

## Introduction to the section on OST, environments and the future

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September, 2019

One of the difficulties in trying to break a comprehensive conceptual framework and body of work such as OST into relatively manageable sections is where to best make the breaks. Because it is so highly internally consistent, most works employ several fundamental concepts and principles and of course, cross disciplinary boundaries. The break points chosen are primarily pragmatic centring on the main purpose of the work.

In this section we concentrate on those works that deal specifically with:

1. the essential nature of the open system,
2. the nature of environments and
3. the future, and their interrelationships.

Because OST genuinely deals with the open system rather than just paying lip service to the concept, systems and environments are mutually determining and a system cannot be accurately described without describing the environments within which it is embedded.

That of course is why the paper on ‘The causal texture of organizational environments’ (Emery & Trist, 1965) became a citation classic and must be regarded as the foundation document for all the further work on the development of the OST framework. Emery & Trist (1965) can also be found in Vol III of the Tavistock Anthology and on [www.moderntimesworkplace.com](http://www.moderntimesworkplace.com).

That paper not only fully conceptualized the open system thereby filling the gap led by von Bertalanffy but also specified the changing nature of the environment, the social field, its various causal textures over historical time.

Both the original formulation of the system-environment relation and the nature of environments have been subjected to further investigation including studies of the break points between different environmental types. One is the ‘3Vs’ paper, ‘Youth – Vanguard, victims or the new vandals?’ the first paper in *Limits to Choice*. The 3Vs is the result of Fred’s exploration of what really caused the shift from the Type III to Type IV social field. It replaces his previous ideas of the reasons for the dramatic change in causal texture between the two which he published in *Futures We are In* (1977).

The third aspect of this group of documents, the future, has always been a major concern of OST practitioners as human minds range over past, present and future with capacities such as imagination enabling long term purposes and infinite ideals.

The future is also an ever abiding concern of all people in terms of the class of ‘the important practical affairs of people’. The unique mission and responsibility of the social sciences is the mutual enrichment of social science and these important affairs (Emery Fred, 1977, p199). Therefore, a responsible social scientist must always keep one eye on the future and implications for the future as they go about more particular or present concerns.

That area of work sometimes referred to as ‘futurology’ constitutes a fairly significant fraction of the work of OST practitioners and necessarily touches upon basic theory and changing environments as well as any particular, more narrowly defined subject area such as telecommunications or work.

Some of that work also includes research into the methodology of social forecasting itself, well illustrated by Appendix 1 of *Futures We are In* (1977). That appendix is a summary of more detailed previous research conducted over years which served as the theoretical foundation of the work on most probable futures and aided the development of practical methods such as the Search Conference.

The version published here (*Futures We're In*, 1998) includes revisions suggested by Fred's notes in his working copy. My introduction to that version explains those changes. Because OST is science, based unlike some of the other forms of 'social science' floating around, it is subject to modifications in both theory and practice as empirical evidence suggests.

## References

Emery, Fred (1977). *Futures We Are In*. Martinus Nijhoff Social Sciences Division, Leiden

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Trist E. L., Emery F. E., & Murray H. (Eds). (1997). *The social engagement of social science: A Tavistock anthology*. Vol. 3. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.