Getting In-Sink with the In-Sink-Erator

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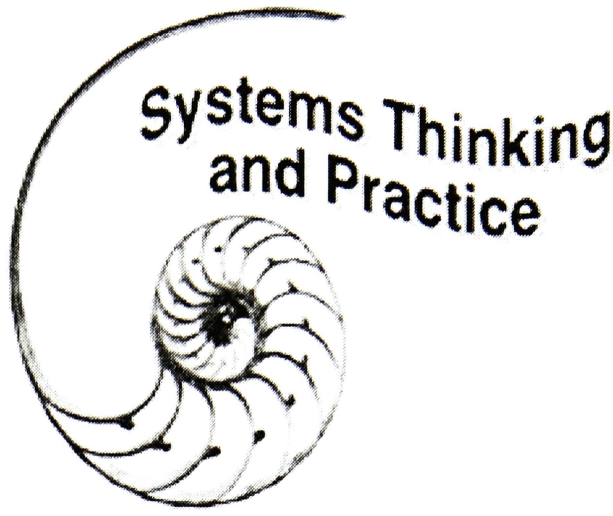

The advertisement shown has obvious contradictions that are invisible to many people in our society. These contradictions arise through the social structures that have become part of our thinking and mindset toward waste management. In order to overcome the displacement of the waste problem that is produced by this device, we have to take a closer look at what we do with our waste and plan a more appropriate disposal mechanism. This would involve a new form of thinking with a sense of responsibility for our waste that we currently do not have as a community in general.

It is apparent that the manufacturers may be unaware of the implications of their device on the environment. The In-Sink-Erator is not a responsible disposal mechanism for household waste as it only displaces the waste problem. Instead of sending the waste to a garbage tip for burial it is sent with the sewerage to a treatment plant. It therefore still must be processed and dealt with before it is no longer a problem. This in fact makes the disposal by an In-Sink-Erator costly as it uses resources in many ways. Such expenses include the production of raw materials for the In-Sink-Erator it self, construction of these raw materials to make the In-Sink-Erator, maintenance over its lifespan, electricity use and the environmental effects from electricity production, excess water use in running the device, treatment of extra sewerage waste, and the release of extra nutrients into our water ways when the processed sewerage is finally expelled. A person choosing to use an In-Sink-Erator for waste disposal would find it expensive if they were able to analyse its usage in these ways. Not only are there personal financial expenses in the purchase of the device and increased water and electricity use, but the user and all others in the community are paying through their rates for the waste to be treated at the sewerage plant. Therefore while putting the food waste 'out of sight, out of mind' is actually producing considerable amounts of other waste in terms of energy, pollution and materials. With this and the environmental effects mentioned, the In-Sink-Erator really is an irresponsible alternative to waste disposal.

It is possible for a company to advertise the In-Sink-Erator in this way due to the social structures that society has implemented over time. Fisher explains that people interpret the world they (re)cognise coherent with the intellectual structures that they already have (Fisher 1996A). These intellectual structures must be developed and as Fisher goes on to explain; 'The constructs we have assimilated to see with are socially provided. We gain them from our parents, school, and society at large through books, the media, social pressure, ("political correctness!?"), friends and so on' (Fisher 1996A). In the example of this advertisement the social structures used include the current and commonly accepted mechanisms of waste disposal such as garbage tips, sewerage, and recycling. Also the dependence of society on using a product or technology to solve every problem, leading to convenience and an easy solution to waste. The advertisement also plays on our feelings of guilt by revealing to us that this is apparently a better alternative to our current environmentally unfriendly disposal techniques. These social constructions and the general structures that underpin will be expanded upon to show how the contradictions arise in peoples thinking.

Historically the problems of waste management have increased since humans began to live in larger communities. The waste produced by traditional cultures was basically biodegradable food or items made from materials that were not highly processed. The communities were small and the amount of waste could be readily absorbed back into the natural ecosystems without causing a disruption to the natural processes. Therefore the problems of waste were minimal. With the advent of farming, increased population and people congregating in larger communities, the amount of waste produced increased, then with the industrialisation of the West materials began to be processed in various new ways. Previously unseen wastes and larger amounts of now common waste such as sewerage and landfill were produced with limited space to process them. As the intellectual framework for disposal of these wastes developed, so did the mechanisms and technology to support them. Both evolved together. Two of the main disposal mechanisms used are landfill and sewerage. We placed our problems out of sight, out of mind to the general populace.

The problem with the disposal of sewerage is that the processing is an unseen and hidden process, therefore people

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do not think about what happens when they flush the toilet or put food waste down the sink via an In-Sink-Erator. They take for granted the sewerage system and have no recognition of how it operates, the resources consumed by it, yet that they actually pay for it through rates. An increase in the cost of sewerage disposal could be a way to make people more cognitive of its existence. Charging should be relative to the real cost of sewerage disposal.

As the pressure on our garbage tips has increased we recognise that alternatives must be found. Our intellectual framework for waste disposal is changing again for good reason. The In-Sink-Erator is an alternative to reduce pressure on landfill, and as the sewerage system of disposal is hidden, people think that they have solved the food waste problem as it disappears down the drain. It is still the out of sight, out of mind mentality. The truth is that by using the device *more* waste is thrown out due to the extra energy and water consumed. This is in direct contradiction to the advertisements statement that 'you will throw out far less garbage'. The garbage plus added water is displaced to be dealt with elsewhere.

Technology has become an accepted way to solve our problems in today's society. This is related to our current paradigm that is based on reductionist science. Science produces the technologies that are used in our everyday lives. Chellis Glendinning in the text *Ecopsychology* states, 'We are so entrenched in our technological world that we hardly know it exists' (Roszak 1995). Technology is not always necessary, as there are many simple and natural solutions to problems that should be considered. We have developed what Glendinning describes as a human-constructed, technology centred social system built on principles of standardisation, efficiency, linearity and fragmentation (Roszak 1995). Technology has become to a large extent our ideology. This allows the advertisement to offer a technological device that people will see as a solution to the waste issue. The problem with many technological solutions is that they commonly displace the original problem or create new problems of their own. This is what is referred to as the revenge effect by Tenner. He proposes that most promises of technology to improve things are illusory. The technology brings about a change that produces phenomena that oppose the change, often having more detrimental effects and worsening the situation (Tenner 1996). This is obvious when the resource use involved with the In-Sink-Erator is analysed. The revenge effect is a feedback cycle that occurs as part of all systems, making them self-referential and constantly changing.

We have also constructed a notion that the technology offers convenience. The advertisement describes the In-Sink-Erator as 'the ultimate in kitchen convenience'. As our lifestyles have become increasingly busy, technology has become accepted as a means of producing increased efficiency in processes, creating the myth that it saves us time. To push material into the In-Sink-Erator, wait for it to operate, and cleaning the sink would take about the same time as carrying it out to a compost bin or rubbish bin. In the long term with ongoing maintenance considerations it may take more time. Not to mention the increased monetary cost for energy and rates for water consumption and sewerage. Where has the convenience gone? This is the case with many technological 'solutions'.

It still must be explained why we have reached this point, and one reason would be the power of advertising and the media. Kanner and Gomes in *Ecopsychology* discuss advertising as promoting a religious belief among people in the ultimate good of all technological progress, through its claim that there is a product to solve each of life's problems (Roszak 1995). There is much psychology behind this belief. For example, people will never understand how their computers work, but by purchasing the latest they are able to identify with the scientific and engineering genius that produced it. Buying is the next best thing to making it. Kanner and Gomes also argue that the advertising industry has become so forceful that it actually influences the direction of technological progress (Roszak 1995). They explain examples in the area of multimedia as being proof of this. Advertising is a powerful influence on people that develops their intellectual frameworks in some very troubling ways.

These many social constructions discussed enable the In-Sink-Erator advertisement to operate in our community despite the now seemingly clear contradictions within it. It is apparent that many of these constructs are not suitable to developing a responsible approach to waste management. Therefore we need a new way of thinking that will allow us to see the problems, then act in ways that will be sustainable. This involves a paradigm shift for society as a whole, with the development of social structures that are formative of more desirable behavior. It is a big ask, yet a necessary one. It is a paradigm shift to a holistic or ecological worldview, seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts (Capra 1997).

In order to be able to move to the point where we think with a new responsibility or paradigm, we must be adequate to do so. Since Descartes and reductionist science developed our current paradigm, we are inclined to believe that we know only of our existence through our head centred thinking (Schumacher 1977). This limits our possibilities as we are not using our bodies to their full potential and are not adequate to be truly responsible. This leads us to use as Schumacher calls it, 'science for manipulation' of the material world. Schumacher argues that in order to know the outside world we must use everything we have got, not just our heads but our living body, mind and our self-aware spirit. Then we can use 'knowledge for understanding', allowing us to see the consequences of our actions, probable alternatives, and making us able to select the course most suitable for our purposes (Schumacher 1977). Science is still a useful and necessary tool to analyse and collect information, but it is how we consider and act upon this information that makes us responsible. This view no longer sees science as an objective tool, but as a way of making choices.

Returning to how we become adequate, Schumacher describes four fields of knowledge that we need to develop. Currently I

believe we do not as humans put enough emphasis on some of these areas, and in particular do not educate people to allow them to become adequate to deal with our problems. The four fields of knowledge discussed are (i) Understanding my inner self. (ii) Understanding the inner world of other beings. (iii) Understanding how other beings see me. (iv) Understanding what I observe in the world around me (Schumacher 1977). The later of these requires an analysis of social constructions through systems thinking. These fields of knowledge are to be learned in order as each depends upon the previous. This knowledge when complete would lead to us having a conscience or social responsibility. It is with this type of understanding of ourselves, others, society and the environment that we can begin to analyse our actions and change the ideology with which we make decisions.

Education can play a major role in teaching society responsibility in the systemic sense. Saul reasons that humanistic education is required for the development of social responsibility. Education has become focussed on technology and the needs of the job market. The humanist approach would teach students the tools of thought to face the changes that will arise in the future. It would allow the development of such attributes as common sense, creativity, intuition, memory (of the past so as to move responsibly to the future), and reason. These attributes would strengthen people's sense of existing outside their professions, as individual, responsible citizens (Saul 1997).

Fisher, who explains that we need to reconnect people to their waste to make their actions more responsible, discusses an alternative way toward the paradigm shift. We must to act on the self-interest of people, if we can find what will motivate people they will change their behaviour. Money is a great motivator, hence a licence on the installation of an In-Sink-Erator may be a successful way of showing people that the device places an added load on the sewerage system (Fisher 1996B). Then we would hope people would have the initiative to look for a better alternative. This possible solution may not seem ideal as people may not develop beyond their current intellectual framework of self-interest, and throw their food scraps in land fill. Yet it may be argued that they will develop a new framework given time and the educational nature that could be attached to a reward or charge system of this kind.

From a systemic point of view the only solution to the disposal of food waste is a 'sustainable' one. In *The Web of Life* a sustainable society is described as 'one that satisfies its needs without diminishing the prospects for future generations' (Capra 1997). The difficulty is in knowing if we have achieved this in cultural, social and natural environments where we try to satisfy our needs and aspirations. In an ideal situation for us to treat our food waste responsibly we must first accept that any waste we produce is a social and environmental problem. This is difficult as we unaware of most of the waste we do generate. Secondly we must realise that the way we dispose of our waste will effect not only ourselves, but other people and the environment of other species. Like the revenge effect our actions will have spin offs that we must consider, then make the effects minimal or useful. Thirdly we must recognise that we are personally responsible for our own waste.

The simplest and most responsible solution to the disposal of food waste is to collect the food scraps, carry them out to a compost bin and recycle them with the help of nature. This has benefits for our own environment as it can enrich our soils with nutrients and decomposers to bring healthy gardens. We deal with the waste on a personal level where we process it in a natural sustainable way. We must remember that we cannot only take from the Earth, but must return the favours the Earth has given us.

Responsibility of this dialectic kind requires us to be self-reflexive or self-aware thinkers. We must look at our actions and change our behaviour because of them. Such contradictions and environmental dislocations as the use of an In-Sink-Erator will then become clear to us. Finally, the solutions to overcome the contradictions will also become apparent.

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