Living better in a better world: Guidance and counselling in an ecosystemic model of culture

Pilon, André Francisco / AF

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Guidance and Counselling in an Ecosystemic Model of Culture

André Francisco Pilon
School of Public Health, University of São Paulo
gaiarine@usp.br

Cultural and epistemic backgrounds, subject-object relationships, assumptions and conflicts, are examined by heuristic-hermeneutic processes in the sociocultural learning niches. Diagnosis and prognosis of current problems take into account the connections (assets) and ruptures (deficits) between the different dimensions of the world, as donors and recipients: *intimate*; *interactive*; *social and biophysical*. The proposal presents not only a descriptive position*, but also a normative position*, critically inquiring into prevailing assumptions in view of design/debate, meaning-making, connections-mapping, democratic dialogue and social construction. Values, goals, and principles are considered in view of the transition from an non-ecosystemic to an ecosystemic model of culture.

In all realms of contemporary science, to understand, describe and act upon reality, we need an all-encompassing sense of totality, which demands complex thought, transdisciplinary approaches and conceptual maps based on new paradigms and rules of legitimation and coherence.

Scientists recognize that the world is not classifiable in different kinds of objects, but in different kinds of connections; “it appears as a complex web of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate, imbricate, combine and determine the texture of the totality” (Heisenberg, 1958).

According to Morin, the passage of life is circular and recursive, we must overcome “the illusion that we are dominators of objects”; “every man is an individual, part of a society and part of a species, in a set that allows mutual achievements and mutual influences between the parties”.

Developing 'more-than-human' modes of enquiry that address “the material and ecological fabric of social life and the politics of knowledge through which this fabric is contested and re-made” (Whatmore, 2008); require an ecosystemic model of culture (Pilon, 2009); work, power, wealth, growth and freedom must acquire new meanings.

Ethical norms, peace building, environmental equilibrium requires ethically interpreted and ordered social experiences, a capacity to develop morally relevant interests as the bases of rights-bearing, a broad, universally rationalised cultural knowledge, an empathy with people, including those regarded as alien, or even hostile (Znaniecki, 1935).

Beyond the creation of choices and the development of capacities and motivations, education, environment, health and quality of life must be embedded into and promoted by the cultural, social, political and economical institutions, which are more critical than individual motives and morals.

“Social inclusion” only accommodate people to the prevailing order and do not prepare them to change the system (Labonte, 2004); once “included", a new wave of "egocentric producers and consumers" reproduce the system responsible not only for their former exclusion, but for proposing an inclusion in a false paradise.

DIMENSIONS OF BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

	INTIMATE	INTERACTIVE	SOCIAL	BIOPHYSICAL
HEALTH PROBLEMS	*SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING*	*GROUP DEVELOPMENT*	*COLLECTIVE WELL-FARE*	*ENVIRONMENTAL BALANCE*
DEPRESSION (EXOGENOUS)	PROJECT OF LIFE	GROUP SUPPORT	SOCIAL OPPORTUNITIES	ENVIRONMENTS' CONDITIONS SETTLEMENTS
SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES	EXISTENTIAL CONTROL	PEERS' VALUES (FIDELITY) (DEFIDENCE)	SOCIAL MOVEMENTS PUBLIC POLICIES	PHYSICAL PROTECTION
ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY	EMOTIONAL MATURITY (SELF-ESTEEM)	FAMILY COHESION "FAIRE ACCUEIL"	COMMUNITY SERVICES	LIFE SPACES
VIOLENCE DRUG-ADDICTION	EMOTIONAL BALANCE (RESILIENCY)	LEADERSHIP SUB-CULTURES VALUES, BELIEFS	SOCIAL INSERTION CULTURAL MODELS	DWELLINGS SURROUNDINGS

Fig. 1 Dimensions' configurations in the genesis of public health problems.

Preparing people to assume their positions as professionals and citizens, cannot be reduced to voting or paying taxes, nor encourage an uncritical allegiance to the "free-market", transforming schools, as centers of critical inquiry and institutional change, in training centers for compliant egocentric producers and consumers.

To develop awareness and capabilities beyond the traditional schemes of thought, feeling and action, creating an "excess of meaning" (Gadamer, 1977), subjective and objective realities should be entangled, encompassing the alien that we strive to understand and the familiar that we take for granted.

Guidance and counselling should not be restricted to an exploratory process (projecting the present trends into a virtual future), but a normative process, which should create the conditions for the simultaneous transformation of individuals, groups, society and the environment in view of a better quality of life.

In the ecosystemic approach, guidance and counseling entail the development of a network of hope, dignity and self-reliance, individuals who think critically, communicate effectively, value diversity, act ethically and show an empathy with others, even those regarded as alien or hostile.

Problems should be defined and dealt with deep inside "the boiling pot", intertwining the four dimensions of being-in-the-world: subject's cognitive and affective processes; groups' mutual support and values; political, economical and cultural systems; biological endowment and natural and man-made environments.

This would entail the abandon of segmented projects and the work with a new framework, encompassing the four dimensions of being-in-the-world: intimate, interactive, social and biophysical. Problems of difficult settlement or solution in the contemporary world, like health-related issues (fig. 1), should be viewed in a new context[1]

[1] Multiple factors, at "biological, behavioural and group levels", influence health and disease, and the interrelation among them "often includes dynamic feedback and changes over time, that require new epidemiological paradigms" (Galea, et al., 2010).

Table I
Intertwining the Four Dimensions of the World In the Diagnosis and Treatment of the Problems

Process Stages	INTIMATE	INTERACTIVE	SOCIAL	BIOPHYSICAL
Diagnosing Events	Subject's Cognitive-Affective Status Existential Control	Dynamics and Cohesion of Groups and Communities'	Public Policies Social Structure Dominant System Culture, Values	Natural and Man-Made Environments Beings and Things
Eliciting Changes	Subjects' Cultural and Educational Development	Strengthening Social Networks Community Building	Integrative Policies Law Enactment Social Control	Enhancement of Natural and Man-Made Environments
Process Evaluation	Subjects' Well-Being Resilience Awareness	Proactive Groups Community Building Cohesion	Social Movements Well-Fare Policies Social Trust Civic Action	Equilibrium of Natural and Man-Made Environments

Table II
Dimensions' Equilibrium in the Ecosystemic Model of Culture

	Donors			
Recipients	INTIMATE	INTERACTIVE	SOCIAL	BIOPHYSICAL
INTIMATE	Creativity	Support	Services:	Vitality
INTERACTIVE	Altruism	Teamwork	Alliances	Niches
SOCIAL	Citizenship	Partnerships	Organisation	Spaces
BIOPHYSICAL	Care	Defence	Sustainability	Equilibrium

Table III
Dimensions' Disruption in the Non-Ecosystemic Model of Culture

	Inflictors			
Victims	INTIMATE	INTERACTIVE	SOCIAL	BIOPHYSICAL
INTIMATE	Solipsism	Subjection	Neglect	Harm
INTERACTIVE	Egotism	Fanaticism	Co-opting	Dispersal
SOCIAL	Abuse	Corporatism	Tyranny	Extinction
BIOPHYSICAL	Injury	Damage	Spoliation	Savageness

The singularity of each dimension and their mutual support must be taken into account, as they combine to induce the events (deficits and assets), cope with consequences (desired or undesired) and elicit change (table I), strengthening connections and sealing ruptures, in view of their dynamic equilibrium.

In the ecosystemic approach, all dimensions of being-in-the-world are considered in view of the development of overall quality of life. The equilibrium (table II) or disruption (table III) between the different dimensions result from different models of culture, which can be ecosystemic or non-ecosystemic.

Man-environment relations imply social, economic, cultural and other dimensions; "it requires dynamic skills to discover and study the environment and find solutions, capacity to discern the relevant dimensions of a situation, readiness to accept responsibility, initiative taking, independence, commitment" (Hugonnier, 2008).

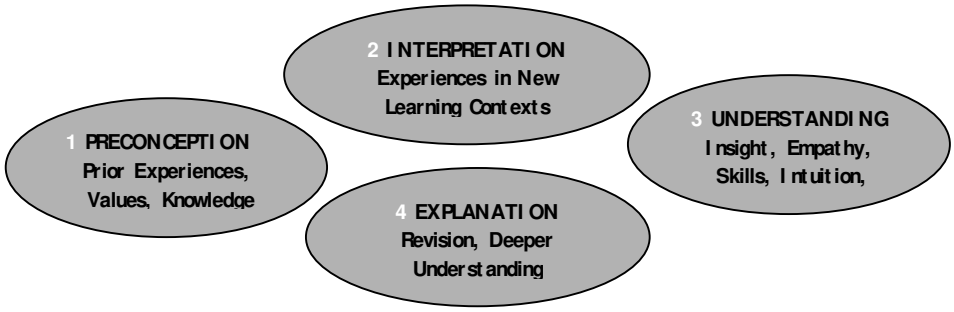

Fig. 2 From preconceptions to explanation: the heuristic-hermeneutic process in the socio-cultural learning niches

Guidance and counseling as a heuristic-hermeneutic process

The ecosystemic conditions to live better in a better world depend on collaborative experiential learning and communicating processes in the socio-cultural learning niches[2], of a network of hope, dignity and self-reliance, consisting of individuals who think critically, communicate effectively, value diversity and act ethically.

Working with phenomena (how reality appears in a specific space-time horizon of understanding, feeling and action), requires an adequate learning environment, which is essential to moral and democratic education (Lind, 2003). The methodology in the socio-cultural learning niches should be participatory, experiential and reflexive (fig. 2).

In the socio-cultural learning niches, significant experiences can be elicited, perceptions and contents can be unveiled, individual initial insights can be enriched by the contributions of others, a process encompassing socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation[3] (Nonaka and Konno, 1998).

By heuristic-hermeneutic process (participatory, experiential and reflexive), it is possible to reflect about our own realities and develop new capabilities to explore and deal with alternative configurations, in view of the interplay of the different dimensions of being-in-the-world: intimate, interactive, social and biophysical.

The objective is not to solve taken for granted problems (the "bubbles" of the surface), but to unveil and work with the dynamic and complex configurations in the "boiling pot", considering individuals, groups, society and environment as active components of the problems of difficult settlement or solution in the world[4].

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[2] "A niche is a new structure, a small core of agents that emerges within the system and is seen as the incumbent for innovation. An emergent structure is formed around niches to stimulate the further development of these niches and the emergence of niche-regimes" (Frantzeskaki and Loorbach, 2009).

[3] According to Nonaka and Konno, the process can be described by the following steps: 1) *Socialisation:* sharing tacit knowledge (internal knowledge, skills and insights) with others by mentoring, imitation, observation and practice; 2) *Externalisation:* converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, through images or words (conceptual knowledge), as a result of a dialogue; 3) *Combination:* knowledge conversion by exchanging and combining different types of explicit knowledge of different sources. 4) *Internalisation:* converting explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge in people's minds, which is represented by mental images or models ('learning by doing').

[4] Diagnosis and prognosis of current problems should take into account the connections (assets) and ruptures (deficits) between the different dimensions of the world, as donors and recipients: *Intimate Dimension*: cognitive and affective processes, existential control, resilience, core beliefs and values, coping abilities, cultural and educational development; *Interactive Dimension*: social networks, groups' dynamics, groups' cohesion and mutual support, community building, bounds and bindings; *Social Dimension:* political, economical, social and cultural aspects, public policies, law enactment, health, educational and environmental programmes; *Biophysical Dimension*: biological endowment, natural and built environments, life spaces, neighbourhoods and settlements.

In this sense, this paper subsequently describes one of the potential heuristic-hermeneutic processes which can be applied in the socio-cultural learning niches in order to develop new conditions and ways to understand and act upon the many problems that affect the collective project of life:

- *Unveiling subject-object relationships and prevailing paradigms (intimate dimension):* Participants are asked to write down in a piece of paper (not identified) whatever comes to their minds in view of circumstantial images or objects which are passed along to catch their eyes (for instance, bottle caps in a string).
- *Sharing perceptions in the group (interactive dimension):* The written statements are subsequently redistributed out of sort to the participants, who share form and content by reading them aloud; the experience goes beyond individual initial perceptions and is enriched by others' perceptions in the group.
- *Working with the cultural and natural milieu (social and biophysical dimensions):* In view of a participatory, experiential and reflexive processes developed in the socio-cultural learning niche, the participants have the opportunity to reflect on their own realities and develop new capabilities to analyse and act upon the present configurations formed by the interplay of the different dimensions of being-in-the-world.
- *Developing a new project of life:* Current and alternative forms of being-in-the-world are compared, alternative configurations are developed by new experiences in the socio-cultural learning niche; social, political, economical and environmental consequences of different systems of culture (ecosystemic or non-ecosystemic) are considered.

Statements offered by the participants of a socio-cultural learning niche, after exposure to the same collection of objects, are subsequently listed, to show the different contents that emerge and the different forms of subject-object relationships (intimate dimension), which were subsequently shared within the group (interactive dimension):

1) Box having within: 3 bottle caps tied up by an elastic string (it may suggest interaction, integration, inter-personal communication, horizontality); a seashell, 3 pink stones (it may suggest compartment, non integration between parts); a ribbon of paper with the inscription: how many parts have a grain? (it may suggest the type of information discussed interaction).

2) This box (and maybe others) remembers me of my childhood and a beloved aunt, who kept photos and others belongings in it. I feel the smell of sea in the stones and in the alga. I don't know how many parts there in a seed., but nevertheless it would contain the production of life. The link between the objects means the link with other people and the basis of social relations. "Keeping" in the box means to keep people, to keep carefulness, preserving relations that became intense.

3) The box deceived me, I expected much for so little. I thought it cold, it is not; heavy, but no. I don"t like it, it is smooth, opening it I thought of a jewel-case; new sensations: white little stones, similar to those in the river where I work; united bottle caps, but for children.

4) Curiosity, boredom, impatience, beach, sea, chilled water, patience, questions and answers, sand, anxiety, to solve, "Maria Chiquinha", children songs, China, Japan, grains, quantity, immensity, plenitude, rest, tiredness.

5) Feeling of anguish in view of the time; inside each of us there are simple and complex things; their development will help us to grow as people.

6) Half shell; organic/inorganic; nature/human made; solid/flexible.

7) Found objects; shell/stones; artefacts; a collection of diverse objects not belonging to any category.

8) Objects of nature are more beautiful and interesting in form than are manufactured articles - but the metal caps may suggest that nature provides in many ways - even when unaesthetic.

9) Sharp and smooth texture; manipulate.

10) Contents: world, rocks from ocean, trash caps, city from modern society, black stones, forest plant; the contents represent global communities: rural, urban, forest, islands.

11) Three black seeds, three elastically connected bottle caps, three white river stones and a heart shaped, dried, open seed pot lay in a white rectangular open top plastic container; remains of living plants, time worn rocks and man-made metal objects represent earth materials.

12) Different shapes, sharp objects, smooth, multi-national corporations, dry.

13) Natural food and junk food; moderation - nature's way and mass consumption; voluntary simplicity, consumerism. sustainability, extinction/destruction.

14) I wonder what type of music these items make; was/is the heart-shaped thing good to eat; what are the little "black beans", how were the holes drilled in the pop tops? what kind of soda are the 2 unfamiliar?

In view of subject-object relationships, statements could subsequently be analysed in the group in view of subjects' epistemic positions regarding the experience (the statements above illustrate most of them):

appropriation or alteration of cognitive, affective and conative processes;

common-sense or adherence to established, stereotyped preconceptions;

academic or reduction to logical categories (describing to achieve closure);

heteronomy or dependency, trust on exterior authority to qualify own experience;

resistance or refusal to being involved (failure to see meaning in the experience);

dogmatism or compliance to fixed paradigms for being-in-the-world.

Statements are also analysed regarding the thematic content, considering the emphasis and inclusiveness given by the participants to the different dimensions in the phenomenal world (intimate, interactive, social and biophysical). The epistemic analysis refers to the "how" and the thematic one refers to the "what".

Policy Lessons, Findings and Conclusions

Development and evaluation of public policies, community projects. teaching and research programmes should intertwine the different dimensions of being-in-the-world, strengthening their connections and sealing the ruptures between them, in view of the development of an ecosystemic model of culture.

As by-products of the prevailing models of culture (ecosystemic or non-ecosystemic), ethics, education, culture, natural and man-made environments, physical, social and mental well-being are not treated as separate objects, nor of individual approaches, but should be embedded in overall policies of quality of life.

Instead of "repairing" "bad" situations to make them "straight", problems are assessed in view of complex configurations encompassing individuals, groups, society, natural and man-made environments, considering the interplay of the different dimensions of being-in-the-world.

The analysis of the events implies the assessment of the actual and potential role of each dimension and of the configurations formed by their entanglement in the space-time

continuum; in this sense, overall policies and projects, in different domains (environment, education, health promotion, quality of life etc.) should:

• define the problems within the "boiling pot" instead of reducing them to the bubbles of the surface (fragmented, taken for granted problems);
• deal with events as products of a dynamic field, intertwining the four dimensions of being-in-the-world: intimate, interactive, social and biophysical
• assess the deficits and assets of the dimensions as donors and recipients, in view of their relationships in a mutually entangled web (configurations);
• preserve the singularity (identity, proper characteristics) of and the dynamic equilibrium between (reciprocity, mutual support) all dimensions, strengthening connections and sealing ruptures.
• contribute to the development of an ecosystemic model of culture, as an essential condition for consistency, effectiveness and endurance, in view of new paradigms of growth, power, wealth, work and freedom.

In order to develop public policies, community projects and research and teaching programmes, additional tables are presented as a framework to combine the different dimensions of being-in-the-world (table IV) and to show the benefits (or harms) upon each dimension of different models of culture (tables V and VI).

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Table IV
Building the Quality of Life In the Ecosystemic Model of Culture

	Dimensions as Recipients			
Dimensions as Donors	***Intimate*** ***Subjective Well-Being***	***Interactive*** ***Group Support and Integration***	***Social*** ***Political and Civic Life***	***Biophysical*** ***Healthy Environments***
Intimate (personal roles) *What individuals can do for the dimensions of the world*	*Subjects care for own development and well-being* Cognitive, affective and cultural predicaments, coping abilities, core beliefs and existential control	*Subjects care for the development of significant others* Bonding, bridging, showing affection, solidarity, support in own group, family, peers and other social groups	*Subjects care for the development of society's well-fare* Civic engagement, assumption of local, national and global responsibilities in public affairs, citizenship	*Subjects care for natural and man-made environments* Caring for different environments, fauna, flora and own body; caring for landscapes and built environment
Interactive (groups' roles) *What groups can do for the dimensions of the world*	*Groups care for the development of individuals* Accepting, caring for and supporting peoples' inclusion and development in different groups	*Groups care for development of own and other groups* Promoting mutual understanding, participation, reciprocity and cohesion.	*Groups care for the development of overall society* Organising societal action, partnerships, alliances, community building; advocacy, citizenship	*Groups care for environments and bodies* Sustaining organisations and civic action for healthy and aesthetic environments
Social (public roles) *What society can do for the dimensions of the world*	*Society cares for individuals* Securing the rights to health, work, education, culture, security, justice, shelter, leisure, nutrition, sports, locomotion	*Society cares for groups* Establishing public policies and facilities for the development of associative tasks and solidarity within the social tissue	*Society cares for society* Developing social, political, economical and cultural institutions; facilities, equity, accessibility and accountability	*Society cares for environment and physical bodies* Sustaining public policies for good governance, health, sanitation, natural and man-made environments
Biophysical (environment's roles) *What natural and man-made milieu can do for the dimensions of the world*	*Environment benefits subjects* Provision of resources and spaces for life (air, land, water, food, natural and man-made landscapes and artefacts, architecture	*Environment benefits groups* Provision of resources and spaces for the organisation and settlement of groups and group activities.	*Environment benefits society* Provision of resources and spaces for physical, social, cultural, political and economic life	*Environment benefits environment* Balance of matter and energy, biodiversity and equilibrium: land, air, water, fauna, flora, territories and landscapes

Table V

Dimensions of Being-in-the-World In the Ecosystemic Model of Culture

	Benefits from the Intimate Area
To Intimate Area	**Creativeness:** subjects develop their inner resoiurces in the cognitive and affective domains and the necessary conditions to be creative and resilient.
To Interactive Area	**Cooperation**: members participate and contribute, enabling groups and networks to perform collective tasks (participants help each other, offer advice, listen to others, feel others needs)
To Social Area	**Citizenship:** societies benefit from active and interested individuals, who perform their social roles with a public regard and responsibility.
To Biophysical Area	**Care**: natural and built environments receive the attention of sensitive individuals, ecosystems are respected by enlightened people.
	Benefits from the Interactive Area
To Intimate Area	**Support:** individuals receive support from groups and networks in order to develop their inner selves (self-esteem, identity, cognitive and affective support to develop as mature human beings).
To Interactive Area:	**Cohesiveness:** groups and networks develop by inner processes the very ground for mutual support and respect for democratic settlings.
To Social Area	**Partnerships:** societies benefit of networks and organised groups that sustain the social tissue, including primary groups (families, peers) and other organised associations (secondary groups).
To Biophysical Area	**Preservation:** environment benefits from the care of groups and networks, which actively preserve ecosystems (as specialised groups and concerned organisations.
	Benefits from the Social Area
To Intimate Area	**Services:** individuals are promoted as citizens by societies which care for education, health, employment, leisure, transport, shelter, security, etc (quality of citizenship results from qualified human beings).
To Interactive Area	**Diversity:** groups and networks benefit from democratic societies who permit diversity of association on cultural, political and economical grounds
To Social Area	**Organisation:** Social development and organisation entitle societies to provide the necessary services to promote citizens and quality of life at all levels.
To Biophysical Area	**Sustainability:** environments are sustained by societies concerned with policies and services aimed at the equilibrium of ecosystems, securing biodiversity
	Benefits from the Biophysical Area
To all Areas	**Vitality:** life sustainment, variety, biodiversity, adequate natural and man-made environments provide the necessary conditions to develop physical, social and mental health for individuals, groups and societies, enhancing overall quality of life.

Table VI

Dimensions of Being-in-the-World in the Non-Ecosystemic Model of Culture

	Harms from the Intimate Area
To Intimate Area	**Solipsism:** self-existence is the only certainty; subject disregard others; absolute egoism hinders own development due to the lack of exchange with others.
To Interactive Area	**Heteronomy:** groups lose their identity, are manipulated and attach their affairs and interests to other's law or rule.
To Social Area	**Subjection:** societies become rigid, totalitarian, obeisance to arbitrary rules is enforced by discretionary power of whimsical individuals.
To Biophysical Area	**Predatoriness:** environments are used arbitrarily, as a unlimited source to increase own wealth and pleasure.
	Harms from the Interactive Area
To Intimate Area	**Abdication:** individuals abdicate of their own identities as human beings, in prejudice of original ideas, feelings and action; self is reduced and impoverished
To Interactive Area	**Fanaticism:** wild and excessive enthusiasm for ideas accepted without discussion, hinders feedback; groups cannot be creative, restricted forms of thinking degenerate into fanaticism.
To Social Area	**Corporativism:** societies are controlled by vested interests; groups lose their public dimension, ignore society's overall needs and look only for own interests and advantages.
To Biophysical Area	**Exploitation**: environments are considered as a stock of resources to be used whenever there is an advantage to the group, with no concern for others' needs and natural and built environments.
	Harms from the Social Area
To Intimate Area	**Domination:** individual feelings and thoughts cannot be expressed; blind obeisance is commanded for subjects; there is no possibility of dissent, nor the possibility of altering the status quo.
To Interactive Area	**Cooptation:** groups degenerate and are used as instruments by dominant interests in an subtle or open form; family, peers, associations and networks are coopted by vested interests as docile instruments to promote acts or ideas; there is no informed consent.
To Social Area	**Totalitarianism:** societies dwindle with the suppression of interlocutors able to present new ideas and to discuss prevailing policies, issues are decided in the benefit of the dominant rulers.
To Biophysical Area	**Spoliation:** environments are abused to the point of no regeneration; deserts, drought, pollution result from brutish policies and practices in connection with production and consuming processes.
	Harms from the Biophysical Area
To All Areas	**Aggression, dispersion, extinction, savageness:** In the absence of the anthropic principle (inclusion of mankind as part of the natural world) environments grow increasing hostile to humans, catastrophes destroy entire populations.