Harmony and Societal Challenges: Empowering Communities

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We have to look at the whole picture to understand the problems we face … to [understand] the principles that produce the active state of balance which is just as vital to the health of the natural world as it is for human society.[1]

Introduction

This chapter reflects upon the principles of harmony outlined by H.R.H. the Prince of Wales as a method of responding to the challenges facing humanity. At the centre of this approach is the need to empower communities to address societal issues for sustainability and resilience. This chapter suggests a pragmatic response to building community capacity to achieve these goals. It outlines the community-based empowerment method of participatory appraisal (PA) which is embedded in the whole-systems perspective of the socio-ecological model. It describes both the quality and ethical role research can play in supporting this process. It is hoped this work will help to empower communities to respond to the call to action from H.R.H. the Prince of Wales to find sustainable solutions and quality partnerships for building community resilience to overcome societal challenges. This call from the Prince of Wales has arisen from his lifelong work in exploring solutions to tackle environmental and social problems. He defines harmony as both an active and balanced state, a dynamic equilibrium of tensions and forces, embedded within a socio-ecological systems perspective of interconnectivity. A key ingredient within this approach is the need to empower communities through the development of public and private-sector partnerships that meaningfully engage with the community using effective participation.[2]

The Entrenched Nature of Societal Problems

The Prince of Wales explains that 'For more than thirty years I have been working to identify the best solutions to the array of deeply entrenched problems we now face'.[3] He highlights the ingrained nature of societal problems which means their key features are that they are challenging, long-standing, difficult to change and

multifaceted. These characteristics can act as significant barriers to finding solutions or designing effective support interventions. For example, within the initial analysis of any societal problem, notions of linear pathways of cause and effect are not usually pertinent, due to the complex interactions from numerous components across multiple system dimensions.[4] At a later stage such components may be broken down and targeted, but at the start a linear model is too limited to understand the full picture. This is why a socio-ecological systems model is a useful starting point for gathering a holistic understanding of the whole system that the social issue resides within.

The Socio-Ecological Systems Model and Complex Systems Analysis

In the socio-ecological systems model, individual and intra/inter-personal relationships are interconnected to the local community as well as to broader societal factors. So there is a complex and dynamic interplay of multiple factors throughout a whole system, ranging from the individual to family and communities and including local and national influences from the wider society such as prevailing societal norms.[5] Mapping the full contextual detail including the range and impact of a problem from this systems perspective in order to understand the issue, and then from this work to also begin to find acceptable and feasible solutions, is complex and resource intensive. Challenges involve non-linear pathways, manifold influences and dynamic properties in the social systems that social issues both stem from and are embedded within.

One solution is to apply a complex systems lens which can accommodate these issues both for analysis purposes and social intervention design.[6] Furthermore, embedding an analytical dimension of sustainability helps in the exploration of socio-ecological system resilience and adaptation.[7] These concepts are informed by complexity science. Understanding the context for this work is therefore paramount, and requires input from multiple perspectives to generate a quality evidence base so that complex system intervention modelling provides effective solutions to the problem.[8]

Using Research to Ensure Quality and Ethics

Research has a key role to play in this complex socio-ecological systems informed process to ensure that the quality of the evidence-base, analysis, process evaluation and outcomes are fit-for-purpose for real-world social solutions. Another important factor that research brings to enhance this societally-focussed work is

ethics. This enables ethical principles and practice to be at the forefront as well as being embedded throughout the lifespan of a project. For example, through utilising the quality framework of social research, the core ethical principles from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) can be clearly activated. The focus of the ESRC is upon shaping society. Embedding its ethical principles in research activities is a strong and pragmatic way of both bringing and consolidating ethical values into society. This is why ethics in practice is a core strand of the ESRC's work which is specifically contextualised in each research project.[9]

A Transdisciplinary Research Approach

For research planning, harnessing the conceptual developments surrounding a transdisciplinary approach to complex societal challenges is one way forward.[10] This is when research is designed from across the boundaries of multiple disciplines, creating innovation and new conceptual frameworks.[11] It uses an array of methods for a collective approach to finding solutions to complex real-world issues. This stems from a collaborative dialogue involving researchers and other sectors of society.[12] It includes important and rich detail being shared by lay experts who have lived experience and knowledge of the context.

In this way, a working group of community stakeholders is brought together to facilitate multiple perspectives, knowledge and skills. Such a transdisciplinary approach has the potential to deliver a working model for the collaboration between public and private-sector partnerships, including non-governmental organisations and the community, in order to tackle societal issues. Managing inherent tensions and challenges within the transdisciplinary approach is necessary to this process.[13] One potential barrier is the structural inequalities that are present, with the potential for some stakeholders to have unequal status. There may also be challenges in interdisciplinary communication and knowledge hierarchies. Another barrier centres around the nature of shared knowledge generation and its validity, stemming from the realm of empirical epistemology and ontology. A further issue is in regards to having the knowledge and expertise in facilitating meaningful community participation. There is also the need to offer multiple and inclusive methods to facilitate community communication and ensure equality of access. Additional barriers reside in having the capacity to build the conceptual frameworks for this work for quality research purposes. From the outset these types of potential barriers should be rendered visible by being brought to the stakeholder discussion table so they are planned for, delineated and actively managed.

Participatory Appraisal

A research method that is suitable for transdisciplinary research, and which can address some of its potential barriers, is *participatory appraisal* (PA). This can incorporate multiple stakeholder perspectives and shared knowledge generation, facilitating equality of access. It is traditionally used within a community-based and localised problem-solving approach to community development.[14] PA creates knowledge in a way that aligns with many of the elements of a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge generation for real-world solutions. For example, PA enables dialogue and input from community laypeople stakeholders, other community organisational stakeholders and community research stakeholders, centred upon the context and real world of where the question/problem resides. This incorporates analysis on a number of levels (for example, from the laypeople's analysis of the current situation, through to researchers' post analysis of the research data within academic research validity, integrity and ethical protocols) which can lead to shared and real-world solutions.[15] Furthermore, a proactive stance is taken at the outset with measures in place to actively address the potential power imbalances that may arise within the process.

PA stems from *participatory rural appraisal*.[16] This was a participatory approach designed for use in rural development agency work from the 1970s onwards. It empowered local people within their communities to unlock their own wealth of expertise from locally situated information to find local solutions to solve local issues. There is a rich history of PA being used to help deliver meaningful participation in democracy, decision-making and governance.[17] PA facilitates perspectives, enabling shared learning and appraisal by the community upon the specific topic under investigation.[18] This is achieved through the use of a highly trained and quality facilitator who enables these goals to be met.[19]

Key facilitation methods include group cohesion activities and rapport building; the use of secondary sources; semi-structured interviewing and creative and visual-based participatory exercises such as participatory diagramming; and focus groups.[20] This way of working is undertaken to draw upon local expert knowledge about a community-based problem and to help provide community solutions to community issues. Through its key methods, PA engenders intensive and rich quality data and encompasses the complexity of the lived social reality under investigation.[21]

The participatory process that is produced by PA may also mean that the knowledge is acceptable to the community setting it is created within, in that it is based on the community's perspectives of the issue/problem. This may help lead the

new knowledge to be implemented within the real world setting, as the knowledge is accepted by the community due to the participatory way it has been generated.[22] The community stakeholder partnership relationships that have developed over time within the initial community research enterprise can also aid this work.[23] For example, the research institution that has established the research stakeholder partnerships in the project will have the expertise in facilitating knowledge exchange and its impact, which can be drawn upon and activated. Applying this additional pragmatic dimension, which includes whether a solution to a societal issue is both acceptable and feasible, to the community, and also the success or failure of the uptake of this new knowledge within the community, is part of implementation science. A model design that uses a 'top down' expert approach with little community involvement or no community partnerships risks the construction of systemic barriers to tackling complex social issues. Some of these barriers will include uptake failure and the work not being fit-for-purpose as its causal assumptions will be flawed due to the lack of community-based stakeholders, perspectives and input.[24]

Law and Community Empowerment in Wales

A final brief reflection within this article is to draw attention to the point that in Wales there is an increasingly strong current within education, health and social care legislative frameworks to give a mandate to the use of community participation and empowerment for tackling societal challenges. Two examples are those of the *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014*, and the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*, where a collaborative community empowerment approach is a key objective, both for working preventatively as well as in finding solutions. All the public bodies in Wales named in both these Acts are directed to work in this way.

In conclusion, engaging in community empowerment is now legally mandated as the way forward for our society. This support from legislation gives legal weight and purpose to revisiting any challenges stemming from ontology and epistemology.[25] As is already acknowledged within transdisciplinary research, we must now continue to extend the frontiers of our knowledge and generate new paradigms that are fit-for-purpose to accommodate these new developments.

As a starting point in beginning this work, in order to find answers that deliver sustainable solutions, we must first create quality community partnerships that can help to build capacity in community empowerment. This is work in which universities can and should play their full part as higher-level public research and education institutions.

NOTES

[1] H.R.H. Prince of Wales, T. Juniper and I. Skelly, *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2010), p. 5.

[2] H.R.H. Prince of Wales, T. Juniper and I. Skelly, Harmony; H.R.H. Prince of Wales, *A speech by HRH the Prince of Wales on Health and the Environment delivered at The Cathedral of the Assumption, Louisville, Kentucky* (2015) at https://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speech/speech-hrh-prince-wales-health-and-environment-delivered-cathedral-assumption-louisville [accessed 22 March 2019].

[3] H.R.H. Prince of Wales, T. Juniper, and I. Skelly, *Harmony,* p.3.

[4] Medical Research Centre, *Developing and Evaluating Complex Interventions* (London: Medical Research Centre, 2008) and M. Petticrew, 'When are complex interventions "complex"? When are simple interventions "simple"?', *European Journal of Public Health*, 21, 4 (2011): pp. 397-398.

[5] See U. Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development. Experiments by nature and design.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) and U. Bronfenbrenner, 'Environments in developmental perspective. Theoretical and operational models' in S. L. Friedman and T.D. Wachs (eds.) *Measuring environment across the lifespan. Emerging methods and concepts* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 1999), pp. 3-28.

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[7] See E. Ostrom, 'A general framework for analyzing sustainability of social-ecological systems', *Science,* 325, 5939 (2009): pp. 419-422; M. Ungar, 'Social ecologies and their contribution to resilience', in M. Ungar, (ed.) *The Social Ecology of Resilience. A Handbook of Theory and Practice* (London: Springer, 2013), pp.13-32; M. Ungar, 'Systemic resilience: principles and processes for a science of change in contexts of adversity', *Ecology and Society,* 23, 4:34 (2018): https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-10385-230434; M. Rutter, 'Resilience. Causal pathways and social ecology' in M. Ungar, (ed.) *The Social Ecology of Resilience. A Handbook of Theory and Practice* (London: Springer, 2013), pp. 33-42 and J. Hinkel, P.W.G. Bots, and M. Schlüter, 'Enhancing the Ostrom social-ecological system framework through formalization', *Ecology and Society,* 19, 3, 51 (2014): http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-06475-190351.

[8] P. Craig, E. Di Ruggiero, K.L. Frohlich, E. Mykhalovskiy and M. White, on behalf of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) – National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Context Guidance Authors Group. *Taking account of context in population health intervention research: guidance for producers, users and funders of research* (Southampton: NIHR Evaluation, Trials and Studies Coordinating Centre, 2018).

[9] Economic and Social Research Council, 'Impact Toolkit', (2019) at https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/ [Accessed 25 March 2019].

[10] See M. Stauffacher; A.I. Walter; D.J. Lang; A. Wiek and R.W. Scholz, 'Learning to Research Environmental Problems from a Functional Socio-cultural Constructivism Perspective. The Transdisciplinary Case Study Approach', *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education,* 7, 3 (2006): pp. 252-275; Schoon and van der Leeuw, 'The shift toward social-ecological systems perspectives' and J. Weichselgartner and B. Truffer,

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[11] Harvard School of Public Health 'Definitions. Transdisciplinary Research. (2019) at https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/trec/about-us/definitions/ [accessed 26 March 2019].

[12] See C. Pohl, 'Transdisciplinary collaboration in environmental research', *Futures,* 37 (2005): pp. 1159-1178; C. Pohl, 'What is progress in transdisciplinary research? *Futures*, 43 (2011): pp. 618–626 and S.L.T. McGregor, 'Transdisciplinary knowledge creation' in P. T. Gibbs (ed.) *Transdisciplinary Professional Learning and Practice* (New York, NY: Springer, 2015), pp. 9-24.

[13] See Schoon and van der Leeuw, 'The shift toward social-ecological systems perspectives' and M.A. Thompson; S. Owen; J.M. Lindsay; G.S. Leonard and S.J. Cronin, 'Scientist and stakeholder perspectives of transdisciplinary research. Early attitudes, expectations, and tensions', *Environmental Science and Policy,* 74 (2017): pp. 30-39.

[14] J. Theis, and H.M. Grady, *Participatory Rapid Appraisal. A Training Manual Based on Experiences in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: International Institute for Environment and Development; Save the Children Federation, 1991).

[15] See Pohl, 'Transdisciplinary collaboration in environmental research' and D. Boyd, M. Buizer, R. Schibeci and C. Baudains, 'Prompting transdisciplinary research. Promising futures for using the performance metaphor in research', *Futures,* 65 (2014): pp. 175-184.

[16] R. Chambers, *Rural Appraisal: rapid, relaxed and participatory*. Discussion Paper 311 (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 1992).

[17] See IIED, *PLA Notes 40. Deliberative Democracy and Citizen Empowerment* (London: IIED, 2001); G. Mohan, 'Participatory Development: From Epistemological Reversals to Active Citizenship', *Geography Compass*, 1 (2007): pp. 779–796. doi:10.1111/j.1749-8198.2007.00038.x and IIED, 'PLA 44: Local Government and Participation' (2018) at https://www.iied.org/pla-44-local-government-participation [accessed 25 March 2019].

[18] Chambers, *Rural Appraisal*.

[19] See Chambers, *Rural Appraisal;* R.Chambers, 'Participatory rural appraisal (PRA): analysis of experience', *World Development*, 22 (1994): pp. 1253-68; R. Chambers, 'Participatory rural appraisal (PRA): challenges, potentials and paradigm', *World Development,* 22 (1994): pp. 1437-54; J.N. Pretty, I. Guijt, I. Scoones and J. Thompson, *IIED Participatory Methodology Series. Participatory Learning and Action: A Trainer's Guide* (London: International Institute for Environment and Development, 1995) and R. Chambers, *Whose reality counts? Putting the last first* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997).

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[21] For data see Chambers, *Rural Appraisal*. Also see J. Bergold, and S. Thomas, 'Participatory research methods: A methodological approach in motion', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13, 1, Art 30 (2010); R. Chambers, 'From rapid to reflective: 25 years of Participatory Learning and Action', *Participatory Learning and Action,* 66 (2013): pp. 12-15 and S. Laws; C. Harper; N. Jones and R. Marcus, *Research for Development. A Practical Guide* (London: SAGE Publications, 2013).

[22] Stauffacher et al., 'Learning to Research Environmental Problems'.

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[25] Schoon and van der Leeuw, 'The shift toward social-ecological systems perspectives'.