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When Everything Interacts with Everything Else: Intervening in Messes¹

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¹ The authors would like to thank Professor Philip Phan and two anonymous reviewers for their support in the development of this manuscript

When Everything Interacts with Everything Else: Intervening in Messes

Abstract

There is growing interest among management scholars, policy makers and practitioners in understanding and addressing deep-seated societal problems, often termed ‘wicked problems’, ‘grand challenges’ or ‘messes.’ An expansive body of research and practice-based literature has appeared with little evidence to-date of synthesis across research streams, tools and practices. We also note a bifurcation between management scholarship and practice in this area that hinders cumulative learning and cross-fertilization to inform practice and policy questions. In this paper, we introduce the RAFFT framework composed of five inter-related themes that underpin messiness (rules, agency, feedback, frames and tensions), and are grounded in knowledge triangulated across thought worlds from research and practice. Supported by illustrative examples from research and practice., we present this heuristic framework as both a diagnostic tool and an intervention repertoire. We hope that this framework can serve as a starting point for further development by researchers and practitioners working more closely together to build cumulative knowledge.

Key words: Wicked Problems; Grand Challenges; Messes; Complexity; Rules; Agency; Frames; Feedback; Paradox

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4 With ever-increasing intensity in recent years, management scholars, policy makers and
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6 practitioners have been working to understand and address major societal issues traversing
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8 organizational boundaries. Issues such as these have been variously labeled ‘wicked problems’
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10 (Rittel & Webber, 1973), ‘messes’ (Ackoff, 1997), or ‘grand challenges’ (Brammer et al., 2019;
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12 Ferraro et al., 2015; Howard-Grenville & Spengler, 2022). The notion of ‘wicked problem’ (Rittel
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14 & Webber, 1973) refers to intractable policy issues that involve multiple stakeholders,
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16 interorganizational cooperation and fragmented knowledge (Head & Alford, 2015). ‘Mess’ is an
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18 evocative term coined by Ackoff (1997, p. 427) for a system of inter-related issues that cannot be
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20 easily decomposed into isolated pieces. The term ‘grand challenge,’ has similar connotations. For
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22 example, Ferraro et al. (2015, p. 364) describe grand challenges as complex (involving multiple
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24 interactions, emergence and non-linear dynamics), as implying ‘radical uncertainty’ (impossibility
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26 of predicting future outcomes) and as evaluative (crossing jurisdictional boundaries with varying
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28 value criteria). All three of these notions imply complex inter-related problems involving
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30 stakeholders with varying values and interests, characterized by non-linear causation and
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32 unpredictability. We therefore use the different labels interchangeably in this paper.
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38 While the term ‘wicked problem’ dates back to the 1970s, the increasing turbulence and
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40 interconnectedness of our world over recent decades has intensified preoccupations with them,
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42 multiplied their impact in some cases, and has made some of them appear more urgent. The Covid-
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44 19 pandemic is one such topical issue bringing messiness to the fore because, as Brammer et al.
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46 (2020) argue, it overflows from the confines of the public health system to both amplify and
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48 interact with a wide range of other societal issues and problems including economic prosperity,
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50 global supply chains, access to healthcare, racial inequity, and poverty. Many sectors are thus
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52 implicated, with varying interests and priorities that collide in some cases. Climate change is also
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