

# Festschrift for Mike Jackson:

## Call for Papers for a Special Issue of *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*

### Guest Editors

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### Introduction

This is a call for papers for a special issue of *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* to honor Mike Jackson's lifetime contribution to systems thinking. Mike, who is currently an Emeritus Professor in the Centre for Systems Studies at the University of Hull (UK), edited this journal for twenty-five years, from 1997 to 2021. Now he has stepped down, it is a fitting time for *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* to recognize his contribution.

Unlike some festschrifts, which are full of anecdotes and reminiscences about the person being honored, we won't be accepting papers focusing on Mike as an individual. In contrast, we want the papers in this festschrift to be significant contributions to the literature in their own right. You might want to:

- Write a paper describing an application of some of Mike Jackson's ideas (with the strengths and weaknesses of them highlighted);
- Take Mike's thinking further; or
- Argue against Mike's position on something.

One of the strong themes in all of Mike Jackson's work over the years has been critical thinking: he was part of a small group of researchers who coined the term 'critical systems thinking'. We believe it would go against everything that Mike has stood for to only include papers offering glowing accolades. Of course, it goes without saying that critiques should be fair and scholarly.

The only real rule, other than making sure your paper makes a novel contribution to the literature, is that it has to relate to Mike Jackson's work in some way: e.g., if you produce a paper on methodological pluralism, which is something that Mike wrote many articles on, it must position itself in relation to his contribution (as well as those of others).

We welcome papers on the following, but also other contributions, as long as they relate to Mike Jackson's work:

- Power relations and politics in systems/OR theory, methodology and practice.

- Bringing Jürgen Habermas's ideas in contact with systems thinking and systems science.
- Reflections on paradigm divisions in systems thinking and operational research.
- From hard systems thinking to soft systems thinking, and then on to critical systems thinking – what next, or are no more paradigm shifts necessary?
- Methodological pluralism (sometimes called 'multi-methodology') in systems thinking, operational research and evaluation.
- The system of systems methodologies (Mike Jackson's framework explaining the assumptions of different systems methodologies), which has often been used to guide methodology choice in practice.
- What are the characteristics of an 'enhanced systems/OR'?
- The use of systems ideas in community operational research.
- Critical systems thinking and practice.
- Total systems intervention.
- The relationship between complexity science, systems thinking and systems science.
- The historical origins of systems thinking and systems science in the works of Alexander Bogdanov and earlier writers (such as Spinoza, Heidegger, and potentially going as far back as the ancient Greeks).

### **Timetable**

Here is our timetable for the festschrift, and details of how to submit to it:

1. Abstracts received (these will be reviewed by the editors to determine their suitability for the special issue): 31 December 2022.
2. Full papers received: 30 November 2023.
3. Refereeing of papers and authors responding to referees, culminating in a final delivery date for the festschrift: 31 October 2024.

Abstracts for research papers of no more than 500 words should be submitted to Gerald Midgley, the special issue Lead Guest Editor, at [g.r.midgley@hull.ac.uk](mailto:g.r.midgley@hull.ac.uk) by 31 December 2022. Any questions regarding the special issue and/or how to approach your paper should also be sent to the same email address.

### **Mike Jackson's Research Career**

If you don't know Mike's work very well, the following explanation of the evolution of his research ideas (and accompanying references) might help:

Mike Jackson's sustained contribution to systems thinking and operational research (henceforth shortened to 'systems/OR') has unfolded in six phases:

1. An initial critique of soft systems thinking and soft OR (1982-1985);
2. A proposal for methodological pluralism to overcome the hard/soft divide (1984-1987);
3. A description of an 'enhanced systems/OR' approach that acknowledges the complexities, uncertainties and conflicts regularly encountered in practice (1987-1988);
4. The further development and popularization of his enhanced systems/OR approach under the banners of 'critical systems thinking' and 'total systems intervention' (1990-1999);
5. The consolidation of his work in three books with mature presentations of his perspective (2000-2019); and

6. A burst of new writings on the history and development of systems science, plus the application of systems thinking in practice, especially in the area of public health (2020-present).

*The key innovation within this body of work, which has advanced the theory and practice of systems/OR, is his proposal for methodological pluralism* (sometimes called 'multi-methodology' in the OR literature). All his subsequent proposals for systems/OR methodology and practice have, in one way or another, been built around this: even Mike's early critique of soft OR (Jackson, 1982) came to inform how he later depicted the strengths and weaknesses of the 'soft tradition' within a framework for methodological pluralism. This work was highly significant, for the following reason:

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a paradigm war between 'hard' and 'soft' systems/OR. This threatened to divide the systems/OR community into two camps which saw methodology and practice so differently that they could barely find any common ground. Mike Jackson then wrote a seminal paper with Paul Keys in 1984 (now reaching 1000 citations, according to Google Scholar) that argued for complementarity between hard and soft. At the risk of over-simplifying their argument, 'hard' (focused on objective modelling and optimization) is more useful when there is agreement between stakeholders on the nature of the problematic situation and the purposes of an intervention, and 'soft' (focused on exploring multiple perspectives and increasing mutual understanding) is more useful when stakeholders disagree over these things. Indeed, Jackson and Keys (1984) proposed a four-box framework explaining the major assumptions of different systems methodologies. Many people understood this framework as matching different systems/OR approaches to their most appropriate contexts of application. This was later expanded to six boxes by Jackson (1987a) and to nine by Jackson (2019). It is the six-box framework (backed up by a broader argument for methodological pluralism in a 1987b paper) that is often cited as the most influential contribution. While there have been many papers subjecting this framework to critique (and actually the number of these is evidence of its influence), Jackson's 1984 and 1987a, b papers are widely regarded as seminal because they offered an early, theoretically-informed and practical means to transcend the soft/hard divide, while still respecting the full set of methodological insights coming out of both hard and soft systems/OR.

Jackson then built on this early work in the following ways. First, he recognised that, if systems/OR is to be a broad practice welcoming the use of a variety of soft (problem structuring) and hard (problem solving) methodologies, it couldn't reasonably reduce the complexities of practice to taking a remit from a client and simply developing a mathematical model. In 1988, he proposed a form of 'enhanced OR' that requires the practitioner to take a critical approach to exploring the remit of an intervention with stakeholders, taking account of power relationships, before choosing the methodology that will work best in the circumstances. This proposal was particularly well received in the Community Operational Research Network (a community of practice with around three-hundred members dedicated to applying systems/OR to community development), and his 1988 paper was later identified as a distinctive, seminal contribution to Community OR (Midgley and Ochoa-Arias, 2004), which is still influential more than thirty years later (Midgley, Johnson and Chichirau, 2018).

Then this work was massively expanded and popularized. There were three important books launched in this expansion phase, all released in 1991 using the label 'critical systems thinking' (CST) (Jackson, 1991; Flood and Jackson, 1991a, b). Up to 1991, the CST research community consisted of

approximately 20 researchers contributing ideas on methodological pluralism, critical inquiry and how to address power relations. The 1991 books facilitated significant growth, and within five years Midgley (1996) commented that the number of authors writing under the banner of CST had grown to over 100 (and of course there were many more readers and practitioners). Flood and Jackson's (1991b) book sold well over 20,000 copies. The work of Jackson and others contributed to a climate where people started to leave the soft/hard debate behind, and methodological pluralism became broadly acceptable within systems/OR (Mingers and Gill, 1997).

Jackson's work finally came to a fully mature form in three more recent books: in 2000, he offered a theoretical overview of paradigms in systems/OR, and discussed the pluralistic use of methodologies drawn from these paradigms; in 2003, he presented a similar argument in a more practitioner-friendly form; and in 2019, he wrote his 'magnum opus', which expanded on the practice of methodological pluralism, incorporated complexity science, and offered a wealth of detailed reflections on a range of systems methodologies that clearly came from decades of dialogues with their leading advocates. These books remain key references for people with an interest in systems/OR, broadly defined.

The period since the publication of the 2019 'magnum opus' has only seen an increase in Mike's productivity. He has set out his views on the current state of both critical systems *thinking* (CST) and critical systems *practice* (CSP), exploring what more needs doing (2020a). He has written four papers on CSP (Jackson, 2020b, 2021, 2022a, b), seeking to show what the ideas of CST entail when translated into practice. These will form the basis for a forthcoming practitioner's guide to CST. He has been involved with Luis Sambo, former Regional Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) for Africa, showing how CST can enhance work on health policy and systems research (Jackson, 2020c, d; Sambo & Jackson, 2021), and is currently working with the WHO to produce a White Paper on systems thinking and health systems strengthening. He has gone back to the work of Alexander Bogdanov, an early pioneer of the systems approach, and philosophical pragmatism, in the search for a philosophy that can unify the systems movement as a whole (Jackson, 2022c, d). This endeavour is continuing with an exploration of the systems thinking of Spinoza in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Original contributions continue to flow.

Based on the above, we think it is clear that Mike Jackson has made a sustained, forty-year contribution to systems/OR, and his proposal for methodological pluralism was highly influential in moving the systems/OR community beyond the hard/soft divide. Of course, no innovation of this nature can be accomplished by one individual working alone, and many more authors were involved in its development and dissemination, but Jackson's contribution has been widely acknowledged as central and seminal.

Please browse some of Mike Jackson's books and papers (mostly available on ResearchGate) and see how *you* can contribute to this festschrift.

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