Wicked Problems Do they exist and does it matter?

Recently, all kinds of problems and issues are being called wicked, not in the sense of evil, but complex, difficult to understand and resistant to solving. This is in comparison to tame problems, which are simple, straightforward and lend themselves to traditional, linear approaches and solutions, usually related to technical disciplinary paradigms. This short paper provides a brief response to two critical questions for policy development related to this term. Do wicked problems exist and does it matter?

The Mass Media Answer

The label certainly exists—a simple search on Google for ‘wicked problems’ returns a result of 92,000 entries—so we know that the term is currently in the public consciousness. The recent popularity of the label can be seen in the graph below, taken from the online database Factiva, which shows the number of articles on wicked problems that have appeared in the media since 2002. Until 2006 there were only a few each year but the number almost doubles each year from 2008 till 2010. By March this year there have already been almost 50 articles on the topic.

Therefore, in the general media the answer is clearly ‘yes’, wicked problems do exist. Does this matter? Clearly, anyone who wants to discuss policy in the public arena needs to be aware of current trends in ideas, concepts and terminology, but maybe this could be just another fad.

The Public Service Answer

The Australian Public Service Commission seems convinced; in 2007 it gave new currency to the term when it published a document titled ‘Tackling Wicked Problems: A Public Policy Perspective’. They define ‘wicked problems’ as “complex policy problems … that go beyond the capacity of any one organisation to understand and respond to.” Other policy writers have agreed, saying that “contemporary policy problems no longer have clear causes but rather a whole host of loosely connected and interrelated factors” … where “each policy issue depends on the complex interplay of a wide range of factors and variables.”

This is not to say that all policy issues are wicked; they range from the tame, simple, straightforward and easily solved through to the ultra-complex, virtually impossible to resolve in any satisfactory way.

Examples of policy problems with wicked tendencies are tackling climate change, dealing with various indigenous related issues, obesity and land degradation. To clarify what a wicked problem is the APSC provides a series of characteristics:

- wicked problems are difficult to clearly define
- wicked problems have many interdependencies and are often multi-causal
- attempts to address wicked problems often lead to unforeseen consequences
- wicked problems are often not stable
- wicked problems usually have no clear solution
- wicked problems are socially complex
- wicked problems hardly ever sit conveniently within the responsibility of any one organisation
- some wicked problems are characterised by chronic policy failure.

One issue that illustrates many of the characteristics of wicked problems is the current debate about the causes of and solutions to climate change. The debate has been simplified into competing ‘stories’ which emphasise different aspects of the climate change issue. Each ‘story’ tends to define itself in contradistinction to the other stories and therefore proposes a different policy solution.

The three stories tell plausible but conflicting tales of climate change. None of the stories are completely wrong, yet at the same time none are completely right—each story focuses on some partial aspect of the debate.

So, for the APSC, wicked problems matter and need to be tackled in significantly different ways from tame policy issues. These include

- working across organisational boundaries
- changes in the accountability framework
- a collaborative approach that engages all relevant stakeholders and citizens.
Thus, one might pose the question: how prepared is the Australian public service to function effectively in these new ways?

Alternatively one might ask, are wicked problems really that different to the type of policy problems that historically have always faced governments? Are wicked problems in fact nothing more than extreme versions of normal policy issues? This is the crux of the debate, and the two options can be shown diagrammatically.

- Option one: gradual increase in complexity.

- Option two: clear disjunction between increasing complexity of tame problems and multiple dimensions of wickedness, (the term used to describe degrees of wickedness, but avoid moral overtones).

Turning to those who conduct research on policy issues may help us choose between options 1 and 2.

**The Research Answer**

In academia, *wicked problems* is an old label, originally coined by Rittel and Webber in 1973. By the 1970s there was a growing consensus around the need to contrast and describe the emerging types of policy problems with what had existed previously. This contrast between one order of problem and another has also been represented in the following terms:

- Generation one and two (Rittel, 1973)
- Social messes (Horn, 2007)
- Messy policy problems (Ney, 2009)
- Adaptive problems (Heifetz, 1994)
- Policy disagreement vs. policy controversy (Schon, 1999)

The common element in all of these was the belief that there was a need to recognise a new category of problem and a new approach to tackling them. Schon’s distinction between policy disagreement and policy controversy is probably the most helpful for settling our question.

He uses policy disagreement, (tame problems), to refer to disputes that can be resolved by analysing the ‘facts’ of the situation. The evidence can be examined objectively and agreement can then be reached. In contrast, policy controversies (wicked problems), are immune to resolution by appeal to the facts. This is because a disagreement about facts often masks an underlying paradigm dispute.

A paradigm is a way of looking at and interacting with the world, i.e. a set of underlying structures of beliefs, perception and appreciation. How to ‘work with’ possible competing paradigms of the stakeholders involved in a problem is key to understanding wicked problems. With wicked problems, stakeholders do not share a common paradigm and therefore such disputes are resistant to resolution by appeal to facts alone because the parties’ conflicting paradigms determine what counts as a fact and what arguments are taken to be relevant and compelling.

These differences in paradigms impact on how facts are used.

- Each paradigm will select different facts as more relevant.
- Facts will also be interpreted differently depending on the paradigms.
- The different value sets in different paradigms will also mean a different set of priorities on the same set of facts.

Moreover, the paradigms that shape policy positions and underlie controversies are usually tacit, which means that they are exempt from conscious attention and reasoning. Therefore, each stakeholder group in a wicked problem perceives and defines the elements of the problem from their paradigm perspective without being aware of the alternative view of reality being used by other stakeholders. Thus researchers who specialise in wicked problems would choose option 2. Two recent books (2010) from ANU and RMIT in Australia take this position and therefore recommend interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to tackling wicked problems.

So, the existence of wicked problems is supported by the media, the public service and researchers, and it matters because these types of problems are different from tame policy issues and cannot be solved using traditional methods.

**For Further Reading**

