

**Coping with high risk and extreme uncertainty in aid
policy design and practice *or*
Towards a Sceptical Change Agent's Manual**

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High risk and uncertainty

- The book argues that an important issue in aid policy design and practice is how high risk and extreme uncertainty is best coped with.
- By asserting the existence of predictive knowledge the DAC-required LFA assumes a known predictive cause-effect relationship – ie very low risk.
- How present is the issue? ‘The data’ suggests ‘a lot’
 - Eg Levine & Zervos 1993 and Fforde 2005 => ‘almost no robust relationships between policy and outcomes, viewed globally, through standard terminology (eg ‘GDP per capita growth’ (*effect*) and ‘*open orientation*’). This implies that high risk is the norm.
 - Eg General sense amongst practitioners that the LFA is imposed rather than spontaneously adopted (eg where practitioners operate outside the DAC system), confirmed by studies of LFA in NGOs. Again this implies that high risk is the norm.
 - Eg repeated evaluations of the same intervention tend not to converge [Tilley 2000]

High risk and uncertainty

- But humans are well-used to unpredictability, *so the main issue is the risks involved in organising on the assumption that the context is predictive, when it would be better to assume not.*
- Fforde and Seidel 2016 looks at Cambodia in these terms, as a case study of where apparently superior Western capacity did *not* lead to desired outcomes.
- Multiple truths, each organising as though the world in predictable, are rather easy to beat.
- What might the world appear unpredictable?

High risk and uncertainty

- Candidates for explanation?
 - 1. Lack of ontological stability – GDP here and now is not the same as GDP there and then
 - 2. Lack of epistemological stability – causal relations here and now are not the same as causal relations there and then.
 - Comes down to assumptions about the model that make empirical results tricky – ‘spurious’ – eg ‘sampling from a single population’, ‘parameter estimation in a sense must assume that the model is true’ etc
- Push this closer to development and one thinks about
 - 1. The nature of the facts – Chapter in the book – use of aggregates that assume similarity and simplicity where the alternative is to assume diversity and complexity – assuming ‘Barbie is real’
 - 2. The odd idea that development is linear – eg that there is strong correlation between components of a composite development index – eg the HDI - (so why use the index?)

Trial and error *or* theory?

- In some areas, it is clear that through extensive experience there is strong and robust consensus about what works, that is, that the development context is reasonably assumed to be low risk (though perhaps costly to engage with).
- I think this is evident, and helps explain tensions
 - Practitioners are willing to assume predictive knowledge, *but this is not theorised – they think they know what will work, but they also think that they do not really know why.*
 - How does this influence how they organise? Not much information available in the literature. *Because the LFA requires theorised predictive knowledge*

Intervention based on theory that is assumed to have predictive power

- In others, where there are good reasons for asserting a need to organise to cope with high risk and extreme uncertainty, better policy and practice, the book argues, are helped by an examination and analysis of the origins of the ways in which policy designers and practitioners develop the ‘theory of change’ that explicitly or implicitly underpins any application of the LFA.
- The key research question is – what social epistemology underpins the LFA, the requirement that interventions *be based upon an assumption of predictive knowledge, that certain changes will knowably (ex ante and ex post) lead to certain outputs (outcomes)?*
- Note that repeated evaluations of the same intervention do not, typically, converge. *There is good evidence that a blanket assumption of such knowledge being available is reckless.*

Predictability

- The book therefore discusses the issue of predictability and how it has been managed. It does this by looking at implicit or explicit statements of procedures governing knowledge production.
- Within the international political economy literature, Held et al. 1999, the question: “What is globalisation and how should it be conceptualised?” In reply is a list of their particular criteria:
 - [A]ny satisfactory account of globalization has to offer: a coherent conceptualisation; a justified account of causal logic; some clear propositions about historical periodization; a robust specification of impacts; and some sound reflections about the trajectory of the process itself. [14]
 - This list is stated *ex cathedra* and not justified in any way.
- The book asserts two co-existing procedures, basing the exposition upon Nisbet (the basis of Rist) comparing this with Crombie (who focusses upon Grosseteste). This is of course a persuasive rather than a necessary argument.

Predictability

- Nisbet's book goes back to the classical Greeks and forward to his time (the 1960s). He argues that much can be learnt from digging deep into history to elucidate and map how these common assumptions (beliefs) have changed over time.
- Held et al fit well within his statement of normative procedure for knowledge production. He argues that beliefs about social development have, over time, *usually contained two distinct sets of ideas that are in mutual tension*.
- I. That social change is particular, contextual and real, and,
- II. That social change is best treated through *metaphor*.

Predictability

- Nisbet argues that “the metaphor ... [is] much more than adornments of thought and language. [It is] quite inseparable from some of the profoundest currents in Western thought on society and change”.
- He talks of ‘natural histories’ – that is, accounts that are expressed in terms of the nature of social change, and are deemed valid.
- In terms of the LFA and ToC, this means that theory is deemed to be a valid guide to action – requiring belief that discussion in terms of metaphor may map readily into discussions of action—of what to do and how things should be.
- What Nisbet illuminates for us is that this willingness to believe in the validity of a metaphorical account drives in part its use as a predictive guide to action.
- In a different language, theory not tested in terms of its predictive validity is accepted as a valid basis for interventions that assume predictively known cause-effect relations.

Predictability

- This can most easily be put as a ready ‘belief in belief’, and theory, of course derived inductively, with empirical reference, and so disbelief in it suspended, is not then tested through deduction and comparison with other theories (I will discuss the role of the ‘predictive criterion’).
- Thus, Fforde 2005 found that most citations of Levine and Zervos ignored their central point – that there were almost no robust relations in that dataset
- Crombie finds that Grosseteste takes a development of the classic ‘inductive-deductive’ iteration to *require* deductions to be test predictively.
- This he treats as a procedural innovation, as we can take Nisbet as an expression of different procedural norms.

Predictability

- This summary has some interesting implications
 - 1. Viewing prediction as a criterion rather than a characteristic of a knowledge or theory
 - Is accurate 51% of the time predictive? Not clear. Depends on many things including observation theory, costs of being wrong, etc.
 - So?
 - More interesting to view prediction as a criterion *where normative procedure contains a requirement that theories be compared and one selectable as the chosen truth (for there and then)*
 - In its absence, clearly, that selection occurs **outside the norms of the science**
 - 2. The apparently predictive knowledge that underpins the LFA and indeed mainstream ideas of policy generally is best seen as empirically-founded theory, with the particular truth adopted and/or advocated here and now therefore to be explained epistemologically, rather than through examination of the data/context.
 - An evaluation, for example, depends on the evaluators, and their ToR, not what they are evaluating.
 - Development doctrines vary over time and space; those with recent Masters are taught a range of them and choose agencies or fields bearing this in mind.

Predictability

- The LFA therefore, in that it requires a single Theory of Change, asserts that any intervention have a single ‘truth’, and so those who disagree with this are wrong. This is a particular social epistemology.
- Compare evaluations of two bridges across the Mekong
 - Japanese stress on reporting stakeholders’ views
 - Australian on stating ‘what really happened’ (and then debating ‘whether this is really true’)
- The latter assumes predictive knowledge, but its science does not require testing for that. The former does not assume such knowledge (though it genuflects towards the DAC, to which Japan belongs), and maps a series of ‘natural histories’ in a Nisbettian manner.
- These are different social epistemologies, and I think the book elucidates how they differ, and that the former is intellectually more consistent.

Implications?

- The book concludes that aid policy and practice both benefit from reconsidering ‘theories of change’ and the LFA, and that this suggests that under high risk situations we should explore methods of devising policy and organising practice that allow for, and make explicitly accountable, ‘sceptical’ approaches, giving some examples from other areas.
- Hostility *in principle* to assertion of a right to scepticism comes down to an empirical assertion, which is that predictive knowledge at reasonable cost is always available, which seems to me to be dangerous nonsense. But yet, it is powerful. *Empirically, it is hard to find formal and informal documentation of practices that enjoy scepticism; this is anathema, violating the DAC doctrine, and so necessarily viewed as seeking to escape accountability – but if the context is better viewed as unpredictable, then LFA managed interventions are better viewed as unaccountable anyway.*
- ‘Tick and flick?’, collapse of authority, lack of trust, ill-discipline?

The way forward

- The book understands such ‘sceptical’ approaches as ones that, as in other areas, formally *assume* the context is one of high risk and extreme uncertainty – that is, best assumed ‘unpredictable’, and so unsuited to the LFA.
- How might this A. be organised and B. felt accountable?
- I answer these speculatively, as we lack good ethnographic data on how people organise on the basis that their context is high risk and best treated as unpredictable (as a choice).
 - But the Victorian DTF disburses to agencies against outputs, not against activities, so it is in a ToC world.

Organising sceptically

- The most interesting empirical materials come from the military – specifically the Prussian and Israeli Armies, and also from attempts to implement their ideas elsewhere and problems these encounter. The ‘organisational glue’ of ‘policy’ (Shore and Wright 1997) ceases to be said to be evidentially-based predictive knowledge, and shifts to be said to be ‘winning’. Not the same!
- So far as I can see, good accounts of systems that do this stress:
 - 1. The importance of openly – doctrinally - accepting that the environment can be chaotic and so interventions then not best planned as though X would lead to Y
 - 2. The broad and profound changes then required in what are called culture, power and inter-personal relations etc. Leadership is about stating goals that lower levels can creatively act to arguably meet, and organising to support this, not about managing how lower levels do so. Accounts often state that such changes took big efforts and fights against establishments.
 - 3. Need for efficiency and the ability to win ‘against the odds’

Being accountable, sceptically

- This is the black box. Very interesting. But obviously, as so much of human activity involves belief in unpredictability, quite normal.
- Accounts stress such issues as the development of trust, familiarity and support for creativity by practitioners.
- Clearly, in areas of high risk where it is better to assume unpredictability, the accountability promised by the LFA is empty and destructive of respect and authority. Most aid practitioners could probably make far more money in other careers, so that *in practice* there has to be, parallel to DAC-compliant accountability, other structures. But as these are what could be called ‘positive violations’, getting at them is not easy. How, I heard it said, does on ‘Mickey Mouse’ the log-frame?

Implications for training

- *A Sceptical Change Agent's Manual*. What would this probably suggest?
- Training on the job and in context.
 - If reality is not assumed predictable, then much expert human capital ('they know about the causes of gender imbalance so they can be good advisers to change agents') would be devalued.
 - If the key issue is how specific interventions can be done that contribute to the overall goal, then training must involve development of relations between, eg, project staff, project managers, the desk and those higher up, *in ways that work*. These relations would no longer be those of the management of the construction, implementation and evaluation of documents expressed in the LFA.

A note – what is the stance of the book?

- The approach, drawing upon the author's own development practice and origins as a natural scientist, has been said to be quite conventional. I think it is.
- It is certainly far from approaches that stress the 'social production of knowledge', or 'critique', which, in the author's own experience, are often not very helpful to practitioners.
- The focus on social epistemology in the book is rather like that of an empirical grammar – what seem to be the rules in play? What are the facts used and how are they given meaning? It asks 'how' questions.
- What I found most interesting about writing the book was two things:
 - 1. How I ended up treating prediction as a possible criterion
 - 2. How it clarified what was being done in the social production of knowledge. It is empirically-based but not predictively-tested theory, so something outside science decides on the truth of the matter. This is rather relaxing, once one gets there.

‘For that reminds me of a story’

- “Fortunately in all this, when the logic is exhausted and the machinery of social analysis creaks to a halt, a refreshing core of irrationality and unpredictability remains” [O’Farrell 1986:9, *The Irish in Australia*]
- Cambodian Research Assistant (CRA): “So what do you personally mean by policy?”
Prof Fforde: “Well, you are Buddhist, right, so you believe that we live in a world of illusion?”
CRA: “Yes”
Prof Fforde: “Well, maybe think of it (as some anthropologists do) as part of the beliefs used by people in a group, such as an aid agency, to organise what they do, rather than worrying too much whether it is some true statement about reality”
CRA: “Oh” (walking on, pensively)
[Discussion in the field, ca. 2009]
- “If an anomaly is to evoke crisis, it must usually be more than just an anomaly.”
[Kuhn 1970:82]