

**Systems thinking in
partnership working for wellbeing and health
practice
in an English city:
absent competence or constrained capability?**

Helen Wilding

Research purpose

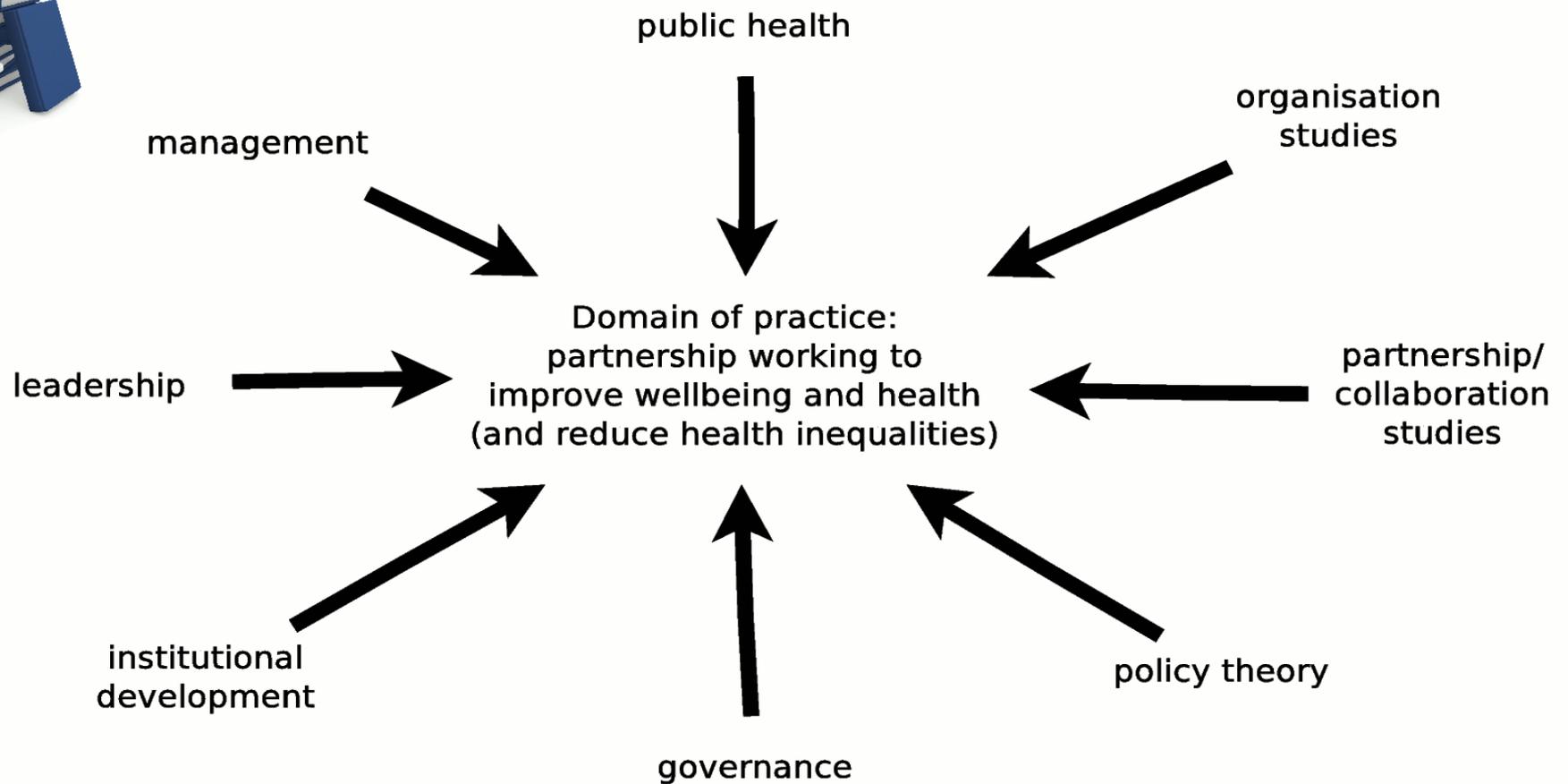
to investigate and develop a useful way of understanding systems thinking in partnership working for wellbeing and health practice

by means of gaining insights from literature review and empirical evidence

in order to open up possibilities for practice improvements and future research

(using PQR structure, Checkland & Poulter 2010)

Relevant intellectual fields...



Published literature seemed to say...

- ✓ Wellbeing and health characterised by interdependencies, complexity, uncertainty, controversy and multiple stakeholders/perspectives
- ✓ Cannot be solved by traditional linear cause-effect, reductionist, dogmatic thinking
- ✓ Therefore we need systems thinking
- × So....leaders need training in systems thinking

But...

- Framing seemed very linear cause-effect – lack of leaders' systems thinking skills are causing the problem
- Didn't fit with my experiences of listening to talk of senior leaders – failed to appreciate existing capacity
- So my alternative framing 'systems thinking as constrained capability':
 - People have natural systems thinking capabilities
 - These are constrained by the setting in which carry out their work

Research paradigm

- Naturalist research paradigm – associated with post-modernism
 - Not about measuring or quantifying or looking for linear cause-effect
 - Recognise that research not a neutral activity
 - Research account is an interpretation – inevitably partial
 - Any 'theory' generated simply acts as model of situation that represents
 - Value is in sensitising people to aspects of situations that they may not have been previously aware of

Research design

- Systems thinking demonstrated to an 'observer' through what people say or what they do (arises in a social dynamic, Ison 2010)
- Decided to focus on what people say
- Eleven 'leaders' participated in a recorded conversation about their best experiences of partnership working (drawing from appreciative inquiry)
- Recordings transcribed verbatim
- Close analysis of the transcripts

Implications for credibility

- Pre-understanding...I wasn't going in with a blank slate – had a 'hunch' I wanted to prove!
- Insider research...all participants already known to me, so I went in with pre-judgements
- Only one 'talk' sample per participant...if feature not in sample then not 'proof' of absent competence
- Only one 'researcher'...someone else would make different judgements
- Contextualised – specific findings cannot be generalised to other people, places or times

First observations...

- Best experiences of partnership working for wellbeing and health, variety of 'tasks', e.g.:
 - Crisis coordination
 - Supporting community-led initiatives
 - Service improvement/service system re-design
 - Service coordination
- Acknowledged range of concerns – strategic to front-line; social change to 'tactical'.
- Key reminder – need methodological pluralism; no one size fits all 'systems approach'

First part of my research question

To what extent did participants demonstrate systems thinking capabilities?

First 'probe' (drawing on Armson, 2011)

- Is there evidence of:
 - Holistic thinking (as opposed to reductionist thinking)
 - Appreciative of multiple partial perspectives (as opposed to dogmatic thinking)

Evidence of holistic thinking?

e.g.

“quite complex, multi-factorial problems if that’s not too jargonised way of describing it”

“so you need that recognition of everybody’s contribution and that the sum of the parts is greater, it has got to be that collective”

“there’s always, always a bigger picture. So always looking for what is the bigger frame of reference umm because the bigger frame of reference will often help you to see how you might solve things that appear to be intractable”

Evidence of appreciation of multiple, partial perspectives?

e.g.

“There’s always, always another perspective”

“we are the organisation who is best placed to have an overview of what the city looks like... All other organisations only see a partial take on that. Now, our overview has some weaknesses so for example we definitely have an overview which includes a perception about health, what we probably don’t bring is the more detailed understanding of that and what some of the solutions might be”

Helen Wilding, SciO presentation

Second 'probe' (after Checkland, 1985)

Is there evidence of:

- Systematic thinking - oriented to goal seeking, problems, solutions, use of analysis or referred to a system that could be 'engineered' or 'designed'.
- Systemic thinking - more oriented to learning or the human content of the situation.

Systematic thinking?

e.g.

"The other asset and the strongest asset is knowing that you've got a problem and finding a solution. So clearly defined problems, with very good indicators of success"

"if we can have the shared analysis of what the problem might be, we can start to try and find a way to tackle those things"

Systemic thinking?

e.g.

"And you know it is fascinating watching when they first come together, they come from different intellectual disciplines as well as different ways of behaving"

"I don't have all the answers, I am open to learning, I'm receptive to new ideas and new ways of learning so I don't bring a closed mindset, you know, that's there is only one way to do it and its my way"

Mixed systematic and systemic?

"But it's the, it's the sort of shared understanding of what the challenge or the issue or the area that you are looking at is, you can call that a needs analysis, or whatever you want to call it, it doesn't really matter, but it's that shared understanding of what the issue is and where it has come from and all the rest of it. And then as a result of that shared understanding, um, you know, for me good partnership is about agreeing or establishing amongst yourselves, what therefore the key priorities are, what the key challenges are going to be"

Third 'probe' (after Ison, 2010)

- Do participants connect with lineages of Systems?
 - Systems concepts? – 111 occurrences of 23 concepts but vast majority discounted as 'false positives'
 - Systems scholars? – one mention of a systems scholar (Bateson)
 - Systems tools/approaches? – no mentions

Conclusion so far...

- People do have natural systems thinking capabilities
- But potential constraint to use of natural systems thinking capabilities is low familiarity with the concepts, language and tools of Systems – or 'Systems literacy'.

(This is consistent with Ison's view that those who already think systemically can be helped to “develop a language, including conceptual and methodological insights, to better understand the nature of their systems thinking”)

Second part of my research question

To what extent did participants demonstrate an appreciation of practices that are consistent with those that enable rather than constrain systems thinking capabilities?

So looked for:

- positive opinion of enabling practice
- negative opinion of enabling practice ('deviant' instance)
- negative opinion of constraining practice
- positive opinion of constraining practice ('deviant' instance)

The partnership 'setting': literature

Limiting current effectiveness

Over-engineered structural partnerships

managerial 'command and control'

those at local level required to establish and participate in ways of working that conceived at a national level*

advice on how to work in partnership rarely based on any theory

practitioners glean evidence from conferences and official guidance rather than look to published research

national performance regime and target mentality affects framing of the issue*

policy making emphasising instrumental rationality*

Suggestions for change

enable relationship building and dialogue*

flexible framework structures that can be adapted quickly in light of learning and review*

practitioners being motivated by their own purpose*

continually reflexive and self-examining approach*

policy making emphasising dialogue and learning*

'Personal' level

e.g.

"I think there was, there was a willingness to work and there wasn't a sense of well this belongs to us, there wasn't a sense of I talk about negative ownership rather than positive ownership."

"relationship building, umm finding the people who are natural or potential allies umm recruiting them to the project, if you like, of partnership working umm and using that to create a centre of gravity which can be grown"

'Organisational' level

e.g.

“Umm I've, I've seen councils that are very top down in their operation, and governments of course they are top down and very centralised in their decision making. I've always believed that it works best if it's the other way round. That umm councils, councillors, politicians generally are facilitators”

“the culture of our two respective organisations was not particularly conducive. Um they were both very controlling”

'Partnership' level

"it's about the people sitting down with each other, sharing the umm sharing the analysis of the problem, agreeing how they are going to work together umm rolling their sleeves up, getting on with stuff, trusting each other, challenging each other, supporting each other, umm and my hope is that we don't let our urr past, our prejudices, our all of the rest of it getting in the way of that"

"I've kind of got over my bit about, it's got to be a structural relationship umm it's, because it isn't, it's people who make partnerships not organisations."

'National' level

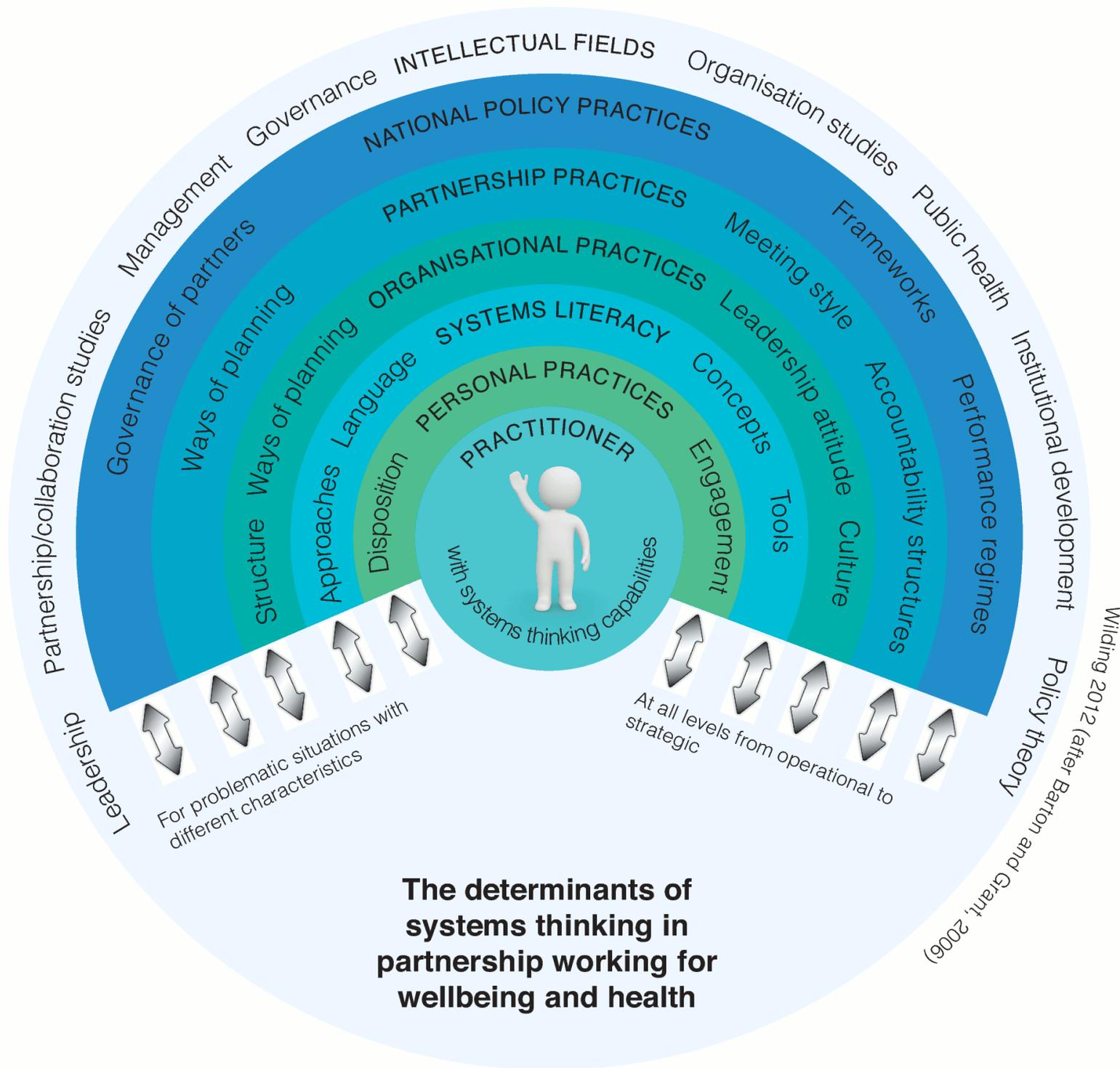
“I think the sad reflection I have of all these structures is that most of them are put in place because we've been asked to put them in place. Umm having said that, when instructed to do so we often get together and think of work as partnership, but in terms of ownership a better starting point would be to recognise and meet a need to establish partnerships to then allow ownership amongst the whole partnership of the agenda that they set themselves to do over the coming years. So I don't think that it is a negative but certainly being told that you ought to set something up umm might not be as good as if you thought that was the need in your locality in the first place”

Conclusion...

- Strong sense that appreciate practices that constrain systems thinking, however this is 'in the name of' partnership working rather than systems thinking
- Practices advocated as good for partnership working almost synonymous with those that enable systems thinking
- Practices advocated as 'bad' for partnership working almost synonymous with those that constrain systems thinking

Bringing it all together

- The determinants of systems thinking in partnership working for wellbeing and health:
 - disposition, engagement and Systems literacy of individuals
 - organisational practices – structures, leadership attitude, culture, ways of planning
 - partnership practices – ways of planning, meeting style, accountability structures
 - national policy practices – governance of partners, guidance & advice, frameworks, performance regimes
 - intellectual fields – use of Systems in relevant academic fields



The determinants of systems thinking in partnership working for wellbeing and health

So what?

- For me
- For my 'purposeful actions' at work
 - 'Releasing the capacity within us' report
 - Cued in to opportunities to introduce these ideas
- Raising awareness with others interested in systems thinking in public sector
 - The setting matters as much as the individual's knowledge and skills
 - Importance of learning through doing, rather than just 'training'
 - Not helpful just to advocate one particular systems approach