



When is transformation a viable policy alternative?



Johanna Nalau^a, John Handmer^{b,*}

^a Griffith Climate Change Response Program, Gold Coast Campus, Griffith University, Queensland 4222, Australia

^b Centre for Risk & Community Safety, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476, Melbourne 3001, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 December 2014

Received in revised form 7 May 2015

Accepted 21 July 2015

Available online 13 August 2015

Keywords:

Policy change

Problem types

Transformation

Disaster risk management

Climate change adaptation

ABSTRACT

The most common response to change by societies is either to take incremental steps and maintain the current system or accept gradual partial change. Yet, given the current and future complex large-scale challenges like climate change, such responses are increasingly inadequate. Calls are now made for societies to implement transformative approaches in order to manage complex problems in a more sustainable and adaptive manner. However, the discussion around transformative change is still emerging and it is not clear as to what transformation means, how it can be evaluated, and how the conceptions of transformation fit within the current understanding of dealing with policy problems in practice. This paper explores the range of current understandings on transformation and its characteristics, and uses Handmer and Dovers' (2007, 2009, 2013) three-staged typology to investigate different approaches to identifying and managing policy problems and the potential scope for transformation. Examples from policy and practice within disaster risk management are used to demonstrate how different management approaches attempt to deal with particular problems and to investigate to what extent these could be transformative. It is argued that not all transformation is positive and welcome, and that greater focus needs to be placed on how complex problems are managed in a manner that enables long-term positive transformation.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Changing climatic conditions are bringing numerous challenges to policy and practice across all sectors (Handmer et al., 2012; Mechler and Bouwer, 2014). These challenges include for example increases in extreme events such as shifts in fire regimes due to increased drought conditions (Pausas and Fernández-Muñoz, 2012), extreme fire weather (Grose et al., 2014), extreme water deficits (Sippel and Otto, 2014), and extreme temperatures and heat waves (Hansen et al., 2012). The heatwaves in Europe in 2003 (Feuensenger, 2012; Larsen, 2006) and Russia in 2010 (Gallant, 2010) both broke temperature records and exposed multiple simultaneous vulnerabilities across service networks and economic sectors. In 2010, NOAA National Climatic Data Center reported a range of extreme events across the globe, many which displayed increases in magnitude (NOAA National Climatic Data Center, 2010). Australia has broken its heatwave records first in 2013 and now in 2014 prompting discussion on the kinds of societal changes

more intense and frequent heatwaves will pose to the society (Frew, 2014). Hence, policy problems in a variety of areas are likely to display increasingly complex features and lie outside of previous experience (O'Neill and Handmer, 2012; Preston et al., 2013).

Yet, while the evidence for climatic regime shifts is accelerating (IPCC, 2014), societies tend to respond to pressures to change mostly through incremental steps, which focus on maintaining the current system or accepting gradual partial change (Handmer and Dovers, 2009, 2013). Part of this problem lies in the human experience as Patt et al. (2010, p. 385) note: "Human society is inexperienced at trying to steer itself, deliberately and quickly, in fundamentally new directions". In terms of risk management, organisations can be quite rigid in their management regimes and "the capacity to respond quickly and appropriately, once emergent signs are noted, often seems to be restricted" (Barnes et al., 2007, p. 9). As Kaspersen (2011, p. 435) also remarks, "societies and decision-makers proceed on basic management or technological courses that accumulate over time. Major shifts away from these well-established developmental paths generally require either major risk events or incremental decisions made over long periods of time". There are exceptions to this view, but they are few.

While institutions and agencies have developed and adhered to particular approaches over time to manage policy problems

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: j.nalau@griffith.edu.au (J. Nalau), John.handmer@rmit.edu.au (J. Handmer).

(Handmer and Dovers, 2013), the way the nature of policy problems is now changing has invoked thinking around which management approaches are sufficient and where transformative change, both in practices and perceptions, is necessary to respond more effectively to evolving complexity in the scope and scale of issues (Kates et al., 2012; O'Brien, 2012; Park et al., 2012; Pelling, 2011; Preston, 2013). Transformation is championed partly due to the urgency to change development pathways to adapt to climate change (Hallegatte, 2009; IPCC, 2014), and the accompanying increasing number of disasters associated with extreme weather and climate events (IPCC, 2012; Preston, 2013; Visser et al., 2014).

However, although the idea of transformation has become more prominent in particular among the scientific community (IPCC, 2012; Mustelin and Handmer, 2014; O'Brien, 2012; O'Brien and Sygna, 2014; Park et al., 2012; Pelling, 2011; Preston et al., 2013), there is no clear consensus as to what the concept means in practice, how it could be evaluated, and what role transformative approaches play in disaster risk management, policy and practice. For example, O'Brien (2012, p. 670) notes that despite the increasing interest in transformation research, the concept remains fairly vaguely defined specifically given that it can mean "different things to different people or groups, and it is not always clear what exactly needs to be transformed and why, whose interest these transformations serve, and what will be the consequences". This poses obvious problems regarding attempts to set and identify such elements as boundaries, scale, and the evaluation of transformation, even though most definitions agree that transformation involves fundamental change.

The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of transformation in its current usage and definition, and to demonstrate how different approaches to public policy and policy problems are more or less able to accommodate transformative approaches. It uses Handmer and Dovers' (2007, 2009, 2013) typologies of common approaches to societal resilience and framing of policy problems, and examines the level of potential for transformation.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews briefly common definitions for transformation as qualitative change. After that Section 3 discusses different framings of policy problems and introduces the typology used to illuminate different dimensions of problem types and management responses. Section 4 discusses in more detail what different responses and framings mean in terms of identifying and understanding the nature of transformative change by using several practical examples from disaster risk

management. Section 5 summarises the arguments and suggests some strategies to better understand such processes of change.

2. Defining transformation

The concept of transformation is frequently used and widely applied across diverse fields such as mathematics, genetics, leadership, organisational change, education, and theatre. Over time particular characteristics have formed to distinguish and explain transformation from the perspective of qualitative change (Table 1), seen as a fundamental system change. Most of these definitions see transformation as an act or process, which demands significant change. This change, as the Farlex Free Dictionary (2013) notes, is "usually for the better". Transformative change in other words should lead to a positive change, which is "profound and radical" at heart (Business Dictionary, 2013). After transformation, the system should be significantly different with "little or no resemblance with the past configuration or structure" (Business Dictionary, 2013). Transformation then requires a significant shift from the status quo.

While most definitions agree with the need for "significant change", some of these refer to a different nature and durability of change. For example, Merriam-Webster's (2013) second definition describes transformation as "false hair worn especially by a woman to replace or supplement natural hair" while another describes transformation as "a seemingly miraculous change in the appearance of scenery or actors" (Dictionary.com, 2013). Transformation in other words can appear to have taken place without changing the actual underlying system. This raises an important qualitative aspect of change and its evaluation: how do we know when transformation is "real" and sustainable? Where can the line be drawn between appearance and rhetoric and actual transformation?

Several disciplines have investigated transformation in the context of global environmental change including risk management, climate change adaptation, sustainable development, emergency management, and disaster risk reduction. The definition and characteristics of transformation have inspired scholarly thinking in recent years in particular in the context of climate change adaptation. O'Brien and Sygna (2014, p. 16) remark that four approaches to transformation dominate the climate change discourse: transformational adaptation, transformations to sustainability, transforming behaviours, and social transformation.

Table 1
Transformation as a qualitative change.

Source	Definition
The Free Dictionary by Farlex	a. "The act or an instance of transforming"
	b. "The state of being transformed"
	"A marked change, as in appearance or character, usually for the better"
Dictionary.com	"change in form, appearance, nature, or character"
	"Theatre. a seemingly miraculous change in the appearance of scenery or actors in view of the audience"
Oxford Dictionaries Merriam-Webster	1. "a marked change in form, nature, or appearance"
	"an act, process, or instance of transforming or being transformed"
	"false hair worn especially by a woman to replace or supplement natural hair"
Business Dictionary	"In an organizational context, a process of profound and radical change that orients an organization in a new direction and takes it to an entirely different level of effectiveness... transformation implies a basic change of character and little or no resemblance with the past configuration or structure"
Macmillan Dictionary	"a change into someone or something completely different, or the process by which this happens"
Wordsmyth Thesaurus	"a significant change in the form, structure, character, or nature of something or someone"

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7467351>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7467351>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)