Understanding and innovatively responding to complexity in practice

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There’s the plan . . . And there’s what we actually do

A. Research findings (didn’t seem grandiose at the time)
B. Preliminary research findings (what we said we’d do in the abstract)
C. The complex reasons we don’t have any findings to report as yet
• The what
• The why
• The how
• The why not
SWHS graduates are required to make street-level decisions regarding policy enactment on a day-to-day basis in an increasingly complex environment (Healy & Harrison, 2016) which extends across client, organisational, and structural levels (Payne, 2008; Weohle, 2007). Neoliberal policies and approaches are significant contributors to this complexity, continually requiring practitioners to do more with less resources (Hughes & Wearing, 2013), in an uncertain environment where recent graduates are often subject to insecure employment (Healy & Harrison, 2016). In addition, this environment is increasingly punitive, both internal and external to the organisational context, and frequently subject to media scrutiny.
Recent graduates’ experiences of innovative practice responses to complexity within the human services sector

Aim to gain an understanding of:
1. What recent graduates understand as ‘complex’ practice situations and the sources of this complexity
2. How recent graduates are socialised in the workplace to make sense of and respond to complexity
3. What recent graduates perceive as the contributors to innovation in complex circumstances (e.g. qualities, processes, and strategies)
Why

• Practitioner lens of what constitutes complexity and innovation is often missing
• Term used in a variety of ways
• Despite being nebulous can wield enormous power
• The ‘increased complexity’ drives the political push for ‘innovation’
Ultimately it’s about

• Encouraging a sense of agency amongst students and practitioners in responding to complexity

• Longer term (post-pilot study) seeking to inform organisational processes so that they don’t stifle the innovation that they often seek
Method - qualitative

- Purposive sample
- Two face-to-face focus groups (8 – 10 in each). Option of an additional on-line focus group (approx 6 participants) to facilitate regional participation. Visual aids to be created as desired by participants.
- Follow up narrative interviews with approximately six participants who have a case study exemplifying innovative responses to a complex practice situation. The interviews will involve creating a visual map of the sources of complexity and the responses to these.
- Narrative analysis
Recruitment

- Advertised through AASW and ACWA
- Changemakers and informal SWHS groups
- Low engagement

- Now looking at recruiting through interested organisations... Additional HREC approval processes etc.
Moved to

• Face-to-face promotion through organisations followed up by email recruitment.
• And will also do another round of the original advertisements
7 basic concepts from complexity theory
(Sanger and Giddings, 2012)

1. There are differences between simple and complex systems
2. Complexity resides in the eye of the beholder
3. Social workers deal with some of the most complex systems imaginable (but we don’t think research systems were the intended target here)
4. Complex systems are intertwineded
5. Complex systems may exhibit the butterfly effect
6. Complex systems exhibit non-predictability
7. The complexity of an analysis should match the complexity of the situation

Acknowledgement: Assoc. Prof Phil Crane
## Complicated or Complex?

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<tr>
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<th>Simple Aspects</th>
<th>Complicated Aspects</th>
<th>Complex Aspects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What interventions look like</td>
<td>Standardized intervention activities, implemented by a single organization</td>
<td>Multiple components or implemented by multiple identifiable organizations in predictable ways</td>
<td>Non-standardized and changing, adaptive, and emergent</td>
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<td>Implemented by multiple organizations with emergent and unpredictable roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>How interventions work</td>
<td>Pretty much the same everywhere</td>
<td>Differently in different situations and for different people or in different implementation environments</td>
<td>Generalizations rapidly decay</td>
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<td>Results are sensitive to initial conditions as well as to context</td>
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Individual factors

• Early career – similar to the position of the ‘Recent’ grads we want to work with

If we go back to our rationale:

Neoliberal policies and approaches are significant contributors to this complexity, continually requiring practitioners __________ academics to do more with less resources (Hughes & Wearing, 2013), in an uncertain environment where recent graduates __________ early career academics are often subject to insecure employment (Healy & Harrison, 2016).
Organisational context

• We had received a kick-start grant that was meant to be expended before Christmas.
• Both teaching/research academics so can be periods where finding time to pursue research is near impossible. Periods of slow response from our end.
• QUT ethics was relatively simple to navigate and predictably time consuming.

So organisationally there’s been some complicating issues, but not really complex by itself.
External systems

Rigid systems: had to get two additional ethics approvals to be able to promote the research in the organisations who had expressed genuine interest in doing so. These were at least predictable, if complicated and slow processes.

Each organisation had its own processes for pursuing these. The NGO sought to facilitate the process smoothly – the Govt Dept did not.
Risk aversion – at every step of the way
Predictable and unpredictable gatekeepers – in ethics processes and dissemination processes
• Unpredictable systems: systems that are meant to be predictable (Research governance) being unpredictable.
The butterfly effect
(although sometimes it’s a bit less gentle)
Our learning? The aha moment

We have been treating complex systems as though they are complicated systems: believing (or at least going through the motions) that persistence and following process will eventually get us there.

Instead we need to find a way to go back to how we know to work with complexity – relationships.

The challenge is of doing this in a time poor environment where other organisations put serious barriers in the way – but that’s where we need to put our energy.
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References


