

Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference 2015

Critical reflection in challenging times: how can research influence policy and practice?

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Politicians say they understand you
And then they walk all over you
And then you are *really* understood

Benjamin Zephaniah

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Chantal Benjamin, our brilliant Communications Manager at LankellyChase who died two weeks ago. Chantal insisted that I accept the invitation to present this, and persuaded me that I had something worth saying. Sadly she wasn't around to help me write it. She would have had strong views both on what I have to say and on my effectiveness in saying it.

At her funeral last week, her friend Benjamin Zephaniah gave a eulogy on the way Chantal embodied the Rastafarian idea of overstanding. Overstand means to have complete and intuitive comprehension. To have empathy.

Overstand is a playful inversion of understand. Zephaniah suggested that understanding is often used to subjugate its object. Those with power seek to understand those without power. The powerless are often told that they need to understand what is required of them.

A theme that will inform this paper is whether research currently creates understanding at the expense of overstanding. I hope to explore what more research can do to promote overstanding.

In Zephaniah's poem 'Overstanding' he tells the listener: 'Open up your thoughts / So we can connect'¹. I want to suggest that the great purpose of 21st century policy and social science is to build connection. At every point of the policy and research process, the key test must be: how will this help connect people, ideas, knowledge and practice? Is this opening up thoughts, or closing them down?

The two most famous words E M Forster wrote were 'only connect'. In the same passage, he went on to write 'Live in fragments no longer'. That was *Howards End* in 1910. Here we are just over a century later, and the challenge is the same.

To influence or shape?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNGRxwmuj24>

This paper is meant to be about how research can influence policy and practice, but I want to start with a distinction between influencing and shaping. Influencing aims to bring about change in policy and practice by getting the ear of those who currently seem able to direct and prescribe action. Shaping on the other hand aims to establish the right conditions or preconditions for future change in policy and practice, agnostic about how exactly it should happen.

Influence is a legitimate aim for research, so long as we recognise that it can rarely do more than tweak the tail of systems we know aren't working well.

What do I mean by systems? We are lucky to live in a country where help is at hand if you fall on hard times. But there is now plenty of consensus that the mechanisms we have put in place to deliver that help are flawed. Too often, they are designed and imposed by people too far removed socially, geographically and experientially from the people they affect. They are delivered through a number of separately managed systems, each driven by unrelated measurements and targets. The assessment processes, inspection regimes and commissioning models that were intended to support practice have ended up dictating to it. Perhaps worst of all, a 'them and us' culture has been allowed to grow in which the professional is presumed to know better than the person asking for support. The list goes on.

If you put good evidence into poor systems you have to expect poor results. The 20th century generated a lot of good evidence. Social science focused on understanding social disadvantage better and testing solutions to it. In the 21st century, we have perhaps a greater appreciation of the complexity of the social problems we face. We can grasp that they do not follow a linear path of cause and effect. Social problems have a dynamic above and beyond that of their component parts.

So if the 20th century was about understanding social disadvantage and its solutions, our task in the 21st century is more akin to overstanding it. In other words, we are now contending with the complexity of applying this knowledge in a connected world where there are many jostling variables, not least real human beings (those running and using services) with all our idiosyncrasies.

We have poured linear, compartmentalised knowledge into complex, connected systems, and have been repeatedly frustrated by the results.

Research has fed into over-specialised systems, with each profession and sector holding its own evidence base and looking to its own field of aligned academics. This has bred fragmentation, defensiveness, even preciousness between those professions.

Research has played a role in the atomisation of charities, each arming itself with its own evidence base. This has bred competition and a refusal to collaborate

And research has supported many separate sub-sectors, each believing that it holds the whole solution. For example, social exclusion charities that seek to target unmet

needs, community development organisations that believe in growing bottom up solutions, feminist organisations that promote gendered responses to social need, social enterprises that believe in market solutions, and a new generation of co-production and peer-led organisations that seek to shift power.

All these sub-sectors or schools of thought operate separately and largely in ignorance of one another. They are driven by passion, but also the need to be right. There is very little willingness to allow that they might all be right, that a pluralism of ideas and approaches might be healthy. Research bodies have lined up behind each, and have helped inadvertently to cement their differences.

So we need more research that focuses on what unites us, not what separates us. We need to grow more connective tissue.

This accords with our increasingly connected view of the world and the way we live within it. But it also speaks to our growing feelings of personal disconnection – the erosion of mutuality, trust and respect – and the heightened sense of alienation and loneliness that many people now experience.

At its most basic, a great deal of social research grapples with the question: how can one human being help another human being deal with the challenges he or she faces? Research has generated layers and layers of understanding in its attempt to answer this seemingly simple question. Has all this understanding helped us contend with complexity or has it added to it? Has it taken us closer to humans connecting with each other or further away?

When research succeeds in shaping policy, it is usually because there is alignment between its means and ends. In this case, this would mean research methodologies which can align with the goal of more human beings helping one another. If we are to promote human connection, this suggests we need more connective research.

The nature of the challenge

I'll try to illustrate this point with a case study from research that Lankelly Chase has sponsored.

We concluded that the way policy, practice and research describes people is a major barrier to them being supported effectively. Most obviously, we were concerned about the way people are described in terms of a single characteristic – usually a problem.

We talk about homeless people, offenders, mentally ill people, drug misusers as if these were real identities and as if they were all different people.

About a decade ago, we did start to see research which acknowledged this point. So we saw reference to homeless people with multiple needs, offenders with multiple needs, and so on. While this was progress of sorts, it still didn't challenge the

presumption that someone was largely understandable in terms of a primary characteristic. People were still being viewed through system-defined lenses which were reflected back unchallenged by research.

Lankelly Chase commissioned Heriot-Watt University to demonstrate the degree of overlap between these apparently separate populations by connecting a number of datasets. The research, which we published as *Hard Edges* earlier this year, synthesised offender assessment, Supporting People, national drug treatment and other datasets, and found remarkably high levels of overlap. For example, two thirds of homeless people were also shown to be in drug treatment and/or offender systems in the same year².

This data has proved remarkably influential in the development of policy. For example, it was cited in the pre-election budget report in support of a new push to reform services that support groups of people with multiple needs.

The word 'groups' is worth pausing over here. There is surely an irony same people who previously fell between the cracks of multiple systems because they were 'everyone's problem and no one's responsibility' are now framed as a group and, what's more, a priority group. They are even known to some as the Lankelly group....

It is not the case that this data suddenly changed policy. It helped clinch an already growing focus on multiple needs found in a number of official reports. There has been an increasing sense that the time has come to sort the multiple needs issue out, and that we can no longer tolerate the cost inefficiencies that we know are generated in this area.

For me, this illustrates the limitations of influence. Policy had already decided that there were high cost groups or cohorts that it needed to find and target. What the research did was furnish them with the evidence for one. The data slotted into a policy-made space.

But does the evidence actually support the case for people in all three systems being thought of as a group? Why these three systems? Other systems would certainly produce a differently configured group – probably one with more women or BAME people in it. What about people just outside the definition (how high should the walls be around it)? Or those on their way in? Why are problems or needs the most relevant way of defining people? Most importantly, is there any evidence that creating groups as a focus for policy and practice works as a sustainable means of improving human outcomes? What about the stigma of labelling, or the perverse effects of targets attached to group-defined problems?

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http://www.lankellychase.org.uk/news_events/501_new_profile_of_severe_and_multiple_disadvantage_in_england

While it feels encouraging to see data influencing policy, there's little sense that it is shaping it. It feeds straight into the compartmentalising paradigm that arguably created the multiple needs problem in the first place. We're still putting people into separate categories based on system-defined deficits. In doing so, we are carving out limited space for action in the midst of systems that will remain resolutely siloed.

When we shared the findings of the research with people whose lives seemed to match the profile, they didn't see themselves in the data. They saw that the data was *meant* to describe them – they just didn't think it did. They didn't see any reference to who they were as people, what their wider lives were like and where they wanted to get to. There was nothing about their strengths and hopes.

The same would probably apply to any of us if three aspects of our lives were chosen (not quite at random) by someone else, then reflected back to us as a definition of who we are. Yet this is what we do to people.

They also noted that the data said nothing about the people who are not in those systems – whose lives are equally challenging or terrible but who haven't been caught up in this particular web. They knew people in their local communities living very challenging lives who wouldn't feature in such a report.

This attempt to escape fragmented system labels helped create a new one. And this is the continual risk of research that aims to influence. It is the risk of being co-opted by the very policy and practice logic that you need to challenge, of cementing further a policy-constructed reality.

In which case, how can we evade this logic or rather attempt to reshape it?

As I began by saying, the answer seems to lie in promoting more open connectivity. What my case study starts to show is that this can't be an event, it has to be a continually evolving process. The products of isolated attempts to build connectivity are too easily assimilated into the compartmentalised logic of the system. We need ongoing processes that can model a different logic.

Connective research

Policy tends to view the world as though it were a massive jigsaw, in which people, interventions and systems can be readily pieced together. Research that focuses on the spaces between available evidence is treated as a hunt for missing jigsaw pieces – new knowledge slotted into the spaces between existing knowledge. This is not what I mean by connectivity. Of course there is a role for research in bridging gaps and building new certainties. But there is an equally compelling need for research that allows us to connect with each other through a shared tolerance of uncertainty, that can help us operate collectively in terrain that isn't fully knowable.

A number of methodologies – all of them in train, most of them tried and tested, but all needing greater priority – can help us build this kind of connectivity.

Perhaps the most obvious example is research that allows us to connect different episodes in a person's life. A great deal of policy, practice and research defines people in terms of where they happen to be in the system at a particular moment, freeze framing and building evidence around that identity: the prisoner, the inpatient, the child in care.

Longitudinal evidence allows us to step back and see a bigger picture, and this is usually about identifying the early risk factors that run through life. But it can also shed light on the connection between different episodes throughout later life stages.

The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions³, for example, noticed a stark divergence in a cohort of young people, some of whose delinquency plateaued then declined during adolescence, some of whose delinquency rapidly escalated. They also noticed that this couldn't be explained by any of the risk factors that tend give policy makers certainty about the action needed.

The only difference they could control for was the decision making of the system itself, and not the underlying behaviour, needs or circumstances of the young people. The decisions included arrest and school exclusion, both of which preceded dramatic rises in delinquent behaviour.

In other words, the shaping of a group of persistent young offenders did not exist in isolation of the systems designed to tackle persistent offending. There was a strong feedback loop between the two. Yet all the 'what works' literature on persistent young offenders allows policy makers to assume that there is something distinct about this 'group' that might be susceptible to further policy intervention.

The researchers hypothesise that the divergence in behaviour is created by the toxic effect of labelling. The system homes in increasingly on the young people it has flagged as problematic and the young people themselves internalise and enact the problematic identities that are ascribed to them. This is an uncomfortable thought for policy – that it may have played an active part in creating the very problem it is trying to solve. Suddenly it is not only the young people who need to be understood but also the unintended effects of policy on young people.

Another connective methodology comes from the field of systems thinking. Rather than accept that demand for a public service equates with inherent needs in the population, systems thinking seeks to understand the nature of that demand and where it comes from. Very often it discovers that the demand arises out of a failure to find solutions elsewhere in the system.

Advice UK, the infrastructure body for advice services, has adopted this methodology to help its members use their knowledge base to understand why people need advice at all. Usually it is because another part of the system has treated them poorly. We are currently supporting them to work with Women Centre in

³ <http://www.esytc.ed.ac.uk/>

Calderdale to create a feedback loop to the wider system in Calderdale, so that other services can learn how to pre-empt the crises experienced by women.

This is not how most organisations are encouraged to gather evidence. Overwhelmingly they are asked to demonstrate their own effectiveness in meeting needs, so they never understand fully why the needs arise in the first place. In turn, these organisations do not understand the impact of their own failures on services further downstream, because outcomes equate with successes. This lack of system thinking leads each component of the system to think and act in a self-perpetuating way, convinced of their own necessity.

You might contrast this with the fire service, which investigates each fire it attends and uses the data to feedback to wider services. This in turn leads to improvements in housing and product design, as well as joint work with schools, the police and community groups. The result is a self-improving system that continually seeks to manage down demand. If fire services rested solely on evidence of their own effectiveness in putting out fires, we certainly wouldn't have seen a year on year fall in house fires.

All of which points to the inconvenient truth that too much research is used to support business models – and not enough to show how we might dispense with the need for them.

Another route into this, of course, is ethnography. Since launching Hard Edges, we're now supporting Innovation Unit and User Voice to work with people apparently described by the data to explore the lived reality of multiple disadvantages. Ethnography done well can be an important tool for uncovering the reality that lies between the life of the person studied and the behaviours of the system that seeks to engage them. Or rather, it tries to reveal how both form one system that cannot be disentangled. Ethnography also helps to locate people in wider systems. In the case of our current work, researchers are picking up on the way problematic constructs of masculinity and femininity shape the lives of highly disadvantaged people. This adds an entirely different dimension to the concept of multiple needs, and one that is far less amenable to policy.

Longitudinal, systemic and ethnographic evidence all challenge the notion that there are things called 'needs' that can be understood separately from the systems set up to meet or manage them. Without these methodologies, we are left with a vantage point on needs as if they can be observed, assessed and counted from a great height, where the effects of the system disappear from view.

As good ethnography also demonstrates, we must never lose sight of whose evidence we are talking about here. One of the trends we will hopefully see in the twenty first century is a shift from people and communities as distanced objects of evidence to people and communities as connected generators of evidence.

However, there are counter trends. In recent years a number of nationally governed what works centres have been established, operating at a considerable remove from the lives and communities about which they are gathering evidence. While the renewed focus on evidence is certainly welcome, these centres carry the perennial risk of local evidence being misinterpreted nationally, or national evidence being misapplied locally. Predictably, the centres are operating in thematic siloes that will make it hard to join up their evidence at the level of a whole community. And the evidence that meets their standards leans heavily towards Randomised Control Trial-level rigour, excluding less academically verifiable evidence held at a community level.

All of which suggests the need for a more mixed economy of evidence generators, and at least the counterbalance of community level evidence hubs. One only has to think of the research undertaken by the network of settlements in the first half of the twentieth century and the degree to which these shaped the subsequent welfare state to appreciate the power of evidence produced and owned at this level.

The types of insight generated by community-led organisations no longer have the status they once did, partly because social sciences have encroached on this space, partly because national charities now command greater research budgets, partly because Government has been preoccupied with evidence for scalable initiatives, partly because these organisations have been put into the impact box and now have to pay other to show that they are effective.

What has got lost, and what needs to be reclaimed, is a wealth of insight into emerging social problems which community organisations spot long before they reach national attention. They see the connectivity between problems that seem separate and distinct to national eyes. And they connect with lives untouched by national systems, lives lived outside of nationally understood categories, such as hidden homeless people, women evading systems that threaten to take their children away, women in coercive situations, or socially-isolated introverted people.

Lankelly Chase is supporting the charity Just Life to investigate the lives of hidden homeless people, and St Mary's Community Centre in Sheffield to conduct an appreciative enquiry into the lives of isolated South Asian women. What is revealing in both cases is the degree to which even those closest to those lives are alarmed by what they find. But how often are organisations allowed to work in such an exploratory way?

Bringing everything I am into one place

I will give another example here of Lankelly Chase's work to show how we have tried to become more exploratory. Until recently our grant making was strongly influenced by evidence of the needs of people in the criminal justice system. There is nothing wrong with this, except we found it much harder to fund work that prevented people entering prison in the first place, where the evidence base is much weaker.

As soon as you enter an institution, it tends to generate huge amounts of data about you, and this data then enables organisations to unlock a lot of funding. It becomes a virtuous or vicious circle, depending on your viewpoint.

In an effort to break this cycle, we set out to understand why existing youth services were failing to prevent young people entering the criminal justice system. We viewed prison as an example of what the systems thinker John Seddon calls failure demand, in which the demand for prison places is fuelled by the failure to provide effective help further upstream. We talked to a lot of youth organisations and asked them where the cracks were in support that might lead some young people to fall through.

All the services we spoke to were confident they were doing a good job and targeting the right people. None could identify gaps or systemic weaknesses that could account for the numbers of young people flowing into prison every year. Out of these conversations, a conviction grew that there was a collective blindspot and we decided to commission research that could operate in this undefined space.

We partnered with the Social Research Unit Dartington to undertake an extended deliberation, the purpose of which was to discover whatever there might be to discover in this blindspot. We were attracted to their common language methodology, particularly two components:

First, it brings together people who would not otherwise meet and gets them to talk about things they might otherwise avoid.

Second, it requires the researchers to listen very carefully to what people are saying. To tune into ideas that are fundamental to the human condition or to health and development. As more people speak and ideas accumulate, they are connected in a story that is then reflected back to those involved. As the Social Research Unit say: “when the same words mean different things to different people, they disconnect. When ideas are formed and developed by a collective, they connect. This is what we mean by common language.”

The basis for their enquiry was an equality of exchange between young people, field experts, commissioners, policy makers, historians and social researchers. In other words, it aimed to draw together multiple lenses on the same problem. It required equal legitimacy to be given to all evidence, and the avoidance of jargon – or what they called bullshit language.

As someone involved in that enquiry, I can say honestly that the principal emotion it generated was anxiety. There were many questions from participants: what is the essay question? where is this going? why is the baby being thrown out with the bathwater? It required the researchers to hold their nerve repeatedly.

The results of the enquiry have been published in a book this year, entitled *Bringing Everything I Am Into One Place*⁴. This title comes from a work by the young poet Sean Mahoney, who captured in this one line most of what I am trying to convey here.

It is worth summarising some of the evidence the enquiry generated:

- Most young people with high end needs are not found in high end services. And most young people in high end services are not those with high end needs. So they are elsewhere.
- Of the remainder, i.e. the majority of young people with high end needs, most of these have access to some kind of support from wider civic society – family, friends, neighbours, wider community members. But there is a significant minority who do not.
- These young people lack both high end support from state sponsored systems and support from civic society. They are socially disconnected. How does this happen?
- Young people themselves talked of backing away from offers of support. These were decisions they took themselves, but they were a response to perceived inauthenticity in the support they were offered. In their eyes, there were faced with too many people with agendas, targets, clipboards, assessment forms. Too many people telling them what to do. Not enough people who seemed genuinely there for them. Too many expressions of pity.
- The young people described the support that would draw them into a positive conversation – support that balanced practical help with empathy.
- Frontline workers talked of working within a system governed by an outcome paradigm that drives transactional behaviours – the system loses sight of the young people because it is focused on outcomes not people. The young people and systems of support seem to pass each other like ships in the night.

The book forwards a hypothesis of a system built around promoting authentic relationships not the pursuit of outcomes. It suggests that for the most disadvantaged young people, what connects two people can form the basis of good outcomes – not the other way around.

This critique of the outcomes paradigm aggravates, even alarms, some people. There is rich irony here because the creation of the outcomes paradigm 25 years ago had the same effect. It has gone from being a challenge to the system to being a sacred cow.

⁴ <http://dartington.org.uk/relatewithoutpity/>

The book maintains that the outcome paradigm is still important but has become overextended as the single governing principle of our approach to disadvantage. It concludes that the paradigm runs out of road at the following points:

- When the outcomes are multiple, rapidly changing, not agreed, or in tension with each other
- When the outcome is difficult to measure and not routinely collected
- When the chain of causes and effects is not well understood
- When it is not clear how best to intervene
- When interventions are proprietary (i.e. they are owned by a developer or organisation and are therefore hard to deliver on a large scale)
- When the outcome hinges on the actions of several organisations or individuals.

When these limits are reached (and together these surely account for a lot of human activity), the drive for outcomes risks creating further disconnection. At this point, collective efforts should focus on building connectivity, between the young person, sources of support, commissioners and civic society.

Can you build connection 'in order' to achieve specified outcomes? Probably not – there will always be a risk that the outcome trumps and compromises the relationship. But if connection can be built for the sake of connection, there is every chance of the resulting outcomes exceeding expectations. This suggests a fundamentally different value base.

Policy shaped by humility

The system we have stands in the way of connection - between different forms of evidence about people, between different parts of the system, between communities and decision makers, between support agencies and the people they are meant to serve. It disconnects by inserting linear logic into a complex world. As a charity CEO said recently, 'we have to build systems around giving a shit about people, not the other way round'.

If we don't want to feed a system that perpetuates disconnection, then we have to prioritise evidence and learning that promotes connection as a fundamental purpose of research.

When things get complex, we tend to look for more and more expertise. We trawl evidence for solutions, we create expensive new professionals who claim to understand the complexity but who speak in a language few understand. All this does is drive us further apart, if anything heightening the complexity. Rather than looking for expertise, we should be looking for humility.

Good leaders faced with complex problems know that they cannot be solved at a distance. They devolve responsibility to those who are nearest the problem, who can

detect the connections hidden from view, who can engage with the uniqueness of the situation in front of them.

A support worker memorably said to me, 'I don't know what my job is until I meet the person, then we work it out together'. You can't scale that as a methodology – but it is surely spreadable as a mindset and value base.

It seems that a precondition of connection is a willingness to say 'I don't know' and even 'this isn't knowable'. The danger for research is that it offers the prospect to policy that everything is knowable – that there is always a missing bit of the jigsaw that will reveal the full picture.

Sure, we can observe patterns – particularly when commenting on the differences between supporting men and women and perhaps people from different ethnic backgrounds. But you very quickly come back to idiosyncrasy and uniqueness.

Research that influences policy tends to feed its certainties. Research that critiques policy tends to rail at its certainties. Research that shapes future policy has the task of reducing its certainties, of helping to legitimise a space where not everything can be measured and specified.

We will always need research that deepens our understanding of the component parts. But this increasingly needs to be balanced with research that helps create a more open space into which resource and ideas can flow in. Where there is more openness to the coexistence of several theories, in other words pluralism.

If we don't, then research will have to work harder and harder to delineate a diminishing space of defined interventions from which resources are draining rapidly. If anything, this model is already broken and a risk is that research methodologies lag behind this changing reality and don't change in time to shape a new one.

What might this look like for funding bodies? A key insight from the Social Research Unit work is that funders of practice and research can't buy relational approaches within a transactional system, no matter how much they might want to. There needs to be alignment – of trust, mutuality, empathy.

Funders need to help researchers create spaces to explore more of the questions that lie between the certainties – drawing together diverse contributions on equal terms. Not driving competition for scarce research resources, but using those resources to bring ideas and people together.

The drive for impact among funding bodies has led to a transactional paradigm in which things must be understood in order to generate impact. But this can only ever encompass a very limited sphere of human activity.

A relational paradigm for research funding would promote methodologies which seek to create shared understanding and language, which grow empathy if not always

agreement, which build our capacity to enquire rather than the imperative to know, which highlight the limits of useful knowledge, and that aim always to connect people, knowledge and resource.

Such a paradigm would start to move us from understanding to overstanding.