Invisible constructions — the case of respect

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Abstract

Respect is a sensitive, complex, and obscure reality of human relations. After a closer look at its 'mechanics', building respect does not seem all that confusing.

1 Introduction

Respect, or feeling deep admiration for someone, is generally elicited by that someone's abilities, qualities, or achievements — e.g. status, vision, power, image, conduct, or *all together* (Figure 1).
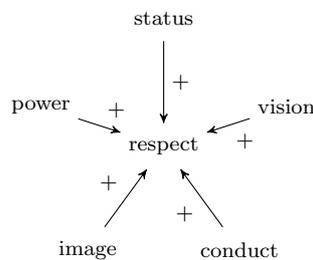

FIGURE 1 Respect depends on certain variables — but not in the same way for everyone

In a social context, respect is known to be *mutual*. For instance, A may say to B: 'I respect you if you respect me', and *vice versa* (Figure 2). When established this way, respect becomes *conditional*, and very difficult to understand how it can be established.
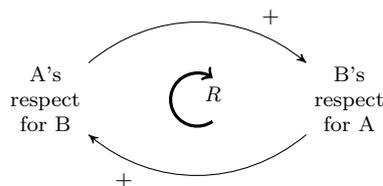

FIGURE 2 In a social context, respect is often mutual — although not always for the same reasons

The *path dependence* of Figure 2 is very similar to the case of the 'inverted bowl' (Sterman, 2000, p.349–353): depending on small, apparently insignificant and often random events[1], the same system configuration can lead to either a very good relationship or to a very bad one — and probably 'lock in' there for ever. Let us explore to see *how* 'starting on the [right/ wrong] foot' can be changed if necessary.

2   Adding resolution

To create a working example, let us add an extra variable to respect from the pool of Figure 1 — for instance, 'A's conduct' — as in Figure 3.
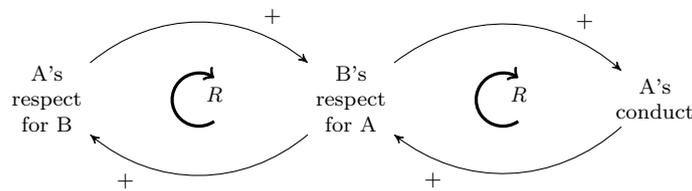

FIGURE 3   Introducing A's conduct

The new parameter 'A's conduct' can be used as a 'leverage' point, to control the situation of the original double-dependence single-loop system. However, as any of the elements of Figure 1, 'A's conduct' is *ambivalent* — i.e. it may imply 'good', or it may imply 'bad' — so it is not possible to run a simulation yet. Hence, we must add just one more factor (or variable, or parameter) that influences 'A's conduct', such as a 'temptation' or a 'rule'. Let us see how the twin-loop system of Figure 3 behaves under each one of these circumstances.

2.1   Temptation

The 'temptation' to do something 'fun but wrong' is capable of influencing 'A's conduct' in a negative way (Figure 4): *ceteris paribus*, the more temptation, the worse the conduct; the less temptation, the better the conduct. 'Bad' conduct by A is capable of decreasing 'B's respect for A' — subject to interpretation and judgement by B. Thus, temptation is capable of destabilising the otherwise stable, coupled reinforcing loops that would have been 'keeping the respect'.
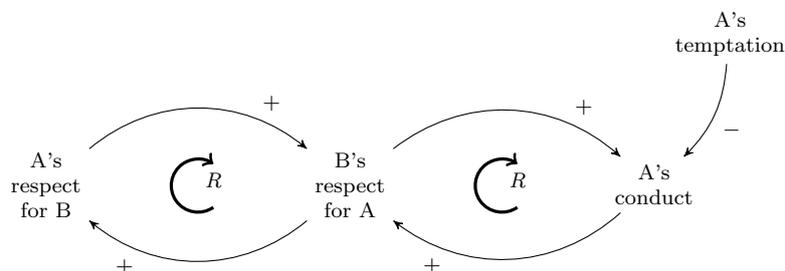

FIGURE 4   A more complete picture, with A's conduct and temptation

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[1] Not shown here: e.g. A and B getting involved in a car accident on the day they first meet for professional purposes

2.2 Rules

A rule such as 'always respect your partner' is capable of giving good guidance to A (Figure 5). Such rules may come from parents, teachers, the police, judges, or the society collectively. This rule is capable of influencing 'A's conduct' in a positive way (Figure 5): *ceteris paribus*, the tighter the application of the rule, the better the conduct; the looser the application, the worse the conduct (i.e. technically, unruly).
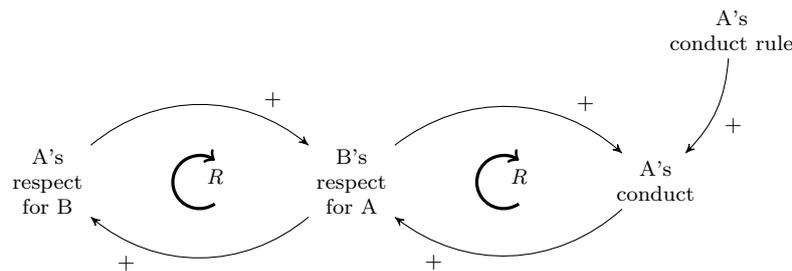

FIGURE 5   A stabilising rule

The addition of a *strong* rule to the configuration of Figure 3 should be able not only to stabilise (lock in) respect, but potentially even correct an initially embittered situation. The case of Jean Valjean and Javert in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* could be an example of such an overturn, powered by Valjean's rule of conduct (Hugo, 1887).

3   Discussion

Reinforcing (or 'positive') feedback loops such as Figure 2 theoretically tend towards explosions (e.g. growth) or implosions (e.g. extinctions). In other words, they are 'amplifiers' of change, and this can be put to either good or bad use. As always, powerful machines need skilled and careful handling.

On their own, reinforcing feedback loops can drive systems towards unexpected outcomes, with 'winning' options that have no apparent reason for success. For instance, in the case of international standards, reinforcing loops amplify small initial changes that make a difference, until that difference reaches proportions that it becomes the *de facto* standard — e.g. the establishment of the QWERTY keyboard, or the standard width of the railroad tracks (Sterman, 2000, p.349–353).

However, the 'driving' of reinforcing feedback loops is not necessarily (or always, or exclusively) passive: many times it requires an effort. With appropriate analysis and understanding of the situation, as in the case of respect, it is possible to find the key factors, and this is indeed a good start. Often in real life there exist various such factors that can be used to change or maintain the course, and hence harness the power of reinforcing feedback loops skilfully and safely (Senge, 2006, pp.94–103).

The particulars of this 'driving' effort vary across cases, so recipes are not valid. What works for one case probably has no *specific* value for another. The general lesson is that each case must be studied, analysed, and resolved with adequate understanding. The basis for this understanding — especially since the subject is so abstract — had better be drawn and shared appropriately. Hence, mastering adequate mapping techniques such as reverse blueprints (Perdicoúlis, 2010, 2011) or causal loop diagrams (Sterman, 2000; Senge, 2006) becomes critical.

4   Conclusion

For the illustrated situation of a two-person interaction, it was necessary to bring in two levels of factors that influence respect. This requires knowledge of the subject, understanding of its 'mechanics', and also some skill in putting the information down on paper (or screen) to be visualised — and shared, when necessary. We can be ingenious only after we can 'see' what is going on, and be sure that we are interpreting correctly. The same procedure encountered in the case of respect applies to all situations that are abstract and/ or obscure, and in which we *must* achieve certain outcomes or 'make things work' in a certain way.

References

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