SST-06 Why the Classical Morphogenetic Cycle Needs Enhancement

A city government introduces a policy to encourage people to use public transport rather than private cars. The goal is to reduce congestion and improve air quality.
However, the policy produces mixed results. Some residents begin using buses and trains more frequently, while others continue driving. Public transport services become overcrowded during peak hours, and complaints about delays increase.
City officials respond by adding new bus routes and adjusting schedules. Over time, the system gradually adapts, but the process is complex and sometimes unpredictable.
Why did the policy produce such varied responses? Why were some changes successful while others created new problems?
The classical morphogenetic cycle helps explain how social systems evolve through the interaction of structure, culture, and agency. However, situations like this suggest that additional mechanisms are also at work.
Understanding these mechanisms requires extending the original framework.

Formal Description
The classical morphogenetic cycle explains how social structures and cultural systems condition social interaction and how the outcomes of that interaction reproduce or transform existing arrangements.
However, the model does not fully specify the mechanisms through which interactions generate feedback, how agents interpret that feedback, or how changes propagate across interconnected social systems.

Plain English Explanation

In the previous module we introduced the classical morphogenetic cycle. This framework explains how existing social structures and cultural ideas shape interaction, and how the outcomes of those interactions may reproduce or transform social systems.

However, when we apply this model to real social systems, an important question arises: what mechanisms operate within the interaction phase of the cycle?

In practice, social interaction is shaped by many factors that the classical model does not fully specify. These include different types of constraints, the needs that social systems must sustain in order to remain viable, the feedback generated by interaction, and the ways individuals and organisations interpret that feedback.

In addition, social systems are interconnected. Changes occurring within one system may influence developments in others, and processes unfolding at one level of organisation may affect outcomes at another.

These observations suggest that the classical morphogenetic framework can be strengthened by incorporating additional mechanisms that operate within the interaction phase. The Enhanced Morphogenetic Cycle introduced in the next module provides such an extension.

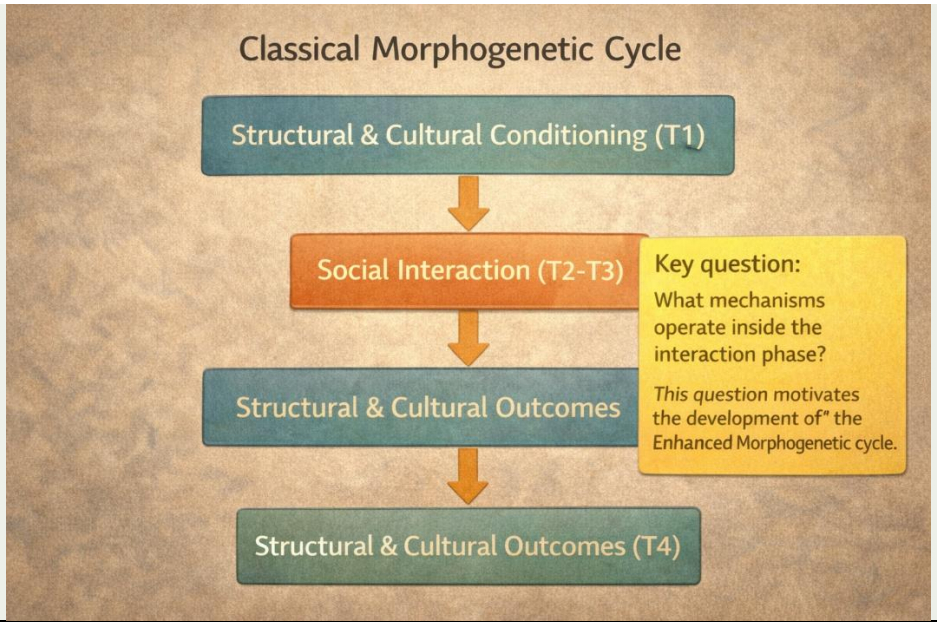
For example, the model does not specify the different types of constraints that shape social interaction. In practice, social behaviour is influenced by physical conditions, institutional arrangements, and cultural expectations, and these may interact in complex ways.

The classical model also does not explicitly describe how social systems receive feedback about their own functioning. Some interactions strengthen the processes required for system stability, while others disrupt them.

Another important issue concerns how people interpret feedback signals. Individuals and organisations may sometimes ignore information that suggests problems within a system, allowing ineffective patterns of behaviour to continue.

Finally, the classical model does not fully explain how processes occurring within one social system influence developments in others, or how change can propagate across multiple levels of social organisation.

These questions suggest that the morphogenetic framework can be strengthened by incorporating additional concepts and mechanisms. The Enhanced Morphogenetic Cycle introduced in the next module addresses these issues by extending the classical framework.



Example 1 – Organisational change
A company introduces a new workflow system intended to improve productivity. Some employees adopt the new system quickly, while others resist it or develop alternative practices. The classical cycle explains that interaction leads to outcomes, but additional mechanisms are needed to explain why responses differ.

Example 2 – Environmental policy
Governments introduce policies encouraging sustainable energy use. Some communities adopt renewable technologies rapidly, while others change more slowly. Understanding these differences requires examining the mechanisms influencing interaction and feedback within the system.

Provenance and Links
The classical morphogenetic cycle was developed by Margaret Archer as part of realist social theory.
Key sources:

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

The need to extend the framework is discussed in:
Challoner (2026), *The Enhanced Morphogenetic Cycle*

Practical Exercise
Consider a policy change, organisational reform, or social initiative that produced unexpected or mixed results.

1. What structures or rules shaped the situation?
2. How did people respond through their interactions?
3. Were the outcomes fully predictable, or did new problems emerge?

Now reflect on the classical morphogenetic cycle:

- What aspects of the situation does the model explain well?
- What additional mechanisms or factors might be needed to explain the outcomes more fully?

