



University
of Victoria

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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“Government Attention on Wicked Problems”

School of Public Administration

Friday, November 9, 2018
10:30 A.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B007

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. J. Barton Cunningham, School of Public Administration, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. James MacGregor, School of Public Administration, UVic (Member)
Dr. Budd Hall, School of Public Administration, UVic (Member)
Dr. Ana Maria Peredo, School of Environmental Studies, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Pierre Walter, Department of Educational Studies, University of British Columbia

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Prof. Martin Farnham, Department of Economics, UVic

Abstract

This doctoral dissertation consists of three separate but related studies that describe and explain government attention on wicked problems as a two-level phenomenon (the individual and the organizational) illustrating basic constituent elements of any attentional process: the stimulus, the perception of the stimulus, and the visible actions taken as a response to the way in which the stimulus was perceived. Each study involves different research designs and levels of analysis, viz.: (i) a systematic qualitative review of empirical research on wicked problems (conceptual level of analysis), (ii) a series of psychological experiments based on realistic hypothetical decision making scenarios (individual level), and (iii) a case study of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans of Canada (organizational level).

The first study analyzes key attributes of wicked problems that turn them into stimuli difficult to be addressed using extant models of government attention and traditional decision making approaches. I develop a conceptual framework that explains the main sources of wickedness of public policy problems and their consequences for policy making at government organizations.

In the second study I investigate how arbitrary changes in the presentation of a wicked issue (i.e., problem framing) affect policy decisions. The study was designed to test the presence of behavioural anomalies and decision biases when people tend to reason and make decisions on wicked problems in scenarios involving policy decisions in the field of socio-ecological sustainability. Based on the results of this study, I develop a causal model that explains how the manipulation of problem definitions has an influence on policy responses and on the attitude of the participants regarding those responses.

The third study analyzes the outputs of attention allocation processes in a public organization. This is a case study that explains how two types of events interrelate to make up an organizational process of attention, viz.: the issues that are identified as critical and important in matters related to the sustainability of Pacific salmon in British Columbia as a wicked problem, and the answers deployed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) to deal with it during two attention cycles, 1990-93 and 1994-98. Through the comparison of these attention cycles I was able to identify a longitudinal pattern of attention, understand how wicked problems evolve over time, and determine some form of causality that explains why certain governmental responses to a wicked problem have been applied in such specific context and period of time.

By synthesizing and integrating the findings of the three studies, this doctoral dissertation provides a better understanding of, and an alternative approach to, the process of attention on wicked problems at public organizations.