

This essay won the UKES/Tavistock Institute Dione Hill Prize for the best short paper on the application of complexity-informed thinking in the field of evaluation, December 2021. It is published in "The Evaluator", Spring 2022 and reproduced here with kind permission of the UKES/Tavistock Institute. Please acknowledge this in any citation or use.

Be a participant, not a spectator – new territories for evaluation

Dione Hills contributed to the HM Treasury Magenta Book supplementary guide on *Handling Complexity in Policy Evaluation*.¹ This single line of advice from that guide stands out: *'Stakeholders may have different views on complexity and appropriate evaluation strategies, so expectations and assumptions will need to be managed carefully.'*² It seems measured, if not understated. Bringing this advice to life is skilled and difficult work and it can be hard to even get started.

My focus here is on the realities of evaluating in complexity where 'nothing is clear, and everything keeps changing'.³ I outline how I use a series of 'provocations' that allow people to choose their own starting point. Sharing those choices fuels conversations that discover, explore, and co-create (rather than manage) our mutual expectations and assumptions and track how these might themselves be influenced by the work as it unfolds. This account draws on a review of literature and my practice experience, including reflections from others brought into local, national, and international conversations about what it means for evaluation to recognise complexity.

When I think of complexity, I recognise the 'wicked' problems that public policy seeks to tackle; the intractable, perhaps unsolvable issues, where there is no clear relationship between cause and effect.⁴ I have witnessed the stubbornness and reappearance of 'old issues' in similar guises. Working across the public service landscape exposes many added layers, where complexity is generated by the services and organisational systems, and relationships amongst and between them. Recognising this complexity, we cannot assume that solutions to problems are known, or that the context is stable and provides the conditions under which 'best practice' can be replicated.

My perspectives come from a varied career of research, policy, commissioning, and teaching, followed by mid-life immersion in action research. Hearing that *'the point of research should be to talk to each other about what we ought to be doing'* as a would-be action researcher certainly upended a few of my own assumptions, with the refreshing emphasis on dialogue, collaboration, purpose, values, and action.⁵ Almost 20 years ago, when I first heard this phrase, I felt like I had

metaphorically though cheerfully fallen off my bike. Back on track and reflecting now, it seems to speak to an honesty and humility required of all of us working in a complexity-informed and coherent way, as we seek to bring new qualities to our talking to each other about our various and shared visions of a better future.

It's worth saying a little about how I see the context before outlining a potentially useful way forward.

High expectations of evidence

Advice to manage expectations is not new, yet, in the context of complexity, we need a more thorough exploration and fundamental rethink of many of our current premises of research and evaluation. Along with the stakeholders whose expectations and assumptions we are advised to manage, we are still grappling with our own deep-rooted thinking about evidence and evaluation. Expectations are often tacit and have a habit of coming to light towards the end of an evaluation.

High expectations of evidence-based or informed practice persist despite the greater recognition of complexity. These expectations sit awkwardly alongside ideas about: knowledge co-production, the role of collective or distributed (rather than heroic) models of leadership, evaluative thinking and action research that recognises that change happens as people use their creativity and generate adaptive solutions that make sense locally.

Embedded assumptions about what we can claim for our intervening, what is valid evidence, what transfers and how we go to scale, act as barriers to evaluation in complexity. These assumptions underpin the consequent relegation of community perspectives, lived experience and practice-based evidence.

People and politics

Despite some promising shifts in thinking and warm policy rhetoric about collaboration, co-production and action research, there's a clear bottom-line. Funders and commissioners still want to be confident that they will achieve value for their investment or that public money will be used well. This is an important concern; there is still significant over-investment in types of evaluation where any lessons that might be useful for practice are brought in too late or the approach adopted is insufficiently agile to respond to changing circumstances or emergent learning.

Interventions or programmes in public services are rarely implemented in isolation; almost all initiatives will be aligned with existing or concurrent programmes that seek similar ends. Some contemporary programme theories still rest on the shaky ground that demonstration of savings will be possible, and that subsequently, such evidence will influence the political redirection of resources.

In thinking about stakeholders, we must address power and organisational cultural dynamics. The most senior people (who have ultimate responsibility for accountabilities) are rarely included in the discussions about evaluation design and appropriate measures. Strategic leaders have little time for lengthy reports. Assumptions, whether philosophical or practical, are rarely examined. What might be an honest and productive dialogue about mutual expectations of evidence is muted or delegated, whatever the rhetoric of wanting to work differently. In such situations, the old ways of measurement reimpose themselves through performance frameworks that bear little relation to the actual work in hand and, anyway, do not measure the changes needed. In this culture, evaluation becomes synonymous with the high-stakes measurement of pre-defined outcomes. Fear of perceived failure and the real risk of loss of funding creates a culture of gaming and superficial evaluation at the expense of genuine learning that recognises good work and supports change.

More positively, recognition of these kinds of issues feeds the undoubted appetite for developmental, collaborative, and embedded approaches to evaluation that recognise complexity, better reflect deeply held values and support genuine inquiry and learning.

Navigation aids and new working assumptions

Ten years ago, Gro Emmertsen Lund outlined a call for '5th generation evaluation' that would better reflect the paradigm shift brought by complexity and the wider recognition of the social construction of knowledge.⁶

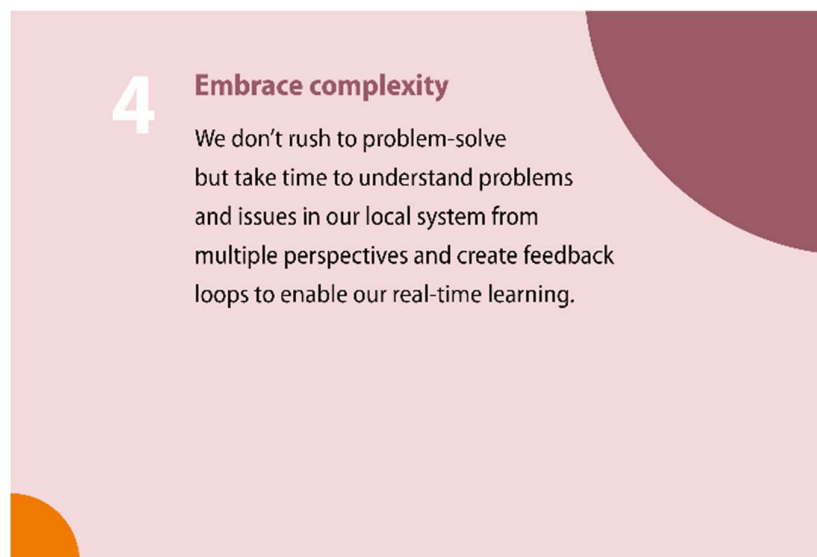
My more recent report explored complexity, evaluative thinking, collaborative inquiry, appreciative inquiry, and action research and summarised some of the key working assumptions of this prospective 'new territory for evaluation'.⁷ It concludes with a series of twenty-four 'provocative propositions', symbolic statements used to provoke or generate thinking and action, made in bold, positive terms to stretch, challenge and encourage innovation.⁸ They are future-forming and action focused, relational and appreciative, promote collaborative inquiry and explore participation, co-

production and knowledge co-creation. In framing the provocations, I am particularly indebted to the development of systemic learning and action research by SOLAR and the model and experience of appreciative action research.^{9,10}

As a practical tool, the provocations help us to navigate the conversations we need to have to help groups explore their own explicit and tacit understandings and negotiate compromises to co-create a bespoke covenant of values, principles, and practices of how they wish to work together.

I have worked with these provocations several times in the last few years, usually with people working in public services, whether as evaluators, practitioners or policy makers and including at a World Congress of Appreciative Inquiry, a Scottish Evaluation Network event and at the Collective Leadership and Leadership-as-Practice Global Campfires in September 2021. Usually, I ask people to pick a small number that excite, interest, or resonate with them. Whether face-to-face or online, they give people plenty to talk about and always create a buzz.

By selecting and sharing something of my own response to a small number of them, I invite readers to notice what's affirming or creates resistance in their own response and how they anticipate others might respond if they were part of a group process.

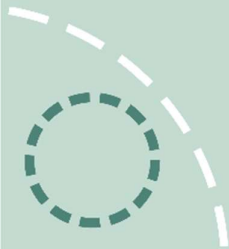


A recent participant commented that *'often we pay lip service to complexity, and then act like it doesn't exist.'* Acknowledging this, we might then explore what it would mean if we did recognise it.

2

Be practical and pragmatic

Learning is available to us in the very work that we are involved in as we engage and improvise around uncertain and complex problems in our work environment or community.



The idea of building inquiry into living systems, generating practical wisdom from the work that we are involved in, and becoming observers of experience, might help us address the reasons that so many change-efforts fail. Responding to the importance of such testing out, a participant commented: *‘involving people who potentially would not normally be at the coal face of change - the results and learning and development growth for people in organisations can be incredible.’*

11

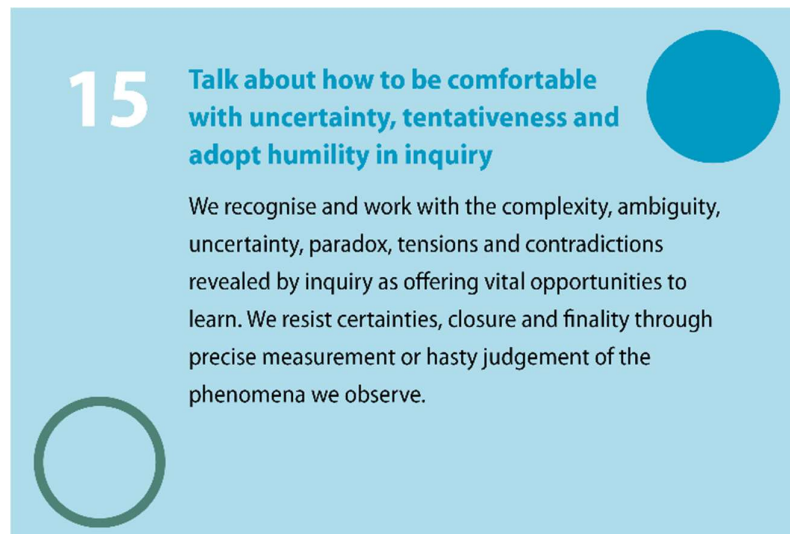
Promote appreciative dialogue

We seek to understand what is working well and what is valued in the ‘here and now’ to support emergence and explore aspirations. This understanding is the foundation for the future and having fresh eyes and ears helps to check whether our existing practices support and motivate us in our vision to build a better future. We recognise that ‘improvement’ may not always be needed.



Exploring achievements, what we each value in the here and now, as well as our difficulties, is a positive form of disruption to norms and expectations which is immensely powerful and motivating, even if it can feel quite odd to begin with. An appreciative stance goes beyond the idea of positivity, to value more explicit forms of inquiry, explore language and recognise strengths and contributions, so building participants’ aspirations to design and embed change. It helps to

overcome inhibitions about acknowledging emotion and discussion of values, both so important to embedding change.

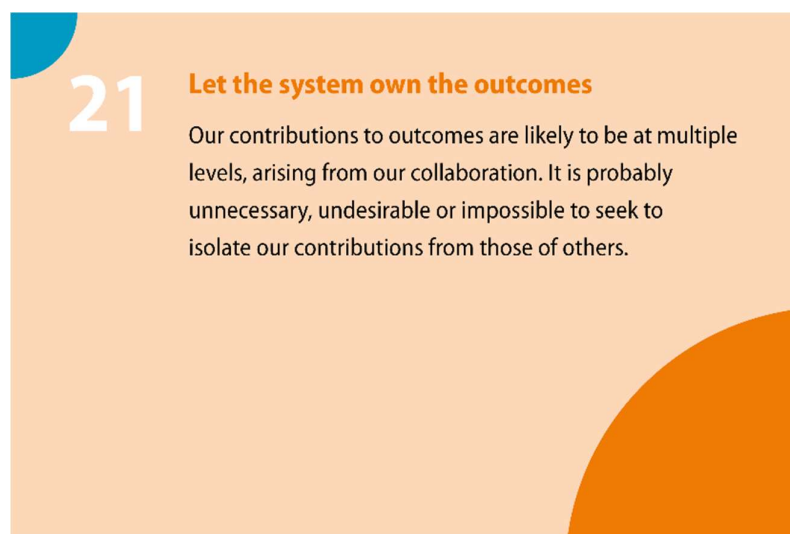


15 **Talk about how to be comfortable with uncertainty, tentativeness and adopt humility in inquiry**

We recognise and work with the complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, paradox, tensions and contradictions revealed by inquiry as offering vital opportunities to learn. We resist certainties, closure and finality through precise measurement or hasty judgement of the phenomena we observe.

The box features a solid blue circle in the top right and a green-outlined circle in the bottom left.

If we are to adopt the Treasury advice, we need honest discussions about what feels difficult, what is real and possible, and what reassurance we each need to enable us to work differently. All of this can feel very uncomfortable and at times, I have walked a tightrope, wanting to act with integrity and honesty, clashing with a funder's desire to have 'deliverables.' Yet, what is revealed in such conversations is rich and important learning. An understanding of what is behind what matters most to people, might enable us to reach a compromise where each party feels understood and can move forward.



21 **Let the system own the outcomes**

Our contributions to outcomes are likely to be at multiple levels, arising from our collaboration. It is probably unnecessary, undesirable or impossible to seek to isolate our contributions from those of others.

The box features a blue curved shape in the top left and a solid orange curved shape in the bottom right.

The idea of letting ‘the system’ own the outcomes feels particularly important given the need to recognise and work alongside existing initiatives and programmes. It may help us to consider how greater alignment could boost the prospects of positive impact for all. Amongst the Scottish Evaluation Network group was a desire not to lose a focus on outcomes, because they serve to articulate shared purposes and goals. ‘The system’ is of course an abstraction; the statement challenges us to let go of a desire to attribute impact or isolate contributions, but to share credit, and be accountable for our learning, rather than for specific outcomes.

To draw to a close with a personal note, I reflect that writing this piece has been a helpful form of meaning-making in quite a turbulent time. My live experience of the dissonance between the rhetoric about a desire to work differently and the reality reminds me that this is, perhaps always, a work in progress. Yet, it is both important and doable to find ways to talk about these issues.

I hope this short exposition demonstrates how these provocations might help us to co-create, explore, and subsequently track our mutual expectations, rooted in an ethic of care, where we pay attention to ourselves and the people we work with as moral agents, to the trust and relationships between us, and the unconditional responsibilities we have towards each other. Ultimately, the test of the provocations is in the quality of the conversations they inspire. The invitation to become an active participant rather than spectator of evaluation, is itself a significant disruption to prevailing expectations and assumptions, and an opportunity to build a relational evaluative practice and culture of collaborative inquiry.

Dr Cathy Sharp, *Research for Real*, November 2021

Endnotes

¹ HM Treasury (2020) Supplementary Guide: Handling Complexity in Policy Evaluation.

² HM Treasury *ibid.* p.26

³ Sharp, C (2018) Collective Leadership: Where Nothing is Clear and Everything Keeps Changing - Exploring new territories for evaluation, Collective Leadership Scotland <http://tinyurl.com/y6vll2hp>

⁴ Grint, K (2008). Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: The Role of Leadership. Cranfield University.

⁵ This paraphrase was made by Peter Reason, at the University of Bath in 2002. The original quote is ‘We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring consensus on the end to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behaviour is not inquiry but simply wordplay’. Rorty, R. 1999, Philosophy and social hope. London: Penguin Books.

⁶ Lund, G E (2011) Fifth generation evaluation, <https://bit.ly/3Bawyxy> Lund, G.E. (2011). Femte generations evaluering. I: EvalueringsNyt 27. udgave, juli, 2011.

⁷ Sharp, C (2018) *ibid.* pp 50-55

⁸ The provocations are numbered simply to distinguish them from each other. The full set is available here [RfR- Provocative Propositions.pdf \(research-for-real.co.uk\)](#) and a slightly different animated format is available here [Provocative Propositions – Collective Leadership for Scotland \(collectiveleadershipscotland.com\)](#)

⁹ SOLAR (Social and Organisational Learning as Action Research), features here: Sharp, C and Balogh, R (2021) Becoming Participatory: some contributions to action research in the UK, in Burns, D., Howard, J. and Ospina, S. M. (eds) The Sage Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry pp. 154-168

¹⁰ Sharp, C (2018) *ibid.* pp.48-49