T802 MSc in Systems Thinking in Practice

Applying the Theory and Methodologies of Systems Thinking to Professional Practice in Conflict Transformation
What helps? What hinders?

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Introduction

Conflict is ubiquitous in human interaction. However, when conflict between communities becomes violent, the result can be widespread destruction and loss of life, and the damage can endure for generations.

Home in Vukovar Croatia, destroyed in 1991 during the Croatian War of Independence (photo taken 2011)

External intervention in the conflict of others has a long history and is undertaken with the purpose of improving matters, but intervention based on the short-term objectives of external agencies, their need for evidence of impact, and use of inappropriate approaches can make matters worse (Anderson, 1999; Vaux, 2013)

Conflict Transformation is an approach to intervention that seeks to address the causes that lie at the very root of the conflict, and to bring about widespread social change so that the violence and destruction does not reoccur. It is a long-term process, requiring engagement at many societal levels (Lederach, 2005). The lengthy peace process in Northern Ireland began long before the signing of the Good Friday peace agreement in 1998, and involved addressing discrimination in social institutions, reforming the police force, and engaging all parties in peace talks. Despite the progress that has been made, crises continue to emerge at community and political levels, and peacebuilding will need to continue for many years to come (Mitchell, 2015).

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The Problem

Practitioners working in the field of Conflict Transformation need to be able to deal with complex conflict situations and to work with many different groups at all levels of society. The process is full of uncertainty and unpredictability, with no guaranteed outcomes. As there is a limit to what any one organization can achieve, each has to determine how best to apply their resources and capacities to bring about an improvement.

A complex ecosystem: corals reefs in the Red Sea
Image source:
http://payne5p.wikispaces.com/Red+Sea+Reef

Complexity arises in situations where there are many interconnected and interdependent parts. The whole cannot be understood by studying the components in isolation. For instance, observing a coral fish in an aquarium tank will tell you little of the richness of the coral ecosystem. Similarly, human communities involve intricate webs of interconnected relationships that change and evolve over time.

Systems Thinking is a well-established field of research and practice that examines ways of working with complexity and can offer those working in the field of Conflict Transformation a rich resource of theory, models, and techniques (Edson, 2008). However the crossover between the 2 fields is very limited at present.

The Research Aim

The present research aimed to explore why it is that some practitioners in conflict transformation explicitly take a systemic approach to their work, and, in so doing, inform educational provision for practitioners in learning of such approaches. The 3 research objectives sought to identify (i) the knowledge, skills and capabiliies needed to work systemically in organizational settings (ii) the influence of organizational culture and worldview on implementing such approaches (iii) the use

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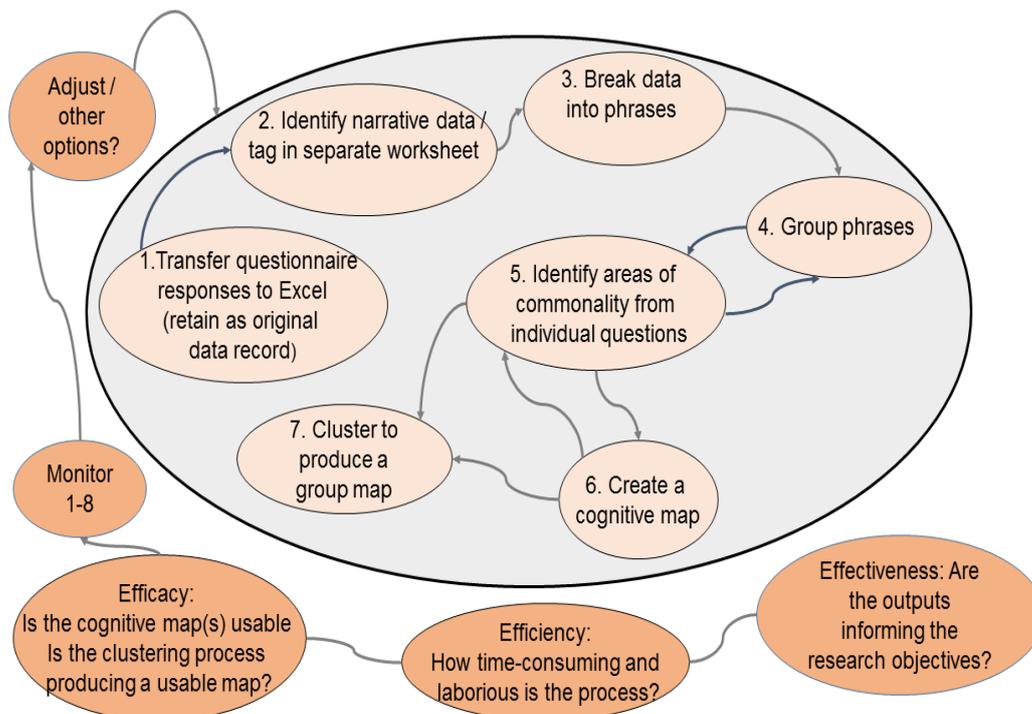Email: elizabeth@ifacilitate.co.uk; Skype: eilismcd1
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made of specific systems methodologies and techniques such as Systems Dynamics or Soft Systems Methodology (Reynolds & Howell, 2010).

Methodology

Practitioners working on conflict transformation and development completed an online questionnaire that inquired into their learning of systemic approaches, the organizational influences in applying such approaches, and their use of specific Systems Thinking tools and techniques.

The results were analysed using a systems approach i.e. cognitive mapping and Strategic Options Development and Analysis (SODA) (Ackermann & Eden, 2010). The creation of cognitive maps provided a means of structuring the narrative accounts from the questionnaires, by breaking the text into key phrases and ordering them. A series of cognitive maps was derived for each individual set of responses and the results collated. A second round of analysis was undertaken by combining all phases from the individual maps, clustering them under themes and creating a hierarchical set of goals, options, needs and issues. The below diagram illustrates the process.

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Key results and analysis

A total of 10 completed questionnaires were received. Of these, 7 had provided rich narrative accounts of their experiences and a total of 25 cognitive maps were created from these accounts. Below is an example of one such map.
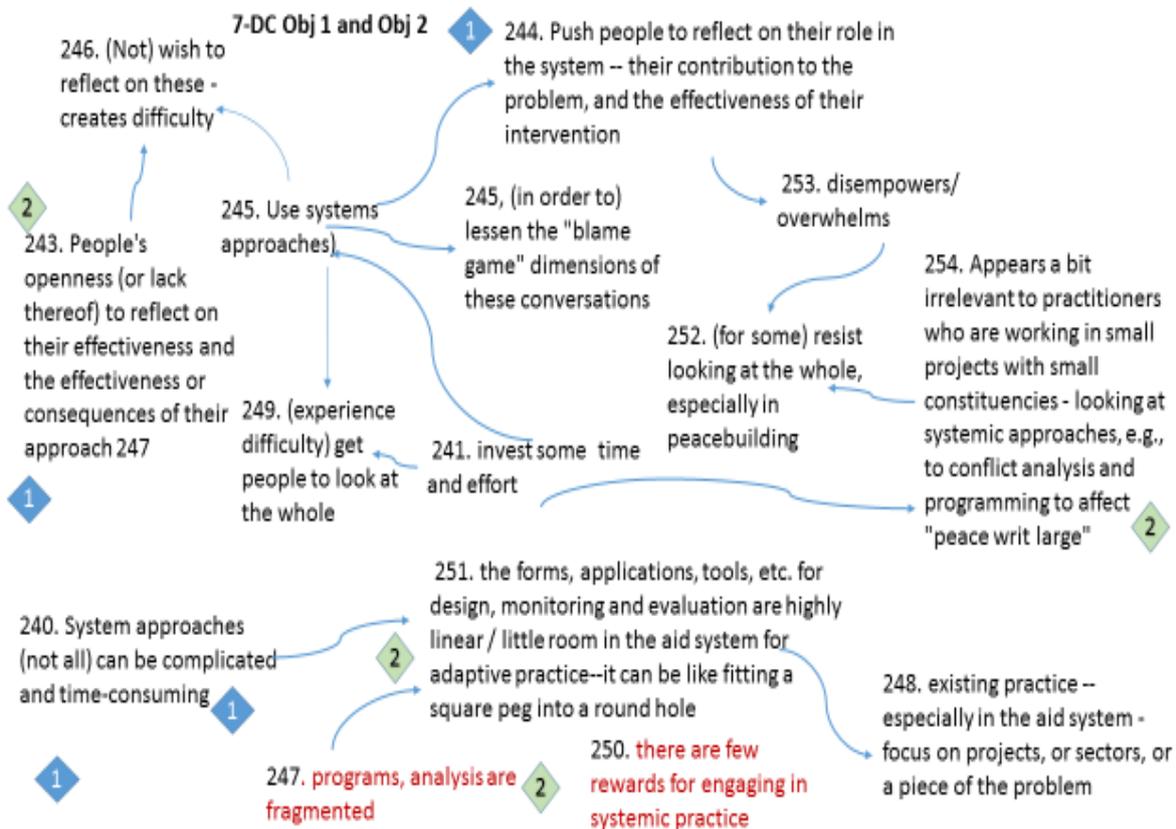
A cognitive map derived from one individual's questionnaire responses

The responses from all 25 cognitive maps were ordered into themes that related to the 3 research objectives. The below table provides a subset of one such analysis clustered around influences that supported the application of systemic approaches.

Important capabilities in adopting systemic approaches included being adaptable and curious, engaging in continual learning and being critically reflective.

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Facilitation skills enabled practitioners to work effectively with groups in introducing systemic approaches. Having a supportive network of colleagues or a community of practice helped practitioners to gain confidence in discovering how best to apply their learning to practice. Challenges included the unfamiliarity of systemic approaches within organizations, the inaccessibility of some systems methodologies and the language used, and a reluctance to engage in reflecting critically. A number of participants made use of specific systems tools, techniques and methodologies. The study didn't identify any clear rationale for their use. It seemed to depend on how the participants were introduced to them.

Selection of the group findings derived from the combining of the cognitive maps

Overall Goal	• Conflict does not revert to violence
Immediate Goal	• Make decisions on what to do
Outputs	• Ease the challenge/ sense of being overwhelmed • Support the emergence of learning systems
Options/ Processes	• Use systemic approaches - push people to reflect on the effectiveness of their intervention • Help decision-makers/ practitioners/ other stakeholders to collaborate more extensively and respectfully
Impacts/ needs	• Scale of tasks involved • Many programs 'missed the mark' – not relevant to drivers of conflict or not effective
Impacts/ needs	• Many in the field dealing with complexity on a daily basis/ diverse stakeholders/ multitude of methods
Situations / issues	• Development sector- very complex, messy, involves many stakeholders • Hardly any NGOs have cross-sectoral teams, business models or practices

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Discussion

The capabilities identified as important in enabling the application of systemic approaches to practice to the fields of conflict transformation are not unique to this field. However, the context of application is quite critical as use of systemic approaches, by its very nature, requires collaborating constructively with others.

Presently, application of systemic approaches is relatively limited in the fields of peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, development management and conflict transformation. Established practices tend to be linear, non-adaptive and in the form of short-term projects, tailored to achieve specific outcomes. Introducing systemic approaches into organizational settings in these fields can be difficult and challenging as they require a different way of working. Practitioners trying to do so need allies, such as like-minded colleagues, and the support of those with influence within organizations who can act as advocates for the initiatives.

In a busy and pressurized work environment, there is a danger that systems techniques will be applied in a routine and standardized way, and so lose the power to inquire into the beliefs and assumptions underpinning the actions of those concerned. Critical reflection in a group is key to exploring such issues and to developing a learning approach. However, this can be an unfamiliar and uneasy process, and needs time and space. Conversely, the use of specific systems tools and techniques can promote critical reflection in a rigorous and structured way. Thus there is an interplay between the use of specific systems tools, and the practice of critical reflection, with the outcome dependent on organizational context.

Outcomes

The research findings provide pointers to the ways in educational resources can be tailored to support the application of systemic approaches in the field of conflict transformation, including:

- Selection and tailoring of relevant systems tools, techniques and methodologies for use in peace and conflict studies
- Creation of opportunities for learning on the use of systemic approaches

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- Development of specific case studies illustrating application of systemic approaches in conflict situations
- Development of critical reflection capabilities.

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