



CHAPTER 2

Rich Pictures

Abstract This chapter introduces readers to Rich Pictures and briefly to Soft Systems Methodology, the broader approach from which Rich Pictures emerged. It overviews what Rich Pictures are, how to use them and the steps in doing so, and the common issues and tricks and tips to overcome them. We also consider what Rich Pictures are good and bad at, give a brief overview of their history, and highlight resources and ways to get started.

Keywords Rich Pictures • Soft Systems Methodology

Humans have likely been drawing pictures for as long as we have existed. Free-form visual representation of things, ideas, and processes are universal in human culture and feel like one of the most natural and intuitive ways of expressing ourselves. We draw before we write. It is thus not surprising that drawing pictures can be a useful way of describing, sharing understanding of, and analysing systems. In this chapter we describe and explore the use of ‘Rich Pictures’ as a systems mapping method.

There is a slight tension in our focus on Rich Pictures. The method comes from the wider approach known as ‘Soft System Methodology’. While we will discuss Soft Systems Methodology briefly, our focus is on Rich Pictures alone. Some researchers and practitioners that use Soft Systems Methodology may feel it is inappropriate to take this approach.

However, we believe that Rich Pictures, although an outlier in this space, are worthy of discussion as a systems mapping method in their own right. While Soft Systems Methodology as a whole is something much larger which does not easily fit into our definition of what can be considered systems mapping.

The primary reason we chose to include Rich Pictures was that they complete our spectrum of systems mapping methods, from the most formal and quantitative, through more flexible, semi-quantitative, and qualitative approaches, to Rich Pictures, an almost completely free-form approach, with the most flexibility, and which puts all the power and decisions in stakeholders' hands. We felt it was important to have this option in our systems mapping armoury/sewing kit. Rest assured, just because this method is one of the most flexible and free form, it does not mean there are no guidelines for its use and fierce methodological debate around how it should be used.

As in other chapters, we use a simple and practical structure to describe Rich Pictures, starting with as clear and jargon-free description of what the method is, as we can muster. We then describe how to do it, common issues, and tricks of the trade. Next, we step back and consider what the method is good and bad at, before closing with a discussion of the history of the method and pointing out some useful resources for getting started.

WHAT ARE RICH PICTURES?

Rich Pictures are a drawing, a picture, of a system or 'situation'. They are almost always produced together in groups in workshop settings, with large pieces of paper (though some scholars have suggested they can be used as individual analytic tools, e.g. Bell and Morse, 2013a). They are intended to be a shared representation of the system; the value they generate is often mostly in the process and discussions this generates rather than the picture itself as an output. What the picture should contain is often left completely up to the participants; very few, if any, prompts are given by facilitators beyond asking them to 'draw the system'. However, some guidance on the method does suggest that using the prompts, 'structures', 'processes', 'climate', 'people', 'issues expressed by people', and 'conflict', as things to consider putting in the picture can be helpful. Another common prompt for groups who are struggling to start is to suggest they draw themselves in the system. Participants are normally discouraged from using text or words as much as possible, though this is not always the

case—some Rich Pictures contain a lot of text. Though not used as a prompt, most facilitators also don't intend participants to produce a diagram which looks like a Theory of Change map or flow diagram. The aim is to avoid the constraints such diagram types introduce. However, Rich Pictures can contain arrows and represent causal relationships. In sum, Rich Pictures are flexible, can contain almost anything, and emphasise letting participants do what they want above all else. Once a Rich Picture is produced, it can be analysed by participants and researchers as part of the process of using the method, though it is often the process of drawing and discussing that is the most important element.

Let's look at some examples. Figure 2.1 shows an 'archetypal-if-poor' Rich Picture of the National Health Service in the UK from Bell and Morse (2013a). We can see the participants who drew the picture in the centre, surrounded by different elements of the system, such as patients and staff (the figures on the right), and concepts such as bureaucracy and

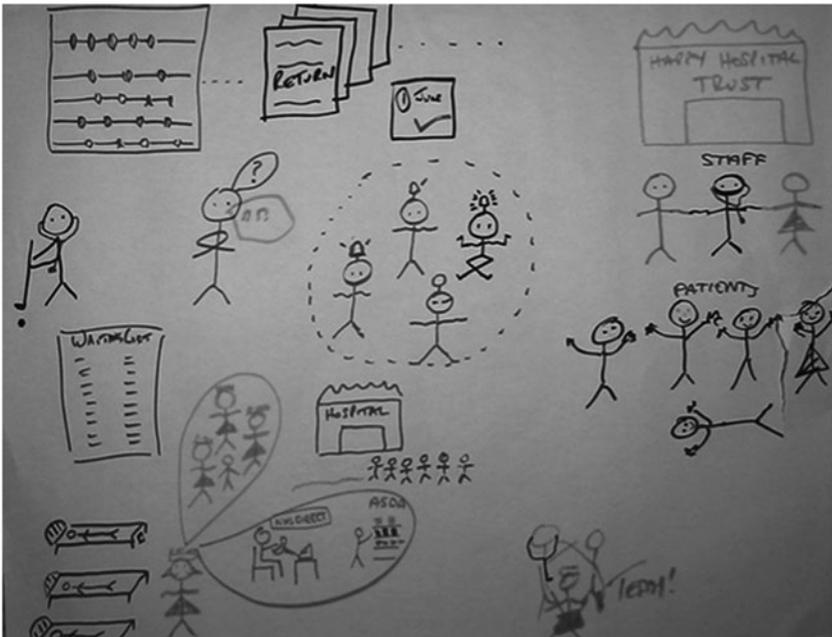


Fig. 2.1 A Rich Picture of the National Health Service in the UK (Source: Bell and Morse, 2013a)

measurement/targets (the abacus and paperwork top left). Bell and Morse describe the picture as being relatively poor in terms of its visual content but suggest that this did not diminish its value as a discussion tool.

Another example can be seen in Fig. 2.2, again from Bell and Morse (2013a). This example benefits from some more skilled drawing perhaps (e.g. the ‘see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil’ monkey) and uses no text, except for the ‘WB’ to denote ‘World Bank’.

There is inevitably a huge variety in Rich Pictures, so we strongly suggest you look for more examples to fully appreciate the range in what they



Fig. 2.2 A Rich Picture of the influence of indicators on sustainable development in Slovakia (Source: Bell and Morse, 2013a)

can look like. A simple search engine image search can help with this, or Bell et al. (2016a) includes many examples. Beyond the variety in what participants might produce, there is also variety in the practice of using Rich Pictures. As we acknowledged in our introduction, some practitioners will only use them as part of a wider process, rather than a standalone systems mapping method. This will affect the way in which they are used, the emphasis put on iterating and returning to the pictures, and the amount of time spent focusing on them alone.

There is also variety in the prompts and facilitation given to participants. Most Rich Pictures will be developed with minimal prompts and will not be developed beyond a simple drawing on paper. However, some will be drawn with stronger guidance on what to include, and maybe use rules such as ‘no text’. The pictures may also go through some digitisation and refinement, even with the help of an artist or graphic designer, with the aim being to produce something more lasting which can be shared as a communication tool. Lastly, we have observed no variety in the terminology used to describe Rich Pictures, but it is worth noting that many participatory approaches will involve drawing and sketching of different types, and they will have much in common with Rich Pictures, even if they are not formally coming from a systems perspective or intended to ‘map’ a system in some way.

Rich Pictures emerged from and are part of a wider approach to studying and acting in systems, called Soft Systems Methodology. We do not intend to go into any depth on this approach in this chapter but do outline some of its history and aims in the ‘brief history’ section below.

HOW DO YOU DO RICH PICTURES?

The steps in using Rich Pictures are relatively obvious and intuitive. Though they can be tailored to different project’s needs, they will typically include the following stages.

- **Planning:** you will need to decide who to invite to a Rich Picture workshop(s) and how to structure the sessions. You may want to do some pre-workshop work on deciding the focus or definition of what system will be looked at. If you are working with a particular client or project partner, they will be key in making decisions at this stage.
- **Workshop:** an individual workshop can be done quite quickly, in as little as thirty minutes if needed, but more commonly around two

hours. The number of participants at a workshop can be relatively large, perhaps as many as twenty per facilitator, and with whole groups as large as fifty. However, each group drawing a picture should be smaller, around three to six people. As the facilitator you will need to decide what prompts, if any, you want to use with participants. This will depend on your own preferences and style but also the purpose of the process and anything specific you intend to do by way of analysing the pictures. Common decisions include (i) whether to ban or discourage the use of text; (ii) whether to mention the list of prompts—structures, processes, climate, people, issues expressed by people, and conflict; and (iii) whether to encourage participants to draw themselves in the picture. In contrast with some of the other methods in this book, we would suggest taking as minimal a role as possible. The method works best when participants are comfortable, and it is likely that too much guidance will disrupt their creativity and expression. Some practitioners even advocate leaving the room during the main drawing time, to avoid the chances of participants asking for help they don't really need, or the temptation for you to hover over those drawing. The final element of the workshop will involve reporting back to the whole group what small groups have drawn. Ideally, this should not just be a short section tagged on the end of a workshop, but should involve at least one cycle of groups sharing what they have done, hearing from others, and then going back to their Rich Picture, updating it, and then sharing again. The discussion within small groups, and between them, as they share their approach and views, is likely to be equally important, if not more important, than the picture itself. You can be creative in designing the process of drawing, discussing, drawing new pictures, or updating existing ones to suit your needs. Ideally, some fieldnotes should be made of the discussions, so that you have a record. It is often impractical to record discussions with an audio recording device, and it may inhibit participants from speaking freely. More likely to be of value would be asking participants to take some notes, or have some observers take notes. A choice will need to be made about whether to take fieldnotes of all discussions or only the full group.

- **Analysis:** although not always done, it is common to do some form of analysis on the pictures generated. This can be started during the workshop discussions, and then continued by the practitioner or

researcher afterwards. The purpose and nature of the analysis will depend on the purpose of the project, but it can range from simple narrative and thematic analysis and comparison of the pictures (including reference to discussions during the workshop) through to more formal aesthetic analysis of the images and what this might convey (e.g. as in Bell and Morse 2013a), or structured content analysis of the pictures (see Bell et al. 2016b), using the types of social research methods used for analysing documents.

COMMON ISSUES AND ‘TRICKS OF THE TRADE’

During a workshop there are two common issues that can arise which we would like to highlight. Firstly, participants can think that drawing is childish in some way or not valuable and can thus be hesitant to contribute or be sceptical about the method/process. This can be a particular issue for Rich Pictures, compared to other methods in this book, because they do not have the immediate ‘feel’ of being a practical tool, or a scientific modelling method. Often, any scepticism is overcome with a little time and the influence of positive engagement of others. However, users of the method should think ahead about how they might assuage concerns along these lines. As a facilitator you want to have enough legitimacy and credibility that people want to take part, but not so much that participants think you should have all the answers or are afraid to express ideas in front of you.

Secondly, power dynamics or dominant individuals can influence the picture and its content strongly. Individuals can force a group to draw only their view, or others may be too nervous or fearful to contribute. Because the method is so free-form and flexible, and we normally avoid prompting too much, there is little scope for using the excuse of ‘the method says we should do X or should include person(s) Y more’ with Rich Pictures. Thus, consideration and management of power dynamics and dominant individuals can only be done in the planning and inviting stages.

Once we have some Rich Pictures and are carrying out some analysis, it is common for those new to the method to struggle to develop rich analyses. People can feel unsure of what analytical tools to use, what can and can’t be inferred or said, or how to connect the pictures to other parts of a project. This is normal, and developing rich nuanced and sensitive analysis is difficult and takes time, both within one project and across multiple projects—you will learn and improve a lot in the analysis you do as you do more.

Finally, we do sometimes observe quite serious ‘research fatigue’ in participants who have taken part in participatory research in the past and not seen tangible results, or those who have simply been involved in many projects. This is a very real issue for any participatory method or project but can be more acute with Rich Pictures because the method is open and flexible. It does not impose a structure on people which may make them feel this is a ‘new’ or different process, without an immediate instrumental value, and it empowers participants meaning that they can express their fatigue more quickly.

There are a range of useful tips and tricks to deal with these issues and others. Some of the most useful we have come across include:

- **Use icebreakers:** it is a good idea to have a handful of icebreaking suggestions to help participants get through blocks related to scepticism, feeling drawing is childish, feeling they cannot draw well, etc. For any block you think participants might have, arm yourself with an icebreaker. One of the most used for people who are struggling to start (for any reason) is to ask them to draw themselves first (this can induce much laughter, quite literally breaking a static atmosphere) and then build from there. For sceptical participants, open an honest discussion about the use and value of what you are doing, and show them you have their concerns in mind and are not naïve about what is useful or what is a sensible use of their time.
- **Give power to the participants:** do everything and anything you can to hand over your power as the facilitator to the participants. Encourage them and emphasise the value of their opinions and knowledge. Leave the room entirely during the drawing stage (if you need to stay, avoid hovering nearby, explain that you don’t want to inhibit them if needed). Make sure they describe their picture first before you or others comment on it. Giving away your power here takes courage as facilitator but is vital to this method.
- **Don’t try to force-fix issues during a session:** it can be tempting to try to ‘fix’ group issues as they emerge by more strongly facilitating group dynamics or what is being drawn. This is almost always a bad idea with Rich Pictures. People will understand that the method is about flexibility and may interpret your attempts as critiques that what they are doing is wrong in some way. Aim to adapt the overall process in planning stages rather than let knee-jerk reactions during a workshop drive your management of the process.

WHAT ARE RICH PICTURES GOOD AND BAD AT?

We hope it is clear from our description thus far, Rich Pictures' strength lies in its flexibility and openness, meaning a process can evolve in almost any direction, and that the method can be bent to almost any purpose. Indeed, the method can easily be bent to the will of participants, it does not constrain them or force them to adopt a modelling framework, meaning it can focus on what is important to them. The method is excellent at quickly opening lively discussions, drawing on humour and expression to help participants develop richer shared understandings of an issue. Visual metaphors (such as the puppet master example in Fig. 2.2) are powerful and quick ways to communicate these understandings. It excels at capturing different perspectives, values, and perceptions often crucial in determining what happens on the ground in social systems, but extremely difficult to capture with formal modelling methods. Rich Picture's flexibility mean they have the potential to allow people to offer whole systems views without constraints or simplifying assumptions. This is a strength, but equally, we should be conscious that they do not enforce or directly encourage a whole systems view, so this does not always emerge.

Rich Pictures are an easy method to start using, there are few resources needed, and though analysis can be difficult to develop quickly, the method itself is not intimidating or technically challenging to use. This means that the barrier to stakeholder participation and engagement is correspondingly low, and most people would be able to contribute their perspectives, including those who might feel intimidated by other methods. It can be used in situations in which participants are not literate, where there are language barriers, or with participants who are unaccustomed to network-type representations. It is also worth noting, Rich Pictures processes rarely fail. Even in a tricky process, or a group the facilitator feels did not work well together, there is still something to work with, some learning to be had, from the discussion and the picture (however simple). Other methods in this book are more likely to fail because of certain essential elements that must be collected or addressed; this is not the case with Rich Pictures.

The flipside of these strengths is the 'weaknesses' of Rich Pictures. We use inverted commas here because these are not really weaknesses, rather just things Rich Pictures will never do because it prizes freedom and expression so highly. The method will not help us formalise knowledge in any precise way, rather it will tend to create discursive and rich descriptions of issues, rather than neater or simplified ones. It will not provide direct inputs into more formal modelling approaches, including those in this

book. It may help open a discussion to frame another method, but you cannot use the picture itself to directly seed a Causal Loop Diagram, for example (unless perhaps you strongly facilitate the picture to this end, which would border on just building a Causal Loop Diagram).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RICH PICTURES

Rich Pictures emerged as part of the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). This approach was primarily developed by Peter Checkland at Lancaster University in the UK in the 1970s onwards, as a way of exploring and making decisions in complex ‘situations’ (Checkland and others seemed to prefer this term to ‘systems’—reflecting less emphasis on attempting to describe whole systems) in which there was a lack of agreement on the issue and ways of managing it. The use of ‘soft’ is in opposition to ‘hard’ engineering systems in which there is no disagreement on the issue and reflects Checkland’s background as a natural scientist and the department at Lancaster he was in—Systems Engineering. The approach developed out of a wider programme of action research and acknowledgement that many projects failed because of issues around agreeing problem definitions. SSM was initially used in organisations as part of management and business research but has now been used in many different settings and domains.

SSM entails a simple and intuitive process of developing an understanding of a system (this is the stage in which Rich Pictures are used), developing options for interventions or management, and then implementing them. Rich Pictures are typically perceived as one of the main innovations of the approach, along with the ‘CATWOE’ analysis tool. CATWOE stands for ‘customers, actors, transformation, worldview, owner, and environment’, and comprises a method for analysing issues using these six perspectives, emphasising finding solutions to any issues identified in these domains.

The exact nature of SSM has shifted through the years as it has been used and refined, but detailed descriptions of it, and how to use it, can be found in Checkland and Poulter (2006) and one of the original texts, Checkland (1981). For those interested in the detail of its history, the retrospective discussion in Checkland (2000) is well worth reading. Rich Pictures as a method remained very much part of SSM until more recently. Bell and Morse (2013a) have been arguably most influential in advocating for thinking of, and using, Rich Pictures as a standalone research method. They emphasised the analytic value of the method and its use in wider range of research and practice settings.

GETTING STARTED WITH RICH PICTURES

Diving into using Rich Pictures is relatively easy. You probably could make a good stab at it from reading this chapter alone. Nonetheless, it is worth sharing some of the most useful resources around which can take you deeper into the method and how to use it. These include:

- Bell et al.'s (2016a) book on Rich Pictures (as a standalone method) is a detailed and creative exploration of its use and value. It is almost certainly worth purchasing if you know you will be using Rich Pictures in your work.
- From the same group of authors there are also a string of academic papers which approach the method in a similar way and are well worth reading. Bell and Morse (2013b) provide a detailed example of using Rich Pictures while also introducing and advocating for the method. Bell and Morse (2013a) provide a more general exploration of Rich Pictures and how they can be used in a range of ways, providing useful discussions of their history and how to approach analysis. Finally, Bell et al. (2016b) look in detail at how the tools of content analysis can be applied to Rich Pictures.
- On Soft Systems Methodology there are multiple 'original' and new texts which are useful; we would recommend Checkland (1975) for one of the earliest descriptions of the approach, Checkland (1981), the earliest book on the topic, Checkland (2000) for a detailed retrospective discussion on the approach, and Checkland and Scholes (1990) for an update with more case studies and examples. For those wanting even more, the special issue of the journal *Systems Practice and Action Research* (issue 13 from 2000), in celebration of Checkland's seventieth birthday, may appeal.

As with many of the methods in this book, we would advocate just diving in and using Rich Pictures. You can use them in your team at work, or with family and friends, to test-run it, and start to think about how you might use and tailor the method for your needs. Probably the most important, or rather most difficult thing to dive into quickly, is how to go about analysing Rich Pictures. To consider this more deeply we recommend looking at examples from academic papers (including those above), and thinking about how different documentary, aesthetic, and social research methods could be applied to Rich Pictures.

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