

Riding Waves of Resonance: Morphogenic Fields and Collaborative Research with Australian Travelling Communities

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- 1 This article explores the theme of collaboration in relation to biochemist Rupert Sheldrake's concept of morphogenic fields. We contend that this idea, with its emphasis on the role of resonance in generating self-organising systems and cooperative action, has application for our research into the culture and educational experiences of Australian travelling communities.
- 2 One of the emerging trends within cultural studies has been an engagement with the concepts generated from new scientific philosophies such as chaos and complexity theory. One such scientific concept is Sheldrake's concept of morphogenic fields, which he sees as being present in biological processes, governing the behaviour of species. Such fields possess very little energy, but are able to absorb energy from other sources (for example, by sensing the presence of gravity) and shape it, so as to transform a physical system from chaotic disorder to dynamic order. The field acts as a geometric influence that generates resonances that affect the behaviour of a species in other sites, such that morphogenic fields are built up through the accumulated behaviour of species' members (Sheldrake 60). As information systems theorist Margaret Wheatley comments of Sheldrake's idea, "After part of the species has learned a behaviour, such as bicycle riding, others will find it easier to learn that skill" (51).
- 3 We argue that the principle of morphogenic fields can help to make sense of work within a cultural field such as academia. In this case we can relate it to our research into Australian travelling communities, such as the circus and travelling showmen. There are particular implications drawn from the concept of morphogenic fields that seem especially significant in considering the practice of collaborative research. Here we focus specifically on the idea that a group of practitioners can absorb energy from other sites in order to self-organise into a dynamic partnership—that is, that the acquisition of the skills of collaborative partnerships is made easier for one group when another has already acquired those skills.
- 4 In relation to this idea, research into collaborative or cooperative communities is well established but an emerging area of interest that is an extension of this field relates to collaboration between groups from different organisations. The focus on collaborative efforts between entities that represent different systems highlights an exponential increase in both possibilities and problems. As Moriarty has demonstrated, when groups from two different organisations collaborate, ethical and political dimensions become important considerations impacting on the degree of success of the partnership.
- 5 The focus in this paper, however, is on the possibilities, rather than the problems. We take a step back and look at how the energy behind a productive group or system emerges and then influences the new partnership.
- 6 In the case of this collaboration between our research team and the show and circus groups, the emergence of a resonant relationship happened through three stages, analogous to the way in which within physical systems the morphogenic field enacts its influence at different levels. In the first stage, happenstance played a part in the emergence of a Traveller education research group at Central Queensland University (CQU). At the same time as the then Dean of Education was encouraging greater research productivity within the former College of Advanced Education by suggesting the formation of collaborative teams, the agricultural show was on in the local area. This circumstance sparked a 'corridor discussion' speculating on how the show children were schooled, providing the impetus for the formation of a research collaboration that has continued for 15 years.
- 7 The second stage involved the forging of links between this research team and the travelling communities. The process of attaining ethical clearance, making contact with the communities, and arranging semi-structured interviews was part of this process. In the case of the travelling show community, these interviews coincided with a period when members of the community, particularly mothers, were coming together to seek mechanisms for improving the school opportunities for their children. While established traditions of home tutoring, correspondence

classes, and boarding schools had provided some level of educational access for show children, the long-term uncertainties of the business, and the increasing emphasis on formal education as a pathway to maximising life opportunities, helped to generate a determination within the show community to seek other options. Through a process of consultation with teachers and educational bureaucrats and lobbying of different levels of government, the community succeeded in having established a dedicated travelling school taught through specialised state-of-the-art classrooms transported on semi-trailers. Thus the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children (QSTSC) was launched as a joint federal and state initiative in 2000.

8 The excitement of these moves within the community to improve their educational outcomes communicated itself to the university research team, who at the same time were generating links with international scholars in Traveller education. One of these, a former head of an Irish Traveller school in Dublin, has conducted research with the CQU team and conducted interviews with the QSTSC. Thus we can see how the energy within one site has communicated itself within another, such as to generate collaborative resonances beginning at the local level and extending internationally.

9 The third stage of this collaborative process has been marked by the principal of the QSTSC co-writing academic papers with the CQU research team. Likewise, a leading member of the circus community has run workshops for academics and teachers, showcasing the role of circus tricks as pedagogical instruments.

10 We contend that the concept of morphogenic fields offers rich possibilities for making sense of such collaborative enterprises. In its focus on such procedures as happenstance, self-generating mechanisms, absorption of energy flows, and the influence of one site within a field upon another, morphogenic fields offer a vision of collaboration that extends beyond observations of others' practices and immersion in their world. Happenstance played a role in the CQU research team coming together at the same time that the show community was becoming particularly concerned with greater options in schooling. These groups have self-organised in response to particular needs: to increase research performance, on the one hand, and to agitate for improved educational access, on the other. The energy generated by the show community in its lobbying for a dedicated school has certainly provided impetus for the research group, while the international collaborations emerging within this research context have helped energise members of the show school in seeking opportunities to make themselves felt within the field of academia.

11 Indeed, there has been a blending of the fields of academia and of occupational Travellers as they play off the resonances that each has generated. Certainly many aspects of our approach to researching Traveller education have been learned from, and made easier to practise by, interacting with Travellers and have extended our thinking and skill base—in this case in relation to negotiation and expanding collaborations with other groups with separate but shared interests. This kind of skill acquisition is more than the observation and immersion highlighted by conventional pedagogical models; it is also facilitated by the morphogenic resonance arising from interactions among groups with such common interests.

12 At the same time, while crucial elements of these collaborations have been intuitive, serendipitous, and unconscious, it is important to note that both the Travellers and we have engaged in systematic reflection, decision-making, and strategic planning about their and our respective directions. Deviating from the 'norm' of permanent residence, the show and circus people have had to devise ways of identifying, lobbying, and communicating effectively with policy-makers with the power to create new structures for the provision of schooling. In doing so, they have highlighted the education of occupational Travellers as a morphogenic field—possessing very little energy in its own right, precisely because it is marginalised from the power of the educational centre or mainstream, it has had to absorb energy from, and to attain resonance with, representatives of that centre or mainstream.

13 "Riding waves of resonance" is thus an appropriate metaphor for this particular 'take' on collaboration. In particular, both the Travellers and the researchers can be likened to surfers expending and expanding energy as they interact with the far more powerful ocean and sustaining other members of the surfing community and themselves as they do so. So too the Travellers and the researchers absorb energy from one another and others and self-organise in further dynamic and resonant collaborations and partnerships.

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