Applying Complexity to Make Practical Decisions About Evaluation: Part 2 of a 3 Part Series

AEA Coffee Break
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Jonathan A. Morell, Ph.D.
4.669 Evaluation and Planning
Director of Evaluation, Syntek Technologies
Editor, Evaluation and Program Planning

Phone: +1 734 646-8622
Website   www.jamorell.com
Email   jamorell@jamorell.com
Blog: https://evaluationuncertainty.com/
YouTube   https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqRIJjhqmy3ngSB1AF9ZKLg

Use complexity to make actionable decisions about

- Metrics
- Methodology
- Program theory
- Data interpretation
- Interaction with stakeholders

Now	My vision of the future
RCT	RCT
Regression	Regression
Causal reasoning	Causal reasoning
	Complex behavior
Outcome harvesting	Outcome harvesting
Text content analysis	Text content analysis
Formative evaluation	Formative evaluation
Evaluability assessment	Evaluability assessment
Developmental evaluation	Developmental evaluation
And many, many others	*And many, many others*

Complex system (crossed out)
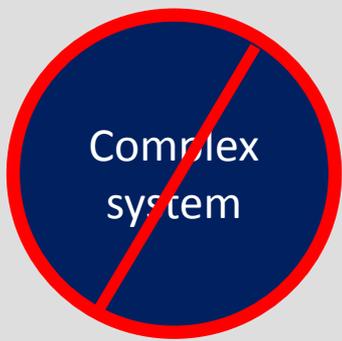
Complex behavior

Themes in complexity science

- Predictability
- Feedback loops
- Patterns of change
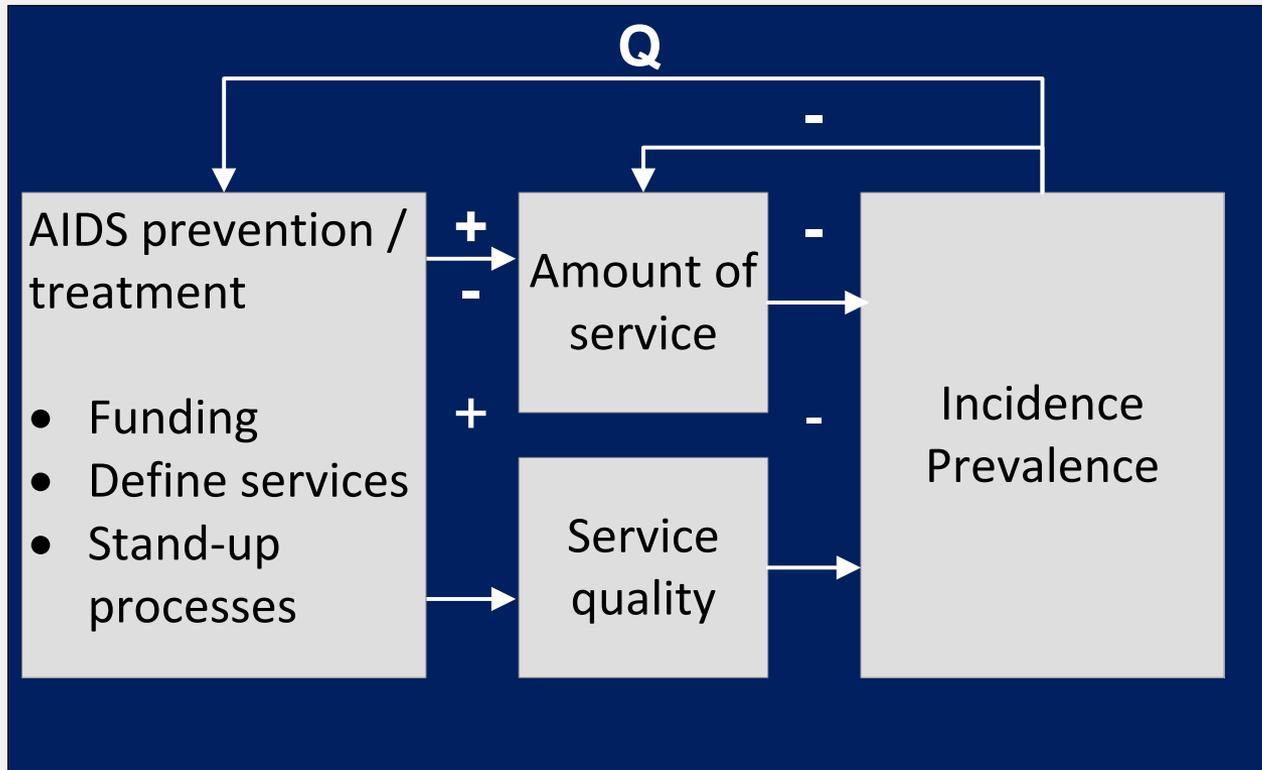- Evolutionary behavior
- Where change comes from

Some complex system behaviors that an evaluator can do something with

- Scaling
- Network effects
- Growth patterns
- Realistic timeframes
- Discontinuous change
- Unpredictable outcomes
- Unpredictable outcome chains
- Consequence of small changes
- Feedback loops among outcomes
- Inequitable distribution of benefits
- Joint optimization of uncorrelated outcomes

Justice Potter Stewart on defining pornography in Jacobellis v. Ohio

"I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. **But I know it when I see it**, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that."
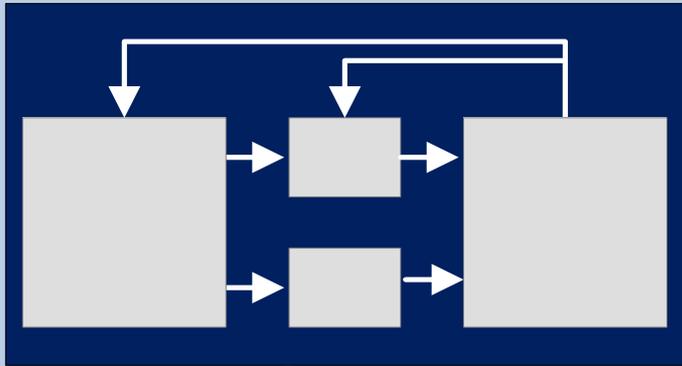
Traditional model for an AIDS prevention effort

Q

AIDS prevention / treatment

- Funding
- Define services
- Stand-up processes

+
-

+

Amount of service

Service quality

-

-

Incidence Prevalence

Outcomes and impacts are all correlated
- AIDS incidence
- AIDS prevalence

Outcome maximization logic

	Public Health	AIDS
After: Public health system		X
Career choices		X
Policy synergies		X
Political capital		X
Intellectual effort		X
Skills people develop		X
Informal relationships		X
Supporting structures		X

Evolutionary adaptive logic

Other   Tertiary

Routine

Women

Prenatal

Other   Tertiary
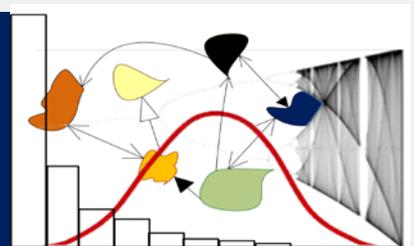
Routine

Women

Prenatal
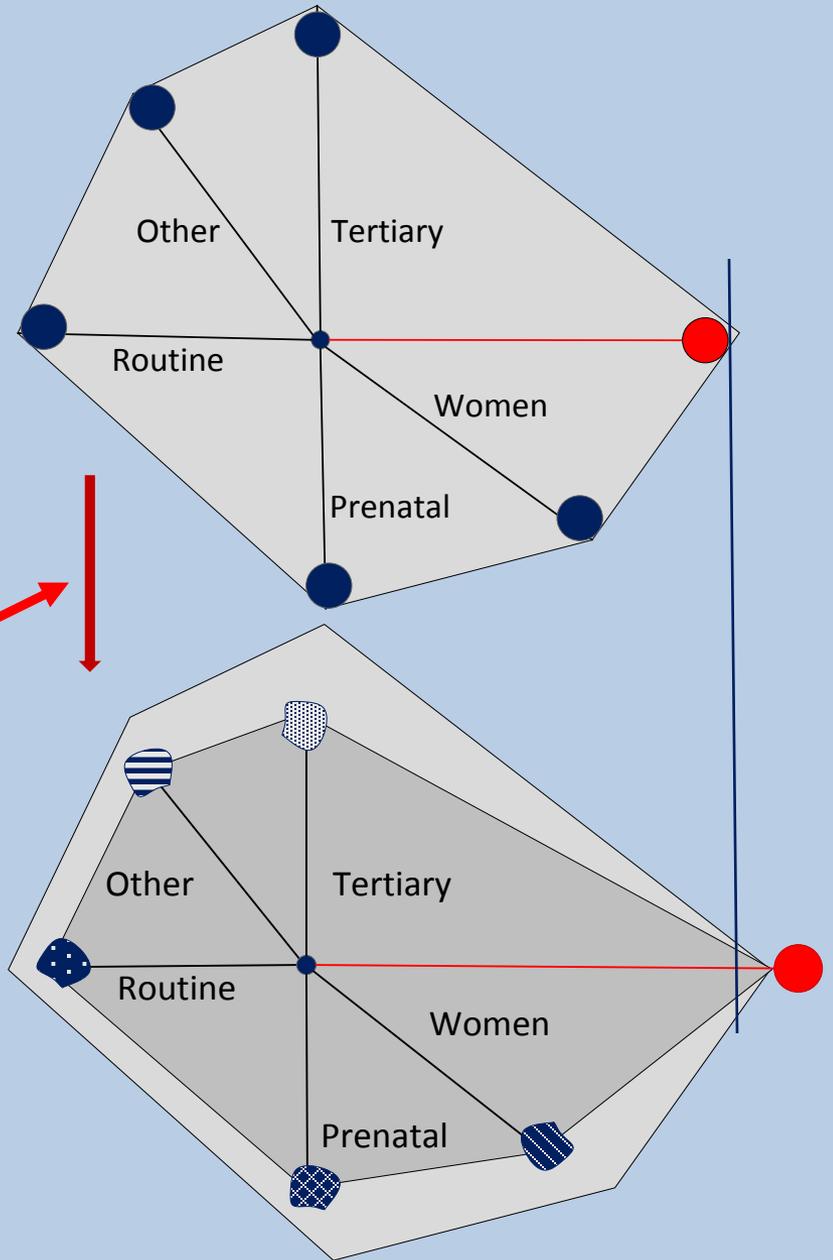
- No value judgement.

- Focusing on AIDS may be the right thing to do.

- Applying logic of complex adaptive behavior provides insight about

    - Program theory

    - Methodology

    - Metrics

Questions? Comments? More information?

734-646-8622

jamorell@jamorell.com

Further Reading

Blog Surprises in Programs and their Evaluations http://evaluationuncertainty.com/

Videos https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqRIJjhqmy3ngSB1AF9ZKLg

Books and Articles

Morell, J. A., Hilscher, R., Magura, S., & Ford, J. (2010). *Integrating Evaluation and Agent-Based Modeling: Rationale and an Example for Adopting Evidence-Based Practices*. Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation, 6(14), 35 -- 37.

Morell, J. A. (2010). *Evaluation in the Face of Uncertainty: Anticipating Surprise and Responding to the Inevitable*. New York: Guilford.

Parunak, H. V. D., & Morell, J. A. (2014). *Emergent Consequences: Unexpected Behaviors in a Simple Model to Support Innovation Adoption, Planning, and Evaluation*. Paper presented at the Social Computing, Behavioral-Cultural Modeling, and Prediction 7th International Conference, SBP 2014 , April 1-4, 2014, Washington, DC, USA.

Morell, J.A. (2017) *From Firefighting to Systematic Action: Toward A Research Agenda for Better Evaluation of Unintended Consequences* Paper presented at Unintended Effects of International Cooperation: An Academic & Policy Cross-over Conference, January 16th and 17th 2017 The Hague, The Netherlands