Does Pragmatism Help Make Complexity Simple?

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Who am I and what is my background in complexity and public policy?

- I have been working on complexity for 15 years.

- I am on the 'general' side of the 'restricted' vs. 'general' debate in complexity (Edgar Morin).
  - Recent 'restricted' debate at Stanford

- To me, complexity is a meta-theoretical framework with fractal properties at various levels!

- My work is focused on making complexity relevant and accessible to policy actors.

- Key areas of interest: health and social policy, local policy, drug and drug advertising policy, GP commissioning, international relations and some aspects of development.

Where is complexity now???

- Byrne and Callaghan 2014
  - Links science to social science (Gulbenkian)
  - Moves beyond positivism and relativism
  - Moves beyond quantitative/qualitative divide
  - Bridging framework
- Geyer and Cairney 2015
- Personal conclusion: I always feel that I have done well if I am only trailing David by 2-3 years.

The State of Play of UK Public Policy

- The Westminster Model
  - Rational, centralised, hierarchical
- New Public Management
  - Intensive rationalisation and self-interest
- Evidence Based Policy Making
  - Better evidence = better policy
- Targeting/Audit Culture
  - More targets/audits = better information/control = better policy
- 'Big Society' and 'Bonfire of the Targets' linked to new mantra of 'Doing more with less' – the politics of austerity

The Big Problem

- Post-WWII UK policy tendency towards the rational, centralised, hierarchical, command and control Westminster model
  - EBPM and targeting/audit culture are merely latest manifestations/intensifications (deeper than New Labour)
- Obvious weaknesses: misdirection, blunt, over controlling, waste of resources, ignores local actors, etc.
- Current move away is temporary
  - Primarily based on budget issues and political expediency. When these change the tendency will resume with the same problems.
  - Key hidden change: growing differences between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

How has this affected health policy? Reorganise, reorganise, reorganise…

- 23+ reorganisations in the last 20 years.
- Current commissioning reorganisation is latest in a long line of reorganisations.
- Political elites and the IMT syndrome
- Is all of this keeping the NHS healthy or critically undermining it?
    - Depends on how you look at it.
    - From the traditional orderly approach: this is the only way to save the system.
    - From a complexity perspective: may work but stifles learning, adaptation and flexibility in the long run.
        - Also, local actors learn to resist/ignore the system

How has this affected education policy? Test, test, test…

- 2009 Cambridge Report
- Most evaluated schools
- Most tested students
- Huge cost
- Large diversion of resources
- Only moderate improvement
- Recent changes: recentralisation of all funding, increase control and constraints on testing, increasing 'political' control over testing (Gove – 'too easy')
  - Works for elites, but what about the rest

How has this affected social policy? Rules, rules, rules…

- 2010 Munro Review into child services concluded that the current system:

- Leads to a 'skew in priorities that has developed between the demands of the management and inspection processes and professionals' ability to exercise their professional judgement and act in the best interests of the child'

- Promotes 'following rules and being compliant' rather than doing the right thing for the child.

- 'operating within an over-standardised framework'

- Performance data collected, at great effort and expense, 'does not describe what matters'

More…

- 'NPM seeks to 'improve practice in child protection through targets and performance indicators'
- Focused on 'top-down regulation' rather than 'personalised service'
- Media and public perception of risk and complex nature of child protection
- 'over-standardised framework makes it difficult for professionals to prioritise time with children'
- *Problems of the traditional policy approach are well known (and the government agreed with the review!!!)*

Munro – (best response I have seen)
The goal is to create a system:

- that learns whether children are being helped, and how they have experienced the help, innovating in response to feedback.

- which is free from all but essential central prescription over professional practice but with clear rules about where and how to co-ordinate to protect children and young people.

- where professional practice is informed by research and evidence, competent judgement informing action when the work is too varied for simple rules.

- that expects errors and so tries to catch them quickly.

- which is 'risk sensible'.

Easy to say, hard to do

- For UK central actors: often held responsible if local actions go wrong. Hard to get away from 'something must be done', 'lessons must be learned' – new target/new audit.

- For local actors: increased freedom, responsibility and uncertainty. Dangerous and uncertain. Often support targets/audits to provide protection (legal and social)

- At local level, despite many doing amazing and impressive work, they are not angels. Need to monitor and review. How to separate the good from bad?

- Wider societal values often play a key role: How to get society to accept some failure and occasional horrible injustice?

Weakness of complexity in a UK context

- Translating a meta-theoretical perspective into local action – how to make complexity simple (Byrne and Callaghan 2014)

- Politically uninspiring – no final vision – 'be balanced'

- Does not provide concrete answers – hard to sell uncertainty

- Against dominant media and political culture – 'lessons must be learned'

- How does complexity relate to democracy and power?

- How to act in an uncertain and complex world?

Complexity and Pragmatism

- Chris Ansell at UCB on exploring the linkages between 'pragmatist' philosophy and complexity theory. Key work, John Dewey's 'quest for certainty'
  - Or maybe I am just going back to my American roots?
- Pragmatism helps to resolve key areas of complexity
  - Morality and complexity (what is right about complexity?)
  - 'action' and complexity (what is to be done???)
  - Power and complexity (what can complexity say to the weak?)
  - Democracy and complexity (are they compatible?)
  - UK example – the work of Ian Sanderson

So what are we, the converted, supposed to do?

- Keep converting – teach and do!
- Pragmatist call to arms: despite uncertainty - engage and act – take advantage of the 'impact agenda'
- May not save the world but can do our best to nudge it in the right direction – optimism and qualified belief in human nature
- Pragmatist, engaged democratic reflexive realism
- My personal examples

Success: from Politics to PPR

- Spring 2009: took over as HoD and told to create PPR – no clear plan just general parameters and three very different departments

- Key decisions: focus on basics, physical integration (bring together and alphabetise offices), decision-making integration (balanced management committee meeting weekly), cultural integration (try to work together to avoid factionalism).

- Multiple tensions (REF strategy, recruitment strategy, and 'political' position in Faculty/University) and multiple changes to external system (new fees, mergers, etc.)

- Where we are now: 'good' culture that is positive and flexible. Don't know about future, but good now!

Failure: Liverpool Social Sustainability Manifesto

- Tried to use complexity principles to guide a local political movement to create:
  - 'a 'better understanding' of what is going on and a 'coordinated push' (not just a little nudge) in the right direction and some really meaningful and positive change may actually occur – making Liverpool a model of social sustainability and compassion.'

  Tried to involve local academics, social organisations and political parties. (six months effort and gone).

Thinking about: the Collaborative Policy Movement in the UK

- US example: Collaborative Policy movement emerged out of growing demands for greater 'state' power and fiscal control.

- Network of state/local government – university collaborative policy centres (range of sizes, types and success).

- Embodies localism, complexity framework and pragmatist philosophy

- Similar regional and local demands in UK today – is this a chance for a UK collaborative policy movement (or not worth the effort?)

Conclusions(?) and implications

- Complexity sciences and theorising are well advanced and numerous academic works are widely available and is having a growing impact on a range of policy areas.

- **Key challenge**: how to translate this research and theoretical knowledge into policy action? In the UK, take advantage of the 'impact agenda' to make links and work with local policy actors.

- In my experience, policy actors generally agree that their world is 'complex', but that actors above and/or below them force them to act in an 'orderly' fashion.

- Nevertheless, complexity can be a way of 'doing more with less' for local and central actors.

- Can help to move media and society away from culture of control/blame

- Wide range of tools and concepts to use. **Key point**: make them SIMPLE/USABLE for busy policy actors who have little time for 'theory'

Personal conclusion

- The key isn't to create a complexity toolkit that can be applied to any context or situation (though they may be helpful), it is to create a 'pragmatic complexity' culture. Create a positive, inclusive, deliberative culture that recognises the complex nature of the wider context and embraces the potential for reasonableness. It does not guarantee success but increases the probability and creates a positive environment where even if you lose you feel good about the journey.