

Reflexive inquiry and the strange loop tool

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ABSTRACT

Reflexive Inquiry (RI) is offered as a framework for consultancy and a tool for developing insights gained from Co-ordinated Management of Meaning Theory (CMM). RI extends CMM, through positioning the space within *interpretive acts* as offering reflexive potential in drawing attention to the ways that we notice, interpret and decide on our choices, responses and actions in a communicative process. In the same way, strange loop patterns can work as a reflexive tool in a context of uncritical consciousness. This paper suggests that the strange loop as a lived pattern represents an attempted, but self defeating, solution to the 'problem' of complexity. However, it is a 'solution' that fragments and polarises. When such looped patterns are identified, connections between poles and fragments are made possible, facilitating reflexive action. The consultancy case used to illustrate the workings of RI shows how it can inform consultant sense making and dialogue.

Setting a context for reflexive inquiry

RI rests on the assumption that consciousness about, and interest in, the patterns of feeling, interpretation and action that we, and others, are experiencing in a relational system, is central to effective organisational development. When we practise reflexivity we become *responsible* and *accountable* for our choices, our actions, and our contributions to a relational system. The five principles constituting RI, position us reflexively in relationship to ourselves, others and the patterns and stories that we make (Oliver et al, 2003, Pearce, 1994). These principles are *systemic, constructionist, critical, appreciative* and *complexity*.

A focus on reflexivity has been a thread in previous writings, particularly in the paper Systemic Eloquence (Oliver, 1996), which built on Pearce's distinction between social and rhetorical eloquence (Pearce, 1989). Social eloquence was defined as a set of communication abilities privileging the second person and facilitating openness to the other. Rhetorical eloquence, on the other hand, privileged the first person and included abilities such as persuasion. Systemic Eloquence, foregrounding the moral actor, attempted to highlight how systemic work requires both for an integrated reflexive practice. This paper develops the account of Systemic Eloquence by drawing on more abstracted theoretical principles for its inspiration for reflexive practice. Within that account, it opens up and details the reflexive space in acts and patterns of communication.

Reflexive inquiry principles for consultancy practice

Systemic principle

At the heart of a systemic orientation to practice is an interest in patterns of connection (Bateson, 1972) and, by implication, patterns of disconnection. We look for patterns in how people respond bodily, make meaning and in how they act. Such patterns become embedded as stories

in organisational culture, relationships and identities. We create accounts about our patterns of organisational life, containing character, relationship, plot, emotion and meaning (Pearce, 1994).¹ In systemic practice we are interested in how stories have been constructed and what possibilities they construct in organisational life. We take a special interest in the possibilities and constraints embedded in language. The use of a word is seen as a moral and political act in that it shapes possibilities for agency and contribution, enabling or disabling meaningful and purposeful participation in organisational life.

When we examine an individual communication and seek explanation for why it has occurred, our resources are limited unless we can explore how that action is embedded in a larger pattern of experiences and stories (Shotter, 1993). We can resort to explanations such as, *he is a difficult person* or *they are a lazy team*, but such explanations offer limited possibilities for action and often fix the part while leaving the whole unattended (Oliver & Lang, 1994). The systemic tradition supports the view that our observations of the system affect the system (Boscolo et al, 1987). By extension, a moral position is implied here of cultivating awareness of the contribution one might be making to the patterns and processes of which one is a part.

Constructionist principle

The social constructionist interest is in the detail of language (verbal and non verbal) and in the opportunities and constraints created by communication for the organisational system (Burr, 1995, Campbell, 2000, Gergen, 1989, Pearce, 1989). The position is taken that our communication makes our social realities - our powers to act, to participate, to take up positions and to make particular contributions. The social constructionist is thus concerned to employ a reflexive responsibility for the identities, relationships and cultures that we create through the ways we communicate. The usefulness of this frame for the consultant is in the idea that the power to make change is found in conversation. Thus an important task of the consultant becomes the structuring of effective dialogue. This will become clearer when we examine the relationship between context and communication.

The CMM contextual framework of Cronen and Pearce (1985) has enriched social constructionist organisational (and therapeutic) practice (Oliver, 1992, 1996). They have provided a means, with their model of *layers of context*, to make sense of the relationship between meaning and action in patterns and stories of culture, relationship and identity.

For Cronen and Pearce (1985), the *speech act* was defined as the relational meaning of a message, interpreted by the receiver of a communication, embedded within a hierarchy of meanings. This paper redefines the *speech act* as the *interpretive act*, highlighting the interpretive dimension of meaning making as a moral choice with moral consequences. The responsibility for the interpretation is located in the individual.² Attention is paid to the detailed potential of such responsibility when examining the *critical principle*.

This device of levels of context facilitates story making for the consultant in the way it helps him or her to develop a (speculative) narrative of patterns and stories and the relationships between them. Within this tradition, the process is called hypothesising. It alerts us to looking

1 I prefer the term 'patterns lived and stories told' than 'stories lived and stories told' (Pearce, 1994) as our experience is fragmented until a connecting narrative can be made, at which point it makes sense for it to be described as a story.

2 In foregrounding the moral place of the individual agent, the significance of the relational in shaping communication possibilities is not forgotten. The I and the We are in contextual relationship.

for particular elements in stories, e.g. *person position* and *subject position*, and the strength of influence of stories at particular levels, both for those we are working with and for ourselves.

We use language in organisations to allocate person position in the ways we use the words *I, we, you, he, she, it, them and us*. Such usage is consequential in the way it shapes patterns of relating (Harré and Langenhove, 1999). For instance, one common cultural language game is that of *us and them*. In this pattern we are positioning the other as *not like me*: consequently each may feel alienated, having been positioned in an adversarial role.

The use of person position provides an example of how the detail of language has moral effects (Harré and Langenhove, 1999, Pearce, 1994,). In the same way, the small words we use in sentences such as *can, should* and *must* invoke a sense of the moral force of a story. They indicate the operation of tacit *rules of entitlement and obligation* in our interpretations of communication and the actions that follow them. For instance, a member of staff might speak from a position of *I can't influence* and in so doing, offer a manager the subject position of *actor* and himself the subject position of *acted upon*. The manager may be taking up a moral position from which the rule emerges: *I must keep tight control or nothing would happen*. A focus on these elements of a story gets us to the heart of the moral and emotional dimensions of organisational patterns. We become connected to where people feel most constrained and most energised.

Critical principle

We are invited or pressured into particular experiences of self. The part we are offered in the organisational script, through our participation in cultural and relational patterns, may or may not be desirable. We do not have to take up these invitations to participate but choosing not to take up a position 'offered' in a pattern, requires *critical reflexive skills* and the ability to act, when appropriate, counter-intuitively. This requires an openness to learn, preparedness to change and a curiosity about the experience of others, positioning self and other as human and vulnerable (Buber, 1970).

In the world of critical theory, power is privileged as a focus (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). The critical analyst sets out to make the construction and enactment of power, visible, through inquiry and sense making. The critical literature, however, shows a tendency to present motivation as self-interested and power hungry (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). RI would, instead, encourage a view that motivation is complex and that we engage in ways that maintain, develop or challenge our (and others') identity stories. In these terms, it is seen as legitimate and desirable to explore how we use our voices and positions and the consequences of that use. The interest is in how organisational members can speak accountably but with appropriate authority. Our powers to participate in meaning and decision making are constructed by and construct organisational discourse. Hierarchical position is relevant in this analysis as it confers and constrains such possibilities. However RI is interested in the patterns of meaning and action in which hierarchical position is embedded rather than in the objectification of such positions.

RI suggests the usefulness of contextual levels of critique and argues that second and third order critique are usually more generative although first order critique is not always inappropriate.

These levels are defined in the following way:

First order critique: a non-systemic position where the explanation (cause or blame) for a state of affairs is outside the self e.g. a staff member making the statement, *it is the fault of management*.

Second order critique: a systemic position where the relational context is invoked and one recognises the part one plays in a pattern e.g. *we are caught in an unwanted repeating pattern where we are not appreciating the wider pressures constraining the other*.

Third order critique: a systemic position where the organisational cultural context is invoked and one recognises ones contribution to that culture e.g. *the culture is one of inconsistent messages around participation – I need to comment on the cultural pattern and behave consistently myself*.³

The development of critical consciousness should facilitate reflexive critique of the system by the system. In my experience, such discussions in organisations are often managed in an unbalanced way through avoidance, control, blame or lack of sensitivity to the complexity of motivation in the system. A critical emphasis should allow for the opportunity to bring power to the forefront of participants' consciousness and a challenge to naïve and simplistic stories of equality and hierarchy, while maintaining systemic integrity.

When we participate in a communication pattern it can often feel *natural* and *spontaneous* in its flow, especially when there is an experience of familiarity in the patterns that we make. While those familiar patterns can help the organisation in its smooth running, they can also constrain creativity and make for stuckness in the flow of productivity. Critical consciousness facilitates mindfulness in communication about the multiplicity of contexts we are acting out of and into. In calling such mindfulness *critical consciousness*, attention is drawn to the *interpretive act* and the opportunities it provides for reflection and reflexivity.

The *interpretive act* is broken down into three parts: feeling, interpretation and action. This is not to suggest that these are separate dimensions of a response in any crude linear sense but only that they are useful lenses from which to examine the observations, interpretations and choices one makes in a communicative episode. Through amplifying the detail of the *interpretive act* in this way, the potential for *reflexive evaluation* is increased when one can become more conscious of the partiality and multiplicity of possibilities for interpretation and action.

Feeling (bodily response): at the point of receiving a communication, we are helped by our senses to read it. We see, hear, touch and feel what is communicated; we experience sensory and emotional responses. These responses are coloured by the contexts of cultural and relational experience and the environmental context of communication. They are inevitably partial, both in the sense that we can never notice all there is to be noticed and in the sense that our experiences (patterns lived) can only provide us with a partial lens.

Interpretation (thinking response): our feeling response contributes to meaning making at the interpretive level. In addition, our life experience and the stories we tell ourselves about those experiences, tend to create habitual *rules for interpretation*⁴, which we draw on in communicative processes. However, we can exercise conscious choice in interpreting and reflecting on our

3 These levels can be treated as parallel to Bateson's levels of learning (1972).

4 Originally, Cronen and Pearce's 'constitutive rule' (1985).

interpretations. We can frame the same episode of communication in many different ways, thereby unpacking the multiplicity of meanings that have potentially been conveyed. It is important to imagine what interpretation(s) best empower one's own response (and the potential for others to respond in their turn) in ways which honour and develop this organisational and relational complexity.

Choice of Action (opportunity for reflexive response): our interpretation(s) of our own and another's meaning, motivation and purpose will have a strong influence on the decision we make to act i.e. the next move in the conversation. We tend to invoke habitual *rules for action*, which are shaped by layers of contextual experience and current contexts of influence and manifested in what our senses and interpretations tell us (Cronen and Pearce, 1985).⁵ A mutually reinforcing pattern can be maintained, developed or transformed, depending on the conscious choices made by the participants.

Appreciative Principle

In managing and facilitating critical consciousness an RI orientation will encourage us to appreciate that all action is meaningful and that our individual and collective histories and purposes give *logic* to our actions⁶. People act in ways that make sense to them and often these actions express attempts to belong and participate. However, while our interpretations are meaningful, they are also partial, contextual and unstable. This view should encourage a position of humility about the rightness of our own contributions.

A distinction is made here between Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Reflexive Inquiry. AI approaches can appear to try to eliminate all forms of 'problem talk' from organisational life (Anderson et al, 2001, Barge and Oliver, 2002).⁷ It is in danger of treating critique as one dimensional, representing a corrective to the kind of problem talk discussed earlier as first order critique, whereas RI encourages second and third order critique.

Complexity principle

In order to make life work in our organisations, we need to create structure and order out of chaos. Complexity theory has helped us to understand that the simplifications of complexity that we make through structuring and ordering our realities, need to be treated as temporary and imperfect and not as higher states (Eve et al, 1997). Clarity and confusion need and give meaning to each other in the flow of organisational life (Cronen and Pearce, 1985.).

Our mechanisms of simplification for managing complexity are varied, some more constructive than others. Polarisation is one strategy that divides reality into dualistic opposites, for instance, good/bad, right/wrong, positive/negative. Although this strategy works in some situations, for instance, where a decision is needing to be made about whether someone should be fired or not, in many situations the polarisation strategy simplifies in a way that does an injustice to the richness and possibility inherent in communication.

5 Originally, Cronen and Pearce's 'regulative rule' (1985).

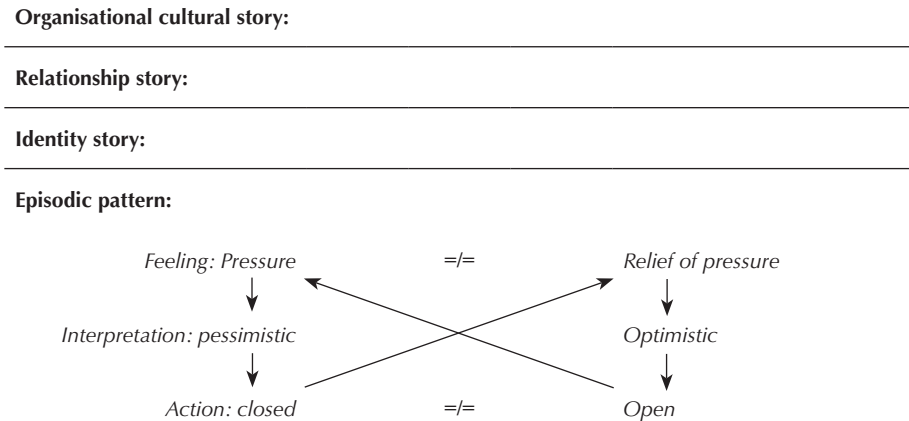
6 The Milan therapists developed the notions of positive and then, logical, connotation which connoted the intentionality of peoples' actions as meaningful (Boscolo et al, 1985). Another connected concept from Cronen and Pearce (1985) is that of 'deontic logic', a reference to those patterns we live and stories we tell that carry moral meaning.

7 See Barge and Oliver (2002) for a wider discussion of appreciation in managerial practice.

When we use a polarising defence, we can sometimes experience a pattern that has been identified as a *strange loop* (Cronen et al, 1982, Oliver and Brittain, 2001, Oliver et al, 2003).⁸ The strange loop is a special kind of hypothesis or narrative that takes the form of a paradoxical and polarised pattern. It is a useful hypothesis in those situations where we feel stuck or confused.

The significant development in the structuring of a strange loop from its original conception (Cronen et al, 1982.) is the definition of the contexts above the pattern as culture, relationship and identity and the context of the pattern as episodic. That episodic pattern is further broken down into feeling, interpretation and action levels. The structure offered above for the interpretive act is taken into the episodic level of context. On the left hand side there is a feeling of pressure (e.g. anxiety, anger) which is interpreted pessimistically and sets a context for a fragmented and closed reaction (e.g. blaming of others) which leads to a relief of pressure, then a more optimistic interpretation which facilitates a more open reaction but this leads to pressure and so on. This structuring of the pattern arguably renders the making of a loop more accessible.

Figure 1: Revised strange loop structure



The participant in the pattern moves through the figure of eight over time. When moving down one side of the loop, there is an experience of disconnection from the other side i.e. a pattern of meaning is not formed, there is only a feeling of stuckness or confusion. The strange loop enables clarity to be felt about unwanted patterns of experience but also facilitates speculation about how best to intervene – at the level of contextual story, or within the episode at the feeling, interpretation or action levels.

Application

Over the last few years I have been working with a male religious community⁹. The community presented their concerns in a language of conflict, demoralisation and breakdown in communication. Most members experienced severe distress; loss of membership became a potential threat. At the beginning of the work people talked in the following terms:

⁸ Oliver et al (2003) have written a fieldbook about the strange loop as a tool in reflexive organisational practice and developed the pattern into 6 forms.

⁹ This work has been undertaken with Martin Daly

It's hard to experience hope
There is envy and competition but we don't talk about it
There is a lack of charity in our talk about others
We don't recognise each other
We need to drop our masks
We are shrinking daily
We need to face the truth about ourselves as a community
I ask myself 'has my life had meaning?'

The breakdown had been triggered by a crisis 2 years previously when a personnel decision had been made that caused a split in the community. The leader, with a group of supporters was on one side and a group who challenged the leadership, on the other. This experience of *two camps* challenged a shared felt obligation of unity. However, whenever attempts had been made to resolve the conflict, the split pattern seemed to become more entrenched.

Initial work involved exploring the meaning of membership of the community through articulating stories of belonging and connectedness. The consultants asked, “how come you chose to belong to this community?” “What were your stories about the community at the time of joining?” “What were your hopes for yourself and the community when you joined?” Using these stories as a base, people were helped to begin to create images of the future – of the community and of the individual and his connection to community. This process had a successful impact in that it did enable a new, inquiring relational context to emerge, not substituting but juxtaposed with the dislocated experience that had developed. People began to say, *well, we can still talk to each other; these are stories we have never told each other and it is good to hear them*. However, what was also said was, *the conflict has not been touched and it still touches us under the surface*. It was apparent to us that the group experienced a struggle to create images of the future. Images were fragmented and associated with fear and a preoccupation with death.

Within the consultancy work a *strange loop* constraining meaningful communication was observed. We noticed that when a concern or difficult feeling was ‘needing’ to be named, a fear of encounter was created with the consequence of invoking a kind of pseudo safety. Thus the experience would not get named with the consequence of withdrawal from engagement. However, the context of disengagement would build such a feeling of discomfort given the discourses of brotherhood that the need for challenge or critique would be invoked, thus there would be a naming and its concomitant fear of destructive consequences in encounter. And so this looped communication would endure. From our interviewing, observation and experience of the patterns lived we hypothesised the following stories to be constraining communication and setting a context for the looped pattern over the page.

The community shared a long history of discomfort with difference and with engagement (e.g. they had always experienced a difficulty about sharing meaning in relation to their religious and spiritual life for fear that too much difference would be revealed). The conflict about the justice of leadership action had deepened fears about irreconcilable differences. A stifling tentativeness was shown in the larger group, which, we hypothesised, inferred a great fear about opening the

Figure 2: The monks' loop

Organisational cultural story:

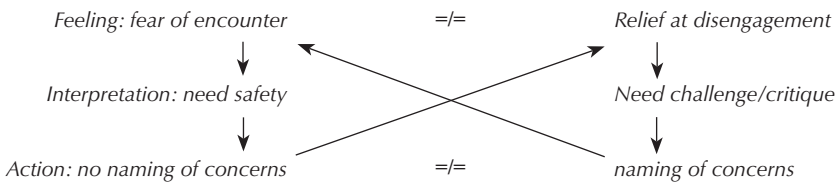
Fear of death: fear of irreconcilable difference

Relationship story:

We cannot be in conflict and love

Identity story:

I am a failure: I can do nothing

Episodic pattern:

subject up again, while at the same time, a sense of despair that if it wasn't addressed, the future of the community was endangered. Two individuals came to us privately, speaking in a very different way from the tentativeness shown in the wider group. They expressed despair about change yet dread that if there were no change they would feel obliged to leave the community.

We felt after these conversations that we too were in a loop – if we addressed the conflict head on, we would create a defensive reaction, yet if we didn't address it explicitly, we would be avoiding something important at the heart of community and not doing our job. We needed to try and understand this conflict and frame it, not through polarisation, but in a way that made the community less fragile. The decision was taken to interview all members of community privately and formally. We shared our experience of the strange loop described above and suggested we would be compounding the community's dilemma if we enacted the pattern in the same way as the community. From the interviews we would be seeking understanding about key themes and concerns in relation to this dilemma and saw our responsibility as feeding these themes back, having listened to the 'mind' of the community. The community agreed, with relief that the consultants were concerned for the fragile, but with hope that they were helping them (potentially) to move out of their stuckness.

This intervention was designed to enable us to articulate unspeakable dilemmas from a position of legitimacy, thus setting a context for further intervention to move things on.

Reflexive Inquiry intervention

Following the interviews, we proposed that the *unspeakable* related to fears about death of community and related fears about difference. However, the polarised behaviour was making that more likely to happen. The community did not feel it was in a sufficiently healthy place to welcome new members and even if others stayed in community (and some were threatening not

to), the feeling of fragmentation felt like a kind of death.

We shared how we had heard about the destructive effects of the split and had heard the desire for change but appreciated that people needed to learn how to change. We suggested the community needed to practise new ways of relating and had designed an exercise for that purpose.

An inquiry process was proposed that aimed to facilitate self and group reflexivity, positioning each participant's behaviour as contributing to the systemic pattern of connections. All 24 participants were asked to work with another with whom they felt they could work. All participants stayed working in the one room.

Stage 1

Write a statement about how you feel you have contributed to misunderstanding, mistrust and distancing in community life, particularly in relation to the conflict that has triggered so much unhappiness.

(Here we gave examples of how people may have contributed – through blaming others without seeking understanding, through silence, through withdrawal).

Stage 2

Working with another, read the other's statement – interview each other from a position of curiosity and concern about the assumptions in the statement.

Stage 3

Write a response in the form of a letter to the other saying

- what effect it has had on you to experience this conversation
- what you have understood about the other's motivations and concerns
- what you wish for the other now.

Stage 4

Share letters and make verbal responses.

Stage 5

Reflect in the large group about the experience and how it has affected your stories about identity, relationship and community.

Group reflection

Verbal responses to the exercise included:

the exercise fitted with our own valuing of confession and helped things to begin to come out into the light. What were stumbling blocks could become building blocks.

It is the first time I have been challenged to take responsibility for my contribution to the malaise. Previously I have tried to analyse what went wrong or try to put it right – this is a new position to be in.

It is a new experience to spend time with one another.

Focusing on ones own vulnerability makes one more attractive to the other and paradoxically helps to build strength

Discussion: theory and practice

Systemic principle

The community understood that they participated in unwanted patterns but were unclear about how their patterns of relating created the demoralising consequences that they experienced. This reflexive inquiry into the workings of the community, set in a context of shared fragility and responsibility, facilitated a developing consciousness about such connections. As such, it represented a turning point in its relationship to itself. In this, a shared moral awareness was created about responsibility for constructing the future. Use of the word story facilitated an appreciation that each position could be less entrenched, inviting people into a position where they might see how a new story could be developed. One important way in which the context was widened was to make the individual story, a relational and community story. The exercise was intended to challenge a pattern of side taking and facilitate more of an image of a web of connections – of individual contributions that were shaped by and shaped the whole.

Constructionist principle

Within the exercise, all participants were positioned with the same task of reflecting together, in a relational context, on the connections between their own behaviour and the patterns of community. The inference was that all had played their part in contributing to the whole and that the communications made in this exercise held new potential for shaping community and relational culture. In sharing the loop hypothesis, the consultants were encouraging members of the community to reflect on the role of polarisation in the making of their communication and encouraging new relational behaviour in the exercise, hoping that it would have an implicative reflexive effect on identity, relationship and culture.

This *confessional* exercise provided a new vocabulary for accountability. The *lived* pattern had only legitimised a calling to account of each other in the context of a right/wrong polarity, accountability being conducted through the mechanism of creating *third persons*,⁷ for example, *we have poor leadership*. In that context, mistrust of the motivation of others was rife. The new form of accountability invited speaking and listening by *first persons to second persons*, in the context of an invited sensitisation, through the ways the exercise was worded, to the impact of contributions on the other, for example, *what do you wish for the other?* – the embedded message being that one has the other's interests at heart.

Critical principle

Through the invitation to inquire into the assumptions of the statement each person made, the interpretive act was opened up for examination. The loop gives some clues as to how this might be challenged. For instance, in the context of a fear of death and relational story of conflict, the fear of encounter could construct the interpreted *need for self protection* which might construct the action rule, *for the sake of survival, I must win*, whereas a more constructive interpretation might have been *I need to be brave for the sake of community* and obligatory act might be, *I should risk sharing more of my own motivations and needs*.

The enactment of stories of obligation invited and constrained particular experiences of self – in this case, a self that struggled with feelings of anger and rejection towards others and a feeling of demoralisation about not being able to change such a position. The exercise was designed to facilitate consciousness of the choices involved and possible changes that could be made. In the group reflection, one person expressed how they were made more *attractive* to each other through the exercise.

In asking people to consider how they had contributed to the difficulties, we were drawing attention to how people used or silenced their voices. It was repeatedly stated people were fearful of asking questions about how others felt or what they thought. This way of positioning self in relation to others was, through the exercise, seen as having an active and destructive effect.

We were also drawing attention to the mechanisms of critique in the group. First order critique was the characteristic *us and them* pattern. People were blamed, either for supporting an unjust process, or, for disloyalty to the leadership. No other position had seemed possible. It seemed impossible for motivation to be ascribed as complex and that people were *acting for the good of the community*. As was stated many times, *we caricature each other*. The exercise invited second order critique through positioning individuals as reflecting on their own contribution to a pattern and facilitated a connection between development for the individual and the ways another might be able to encourage such development. It also facilitated third order critique in the way it invited the community to take a reflexive position to how community was created through individual behaviours and relational patterns.

Appreciative principle

The exercise was designed to convey that peoples' actions were meaningful even if not desirable. It was also an attempt to convey the usefulness of seeking understanding and opening up stories of motivation. In this, people experienced the witnessing of the commitments, struggles and intentions of the other. The lived pattern was reframed from a story of failure to one of shared humility, vulnerability, compassion and generosity about the intentions and limitations of self and other.

In opening up inquiry about the *confessional* statement, the message was communicated that there are no fixed meanings. In inviting people to consider and share what they wished for the other, obligations were subtly constructed in relation to the other for one's own development (and that of the community) and concrete help provided about ways to go forward. The breaking

of habitual patterns was made more possible in the context of that shared good will and the development of a shared vocabulary for reflexivity. People talked of the possibility of being able to say, *we are in that pattern again – help me get out of it*. Arguably, conditions for trust were laid down in this cautious attempt to be open about ones own position and open towards the other.

Complexity principle

The strategy that members of the community used for managing experiences of discomfort was one of enacting a feeling (of fear) rather than speaking about it and exploring (and developing) its meaning. This fragmentation precipitated a strange loop pattern of oscillating encounter and withdrawal. The fear that was associated with encounter was thus temporarily but not permanently disposed of. A difficulty was shown in seeing and holding the complexity of the pattern of connection. The difficulty was connected to a problematic shared belief that conflict was problematic. In the group reflection, the consultants offered the framing of co-unity as a model for community rather than unity. The fear of a lack of shared vision had meant that discussion at the level of vision and strategy never took place in any grounded way. Behaviours that seemed to indicate extreme differences became feared as representative of division and incommensurability; fears bred more fears.

Participants described how the exercise facilitated an experience of respect and empathy for the other's difference. When the other described his experience, its difference was allowed to co-exist rather than being heard as undermining or blaming. Someone described how, *I felt respect for him for being able to tell me this*. The ability to own one's part in a difficulty rather than blaming the other side or trying to fix what went wrong became consciously valued.

The representation of the community's experience in the form of a strange loop enabled the focus to become more complex – rather than two opposing sides the focus became a system of rules for feeling, meaning and action, which showed itself in patterns lived and stories told. This systemic focus helped to detoxify the poisonous *us and them* discourse that had been governing relationships. It created a feeling of each person as a suffering fallible human being and facilitated the positioning of mutual help.

The loop also identified particular stories that were thought to be problematic, allowing for grounded practical developments in community life. In a later intervention, we invited the community to address the question of vision and strategy by facilitating the creation of a group who were to investigate the relationship between the community and its theological college. The group developed terms of reference and were to account for their work to the community during the consultation processes.

In an attempt to consider alternative options to encounter and withdrawal, the core form of engagement, a weekly meeting was discussed and was redesigned to allow for more openness and less competitiveness. A turn taking strategy was created for leading a discussion and part of the meeting was given over to sharing the experience of the week in a meaningful way rather than the previous rote contributions.

Final reflections

It has been proposed that RI can function as a frame for structuring dialogue in a consultancy context. RI makes use of and extends CMM through reframing the speech act as the interpretive act, amplifying its detail and using the same form to restructure the strange loop tool. The strange loop has been defined as a powerful force for change within the RI repertoire of tools.

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