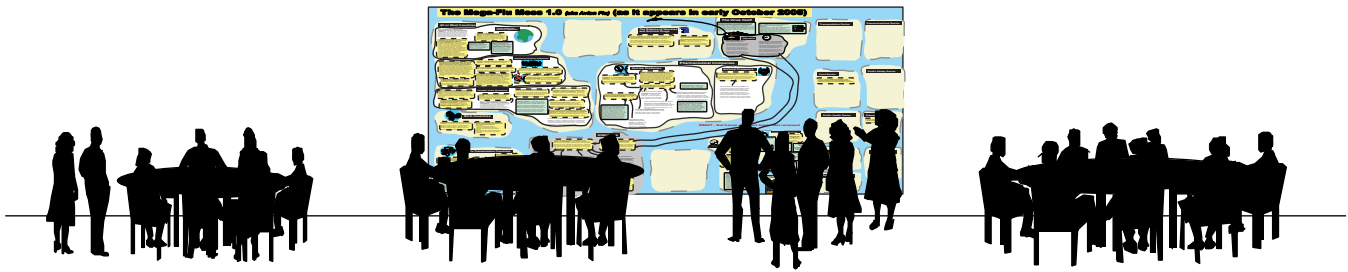


# Mapping Social Messes with New Interactive Group Processes



**The concept of “Social Messes.”** Russell Ackoff, of the Wharton School, originated the concept of the mess. He describes messes as collections of problems and other messes, suggesting that "no problem ever exists in complete isolation. Every problem interacts with other problems and is therefore part of a set of interrelated problems, a system of problems."

At MacroVU, we think of social messes as having these characteristics:

- complicated, complex, and ambiguous
- much uncertainty – even as to what the problems are, let alone what the solutions might be
- great constraints
- tightly interconnected, economically, socially, politically, technologically
- seen differently from different points of view, and quite different world views
- contain many value conflicts
- are often a-logical or illogical.

Morover, often there are

- many possible intervention points
- considerable risks that are difficult to calculate.

**Different levels of analysis for social messes.** Messes can be analyzed and described at different levels of focus. For example we have helped county task forces and national and international task forces to address their respective messes. Here are some examples:

- County Public Mental Health Delivery Mess
- County Long Term Care Mess
- UK National Health Service Mess
- Avian Flu Pandemic Mess
- United Methodist Church Pastor's Health Mess
- Thinking Through Terrorism as a Conceptual Mess
- U.S. Health Care Financing Mess

## For further information on social mess processes and mapping

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**A new group process for capturing expertise.** The mess mapping process is a general method for groups working on complex problems. The exercise is ordinarily used to capture and synthesize group expertise early in the project. It is based on the assumption that multidisciplinary task groups need special forms of group interactions in order to effectively use the expertise assembled.

### **First form a common mental model of the mess.**

Nearly every expert in such a group has come to the table with their pet “solutions” to the “problem.” This interferes with deeper exploration of the mess as well as creative exchange.

The use of the concept of a “mess” as an interrelated set of problems breaks that initial set and challenges the experts to work together to produce an analysis they would not have produced by themselves or in a conventional group process. This changes their motivation from displaying their expertise to involvement in exploring new territory together.

### **The map metaphor provides useful group navigation.**

The use of the physical metaphor of a “conceptual map” also intrigues them. It draws on their experiences of navigating in new territory as well as in the process of constructing the map which changes significantly over several sessions.

A large version (24 x 36 inches) of the seed mess map is usually placed on each table. An even larger, mural size version hangs on the wall. Recordors at each table add comments of the group to the current version of the map at each task group session during the mess mapping exercise.

**Purpose of the mess exercise in the context of conferences.** In conferences, mess mapping exercises can be used to “prime” the participants with a broad picture of what problems they face and to get them ready for the later brainstorming and action planning parts of the conference.

### **Examine mess maps online:**

[www.stanford.edu/~rhorn/b/UCH5N1MessV8.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/~rhorn/b/UCH5N1MessV8.pdf)