



1 Introduction

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- **The perspective of complex responsive processes**
- **The properties of complex responsive processes of relating**
- **The consequences of taking a complex responsive processes perspective**
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Over the period 2000 to 2002, a number of us at the Complexity and Management Centre at the Business School of the University of Hertfordshire published a series of books called *Complexity and Emergence in Organizations* (Stacey *et al.*, 2000; Fonseca, 2001; Stacey, 2001; Streatfield, 2001; Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002). These books developed a perspective according to which organizations are understood to be ongoing, iterated processes of cooperative and competitive relating between people. We argued that organizations are not systems but rather the ongoing patterning of interactions between people. Patterns of human interaction produce further patterns of interaction, not some *thing* outside of the interaction. We called this perspective *complex responsive processes of relating*.

Since 2000, some of the authors in the series, together with other Complexity and Management Centre colleagues in association with the Institute of Group Analysis, have been conducting a research programme on organizational change leading to the degrees of Master of Arts by research or Doctor of Management. This is necessarily a part-time programme because the core of the research method (see another volume in this series: Stacey and Griffin, 2005) involves students taking their own experience seriously. If patterns of human interaction produce nothing but further patterns of human interaction, in the creation of which we are all

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participating, then there is no *detached* way of understanding organizations from the position of the objective observer. Instead, organizations have to be understood in terms of one's own personal experience of participating with others in the co-creation of the patterns of interaction that are the organization. The students' research is therefore their narration of current events in which they are *involved* together with their reflections on themes of particular importance emerging in the stories of their own experience of participation with others. The research stance is thus one of detached involvement.

The purpose of this volume is to bring together the work of a number of programme participants who have been concerned with the experience of working in public sector health and educational organizations which now have to operate in a performance management regime established by central government. Over the past two decades there has been a major change in the mode of public sector governance in most countries in Europe and North America. There has been a significant move away from a decentralized, collegial form of governing health and educational institutions to a highly managerial, centralized one. This centralization involves central government taking a much more intrusive role in setting targets and requiring monitoring procedures to be followed. Within the institutions themselves there is a further centralization in which managers at the top of the hierarchy have much more say over what groups of professionals within the organization do. The figuration of power relations has thus shifted from one in which the ratio of power was tilted towards groups of professional health and education workers who had considerable autonomy in governing themselves to one in which the power ratio is tilted towards senior managers and central government. This power figuration is underpinned by an ideology of marketization and managerialism which emphasizes control, compliance, uniformity, efficiency and improvement. Such an ideology contrasts sharply with the ideology underlying the old mode of public sector governance, which was characterized by professional freedom and vocational motivation. In the United Kingdom, and probably elsewhere, the new mode of governance requires the expenditure of large sums of money on monitoring. Despite the enormous cost, however, it is far from clear that the new mode of governance is delivering the efficiency, uniformity of service and improvement it promises. This volume is concerned with why this is happening. It focuses on the way of thinking that underlies the move to marketization and managerialism, and explores its consequences in the experience of those working in the health and education sectors in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The questions of central concern in this volume are as follows. Has the dramatic change in the model of governance delivered what those imposing it promised? Does it actually improve efficiency and quality? What are the emotional consequences for the people who work in health and educational institutions? Academic research and a steady stream of newspaper articles over the past few years make it clear that the move as a whole has not been a clear success. Yet despite the antagonism of so many in health and education, there is little sign of a wholesale move to some other form of governance. How is it that so many in the health and education sectors feel powerless to argue against the model imposed upon them, despite their intense feelings of alienation? Why is it so difficult to argue against the new model? What is the thinking underlying it? These are central questions which are addressed by the contributors in the form of their personal experiences of working at various levels in both health and education. Chapter 2 will argue that a fundamental problem with public sector governance today has to do with the way of thinking which it reflects. This is a way of thinking in which an organization is thought of as a ‘thing’, as a system, which can be designed to deliver what its designers choose. This volume, and others in the series, questions this way of thinking and takes a perspective in which organizations are complex responsive processes of relating between people.

Two other volumes in this series are relevant to the questions posed above. The volume *Experiencing Emergence in Organizations: Local interaction and the emergence of global pattern* is concerned with the manner in which people take up global policies in their ordinary, everyday local interactions with each other. Richard Williams (author of Chapter 3 in this volume) describes how the cult values to do with performance and targets are taken up in the local interaction between college CEOs and those charged with implementing government policies. In particular he identifies the anxieties aroused by the threats to identity which these policies give rise to. The volume *Complexity and the Experience of Leading Organizations* presents a complex responsive processes perspective on leadership. Richard Williams describes the impact of the current mode of public sector governance on the relationship between himself and his managers.

The following section gives a necessarily brief indication of what the theory of complex responsive processes has to say about organizations – a much fuller development is given in the first series of books referred to above, and Chapter 2 (this volume) also presents some aspects of the theory relevant to the central questions in this volume. Subsequently, this

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chapter gives a brief indication of what each of the ensuing chapters will cover. We will also be introducing each chapter with an editorial comment. We turn now to a brief review of the theory of complex responsive processes.

The perspective of complex responsive processes

From the perspective of complex responsive processes, organizations are thought of as patterns of interaction between people that are iterated as the present. Instead of abstracting from the experience of human bodily interaction, which is what we do when we posit that individuals create a system in their interaction, the perspective of complex responsive processes stays with the experience of interaction which produces nothing but further interaction. In other words, one moves from thinking in terms of a spatial metaphor, as one does when one thinks that individuals interact to produce a system outside them at a higher level, to a temporal processes way of thinking, where the temporal processes are those of human relating. Organizations are then understood as processes of human relating, as the simultaneously cooperative–consensual and conflictual–competitive relating between people in which everything organizational happens. It is through these ordinary, everyday processes of relating that people in organizations cope with the complexity and uncertainty of organizational life. As they do so, they perpetually construct their future together as the present.

Complex responsive processes of relating may be understood as acts of communication, relations of power, and the interplay between people's choices arising in acts of evaluation.

Acts of communication

It is because human agents are conscious and self-conscious that they are able to cooperate and reach consensus, while at the same time conflicting and competing with each other in the highly sophisticated ways in which they do. Drawing on the work of the American pragmatist George Herbert Mead (1934), one can understand consciousness (that is, mind) as arising in the communicative interaction between human bodies. Humans have evolved central nervous systems such that when one gestures to another, particularly in the form of vocal gesture or language, one evokes in one's own body responses to one's gesture that are similar to those evoked in

other bodies. In other words, in their acting, humans take the attitude, the tendency to act, of the other, and it is because they have this capacity that humans can know what they are doing. It immediately follows that consciousness (knowing, mind) is a social process in which meaning emerges in the social act of gesture–response, where the gesture can never be separated from the response. Meaning does not lie in the gesture, the word, alone but in the gesture taken together with the response to it as one social act.

Furthermore, in communicating with each other as the basis of everything they do, people do not simply take the attitude of the specific others with whom they are relating. Humans have the capacity for generalizing so that when they act they always take up the attitude of what Mead called the generalized other. In other words, they always take the attitude, the tendency to act, of the group or society in relation to their actions – they are concerned about what others might think of what they do or say. This is often unconscious and it is, of course, a powerful form of social control. According to Mead, self-consciousness is also a social process involving the capacity humans have to take themselves as an object of subjective reflection. This is a *social* process because the subject, ‘I’, can only ever contemplate itself as an object, ‘me’, which is one’s perception of the attitude of society towards oneself. The ‘I’ is the often spontaneous and imaginative response of the socially formed individual to the ‘me’ as the gestures of society to oneself. Self is this emergent ‘I–me’ dialectic so that each self is socially formed, while at the same time interacting selves are forming the social. The social may be understood as a social object. A social object is not an object in the normal sense of a thing that exists in nature but is a tendency on the part of large numbers of people to act in a similar manner in similar situations. The social object is a generalization that exists only when it is made particular in the ordinary local interaction between people. Communication, then, is not simply the sending of a signal to be received by another, but rather complex social (that is, responsive) processes of self-formation in which meaning and the society-wide pattern of the social object emerge.

Relations of power

Drawing on the work of Elias ([1939] 2000), one understands how the processes of communicative interacting constitute relations of power. For Elias, power is not something anyone possesses but is rather a characteristic of all human relating. In order to form, and stay in, a

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relationship with someone else, one cannot do whatever one wants. As soon as we enter into relationships we constrain and are constrained by others and, of course, we also enable and are enabled by others. Power is this enabling–constraining relationship where the power balance is tilted in favour of some and against others depending on the relative need they have for each other. Elias showed how such power relationships form figurations, or groupings, in which some are included and others are excluded, and where the power balance is tilted in favour of some groupings and against others. These groupings establish powerful feelings of belonging which constitute each individual's 'we' identity. These 'we' identities, derived from the groups we belong to, are inseparable from each of our 'I' identities. As with Mead, then, we can see that processes of human relating form and are formed by individual and collective identities, which inevitably reflect complex patterns of power relating.

Choices arising in acts of evaluation

In their communicative interacting and power relating, humans are always making choices between one action and another (Stacey, 2005). The choices may be made on the basis of conscious desires and intentions, or unconscious desires and choices; for example, those that are habitual, impulsive, obsessive, compulsive, compelling or inspiring. In other words, human action is always evaluative, sometimes consciously and at other times unconsciously. The criteria for evaluating these choices are values and norms, together constituting ideology. We are thus using ideology in the sense of Elias (1970), who held that we always act according to some ideology, and negating one ideology immediately gives rise to another. Here ideology arises in the experience of bodies interacting with each other rather than as some 'whole' abstracted from experience with the potential for this to give rise to 'false' consciousness where people are alienated from their direct experience.

Norms (morals, the right, the 'ought') are evaluative criteria taking the form of obligatory restrictions which have emerged as generalizations and become habitual in a history of social interaction. We are all socialized to take up the norms of the particular groups and the society to which we belong, and this restricts what we can do as we particularize the generalized norms in our moment-by-moment specific action situations. Elias' work shows in detail how norms constitute major aspects of the personality structures, or identities, of interdependent people.

Values (ethics, the ‘good’) are individually felt voluntary compulsions to choose one desire, action or norm rather than another. Values arise in social processes of self-formation (Joas, 2000) – they are fundamental aspects of self, giving meaning to life, opening up opportunities for action. They arise in intense interactive experiences which are seized by the imagination and idealized as some whole to which people then feel strongly committed. Mead (1938) describes these as cult values which need to be functionalized in particular contingent situations, and this inevitably involves conflict.

Together, the voluntary compulsion of value and the obligatory restriction of norms constitute *ideology*. Ideology is the basis on which people choose desires and actions, and it unconsciously sustains power relations by making a particular figuration of power feel natural. We can see, then, that complex responsive processes of human relating form and are formed by values, norms and ideologies as integral aspects of self/identity formation in its simultaneously individual and collective form.

In describing the fundamental aspects of the complex responsive processes of human relating, we have referred on a number of occasions to *patterns* of communicative interaction, *figurations* of power relations, and *generalizations/idealizations* that are *particularized/functionalized* in specific situations. These patterns, figurations, generalizations/idealizations and particularizations/functionalizations may all be understood as themes, taking both propositional and narrative forms, which emerge and re-emerge in the iteration, in each succeeding present, of the interactive processes of communication, power and evaluation. These themes organize the experience of being together and they can be understood, in Mead’s terms, as social objects and the imagined wholes of cult values which are taken up by people in their local interaction with each other in specific situations of ordinary, everyday life.

The properties of complex responsive processes of relating

By analogy with complex adaptive systems (Goodwin, 1994; Kauffman, 1995; see also Waldorp, 1992), the thematic patterning of interaction is understood to be:

- *Complex*. Complexity here refers to a particular dynamic or movement in time that is paradoxically stable and unstable, predictable and

unpredictable, known and unknown, certain and uncertain, all at the same time. Complexity and uncertainty are both often used to refer to the situation or environment in which humans must act and this is distinguished from simple or certain environments. Prescriptions for effective action are then related to, held to be contingent upon, the type of environment. However, from the complex responsive processes perspective it is human relating itself which is complex and uncertain in the sense described above. Healthy, creative, ordinarily effective human interaction is then always complex, no matter what the situation. Patterns of human relating that lose this complexity become highly repetitive and rapidly inappropriate for dealing with the fluidity of ordinary, everyday life, taking the form of neurotic and psychotic disorders, bizarre group processes and fascist power structures.

- *Self-organizing and emergent.* Self-organizing means that agents interact with each other on the basis of their own local organizing principles, and it is in such local interaction that widespread coherence emerges without any programme, plan or blueprint for that widespread pattern itself. In complex responsive processes terms, then, it is in the myriad local interactions between people that the widespread generalizations such as social objects and cult values emerge. These are particularized in the local interaction between people.
- *Evolving.* The generalizations of social object and cult value are particularized in specific situations, and this inevitably involves choices as to how to particularize them in that specific situation, which inevitably means some form of conflict. The generalizations will never be particularized in exactly the same way, and the nonlinear nature of human interaction means that these small differences could be amplified into completely different generalizations. In this way, social objects and cult values evolve.

The consequences of taking a complex responsive processes perspective

We are suggesting, then, that we think about organizations in a way that is close to our ordinary, everyday life in them. We understand organizations to be the widespread patterns of interaction between people, the widespread narrative and propositional themes, which emerge in the myriad local interactions between people, both those between members of an organization and those between them and other people. Thinking in this way has two important consequences.

First, no one can step outside of their interaction with others. In mainstream thinking, an organization is thought of as a system at a level above the individuals who form it. It is recognized that this organizational system is affected by patterns of power and economic relations in the wider society and these are normally thought of as forces, over and above the organization and its individual members, which shape local forms of experience. Individuals and the social are posited at different levels, and causal powers are ascribed to that social level. In the kind of process terms we are trying to use, there are no forces over and above individuals. All we have are vast numbers of continually iterated interactions between human bodies, and these are local in the sense that each of us can interact with only a limited number of others. It is in the vast number of local (in this specific technical sense) interactions that widespread, global patterns of power and economic relations emerge. The widespread patterns emerge as repetition and potential transformation at the same time. We can then see highly repetitive patterns iterated over long time periods. The general comments we make about such patterns refer to what is emerging rather than to any force over and above those in whose interaction it is emerging. In their local interaction, people will always be particularizing, taking up in their local interactions these generalizations, and they may not be aware that they are doing so. No one can step outside of interaction to design that interaction.

Second, then, there is no overall programme, design, blueprint or plan for the organization as a 'whole'. Designs, programmes, blueprints and plans exist only insofar as people are taking them up in their local interactions. Any statements that the most powerful make about organizational designs, visions and values are understood as gestures calling forth responses from many, many people in their local interactions. The most powerful can choose their own gestures but will be unable to choose the responses of others, so their gestures will frequently produce surprising outcomes.

If one thinks of organizations as widespread narrative patterns emerging in local interaction, then how are we to think about public sector governance? This is the question explored in Chapter 2.

The chapters in this book

Chapter 2, by Ralph Stacey, explores the way of thinking underlying today's dominant mode of public sector governance, identifying it as a

rather crude form of first-order cybernetic systems thinking. The chapter also covers the ideology underlying current public sector governance, identifying it as the cult of performance which replaces purpose. It has the hallmarks of the cult, namely presentation of a hopelessly idealized future and heavy demands for conformity. The approach is characterized by the instrumental use of naming and shaming people and institutions to enforce compliance, aided by a form of emotional blackmail as people are exhorted not to let their colleagues down. Stacey then goes into how the cult of performance is actually operationalized in ways that involve the manipulation of figures and the distortion of clinical decisions to ensure the appearance of meeting targets. The result is a culture of deceit and spin in which appearance/presentation/spin replaces substance and people become alienated from their experience. Instead of leading to authentic quality, the whole approach amounts to a system of counterfeit quality. Stacey then moves on to ask whether the model of governance actually works, reaching the conclusion that while there may have been pockets of improvement there is very little evidence indeed for overall improvement. In the face of this conclusion it becomes important to ask why it is so hard to argue against this mode of governance. The first reason is that doing so leads to challenging the dominant ideology and so risking exclusion. The second reason is that the underlying way of thinking is so taken for granted, and an alternative way of thinking is not immediately apparent, that there seems to be no way out. After all, who can be against improvement and efficiency? He then goes on to argue for a move away from system thinking to the perspective of complex responsive processes. If an organization comprises patterns of relations between people but policy makers think organizations are systems, then what will happen as they enforce their policies? From the complex responsive processes perspective, such policies are simply gestures, the articulation of cult values, or social objects which have to be operationalized. What matters is how people operationalize the policies. The remaining chapters in this volume give an insight into the operationalizing of policies.

In Chapter 3, Richard Williams, who at the time of writing this chapter was Principal and CEO of the Westminster Kingsway College of Further Education in the UK, contrasts the official approach to developing leaders for the public sector in special leadership colleges with his own day-to-day experience of his work as leader of his college. He argues that the official approach amounts to a leadership mythology based upon a reified and sanitized representation of organizational change and the roles of

staff occupying senior positions. Organizational leadership in the public sector takes place in a context of intense scrutiny and pressure to deliver performance targets. In responding to this pressure, those in leadership positions focus on the management of information required to supply evidence of the achievement of national performance indicators.

Pressures to increase performance at lower rates of unit cost are sustained by the intervention of regulatory, audit and inspection agencies. These regimes apply right across the public sector, and the impact on individuals leading organizations under this pressure sometimes surfaces in the national media as scandals concerning the manipulation of data and the emergence of sudden and catastrophic financial failures. ‘Leadership’, as a process enacted by individuals in the public sector, is situated in this narrative context. These processes engender great waves of anxiety, feelings of loss and threats to identity of those caught up in them. They also engender potent insider/outsider feelings, since all these processes entail the identification of winners (those promoted, whose status and salaries are enhanced, who are retained, moved to ‘better’, ‘safer’, more secure jobs) and losers (e.g. those demoted, made redundant, sidelined). Williams describes his lived experience of occupying a leadership role by reflecting on the detail of his interactions with his chairman which reveal issues of power, norms and values.

Chapter 4 is by Nicholas Sarra, who works as a psychotherapist and organizational consultant for an NHS Trust in the UK. In this highly imaginative study he explores the meaning of the metaphor which people in his organization sometimes use when they talk about the senior executive corridor. Having once called it the ‘golden mile’, they now refer to it as the ‘green mile’, which they associate with Stephen King’s book and a consequent film about death row. In the story, the green mile is the walk to the electric chair. The condemned men wait their time in cells on either side of this forbidding passage. From this, Sarra suggests that working within senior management was perceived as a high-risk occupation in which emotional pain, self-sacrifice and feelings of humiliation were to be expected. The way of talking about the corridor may also reflect the ironic use of humour both as a means of catharsis and as a way of coping with perceived power relations through the use of mockery. This was a climate in which targets and perceived performance to attain those targets were the only legitimate discourse. Through this process managers were held individually accountable for a linear progression in organizational outcomes which they often struggled with, or found impossible or pointless to achieve. The cultural climate tended

to predicate feelings of exclusion, isolation and dissonance in sense making as organizational realities became unduly weighted and constructed in top-down ways. National policy with its emphasis on the top-down modernization of the health service was therefore inevitably leading to a pressure for correct appearances in line with that policy. This pressure created a split between the required external appearances and the complex experiences of day-to-day service provision. Thus a dissonance between private experience and corporate appearance arose which increasingly threatened to undermine the ontological security of health service workers. Such dynamics threaten to alienate health service workers. They give rise to metaphors such as the 'green mile' whereby people express, in sardonic form, feelings of acute insecurity, powerlessness and alienation from the given organizational norms.

Chapter 5 is by Karen Norman, who, at the time of writing, was Director of Nursing at a National Health University Trust in the UK. In the NHS, key accreditation bodies such as the Healthcare Commission (formerly the Commission for Health Care Audit and Inspection), Clinical Negligence Schemes for Trusts (CNST), and Risk Pooling Scheme for Trusts (RSPT) all require NHS Trusts to have a clinical risk management strategy and processes to ensure that it is implemented. Norman explores how this global risk management policy is functionalized in practice. She uses narratives from her own practice to explore serious clinical incidents (SCIs) which have occurred in the NHS. One narrative includes a child dying due to a mistaken injection into his spine. Another explores a serious near miss involving a patient who had an inaccurate blood sugar reading by staff who were following an outdated practice that an alert from the Medical Devices Agency had identified several months previously. She explores why it is that global policies seem unable to prevent these problems.

Chapter 6 is by Penelope Lacey, manager of a podiatry service at an NHS Trust. The Podiatry Service receives a large proportion of the complaints made by patients to her organization and it is her job to deal with them. Her organization nurtures a 'no-blame culture', which is referred to in two major documents from the Department of Health, *An Organization with a Memory* (2000) and *Building a Safer NHS for Patients* (2001). Within this philosophy, complaints are 'welcomed' as a way of registering feedback from direct patient-service contact and a means of 'learning lessons' from poor practice. The 'no-blame' culture was developed in the early 1990s following investigations into major incidents or serious near misses in nuclear and aviation industries. The underlying concept was that

if blame was removed, employees would not cover up small accidental errors. In the long term this should lead to a reduction in the risk of major catastrophes. However, 'no blame' as a conceptual label did not translate well in practice in the NHS because of the procedural frameworks, which focused on 'locating' blame as a way of explaining what had gone wrong. Furthermore, the Board of the Trust takes a fairly punitive stance if a particular service receives too many complaints. The Board takes the view that something has to be done to resolve this; someone must be to blame for these complaints. Thus despite the no-blame rhetoric, it seems as though there does in fact exist a powerful blame culture. The belief behind this seems to be that once the offending person or thing has been located, further mishaps will not occur. Lacey explores in some detail how one particular complaint was dealt with and how this reflects on national policies.

Chapter 7 is by Séamus Cannon, Director of an Education Centre in Ireland. He describes his response to the requirement placed upon him by those inspecting his Centre to have a strategic plan. In asking for the strategic plan, the inspectors were doing what had been requested of them by their immediate superiors, who were in turn responding to theirs, and so on, until we reach the people within the DES who were responsible for the requirement. Control is at the heart of strategic choice theory and this, he concludes, was the intention behind the DES strategy and the review by the inspectors. But what does it mean to be 'in control'? The senior managers within the DES are seeking to exercise control in order to create a state of equilibrium, of stability in the education system. But can control be exercised to this degree? Does his lack of a plan mean that his organization is an aberration? He admits that a continuous state of 'not knowing' and not being 'in control' is characteristic of his life as a manager. He does not think that this is unusual, and if this is the case what use is the plan? The essential management capacity is the courage to participate in the construction of meaning in spite of not being 'in control'. For management here, read senior staff in the DES as well as local staff in the Education Centre. In describing how his organization actually works, Cannon attempts to identify other ways of looking at himself in his work 'from the inside', as it were, and not from the detached and 'objective' viewpoint of an external observer. He argues that human relating is a complex and responsive process; that human interaction in organizational life requires the constant exercise of a practical judgement that goes far beyond the illusory lure of predictability contained in mainstream theory. To proceed in this way is to discard

notions of being 'in control' in favour of thinking of oneself as being in a paradoxical state of 'in control' and not 'in control' at the same time. It is in this state of constant flux that new meaning, the constant construction of organizations into the future, takes place.

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