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Institutionalising social learning: Towards systemic and adaptive governance

Raymond L. Ison^{a,b,*}, Kevin B. Collins^a, Philip J. Wallis^b

^a Applied Systems Thinking in Practice Research Group, Engineering & Innovation Department, The Open University, UK

^b Systemic Governance Research Program, Monash Sustainability Institute, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines how public policy makers limit policy and other institutional design choices by a failure to appreciate (i) how situations may be characterised or framed; (ii) how practices that generate neologisms (invented terms or concepts) or reify (make into a thing) abstract concepts can displace understandings, and (iii) the epistemological bases of governance mechanism choices. An inquiry into the coining of the neologisms ‘wicked’ and ‘tame’ problems is reported and the implications for research and policy practice explored. As practices, neologising, reifying, categorising and typologising have unintended consequences – they remove us from the primary experiences and underlying emotions that provided the motivation for formulating these concepts in the first place. The failure to institutionalise the understandings and experiences that sit behind the invention of the terms ‘wicked’ and ‘tame’ problems (or similar framing choices such as ‘problematique’, ‘messes’, ‘lowland real-life swamps’, ‘resource dilemmas’ or ‘complex adaptive systems’) present systemic constraints to institutionalising social learning as an alternative yet complementary governance mechanism within an overall systemic and adaptive governance framework. Ultimately situations usefully framed as ‘wicked’, such as water managing and climate change are problems of relationship – of human beings with the biosphere. Re-framings, such as institutions as social technologies and other research and praxis traditions concerned with the breakdown of relationships may offer ways forward in the purposeful designing and crafting of more effective institutions.

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1. The problematique

Thompson and Warburton (1985) once sensibly set out to find out what was wrong with the Himalayas, acknowledging that the problem was to know what the problem was. Underlying their work (see also Thompson, 1993) was an appreciation that

scientific research and policy options incorporate social constructions of reality based on certain sets of assumptions that frame how a situation is understood. It follows that a particular framing, a perspective for making sense of a situation (Schön and Rein, 1994), leads to particular sets of acceptable practices and actions offered as suitable responses or ‘solutions’. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in

* Corresponding author at: Systemic Governance Research Program, Monash Sustainability Institute, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, Australia. Tel.: +61 404 308 180.

E-mail addresses: Ray.Ison@monash.edu (R.L. Ison), Kevin.Collins@open.ac.uk (K.B. Collins), Phil.Wallis@monash.edu (P.J. Wallis).

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climate change debates. While there is growing agreement globally that climate and thus water, health, food security and the like are ‘problems’, their nature and scope and the means of engagement with, and ‘solutions’ to, them are highly contested (Hulme, 2009; Hussey and Dovers, 2007; Giddens, 2009; Warner, 2007). Tompkins et al. (2008) argue that “the complexity of the climate change problem and the uncertainty about the timing, severity, magnitude and type of impacts makes planning for climate change a challenge” (p. 1580). ‘Climate change adaptation’ and the ‘global water crisis’ are, in many respects, the new Himalayas.

Consistent with Thompson and Warburton’s (1985) conclusion that institutional innovation is central to transforming complex issues, we address the conceptual foundations of, and politics involved in, purposeful institutional change to effect transformations towards more systemic governance of social–biophysical systems. We employ the distinctions systemic, meaning pertaining to a whole, and systematic meaning linear, sequential or step-by-step. In line with the purpose of this special issue we understand institutional change to involve the deliberate, or purposeful, replacement of existing formal and informal institutions or the creation of new institutions in a socially desired way (Thiel et al., 2015). In other words, changing institutions is a form of praxis (theory-informed practical action); this praxis can be understood as *crafting or designing institutions*. But we will argue that transformation towards governance regimes that are more systemic and adaptive is more than crafting the new; crafting also requires innovations in understandings and practice of those who do crafting. Crafting may also involve clearing the situation of old, constraining institutions and appreciating extant institutional complexity (Wallis and Ison, 2011). Institutions mediate the relational dynamics between a social and biophysical system (cf. Ison et al., 2007) and also act as a form of ‘understandscope’ on the world we experience because institutions tend to contain (reify) understandings that were prevalent when the institutions were first invented. As in metaphor theory (Ison et al., 2013), institutions can be understood to have theoretical entailments that influence how people think and act. A good example is how the mainstream, ‘common’, understanding of ‘performance management’ institutions (e.g., key performance indicators) survive and flourish despite theoretical and evidence-based assessments which argue against their use (Lowe, 2013).

Using the metaphor of the Himalayas is a form of framing (Schön and Rein, 1994). How situations are framed is a choice that can be made. This applies also when framing a situation as ‘a problem’, rather than say ‘an opportunity’, or ‘contested issue’. Framing choices, knowingly or not, direct thinking and practice. For example, the so called ‘problems’ of food security and global water managing have, when grounded in specific situations, many of the features attributed to complex and uncertain social planning situations that systems scholars experienced in the 1960s and 1970s. These scholars coined particular neologisms (invented terms) as a means of describing and explaining the situations they experienced. Turkish cybernetician, Hasan Ozbekhan, introduced the idea of the ‘problematique’ to refer to the ‘bundle of problems’ that the Club of Rome wished to address in the late 1960s; this concept subsequently became central to *The Limits to Growth*

report (Moll, 1991). The ‘problematique’ came to represent the special character of the problems the Club of Rome intended to investigate:

“First, these problems could not be solved within electoral cycles because of their long-term characteristics; second, they could not be solved within individual countries because of their global scale; third, these problems could not be considered separately, because they constituted interacting ‘clusters of problems’. The ‘problematique’ thus summed up this inextricable net of long-term and global-scale problems” (Blanchard, 2010, p. 97)

Latterly, the term ‘resource dilemmas’ was coined to describe uncertain and contested natural resource management (NRM) situations (discussed in Ison et al., 2007). Earlier systems scholars coined other terms to describe similar situations. These include ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973), ‘messes’ (Ackoff, 1974a,b), or the ‘swamp of real-life issues’ (Schön, 1995). What these scholars also did was to recognise that some situations were much more tractable and more open to the tools of traditional engineering and science and they named these situations as ‘tame problems’, ‘difficulties’ and the ‘high ground of technical rationality’, respectively. But, knowingly or not, what Rittel, Webber, Ackoff and Schön did was to create a classificatory system based on their personal experiences as well as invoke a set of distinctions that have been widely interpreted as dualisms. A dualism is a self-negating pair, much like the concepts objective and subjective. A dualism leads to an either/or choice in which the act of making the choice is a negation of the other. In contrast a duality is a pair that together forms a whole, such as the concepts predator/prey. Unfortunately, in science, the act of naming through a neologism creates a noun, and thus a ‘thing’, out of a description or explanation. The noun becomes a form of shorthand, but one which is devoid of the experience that is embedded in the description, to all those who follow and use it. Institutions that are based on typologies or classificatory schemas often exacerbate the effects of reifying nouns, e.g., the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment exercise (Hubert and Ison, 2011).

The practice of inventing neologisms continues with, for example, ‘complex adaptive systems’ (Cilliers, 1998) and ‘social–ecological systems’ (Holling, 1973). Another neologism is ‘social learning’ which is used in many, often contested ways but which Ison et al. (2013) understand as a combination of both process and entity, i.e., a duality that combines the dynamics of practice with a governance framing that is supportive of the practice. We will argue, in terms of systemic governance, that dualisms are unhelpful. Instead we raise the possibility of new forms of governance praxis by exploring framing choices that act as a duality rather than a dualism. The pair systemic/systematic understood as a duality in relation to practice is, we contend, more suited to managing a co-evolutionary dynamic such as that between humans and the biosphere (Collins and Ison, 2009a,b; Ison, 2010). Our use of co-evolution of social and biophysical systems is a framing choice which we think has contemporary relevance because of the systemic, relational dynamics such a framing reveals. We

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