

Systems Thinking: Focus by Level.

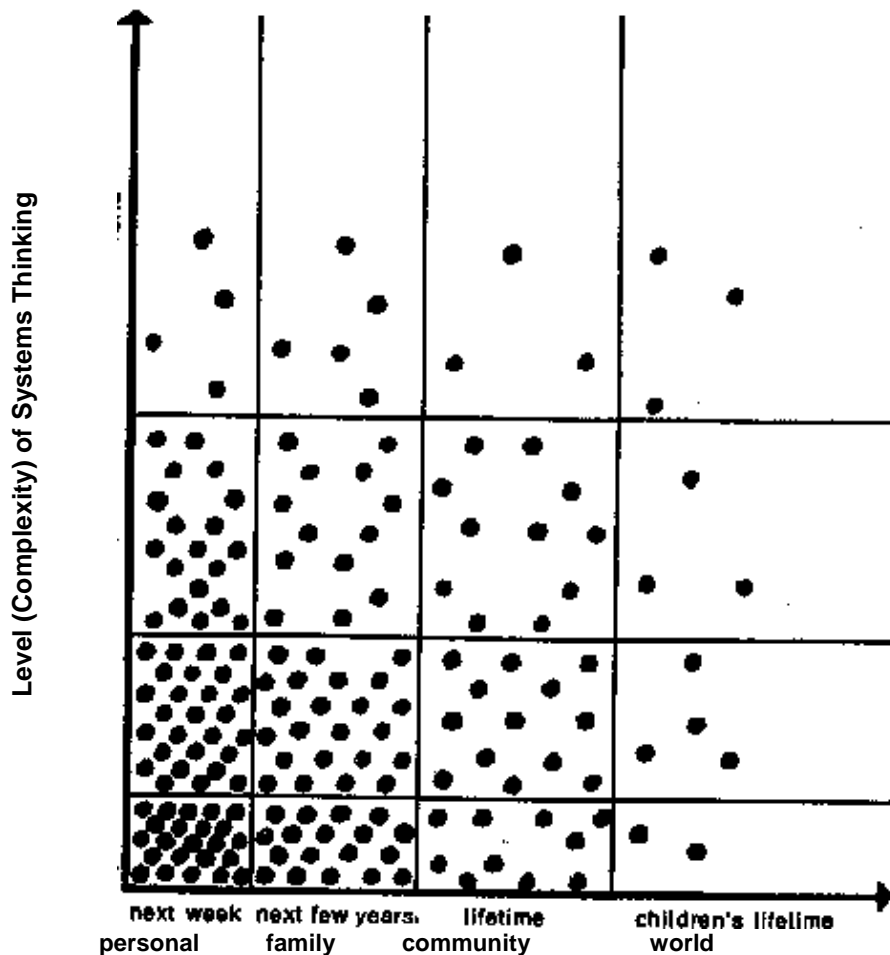
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The “Club of Rome” *Limits to Growth* report contains, without comment, the diagram reproduced below, although I have modified the captions on the axes. The dots represent the proportionate number of people in the total population falling into each cell.

Meadows Sys Thinking Diag.doc

Levels of Systems Thinking



What it illustrates is that, contrary to common assertion, most people engage in systems thinking at some level.

Most people use it to try to understand how to survive today, tomorrow, next week. Their thinking is short term and personal. However, some of those who are concerned with

personal advancement and survival do engage in complex systems thinking (top Left Hand cell). These include those who destroy their organisations for the sake of personal advancement.

However, there are also others (bottom Right hand cell) who *are* concerned with world issues but only able to grasp things in a most rudimentary way.

In fact, relatively few of those who are concerned with world issues are able to think about them in ways which reflect complex systemic understanding and intervention.

Interestingly, the vertical axis, the ability to make sense of complexity, viz systems thinking, is precisely what the RPM measures.

What is more, we know that social mobility, both upward and downward, is strongly related to the RPM scores people achieved as children.

So one has people from environments characterised by low-level short term systems thinking who escape from those environments by engaging in high level systemic thinking. But few of them are thinking about issues having to do with the survival of the planet.

Interestingly, our other research on adolescents' values (occupational and otherwise) revealed that, when the data were sectioned by background and anticipated destination, more or less the only adolescents who were concerned about community and planetary issues were those from high status backgrounds who saw themselves as headed for high status positions.

One sees the same relationship in studies of the added value of Higher Education. More or less the only institutions which enhance student competence are Ivy League Universities in the US and Oxbridge in the UK. But the same work shows that a disproportionate number of the graduates from such institutions take jobs from which they can work for the benefit of the community. Such gains are much more important than personal income differentials. Although the selectivity of these institutions by background is usually over-estimated, it therefore again, disturbingly, emerges that, if we are interested in planetary survival, selectivity by background may be more important than we care to think.