

WSSA In Terms of Itself: Associations within the Association*

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Thank you for attending this luncheon address today. A couple of weeks ago, when I was sitting in my office trying to think about what I was going to say to you today, I had an idea. As a part of my strategy to avoid putting something down on paper, I went to Google.com and typed in four words, “war”, “Iraq”, and “resolutions against”.

What I received was page after page of websites that represented organizations of one type or another, state and local governments, university faculties, unions, and so on that had gone to the trouble to debate and develop a resolution against the war in Iraq. I clicked on a few of them to see what they had to say and then it hit me. Why not put together a similar resolution against the war and present it to the WSSA membership for passage at this conference?

I printed out several of the resolutions, grabbed parts of this one and parts of that one that seemed to suit a perspective coming from this association; I amended several of the “where as’s” and reworked a “be it resolved” or two and I had it—WSSA’s resolution against the war in Iraq. I fired it out as an e-mail attachment to the members of the Executive Council asking them what they thought about my idea. Then I waited for a response.

I did not have long to wait. The first was one member’s advice to drop the idea immediately. Then others came in. A couple were very supportive of my resolution, but most said it was a bad idea, not because they didn’t support the content of the resolution (most of them did support it), but because it couldn’t be done on such short notice. They didn’t think that the membership would have time to debate, discuss, or possibly amend the document, and there would be no venue available at the conference for all of the WSSA members to get together to discuss the resolution, let alone come to some sort of

agreement on the wording of the document and then vote to approve it. Based on the response of the Executive Council, and for all practical purposes, my resolution died in about two or three hours.

But it didn't die completely. The experience of writing and proposing a resolution against the war to the Executive Council led me to think about WSSA itself, and in particular to think about what kind of organization this is. Why wasn't it possible for me to get a resolution about the war in Iraq through WSSA? Was it for obvious reasons like a lack of time to do it or that it was just a bad idea or were other things involved, maybe things that weren't so obvious?

For over two years now, I've been working on a book about the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin. An earlier book was about the termination and subsequent restoration of the tribe's status as a federally recognized Indian tribe. This time around, I want to look at what the tribe looks like twenty five years after federal restoration of its identity as a fully recognized American Indian Tribe. To do that, I'm using a theoretical perspective that I've been playing around with for over twenty years now. For awhile it was called a "new science" or "the new sciences". Then a version of it became popular as chaos theory. Now it is generally called complexity theory. Using this new theoretical perspective, my research goal is to think about the Menominee tribe as a complex adaptive system or living human system. Could a similar theoretical perspective bring with it any new insights into WSSA as an organization if we thought about it as a living human system? Can complexity theory help explain the fate of the anti-war resolution I proposed to the WSSA Executive Council a couple of weeks ago? An attempt to answer these two questions is going to be the focus of my talk with you here today.

A process: An alternative way of seeing ourselves

Complexity theory, like WSSA itself, is grounded in many different academic disciplines. It probably has an origin in physics when physicists had gone as far as they thought they could go thinking small; i.e., particle physics and quantum mechanics, and thinking big; i.e., a theory of the universe, of all things great and small. Looking for new challenges, some physicists turned to living systems to explain the most mystifying thing of all, life itself.

Complexity theory also evolved out of the study of human intelligence and the pursuit of artificial intelligence. It came out of the study of the weather and efforts to predict the weather, both locally and on a global scale. The theory also has origins in biology and the ecological sciences where scientists think about swamps, rain forests and other ecological systems as complex adaptive systems. Today, if you go to Google.com or some other search engine and type in terms like “complexity theory”, “emergence” and “complex adaptive system”, my guess is you will see applications of complexity theory in virtually all of the academic disciplines represented in WSSA.

In my own case, a clear connection between my work with complexity theory and the research underway by my colleagues in the American Indian Studies Section happened more or less serendipitously. Several years ago, when I was just beginning to grapple some of the concepts associated with the theory, I gave a paper about complexity theory and American Indian policy that, judging from the audience’s reaction, did not go well at all. After the panel was over though, two Navajo students came up to me, thanked

me for presenting the paper and said they knew what I was talking about. That was amazing and wonderful to hear.

One of them said that she saw a lot of parallels between complexity theory and traditional Indigenous knowledge or Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK). Well, it turned out they were right. And, since virtually all of my research is in American Indian studies, I couldn't have been happier with the fairly easy compatibility between the two independently derived views of the world.

One of my Ph.D. students, Dan Wildcat, once told me that Western Science is just now discovering a way of thinking about and seeing the world that has been well-known in Native America for hundreds or even thousands of years. I think he is right about that.

The key idea that a perspective informed by complexity theory brings to an effort to think about WSSA and other human organizations is that they are all living systems and they are all a process—a dynamic living process. And whether it is a single-cell organism, a human being, a social system or even something like a team in the recently concluded NCAA college basketball tournament, they are all motivated by one thing. They are living systems that want to perpetuate themselves as long as they can. They do not want to die.

The parts: Systems nested within systems within....

All complex adaptive systems are systems nested within systems nested within systems. The human body, which is a living system, is composed of organelles and other nested subsystems that make up single cells that make up larger nested subsystems like the lungs, which make up still larger subsystems like a respiratory system, digestive

system and nervous system. Living systems range in size from single living cells to the entire earth itself.

Following this theoretical perspective, WSSA is not a hierarchical system with a president on top controlling the association, and the members on the bottom contributing their time and money to the organization. Rather the Association is a system composed of systems within systems within systems. The program sections are the most numerous and important subsystems in the Association. They are where the action is and, from a complexity perspective, they are the heart and maybe even something like the soul of this organization.

And there are other nested subsystems in WSSA. The Executive Council is one such subsystem which itself contains other subsystems such as appointed committees and an executive director. The latter contains a subsystem responsible for the WSSA website and another for WSSA newsletters. Another nested subsystem, The Social Science Journal, contains within it subsystems like the book editor accompanied by the volunteers who help him put together the book review section in each issue of the journal.

A common body of metaphor

Something that holds this whole system of systems nested within systems together is a common body of metaphor. The term metaphor, as I use it here and in my research, refers to the stored images, archetypes and stereotypes that collectively represent our knowledge of ourselves and the world around us. Every day we come to understand new things in terms of the things we already know and what we already know is stored in our minds as metaphor.

There is research to suggest that we are all born with a preprogrammed set of archetypes or basic images of the world—basic concepts of security, danger, and so on, that help us make sense of the world around us. Years ago, when my kids were growing up, I picked one of them up from her pre-school and when she climbed in the car she told me that she had seen some monsters in the school's gym. I said okay, tomorrow I'll go with you and we'll check them out. The next day, again after school, I asked her to show me the monsters. We went to the gym, a fairly dark place with no windows, and she pointed to some gym mats hanging on the far wall. We walked over to the mats, I took one down, put it on the floor and told her that they were used by kids so that they wouldn't hurt themselves when they were tumbling, or playing with each other. So, what did she see the next time she went into the school gym? She no longer saw monsters. Now, because of the newly acquired images in her mind, she saw gym mats.

A common body of metaphor is acquired and shared by people in various nested sub-systems like the ones we are all a part of in our everyday lives. In WSSA, most of the metaphor we acquire and share with others comes to us through our participation in our program sections. In fact, if my personal history is any guide, my early experience with WSSA was almost exclusively acquired through my participation in the American Indian Studies Section of this Association. I gave my papers there, virtually all of my formal and informal interaction was with other members of the AIS section, and my memories of those first years of participation in WSSA are almost exclusively tied to my experiences with my colleagues in American Indian Studies. In a sense, for me, the AIS Section was the Association.

Still, at the same time and almost without really being conscious of it, I also acquired a shared body of metaphor with other members of WSSA attending our annual conferences. The common experience of attending our meetings in Albuquerque, San Diego, Denver and elsewhere, the hotel venues, associations with our conferences and other things going on at the same time every year and all manner of other things contribute to a common body of metaphor that embodies what WSSA is as an Association. The Association exists as information, knowledge and memories—as metaphor—in the minds of the members of the Association.

Self-organization/self-perpetuation

Another defining characteristic of WSSA and other complex adaptive systems is an ongoing process of self-organization or self-perpetuation. To maintain internal organization and avoid total dissipation into its environment, living systems constantly rebuild themselves by drawing energy and other materials from the environment. While it is distributed throughout all of the nested subsystems of this organization, the underlying source of all organizational life in WSSA is in the program sections. Over the years, new sections have formed while others have dissolved; some sections have remained more or less active and stable for years, while participation in others has shrunk for a few years only to revive and become larger and more active than ever. Through it all, the activities of the WSSA membership in the program sections sustain the Association.

Understanding the concept of self-organization is central to understanding complexity theory and the idea of a complex adaptive system so I want to dwell on it for

a minute or two. One common complex system familiar to most people is an ant hill. It consists of a queen, the rest of the ants and the hill itself. It is all one living system.

I'm an old farm kid, and one thing I used to like to do is kick ant hills. Kick it, and the ants would come running out every which way and if you kicked the ant hill hard enough, you'd see some of the ants carry eggs, others seemed to do emergency repairs, but most ran around trying to bite anything they could find around the ant hill. Unless you were a particularly slow farm kid, you soon learned to quickly step back and away from the ant hill because if you didn't you were likely to get bitten by the ants.

There is no central control involved here. There isn't a queen ant telling the other ants where to go and what to do. Each ant acts on local information about what's going on, local knowledge about what to do and each ant exercises local control over what it does to protect the colony. Consider it all together—all those ants running around protecting the ant colony—and you are looking at the process of self-organization and a living complex adaptive system.

I have an old war story that illustrates the concept of self-organization in human systems. Years ago, in the Vietnam War, I was a very junior naval officer on an aircraft carrier called the Forrestal. Some of you from Arizona may be familiar with the Forrestal because Senator John McCain served on it during a part of the war. When he and I were on the ship, we had a fire onboard and lost 134 men before we put the fire out. It all started when an air-to-air missile on one plane accidentally launched and went into the wing fuel tank of McCain's plane. A thousand pound bomb dropped from his plane and fell into the burning jet fuel. A team of firefighters immediately ran out to put out the fire, but—you could see all this because we filmed all of the take offs and landings on the

carrier—the bomb went off and the firefighting team disappeared. A backup firefighting team then ran out to fight the fire, but another bomb went off and they also disappeared.

Now we were in real trouble. We were down to people like me to do something to save the ship. To compound problems, one of the first things destroyed by the explosions and fire was communication from the bridge so there was no central coordination and control from the captain. Most of us throughout the ship did not know what was going on except that we were in real trouble. I had had three weeks of firefighting training prior to going on the ship so I had a little bit of knowledge about what to do to fight a fire. Most of the other people had no training at all.

Self-organization is sort of like the default behavior of an organization. In this case, most of us started to do something. We rolled bombs and pushed planes over the side so they wouldn't explode or burn in the expanding fire. We grabbed hoses and extinguishers and applied water or foam on the fire where we could. After several hours, of working together with local information, local knowledge and local control over what we could do to fight the fire, the ship, functioning as a living process of self-organization, saved itself. To my knowledge, we have never been in anything like the life threatening situation the Forrestal found itself that day off the coast of Vietnam, however a similar dynamic process of human self-organization sustains this Association and has done so since WSSA emerged as an academic association almost fifty years ago.

Emergence

Emergence is something that the parts of a complex adaptive system do together that they would not do by themselves. Putting out the fire on the Forrestal is an example

of emergent behavior. Another example occurred in Los Angeles on the day authorities announced the Rodney King verdict to the public. If you had conducted a poll before the announcement asking people what they would do if they disagreed with the verdict, most people would not have said that they planned to riot, loot and burn the city. Most people don't think that way individually, but put them together under the right circumstances and you have the violence that was an emergent behavior of the mob in downtown Los Angeles that day.

Emergent properties evolving out of this Association include the Social Science Journal, our newsletter and the WSSA website. Perhaps the most visible emergent property in WSSA is the annual conference you and I are attending here this week. It took many people, volunteering hours of time and effort, to put this conference together including all of you who presented papers, who serve as section coordinators, the people who worked with Larry Gould on the executive director's staff, and the contributions of the current as well as several past members of WSSA's Executive Council. Together they contribute to something that is important to the members of this Association, the larger academic community and it is certainly something that we would not do by ourselves.

Range of Interaction

Beyond conference programs, a website and newsletters, WSSA is something that is nonmaterial and irreducible. It consists of patterns of relationships between people that generally compliment one another and together, this process of interaction between the parts of the system embodies the existence and identity of the Association as a living

human system. The range of interaction is local and from one person to another. Whether it is face-to-face, on the phone or via exchanges of e-mail on the world-wide-web, the dynamic pattern of personal human relationships between members of the Association is the Association.

Emerging out of all this interaction is the distinctive interdisciplinary identity of this association. While interdisciplinary interaction certainly occurs in many, and perhaps all of our sections (American Indian Studies, my home program section, is a prime example of this), the interdisciplinary character of WSSA is an emergent property of the Association as a whole and emerges out of interaction between our members within and outside the program sections. It emerges from discussions between members at our receptions, around the book displays, during the coffee breaks and out of the interaction between members of the audience at this luncheon. The interdisciplinarity that emerges out of all this interaction is definitely something we do together that we would not do by ourselves.

An open system

From a perspective informed by complexity theory, WSSA is not a coherent, material thing that somehow exists separately from its environment. Instead, it is inseparable from and exists in a simultaneous cause and effect relationship with its environment. What we do as an Association changes the world around us as and, at the same time, we are changed by it.

For several years now, I have gotten into the practice of distributing my WSSA conference papers in my graduate classes in public management at the University of

Missouri-Kansas City. I suspect that at least a few of my students get something worthwhile from thinking about complexity theory, Indian gaming, or some of the other things I have written about in recent years. At the same time, their reactions to my papers influence what I write in my subsequent conference papers in American Indian Studies. The range of this interaction between my students and me is local and things change in both systems, my class and my program section, because of the interaction.

I suppose it would be legitimate to ask at this point if human systems and their environments are inseparable, how can we know where one ends and the other begins? How can we tell what is and what is not a part of the system? The answer is that the term “complex adaptive system” or “human system” is an analytical construct. It is a concept. It is not different from other concepts we use every day to order and understand our world. Think about WSSA as an association or an organization and you are doing the same thing I am doing when I use the term complex adaptive system. The only difference is the latter term may be a new one to many of you.

When we think about something like WSSA, we inevitably use a construct like “organization”, “association”, or now perhaps “human system” to think about it. And when we do that, we also boundary the system because, in our minds, we are thinking of some things as inside the system and of some things as outside the system. This is automatic. We think about and perceive things this way and we do it all the time.

The whole system

So if WSSA is a self-organizing and self-perpetuating process of simultaneous interactive relationships between the various parts of the system, how can we describe the

whole system? I have talked about relationships, about simultaneous cause and effect relationships and about interactive processes, but what is the whole system?

For me, the best way to think about this is to use an analogy of the entire universe (I know this is really thinking big, but it works for me). Physicists say that only about five percent of the universe is ordinary matter—the stuff that you and I, mountains and rivers; and planets and galaxies are made of. The rest of the universe, ninety-five percent of it, is “dark matter”. We cannot see it, or touch it, but because it has mass, we know it is there.

I think that the simultaneous interactive relationships between people in WSSA and in all other human systems are the equivalent of dark matter in the universe. Human relationships are what organizations are all about. The most significant human relationships in this Association are those that occur in our program sections. As long as a dynamic pattern of roles and relationships between our members in and between WSSA’s sections maintains itself, WSSA will adapt and continue to do well as a living human system.

The fate of the resolution

Well, this is the Western Social Science Association, and one thing social scientists like to do with theories is try to explain things with them. So, here are some thoughts about the fate of my resolution against the war in Iraq that are, at least in part, based on the use of some of the concepts associated with complexity theory. Bear in mind, that there is still a healthy debate going on among those of us working with this theory (some of us call ourselves “complexifiers”) around the question of whether or not

complexity theory is testable and, therefore, even a real theory. Personally, I think we are working with some similar concepts and we are taking some steps toward a common way of seeing the world, but I'm not sure how much farther than that I would go right now.

Human systems are not hierarchical. As the President of WSSA I cannot exercise any central control of anything in this Association. Even without the aid of complexity theory, this is obvious. I only have one vote on the Executive Council and as the chair, I cannot introduce a motion in a meeting of the Council. Even faculty members have more power than I do. You can't be much more powerless than that.

Complexity theory suggests that the established patterns of roles and relationships between the parts of WSSA are dynamic, robust and largely consist of local one-on-one personal interactions within the sections, and, to a lesser extent, between members from different sections of the Association. Under such circumstances, it is extremely difficult for a WSSA President to break in and interact with others in the process before or during the conference. Although we are working on it, there is no list of member e-mail addresses so it is all but impossible for anyone to start an interactive dialogue with the membership two weeks before the conference is set to get underway. And once we are here, we never get together in one place at the same time so initiating or leading a debate on something like my resolution is not possible at the conference.

WSSA is an open system in a constant interactive relationship with elements of its environment. That environment includes the large and diverse community of American higher education, many agencies of the U.S. Government and the larger society as a whole. WSSA's response to an anti-war resolution, as articulated by the members of the Executive Council, reflected their perceptions of, and in some cases, uncertainty about

the proper role of WSSA in the context of this country at war. By their very nature, all human systems exhibit a certain dynamic stability over time. Therefore, caution and initial inaction is the most likely response of organizations like this one in times of uncertainty and rapid change.

Finally, although you may not realize it, I suspect that of you are familiar with the concept of deterministic chaos. It is also known as the butterfly effect. The idea is that under the right circumstances, a seemingly insignificant event like a butterfly flapping its wings in China can contribute to the later development of a tornado in western Kansas. In some ways, I see my war resolution as something like that butterfly. It emerged as an idea, flew out into the Ethernet to interact with the WSSA Executive Council, it immediately encountered some severe turbulence, bounced around for a couple of days and then died. But if complexity theory is right, butterflies, under the right circumstances can definitely stir things up. I like butterflies and if I could, I'd be in favor of launching as many butterflies in this country as often as I could. This world needs all the butterflies it can get these days.