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Enhancing the Process of Methodology Choice in Total Systems Intervention (TSI) and Improving Chances of Tackling Coercion

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The process of Choice in TSI is reexamined in this paper. Previously, methods[2] have been understood to have a given and immediate purpose and are employed when this is judged to be most suitable in the circumstances. In this paper we suggest that methods can be operated in ways that meet purposes not provided by their founding theoretical underpinnings. We develop this argument by pointing to cases where cybernetic or soft methods are driven by purposes and principles given to emancipatory methodology—in a quest to address more effectively issues of coercion. This may be necessary when explicit and direct employment of emancipatory methodology is not sensitive enough to political dynamics, where certain people may feel overly threatened by its language and consequently feel the need to subvert its use. We develop a defence for this *oblique* use of cybernetic and soft methods in coercive contexts, and extend the argument to suggest that all methods can be employed in such a way.

KEY WORDS: methodology choice; Total Systems Intervention; emancipatory practice; managing coercion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Total Systems Intervention is an approach to problem solving that has three phases, Creativity, Choice, and Implementation: *Creativity*—to think creatively and perceptively about problems faced; *Choice*—to choose a method(s) relevant to those problems; and *Implementation*—to apply chosen methods to tackle those problems. The process of Choice in TSI is reexamined here.

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[2]We wish to avoid confusion between the words method and methodology. Methodology means purposes and principles for action, and in this sense incorporates the theoretical underpinnings normally associated with it. Method is a set of guidelines used to operationalise methodology.

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Previously, methods have been understood to have *a given and immediate purpose* and are chosen when this is judged to be most suitable in the circumstances. However, in this paper we suggest that methods can be used obliquely in certain circumstances.[3] By this we mean that the given and immediate purpose of any method can be dominated by the given and immediate purpose of some other method so that, for example, *with astute and careful handling* a cybernetic or soft systems method can be employed to tackle emancipatory issues *in a way which undercuts and redirects its theoretical underpinning*. This added sophistication to the process of Choice provides a useful alternative when head-on employment of emancipatory methods in a problem solving context comes up against barriers such as subversion of the intervention by people who feel threatened by it.

A major question isolated by researchers with an interest in emancipatory intervention[4] is how to manage different stakeholder positions in a way that is judged to accommodate those who may have been isolated as "disadvantaged." What should be the role of the practitioner/critical inquirer when getting involved in the dynamics of social asymmetries? We argue in this paper that the solutions which have been proposed by cyberneticians and soft systems thinkers (linked to their founding theoretical underpinnings) involve reiterating their own commitments primarily to design and debate as guiding principles of social life, but do not guide an interventionist who may wish to address the issue of "coercion" as a separate dynamic by invoking alternative principles.

The enhanced process of Choice, which we outline and extend herein, is based on a line of inquiry that disputes claims of cyberneticians and soft systems practitioners when they argue that their own brands of problem solving can directly tackle coercion. We argue in this paper that methodology use is guided by principles and purposes, and that these principles and purposes are not all reducible to one another. Certain methods, thanks to their theoretical underpinning, are designed to address some issues better than others, and such addressal

[3] Circumstances means the whole situation, that is, all people and all things involved in the defined problem solving activity [whose boundaries of course can be revised/redefined (Flood, 1994, 1995a)]. This includes those who may be regarded as researchers/consultants/TSI practitioners. The methodologies adopted therefore depend on circumstances. Yet one can still question how a TSI-user is able to make judgements about how to manage the process of intervention in a way that does justice to the array of perceptions held by those involved and affected. Ideally, any judgement made should be tested dialogically. But accountability for our judgement still cannot be read off as if consulting a chalkboard of other people's views. Ultimately, choice for a practitioner involves taking some responsibility for processing and critically assessing people's views. Matters of conscience arguably should also be recognised in the process of Choice and wider intervention (cf. Flood and Jackson, 1991a, p. 244).

[4] Researchers include "systems" practitioners as well as those supporting, for example, movements for better education agendas linked to the process of empowerment (e.g., Wexler, 1987), participatory development initiatives in rural development (e.g., Arce *et al.*, 1994), and empowerment through enskilling (e.g., Brown, 1995).

we call here the *immediate and given purpose of the method.* An immediate and given purpose is grounded in principles for action. The principles and purposes of cybernetic and soft systems methodology are not immediately best suited to coercive contexts.

TSI allows the theorist/methodologist to avoid total immersion in one theoretical argument, to consider possible principles and purposes for intervention springing from other theoretical positions, and attendant on this, to consider the possibility, in certain instances, of using methods to fulfil a purpose(s) other than their immediate and given one. We call this aim to fulfil alternative purposes *the oblique use of a method.* We argue that oblique use is both theoretically and morally defensible, and we concentrate here on showing what it may mean to use cybernetic and soft approaches this way. The final decision of any practitioner faced with coercive forces at work is a "matter of [both] strategy and conscience" (Flood and Jackson, 1991a, p. 244).

This paper is structured as follows. To start with, the salient features of the process of TSI in the context of the argument herein is given. Ways that we may address "coercive contexts" accordingly are discussed, but are found to be somewhat unsatisfactory in the light of TSI's principles and practical goals. An alternative way is then introduced which explains the notion of oblique use of methods. Two examples are given, demonstrating, respectively, how a cybernetic and a soft systems approach arguably have been employed obliquely to tackle coercive contexts. The wider applicablity of oblique use of methods is then discussed yielding an enhanced version of the process of Choice in TSI. The paper is then concluded. Ultimately, we hope to open up meaningful discussion about choice of methodology (or indeed method) in problem solving.

2. BACKGROUND TO TSI

TSI is a metamethodology.[5] It works with the assumption that all problem solving methods are complementary.[6] The key to TSI's metamethodological process is to enable problem solvers to choose an appropriate method (or methods) to deal with problems taking circumstances into account. Any method can be judged most suitable depending on circumstances as already made clear in Footnote 3. The judgement is made by problem solvers using given procedures. TSI does not dictate which method should be used, nor indeed what the immediate and given purpose of a method is, but it does ask problem solvers to make

[5]The main references are Flood and Jackson (1991a) and Flood (1993a, 1995a).

[6]The meaning of TSI's complementarism is still subject to ongoing debate. Flood and Romm (1995) offer an account of complementarism which highlights the relationship between choice and responsibility as the factors that provide for theoretical and methodological (in)commensurability.

a choice about these matters and provides procedures to operationalise this [Flood (1995a) provides comprehensive details].

The process of TSI that guides problem solvers through the choice and use of a method(s) has three phases; Creativity, Choice, and Implementation. A summary of each phase follows.

- *Creativity.* The aim of Creativity is to break out of current assumptions and to get to grips with core issues that need to be dealt with.
- *Choice.* The aim of Choice is two pronged: (i) to judge which issues different methods are best at dealing with and (ii) to choose a method(s) for implementation to tackle the issues raised during creative thinking. Choice is made by first identifying the main types of method for implementation. Three types have been identified in TSI: (i) methods that ask the question "How?" i.e., How should we do something? (ii) methods that ask "What?" i.e., What should we be doing? and (iii) methods that ask "Why?" i.e., Why this design or that decision, and whose interests can it be seen as serving? Methods are categorised by TSI users employing this structure.[7] Core issues are similarly categorised. Choice is made by aligning a method(s) with their immediate and given purpose to the core issues in the circumstances (or, as explored in our enhanced Choice process discussed below, by deciding to employ methods obliquely.)[8]

[7]This is not to say that TSI users are discouraged from considering that methods cannot address *at all* "other" issues—the point is that the way they address them normally flows from an underlying theoretical position which encompasses a specific focus. For instance, though it may be argued that, say, Beer's cybernetic approach can address issues of debate and communication, the way that this is done is through a concentration on *structures* for communication, rather than on the quality of the communication and the quality of the cultural ethos which might make possible an acclimatisation to more democratic forms of existence. The same holds for other methods. So, say, soft methods may address issues of structure, but as part of the process of reaching culturally feasible ways of "*living*" *with* structure. And they may address, say, issues of "power"—but, again, within the context of seeing how accommodations (e.g., Checkland) or consensual patterns (e.g., Ackoff) can be generated (and regenerated). The TSI categorisation of methods is based on our pinpointing clear intentional differences between these different ways of treating "the issues" (in terms of defined theoretical commitments). This is, of course, partly our categorisation, but it has been carried out in dialogue with primary source texts, as well as reviewing the way other researchers have read those texts and seen their relevance. Incidentally, the latest version of TSI (Flood, 1995a) operationalises this process of critical review, thus enabling users to isolate for themselves core purposes in methods that they may use for intervention.

[8]It should be noted that the argument of TSI [already in the version presented in *Creative Problem Solving* (Flood and Jackson, 1991a)] states that one cannot simply mix'n'match methods in all interventions, without considering fundamentally how one wishes to tackle "the issues." Different methods may be guided by theoretical underpinnings and therefore have different purposes which are incompatible. Unless our choices are thought through, one of the purposes may unwittingly come to dominate. Hence, *Creative Problem Solving* suggested that the dominance of a particular vision of the issues in "the situation" (which in turn may determine how the intervention should

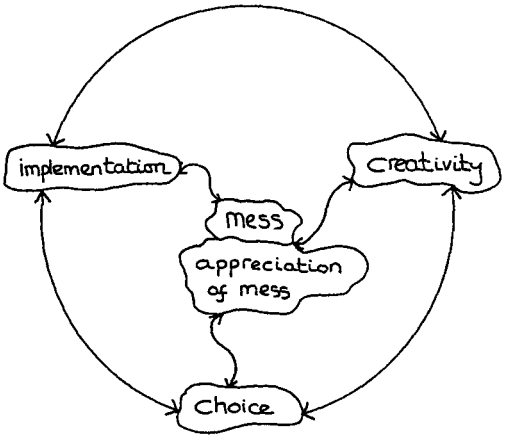

Fig. 1. The process of TSI.

- *Implementation.* The aim of implementation is to use the chosen method(s) to develop change proposals to deal with the issues raised during creative thinking.

The process is expressed diagrammatically in Fig. 1. Figure 1 shows that the process is circular. There is no given beginning or end. At any one moment one of the phases will be the main focus but the other two will always be running in the background.

The process has a recursive structure too. This means that each phase contains the three phases of TSI. The Creativity phase has creative thinking as its main focus, but also involves making choices about what the fundamental issues are, and requires this to be implemented. The Choice phase has choice of most suitable method as its main focus, but this requires creative thinking about methods and whether they are to be judged as most suitable in the circumstances. Choice is then implemented. The Implementation phase has implementation of change proposals as its main focus, but involves creative use of the methods to come up with change proposals, and choice to address the way that the method is used.

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proceed) be consciously considered, so that purposes would not become dominant "by chance." [See, for instance, the discussion of the TSI case study (Flood and Jackson, 1991a, p. 231).] This decision-making continues to take place during the intervention and, thus, allows the intervention to evolve. Our argument concerning the oblique use of methods, which is discussed below, refers to another matter: It refers to the *way* any method is used to fulfil purposes. It suggests that, in some cases, one may choose to utilise a method by shooting it through (as far as possible) with purposes derived from a theoretical framework not domain to that method.

An elaborated version of the process of TSI has been published recently (Flood, 1994, 1995a,b). The elaborated version has three modes of operation:

- a Critical Review Mode,
- a Problem Solving Mode, and
- a Critical Reflection Mode.

The Critical Review Mode encourages TSI users to review critically methods that might be used in a TSI intervention (i.e., in the Problem Solving Mode) in the following way (see Wilby, 1995, for a helpful diagrammatic representation).

- It reviews and categorises methods, judging which of the three problem-solving phases the method may contribute to—namely, Creativity, Choice, and/or Implementation.
- It reviews elements of methods considered suitable for the Implementation phase of TSI by assessing and categorising them and naming their immediate and given purpose.

In this way the Critical Review Mode critically reviews methods in terms of the TSI framework and, through this interpretation, constructs a system of methods that may be employed in intervention in the Problem Solving Mode.

The Problem Solving Mode of TSI helps TSI users to employ methods brought together through the Critical Review Mode in the following way:

- to think creatively about the problems faced,
- to choose the method(s) judged most suitable to tackle problems in the circumstances, and
- to use the chosen method(s) to develop and implement innovative change proposals that effectively tackle the problems.

The Critical Reflection Mode asks TSI users to reflect upon the adequacy of results of the Problem Solving Mode. It asks in the circumstances the following of each phase.

- Was the most suitable method(s) used? (Can methodological practitioners defend their choices?)
- Was the output of the method(s) appropriate? (Is the practitioner able to account for the output?)

The three modes, then, want TSI users to construct a system of methods for problem solving, operate those methods in problem solving, and review the use of the system of methods in problem solving; each mode being carried out in a critical, reflective, and discursively accountable way.

The crucial aspect of the above discussion for the current argument is what relates to Choice, especially the types of method employed through the process

of Choice. The essence of Choice[9] can be extracted from the above presentation and developed a little more to prepare for the enhanced version of the Choice phase given near the end of this paper.

3. THE PROCESS OF CHOICE

The process of Choice of method for implementation is built upon the philosophy of TSI and its systemic view of organisational processes in society. "Organisation" refers to relations between all interested parties in the process. The philosophy of TSI argues that addressing "organisation" requires analysis of it in terms of the following four key dimensions.

- *Organisational processes*—consideration of flows, and controls over flows.
- *Organisational design*—consideration of functions, in terms of their organisation, coordination, and control.
- *Organisational culture*—consideration of the mediation between people's meaning-creation processes as constituting their relations to rules and practices [cf. Romm (1994a, pp. 327–328) for a full discussion].
- *Organisational politics*—consideration of the involvement of people in exercising "will": When the involvement on the part of some in potentising *their* input smothers or denies meaningful involvement of others, it may be regarded as "coercive" (cf. Flood, 1990, pp. 80, 151–152; Romm, 1991, pp. 140, 153).[10]

Problem solving using a TSI framework must take into account all four key dimensions. The system of methods created through the Critical Review Mode, to be effective, must incorporate the following types of method (focusing on TSI's three main purposes of problem solving: How? What? and Why?).

- Methods that address the question "*How* can we design the most efficient organisational processes and arrange their implementation?"
- Methods that address the question "*How* can we achieve effective organisation?"

[9]Space does not permit a full explanation of the relevance of concentrating on the process of choice, and of defining it in a certain way within our argument. Suffice it to say that we believe that the essence of choice is linked, within our TSI approach, with taking some responsibility for action, doing so in the light of a serious confrontation with alternative routes for action.

[10]Romm and Romm (1987) explore the notion of "potency" as an alternative to power-as-coercion. This notion opens the possibility for redefining/shifting "power relations." They emphasise that "transformation [which can be sought] is not from power to passivity; but rather from reductive, exclusivist, power-as-domination, to an expansive base of potentized tolerance" (1987, p. 23).

- Methods that ask "*What* options should we decide upon?—that debate technical and human issues that arise in organisations and lead to decisions on what to do about them."
- Methods that ask "*Why* should a design or a decision be adopted if it merely serves the interests of dominant groups who smother the inputs and meanings of others, rather than balancing the needs of individuals and the organisation, taking into account the physical, biological, and social environments?"

Incorporated above are TSI's three main purposes of problem solving methods (How? What? and Why?) and the four main questions about organisations that they address. Methods are employed when they are seen to be most suitable in the circumstances to address core problems identified, but will be replaced by another method(s) if/when core problems are considered to have changed. Core problems change because organisation is dynamic, and part of that dynamic is intervention using methods (effective use of a method may be responsible for its replacement).

The process of Choice of methods for implementation is in line with the principles of TSI. The emphasis is on upholding the principle of human freedom, which is supported by three other principles; reflection, participation, and being systemic. The three purposes of problem solving methods address the need to guarantee as far as possible human freedom. This requirement can be shown to exist for each of the main purposes as summarised below.

Technical activities centre on the need for some level of prediction and control. These are catered for by methods that *design freedom into organisations and their processes in the form of efficient organisational processes and effective organisational design.*[11] For human activities, methods have been established that encourage *freedom through open and meaningful debate.* Also focusing on human activities are methods that generate debate about individual and group *freedom, freeing people from dominating designs and decisions (emancipatory).* TSI's principle of human freedom is therefore taken into account by the three main purposes of problem solving methods in different ways (including an emancipatory purpose).

Each purpose is mutually dependant. We need to have efficient designs for processes and organisation that meaningfully involve people at all levels of the organisation so that it can operate well. The amount of efficiency and effectiveness realised from the designs depends upon there being an understanding about

[11] This of course raises a contentious issue because some argue that a drive for efficiency is associated with less freedom for workers. We nevertheless consider relevant Beer's suggestion that in certain ways (admittedly not as clear-cut as he imagines), lack of organisation, and consequent inefficiency, may become frustrating and time-consuming, to the extent that people are unable to feel free (cf. Flood, 1993b).

how to operate the designs, roles to be played by people according to the designs (and their interpretation of the designs), how each role may contribute and fit into the whole design, appreciation of the benefits and meaningfulness of the whole, etc. This means that people must learn about and understand these things, which requires open and tolerant debate, in which the expression of alternative positions is fostered. Now, when designs or outcome of debate are subject to dominating forces, a means of overcoming the forces is essential. Explicit questions about why designs or decisions should be adopted helps to achieve more genuine debate, enhancing learning and understanding, making fairer decisions leading to more meaningful work and maximum efficiency from designs. (We recognise that there is no absolute criterion for deciding on the quality of fairness—what we can say is that decisions are "fairer" to the extent that they are generated through processes of argument in which people participate in defining options for thinking and acting.) This allows argument into the dynamics of organisational processes.[12] Decisions and designs are therefore operated through the principle of human freedom including emancipation (in the sense of developing "power" as potentised involvement as opposed to power as coercion; see also Footnote 10).

A summary of the above is represented in Fig. 2. This figure illustrates the mutual dependency between types of method as just described, naming types as How? What? and Why? It is circular, meaning that movement can occur in any direction at any time, depending on circumstances.

This leads on to the process of choosing a relevant method(s) to tackle the problems brought forward from the Creativity phase. This is relatively straightforward. There are two steps.

- *Choose the type of method* by linking problems to be managed to one of the three main purposes of problem solving methods.

[12] We are aware of and appreciate the postmodernist concern that argument is not easily (or ever) judgeable outside of local decision-making, which is itself beset by struggles over criteria for deciding what "good" argument is. But we still believe that argument can be a route to helping to shatter monopoly visions and, hence, to temper power-as-coercion. Indeed we believe that our position here tallies with the concerns of so-called postmodern writers—see for instance, Foucault (1983, pp. 382–383), where he discusses and criticises what he calls "polemic" forms of argument in favour of alternative ones, where the aim is not to convince or persuade opponents to accept one's own standpoint (in a prepacked form). The critique of polemic use of argument opens the way for alternative uses thereof. It is beyond the scope of this paper to elucidate fully our position in this respect. For the moment it is sufficient to point out that we do not concur with Habermas (1982) that communication is guided by the quest for consensus, but we still accept that argument in human life can be a progressive force. See also Flood (1990) and Romm and Sarakinsky (1994) for a discussion of some possible liaisons between critical modernist and postmodernist concerns. These references indicate our belief, which we reinforce elsewhere (Flood and Romm, 1995), that complementarism to be tenable and hence effective will reside somewhere between modernism and postmodernism.

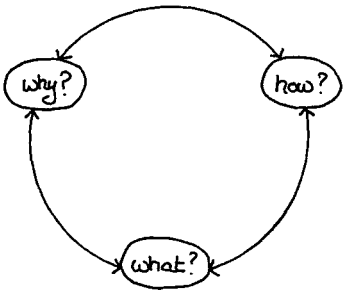

Fig. 2. Categorisation of types of method in the process of TSI.

- *Choose the actual method(s)* from the set of methods grouped under the type of method already chosen by assessing which one(s) most clearly can tackle the problem in detail.

Our elucidation of the process of TSI concentrating on the Choice phase (in the Problem Solving Mode) is now in place. This prepares the way for a discussion of some dilemmas that TSI practitioners face, which are then addressed through an enhanced version of the Choice phase.

4. DILEMMAS FOR THE TSI PRACTITIONER

TSI is founded on an approach to the management sciences called Critical Systems Thinking (CST; Flood, 1990; Jackson, 1991; Flood and Jackson, 1991b). CST, and therefore the thrust of TSI, is emancipatory and reflective, seeking to achieve for all individuals the maximum development of their potential. TSI therefore promotes the use of emancipatory methodologies to support the emancipatory interest, but also promotes a range of methodologies that serve different interests, such as cybernetic approaches that support a technical interest and soft methodologies that support an interest in (co)learning and understanding.

Accounts of TSI have stated that when creative thinking discovers that the main issues to be dealt with are those of power (as coercion), which mitigate against the maximum development of all people's potential, then an emancipatory methodology must be drawn upon. For example, ". . . Each methodology is put to work only on the kinds of issues or 'problems' for which it is most suitable" (Flood and Jackson, 1991a, p. 48). This seems to rule out the use of methods that address one of the other two main purposes from being used in coercive contexts.

The dilemma that arises for the TSI practitioner is what to do when s/he seems to be confronted with a problem context where s/he is aware of issues of

power as coercion, yet tackling these head-on may in itself be problematic. Those with power,[13] whose position may be shaken if questions like "Who benefits?" are asked, could strongly resist the process. The practitioner therefore may be reluctant to ask such questions in the belief that those who have (or believe they have) power will ignore their involvement or deny access to them. TSI principles imply that practitioners should themselves be wary of simply disregarding "the powerful" in the face of this type of possible response on their part: the attempt, ideally, is to engage them in some way in a process aimed at shifting patterns of domination. The principle of emancipation implies that the critical inquirer attempts as far as possible to contribute to generating a climate of engagement between contending positions (for a discussion see also Romm, 1995a).[14]

Several commentators, however, have drawn attention to TSI's failure to have adequately catered for the relationship between TSI practitioners and those who are assessed as "the powerful" (as defined in specific contexts of intervention).

Oliga (1990) notes that true opportunities for initiating educative enlightenment or empowerment may often seem an unrealistic possibility given strong political and ideological forces which, he argues, exist in most organisations. Payne (1991) comment's on Oliga's dilemma: "Even committed critical systems theorists as educators or consultants face a difficult task in actually initiating a 'contracting' process leading to CST." Payne continues, talking of slowness and uncertainty of bringing about change unless "organisational leaders become convinced to initiate modes of discursive rationality with which they are presently unfamiliar."

[13] Romm points out (following many other sociological theorists) that "the powerful" are themselves always to some extent dependent on others—there is a dependence between the seemingly "powerful" decision-makers and "powerless" (apparently voiceless). The latter make decisions which also affect the former (cf. Romm, 1994a, p. 332). We can never be sure what power the different parties have, for people can always express their power in unexpected ways (Romm, 1994a, p. 333). Morgan (1991, p. 292) expresses a similar argument when he considers that "managers will have to develop a greater sense of responsibility—not just for lofty moral reasons, but because this needs to be integrated with the way managers think about their relationship with the wider context. . . ." The implications for (emancipatory) intervention on the part of practitioners who wish to address and engage management as part of their clientele, but who recognise that they may become defensive of maintaining their position, are explored in Section 8.

[14] Romm (1995b) locates some of the theoretical anomalies in, for instance, Ulrich's position (1983, 1991, 1994), and other critical theoretical ones, which can be seen as giving rise to practitioner dilemmas. She indicates that sometimes the use of so-called emancipatory methodologies may further entrench situations of (apparently) nonnegotiable conflict (to the continued disadvantage of those assessed as disadvantaged). Schön offers an example which can be said to illustrate this point. He points out that "poverty lawyers who construe the housing problem as one of 'getting the landlord's off the tenant's backs' may provide a legitimate defence against exploitation of the powerless, but may also generate a militant orthodoxy which ignores the deeper causes of the housing problem and even may worsen tenants' lot over the long run, [by] causing landlords to abandon properties and reduce the stock of available housing" (1983, p. 294).

Cummings (1994) similarly argues that we need to recognise that the desire to offer a practical methodology may at times come into conflict with serving the emancipatory interest. There is a dilemma. He argues that at the time when the practitioner identifies issues of power-as-coercion being of primary concern, it often will seem unlikely that an emancipatory intervention is possible because of likely resistance on the part of the powerful. He questions what guidance, if any, TSI gives for resolving this dilemma.

Taket (1992) raises different doubts about practitioners' possible reluctance to employ emancipatory methods. She points out that, as Flood and Jackson (1991a) are aware, emancipatory methodology is not (yet) a well-worked out methodological option. This has consequences for practice. It means that the emancipatory option is a relatively weak one and in practice is much less likely to be used than might have been the case.

This raises a number of key questions as follows. Can issues of power and domination be addressed only if alternative sources of power can be found for the practitioner? Are there alternative sources of power? Should the practitioner take on the role of attempting to generate a stable base of alternative power before reconsidering relations with "the powerful"? Should work be refused? Should the practitioner make the best of it using nonemancipatory methods? And what does all of this mean for the relevance of emancipatory methodology and the TSI framework? These questions are addressed in the next section.

5. CURRENT RESPONSES TO THE DILEMMAS

Currently there are various responses to the dilemmas just mentioned. None are fully satisfactory; or rather, all can be seen to be accompanied by "bad news" [see Gouldner (1980, p. 18) for a discussion of "bad news" and its relation to the development of a reflexive attitude which embraces openness to receiving such news]. The responses are as follows.

- Press forward with an emancipatory agenda and attendant methods that highlight the need to raise "ought" questions, so as to assess the normative implications of would-be systems—*even if this means that defensive mentalities on the part of all the participants (including the powerful) may become entrenched as one begins to raise these questions directly.*
- Refuse to continue with the work if it is deemed impossible to raise the questions, withdraw from all involvement with "the powerful" and thus (supposedly) support the disadvantaged—*even though it is possible that the disadvantaged's perspectives may have been better incorporated if one adopted a more mediating role.* Linked to this is the option of developing protest initiatives and advising the disadvantaged to continue with whatever forms of protest they can imagine—*even though in this*

process the practitioner recognises that s/he is not having to bear the brunt of the consequences that might follow.

- Press forward and continue to work in the situation, with clientele that includes all the stakeholders (including the powerful) and make the best of it—*even if some of TSI's principles (such as those which support emancipation) have to be temporarily sidelined* because one is failing to employ methods designed to address coercion, even though one understands this to be a primary issue of concern.

The first and second bullets suggest that practitioners press forward with an emancipatory agenda as soon as s/he perceives coercion is present, by supporting the disadvantaged as "key client" in Ulrich's terms (1983, p. 393). If the intervention fails to render the powerful more accountable, then the practitioner at a certain point considers this task fruitless. Ragsdell (1995) offers a pertinent example of a case when she decided to withdraw because, in TSI terms, the situation became, for her, unbearably coercive. In such cases a practitioner remains true to the theory and principles of TSI. But her/his practical impact as a critical inquirer in the situation is dubious. It can be argued that if in such cases the researcher adopts the role of supporting and advising protest, where this seems feasible, this may still lead to (further) entrenchment of nonnegotiable stances, to the detriment of creating a climate where ways forward can be negotiated; see again Footnote 14.

The third bullet has the practitioner wishing to adopt an emancipatory agenda when s/he perceives coercion is present. However, s/he assesses the practical difficulty of pressing forward with such an agenda in the face of perceived/assessed resistance of "the powerful." S/he decides that s/he cannot adopt an emancipatory approach, but may use other methods which are available, such as cybernetic or soft systems ones, to operate practically in the situation. This means operating at the expense of TSI's principles. Such a possibility leaves the TSI framework (of methods) intact and ensures that practical work is done, but ultimately means that TSI users fail to adhere to the principles in practice. It is not a valid use of TSI.

These types of responses outlined above appear to leave TSI, and indeed emancipatory methods, on rather shaky grounds. It seems that in situations where coercion is of primary concern, TSI and emancipatory methods are accompanied by risk-taking that the practitioner cannot easily justify as necessarily worthwhile (by virtue of the so-called necessary commitment to "the disadvantaged"). That is not to say that risk-taking can ever be avoided: But we suggest, following the principle of reflexivity, that it has to proceed in the light of an acknowledgement of the bad news accompanied by one's stance, and also in the light of other possibilities (themselves admittedly not risk free). The above analysis, however, omits to ask if there is another as yet unrecognised

response which the TSI practitioner could take into account as an option that requires some consideration?

6. A NEW RESPONSE TO THE DILEMMAS

We now argue that there is indeed another response, one that accounts for the way in which practitioners may proceed in situations when coercion is judged to be of greatest concern but where direct use of an emancipatory method is considered untenable. It provides an option where the practitioner neither withdraws from involvement with those conceived as being too defensive (of their vested power-interests) nor breaks with TSI's principles (by operating methodologies not theoretically equipped for specifically addressing this).

The new response argues that methods with their immediate and given purpose may be used to address purposes other than those provided for in their current theoretical underpinning, but this first involves enhancing TSI's theoretical framework. The practitioner, guided by an enriched TSI framework (presented later), may choose to use a method obliquely to fulfil, say, an emancipatory purpose that s/he regards as primary, yet believes cannot be tackled successfully by an emancipatory method with a given and immediate purpose to tackle coercion. This means confronting the coercive situation from a less direct angle.

The idea of an oblique use of a method to achieve some purpose other than its immediate and given one must be differentiated from claims by cyberneticians and soft systems practitioners, that they are already able to deal with or accommodate for coercion. Oblique use of a method is not the direct use that they are talking about employing, or in Jackson's (1991) terms, their critical kernel. We suggest that in the case of the cybernetic approach, for example, explosion of its critical kernel still prioritises design principles as the precondition for social existence and does not make provision for other guiding principles to be given priority. An oblique use means operating, say, a cybernetic approach in the knowledge, and through the principles of, for instance, an emancipatory approach. Two practical examples illustrate the point to some extent (in advance of a full moral and theoretical justification, and extension of the reasoning to enhance the process of Choice in TSI).

But before providing our examples, we wish to emphasise that the oblique use of a method does not amount to duping any of the clients (including the powerful) as to "what is going on" in the intervention. When the TSI practitioner proceeds by operating a method obliquely, s/he operates it with knowledge drawn from his/her experience of, and insight into, what other theoretical positions can offer. In the case of oblique use, a theoretical agenda not written into the framework is used to penetrate (as far as possible) the framework. This enables the (powerful) clients to be addressed in a way that does justice to that

agenda—but in a way that they might find less threatening. It does not mean that the powerful, one part of the clientele with whom practitioners are working, will feel duped or will be duped. On the contrary, they are addressed by appealing to factors with which they can identify. The purpose of oblique use of methods is to manage likely client resistance by formulating one's mediating role as a practitioner in such a way as to begin to engage the various parties in acceptable terms—*as a starting point for continued conversation.*

7. TWO EXAMPLES OF THE NEW RESPONSE

We now review two practical examples that help to illustrate our point. The examples deal respectively with an oblique use of cybernetic and then soft systems methods, both in coercive contexts. Neither example is purely our own, but we have consulted the practitioners concerned who find our interpretation of their work satisfactory. Neither intervention was carried out with an oblique use of method explicitly in mind. Furthermore, purported demonstrations or illustrations, which necessarily involve interpretation, provide no final "proof" of their relevance to an argument. At the end of the day, however, we strongly suggest that an oblique interpretation of these two cases is a plausible one. In a future article we will discuss further our own consultancy in terms of oblique use of methods.

7.1. An Oblique Use of Cybernetics

A cybernetic approach to problem solving often cited in this journal is called the Viable System Model (VSM; Beer, 1981, 1985, 1989; Espejo and Harnden, 1989; Espejo and Schwaninger, 1993). The model brings together five key management functions and organises them according to a carefully worked out series of information flows. The functions are operations, coordination, control, intelligence, and policy. The types of flow are lines of command and control, audit channels, vital information about problems faced in the operations, and vital information about opportunities and threats in the organisation's environment.

The model broadly speaking separates out the main operations and specifies the relationship between the operations and the management functions that serve them. The operations comprise a number of divisions with their operational managers. Operations with their own management are the primary activity of the organisation. Each division is considered to be a viable entity in its own right. Viability here means that the division holds some guarantee of continuity. The divisions are serviced through four management functions. These are, from above, coordination, control, intelligence, and policy.

Coordination ensures that there is an efficient and stable use of resources achieved in a harmonious fashion, i.e., it also or even primarily manages conflict. It receives vital information about short term problems faced in operations. Control is an audit and control function that maintains relatively stable equilibrium between the interdependent parts. It does this in various ways. Control deals with vital information about problems in operations that coordination is not able to cope with. Control manages resource bargaining. Control also audits the divisions in a regular and routine manner. These include operational, quality, and financial audits such as budget reviews. Control action is taken when audits show up operational problems that have not or can not be dealt with through coordination.

The intelligence and development function captures information about the total environment of the division. This comprises the internal and external environments. Intelligence is gathered, about the strengths and weaknesses of the internal processes and the opportunities and threats in the external environment. Vital information about strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are disseminated in the organisation to those who benefit from it. Policy deals with strategic decisions and issues of management style. It receives all relevant information about strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and, on the basis of this information, reviews and modifies policy.

As can be seen, the VSM has a *given and immediate purpose to design effective organisation*. Our claim in this paper is that it is possible to use the VSM *obliquely* in a context perceived to be coercive, where cultural space for contentious viewpoints seem to be resisted by those in positions of power. This involves investigating the question of effective design specifically with the intention of addressing another problem—the problem of coercion. This amounts to more than arguing that cybernetics can be used to promote democratic organisational forms through its critical kernel (see Jackson, 1991, p. 206). We suggest that in order to address the issue of coercion using the VSM, it must be decided to proceed from an oblique angle in the knowledge, and through the principles, of an emancipatory approach. The method is the VSM. The principles and purpose are emancipatory. The following example will serve to clarify this point.

The original interpretation of this example is written up in Flood and Zambuni (1990). Our current explanation throws more light on the case, by providing a reinterpretation of how the intervention may be understood. Flood and Jackson argue (1991a, p. 110) that in any TSI study, it is "usual to combine its use [that is the use of VSM] with attention to the culture and political metaphors." Here they acknowledge that VSM on its own is not equipped specifically to pay attention to such issues. What we suggest in this case is that the so-called attention to the political metaphor was instantiated by redirecting the VSM in terms of this attention. A VSM analysis, Flood and Jackson note, is normally tempered in use with attendance to other issues. We suggest that a neat expla-

nation of what occurred in the case is that it was recognised coercion had to be addressed—a choice was made to address it by using the VSM, but "attending" mainly to issues of coercion and corruption through emancipatory principles and purpose. We call this "attendance," an oblique use of the method: an attempt to fulfil (some) emancipatory aims by paying careful attention thereto. This way of explaining the case, we believe, is a plausible one, and may indeed help to further conceptualise intervention possibilities in future. Of course, more work needs to be done in considering how the practitioner (and others) may assess the "validity" of such redirected methods. This work can be done through the Critical Reflection and Critical Review Modes of TSI!

The intervention occurred in a major tourism services group. The country in which the intervention was carried out has suffered from poor economic growth and political instability. The society is beset by significant amounts of corruption. The standard of education for most citizens is rather basic. This has an impact on the capabilities of those working at the lower levels in organisations. An almost inevitable result is that management style in this country is sometimes corrupt and tends to be autocratic. The interventionists conceived the organisation as suffering in this way. Most employees felt generally unhappy, neglected, and even victimised. For example, the most lucrative jobs were always given to a privileged few employees. Management reacted with autocratic policies. A challenge which the interventionists perceived, was to seek to introduce a more liberated democratic style for lower staff levels with the aim of improving management overall. In other words, the context was judged to suffer from ineffective organisation, but it was also judged to be coercive and so choice of an emancipatory approach would have been appropriate.

Instead of using an emancipatory method, however, a cybernetic method was chosen, specifically the VSM. In discussion with participants (managers included) the pressing and primary need became defined as installing an organisation that could provide necessary services and survive, and would be equitable. It would survive only if it were equitable. Hence a cybernetic method could be drawn in—which we suggest was operated through emancipatory principles to help achieve emancipatory goals.

The apparent solution may be seen to be cybernetic. According to some interpretations the organisation was merely redesigned employing the VSM. The operational divisions broke up the old corrupt organisation. New procedures for coordination and control were implemented. The procedures put in place ensured that lucrative jobs could be shared out fairly. Overall the way the design was put together had an impact on autocracy and corruption because of the VSM's critical kernel.

Another plausible explanation, however, is that the VSM was used obliquely. The main purpose of the exercise was to deal with corruption and coercion. Although tangible results are seen in redesign, the main principles and

purposes, and hence changes, were actually emancipatory: if for no other reason than "good management sense" (concurring with the theoretical justification of oblique use of method argued in Section 8).

Despite this practical illustration, some cyberneticians may stick with the former type of interpretation of the general utility of a cybernetic approach. They may well argue that cybernetics, say the VSM, can tackle all issues—issues of design, debate, and full and equal participation. It might be argued that these are in principle accounted for within the proper use of the approach. They may claim that the example given actually demonstrates this.

But TSI maintains its view that this cannot be the case. Cybernetics on its own cannot adequately tackle issues of debate, or full and equal participation. It treats "participation" and discussion of relevant information as grounded in the fulfilment of organisational functions (see also Footnote 7). Hence, attempting to use a cybernetic approach to tackle issues of coercion directly is not likely to be successful. The approach on its own is not best at doing this, because a new "ethos" is not likely to be generated through redesign as such. What is preferable, then, is to proceed in terms of the rationale that we are developing in this paper. What can be achieved in terms of this rationale is that practitioners gradually attempt to open space for those involved (and affected) to become less defensive about their positions. (Refer to Footnote 14.) At the same time, practitioners may begin to generate a shift in consciousness across the organisation, so that information-carrying within the system itself may start to become redefined in a way which renders it less amenable to relaying of (nonnegotiable) messages.

7.2. An Oblique Use of Soft Systems

A soft systems approach to problem solving often cited in this journal is called Interactive Planning (IP; Ackoff 1981; Ackoff *et al.*, 1984). IP is normally used by TSI practitioners when the Creativity phase of TSI demonstrates a need to explore creatively idealised designs as optional ways to tackle problems faced, overcoming hidden assumptions that normally hold progress back. The aim is to come up with an idealised design free from all constraints except technical feasibility and viability. The principles of idealised design are twofold: (i) suspend judgement held by stakeholders about what is possible, and (ii) work out an idealised design that stakeholders would have now if they could have any design they wanted. The method has 3 stages: (i) select a mission, (ii) specify the desired properties of the design, and (iii) develop an idealised design of the system. Idealised design is the unique component of IP.

Idealised design assumes that conceptual traps in problem solving arise mainly from a concern with what is feasible. Idealised design suspends judgement about assumptions held by stakeholders and removes all constraints except

those relating to technical feasibility and viability. Judgements serve only to obstruct the way of progressive creative thinking and change. In place of this, idealised design works out the design that stakeholders would have now if they could have any design they wanted (subject to the rules of idealised design).

As can be seen, IP has a given and immediate purpose, to engender meaningful debate about the issues faced, to enhance learning and understanding and, hence, improve decisions about what to do in terms of agreed working arrangements. Nowhere does it explicitly tell the practitioner what to do in circumstances, say, where the debate is distorted by uneven power among the participants. This lack of guidance to practitioners about their involvement in such scenarios, may be due to the IP belief that when the design process focuses on "ultimate values," surprising amounts of agreement are normally generated, that is, surprising even to the participants (cf. Ackoff, 1979, p. 192, 1993, pp. 406, 407). But it is possible to use IP obliquely in a context perceived to be coercive. The logic developed earlier in this paper suggests that in cases where participation in a debate is less than sufficiently dialogical, a practitioner may use some form of a soft method. This form, though, would be shaped by an oblique use with the purpose of addressing issues of coercion in terms other than those offered within the principles of a soft approach. An example which we believe illustrates the oblique use of IP is offered below.

The example that we discuss is taken from a paper that describes some very interesting examples of the use of IP (Magidson, 1992).[15] Our presentation sticks closely to the original since Magidson's effort blends well with our point. The use of IP is clearly carried out with emancipatory principles at the fore as we shall soon see.

The case deals with problems in communities in inner-city Philadelphia. Typical inner-city problems plagued communities, such as homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, auto theft, and arson. Some community volunteers decided to do something about the matter. They started a grass-roots movement consisting of people frustrated with the efforts of government but determined to do something about it. The government were reluctant, so the grass-roots movement decided to review their own problems and make improvements. INTERACT, the organisation employing Magidson, was "enlisted" to participate in the process of improvement.

The process began with obstruction analysis, and right away we can see emancipatory principles flowing in. Four interacting categories in which progress is necessary if society is to develop were considered: the political-economic (scarcity of resources), the scientific (lack of relevant knowledge), the ethical-moral (areas of conflict), and the aesthetic (vision of a desirable state and belief in the possibility of its realisation). This exercise was conducted first so that

[15] Actually, System Dynamics was used too but, in TSI terms, only in a support role.

solutions developed could be tested to determine whether they would remove the obstructions. This means that the outcome of the whole IP exercise was subject to principles of an emancipatory sort. Let us pick up on one obstruction and follow it through the intervention to demonstrate how emancipatory principles prevailed.

An obstruction in the political-economic category was a maldistribution of wealth that reduced the quality of various services supplied to the citizens of Philadelphia. Many of Philadelphia's services are budget-based, and funding comes from decision makers whose objectives are frequently in conflict with those who need and use the services. The funding structure for providers of youth services (e.g., community and recreation centres) was serving to obstruct development. Much of the centres' efforts had been spent in fund raising. Their success depended on whether they met requirements of decision makers, for example, in government agencies. The requirements of these decision makers frequently did not match the requirements for successful community development. If proposals did not match the interests of decision makers who allocate funds, they were likely to be rejected.

Using idealised design, the community volunteers assumed that their neighbourhoods had been destroyed the night before and that they were designing the ideal neighbourhoods with which they would replace them today (i.e., there were no obstructions assumed except technical feasibility and viability). The participants specified characteristics that they felt ought to exist ideally in their neighbourhoods. After the group specified the (56 idealised) characteristics, they developed two means of more closely approximating their ideals. "Pride Coupons" were one of them.

The Pride Coupon Program was designed to promote a variety of quality activities through which youths could develop their talents, be recognised for doing so, and derive satisfaction in the process. Also, it was intended to eliminate the obstruction of the current funding system that had resulted in poor services to youths and to address the scarcity of meaningful, legitimate, after-school activities. The emancipatory principles were therefore prevalent at this stage.

The essence of the idea was to turn the funding structure on its head so that the service providers depended on demand. This could be accomplished by "subsidising" the users of services and allowing them to choose which service providers to buy from. Each provider's income therefore comes to depend on how many youths purchase from them. Preference is indicated through choice. This arrangement dramatically increases the quality and variety of services and reduces waste. Youths spend vouchers called "pride coupons" at a youth activity organisation of their choice. Providers are reimbursed by submitting the coupons they collect to a fund established by donations from foundations, corporations, government agencies, and private individuals. Organisations put in

place through political interest, but which raise no interest in the youths, receive no demand and become financially and socially defunct.

This example is likely to attract the following responses. Proponents of a soft approach may argue, just as proponents of cybernetics might in the previous example, that their preferred approach is capable of tackling issues of coercion. The example just given may be claimed to demonstrate this. TSI argues, however, that soft methods have not evidenced a specific relevance for dealing with coercion. This, we argue, is due to the underlying theoretical belief that reaching agreement between stakeholders is unlikely to be problematic and that, when it is, processes for dealing herewith can be designed into the system (cf. Ackoff, 1979, p. 192; 1993, p. 407).

We contend that for the fair application of soft methods in what may be called coercive contexts, there should be some evidence that the question "Whose interests are being served?" is genuinely worked over, and the results harvested and made use of. The way forward when there is resistance from certain clients in a soft systems intervention is to begin to use it in an oblique mode of operation. Using it obliquely would mean that one uses it in a way that transcends the purpose for which it is best suited (according to the theoretical rationale that normally underpins it).[16]

The examples in this section briefly review practical cases where we suggest both cybernetic and soft approaches have been used in the oblique fashion argued for in this paper—in line with our new response to the dilemmas TSI practitioners face when operating in coercive contexts. The paper now puts in place both moral and theoretical justification for the oblique use of problem solving methods.

8. MORAL AND THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATION

This paper has thus far argued using two practical examples that purposes aimed at addressing the issue of domination can be served by the oblique use of, for example, cybernetic and/or soft systems approaches. This is provided that the practitioners are aware of the principles they are using to drive the method and, hence, adjust it to serve this purpose. Of course, it must not preclude attempts to use emancipatory methodologies for addressing directly and head-on issues of domination where practitioners find this is practically feasible.

[16] Romm (1994b) explores the theoretical roots of the absence in a soft system agenda of fairness and "Whose interests are being served?" focusing on Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1981; Checkland and Scholes, 1990). This lacuna in soft approaches has been extensively argued elsewhere in the literature (e.g., Ivanov, 1991; Jackson, 1982; Flood and Jackson, 1991a; Mingers, 1984).

We believe that the argument that we have presented has moral and theoretical justification. Moral justification is given first and thereafter we discuss a possible theoretical justification.

A moral basis for the oblique use of methods to tackle coercive issues rests on the recognition of the responsibilities of the TSI practitioner. These are responsibilities in making a choice not only about which methods may be used, but also about how chosen methods may be used. The practitioner has to decide whether it may be possible to attempt to address what s/he regards as a pressing issue of "coercion" via an oblique use of a method not specifically designed for this purpose.

The rejoinder by critics of the new response may be that this defence of the (oblique) use of cybernetic and soft approaches in clearly coercive contexts is too easy. It suits practitioners who wish to pretend to themselves and others that they are trying to fulfil the purpose of addressing domination, but that they judged this to be possible only obliquely. A glaring question asks "Is this defence too easy?"

Taket and White (1994a, p. 8, 1994b, p. 184) have pointed out (as part of their effort to emphasise that all theory-and-practice contains risks) that whether approaches are judged as successful in achieving outcomes, and whether "outcomes . . . can be seen as liberatory or emancipatory is only ever locally decidable." We concur with Taket and White on this point. However, in the light of our recognition that "outcomes" cannot be defined independently of local decision-making, we are now left wondering whether practitioners, hoping to effect some emancipatory outcomes, will be offered an "easy" way out of addressing their specific responsibilities by being able to state simply that they "tried"—obliquely—to incorporate an emancipatory focus.

We answer this question by suggesting that, in our proffered framework, the range of choice becomes extended through our introduction of the oblique-use option and that it aids the process of critical review as well as critical reflection (see the discussion in Section 2 above). This helps to sensitise us, *inter alia*, to emancipatory issues—a sensitivity which in turn affects our ways of appreciating "the issues." If we are aware of the oblique options as presented in this paper, we may be more inclined to appreciate coercion as an issue that can be addressed. Various authors have commented that proponents of, say, cybernetic and soft approaches, seem not to appreciate problems of coercion as distinct issues that need to be addressed (e.g., Gregory, 1993, p. 51). This may be because, as we have explained above, their method is not designed specifically for this purpose. Their perception of issues is framed by what they believe they *can* address. The option of oblique use of methods may increase sensitivity to coercion being appreciated.

Of course, as Habermas indicates, there is no recipe for striving for emancipation [cf. Habermas (1982, p. 223) and also Romm's discussion of the argu-

ment (1991, pp. 152–154)]. Actors have to take risks, for there is no direct and obvious route from "theory" to "action"—especially in the light of the uncertainty of theoretical accounts of "the situation." But people should be required to defend their choices with reference to their engagement with various possible options—and we argue in this paper that the more varied these options, the more they are called upon to *reflect critically on their chosen involvement.*

In terms of the above account, the justification which we have presented adds an important new dimension into our choice-making schema, and in this sense is *not* a route to easy moralising. On the contrary, it requires of practitioners that they make more considered choices.

Another possible rejoinder by critics of our new response may be that, in any case, practitioners are aware that they may combine various methods. Hence the whole TSI framework that has been set up is artificial anyway. In practice, people may combine, say, cybernetic and/or soft methods with emancipatory ones to address various issues, including coercion. Indeed, proceedings at systems conferences always have their fair share of papers on combined methods. The idea of using a method obliquely, it may be argued, is hardly different in practice with what practitioners do anyway—namely, combine methods to tackle the issues that they face.

But we argue that such eclecticism (defined as adding up of competing methods in a presumably pragmatic way) is not "good practice." We suggest that so-called combinations have to be carefully thought through in order to avoid principles and purposes becoming dominant by default (see Footnote 8). In practice, practitioners may use one of the methods according to *its* logic and then eclectically add on other methods in terms of that logic without considering/confronting competing ways of addressing their response to the situation (derived from other theoretical underpinnings). This means that a serious confrontation with competing possibilities for addressing issues faced may be occluded.

Our argument is that it is morally preferable that practitioners decide how and for what purpose they will be using the various approaches. If they see their own operation of methods through the framework that we have described, they have to make the choice as to *how* they will be addressing the relevant issues. Practitioners cannot leave it to some mix of methods with different (competing) foci—and hope that in this way they somehow will be tackling all issues faced. They may have to decide that while they are using, say, a cybernetic approach (at any point in the intervention), they need to use it *in a specific way* in order to address obliquely issues of coercion; and likewise with the use of a soft approach at any point in an intervention.

As mentioned above, there is also a theoretical defence for adding the oblique-use option for tackling coercion into our intervention framework of possibilities. (Within our argument this defence cannot easily be separated out from our moral defence, for it is tied to our moral commitment.) The defence

could run as follows. One can draw on and extend Habermas's suggestion that coervice noncommunicative action may be self-destructive (1982, p. 227). Romm explains this argument as follows (in terms of what she calls a "symbolic" theoretical view):

> . . . People wishing to "play the power game" in the human world often find that such thinking-and-acting is self-destructive, because people have to rely on others and are, therefore, never self-sufficient. Imposed plans, which are imposed on people perceived to be less powerful, are often not fulfilled in the way they were intended by the "imposers." (1994a, p. 332)

Romm further points out (1994a, p. 333) that people may realise that their power is fragile and that others may wish to become involved in defining reality. This may prompt them to become open to encounter with other positions. In other words, the perceived recognition that others may resist their imposition may prompt people toward more dialogical communication, or at least to some openness towards others. This is the space which, as shown above, we believe the (TSI) practitioner can exploit and develop, for example, through the kind of oblique engagements we have outlined. These engagements are intentionally aimed at shifting the control mentalities that are associated with "coercion," but through procedures that open rather than close the agendas which may generate possibilities for rethinking options for action.

Although the TSI agenda would ideally hope that we may address in moral terms those with official power (requiring them to be fair for moral reasons),[17] we recognise that there is also an opening for TSI practitioners to proceed strategically.[18] In a context where the powerful may resist a normatively oriented intervention programme, there still may be an opening for some sort of intervention which the practitioner may consider strategically preferable to the other responses offered in Section 5. The recognition by "the powerful" of possible self-destruction (a recognition which may be prompted by the practitioner's involvement) reduces the need to tackle directly the question of coercion to deal with coercion. Instead of focusing directly on questions such as "Who benefits

[17] McKay and Romm point out that the normative orientation towards strengthening a "norm of discourse" is part of many global social movements—it is strongly linked with so-called people's education movements which focus on the possibility of developing skills for discursive learning and acting (1992, pp. 56–58). One could argue that the norm of discourse—as a moral requirement—has entered and penetrated various areas of social life in pockets of the globe, which is why it is possible to raise issues sometimes in moral terms. Ulrich refers to the possibility of "internalising" within the elite (through education or acculturation) "the values that are to be promoted" (1983, p. 404). We interpret this to mean the "value" of enshrining possibilities for discursive engagement with "the Other."

[18] Ironically the problem solver may act strategically (in terms of, in this case, an emancipatory agenda) to address what some clients may regard as strategic issues of success. This reasoning is becoming prevalent in CST, for example, being the cornerstone of a new argument about facilitation from a CST perspective (see Gregory and Romm, 1994).

through designs/accommodations?" (a focus which may meet with resistance), it would be possible to proceed using methods such as cybernetic or soft ones to evoke options for reassessing arrangements. In terms of the problem solver's conception of the wider relevance of the intervention, however, the methods are addressing obliquely issues of coercion and are used in support of disadvantaged participants.

The argument so far has centred on the oblique use of methods to achieve essentially emancipatory goals. This argument can be broadened into one that enhances the process of Choice in TSI. We now turn our attention to offering an outline of the enhanced choice process.

9. ENHANCING THE PROCESS OF CHOICE IN TSI

The discussion above has pointed to a way in which issues of coercion may be tackled both obliquely and directly through methodological intervention. It has concentrated on outlining some of the oblique possibilities. The paper has concentrated on this in the light of comments made by critics mentioned earlier. Interestingly, the notion of the oblique use of methodologies lays open further possibilities for reconsidering the TSI framework. For instance, it can be argued that all methodological options can be employed to serve alternative purposes than their immediate and given one. This would mean that just as one can use VSM and IP obliquely, so could one use any method in this fashion.

There may be cases, for example, where practitioners use a version of an emancipatory method, while the purpose for them is to generate a design or an accommodation between participants as a more pressing issue. They may feel that they need to raise the issue of "Who benefits?" in order to *press towards a design or accommodation for effective action*. In this, as in all cases, the decision-making of the practitioner would of course be guided by prior and ongoing involvement with participants, but as stated in Footnote 3, decision-making finally rests on practitioners' taking some responsibility for assessing possibilities in "the situation." Where such a decision was taken, one could be said to be using an emancipatory method obliquely. It would not then be expected for nondialogue or pseudo-dialogue to dominate—which means that the use of an emancipatory method would not be guided by this expectation. In this sense the use of, say, an emancipatory approach such as Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH), developed by Ulrich (1983), need not be used with the intention stressed by Ulrich, namely, to address the problem of expected pseudo-rationality.

An example of what we would call an emancipatory method being used obliquely in a design process is given by Cohen and Midgley (1994), which we detail and interpret as follows. Cohen and Midgley were asked to act as consultants in the North Humberside Diversion From Custody Project. The focus

of the part of the intervention of concern here was the design of an ideal diversion service. It involved looking at what clients and professionals in the field thought the system ought to be, by using an emancipatory approach (CSH). CSH asks 12 questions to find out whose interests "are being/ought to be" served (Ulrich, 1983, 1991). They focus on the client, the decision maker, the expert, and those affected but not involved in the decision making. This enabled the following things to be achieved in the case under review.

- Making comparisons between client and staff views, revealing discrepancies, discussing the discrepancies, and from this, making recommendations.
- Exploring the possibility of a shared ideal vision of the future direction of diversion activities.
- Evaluating current activities in terms of whether they are moving toward the ideal.
- Helping people with mental health problems caught up in the criminal justice system to get involved in the evaluation of the diversion service in a constructive way.
- (And in the context of this paper and the point picked up below) coming up with desirable properties for a technically feasible and viable design (in IP terms) of the diversion from custody system.

Two 1-day workshops were run. The first was for people with mental health problems who were, or had been, caught up in the criminal justice system. A trawl for participants was conducted by sending out letters to all clients and ex-clients of the Diversion from Custody Project. In addition, letters were sent to 30 users of North Humberside MIND. Twelve people chose to take part. Their experiences of custody ranged from being held overnight in a Police cell following arrest to a 6-year prison sentence. The second workshop was held with the staff team and management group.

Both workshops followed the same basic format. First participants were asked key questions in order to generate a list of desired properties of a diversion system. This entailed using the questions of CSH in advance of idealised planning (from IP, described earlier). The second part of the intervention went on to design the skeleton of an ideal diversion system—a system that contained all the desired properties generated by using CSH.

To sum up, we have used the above brief example as an illustration of how the framework provided by a CSH approach (which is underpinned by a theoretical expectation of pseudo-dialogue being the primary issue of concern for practitioners/critical inquirers) could be dominated by guiding principles and purposes compatible with (and springing from) a soft approach. We call this

domination of the framework with principles and purposes springing from an alternative theoretical position, the oblique use of a method.

This example has paved the way for rounding off discussion about enhancing the process of Choice in TSI. In choosing methods, then, practitioners are faced with options such as which one(s) to use. But they also have options about how to use them—these choices must be defended in live situations as practitioners decide how best to tackle the issues. Appropriateness of choice rests on the practitioner's conception of the circumstances, as made clear in Footnote 3, of which s/he is by definition a part.

Of course, this does put more responsibility on the shoulders of practitioners in defending their choices and working with them. It may further lay the TSI framework open to the charge that it has now become too complex to be of help to would-be practitioners. This, we suggest, is not the case. The new response enhances the Choice phase of TSI and simplifies the overall process because it clarifies what can be done.

The enhanced process of Choice in TSI can be put across diagrammatically. Figure 2 shows the relationship among the three main purposes of types of problem-solving method. This was the understanding held prior to our new response to the dilemmas for TSI practitioners. The figure pictures how a practitioner may move from one type of problem solving method to another in any direction at any time, depending on circumstances. It pictures types of method being used according to their immediate and given purpose.

Figure 3 extends Fig. 2 with three straight lines that represent the oblique

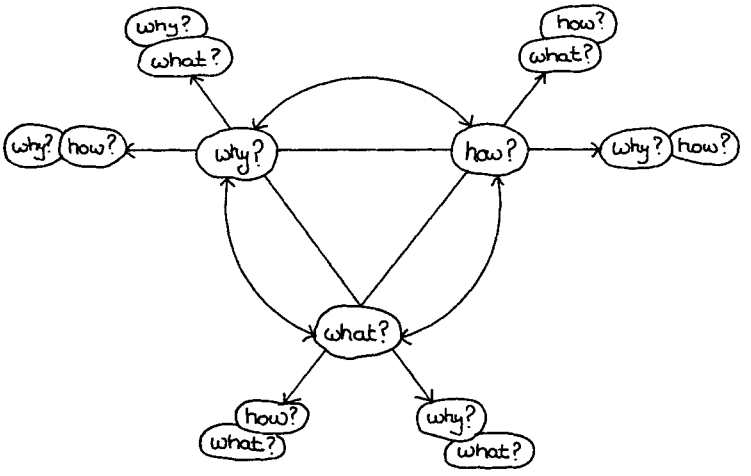

Fig. 3. The process of Choice in TSI, including oblique use of methods.

use of methods. For example, it shows how the normal application of "How" and "What" methods can be dominated by other purposes ("Why" ones), when oblique use seems justified in the circumstances—and this applies to all purposes, and hence all methods. The lines are directed with arrowheads. Each line has two arrowheads, one at either end, meaning that it is possible to move in both directions of the line. There are six possible oblique uses of types of method shown in Fig. 3. An oblique use occurs when a method of a given type is drawn along any one of the arrows, piercing a method of another given type that it is directed at, and dominating it, as depicted at the tip of the arrowhead. Domination means that a chosen method is operated according to the immediate and given principles and purposes of another method.

A hypothetical illustration will help. Take it that problem solvers have moved around the circular part of the diagram by employing the process of TSI, and have chosen "Why?"-type methods as most relevant to the issues faced. In other words the problem solvers judge the problem context to be coercive and a method is about to be chosen with an immediate and given purpose to tackle coercion. Another feature of the problem context may be, however, that management feel edgy about the explicit use of an emancipatory method that directly questions the appropriateness of their previous actions and, indeed, their integrity as managers. Yet they understand the need to accommodate the will of those affected, if for no other reason than maintaining organisational viability and/or avoiding the self-destruction of their own would-be designs (our theoretical justification). Then a good choice of method might be to draw in a method of either a "How?" or a "What?" type and to operate it with emancipatory principles in mind. The operation must of course adhere to the principles of emancipatory practice to be a valid oblique emancipatory use of the method. In this way it may be possible for managers to permit emancipatory practice "through the back door." (The hypothetical example just presented will help the reader use Fig. 3 to follow broadly the dynamics of choice in the three real examples given above.)

10. CONCLUSION

This paper (Sections 1–5) has explored current TSI practice, focusing on the Choice phase, and recognised that there are dilemmas here for TSI practitioners. Dilemmas occur when practitioners are faced, for instance, with choice of emancipatory methods and the direct use of their immediate and given purpose. The possibility of direct use may be sufficient to threaten the powerful and to attract their influence so that it is not possible to develop an emancipatory agenda. The choices in these circumstances then seem to amount to some form of withdrawal from engagement with those perceived as "the powerful" (on the grounds that they are impermeable), or making the best of a bad job. With-

drawing raises questions of impotence about emancipatory methods and the TSI framework. Making the best of it means some violation of TSI's principles.

An alternative response, which we begin to outline in Sections 6 and 7, is to use methods obliquely. This means that, for instance, methods that do not have emancipatory practice as their immediate and given purpose can with careful handling be used to achieve that purpose. Two practical examples of this have been given (by exploring an oblique use of a cybernetic and a soft approach dominated by "Why?" purposes). The case for oblique use has also been argued on moral and theoretical grounds (Section 8). The argument has been extended to enhance the process of Choice in TSI. We have also provided an example (in Section 9) where it can be argued that an emancipatory method was employed obliquely (dominated by "What?" purposes). We believe that our way of understanding the various examples of oblique use throws new light on them and the way they have been used and, also, provides a framework to guide reflection on possibilities for choice-making on the part of problem solvers.

We present our argument on oblique use as an initiative in problem solving which we believe is possible because of the complementarist argument in CST that shapes up the process of TSI. Our argument has relevance also for our understanding of the possible utility of cybernetic and soft systems approaches. In our view complementarism and its new understanding of the oblique use of methods provide a suitable (and morally defensible) way forward for cybernetic and soft systems methods to be used in certain circumstances in coercive contexts. This requires the methods to be redirected at that time according to the demands on (TSI) practitioners to pay proper attention to what it may mean to act appropriately in directing their interventions. We also do hope that some of our arguments will serve to sensitise those normally wedded to particular approaches to other possibilities based on alternative theoretical self-understandings.

Our argument about the possibility of oblique use is based on the suggestion that practitioners have the (reflexive) capacity to learn from a variety of theories, by opening up to "news" springing from different theoretical appreciations of situations. This capacity creates options for oblique methodological use—by practitioners incorporating news not normally seen if one simply operates within a theoretical position which usually informs a method, but "seeable" if one is aware of other theoretically informed visions of situations. It is this capacity that may allow someone deciding to employ, say, a cybernetic approach to indeed use it, but with self-understanding not normally domain to the method. (It is also this capacity which may allow practitioners to decide to employ an alternative method—but this is not the subject of this paper.) We have tried to show in this paper the possibility and acceptability of a reflexive consciousness able to operate methods obliquely. More generally, we have tried to open up debate about method choice in problem solving.

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