

USING DISAGREEMENTS FOR SUPERORDINATE FRAME CONFIGURATION

Note by Anthony J N Judge, Union of International Associations, Belgium. (Fax: (32 2) 646 05 25)

Intractable disagreements

As an urban planner, Donald Schon (1) provides a remarkable review of the reasons for intractable policy controversies, resistant to evidence, and unlikely to be settled by compromise. Any "agreement" negotiated is then unlikely to hold, since implementing such an agreement usually gives rise to new conditions of disagreement. This was ignored in the Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro, June 1992) pursuit of environment/development agreements charted by Jim MacNeill (2). Conventional reasons for such differences are emotion, values or politics. Schon argues that these are "junk categories" -- a category that can be used to explain phenomena that are poorly understood, without needing to question the validity of one's own approach. In his view these categories rest upon false dichotomies due to distortions of reason.

Conflicts of frames

Schon proposes that these policy conflicts be understood as involving conflicts of frames. Framing and naming are ways of setting boundaries to things, giving coherence where it would otherwise be lacking. He gives the example of a slum could either be framed as a "blight" (to be excised) or as a "community" (calling for enhancement as a vehicle for social learning). Frames construct the phenomena the user takes to be "there". They provide ways of framing reality. Things are only seldom unframed. People are obliged to deal with realities that have already been framed. Through different frames different realities may be constructed -- leading to frame conflict.

Normative leap

Schon points out that "One of the things we get when we get a frame is a way of thinking what to do - a way of getting from data to recommendations, from facts to values, from is to ought". He calls this the "normative leap". He notes that even where the facts are acknowledged to be different by policy-makers, they will leap to similar action recommendations within their chosen frame. It is the metaphor articulating the frame that carries over the logic from "is" to "ought". For him the challenge is that there is no evidence with which a given frame is unable to deal -- if one is sufficiently attached to that frame. Disagreements can be settled reasonably within a frame -- it is between frames that lies the superordinate challenge.

Frame reflection

Schon shows the weakness of conventional approaches to negotiation (as practiced at the Earth Summit), and the non-durability of the agreements that tend to be reached when dealing with intractable frame conflicts. He proposes a process of "frame reflection" leading to a resolution of a conflict through reflection on that conflict. He argues that this offers the possibility of synthesizing a new frame out of conflicting ones, opening a wider range for informed choice. From a cognitive perspective, the process ensures a recasting and reconnecting of things and relations in the perceptual field. He acknowledges that this necessitates the acquisition by planners of "psychological competences" of a very high order.

Window of opportunity

Without questioning the value of Schon's recommendation, it is worth exploring a window of opportunity which may well require a less time-consuming, interactive commitment than called for by his approach. There is the possibility that it may not be necessary to stress the "falseness" of dichotomies or the "limited" nature of particular frames. Rather than synthesizing a new frame from scratch, it may be possible to use the existing dichotomies and frames as structural elements -- to

configure the elements of disagreement so as to bring into focus higher orders of agreement. Schon has not explored how frames might be juxtaposed in the light of dichotomies to encode the discontinuities between frames to which people will continue to cling.

Frame configuration

Given the importance Schon attaches to metaphor (3), his concept of frame reflection might be looked at in terms of the metaphors on which it is based. "Frame" suggests a scaffolding of interconnected structural elements, perhaps a 2-dimensional "window", or possibly a 3-dimensional window. Within this metaphor, different frames might be related like "panes" in a window, or as panels configured at different angles to provide a 3-dimensional framework around the user. In this way a superordinate frame is "synthesized". Rather than aiming to "resolve" disagreements, the intention here is to "position" frames so as to use the tensions and stresses of disagreement to give form to an encompassing structure. The challenge in configuring subordinate frames in this way is how to ensure that the patterns of tensions and stresses are appropriately distributed to guarantee the stability and durability of the synthesized frame.

Frame symmetry and reflection

In his use of "reflection" to describe the dialogue between those using different frames, Schon again misses the insights emerging from the metaphoric significance of the term. He suggests that the dialogue process will lead to a new superordinate frame but does not discuss how it might emerge. Using the metaphor of a configuration of frames (eg of glass), one may however usefully ask how "reflection" of insight can appropriately occur between them so as to reinforce collective understanding of the superordinate structure -- without denying or condemning the perspectives through any particular subordinate frame. In the case of light, it is best reflected between the facets of a structure only if that structure has an appropriately complex symmetry. Such symmetry is best seen in the polyhedral structures typical of geodesic spheres and cut precious stones. The stability of polyhedral architectural structures has been extensively studied (4). The light enhancing qualities of precious stones require no comment.

Configuring globally and contending locally

An exercise was undertaken to treat the distinct issues of the Earth Summit as associated with frames in a single polyhedral structure (5). In order to move beyond the effort at negotiating individual agreements for each frame (which ignore the threats to the stability of such agreements from related frames) the challenge was to discover an appropriate "design" for such a polyhedral structure. The design was required to juxtaposition the different frames to bring out a comprehensible pattern of mutually reinforcing relationships. It is the comprehensibility of such a pattern that ensures the coherence and stability of the global configuration of frame perspectives. In this sense, consistent with Schon's view, it provides the basis for a higher order of consensus which is less demanding of compromise than the haphazardly ordered pattern of bilateral bargains between frames that is currently sought (2).

Pluralistic perception

Non-tokenistic consensus is improbable in the case of intractable differences. Where integration of perspectives cannot be achieved through hierarchical structuring, depth psychologist Andrew Samuels (6) introduces the concept of an "imaginal network" to provide coherence to a set of seemingly disparate images (equivalent to Schon's frames). It provides the basis for a pluralistic psychology of perception. However he acknowledges that the "giving and receiving of plural interpretations is a highly problematic technical issue." Like Schon, he then emphasizes dialogue processes (unconstrained by urgency). But there remains the possibility of reconfiguring the imaginal network (itself a sight-oriented structural metaphor). Networks as a reaction to the ills of hierarchy have demonstrated complementary weaknesses, notably a marked tendency to "flabbiness". Tensional integrity structures (based on principles of polyhedral symmetry) suggest ways of "tensing" networks to remedy such weaknesses (7, 8, 9). The use of such "tensegrity" structures in social organization is currently being researched by cybernetician Stafford Beer (10).

Metaphors of frame complementarity

The previous paragraphs have suggested symmetrical polyhedral structures as providing a stock of possible superordinate frames to relate apparently incommensurable perspectives, highlighting their different degrees of complementarity. Alternative superordinate metaphors could also be fruitfully explored to facilitate comprehension of how subordinate metaphoric frames can co-exist as an ecology of complementary perspectives. The integrity of such multi-frame systems is as important for global survival as it is for individual psychic survival.

Notes

1. Donald Schon. Stubborn policy controversies and frame reflection (Talk given at Strathclyde University, June 1987).
2. Jim MacNeill, et al. Beyond Interdependence; the meshing of the world's economy and the world's ecology. New York, Oxford University Press, 1991. (A Trilateral Commission Report)
3. Donald Schon. Generative metaphor: a perspective on problem setting in social policy. in: Andrew Ortony (Ed). Metaphor and Thought. Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp 254-283
4. Fuller, R Buckminster. Synergetics: explorations in the geometry of thinking. New York, Macmillan, 2 vols (1975, 1979).
5. Anthony J N Judge. Configuring Globally and Contending Locally; shaping the global network of global bargains by decoding and mapping Earth Summit inter-sectoral issues. (Background document to the Inter-Sectoral Dialogue, Rio de Janeiro, June 1992 commissioned by the International Facilitating Committee for the Independent Sectors in the UNCED Process).
6. Andrew Samuels. The Plural Psyche: personality, morality and the father. London, Routledge, 1989
7. Anthony J N Judge. From Networking to Tensegrity Organization (Collection of papers prepared in response to the concerns of the Networks sub-project of the Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development project of the United Nations University). Brussels, Union of International Associations, 1984
8. Anthony J N Judge. Groupware configurations of challenge and harmony; an alternative approach to "alternative organization". Transnational Associations, 1979, 10, pp 467-475
9. Anthony J N Judge. Implementing principles by balancing configurations of functions; a tensegrity organization approach. Transnational Associations, 1979, 12, pp 587-591.
10. Stafford Beer. Team Tensegrity (forthcoming).