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## Connective Planning

### From Practice to Theory and Back<sup>1</sup>

This paper tells the story of an innovative program of research, consultancy and training in the field of collaborative planning; a program which began in the early sixties, when the Tavistock Institute took the bold step of agreeing to provide an organizational home for a new Institute for Operational Research. The program received its initial impetus from a major research project on policy-making in city government. This was a project which offered unusual opportunities for social scientists and operational research scientists to work together in observing and understanding the behavior of groups involved in complex planning tasks. This experience led to a distinctive theory of planning seen as an adaptive process of strategic choice; and this theory was, in turn, to provide the foundation for a set of practical planning methods that have since become widely used as a framework for interactive working in decision making groups.

During the 1970s, this new approach was extensively tested, and progressively refined, through action research projects in Britain and other countries. Meanwhile, a further observational research project concerned with inter-organizational decision making in regional development led to further advances toward an ecological perspective of planning in the public domain. From this perspective, the adaptive capability of inter-organizational planning networks could be seen as largely dependent on the development of personal networking or "reticulist" skills among actors in key interface roles.

The 1980s saw further advances in two directions. First, the practice of facilitating interactive strategic choice "workshops" came to maturity, influenced in particular by extensive work for the Netherlands government on major environmental policy issues. Second, work started on the development of software for personal computers, as a means of making this broad philosophy of planning more accessible to individuals and to "intimate groups" working on strategic issues in their normal office environment.

By the early 1990s, there had been further diffusion of the ideas emanating from this program in several directions. This paper tells the story of the origins

<sup>1</sup> A new paper.

of the program within the Tavistock Institute and the subsequent emergence of a concept of “connective planning,” involving a dynamic balance between interactive group processes and the deployment of personal networking or reticulist skills. Finally, some speculations are offered about the opportunity to recognize an emergent field of grounded theory concerned with developmental decision making.

### *Origins: The Coventry Project*

The Institute for Operational Research (IOR) was formed in London in 1963, as a new semiautonomous unit of the Tavistock Institute under the leadership of its first director, Neil Jessop. Prior to this, he had been intimately involved in developing the proposal to set up such an institute in his role as a council member of its other parent organization, the national Operational Research Society. The formation of IOR was seen as offering an opportunity to break new ground in tackling important societal policy issues through the joint application of operational research and social science skills within an action research philosophy.

This mission underpinned the design of the first joint project undertaken by the staff of IOR and the Tavistock Institute’s Human Resources Centre; this was a project on communication in the building industry, commissioned by a consortium of professional associations and other relevant national interest groups (Chrichton, 1966). The same philosophy also lay behind a second research proposal, which was submitted by Neil Jessop to the Nuffield Foundation in 1963, entitled “Policy Research for Local Government” and ambitiously subtitled “the Development of a Planning Process.” This proposal—which was approved in time for a start early in 1964—arose from discussions with the City Council of Coventry, a city of some 330,000 people in the English midlands where Neil Jessop had previously been working as operational research manager in a large textile company. The notion was that the city council could be seen as “a microcosm of government as a whole” in that its organization, if it was to be effective, had to mirror the complexity of the wider community which it was intended to serve.

The Nuffield grant covered a four-year period; a generous span when compared to that of the building communication project, which lasted little more than 12 months. This four-year term was to become significant in creating a protective setting within which adaptations—some of them quite painful—could be achieved between the thinking of the social scientists and the operational research scientists on the team. I was appointed as the team’s full-time operational research scientist, having had no previous experience in working with social scientists; while social anthropologist Paul Spencer joined the team as my social science counterpart. Meanwhile Neil Jessop and Hugh Murray,

who had worked closely together in developing the project proposal, replicated this inter-disciplinary perspective in part-time senior support roles.

Coventry in the early 1960s was a city which prided itself on its image as a leader in the field of urban planning; so its leading elected members and officers readily agreed to offer facilities for our research. From the outset, open access was offered to all meetings which might help the team in developing their understanding of the city's decision processes. Paul Spencer and I soon found ourselves sitting as observers not only in the council's formal committee meetings, but also in meetings of many other less formal departmental and inter-departmental groups. After a short probationary period, we were given the even more unusual privilege of being granted open access to the private caucus meetings of both the council's opposing political party groups: the Labour Party which was then in control and the Conservative Party, at that time in opposition.

From Paul Spencer and Hugh Murray, I gradually began to acquire some of the more basic skills of applied social science research; skills of which I had been previously quite unaware. Among these were the skill of observing group behavior and recording my interpretations so that they could be compared with those of colleagues after the event; the skill of conducting a semistructured interview; and the skill of tuning-in to interactions and events within the wider community fabric of Coventry seen as the broader social milieu within which the city's decision makers played their various roles. We found ourselves immersed in a continually changing web of interconnecting processes. Within this, we gradually began to piece together a view of four persistent dilemmas which the decision makers faced:

- They held differing and continually shifting views about the "shape" of the strategic issues which confronted them, and about how broadly or tightly the boundaries of their current area of concern should be drawn.
- However committed they might be to the ideal of taking a broad synoptic view of their problems, they were under continual pressure to work toward decisions in a piecemeal, incremental way.
- There was a persistent challenge in attempting to maintain a dynamic balance between the concern to make decisive commitments and the concern to retain flexibility in the face of uncertainty.
- There were persistent difficulties in distinguishing the political from the technical and administrative aspects of decision making, even though the main role differentiations in the decision process were built on distinctions of this kind.

As an operational researcher, I found the experience of the early months in Coventry a profoundly uncomfortable one. My previous experience as a member of industrial operational research groups led me to expect to treat my hosts as clients; and to want to justify my existence from an early stage by being able to offer them some practical advice on their problems, based on relatively firm