

BULLETIN NO 16: IMPROVING METHODS TO DEAL WITH UNCERTAINTY IN ILLICIT DRUG POLICY FORMULATION

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Rationale

Among the most challenging aspects of making decisions is dealing with the inherent uncertainties. There are uncertainties in how to frame or approach the issue under consideration, as well as lack of information due to relevant areas not being investigated or because available methods are limited. Furthermore, some things are just unknowable and sometimes we are not aware of what we do not know. These are the aspects that the DPMP 'uncertainty project' is tackling, as outlined below.

Not surprisingly, numerous ways have been developed to understand and deal with uncertainty. What *is* surprising is that there has been relatively little exchange between or synthesis of these different approaches. This project is a step in fostering such interaction and integration. It responds to growing recognition that uncertainty cuts across disciplinary and practice boundaries and that we need to trade ideas and experiences to develop better tactics and methods for conceptualising and coping with uncertainty. Exposure to current debates and competing perspectives will highlight unresolved issues and stimulate new understanding and approaches.

The overall aim is to improve available methods for dealing with uncertainty, especially in relation to illicit drugs policy, although this research will also have a broad-reaching impact. The objective is to allow us to be better equipped to deal with the different dimensions of uncertainty.

The most obvious uncertainty that DPMP confronts is lack of data about a whole range of aspects of illicit drug use. While there are standard ways of dealing with this, such as estimation techniques and sensitivity analyses, the uncertainty project aims to provide a more comprehensive catalogue of methods to compensate for lack of data, so that new methods and combinations of approaches can be trialled and assessed. This is also the case for lack of information about how different factors involved in illicit drug use relate to each other.

A second dimension of uncertainty central to DPMP relates to how problems are approached. Any particular approach necessarily excludes or marginalises other ways of considering the problem. Thus if drug use is considered to be a criminal problem, questioning of the legal status is excluded and treatment is marginalised. Because DPMP is taking a broad view of drug use, it is in a good position to explore and highlight the consequences of different ways of framing drug-related problems. The uncertainty project will provide a template for exploring the consequences of problem framing, as well a catalogue of techniques for dealing with competing approaches, which can be trialled and assessed.

A third key dimension of uncertainty has two aspects – managing the unknowable and dealing with what we do not know. An example of the unknowable is the number of illicit drug users, which we can never know precisely because the problem is hidden. One approach is to keep refining estimates, another is to use numbers that suit political purposes. Again the uncertainty project will look for new ways of dealing with this dimension of uncertainty. In order to deal with issues we are not aware of, we need to foster an openness to new ideas, new thinking and new information. That there are some aspects of drug use that simply have not been thought about is best illustrated by an historical example. Thus, for a long time it was widely believed that all drug users came from dysfunctional homes. It was not until ordinary parents gathered the courage to speak out and band together that we realised that the social backgrounds of drug users were much more diverse. The uncertainty project will also provide a foundation for DPMP to think broadly, and sometimes radically.

The uncertainty project involves collating different disciplinary- and practice-based approaches to uncertainty in order to make researchers and policy makers aware of other useful approaches. It also involves developing new combinations and syntheses of approaches that will improve the ability of researchers and policy makers to deal with uncertainty. The size and diversity of the DPMP project itself makes it an ideal test bed for the ideas generated.

Approach

In the feasibility stage of DPMP, we assessed whether different disciplinary-, practice- and problem-based approaches could be brought together to learn from each other and whether new syntheses were possible. We therefore held a two-day symposium, covering the disciplines of statistics, physics, history, futures, art history, integration, philosophy, law, complexity, theology, economics and psychology. Practice-based perspectives included government policy, hazards, intelligence, music, law enforcement and politics; and problem-based perspectives were environment, communicable diseases and illicit drugs.

The “price of admission” for each participant was to produce a paper on the approach to uncertainty in their area of expertise, for circulation before the symposium. The main activity of the symposium was participant presentations with each commenting on two allocated papers, then using those to reflect back on their own. The allocated papers were designed to be as different as possible from the commentator’s own field and participants could comment on more papers if they wished.

This process was the first part of the integrative exchange. The remaining symposium time was focussed on group and subgroup interactions to foster other syntheses. We took a product-based approach, rather than a more open group discussion.

Participants subsequently produced revised papers. Further integrative activities are planned to produce syntheses of the approaches to uncertainty presented in these papers.

Key findings

The first finding was that there is considerable interest among the disciplinary and practice based participants in sharing their perspectives and learning from others. The symposium generated a lot of energy and insights. Production of the book of papers is on track.

In terms of DPMP, three investigators – Alison Ritter, Pascal Perez and Gabriele Bammer – participated in the symposium, with papers on illicit drugs, complexity and integration, respectively. Their papers are specifically relevant to DPMP.

The next phase of work which is to draw insights from the other disciplines and practice areas for DPMP and to develop synthesised approaches, will largely be undertaken in Stage 2 of DPMP, building on the foundations which have been laid.

Thus the primary product from the uncertainty project in the feasibility stage of DPMP will be an edited book of papers covering different approaches to uncertainty. This collection of writings on uncertainty is simultaneously more diverse and stimulating than any available today, and will appeal to a very broad audience of scholars and practitioners. We are in the process of approaching a range of publishers.

Implications

The potential for learning from other approaches to uncertainty has been demonstrated. The next phase of work involves more specific application to DPMP, both in terms of introducing new approaches and of developing combined and synthesised approaches. There are, of

course, still many areas which have not been included in this process, such as psychiatry, education and so on. Once the current work has been fully mined, the value that can be added from other areas will be investigated.

Research team

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Michael Smithson (School of Psychology, The Australian National University) and Steve Dovers (Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, The Australian National University) were co-organisers of the symposium. Michael Smithson is the co-editor of the uncertainty book that is currently in production.