

CHARMED LOOPS IN UNDERSTANDING A USER-LED, USER-RUN MENTAL HEALTH ORGANISATION: AN APPLICATION OF PEARCE AND CRONIN'S (1980) THEORY OF THE COORDINATION OF THE MANAGEMENT OF MEANING

Key words

User-led organisation, charmed loop

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this presentation is an application of Pearce and Cronin's (1980a) Theory of Co-ordinated Management of Meaning to a user-led, user-run, mental health, peer advocacy service. An episode of communication is analysed. This suggests the usefulness of considering a 'three levelled' 'charmed loop' (Pearce and Pearce 2000b:13) of 'reciprocal relationships' between interpersonal relationships, life scripts and agency ethos. The agency ethos of mutualism is connected with the creation of a positive identity and the creation of comparatively egalitarian relationships. This charmed loop contrasts to the strange loop that is often found in professionally led mental health services.

PAPER

The focus of the paper is a locked stampbox that is kept in a dull grey metal stationary cupboard in what has been tactfully described as a small and rather 'well-used' (Action for Advocacy 2010) registered charity office, in a Northern, inner-city, low-income estate. The charity's main project is a peer advocacy service. The stamp box contains large and regular size First and Second Class stamps of approximately £60 in value, at any one time, and a small handwritten recording book. There are three main uses of the postage stamps in the box: first, letters can be sent by the Peer Advocates (PAs) representing the views of clients to other agencies; secondly, letters can be sent by the Office Co-ordinator (OC) and Administration Support Worker (ASW) about office management; and thirdly, letters can be sent by the Trustees, including the author (DG) about the charity's governance. In this sense, postage stamps assist the charity in

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communicating with its environment, for example, communicating with other healthcare agencies, and also communicating with suppliers, funders, regulators and advisors.

The mundane focus of the paper is deliberate. The paper was originally written as an essay for a MSc Systemic Therapy. This required the application of Pearce and Cronin's (1980) theory of the co-ordination of the management of meaning theory to an organisation where the author worked. The essay further required individuals within the organisation to be interviewed and for these interviews to be written down, so that an 'episode' of communication could be analysed in depth and detail. The essay and subsequently the paper would not have existed without the MSc requirement to undertake this activity. There are countless episodes of communication within a busy charity office. The specific emphasis upon the stampbox resulted from a compromise between the author (DG) and his tutor (MM) who firmly guided the author towards a focus upon something practical rather than abstract.

The main body of the essay consists of a sketch of the possibilities of user-led organisations, a brief summary of Pearce and Cronin (1980)'s theory, the consideration of this episode through the frames of the key participants, specifically, OC, ASW and DG, an organisational formulation, and a meta-learning conclusion. The paper adds to this a consideration of the politics of disablement, and the ambivalence of academic work in the politics of enablement.

1 User- Led Organisations

The redefinition of disability by disabled people themselves during the nineteen-seventies onwards was an important event in the history of the disabled peoples' social movement. The Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People, in 1986, stated:

We hold that disability is caused by segregative social arrangements that deny equality of opportunity for impaired people to participate in mainstream social activities. We are committed to the removal of such barriers, whether physical, organisational or attitudinal and their replacement by arrangements that enable us to play a full part in the social, political and economic life of the country (DCDP 1996 cited in Thompson 2001;114).

This redefinition distinguishes impairment, a functional limitation of an everyday activity, such as respiration or movement, with disadvantageous social, political and economic processes. The latter is afforded primacy in the social model of disablement. This is a contrast to the medical model which defines the impairment as the primary disadvantage. The late nineteen-seventies saw the rise of the Mental Patients' Union in

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the context of the trade union movement, and the nineteen-eighties saw the rise of consumerism and the development of healthcare internal markets within the welfare state. These redefinitions have informed a number of initiatives and innovations with the disabled peoples' movement. Firstly, the challenging of professional and public prejudices, for example, the view of impairment as a tragedy and the promotion of positive images. Secondly, the dismantling of physical, organisational or attitudinal barriers through a combination of direct action and subsequent legislative reform. Thirdly, advocacy of independent rather than institutional living arrangements. Fourthly, the development of organisations run by disabled people themselves, for example, Centres for Independent Living, that provide services to maximise disabled peoples' independent living. Barnes and Mercer (2006:43) argue 'User led services offered an example of disability praxis – with the integration of socio-political analysis of disability and the practice of independent living'.

Research and evaluation from a social model of disablement perspective gives centrality to disabled peoples' experience and expose the barriers to independence and inclusion (Barnes and Mercer 2006). One of the ethical and methodological difficulties is 'whether and how far researchers are entitled to 're-author' lay [disabled peoples] accounts to indicate what they 'really meant' when reporting their views and experiences', according Shakespeare et al 1996 and Corker 1999 cited in Barnes and Mercer 2006:62). Thus the author's application of CMM was a dilemma to him because it could easily become an example of the academic colonisation of disability praxis, rather than anything resembling emancipatory action.

1.2 The author

The author has been involved in the survivor and user movement for about eight years. His standpoint for evaluation is that of an activist involved in campaigning, lobbying, arts development, peer support development and peer advocacy development. The author's frame, which is derived from a combination of the national survivor and user agenda with local grassroots politics is well-rehearsed, as might be expected from someone who has experience of advocacy and lobbying. This is not to say he neglects mundane activities. Indeed, he has sometimes introduced himself to public meetings as the charity's "strategic manager, frontline manager, practitioner, and occasional toilet cleaner".

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1.3 Coordination of meaning

An episode can be defined as meaningful actions and reactions that can be distinguished from other meaningful actions and reactions. The meaning connects the actions and reactions within the episode into a pattern. The meaning of the episode determines the boundary between what are considered meaningful or meaningless actions and reactions. Meanings for the same actions and reactions may change over time (Hedges 2005:148). Coherence, as defined by Cronin and Pearce (1984), is the unity of an individual's meanings and actions, and coordination the attempt to bring together one person's coherent actions and meanings with another's reactions, and so on.

Rules are embedded within the making of a meaningful episode of actions and reactions. Furthermore, embedded 'regulative' rules determine what specific reactions are required to specific actions (Hedges 2005). CMM is sensitive to 'patterns of felt moral obligation' (Pearce 1994:182 cited in Hedges 2005:153).

Following Bateson, CMM appreciates the multiplicity of contexts (Hedges 2005). The episode exists in the context of a relationship between individuals, and the relationship exists in the context of the individual's self-image. This self-image exists within a relationship. This in turn exists in the context of culture. The higher context offers 'contextual force' in defining the lower context, and the lower context offers 'implicative force' for the higher context.

Pearce and Cronin seeks to create a shared understanding of 'repetitive unwanted patterns' (Pearce 1994 cited in Hedges 2005:149) and to create better futures.

1.4 The identified episode

The episode commenced when the office co-ordinator (OC) delegated some responsibility for the maintenance of the stamp box to the administration support worker (ASW) in April 2010. The episode stopped late August 2010 when the ASW went on his summer holidays.

The author approached OC and ASW for assistance with his MSc essay. They agreed to be interviewed for this purpose. The author told them that he had been guided by his tutor (MM) to choose a 'mundane' and unproblematic aspect of the charity's work. The author and OC agreed that the management of the stamp box was suitable for this purpose. The interviewees also assisted by taking notes for the author, at his request. OC took notes while ASW was interviewed, and ASW later took notes while OC was interviewed.

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OC and ASW became interviewees for the purposes of this essay because the author introduced a novel educational context alongside the everyday charity context. The definition and significance of the episode in this paper largely arises from the author, and his educational context. This is not at all to say that the OC or ASW did not attribute any meaning to their management of the stamp box. However, there are countless meaningful activities in the everyday management of the charity office. The bringing together of the charity (ASW, OC and DG) and educational (DG, MM) contexts resulted in a collaborative conversation focused upon meaning that otherwise would not have occurred.

1.5 The ASW's frame

The importance of the cashbox episode to ASW was that it offered him a 'real role in the charity'. Stamp box auditing is something of genuine importance to the charity's financial probity. ASW appreciated this, and appeared to take pride in undertaking this responsibility. ASW's comments about his positive relationship with his line-manager perhaps reflect the respect that ASW has won from OC by his achievements.

ASW appears to appreciate that he has been given a task that is 'simple and not confusing'. Here ASW is defining as 'simple' a shared task that is socially embedded in his relationship with OC. Nevertheless, this task is not unimportant.

ASW's comment that 'change will continue to happen' perhaps suggests that he is actively contributing to changes in the charity. Furthermore, this in turn leads to empowerment, in the sense defined by Segal and Silverman (2002), of a sense of confidence and competence about the challenges of future change. This may contrast with other contexts where he might be expected to adapt to change arising from higher-order contextual force.

1.6 The OC's Frame

The OC's stamp box story started with her concern that ASW was 'not achieving his potential', and this leading to a conversation with her manager (DG), resulting in an agreement that ASW could 'have more responsibility', for example, in auditing the stamp box. The OC's statement that ASW was 'helping [the charity] out' is coherent with ASW's earlier statement that he has a 'real role in the charity'. The result of undertaking this responsibility was that ASW 'built up his confidence, self esteem and, most importantly, self worth' from OC's point of view. Emotions are in the 'background' of this conversation. It can be surmised that ASW's activity within the episode, or the assumption of a delegated task, results in OC showing 'respect' (Harre

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1979) towards ASW because he is doing something of social value, and ASW is noticing this.

Furthermore, there was an additional outcome. OC stated that DG's expectation that she had discretion to use her own judgement in mentoring ASW 'instilled (in her) confidence and self worth'. This success has an impact upon OC's 'life-script'. In short, the 'implicative force' (Cronin and Pierce 1980) of the stamp box episode was that OC may be developing a new life-script of 'pride' based upon her hard-won workplace capabilities and confidence.

The author towards the end of the interview became curious about the organisational culture or 'agency ethos and team ethic' (Lindsey 1993), that cultivated this self worth:

DG: Why is this (confidence and self-worth in the team) important?

OC: It creates a better working environment as a working and supportive environment, a more efficient environment, as learning and teaching together helps us to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses

When the same question was asked again, in order to further unpack ideas, this led to a comment about the value of 'working closely together as colleagues', and getting to 'instinctively know when another colleague may need 'time out' or 'support.' These observations may reflect a richness which values efficiently working together and also knowing each other well, knowing each other's 'strengths and weaknesses', to such an extent that support can be offered seemingly intuitively. The mention of 'learning and teaching' might seem out of place, because the charity's constitutional objective is healthcare 'support' rather than education. However, as indicated above, this appears to be an environment where individuals are actively encouraged to make good use of their 'potential', and where there is much 'informal learning' (Livingstone and Sawchuk 2004) through working together on tasks. To OC and ASW, this episode within the agency ethos and team ethic was perhaps an opportunity to develop self-stories that are full of pride. Therefore, this was not to them simply a mundane matter of the auditing of a stampbox.

1.7 The author's frame

The author believes his talent is working with large scale complex patterns rather than small scale practical problems, as indicated above. Therefore, the MSc Systemic Therapy tutor's (MM) insistence from the educational context that he addressed a mundane issue in the charity context was a considerable challenge.

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Towards the end of the interview, OC somewhat unexpectedly asked DG what insights he had gained from the interview. This turning tables on the interviewer probably reflects positively upon the fluidity of power (Chen 2004:188) within the charity.

OC: Maybe this (interview) has given DG some insight into how we function as a team?

DG: Yes. I have got some good depth and detail as to how the team works and I can see how OC and ASW are clear about the way they create a culture of mutual support.

At this moment, the author was privately making an understated connection between the seemingly ‘mundane’ interpersonal communication and the marvellous international social movement politics. The author remembered other past life-script conversations he had had with OC and ASW. The stamp box episode alongside many other episodes afforded an opportunity to discover pride in a new self-identity in the charity’s organisational culture of mutual support, that contrasted to the standard identities available to disabled people in the larger societal system.

The combination of these remembered conversations and current reflections led to the author extending Pearce and Cronin’s (1980) CMM model. First, Lindley’s (1993) was inserted in the conceptual hierarchy. Secondly, he extended the consideration of culture to a consideration of societal cultural stereotypes.

TABLE 1 CMM HIERARCHICAL MODEL ASW CO AND DG

	ASW	OC
Speech act	Stamp box Audit Signature	Oversee stamp box audit Counter-signature
Episode	Responsibility assumed for task from supervisor	Delegation of task to supervisee
Relationship	Supervisor-supervisee The team	Supervisor-supervisee Supervisor-Manager
Life-Script	<i>Doing “real role” in charity “Simple” activity</i>	<i>Increasing confidence and self-worth “High confidence, low self-esteem”</i>
Agency ethos and team ethic (Lindsey 1993)	<i>“We work together as a team” “We all work for the same charity”</i>	<i>Building confidence and self-worth in the team Supportive and intuitive working environment</i>
Societal culture	Political and social assumptions that people	Awareness that unmarried working class women with

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	with complex impairments are unemployable and a burden upon society	children are often seen as 'scroungers'
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The 'agency's ethos and team ethic' (Lindsey 1993:306) exists in a context of societal cultural assumptions, specifically, societal stigma and stereotypes (Imber-Black 1988) about people with mental health problems, which erode opportunities for the elaboration of positive life-scripts and identities. Indeed, the agency has a limited degree of implicative force in challenging these cultural assumptions.

1.8 Formulation

The formulation seeks to make sense of the episode using 'third order critique' (Oliver 2004:129 and third order cybernetics (Dallos and Urry 1999), that appreciates circuits in the first order context of the charity, the second order context of the bringing together of charity and educational contexts, and the third order societal context of welfare capitalism.

TABLE 2

FORMULATION
<p>The analysis of the episode led to a shared appreciation of how the successful sharing of mundane tasks was an opportunity for creating an organisational culture of informal learning and mutual support that nurtured positive life-scripts and pride.</p> <p>There appears to be a three or four level charmed loop within the charity that may account for its success.</p>

The author has been puzzled for some time about how the charity succeeds in such a challenging societal context. One answer, drawing upon CMM, is that the analysis of the episode reveals a 'three levelled' 'charmed loop' (Pearce and Pearce 2000:13) of 'reciprocal relationships' between workplace relationships, lifescrpts and agency ethos that is sufficiently powerful to constitute a 'stable hierarchy' (Leppington 2010), in Cronin and Pearce's terms.

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1.9 Post-welfare state capitalism

The implicative force of the agency for the contemporary culture of late capitalism is much less clear. The formulation deliberately leaves the charity in a politically ambiguous position. The analysis of the episode can be seen as a practical demonstration that disabled people can be productive and proud. This group discourse could be accommodated within either current left wing or right wing political ideological frames.

The CMM formulation can be extended by a consideration of the link between group discourse and political ideology, as indicated in the above formulation, as recommended by van Dijk (1998). In his important work upon the politics of disablement, Mike Oliver argues that the dependence of disabled people upon non-disabled people is ultimately an economic and political phenomenon. Thompson (2001:125) asserts that Oliver adopts Marx's analysis of the functional value of the 'reserve army of labour', when he argues that disabled people are either absorbed into the workforce, or removed from the workforce, depending upon fluctuations in capitalist corporate productivity. Additionally, within this functionalist analysis the stigmatisation of disabled people further serves 'as a warning to those unable or unwilling to work' (Oliver 1990:125 cited by Thompson 2001:70).

There is an entirely different politics of disablement. In a consideration of Marxism and disability, Armer (2004:52) noted that Henry Ford argued:

Charity becomes unnecessary as those who seem to be unable to earn livings are taken out of the unproductive class and put into the productive...there are places which can be filled by the maimed, the halt, the blind. Scientific industry need not be a monster devouring all who come near it (Ford 1923:52 cited in Armer 2004:52)).

This is not incompatible with the argument for disabled peoples' call for their employment, and the economic and social advantage this brings. Therefore, there has been a compatibility between the disabled peoples' movement and liberal late capitalism. This readily extends to the development of the development of organisations run by disabled people themselves.

The future of the charity, in the short term, will probably depend upon its adaptability to a new political dispensation and therefore some coordination between its group discourse of mutual support and informal learning with the political ideology of conservative liberalism. The same may be true of other peer led services nationally.

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1.10 University-ULO collaboration

There is a possibility that despite the author's intentions of 'respecting real people's voices and stories' (Chen 2004:188) the education context requirement of demonstrating CMM theory in practice in this assignment perhaps results in him advancing his 'intellectually privileged voice' (2004:188) while overriding less educationally privileged voices, specifically OC and ASW. The author of the essay was anxious that this could be deemed academic colonisation that discounts or misrepresents social movement knowledge and practices, or exploits them. These are common concerns within disability research and evaluation (Barnes and Mercer 2006).

The redrafting of the paper for this conference created another context for the analysis of the episode. When this was undertaken a series of political footnotes became a consideration of the positions of ULOs in the post-welfare state in the main body of this conference paper. The emphasis then became more on necessary appreciation peer practice development in the contexts of charity and voluntary sector systemic management, rather than an educationally required appreciating CMM theory in an academic clinical context. This seems a worthwhile emancipatory project, and this quelled the author's earlier anxieties. Upon reflection, the author's meanings became more coordinated, and the paper more coherent. This suggested to the author that, as Kurt Lewin (1952:169 cited in Vansteenkiste and Sheldon 2006)) asserted: 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory'.

1.11 CMM and public dialogue

In seeking to coordinate meanings about the cashbox through 'dialogue' (Oliver 2004:128) between the university and the ULO, formal coherent meaning was created that would otherwise not have existed. The originality of this paper is in the understanding of the existence of precarious stable hierarchy of a charmed loop of self-script, relationship, and ULO agency ethos in a highly challenging societal culture.

The application of CMM systems theory therefore may assist in arguing for ULO's 'right to operate in the judgement of key stakeholders' (Nicholls 2008:115) through organisational cross-cultural dialogue in the public sphere. In this case, CMM could be seen as of some value in redeeming the validity claim of users of mental health services, whose views are often invalidated. If this were the case then Pearce's (2010) hope that culturally sensitive collaborative appreciation using CMM methodology could transform patterns of communication could perhaps be realized in this context. Indeed, CMM could be used to foster public dialogue, deliberation and decision-making (Pearce 2010) about the potential value of the distinctive contribution of ULO's in society.

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The usefulness of this can be further be explored though dissemination and debate within both academic and social movement contexts. The latter of these could ensure the greater accountability of any further CMM ULO evaluations.

1.12 Reflection upon learning

The author's frame here is his learning style (Cecchin et al 1994) prejudices. He 'believes his talent is working with large scale complex patterns rather than small scale practical problems', as indicated above. However, at the same time he demonstrated to himself that the marvellous can exist within the mundane. Thus, the author created coherence for himself that had hitherto existed as a polarity. To some extent, this is consistent with CMM because it is 'concerned with the enormous complexity of microsocial practices and the cultural totality' (Holmgren 2004:92).

One of the author's most notable examples of power and privilege in the development of this assignment is the opportunity to have the time to narrate his own practice, and narrate his version of the practices of those he has interviewed. However, ASW and OC have not been afforded this same privilege. To adopt a 'moral stance' (Oliver 2004:128) the author must develop 'critically reflexive skills' in his use of this power (2004:129). At best, there is no zero sum achieved by the author and the charity both claiming a more powerful positions, rather being positioned by economic and political context. This may indeed be some kind of charmed loop between the author, and the interviewees in the context of ULO-University collaboration that created new knowledge (1)

1.13 Conclusion

The paper is a report of conversations about the auditing of a stamp box using Pearce and Cronin's (1980) CMM theory. The author hopes he has 'adopted a moral position' in the sense that this report 'cultivate(s) his awareness of his contribution to the patterns and processes of which he is a part' (Oliver 2004:128) and also that some potentials for progress have been created. The MSc essay and the conference paper has resulted in greater coherence of the author's life-script, and his dual relationships with both ULO and university, and an greater appreciation of the position of ULO's in the current political and economic context. Furthermore, a much more coherent extant charity discourse has been created that hopefully brings forth a greater possibility of a preferred future.

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(1) This possibility was suggested to the author by one of the MSc Systemic Therapy essay's markers.

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