

Boundary Critique

Boundary critique is the methodological core idea of *critical systems heuristics* (CSH, Ulrich 1983). Increasingly, it is also recognized as a central concept of *critical systems thinking* and of critical professional practice in general. In the terms of CSH, the idea is that both the meaning and the validity of professional propositions always depend on *boundary judgments* as to what 'facts' (observations) and 'norms' (valuation standards) are to be considered relevant and what others are to be left out or considered less important. Such boundary judgments are constitutive of the reference systems to which refer all our claims to knowledge or rationality, in professional practice as well as in everyday life.

Systems thinking – the effort to consider the 'whole relevant system' (Churchman 1970) – cannot alter the fact that all our claims remain 'partial' (Ulrich 1983), in the double sense of being selective with respect to relevant facts and norms and of benefiting some parties more than others. This is what 'boundary critique' (Ulrich 1996, 2000; Midgley et al. 1998) is all about; it aims at disclosing this inevitable partiality. A systematic process of boundary critique needs, first, to identify the sources of selectivity, by surfacing the underpinning boundary judgments. Second, it needs to question these boundary judgments with respect to their practical and ethical implications and to surface options, through discussions with all concerned *stakeholders* (note that their selection in turn represents a boundary judgment in need of critique). As a third and last consequence, based on these two critical efforts it may then become necessary to challenge unqualified claims to knowledge or rationality by compelling argumentation, through the emancipatory use of boundary critique. CSH offers a conceptual framework for all three tasks.

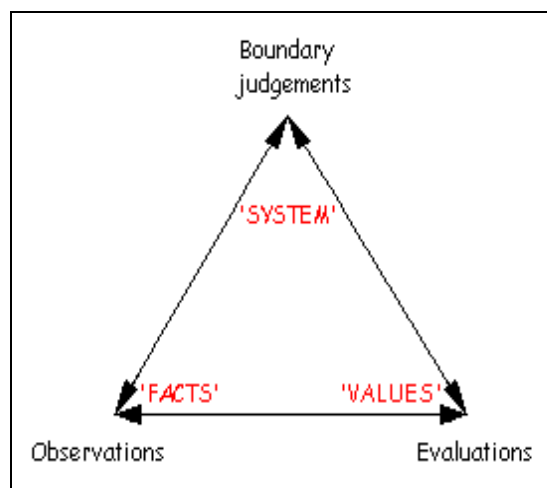


Figure 1: The 'eternal triangle' of boundary judgments, observations, and evaluations

(Source: Ulrich 2000, p. 252)

Basic to the entire process is grasping the ways in which a specific claim is conditioned by boundary judgments. CSH explains this by means of the 'eternal triangle' of reference system, facts, and values: Whenever we propose a problem definition or solution, we

cannot help but assert the relevance of some facts and norms as distinguished from others. Which facts and norms we should consider depends on how we bound the reference system, and vice-versa; as soon as we modify our boundary judgments, relevant facts and norms are likely to change, too (Figure 1).

Thinking through the triangle means to consider each of its corners in the light of the other two. For example, what new facts become relevant if we expand the boundaries of the reference system or modify our value judgments? How do our valuations look if we consider new facts that refer to a modified reference system? In what way may our reference system fail to do justice to the perspective of different stakeholder groups? Any claim that does not reflect on the underpinning 'triangle' of boundary judgments, judgments of facts, and value judgments, risks claiming to much, by not disclosing its built-in selectivity.

Once the selectivity of the reference system in question has thus been grasped in terms of underpinning boundary judgements, systematic boundary critique then means exploring its implications for all the parties concerned, regardless of whether or not their concerns have been included in the underpinning reference system. CSH conceives of this larger context as the 'context of application' of a professional proposition, as opposed to the primary system of concern. The context of application considers all the effects that a professional claim may impose on third parties, including stakeholders whose concerns are not represented by the primary system of concern. Both the primary system of concern and the context of application can be examined systematically by means of CSH's boundary questions, see *critical systems heuristics*.

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File name: <Ulrich_2002b // Ulrich (2002b) – Boundary critique (prepublication version)>

Date completed: 16 August 2001

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