



MR-12 The Modified Morphogenetic Cycle



The Wind Towers of Illyr

For generations, the people of Illyr had built wind towers. They rose above every home — tall, elegant structures that caught the strong mountain winds and turned them into gentle currents of cool air. In the long, hot summers, the towers made life possible. They were the pride of the city. Children learned how they worked in school. Craftsmen competed to build the most beautiful ones. Songs were written about them. The towers were not just useful. They were part of who the people of Illyr believed themselves to be.

But over time, the winds began to change. They came less often, and when they did come, they were weaker. The summers grew hotter. Inside their homes, the air grew still. People slept poorly. Work slowed. Tempests shortened.

Engineers quietly proposed a new idea — mechanical cooling. It was effective and reliable, but it required abandoning the towers. Many refused to consider it. “The towers have served us for centuries,” people said. “They are part of our identity. To abandon them would be to abandon ourselves.” So the towers remained, and the heat grew worse.

Among the engineers was a young woman named Sarai. She had grown up admiring the towers. She had studied them and loved them. But she could not ignore what she now saw. They no longer worked. Not because they had been poorly built, but because the world around them had changed.



She installed a small cooling device in her own home, quietly. She did not speak about it at first. But she slept better. She worked better. She felt alive again.

When friends visited, they noticed. They asked questions. Some were curious. Some were uneasy. “It feels wrong,” one said. “It feels necessary,” Sarai replied.

Months passed. A few others followed her example. Then more. Not because they stopped loving the towers, but because they began to see that loving them was not enough to make them work.

The towers still stood above the city — beautiful, honored, but no longer unquestioned. And slowly, without decree or announcement, Illyr began to change.

The towers had not failed. They had simply belonged to a different wind.

Formal Description

The Modified Morphogenetic Cycle is a working systems model describing how individual agency, social structure, culture, and the natural environment interact over time to produce stability (morphostasis) or change (morphogenesis).

In this formulation:

- **Structure** defines what interactions are possible (“can”).
- **Culture** defines what interactions are considered legitimate or desirable (“should”).
- **The natural environment** bounds both through material constraint.
- **Agency**, shaped by belief formation and motivational reflexivity, mediates alignment or misalignment between these domains.

When structural possibility and cultural legitimacy align within environmental limits, social systems tend toward stability. When they diverge, tension arises, and reflexive action may initiate change.

This model is used here as a guiding framework for understanding how individual reflexivity can propagate into broader transformation. A fuller theoretical justification is available separately.

Plain English Explanation

The Modified Morphogenetic Cycle explains how societies stay the same — and how they change.

Every social situation involves three basic elements:

- What can happen (structure),
- What should happen (culture),
- And what is materially possible (environment).



Most of the time, people absorb norms automatically and act within existing structures. When what can happen matches what should happen, society feels stable. This is known as morphostasis.

But sometimes they fall out of alignment.

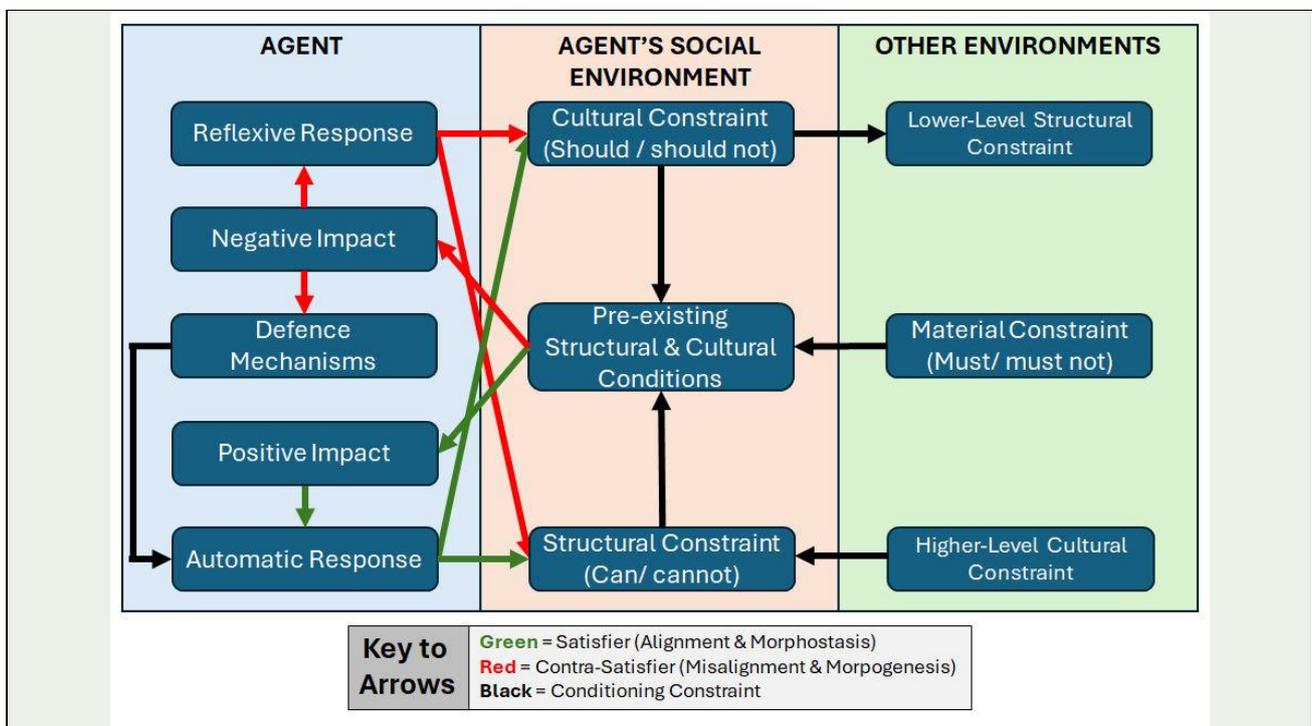
- People may feel that what is happening should not be happening. Alternatively they may feel that what is not happening should be happening.
- Or they may want change that existing structures cannot deliver.
- Or environmental limits may make both unsustainable.

When this misalignment becomes visible, discomfort appears.

Motivational Reflexivity is the process through which individuals examine that discomfort rather than automatically explaining it away.

If enough people do this — and if their insights spread — culture shifts, structures adapt, and new patterns stabilise.

That is morphogenesis.



Example 1 – Societal Change

Cultural norms once treated smoking as normal. Over time, medical evidence and lived experience created tension between what should happen and what could continue sustainably. Reflexive action — research, advocacy, regulation — altered both cultural legitimacy and structural rules.



Example 2 – Organisational Change

An organisation values efficiency above all else. Employees experience burnout and question whether the current pattern should continue. Reflexive individuals raise concerns. If these insights propagate, structural adjustments follow.

Provenance and Links

This model draws on:

- The Morphogenetic Approach (Archer),
- Systems theory,
- Motivational reflexivity,
- And research on belief formation and cognitive dissonance.

For the purposes of this course, it functions as a conceptual map connecting individual reflexivity to broader social dynamics.

A fuller theoretical exposition of the Modified Morphogenetic Cycle is available separately.

Practical Exercise – Student Response Area

Exercise: Locating Yourself in the Cycle

1. Identify a situation where something “no longer works” for you personally or professionally.
2. Ask:
 - Is this tension about what can happen?
 - Or about what should happen?
3. Reflect:
 - What structural factors limit change?
 - What cultural expectations reinforce the status quo?
4. Consider:
 - What small reflexive action could bring “can” and “should” into better alignment?
5. Complete the sentence:
 - “If this insight were shared, it might gradually change...”

This exercise connects personal reflexivity to systemic awareness without requiring theoretical depth.



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