**, where exerting force or energy produces predictable outcomes *Theory of truth*: **Causal adjustment** to a mature nominalism (i.e. named response to stimulus) *Categories*: **Primary qualities** (effectual aspects) and **secondary perception** (symbols in the mind) *Nature of time*: **Schematic time** as location (linear and dimensional)
Synthetic mode of reasoning	**Contextualism** *Root metaphor*: **Situation**, as a historic event in its living actuality *Theory of truth*: **Operationalism**, via qualitative confirmation of solving a specific problem *Categories*: **Strands, texture, quality, novelty** *Nature of time*: **Qualitative duration**, **event** relative to a specious present	**Organicism** *Root metaphor*: **Constructive Development**, with orderliness of changes from stage to stage *Theory of truth::* **Coherence**, where fragments cohere with their nexus, free of contradiction *Categories*: **Progression** (steps), **final outcome** (ideal) *Nature of time*: **Directional arrow**, successive integrations

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C. (Con)textural-Dyadic Thinking (page 1 of 4) …

The analytic-synthetic modes and dispersive-integrative manners are ontologically grounded in the stability of Western substance philosophy

	Dispersive manner for organizing evidence	***Integrative*** manner for organizing evidence
Analytic mode of reasoning	**Formism** *Root metaphor*: **Similarity**, as recurrence or recognizable features	**Mechanism** *Root metaphor*: **Machine**, where exerting force or energy produces predictable outcomes
Synthetic mode of reasoning	**Contextualism** *Root metaphor*: **Situation**, as a historic event in its living actuality	**Organicism** *Root metaphor*: **Constructive Development**, with orderliness of changes from stage to stage

	Dispersive manner for organizing evidence	***Integrative*** manner for organizing evidence
Analytic mode of reasoning	**Formism** **Analytic**: parts in relations are presumed; each whole is inferred. **Dispersive**: unpredictability (non-determinism) is presumed; determinate order is denied.	**Mechanism** **Analytic**: parts in relations are presumed; each whole is inferred. **Integrative**: determinate order is presumed; unpredictability (non-determinism) is denied.
Synthetic mode of reasoning	**Contextualism** **Synthetic**: wholes are presumed; parts in relations are inferred. **Dispersive**: unpredictability (non-determinism) is presumed; determinate order is denied.	**Organicism** **Synthetic**: wholes are presumed; parts in relations are inferred. **Integrative**: determinate order is presumed; unpredictability (non-determinism) is denied.

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A new World Hypothesis is proposed as (Con)texturalism-Dyadicism, embracing both dispersive and integrative manners

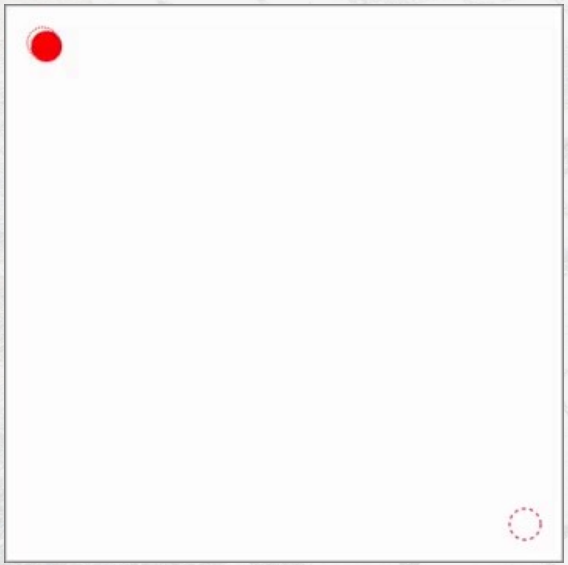
Synthetic mode of reasoning	***Dispersive*** manner for organizing evidence	***Integrative*** manner for organizing evidence
	Contextualism: *Root metaphor*: **Situation**, as a historic event in its living actuality *Theory of truth*: Operationalism, via qualitative confirmation of solving a specific problem *Categories*: Strands, texture, quality, novelty *Nature of time*: Qualitative duration, event relative to a specious present	**Organicism** *Root metaphor*: **Constructive Development**, with orderliness of changes from stage to stage *Theory of truth*: Coherence, where fragments cohere with their nexus, free of contradiction *Categories*: Progression (steps), final outcome (ideal) *Nature of time*: Directional arrow, successive integrations
	(Con)texturalism-Dyadicism: *Root metaphor*: **YinQi ⇌ YangQi dancing through [eight] seasons**, as ((YinQi) ∝ 1/(YangQi)) wayfaring in unfolding wanwu [dissipating ⇌ concentrating] textures *Theory of truth*: Entailment, traceability back through history, with anticipated outcomes indetermined *Categories*: Rhythmic shifts in (con)textures, situational propensity, dyadic diachrony *Nature of time*: Kairotic, with propitious periods and inopportune periods	
	Dispersive + integrative manner for organizing evidence	

Interpret the double harpoon as reversibility in chemistry: (YinQi ⇌ YangQi) == (YinQi is complementary with YangQi).

Interpret the math symbol ∝ not as alpha: (YinQi ∝ 1/(YangQi)) == (YinQi is inversely proportional with YangQi).

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Ancient Greeks → Western science on straight lining (point-to-point); Classical Chinese → science as yinyang rhythmic complements



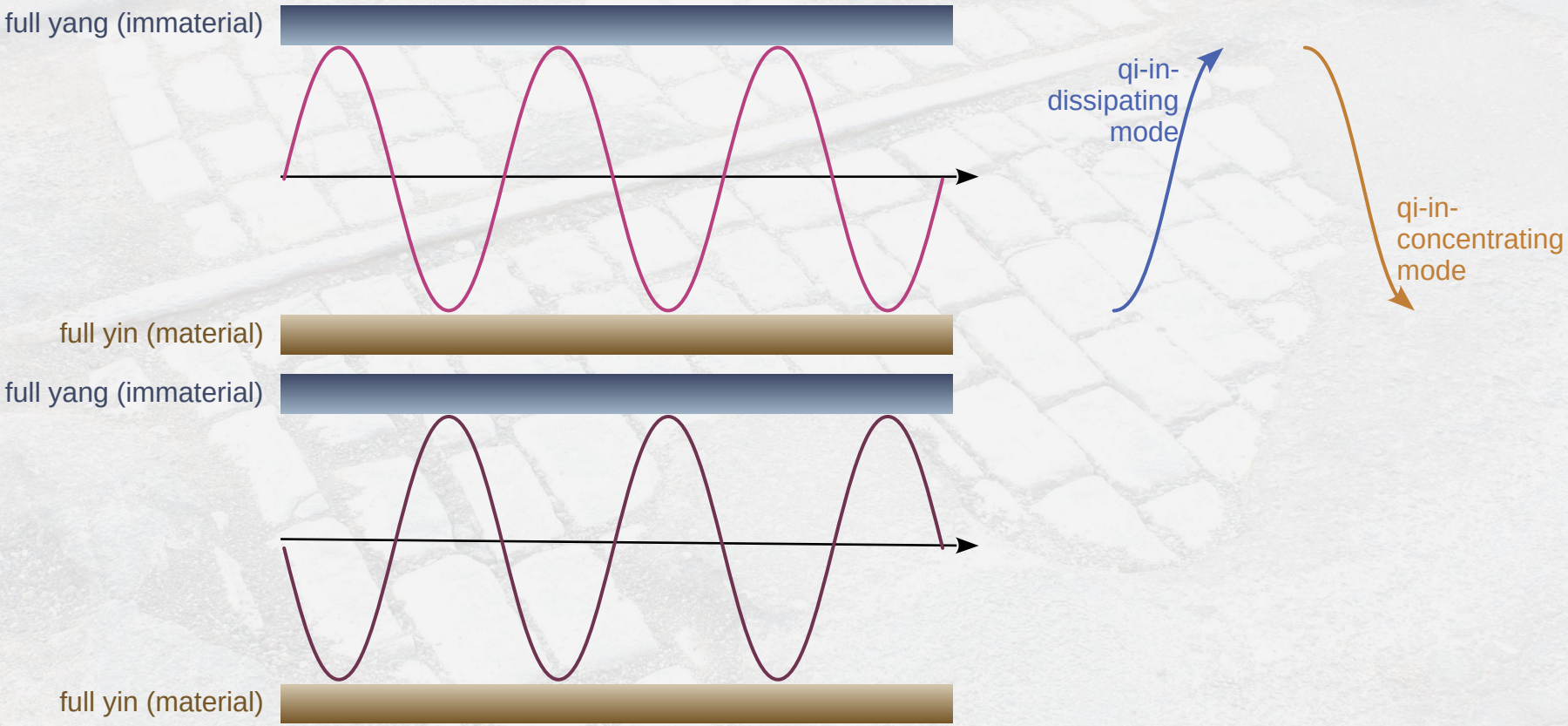
Square red dot straight line CC-BY-NC-SA David Ing 2024)



Sine Waves Blue and Brown CC-BY-NC-SA David Ing 2024

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Yinyang is dyadic with qi-in-dissipating mode alongside qi-in-concentrating mode



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Reifying root metaphors: ↓ rearranging objects, ↑ repacing rhythms

Reifying philosophy	***Reifying theory***	***Reifying practice***
↓ straight-lines + jumps	↓ reduction down to one	↓ unfreeze-move-refreeze,
↑ rhythms + anticipation	↑ threads co-responding	↑ (con)textural dyadic rhythmic learning



Spontaneous Synchronization, by University of Michigan Demo Lab (2022)



Cai Rang Floating Market, Mekong Delta, Vietnam by Elisabeth Frette (2020)

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Implications of systems changes: ↑ living systems, ↓ machines

Philosophical	***Theoretical***	***Practical***
↑ when+where;	↑ kairotic rhythms + dyadic diachrony + situational propensity,	↑ doing no harm,
↓ what+why	↓ future state ← current state	↓ bias for action



When Time Stands Still – Replacing Clock Movements by BaldGuyDIY (2020)



Plant Coming Back to Life by Storm Chasing Video (2018)

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D. Visualizing Implications with ↑ Systems Changes (page 3 of 3)

When systems changes predominate,

↓ (function → structure), ↑ (process as yinyang threads in diachronic emergence with yinyang textures)



BMW Z4 GT3 - Car Assembly HD Time Lapse
by TeamWestCoatRacing (2010)



VirtualSF (2024) Swing Dancing in Golden Gate Park

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This first 4 of 8 ways of Ways that Meaning Comes Together was generated via Google Gemini Canvas Pro

	Ways that Meaning Comes Together			
	20th Century Systems Thinking	Relational Systems Thinking (Anishinaabe, First Nations)	Native Science (Hózhǫ́, Navajo-Hopi)	Autochthous (Ubuntu, African)
Root Metaphor	**The Purposeful System**: Entities progressing toward ultimate ideals.	**Kinship/Web of Life**: Humans and non-humans as entangled relatives.	**Harmony & Balance**: An interdependent system seeking equilibrium.	**Communitarian Interconnectedness**: "I am because we are" (Ubuntu).
Criteria of Adequacy / Validity	**Pragmatic Utility**: Validated by enabling progress and "sweeping in" views.	**Relational Accountability**: Validated via lived experience and story.	**Walking in Beauty**: Validated by maintaining/restoring balance.	**Participatory Onto-Epistemology**: Collectively and relationally negotiated.
Primary Distinctions	**Producer-Product**: Means/ends and pragmatic ideals.	**Inseparability**: Spirit, reciprocity, and responsibility.	**Spiritual Ecology**: Integration of physical, mental, and spiritual wellness.	**Eco-Spirituality**: Collective well-being and kinship.
Nature of Time	**Future-Oriented**: Teleological arrow toward a designed future.	**Cyclical**: Intergenerational (Seven Generations) and co-present.	**Rhythmic**: Fluid, tied to natural and ceremonial cycles.	**Polychronic**: Ancestral, defined by events and relationships.
Research Sources	Churchman, Ackoff, Mitroff, Linstone, Britton	Goodchild, West et al.	Haskie, Kahn-John, Koithan, Cajete	Chibvongodze, Chilisa, Adyanga, Romm, Ijatuyi

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This second 4 of 8 ways of Ways that Meaning Comes Together was generated via Google Gemini Canvas Pro

	Ways that Meaning Comes Together			
	Nordic + Inuit	Chinese Classical (Yinyang)	Islamic Civilizational	Process-Relational SES
Root Metaphor	**Wayfaring & Meshwork**: Fluid, interwoven lifelines and trails.	**Dynamic Interplay**: Continuous transformation of yin and yang.	**Divine Unity (Tawhid)**: Integrated creation with ethical stewardship.	**Continuous Becoming**: Fluid unfolding of networks (verbs over nouns).
Criteria of Adequacy / Validity	**Knowing as Going**: Validated via skilled practice and attentiveness.	**Efficacy & Propensity**: Sensing and aligning with natural unfolding (shi).	**Reason & Revelation**: Truth serves the public interest and ethics (haqq).	**Emergent Understanding**: Pragmatic, situated, and co-created.
Primary Distinctions	**Lines & Emplacement**: Movement, taskscapes, and animacy.	**Process Ontology**: Qi, continuous change, and the Five Phases.	**Holistic Knowledge**: Integration of physical/spiritual; moral boundaries.	**Processes & Intra-actions**: Fluid boundaries and emergence.
Nature of Time	**Taskscape**: Continuous flow tied to movement and seasons.	**Processual**: Rhythmic unfolding of yin/yang transformations.	**Teleological & Moral**: Rhythmic unfolding of a divine trust.	**Fluid Flow**: Active medium of emergence without static endpoints.
Research Sources	Ingold, Anderson et al.	Feng, Lee, Maciocia, Jullien	Sardar, Bakar	Mancilla García, Hertz, Schlüter

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This first 4 of 8 ways of Ways that Meaning Comes Together was generated via Qwen 3.5 Plus

	Ways that Meaning Comes Together			
	20th Century Systems Thinking	Relational Systems Thinking (Anishinaabe, First Nations)	Native Science (Hózhǫ́, Navajo-Hopi)	Autochthous (Ubuntu, African)
Root Metaphor	Inquiring system as historically situated, purposive, boundary-judging process (Churchman, 1971)	Land-water-sky relational nexus as living, storying, reciprocal process (Goodchild, 2023)	Cosmos as dynamic, ceremonial, interdependent web; Hózhó/K'é as harmony-kinship (Cajete, 2000)	Communal-cosmic relational nexus; "I am because we are" as ethical co-creation (Chilisa, 2017)
Criteria of Adequacy / Validity	Structural corroboration across inquiring modes; pragmatic workability; ethical reflexivity (Mitroff & Linstone, 1993)	Relational accountability; story coherence (dibaajimowin); practical wisdom (mino-bimaadiziwin) (Goodchild, 2024)	Ceremonial coherence; practical wisdom (Hózhóógo iiná); relational accountability (Kahn-John, 2015)	Relational accountability; communal validation; practical wisdom (botho/ubuntu); epistemic justice (Romm, 2024)
Primary Distinctions	Subject-object transaction; means-ends reciprocity; part-whole dialectic; fact-value entanglement; boundary critique (Britton & McCallion, 1994)	Human-more-than-human reciprocity; story-science complementarity; place-based universality; gift-economy logic; verb-based ontology (Goodchild, 2023)	Nested relational domains; clan kinship (Hak'eí); story-ceremony-science complementarity; reciprocity as cosmological law (Haskie, 2023)	Human-more-than-human kinship; spirituality-science complementarity; communal identity; verb-based ontology; participatory onto-epistemology (Chibvongodze, 2016)
Nature of Time	Historicist and teleological; retroductive-prospective; unbounded iterative inquiry (Churchman, 1971)	Cyclical-spiral and generational; ancestral continuity; future-gifting (niigani miinigowiziiwin) (Goodchild, 2023)	Cyclical-ceremonial and generational; seasonal rhythms; ancestral-future continuity (Cajete, 2000)	Cyclical-ancestral and generational; seasonal rhythms; ancestral continuity; future-gifting (Chilisa, 2017)
Research Sources	Churchman & Ackoff (1950); Churchman (1971); Mitroff & Linstone (1993); Britton & McCallion (1994)	Goodchild (2021, 2023, 2024); West et al. (2020, 2024)	Haskie (2023); Kahn-John (2010, 2015); Cajete (2000, 2005)	Chibvongodze (2016); Chilisa (2017); Romm (2024); Ijatuyi et al. (2025)

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	Ways that Meaning Comes Together			
	Nordic + Inuit	Chinese Classical (Yinyang)	Islamic Civilizational	Process-Relational SES
Root Metaphor	Meshwork of wayfaring lines as animate, interdependent process; animic ontology (Ingold, 2011)	Dynamic yinyang interplay within qi field; shi (propensity) and wuxing phase-relationality (Lee, 2017)	Tawhidic cosmos as unified, hierarchical, ethically-teleological knowledge field (Bakar, 1998)	Social-ecological world as dynamic, relational, processual field of becoming (Mancilla García et al., 2020)
Criteria of Adequacy / Validity	Correspondence through skilled practice; animic resonance; wayfaring coherence; generational continuity (Ingold, 2018)	Correlative coherence; practical efficacy via shi; dynamic balance (he); processual resonance (Jullien, 2004)	Tawhidic coherence; revelatory warrant (naql); ethical-teleological efficacy; integrative synthesis (hikmah) (Bakar, 1999)	Relational coherence; methodological reflexivity; transformative resonance; pluralistic integration (Hertz et al., 2025)
Primary Distinctions	Wayfaring vs. transport; meshwork vs. network; animic vs. mechanistic; place as knot vs. space as container; correspondence vs. representation (Ingold, 2011)	Yinyang complementarity vs. dichotomy; qi as process vs. substance; wuxing as phase-relationality; shi vs. causality; correlative resonance (Lee, 2017)	Naql vs. ‘aql; sacred vs. profane sciences; hierarchy vs. fragmentation; ethical-teleological purpose; hikmah as integrative knowledge (Bakar, 1998)	Process vs. substance; relations vs. entities; verb-based vs. noun-based; entanglement vs. separation; emergence vs. prediction (Hertz et al., 2020)
Nature of Time	Rhythmic, generational, processual; duration of movement; seasonal cycles; world-in-formation (Ingold, 2011)	Cyclical-phase and processual-generative; seasonal rhythms; wuxing transformations; yinyang oscillation (Lee, 2017)	Teleological-cyclical and eschatological; directional purpose (maqasid); ritual rhythms; ultimate accountability (akhirah) (Bakar, 1999)	Processual, non-linear, transformative; medium of becoming; adaptation; co-evolution (Mancilla García et al., 2020)
Research Sources	Ingold (2007, 2011, 2018); Anderson et al. (2017)	Feng (1948/1966); Lee (2017); Maciocia (2015); Jullien (1995, 2004, 2015)	Sardar (2003, 2006); Bakar (1998, 1999)	Mancilla García et al. (2020, 2024); Hertz et al. (2020, 2025)

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	Ways that Meaning Comes Together			
	20th Century Systems Thinking	Relational Systems Thinking (Anishinaabe, First Nations)	Native Science (Hózhǫ́, Navajo-Hopi)	Autochthous (Ubuntu, African)
Root Metaphor	Purposive system as coherent whole	Relations as primary; land and life as kin	Living harmony, balance, and beauty	Being-through-relation
Criteria of Adequacy / Validity	Pragmatic improvement of decisions	Relational accountability	Restoration of harmony	Relational flourishing
Primary Distinctions	Whole–part; means–ends	Kinship, reciprocity, responsibility	Harmony/imbalance; ceremony	Community, dignity, reciprocity
Nature of Time	Progressive, teleological	Ancestral–present–future continuity	Cyclical, ceremonial	Generational, world-forming
Research Sources	Churchman; Ackoff; Mitroff	Goodchild	Kahn-John; Cajete	Chibvongodze; Chilisa; Romm

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	Ways that Meaning Comes Together			
	Nordic + Inuit (Wayfaring)	Chinese Classical Naturalists (Yinyang)	Islamic Civilizational Epistemology	Process-Relational SES
Root Metaphor	Life as wayfaring along lines	Correlative transformation of qi	Unity-in-multiplicity (tawḥīd)	Ongoing becoming of interdependent processes
Criteria of Adequacy / Validity	Attunement and correspondence	Efficacy via propensity (shi)	Ethical responsibility and stewardship	Responsible participation in transformation
Primary Distinctions	Movement, line, dwelling	Qi, yinyang, phases	Revealed/acquired knowledge; ethics	Process, relation, entanglement
Nature of Time	Processual, along-the-way	Diachronic, phasic	Continuity, renewal, accountability	Continuous, non-stationary
Research Sources	Ingold; Anderson et al.	Feng; Lee; Jullien	Sardar; Bakar	Mancilla García; Hertz

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