

**Transcript, kylie valentine, Against complexity: notes on the policy ontologies of ‘vulnerable clients’**

**Policy Ontologies; Working Across Theory and Practice, 16.03.22**

**Rachael Dobson 00:04**

Okay, so now let's move on to kylie valentine. So kylie is. I've already said research director at the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW in Sydney, Australia, where she conducts research on social disadvantage and exclusion. kylie's research interests include using methods and concepts from science and technology studies in Policy Research and Evaluation research on integrated service delivery and programmes for children and families. So I'm just really delighted that kylie has been able to join us this morning our time and obviously, I'm mindful that this is your evening time and kylie and Tess. Of course, I thank you very much for giving up that space for us. Over to you, kylie.

**kylie valentine 00:52**

Thank you very much. And what can you see?

**Rachael Dobson 00:55**

So I can see the presentation. And it looks big, if that makes sense from our point of view,

**kylie valentine 01:04**

and is it just the title slide? Yes. Good, okay, because I hit the PowerPoint live thing, and I never know exactly what that does. So thank you, Rachael. Thank you, everybody. I'd like to acknowledge that I am on unceded Gadigal land in Sydney, and it is evening, I do apologise in advance, I have a teenager at home who may have lost her keys. So if I get interrupted, that's why. And to acknowledge also that Tess has been an enormously beneficial contributor to Australian social policy. And British Columbia's gain is very much our loss. I was lucky enough to see Tess in person a few weeks ago, and it was such delight for a return to real live lectures to be at the University of Sydney seeing Tess. And also to acknowledge how nice it was to hear Rachael say that something had been delayed, not because of COVID. But because of maternity, that seems like a real treat at this time as well. So I'm going to talk today about the concept of complex needs and complex clients. I'm not sure the background of people here, but I'm going to assume that most people do have a kind of at least intuitive understanding of the concept of clients with complex needs as they are confronted by and confront a range of social policy institutions, most notably disability, welfare, health and family support. So complex needs is a heuristic that I'm going to try to kind of trouble in various ways. But before I go to that, I'll say that it was such welcome events in my life to learn about this policy ontologies series. As somebody who has worked with the ontological turn in other fields for quite some time, it was always travelling to me and concerning that social policy seemed to not really be engaging with that, to the extent that other fields were and that it seemed to me really ripe with exceptions like, like Tess, of course. So when I saw the policy ontologies thing named as such, and was such a social policy band, it was, it was really, really delightful to me. So, as I said, today, I'm going to be talking about complex needs. And in a bit of a nod to Carol Bacchi and

the, you know, what's the problem that presents to be policy approach? I'm going to be starting off by asking, what's the problem and you'll see that I'm working off an article of mine and an article approach was on this idea of complex needs and multiplicity, in social policy. And the question of going to all the questions I'm going to try is, is to kind of answer is the problem, the objective analysis, the glitch, the wicked policy problem, is nominated at various things, complex clients, clients with complex needs, complex pathways, complex systems, and complex failures. And I'm going to ask, Which of those are these? In fact, the problems and stealing another line from Tess ongoing say the answer is yes. And to all of those questions and also not And they're the kinds of things that I'm going to get to a hope at the end. But to kind of foreshadow, what I'm going to say is that one of the things that's really valuable, I think, in thinking about this from policy ontologies framework, is the way that policies are enacted in practice through networks, and lived in the body. And this is from the perspective or the analysis of both clients, and the systems and networks that that guides will enact policy. So today, I'll be concentrating a little bit on clients voices. But this is equally true as, as Tess and Rachael have talked about, for frontline bureaucrats, people on the ground policy practitioners wherever they are. So my indebtedness to these two three very fine theorists and thinkers, Rachael Dobson, Tess Lea, Anne Marie Fortier, I'm going to not go through these at length, but just to say, that, that the indebtedness to this is to the ontological turn in humanities and social sciences. So that's kind of bound by a series of kind of principles or assumptions, that reality is not something fixed or predetermined, but that is constituted through practice, that things are real, but nevertheless made up and could be otherwise. That there are social realities that are multiple and entities or multiple. And this is not a question of perspective or construction, but an ontological question. That is the kind of insistence of some of the ontological turn. And some of this, as I have said, in a different context, can get a little, how many angels can fit on the head of a pin when it comes to questions of non human actors in a network. So notably, questions of whether entities like lightning and rocks have agentic capacity, and whether or not it makes sense to speak of non human non human actors as having a kind of in intra object politics in the way that intra human relationships do. Taking my lead from Tess Lea and another anthropologist, Elizabeth Povinelli, I'm going to say, although they would be too professional deciding these terms, who cares about ontology ontology for its own sake, really, the point of this is to answer kind of questions of ethical accountability and to address questions of historical trauma and grievance. And, finally, that, that when thinking about policy as enactment, we are thinking about policy being or worlds being made up into ways that is how they are imagined they are envisioned by, constituted through policy artefacts, and also how they are actualized in everyday practice. So thinking about systems and policies and ideas and myths and artefacts and ideas and stereotypes. One of my key points here today is that that is then lived in the body and through and across the lives of people most affected. So although I will be following some colleagues who insist very much that the problem is not the complexity of clients, but the complexity of policies and policy systems, I will then go on, I hope, to articulate and in some ways, quite elementary points, although the fact that they're elementary doesn't mean that especially clearly that the question is not one necessarily of whether or not the problem realised, resides in the complexity of clients or the complexity of the policies that they're dealing with. But the complexity of policies do have ontological effects that then feed back into policies. So insofar as I have much time for complexity theory, and as you'll see, I don't have that much time for it in this context, that idea

of feedback loops, and people changing things and things and changing people, I think is, is one of my core concerns, although I don't think you need complexity for that, but we can get into that and they'll be in the discussion Okay, so I'm going to present kind of some alternative ways of thinking about this. They're not necessarily in conflict, they're not necessarily made by different people. And quite often, these kind of ideas of models or the kind of alternatives are, in many cases non aligned, they're not actually found in the literature or in, in policy or that are found in policy research. A lot of it for me, okay. So, the first kind of model is that of complex clients, or clients with complex needs. I was going to say an emergent field is trauma informed policy and practice, although I think that that is now fairly well established. And the idea of this kind of idea of complexity is that there are multiple causes and multiple pathways to multiple systemic disadvantages that then intersect and compound each other in new ways. So that when we are talking about a client with the complex needs, we're talking about a client who has both a mental health problem and alcohol and other drug problem and possibly also some co occurring, historical, biographical experiences like time in prison autonomy out of home care system. So complex clients are those who present with more than one need to a service or who are dealing with more than one policy system. And they are, according to both UK Australian and other policy researchers and practitioners becoming an increasing part of social policy delivery. So when we speak to practitioners, they will often say that there's no such thing as a client data complex needs, that everybody that they're dealing with these days has more than one thing going on. So it's not just a question of disability, it's a question also of alcohol and drug use. People are homeless, but they are also experiencing trauma from domestic violence and possibly have a child with a disability possibly there have not been diagnosed disability themselves. And this means that policy aspirations are very, very difficult to meet, because the complexity of needs of the clients kind of bedevil the way that policies are designed. They bedevil the way that our clients can engage with the policies. It means that, that policies that are directed at a certain type of person that assumed a particular type of engagement, or a particular level of resources aren't being taken up by that by that client, because of capacity issues, because they have other competing demands, because they their co presenting problems, get in the way of the service that the particular service is trying to deliver. So you know, you get it, you know, how this goes. The second model, or a tentative model for that is one where there is less focus on the kind of complexity of the clients and more on the complexity of the policies or systems. So this is from a report from colleagues at the Centre for Social Impact, which is talking about sort of two ideas of pathways to social housing, public housing, one of them is the kind of imagined pathway, which is assessments and get a house and then you know, leave the house are you saying the house, so it's a fairly straightforward, logical, predictable pathway. And I know that the second one is difficult to read, that is kind of the point in that there are lots of dead ends, there are lots of blockages, there are lots of ways for people to kind of get sent in a loop or to get stuck, lots of points that which service is denied. So in this case, the problem is not the priorities or the capacities of the client, but the complexity of the pathways and the complexity of the systems that the client is dealing with. And the third model, which is a kind of count, complementing this, in some ways, is the idea of complex policy systems. And I'll say that this is not presented as an example of a policy minutes. This is an aspirational document produced by a policy organisation. So this is something We're all trying and trying to achieve. And it is a outcomes framework based on the kinds of well being and achievement domains that that we're all supposed to meet. So it's

gonna pathways in which we can intervene to make sure that people meet their objectives to become fully healthy, housed, functioning, employed, socially connected, citizens. So it doesn't take very much analysis to kind of see that in a system like this, there are so many points at which something can go wrong. And that it is, in fact, a really difficult thing to imagine being a part of, and that, that when you have a system of policy interventions, or imagination or policy interventions, that is this complicated, it's going to be pretty difficult to implement, particularly for policy organisations that tend to do one thing in pretty constrained circumstances. So that that's the kind of idea where it's not a kind of pathway that an individual goes along. But a kind of world or policy now, networks and systems. Now, these are all kind of imaginings and kind of representations which we'll get to in a second. But but it is important to note that these are attempts to map sort of policy worlds in ways that that talk about people's pathway through it and their relationship with it. So this is a really, I think. And relevance kind of response to the idea of policy of the complex system, which says, yeah, it's a complex system. But you can also attach the system failure, either to the complexity of the system, or the complexity as a failure. And the way that it can be compared is to social infrastructure, things like aviation, where yes, it's it's a very sophisticated kind of setup of interacting interdependent systems. But unlike other systems, there are no failsafe and in fact, as has been shown in Australia in the last few years, people who are kind of classified as complex clients, people who earn income support, tend to be the canary in the coal or coal mine of policy experiments in which fail safes are removed first, or automation, algorithmic decision making is implemented instead of human checks and balances. So it's kind of like the opposite of the way that a complex system is supposed to work. A complex system is supposed to have complex failsafe mechanisms. And that's why a plane crash is a catastrophe not just because it's said because it's a kind of multiple systems failure was set up in social policy is a kind of system of multiple interdependencies where there is a real fragility and vulnerability to many of these things that can fall over and do regularly because the the resources to back them up. So that's, as I said, the kind of mapping of the kind of policy artefact of it. And when I put this up, I was once not actually thinking that I was plagiarising Tess, although it turns out that I have because she's also done. This is not a part. But what I just want to emphasise here, by way of kind of stepping back from those kind of policy documents and policy aspirations is the way that these things are lived in practice and what is often talked about when those networks and pathways are presented. And what practitioners talk about a lot is navigating a maze, the metaphor of a maze is used often, the policy responses or is often to introduce new levels of case coordination, or workers pay workers to help people navigate the maze. So it's recognised that there are multiple systems that people have to deal with. And because of the vulnerabilities or the complexities of the clients, they find it difficult to deal with. So we will put in an extra layer of care coordination case management people to help you navigate that system. What often happens then, of course, is that they become a part of that mode as part of that network. They're not recognised by the by the clients or anyone else. as external to the maze or helping navigate the maze, but as part of the maze themselves, but when you speak to clients, about particularly clients, who are in this instance, dealing with homelessness systems and they need a house, or they need accommodation or homelessness systems do that it's not a maze, it's, it's a kind of hard, existential graft of time and grinding down and meaning to be in two places at once. And accumulating documents and following directions that don't make sense and being treated very badly. And in ways that are often designed to seem extremely punitive.

So one of these quotes here, and and I'm not going to read through them, you'll have access to them afterwards. But I really do encourage you to read the the clients words, emergency accommodation, often is available for one night. So if you need a motel room, because there are no other options, you can sometimes get a motel and but you will only have it for one night. And then the next night, you have to apply again. So sometimes people do this for two weeks at a time, every day, they have to pack up their stuff, leave the motel, go to another office and apply for another night's accommodation. This is designed to be something that's transitional and emergency. So it's not an accident that it's only for a night, but the actual lived experience of that is not filled as a maze, it's filled and it is an incredibly punitive, onerous system. And if it's not actively designed to discourage people from sticking with it, that's the effect that that it often has. So, this is ontologically not a maze, as evocative as a description and as a, as a kind of reflection of the design of the policy system is a two dimensional thing in which there is a path and if you can find it, you will get there. the lived experience of this complexity is is something that's much more embodied and grinding and consuming than being in a maze. And just to, to kind of say something else that's quite obvious is that it doesn't matter how vulnerable these clients are, doesn't matter what kind of complex trauma they're dealing with, what they're being asked to do is outrageous and demanding for anyone. And I think that that the kind of increase of things like automated decision making shortfalls in this pandemic has have kind of amplified and elevated the horrors of the bureaucracy as experienced by some people all the time. And and it actually has nothing to do with the vulnerability of the clients, what What the What is particularly about the clients is that they are asked to put up with stuff that those of us with privilege and who could probably have the resources to deal with it better are very, very rarely asked to do. So, systems that go know where exclusion criteria for one thing that mean that you are ineligible for other things as well, all the kinds of rules of bureaucracy that are either designed or implemented in practice ah something that when resourced people have to deal with, you know, they kind of come can't believe how bad it is. So, so, although the the effects of these policies on people are that it turns them into people who are vulnerable and ground down to kind of be unforgivably crude about it? It it's not it's not the, the clients. It's not what clients bring to these that makes that happen. It's what actually happens in the through the enactment of the policy. And I am mindful of time, but I guess one of the points that I want to kind of shadow here is is bringing up this question of complexity and the kind of imagined And real complexity of what actually takes to address this. So when we speak to clients who talk about what is valuable to them, and when we speak to practitioners about what they think is valuable to clients, and also what is valuable to them, quite often, it's not something that responds to the complexity of systems in those kind of technical ways about complexity theory of emergent properties coming from a system or feedback loop sort of unpredictability, its time and care and relationships. And arguably, there's nothing particularly complex about that. It's an effect of service rationing, and the ridiculous kind of criteria and narrowness and targeting the policies, that it seems a resource. But in fact, it's really quite simple. And although some clients have quite transactional relationships with services, and and don't need that kind of support, many people say that what they really want is for somebody to listen to the kind of mess that they've been put in, and to help them through it. And again, this is not a question of their capacity. This is because the systems are so ridiculous and horrible to set up with. So a good example is caseworkers to help people apply for and get income support payments. Now, the fact that so many people need that you would

think would indicate that the process of application could afford to be a bit simpler. You know, like, if you have a system that's set up, where you need someone to help you get through it, maybe you should just make it a little bit easier to apply. And then you could sort of cut out the middleman. So just to sort of summarise is complexity the problem? Yes, yesterday's complexity is a problem in that this is something I mean, people are complicated, right? And what we're dealing with quite often when we're talking about homelessness services, and Social Policy, generally stuff that goes very deep, and is actually really quite, quite difficult and hasn't has, it isn't kind of long standing problem. So So yes, it's complexity and other things. And also know, complexity is often not the problem. It's presented as complexity, when in fact, it's complicated because there are multiplicities to it. But is it in fact, complex in the sense of this couldn't be foreseen or this is unpredictable, or this isn't something that can be predicted or managed? No, it's entirely analysed, known and studied predicted. So people who have been experienced in practice for a while and social policy researchers, who have been working in the critical tool for a long time, have been it seemed saying the same criticisms for for quite a long time about the effects of rationing, of targeting of inadequacy of setting up things that are punitive based on whatever kind of behavioural theories around at the moment about undeserving poor. So in some ways, a problem is not complexity at all. And in other ways, the kind of lived effects on people that then go back to policy as it's enacted through practitioners is, is something that is enormously difficult for anyone, person, anyone, agency anyone system to kind of comprehend. And so my final point is a kind of nods to Eve Sedgwick, and the, the, the kind of idea of paranoid versus recruited reading and my argument here is that we know enough by now to know that clients with complex needs are absolutely what services should expect, as part of the everyday business complex clients are not unusual. excluding them on the basis that they have multiple needs is a recipe for continuing inequities. And as said, if that is the kind of the kind of mode of paranoia is an incapacity to be surprised. What's kind of needed in policy systems is a kind of recognition that it's no longer okay to be surprised when the kinds of complex needs or complex problems turn up. This is some thing that is built into arguably into human living and certainly into things of social policy as it works. So I will stop there and apologies for the kind of rambling and and thank you again um thank you