

Project

Applying insight from Systems Laws to challenge thinking on, and service design for, the Multiple Disadvantage system.

Practitioner

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Context and System of Interest (SOI)

Multiple Disadvantage (MD) refers to experiencing several complex issues simultaneously, such as homelessness, substance use, mental health challenges (Fig. 1). These issues interact to create 'meta-issues' and emergent experiences. The dominant paradigm ignores these emergents, and frames the issue as problematic individuals. The Charity adopts an alternative paradigm: MD is a systemic issue, not an individual one, and works to raise awareness and transform systems and services. This study focuses on leveraging the system by improving understanding for stakeholders who design and deliver services.

Approach Taken and Focus

Systems Laws were used to gain insight into the SOI and dominant paradigm, whilst highlighting potential solutions. The methodology used was splicing, described by Hoverstadt (2022) in *The Grammar of Systems*.

Models and Insights

Loose ends (1)

Law of Calling - the boundaries we call matter. Current bounding construes several discrete issues happening concurrently. Instead, recognition that individuals facing MD don't *actually* experience this - rather each disadvantage affects the others, and new experiences emerge - offers more powerful insight.

Law of sufficient complexity - structure drives behaviour. Persevering with the same models and the same actions will not produce meaningful change. This fundamental insight is both 'accepted' and 'ignored' simultaneously by stakeholders - they try to reach new futures along old paths.

Conant-Ashby Theorem - to *really* change this, we need a better model. This is difficult because each organisation operates from its own model, and the space where these should converge is 'phantom' - that is a good-will partnership with no underpinning structure or accountability.

Resonance principle - if new models don't fit with current paradigms - one must change to create resonance through feature-filter activation. Currently, resonance is induced using emotive leverage, which ultimately becomes temporary because worldviews of stakeholders are not challenged or changed. If models are changed to fit the paradigm - this is confirmation bias.

Emergent (spliced) insight (1)



A Better model, (Fig. 1), communicates insights from this splice. Firstly, Organisations work from the outside -> in - from their own models and specialisms and somewhat ignorant of the others. People, however, experience life from the inside -> out. What this means is the experiences of substance use *and* mental health combine to create new, emergent disadvantages which are particularly wicked. However, organisations still try to treat these as

discrete entities, rather than a) updating their model and b) *creating requisite approaches for the emergents*.

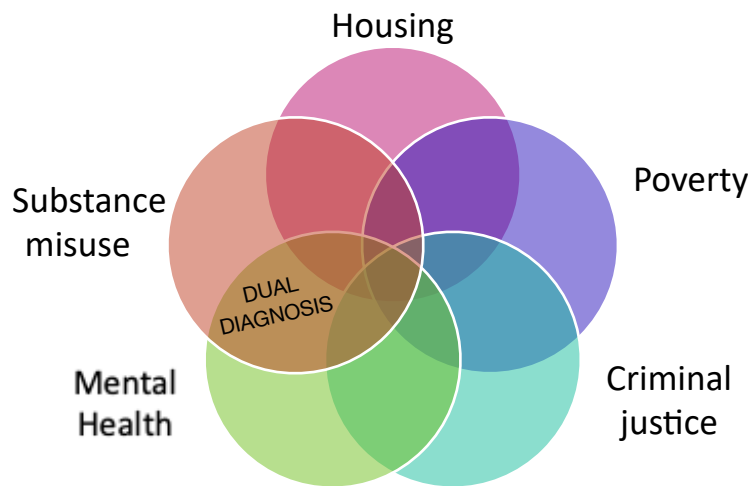


Fig.1 - Venn diagram modelling Multiple Disadvantages

Secondly, adding the Law of Reciprocity, we observe the actions of services directly affecting the outcomes of others - via the person worked with. Actions in housing impact the outcomes of substance, and vice versa, all whilst further traumatising the individual. As before, this is 'accepted', but ignored in most service design and delivery.

Thirdly, there aren't 5 disadvantages here, there are 26. Adding the Law of Requisite Variety challenges: "and how are we meeting these 26?". Do we *really* believe the approach to housing *really* deals with the emergents in the overlaps with other disadvantages?

Further splicing (2)



Adding the Osmosis Principle explains the chasm between commissioners/managers and clients. Commissioners migrate away from complexity, finding solace in neat, ordered (and wrong) delivery models. Clients favour highly-organised systems they create to acquire and concoct substances, and co-regulate trauma - a welcome respite from the mess of confusing service pathways and KPI's.

Further, Adam's Third Law highlights the paradox of a siloed approach to de-risking each disadvantage - in turn creating a greater overall risk (evidenced by multiple deaths, crimes etc). Approaches to managing risk are bureaucratic and isolated - not action-orientated or holistic - leaving all the experiences 'in the overlaps' unrecognised and unmanaged.

Key Interventions Undertaken and Results



We lever action by challenging worldviews and informing service design via our Systems Leadership Development Programme. Over 150 stakeholders in this SOI report learning valuable and actionable; over 90% report they are still applying learning 3 months later. Several high-impact programmes have

been affected including Blue-Light, homeless outreach and tenancy sustainment programmes.

Direct work on projects informed design and challenged thinking; transformation initiatives, 18-25 provisions and community engagement projects have all incorporated these insights - slowly working to change collective thinking and approach to the SOI.

Afterthoughts and other Methods

The Charity's role in the wider system is that of System 4 (VSM). No prior attempts have explored the SOI at such fundamental systemic levels, and no current training programmes incorporate such powerful and actionable insights. Alternative approaches such as VSM or SSM may have been useful but require time, methodological learning and risk conflict with existing protocols. However, systems laws are *rapid* and *accessible* - requiring no training in models or methodologies and can be actioned via existing channels.