However, DDW still faced a deterrence dilemma—MDHC still preferred ‘stand off’ to ‘reinstatement’—but MDHC’s deterrence dilemma was eliminated. More pertinently, DDW now faced an inducement dilemma as its lobbying actions in ‘stand off’ lacked credibility with its new preference for the ‘buy off’ scenario. In turn we can surmise that DDW’s preference would shift further (see following row of table) so that ‘buy off’ became the most preferred scenario, for instance because of recognition of the persistent erosion of members’ economic conditions while they remained on strike, the apparent isolation of their cause, and the strength of feeling against them. However, as long as their position remained ‘reinstatement’—a position is a publicly stated solution—then they faced a full range of dilemmas, including now a positioning dilemma, for they actually preferred MDHC’s solution to their own.

Ultimately a shift in position (last row of table) to coincide with that of MDHC, removed all significant dilemmas in the case. Each of these moves on the part of DDW was accompanied by expressions of emotion that accord well with drama theory. So, for example, the final shift in DDW’s position (eliminating its positioning dilemma) was accompanied with a sense of guilt at abandoning the cause and a search to rationalise the positive aspects of the final deal. Some of these changes in feeling are nicely caught in a statement made by one of the shop stewards after the MDHC package had been accepted: ‘we’re not looking at it as a defeat; instead it has raised the consciousness of all those involved.’

This exploration of the Liverpool Docks case using drama theory has necessarily been drastically abbreviated, but should illustrate the explanatory power of the approach, as contrasted with the viable boundary technique. Clearly the analysis is open to the same criticism that any post hoc study shares; that of being wise after the event. However, this is not the preferred mode of application of confrontation analysis (the term for this technique of using the drama theory framework to structure conflict), which rather would be employed either to give unilateral support to one party in such a dispute, or else to provide a medium for mediation. It would appear that such a structuring device has more to offer to protagonists (and so to the consultant whose query prompted this viewpoint) in a dispute than the rather blander restatement of perceived belief systems provided by viable boundary critique.

References


Reply to Bryant


I read with interest Bryant’s comments on my paper. I am sorry that he was disappointed at the way that I have applied viable boundary critique (VBC) to the case presented. However, I too was disappointed that he has used my paper as an opportunity to promote drama theory, rather than discussing comparative concepts. I have looked at drama theory and find while there is a strong relationship between it and VBC, the brief for drama theory is significantly less than that of VBC. To explain why this is the case I will have to explore elements of their theoretical natures.

VBC is embedded within viable systems theory (VST); it adopts a broad systemic perspective, is orientated towards complexity, and uses cybernetic principles that are concerned with communications and control. Much of the theoretical work is hinged on the work of such people as Stafford Beer, Peter Checkland, Habermas, and in particular Eric Schwarz. VBC is an immediate development from boundary critique in the form as represented by Midgley et al., itself a derivative of the work of Werner Ulrich, who originally coined the term. However, it should be realised that by embedding boundary critique in VST we seem to be changing some of its conceptualisations and thus taking it through a paradigm shift. While this does not alter the strength of the original paradigm, it could provide an indication of other possible areas of application.

Drama theory would seem to have developed as a counter to the limitation of game theory. It provides an approach to conflict resolution that is based on a drama metaphor. Dramas are analysed as if they were real, focussing on how ‘characters’ resolve problems rather than on how ‘actors’ follow ‘scripts’ (which would likely be seen as an
overextension of the metaphor). According to Nigel Howard\textsuperscript{3} it permits both rational and irrational (whatever these are and according to whose point of view is not explained) reasoning or behaviour to be modelled, and allows outcomes to be influenced by emotion, deceit, disbelief character development, and rational arguments in the common interest. Unlike traditional mathematical game theory it is seen as a ‘soft’ game, called a frame, which can be transformed through the emotions of characters as they face dilemmas and paradoxes of rationality. Positive and negative emotions (like love and anger) are seen to cause preference changes as options are created, and change in the ‘cast’ as its value systems and viewpoints develop. The preferences of characters are determined by their value systems, which is part of their cognitive organisation of beliefs, attitudes, and values that make up their worldview. Situations of potential conflict that the theory seeks dramatically to resolve occur in episodes, defined as an interaction in which a set of issues is at stake between the set of characters. An uninterrupted, successful episode ends in the resolution of those issues. An unsuccessful episode results in conflict.

Actors play as characters in drama theory. They may, one therefore supposes, change roles. When this happens, it is really a process of changing frames of reference by adopting a distinct set of base elements through which to look at a situation. Perspectives are models of the situation, and these can change in drama theory by the impact of the information exchanged or the emotional energy and bias generated through the interaction. It can also change because of exceptional political or economic or social situations. The preferences of characters are determined by their value systems, which is part of their cognitive organisation of beliefs, attitudes, and values that make up their worldview. Situations of potential conflict that the theory seeks dramatically to resolve occur in episodes, defined as an interaction in which a set of issues is at stake between the set of characters. An uninterrupted, successful episode ends in the resolution of those issues. An unsuccessful episode results in conflict.

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In VBC, like VST, characters are more usually called actors (those who act in situations and who may be individuals or groups) or agents (actors who operate according to some strategic purpose on behalf of themselves or others). VST provides a general set of principles and theoretical constructs that enable complex situations to be examined, explained, and where appropriate, intervention strategies found. VST is fundamentally pluralistic, and is eclectic in respect of theories that are consistent with its prepositional base. It supports methodological pluralism, and where appropriate adopts a mixed methods approach for interventions. In VST, worldviews are linked within the lifeworld that in cybernetic terms I would call a social group phenomenon of thematic semantic communications (that is, the purposeful meaningful communication between participants engaged in a particular theme). Schutz and Luckmann\textsuperscript{7} would express lifeworld in terms of narrative, which can be simply explained as ‘a coherent story’. Perhaps it is here where VST and drama theory first meet.

While drama theory seeks dramatic resolution in episodes, VST rather provides a theoretical framework to explain the how and why groups can secure and maintain their viability when dealing with problem situations that involve both tasks and issues. As a subset of this, VBC is concerned with explaining certain types of issue (through the examination of issue boundaries) that is fundamentally due to a process of exclusion or inclusion. Recall that my argument about marginalisation is that it is a consequence of the differences that result from exclusion or inclusion, and power is a consequence of this. This logically connects judgement, in/exclusion, marginalisation, and power. Such explanations involve ideological, ethical, and other considerations that are important to the situation.

As a result, the idea of situational pathology is very useful. VST incorporates the notion of social pathology of Habermas,\textsuperscript{8} which has been used in describing what he calls colonisation of the lifeworld, which in our terms summarily occurs when ‘foreign’ belief systems ‘overcome’ an autonomous organisation. It also involves Stafford Beer’s\textsuperscript{9} interest in what is called auto poetic pathology, and very simply put this is concerned with purpose and relationships between distinct generic functions in an organisation. There are other forms of pathology relevant to VST,\textsuperscript{10} like anticipatory contradiction and projective anticipation (notions that derive from work by Yolles and Dubois\textsuperscript{11}), political paranoia, and paradigmatic schizophrenia. In contrast, Howard identified four pathologies in drama theory. In my terms these pathologies include: (1) communication failures, (2) differences in aspiration resulting in potential conflicts, (3) conflict inertia, and (4) unresolved settlement. All four pathologies are also embedded in VBC.

Let us consider Howard’s pathologies a little more fully using my own VST language where appropriate. In pathology 1, characters deliberately fail to communicate in their interaction, and this represents a build-up phase to a conflict. Howard suggests it will occur just in case communication leads to conflict. This assigns either rational or emotional purposefulness to the situation. However, there may be other reason for the lifeworld not to operate. For instance, power or exchanges (e.g., money) can rather steer situations, or the lifeworld may be colonised by other belief systems that are foreign to the group. Even where semantic communication does occur in a group there may be problems understanding what is going on in the lifeworld, particularly with groups from very different ambient cultures. This is because they will have distinct worldviews leading to different patterns of knowledge and therefore