Systems Concepts in Evaluation: An Expert Anthology, Edited by Bob Williams and Iraj Imam. Point Reyes, CA: EdgePress, 2007.

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In my Ph.D. program, there are those of us who are known for our areas of interest. I happen to be the 'systems person.' Prior to reading this book, I believed I was pretty familiar with systems theory and practice. However, I discovered while reading *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990) that thinking systems in my work and using family systems theory in my thinking about work still left a lot of territory uncovered. Reading the introduction to *Systems Concepts in Evaluation* made it clear to me that I have much to learn about the many other approaches to systems, and how they relate to evaluation in particular. This anthology provided not only an eye opener, but also an excellent initiation to the variety of concepts inherent in systems. I also learned that when someone says they know systems, it's a good idea to ask "Which kind?"

As outlined in the introductory chapter, the purpose of this anthology is to answer three questions:

1. What key systems concepts do evaluators need to know?
2. How can evaluation benefit from using systems concepts?
3. What do evaluations based on systems concepts look like?

The introduction to the book clarifies exactly how this book addresses these questions (thus, serving as a handy checklist for someone reviewing it!). It also serves as a guide to help readers determine what chapters to read based on their own interest, knowledge, and experience with systems.

The flow of the chapters is directly related to the editors' three purposes for the anthology. It begins by laying out the history of systems thinking by describing three waves of development. The next several chapters explore the basic concepts that comprise those waves and how they can specifically be used to benefit evaluation work. These case studies give a broad representation of what it looks like when systems theory meets the reality of doing evaluation. The final contributed chapter explores possibilities for further development of systems theory based on both evolution and behavior characteristics.

The progression from basics to case study to theory was particularly useful for someone like me, who thought she knew what she was getting into, but really didn't. Those of you who really DO know systems may enjoy breezing through the first chapters. However, I think there's enough heavy lifting in the last five chapters to make it a worthwhile read even for the experienced systems thinker.

One of the challenges of an anthology is that the chapters do not specifically build on each other. The editors' opening comments for each chapter offer guidance on the key concepts

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within and how those concepts relate to the whole. Systems are messy business, so the editors' comments felt to me like having a companionable guide on a jungle trek. The chapter authors' reference lists also provide resources for those who are interested in side trips to learn more about specific concepts. I've already planned several of my own based on things that intrigued me in terms of my future practice.

The only thing missing from this book is a glossary of terms and acronyms. Like any discipline or field, the systems field has a goodly share of unique uses of common terms and TLAs (three letter acronyms). Some are used with enough regularity to be memorable, like SSM (soft systems methodology). However, there are so many that I had a difficult time keeping them all in memory. The language is also a challenge. Concepts like 'counter-intuitive' may have innate meaning to the reader, but have a specific connotation in the systems field that was not clarified. Perhaps a second edition could add a glossary and clean up the variety of typographical errors in the chapters.

Overall, I think this anthology does a remarkable job of fulfilling its stated purpose. The editors and Amy LaGoy are intentional in using both the introduction and the conclusion to emphasize the existing links and potential for further connections between evaluation practice and the concepts discussed in the book. In addition, its design enables its use by a broad audience—from evaluators with no experience with systems concepts, to the middle ground folks like me with some knowledge of both, to systems thinkers who want to understand how to apply what they know to evaluation.

Systems Concepts in Evaluation presents a clear and effective argument that evaluation will benefit from future applications of systems concepts. It also serves as an excellent resource for those who wish to move in that direction. I know I will continue to read and refer to it throughout my practice.

References

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Currency Doubleday.