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Innovative Applications of O.R.

Blending systems thinking approaches for organisational analysis: Reviewing child protection in England

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the innovative use of a blend of systems thinking ideas in the 'Munro Review of Child Protection', a high-profile examination of child protection activities in England, conducted for the Department for Education. We go 'behind the scenes' to describe the OR methodologies and processes employed. The circumstances that led to the Review are then described. First, the systems-based analysis and visualisation of how a 'compliance culture' had grown up. Second the creation of a large, complex systems map of current operations and the effects of past policies on them. Third, how the map gave shape to the range of issues the Review addressed and acted as an organising framework for the systemically coherent set of recommendations made. The paper closes with an outline of the main implementation steps taken so far to create a child protection system with the critically reflective properties of a learning organisation, and methodological reflections on the benefits of systems thinking to support organisational analysis.

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1. Introduction

This paper goes 'behind the scenes' of a Government-initiated review of a sector of the public services in England: the child protection system. The 'Munro Review of Child Protection' employed a blend of systems thinking approaches to examine the activities, culture, effectiveness and social relations of the child protection sector. We go beyond the officially reported outcomes of that Review to give an account of the OR methodologies and processes used.

The paper proceeds as follows. We introduce the structure and problems of the child protection system. We then describe the approach taken by the Review, concentrating on its use of systems ideas. We turn to three contributions that systems thinking made to the Review and the resulting recommendations. We close the paper with a report on implementation and with methodological reflections on the utility of systems approaches.

2. Setting the scene

Here we describe the context of the work discussed in this paper. We introduce the child protection system in England, describe the daily, risk-balancing judgements that have to be made and outline

some of the concerns that had arisen regarding the functioning of the system.

2.1. Child protection

In England, the child protection system – or just 'child protection' – is a collection of primarily state-administered services involved in protecting vulnerable children and young people from harm and promoting their welfare. This includes investigating cases of maltreatment and intervening in such cases. Here 'maltreatment' includes neglect (a failure to safeguard from harm or provide for basic physical and psychological needs), psychological/emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse (Waterhouse, 2008). Although the system concerns itself with 0–18 year olds, for simplicity we use 'child' and 'children' throughout.

In England child protection is led by local government, which is responsible for the children in its area and which employs social workers in dedicated 'Children's Social Care' departments. However, 'child protection' also involves a range of other public agencies (schools, health authorities, police) and voluntary organisations. Local government therefore has a statutory responsibility to convene 'local safeguarding children boards' (LSCBs) with the aim of co-ordinating 'multi-agency working' to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Child protection activities are overseen by the Department for

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Education and inspected by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills).

The scale of activities is noteworthy. Within a twelve months period, for a population of 12.3 million 0–18 year olds, the statistics for Children's Social Care show that there were: 607,500 referrals (reports of concern from a range of individuals); 390,600 'Initial Assessments'; 141,500 'Core Assessments' (more detailed explorations of the problems); and 35,700 'Child Protection Plans' put in place (packages of measures aimed at safeguarding children in the family environment) (DfE statistics quoted in [Munro, 2010](#), p. 27 & footnote 37).

Safeguarding children from all forms of maltreatment is the overarching aim. The most extreme form of maltreatment leads to child death. Reports from LSCBs show that during this one year period there were 20 cases in which a child died because of 'deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect' ([Department for Education, 2010c](#)).

2.2. Judgement and the inherent risk balance

Not only is the scale of child protection work considerable, at the level of individual cases it is an extremely difficult job to do. To discharge their responsibilities social workers can, for example, apply to courts to remove a child from his or her parents. This is a profoundly intrusive act which should only be undertaken after careful consideration but it indicates the stakes in this area of social policy. At the heart of child protection work is the need for social workers to choose correctly in each specific situation between two very different responses: 'family preservation' and 'child rescue', and to balance the inherent risks of each ([Mansell, Ota, Erasmus, & Marks, 2011](#)). A 'family preservation' emphasis tends to seek ways to keep children with their families. A 'child rescue' emphasis may remove children at a lower threshold. Errors in judgement in either direction have serious repercussions.

Social workers daily face the difficult task of finding the correct balance of judgement. To do this, they aim to spend time with family members so as to establish a relationship of trust and to understand what is actually happening. Making judgements on which approach is best for a particular child is difficult; as the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families observed, "We often face our social workers with the judgment of Solomon as to whether it is better to bring a child into care" ([Loughton, 2010](#)).

2.3. Emerging concerns

Whilst professionals endeavour to make fine judgements, errors do occur. These are of concern to local and central government. A particular additional feature of the child protection area is that some cases of maltreatment, and particularly the most extreme ones involving child deaths, are also taken up in the media and generate strong critical public reactions. These frequently involve public condemnation, both of the particular social workers involved and the profession in its entirety.

Generally, a range of concerns had emerged about the state of child protection in England. Overall, there was a feeling that all was not right in the sector. There was low public esteem for the social work profession, low staff morale and serious problems in recruitment and retention so that this challenging area of work was being done increasingly by less-experienced social workers.

There had been efforts to improve the quality of professional practice. A prime mechanism designed to correct problems in the sector was the 'Serious Case Review'. These take place when a child dies or is seriously injured and maltreatment is thought to be a factor. The 'local safeguarding children board' must appoint an independent reviewer who examines the parts in the case played by various agencies and organisations. The purpose of an 'SCR' is to understand what happened and to investigate professional practice with the aim of improving it in the future. However, these SCRs were widely seen not to

be working ([Brandon et al., 2009](#)). Whilst they kept finding the same problems with practice ([Reder, Duncan, & Gray, 1993](#)), there were "divergent views ... [and] ... different perspectives" about the cause of these problems ([Rose & Barnes, 2008](#), p. 70). What many recommendations shared was an emphasis on, "reviewing or strengthening existing procedures or developing new procedures" (loc. cit.).

It was in this complex environment that the Munro Review was initiated.

3. The Munro Review: use of systems thinking and general structure

Eileen Munro is an academic and former social worker. She was invited by the Secretary of State for Education to "conduct an independent review to improve child protection" in England ([Department for Education, 2010b](#)). The invitation stated that, "the system of child protection in our country is not working as well as it should. We need fundamentally to review the system" (*ibid.*) and in June the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families announced the Review's launch to Parliament ([Department for Education, 2010d](#)). In this section we describe the blend of systems thinking-related approaches that were central to the Munro Review and then outline the Review's general structure.

3.1. Application of systems thinking in the Review

Munro had previously argued that, in child protection, it was necessary to take a broad view of the contexts in which humans make decisions – to treat it as a 'system' ([Fish, Munro, & Bairstow, 2008](#); [Munro, 2005b](#); [2005a](#)). Whilst her approach to the Review was wide-ranging in terms of topics, methodologically she hoped to find a 'systems thinking' method which would bring this insight to life and play a central analytical role.

Systems approaches derive their analytical capability from mechanistic roots (e.g. [von Bertalanffy, 1972](#)) but also address interpersonal relations in organizations. Hence, there are forms of systems thinking embracing socio-technical thinking ([Emery & Trist, 1969](#)), or explicitly rooted in interpretivism ([Checkland, 1981](#)). Systems approaches are effective for understanding complex situations; 'whole systems' tools which treat organisations in an holistic manner are widely used, for example, in public health management ([Greenhalgh, MacFarlane, Barton-Sweeney, & Woodward, 2012](#); [Midgley, 2006](#); [Pratt, Gordon, & Plamping, 1999](#)). There is a now a wide range of different systems approaches which are used with a critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, limitations and strengths of each ([Jackson, 2003](#); [Keys, 1988](#); [Mingers, 2015](#)). In consequence, a range of systems thinking approaches was introduced by Lane and Husemann and these were then blended together and employed at the heart of the Review. We introduce these approaches here.

Munro sought an 'holistic' method to analyse the thinking behind previous policy recommendations, as well as the 'ripple effects', or unintended consequences and feedback loops, of those policies. She wanted a method that would reveal both why the well-intentioned reforms of previous years had been proposed and why they seemed not only to have failed to produce the intended improvement but also created new problems. The ideas of intended and unintended consequences relate, respectively, to teleology and teleonomy – central ideas in systems thinking ([Checkland, 1981](#)), indicating that a systems perspective was required. A range of systems mapping approaches is available ([Lane & Husemann, 2009](#); [Mingers & Rosenhead, 2001](#)). Here, the focus on causal mechanisms and behaviour over time, combined with the wish to consider anticipated and unanticipated consequences of policy initiatives, indicated a central role for system dynamics modelling.

Originally created by Forrester, system dynamics focuses on causal mechanisms to provide an effective means of understanding why

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