Systems Thinking Research in the Twenty-First Century: 
A SWOT Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In this opinion article, the author aims to depict the state of systems thinking research through the lens of my own personal experience. His point of view is that of a relatively young scholar who has the privilege to be involved in the international systems thinking community in many ways. Indeed, in 2012 he established, with other colleagues, an academic society named Business Systems Laboratory (BSLab), which has rapidly become an important society for research into the application of systems thinking to society, business and organizations. Through his activity of organization of conferences and his editorial activity at the journals associated with BSLab (and recently as Editor-in-Chief of one of the older leading scientific journals on systems thinking and cybernetics, Kybernetes), the author has a privileged point of observation over the path of systems thinking in recent years. With this premise this opinion article aims to point out through a SWOT analysis the strength, the weaknesses, the opportunities and the threats of and for Systems Thinking.

KEYWORDS

Personal Perspective, Research Trends, SWOT Analysis, Systems Thinking

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Premise: Personal Perspective and Background

In this opinion article, I aim to depict the state of systems thinking research through the lens of my own personal experience. It is therefore worth indicating whose point of view is being presented here by introducing myself to the reader. My point of view is that of a relatively young scholar (as 43 years old can be considered young in academic community in many countries, including Italy, where I live) who has the privilege to be involved in the international systems thinking community in many ways. Indeed, in 2012 I established, with other colleagues, an academic society named Business Systems Laboratory (BSL), which has rapidly become an important society for research into the application of systems thinking to society, business and organizations. It has about 200 members from more than 50 countries worldwide. Through my organization of conferences and my editorial activity at the journals associated with BSLab (and recently as Editor-in-Chief of one of the older leading scientific journals on systems thinking and cybernetics, Kybernetes), I have a privileged point of observation over the path of systems thinking in recent years.

Being one of the few marketing professors in the systems thinking community, my point of view is somewhat different from that of many of my colleagues in this learned community, being more focused on the possible “targets” to positioning the research according to business and academic needs.
Moreover, my perspective is also influenced by the country where I live: Italy has been facing a gradual but severe reduction in the state funds available for academic research, and an even worse downturn in the private funding and sponsoring of social and business research over recent decades.

1.2. Framework of Analysis

Given what I have said above about my personal point of view, on which this article is based, I will try to give a formal quality to my examination of the state of the art of systems thinking using a classical marketing planning tool: the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis. This analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats is considered to have been put forward by Albert S. Humphrey in the 1960s. It is a simple model that assesses the internal and external positive and negative points of an organization in its context. More specifically, SWOT analysis gathers information and divides it into internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats) concerns in order to determine what might support the organization, and which problems must be overcome to carry out the organization’s goals.

1.3. Subject of the Analysis

Systems thinking research is not a firm or defined entity. To apply the SWOT analysis, it is thus necessary to widen the perspective and consider the systems thinking research community as an informal international group made up of researchers that adopt any kind of systems thinking approach or methodology in their research—and more specifically in our case, apply systems thinking research to social and organizational studies.

In defining the systems thinking field as a group of people with similar interests, we can also define the context in which the SWOT analysis can be applied: in our case, this is given by the academic environment, the government, and the firms that may sponsor systemic research.

1.4. The Value of Sponsors

The relevance of sponsors is in fact a major issue, not only for systems thinking, but for any kind of research. In recent decades, public funding for research through universities has dropped in most countries, and especially in Mediterranean Europe, due to the austerity policies implemented as a result of the debt spread following European Union rules.

In countries such as Italy, the public financing of university research is almost nonexistent, and is certainly insufficient to fund research in theoretical fields. In my personal experience, I have seen my annual research fund decrease from very little (about €1,000 per year) to zero over the last ten years.

Where possible, and where there are potentially interested firms, the ability to find private sponsors could be one answer to this shortcoming.

To understand what can be proposed and which firms can be targeted is one of the goals of the analysis I am going to conduct; but at the same time, it must be clear that this is not an easy challenge in areas where the GDP has seen a severe downturn due to austerity policies (this includes the south of Italy where I live, as well as Greece and other depressed economies).

On the other hand, the European Union can be seen as an opportunity when and if academic societies or universities are able to join in networks for EU projects that may give significant funds to research. This implies a high degree of coordination among research units, as well as the ability to attract technical staff capable of managing the heavy burden of administrative work required to be successful in writing and reporting such projects.
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