

Long Abstract: Uprichard, E. and Byrne, D.

Studying complex social change:

Linking levels and meaning through adult and child personal reflections

Complex social systems are recognized as multi-level and multi-dimensional entities. However, understanding the ways in which the multiple multi-dimensional levels interact together and produce social change at the local level is methodologically problematic. So far, the dominant mode of representation of social systems as complex systems has been through iconic modelling. Iconic models are founded on algorithms that derive complex emergence from the iterative progression of either non-linear equation sets or 'game' rules in simulations. However, whilst such approaches certainly have their uses, they do not address crucial aspects of the processes of complex causation in social systems. There are three main reasons for this. First, they have a limited capacity for capturing generative dynamics that occur across the multiple hierarchical levels. Most models only account for two or three levels whereas aggregate social form is derived from the multiple nonlinear interactions of multiple levels; the interactions are interdependent across and between levels. If we are to construct representations of the social then somehow, we also need to construct models that acknowledge multiple non-linear multi-level interactions.

Second, whilst many models are based on empirical data, few use this data directly within the model and instead take the form of hypothetical predictive propositions about particular systems rather than working with what is known to be real about the system. We stress the importance of exploring modes or representations in which actual data is directly integrated. Traditionally, data would be understood in this sort of context as the quantitative products of measurement processes. We absolutely agree that social measurements are relevant but we think that measurements alone will not resolve the issue. Third, measured data and the structures of explanation we construct with it are not adequate either as account of the nature of complex systems incorporating human agency or as modes of establishing such accounts. We also need data forms, which can convey meaning and the potential for social action. Narratives have this capacity.

Hence, this paper argues that personal narratives are a way of responding to this methodological challenge because narratives allow access to the multi-level and multi-dimensional meaning that underlies human agency. This argument is illustrated in relation to studying urban change - where cities and urban regions are understood as complex systems - by drawing on first-hand empirical examples from Byrne and Doyle's examination of people's understanding of 'post-industrial transformation' in South Shields (UK) from the past through the present to the future, and Uprichard's work on children's understanding of York (UK) and Dijon (France) in the present and the future. In turn, the paper proposes that the use of adult and child personal narratives must be part of the methodological repertoire of approaches to studying and understanding complex social change.