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Investigating the Emotional Roller-Coaster Ride: A Case Study-Based Assessment of the Future Search Conference Design

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The aim of this paper is to make recommendations for the procedural optimization of the Future Search Conference design on the basis of empirical evidence from two case study conferences in Germany and the United Kingdom. The paper presents the major criticisms that have been raised against the step-by-step conference design in the theoretical literature and contrasts these with the empirical findings of two stakeholder-based evaluations. The author draws attention to a number of weaknesses in the conference opening, the common ground phase and the action planning phase of the Future Search Conference design and makes proposals for design changes. The paper suggests that a systematic and stakeholder-oriented evaluation should be part of interventions like Future Search Conferences. The paper concludes with a reminder that the political context and local power relations are a key variable in determining success or failure of a Future Search conference.

Keywords Future Search; case study; evaluation; large group; whole system

THE FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE: A BRAIN CHILD OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY AND SYSTEMS THINKING

New participatory processes for local communities and workplaces have been developed in line with the ideal of the 'learning organization' (Senge, 1993) and systems thinking (Pratt *et al.*, 1999). The aim of these so-called 'large-group interventions' (Bunker and Alban, 1997) is to act as 'catalysts in the transition from bureaucratic to learning organizations' (Burow, 1996, p. 40, my translation), i.e. to improve an organization's

capacity to pursue its purpose under changed conditions, with new means and new structures if necessary. Zur Bensen (1995) has assembled a list of principles (Table 1) upon which these large group interventions are based and how they differ from conventional interventions in organizations or communities (for a similar table see Leith, 1997).

The new generation of participatory processes has emerged from three intellectual traditions: Lewin's social psychology, Bion's psychoanalytic theory and von Bertalanffy's systems theory as applied to organizations (Bunker and Alban, 1997, p. 11). There has also been a strong influence of Asch's four conditions for effective communication (Asch, 1952; Weisbord, 1997): openness; the presence of a shared field; psychological similarity among the participants; and

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Table 1. The difference between 'whole systems' large group interventions and conventional interventions

Conventional intervention	Large group interventions
Sequential change Only parts of a system in the same room Works on single issues	Simultaneous change The whole, open system in one room (including outsiders) Works on whole system (visions, objectives, measures, relationships, values, norms)
Often problem-centred Analysis of the organization/system by few (project teams, consultants ...)	Always vision-centred Analysis of the organization/system by all
Analysis of the system environment by few Vision/long-term objectives (if they exist) only top-down	Analysis of the system environment by all Vision/long-term objectives open for contribution by all
Change in seemingly controllable, small steps	Letting go of control in the traditional sense in order to gain control in a higher sense
Slow change	Fast change

Source: zur Bonsen 1995, p. 39 (my translation).

mutual trust. The first condition requires that participants freely share their views, information and purposes with each other and do not hold back or manipulate. This requires that all contributions are regarded as equally valid and worthy of further examination. Asch's requirement of a shared field points towards the need for participants to shift their awareness from an obsession with their own petty lives towards the larger world that they co-inhabit with their fellow citizens. The third condition for effective communication is that participants recognize their basic psychological similarity. This means that they realize how similar other people's motives and behaviours are to their own, which makes them feel more connected with others. Finally, mainly as a result of the other three conditions, trust grows between participants. Individuals learn to trust their own perceptions and the group learns to trust its members to act in responsible ways. Trust is the core condition that sets free the energy and commitment needed for successful implementation (Emery and Purser, 1996, pp. 134–139).

THE FUTURE SEARCH DESIGN AND ITS ANCESTOR THE SEARCH CONFERENCE

The Future Search Conference was first developed by the American Weisbord in 1982, was

first published in 1987 (Weisbord, 1987) and has gone through a number of minor redesigns since (Weisbord *et al.*, 1992). A handbook for Future Search facilitators (Weisbord and Janoff, 1995) and a summarizing article (Weisbord and Janoff, 1996) have been published in 1995 and 1996 respectively, thereby making the methodology available to anyone wishing to use it in their own organization or community.

The Future Search Conference aims to bring together a broad spectrum of local stakeholders in a collaborative process over the course of three days. Participants are regarded as experts in their own right and are encouraged to use the full range of ways of knowing—including anecdotal knowledge. The aim of a Future Search Conference is to create a shared vision for the future of a community or organization and to do so by discovering the common ground, not by negotiating or resolving conflicts. The 64 participants are carefully chosen by an appointed or self-selecting steering group to represent a broad spectrum of local stakeholder groups. The Future Search Conference follows a standard sequence and is led by trained facilitators.

Weisbord's creation of Future Search was informed and inspired by Schindler-Rainman and Lippitt's (Schindler-Rainman and Lippitt, 1980) large-scale community futures conferences in North America in the 1970s and by Trist and F. Emery's Search Conference model, first used

Table 2. The major differences between Search Conference and Future Search Conference

	Search Conference	Future Search Conference
Duration	2.5 days	18 hours over 3 days
Number of participants	35–40	64
Selection of participants	Limited to members of the system (those with the power to implement action plans)	Broad cross-section of stakeholders from inside and outside the system
Set format	Analysing the environment, analysing the system, integrating system and environment, action plans	Past, present, future, common ground, action planning
Grouping	Most of the work done in the large group	Mixture of large and small groups
Methods	Emphasis on rational methods	Emphasis on evocative methods (e.g., drama)
Handling conflict	'Rationalizing conflict', spending time to discuss and clarify	Disagreements acknowledged without further discussion
Action planning	One full day spent on action planning	3–4 hours spent on action planning
Long-term aim	Democratizing the workplace	Collaborative action toward a desired future

Source: my table on the basis of Bunker and Alban (1997, pp. 57–60) and Holman and Devane (1999, Appendix IV).

in 1960. Because of the major influence of the Search Conference in shaping the Future Search design, Table 2 highlights the key differences between the two conference designs.

The developers of the Search Conference model, M. Emery and Purser, have criticized Weisbord's Future Search Conference design on a number of counts. The remainder of the paper will contrast their critical comments with the empirical findings of two case studies—not to refute or verify them in any final way, but to advance the informed discussion of these criticisms.

METHODOLOGY

I investigated two cases of a community-based Future Search Conference from 1997–2000. The evaluation included an assessment of the step-by-step conference design, the result of which is presented in this paper, and an assessment of the outcomes of each conference, which can be found elsewhere (Oels, 2000). Inspired by the Social Audit approach (Zadek and Raynard, 1995; Zadek *et al.*, 1997) developed by the New Economics Foundation (<http://www.neweconomics.org/>), I allowed those with a stake in the

success of the Future Search Conference to define the criteria and indicators for the evaluation. I conducted short, semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of stakeholders before the conference and aggregated the suggested evaluation criteria and indicators into a matrix, which from then on guided (but not limited) my observations. As the aim of this paper is to discuss some of the theoretical queries raised in relation to Future Search conferencing with reference to empirical data, I have decided to structure the presentation of the findings in this paper along the points raised in the theoretical literature and not along the evaluation matrix. I was present at both Future Search Conferences as a non-participant observer and conducted a questionnaire survey with open-ended questions on the last conference day. I also recruited a cross-section of participants to three focus-group discussions with five to nine participants each, which took place around 10 days after the conference. Eleven to fourteen months later, I returned to each case study area and conducted 30 expert interviews—including conference participants, but also local key players who had no direct involvement with the Future Search process. The aim was now to trace the wider ripples of the Future Search Conference

and to discover explanations for failures and successes.

INTRODUCING THE CASE STUDY AREAS

The selected cases seemed suitable because they both appeared to be rather 'typical' in their approach to Future Search conferencing for each respective country. Both investigated Future Search Conferences were initiated in order to start a Local Agenda 21 process as recommended by the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 (O'Riordan and Voisey, 1998). The organizers were hoping to produce shared visions and collective action plans on an environmentally sustainable, socially just and economically viable future for their region as a result of the conference. Nevertheless, many participants had their own ideas about what the conference was meant to achieve. The British case study, Rushmoor, is a commuter area south-west of London, consisting of the two towns Aldershot and Farnborough, with a total of 86,000 inhabitants. The dependency on the military makes the region vulnerable to cuts in military spending, and visions for a more 'civic' future were desperately needed. The German case study *Gemeinde Olching* is a commuter area north-west of Munich, consisting of the three formerly rural villages Esting, Geiselbullach and Olching, with a total of 22,000 inhabitants. Roughly 60% of the land in *Gemeinde Olching* is still used for agricultural purposes, but only 1% of the employees are in the agricultural sector. Pressure for further housing developments is still high, as the three former villages are at the verge of turning into a town. The Rushmoor conference was initiated in a top-down fashion by the Local Agenda 21 coordinator and organized by a number of professionals in their work time, while the Olching conference was organized in a bottom-up fashion by members of voluntary sector organizations in their spare time.

GENERAL DESIGN ISSUES

The remainder of the paper will present the findings of my stakeholder-based evaluation of

the two investigated Future Search Conferences with regard to the Future Search design and propose some design modifications on that basis. The discussion of the empirical material will be informed by the claims made by Weisbord and Janoff about their method as well as by the points of critique raised by Emery and Purser.

Emery and Purser (1996) have challenged the Future Search design on a general level on three counts:

1. First, they have claimed that the fact that the Future Search Conference works with a fixed agenda bears the risk that participants go through the motions without an intrinsic motivation and end up forming a group without a well-defined task. Emery and Purser have claimed that the fixed agenda—which they consider as a mixed mode between truly democratic and hierarchical approaches—might have good therapeutic value, but may fail to produce tangible outcomes. The findings of both case studies show that participants had been unclear about what it was they had agreed to participate in, and some still did not know after the conference what it had all been about. In the Rushmoor case study, one participant used the strong word 'social experiment' to describe their resulting experience. In Olching, participants were overall better informed. These findings reinforce Emery and Purser's (1996, p. 136) concern that enough time needs to be spent at the beginning of a (Future) Search conference to define and explain the purpose of the event.
2. Secondly, Emery and Purser believe that Weisbord and Janoff's (1995) emotional roller-coaster ride can and should be avoided by choosing a design that does not intentionally upset or confuse conference participants. My focus group findings show that a large majority of the conference participants in both case study areas experienced considerable mood swings over the course of the Future Search Conference—including feelings of anger, frustration and helplessness. Interestingly enough though, the conference participants explained these emotions with reference to factors like overly long conference hours,

having to stand up for too long, facilitators who seemed to give in to vociferous minorities, and ill-designed conference tasks (e.g., veto rights for individuals in the common ground phase). I believe that there is a real danger that the conference facilitators and the entire Future Search Conference design remain immune to criticism because all negative emotions over the course of the conference are interpreted as psychologically predictable and as part of the intended emotional roller-coaster ride. My recommendations for the redesign of certain conference steps are based upon taking participants' anger and frustration seriously.

3. Finally, Emery and Purser disagree with the label 'stakeholders' employed in the Future Search Conference, as they fear that the label would make it difficult for participants to attend in a private capacity. The dislike for the Future Search 'jargon' which I encountered in the Rushmoor focus groups in response to my question 'What is your stake in the area?' made it rather clear that the majority of conference participants did only identify with their 'stakeholder' label to a very limited degree.

THE FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE DESIGN: STEP BY STEP

I will now turn to a discussion of each conference exercise in relation to the background of the theoretical debates that can be found in the relevant literature.

Time-Lines

At the beginning of a Future Search Conference, the participants sit silently in mixed groups and explore milestones of the last three decades in their personal lives, their community or company and the world at large. Participants then transfer their individual notes onto three huge time-line posters in the room. Emery and Purser's critique that it is not to be recommended to start a conference with 40 minutes of individual work in silence was strongly echoed by the

Rushmoor participants, who felt angry that there was no proper welcome and warm-up. In Olching, the conference facilitators had designed two small group exercises to allow conference participants to introduce themselves to each other before they embarked upon the silent phase of the time-line exercise, so there were no complaints. The vivid descriptions of how people started to feel part of a group during the time-line exercise suggest that Asch's (1952) shared field became established successfully for a majority of conference participants in both case studies. Emery and Purser's concern that reviewing the personal history, the internal system and the trends in the environment at large at the same time would confuse people unnecessarily was not backed by my research. On the contrary, one participant reported that she could only access her memory of global events by going through her personal life step by step.

Mind Map

The second step of a Future Search Conference gathers all participants at one end of the room in front of a huge poster in order to record trends affecting the local community or company at present in the form of a mind map. While the Rushmoor participants disengaged mostly from this exercise as they were tired and resented having to stand up, the Olching participants, who were allowed to remain seated, actually reported they had felt overwhelmed and dragged down by the complexity and negativity of the mind map data. Emery and Purser might argue that a data overload pushed the group into a dysfunctional (and avoidable) behaviour that can be interpreted as Bion's (1961) basic assumption of flight. On the other hand, Weisbord and Janoff's aim of causing confusion and destroying participants' illusion that they are in control could be regarded as achieved.

Trends in Stakeholder Groups

The case studies provided too little data on this conference phase and hence it would be

inadvisable for me to draw any strong conclusions with respect to this part of the conference method.

Prouds and Sorries

The Prouds and Sorries session, where participants share what they are proud of and sorry about in their own work with the community or company in their stakeholder groups, was considered the 'least necessary' part of the Rushmoor conference from the point of view of the participants—a fact which is astonishing, given the great significance attributed to this phase as one of 'owning up' by Weisbord and Janoff. My preliminary explanation for this, from one of the Rushmoor focus groups, is that the American approach to identifying one's personal contribution might be at odds with the English culture. However, I have little data on this issue and this proposition must therefore be taken with great caution. One factor that might have made Olching's Prouds and Sorries session more effective is that the facilitators had replaced the oral reports of the small groups back to the plenary by a system in which one representative of each small group presented the group's work to one other small group at a time—until each group had learned about the work of all other groups. The participants at the Olching conference were pleased to recognize a lot of commonalities and to tap into positive energy when sharing their Prouds. There seemed to be a strong recognition amongst participants that 'others are like me', thereby establishing Asch's condition for effective communication as intended by Weisbord and Janoff.

Ideal Future Groups

In the next phase of the Future Search Conference, participants form mixed groups to develop concrete images of what they want their community or company to be like in 15–20 years time and to present those in a creative way. The drama performances of the small groups were described as 'good fun' and triggered a lot of

positive energy. This seems to reinforce Ronald Lippitt's (1983) claim that the possibilities of the future have a capacity to excite people. In Rushmoor, tensions were reported from the small groups between those who wanted to get straight down to planning the acting performance and those who sought a thorough discussion of all issues. This tension between the two tasks assigned to one time slot has been described as problematic by Williams (unpublished fax, 1997) as well, and she recommends that the facilitators separate the two steps of this exercise and assign a time slot for each one separately. My findings support this. The experience of working through the difficulties together, laughing about the nonsense they came up with and risking exposure in the drama performance together had a strong bonding effect. The original conference design asks participants in the ideal futures groups to discuss the steps necessary to turn their vision into reality and to list some obstacles that would have to be overcome on the way. However, my observation from both conferences showed that this step was dropped due to time pressure. Therefore, it might be necessary to allocate an extra time slot to this step in the conference design.

Common Ground

In a next conference phase, each scenario group is asked to work out a shared desirable future, a list of all potential projects they could undertake and a list of unresolved differences, which will not be discussed further. The original Future Search Conference design recommends that in a next step two of these small groups merge to discuss their lists of the common future, potential projects and unresolved differences on the evening of the second day. The huge task of identifying common ground between all groups is then left to the morning of the third day, when participants are fresh and awake and the experiences of the second day have had time to settle and sink in over night. However, neither the Olching nor the Rushmoor conference followed this recommendation and, as my research reveals, to their own disadvantage. As my

analysis of the quality of the consensus achieved in this session in both conferences shows, a majority of participants criticized the common ground statements for lacking enough detail to be meaningful, for including contradictions and for failing to prioritize clearly between issues that were making claims to the same limited resources. Emery and Purser have argued that if the consensus was to carry participants through it must be based on real understanding, which in turn requires thorough discussion. Emery and Purser argued that otherwise the consensus would remain at a 'motherhood-and-apple-pie' level and therefore useless to guide decision-making. The suggestions of Future Search practitioners to overcome this deficiency go in two directions. First, it is proposed that the facilitators prepare common ground statements overnight out of their observations of the ideal future presentations and the first small group merger session towards the common ground (Penn State Geisinger Health System, 1997). An alternative to more debate is the introduction of voting cards (for example, red/green traffic light) (Jones, report to UK Future Search practitioners' day, London, unpublished, 1998), but this again may undermine participants' identification with the outcomes.

Action Groups

In a last conference phase, participants make personal commitments to whatever it is they are ready, willing and able to do now without negotiation or permission from above and report these to the large group. Participants complained that the action planning had been too short compared to other conference phases, thereby echoing Emery and Purser's criticism. Emery and Purser's Search Conference design spends at least half of the conference time on the action planning. Secondly, in both cases, a considerable number of conference participants were surprised that the action groups were supposed to continue with their work after the conference. This was criticized as a 'surprise attack'. Some participants had even volunteered to join groups which lacked members as it had not seemed to

matter that much. However, looking back, this fact seems to explain the instability of some groups. There was also evidence that at least one action group in the Rushmoor case study faked their intention to continue their work as a group, simply to please the organizers and not to expose themselves as non-committed. I conclude that it is important to make the action planning stage of the Future Search Conference a lot more transparent and to give participants an opportunity not to commit to any follow-up action without losing face.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Three changes to the Future Search design can be recommended on the basis of my case study findings:

1. First of all, the conference should start with a warm welcome and a clarification of the purpose of the event. A warm-up phase should be designed which allows participants to meet their fellow participants, before the silent individual working phase of the timelines exercise is entered.
2. Secondly, a new design should be considered for identifying the common ground. This new design should raise the quality of the common ground statements, allow more time for a clarification of the differences and enhance participants' sense of ownership of and identification with the common ground statements. One possibility was that the facilitators or a working group of participants could formulate a draft text of the programmatic statements overnight, upon which the plenary would then vote the next morning.
3. Finally, the action planning phase should be longer and be divided into two separate steps in order to improve the quality of the action plans.

I hope I have been able to show that much can be gained from an empirical assessment of the impact of large group interventions on the participants and that there is a huge scope for learning and design innovations. I therefore conclude that an independent stakeholder-oriented evaluation

is a valuable tool for increasing the effectiveness of large group interventions and should become a routine part of such interventions.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that there is a lot more to facilitating effective local change than optimizing the participation tool. Fainstein (1999) has warned that the wonderful plans which get formulated in collaborative planning processes are bound to remain castles in the air as long as they ignore the powerful interests that govern local or company affairs. I have found this very true for the two investigated case studies, both of which facilitated new contacts, learning and commitment, but had not triggered much tangible change on the ground two years on (Oels, 2000). The reasons for this failure to deliver are not limited to shortcomings in the conference design. They are rooted in factors like the withdrawal of champions after the conference event, the cultural and institutional gap between representative and deliberative democracy and in the limited decision-making power of municipalities in multi-level governance (Oels, 2000). I conclude that what happens in and after a Future Search Conference must be understood in relation to the political context that nourishes or fails to nourish the Future Search process. Even a procedurally optimized Future Search Conference can only be as good as the context it is embedded in.

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