

The function of the symptoms in human systems

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The concern to maintain economic performance and personal well-being is a topic of major interest in most organizations. On the one hand, it is clear that there is a limit to growth rates in many sectors in all regions of the world. On another hand, due to global interdependence, instability is present in all decisions. In pursuit of an improved quality of life, organizations have generated a variety of responses. The dynamics of the current context pushes human systems to innovate. These decisions are related to restructuring the patterns of life in order to maintain the capacity for response to new conditions of the context.

All decisions in human systems are based on a purpose. In the human system, this purpose is symbolic and constitutes the framework for actions that make sense and give coherence to decisions and choices. Without a purpose, decisions become random (compulsive) or stereotypical (reactive). The consequences in both cases is that lost response capability. This gap between environmental demand and the ability to the system to adapt and respond generates symptoms. In a system that has lost its ability to make decisions, symptoms decide for the system.

When the machines overcome their structural capacity, they are broken. When organic systems stray from their biological commands, they suffer transformations and mutations. Human systems become ill when their lives become meaningless. What keeps the dynamic cycle in life is the purpose of the system. When the human system loses its purpose, the growing cycle stops and begins to spin in a vicious cycle that leads to collapse.

Therefore, dysfunction gives meaning to the system in the absence of meaning. In the case of a lack of purpose, dysfunctions order and organize the daily life of the system. Symptoms visibly emerge from a system that is stopped in its transformation to a new order of internal complexity.

In this paper, we will discuss the functions of these dysfunctions. That is, what is the meaning of symptoms in human systems? Why are we living and working in dysfunctional systems? What are the implications of these symptoms for the development of people? What are the challenges of transformation to achieve quality of life?

Nodes of transition

When the chimneys of the early nineteenth century began to expand and industrial growth shook Victorian monotony, Freud opened the doors of the unconscious. The world acceded to causal explanations of daily symptomatic manifestations from a new perspective that was associated with sexual repression. Traumatic sexuality as the cause of many symptoms grew just as did the chimneys, associated with the consequences of repressive Victorian morality. In the beginning of last century, sexuality was unproductive for a workplace within which 90% of the work was based on physical effort. The moral of the Victorian era was only a functional excuse for the expansion of an industrial model that needed energy from both the minerals and the workers.

The social symptoms or illnesses that characterize a historical period have always been associated with its lifestyles. What defines patterns of illness depends upon the life characteristics of a society. These characteristics are defined in the relationships between conditions of production (workplace) and well-being (personal development). Today, repressed sexuality is far from the pathological basis of our time. The number of physical workers has been reduced to almost a third of what they were in the Victorian era. Furthermore, a diversification of job roles has expanded the diversity of everyday symptoms. The diversity of symptoms present currently ranges from classical diseases, which are of high labor costs (e.g., depression, heart disease, stress, physical trauma) to the most modern diseases, which in the last years have grown exponentially (e.g., panic disorder, Burnout, addictions, bullying, substance abuse).

Over the last century, different productive moments have generated a series of theoretical and methodological “analgesics” in order to temporarily balance well-being and maintain the conditions

of production. In more than a century, symptoms have changed, but the relationships between conditions of production, workplace rules, and well-being (conditions of personal development) have not changed. The daily headlines show us a landscape of failures in the current macroeconomic situation. These mistakes are caused by solutions that come from old patterns of thought. In front to the amplitude of the unknown, the automatic responses have been pressured by the old models and recipes in an attempt to control the volatility of the current environment. This behavior creates a vicious circle of crisis. More pressure on productive conditions generates more symptoms in quality of life. This is manifested in a wild race to nowhere that leads to the self-destruction of the system. This is the feeling that occurs sometime in the life cycle of a system. It is the sensation of "running to stay at any cost" in a race that doesn't lead anywhere. This vicious circle transforms the system into the worst enemy of growth. The biggest obstacle to growth is the way of life of a system, the beliefs and attitudes that lead a system to live under pressure and to keep the life conditions at the cost of a variety of symptoms.

In this frame, symptoms represent the nodes of transformation for human systems; these are nodes of transition to a new organization of life. A symptom shows that the system can't take a leap of transformation. A symptom shows what a system cannot do, does not dare to do, or does not want to do. These are different versions of impossibility. This means that "there is a threshold that the system can't cross." The symptom is a mask, which hides features while demonstrates difficulties.

Therefore, the function of symptoms, or the function of dysfunctions, is to maintain the permanence of the system without causing structural modifications. This is the paradox of the symptom: on the one hand, it makes life more painful (dysfunction), but it also allows for the benefit of inertia (the survivor function). This postulate is a key point in addressing dysfunctions because attacking the symptom presses the system's vulnerability. Attacking the symptom reinforces its dysfunction and increases the level of vulnerability. Therefore, the system closes to the possibilities of transformation.

The mask of the symptom

When a system is purposeless, its "guide of life" has been lost or abandoned, and the symptom recovers the "reasons for existence." The symptom becomes a guide to interaction that can order everyday behaviors and actions. From the biological perspective, the development of automatic processes is a natural factor in the optimization of resources. The more automation, the lower the level of resources involved. Therefore, the response is faster and more efficient. This works as long as the features of the environment are stable and predictable. But if the environment is itself transformed into turbulence, the "automatic mode" becomes a suicide risk to the system because it starts to generate dysfunctional responses to contextual conditions. The "automatic mode of life" is a sign of fear within a system.

In the classical logic of disease, the symptom appears as a negative effect that is associated with a negative external shock. By contrast, from the perspective of self-organization, the symptom reflects a level of structural complexity that has been achieved in order to maintain stability and integration within the system, which otherwise would not be possible. For this reason, while organic systems and symbolic systems have a mandate to adapt biologically, they have different ways of achieving this purpose.

A dysfunction is a complex process. Canceling the symptom or removing it entirely does not stop the continuation of the dysfunctional process. Without addressing this structural organization, changing the status of the symptom only generates the emergence of new dysfunctions. In this sense, the concept of a "disturbing factor" is reversed. The "enemy" is not outside the system. The symptom is an ally of the system, which is attempting to maintain a durable structure. Why a human system sustains its survival at the cost of a symptom or dysfunction? In general, the cost of the symptom is less disturbing than the greater process of structural transformation.

The inability to transform generates the parallel structures that mechanically, biologically, or psychologically support (as prosthesis) a fragile dynamic of interaction. Under these conditions, the adaptive capacity depends upon the resistance of prosthesis to changes in contextual living

conditions. In order to achieve a level of dynamic functionality, however, the system requires a different level of organization in its structure that allows it to face conditions of interaction smoothly. This means, modes of internal organization that allow the system to generate resources that can absorb new environmental shocks without generating dysfunctions. If the system does not solve its internal dynamics, it will continue to generate different dysfunctional processes. It is not enough to analyze a dysfunction in a system within the physical limits that generated that dysfunction because this only reduces its performance of "defense against a foreign agent" that threatens its overall integrity.

In short, we must consider symptoms as a phenomenon of self-organization in order to understand their function in the structure. For this reason, we adopt the metaphor of masks in order to explain the role of symptoms in a human system. In general terms, masks have the function of hiding certain features while keeping others visible. Thus, masks are functional elements for interaction. The game of hide-and-show is only feasible within a wider context of significance. Without this context, masks are worthless. Like masks, symptoms show certain aspects of the system. These are the visible aspects of the symptom. What does the system hide through the symptom? Symptoms display the mediocrity of the system. What is meant by mediocrity? The mediocrity is the naturalization of the "mechanization of life". We can understand the mechanization of life as one of "dysfunctional equilibrium" or "functional mediocrity."

Symptoms appear because every living system that does not structurally change at some point collapses. Human systems (from individuals to families, groups, organizations, and entire societies) are complex cultural systems that contain deep levels of interaction and symbolic development. Symptoms are signs that express the mechanization of life of these systems and show the vulnerability of their automatic ways of life that create difficulties in interaction. Therefore, particular symptoms are not of concern; the key factor is the structure that has created and contains this self-destructive dynamic.

The magnitude of a dysfunction depends upon the magnitude of its function, which requires support. The risk of dysfunctional operation in human systems is that, if there is no transformation, the symptom engulfs the entire structure. That is, dysfunction engulfs the function. This is the paradox of suffering and possibility that exists between destruction and creation. These are two faces of the same mask. Symptoms sustain our structures in order to show the difficulties within them.

The visible symptoms of a hidden purpose

All the systems have a purpose. In the case of mechanical systems, this purpose is connected to an external task. In the case of organic systems, this purpose is related to the survival of the species. In the case of human systems, or cultural systems, this purpose is related to the development of a symbolic sense of existence and integration.

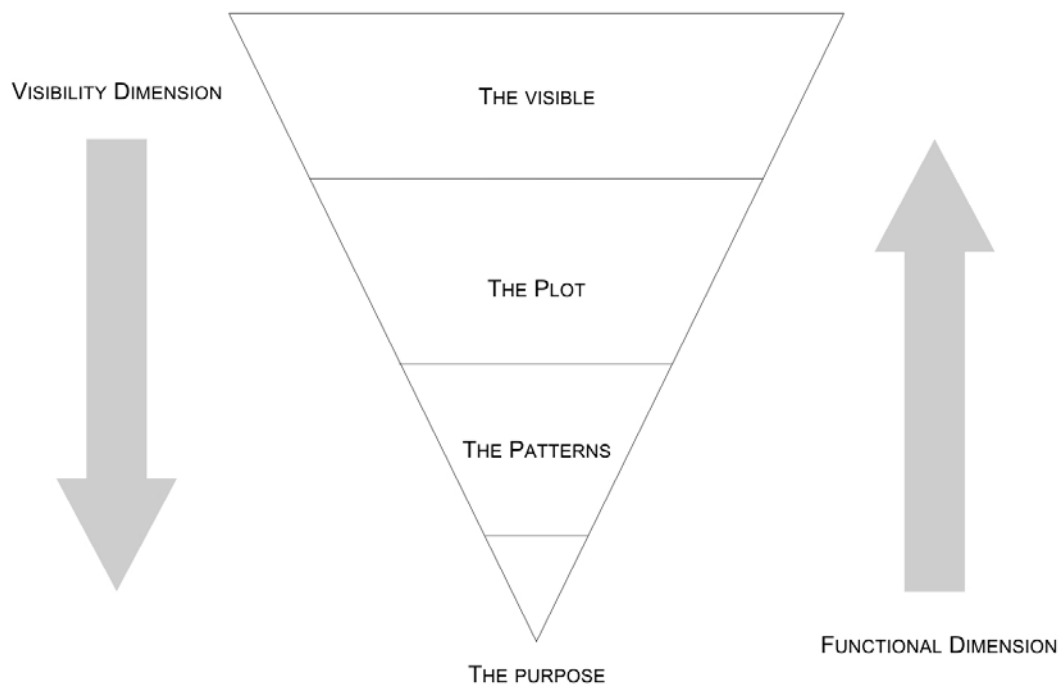
The structure of human groups places persons in the roles and functions that are necessary for the system to sustain its life purpose. Generally, this is a spontaneous and unconscious process that is generated in daily interactions. Therefore, in the integration of human systems, there is a "double game" of disturbance. On the one hand, the system accommodates a structure that imposes certain roles on its members; on the other hand, people also disrupt this system with their movements. In this game of mutual perturbation, a person can have different positions:

- **RECOGNIZE:** The person accepts the rules and assumes the correct behaviors.
- **DEFY:** The person recognizes the rules, but rejects the system's mode of life and refuses its patterns of organization.
- **ASSUME:** This situation is more implicit. It involves living in the system but not recognizing the roles that the system imposes.

This latest role, which is usually "asleep," is activated when the system moves and changes the structure that supports its existence. The people that assume these roles are usually resistant to these changes or produce symptoms in response because they cannot comply with the new mandate of the system and cannot understand the implications of change for their individual lives.

In general, the analysis of problematic situations in human systems stops at the superficial reading of a system and does not consider that these factors are functional to the overall dynamic of the structure. A human system is not a two-dimensional machine. It is a dynamic network of symbolic factors that constantly readjusts the emotional charges that are generated by the relationships within it.

In this sense, we can approach the analysis of a human system through the figure of an inverted pyramid. This geometric figure allows us to analyze various levels of depth from visible symptoms to the hidden network that supports the system itself.



Within this structure, there two dimensions of analysis: visibility and functional.

THE DIMENSION OF VISIBILITY presents the levels of organization of the system's dynamics:

- THE VISIBLE shows WHO are involved within the facts. These can be identified as individuals, physical symptoms, emotional issues, psychological disorders, among other things.
- THE PLOT is the STORY that orders specific events, connects visible elements, and explains behaviors, relationships, or incidents.
- THE PATTERNS show HOW the system is organized. These are the rules that define the principles of operation within the system.
- THE PURPOSE is WHAT sustains the life of a system. It defines a sense of existence and the integration of system's various elements.

THE FUNCTIONAL DIMENSION is the relation of correspondence of each of these levels. The PURPOSE is the support of the system that defines the modes of operation; the PATTERNS are those processes (whether explicit or implicit) that have been generated to support this purpose. At the same time, these PATTERNS order the PLOT that gives support and frames the behavior of the VISIBLE ELEMENTS, or those characters, symptoms, or other manifestations that appear as the protagonists of the different events.

The passage of time consolidates the pyramid to its base. The casual or temporary formation of a group usually develops within the levels of ACTORS and PLOT (the frame that orders the visible elements). Over time, consolidated PATTERNS of that group (i.e., its rules of coexistence) until the group reaches a level of organization that defines a PURPOSE. Once this PURPOSE establish, the dynamic is upward-moving. That is, from this PURPOSE are defined PATTERNS, or principles of life. These PATTERNS hold the PLOT that gives meaning to the ACTORS (i.e., people or elements, the protagonists of various events).

The process of transformation requires a deeper approach to the system. It is important not to confront symptoms because they are functional factors of the dynamics of life. The system needs these elements (e.g., characters or actors) in order to maintain its structural integrity. It is important not to attack THE VISIBLE because this goes against the way of life (even in its dysfunctional conditions). The possibilities of a system arise by transforming living patterns. The patterns, the rules, constitute a fundamental level in the transformation process. This is a strategic zone because, without transformation of the patterns, the structure does not change. It is possible to change actors and redefine the plot, but if the structure does not itself change, new symptoms continue to appear.

The sensitivity of the purpose

Why work on patterns and not intervene directly on the system's purpose? The purpose is the system's reason for existence. Therefore, it is the limit of transformation. A purpose is the guarantee of a system's integration, even in dysfunctional conditions. Questioning the purpose of a system involves directly challenging its reason for being. And this can be experienced as a direct attack on the system's integrity. The consequence, then, is that the system rejects any intervention in this direction and closes up possibilities for transformation. For this reason, it is important not attack the symptom because this is what the system has employed as a possibility of life. If interventions only focus on symptoms, they attack only the way of life that the system has found and employed as a means of self-organization.

Every human system builds its destination based on a purpose that keeps the structure of the system integrated. Human systems are beginning to sicken and to generate a range of visible symptoms when their purposes are meaningless and when they lose their transcendence and frameworks of interdependence. Faced with the weakness of its purpose, a system begins to live in automatic mode and simply desires to survive without further direction or determination. When these living conditions are automated and naturalized, the system is installed as a mechanical way

of life. It lives only to comply with a mechanical and external task that has no meaning or significance in the context of personal development.

The purpose that supports an integrated system can have a symbolic meaning. In some cases, this symbolic base falls into the category of routine or automatic survival. Even in the latter case, however, the system will defend its purpose against a change intervention. In this sense, intervention on a system's patterns consists of a transcendental space that can manage new possibilities of life for the system.

Change is in the action. The objective is to create new rules of life for the system. An intervention on patterns allows for a gradual approach, such as time management system integration, and also implies respect for its purpose. It is not the intensity of intervention that defines the possibility of change within a human system, but the management of small interventions that can provide permanence to new feedback processes in that system. That is, small interventions that are sustainable over time can be transformed into processes that could generate changes in the system's purpose.

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