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Clean Language' and 'Metaphor Landscapes' as potential tools in Systems Practice

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PLEASE NOTE: This is the revised version of the paper, following the presentation of the workshop at the UKSS conference.

5825 words

'… and good systems practice is *[pause]* like *[pause]* what?'.

'Clean Language' and 'Metaphor Landscapes' as potential tools in Systems Practice [1]

Abstract

Checkland has referred to the primacy of cognitive processes, and the importance of self-reflection and phenomenology in modern Systems thinking.

This paper takes that position at its face value and describes a way of reflecting on one's sense-making cognitive processes that is well established in its own domain, but, so far as we can tell, not widely known to Systems practitioners. It was developed by David Grove ('clean language') (Grove and Panzer, 1989) and subsequently codified by James Lawley and Penny Tompkins ('symbolic modelling') (Lawley and Tompkins, 2000).

This printed paper provides the underlying rationale. The related UKSS conference presentation provided a live demonstration and discussion and a BBC/Open University video demonstration.

Key words: Systems practice, imagery, soft systems, metaphor landscape; symbolic modelling; clean language; limits to rationality.

Introduction

In his presentation to the 2007 UKSS conference, Peter Checkland briefly reviewed the historical transition in applied Systems thinking from its engineering roots to its modern emphasis on *'organised reflection'*, *'phenomenology'* and the *'primacy of cognitive processes'*. However, this (widely accepted) position raises a couple of anomalies:

- Firstly, one might expect a subject based on *'the primacy of cognitive processes'* to make significant use of the (very large) research literature on cognitive processes. But a glance at the bibliographies of most Systems articles and books will quite often show references to philosophy and social science, but rather rarely to areas of cognitive science such as psychology. [2]

- Secondly, one might expect an emphasis on 'reflection' and 'phenomenology' to manifest itself in an emphasis on 'live' activities in which the experience of sense-making is evoked and explored

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[1] This paper draws on an earlier review (Martin, 2007) which benefited greatly from input from James Lawley, and from members of the Clean Language Research Group.

[2] Of course, the general cybernetic idea of the brain as a feed-back-driven information processing device has been very influential in pure and applied cognitive science thinking – as to a lesser extent have been the more specific ideas about cognition by Systems thinkers such as Bateson, 2000 and Varela - e.g. Varela, Thompson and Roch, 1993. What seems to be largely missing is the flow in the other direction – up-to-date ideas from cognitive science being absorbed into Systems.

as it happens – as is the practice in analogous applied areas such as psychotherapy and creative problem-solving.[3] However, this type of activity seems rather infrequent in Systems.

In this paper, we have tried to avoid these anomalies, describing a technique for working 'live' with cognitive sense-making processes as they happen and in the form in which they are experienced.

It uses a simple type of non-directive questioning called 'Clean Language' (CL) to explore a problem-owner's internal imagery (their 'Metaphor Landscape' – ML). It illustrates how issues can be resolved by working entirely at the level of imagery (Grove and Panzer, 1989; Lawley and Tompkins, 2000). Though very unlike the normal gamut of Systems methods, it seems consistent with the position Checkland described, so we believe it to be potentially relevant to Systems practitioners:

CL questioning was originally devised in a therapeutic context, since it helped clients to become much more self-aware of their underlying mental processes. Indeed simple CL dialogue was often enough to allow thinking that had become trapped in binds of various kinds to resolve itself and move on.

However CL questioning can also be used in many other information gathering situations that need to minimise interviewer bias (it has even been used by the police for interviewing witnesses) so organizational applications soon began to appear. Two examples:

- Caitlin Walker developed a CL-based technique she called *Metaphors@Work* for helping a team to negotiate a shared metaphor. In one project, a software firm used it to develop metaphors to capture very early design concepts for complex software projects, so that salesmen and senior managers from the client firm could discuss requirements in a non-technical way.

- Stefan Ouboter, in action research on a complex environmental issue, worked with stakeholders who had potentially conflicting positions (e.g. industrialists, environmentalists, academics, local government officials, planners, the general public). Clean language interviewing helped these very different groups of participants to each identify their own metaphors for the current situation and how they would like it to be. These metaphors could then be used as a means of sharing views amongst the different groups. [4]

Linking metaphorical imagery and reasoned analysis

If you read a transcript (e.g. those at the back of Lawley and Tompkins, 2000) or view a video of CL use for developing imagery (an Open University/BBC video was available at the conference) – or, even better, try it out for yourself, it immediately becomes apparent that you are in a domain that operates at a symbolic or metaphorical level closer to folk tales, poetry, art or dreams, than to what we normally think of as 'rational thinking'. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) put it in the opening page of their seminal book:

> *'We have found … that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature….*

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[3] Indeed a psychotherapy summer school was in progress in the same building as the UKSS conference, and its time-table appeared to be organised round sessions of this kind.

[4] Notice the parallel here to Soft Systems work, with its development of separate Conceptual Models for each participant worldview, in order to facilitate debate between participants.

> *If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor'*

These metaphorical cognitive processes, which are normally below our awareness, presumably contribute strongly to the frame of values, beliefs, assumptions and needs which make up a participant's Weltanschauung or Appreciative System, and which play such an important role in determining how our conscious, rational, analyses get interpreted. CL dialogue appears to make this metaphorical under-pinning more accessible.

In a later book, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) argued that major philosophical positions could be seen as growing out of particular metaphorical roots. Lakoff and Nunez (2000) have attempted to do the same for mathematical ideas.

However, the idea that thinking involves a combination of rational, analytic processes that we are normally aware of, and metaphoric or symbolic processes that we are normally much less aware of, is certainly not new. Back in the 1930s, Ivan A. Richards, the founder of modern, psychologically-based, literary criticism wrote (Richards, 1936):

> *That metaphor is the omnipresent principle of language can be shown by mere observation. We cannot get through three sentences of ordinary fluid discourse without it … Even in the rigid language of the settled sciences we do not eliminate or prevent it without great difficulty. In the semi-technicalised subjects, in aesthetics, politics, sociology, ethics, psychology, theory of language and so on, our constant chief difficulty is to discover how we are using it and how our supposedly fixed words are shifting their senses. In philosophy, above all, we can take no step safely without an unrelaxing awareness of the metaphors we, and our audience, may be employing; and though we may pretend to eschew them, we can attempt to do so only by detecting them. And this is the more true, the more severe and abstract the philosophy is. As it grows more abstract we think increasingly by means of metaphors that we profess not to be relying on. The metaphors we are avoiding steer our thought as much as those we accept. So it must be with any utterance for which it is less easy to know what we are saying than what we are not saying. And in philosophy, of which this is almost a definition, I would hold ... that our pretence to do without metaphor is never more than a bluff waiting to be called. But if that is a truth, it is easier to utter than to accept with its consequences or to remember.*

Bateson, in an interview with Capra (Capra, 1989, but based on an interview ca. 1978) expresses the same idea very forcefully: *"Metaphor, that's how the whole fabric of mental interconnections holds together. Metaphor is right at the bottom of being alive."*

Metaphor as it appears in language is itself just an external manifestation of less accessible and more general processes. For instance, Fauconnier and Turner (2002) see metaphor as merely one form of a very general cognitive process that they call 'conceptual blending' – the combination of different images ('mental spaces' in their terminology) to create new images.**5**

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5 They speculate that the extraordinary development of modern humans over the last 50,000 years might have arisen from the point where our brains evolved this capacity. Pure speculation, of course, but also a measure of the importance that they place on the 'blending' process. The 'model vs. reality' comparisons that are the basis of various Systems approaches could be seen as a form of 'conceptual blending'.

So authors who focus on the integration of different mental modes, rather than on metaphor as such, may well be referring to related phenomena. E.g. Bateson used the term 'grace' to describe the integration of conscious and unconscious aspects of thinking:

> *'I shall argue that the problem of grace is fundamentally a problem of integration and that what is to be integrated is the diverse parts of the mind – especially those multiple levels of which one extreme is called "consciousness" and the other the "unconscious". For the attainment of grace, the reasons of the heart must be integrated with the reasons of the reason.'   (Bateson, 2000, pg.129; originally 1967)*

Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) notion of creative 'flow' echoes Bateson's 'grace', since it emerges when there is a similar synergistic balance between the imposed demands of the external task and the internal capacities and needs of the agent.

Donald Winnicott (1971) also seems to be exploring a related idea when he writes of the importance of play as a creative integration between projective fantasy and objective perception:

> *'It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self. Bound up with this is the fact that only in playing is communication possible.' (p.63)*

> *In a tantalizing way many individuals have experienced just enough of creative living to recognize that for most of their time they are living uncreatively, as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine.'. (p.76)*

It seems that reasoned thought on its own won't do. It is merely one aspect of much more complex cognitive processes that are as much about engaging with metaphor, imagery, creativity and play as about objectivity and reason.

'Metaphor landscapes': A quick history

The term 'metaphor landscape' was coined by Lawley and Tompkins (2000). However, in the last century another common term for this kind of vivid imagery was 'rêve evéillé' or 'waking dream' – a term coined by Robert Desoille (1938), because the imagery, and the way it transforms spontaneously, seemed very similar to what happens in dreams. Indeed, Desoille's early work coincided with the emergence of the Surrealist movement in art, and French commentators have drawn attention to the parallels.

There are useful histories of this phenomenon in Kretschmer (1951), Shorr (1983), and Sheikh (2002). Some of the key names include Freud (in his 1892 'concentration technique' which he later abandoned), Jung, Caslant, Desoille, Happich, Leuner, Fretigny and Virel, Assagioli, Hammer, Singer, Shorr, Epstein (1981), Kopp (1995), Grove and Panzer (1989) and Lawley and Tompkins (2000). There are also a number of modern books in French that relate directly to the Desoille tradition (e.g. David Guerdon – 1993, 1998; Elisabeth Mercier – 2001; Georges Romey – 2001). Gendlin (1978) developed an approach to what seems to be essentially the same phenomenon, though based mainly on kinaesthetic imagery. There are others as well.

Many people who experience this phenomenon are struck by its power, vividness and apparent autonomy. Epstein (1981) was so impressed that he referred to it as a different 'realm of existence', and while one might question his metaphysics, it is a very apt descriptive metaphor. The phenomenon is

surprisingly easy to induce and most people seem able to experience it, though see Thomas (2001) for an interesting discussion about people who say they have 'no imagery'[6], and Richardson (1994) for a more systematic account of individual differences in imagery.

Since it is easily generated and powerful it is hardly surprising that it has been rediscovered repeatedly. Ways of working with 'imagination' may well have very ancient roots. However, it seems to have attracted a rather modest amount of serious research for such an obviously significant phenomenon. This is, no doubt, partly for historical reasons, such as the behaviourist taboo on introspective methods that emerged from the bitter and unproductive wrangles of the early introspectionists (Wundt vs. Külpe), the analytic philosophers' dislike of images being treated as 'things in the mind', and psychoanalytic orthodoxy, which preferred to work with speech, regarding imagery as merely a kind of interfering smoke-screen. Academic orthodoxy still seems strangely uncomfortable about working with imagery – Thomas refers to a persisting academic 'iconophobia'!

'Clean Language' and 'Symbolic Modelling' [7]

While the generation of vivid, self-transforming, imagery ('rêve evéillé', 'metaphor landscape') has a long history, the particular techniques developed by Grove ('Clean Language'), and codified by Lawley and Tompkins ('Symbolic Modelling')[8] appear to be new, though the questioning technique they use has obvious generic predecessors such as Carl Rogers' non-directive counselling methods, and Kipling's:

> *I keep six honest serving-men*
> *(They taught me all I knew);*
> *Their names are What and Why and When*
> *And How and Where and Who.*

Basic use of the clean language questions is very simple, but sophisticated use needs considerable experience. The questions encourage the client to describe various aspects of his or her current sub-

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[6] Any exercise that calls for students to explore new ways of thinking has the potential to bring to attention previously un-noticed mental anomalies. JNTM's Open University course that includes an ML exercise had a course discussion forum. One student (out of several hundred) reported non-existant imagery (possibly related to a car accident many years earlier) and another reported uni-lateral imagery. It was ethically and practically inappropriate to follow up either case, and in other respects both students appeared to be normal. However, there is clearly a need to be alert to such possibilities and to handle them with sensitivity.

[7] The word 'modelling' in this context is derived from NLP, and is potentially confusing for a Systems audience, since it does *not* mean the development of a recordable model (in the sense of, say, an SSM conceptual model or a Systems dynamics model).

'Modelling' here refers to developing an understanding of a set of elements and processes that were initially out of the client's awareness, in such a way that they become available to the facilitator ('modelling') and to the client ('self-modelling') for exploration. The client might sometimes be asked to sketch this on paper, and the facilitator might write case-notes about it, but the generation of these recordable representations is secondary. 'Doing the modelling' is usually more important than 'recording the model'. It is primarily *an activity* to encourage potentially transformative dialogue about the client's inner world.

Often (but not always) this inner world is described by the client as a kind of 'landscape' – i.e. there are imagined features and activities that can be located with reference to the physical space in and around the client – e.g. the client imagines *'a house over there, a group of people over here'*, and so on.

[8] In practice, the terms 'Clean Language' and 'Symbolic Modelling' tend to be used almost interchangeably, and share the same basic ideas. However, Lawley and Tompkins have added their own refinements and 'voice' to Grove's methods, and the different terms reflect this.

jective experience, but do so in a radically non-directive way. The client sets the initial agenda and the questions do little more than direct the client's attention, the content of the questions being derived entirely by feeding back the client's own words or actions. No interpretations are offered at any stage.

Grove developed thirty questions in all, and Lawley and Tompkins (2000) describe the full set. However, for most purposes, only a small sub-set of very simple 'what, where, when' questions, such as those listed below, are needed. The sections marked: '…' reflect back the client's exact words or non-verbal gestures:**9**

- *What would you like to have happen?*
- *Is there anything else about that …?*
- *What kind of … is that?*
- *That … is like what?*
- *Where is …?*
- *Then what happens?*
- *What happens just before …?*
- *Where could … come from?*
- *Is there a relationship between... and …?*
- *When …, what happens to …?*
- *What needs to happen for …?*
- *Can … [happen]?*

A useful introduction is available at: http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/CleanLanguage.html.

Though many earlier authors recognised that 'waking dreams' seemed to have a life of their own, and required neutral facilitation rather than active direction, they nevertheless still felt the need to 'help'. Some tried to set the initial metaphor (e.g. *'Imagine you are in a meadow'*; *'Imagine you are looking down on two armies'*; *'Imagine your right hand talking to your left hand'*). Some tried to prescribe various kinds of action as the imagery unfolded (e.g. *'See what happens if you climb the hill'*; *'Somewhere you will find a message for you'*; *'Try to talk to it'*). Some tried to engineer transformations (e.g. *'What if you could change the image so that it would be better for you, how would you change it?'*). Some made assumptions about the kind of internal representation the client was experiencing – e.g. assuming that they were having a *visual* image. Some tried to offer interpretations.

In contrast, the *Clean Language* strategy is to minimise any kind of contaminating input of this sort. The questions make no assumptions about imagery being visual, auditory, etc. or about its content (other than that it will make sense to ask questions about location and time). All questions can be answered by direct 'factual' reporting of what is being experienced. There are no 'why' or 'how',

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9 In a therapeutic context, the questions are usually set in a 'full syntax' with the formal structure: *'and* [client's words/non-verbals] *and when/as* [client's words/non-verbals] [clean question]'. This is illustrated in this brief excerpt from a transcript in Lawley and Tompkins (2000):

> **Client:**   I'd like to have more energy, because I feel tired.
>
> **Facilitator:**   and you'd *like to have more energy because you feel tired.*   and when you'd *like to have more energy*, that's *more energy* like what?
>
> **Client:**   It's like I'm behind a castle door … (etc)

'explain', or even 'who' questions that would require cognitive analysis or supposition. There are no pronouns or other forms of indirect referencing whose interpretation might impose a cognitive load. The client's words and gestures are not reinterpreted or rephrased (sometimes even to the extent of retaining the client's 'I', 'you', etc.). The facilitator's role is simply to establish and sustain the client's attention to their own metaphor landscape, reflecting back their own words and gestures in such a way as to suggest areas that might be worth attending to.

Use of CL in its 'classic' therapeutic context

Grove started working with this approach on finding that a number of his psychotherapy clients had suffered from traumatic events in their childhood – abuse, etc. As he worked with these clients, he became concerned that if memories of traumatic events were recovered under such conditions, this direct re-living of the old events might re-traumatise the client. There was also a risk that an interventionist practitioner-client power relationship might take on unhelpful echoes of the original abuser-abused power relationship. It seemed better to work in a way that was indirect (based on metaphor rather than direct memory) and client-centred (so that the client retained full control).

Grove found that as he used CL questioning, the client's metaphor landscape would unfold, and as it did so, areas of restriction, constraint, omission, etc. would often become apparent. Under further questioning, these would often resolve – the 'impenetrable wall' might turn out to have a 'doorway', or whatever. The client usually experienced symbolic resolutions of this sort as being helpful not only within the 'virtual world' of the image, but also with the associated 'real' issues. Presumably the questioning had resulted in some kind of underlying neural reorganisation. Whatever the mechanism, the process seemed to result in changes that allowed them to move on in their lives.

Skilled CL questioning can provide a context that encourages transformation, but the particular points at which the imagery transforms are largely unpredictable. However, once a transformation has occurred, subsequent questioning can then be used to consolidate the transformation, before starting a new cycle of questioning, transformation and consolidation.

The process is normally robust:

- It seems to work well 'at a distance'. A number of practitioners (including one of us - WS) have run successful telephone training programmes (including international training), and use telephone sessions with clients. Some Open University students have reported running useful 'beginners' clean language sessions using electronic 'chat' facilities.

- It can even work with automated or random generation of questions. A version of the classic *ELIZA* 'psychiatrist' software (Weizenbaum, 1966) has been developed to generate clean language questions in response to client input (try it at: http://www.cleanlanguagecoach.co.uk/), and at 'beginners' level' basic exploratory work can often be done by writing the commonest questions on cards and shuffling them, so that the facilitator simply picks a random card and asks that question. Even 'inappropriate' or 'silly' questions generated in this way can be surprisingly effective. Indeed the UKSS conference attendee who agreed to be our 'demonstration client' suggested afterwards that there were points in the session at which 'sensible questions' would actually have been distracting, while 'inappropriate' questions had helped to maintain the flow of exploration without imposing distracting demands.

Of course, a skilled practitioner carefully judging the choice and timing of questions, can work very much more effectively than a beginner, take less time, and facilitate the resolution of much more in-

transigent issues. So for serious use, as distinct from beginner's demonstrations, it is well worth getting practical training rather than trying to work 'from the book'. Like chess, learning the basic rules of the game is easy enough, but skilled deployment in challenging settings is another matter.

Notice that because the entire process happens at a symbolic or metaphorical level, the 'meaning' of the internal imagery and its transformations is private to the client. Though the dynamics of the imagery, and the client's non-verbal behaviour, will usually show when change has happened and whether the session has been helpful or not, the therapist may have no idea of what the actual problem is, or what actual solution has emerged, unless the client chooses to share this information.

Use outside therapeutic contexts

As experience with this approach developed, it soon became clear that its benefits were not restricted to trauma cases or even to psychotherapy. The radically client-centred approach seemed to be widely applicable, and it is now used in a range of non-therapeutic contexts involving individuals (e.g. executive and life coaching) and groups (e.g. team and organisational development).

However, in group and organizational contexts, the emphasis often switches away from the metaphor transformation used in change-oriented individual work, towards the uncovering or development of sharable metaphors.

In everyday settings, the CL questions can be used in an apparently conversational way, though if 'clean' principles are carefully maintained, the impact is very different from a normal conversation. For instance Lawley reports a manager's comment after an interview conducted in this way: *'I don't know what was going on, but you sure got me to think deeply about what I do.'*

Questions about these techniques

We have structured this section around six 'FAQ-style' questions. Questions 1 and 2 arose from the discussions that followed our demonstration of CL work at the 2007 UKSS conference. Questions 3-6 arose from problematic themes identified from Stowell, Welch and Sice's (2007) paper at the same conference entitled: *'Grand Challenges in Systems'*.[10]

Question 1: Are there ethical and contractual issues in using techniques derived from psycho-therapy in organisational consultancy work?

Organizational consultancy usually assumes that the consultant will be working within the normal, relatively impersonal, organizational structures, processes, flows, roles, etc. Therefore if the intention was to work with participants' metaphor landscapes in a transformational way, the consultancy contract and expectations of participants would certainly have to reflect that.

However, other modes of CL work, such as those to do with the development of shareable metaphors for particular organizational roles, tasks, etc., can easily be carried out wholly within the normal organizational consultancy expectations.,

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[10] The workshops reported by Stowell, Welch and Sice were a response to the perceived paradox that Systems teaching and research in UK universities seems to be under its greatest threat at the same time as demand for 'joined-up thinking' in government and business is growing strongly. Two workshops had been held in which practicing managers and academics from related disciplines were asked to explore this paradox and come up with suggestions.

Question 2: How well do these 'one-to-one' techniques adapt to group settings?

Though clearly not group-oriented in the sense of, say, a group project that requires all members to collaborate, these techniques can easily be adapted for group workshop settings. Using the two examples mentioned earlier:

- In Caitlin Walker's *Metaphors@Work* procedure group members think (privately) of a metaphor for something appropriate to the nature of the session (e.g. *'Our team project is like ….'*). Then each group member reads out their metaphor, and the facilitator asks what they see as the strengths of regarding it in that way, and then the weaknesses. Other members ask CL questions about it to clarify their understanding of it. After hearing about all the individual metaphors, the group try to develop a metaphor they could all share, that includes all the important qualities of all the individual metaphors. They then identify steps they could take to put this collective metaphor into practice.

- Stefan Ouboter's work doesn't attempt to create the same degree of synthesis. He starts off in a similar way, but then uses the range of metaphors that have been externalised as a basis for debate.

Question 3: How successful are these techniques at capturing 'joined-up' complexity in a way that is holistic and easy to grasp?

The 'Grand Challenge' panel suggested that while Systems academics appreciate complexity, practising managers tend to value simplicity. While culture and education may play some part in the managers' preference for simplicity, it may also have a sound, practical, basis – decisions based on simple explanations are often easier to implement, less likely to be distorted over long communication chains, easier to hold 'at the back of your mind' as everyday guidance, and so on. Actions based on complex explanations can 'go wrong' in many more ways.

So reality is complex, but it needs to be conveyed simply.

Metaphor seems to be one of the cognitive mechanisms that we have evolved for meeting this apparent paradox. A single metaphorical phrase on its own cannot, of course, convey complexity – it is merely a few words. Its information-carrying power comes from its ability to highlight a suitable domain from within our experience, and it is our explicit and tacit knowledge of this selected domain that is being used to capture the complexity, rather than the words of the metaphor. A metaphor based on quantum mechanics might work well for quantum cognoscenti, but fail dismally for the rest of us.

CL questioning is an excellent vehicle for developing useful metaphors. Three broad modes of metaphor use can be distinguished:

1. *Therapeutic mode:* Here the metaphor can be highly personal, and no attempt is made to interpret it – but the facilitator encourages the metaphor to develop autonomously, on the assumption that this will allow the client's issue to progress.

2. *Sharing personal metaphors:* This is usually a group activity, in which the members share their personal metaphors for something, and allow others to ask CL questions to explore their grasp of the metaphor, without any attempt to encourage the metaphor to change. For example, WS ran a workshop for a team, and at one point asked each to give their metaphor for the team. The team leader said that he saw it as *'the pit stop operation in a Formula One race'*. Smiles of recognition spread around the team as they recognised how this fitted his highly pressured mode of working – no tea or coffee breaks, lunch taken on the fly, running every-

where, talking and thinking at high speed, etc. The next contributor said that her view of the team was of a group *'setting sail for far, unexplored, shores'*. Needless to say the potential for clashes between these two was immediately apparent. However, once the nature of the difference had been surfaced they were much better able to communicate by expressing themselves in terms of each other's metaphors.

3. *Negotiation of communal metaphors:* Here the aim is for group members to come up with a communal metaphor which they can all accept and work with. Sometimes this will be some sort of composite of their personal metaphors (e.g. where the communal metaphor has to do with the running of their own team, and therefore needs to reflect the needs of all members so that the team can align itself). At other times it may be merely a useful descriptive metaphor that all have explored and understand – e.g. a metaphor to describe a design concept at a very early stage of the design process.

Question 4: How successful are these techniques at enhancing communication and mutual understanding across substantial differences in world view?

A core Systems activity is the recognition and exploration of different personal perspectives (e.g. different cultures, different status levels, different roles, different stakeholder positions, different beliefs and values, etc.).

This is also central to Clean language/Symbolic modelling, which aims to explore personal constructions in as unintrusive a way as possible, and with as few assumptions as possible – and that includes the consultant's inner processes as well as the clients'. Metaphoric assumptions exert their influence largely out of awareness, so unexamined cultural, interviewer, or researcher bias can be insidious, particularly when tackling 'soft' problems that are heavily dependant on negotiated perceptions.

For the consultant, symbolic modelling of their own metaphor landscapes can help them to explore their own mental schemata, preferences, biases, etc. and hence manage these in their work in a more conscious way, allowing them, where appropriate, to minimise the effect of their own worldview.

For clients, symbolic modelling can be a powerful way to begin to unpick tangled and/or unconscious motivations because it maximises rapport development, minimises interviewer intrusion, and encourages the client to 'go inside' and explore underlying patterning rather than superficial targets.

Where a client group has been trained in CL questioning, it can also markedly improve discussions and negotiations between group members, particularly across large status differences: a low status team member can readily make suggestions about changes to a communal metaphor (which includes contributions from a high status member) but might be much more diffident about criticising the high status member directly.

At a more everyday level, CL questioning can improve the quality of conventional information gathering, both because of improved rapport with interviewees, and because it reduces the risk of the data distortion due to the unintentional use of leading questions. This sense of neutral attention tends to create a degree of trust that is often very helpful when trying to reach across large differences of worldview. For instance police have been taught it for interviewing vulnerable witnesses, it has been used in recruitment interviewing, and Lawley and Tompkins have used it to assist questionnaire designers to formulate their questions in a 'cleaner' way.

Question 5: Can these techniques support the conditions for effective stakeholder interaction?

The section: *'Drivers for Meaningful Systemic Inquiry'* in the Grand Challenge paper (Stowell, Welch and Sice, 2007) is particularly relevant to the present argument, since it emphasises that the quality of a systemic inquiry depends to a large extent on providing conditions in which the relevant stakeholders interact effectively. This in turn is seen as depending on factors such as trust and good will, communication skills, reflective skills, openness, awareness and noticing skills, individual and group creative capacity, and so on. The authors suggest a need for: *'… grounding the inquiry into reflection on lived experience.'* They continue:

> *'Discussion and debate are not sufficient. Dialogue is needed …* [this is the ability]*… to talk while suspending your opinions, … neither suppressing them nor insisting upon them, not trying to convince but simply to understand. … This creates an opportunity for expanded intelligence that emerges from the group rather than from accepting (defending) one individual perspective over others.'*

These are, of course, precisely the supportive, listening, but non-intrusive values that Symbolic Modelling is designed to create, and clients will often experience good CL questioning as profound attention.

Question 6: Would the inclusion of techniques such as these make Systems easier to 'sell'?

A recurring theme of the Grand Challenge panel was the difficulty of persuading the uncommitted sceptic of the value of the Systems approach. Systems certainly *claims* to be more 'joined-up' than other approaches, but Systems projects are, by their nature, hard to evaluate, so there is often no real evidence-based ground for deciding whether this is so – or, indeed, whether the outcome has more to do with the generic facilitation and intervention skills of the practitioner than the contribution made by Systems, *per se.*. This is not a criticism of Systems – it is in the nature of the process – but the lack of any really convincing way to demonstrate its impact is a problem in 'selling' the Systems approach.

In contrast, one advantage of techniques such as symbolic modelling, which are based directly on experientially observable psychological processes, is that a powerful and convincing demonstration is relatively quick and easy. It is difficult to emerge from a symbolic modelling session without a very clear sense of the importance and reality of tacit metaphorical processes, and of the need for some kind of partnership between them and the more rational kinds of thinking.

While demonstrations of symbolic modelling could hardly, in themselves, be said to 'sell' Systems thinking, they do suggest that if Systems became more experientially-based (as implied by Checkland's claim referred to at the start of this paper) its power might be easier to demonstrate.

Conclusion

Systems tends to be strong on ideas and reasoned methods, but weaker in its valuing of practices that take into account the idiosyncrasies of human psychology and cognition. This paper, and the conference workshop that accompanied it, present a technique that has the opposite set of biases, but that turns out to share many of Systems' espoused goals.

One can draw two kinds of conclusion from such a presentation:

- A specific case for adding a particular technique to the Systems toolbox.

- A much broader case for adjusting the balance of Systems practice so that much more attention is paid to the full implications of the espoused goal of: *'… grounding the inquiry into reflection on lived experience.'*

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