



SST-05 The Classical Morphogenetic Cycle



A city government introduces a new policy intended to revitalise an older neighbourhood. The policy encourages new housing developments, improved public transport, and additional community services.

At first, the policy exists only as a set of plans and regulations. These plans shape the choices available to developers, residents, and businesses operating in the neighbourhood.

Over the next several years, these groups respond to the policy in different ways. Developers propose new projects, residents organise community discussions, and local businesses adapt to the changing environment.

As these interactions unfold, the neighbourhood gradually changes. Some existing features remain the same, while others are transformed as new buildings, services, and social activities emerge.

How can we understand this process of stability and change within social systems?

One influential framework for analysing this dynamic is the morphogenetic cycle.

Formal Description

Morphogenetic Cycle

A morphogenetic cycle is a temporally structured process through which social structures and cultural systems condition social interaction, and through which the outcomes of that interaction either reproduce existing arrangements (**morphostasis**) or transform them (**morphogenesis**).



Plain English Explanation

The morphogenetic cycle is a framework developed by sociologist Margaret Archer to explain how social systems evolve over time.

The key idea is that social life unfolds through a sequence of stages linking structure, interaction, and change.

First, existing social structures and cultural ideas shape the context in which people act [T1]. These structures include institutions, laws, organisations, and shared beliefs that influence what people can do and what they expect from one another.

Second, people interact within these conditions. Individuals and organisations pursue goals, cooperate with others, and respond to opportunities, risks, and constraints [T2-T3].

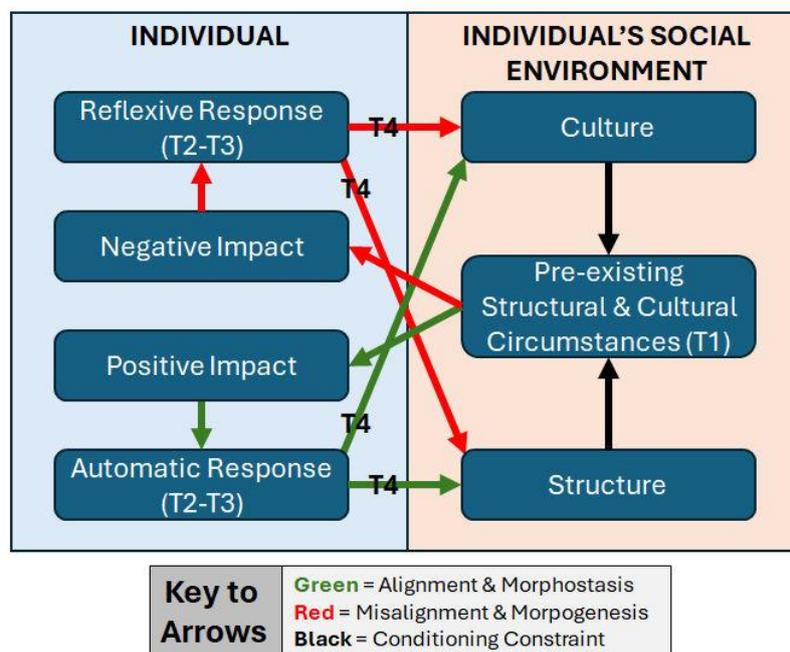
Third, the outcomes of these interactions feed back into the system. Sometimes they reinforce existing arrangements, allowing the system to continue operating in roughly the same way. This outcome is called morphostasis [T4].

At other times, interactions lead to significant changes in institutions, practices, or beliefs. When this happens, the system undergoes morphogenesis, meaning that new structures or patterns emerge [T4].

The morphogenetic cycle therefore provides a way of understanding how social systems can be both stable and capable of change.

However, the classical model leaves an important question open. While it explains that structures and cultures condition interaction and that interaction produces outcomes, it does not specify in detail what mechanisms operate inside the interaction phase itself.

Understanding these mechanisms is essential if we want to analyse how real social systems adapt, reproduce existing arrangements, or undergo transformation. The next module explores this question and examines why the classical morphogenetic cycle can be strengthened by introducing additional concepts.





Example 1 – Educational reform

A government introduces a new education policy. Teachers and schools respond in different ways. Over time, the interaction between policy expectations and classroom practices may either reinforce existing systems or lead to significant changes in educational structures.

Example 2 – Organisational change

A company introduces new management procedures. Employees adapt their behaviour in response to these rules, sometimes reinforcing existing organisational practices and sometimes creating new ones.

Provenance and Links

The concept of the morphogenetic cycle was developed by **Margaret Archer** in the context of realist social theory.

Key sources include:

- Archer, M. (1995). *Realist Social Theory*
- Archer, M. (2003). *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*

Practical Exercise

Think about a social system you are familiar with. Examples might include:

- a workplace
 - a school or university
 - a community organisation
1. Identify one existing rule, institution, or cultural expectation that shapes behaviour in this system.
 2. Describe an example of interaction between people within the system.
 3. Did these interactions reinforce the existing system (morphostasis) or contribute to change (morphogenesis)?

Explain your reasoning using the stages of the morphogenetic cycle.