

Lessons from a Pluralist Approach to a Wicked Policy Issue

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Abstract: The most difficult policy issues are those where there are profound disagreements about what is wrong, what should be done, and how things work. This paper describes a pluralist approach, based on the soft systems methodology, to youth nuisance on deprived estates in Manchester, UK, where there were profound disagreements between the agencies involved. When there are disagreements about the nature of the problem, its causes, or about how the system of interest actually functioned, a pluralist approach is required, and this is provided by Checkland's *soft systems* approach. When the disagreements involve conflicts of value, it is necessary to adopt an adaptive approach that fosters change in the values, beliefs or behaviour of those involved. In the spectrum of public sector agencies involved, five different perspectives of agencies were identified, their descriptions indicating the need for the pluralist approach taken. The project was an experiment in using systemic approaches in public policy and the paper describes the learning associated with impacting outcomes. Processes used in the project included a "soft systems" workshop, which is described along with some effects on both the project participants and overall outcomes. The overall aim is to share the experience of this project so that it may inform those working with systemic approaches and other pluralist methods on wicked problems in the public sector.

Keywords: Pluralist policy making, soft systems methodology, systems thinking, wicked problems, youth nuisance.

Introduction

In this paper I describe the application of a soft systems approach to a contentious policy issue that involves a spectrum of public sector bodies in the UK. The project was conceived by the sponsors (see below) as an experiment in using systemic approaches in public policy and the paper describes the learning associated with impacting outcomes.

There have been many attempts to make use of the ideas involved in *systems thinking* to make progress in areas of public policy, with varying degrees of success. Many of the methods and their application have been reviewed comprehensively by Jackson (2003), though this does not cover the more recent work by Seddon (2008, 2010). In a review of the relevance of systems

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thinking to policy and government Mulgan (2001) identified seven factors that required a systemic approach:

- The ubiquity of information flows, especially within government itself
- Pressure on social policy to be more holistic
- The growing importance of the environment, especially climate change
- Connectedness of systems brings new vulnerabilities
- Globalisation and the ways in which this integrates previously discrete systems
- Need for ability to cope with ambiguity and non-linearity
- Planning and rational strategy often lead to unintended consequences.

These characteristics all play into the holistic nature of systems thinking and systemic approaches. However, many of the early attempts to use systems approaches failed because there was no agreement about the nature of the problem, its causes, nor about how the system of interest actually functioned. Where such disagreements exist a pluralist approach is required, and this is provided by the *soft systems* approach introduced by Checkland (1981). Checkland's approach has been extensively used within organisations in both the public and private sectors in the UK (Checkland 1999; Morcos, 2009; Wilson, 2001) where the scope of disagreements is limited.

Most public policy issues involve disagreements about how to proceed and such disagreements are the “bread and butter” of politics. In most situations, policy makers and politicians establish policy according to their own preferences and positions in relation to the disagreements; that is, they adopt or champion one of the contested positions. However, depending upon the nature of the disagreements, this may not be the most productive way to proceed.

When the disagreements involve conflicts of value, either between groups or between the values people stand for and the reality they face, then, in Heifetz's terminology (Heifetz, 1994, 2002, 2009), it is necessary to adopt an “adaptive” approach that fosters change in the values, beliefs or behaviour of those involved. A key feature of the strategy he proposes is that the leader does not seek to resolve the value conflict but instead gives the work back to the people—those who have to adapt. No amount of legislation, no law or policy, will cause individuals to change their values. Those changes have to arise as a result of the individuals facing reality, becoming aware of conflicting perspectives, and choosing to change. Heifetz and collaborators describe in some detail the difficulties in implementing such an approach and strategies that can be adopted.

In this article, I describe an approach that is suited to another context, namely one where the disagreements are not between groups of citizens or politicians, but between *agencies* responsible for the implementation of *any* policy initiative in a specific domain. The disagreements may involve conflicts of value, but more normally they are based upon different perspectives (or paradigms or frames) that cause those involved to interpret the situation differently and hence advocate different policies or strategies. These disagreements are characteristic of “wicked issues” and, it is argued, require a systems approach that encompasses the existing pluralism, as opposed to systems approaches that presume agreement on objectives

or desired outcomes. Failure to embrace the pluralism will ensure that most energy is directed to the contests between agencies and not toward implementing any policy or action plan.

The issues and the proposed approach are illustrated by its application to the issue of Youth Nuisance in Manchester in the United Kingdom. The work described here formed part of a Demos project funded by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) and Manchester City Council (MCC) in 2005-2006. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit was established in 2001 to coordinate government initiatives to tackle the most deprived neighbourhoods, some of which are located in Manchester. The next section describes the context of the project that includes the different perspectives held by agencies working in Manchester. This is followed by a description of the “soft systems” workshop run in Manchester in December 2005 and the immediate outcomes. The final section reflects on the impact of the workshop and project and draws lessons for interventions of this type in the future. The overall aim is to share the experience of this project so that it may inform those working with systemic approaches and other pluralist methods on wicked problems in the public sector.

Youth Nuisance in Manchester

Youth nuisance is part of the wider problem of anti-social behaviour (ASB) that became an important political issue during the 1990s in the UK. Typical examples of youth nuisance include graffiti, groups of youths harassing elderly pedestrians or playing music very loudly in public places. The youths involved ranged in age from 10 to 15, most of who should have been in school during the day. In order to “be tough on crime and on the causes of crime,” in 1999 the government introduced Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBO). An ASBO is a community-based order that can be applied for by the police or local authorities in consultation with each other against an individual, or several individuals, whose behaviour is anti-social. The behaviour must cause alarm, distress, or harassment to one or more people not in the same household as the offender. Applications are made to the Magistrates Court acting in a civil capacity. An ASBO might ban an individual from an area, such as a park or shopping centre, or require the recipient to cease certain behaviours. However, controversially, breach of an ASBO without reasonable excuse is a criminal offence with a maximum penalty of five years in prison. Where ASBOs have been issued for nuisance, but not criminal, offences, the effect has been to criminalise those subject to the orders. By 2005, Manchester was known as the “ASBO Capital” of the UK due to its extensive use of the orders; however the problem of youth nuisance was not improving significantly. The incidence of youth nuisance was higher in deprived neighbourhoods and it was Manchester’s inability to meet its nuisance targets in these areas that prompted the NRU to initiate the project.

One of the disagreements brought into focus by Manchester’s use of ASBOs as whether or not they were an effective deterrent for youths. There were reports in the press of youths being proud of having “scored” six ASBOs, with the implication that it added to their “street cred.” This exacerbated the disagreements between those who wanted to eliminate youth nuisance by being tough and those who regarded the root of the problem as lying elsewhere. The various positions adopted by different agencies can be summarised as follows:

Enforcers:

This is the group that wants to adopt a zero tolerance approach to ASB in general and youth nuisance in particular. They want to establish very clear boundaries of what is acceptable and to enforce those boundaries with the force of law as necessary. Youths who, in their view terrorise old women, should not be exempt from the use of criminal sanctions. They regard those who object to ASBOs and criminal sentences as part of the problem – it is their liberal attitudes and failure to impose boundaries on children that has led to the current problem.

Distracters:

According to this group, youth have always been mischievous, and probably always will be. The root of the problem is that now they do not have safe ways to let off steam. This group argues that what are needed are supervised activities and channels where the youngsters can channel their energy creatively. They see a large part of the problem stemming from general lack of youth facilities and the early closure of those that do exist. They also regard demonising and criminalising children as the worst possible response to the problem.

Parenters:

This group maintains that it is wrong to blame or punish the children who cause trouble because the people who are really at fault are the parents. They see the problems stemming from poor parenting, in particular a failure to impose and enforce normal boundaries of acceptable behaviour. For this group, the way forward is to hold parents more accountable for the behaviour of their children. They support the use of tenancy agreements and Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) which, if breached, mean that the entire family is evicted. For this group, focussing on the children is letting the real villains get away.

Deprivation:

This group points out that the problem of youth nuisance occurs on deprived estates. Middle class suburbs are largely free of the problem, and this is regarded as highly significant. This group maintains that the real problem is families living in poverty, often dire poverty. This means that there is often insufficient space in the home for the children to play or study, there are not the usual resources of books and games available, and so it is not surprising that the children are out on the street causing mischief. All this is aggravated by the poor condition of the deprived estate, the poor quality school, the widespread use of drugs and incidence of criminality in the impoverished community. This group regards punishing the children of these impoverished families as inappropriate and as being advocated by people who do not want to see or address the underlying cause of extreme poverty. The solution they propose is to take measures to address the poverty.

Cultural breakdown:

This group regards youth nuisance and the whole spectrum of anti-social behaviour as symptomatic of the loss of value and respect in modern culture, a trend they see reinforced by the media, TV, computer games, rap songs and celebrities behaving badly. They point out that many of the youth involved in nuisances do not have a father at home; indeed the only male role models they see are drug dealers. They do not see how we can expect young

children to behave appropriately when their parents fight and divorce, when common courtesies are regarded as antiquated, and crime and violence is glorified. For this group youth nuisance is a symptom of cultural breakdown and as such is a distraction from the core issue, which is finding ways to reinstate traditional values of respect.

These short descriptions do not do justice to either the strength of feelings involved, or the more subtle aspects of the perspectives involved. However, they are sufficient to demonstrate that each perspective is well articulated and clearly has some supporting evidence. Further, it is fairly easy to see how from each perspective those adopting one of the other perspectives are contributing to the problem. It is not just that these other people disagree about what should be done: what they are doing and saying is making matters worse. It is this antagonism between the perspectives that explains why so much energy is directed toward winning policy arguments—and stopping opponents—rather than addressing some aspect of the problem. Under these conditions, *all policy initiatives based in a single perspective will fail*. They will fail for a number of reasons because a policy based on one perspective will:

- excite intense opposition from all those holding different perspectives
- not address the complexity of the situation
- presume a homogeneity in the situation that does not exist.

Wicked Problems

Earlier it was asserted that this type of disagreement was a characteristic of a “wicked problem.” This terminology was first introduced by Rittel and Webber (1973/1984). The abstract to their paper, originally written in 1973, remains cogent:

The search for scientific bases for confronting problems of social policy is bound to fail, because of the nature of these problems. They are “wicked” problems, whereas science has developed to deal with ‘tame’ problems. Policy problems cannot be definitively described. Moreover, in pluralistic society there is nothing like the undisputable public good; there is no objective definition of equity; policies that respond to social problems cannot be meaningfully correct or false; and it makes no sense to talk about optimal solutions to social problems unless severe qualifications are imposed first. Even worse, there are no “solutions” in the sense of definitive and objective answers. (Rittel & Webber, 1984, p. 135)

A recent review (Chapman, Edwards, & Hampson, 2009) of the features of wicked problems and how these impact policy, identified the following five key characteristics:

1. The issue had defied previous attempts to “solve” it, i.e., there was a history of repeated policy failure. This is indicative that the normal reductionist and positivist approaches may not be appropriate.
2. There is profound disagreement on both the causes of the problem and the best ways to address it. As the above summaries indicate there are several different perspectives claiming priority in the case of youth nuisance.

3. The issue is unbounded in scope. This arises because it is connected with other issues that are also “wicked.” In the case of youth nuisance, there are obvious links to poverty, family breakdown and the persistence of deprived neighbourhoods all of which are also “wicked” issues.
4. The issue is resistant to completion, i.e., there is no sense in which one can ever claim that the “problem is solved.”
5. There is a high level of complexity involved, which means that aspects of the behaviour of the system of interest are *in principle* unpredictable.

These characteristics challenge the conventional approach to policy making which usually starts with a stage labelled “problem definition” (Strategy Unit, 2004). However, this is precisely the area in which the disagreements exist. Is youth nuisance a problem of poor parenting? Poor facilities? Poverty? Misbehaviour or cultural breakdown? Without an agreed definition of the problem, the conventional policy process cannot even begin. The alternative, proposed by Chapman (2002) is to adopt a systemic approach that is both holistic and pluralist, in particular, a *soft systems* approach.

As well as addressing the issue of youth nuisance, the Manchester project also had the aim of demonstrating the utility of systemic methods in addressing complex issues in deprived areas. The project involved three distinct phases. The first involved a series of interviews with a large number of individuals working in different agencies so as to appreciate the scope of the problem, initiatives that had been tried, and the different perspectives operating. The second phase involved a soft systems workshop, described in detail in the next section. The final phase involved constructing a system dynamics model of an aspect of the issue. This was undertaken by Lane (2007) and is discussed further below.

The Soft Systems Workshop

One of the roots of systems thinking lies in cybernetics and its application to engineering systems. In this domain, the development of computerised system dynamics models proved a powerful tool for analysis of industrial processes. Stafford Beer (2002) extended the domain to include broader organisational processes. Known as “hard systems,” these methods continue to find wide application today as demonstrated by the system dynamics literature and the use of “lean systems” (see, for example, Seddon, 2008) to improve the efficiency of operations in both the public and private sectors. In the 1970s it was anticipated that these approaches, coupled with the deployment of multidisciplinary teams, could be used to address a broad spectrum of social problems. These hopes were not realised in those domains where there were profound disagreements about *how the system functioned*. These disagreements, as described in the youth nuisance case earlier, mean that a model constructed using one perspective will be contested from the other perspectives, and will simply become another domain of disagreement and contest.

The “soft systems” approach was pioneered by Checkland (1981), who emphasises that what distinguishes his approach from “hard systems” is the way that systemicity is attributed. In hard systems, the observer or analyst perceives *systems* in the external world, systems that can be modelled and improved. In soft systems, the observer or analyst perceives *complexity* in the

external world and organises the exploration as a learning system: thus, it is *the process of enquiry that is systemic* (Checkland, 1999). However, for the purpose of this project the main attraction of adopting Checkland's soft systems methodology (SSM) was that it explicitly surfaces the differences in perspective and uses a learning approach to devise *improvements* agreed by all the participants.

The Manchester project made use of a whole day soft systems workshop with about ten participants. The aim was to have representatives from all the different agencies and departments that were involved in addressing the youth nuisance issue in Manchester, including relevant central government departments. There were representatives from the NRU, The Home Office, The Government Office NW, Greater Manchester Police, several departments within Manchester City Council, a local resident, a youth project leader and the manager of a facility for dysfunctional families (the "Foundations project" described later).

The briefing for the workshop made it clear to the participants that they were to present their perspective on the issue as fully as possible, not with a view to changing other people's minds, but so that their perspective was understood by the other participants. Everyone was also asked to be open to hearing the perspectives of the other participants and to be willing to engage with a process that might strike them as strange, but which, in the end, would make sense. The group participants were seated at tables arranged in a large square with everyone looking toward the middle so everyone could see all the other participants. At each person's place, there was a stack of A3 paper and a large number of coloured pens available to share. The workshop was briefly introduced and then the participants invited to spend 10-15 minutes drawing a *rich picture* of how they perceived youth nuisance in Manchester. They were shown examples of pictures from other soft systems workshops to make it clear that drawing skills were not required but it was a real picture, not a diagram or flow chart, that was expected. An example of one of the rich pictures completed at the workshop is shown in Figure 1 below.

Once everyone had completed their rich picture, participants took a turn to introduce themselves to the group and to then show and explain their picture. After showing and explaining their picture, other members of the group could ask questions for clarification and there would sometimes be a short discussion of some of the issues raised. As the workshop facilitator, my role was to make notes on a flip chart of the key issues and themes that emerged from each picture, and to limit these initial discussions so that the main discussion could take place after all the pictures had been seen. The pictures were a powerful adjunct to each person's exposition of his or her perspective on the issue, because the visual element would often convey emotion, emphasis, and qualities that would be missed from a simple description.

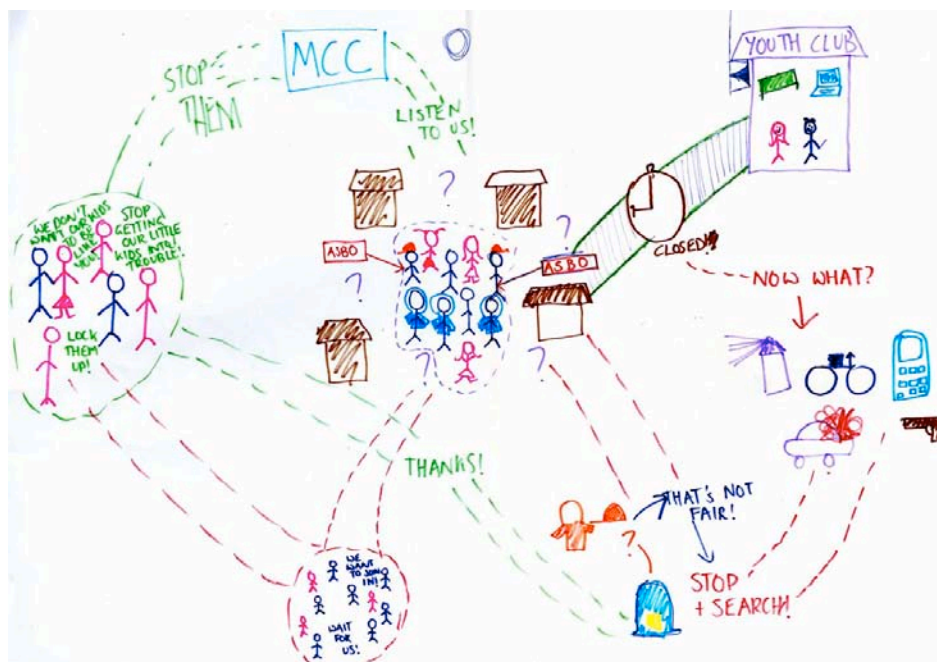


Figure 1. A participant's rich picture of youth nuisance in Manchester

This can be illustrated by particular picture, drawn by a woman who was a senior manager of the MCC anti-social behaviour programme. She concealed her picture after drawing it. When it was her turn to present she said who she was and her role and then held up her picture. She had filled the A3 sheet with a large heart, coloured in a deep red colour. Across the heart was a jagged black crack. She said, "Youth nuisance is all about broken hearts." The impact of her picture and words were tangible: it brought tears to my and other people's eyes.

Once all the pictures had been presented, about an hour and a half into the workshop, the group returned to topics participants wanted to discuss further. The first was whether ASBOs were effective in addressing youth nuisance, or, as some maintained, they simply added to the reputation of the youths involved. After a few heated exchanges, the youth project worker, who ran projects with some of the youths on one of the deprived estates, intervened and drew a key distinction between gang leaders and followers. He asserted that for gang leaders ASBOs were ineffective and did indeed often enhance the leader's reputation. However, for the "followers," the threat of an ASBO was often sufficient to bring the youth under control. This was a significant intervention because it allowed both sides to have their position affirmed without making the other side wrong. It prompted further discussion about the gang leaders. What emerged from this debate was that the gang leaders were usually male and usually came from single parent families where the mother was in difficulties, usually with addiction or mental illness and often both. It was not unusual for the youth to have an older brother who was already in custody and for there to be several younger siblings also out of control.

At this point, the manager of the Foundations project said more about the work of his unit. He ran a facility that took in families of the "gang leader" type and provided a combination of very clear boundaries and complete support. The facility could accommodate only five families at any one time but had a very high success rate in enabling the single parent to overcome her

addiction and regain control of her family. Typically, a family would be in the facility for between 18 and 24 months and would continue to receive support through an outreach programme after returning to the wider community. The manager said there were several key features that enabled the unit to succeed:

- It was outside the MCC system (it was partly funded by a national children’s charity) and so could combine services and facilities far more easily than anyone within the council.
- It had very clear rules, and a family breaking the rules risked eviction. The key rules were to cease “using” (drugs or alcohol), to keep the home clean, and to have the children in school on time every day. These were policed and enforced by 24-hour supervision.
- It was able to offer whatever support the families needed, including treatment for addiction, assertiveness training, parenting and cookery classes and assistance dealing with MCC procedures.

He recounted examples of the work of the unit. One woman was at the point of being evicted for repeatedly being late, both for appointments and in getting her children to school, when one of the workers realised that she could not tell the time. Another woman often returned late from trips to town and sometimes had to be collected from remote places. It transpired that she did not understand the numbering of bus routes and thought that all buses would carry her to and from the city centre. At one of the early cookery classes, when asked what they wanted to learn to cook, one woman responded, “I would really like to know how to make a sandwich.”

These stories made clear the level of difficulty that the single parents experienced and that “broken hearts” were indeed a large part of the problem. Equally important, they contributed to an increased level of openness among the workshop participants. The problem was made more real by the stories and experiences of those working in the deprived neighbourhoods and with the most dysfunctional families and the workshop participants were able to let go of polarised positions and become more open to seeking ways of working together. It was important that prior to this, everyone had had the opportunity to present their perspective on the issue and to have had their concerns recognised and noted: this gave them the space to explore other perspectives and engage in a different type of debate.

SSM Modelling

The discussions continued for more than an hour and were brought to a conclusion by the facilitator asking the group to review the lists of topics that had emerged from both the pictures and the debate. The lists now covered half a dozen flip charts, but it was clear to the participants that there were a few obvious groups of items. These groups were identified and over the next 15 minutes condensed to four themes:

- Home and family life: role in providing boundaries, praise and respect
- Dealing with boredom and providing appropriate facilities
- MCC and other services needing to work together
- Involving the local community in addressing the issue and shifting perceptions of young people

The next stage of the soft systems methodology required the group to choose one of the themes and to then construct an *ideal system* that, if it existed, would address the issue encapsulated in the theme. It is important that the ideal system is not constrained by factors or issues in the real world; this is an abstract exercise with the aim of identifying a genuine *ideal*. The ideal system is then modelled in terms of the activities that would have to take place for the system to function effectively. It is common for the process to iterate between the definition of the ideal system and the modelling of the activities. Finally, the activities in the ideal system are *compared* to what is occurring in the real world with a view to developing an *agenda for improvement*. Undertaking these steps is actually straightforward since each logically follows from the previous step.

In the workshop, the sub-groups were formed to work on different themes. What follows is a summary of the work carried out on the ‘Home and family life’ theme. The definition of an ideal system has three components. The first is to identify *what* the system does, i.e., the transformation that it brings about. The second is to specify *how* the system achieves the transformation, i.e., the means employed. The third component is the specification of *why* this is being done, i.e., setting the larger context within which the system operates. Here is a definition of the “Home and family life” system used by the sub-group:

A system to improve a family’s capacity to raise children	<i>(The purpose)</i>
by improving the parent’s self esteem, providing role models and support and engaging children with education	<i>(The means)</i>
in order to enable young people to become fully functioning members of society	<i>(The context)</i>

In iterating this definition the group dropped the specific reference to parent’s self esteem and subsumed this within the range of support services to be provided. It also dropped the reference to “engaging children with education” since this was regarded as separate from core purpose of improving a family’s capacity. The activities that the group identified this system would need were listed as follows:

- Identify families needs
- Develop services to meet needs
- Direct families to appropriate services
- Provide intensive care for dysfunctional families
- Give detailed guidance on parenting
- Support parents learning new skills
- Provide role models for parents and children

This list was developed into the *conceptual model* illustrated in Figure 2. The model organises the activities into a logical sequence and helps identify any gaps or overlaps in the activities. One of the insights that arose for the sub-group working on this system was that the best role models were likely to emerge from the support system itself, as shown in this version of the model.

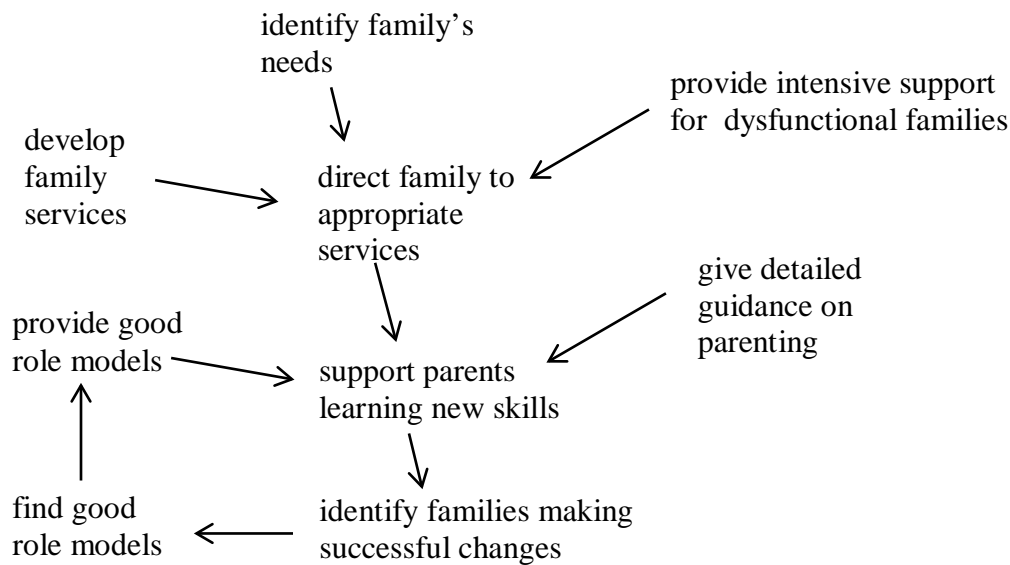


Figure 2. A conceptual model of the *ideal* family support system

The final stage in the SSM is to compare this model of an ideal system with what occurs in the real world in order to identify the steps that would lead to an improvement. It is stressed during the workshop that the aim is not to find a *solution* to the issue, but simply find the steps that can be agreed that would *improve* the situation. Once the improvement has been made then, ideally, the process would be repeated to establish the next improvement steps.

The group working with the ideal system shown in Figure 2 concluded that there were two improvements that they could all agree to. The first was to increase the capacity for handling dysfunctional families (the Foundations project). The second was to introduce parenting courses for parents of children over eight years of age. Up to that point, the parenting courses in Manchester had focussed on very young children whereas the youth nuisance issue only arose for children over eight! These are very practical steps, but the most significant feature of the conclusions was that all those involved agreed that they would support them. This is in sharp contrast to the competing perspectives and hostility present at the beginning of the workshop.

Workshop Outcomes

The aim of this section is to reflect on the shifts that occurred for the participants as a result of the Soft Systems workshop for the project. The previous section has described the workshop in some detail to illuminate these shifts because they are a crucial component of any pluralist approach to contentious policy areas.

During the pre-workshop interviews it became clear that most of those engaged with youth nuisance in Manchester were most interested in convincing the listener of the validity of their position and ridiculing other positions. This was reflected in the early exchanges in the workshop

itself, particularly where the discussion entered disputed territory, for example whether or not ASBOs were an effective deterrent. It was highly significant for the workshop that this issue was resolved without making either side in the dispute wrong. Sometimes ASBOs were effective, and sometimes they were not—and the key difference was in the role of the youth in the gang. This reinforced the workshop ethos of sharing your own perspective as fully as possible and being open to hearing other peoples' perspectives.

The rich picture process also fostered a level of openness through:

- everyone sharing a strange process to which they were all new
- discovering who the other participants were through their pictures
- having the same amount time to present each person's picture and their perspective
- clearly conveying emotions as well as ideas via the pictures

The stories communicated to the group served two important roles. First, they were a powerful way to share people's firsthand experience of the issue. Second, many stories conveyed the severe levels of deprivation and the tragedies in the lives of those involved—and as such, opened people's hearts to aspects of the problem that their entrenched position had enabled them to ignore.

It was also important that the group was small, ten participants and two facilitators, since this enabled people to appreciate each other as human beings and not simply as representatives of "them." By the end of the workshop, there was a clear sense that the group had been on a journey that had affected all those involved.

A key element of that journey was a shift in the individual's ability to appreciate different perspectives. Achieving this shift was a significant outcome for the project (and see further below for the wider impact on outcomes) since it demonstrates the feasibility of working pluralistically using a systemic approach. It is highly likely that the shift experienced by the participants was temporary and limited to this domain; however, such experiences are the stuff from which development as an adult is constructed. It is also the case that the group participants were able to agree a number of improvements to the situation in Manchester without being seen to "win" the debate—an outcome that seemed impossible at the outset.

System Dynamics Component

As indicated earlier, it is only feasible to construct a system dynamics model when there is broad agreement about the way that the system of interest actually works, that is, what causes what. Whilst it remained impossible to model the issue of youth nuisance as a whole, following the SSM workshop there was agreement about the role of dysfunctional families and gang leaders in contributing to youth nuisance, and the treatment of this part of the problem could therefore be modelled. Although the construction of a computerised model requires the expertise of a modeller, the main contributors have to be those with knowledge and experience of working in the system. Furthermore, it is normal for the main benefits to arise as a result of the *modelling process* and not from the completed model. The benefits are realised because in the modelling process the participants have to surface their mental models of how things work and test them against the data available and the models held by others.

One of the conclusions from the SSM workshop was that dysfunctional families tended to propagate through generations. Many of the young single mothers in difficulties were themselves children of young single parent mothers with addiction or mental health problems. This process was likely to continue to produce children who would contribute to youth nuisance and eventually end in the criminal justice system. The aim of the modelling work was to explore the resources required to overcome this self-perpetuating system, and the likely impact this would have on youth nuisance.

The people involved in this modelling were deeply impressed by the process of surfacing and quantifying mental models and were able to develop a model that illustrated the scope and likely impact of targeting different interventions to families in different levels of need. Some of the data required by the process, for example the success rates of different interventions with different categories of families, were readily available. Other data, for example the number of potentially dysfunctional families with young children that was not directly measured, could be estimated. One of the strong conclusions was that without addressing the needs of the families involved, other measures such as ASBOs and tenancy contracts, could only have a limited effect on the incidence of youth nuisance. However, addressing the needs of the families would not lead to immediate large scale effects since there already existed a full pipeline of “problem families” whose children were approaching the age when they were likely to engage in anti-social behaviour. The model convinced those working on it that it would take a minimum of 20 years, and more likely twice that long, to deal satisfactorily with the core issues. The group also recognised that this was way beyond the planning or policy horizons of any of the agencies involved!

Conclusions

The soft systems workshop succeeded in identifying steps that could be taken to improve, not solve, the issue of youth nuisance in Manchester, despite the conflicting paradigms of those attending. The system dynamics model succeeded in showing those building the model the value of surfacing and quantifying their understanding of how the system worked—and also showed them the timescale for a significant improvement. However, the workshop, model, and the project as a whole had little impact on the policies and activities within Manchester. The aim of this concluding section is to explain why this was the case and to provide guidance for the future use of systemic methods in the domain of public policy. There are four main issues that have emerged from reflecting on this project.

The first is the amount of time required from the departments and agencies involved in the various strands of systems studies. Although those commissioning the work were informed that significant contributions of staff time were required, there was insufficient time available from the key individuals involved. (Ideally they were required to be available for several interviews, as participants in the SSM workshop, as advocates of the outcomes in their department and as contributors to the series of system dynamics modelling workshops.) There are several reasons for this. One is a failure of communication between the project commissioners and those required to participate. Another is the general level of overload of all public sector workers and the difficulty they have in prioritising what they see as an external project. Another was the alarmingly high number of projects being run by MCC. Indeed there were so many projects

running concurrently that it would be impossible to identify which were having positive impacts. However, probably the main reason, and of particular relevance to the systemic approaches used here, is that the bulk of the work is done, and has to be done, by those already working in the system, not by the external consultants. As consultants, our role was that of expert facilitators whereas the real work, that of thinking through how systems function and so on, had to be done by the staff. What is more, much of what we were setting out to achieve challenged the way that these people worked and thought about the issues involved.

The second issue is the level of staff that worked with us on the systemic approaches. As the description of the SSM workshop indicated, all those participating emerged from the process with a deeper understanding of both the system they were working in and the perspectives of the other agencies involved. However, the participants were not at a senior enough level to be able to carry these conclusions and the new understanding back into their departments. This is a real problem where there are departmental and agency conflicts. Inevitably, when individuals have their awareness and understanding shifted, there is a follow through problem of translating the individual shifts into cultural shifts within departments or agencies. In general, the follow through is best when those involved in the systems work are at a sufficiently senior level to be able to influence the perspective and policies of their departments and agencies. But the senior people are often those who can least afford the time required to be active participants, as identified in the first issue.

The third issue is that despite many statements making it clear that systemic approaches are largely about improvements and not solutions, most of those involved in the project in the departments and agencies were looking for a *solution*. As a result, many were disappointed and probably were left with a view that the project had been a waste of time. This was particularly striking in the case of the system dynamics model where one of the senior commissioners was just not interested in an “answer” that said it would take between 20 and 40 years to address the issue!

The fourth issue is one familiar with many working with systems tools and approaches and is simply that in order for them to be used effectively, it is critical that they are understood and supported by the most senior managers or executives. A previous government review of the Lean Systems method concluded that for systems projects to be successful

Managers must be supportive of the process. They need to be aware of, and understand, the work at an early stage and allow the review team unfettered access whilst carrying out ... the initial review of the service. The support of the Chief Executive and senior management is crucial in driving the changes in their organisations. (ODPM, 2005, p. 4)

These conditions were simply not in place for the Manchester project, and this author would not undertake a similar project again without ensuring a far greater level of understanding by the senior executives. Since the Manchester project there have been a wide range of systemic initiatives in the public sector in the UK that has resulted in a greater awareness of the requirements for success—and willingness for leaders to take risks.

Although the project did not have the level of impact we would have liked, it became clear in later discussion with officers in MCC that our contribution did support and foster what became known as the “twin track approach” to youth nuisance, an approach that established and enforced clear boundaries of acceptable behaviour whilst giving as much support as possible to families and children in deprived neighbourhoods where anti-social behaviour was a particular problem.

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