Addressing wicked policy problems through cross-government collaboration. Insights from the UK context

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Abstract

The challenges and opportunities of governing wicked problems have received increased attention in the public policy literature, analysing how collaborative arrangements, network governance or whole-of-government approaches can leverage on the existing policy expertise within and beyond governments. However, the current literature has failed to provide comprehensive insights on how policy collaboration is experienced by policy actors. To explore this, our study proposes looking at cross-government policy teams, analysing the consequences for dealing with wicked policy problems in such collaborative policy settings. It is an important conceptual gap to fill in given that depending on how cross-departmental collaboration is experienced by policymakers, this experience can lead into consolidating or preventing the emergence of an organisational culture able to deal with the complexity of the policy issues at hand. This means, creating the structural promise that policy actors will be able to face the complexity of wicked policy problems in the future.

Impact

The study aims to identify policy behaviours, related to either taming complexity or coping with complexity. Analysing these policy behaviours at different levels within central and local governments can help policymakers to navigate the constantly changing landscape of global policy challenges, understanding how each one of them can enable a shift towards either encouraging to explore the complexity of policy issues by coping with complexity or moving towards taming such complexity in order to, for example, encourage policy coherence. In turn, this leads to highlighting the importance of further developing the policy capabilities needed to deal with the complexity of wicked problems. The argument introduced in this new development article will need to be further developed in the future. The empirical data collected in this study will allow for a deeper exploration of such policy implications.

Keywords:

wicked problems, complexity, cross-government collaboration, policy capabilities, policy behaviours

Complexity and policy making

In today's interconnected world, governments face increasing difficulty in addressing complex policy problems due to their intricate nature. Known as ‘wicked’ policy problems, these issues are inherently ambiguous and contested, characterised by multi-layered interdependencies and complex social dimensions (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Termeer et al., 2015). Wicked problems necessitate intense collaboration among numerous policy actors (Australian Government, 2023) and present novel governance challenges, particularly in problem definition. Different actors propose varying policy frames, often under high uncertainty due to the evolving nature of these issues. Moreover, wicked problems defy complete resolution, requiring continuous adaptation and innovative governance approaches (Cash et al., 2006). As Peters and Wright (2001, p. 158) note, managing these issues involves addressing fragmentation, sectorisation, and policy interdependence. This article seeks to explore policymakers' experiences in cross-government teams, focusing on how they navigate the complexity of policy problems through adapted governance mechanisms and collaborative policy behaviours.

To tackle wicked problems such as regulating artificial intelligence (OECD, 2024), dealing with sustainable development (Jordan & Schout, 2006), climate change prevention (Van Bueren et al., 2003), and promoting long-term integration frameworks for refugees and migrants (Poppelaars & Scholten, 2008), renewed governance approaches have been highlighted. These approaches must consider the broader policy environment, anticipate interdependencies, and mitigate potential negative unintended consequences (Termeer et al., 2015). Network and collaborative governance are presented in the wicked problems literature as effective strategies, enabling the use of diverse information sources (Leach et al., 2014). They help

manage complexity by encouraging policy actors to incorporate views from a wide range of stakeholders (Roberts, 2000; Weber & Khademian, 2008).

Collaborative arrangements are seen in this context as a way to access fragmented and local knowledge, mobilise dispersed resources, and build legitimacy through shared purpose and communal problem ownership (Daviter, 2017, p. 574). These arrangements foster governance mechanisms that can integrate conflicting or diverse types of knowledge from various sources (Daviter, 2017, p. 572). Such an approach to governing wicked problems focuses more on problem setting than on problem solving (Schön, 1993, p. 138). Collaborative settings appear as particularly effective (Janis, 1972; Janis, 1982; 't Hart, 1998; Feldman et al., 2006; Leach et al., 2014; Barr & Mintz, 2018). In decentralised institutional structures, these endeavours can incorporate and institutionalise multiple dimensions of an issue (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015, p. 49). They serve as boundary arrangements and encourage tolerance of different policy frames, addressing the main challenges of wicked problems (Candel et al., 2016).

Besides network governance, a second widely debated governance response is the whole-of-government approach, which aims for policy coherence and collaborative work across government departments (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Christensen & Lægreid, 2008). This approach leads to the emergence of policy networks and aims to avoid departmentalism, thus enabling effective cross-sectoral problem-solving (Kavanagh & Richards, 2001). Wicked problems, considered cross-cutting policy issues, are seen as ideal candidates for such a joined-up solution (O'Flynn et al., 2011, p. 246).

Thus, facing complex policy problems requires expanding the range of voices in policymaking and promoting collaboration among policy actors, including fostering cross-governmental cooperation across diverse governmental units. However, there is still much to learn about how policy actors experience cross-government collaboration and its impact on addressing wicked problems. Understanding these experiences is crucial, as they can either facilitate or hinder the development of an organisational culture capable of managing complex policy issues. Encouraging cross-government collaboration and updated policy behaviours can create an environment that equips policy actors to handle the complexity of wicked problems.

Governing complexity – the case of cross-government policy teams

In this section we present a theoretical proposal based on analysing the policy governance capabilities needed to address wicked problems (Temeer et al., 2015; Candel et al., 2016) and linking them to the policy processes and behaviours deployed in such contexts. We examine three processes related to policy governance capabilities: observing complexity (through reflexivity), acting on complexity (through resilience and responsiveness), and enabling change (through revitalising and rescaling) (adapted from Termeer et al., 2015). These processes are considered alongside two policy behaviours: taming complexity and coping with complexity (Daviter, 2017).

Coping with complexity allows for 'redundancies and overlap' and provides space for an approach that 'does not necessitate ambitious attempts at bridging or consensualising competing perspectives and conflicting evidence', initially requiring 'less coherence and coordination across policy responses' (Daviter, 2017, p. 580). Thus, policymaking is viewed as 'a never-ending discourse with reality, to discover yet more facets, more dimensions of action, more opportunities for improvement' (Dery, 1984, pp. 6-7). Conversely, taming complexity aims to 'reduce and control' a wicked problem by scoping and framing it in a way that aligns with existing administrative expertise and responsibilities (Daviter, 2017, p. 578). Policymakers who adopt a taming strategy structure wicked problems to make them manageable for decision-making.

By linking policy capabilities, behaviours, and processes, we aim to identify how policymakers experience complexity when working in cross-government policy teams and the consequences of their interactions with complex policy issues.

At the initial stages of problem setting or framing, policymakers may adopt different strategies to deal with the complexity of wicked problems. In cross-government policy teams, members develop reflexivity by observing the complexity of policy problems and leveraging diverse experiences from multiple departments. This allows policymakers to identify 'multiple approximate solutions to ill-structured problems arising from the organised complexity of the knowledge system' (Dunn, 1991, p. 49) - a coping with complexity behaviour as defined here.

Encouraging reflexivity at the initial policymaking stage enables policymakers to cope with complexity. This perception allows them to transition from observing to acting on complexity. Acting on complexity involves developing resilience, understood as flexibility and adaptability to uncertainty (Termeer et al., 2015), connecting initial policy frames with concrete solutions, and selecting which solutions to test. Policymakers begin to raise concerns about unintended consequences and policy coherence, acknowledging how their preferred solutions might interact with existing policies. Thus, policymakers must connect resilience with responsiveness, the ability to 'observe and respond effectively and in a timely fashion to pressing issues' (Candel et al., 2016, p. 793), by incorporating diverse stakeholder views.

In a cross-government setting, policymakers benefit from the varied experiences of team members, identifying unintended consequences and barriers to policy coherence. To increase the governability of policy responses, policymakers need to shift from coping with complexity to taming complexity. This shift moves from policy framing to policy design, enabling policymakers to address the administrative challenges of wicked problems. As suggested by Roberts (2000, p. 4), this might involve experts or stakeholders chosen for their 'knowledge and expertise, organisational position, information, or coercive power'. These individuals help decide on the solutions to adopt and implement.

However, acting on complexity involves ongoing social processes of sensemaking, which can sometimes be disrupted (Temeer et al., 2015, p. 696). Stagnation may result from groupthink (Janis, 1972; Janis, 1982; Grube & Killick, 2021). To overcome this, revitalisation is needed, defined as the 'capability to unblock unproductive patterns in the governance process" (Candel et al., 2016, p. 794). Learning lessons from cross-government teams can enable change through renewed policy behaviours, as individual policy actors apply these lessons in their own departments. To deploy these renewed behaviours, policymakers consolidate a final capability: rescaling. Rescaling is the 'capability to observe and address cross-scale interactions and mismatches' (Candel et al., 2016, p. 794), changing the scale and perspective of policy learning accumulated through observing and acting on complexity.

This theoretical framework allows us to view the governance of wicked problems as an act of observing complexity through policy reflexivity, prompting follow-up actions

through resilience and responsiveness, and enabling future change through revitalising and rescaling capabilities. Moving from observing to acting on complexity involves coping with complexity initially, but also finding manageable administrative arrangements to tame complexity. The policy learning developed through acting on complexity leads to rescaling and applying these insights to new policy contexts, ensuring ongoing adaptation and improvement.

Study design, data collection and analysis

To test this theoretical approach, we carried out an empirical study between May 2022 and June 2023. In collaboration with the UK Civil Service Policy Profession, we placed a call to participate in our research about cross-government collaboration addressed to mid-career Civil Servants on grades 6 and 7 (Institute for Government, 2019), who had a recent experience of drafting new policies in a cross-government working group, which included officials from at least two different government departments. We deployed a snowball convenience sampling strategy (Parker et al., 2019). Subsequently, the civil servants who agreed to participate in an interview were asked to identify peers from the same working group. Only those call respondents who completed their policy work within the last year were invited to take part in this research. So, they could reflect on their experience of working in a cross-government setting and talk about their perceptions and lessons learned recently, as suggested by Roulston (2010) in the guide to reflective interviewing. 60 mid-career Civil Servants from 18 Government Departments, executive agencies and devolved administrations took part in this research by participating in an individual interview lasting between 1 and 1.5 hours. All interviews were conducted online via Teams, recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide covered the following key topics and questions: 1) Which policy areas have been covered in your working group and how would you reflect on the process of inputting and sharing information from different policy areas in order to design a policy? 2) How would you describe the process of framing the policy issue in your cross-government working group? 3) What was your strategy to address the cross-cutting policy issue within your working group? Participants were encouraged to be reflective and critical. All interviews were analysed

using the stages of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis of the interview data allowed exploring how participants experienced the process of designing a policy intervention tackling a cross-cutting policy issue in a cross-government working group. The analysis allowed identifying policy behaviours showing how policymakers cope or tame complexity while observing and acting on a policy problem at hand.

Discussion and conclusion

Our preliminary research findings confirm coping and taming as distinct yet interconnected strategies for addressing complex policy challenges. Reflexivity enables coping with complexity by embracing the diversity of perspectives and tolerating ambiguity to explore multiple solutions without immediate need for integration. Conversely, taming complexity aims to consolidate and structure diverse inputs into coherent policy frameworks, leveraging administrative expertise to streamline decision-making processes (Daviter, 2017). Within cross-government groups, policymakers negotiate between these strategies, often adapting their approaches based on the evolving nature of the policy issue and the dynamics of the team. This nuanced understanding enhances our theoretical framework by elucidating how policymakers move from observing to acting on complexity within collaborative governance settings.

Our empirical findings showcase how policymakers engage with the complexities of wicked problems over the course of policy development. Initially, when observing complexity, policymakers embrace a coping strategy, exploring diverse perspectives and potential solutions. This phase allows for flexibility and innovation as teams grapple with the multifaceted nature of the problem. Moving into acting on complexity, policymakers shift towards taming complexity, seeking to structure and refine policy responses (Temeer et al., 2015). This shift is driven by the need for coherence and effectiveness in implementation, where administrative arrangements are tailored to align with policy objectives and stakeholder expectations. By analysing this sequential evolution, our research evidences the adaptive strategies policymakers employ to

navigate the complexities inherent in global policy challenges, offering valuable insights for enhancing policy development processes.

Our findings also underscore the strategic sequencing of coping and taming strategies in addressing wicked problems. Coping with complexity at the outset enables policymakers to embrace uncertainty and diversity through reflexivity, facilitating the exploration of innovative solutions and fostering a collaborative environment where multiple viewpoints are valued. As policy formulation progresses, transitioning to a taming strategy becomes essential to consolidate insights and integrate disparate perspectives into actionable policy frameworks. This shift towards coherence and alignment requires adaptability, ensuring that policy solutions are robust and effectively address the complexities identified during the initial phase. By evidencing this sequential approach, our research supports the importance of adaptive governance strategies in managing wicked problems, providing a structured pathway for policymakers to navigate from problem exploration to policy refinement (Candel et al., 2016).

Moreover, our empirical analysis confirms the iterative nature of policymaking in cross-government teams, where shifts between coping and taming strategies occur dynamically. After initial efforts to tame complexity and streamline policy approaches, policymakers often revisit coping strategies to incorporate new insights and accommodate evolving stakeholder perspectives, therefore deploying responsiveness capabilities. This iterative process fosters a shared understanding of the policy problem, leveraging the diverse knowledge and expertise present within the team. By embracing conflicting viewpoints and integrating diverse inputs, policymakers enhance their capacity to address complex policy challenges effectively. This adaptive approach encourages continual reflection and adjustment in policymaking practices deploying revitalising capabilities and rescaling the lessons learnt.

The findings presented in this article allow formulating a recommendation for policy practitioners who grapple with the inherent complexity of the public policy challenges. In order to address complex policy problems, policymakers should adopt a combined strategy sequencing two distinct policy behaviours – coping with complexity by allowing reflexivity and tolerating ambiguity and taming complexity by integrating diverse inputs into a coherent and actionable policy framework. Firstly, when

observing the policy problem at hand, they should adopt the coping strategy allowing enough time for reflection, exchanging divergent perspectives to create a shared multifaceted understanding of the policy problem. Secondly, when policymakers move on to the next step of designing a policy intervention, they should shift to the taming behaviour to integrate all the diverse perspectives and reflections into a joined-up and actionable policy framework. Taming complexity assures coherence and effectiveness in policy implementation and is required at this second stage. Finally, policymakers should shift again adopting the coping with complexity behaviour. This is to allow for the final round of reflections. This reflexivity helps understand if any important aspects of the policy problem, gathered during the initial stage of observing complexity, were either lost during the subsequent taming while acting stage or remained unaddressed while aiming for coherent and actionable policy design. Such lost connections may result in potential unintended consequences if remain unaddressed. Reflecting on the final policy design while coping with complexity helps identify and address the key vulnerabilities within the policy intervention by making the best use of diverse perspectives gathered at the outset.

These insights represent a significant advancement in understanding how policymakers engage with complexity within cross-government teams, navigating between coping and taming strategies to address wicked problems effectively, and deploying specific governance capabilities. This section is only an initial step of our empirical analysis. Moving forward, our research will lead to a deeper exploration of the nuanced dynamics of policy behaviours in complex governance settings and the ways in which governance capabilities are deployed.

Moreover, exploring the practical implications of these strategies for enhancing policy coherence, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive governance will be crucial for informing policymaking practices. Conceptually, this research opens avenues for refining theoretical frameworks that capture the dynamic interplay between coping and taming strategies in policymaking and connect them with governance capabilities. By continuing to unpack these complexities, policymakers and scholars alike can contribute to more effective strategies for addressing global challenges and fostering sustainable policy outcomes.

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