



# The purpose thing.... A provocation

- The split in the systems thinking field
  - Methodologies
  - Tribes
  - Mutual incomprehension
- The evidence
- Ethics
- ‘Systems leadership’
- Reconciliation....

# Two perspectives....

## Purposeful

- Purpose as ‘intention’
- Anchored in the motivation / will of actors – especially individuals
- Individual’s agency to define / design / direct, shape the system
- Objective

## Purposive

- POSIWID – not dependent on intention
- Anchored in the system’s emergent properties
- System’s agency to shape individuals within the system
- Subjective



# The split in our field – mutual incomprehension

## Purposeful

- *‘They assume the system’*
- *‘They ignore multiple perspectives’*
- *‘That’s an engineering approach’*
- *‘They’re naïve...’*

## Purposive

- *‘They ignore emergent behaviour / properties’*
- *‘Reality simply doesn’t bend to intent’*
- *‘That’s an engineering approach’*
- *‘They’re naïve...(or solipsistic)’*

# The split in our field – empirical balance

## Purposeful

- All:
  - problem definition,
  - system diagnosis,
  - system design,
  - system development
- Is relative to intent....
- ....so intent does matter

## Purposive

- Strategy: 90% is emergent
- Transformation  $\approx$  70% is emergent
- Repeating systemic patterns  $\rightarrow$  individual behaviours
- System over-rides intent

*A / the defining architecture of the discipline?*

# Some other effects areas...

- Systems practice ethics:
  - Deontological ethics (motivating principles more important than effects)
  - Consequentialist or utilitarian ethics (effects more important than motivating principles)
- Core ST issue: agency of individual vs agency of the system they are in
- Systems leadership:
  - Leadership theory focuses on the agency of individual leaders rather than the system being 'led'
  - or an approach that asks what leadership is possible given agency of the system

# Some other effects areas...

- Performance management:
  - Set goals then performance metric targets (purposful)
- Vs.
- Measure performance then improve (purposive)
- Balance of evidence in operations management is for ‘Purposive’
- Goodhart’s Law
- ‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast’
  - Culture as an emergent property of the system beats intention

# Some other effects areas...



- Lewin's formula:  $B = f(P, E)$
- Behaviour is a function of a Person (including their characteristics) and their Environment (the systems they are in)
- Most psychologists & OD practitioners & leadership coaches focus on the individual and their ability to carry out intent not the system
- 'Resistance to change' – systemic for Lewin – is re-factored as personal, so power of the system is ignored

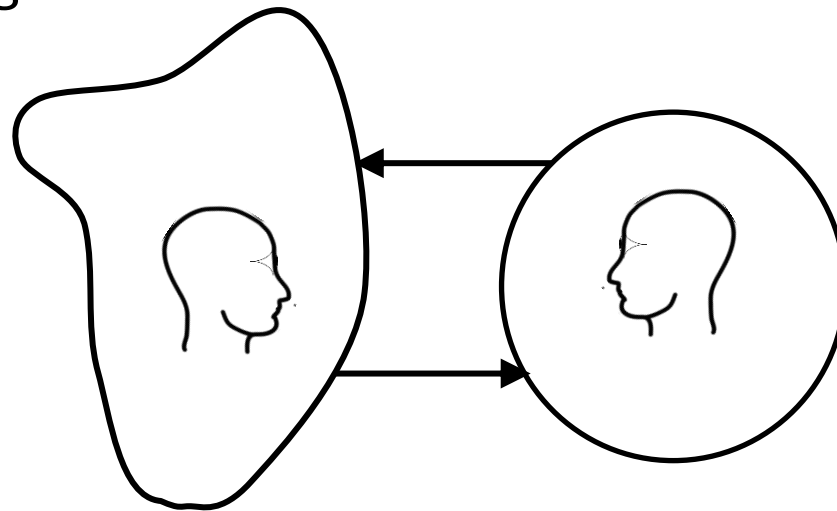
# Reconciliation?

- Everyone agrees (and always have) that system definitions and boundaries are chosen / ascribed by observers
- Intervention in a system is purposeful (intent)
- Intent is not independent of the system its conditioned by it, or its irrelevant and ineffective
- We need both a purposeful and purposive stance

# Reconciliation - moving stance

- In SSM you define intent before understanding what the system will allow you to do
- So moving from outside to inside

Where do you choose to stand – inside or outside?



- In VSM, SD, PoS you *have* to understand the internal dynamic structure of the system before you can sensibly intervene with intent
- So moving from inside to outside and back

# Why is this so hard?

- If the ability to:
  - Adopt both stances
  - And move between them is so important,
- Why do some people seem so entrenched in arguing for just one?
- Parallel with reductionist's rejection of holism?
- Or is it just that:

*“The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”*



Thoughts / discussion / questions /  
answers