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4. WORKING IN COMPLEX PRACTICE SPACES

Focusing and Calibrating Professional Effort
in Organisations and Communities

> The ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised (Bauman, 1992, p. xxii).

There is no doubt that the spaces in which contemporary professional practice is enacted are inherently complex. These spaces hold in tension the practice requirements of being human and technical, discipline-framed as well as interdisciplinary, client-centred yet professionally "managed", particularised for client and setting but held to evidence-based standards, and priceless in benefit but constrained by cost-efficiency imperatives. For the professional practitioner, working in these spaces means finding ways to focus and calibrate effort that are sustainable and defensible in the face of intense scrutiny. This chapter examines the dynamics of some of those tensions, with the aim of assisting practitioners to understand, articulate and confidently engage with them robustly and transparently. This discussion is illustrated by emerging developments in organisational governance. Not only is governance a significant dimension of practice spaces, but it is also one that is now challenged by the increasing complexity of practice spaces more generally. As a result, the chapter also illustrates how mainstream corporate discourses about individual, organisational and systemic governance are being challenged by voices from other sectors.

PRACTICE COMPLEXITY IN PRACTICE SPACES

Complexity thinking challenges conventional ideas and discourse by arguing that some things can never be fully understood, because multiple factors are interacting across time and space and across different scales of activity. Richardson and Cilliers (2001) have pointed out that complexity theory is itself evolving, taking several distinct forms. For example, a clear distinction can be made between hard systems thinking, which understands the world in terms of dynamics that can be tracked and engineered, and soft systems thinking that frames processes of learning and inquiry as systems.

Other authors contest complexity thinking, arguing that claims that a practice field or system is complex are often made without any evidence or any carefully argued logic (Hardman, 2010). The result of these differing viewpoints is an evolving and contested

set of discourses, in which mainstream thinking about practice fields is challenged from a perspective that is itself multiple and contested. On the far margins of these volatile discourses, radical critique and commentary calls the whole conversation into question, as when postmodernists suggested that the self disappears when considered as text.

> The world is such that not just our propositions, our theories, our actions and our social institutions are contestable; rather, the world is such that the very frameworks by which we might try to come into some kind of determinable relationship with the world are themselves contested. ... We are in a situation of supercomplexity when our very frameworks for making the world intelligible are in dispute. ... There are no secure holds on the world (Barnett, 2000, p. 75).

Likewise, this is a time of relentless innovation, a time in which human ingenuity and imagination have unparalleled access to global resources of all kinds. The many opportunities, challenges and dilemmas associated with this era have led Oliver (2000) to describe it as an "age of complexity". Various dimensions of this era have been articulated thus:

- *The relentless pace of change*. Our individual and collective practices constantly need to develop to keep pace with the perpetual change of our globally connected world (Higgs & Cherry, 2009).
- *Rapid knowledge evolution*. The volume and scope of knowledge evolution is overwhelming in its rate of change and access possibilities.
- *Wicked problems*. According to Rittel & Webber (1973) wicked problems are so described because they are messy, circular, aggressive, feature ill-defined design and planning problems and pose personally demanding challenges. For Conklin (2003) wicked problems and, alternatively, juicy opportunities, are often systemic, with obscure links between causes and symptoms and potentially enormous consequences, such that people see them as unsolvable and tend not to pursue their solution. Data available to deal with wicked problems is typically limited, ambiguous and often contradictory.
- *Troublesome knowledge*. This term is used by David Perkins (2006) to describe knowledge that is potentially transformative and ground-breaking but brings with it enormous dilemmas as to how it is to be used wisely and ethically.
- *The knowledge use paradox*. Cherry (2010) describes the paradoxical situation in which high levels of specialisation in research and knowledge, combined with very divergent ways of dealing with difficult issues coexist with a collision and convergence of industries and disciplines. This has led to such blurring of the boundaries that we can be said to be in the postdisciplinary age.

One strategic way of dealing with the challenges of wicked problems and supercomplexity is to recognise the value of white spaces. These are the spaces between the words or marks on pages. In this book we see such spaces in discourse as ideal opportunities for marginalia; for comments and ideas that move beyond existing thoughts and practices. White spaces allow us to go beyond: existing rhetoric, theories and practices, the boundaries of what we know, what we can express and even beyond imagination and optimism. Emmett (1998) proposes that we can go *searching among the*

Knowledge can trouble

absences for solutions in the unknown, or white, spaces. In professional practice and in practice discourse, then, the challenge for professionals is to look beyond certainties, existing knowledge and received practices, and to imagine and explore new possibilities.

UNDERSTANDING PRACTICE COMPLEXITY THROUGH GOVERNANCE

Another strategy for managing the rise and global spread of modern organisation and managerialism is through governance which has come to be part of the common language of organisations of all kinds. Organisations provide the site for many forms of practice in business, government and non-profit activities, and significantly shape much of the context for practice. It follows that professional practitioners regularly participate in, and are affected by, the processes of governance.

This section examines the particular case of how the adoption of corporate governance in the third sector has impacted practice spaces, and how those changes are now under challenge from the margin.

The Impact of Governance on Complexity in the Third Sector – A Margin Note

While professional practice often occurs within the public (e.g. government) and the private (e.g. business, private practice) sectors, the third (not-for-profit, voluntary and community) sector is an important space for professional practice. Discourses of governance practice and theory in the third sector over the last three decades offer a striking example of the ways in which a mainstream position emerges, and how that position is being challenged from both the near and far margins.

In their commentaries on governance in the third sector, Cornforth (2004) and Cornforth and Brown (2014) highlight the complexities that beset the operation of the sector at every level. They call attention to the paradoxical tensions that make planning difficult and leave the way open for almost any action to be contested and challenged. Recent research into the discourse of management used in the practice world directly reflects that complexity. Hermans' (2014) exploration of the views of Australian third sector CEOs throws interesting light on the practice challenges that they believe confront them. Their thick descriptions convey a series of eight paradoxes of practice that they and their organisations grapple with including: balancing mission and being business-like, dealing with partnerships and dependencies and spending time on income generation alongside service delivery.

For many third-sector agencies, over many years, the guiding principles for organisation were derived from a strong sense of mission or purpose, while organisational activity reflected a combination of voluntary effort and remunerated professional practice. These were times when leadership and organising practices were idiosyncratic, reflecting the particular histories, cultures and communities in which non-profit efforts had grown. Calls to contribute were frequently based on strong, shared values of compassion, generosity and moral obligation. A more cynical summation of their administrative practices depicts them as being run "by the well-intentioned 'cardigan brigade', by pensioned-off minor officers from the armed forces, or by well-meaning financial illiterates" (Judd, Robinson, & Errington, 2012, p. 3).

Such revolutionary changes to third sector practice bring changes to its core discourse.

Times have changed, however. Instead of relying solely on voluntary efforts and the donations of private individuals, foundations and commercial businesses, third-sector organisations in many countries now receive grants or are contracted by government to provide services that the government does not want to provide itself. At the same time, as the number and range of non-profit agencies has grown, funding from both private and public sources has become more competitive and for smaller agencies, less reliable. The search for new and more certain funding strategies has led to the restructuring of some agencies, as smaller ones either disappear or merge with others to create the critical mass needed for survival. Others have taken the path of creating separate commercial and/or hybrid organisations that are run as profit seeking businesses.

The result of all these developments is that third-sector organisations are now expected, by both government and donors, to be transparent, efficient and accountable in their operation. They are also expected to comply with rules and regulations that cover things like the protection of privacy, food hygiene, and health and safety. The adoption of modern corporate organisation, with its regimes of managerialism and governance regimes, is now widespread across the third sector and across the world. The subject of governance attracts a great deal of interest in both academic and practitioner commentaries. Although definitions abound, its close association with modern corporate organisation is reflected in the way it is most commonly defined: the direction and control of the organisation and its meeting of accountability obligations to external stakeholders, especially those who fund the organisation or run its regulatory environment (Hodges, Wright, & Keasey, 1996).

Principles of corporate governance address the ways in which financial resources are mobilised and accounted for; the efficient use of resources of all kinds, including human effort; the maintenance of standards for service and product quality and reliability; and the meeting of legal and other regulatory requirements, that now include a range of social, environmental and safety issues. Norms of governance themselves have become institutionalised across the many sectors and regions in which organisations (small and large) operate. These norms and expectations of quality counteract organisational chaos but, regardless of the sector, are associated with the cost of time, effort and distraction from primary work tasks, that comes with ever more rigorous demands for public accountability and transparency.

With the widespread adoption of modern organisation and governance by government, educational and research institutions, and non-profit organisations of all kinds, professional practitioners can find themselves caught between the standards and accountabilities expected of them by their employers and those dictated by their accrediting bodies. Even trying to describe or negotiate their practice on a practical day-to-day basis requires them to use the language of modern organisation and governance, rather than that of their wider community of professional practice. And their performance goals and indicators will certainly reflect the priorities and requirements of their employing organisation.

Another consequence of the adoption of corporate governance has been the homogenising of the discourse for practice and for policy and theory. This homogeneity creates legitimacy and an appearance of robustness for external stakeholders but does not necessarily equally reflect the actual contribution of organisations across the various

sectors. For example, the mainstream governance discourse is one of economic rationalism, and strategic management where the language of performance metrics (Pynes, 2011) replaces the political, social and spiritual discourses that could capture the full contribution of the third sector.

Parsons and Broadbridge (2004), and more recently Ainsworth (2013), are among those expressing concern about the adoption by non-profit managers of a professional identity borrowed almost exclusively from business and from industry, and from the strategic planning movement in particular. Similarly, Grant (2012) argues that the measurement and monitoring of performance and the tying of funding to demonstrable outputs and outcomes, while understandable in terms of public governance, significantly moves agencies away from traditional trust-based and philanthropic relationships. These concerns are but one aspect of the larger issue of what is referred to as mission drift: the pull away from the founding vision of the organisation and the gradual loss of trust-based and values-based decision-making and leadership. Mission drift happens as agencies try to stretch their resources to take on activities (like branding, reporting and marketing) that undermine their ability to stay on track with core goals.

Other challenges to the mainstream adoption of corporate governance by the third sector come from a different direction. Many argue that the work of the sector per se engages a greater level of complexity than that of the for-profit sector, and therefore demands a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to governance, both at organisational and systemic levels:

> Public and non-profit leaders face many of the same pressures of private sector organizations, but often have fewer resources and a more complex set of relationships with stakeholders. Clients and citizens are different than customers; legislatures and donors are different from stock and bondholders; organizational governance structures are often more complex and involve a greater number of actors who must be involved in any organizational change in the public and non-profit sectors (Davis, Kee, & Newcomer, 2010, p. 68).

In particular, contractual arrangements with government, networked services, and new relationships with for-profit organisations pose serious challenges for the corporate forms of governance adopted by the third sector. Hierarchical control systems that require a unitary organisational focus are unable to deal with the complexity and ambiguity of the dispersed powers of loosely-coupled organisations (Bradshaw & Toubiana, 2014). And Stone, Crosby, & Bryson (2013, p. 249) have drawn attention to the "chaotic character of collaborations, often driven by complex internal dynamics and external uncertainties".

Models of governance that reflect the interdependencies between non-profit organisations and between them and their communities include suggestions for community participation and decision-making (Freiwirth, 2014) and nested governance (Bradshaw & Toubiana, 2014). Beyond the abstractions of community engagement, inclusion and access though, such models must deal with issues of power, control, inter-dependency and trust that are inherent in human relationships within and between organisations. Recognition of the vitality of these issues under conditions of complexity has drawn a more radical response from at least some commentators.

Consider the dynamics and challenges of liquid modernity (see Bauman, 2005).

33

More Radical Voices on Management and Governance

Based on their practical research engagement with community projects in very different geographic areas of Australia, Earles and colleagues (Earles & Lynn, 2005; Earles, Lynn, & Jakel, 2005; Earles & Lynn, 2012) describe how global and parochial discourses and practices of management and governance are capable of fracturing and dis-membering the provision of human services to local communities. In the process, they can have an even greater impact, threatening communities' fundamental experiences of place and \identity. Earles and her colleagues sought to understand organisations and systems that are "simultaneously robust and fragile, that exhibit order at the edge of chaos, that restructure time and space, that reorder what is present and what is absent" (Urry, 2004, p. 127).

Driven by these experiences, Earles and colleagues have suggested an emergent way of organising that they call transformational collaboration. In crafting their model, they draw on the concepts of integral theory and spiral dynamics (Wilbur, 1996), spiritual capital and intelligence (Zohar & Marshall, 2004), and collaborative change practices. They explicitly challenge what they see as the pragmatic and self-interested drivers of most efforts at networking and seeking collaborative advantage. So instead of framing collaboration as a means of gaining efficiencies, pooling resources and information, and sharing risks, they suggest that doing things together is for the purpose of transforming the people involved, their practices, their organisations and their communities. These transformations are of a kind that emphasise power sharing, and community-led definitions of need.

Observing the "limited studies of principles and logics for building collaborative structures within human service provision that enhance citizenship and civil society" (Earles & Lynn, 2012, p. 125) they have developed their own perspectives, expressed in language that explicitly articulates the informing values of transformational collaboration. Their set of *principles* includes seeking a *state of equanimity*, balancing negotiation, planning, action and reflection, and using emotional, intellectual, and spiritual intelligences. *Abstract fractal oneness* is a state that recognises the complexity of independent and interdependent temporal and spatial actions. *Relational synergy* involves epiphanic connections of trust, identity and resources between individuals and local organisations and groups, inspiring people to work beyond their usual boundaries and sense of responsibilities. *Groundedness* relates to strategies and activities deeply rooted in the communal and cultural soils of local groups, recognising local context, ownership, power, control and local leadership. *Conscious sustainability* involves continually reading the dynamics of a complex world and adjusting organisations so that they can form, develop, reproduce or die according to their life course. The *logics* in this approach to interpreting and implementing organisational practice are the basic design elements for collaborative practice.

At this point our chapter seemingly comes full circle – from complexity through a discussion on the pros and cons of pursuing control – back to complexity, indeed to an embracing of complexity. Yet, this complexity is not unbridled but instead it is understood, valued and not watered down; through appreciation and profound understanding such complexity becomes a collaborative not chaotic space.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have explored and illustrated the increasing complexity of practice spaces by considering the example of organisational governance. In understanding this complexity as *white spaces,* we believe that it is possible to create new ways of engaging with wicked practice problems. The third sector suggests strategies for this engagement. One strategy presented is to write and practise in the white spaces of practice discourse and professional practice. Through this creativity we look for the opportunities that the problems themselves and the white spaces provide. This is creative marginalia.

A second strategy is to stand back and view bi-directional marginalia in action. First, the mainstream practices of governance were brought into the non-mainstream sector as a response to the changing opportunities and demands it was facing, such as the availability of government funds and the expectations of accountability. Through these processes a practice that was marginal became increasingly a part of the core of practice and discourse. Second, the new player in the field of governance, by entering this central space, changed the core discourse, enriching it with new possibilities and narratives. Both of these dialogues are associated with new problems (e.g. changing identities, ambiguities in primary purpose). Yet, at the same time, both existing and newcomer governance players face practice development possibilities (locally) and development of governance as a practice and discourse.

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