A Research Note on Home Study in Housing Imagination using Soft Systems Methodology

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Abstract:

     For a newly conceived subject, Housing Imagination (HI) needs methodological clarification on various topics that it covers. This paper examines home study as an HI subject. In the discussion, the writer makes use of an adapted 'processes of organization meanings' (POM) model of the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) of P.B. Checkland and S. Holwell as a conceptual reference framework to review this HI subject of home study. It is argued that HI can be quite comfortably anchored theoretically on Soft Systems Thinking. Nevertheless, doing so does not hinder more sophisticated HI practitioners to adopt a more critical theoretical stance to conduct HI study with critical theory, which aligns more closely with the theoretical position of Geographical Imagination (GI) as propounded by the GI originators. A brief discussion on the notions of place, home, and house in this paper also serves as a pedagogical means for HI study.

Key words: Housing Imagination, Geographical Imagination, Home, Housing Studies, Soft Systems Methodology, The 'processes for organization meanings' (POM) model, the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination)

Introduction

The notion of home has been a key subject of study in Housing Studies. In this paper, the home notion is examined from a more

specific and new Housing Studies (HS) field, namely, Housing Imagination (HI). Such a discussion illustrates how HI approaches the topic of home. In addition, in the discussion, the writer makes use of P.B. Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to clarify the nature of the HI lenses in the study of home. In the field of Housing Studies (HS), including the sub-field of Housing Imagination, such kind of intellectual endeavor on clarification is pioneering. The writer, as a teacher on HI, maintains that such an intellectual exercise has good pedagogical and academic values.

The Housing Imagination (HI)'s way to study home

To start with, Ho (2014) offers the following description of the newly conceived subject of Housing Imagination (HI): "an intellectual field of study in Social Sciences that makes use of the Geographical Imagination lenses to examines topics in Housing Studies". The main purpose of HI is to inform housing research and housing policy by studying housing imaginations (hi's) (e.g. images and socially produced discourses as related to HS) via the Geographical Imagination lenses (Winter and Seeling, 2001; Ho, 2014). HI should also inform people who are adversely affected by their living places to seek for improvements, with emphasis on housing. The GI lenses refers to the perspective based on GI, which studies geographical imaginations (gi's)[1]. In turn, gi's play a role in "producing notions of social and spatial reality" (Gieseking, 2007). Two main representative works of GI are Gregory (1994) and Harvey (1990). Both their works, as a subject in Human Geography, lay stress on the study of place and space with much employment of critical theory (Wikipedia, 2014). Ho (2014) espouses that GI has a similar theoretical orientation as the Emancipatory Systems Thinking in the Systems Thinking field. GI favors study of artifacts[2], e.g. photographs, news articles and songs, etc. and field research (see Schatzman and Strauss (1973) for an introduction on Field Research). In this regard, Ho (2014) maintains that the phenomenological research approach (Seamon, 2000) is

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[1] A *gi* "encompasses a variety of meanings, including individual images and socially produced discourses about culture, spaces, and differences." (Gilley, 2010).
[2] Artifacts such as photographs, songs, books and news articles, etc., can be considered as physical/ tangible evidences of *hi's* and *gi's*.

highly relevant for these favored research practices in GI/ HI as they all share a strong interest in studying "experiences as human beings experience them" (Seamon, 2000). For Seamon (2000), "any object, event, situation or experience that a person can see, hear, touch, smell, taste, feel, intuit, know, understand, or live through is a legitimate topic for phenomenological investigation". Apparently, home and home-making as topics of investigation in HI meet Seamon's criteria on topic legitimacy. The phenomenological research approach comprises three specific research methods, namely, First-person phenomenological research, Existential phenomenological research, and Hermeneutic-phenomenological research (Seamon, 2000); nevertheless, these research methods all make use of the sensemaking process to generate insights that have actionable value (Madsbjerg and Rasmussen, 2014), e.g. improvement of housing policy formulation. The sensemaking process offered by Madsberg and Rasmussen needs some adaptation to be used in HI study as their proposed process is formulated for application in business settings. In this respect, the writer proposes the following five steps for HI study:

1. Identify a phenomenon related to human experience as problematic,
2. Gather data by engaging in specific individuals' lives,
3. Uncover patterns that have explanatory power, preferably in a critical thinking mode,
4. Generate vital actionable knowledge from the analysis, and
5. Formulate appropriate recommendations based on the knowledge gained.

As HI's main research topics are in HS, naturally, it is attentive to the notion of home. Specifically, HI examines the notion of *home* as a subject in HS based on GI thinking. This notion of home and related concepts of place and house are discussed in the next section.

Place, home, house and the relationships between them

The notions of home, place and house have been studied in the Human Geography (HG) and Housing Studies (HS) fields for a long time. To begin with, Creswell (2009) explains a few terms as related to the notion of place:
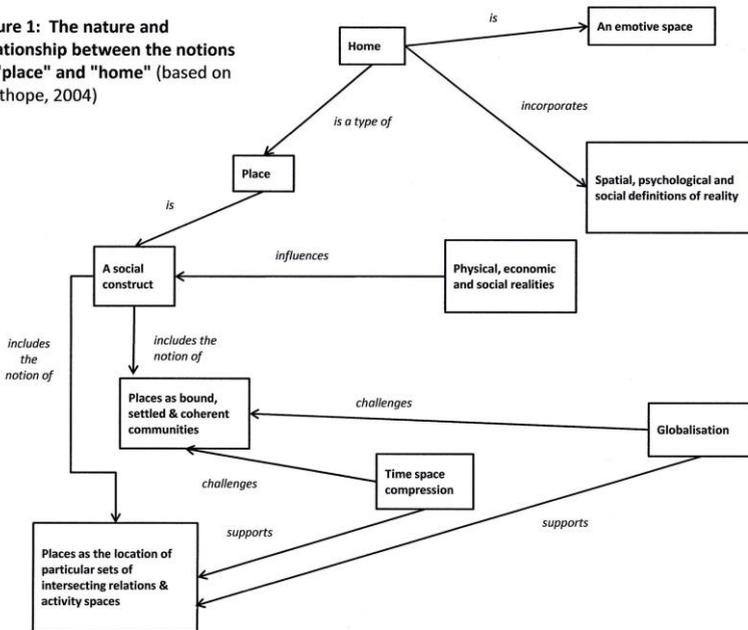
(i) *Place* is "a meaningful site that combines location, locale, and sense of place".

(ii) *Location* is "an absolute point in space".

(iii) *Locale* is "the material settings for social relations".

(iv) *Sense of place* is the "feelings and emotions a place evokes".

As to home, Creswell (2009) states that it "like place, can exist on many scales from our individual abodes to the whole earth." For the humanistic geographers, home is a kind of place with intense meanings and attachments (Creswell, 2009). In an ideal world, it is where we feel "safe, secure and loved" (Creswell, 2009). In actuality, as Fox (2002) puts it, "it is often difficult to verbalize ideas about home, since they are highly personal, and not easily analyzed." and home is a "fluid concept" which may embrace several meanings. In the same vein, Blunt and Varley (2004) explain that "As a space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear, the home is invested with meanings, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life". Due to such messiness of this concept, the writer recommends the exploratory phenomenological research approach to study home in HI. In investigating home and place, inevitably, the notion of house also comes up in the discussion. In this regard, home has been described as **house plus x**; in this case, house represents the physical structure part of home while x comprises the social, psychological, and cultural values which a house acquires (Fox, 2002). Meanwhile, humanistic geographers remind us that individuals and groups are place-makers (which implies home-makers), being able to "make moral decisions about the value of places in relations to the goals of human projects" (Entrikin and Tepple, 2006). Place-makers, in short, carry out place-making to construct places. Similarly, home-makers conduct home-making to construct homes.

It is not feasible to provide an in-depth discussion on all these notions of home, place and house here, given the substantial HS/HG writings on them. Nevertheless, an additional brief summary on the relation between home and place can be made by capturing some of the main ideas from Easthope (2004) in the form of a conceptual diagram, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The nature and relationship between the notions of "place" and "home" (based on Easthope, 2004)

This is not to suggest that there is only one version of the relationship between the notions of home and place. In Figure 1, the writer records and relate some of the ideas from Easthope; in short, it depicts a partial and simplified account of Easthope (2004) as follows: **place** is a social construct, which includes a wide array of notions, e.g. (i) places as "bound, settled and coherent communities" (Easthope, 2004) and (ii) places as "the location of particular sets of intersecting relations and … activity spaces" (Easthope, 2004). The various notions of place are influenced by "physical, economic and social realities" (Easthope, 2004), which can be related, more specifically, to themes such as "globalization" and "time space compression". As to **home**, it can be conceived as a type of place. More specifically, it is an emotive space and incorporates "spatial, psychological and social definitions of reality" (Easthope, 2004). Such a conceptual diagram on place and home, though simplified, makes up a convenient teaching tool to introduce these notions to students new to HI. In Ho (2014), the writer makes an attempt to consider the notions of home and place in the form of a Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Framework. Readers are also encouraged to study these two concepts further in the HG and HS literature.

Using Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to make sense of the HI's approach to study home

Having defined HI and the notions of place, home and house, what can be said about nature of the HI approach to study home [*question 1*]? How can the employment of the HI approach generate knowledge to inform (i) housing policy development, (ii) housing research and (iii) people's efforts to improve their living environment, with special reference to their housing, bearing in mind that informing (i), (ii) and (iii) are the stated purposes of HI [*question 2*]? One way to address these two questions, in the writer's view, is to make use of a robust reference methodology to make sense of the HI approach in this regard. The one chosen by the writer is the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) of P.B. Checkland (Checkland and Holwell, 1998; Jackson, 1991)[3]. SSM represents a subjective approach in systems thinking which shares much with HI in its theoretical orientation and concepts interested in, e.g. sensemaking, discourses, and meanings creation, etc. Back in 1984, Checkland already made clear that "the social theory of soft systems methodology, with its emphasis on the process of learning and its acceptance that its models of human activity systems are models of perceptions…, clearly lies … with hermeneutics and phenomenology." (Checkland, 1984). In the SSM model called the 'processes for organization meanings' (POM) model (Checkland and Holwell, 1998), the social processes, as decomposed conceptually into a number of components, in which "meanings are established", are depicted in a way that can be related to the HI approach to study home. Some of the major components of the POM model are noted in Table 1, which are then related to examples specific to the study of home in HI. In Table 1, Component 9 (Habitual activities)[4] is added to

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[3] Jackson (1991) describes *Soft Systems Thinking* (SST) as "subjectivist in character" and endorses "a consensus worldview". *Soft systems methodologies*, such as Checkland's SSM, "do not give a great deal of useful support to the technical interest in predicting and controlling natural and social systems". Nevertheless, SST offers support to "the practical interest in promoting intersubjective understanding".

[4] The *habitual activities* are customary with "very little attention paid to questions of meaningful or intentional action" (Entrikin and Tepple, 2006).

cover a topic specific to HI. When examining Component 2 (Perceived world) in HI, certain HI analytical notions, that are sensitive to subjective and social factors in HS, are highly relevant. They are, among others:

(i) *Place context*: a "combination of cultural, economic, political, and environmental dimensions that give character to a particular setting" (Dixon and Jones III, 2006).

(ii) *The lifeworld*: "the tacit context, tenor and pace of daily life to which normally people give no reflective attention" (Seamon, 2000).

(iii) *Relational space*: space as conceived "to be produced or constructed by people through social relations and practices" (Kitchin, 2009).

(iv) *Paradoxical space*: space as considered to be "unrepresentable and unknowable, given that it is diversely produced by multiple actors" (Kitchen, 2009)

The examples in Table 1 represent some of the major topics that appear in academic journals on housing studies, such as *Housing Studies* (Routledge) and *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* (Springer). Some readers may think that certain examples in the right-hand column of Table 1 can also be associated with components other than the ones suggested by the writer in the table, which is quite acceptable but need to be explicitly justified. [As the notions of place, home and house are related, the examples in Table 1 cover all the three notions of place, home and house. Furthermore, since academic articles on the examples from the HS literature can be found in these HS journals easily, no specific references on these examples are provided in Table 1.]

Table 1: An adapted 'processes for organization meanings' (POM) model and the study of home in HI

Components of an adapted POM model based on Checkland and Holwell (1998)	Corresponding HI examples in the study of home
Component 1: External trends & events	Globalization, time space compression, economic growth, influx of immigrants, urbanization, and gentrification.
Component 2: Perceived world	Images (as hi's) on housing market,

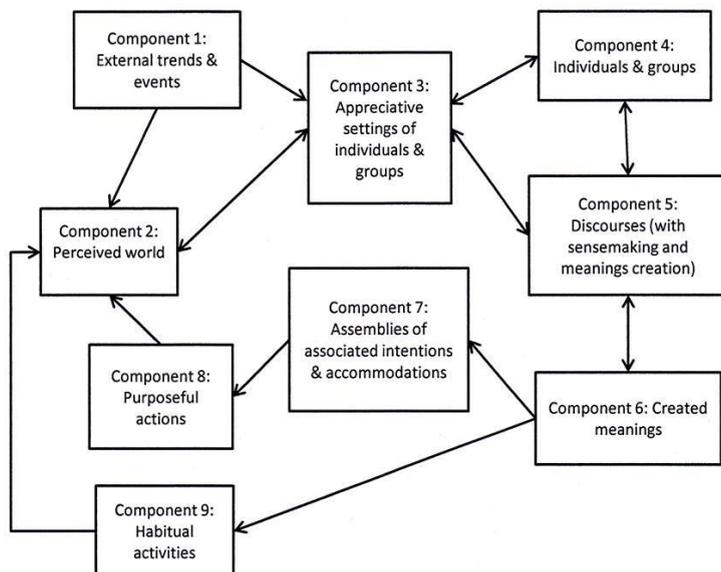|	
	housing market for women, housing system, housing finance system, vacancy rates in housing stock of all kinds, housing conditions, homelessness, housing densities, social cohesion, social exclusions, housing deprivation, slums and shanty towns.
Component 3: Appreciative settings of individuals and groups	Values, norms, and cultures upheld by individuals or groups (e.g. by gender, social class, ethnic group or age group, etc.) as related to the theme of home, e.g. housing preference. Ways of thinking about space, place and home are considered as *gi's* and *hi's*.
Component 4: Individuals & groups	Specific individuals or groups (by gender, social class, ethnic group or age group, etc.) as place-makers; stakeholders as related to a specific topic in the study of home and related housing policy.
Component 5: Discourses[5] (with sense making and meanings creation)	Socially produced discourses (as hi's) related to a specific topic in home study, e.g. housing affordability, housing market bubble and residential mobility, and racial discrimination by landlords.
Component 6: Created meanings	Meanings of home and meanings of place held by various individuals and groups.
Component 7: Assemblies of associated intentions and accommodations	Related intentions and accommodations by individuals, groups or the Housing Authority on housing-related actions/ policies to be taken, arising from Component 6.
Component 8: Purposeful actions	Housing/home-related actions/

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[5] *Discourse* means written and spoken communications. As Gee (1999) reminds us: "When we speak or write we always take a particular perspective on what the "world" is like. This involves us in taking perspectives on what is "normal" and not; what is "acceptable" and not; what is "right" and not; what is "real" and not…."

	housing policies taken by individuals, groups or the Housing Authorities to meet their intentions or accommodations (Component 7), e.g. flat sharing, urban renewal, housing production by local authorities, social housing management housing benefit reform, elderly housing policies and temporary housing after disasters.
Component 9: Habitual activities	Everyday habitual routines of people as related to home study, e.g. household chores. These routines are also place-making actions[6].

There are other components of the POM model from Checkland and Holwell (1996) that are related to the subject of Information Systems study, thus ignored in Table 1. The various components of the POM model are related. For examples, Component 1 (External trends and events) affects component 2 (Perceived world) and Component 3 (Appreciative settings); Component 5 (Discourses) leads to Component 6 (Created meanings) while Component 6 (Created meanings) enriches Component 5 (Discourses); finally, Component 6 (Created meanings) leads to Component 7 (Assemblies of related intentions and accommodations). Components 8 and 9 are both spatial practices, i.e. "the processes, flows, movements, and behaviors of people and things that can be perceived in the world" (Kitchin, 2009). They are the main inputs to Component 2 (Perceived world). These inter-relationships between POM components have been pointed out in Checkland and Holwell (1999; p. 106). This is also shown in Figure 2.

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[6] Entrikin and Tepple (2006) explain that "The place-making actions of individuals and groups transform environments, from the simple act of consumption to the potentially more consequential and larger-scale acts of collective agencies, such as communities, corporations, and government…"

Figure 2: An adapted 'processes for organization meanings' model for home study in HI

In Figure 2, the boxes are the components of the adapted POM model while the arrows indicate both information flows and directions of influence. The hi's and gi's, as represented by maps and images of spaces, depict the perceived world (Component 2) in specific ways based on particular values and cultures (Component 3). When examined via the HI lenses, these hi's and gi's reveal the appreciative settings of individuals and groups (Component 3). This enables an informed study of (a) related socially produced discourses (which are also a kind of hi's and gi's) (Component 5), that are shaped by various appreciative settings, and (b) the created meanings upheld by individuals and groups (Component 6). Subsequently, an HI investigation exercise is expected to produce (i) actionable knowledge to inform purposeful actions by various stakeholders (Component 8) as well as (ii) intellectual/ theoretical knowledge on HI. Such an HI investigation exercise follows the sensemaking process of the phenomenological research approach.

By using the adapted POM model of SSM, the nature and relatedness of various HI analysis foci and objects of study are clarified. While the POM model was originally formulated to examine

"processes in which organization meanings are created" (Checkland and Holwell, 1990), this writer finds it quite feasible to adapt the model by introducing an additional component on habitual activities (Component 9), to cover the main social processes in which meanings of home and place are created. In this regard, we might as well call the adapted model as depicted in Figure 2 and Table 1, the Processes for Meanings model (Housing Imagination) (or PFMM-HI for short). Moreover, as an intellectual exercise, the PFMM-HI can be further enhanced with critical theory as it is endorsed in GI. Such an intellectual exercise is not to be taken up in this paper. All in all, the adapted POM model (i.e. PFMM-HI) can be treated as a systemic conceptual framework for HI study. Exhibit 1 provides some relevant news article extracts as illustrative examples for the PFMM-HI.

Exhibit 1: News article extracts as illustrative examples for the PFMM-HI

News extract 1 (Wahl, G. 2014. "The Two Brazils" *Time*. March 31: 26-32.)

> The demonstrations in June began small…. But the military police overreacted…. That sparked mass protests over a litany of grievances: government corruption, substandard education and health care, the forced removal of favela (or slum) dwellers and the $22.8 billion in public spending on facilities for the World Cup in 12 Brazilian cities and for the 2016 summer Olympics in Rio…. Looming high above Rio de Janeiro, Santa Marta is one of the city's oldest favelas, a place … rich in history, grit and spectacular views …..… Santa Marta was one of the first favelas to be overhauled by Rio's massive urban-pacification project…. Many of the housing structures in these favelas were originally improvised from brick, wood and cinder blocks; their water and electricity were sometimes appropriated from municipal lines… now … many Santa Marta's 6,000 residents are being threatened with forced removal by the city.

News extract 2 (The Economist. 2014a. "Special Report: China: Building the dream" *The Economist*. April 19th: 3-5.)

> Thanks mainly to a tide of migration, China's urban population had grown by more than 500m since Deng

launched his reforms …   A new grand plan for China's cities, overseen by the prime minister… admits to a number of problems, such as worsening pollution, urban sprawl and congestion as well as growing social tensions…. The recent growth of China's cities has created two new social forces … One is a vast migrant population (including the urban-born children of recent migrants from the countryside…   The harsh treatment of China's internal migrants is creating huge social divisions that could erupt in serious unrest…. The other new force is the urban middle class….. China's middle classes, like those elsewhere, worry about property: how to protect it from the whims of urban planners and party officials, what is happening to prices, and what to do if the bubble bursts.

News extract 3 (*The Economist*. 2014b. "Briefing: Japanese women and work" *The Economist* March 29th: 18-20.)

Female participation in the labour force is 63%, far lower than in other rich countries. When women have their first child, 70% of them stop working for a decade or more, compared with just 30% in America. Quite a lot of those 70% are gone for good… In 2005, when a previous government was talking steps towards greater equality, Mr Abe and his fellow conservatives warned of the damage to family values and to Japanese culture that could result if men and women were treated equally.…   keeping women out of the workforce, conservatives thought, made economic sense too. If the country's "baby-making machines", as a former LDP health minister put it, stayed at home then they would produce more babies, and thus more workers.

News extract 4 (Chen, A. 2013. "Hong Kong's middle class most burdened by high housing costs" *South China Morning Post*, August 9.)

The middle class is shouldering the biggest burden from high property prices, with mortgage payments or rent accounting for 44 per cent of monthly expenditure, according to a new survey. Citibank vice-president Chow Wai-kit said it was common for Hongkongers to depend on their family for

property purchases…. Chow: "In Chinese tradition, it means more than just a place to live - it means having assets." The high cost of property also has an effect on personal decisions, with 53 per cent of the single respondents saying they would delay their marriage plans to buy time to save more. Nearly half of those who were married also chose to delay having children, or to have no children, so they could boost their savings.

News extract 5 (Tomlinson, P. 2014. "A made-to-measure home solves all your problems" *South China Morning Post*, July 24.)

In Hong Kong you can buy just about anything - and what you can't find, can be easily custom made….. Home furnishings hard and soft, decorator items, even lighting, can be made to order, if you dig around enough. According to Mark Fraser, an expatriate craftsman who specialises in made-to-measure furniture for awkward-sized Hong Kong flats, just about any kind of furniture can be custom-made and built-in, saving space and maximising storage in smaller homes.

Referring to Exhibit 1, news extracts 1 and 2 are related to Component 1 (External trends and events); news extract 3 is illustrative on Component 3 (Appreciative settings of individuals & groups); news extract 4 is associated to Component 6 (Created meanings). Finally, news extract 5 is related to Component 8 (Purposeful actions). Likely, some readers may also consider that some of the news extracts offer examples to other components in Figure 1. From this exercise with the PFMM-HI which is based on the Soft Systems Thinking of Checkland and Holwell (1999), it can be seen that HI analysis can be anchored theoretically[7] on SSM. Also, there have been theoretical works that map Checkland's SSM to the Phenomenological approach (see Jackson, 2000, p. 249), an approach that has been recommended to be employed in HI in this paper. Nevertheless, it is also feasible, based on the original critical

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[7] *Perspective anchoring* is defined as "the intellectual effort to explicitly relate a methodology to a particular so that it explicitly respects the rationality of such a perspective" (Ho, 2013).

perspective of GI[8], to examine the HI topics on the right column of Table 1, with a critical theory lenses (Wikipedia, 2014). The writer believes that a more critical approach to study HI does require a higher level of theoretical sophistication on its practitioners, including the ability to apply a perspective switch[9], a concept as explained in the Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Research (Ho, 2013). For Soft Systems theorists, they can also study HI to heighten their theoretical sensitivity on HI, including writings on home study in HS and HG, which enables them to apply SSM to study HS-related problems or issues. Via the discussion, the two questions raised at the beginning of this section have been addressed.

Concluding remarks

By explaining how the topic of home is studied in Housing Imagination (HI), this paper contributes to the clarification of the newly conceived subject of HI itself. The writer also finds it relatively straightforward to relate the POM model of SSM to the study of home in HI and, subsequently, comes up with the PFMM-HI. This indicates that HI can be theoretically anchored to SSM, and HI study can be informed by Soft Systems Thinking. A more sophisticated HI practitioner should still find it quite feasible to then switch the underlying theoretical perspective from one based on SSM to another one based on critical theory thinking in their HI investigations. This meets the theoretical orientation of GI, as propounded by GI writers such as Gregory (1994) and Harvey (1990). Besides, thinking in critical theory mode is stimulating and liberating, thus worth doing.

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[8] Gregory (1994), as a main theorist on GI, states that "My particular concern is with multiple discourses of critical theory: discourses that seek not only to make social life intelligible but also to make it better".
[9] A *perspective switch* is the switching of perspective by the problem-solver from one moment of reflection based on one perspective (e.g. Soft Systems

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Thinking) to another moment based on another perspective (e.g. Emancipatory Systems Thinking) (Ho, 2013).

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