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Shifting sands

The papers in this edition of the journal reflect to some extent the ever-changing nature of research intended to inform social policy for children. We see some of the emerging trends in our own work at Dartington, and in the interests of our collaborators mainly in the UK and the USA.

A good example is the renaissance of interest in agency – the decisions a child or young person makes that influence their future life chances. The great and productive interest in the risk and protective factor model over the last three decades has tended to demote agency, treating the individual as a passive responder to the good and bad influences in his or her life. Yet, as young people exposed to the greatest disadvantage are often the first to say, “I was exposed to lots of challenges in life but I was the one who decided to take drugs and, if I am going to stop using them, it will down to me again”.

The challenge is to get beyond these first and – once they are said – somewhat obvious steps in the recovery of agency in models of child and adolescent development. As Tulane and Oxford philosopher Alison Denham said at one of our recent seminars, “So much of what we do is unchosen”. Few of our decisions are final: we shilly-shally. Relatively little of what we resolve to do reflects a scientific rational choice methodology that balances costs and benefits. Instead, we subject ourselves to unhelpful heuristics and our resolution too easily wilts in the heat of social expectation. Some of this can be seen in William Hansen and Jared Hansen’s analysis in this edition of the way that adolescents’ decision-making changes over the course of their development, and the bearing down of gender.

We also see a coming back to the role of emotions in child and adolescent well-being. Helena Russell and Joel Harvey take an important but traditional perspective by drawing out the impact on practitioners of supporting adolescents who are prone to sexually harmful behaviours. We anticipate that future research will go further and look at the role of emotions in the trajectories of children and adolescents.

For example, a recent enquiry undertaken by our unit into young people dealing with multiple risks at one time – being homeless and misusing substances and getting involved in crime – showed that many were driven away from the help that they needed by the sense of shame in their circumstances and behaviours. Their shame, just like our own shame, leads to hiding away from society. We also found that the young people were highly attuned to pity expressed by those who reached out to help them, and where they found it they once again recoiled.

Probe a little further and the role of emotions becomes a little more complicated. Some, reading our work, have commented that victims of maltreatment can see themselves as deserving of blame, which on first hearing sounds counterintuitive until one reflects that by accepting blame the victim recovers some agency for what has happened. There are emotions and there are manageable emotions. The former can wreak havoc with good decision-making and life chances, while the latter give the person in need of help – as well as those who provide that help – a fighting chance.

Agency and emotions are strongly implicated in what we are beginning to shorthand as “C2O”, or connection to outcomes, which is where we place the article by Ann Hagell and Stephanie Lamb on boosting the rate of referrals to a well-being centre for adolescents in London. In the last three decades, as articles in this journal clearly demonstrate, the primary interest has been in finding effective interventions. But if we cannot get people who can benefit from those interventions to the front door, if we cannot get them to participate, then any gains will be potential not real.

It should never become an alternative to discovering what works, but much greater scientific investment is needed in C20. In recent years our unit has come back to an issue we first addressed a long time ago, namely the matching of needs and services. Looking at social care, youth justice, mental health and special educational need systems we find that the majority of children and young people with high-end needs do not receive high-end services designed to meet those needs, and many, possibly the majority, of children and young people receiving high-end services do not have high-end needs.

In other words, there is a poor match between needs and services. We are thinking too much about the O for outcomes and not enough about the C for connection.

We are also intrigued by the potential to learn from complex situations such as those described by Jennifer Fraser and colleagues with respect to nurses' home visiting in rural Australia, and Anita Schrader-McMillan and Elsa Herrera with respect to street children. There is a burgeoning industry of expertise on complexity, and even theories, those dealing with system behaviour, for example.

At a more practical level we continue to be interested in the relationship between complexity and evaluation methods. More or less everything included in this Journal deals with complex phenomena. We don't get many submissions saying "Here is a straightforward problem, and here is the straightforward solution". But much of the complexity is organised, either by the nature of the phenomenon itself or by virtue of doing what scientists do well in "un-convoluting" matters. By organising the problem, the evaluation becomes more straightforward, often expressed as a series of sequential steps in the testing of hypotheses.

But much complexity is disorganised, meaning that we do not know enough to order it into manageable chunks. For example, in our collaboration with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, one product of which is Figure 1, we found ourselves trying to figure out why hospitals in India would not use simple antiseptics when cutting the umbilical cord of newborns, an intervention with the potential to save hundreds of thousands of lives. This was a complex problem, the complexity could not be organised and the foundation was not in the mood to give up. So it devised techniques to capitalise on the complexity, and those techniques demanded a different kind of evaluation, one that took account of feedback loops, that was interested in consumer satisfaction as a mechanism to achieve better outcomes, and that worked with a "test, fail, revise and test again" mentality, releasing results as soon as they were good to go.

In several respects all of the papers in this edition are dealing with disorganised complexity but all of the authors, like us, are hesitating before giving up on the orthodoxy of what we call "sequential evaluation".

Figure 1 The right tools for evaluating complexity

