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Anti-Archetypes
Systemic Stories of Hope

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Abstract

Positive stories of change can play a powerful role in shaping systems. In systems-thinking, stories can take the form of systems archetypes which depict recurring themes and organizational dramas. Though these patterns are important for uncovering problems, they also have the potential to help us reimagine utopic versions of our system that pattern hope and provide inspiration. This paper will introduce Anti-Archetypes: systemic patterns of hope that allow us to move beyond what is to what is possible. The Anti-Archetypes are not radical redesigns of the existing Archetypes; instead, they reframe familiar stories to reflect more positive dynamics and outcomes.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide, reconciliation between the Tutsi and Hutu seemed all but impossible. It is estimated that approximately 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus were massacred (Bhalla, 2019). Peacebuilding initiatives were imperative to moving beyond the crisis and healing the nation.

Amongst the most effective systemic change solutions was a radio soap opera called *Musekeweya*, which translates to 'New Dawn'. Sometimes referred to as 'Romeo and Juliet in Kigali', the story depicted two star-crossed lovers — one Tutsi and one Hutu — from rival villages (Schwartz, Vedantam, Boyle, & Shaw, 2018). Rather than ending in tragedy like its Shakespearean archetype, the two protagonists overcome challenges and opposition to love, depicting storylines in which they not only navigate the opposition but present an aspirational, yet nuanced image for a post-genocide society (Schwartz, et. al, 2018). The prevalent themes of reconciliation and healing trauma are embedded within storylines that demonstrate how to come together after being torn apart (Tanganika, p. 59, 2015).

Musekeweya aired on government radio, reaching almost 70% of Rwandans, and became a cultural staple for the nation (Schwartz, et. al, 2018). Today, it is credited with helping to heal a deeply divided nation. It is a testament to how positive stories that demonstrate desirable future states and behaviors have the power to change systems.

One of systems-thinking's most explicit ties to storytelling is that of systems archetypes. In essence, "systems archetypes are analogous to basic sentences or simple stories that get retold again and

again. Just as in literature there are common themes and recurring plot lines that get recast with different characters and settings, a relatively small number of these archetypes are common to a very large variety of management situations" (Senge, p. 18, 1990). Furthermore, "as we do with stories and fairy tales, we can use the archetypes to explore generic problems and hone our awareness of the organizational dramas unfolding around us" (Kim, p. 1, 2002).

Though archetypes are critical for uncovering problems, they provide insights about the existing systemic paradigm rather than its potential or desired state. While this may suffice within an organizational context underpinned by a business as usual or growth narrative, the current set of archetypes require rethinking if the existing underlying narratives are insufficient or the paradigm shifts.

Consider the evolution of wicked problems and the deep-seated mythologies they are built upon. It has been 50 years since the Club of Rome's co-founder, Hasan Ozbekhan, outlined the *49 Continuous Critical Problems: An Illustrative List* in *The Predicament of Mankind* (1970). Each of the critical problems tells a dark story that has yet to be resolved. In the decades that have passed, we have done little to circumvent these problems; instead, we have exasperated our problems to the brink of collapse. Nationalist movements are putting established democracies in peril, financial inequality runs rampant with an ever-increasing gap between rich and poor, and environmental collapse seems all but imminent. In 2019, "General Assembly President María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés (Ecuador) warned the gathering in her opening remarks, stressing that 11 years are all that remain to avert catastrophe", stating: "We are the last generation that can prevent irreparable damage to our planet" (United Nations General Assembly, 2019). Yet, we have failed to take enough meaningful action that attacks these issues at their core, settling instead for shallow solutions and temporary fixes that will generate more unintended consequences in the long run.

In order to meet the emerging challenges of the 21st and 22nd century, we may need to reimagine our systems altogether. If we only seek and design for patterns within the existing paradigm, we will continue to create patchwork solutions and reinforce existing systemic states. By default, we will design extensions for what it is rather than what ought to be. Not all systems can or should be repaired; when a system is unsustainable or inflicts harm, we may need to redesign it altogether.

It is also important to note that language is soft power. In *Notes on the Role of Leadership and Language in Regenerating Organizations*, "language is the defining environment in which these systems live. It is how those in the system reach agreement. It is also a medium for organizational growth and change," (Esmonde, p. 3, 2002). If language has the power to shape systems, then future-oriented language of hope may enable the creation of hopeful systems. Consequently, language surrounding our frameworks and models also need to reflect those future states — a language of flourishing — in order to tell new stories.

Infusing aspirational language and frameworks into the broader field will enable new dialogue that seeks to transcend the current paradigm rather than work within it, and encourage us to rethink what we take as a given. Today's words should not constrain tomorrow's stories, and reframing

systems archetypes to reflect aspirational stories is one approach that may edge us towards transformation. Similar to stories, the patterns we privilege lay out a journey towards a possible set of outcomes. Without positive language and models, we are hindered in our capacity to reimagine systems that embody an everyday utopia.

Borrowing From Futures Studies

In order to reimagine systems for the better, systems-thinking may benefit from borrowing from an adjacent field that is abundant in hope: strategic foresight. Strategic foresight explores multiple, alternative future states (i.e. prototypes of the future) in order to design present-day strategies. Unlike forecasting which aims to make predictions, foresight posits that the future cannot be predicted (Dator, p.1, 1995) . Instead, it anticipates the various ways in which an organization's broader context (e.g. industry, ecosystem, country, etc.) might evolve, and identifies strategies and innovations that might be future-proof (viable regardless of how the future unfolds).

Amongst the futures considered in any given foresight exercise are bright and hopeful ones. Frameworks such as Bill Sharpe's Three Horizons and Jim Dator's Generic Images both include transformational futures marked by high-spirited systems in which complex problems are addressed with aspirational outcomes, if not outright resolved. These futures are balanced by others that are less than ideal or outright undesirable. The implication is not that one type of future is more important than another, but that a spectrum of futures must be considered in order to create viable and/or sustainable solutions that are future-proof.

If we integrate this approach into systems-thinking, we may apply a futures orientation to systems archetypes that speak to transformation. Rather than surfacing problems, futures informed archetypes can help us design towards a preferred state.

Anti-Archetypes

Archetypes lend themselves well to reinterpretation through a futures lens because they are stories, and stories are constructs that can be deconstructed and reconstructed. Similar to archetypal plots, we can substitute new ideas into an existing structure that follows a similar pattern but tells a different tale. Rather than take archetypes as a given pattern for problems, we can use them to pattern aspirations and opportunities. In other words, we can subvert the existing patterns to create 'Anti-Archetypes'.

The term 'anti' means opposite, not negative. They are not a radical reimagining of the Archetypes that call for a fundamental change to their structures, and neither are they a prescribed replacement for the Archetypes. Instead, Anti-Archetypes introduce a new language that repositions our thinking around the patterns to reflect an alternative, futures-oriented, preferred state perspective. Anti-Archetypes borrow from futures-thinking and utopian fiction to imagine the system not as it is but as it could or should be. They aim for long-term collective success rather than

short-term individual or siloed gain, with an underlying value system that speaks to aspirational outcomes. They grant permission to tell stories of desired systemic states that perpetuate hope and strive for collective flourishing—the 'all ships rise with the tide' scenarios. Anti-Archetypes will allow us to envision and design interventions and solutions to root problems, encouraging us to seek out positive unintended consequences. For instance, rather than identifying delays in the system, we look for catalysts (signified by the symbol delta) that facilitate change. Anti-Archetypes that reflect a desirable future state may be created once a traditional Archetype has been identified and explored, or when a future state that breaks from the existing paradigm is required.

Descriptions and Examples

Cohesive Visions

Corresponding Archetype: Drifting Goals

In a Cohesive Visions Anti-Archetype (Figure 1), we pursue corrective action that achieves the desired goal but also incentivizes further action to raise the goal towards a greater vision. In contrast to Drifting Goals, which seeks to diminish the gap by lowering goals, here the gap is maintained because our goals escalate as we strive for more and better alignment towards a greater vision (Kim, p. 13, 2002). Cohesive Visions encourages individuals, teams, and organizations to come together to work on goals with a collective benefit. These are visions that put people and the planet first. The goal may reside outside the primary stakeholder as an ecosystem or societal goal that is adopted for a specific context. Articulating clear, actionable incentives that escalate as goals are achieved may help catalyze change.

An example of a Cohesive Vision is reducing CO_2 emissions (Figure 2). Rather than attempting to meet prescribed standards for CO_2 emissions, we can seek to escalate our efforts towards a new goal as the initial goal is achieved. A corrective action such as a carbon tax can accelerate the achievement of our initial goal, which then reduces the existing gap.
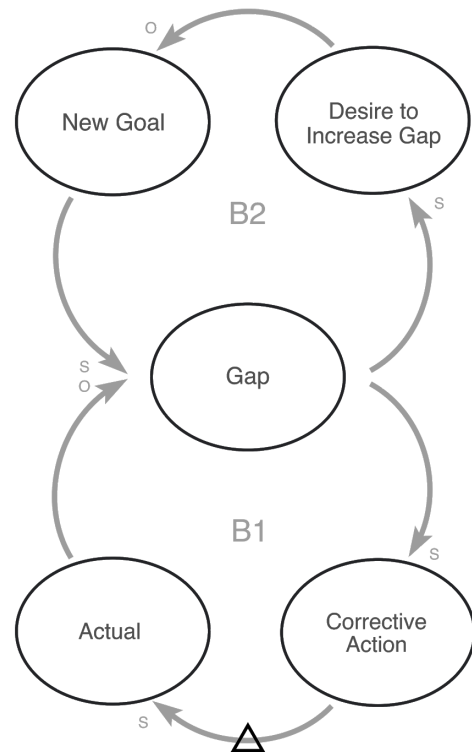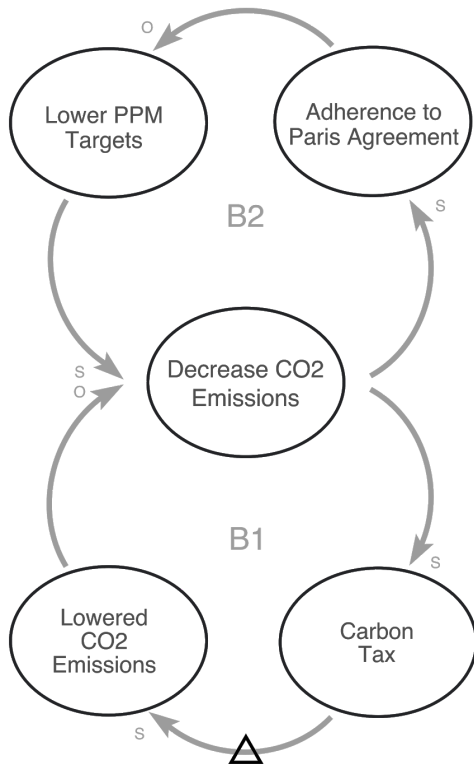

Figure 1. Cohesive Visions Anti-Archetype.

Figure 2. Cohesive Visions Anti-Archetype Example.

Organizational Applications Examples
- Mergers and Acquisitions
- Ecosystem Collaboration
- Cross-Siloed Collaboration

Systemic Applications Examples
- Reducing CO2 Emissions
- Reconciliation
- Peace Negotiations

De-Escalation

Corresponding Archetype: Escalation

When a De-Escalation occurs each stakeholder takes action or makes concessions to diminish threats, resulting in a diffusion of the problem (see Figure 3). The intention is to neutralize a high-intensity stand-off and seek out win-win scenarios in which the competing needs of each stakeholder are met. Some compromise may be necessary depending on the nature of the challenge, however, stakeholders act in good faith to ensure that both parties benefit from the outcome. A De-escalation Anti-Archetype may be used to negotiate and reduce conflict, particularly when an Escalation Archetype has already occured.
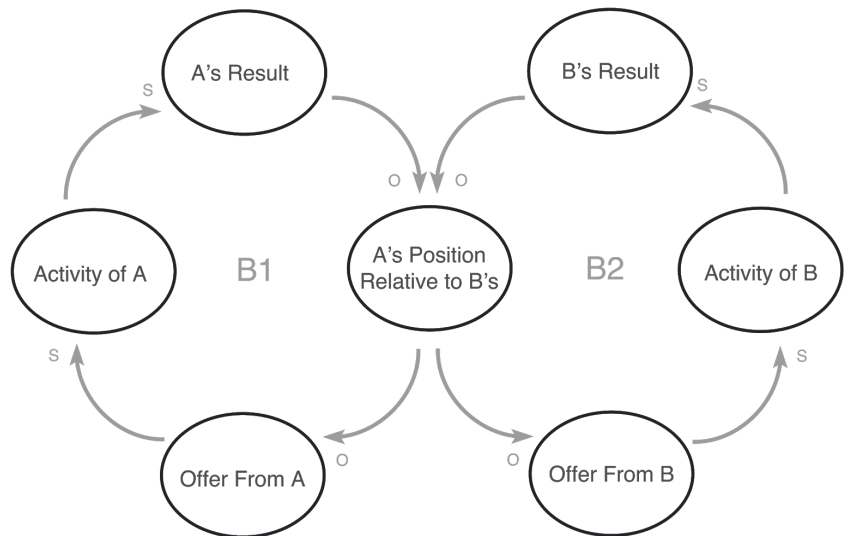

Figure 3. De-Escalation Anti-Archetype.

In Systems Archetypes I, Kim presents the concept of de-escalation and cites the Cuban Missile Crisis as an example, noting that "it takes two to have an arms race, but only one to stop it. Unilateral action can break the escalation dynamic by robbing it of its legitimacy," (Kim. p. 15, 1992). A De-Escalation Anti-Archetype begins with one side extending an offer or an olive branch to the other, recognizing that a concession must be made to return to a state of peace.

An alternative example is presented here in which an escalating protest is diffused by friendly engagement and withdrawal of police (Figure 4). With reduced fears, crowds calm and are less likely to incite violence. Protestors, having communicated their concerns, eventually disperse.

Organizational Applications Examples

- Conflict Management
- Contract Negotiations
- Leadership Stalemates

Systemic Applications Examples

- Denuclearization
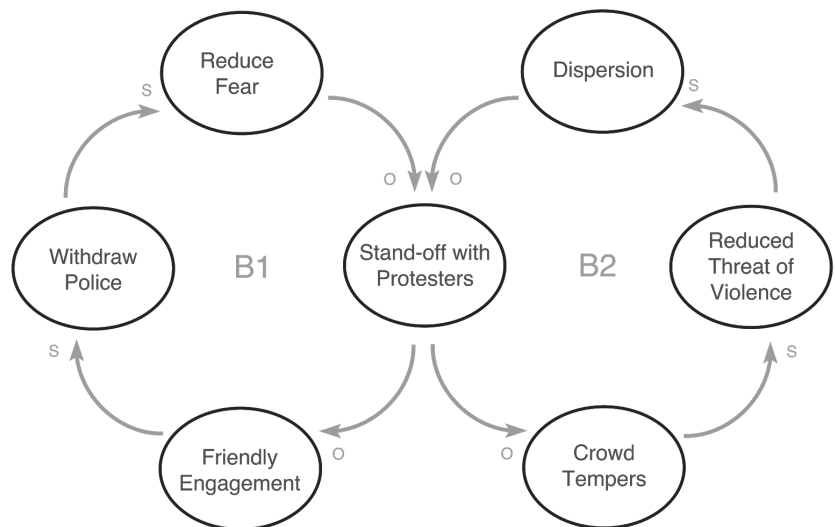- Racialized Conflict
- Peace-Building Efforts

Figure 4. De-Escalation Anti-Archetype Example.

Fixes that Fuel

Corresponding Archetype: Fixes that Fail

This Anti-Archetype identifies fundamental solutions that alleviate symptomatic problems or symptomatic solutions that alleviate fundamental problems through positive unintended consequences. Fixes that Fuel may trigger a cascade of positive chain reactions that provide additional unexpected benefits or alleviate a problem not originally within scope (Figure 5).

For instance, Universal Basic Income (UBI) may be intended as a solution for poverty but has a number of positive side-effects (Figure 6). Researchers evaluating the success of the UBI pilot project in Ontario, Canada noted that participants experienced a wide-range of positive outcomes including less visits to the hospital and improved mental health (Taekema, 2020).
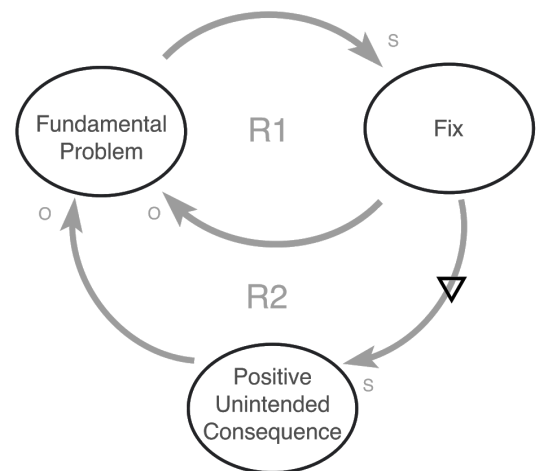

Figure 5. Fixes That Fuel Anti-Archetype.

Organizational Applications Examples
- Employee Wellbeing Initiatives
- Reduced Work Hours
- Corporate Social Responsibility

Systemic Applications Examples
- Denuclearization
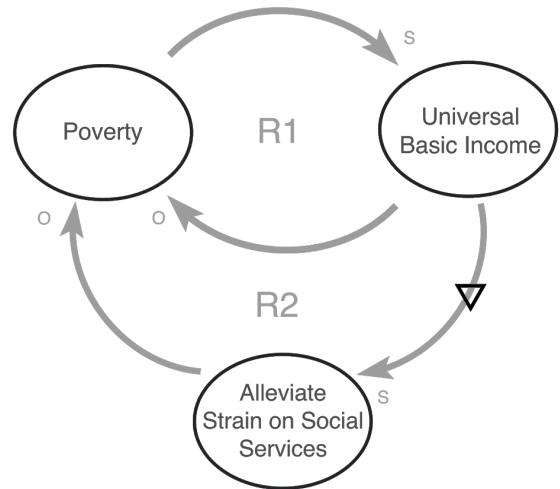- War
- Racialized Conflict

Figure 6. Fixes That Fuel Anti-Archetype Example.

Success to the Marginalized

Corresponding Archetype: Success to the Successful

The Success to the Marginalized Anti-Archetype should be used when a redistribution of power and/or resources is required due to systemic abuse, institutionalization, and oppression (Figure 7). It may also be referred to as Success to the Hindered when alluding to concepts and states, rather than stakeholders. Success to the Marginalized is intended to offset previous Success to the Successful dynamics or to anticipate where a potential redistribution may be required.

Wealth inequality is a good example of how and when a Success to the Marginalized is required (Figure 8). When corporate power and wealth far exceeds that of the communities that support them, tax policies can be introduced to redistribute wealth to communities through augmented social services. When communities thrive, corporations may benefit from improved neighborhoods and consumer spending, which further incentivizes the need for redistribution.

Organizational Applications Examples
- Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives
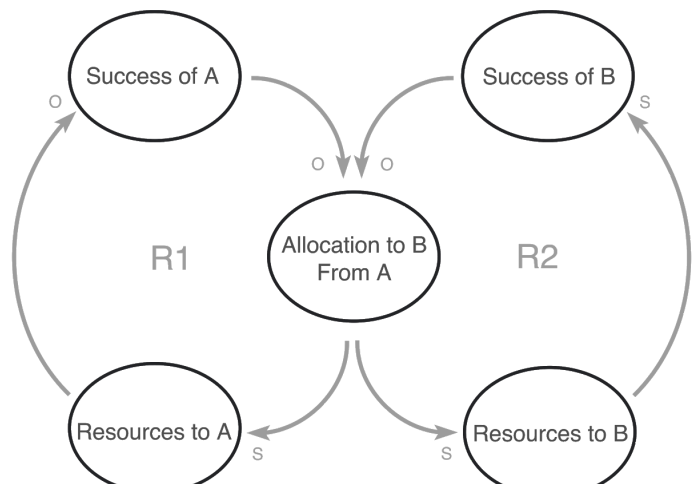- Unionization
- Resource Dispersion

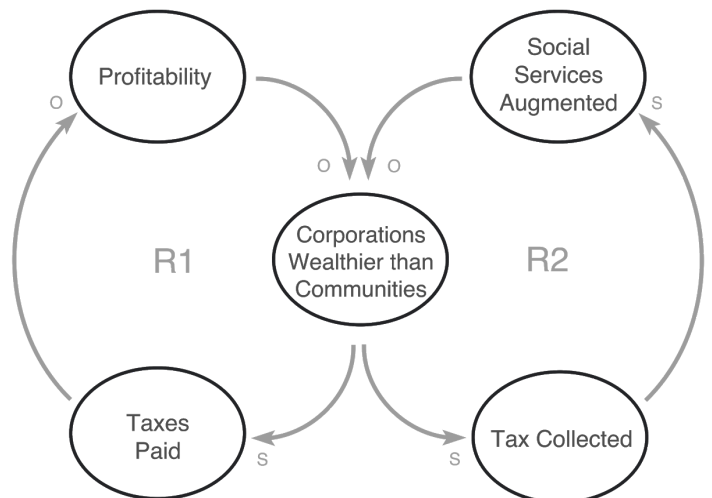Figure 7. Success to the Marginalized Anti-Archetype.

Figure 8. Success to the Marginalized Anti-Archetype Example.

Systemic Applications Examples
- Wealth Inequality
- Reparations
- Human Rights

Sustainable Growth

Corresponding Archetype: Limits to Growth

This Anti-Archetype acknowledges and accepts the limits to growth, and strives for long-term sustainability over short-term performance (Figure 9). Environmental, social, and ethical performance indicators are strategically valued as much as (if not more than) economic ones because Sustainable Growth takes a systemic view that accounts for long-term needs of the many. Stakeholders design restraints and intentionally limiting actions that ensure long-term performance before externally imposed constraints can diminish outcomes.
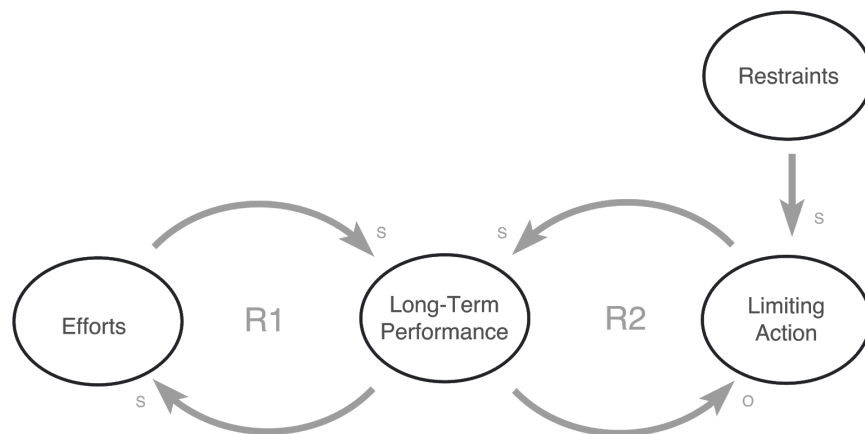

Figure 9. Sustainable Growth Anti-Archetype.

Sustainable food production is an example of this Anti-Archetype (Figure 10). Lab grown meats and overall reduction of meat in diets may help enable more sustainable food supply chains that are better for the environment. Both restraint and limiting action are designed solutions.
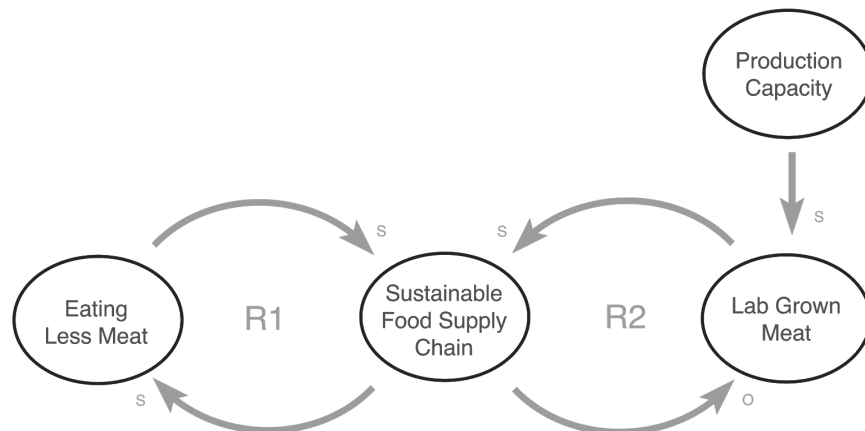

Figure 10. Sustainable Growth Anti-Archetype Example.

Organizational Application Examples
- Achieving B-Corp Status
- Launching a Social Enterprise
- Service Design

Systemic Applications Examples
- Low Growth Economics
- Environmentalism
- Infectious Disease Management

Taking Responsibility
Corresponding Archetype: Shifting the Burden

Taking Responsibility places an emphasis on accepting accountability for fundamental problems and making a commitment to identifying and implementing fundamental solutions (Figure 11). Furthermore, symptomatic solutions may have positive side-effects that catalyzes fundamental solutions.. Accountability and measured steps may be taken to counteract a previously established pattern of Shifting the Burden or when designing for emerging problems where a high degree of systemic responsibility is required.

The solutions implemented during the Coronavirus pandemic illustrate how symptomatic solutions can have positive side-effects that help augment fundamental ones. Though managing a pandemic requires strong healthcare systems and policy response, bottom-up discipline efforts such as physical distancing helped to reduce spread and, ultimately, prevent further strain on healthcare.

Organizational Applications Examples
- Environmental Clean-Up
- Corporate Fraud
- Triggering a Crisis

Systemic Applications Examples
- Decolonization
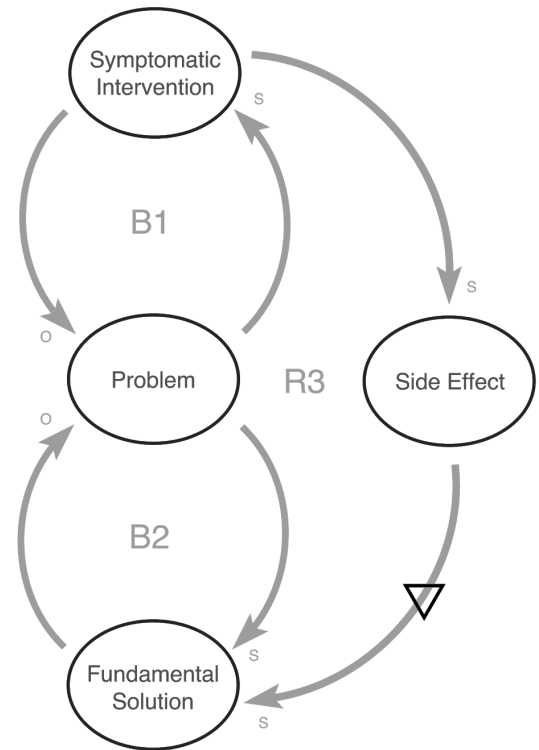- Environmental Protection
- Wealth Distribution

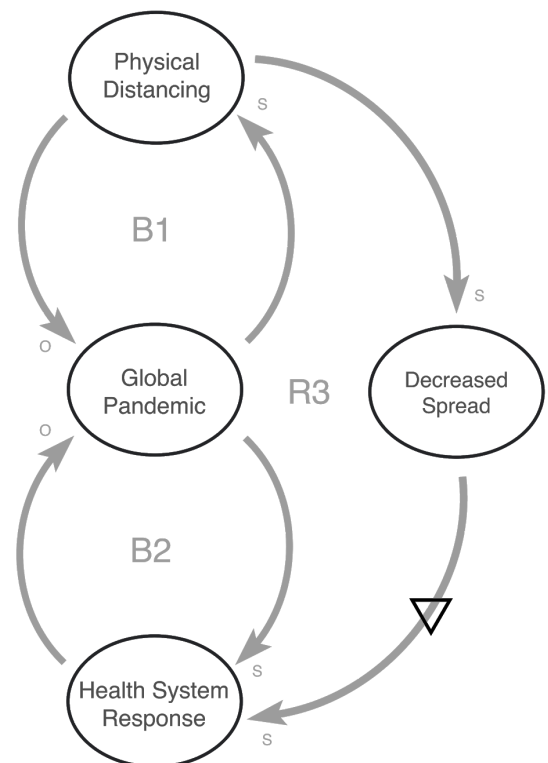Figure 11. Taking Responsibility Anti-Archetype.

Figure 12. Taking Responsibility Anti-Archetype Example.

Wisdom of the Collective

Corresponding Archetype: Tragedy of the Commons

In contrast to Tragedy of the Commons, Wisdom of the Collective embraces a narrative in which each stakeholder pursues an aspect of a common vision, so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Figure 13). The aim is to align individual activities for collective gain and desired outcome is increased benefits for all. This archetype may be used to design collaboration opportunities that seek compounded benefits or a paradigm shift.

The example in Figure 14 illustrates how different organizations have helped respond to the Coronavirus pandemic. With governments aiming to support and increase health capacity, some private organizations have shifted their production to include supplies such as ventilators, masks, and hand sanitizers (Oved, 2020). This combined effort increases overall output which increases the system's ability to respond to the problem and support frontline medical staff. In turn, the organizations that offered to make medical supplies may benefit from government funding at a time when their revenue has declined, while building goodwill with the general public.

Organizational Application Examples
- Coopetition
- Public-Private Partnerships
- Community Outreach

Systemic Application Examples
- Public Service Reform
- Crisis Mitigation and Management
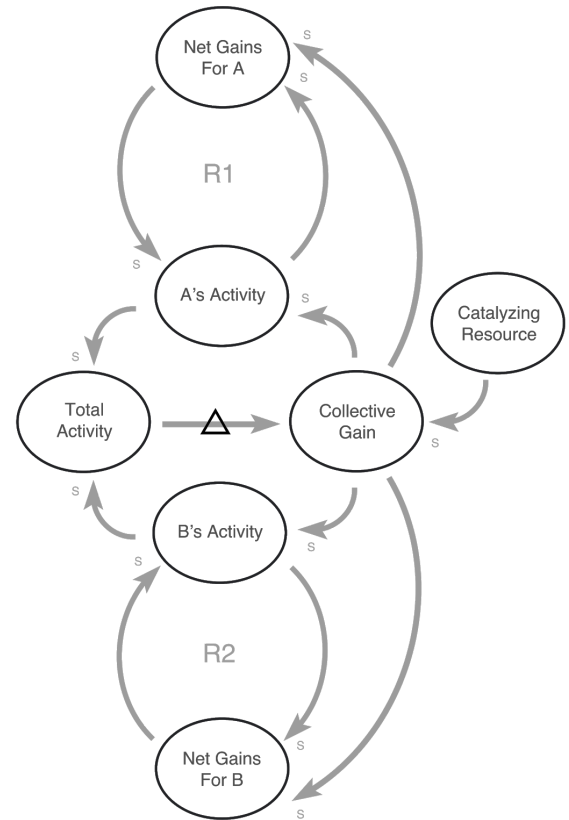- International Treaties and Agreements

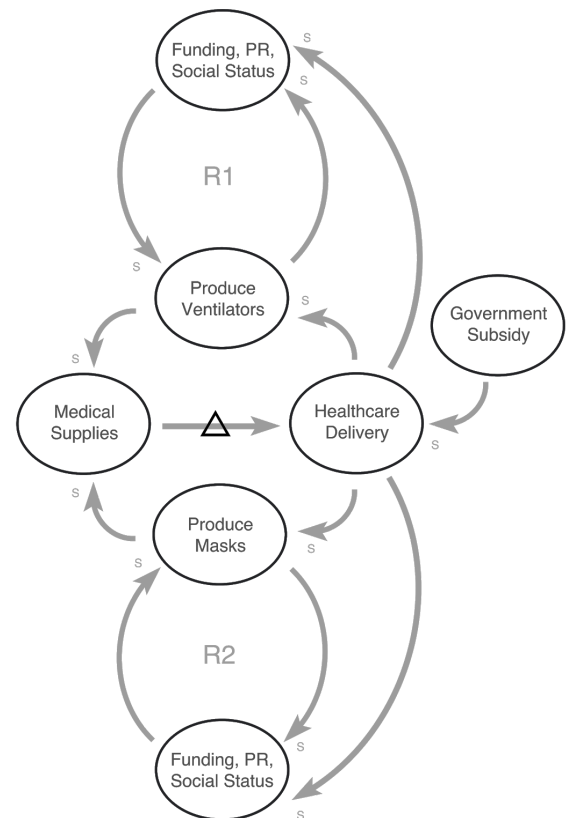Figure 13. Collective Wisdom Anti-Archetype.

Figure 14. Collective Wisdom Anti-Archetype Example.

Conclusion

As the coronavirus creates a global crisis — the aftershocks of which will be felt for years to come — identifying and perpetuating positive, transformative narratives will become more important than ever. In order to meet the needs of our current and emerging complex challenges, we need to think beyond our current paradigms to what is both possible and desirable. High-spirited, aspirational patterns and stories in the form of Anti-Archetypes will allow us to take a futures-thinking approach to systems-thinking. By designing patterns of hope, we create pathways to our collective preferred futures.

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