

14. Context?

As with the first domain of knowledge synthesis, consideration of the framework question '*What circumstances might influence the understanding and management of diverse unknowns?*' involves the historical, political or other background that led to the integrative applied research and that may be influential during its life, but in this domain context is viewed through the lens of unknowns rather than knowledge. The three areas for consideration then become

- determining which aspects of the context of the problem are important for the consideration of diverse unknowns, especially which unknowns will be taken into account and how
- understanding the sources of authorisation for a broad consideration of unknowns and their management, as well as how such endorsement affects what is investigated
- understanding the facilitators and barriers to a wide-ranging consideration of unknowns and their management within the organisations undertaking the integrative applied research.

The general paucity of understanding about diverse unknowns and how to manage them (described in Chapter 10) is a key contextual issue that influences each of these considerations.

Overall Context

Although there are few useful concepts and methods for determining which of the circumstances surrounding the problem are likely to be important and how they should be taken into account, some aspects of context are relatively easy to grasp. One is the historical context, which involves examining how unknowns were dealt with in the past, especially which unknowns were considered relevant previously and how other unknowns were managed. If we take a problem like family violence, for instance, this was not considered to be a problem at all a few decades ago, with the whole issue being denied.¹ Sociological circumstances, especially taboos, are also relatively straightforward to think about. For example, examination of unknowns like the way the behaviours of victims contribute to violence is often considered to be taboo.

¹ Until feminist advocacy made it an urgent research and policy issue.

Tasks for the I2S Development Drive

Collect case examples dealing with overall context relevant to considering diverse unknowns.

Work with a range of social scientists to produce guides for how context can be taken into account.

Authorisation

As is the case for knowledge synthesis, funding and support from influential organisations or individuals are also important sources of authorisation for dealing with diverse unknowns. Traditionally, research funding is directed at reducing a carefully circumscribed set of unknowns. It may be more difficult to obtain funding to consider unknowns that are more expansively defined. Indeed success will be influenced by how well reviewers understand the complexity of unknowns and how good a case can be made. Similar considerations apply to receiving backing from influential organisations or individuals. Obtaining their support for a broader consideration of unknowns will depend on how well they understand its importance and whether a way forward that has merit can be produced.

My experience in directing the feasibility research into diamorphine prescribing was that having relatively untied funding was critical for examining some unknowns, especially risk factors like the potential honey-pot effect and possible increased marginalisation. Although these were widely considered to be important, it was hard to conceive how to frame them in a way that would be attractive to a funder, because there was no clear way to tackle them.² Support from the directors of the centres in which the research was being undertaken and from the advisory committee was essential for the approach we took.

Untied funding has another benefit, in that it can allow unknowns that become evident only once the research is under way to be followed up quickly. It may be that new funding mechanisms better adapted to the complexity of unknowns are needed to complement (rather than replace) those that currently exist.

² For the honey-pot effect, we thought through a range of likely 'push' and 'pull' factors, analysed a case of drug user migration and responses to it in Australia some years before, examined two open drug scenes and lessons for how to prevent them, and considered ways of establishing and enforcing residency criteria (Bammer et al. 1994).

Tasks for the I2S Development Drive
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Gather case examples describing funding, endorsement and other forms of authorisation, along with any restrictions on understanding and management of diverse unknowns.

Examine whether provision of untied funding enhances the ability to explore unknowns in less traditional ways.
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Organisational Facilitators and Barriers

The third area relevant to context applies to the organisations undertaking the integrative applied research and involves whether their organisational structures and cultures aid or impede a broad consideration of unknowns. Two germane dimensions are presented here.

First, organisations—consciously or not—take a position in relation to unknowns, embodied in their epistemological and methodological approaches. For example, some organisations are very specific in how they deal with unknowns, such as the Jerry Lee Centre of Experimental Criminology at Cambridge University,³ which focuses on randomised controlled trials, and the University of Tennessee’s Center for Applied Phenomenological Research, which concentrates on phenomenological and other qualitative methods.⁴ Other organisations, such as my own centre, are eclectic in the epistemologies and methodologies embraced and hence in the way unknowns are considered.

Second, there are also likely to be differences between organisations in the research risks they are prepared to take. All research organisations have to engage with a level of chance for their work to stay current and fresh, but some organisations are more likely than others to support investigation of new problems, application of novel methods and unconventional collaborations. Taking a comprehensive approach to unknowns—especially at this stage when concepts and methods for understanding and dealing with them are still relatively underdeveloped—is a precarious activity especially as there is no guarantee that the result will be insightful and publishable. Some organisations will therefore be more open to this than others.

Task for the I2S Development Drive

Compile case examples describing the diversity and impact of organisational barriers and facilitators.
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³ <<http://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/research/experiments/>> and <<http://knol.google.com/k/jerry-lee-centre-of-experimental-criminology#>> (accessed 13 October 2011).

⁴ <<http://phenomenology.utk.edu/default.html>> (accessed 13 October 2011).

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