UK Systems Society

Springer

Systemic Practice and Action Research

Special Issue, Soft Systems; Theory and Practice. Guest Editor Frank Stowell

Summary
More than 50 years has passed since the ground-breaking 'soft systems thinking' emerged from an action research program initiated in the 1970s at the University of Lancaster. The guiding aim of the program was to find meaningful ways for practitioners to tackle ever-more complex real world organizational issues. The maturing 'soft' ideas were operationalized by Peter B. Checkland and co-researchers in an approach that became known as Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). This radically new approach to organisational inquiry generated excitement and criticism in equal measure from the systems community. Nevertheless, throughout the 1980s and 1990s the Lancaster team and a growing number of its supporters forged a leading role for SSM in systemic practice and action research.

There is an important distinction between the theory and the methods of 'soft systems.' Soft systems theory raises philosophical questions, for example, about the notion of 'system', teleology, and what constitutes a valid 'system of interest'. It highlights the inescapable role of subjectivity in shaping the way that we perceive the world, and thus the subjective nature of organizational 'problem solving' and decision making. Soft Systems Methodology operationalizes such complex ideas into a means of gaining understanding and deciding upon agreeable actions supported by involved and affected actors.

The outcome of this work has inspired several influential books, a multitude of refereed articles about the theory of soft systems and the practice of SSM. The latter includes numerous highly informative applications of the ideas. The many published applications of SSM inspired a range of other practical applications of soft systems, notably the Appreciative Inquiry Method (AIM) and the embedding or 'grafting' of SSM to front-end approaches to problem solving. This has generated considerable debate about the validity of some of the applications from a soft systems theoretical position. Reflection on current soft systems thinking and practice in the context of the original ideas arising from Lancaster University is long overdue.

This special issue aims to attract submissions from across disciplines and from academics and practitioners. Reflective applications of soft systems to specific organizational or other problems are encouraged, along with contributions discussing and clarifying the underpinning theory upon which soft systems thinking is based. Submissions are welcomed from across the spectrum of topics from Architecture to Zoology. The ubiquity of Artificial Intelligence and its potential impact upon society is a topic of increasing importance from a holistic perspective and a topic encouraged for this special issue. Further, soft methods such as SSM and AIM can play an important role in the unstoppable digitization of society and we encourage submissions dealing with the topic.

Suggested topics for submissions:

- The relevance of soft systems thinking and practice in 21st C
- Reflective applications of SSM in any context
- Inquiring systems from a soft systems perspective
- Soft systems methodologies for intervention and change
- Cross disciplinary research - the contribution of soft systems
- Soft systems thinking and the ubiquity of AI
- Soft systems, digitization and knowledge transfer
- Soft systems and sustainable Information Systems in business
- Power and accountability – soft systems perspectives
- Sustainable research- what can soft systems offer?
- The relationship between soft systems thinking and critical systems thinking

Submission guidelines see https://link.springer.com/journal/11213/submission-guidelines

Abstracts submitted by **March 2025**;
Authors of **accepted abstracts** will be invited by **May 2025** to submit the full paper via SPAR submission system.
Final decision on accepted papers by **September 2025**;
Publication of the special issue is planned for the first half of **2026**.

Abstracts to Frank Stowell at frank.stowell@port.ac.uk