

***THE SEARCH CONFERENCE IN
THE USA TODAY: CLARIFYING
SOME CONFUSIONS***

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This paper has been scanned with all the problems that produces. I hope most have been removed.

Some minimal editing has been done, mainly to improve meaning. A couple of references have been updated, ME, 2022.

THE SEARCH CONFERENCE IN THE USA TODAY:

Clarifying some Confusions.

The Search Conference since its invention in 1959, has been a unique method which is specified quite precisely by its theoretical framework. This framework is a practical one guiding overall design, internal structure in terms of the relationships between task, participants and designers and managers and the minute to minute management of the learning environment and process that is the Search Conference (SC). It is participative strategic planning whose goal is **ecological adaptation**, between a system as defined and its broad social environment. Every aspect of the SC has been subjected to intensive and integrated action and conceptual research over many years. It is this development which provides its reliability and replicability. Nobody today would run a 1974 SC let alone a 1959 version. This history resulting in comprehensive training courses has been documented (Emery M, 1992,a; Emery M, 1993). I emphasize the theory of the SC as theory determines design and practice which determines dynamics which determines outcomes. Theory and design are more powerful than intentions. A few examples illustrate the relationship between different theories and outcomes. The choices for practitioners will become clear.

In the USA today there are several models of participative strategic planning in practice. They all go by the name of 'Future Search Conference', 'Search Conference' or just 'Search'. This is largely a result of Weisbord (1992). In his own words, "this book contains perhaps six strategic conference models" (p62). These models are in fact very different with different outcomes. A more accurate title would have been 'New Models for Participative Planning'. The open process of exchange of correspondence prior to publication did not have the expected outcome of clarification of the Search Conference (SC) and its delineation from the infinite range of participative events. Consequently there is confusion about the SC which is a distinct method with a specific theoretical base and accompanying set of practices. If a method employs other concepts and practices, they are by definition, not SCs. This paper sets out the major dimensions of the SC in the hope that there will be less confusion in the future.

The good news that the SC is an effective method of participative strategic planning has always been a two edged sword. From its immature form in 1959 (Emery and Trist, 1960) it underwent major development in Australia during the seventies (Emery M, 1974; 1976; Emery M & Emery FE, 1978; Emery M, 1982). It experienced extraordinarily fast and wide diffusion. But by the late seventies, many so called SCs were nothing more than exploitation of its good name. These non SCs frequently resulted in failures and bad experiences for participants. They almost destroyed its reputation as a unique and reliable method (Crombie, 1985, p3).

The SC also diffused into many countries including the USA. As is seen in Baburoglu & Garr (1992) SCs were running in the US early on and today, they are flourishing. The experience of those in the USA who are designing and managing SCs shows once again that it is a cross cultural tool. "After doing about 20 real SCs, we can find no cultural impediments to success" (Cebula & Rehm, 1994).

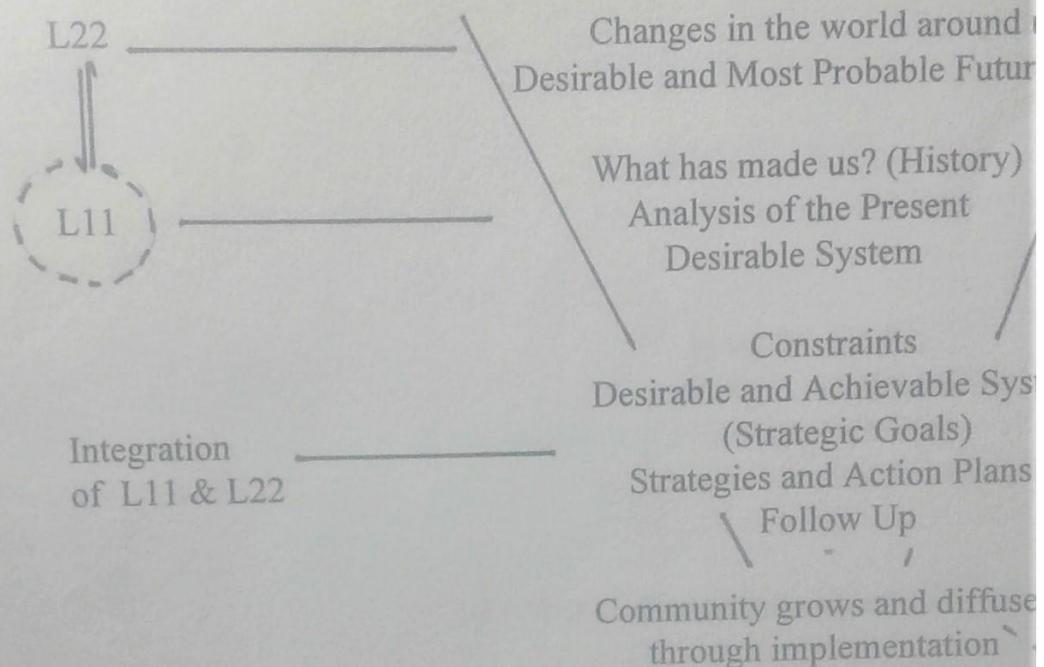
The following discussion highlights the major dimensions of the SC and compares

them with other models which share some features but lack the internal integrity of the SC. Above all, the SC was the first method to focus on changes in the external environment as the critical element in establishing adaptation and retains this essential focus. In addition to providing a way to bring the dynamic environment under control, it also brings into being responsible learning and planning **communities**, committed to pursuing ideals for the benefit of all, realizing desirable futures in which all can share.

External Structure or Design

The SC is a translation of the Open System into a design (L₂₂/L₁₁) and process (L₂₁/L₁₂). (Emery M, 1992 a, pp330-1). Its characteristic funnel shape is the opposite of the bureaucratic pyramid.

Figure 1. The Open System Translated into the Search Conference



This conceptual framework provides the characteristic external structure, guides flexibility and establishes **active adaptation** rather than "a vision for the future" as claimed by Bunker & Alban (1992, p584). For the Nebraska Children's Mental Health Search Conference (1994) the purpose was "to develop a shared commitment to specific action steps to build an integrated system."

Compare it with what I am calling the SRLW model, so called because it is the Schindler-Rainman & Lippitt design as used by Weisbord. The only modifications involve process rather than design, dropping small group facilitators and the skills training component (Weisbord, 1992, p41). While the original (Schindler-Rainman & Lippitt, 1992, p39-40) reviews the past of the community, the L₁₁, the SRLW lumps data about the L₁₁, the L₂₂ and the individual, together into this review and renames it a SC rather than Collaborative Community Design.

Table 1. Comparison of SC Design and the SRLW Model

Search Conference	SRLWModel
<i>The Future of XYZ</i>	<i>The Future of XYZ</i> (issue, company, community)
L ₂₂ , Data--> L ₂₂ Futures (past to future)	1. Focus on the PAST: Milestones in society, self, sponsoring org(s) over--- decades
L ₁₁ , history of XYZ Analysis of present XYZ desirable future, XYZ	2 Focus on PRESENT, External Trends Focus on PRESENT, Internal-Prouds/Sorries in our relationship to XYZ
	3 Ideal FUTURE Scenarios (done as skits)
	4 Identify Common FUTURES
Integrate L ₁₁ & L ₂₂ for adaptation Constraints Action Plans in community task forces	5 Action Planning- In stakeholder, functional and/or voluntary groups

As we see in Figure 1 and Table 1, the SC consists of an indeterminate number of tasks and questions guided by the conceptual framework, e.g. there may or not need to be a task environment analysis, a history session, an elaboration of system analysis, a probable future of the system, etc. Weisbord and Janoff (1994) by contrast "have closed on Five Tasks" (pl). At this level of design or external structure, we see immediately that we are dealing with incompatible entities. The SRLW model is based not on the open system but on linear time. It makes no allowances for the idiosyncracies of a

system in an objective ordered environment with a changing informational structure. This design by definition then is not a SC.

There is confusion about time and concepts. Weisbord (1992, p63-4) states with my emphasis added: "Your experience, right back to Barford, is that this agreement is more probable when we start with the global situation-**present and future** By contrast, ... several of us...start with a review of the **past**...(But) "Starting with an open-ended global history (our legacy from Barford) strikes me as the heart of the matter" of the difference between Searches and participative conferences. Making matters worse, Crombie (1985, 1992) presents a linear time model but his design (1992, p256-7) shows the conceptual model, simply putting the L₁₁ history before the L₂₂. He did not mix L₁₁ and L₂₂.

Focusing on the L22

As Table 1 also makes clear, the SC is concerned to understand the L₂₂, the 'extended social field of directive correlations' (Emery & Trist, 1965). The L₂₂ *cannot* be reduced to "technological and economic 'turbulence'" (Weisbord, 1992, p2). Its shifts and discontinuities are mainly those of values.

Nor is it the business or task environment of any particular system as understood by Cumming (1992, p378). It is everything outside the boundary of the system. The SC uses a two step process to achieve understanding and clarity. Firstly it collects data about events in the L₂₂ over the last five to seven years. These are 'the embryos of social change' (Emery F, 1967). This data is then analysed and synthesized into both 'most probable' and 'most desirable' futures for the time frame of the plan. Focusing on the L₂₂ distinguishes the SC from many other forms of strategic planning and is responsible for its effectiveness in establishing adaptation between environment and system. Models which do not focus on the L₂₂ as a constant reality influencing our lives and plans are not SCs.

"My personal preference is not to have a group brainstorm of global trends as an opening activity, finding it more cognitive and passive an exercise that I like (so I invented an alternative I could run with more enthusiasm)" (Weisbord,1992, p385). "The process is calculated to throw participants into a form of chaos through data overload" (Bailey & Dupres,1992, p513). Sometimes no time frame is put on the probable future of the world which makes it by definition impossible to project a valid 'most probable future'. Without it, there is no benchmark against which the system can plan or practice active adaptation.

But SRLW's second task, external trends operating in the present is also data about the L₂₂. Separating the past L₂₂ from the present only further lowers the probability attached to the 'most probable future' of the world. The use of 'mind maps' makes the real purpose obvious. "We confront the complexity, affixing colored dots to trends we consider important. This is NOT a poll to set priorities, but rather to stimulate dialogue. Each person has to encounter all the issues and own the trends they feel passionate about. Everybody touches the map" (Weisbord & Janoff, 1994). Rather than hard, objective data, the L₂₂ becomes a vehicle for a human relations encounter.

Strategic planning via the SC follows Emery and Trist (1965) where the L_{22} was conceptualized in its own right. The Type IV environment and its demands for understanding of its nature and direction led us to develop processes to precisely map and monitor the L_{22} as the basis for the adaptive relation between L_{22} and any unique L_{11} . The SRLW model resides in the Bertalanffy era (1950). It cannot produce effective strategic planning in a Type IV environment. It is noteworthy that 'open system' does not appear in the index to **Discovering Common Ground**.

Ignoring the L_{22} also destroys the most fundamental basis for the establishment of common ground. This is discussed in more detail below.

Focusing on the L_{11}

After dealing with the L_{22} as a distinct entity, the SC proceeds to make a similarly thorough examination of the system. Firstly we have a dramatic unfolding of events as the community tells itself and relives its history through the events and changes which have formed it. The Nebraska Mental Health System (NMHS) traced its history through milestones and stories from the first Department of Psychiatry at University of Nebraska. Secondly the SC analyzes the present L_{11} through a comprehensive process. The NMHS considered nine items to be kept, eighteen to drop and seventy two to be created. These items covered every possible dimension of the system, its culture and consumers. A SC community expends considerable effort making sure that it understands the system, itself, before it decides on its Most Desirable Future. This final process usually includes small group work for validation of commonalities, negotiation and rationalization of conflict before agreeing a set of strategic goals.

Models which obliterate the clarity and rigour applied to understanding the L_{11} do not meet the specifications of a SC. Clarity is lost when the history of the L_{11} is mixed with L_{22} and personal data. The imposition of a mechanistic artefact, the decade, also damages its intrinsic flow. Instead of oral history, individuals write items into boxes. For analysis, stakeholders make lists of their 'prouds' and 'sorries' in their relationship to the L_{11} . This provides a very narrow base for analysis and in addition, tells us that it may include a view from outside the system. This major difference of who attends is discussed below.

Such a process precludes probable identification of the system's essential character and continuities. Underlying it is an implicit theory that systems are nothing more than aggregates of individual perceptions and feelings which denies the notion of a wholeness governed by a system principle. We see here the emphasis on personal autonomy rather than a developing sense of system.

The Ideal Scenario as substitute for the Desirable System is a dream only, divorced from any agreed information about the system. Using skits etc, makes clarity difficult and requires additional processing before a Common Future can emerge. After a SRLW event in a small community in New Mexico which was searching

for regional economic development, nobody seemed clear about goals at all. The committees formed after the event clarified some but they then tended to be seen as committee rather than community goals. This generated further conflict. Bailey & Dupre (1992, p519) provide another example. "Many people left the conference feeling confused and unclear."

Focusing on Action Planning

Roughly one third of the time in a SC is allocated for integration of L₂₂ and L₁₁, that critical segment which formulates a unique adaptation. It includes major constraints and plans to deal with them, possible reconsideration of the 'desirable future' in terms of its achievable within the time frame and action planning which is by far the most consuming component. As a normal SC is 24-28 hours working time, two days and two nights, there is about eight hours for phase three. But at this point in the SC, the **community** is self managing and the task forces self selected around one of the community's strategic goals spend as much time as they need to develop plans. They are committed because they are developing plans for **their** future and they are working on behalf of the whole SC community. In the NMHS example and both of the following complementary SCs, detailed action plans were developed, both short and long term for each strategic goal including plans for overcoming constraints, identifying those responsible for implementing, others who need to be involved, the contact person, milestones for the implementation timeline, the communication to others in NMHS. Each SC also agrees detailed 'next steps'.

In comparison, the SRLW model only sometimes generates "committed action plans" (1992, p64) although "every design concludes with action planning" (p63). Weisbord and Janoff (1994) specify that action planning should be a 'session' of 3-4 hours out of a total of 16-18 hours. As part of 'current reality', stakeholders have already described "what they are doing now about key trends and what they want to do in the future" (Weisbord and Janoff, 1994). This latter is a form of quasi action planning inserted before a future is agreed and again, left hanging in the form of unprocessed lists. The picture is one of segmented authority reinforcing the current power structure. This was clearly the case in the New Mexico example. Very little time had been left at the end for **community based** action planning.

But there is another serious problem with action planning in the SRLW model. It involves the question of who is in a position to take responsibility for the future of the system and is dealt with in the section on the design principles.

Personal History?

The SC is designed and managed for building learning and planning communities such that through diffusion, the whole system itself learns how to practice active adaptation. Searching mobilizes the *ideals* held in common by all humans rather than values (Emery F, 1977). The SC is designed as an econiche for experiencing

ideal seeking. Other models focus substantially on individual selves and explicit values, e.g. Briggs, 1992.

The power of participative methods involves a way "that is more structural than interpersonal...The starting place is NOT relationships with each other. It is our joint relationship to the wider world...The entire open system" (Weisbord, 1992, p10-11). But SRLW moves the focus substantially from task to interpersonal. Individual participants and their histories share equal weight in the first session along with the world and the system. "This may reflect my bias as citizen of a highly individualistic culture. Or it may reflect a broader human need to validate ourselves and be validated" (Weisbord, 1992, p65). By putting the self and theatrical performances on centre stage, the SRLW model invites narcissism. This reflects a particular conception of people (See below).

The history of the self and explicit values are irrelevant in a SC as it is about changing the future of systems. The 1960s was the largest demonstration in history that simply saying values or changing personal behaviour was ineffective at making long term system change (Gottlieb, 1987).

However, there is more than a little confusion in this whole area. "We find that integrating personal and focal issue histories with global data at the start helps people reorganize their experience in a way that is not all cognitive" (Weisbord, 1992, p64). He then quotes as 'personal data' the example of Axelrod's fresh water fishing where "many of the men talked with great emotion about what fishing meant to them as children-a place and a time alone with their fathers" (1992, p285). This sounds identical to what happens in a SC history session where people relive the history of the system that is the focus of the SC with all the emotion and meaning that it contains. It is far removed from individualism. Cebula & Rehm (as above) mention a case of a follow up SC where in the preparatory phase, previous participants told them that it was the history of the system that had been important, not their personal stories.

We also note in the above that Weisbord appears to be separating cognition from affect. This is mechanistic psychology, contrary to the open systems view of people which informs SC practice. "The human being confronts the world as a unitary totality" (Tomkins, 1992, p8).

Internal Structure and Process

Confusion about internal structure and process are equally if not more pronounced than those at the external design level. The SC derives its great power and consistency from the integrated use of the second organizational design principle, the second educational paradigm of ecological learning, the Creative Working Mode and influential communication (Emery M, 1992a & b).

Centrality of the Design Principles

There appear to be only two principles on which organizations can be designed (Emery F, 1967; 1977; Emery M, 1993). The third option is laissez faire which is the absence of structure or design principle. The first Design Principle (DP1), 'redundancy of parts', produces an organization where responsibility for coordination and control is located at least one level above where productive activity is being done. Examples of DP1 structures are dominant hierarchies or **bureaucracies** enshrining supervision, **committees** which are only mini bureaucracies and **representative** structures. The second Design Principle (DP2), 'redundancy of functions', produces an organization where responsibility for coordination and control is located with those doing productive activities. These are flat, **non dominant functional** hierarchies. The SC is designed and managed as a temporary DP2 organization.

There is serious confusion about the design principles and structure. Bunker and Alban (1992, p583-4) refer to 'structure' only on a low-high continuum. Because they do not understand that the design principles result in mutually exclusive forms of structure, my statement that "the decision (about choice of design principle) will determine how a conference is structured" (Emery M, 1992b, p523) was misinterpreted to "Principle 2 she defines as that of the search conference, which is self managed as regards content, with expert help from facilitators about structures for best process (notice that Weisbord and Owen reject this much control and do not use facilitators" (p584). My paper did not mention 'facilitators'. SCs have 'designers and managers of the learning environment and process', the term used to distinguish their role from conventional facilitators who intervene in the content. It is an ironic note as SRLW's process includes more instructions to groups about process than the SC which is confident of group self management and only defines the task. If the two forms of structure are not recognized in debates about the 'structuredness' of learning settings then misunderstandings are inevitable (Emery F, 1978, p223).

Weisbord takes an aconceptual position. "Of **course** I blur the boundaries (between the design principles.) The (one-way) 'debate' between us is between two models of reality. Search for me is a both/and proposition. Either/or is one reality- a reminder, not a law that governs my life. I seek to be inclusive, not of any old thing, but of particular work that supports my values, including but not limited to yours. A war between design principles is one of many useful ways to look at the world" (Personal communication, 14 4 1993). Elsewhere (letter to contributor, 16 4 1993, copy to ME) he states that he experiences "all this stuff on a continuum", including the two design principles. But there is no continuum between redundancy of parts and redundancy of functions. There can only be a Mixed Mode event which alternates the design principles and carries high risk of fight/flight.

As an example of what results from such an aconceptual position let us look at Dubras and Brokhaug on the planning of the Isle of Jersey 'Future Search' (p363-

73). This is a SRLW model which didn't happen. Their paper is an elaborate illustration of lack of knowledge of design principles and how in that absence, using a DPI approach to planning and designing a participative community event, let alone a SC, doesn't work. Because the authors have no knowledge of the design principles, they attribute their failure to other factors.

In their initial document, they describe a preparative stage to ensure that the "sponsors (not the community) are fully informed and committed" (p370). They describe the SC group as **representatives** of the whole island in one room." Their intention after the SC was to "work closely with the sponsoring group (not the community) throughout."

By contrast, participants in community SCs are chosen through use of the **community reference system** such that the community chooses its own people who collectively cover knowledge of the whole system. They attend because they each know a part of the jigsaw puzzle which is the future of their system, the puzzle they have to solve. Note that this is **puzzle learning** in action not problem solving as in Franklin and Morely (1992). Those with technical expertise in a part of the jigsaw attend the SC as full participants, not as guests or special resources (Franklin & Morely, as above, p236-7).

Throughout, Dubras and Brokhaug used a top down process together with a representative structure of vested interests. The representative Steering Committee had a leader, "a small executive team" and the meetings were minuted (p365). They admit they worked only with the "power structure of Jersey" (p369) but blame the failure on the fact that there was "no established structure" (p368).

Dubras and Brokhaug are referred to as the 'planners' (p364) and at no stage does there appear any attempt to involve the community (other than the Steering Committee) in the planning of the SC. In fact, the community and "their major issue" (p366) was noted and then ignored. Compare "We developed a division of labor between consultants and planners. The planning group would develop objectives, invite participants, and handle logistics. They decided their group would fade away in the conference and they would join in as participants." The consultants did design and management (Rehm et al, 1992, p218).

When the Steering Committee wanted to maintain secrecy, there was no ground swell of public opinion (p369). Why should there be? Why would the community see this as any different from the normal DPI community process? Their most obvious response was to continue dissociation from their representatives.

In the design itself, DPI is again evident with specially prepared presentations of the history and from past through the present to the future. On Day 3, it is the staff and Steering Committee "with assistance from participants who integrate and select the most important ideas".

They make the comment (p365) that many seemed content with the way things had been but this is juxtaposed with the community's major issue or complaint. Yet they write of 'denial' as if it were a widespread feature of the community. It would appear to have been only the expected reaction from current power holders. It should not have been surprising, therefore, that eventually these 'leaders' rejected the process when they discovered that the community would be present as equals. Why would these 'leaders' risk a power base in a quiescent community?

Their second principal learning sums up the lack of understanding and analysis. It was that "the political impact of an innovation such as this process...has to be anticipated and coalitions built early among all the key players" (p368). By using a representative structure which worked as a committee, there was no chance that they would ever arrive at "well-articulated, common goals" and every chance that they would be dealing with fight/flight. Which was exactly what they got-"the changing situation among top politicians and the individual ambitions of sponsors were tough to anticipate and work with". Dubras and Brokhaug appear to have no concept of a community acting as community (DP2) and no understanding of the relationship between design principles and dynamics. They assumed that a community can be equated with its elected representation. (Compare this with Schindler-Rainman and Lippitt who include people from all sectors and strata (1992, p37)). The ultimate result of this ignorance is increasing confusion (Emery M, 1993, p228-9).

A critical feature of DP2 planning is that those responsible for the future of the system do the planning. As the SC is a DP2 event, it has the system (L_{11}) in the room. Not "everybody includes not only organization members but also stakeholders from the wider system" (Bunker & Alban, 1992, p581). Without understanding of both design principles and open systems, SRLW has both the system (L_{11}) and environment (L_{22}) in the room. But the L_{22} is by definition not in a position to take responsibility for the future of the L_{11} . Should a system need data directly from its environment, it should collect that in the preparation phase prior to the SC. It can do that in highly participative and collaborative ways.

If the task of a SC is to plan a new relationship between organization and supplier for example, then the system boundary is drawn around both organization and supplier. As both parties will have to take responsibility for the future of the new projected system, then both will be participants in the SC.

In this section we see the difference between the **Human Relations** school and **Democratization** of communities and organizations. The metamorphosing of the SC into just another participative event parallels the bastardization of organizational democratization into the 'cop to coach' or 'trainer, leader, coach' model which leaves DPI intact (Emery M, 1993, p148-152). The Human Relations school obviously believe that if people do the right thing by each other, change will happen and evangelicism will accomplish the diffusion. Unfortunately, history is against them.

Discovering Common Ground?

It is ironic that this should be the name of Weisbord's book when his method is inherently incapable of identifying common ground. The SC does intensive work to distil critical points, followed by intensive work to cumulatively integrate group reports into a final agreed **community product**. The following process was used in the Nebraska Mental Health System Performance Improvement SC (July 27-29, 1994). "People then integrated their 35 separate future points across table groups by merging those that were similar and leaving those that were not as stand alone points. After a lengthy discussion to understand each of the future points, they were organized into 10 'clumps'. Table groups developed three criteria to measure each of the future point clumps. Using these criteria, the top five future points were identified by each group. The results of this were then tallied in the large group. The final ten future points were then presented to the entire session for understanding and clarity. The large group determined whether each future point should be on the final list to go to the action planning phase. One point was merged with another that made the final list and one point was identified as being worked on by planning groups from both the Adult and Children's Search Conferences, so did not need to be worked on here."

This SC was the third in a series to develop this system in March (Adult), July 11-13 (Children). Focusing on performance improvement, it illustrates the care given both to getting the future system right and coordination across SCs.

The SC **rationalizes conflict** (Emery F, 1966) by using a 'Disagreed list' where there are substantive disagreements. This process draws a sharp line between what is agreed, the 'common ground' which is normally much larger than expected and what is not agreed which then simply ceases to be part of the continuing work of the community at that point in time. It is a 'cool', commonsense approach to the reality of our diverse communities. It is an essential component of integration and achieving agreement, simply good practice in acknowledging diversity and differences of opinion on some aspects of a future while agreeing on others.

SRLW for example, employs a very simple device also but for the **avoidance of conflict**. It avoids the expression of even minor disagreement. Weisbord denies the charge of avoiding conflict. "We neither avoid nor confront the extremes. Rather, we put our energy into staking out the widest common ground all can stand on without forcing or compromise." This stance toward conflict is "the most radical aspect of these conferences" and a "major break with the recent past. When we invite the right people (sic), we will nearly always find unresolved conflicts and disagreements. **Yet we discourage conferees from 'working' their differences.**" Instead, we create a figure/ground reversal. We put the dysfunctional 'shadow' dynamics **in the background**. People tune in on different aspects of themselves- the more constructive and cooperative impulses" (My emphases, all quotes Weisbord, 1992, p7).

His device is to leave group work at a premature stage and without integration. In most cases, groups merely prepare shopping lists without benefit of serious group analysis. These are then reported and left. SRLW's 'common ground' is merely an undifferentiated and unexamined array. It contains of course, all of the conflicts and disagreements he acknowledges. He is quite correct in saying that the 'shadow' dynamics remain in the background, but he doesn't say until when. Examples do tell us, however.

There is nothing more destructive of the process of community building than to find at the stage of action planning that there is disagreement about fundamental directions or goals. Weisbord's process left in New Mexico, a depressed community in a greater state of conflict and helplessness than before. Similarly, Bailey and Dupre record that following the skits, there was a "lack of patience with other participants and the process. The group did identify common themes from the skits...but also insisted on having many personal ideas included." This was an outbreak of fight/flight but without recognition of the basic group assumptions, they explained it as fatigue. They then "realized that the group would not have the drive or commitment to this task or the subsequent planning tasks" (p516).

Weisbord says "we have to skirt the **bottomless pit** of irreconcilable differences. That seems more likely if we make all data valid, acknowledge our differences, and agree to put our energy into working the common ground" (p11, my emphasis). Skirting around them and acknowledging them are two entirely different processes. Weisbord does the first, not the second. This quote also makes clear that by 'common ground', Weisbord really only means 'task'.

Since introducing the session on the 'common future scenario' which is a quasi form of integration, Weisbord & Janoff (p5) report that "sometimes, disagreements are raised". "The ground rule is that we report the lists AS IS....Anything that stirs up disagreement is reported as a potential future wished for by some". This move towards rationalization of conflict and the 'disagree list' was inevitable once integration was attempted.

Is there a cultural imperative to the hell and brimstone interpretation of disagreement? Cebula and Rehm's work says 'no'. "Americans resonate to DP2, prefer discussing their desirable futures over fantasy games, enjoy the opportunity to really argue things out and get clear about differences" (as above). The SC has the same power in the US as it has in any culture, i.e. to begin reversing trends towards dissociation and start encouraging through successful action the growing awareness that there can be a culture which is joyful, associative and wise.

Preventing Maladaptive Dynamics for Creativity

Every aspect of the SC has been designed so that participants go immediately into the Creative Working Mode and stay there, generating learning and energy (Bion,

1952; Emery M, 1982). Dynamics, learning, ideal seeking and the affects they produce are correlated, collectively produce diffusion and induce wisdom (Emery M, 1982; 1986a). Reports of SCs in the USA report work and learning. These effects fuel active implementation, e.g. Higgins, 1994.

The basic group assumptions of dependency, fight/flight and pairing (Bion, 1952) in its schismatic form (Emery M, 1999) inhibit learning and drain energy, hence Bailey and Dupre's observation of fatigue. In each of the examples of the SRLW model, there have been outbreaks of these group assumptions.

Rationalizing conflict is part of the **prevention** of outbreaks of the group assumptions. Participants use it from the beginning of the SC. They learn that all perceptions are valid, the common ground is greater than expected, the line between agreed and disagreed interpretations is clear and that there is no reason for either dependency or fight/flight. All can relax as the critical **conditions for** creative work are in place. SCs typically generate a lot of highly creative and often artistic work which emerges with the joy felt from achievement as a **community**. Methods which create uncertainty or assume conflict or fear of it, elevate our lowest common denominator, our group assumptions which usually operate only with awareness, not awareness of awareness or consciousness (Chein, 1972, p95). They also deny opportunities for learning about our highest common denominator, pursuit of ideals through the Creative Working Mode. The potential in SRLW for example, for explicit group assumptions is, therefore, always much higher than in the SC. Morley & Trist (1992) also demonstrate that errors in design and management cause serious outbreaks of maladaptive dynamics, inhibiting creativity.

Instructing groups to be creative creates both a paradox and a suspicion that the instructor doesn't trust people to use the Creative Working Mode, conscious of reality bound tasks. "What is doable is implanted in the unconscious of every person who comes into the room. What is to be discovered is **already** there" (Weisbord, 1992, p69). If this is accurate, all social methods for making change are irrelevant and individual dreams are sufficient. But the success of the SC proves that it is the hard creative work collectively done which bring dreams and innovations to fruition.

Observing the Conditions for Effective Communication?

Asch's (1952) conditions for effective, influential communication was one of the three conceptual planks built into the first SC. The conditions are **openness**, knowing that all share an **objective ordered field** and **psychological similarity** which result in **trust**. Today, they are embodied in all aspects of design and management.

SRLW violates the first condition of **Openness** right from the start. Directing predetermined groups to particular tasks without explanation, innocent though it

may be, does not meet the need for all processes and managerial behaviours to be totally transparent. Gimmicks such as coloured dots do not obviate the need and may exacerbate suspicion and distrust when there are adversarial parties. When there is a need within a SC for groups to be specially designed so that one or more interest groups cannot dominate a particular group or session, it is normal for managers to explain the rationale for group composition, e.g.

'we need people from every state in each of the groups so that states cannot push their traditional barrows'.

The L22 as a reality represents the ultimate in interdependency, common ground. In the process of analyzing data about its changes and then synthesizing it into a community agreed Most Probable Global Future, SC participants realize that they share an **objectively ordered field**. In agreeing a clearly articulated Desirable World, they acknowledge their basic concerns, the **ideals** and thus their common status as **humans**. SRLW through lack of integration and rationalization of conflict automatically leads to a violation of the second and third of the conditions for influential communication. SRLW's participants will remain in doubt as to whether they are all indeed living in the same world or have the same status. In the absence of those clear perceptions, trust will not develop.

But there is a further obstacle. Many accept the status quo, the conventional wisdom of much of corporate USA which rests upon the world hypothesis of mechanism and the associated design principle of redundancy of parts. One of its effects is segmentation which results in the prominence and use of 'stakeholder groups'. This is an operational division into self interested and sectoral groups which bear little relation to responsibility as discussed above. Some 'stakeholders' are not in the system. The 'stakeholders' are a major plank of the SRLW for example, and in contrast to the SC which works with heterogeneous groups, are encouraged to act as entities within the event from an early stage. Naturally they behave as representatives of their broader constituencies, defeating one of the purposes of the SC which is for people to act in the interests of the system whose future is being planned. Once stakeholders have stood on their individual soap boxes, or been forced to defend them, it is increasingly difficult for them to assume a non representative stance. Again, this cuts across the condition of psychological similarity. Because these first three conditions are violated, there is little fundamental basis for the spiraling growth of **trust**, openness in communication and therefore, greater trust in others to take responsibility for actions on behalf of and in the interests of the whole community.

But Weisbord claims that "we have found an effective (different) way to establish the basic Asch levels" (p64). He describes the design and the desired outcomes as above but fails to note that the process doesn't allow participants to collectively identify **their** world, **their** psychological similarities and/or differences. His method embodies superficiality. By running through the steps, the realities that are involved in creating Asch's conditions are avoided so that he can blithely state that

SRLW's process establishes them.

Another of the ironies in **Discovering Common Ground** is that Weisbord quotes my correspondence.

"If people can't see that they share a world of their collective making, you've failed right at the start. The basic rules for avoiding 'in' or 'out' groups and major divisions, and for staying totally task-oriented, are violated time and again." "She would not wish to perpetuate these errors, said Merrelyn. Nor would I"(p11).

But he has!

Clarity and Confidence or Confusion and Anxiety. Concepts of People.

The SC is only an intensive stage of a much longer process of preparatory activities and later implementation. Participants are prebriefed on, if not involved in, every aspect of purpose and method. Each stage of the SC itself is clearly defined, work on it is clarified and agreed leading to the next conceptual stage where work builds upon the agreements of the previous stage. It is a model of building clarity and confidence.

"Transformative change, I believe, always means a journey through denial and chaos" (Weisbord, 1992, p53). It seems to me inevitable that we make the journey into confusion-even anger, frustration, despair"... (People) tend to become agitated by external data-the world, the environment, history, complexity" (Weisbord, 1992, p68). "Some feel a strong urge to run away" (Weisbord & Janoff, 1994, p3). No wonder given the mess they are asked to create and then confront. The SRLW model compounds confusion with confusion. This is a classic example of a self fulfilling prophecy- create confusion and then claim that it is an inevitable step. It bears a distinct resemblance to the self fulfilling prophecy that all 'process conferences' must experience fight/flight. This belief is not only wrong as the development of the SC shows but also dangerous to active adaptive outcomes. A major participative conference in Orillia failed partly because its manager mobilized this belief and encouraged group assumptional behaviour (Emery M, 1986b). Burgess (1992, pp412-415) describes this conference as a SC which it wasn't and applauds the creativity of the group who refused to work in the interests of the conference as a whole. They resorted to non verbal and pictorial presentations to avoid reporting their failure. They admitted this at the time. Their maladaptive behaviour, not Creative Working Mode, largely contributed to overall failure. This conference was fully documented and analyzed (Emery M, 1986b). Burgess is reporting out of context and contributing to the confusion.

Applying Janssen's theory (Weisbord, 1992, p101-3) denies any other motivation for change apart from 'the journey' as above. The motivation for most SCs and their participants is as far from Janssen as you can get. Most are delighted to be there, rearing to get on with the task and showing affects far from confusion and anxiety. This is their opportunity to plan their own future, they understand the process and

its rationale and are clear about where they are going and why. Collecting data about the L₂₂ is not confusing because they know they will use it to as accurately as possible, anticipate the most probable future. Normal people are enthusiastic about taking responsibility for their own affairs, not anxiety ridden 'victims'.

We are of course dealing with very different conceptualizations of people. The SC takes people as purposeful (Ackoff & Emery, 1972), wanting to learn and take responsibility for their future. They can also under conducive circumstances be ideal seeking, making choices between purposes that are in the interest of the total system. The SC is an econiche specifically designed and managed for the emergence of ideal seeking.

Central to this conceptualization is integration of autonomy and homonomy which means interdependence and belongingness. Mental health is "the capacity both for autonomous expansion and for homonomous integration" (Angyal, 1965, p254). Autonomy means governed from the inside. Many central processes such as adaptation cannot be understood without it. But "life is an autonomous dynamic event which takes place **between** the organism and the environment" (Angyal, as above, p48; Robertson, 1978). Without participation in and responsibility for the world outside the self, autonomy becomes egocentrism (Bohm & Weber, 1983, p35) and mental health deteriorates (Laing, 1959; Fromm, 1963). For learning to act wisely, the basic unit shifts from the individual to 'people in environment' (Emery M, 1982). Our Western culture has encouraged autonomy to run amok and one of the aims of the SC is to restore the balance by learning for continuous adaptation and mental health, both personal and cultural. Only ideal seeking and the positive affects and energy which flow from it has the power to fuel that learning (Emery M, 1986a).

In contrast, the SRLW model emphasizes anxiety. For example, proven tools to "manage our own anxiety" (p65) eliciting values, dreams etc is an "enormous anxiety reducer" (p10). "Every discovery brings heightened anxiety" (p103). This concern is transformed into a set of practices which appears to contain an implicit theory that if we stay confused, we may avoid having to perceive conflict and thereby avoid the anxiety relating to our **incapacity** to deal with it. This derives from the Judeo- Christian religious paradigm (Cebula & Rehm, 1994; Emery M, 1982, Part I) which emphasizes our helplessness and need to **accept**, as below. This is the direct opposite of an explicit theory which celebrates the diversity and difference of purposeful people learning to share responsibility for their collective future by pursuing ideals into action and thereby approximating adaptation and wisdom.

Ecological Learning and Remembering

The SC is ecological learning (Gibson, 1966, Emery F, 1980) in action. As it unfolds, it consolidates the range of perceptions of environment and system into a core of essential features. These are high resolution commonalities which express

the consistency or singularity within the community. Features with **singularity** are precisely encoded, easily learned and accurately remembered (Goldmeier, 1982). Such features are **invariances**. The SC establishes the invariances of probable and desirable worlds and systems and as these build upon each other, meaning is heightened. Meaning determines memorability. A model for implementation and diffusion must produce clear memories. Nobody leaving the NMHS SC could fail to know or remember exactly who was responsible for what by when. Its impact and diffusive power was so great that two further SCs were held to comprehensively cover the mental health system in Nebraska.

Many participative methods employ ecological learning. But methodological flaws can destroy much of its effect. Failing to integrate perceptions precludes singularity and renders encoding approximate. It is, therefore, not accurately reproducible resulting in instabilities of both perceiving and remembering. This explains many of the problems experienced by participants after the event as they attempt to remember or reconstruct their experience. In New Mexico, design and management were responsible for failures of knowing and remembering. The design followed no logic, invariances about the L_{22} or L_{11} were not extracted and there was a shifting population of about 70. There were endless unrelated perceptions but no singular perception of adaptation or goals could emerge. While there was hope for their future, it was undefined and therefore, rememberings of it diverged over time. Reconstructions by those determined to continue caused problems as above.

Again we have theoretical confusions. Franklin and Morely (1992, p230) discuss "a mode of searching based on action learning". What other sort of searching is there? They seek to distinguish 'contextual searching' from the 'traditional' and the 'radical' (p231). But the SC has always been based on collaboration rather than consultancy and stayed away from advocacy. A SC's purposes and its underlying values do not "determine which orientation is applied to the learning setting" (p231). The values built into the SC as a unique method have been spelt out above. It is a process owned by participants and aimed at empowering all involved (p232), hence the importance of understanding DP2, that managers do not intervene in the content, that small groups do not have facilitators and action planning by those responsible for the future of the system, is critical. Violations of these encourage group assumptions which inhibit learning (Emery M, 1982). Their specifications for 'contextual searching' are simply those of the SC. Methods which do not meet these values and specifications are not SCs.

The three cases they mention, waste management, development of nature tourism strategies and development of a support network for the developmentally handicapped are quite rightly placed by Weisbord in the category of issue SCs. Issue SCs are not distinguished by a focus on action learning but rather by a drawing of a new system boundary, i.e. around an issue rather than such as a community, nation or organization.

Magic?

In the absence of knowledge or understanding of the many concepts involved in the SC, it is easy to perceive "many aspects to a future search that feel magical". (Wheatley, p105). There is nothing either magic or miraculous about participative or DP2 conferences. For example, Wheatley is struck by the similarities of the visions which emerge and their "sheer attractiveness. **Why does this occur?**" (p106, my emphasis). It occurs because the conditions are conducive to the elicitation of the **ideals** (Emery F, 1977; Emery M, 1982). It is not necessary to impart human characteristics to **information** to explain this phenomenon. The "ordering capability" of people functioning within a DP2 structure, the dynamic of the Creative Working Mode and the energy it releases, are quite sufficient to explain it without endowing a disembodied concept such as information with a "structuring dynamic", something surely which implies a biological basis. "New information is created any time information meets other information, providing there is a context that gives meaning to the exchange." This could lend itself to unkind jokes about the promiscuity of informations and lack of sex education. But levity aside, the 'new science' could do well to research some of the 'old science', that which underlies the SC. In fact, the 'new science' has shown itself to be not very scientific.

Weisbord has used Wheatley's 'new science' to justify his generation of confusion and 'anxiety' as in 'Two Cheers for Chaos' (1992, p68) but as Wheatley herself admits above, she doesn't understand the theory behind the SC. She too has no concept of design principle as she shows by juxtaposing 'structure' with 'information' (1992, Table p109). What she is searching for is the juxtaposition of DP1 and DP2. As she has no concept of DP2, she presents the same old choice between DP1 and laissez faire where laissez faire is an absence of structure. When this is the only choice presented, it reinforces the view that democracy (DP2) is laissez faire. There are already many who equate laissez faire with human freedom and dignity. They believe that the control exercised within DP2 structures is a constraint on individual freedom but it is in the nature of this form of control that freedom actually lies and develops as a conscious property of the individual. The key is the interdependence of autonomy and homonomy as above.

A balance of autonomy and homonomy depends on shared responsibility. Responsibility for an object entails concern for that object (Fingarette, 1967). When a **community** accepts responsibility for an outcome they also share concern for each other. They experience homonomy. Shared responsibility produces genuine equality and this in turn produces positive affect. Only through the expansive qualities of positive affect, particularly joy (Tomkins, 1963), can people grow and become more free as they enlarge their sphere of control. DP2 structures based on shared control give rise to freedom through creativity and growth in a way which is impossible within DP1 and laissez faire.

The consequences of laissez faire have been known for a long time, e.g. Lippitt &

White, 1943. Its dangers are extensive particularly in cultures with trends towards individualism and dissociation. Generation of negative affects, feeling lost, inadequate and becoming demoralized leads to either further withdrawal from society and lack of care for others, or to increased lawlessness and random-aggression. Putting autonomy on centre stage and believing that some natural goodness or order will arise and prevail, promotes laissez faire, reducing the probability of shared responsibility for outcomes and those with whom the sharing needs to be done.

This belief also bears more than a distinct resemblance to the magical thinking of the 1960s. **Do You Believe in Magic?** (Gottlieb, 1987). 'Shut your eyes, think it or say it and it will happen' is the essence of magical thinking. "Sixties survivors...think the (old) world already ended, and can't understand why its still here...we said, 'Its either all gonna end, or its gonna be transformed, and we're the lever and the fulcrum on which these things are gonna move'. **And IT DIDN'T HAPPEN**" (Gottlieb, 1987, p387).

There is no doubt that the USA experienced the most intense and extensive countercultural wave in the sixties and seventies. Gottlieb's analysis is useful in this context as it highlights features of this 'revolution' which would be inimicable to the real structural revolution taking place, were they to seriously resurface. The SC is designed to make long lasting change and it achieves that by staying totally task oriented around a carefully defined system in an objective world. The 60s wave by contrast had a totally **internal** focus. From every perspective, Gottlieb found the implicit message that 'if we change ourselves, we will change the world'. Weisbord continues to stress the 'Pogo phenomenon- we have met the enemy and they is us' (Weisbord, 1992, p68; Weisbord and Janoff, 1994, p5). The 60s encompassed change in values, perceptions and individual personal behaviour. "It gave us time to deepen the changes in ourselves, but deluded us about the ease of changing the world." (Gottlieb, 1987, p308).

There was a powerful awareness of 'the System', "the evil spell of the mechanistic world view" (p193) and hierarchy (DPI). But there was no conceptual understanding of the System, how to analyze and change it. When laissez faire is seen as the only alternative to DP1, nothing changes. The 60s were a major experiment which proved unequivocally that:

- expressing values and dreaming dreams alone are inadequate
- the powerless no matter how much they have changed themselves, remain powerless.

Any potential innovation such as a new social method for change needs to be evaluated in terms of what it can and cannot achieve before it is adopted. If it is found to promote laissez faire because of ignorance of the design principles and belief in the Human Relations ideology, it is destined to join the already long list of similar failed experiments. One of the real dangers of the degradation of the SC is

that it will encourage existing trends towards magical thinking in the US. When change becomes difficult, it may be found easier to resort to an internal focus and build stronger walls to insulate the self or the internal however defined, from the external.

Spoken vs Written Language

All processes within the SC are designed for community building and active adaptation via **spoken language**. Data presented orally becomes the property of all and binds people together (Farb, 1973, p24-5). It is irrelevant in a SC whether the community or individuals are oral or illiterate. If we are to take active adaptation seriously, then our processes cannot be limited to the affluent and the literate. Accessibility is a critical feature of any transforming method.

This contrasts with another feature of the SRLW model which militates against community building. Its basis lies in writing in individual workbooks and then on wall paper as individuals, without benefit of oral/aural sharing. This is an individuating experience and again reinforces the status quo and its trends towards dissociation. There is a correlation between literacy and dissociation (Ong, 1967). In addition, this process wastes paper as 70 people write up the same items over and over again.

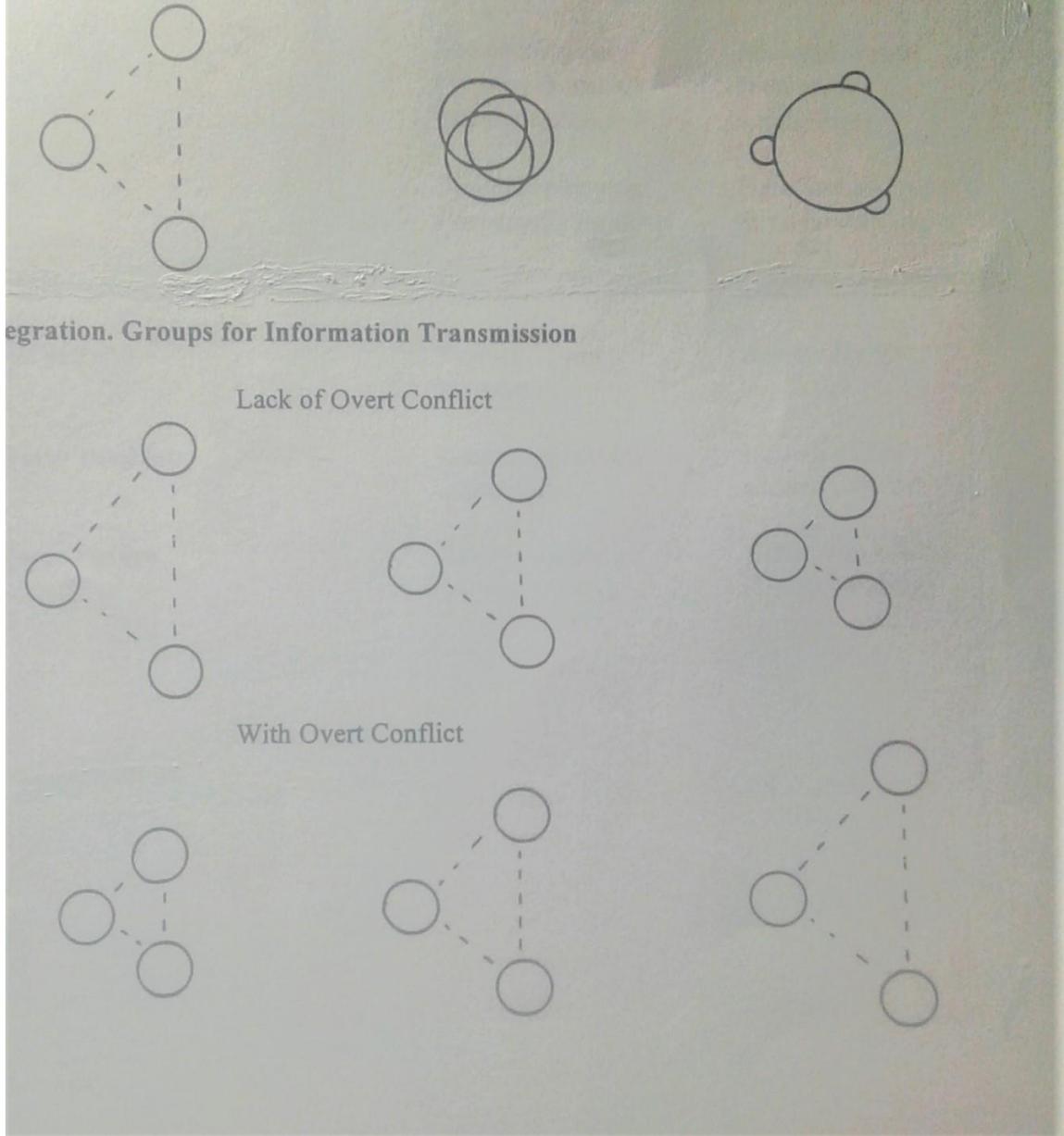
In highlighting individual superficialities, reinforcing literacy and limiting access, SRLW also denies many opportunities for learning more about being part of a genuinely human community where each individual becomes part of the whole environment.

Community Building vs Aggregate of Groups

The following diagrams illustrate the most usual course of relationship between groups and whole system under two concepts. The SC is built around the establishment of interdependency and integration. The other involves little or no integration. The results are vastly different.

In Figure 2, the second heading should read *No Integration: Groups for Information Transmission*. Figure 2 shows that in the SC, small groups are used only as scaffolding or vehicles for the task and increasingly become irrelevant as the community consolidates. In other models such as the SRLW, community really does not develop at all leaving the groups as full entities in their own right. This is true even when there is no overt conflict although the groups may move closer together. When there is overt conflict, groups move further apart.

Figure 2. SC. Step by Step Integration. Community Building



The less interdependence and integrative activity, the more individuals and interest groups can continue to see themselves as separate from the larger whole. Of course, when participants are not part of the system, it is entirely proper for them to see themselves as external to the system. But that makes a mockery of the idea that the SRLW model for example, is a SC because in a SC, those people wouldn't be participants.

As above, if this type of event goes well, the product is a better informed and closer set of 'stakeholders' or parts. These will continue to act as entities but with greater

understanding of and accommodation to the other entities. If it ends with overt hostilities, the dynamics of fight/flight mean that even accurate information shared will tend to be disregarded and distances between parties will expand. They will see themselves as less bound by basic interdependence.

The product of the SC is a system within which some parts may still take different stands on some outstanding issues as in Industrial Relations but the parts will work as system with a vested interest in enlarging the common action base of the system.

If the purpose of an event requires community building, then it is virtually impossible to obtain that result from the group model. The groundwork isn't there for it. If the purpose is merely data collection, information sharing and/or 'getting to know you', then the group event will work as long as fight/flight is avoided. Given this, it would be wise for the action planning phase to be omitted entirely.

The SC is based on community and uses groups only to speed work up and provide validation. It does not emphasize "self-managing small groups" (Weisbord, 1992, p51) but it uses them. It does not use small group facilitators as did Morely and Trist (1992). But Smith (1992) had 'self managing groups with facilitators' which again shows the confusion of using fashionable terms without concepts. Self managing groups (DP2) cannot by definition have 'facilitators' any more than they can have fixed 'leaders' (DP1).

Because the SC is a community event it works best with about 35 people. If more are required to cover knowledge of the system, then a series of SCs or a Multisearch (Emery M, 1982, 1992b) is designed with final integration of strategic goals. It is a **socioecological** model- system in environment. The group model is a variant of participative, social island conferences which find it very difficult to achieve a slight degree of community (Emery M & Emery F, 1978, p274-277). It belongs to the class **socioperceptual** - parts with partial and overlapping perceptions.

Table 2. Summary of Community Building vs Group Work		
Type	<i>Socioecological</i> (Trusted & tested interdependencies)	<i>Socioperceptual</i> (Perceived similarities)
Purpose	Systemic planning, Community building	Data Transmission & understanding
Integration	High	Low
Common ground	Explicit, sharp	Impressionistic boundary
Short Term Product	Learning/planning community	Knowledge & accommodation
Long Term Future	Active adaptation (acting wisely)	Better networking (Understanding)

Mechanism vs Contextualism

Moving from open systems (L22->L11->Integration) to Past->Present->Future, entails a transformation from a practice of contextualism to yet another experience of mechanism (Pepper, 1966). Linear time as a bulwark of mechanism denies the non linear human experience of time, history and potential future as meaningful events and changes. It institutionalizes mechanistic, measurable logic, e.g. decades, not **psychologic** as people directly extract meaning from experiencing concrete historical events in the present and similarly merge past and future into creative acts in the present. The SC makes **conscious change** at the level of world hypothesis. Others accept and reinforce the status quo, eg "to help people describe and **accept** their (mutual) current reality" as an impetus for action. ... "As we **accept** our common fate, we tum towards each other...we must each perceive that 'we are the world'... The action shift comes at the **unconscious** level as we discover that in the wider context it is **much** easier to make practical action plans and to commit ourselves willingly" (Weisbord, 1992, p67-68, my emphasis on 'accept').

In Weisbord's statement above, the reality of the L₂₂ has become us personally, change has become action, turning towards each other, conscious has become unconscious. Yet wisdom inheres in **consciously** experiencing, understanding and practising the meaning of the whole (Knutson & Suzuki, 1992).

Conclusion: Let's not Confuse Apples and Oranges

Enough basic concepts and practices of the SC have been spelt out to clarify the major confusion which is that any large group participative method is a SC. Any pure participative event is based on DP2 but that is only one dimension built into the SC. When a DP2 event is confused with a SC, it is possible to say "I have given up trying to classify 'degrees' of searching" (Weisbord, 1992, p15). But when the features of the SC are put together as a unique constellation of features, a method, it is quite easy to delineate it from other participative events.

Table 3. Summary of Differences in Outcomes		
	Search Conference	SRLW Model
Observance of reality	Yes, interdependence & rationalization of conflict	No, individualism & avoidance of conflict
Mode	Oral/aural	Literate
Asch's Conditions	Observed	Violated
Bion's Dynamics	Prevented	High Probability
Design Principles e.g. responsibility for implementation	Central Yes, System in room	Ignored No (System & Environment in room)
Purpose	Community	Groups
Projected Scenario	Active Adaptation	Dissociation
World Hypothesis	Contextualism	Mechanism

As the summary Table 3 shows, Weisbord would necessarily fail to compare the SRLW model with the SC in terms of degrees. The same applies to most other large group methods. Are they all fruit? Yes. They are all participative events. The other models do not produce the same outcomes as the SC for the reasons spelt out above. They should not be confused with it. Many unique designs for unique purposes use bits from the SC but that does not make them SCs.

Experienced designers and managers know that different designs and practices produce different **outcomes**. It would be nice if it were true that "There are quite a few real things going on, used in different ways by different people in different settings. The overriding reality, I conclude, is 'equifinality' - lots of paths to the same place. That place, of course, is greater control of and responsibility for our own lives" (Weisbord, 1992, p15).

That is abusing the term equifinality in the current faddish way (Emery M, 1993, p4) and the summary of differences in outcomes makes nonsense of it. If equifinality did apply to social methods, then much social science would be irrelevant and the years of work put into developing the Search Conference to its current reliable form would have been unnecessary. It has been necessary in order to ensure that people can reliably learn how to take responsibility for their own lives.

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