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CRITICAL SYSTEMS INTERVENTION: A WAY TO OPERATIONALISE CRITICAL SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP IN COMPLEX ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract
Critical Systems Leadership (CSL) is a type of leadership associated with the politically radical systems philosophy known as Critical Systems Thinking (CST). A methodology known as Total Systems Intervention (TSI) showed some initial promise in how to operationalise CSL as part of the CST implementation process, but TSI was soon critiqued both on political and scientific grounds, resulting in revisions like Critical Systems Practice (CSP). We believe that CSP missed some of the key aspects of the criticism, so we want to bring attention to a different version of TSI called Critical Systems Intervention (CSI), which we believe is simpler, sounder and more aligned with CST's commitments to critical awareness, emancipation and multimethodology. We illustrate the usefulness of CSI by revisiting a CSP case study, showing how the CSI approach corrects for areas where the CSP intervention would be open for critique. Due to how CSI embodies ideas from classic CST literature that were identified in the early days but not sufficiently explored and thus abandoned too quickly, we believe that CSI is the currently best vehicle for operationalising CSL.

Keywords
Critical Systems Leadership, Critical Systems Thinking, Critical Systems Practice, Total Systems Intervention, Critical Systems Intervention

1 | Introduction

To deal with complex issues like climate change, global economics and worldwide social collapse, the systems perspective is important. Systems leadership, an approach to leadership that focuses on understanding and influencing complex systems rather than just managing individual components, responds to this challenge (Macdonald et al., 2006; Coll, 2022). It involves seeing the bigger picture, fostering collaboration across different sectors, and driving systemic change to address large-scale challenges, but it can be difficult to operationalise because it rejects the traditional hero leader narrative and the idea of central control (Cairney & Toomey, 2025).

Jackson (2024) provides an interesting response to this by stressing the political aspects of systems leadership in his Critical Systems Leadership (CSL) for implementing Critical Systems Thinking (CST), where CST is a holistic mode of thinking that is committed to critical awareness, emancipation and multimethodology (Flood & Jackson, 1991a; Midgley, 1996). The commitments are part of a systems philosophy claiming that "the world is as it is because those that have power control the many without, [making] the pillars of our society such as science and industry […] reinforce the status quo in order to sustain the dominance of the possessor" (Stowell & Welch, 2012, p. 154). In other words, CST gives ideological and theoretical motivation for a CSL where the organisational pyramids are turned upside down.

To give guidance on how to translate CST into practice, various efforts have been made, including the development of an influential methodology known as Total Systems Intervention (TSI) (Flood & Jackson, 1991b). TSI met an important need, but it was soon critiqued on both philosophical and practical accounts

(e.g. Tsoukas, 1993a; 1993b; Flood, 1995), which resulted in revised approaches such as Local Systemic Intervention (LSI) (Flood, 1996) and Critical Systems Practice (CSP) (Jackson, 2000), although both of them have been said to ignore aspects of the criticism that had been raised against TSI (Midgley & Rajagopalan, 2020).

In this paper, we want to respond to the CSL operationalisation challenge by pointing towards a more recent revision of TSI called Critical Systems Intervention (CSI) (Ogland & Evans, in press), which we believe is simpler, sounder and more practically aligned with the political commitments of CST than is the case with LSI and CSP. As we found it difficult to deal with the details of both LSI and CSP in a single paper, and the fact that academic interest in LSI has been declining while interest in CSP continues to be on the rise, our focus will be on CSP.

The paper is structured in six sections. The introduction is followed by a literature review to explain some of the shortcomings of CSP by looking at previous criticism of TSI. This is followed by a presentation of the CSI methodology. To show how CSI compares with CSP in practice, a case study is given, followed by a discussion. The concluding section summarises the importance of CSI as a simpler, sounder and better way of operationalising CSL in complex organisations.

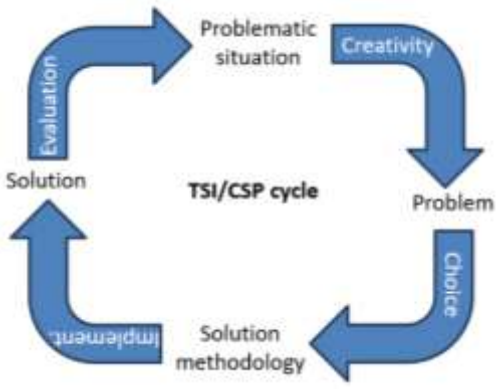
2 | Critical Systems Practice (CSP)

As we claim that CSP falls victim to some of the same type of critique that was once given to TSI, the literary review follows the structure of Tsoukas' (1993a) with a brief outline of TSI and then a critique of TSI/CSP, starting with the System of Systems Methodology (SOSM), then the philosophy of complementarism, before moving on to metaphors and whether the intervention methodology effectively supports the original CST commitments.

2.1 | Brief outline of the intervention process

At an abstract level, the cyclic CSP process is more or less identical to TSI, which makes it possible to present both TSI and its revision in Exhibit 1. In the case of TSI, the process started with a broad diagnosis of the problematic situation through use of metaphors ("Creativity"), then came up with a relevant remedy by use of SOSM ("Choice"), before executing the remedy ("Implementation"), followed by an evaluation of the total process if done in the context of action research, and then starting again with a modified or new problematic situation.

Exhibit 1. A broad representation of the intervention cycle used in TSI and CSP



Jackson (2000; 2003; 2019) continued to use these labels of "Creativity", "Choice" and "Implementation" in his early versions of CSP, although making "Evaluation" a mandatory part of the process. In his latest

version of CSP, he has renamed the four steps as "Explore", "Produce", "Intervene" and "Check" to fit with the acronym EPIC (Jackson, 2024).

2.2 | The System of Systems Methodology (SOSM)

As the first step of TSI made use of metaphors to frame the problematic situation (Flood & Jackson, 1991b; Flood, 1993), one might expect that the metaphors were used for identifying the relevant sociological paradigm to produce a list of relevant solution methodologies (Morgan, 1980; 1986; 1993; Burrell & Morgan, 1979), but Jackson (1991, p. 27) claimed (without documented evidence) that the Burrell-Morgan paradigm matrix was difficult for people to understand, thus replacing it with his own SOSM matrix (Jackson & Keys, 1984).

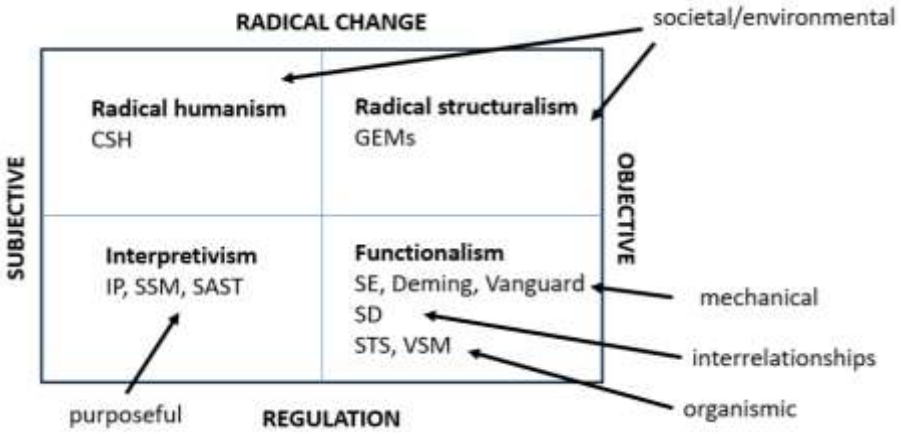
Tsoukas (1993a, pp. 59-61) saw the SOSM as logically flawed and Flood (1995) saw it as impractical, but for us the main problem was that it corrupted the logic of the Burrell-Morgan matrix by confusing theoretical positions (subjective/objective) with ideological positions (regulation/radical change) (Ogland & Evans, in press). Furthermore, SOSM was not originally designed for the purpose of using metaphors as input, and there is no one-to-one correspondence between metaphors and SOSM categories (Flood & Jackson, 1991, p. 42), so SOSM feels less suited for matching metaphors with methodologies than what would be the case with the B-M paradigm matrix.

Apparently aware of this, Jackson (1991, p. 271) said that there was nothing wrong in using the B-M matrix instead of SOSM, but he did not recommend doing so. When he responded to the criticism of TSI by revising it into CSP, the SOSM remained a key part of the approach (Jackson, 2000; 2003; 2019). It is only more recently that he changed his mind:

> *Various tools have been used for explaining the type of issues for which each [systems methodology] is most suitable, for example, the 'system of systems methodologies' […]. It now seems better, for facilitating the use of CSP, to relate the methodologies directly to the systemic perspectives employed during "Explore" (Jackson, 2021, p. 598).*

Although not explicitly stated in the quote above, Jackson's way of linking methodology with metaphor ("systemic perspective") corresponds with how Morgan (1980) saw the relationship between metaphors, paradigms and methodologies, making it possible to visualise Jackson's revised approach by use of the diagram in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2. Visual interpretation of the "Choice/Produce" step in the latest version of CSP



The figure visualises the replacement of the SOSM approach by the way Jackson (2024, pp. 89-100) first explains how his five systemic perspectives fit within the B-M matrix and then lists systems methodologies associated with each perspective (Jackson, 2024, pp. 116-117), saying that this will now be the basis for selecting methodologies. For example, if the problematic situation relates to the need for improving productivity, a first approach may be to look at the situation from a "mechanical systems perspective", which means that the corresponding arrow on the bottom right in Figure 2 points towards the functionalist paradigm quadrant with methodologies like Systems Engineering (SE), the Deming Method and the Vanguard Method.

Although the CSP choice method represented in Exhibit 2 is an improvement over SOSM by responding to the problems pointed out by Tsoukas and Flood, it is still "logically flawed" in the way the societal/environmental systems perspective points towards systems methodologies associated with two completely different sociological paradigms. Given how Morgan (1980; 1986, 1993) makes use of metaphors of organisations like "psychic prison" and "instrument of domination" to distinguish between subjective and objective theories of radical change, which would then inform on how to choose systems methodologies embedded in different sociological paradigms, it is surprising that CSP blurs this important distinction by treating the relevant metaphors as part of the same systems perspective.

2.3 | Complementarism

Because SOSM did not separate theory and ideology along different axes, as was done in the B-M matrix, it is perhaps not surprising that TSI was designed for allowing users to walk in and out of complementary paradigms as they saw fit. Tsoukas (1993a, pp. 61-63) questioned whether such non-commitment was practically possible, and also found it peculiar given the way TSI and CST were originally presented as solutions to the problem of how both Hard Systems Thinking (functionalism) and Soft Systems Thinking (interpretivism) tended to be blind to the patterns of power and oppression made visible through radical paradigms.

While Jackson (1991, p. 260) admitted that radical systems thinkers are more likely to be "imperialists" than "complementarists", meaning that they saw the radical paradigm as the overall perspective while interpretivism and functionalism were reduced to playing a subservient role, which should indeed fit perfectly with the CST commitment to emancipation, he decided to reject imperialism because the "imperialist scenario seems […] unlikely to come to pass as a result of natural developments within the discipline [and forcing it may have negative consequences]". Later on, he acknowledged how Mingers used the philosophy of Critical Realism as an "imperialist" foundation for CST, but rejected the approach on the basis of not believing in Critical Realism (Jackson, 2006).

Jackson (1991, pp. 261-262) also identified "pragmatism" as a way of navigating between different paradigms, but rejected it not only because of its atheoretical approach, which he saw as unscientific, but also because "the pragmatist approach employed in the social domain can lend itself to misuse in the service of authoritarian interests. [It is known how] traditional approaches in management science often 'work' not because they are the most suitable for the situation in which they are employed, but because they reinforce the position of the powerful and implementation is therefore enforced. Theoretical understanding can allow such misuse to be identified".

In more recent years, however, Jackson (2019, p. 584) has abandoned "complementarism," explicitly admitting that Tsoukas was right. The way forward, he now believes (Jackson, 2019; 2024), is "pragmatism", despite his previous rejection of this philosophy. While he explains this by saying that his previous critique was based on pragmatism in a broad sense, while he is now using a more sophisticated version of that philosophy, it remains unclear to us how this new form of pragmatism sidesteps his previous

critique, unless he by "pragmatism" would be thinking of something along the lines of Constructive Empiricism (van Fraassen, 1980; Ogland, 2014b; 2017).

2.4 | Use of metaphors for outlining problem spaces

Tsoukas (1993a, pp. 63-65) said that metaphors may have relevance when they bring out new and unexpected perspectives, but in TSI case studies it looked like metaphors were only used in confirmatory and useless ways. This may not come as a surprise when we notice how the "Creativity/Explore" step of TSI consists of having group discussions about which metaphors to choose rather than using metaphors to control the intervention in a manner that enforces a commitment to critical awareness, emancipation and multimethodology.

In the latest version of CSP (Jackson, 2024), metaphors have been replaced with systemic perspectives, which includes grouping certain metaphors together. Abandoning the direct use of metaphors could be seen as a response to Tsoukas' attack on TSI, but it does not solve the problem Tsoukas describes. Regardless of whether we are stating that "the organisation is like a machine" or saying that "we want to look at the organisation from a mechanical systems perspective," the challenge remains the same as to whether the metaphor or perspective creates novelty or just confirms what is known in a useless manner. Furthermore, as pointed out earlier, the way the societal/environmental systems perspective contains metaphors that point dualistically in the direction of incommensurable paradigms is not an improvement on how the metaphors themselves were previously used for outlining problem spaces.

2.5 | CSP and CST commitments

As Tsoukas (1993a, pp. 65-67) pointed out, when TSI was supposed to be the practical face of CST, one should expect that it was intrinsically linked with the CST commitments to critical awareness, emancipation and multimethodology. Although TSI could be seen as a tool in support of multimethodology, it seemed much less clear whether it would aid the oppressed in breaking out of their "false consciousness" and taking emancipatory actions. Tsoukas saw very little evidence of this, and it is thus noteworthy how emancipation was replaced by the broader notion of "improvement" when TSI was revised into CSP (Jackson, 2003, pp. 303-305). Although this allows CST/CSP to become more like General Systems Theory (GST) (von Bertalanffy, 1968) in acting as an umbrella for all sorts of systems theories and systems methodologies, it corrupts its initially strong ties with critical theory. It thus seems to support Tsoukas's (1993b) view that TSI was never all that political in the first place, indicating that CSP is perhaps even less so.

3. | Critical Systems Intervention (CSI)

In response to the CSP weaknesses identified above, we would like to draw attention to a methodology called Critical Systems Intervention (CSI) (Ogland & Evans, in press). CSI is structurally similar to TSI/CSP in the sense that it uses the same four-step cycle of "Creativity/Explore", "Choice/Produce", "Implementation/Intervene" and "Evaluation/Check" from Exhibit 1, but otherwise makes some adjustments with the aim of making CSI simpler, sounder and more intrinsically linked with CST than is the case with CSP.

3.1 | First step: "Creativity/Explore"

Rather than allowing people to choose whatever systemic perspective they feel relevant, or use more or all perspectives at the same time, as is how CSP works, CSI follows a sequential logic of plan-do-check-act (PDCA) interventions (Deming, 1986; Flood, 1993, p. 13; Jackson, 2021, p. 599), assuming that each of the four steps requires a particular sociological paradigm to support CST, and where each paradigm gives rise to one or more distinct metaphors (Morgan, 1980).

Exhibit 3 lists the PDCA steps in the pragmatically useful CAPD order (Seddon, 2005; Jackson, 2021, pp. 599-600), and shows the corresponding paradigms (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) and how Morgan (1980) assigns lists of metaphors to each such paradigm.

Exhibit 3. How different organisational metaphors apply to different stages of PDCA interventions

Stage of PDCA intervention	Sociological Paradigm	Organisational metaphors
Check (current status)	Radical structuralism	Instrument of domination, schismatic, catastrophe
Act (decide whether to intervene)	Radical humanism	Psychic prison
Plan (create consensus on how to act)	Interpretivism	Text, language game, accomplishment (enacted sense-making)
Do (design and carry out intervention to achieve specific goals)	Functionalism	Machine, organism, population-ecology, cybernetic system, loosely coupled system, political system, theatre, culture

The way the PDCA process in Exhibit 3 has different lists of metaphors for different paradigms is expected to enforce commitment to CST, like telling the CSI user to start by visioning the organisation as an instrument of domination, regardless of how benign or altruistic the members of the organisation may think it is, so the idea at this stage is to force a radical structuralist perspective on the situation. The assumption at the second step (Act) builds on this by saying that organisational members are not aware of their own reality ("psychic prison"), so whether an intervention is possible will also depend on whether it is possible to establish critical mass for taking political action. The next few steps then consist of aiding the oppressed in understanding reality ("sense-making"; Plan) and creating the necessary structure ("cybernetic system") for carrying out political action (Do), which may lead towards new cycles after we have returned to the initial domination metaphor for evaluating consequences (Check).

3.2 | Second step: "Choice/Produce"

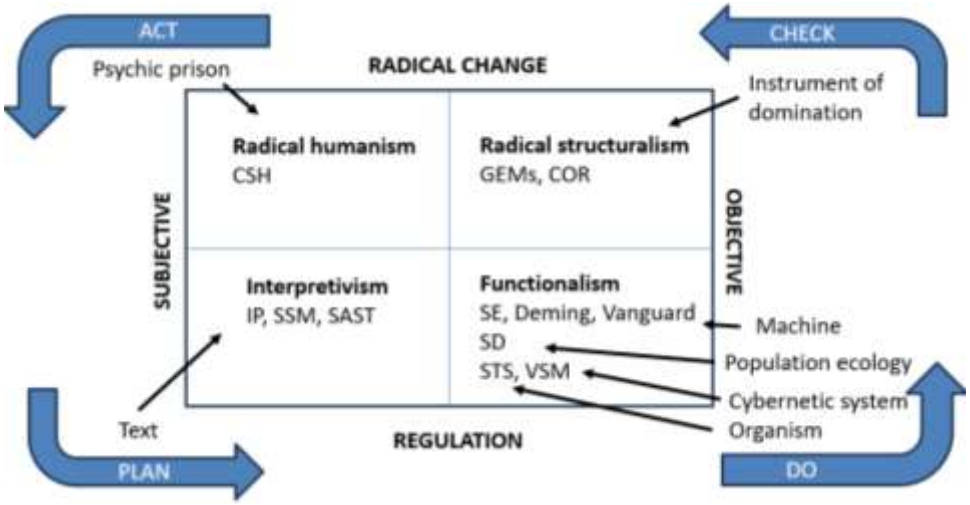
In Exhibit 2 it was shown how CSP makes indirect use of how the organizational metaphors connect with the sociological paradigms and methodologies. In Exhibit 4 we see a corresponding image of how the selection of systems methodologies in CSI works.

Apart from the PDCA cycle that surrounds the B-M matrix, the most important change is the replacement of the systems perspectives back to metaphors, connecting them with the methodologies by way of paradigms listed in Exhibit 3.

The way the B-M matrix is inhabited by systems methodologies is identical to how it was done in CSP, except for the inclusion of Community Operational Research (COR) in the radical structuralism quadrant, as this used to be a major point for Jackson (1991), because it explicated the use of Hard Systems Thinking within the context of political radicalism. As game theory played an important part for explicating conflict in this context (Rosenhead & Mingers, 2001), we let COR include "game theory for the oppressed" (Elster, 1982; Rosenhead, 1987; Frasca, 2001; Ogland, 2009; 2014a; 2023a; Klein, 2023) for the purpose of

articulating the problematic situation by means of a game model and use the perspectives given by the four paradigms to investigate this model through each of the PDCA steps.

Exhibit 4. Cycling the Burrell-Morgan paradigm matrix by use of a PDCA process



According to Frasca (2001), classic video games like *Pac-Man*, *Tetris* and *Space Invaders* can function as scientific models of the conflict situation that is to be understood under the "organisation as an instrument of domination" metaphor. When going through the PDCA cycle, different aspects of the game model can be explored according to the nature the systems methodologies embedded in the different methodologies, such as recognising oneself as a player (radical humanism), developing a game strategy (interpretivism), playing the game (functionalism) and collecting scores (radical structuralism), all based on how systems methodologies are aligned with the paradigms displayed on the B-M matrix in Exhibit 4.

3.3 | Third step: "Implementation/Intervene"

In reference to Exhibit 4, it should be noted how CSH becomes a mandatory part at the beginning of every CSI, which Midgley and Rajagopalan (2020, p. 122) also believe is necessary. It means that CSI tries to fix the problem of making TSI/CSP align with CST commitments in a similar way as Systemic Intervention (SI) does. Still, it is important how CSI departs from SI in the way it makes use of the methodologies in a PDCA-based stepwise manner rather than integrating them in a total mix. CSI starts and ends within the paradigms of radical change but makes excursions into the paradigms of regulation when dealing with how the oppressed should think and act among themselves for planning and executing interventions. As seen from previous steps of "Creativity/Explore" and "Choice/Produce", it is the ties between the PDCA and the paradigms, metaphors and methodologies (Exhibit 3 and Exhibit 4) that make CSI intrinsically linked with CST.

3.4 | Fourth step: "Evaluation/Check"

In previous presentations of CSI (Ogland, 2023b; Ogland & Evans, in press), the evaluation step was not made explicit because it was not an explicit part of TSI, which means that the step was either carried out as a part of "Implementation" or it was specifically associated with the action research evaluation step. However, one might equally well conceptualise CSI along the TSI/CSP framework in Exhibit 1, where the evaluation step has been made explicit.

3.5 | Embedding the four steps within a PDCA cycle

In the case of TSI/CSP, an intervention is defined by the four steps "Creativity/Explore", "Choice/Produce", "Implementation/Intervene" and "Evaluation/Check" as visualised in Exhibit 1. A CSI intervention is a sequence of four such small intervention, circling around the B-M matrix as explained in Exhibit 4, or to be more precise, each CSI intervention consists of six TSI/CSP-like interventions following the CA-PDCA sequence as the PDCA process cannot be started before initial CA-steps have been executed to get an initial organisational assessment from the viewpoint of radical structuralism and see whether the organisation is ready for change by using a radical humanist perspective. Although this means that a CSI intervention in theory could be six times as long as a TSI/CSP intervention, in practice a CSI may be easier and less costly to execute, as will be illustrated through the case study.

4. | Case study

We have chosen to look at a CSP-oriented case study of the development and running of a business school at the University of Hull in the UK (Jackson, 2019; 2024), aiming to illustrate the difference between CSP and CSI. The first narrative below tells the story through the perspective of CSP, making it open to the critique mentioned above, while the second narrative makes use of CSI, making it less open to this type of critique.

4.1 | A case study told through the perspective of CSP

Jackson (2024) writes about the latest version of CSP, and uses action research based upon his twelve-year period as Dean of the Hull University Business School (HUBS) to exemplify. The HUBS case is an interesting account of successful business development, but the main purpose here is to contextualise worries Tsoukas had with TSI that still seem relevant for CSP, which is why the account is retold with a more explicit use of the CSP cycle (the EPIC cycle) than what is found in the original text.

Creativity/Explore: In his self-evaluation of the HUBS case, Jackson (2019, p. 631) says that all the systems perspectives were used to review issues in HUBS as they arose, and he also explicitly mentions how all of them put focus on different types of problems (Jackson, 2024, pp. 163-164). To illustrate the importance of including all the perspectives, he makes a comparison with a seemingly oppressive approach used by the dean of a different business school (Jackson, 2019, p. 631). However, the emancipatory aspects of the HUBS account are not dominant. Indeed, as Jackson (2024, p. 162) argues, part of the reason behind the success had to do with the way the mechanical and organismic systemic perspectives were used for identifying early primary issues, and although he points out that the societal/environmental perspective played a role in preventing an academic/administrative divide (ibid, p. 163), there is no evidence of systemic perspectives or metaphors being used for creating new perspectives on familiar situations. On the contrary, Tsoukas' point about using metaphors to confirm rather than challenge accepted understanding remains unchallenged.

Choice/Produce: The HUBS study documents how different methodologies were chosen in response to different primary and secondary issues, like how SSM and VSM were chosen in response to taking purposeful and organismic systems perspectives (Jackson, 2024, p. 164). When it comes to the oddity of how the societal/environmental systems perspective was supposed to result in paradigmatically incommensurable methodologies like CSH and GEMs, the account is vague (ibid., p. 164). This also applies to the more extensive HUBS account that made use of an earlier version of CSP to explain the choice of methodologies, where various social challenges are explained in more detail but still does not explicate what systems methodologies were put into use and how they were chosen. Not only could it be argued that the selection framework in Exhibit 2 is logically flawed but also could the case study make one wonder to which degree the framework played an explicit role in how methodologies were chosen.

Implementation/Intervene: The main impression is that the selection of a given systems methodology resulted in that methodology being implemented, like the case of using linear programming to develop a workload model, or how the selection of a VSM strategy resulted in a VSM intervention. On the other hand, Jackson (2019, p. 627) explains eclectic use of SSM tools such as rich picture diagrams rather than full SSM implementation, something that gives CSP the flavour of an "anything goes" methodology that makes it difficult to distinguish between what is a CSP intervention and what is not. As Tsoukas pointed out in the case of TSI, the practical approach seems more like common sense than a result of following a formal method.

Evaluation/Check: According to Jackson (2024, p. 184), the HUBS interventions were constantly evaluated to see what impact they had on efficiency, efficacy, viability, resilience, effectiveness, serving stakeholder purposes, mutual understanding, empowerment, emancipation and sustainability. However, he does not present statistics showing how this kind of balanced scorecard evolved during the 12 years of intervention, so it is difficult to get objective indications on how CSP supported CST's commitment to emancipation. Just like Tsoukas felt that TSI was contingently rather than intrinsically linked with CST, the HUBS study gives the impression that CSP has moved even further away from seeing emancipation as the main goal, which is perhaps not surprising when it is the head of the organisation who is running the intervention.

4.2 | Reconstructing the same case study with CSI

If we try to read the HUBS study through CSI by using the PDCA process for circling through the Burrell-Morgan matrix, the story remains the same, but it reads in a different way. As explained previously, the EPIC steps will be used for each PDCA stage, where the PDCA cycle is initiated at "Check" (C) and then moves to "Act" (A) before entering "Plan" (P) and so on.

Check: According to CSI, the initial expectations of a CST consultant are that any organisation is oppressive and characterised by conflict (radical structuralism). Indeed, as Jackson (2019, p. 631) suggests, his role as Dean could easily be implemented as the source of oppression, but from our CSI perspective it would be more meaningful to describe the Dean and HUBS as the victims of the demands put upon them by the larger university and the social or political community. If one were to use the inner CSI cycle, the "Creativity/Explore" step could start by using the "instrument of domination" metaphor to look for models of oppressive organisational behaviour as a concrete game from the list of "video games of the oppressed" (Frasca, 2001), like using the *Space Invaders* game to describe how the dean and his staff have to shoot down problems as they continually invade from the top of the screen (Crawford, 2003, p. 30; Ogland, 2023a). The "Choice/Produce" step would then consist of choosing a structural assessment method in correspondence with the chosen model, like the way Jackson (2019, p. 606) suggested the use of a bar chart to keep scores for parameters like efficiency, efficacy, awareness, anti-fragility, effectiveness, empowerment, emancipation and sustainability. The "Implementation/Intervene" step would consist of producing the initial bar chart to give an objective score for parameters that are in need of improvement.

Act: After having done the initial assessment, the decision to carry out a CSI intervention starts by the dean asking himself and his staff if they have developed a "false consciousness" that prevents them from taking political action (radical humanism). In the HUBS case, Jackson (2019, pp. 577-578) describes an environment of mistrust and conflict that was focused on producing MBA students, because that was where the money was, rather than improving the quality of teaching and research. If one were to use the inner CSI loop, the "Creativity/Explore" step might be useful for thinking about HUBS as a "psychic prison" (nobody realising life was like *Space Invaders*), making it possible at the "Choice/Produce" step to use something like Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH) at the "Implementation/Intervene" step for clarifying the difference between how the organisational system is and how it ought to be.

Plan: Once having broken out of the "false consciousness," an atmosphere of harmony and cooperation is needed for collective problem-structuration (interpretivism). In this particular case, the dean used rich pictures from SSM for creating collective consciousness about existing challenges in the hope of creating shared visions and unified goals (Jackson, 2019, p. 268). If the inner CSI loop had been applied, perhaps "text" would have been a relevant metaphor, as the choice of SSM at the "Choice/Produce" step means that "Implementation/Intervene" consists of reading the organisation in search of a *Space Invaders* strategy.

Do: Having established the goal to gain accreditation from the three main business school accrediting bodies, the overall strategy was in need of being implemented through concrete efforts like marketing, alumni, administration, finance, human resources and quality management in support of improved teaching, research and outreach (Jackson, 2024, p. 162). If the inner loop of CSI had been used, thinking about the organisation as a cybernetic system at the "Creativity/Explore" step would explain why VSM was selected at the "Choice/Produce" step and made sure the "Implementation/Intervene" step was carried out in alignment with the functionalist paradigm, metaphorically corresponding with how the new *Space Invaders* strategy was now being implemented.

Check: In CSI it is important to make a paradigmatic distinction between the intervention process and its outcome, as the execution of the process is a technical challenge (functionalism) while the outcome is expected to have social consequences (radical structuralism). In the HUBS case, Jackson (2019) talks about the consequences of the VSM interventions and the wider consequences of how the various methods interacted (Jackson, 2024, pp. 184-185). Although the overall story is presented as a success, the intervention ended with challenges that could provide food for starting a new PDCA cycle. If the inner CSI loop had been more explicitly used, it would have been interesting to look at the concluding scores for the *Space Invaders* game, looking at the updated bar chart and perhaps also having a look at run charts for how each of the parameters had been developing during the 12-year period. The emancipation parameter would be of particular interest, given the CST commitment to emancipation, where the balanced scorecard approach would put emancipation within a wider context of improvement and success.

5. | Discussion

5.1 | The methodological soundness of CSI in contrast with CSP

Although the story in sections 4.1 and 4.2 is the same, when using CSP as a narrative tool, it invites much of the same criticisms Tsoukas raised against TSI. For instance, when he says that TSI tends to use metaphors in a circular or redundant matter, it does not help that CSP has replaced metaphors with systems perspectives when the systems perspectives are used in the same circular or redundant manner.

In a similar way, when Tsoukas accuses SOSM of being impractical and illogical, the revised framework in Exhibit 2 is an improvement in way of creating a more obvious connection between metaphors (systems perspectives), sociological paradigms and methodologies, but the way the systems perspectives contain individual metaphors that point towards multiple paradigms makes it illogical and impractical. Indeed, there is no mention of either the new framework nor of SOSM in the HUBS accounts (Jackson, 2019; 2024).

Finally, when Tsoukas says that there is no mechanism in TSI that links it with the ideology of CST, there is nothing about the CSP case study that should encourage him to change opinion. Both TSI and CSP make it possible to engage with emancipatory problems, but there is nothing about the methodologies that enforces this type of direction. Jackson (2019, p. 631) mentions a dean who used oppressive methods for running the business school, but how do we know that this particular dean was not using CSP? There is nothing about CSP that prevents it from being used in a non-emancipatory manner.

When we look at the case study from the viewpoint of CSI, it becomes radically different. For instance, CSI is intrinsically linked with CST in the way it makes default use of radical structuralism to focus on the

emancipatory interests of those being oppressed, which in this case would be the dean and most of the staff, and then switches to radical humanism when the dean and the staff jointly raise critical awareness, creating a climate for developing emancipatory plans (interpretivist paradigm), carrying them out (functionalism) and evaluating them (radical structuralism). Unlike CSP, which leaves it to the organisation to decide whether the intervention should focus on emancipatory or non-emancipatory interests, CSI is intrinsically focused on emancipatory interests.

When it comes to the criticism of the framework in Exhibit 2, the latest CSP version acknowledges the failure of SOSM and suggests something closer to how Morgan (1980) described the relationship between metaphors, paradigms and methodologies, which is a move in the right direction, but not sufficient. CSI suggests a full return to Morgan's approach, which is also something Jackson (1991, p. 271) has previously suggested as a possibility. Unlike the framework in Exhibit 2, Morgan's original proposal of how to link metaphors, paradigms and methodologies is practically useful and logical, which is why it is presented in Exhibit 4 as an improvement on Exhibit 2.

According to Jackson (2019, p. 594), the term "systems metaphors" from TSI was replaced with "systems perspectives" in CSP because some perspectives do not take the form of metaphors. In a previous text about CSI (Ogland & Evans, in press), it was noticed how TSI dumped some key Morgan metaphors (like "instrument of domination") and introduced new "metaphors" that were not really metaphors (like "team" and "coalition"), which is why CSI did the opposite of CSP. CSI not only makes use of Morgan's original set of metaphors but it also gives structural support to metaphors like "instrument of domination" by use of game-theoretical models of oppression and conflict, which can then be viewed through the lens of the four different paradigms depending on how the problematic situation is to be explored and/or acted upon. For this reason, CSI avoids Tsoukas' critique both on account of the use of metaphors to frame the problematic situation and the use of a relevant process for identifying solution methodologies.

5.2 | Is pragmatism the right approach for CSL and CST?

The CSP account of the case study is narrated in a manner that fits with Jackson's (2024) support of pragmatism in the sense that the decision-makers will have to decide on whether emancipatory or non-emancipatory interests are to be served and thus jump between sociological paradigms. However, the way this approach can easily put non-emancipatory interests above the emancipatory ones could be seen as legitimising Tsoukas's (1993a; 1993b) worry that this type of philosophical approach does not really work.

In the CSI version of the story, the underlying philosophical reasoning is not so different, with the exception of the introduction of a game model; the *Space Invaders* game in this particular case. This is used for aligning with Bas van Fraassen's (1980) pragmatic philosophy of science, which looks at science as the process of building useful models of reality rather than searching for ontological truth. Contrary to philosophies like Critical Realism (Bhaskar, 2008; Mingers, 2014), which Jackson (2024) correctly identifies as an "imperialist" philosophy that makes ontological claims about non-observable parts of reality, van Fraassen's Constructive Empiricism is a type of pragmatism that is far from the "anything goes" pragmatism that Jackson (1991) previously attacked. It is a type of pragmatism that looks exclusively at how knowledge and understanding develop in how we gradually improve our understanding of a problematic situation by improving our scientific models, as was illustrated in the way the *Space Invaders* game was used to model the HUBS conflicts, and it contrasts CSP, where there was no overall model of the situation beyond the VSM, the SSM output and other paradigm-specific models that gave fragmented pictures of how the situation was evolving.

The problem with CSP as a driver of CSL is that the critical or emancipatory aspects are totally dependent on the person or group in charge of the interventions. While Jackson (2019, p. 631) pointed towards an approach used by a dean at a different business school to show how lack of CST might lead towards

oppressive regimes, this other dean could easily have claimed that he or she was practicing CSL by use of CSP and CST, given the nature of how CSP is formulated. However, as is the point in our case study, this particular dean would not have been able to state that he/she was practising CSL by use of CSI and CST. In the language of Tsoukas, CSP is only contingently linked with CST while CSI is intrinsically linked.

6. | Conclusion

Critical Systems Practice (CSP) has been designed for the purpose of operationalising Critical Systems Leadership (CSL) in complex organisations, where CSL is based on Critical Systems Thinking (CST) and is consequently focused on dealing with political challenges in transforming environments that are tied up with the traditional hero leader narrative and the idea of central control. However, the initial version of CSP, known as Total Systems Intervention (TSI), was criticised both on practical and theoretical terms, where we believe only minor aspects of that critique were taken seriously as CSP developed.

In this paper we have looked at a relatively new revision of TSI, called Critical Systems Integration (CSI), which draws inspiration from the roots of CST and how the important interplay between metaphors, paradigms and methodologies was discussed among leading scholars at that time. Although there are strong similarities between CSI and the latest version of CSP, a case study was used for illustrating how philosophical, theoretical and practical issues played out when a complex and somewhat confusing CSP case study became simple, efficient and convincing when being retold through the perspective of CSI.

As CSI is a simpler, sounder and more efficient than CSP as a way of operationalising CSL and turning CST into practice, we hope the paper will stimulate further research on CSL, CST, CSP and CSI.

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