Critical Systems Thinking and Management Consulting

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Presentation by:

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Hosted by:

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Background to this research

- Formal training in Systems Thinking in 2003 from the Centre for Systems Studies, University of Hull

- Systems enthusiast over the years with particular interest in Critical Systems Thinking

- Several publications culminating in a sole-authored book published worldwide by Springer in 2019

- Ideas presented in the book argue for a contribution to knowledge in extant literature

Flexible Systems Management

Rajneesh Chowdhury

Systems Thinking for Management Consultants

Introducing Holistic Flexibility

*Foreword by*
Professor Michael C. Jackson OBE

Springer

Highlights of the research

My work and my research reflects a practitioner perspective that has the characteristics of experimentation, exploration and learning.

Craft researcher: for whom "research is a creative as well as a technical-rational act; an art as well as a science. This requires not only skill and training but also a sense of imagination and the ability to switch perspectives in order to build up a complex picture of management. It can even involve an element of calculated risk, breaking away from established ways of doing things to enhance the possibility of learning something new" (Bell & Thorpe, 2013).

Themes explored
- CST and flexibility
- CST and responsible practice
- CST as a "state of mind"
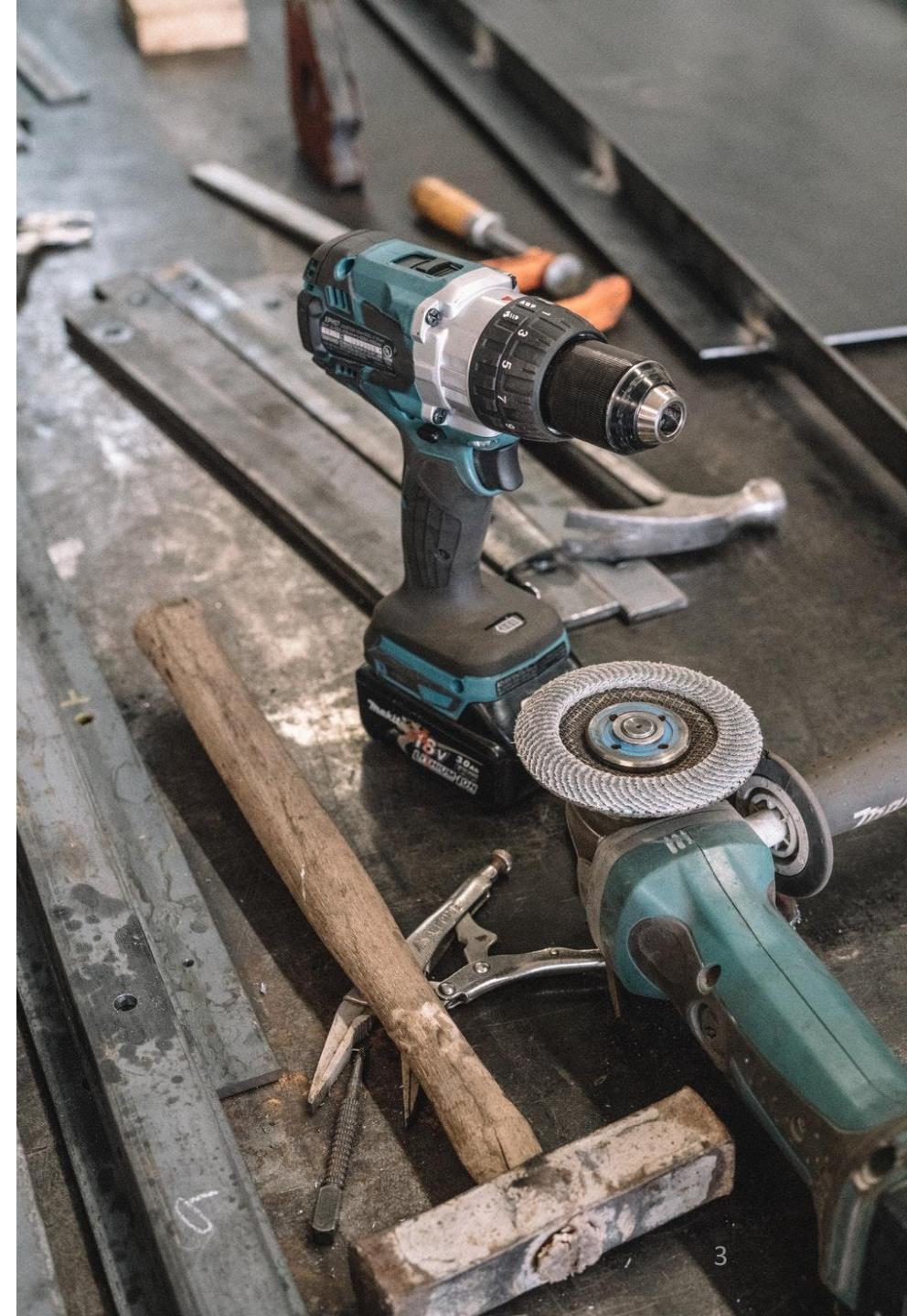
Critical Systems Thinking

The development of CST was a confluence of two strands of thought in OR (Rosenhead, 1989):

- The first, during the 1970s at the University of California at Berkeley that was a development of Churchman's philosophy of social systems design
- The second, in the 1980s at the University of Hull as a response and development of soft systems methodology, along with other problem structuring methods in OR

Three commitments of CST (Jackson, 2000):
- Critical Awareness
- Pluralism
- Improvement

CST and Management Consulting

Challenges of a consultant (Poulfelt, 1997; Kipping & Armbruster, 2002; Nosseir, 2016):

- External
- Internal

Stakeholders in management consulting/ OR (Checkland, 1990; Gregory et al., 2020)

Qualities of a consultant (Bell & Morse, 2013: Ormerod, 2014; Schein, 2016)

Ormerod's (2014) comparative study of systems/ OR methodologies: Critical Rationalism in Practice, Critical System Heuristics, Total System Intervention, Creative Holism, Systemic Intervention, Multimethodology

Scope of the research

CST and flexibility
CST and responsible practice
CST as a "state of mind"
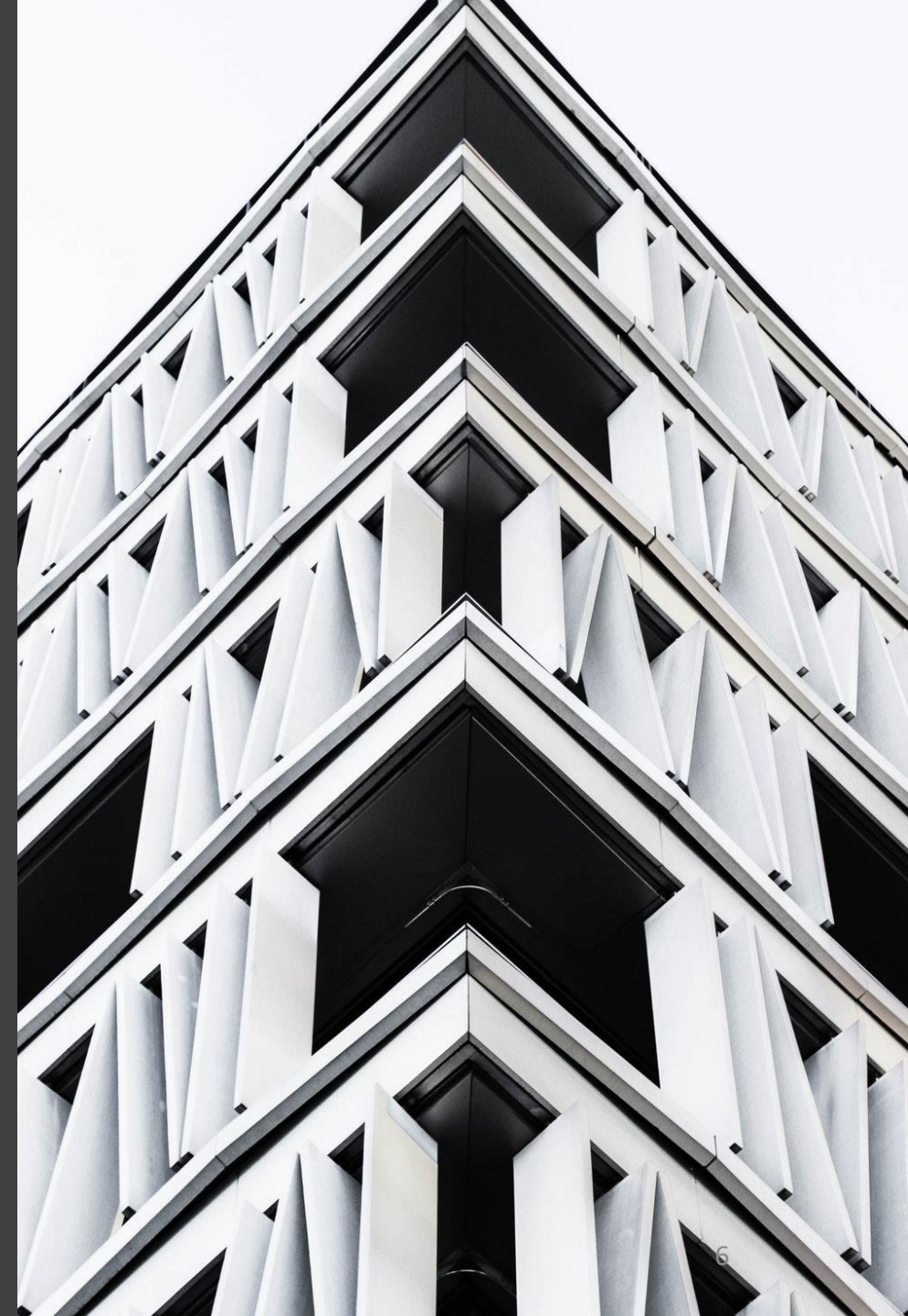
CST and Flexibility
Extant literature

- Three dimensions of problem, perspective and time as "fluencies" as necessary to create a systems framework (Grohs, et al., 2018)

- OR criteria pertaining to the nature of problem-situation, outcomes and mixing methods (Mingers & Brocklesby, 1997)

- Need to demonstrate open-mindedness and risk-taking (Jackson, 2000)

- Pragmatic Pluralism – be able to work across paradigms (Taket & White, 1996)

- Approach as "cyclical, subjective, embraces uncertainty and works with selectivity" (Taket & White, 2000)

- Flexible Systems Methodology (FSM) based on spectral and integrative theories (Sushil, 1994, 1997, 2015)

- Positive impacts of flexibility has been studied in various fields (Bahrami & Evans, 2011; Richman et al., 2011; Sushil, 2015)

- Different ways of combining methodologies have been proposed in various works (Checkland & Scholes, 1990; Mingers & Taylor, 1992; Savage & Mingers, 1996; Jackson, 1989, 1990; Keys, 1988; Flood, 1995; Ormerod, 1995; Holt, 1994; Taket, 1993; Bennett, 1985; Eden, 1994; Lehaney & Paul, 1994; Hocking & Lee, 1994; Sushil, 1994, 1997)

CST and flexibility
CST and responsible practice
CST as a "state of mind"

CST and Flexibility
Gap in knowledge

- CST literature implicitly assumes the presence of flexibility as a quality; none highlight flexibility as a topic of scholarly deliberation

- FSM recognises the need for flexibility but does not go so far as to explore the nature of the flexibility that may be required

- No scholarly discussion of the benefit of flexibility in the context of CST from a consultancy standpoint

- Need to articulate the different kinds of flexibility that a consultant needs to display

- Need to define what being flexible really means for a systems consultant

- Need to understand if flexibility entails specific behaviour traits for a systems consultant

- Need to understand what are the effects of flexibility and that of inflexibility

CST and Flexibility
Importance of the research

CST and flexibility
CST and responsible practice
CST as a "state of mind"

- A scholarly discussion of this will enable both academics and consultants to be more aware of their intervention approach and it will contribute towards aspects such as:

    - Change readiness

    - Adaptation in scenario shifts

    - Risk appetite

    - Resource resilience

- An articulation of the kinds of flexibility can further the scholarly discussion of what it means for systems consulting

CST and flexibility
CST and responsible practice
CST as a "state of mind"

CST and Responsible Practice
Extant literature

- The desire to do socially beneficial work has always been a motivator for the vast majority of OR practitioners (Wong & Mingers, 1994)

- Multivariate intervention dimensions – both human and non-human existing in close interrelationship (Eckersley, 1992; Ormerod, 2013; Gregory & Miller, 2014)

- Implementation and the sustainability of change (McKenna, 2006; Ashkenas, 2014; Sturdy, 2009)

- Not to find a "solution" for the client, but the "next adaptive move" (Schein, 2016)

- OR consultants require a combination of technical, institutional and heuristic understanding (Murphy, 2005)

- Need for consultants to recognise their actions in light of ideological constructions and ethical considerations (Yolles, 2006; Hamann, 2012; Ormerod & Ulrich, 2013)

- Ethical dilemmas, precarious behaviours and deceptive practices that shroud the consultancy industry (Alvesson et al., 2009; Smith et. al., 2003; Parsons, 1996; van Rooyen, 1996; Allen & Davis, 1993; De George, 1986)

- "Systemic mediation" based on one's moral reasoning (Midgley and Pinzon, 2013)

- Critical Systems Practice in enabling responsible leadership (Jackson, 2019)

CST and flexibility
CST and responsible practice
CST as a "state of mind"

CST and Responsible Practice
Gap in knowledge

- Discussions have an intellectual bent without actual indicators for consultants on what can make outcomes more responsible and sustainable

- Ormerod (2014) cites Franco and Montibeller (2010) and Rouwette (2011) to bring home the message that facilitated modeling can encourage learning, which in turn can result in more sustainable outcomes for the client. However, such outcomes are more project-centric rather than stakeholder-centric

- Discussions do not offer pragmatic insights within the constraints of a client contract and internal pressures

- CST can drop the claim of being "metaparadigmatic" (Midgley, 1996)

- The consultant needs to draw from various disciplines and consider multiple factors that protect the client-consultant relationship

  - Extant literature does not cover consideration of such holistic outcomes for consultants

- I have myself not been able to touch on all the desired outcomes due to the constraints posed in a consultancy situation

- Need to understand is flexibility in systems consulting can have a direct bearing on responsible practice

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CST and flexibility
CST and responsible practice
CST as a "state of mind"

CST and Responsible Practice
Importance of the research

- This exploration is pertinent in the world of increasing complexity and uncertainty where we live in the midst of the unknown unknowns

  - Understand what responsible practice really means

  - Understand if there are specific traits of a systems consultant that drive responsible practice

  - Bringing about a pragmatic shift to approach responsible practice rather than being idealistic

  - Understand how certain systems frameworks designed to address specific domains can support responsible practice

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CST and flexibility
CST and responsible practice
CST as a "state of mind"

CST as a "state of mind"
Extant literature

- Mode-2 form of problem solving is exploratory and reflective (Gibbons et al., 1994; Checkland & Scholes, 1990)

- Mode-2 form of Applied Systems Thinking (AST) to be agile and adaptive and serve the needs of a variety of stakeholders (Jackson, 2002, 2009)

- Real-world projects are conditioned by a dynamic interaction between *wuli, shili* and *renli* (Gu & Zhu, 2000)

- Systems can transition between simple, complicated, complex and chaotic states (Snowden, 2015)

- OR practice as a "craft" that is based on intuition and experience (Ormerod, 2013)

- The Reflective Practitioner popularised the importance of acting reflectively on the spot driven by tacit knowledge (Schön, 1983, 1987)

- Criteria of sustainable outcomes may also not be fixed (Cordoba-Pachon & Midgley, 2003)

- When it comes to wicked problems, rationality does not help much (Perdomo & Cavallin, 2014)

- "Professional practice is what professionals do in practice rather than what some theorists say it is" (Ulrich, 2012)

CST and flexibility
CST and responsible practice
CST as a "state of mind"

CST as a "state of mind"
Gap in knowledge

- Despite prevailing discussions on the ability to be contextual, reflective and adaptive in CST, a thorough discussion on the ability of a consultant to operate with CST as a state of mind is missing

- Extant literature does not articulate what it means for a consultant to have CST as a sub-conscious mental construct, i.e. as a state of mind, to deliver on interventions flexibly and seamlessly

- Lack of discussion on if CST needs to be more like a mindset rather than that being directed by a framework or methodology

- Systems thinkers and practitioners use their own terminologies that often sound alien in general management practice (Cordoba-Pachon, 2010)

- There is a loud call for flexibility and openness in Critical Systems Practice (CSP), but CSP is itself bounded within the System of Systems Methodologies (SOSM)

- No current discussion on the implications in practice for CST without the application of methodologies traditionally identified with systems literature

- Need to understand if a conceptual lens can make CST as a state of mind more pragmatic for consultants

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CST and flexibility
CST and responsible practice
CST as a "state of mind"

CST as a "state of mind"
Importance of the research

- CST as a state of mind will contribute towards:

    - Greater adoption of its principles in popular consultancy and managerial practice

    - Making CST more acceptable and less jargon-driven

    - Further mainstreaming of CST

    - Greater opportunities to widen CST research in areas of general management and managerial practices

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Research Question
and related themes for exploration...
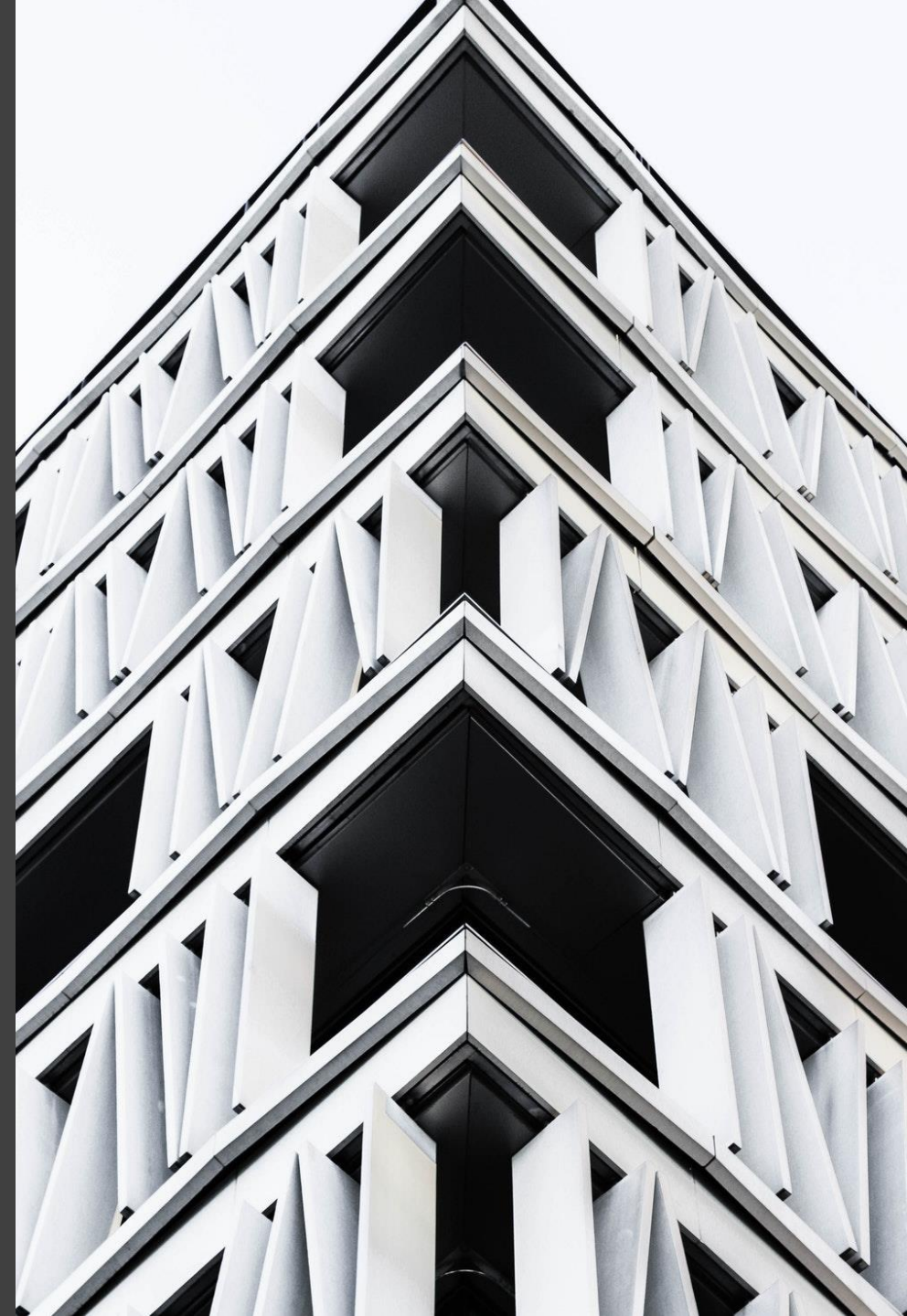
What does it mean for a systems consultant to be flexible?

Why is it important for systems consultants to be flexible?

What does it mean for a systems consultant to engage in responsible practice?

Does a knowledge of CST make a consultant more inclined to responsible practice?

In what ways can CST serve as a "state of mind" in supporting flexible and responsible management consultant practice?

How can CST be made fit for the purpose of aiding flexible and responsible management consultant practice?
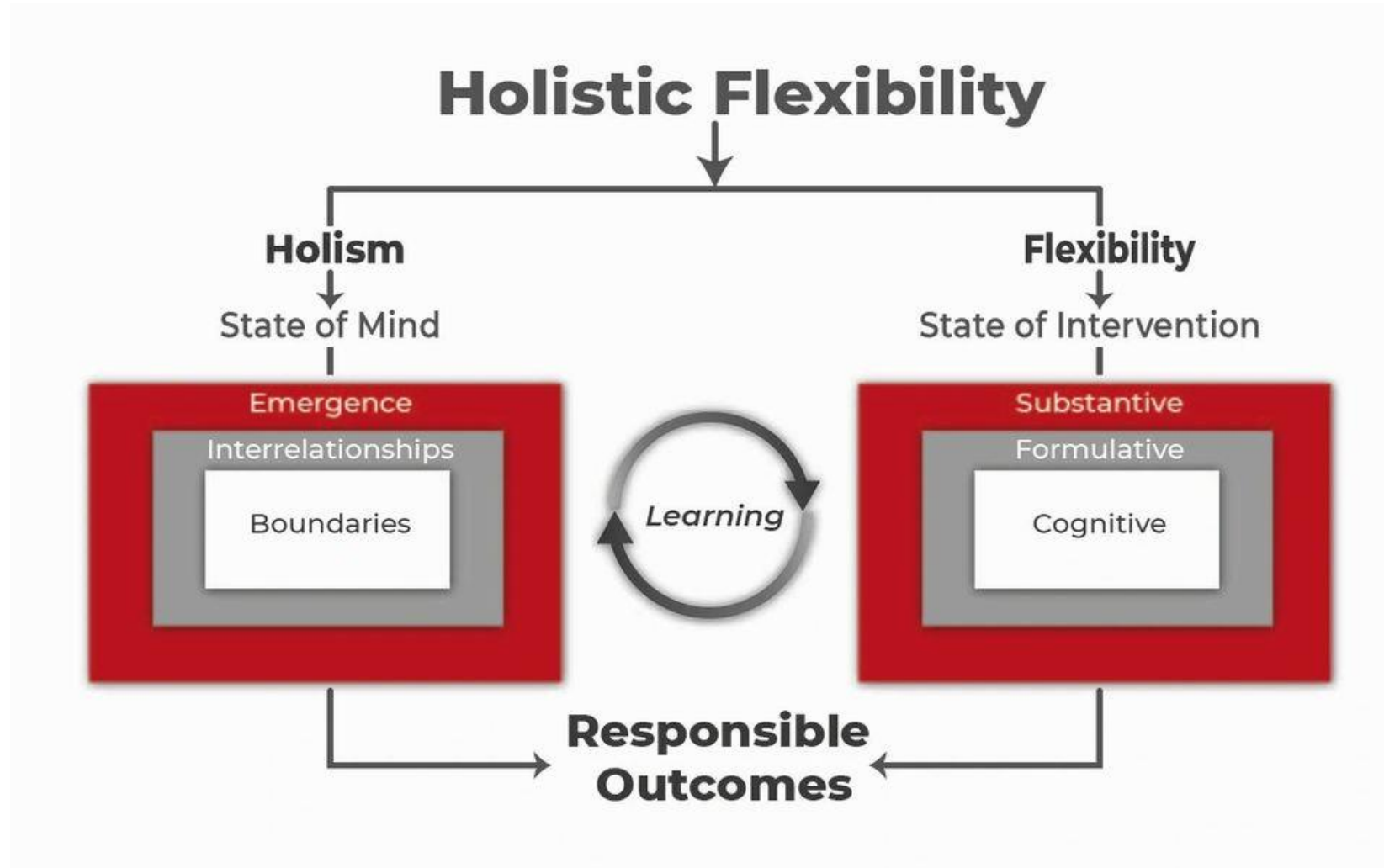
What is
Holistic Flexibility?

Flexible Systems Management

Rajneesh Chowdhury

Systems
Thinking for
Management
Consultants

Introducing Holistic Flexibility

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Holistic Flexibility is a dynamic interplay between a state of mind that has the ability to absorb systemic complexity, and a state of intervention that has the ability to embrace flexibility both in intent and in form.

Domains explored in the book

- Organisational Development
- Corporate Reputation
- Social Impact

Types of flexibility	Aspect addressed	Dependency	Related discipline
Cognitive flexibility	Thinking	Nature-Nurture	Psychology, Psychiatry, Neuroscience, Sociology
Formulative flexibility	Planning	Frameworks & Models	Management, Administration
Substantive flexibility	Action	Resource availability	Material Sciences, Finance, Human Resource, Supply Chain

Systemic Value Add

Emancipation

Sustainable Outcomes

Avenues for further exploration beyond the PhD research

- Comparative study of behavior displayed between consultants who are exposed to CST and those who are not

- Competencies for a manager in the context of Holistic Flexibility

- Holistic Flexibility and consultant wellbeing

- Does taking a client-centric perspective impact the understanding presented in this research?
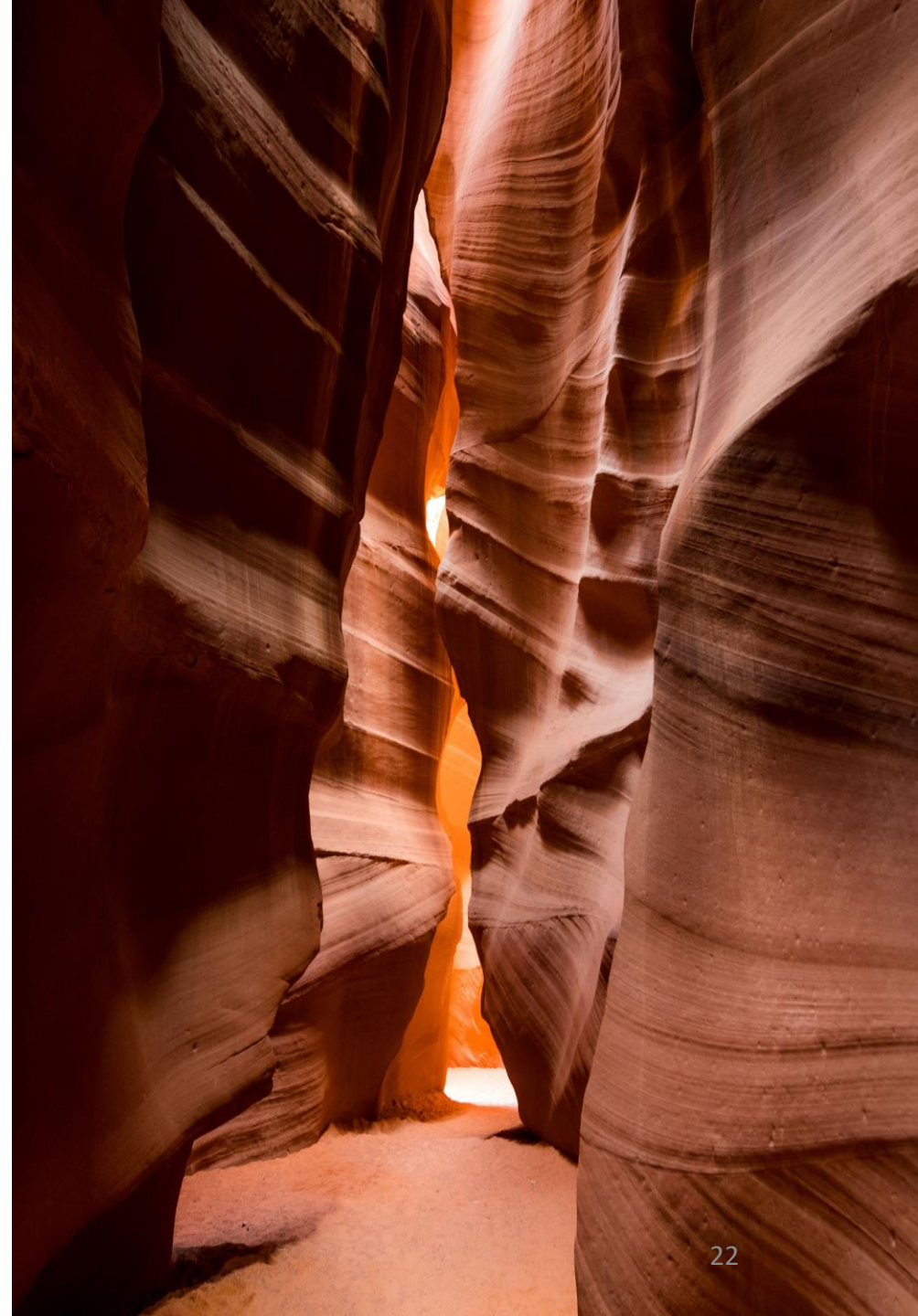
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Thank You!

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