Notes on conceptualizations (final)

ME (25.10.06)

ME: these notes were written as preparation for a group effort to research laissez-faire as we find it today particularly in North America but also in Australia. It was critical that our conceptualization was totally accurate so that we could be sure we were measuring what we thought we were measuring.

We have three problems:

1. Logic
2. English language (redundancy of meaning)
3. Understanding the process of translation of concepts into measurements

These problems are interrelated.

Problem 1. **Logic**. The two design principles and laissez faire (LF) comprise a *full set of possibilities* with two defining sets of *elements.* The first set of elements:

- DP1=redundancy of parts
- DP2= redundancy of functions
- LF=no redundancy

The second set of elements:

- DP1=responsibility for coordination and control is located at least one level above where the work is done, (i.e. not with)
- DP2= responsibility for coordination and control is located at the level where the work is done, (i.e. with)
- LF= responsibility for coordination and control is located nowhere, (i.e. neither with nor not with). Setting it out like this answers my own question as to whether control and coordination need to be included in the LF scale. They don't.

These two sets of definitional elements yield three (a full set of) *structural possibilities:*

- DP1=a structure of dominance (inequality of power relations)
- DP2=a structure of non dominance (equality of power relations)
- LF=no structure (neither equality nor inequality of power relations)

In *systems terms* this becomes:

- DP1=non jointly optimized socio-technical (psychological) (ecological) system
- DP2=jointly optimized socio-technical (psychological) (ecological) system
- LF=no socio-technical (psychological) (ecological) system

The design principles stand regardless of how they are used in action. It is perfectly obvious that they do not say anything about the strength or rigour with which they are practiced. As soon as any mention is made about how people *function* in relation to the structures or systems, how they understand the operation of the design principles or how they manage and enforce them in practice, dimensions are being *added*. They do not change the definition of the principles, structure or systems.

Don has seen this clearly several times. In his latest note he specifically wrote:

"Since the location of responsibility when things go wrong is variable and since LF is not a part of this conceptualization ***another concept and scale is needed to identify different types of DP1 and DP2.*** This concept is management.

Management can be thought of as people (managers) and the activities/behaviours of managers "getting work done through others" (Fayol) or as a cadre or class of people. ***Management can also be thought of as a function***." Etc. (My emphases added).

The failure of logic is that he sees the separate dimension (function) but then ignores its separateness to structure and attempts to build it into the definitions of the design principles and structures rather than attempting to define it as that additional dimension or overlay. Discrete or separate things must stay discrete or separate.

Whether or not 'management' is the right term, it can be seen as:

- tight-loose,
- non-participative-participative,
- good-bad.
- Etc, etc

There are probably several additional dimensions that need to be defined and measured if the work is to be comprehensive. Don has mentioned several.

Problem 2. Language. The word 'control' in English has several different meanings. These must be separated. There are three so far that are relevant to this debate.

First meaning. A *technical use* as in the design principles above -
DP1=those above control the behaviour of those below as individual people **and** specifically control the ways in which the individuals below them behave in relation to the technical (psychological) (ecological) system. They control the general behaviour of the people by designing and using a system of rules, rewards and punishments. They control the behaviour of the people below them in relation to the technical (psychological) (ecological) system by designing and using mechanisms such as SOPs.

There is also an overarching system of controls built in through individual job specifications, individual or classification based contracts etc. These usually specify the relations of the individual to others and to the technical (psychological) (ecological) system. These vary by individual enterprise, industry, IR system, country etc.

DP2=all of these controls are vested in the self managing groups, i.e. the groups decide the nature of the controls they will use in relation to the behaviour of their people to each other and the group, and in relation to the technical (psychological) (ecological) system. (In practice, because these groups are self managing rather than autonomous, some, indeed many of these controls originate in operating procedures, legislation, and more general societal expectations, taboos etc but the group must observe those that apply in its work).

When the shift to DP2 is legally based, the overarching set of controls is built into the EBA (enterprise bargaining agreement) or its equivalent. It is also built into the set of goals that the self managing groups work to meet. These sets of goals may be more or less comprehensive and more or less measurable.

LF=there are no such controls exercised. So here you can see Henry that you have used a different meaning of control (second meaning) when you concluded that the LF leader exercised high control. Ralph White didn't exercise control in the first technical sense because he did not design, discuss, negotiate or enforce a set of rules, rewards or punishments and he gave no advice on how to use the materials the boys had to work with. He spoke only when spoken to and gave as little help as possible. In other words, the sense in which 'control' is used in the definition of the design principles is an ***active*** one. Your sense Henry is a passive one in which the leader exercised control by not meeting the boy's expectation of him being a leader in a structure, either DP1 or DP2. His failure or refusal to exercise this technical control threw them as they did not know how to work in a lack of structure. Thus the meaning of control in Henry's sense is that of 'having influence by not…'.

On one occasion in the LF condition, one of the boys attempted to exercise leadership when the 'leader' left the room and "achieved a more coordinated group activity than when the relatively passive adult was present" (Lippitt & White, 1947, p323). That boy was attempting to exercise control in the active technical sense of the design principles. In other words, he was pairing in the regenerative sense of attempting to restore some effective or workable structure (Emery M, 1999).

So far we have delineated two meanings of control. There is a relevant third meaning here which is what Don was using when he wrote "DP1 organizations are error amplifying and DP2 organizations are error attenuating, so all these tight controls do not mean that the system is in control. Usually quite the opposite." I then responded as follows: [OK. I get it!!! You are using 'control' in 2 different ways – there is a technical meaning of the term as it is used in the design principles. And there is a laymen's meaning that implies everything is working smoothly. Have to untangle them.]

Clearly this third meaning of control is additional to the definition of the design principles as it involves the *results* of the degree of rigour with which the design principles are operationalized and/or enforced. Don's previous examples included goal setting, the presence or absence of goals for a group, the clarity with which goals are set out etc. But again, let us be clear that this is another and quite separate dimension which is an overlay to the principle or structure. It is **NOT** the principles or structures themselves.

Problem 3. Translation. There are rules (again logical) about how to translate a concept into one or more set of measures.

In addition, if you are going to use a questionnaire or survey, you are inevitably giving it to individuals who can answer only from their own individual experience. Hence one of the rules is that you don't ask questions that the individual respondent cannot answer accurately from their first hand experience.

One of the most basic rules in questionnaire design is that you can ask only one discrete question at a time, because if there is more than one item built into a question, you cannot interpret the answers.

Another basic rule is that you must design (word) the question in such a way that you are sure which meaning of the words the respondent will build into their answer. This can be tricky, particularly given that the English language has about 70% redundancy.

Questionnaire design is, therefore, a highly technical business. As such, it has its own inbuilt set of constraints. In other words, once you have chosen a method, you are stuck with its inherent constraints. If these constraints are not respected, you will achieve nonsense and only nonsense.

A set of concepts such as the design principles and LF must be broken down into their most basic components with each component designed as a question which has one meaning only and, which the respondents can answer accurately from their own experience.

A set of questions to measure a concept may or may not have checks built into it. In the current version of my mental health (MH) questionnaire I have two checks built into the measurement of the design principles and LF, a little redundancy of parts if you like. The first redundancy is the use of the teamwork scale which is measuring degrees of structural change. This scale gives me a check on their use of the teamwork categories (what they mean) and the accuracy of their use of the questions relating to control and coordination.

The second is the full set of questions relating to who is held accountable when things go wrong. This gives me a check on the accuracy of their use of the questions relating to control and coordination as well as it being an accurate measure of LF (see above). So I have two measures of location of control and coordination and they are very revealing.

A set of questions also may or may not constitute a full set of possibilities in the same way that a set of concepts may or may not constitute a full set. Therefore, we need the concept of LF because without it, the set is incomplete. A set that does not constitute a full set of possibilities is an inadequate set. In terms of measurement, an incomplete set means that you are not properly or comprehensively measuring what you should be measuring.

Every question must respect the fact that most things vary. There is no point in making a big deal out of this – it's a fact of life. Yes,

- people are purposeful,
- different organizations grant different degrees of control and coordination to different people and groups,
- different organizations allocate different functions to people or groups,
- different organizations may or may not practice what they preach in terms of their stated location of responsibility for coordination and/or control.
- etc etc

That is one reason why scales are preferable to yes/no answers. They reflect life and they allow us to measure degrees of things. So one of the other facts of life is that while we can have discrete concepts, we can most accurately and usefully measure them only in degrees.

I could go on but that should be enough to remind you what the task is actually about and what it entails.

The LF research

So far Don has delineated two major purposes. The first is to attempt to conceptualize and measure what LF means in terms of the mess that is out there. The second is that he wants to know what works and what doesn't. How you proceed Don will depend on which of these you finally decide to pursue. These purposes may or may not be related and probably are because you are observing something in the field. The final purpose of the research is for you Don to spell out.

I have made my position perfectly clear. I am happy to help in any way I can. I will not, because I cannot, start destroying the extremely useful foundations we have to build on. They will be heading for destruction if we join the rest of them who are already confusing concepts and terms and blurring boundaries.

There are simple straightforward ways of proceeding from here. They are all logistically feasible in terms of instruments and measurement. I have outlined some of them in previous notes. Don has now made another attempt at one of the additional dimensions with the question below. It measures control in the sense of 'under control' or 'out of control'. That is a great approach and question. However, it does not substitute for the *location* of accountability when things go wrong.

How often do things go wrong in your section of the organization?

Never	*Rarely*	*Sometimes*	*Frequently*	*All the time*
1	2	3	4	5

I have left out 'As far as you know' because that is all people can do with any question – i.e. answer it to the best of their knowledge. That question now needs some mates to back it up. You can find suggestions for these additional questions scattered through Don's and my previous notes.

As the elements of LF spelt out above make clear, it is nigh on impossible to have a sustained LF organization. LF must necessarily be unstable and temporary. See the small illustration from Lippitt & White above. People will always move to restore something more pleasant and viable. Perhaps one of the first things you need to measure is how long people allow these sections built on teams with leaders to go on before somebody moves to change them. For how long can they be sustained?

You could get some way on this just by talking it around with people in some of those organizations. Ask them how long the original arrangement with teams with leaders lasted before somebody started fiddling with it in some way or another. I'll bet people have been fiddling constantly with some of those sections in org2 Henry to try and get them to work better. How many disasters does it take? And make no bones about it. When that percentage of people says nobody much is held accountable "usually" or "always", you can bet it translates into a disaster of some proportion somewhere, covered up or not.

So what we need now is clarity of purpose, together with an acknowledgement and resolution of these three problems - logic, language and translation of concept into measurement. Until these are overcome, we are going around in circles. I don't have any more time for that now.

Before the next version of the MH questionnaire goes into the field I want to consider all elements and questions relating to measurement including MH, the affects, 'management' vs 'a manager', the question of the teamwork scale etc. You have been most helpful. Adding to the teamwork scale raises serious layout problems amongst other things. I am also considering whether or not we should have a set of questions relating to goals, etc. The desirability of any additions also needs to be weighed against the disadvantage of lengthening the instrument. We are pretty close to the edge now in terms of what the normal person will willingly accept. We need full and enthusiastic cooperation from as many in our organizations as possible.

Sorting out the details of this questionnaire takes time. Don needs a version for Kingston and we could get another request any time. So I need to get on with it. I sincerely hope this helps.