

Chaos and patterns: whither the health promotion trajectory?

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The unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is ... It's the best possible time to be alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong.¹

Some years ago, I had the pleasure of attending a performance of Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*. In the final scene of Act 1, the young mathematician Valentine excitedly expounds the essence of complexity theory to the questioning historian, Hannah, in Stoppard's brilliantly evocative language, as exemplified above. On hearing this on that night in the Sydney Opera House, I immediately felt that Valentine was saying something that I wanted to heed – something that had meaning to me in relation to my work. I have often since mused over this text, endeavouring to clarify why I felt this way. I now once again return to Valentine's words in confirming the way I feel health promotion should progress in this 21st Century.

I think I felt, and still feel, excited about this message primarily because it is reinforcing my gut feeling that we have full justification in putting the predetermined and the unpredictable together. Nature does this; science does this; so health promotion can do it, too. In my opinion, for too long the wide-based health literature has generally been a bit too precious in keeping separate the various paradigms or world views on which knowledge about human health is built. It has divided and isolated the results of health research that seek to find the ultimate 'truth' – what I call here the predetermined – from research seeking human meaning and understanding – the unpredictable. The predetermined has taken precedence over the unpredictable and retained higher supremacy. Methods from the 'hard' sciences have, without question until recently, dominated our learnings and become the primary contribution to the foundations of knowledge upon which we have built our health promotion action. It is only in the more recent couple of decades that we have realised that human behaviour is far more unpredictable than earlier psychological research had led us to believe, and we have thus found that prediction of outcomes regarding changes in human health-related behaviour has been almost impossible. A gap in our knowledge has been recognised. To fill this gap, anthropological, sociological and historical studies in the tradition of the 'soft' sciences have more recently been permitted into the health arena, bringing confirmation that an understanding of reality being socially constructed is an

essential part of our creation of health promotion knowledge. The maxim that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' which now epitomises the people-centred health promotion approach can be accepted as just as legitimate in its contribution to the evidence base for health promotion action.

This bringing together in health promotion can learn from complexity theory where in the latter, the design of the fractal arrangements is both patterned yet chaotic at the same time. In both complexity theory and health promotion practice it is the results to which we can apply these ideas. We need to realise that the techniques in health promotion used to research the predetermined and the unpredictable must remain apart. I am not seeking to argue with Thomas Kuhn or dispute his view that the measures used in these different paradigms are incommensurable.² In fact, I agree with him wholeheartedly that the different measures used in the different research perspectives are derived under different criteria of validity or credibility and therefore deserve to remain apart. What I do find reassuring is that the results arising within these two different approaches can so strongly complement each other and thus throw greater light on our ability to comprehend the whole picture of how we can aim to make the healthier choice the easier choice.

The quote from Stoppard above does two more things for me. It poses these difficulties as exciting challenges that we can rise to meet. I, too, feel it is a time when we can actually make a difference. But the other message for us in health promotion is humility. Being able to acknowledge that we are sometimes wrong, that other practices have merit, that the status quo is not the most desirable, that other people's views are not only to be tolerated but valued – all these are characteristics of people who are on the cutting edge of managing change for the greater good.

Time will tell whether the trajectory we set for this century is a good one for the peoples of this earth and whether Stoppard, in addressing the nature of time and truth in his play, has provided inspiring lessons for coping better in the real world.

References

1. Stoppard T. *Arcadia*. London: Faber & Faber, 1993.
2. Kuhn T. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

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