

KNOWLEDGE BRIEF

Emergent Strategy



This knowledge brief will seek to explain emergent strategy and how this emergence shows up in different sectors. Strategy and adaptability within the food and public health sector are outlined.

“In emergent strategy it is important to recognize and be appreciative of the many emergent patterns which surround a system and that these can be used as a tool to effectively influence change (Brown, 2017). One of the elements of emergent strategy are fractals. Fractals are patterns that are continuously repeated in a feedback loop and “what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system” (Brown, 2017, p. 53). This demonstrates that change on a small level can have a tremendous impact on a large level, and that what happens personally, individually, as a group or organization will translate out into larger scale change, whether good or bad.”

What does literature include about this theory?

The concept of emergence is defined by Brown as the ability of minor and simple interactions to create complex patterns and systems (Brown, 2017). Emergence uses all the components present in a system, it is never wasteful (Brown, 2017). Brown describes emergent strategy, inspired by the science fiction works of the late author Octavia Butler, as providing a manual to individuals or organizations who would like to engage in change. In emergent strategy it is important to recognize and be appreciative of the many emergent patterns which surround a system and that these can be used as a tool to effectively influence change (Brown, 2017). One of the elements of emergent strategy are fractals. Fractals are patterns that are continuously repeated in a feedback loop and “what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system” (Brown, 2017, p. 53). This demonstrates that change on a small level can have a tremendous impact on a large level, and that what happens personally, individually, as a group or organization will translate out into larger scale change, whether good or bad. Organizations therefore need to look at these small scale, internal patterns and consider how collaboration and community can be used to set new patterns to shape the large level into a positive societal change (Brown, 2017). Collaboration does not rely solely on one person, but relies on the interwoven skills and abilities of everyone, ultimately resulting in positive community action at the small level which carries over into the large level (Brown, 2017).

Emergent strategy is also discussed in economic and business literature, referring to a business strategy that can be applied by organizations and individuals (Edwards, 2014; Liebhart & Garcia-Lorenzo, 2010). Edwards (2014) describes three strategies to business students: intended, emergent and realized. The intended strategy is the original well organized and laid out plan, while emergent strategy is unplanned and “arises in response to unexpected opportunities and challenges” (Edwards, 2014, p. 16). Ultimately the realized strategy combines intended and emergent components to achieve a goal (Edwards, 2014).

Many systems today are very diverse and unpredictable and therefore it is important to recognize their complexity (Liebhart & Garcia Lorenzo, 2010). Literature suggests that solely a planned approach is not sustainable, rather an emergent approach is preferred due to its ability to be more adaptable to unexpected challenges and developments in every system (Liebhart & Garcia-Lorenzo, 2010). Neugebauer, Figge, and Hall (2015) also looked at the planned and emergent strategy and the benefits associated with both. A strategy itself is informed by both planned and emergent components (Neugebauer et al., 2015). Planned strategy is well organized and structured, while emergent strategy is more flexible to change (Neugebauer et al., 2015).

Hernandez-Betancour et al. (2017) used a game to understand the relationship between deliberate and emergent strategy and the moment which leads individuals to change from one strategy to the other. The game ended abruptly on purpose, to the surprise of the participants (Hernandez-Betancour, Montoya-Restrepo, & Montoya-Restrepo, 2017), forcing them to abandon their original strategy. This resulted in anger initially but also led them to realize that in the next game their strategies would have to include situations that would leave room for the incorporation of emergent strategies (Hernandez-Betancour, 2017). The article concluded that the incorporation of unpredictability, the premature interruption of the game, in this case, lead participants to seek other strategies and the original plan failing (Hernandez-Betancour et al., 2017). However, a combination of the situation and its unpredictable nature would have led to the development of a more successful solution strategy and increased their success in the game (Hernandez-Betancour et al., 2017).

How has it taken up in the “food” movement?

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A direct mention of emergent strategy as a tool to promote change in the food system was not found. Nonetheless, elements were found that correlated with the definitions of emergence and emergent strategy. The food system must be recognized as static but adaptive systems (Meter, 2010) to recognize the many actors that are moving within it to promote change (Meter, 2010). This relates to complex adaptive systems where a controlled and linear approach is not always the best strategy (Meter, 2010). The food system is contained within economic, societal and natural environments (FAO, 2018, p. 1) and incorporates many interconnected elements such as production, processing, and consumption (FAO, 2018). Change in one part of the system may originate from or influence change in another system (FAO, 2018) due to the many categories and subcategories making up the food system, for example, agriculture, farming, waste management and transportation (FAO, 2018).

Therefore it is important to use the synergy which consists between these interrelated elements to implement policy changes and engage in effective action (Meter, 2010). Multiple perspectives are needed to analyze these patterns (Meter, 2010), suggesting a collective action approach is best. A collective approach is necessary to recognize the emerging patterns part of the food system.

The food system is in constant motion with many unexpected and surprising elements that are part of its nature (PHBC, 2019). Within this are frequent emergent patterns that are part of the food movement and part of the dynamics in the system which make up the whole (PHBC, 2019). Brown (2014) recommends incorporating these patterns to promote change and business literature recommends making room for unpredictability in planning as the best approach to achieve sustainable solutions (Neugebauer et al., 2015) which is also the main goal in the food movement (Hassanein, 2003).

How does it impact public health?

A research study analyzed the effectiveness of deliberate strategies and emergent strategies as a framework for patient-centered care (PCC) (Naldemirci et al., 2017). It was found that deliberate strategies are effective in providing baseline knowledge and plan for patient care, however, the incorporation of emergent strategy allowed for better decision making (Naldemirci et al., 2017). This consisted of providing the hospital units with an information package that contained specific information on PCC however left room for interpretation and included spontaneous team meetings as the emergent component (Naldemirci et al., 2017). This was able to enhance the collective action of health service workers and resulted in improved “co-operation, inter-professional teamwork and communication with patients” (Naldemirci et al., 2017, p. 8).

Marjorie MacDonald (2019) presents Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) as an approach to public health. A complex adaptive system like the health system is a collection of individual components that are not always predictable (MacDonald, 2019). However, all elements are interconnected with each other meaning that a change in one element has an impact on the other ones. This highlights how a public health system is non-linear and as explained in CAS, is informed by the emergent nature of the relationships that are part of it (MacDonald, 2019).

A planned approach is often not suitable to address the dynamic pathways which are part of public health itself and the health concerns within it (Paina & Peters, 2012). CAS, however, can foster and recognize the emergent patterns and networks that inform its structure (Paina & Peters, 2012). It,

therefore, incorporates flexibility into its planning which can create a more effective public health impact (Paina & Peters, 2012) which draws similarities with emergent strategy.

Emergent strategy is not a concept that was found in direct correlation to public health during research. However, strategies that are informed by components of emergent strategy such as CAS are incorporated increasingly into health system planning (Paina & Peters, 2012) or as part of workplace strategies (Naldemirci et al., 2017).

Implications of the theory on the work of the KFPC?

The KFPC used an emergent strategy framework for a collective impact project that brought local governments and community partners together to identify patterns in adopting food policy and then work towards goals that emerged from the process (KFPC, 2019). This project presented an emergent process design which had some set goals, however also flexibility to allow participants to bring in their ideas and concerns. A finding revealed that this collective impact required participants to work outside of what they were used to, accepting and tolerating the uncertainty (KFPC, 2019). Emergent strategy encourages organizations to embrace this uncertainty and work with it, instead of against it (Brown, 2017). Adapting to the unknown and working with it will aid in finding better intervention strategies. Collaboration is also encouraged by emergent strategy, suggesting that the impact is much more effective because it uses the individual strengths of its members to shape the whole (Brown, 2017). As it was already highlighted in the collective impact report, the process of accepting the uncertainty can sometimes be very uncomfortable, but when time is provided for discussion, mutual learning can occur in the collective which can positively translate into effective community action (KFPC, 2019).

Uncertainty sometimes also can be introduced with multiple viewpoints in an organization. In communication with the gaps and assets part of the project a gap was identified: Decision makers and members of the community do not have enough voices represented in the organization and because the people are not represented accordingly, it is difficult for the KFPC to determine the actual needs in the community. Fractals, an element of emergent strategy looks also at collaboration and how the different strengths of organizational members can positively contribute to change (Brown, 2017). Suggesting the more viewpoints are involved, the better the interventions. Food democracy requires us to engage in collaboration with each other and to act on multiple levels. The strength of food movements in any organizational approach is diversity, as it allows members to participate in many different ways (Hassanein, 2003). Because every member has strengths that can be contributed to the whole (Brown, 2017). A potential suggestion to increase community voices would be to engage in open discussions, which occur in the introduction time of the monthly meetings anyway or over social media channels, and to identify topics that people are interested in. If there is a topic that receives lots of attention for example: sustainability and environment, speakers could be invited who focus their research on this particular topic. An example of this is Dawn Morrison at the March 4th meeting. The topic of water and climate crisis had a great audience/member turnout. Therefore focussing on topics that the community is interested in, could potentially increase the turnout and introduce a wide variety of individuals that would help the KFPC to incorporate more points of view.

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