

## A Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) knowledge compilation exercise on the notion of relationship-managing organization (RMO)

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### Abstract:

*The notion of relationship-managing organization (RMO) was formulated by Checkland and Holwell (1998) to clarify the underlying worldview of Soft Systems Thinking (SST). Naturally, to understand SST and Soft Systems Methodology, it is important to grasp this notion of RMO, despite its under-developed status. Ho (2014a) made an attempt to elaborate on and illustrate this RMO notion with the recent Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. This paper makes a further attempt to enrich the RMO notion using a Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) knowledge compilation exercise from the field of Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Research. In this broad brush knowledge compilation exercise, four management approaches are considered, namely, Intellectual Capital Management, Stakeholder Management, Marketing 3.0 and Diversity Management. As a result, a Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Framework is constructed out of the knowledge compilation exercise. The MPSB Framework on RMO is intended to inform application of the RMO notion in management practices.*

**Key words:** Relationship-managing organization (RMO); Systems Thinking; a Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) knowledge compilation exercise; the MPSB Research; an MPSB Framework; Intellectual Capital Management; Stakeholder Management; Marketing 3.0; Diversity Management

## Introduction

The original notion of relationship-managing organization (RMO) came from Checkland and Holwell (1998). It has recently been examined by Ho (2014a), using the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong as an illustrative case study on the notion. As a follow-up of Ho (2014a), the writer takes a closer look at the RMO notion from a Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Research stance. [The MPSB Research has been explained in Ho (1995; 2013; 2014b; 2014c) which have been published in the *European Academic Research*, thus not further elaborated on in this paper.] Via an MPSB review, the paper intends to further clarify and enrich the RMO notion to inform its management application.

## On the Soft Systems version of the relation-managing organization notion and other versions of RMO

Drawing on the Soft Systems literature, the underlying worldview of Soft Systems Thinking (SST) can be explicated as follows:

- (a) Reality is problematical (Checkland , 1984);
- (b) Human organizations are made up of people<sup>1</sup> who are by nature purposeful (Ackoff, 1981; Ackoff and Gharajedaghi, 1996), thus conflicts of interest and disagreements (i.e. problematic situation with soft complexity (Ho, 2014a).) are inevitable but bridgeable;
- (c) Organizations are “social entities which seek to manage relationships” (Checkland and Holwell, 1998). This is the core idea of the RMO notion in Soft Systems

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<sup>1</sup> *People* include all the primary and secondary stakeholders of an organization. Primary stakeholders are those people who are directly affected by an organization while secondary stakeholders are the ones who are indirectly affected by it.

- Thinking, which is conceptually compatible and relevant to the study of (a) and (b);
- (d) Collaborative and interactive learning in organizations, perceived as RMOs, is feasible and desirable (Checkland, 1984; Ackoff, 1981);
  - (e) Using Soft Systems Thinking and Soft Systems Methodologies to guide and inform learning is appropriate in an RMO, as the problem situations encountered more often than not pluralistic in nature (Flood and Jackson 1991; Ho, 2014a).

In this SST worldview, the Soft Systems version of the RMO notion serves to clarify SST and inform application of Soft Systems Methodologies in pluralistic problem contexts. Due to its conceptual value in understanding SST, the RMO notion has been examined by Ho (2014a), using the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong as an illustrative case study. The term RMO was coined by Ho (2014a). To further pursue this academic venture on RMO study of Ho (2014a), this paper examines the notion of RMO from a Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Research position (Ho, 2013; 2014b) because:

- (a) the idea of relationship-managing can be understood differently based on different strands of systems thinking. Thus, there is a danger that the RMO notion can be easily misunderstood by both readers and its practitioners if the alternative underlying systems thinking perspectives adopted to study it by its practitioners are not made explicit. For instance, the Hard Systems-based notion of RMO could be misunderstood as the Soft Systems-based one.
- (b) the Soft Systems version of RMO (RMO-ssv) has conceptual blind spot when applied in real-world situations (Ho, 2014a; Flood and Jackson, 1991). It is therefore desirable to develop other versions of RMO based on different systems thinking perspectives to promote comprehensive, creative

and critical problem-solving practices, as guided by Critical Systems Thinking of Jackson (2003) and the MPSB Thinking of Ho (2013; 2014b).

It is argued in this paper that other than the Soft Systems version of RMO (RMO-ssv), it is useful to refine and enrich the notion of RMO based on the MPSB Research perspective by distinguishing other versions of RMO. In this respect, the writer comes up with four basic versions of RMO altogether:

- The Hard Systems version of RMO (*RMO-hsv*)
- The Soft Systems version of RMO (*RMO-ssv*)
- The Emancipatory Systems version of RMO (*RMO-esv*)
- The Postmodern Systems system of RMO (*RMO-psv*)

To comprehend these four versions of RMO, readers are required to have at least some grasp of the four strands of systems thinking involved here. Briefly, Hard Systems Thinking is concerned about how to choose an efficient means to achieve a defined goal; Soft Systems Thinking's primary focus is on collaborative learning and objective exploration; Emancipatory Systems Thinking aims at eliminating sources of oppression and promoting empowerment for the disadvantages groups in organizations and society; finally, Postmodern Systems Thinking is interested in (i) heeding marginalized voices, exceptions, funs and (ii) engaging emotions in a specific organizational and social setting so as to promote diversity and creativity (Jackson, 2000; 2003). The four versions of RMO are explained in Table 1, which draws on the works of Jackson (2003), Flood and Jackson (1991), Miles (1975) and Feldman (1999).

**Table 1 Underlying worldviews of the four versions of relationship-managing organization (RMO)**

RMO (Hard Systems version) [RMO- <i>hsv</i> ]	RMO (Soft Systems version) [RMO- <i>ssv</i> ]	RMO (Emancipatory Systems version) [RMO- <i>esv</i> ]	RMO (Postmodern Systems version) [RMO- <i>psv</i> ]
<p><u>Primary organizational concerns</u> (Jackson, 2003) Efficiency, efficacy, viability, effectiveness</p>	<p><u>Primary organizational concerns</u> (Jackson, 2003) Effectiveness, elegance</p>	<p><u>Primary organizational concerns</u> (Jackson, 2003) Empowerment, emancipation, ethics</p>	<p><u>Primary organizational concerns</u> (Jackson, 2003) Exception, emotion engagement, fun, ethics</p>
<p><u>Related theories of management</u></p> <p>The traditional model of Miles (1975)  Human relations model of Miles (1975)</p>	<p><u>Related theories of management</u></p> <p>Human resources model of Miles (1975)</p>	<p><u>Related theories of management</u></p> <p>Human resources model of Miles (1975)</p>	<p><u>Related theories of management</u></p> <p>Critical postmodern organization theory (Feldman, 1999)</p>
<p><u>Organizational metaphors</u> (Jackson, 2003; Flood and Jackson, 1991) Machines, organisms</p>	<p><u>Organizational metaphors</u> (Jackson, 2003; Flood and Jackson, 1991) Organisms, brains cultures, communities,</p>	<p><u>Organizational metaphors</u> (Jackson, 2003; Flood and Jackson, 1991) Psychic prisons, political systems, coercive systems</p>	<p><u>Organizational metaphors</u> (Jackson, 2003; Flood and Jackson, 1991) Carnivals</p>
<p><u>Primary relationship management concerns</u> (Jackson, 2003)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manage relationships between stakeholders in order to achieve well-defined organizational objectives, e.g., efficiency,</li> </ul>	<p><u>Primary relationship management concerns</u> (Jackson, 2003)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain relationships between the stakeholders of an organization to support (i) collaborative organizational learning and</li> </ul>	<p><u>Primary relationship management concerns</u> (Jackson, 2003)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seek for (i) empowerment and human development, especially for the weak stakeholder groups, and (ii) fairness by eliminating</li> </ul>	<p><u>Primary relationship management concerns</u> (Jackson, 2003)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster diversity and creativity by heeding all kinds of marginalized voices, funs, emotions and exceptions in the process of</li> </ul>

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<p>efficacy and viability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceive relationships among stakeholders as fundamentally harmonious.</li> </ul>	<p>purpose exploration as well as (ii) attainments of effectiveness and elegance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceive relationships among stakeholders as mildly conflictual.</li> </ul>	<p>alienation and oppression sources as embedded in social relationships in a specific organizational context.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceive relationships among stakeholders as simple and coercive.</li> </ul>	<p>dealing with relationships between stakeholders in a specific organizational context.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceive relationships among stakeholders as complex and coercive.</li> </ul>
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The worldviews of the four RMO versions are described in terms of (i) primary organizational concerns, (ii) related theories of management, (iii) organizational metaphors, and (iv) primary relationship-management concerns. These four worldviews, reflecting four different paradigms, have long been argued in the systems literature to be incommensurable, see, for examples, Jackson (2003) and Flood and Romm (1996). Admittedly, it is quite an oversimplification to summarize ideas from the four strands of systems thinking and RMO-related management theories into a table. Table 1 can also be validly challenged as being insufficiently informed by literature review, given that only a few references are considered in the table. On the other hand, the main purpose of constructing Table 1 is to highlight and contrast the underling worldviews of the four versions of RMO in a crude way to further reveal their basic conceptual nature. Table 1 reminds us that, just because a specific management theory focuses on relationship-management, e.g., the theory of relationship-oriented organization structure of Chinn (2014), it does not automatically owe allegiance to Soft Systems Thinking (SST). In the case of Chinn’s (2014) theory on relationship-oriented organization structure, it has been explained by Chinn (2014) to be theoretically associated with both the human relations

model and the human resources model as espoused by Miles (1975). Such explanation by Chinn suggests that this theory can be anchored in both Hard Systems Thinking and Soft Systems Thinking.

### **An MPSB knowledge compilation exercise on RMO with four management approaches**

To further enhance the notion of RMO, a broad brush MPSB knowledge compilation exercise is conducted by examining four management approaches, namely, (i) Intellectual Capital Management, (ii) Stakeholder Management, (iii) Marketing 3.0 and (iv) Diversity Management. The relevance of these four management approaches to the notion of RMO has been suggested by Ho (2014a), as they all take substantial interest in the relationship management of stakeholders with different expectations and concerns. Such interest strongly suggests that these four management approaches are compatible with Soft Systems Thinking. The knowledge compilation exercise makes use of an MPSB knowledge compiler which has been defined as: “A set of techniques based on Critical Systems Thinking used to examine a management discipline at either an individual concept level or the whole discipline level, resulting in the construction or enhancement of MPSB frameworks that make the management disciplines coherent and understandable from the Critical Systems perspective” (Ho, 1995; 1997; 2013). In essence, an MPSB knowledge compilation exercise is a specialised form of literature review, being (i) explicitly grounded on Critical Systems Thinking and (ii) not reliant on any primary data gathering endeavour. The exercise is also a way to practise managerial intellectual learning (Ho, 2014d). An MPSB knowledge compilation exercise is composed of four phases (Ho, 1995; 1997):

*Phase 1:* select a specific management approach, e.g., Intellectual Capital Management, for the relationship-managing function in an organization, perceived as an RMO;

*Phase 2:* Unearth the underlying organizational metaphors and its affiliated systems thinking perspective(s), e.g., Hard Systems, Soft Systems, Emancipatory Systems or Postmodern Systems perspectives, of the management approach under review;

*Phase 3:* Contrast the identified underlying organizational metaphors and systems thinking perspectives of the management approach being examined with alternative metaphors and perspectives to further clarify its conceptual nature;

*Phase 4:* Make use of the review exercise to enhance the MPSB knowledge structure for the management approach under review, e.g., Intellectual Capital Management for the relationship-managing function in an organization.

Specifically, the knowledge compilation exercise in this paper (i) discusses how these four management approaches can be employed in the relationship-managing activity of an RMO, thus informing this activity and (ii) unearths the underlying organizational metaphors of these four management approaches so that their respective affiliation to the various versions of RMO can be made explicit, resulting in further conceptual refinement of the four versions of RMO themselves. As a result of the exercise, the MPSB knowledge structures of these management approaches as well as the RMO notion are enriched. Due to the interpretive nature of the knowledge compilation exercise, its theoretical validity is solely based on the plausibility of the intellectual interpretation and reasoning of the writer. Here, the writer chooses to conduct the exercise in a broad brush manner on the four management approaches based on the works of Jackson (2003), Choong (2008), Recklies (2001), Arkinson, Waterhouse and Wells (1997), Kotler,



Kartajaya and Setiawan (2010), Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) and David (2010). The findings are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2: Key managerial principles, affiliated organizational metaphors and systems thinking perspectives underlying the management approaches of ICM, SM, M3.0 and DM for RMO study**

<i>Management approaches</i>	<i>Key managerial principles as related to the relationship-managing function of RMO and their implications on relationship management</i>	<i>Affiliated organizational metaphors and systems thinking perspectives (Jackson, 2003)</i>
<b>Intellectual Capital Management (ICM)</b> (Choong, 2008)	<p><u>Key principles</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobilise ‘things’ such as employees, customers and knowledge, and bond them together in the productive process, notably knowledge conversion process, of an organization so as to earn profit.</li> <li>• Manage, measure and report Intellectual Capital, e.g., consumer trust, brand image and corporate culture so as to improve organizational performance, especially on its financial performance.</li> </ul> <p><u>Implications on relationship management:</u> manage relationships to achieve goals and promote learning.</p>	<p><u>Affiliated organizational metaphors</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Machines</li> <li>• Organisms</li> <li>• Cultures</li> <li>• Coalitions</li> </ul> <p><u>Affiliated systems thinking perspectives</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard Systems Thinking</li> <li>• Soft Systems Thinking</li> </ul>
<b>Stakeholder Management (SM)</b> (Recklies, 2001; Arkinson, Waterhouse and Wells, 1997)	<p><u>Key principles</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage the complex systems of interests and influences from different stakeholder groups of an organization to adjust and subsequently meet primary organizational goals.</li> <li>• Meet an organization’s stakeholders’ requirements to gain their continued cooperative participation in an organization’s activities so as to meet primary organizational goals.</li> </ul> <p><u>Implications on relationship management:</u> manage relationships</p>	<p><u>Affiliated organizational metaphors</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Machines</li> <li>• Cultures</li> <li>• Coalitions</li> <li>• Political systems</li> </ul> <p><u>Affiliated systems thinking perspectives</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard Systems Thinking</li> <li>• Soft Systems Thinking</li> </ul>

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	to achieve goals and promote learning.	
<b>Marketing 3.0 (M3.0)</b> (Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan. 2010)	<u>Key principles</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employ “many-to-many collaboration” with customers.</li> <li>• Offer products with value propositions that are “functional, emotional and spiritual”.</li> <li>• See the market as made up of “whole human with mind, heart, and spirit”.</li> <li>• Manage products with cocreation practices, e.g., creation of products via collaboration with business partners and customers.</li> <li>• Manage customer with communitization practices, e.g., nurturing brand-based communities for consumers.</li> </ul> <u>Implications on relationship management:</u> manage relationships to achieve goals, promote learning, creativity, human development and emotion engagement.	<u>Affiliated organizational metaphors</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Machines</li> <li>• Cultures</li> <li>• Coalitions</li> <li>• Prisons</li> <li>• Psychic prisons</li> <li>• Carnivals</li> </ul> <u>Affiliated systems thinking perspectives</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard Systems Thinking</li> <li>• Soft Systems Thinking</li> <li>• Emancipatory Systems Thinking</li> <li>• Postmodern Systems Thinking</li> </ul>
<b>Diversity Management (DM)</b> (Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000; David, 2010)	<u>Key principles</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harness the differences (diversity) in an organization’s employees so as to create a productive environment in which employees feel valued and their talents are utilized so as to meet an organization’s goals.</li> <li>• Manage different aspects of diversity as related to the workforce, behavioural/ cognitive diversity, structural diversity and strategy so as to gain various benefits of diversity in terms of cost savings, greater learning, a more diverse mindset and improved customer knowledge.</li> </ul> <u>Implications on relationship management:</u> manage relationships	<u>Affiliated organizational metaphors</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisms</li> <li>• Cultures</li> <li>• Coalitions</li> <li>• Carnivals</li> </ul> <u>Affiliated systems thinking perspectives</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard Systems thinking</li> <li>• Soft Systems Thinking</li> <li>• Postmodern Systems Thinking</li> </ul>

	to achieve goals, promote learning and creativity.	
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Referring to Table 2, all the four management approaches, i.e., ICM, SM, M3.0 and DM, involve: (i) key management principles as related to the relationship-managing activities in organizations perceived as RMOs with implications on relationship management, (ii) affiliated organizational metaphors and systems thinking perspectives. Again, based on the writer's evaluation on the relevant management literature, all of them appear to endorse more than one organizational metaphor and systems thinking perspective, although their perspective anchoring<sup>2</sup> is very often implicit. It is likely that some organizational metaphor(s) and systems thinking perspective(s) for a specific management approach can be dominant while others play a supportive role, but this issue is not further examined here. Also, which organizational metaphor and systems thinking perspective is dominant and which supportive can be influenced by its practitioner's personal preference and the idiosyncrasy of the specific organizational context at a specific moment in time. Referring to Table 2, Marketing 3.0 and Diversity Management are both more sensitive to emotional and spiritual aspects as well as creativity consideration in relationship management, thus considered as more affiliated to Postmodern Systems Thinking. Marketing 3.0 puts more stress on human development than the other four management approaches, thus viewed as associated with Emancipatory Systems Thinking, though in a relatively weak sense. All in all, a broad brush MPSB knowledge compilation process on these four management approaches by the writer, resulting in the construction of Table 2, sheds light on the nature of these four management

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<sup>2</sup> *Perspective anchoring* is the intellectual effort to explicitly relate a methodology to a particular perspective, e.g., Soft Systems Thinking

approaches as well as enhances the notion of RMO itself. Tables 1 and 2 together can be considered as an MPSB Framework on RMO produced from a broad brush MPSB knowledge compilation exercise. The MPSB knowledge compilation exercise can be carried out in a more vigorous and systematic way with comprehensive literature review. Such an academic challenge is not taken up in this brief paper. The MPSB Framework on RMO as portrayed in Tables 1 and 2 can be employed based on Critical Systems Thinking to improve management practices in terms of efficiency, efficacy, elegance, creativity, human development, fairness, fun, emotional engagement, and ethics (Jackson, 2003). This point was briefly suggested by Ho (2014a) in the Umbrella Movement case study in Hong Kong, and now elaborated on here.

### **Concluding remarks**

The notion of RMO from SST has been illustrated and explained by Ho (2014a). This paper further develops the RMO notion by means of an MPSB knowledge compilation exercise. The resultant MPSB Framework on RMO (re: Tables 1 and 2) can be considered as the main achievement of this paper. It does not only clarify the SST-based notion of RMO (i.e., *RMO-ssu*) but also offers three additional versions of RMO, i.e., the *RMO-hsv*, the *RMO-esv* and the *RMO-psv*. Together, they can be employed based on Critical Systems Thinking to inform management practices that makes use of RMO as an analytical notion. The discussion on RMO in this paper should also enable readers to better comprehend the RMO notion and the Umbrella Movement example in Ho (2014). In this regard, this paper is a follow-up intellectual exercise on Ho (2014a) to develop the RMO notion. Finally, to further develop and

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perspective, so that it explicitly respects the rationality of such a perspective (Ho, 2013).

validate the enhanced RMO notion in this paper, it is necessary to conduct more empirical research works, e.g., survey research, case study research and newspaper articles study, etc., on this concept. After all, the elaborated RMO notion, in current form, is a quite new and untested concept.

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