The Routledge Handbook of Global Public Policy and Administration

Thomas R. Klassen, Denita Cepiku, T. J. Lah

Resilience in Public Administration

Publication details
Tony Bovaird, Barry Quirk
Published online on: 21 Oct 2016

How to cite: - Tony Bovaird, Barry Quirk. 21 Oct 2016, Resilience in Public Administration from: The Routledge Handbook of Global Public Policy and Administration Routledge
Accessed on: 27 Sep 2023
PART III
Forging a resilient public administration

Introduction
The former two sections of the handbook make clear that the public sphere is still relevant in an age of globalization, when the nation-state can no longer be taken for granted as the natural frame for social and political debate, and global governance institutions often seem inadequate. The third section of the handbook asks: can public management play a role in forging a resilient public administration? Public management is the most rapidly developing field of public administration since the New Public Management (NPM) of several decades ago. Recent reforms implemented worldwide show that public management:

- is highly context dependent;
- has its own specificities vis-à-vis management of profit firms;
- is about outcomes and processes and not only outputs;
- is not politically neutral (or when this happens it becomes irrelevant);
- can make a difference in achieving global goals, in addressing challenges such as terrorism, climate change, mass migration, and in promoting sustainable social and economic development.

Some universities, including the University of Rome Tor Vergata (Italy) and the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy at the University at Albany (USA), now offer courses on global public management, acknowledging the wider relevance of public management for public policy effectiveness. In research, evidence is however limited to case studies and more is needed to understand cause-related mechanisms between certain public management practices and outcomes.

This section focuses on some key areas that are critical for achieving the transformation of public management from a set of uncritically imported tools and techniques from the private sector to an approach that can contribute to protecting and enhancing the public interest. The chapters that follow analyze: risk management, leadership, strategic management and long-term thinking, performance management, program evaluation, public budgeting, policy capacity, motivation, public procurement and e-government.
In Chapter 23, “Forging a resilient public administration: moving from risk avoidance to assuring public policy outcomes”, Tony Bovaird and Barry Quirk from the United Kingdom argue that traditional approaches to risk management in public administration have tended to focus on likely future negative events, leading naturally to an emphasis on risk avoidance and losing sight of the trade-off whereby risk reduction for the agency normally also entails outcome reduction for service users and communities. They propose the adoption of integrated resilience strategies based on risk enablement, so that a better balance between risk and outcomes can contribute directly to more cost-effective public services and more desirable outcomes.

In Chapter 24, “The changing roles of politicians and public servants”, Robert Shepherd, Christopher Stoney and Lori Turnbull from Canada address a key issue in public sector leadership: the relationship between politicians and public servants. Reviewing the increased emphasis in the literature on the politicization of public services in Western democracies, the authors discuss the changing relationship between ministers and public servants and consider the implications in terms of a declining state of trust and confidence between elected leaders, who are expected to be partisan, and public servants, whose role in a modern and professional public service is based on principles of merit, a non-partisan conceptualization of public good and a longer-term view of public policy aims. They conclude by observing a steady decline in the value placed by political masters on a traditional merit-based and professional public service, and a corresponding change in the role and importance of the public sector, particularly in relation to political staff.

Chapter 25, entitled “Strategic management and public governance in the public sector”, by Paul Joyce from the United Kingdom, proposes a definition of strategic management that puts the emphasis on achieving long-term goals based on thorough analysis and assessment of the situation, options and resources. The chapter looks at strategic management consequences in a public sector context and considers strategic management and reforms to modernize civil service policy-making and systems of public governance. The concept of the strategic state is introduced and it is suggested that governments must take strategy and long-term thinking more seriously so as to increase the effectiveness of services.

The following two chapters are dedicated to performance management in the public sector, which can occur at four different levels: the global level refers to rankings and measures produced by international institutions to assess the aggregate performance levels of different countries’ public sectors; the level of public sector policies is connected to the main component of public sector reform agendas since the late 1980s; the organizational level is represented by performance management activities that are part of strategic planning and managing efforts; finally, at the individual or team level, performance management can operate by integrating human resources management through instruments such as performance-related pay.

Although there should be cause–effect links between these different levels, empirical research on these links offers mixed results.

Chapter 26, “Performance management in public administration”, by Denita Cepiku from Italy, focuses on performance management at the organizational level: such systems comprise a bundle of activities quantifying performance: defining a measurement object, formulating indicators, collecting, analyzing, and reporting data. The chapter illustrates the multi-dimensional concept of performance in the public sector and the characteristics of effective systems and processes that govern it. The performances of public and for-profit organizations are compared and key issues regarding the future of performance management systems in public administrations are illustrated with practical examples. Conditions ensuring – what is considered the Achilles’ heel – the meaningful use of performance information by public managers, politicians, citizens, civil society organizations and the media are highlighted.
Forging a resilient public administration

Managing performance is a complex and expensive activity, which is carried out assuming that organizations have a greater probability of achieving their objectives. However, the author notices that there is insufficient empirical evidence to back up this claim and, as with any investment, it makes sense to ask if performance management leads to better results.

She concludes by arguing that the future of performance management will depend on the extent to which it will be able to adapt to address emerging trends, including: critiques of its use for performance improvement, the recent explosion in the availability of data, and the shift of public management from competition to collaboration.

Joshua L. Osowski and Sanjay K. Pandey from the United States utilize Chapter 27, entitled “Public policies promoting performance management: Australia and the United States”, to review public policies promoting performance management within national governments, including legislative as well as executive measures. They choose to compare Australia and the United States because of the relatively long and sustained use of performance management at the national level, despite changes in ideology and governmental leadership over the years.

Similarities between these two countries tend to suggest that there is a rather orderly progression that takes place as national level governments grapple with (1) initiating, then (2) incorporating, and (3) improving the performance management process.

The analysis of performance policy and practices commonalities along these three stages contain lessons that Australia and the United States learned during several decades of experience and can be useful in other national contexts as well. In particular, leadership commitment and creating a formal requirement are key in the first stage. Subsequently, the use of inclusion in goal setting and decentralized decision making, linking performance to consequences and making performance reports available to the public become relevant. Finally, it is important to have sustained effort to improve performance methods by analyzing and learning from past performance policies and practices.

The next chapter, “The role of policy capacity in policy success and failure”, by M. Ramesh from Singapore and Michael Howlett from Canada, analyses the nature of the competencies and capabilities that governments must possess in order to be able to develop and implement effective policies and deliver successful programs. The authors argue that there are different modes of governance that can be identified around the world, such as network governance, market governance and government governance. In recent decades there has been a transition – as analysed in other chapters in this handbook – from government service delivery and regulation to more market-based types of governance regimes. This has been accompanied by a shift from hierarchical and market forms of governance to more network-oriented governance relationships. However, as the authors explain, a new form of governance requires the relevant policy capacity to be high in order to reach its policy-making potential.

Chapter 29, “The program evaluation function: uncertain governance and effects”, is dedicated to the program evaluation function. In his analysis, Robert Shepherd from Canada positions internal program evaluation functions in the context of public management reform efforts, shifting governmental expectations, and the role of rationalistic evidence in policy decision making. He argues that although change is commonplace in public sector operations, some sub-functions of government have the unique responsibility to ensure that decision makers not only have the information they need to make critical decisions, but must also serve to support public good objectives of speaking the truth about the effectiveness of government policies and programs. Speaking truth has always been difficult for the evaluation function given that evaluation is not a politically neutral enterprise; nonetheless, there is no consensus on how to cope with the political dimension of assessments. Increasingly, governments rely on many forms of evidence, and evaluation is not as privileged as it once was. With the increasing
influence of think-tanks, lobbyists, and political staff, evaluation that is dependent on rationalistic methods supposedly removed from politics has declined in prominence.

In Chapter 30, “Motivation in the public sector”, Adrian Ritz and Oliver Neumann from Switzerland and Wouter Vandenabeele from the Netherlands uncover another critical aspect: human resources motivation in the public sector. They observe how the provision of public services is heavily dependent on the knowledge, skills, attitudes and motives of public employees. Unsurprisingly people are the main asset of most public organizations and their actions are significant drivers of organizational outcomes. The authors argue that motivation becomes a crucial factor in both the provision of public service and the quality of public sector work.

The authors sketch out some of the most important general theories of motivation and draw a distinction between public sector motivation, which is based on self-interest, and public service motivation, which is additionally rooted in the desire to serve the public interest and to comply with specific institutional rules. After summarizing how the stream of research on public service motivation has developed over time, they develop a conceptual model to provide an overview of the antecedents and outcomes of public service motivation that have been investigated to date.

Chapter 31, “Public budgeting from a managerial perspective”, authored by Riccardo Mussari from Italy, reviews the public budgeting function from a managerial and political perspective. The approaches used to explain and justify budget formulation, including classical rationality, with its variant bounded rationality, and disjointed incrementalism are compared; the functions and principles of budgeting introduced; and budget formats described. The main functions of a public budget are: political; steering and programming; authorization; and cyclical economic policy, with specific regard to the federal/national government. As Mussari makes clear, the budget is not simply a financial forecast but a document that, starting from a strategy defined upstream, guides the actions of those called upon to use financial and non-financial (human, material, immaterial) resources to achieve expected results. From this perspective, the budget is a managerial tool and budgeting is mainly approached as a technical problem.

Giulia Di Pierro from England and Gustavo Piga from Italy use Chapter 32, entitled “The road ahead for public procurement in Europe: is there life after the directives?” to focus on the purchase of goods, services and works by governments, public authorities and the public sector. The authors make clear the several reasons that make public procurement an increasingly critical function for governments worldwide. It represents a significant share of GDP in both developed and developing countries and influences directly not only the economy, but also broader government objectives such as job creation, industrial policy, the environment and innovation. The authors analyze the recent modernization of several procurement regulations that occurred in response to new market dynamics. With a focus on Europe, they show how reforms of public procurement could leverage the socio-economic development of the region.

This handbook concludes with Chapter 33, “Korean e-government in a social media environment: prospects and challenges”, which reviews the role of e-government in enhancing transparency, participation, accountability and trust in government. M. Jae Moon, from South Korea, focuses on that country during the past several decades as a case study. With continued advancement of information and communication technologies, e-government has evolved from simple automation of administrative works and back-office applications to provision of customized online services and crowdsourcing through which individual citizens often become co-producers of public services. The author identifies the key success factors of the Korean e-government experience in the strong commitment by the central government, which strategically promoted the national informatization and e-government projects with the support of top policy-makers, capable institutions, and financial resources. E-government continues to
evolve in a social media environment, which offers both challenges and prospects while the crowdsourcing and e-government 3.0 paradigm are being gradually adopted.

The Korean government has been a forerunner in e-government both in back-office and front-office (Korean Immigration Service System) applications of ICTs. However, the Korean government faces a new set of e-government challenges in the social media environment, where more openness, interaction, participation, information sharing and collaboration are demanded by citizens. The author notes that the government needs to be cautious when it attempts to correct biased, incorrect and cyber-cascaded information in social media. Unless trust in government is well secured, government actions could be perceived to be unnecessary interventions and an overreaction to social media communications. Both quantity and quality of citizen participation and social and information connectivity based on social media and other web 2.0 technologies will further shape future e-government and make government more open, connected, participatory and collaborative.
RESILIENCE IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Moving from risk avoidance to assuring public policy outcomes

Tony Bovaird and Barry Quirk

Introduction: why resilience?

Traditional approaches to risk management in public administration have tended to focus on likely future negative events, resulting in complex “blame avoidance strategies” through which public agencies attempt to minimise damage to themselves and deflect blame for failure. This leads naturally to an emphasis on risk avoidance, so that these negative events are rarer. However, this comes with a cost – it loses sight of the trade-off whereby risk reduction normally also entails outcome reduction. A radically different approach is to accept the inevitability of some failures and to seek to embed resilience in the way in which the overall service system works, and in each of its components. In this way, the negative consequences of failure can be minimised. More importantly, the transformative potential of a responsible risk culture, based on proportionate rather than over-cautious responses to risk, can be realised.

In this chapter, we explore the interrelationship between risk and resilience, the elements of the resilience chain linking citizens and service users to the overall service system, and ways in which the “resilience” chain can be managed to achieve a desirable balance between system outcomes and outcomes for individual citizens.

Risk for government – and from government

Risk is how we measure today the adverse impact or losses we think may happen in the future (Knight 1921). Economists have traditionally defined risk as those elements of uncertainty to which probability estimates can be attached, typically only a subset of the overall influences on uncertainty. However, risk assessment and management specialists in the “risk industry” nowadays normally use “risk” to cover all the factors which contribute to uncertainty, whether or not they can be captured by probability estimates.

This definition is consistent with some “risks” turning out to be advantageous in their effects. However, in practice there tends to be an asymmetry in how negative and positive risks are regarded (Peters and Slovic 2000). The public expects government to take action in relation to any negative social, economic and environmental risks identified, even when it is not clear what has caused the problems or whether proposed interventions might reduce the risk.
Consequently, in a world of open government and high transparency, the risk of future failure looms as a spectre over public action and the potentially positive effects of some actions with uncertain outcomes are overlooked or underestimated.

Moreover, “just as there is a risk to government so, from a citizen’s perspective, there is also a risk from government” (Quirk 2011: 160). In the current climate of public spending cuts throughout OECD countries, there are now major risks to citizens (particularly the most vulnerable) when services upon which they depend face major cuts. At this time public agencies need increasingly to look outward, helping their public to cope with the changing character and intensity of economic and environmental risks, and helping their communities to develop resilience to social and economic changes. Paradoxically, however, just at such times public agencies tend to look inward, getting their budgets under control and reducing the risk that they will be held responsible for the decreasing outcomes which occur. Sight is lost of the trade-off which means that risk reduction normally also entails outcome reduction.

Focusing on the UK public sector, this chapter argues that public policies need to focus more on risks to the outcomes experienced by service users and communities (and less on the internal risks to the agency); to place more emphasis on embedding resilience within the behaviours and resources of users, communities, providers and service systems. This approach develops the taxonomy suggested by Flemig and Osborne (Chapter 16 in this handbook) which distinguishes consequential risk at the level of the individual, organisational risk on the level of the organisation and its staff, and behavioral risk at the level of the wider community and environment. We then explore how public sector organisations can adopt integrated resilience strategies based on risk enablement, so that a better balance between risk and outcomes can contribute directly to more cost-effective public services and more desirable outcomes.

**Relationship of risk to public services failure**

Citizens potentially face multiple sources of hazards and harms from their general environments. At the most dramatic, “macro” level, potentially affecting large populations, hazards range from hurricanes, floods and public health risks through to terrorism. At first sight, it might seem that public policymakers have already become highly attuned to managing such adverse risks. Emergency preparedness planning, disaster recovery and business continuity work have mushroomed at every level of government. However, the extent to which these risks have actually been reduced by public intervention is still in dispute.

The UK White Paper on Open Public Services (HM Government 2011) proposed “continuity regimes”, as an integral part of public agency modernisation programmes but offered few details of what this might mean in practice, focusing instead on key principles. Remarkably, these principles focused more on protecting potentially failing providers from too early intervention by service commissioners and on monitoring signals of financial failure, rather than signals of outcome failure.

While many of the major dangers external to the public services system listed above threaten much greater damage than the more micro-level risks to everyday quality of life posed by most internal failures of public services, these latter are generally clear and present, while macro-level risks often appear remote and unlikely. Consequently, these micro-level risks have driven a major redesign of UK personal social services in the past two decades. Children’s services in the public sector have put a much higher emphasis than ever before on “safeguarding”, i.e. protecting children from maltreatment, preventing impairment of their health or development, and ensuring children grow up in safe circumstances (NHS Commissioning Board 2013; Martin et al. 2010; Bonnerjea 2009). This has partly been driven by a genuine concern for the wellbeing
of children – but it has partly also arisen from concern about the reputation damage to politicians and public agencies from the major media publicity given to a series of gruesome and highly publicised cases of neglect and abuse; and partly by concern on the part of public agencies to reduce their legal liability in case “looked after” children and adults come to significant harm.

Again, as with the more dramatic macro risks, the extent to which these risks have been reduced by public intervention is still unclear. Indeed, a recent review (Moran 2009: 25) concluded that “research is lacking in the evidence required to guide practitioners in the development and delivery of interventions to prevent or reduce neglect and its impact”, that many current interventions are “promising” but no more and “intervening in neglect is likely to be costly, requiring intensive, long-term, multi-faceted work by a highly skilled workforce”. It appears that the new emphasis on and policies for children’s safeguarding, with the intrusive and costly bureaucratic mechanisms they entail, may be having limited effect on outcomes, although they may be serving to protect public service organisations, their managers and staff from blame. This seems a low-value way to organise public sector responses to risk.

Why has this situation arisen? Smith et al. (2011: 3) suggest that we have become captured by “process” and the allure of “risk tools, frameworks, registers, matrices, spreadsheets, guidance and software … elegant risk registers, local risk champions and ‘traffic-light’ dashboards” – what Ellis (2013: 8) calls the “ratcheting up of managerial technicist practices”. In practice, these approaches have not been developed with the primary purpose of reducing risk. They respond rather to demands for accountability in respect of budgetary control and/or service failure, based on an audit approach that internalises risk and institutionalises its management. They therefore partly reflect the “blame-avoidance” and self-preservation strategies of public institutions (Hood 2011) rather than a thorough framework for reducing public risk and improving resilience. Moreover, they may even be counter-productive in giving decision makers an illusion of control over risk – decision makers may well believe that they are monitoring and responding to the major risks they face, although in fact the real risks are largely unknown and the degree of control available to policymakers is very low. Rather than opening up options, this internally oriented approach often closes them down, undervaluing pragmatism and common sense, encouraging low-risk appetites and risk-averse behaviour, and undermining proper responses to the opportunities facing public agencies and the citizens they serve.

Understanding risk in different knowledge domains

The theoretical underpinnings of current risk assessment and management approaches are largely to blame for their relatively weak role in tackling the uncertainties facing public policy. To see why, we employ the Cynefin framework proposed by Snowden and Boone (2007) to classify the kind of information available about an organisation’s environment into four domains of knowledge (see Figure 23.1).

**Simple domain:** Here the relationship between cause and effect is widely believed to be obvious, with solid evidence for predicting policy outcomes – in this domain, we are dealing with “knowns” and we can expect to apply best practice. This is the domain for which current risk assessment and management tools are most appropriate.

**Complicated domain:** Here the problem is generally understood but cause-and-effect relationships behind the problem, although “knowable” in principle, need application of expert knowledge to predict how policy outcomes are likely to be affected by specific interventions. In this domain, we can expect to apply good practice. The tools of risk assessment and management are appropriate but difficult to apply because the set of “knowns” that can be modelled is quite limited.
Resilience in public administration

Complex domain: Here, because of the strong interconnectedness of the phenomena being managed, the relationship between cause and effect can only be perceived in retrospect. The best we can do is to sense emergent practice. Techniques such as agent-based modelling, assuming that actors are adaptive rather than “fully rational”, and simulating how their multiple interactions create complex social patterns allow a range of scenarios to be explored (Bryson et al. 2005). This analysis can inform policymakers only at a broad level of decision but not give detailed predictions. Risk assessment and management are necessarily very different in this domain. Since we are dealing with variables which are only predictable to a very limited extent, the role of risk management here is to warn against the temptation to look for “facts”, rather than allowing patterns to emerge. Risk management also has to signal how the interdependence of the organisation and its environment can create the conditions for “emergent” threats that are traceable to no specific element within the system (Buchanan 2004) – a particularly hard task. This emergent property of collectively generated risk suggests that over-confident policy prescriptions should be avoided, that experimentation is likely to be fundamental, and that a range of policy approaches is likely to be superior to “putting all your eggs in one basket”.

Chaotic domain: Here there is no discernible relationship between cause and effect at systems level, so nothing can be predicted in relation to policy outcomes – the best we can do is to explore novel practice. In this domain we can place the arrival of “black swans” – unpredicted (and unpredictable) negative events with such dramatic consequences that they threaten the very existence of the organisation (Taleb 2007). The role of the risk manager here is simply to monitor and point out the level of turbulence, so that the organisation does not fall for off-the-peg solutions which were appropriate to more ordered knowledge domains. Anyone offering to do a risk assessment in these circumstances is revealing that they are disqualified to comment.
(Even more threatening, of course, is the “disorder” domain in Figure 23.1, where we do not even know which knowledge domain we are in).

So, how can we tell in which knowledge domain we are currently operating? In practice different parts of organisations are likely to be working in different knowledge domains, so that most of the knowledge domains in Figure 23.1 may be appropriate in different circumstances. Many public services may operate at least partly in the simple knowledge domain (e.g. technical services such as transport or waste collection and disposal). However, this seems unlikely to be true for social policy, which is more likely to be operating in the “complicated” or “complex” knowledge domains (or even, at times, in chaotic conditions). Duit and Galaz (2008) present evidence which they suggest justifies the need for policymakers to consider the implications of complex adaptive systems (CAS), because nonlinear behaviour can spark off political crises in governance systems, e.g. through disasters triggered by passing critical biophysical/technical thresholds; or through significant changes in interconnected social or economic systems – especially if they occur in already vulnerable systems. There has also been significant interest in modelling health and social services systems as CAS (e.g. Health Foundation 2010; Tsasis et al. 2010; Plsek and Greenhalgh 2001).

In summary, risk assessment and management approaches have to differentiate between different knowledge domains and therefore between different parts of public service organisation which are working in different domains. Where applications of risk assessment and management stray from the domain in which their approach could be relevant into domains where their assumptions are irrelevant, their subsequent conclusions are, literally, nonsensical.

**Strategies for managing risk**

We can distinguish a range of quite distinct strategies towards risk in public services:

- activity portfolio management: choosing a portfolio of activities with lower risk attached;
- risk reduction in the environment: either ensuring key risks are less likely or influencing their character so that particularly damaging features of those risks are reduced;
- building resilience into the service system, including the activities of providers and the behaviours of service users, their support networks and their communities;
- risk enablement: encouraging decision makers in the service system to choose activities with appropriate levels of risk, rather than always aiming at risk minimisation.

These strategies are not, of course, mutually exclusive. The first two are essentially preventative, the third is about mitigation of risks and the fourth is about learning to live appropriately with the levels of risk that the organisation faces. As such, all could be pursued simultaneously. The third and fourth strategies have a mutually reinforcing characteristic, in that the more successful is the resilience strategy, the more confidently can a public service organisation pursue a risk enablement strategy. In the rest of this chapter, we focus on the strategies of building resilience into the service system, in conjunction with the strategy of risk enablement.

**The concept of resilience**

However cleverly public policy tries to prevent identified risks eventuating, the service system has to be able to cope with some things going wrong. For this, it needs resilience. There is no universally agreed definition of resilience but the recent social sciences literature has stressed the idea of resilience as “adaptive ability” (Simmie and Martin 2010: 28). This goes beyond the
Resilience in public administration

traditional definitions of resilience – “engineering resilience” (where the level of resilience is measured by the speed of return to the pre-existing equilibrium) and “ecological resilience” (where the level of resilience is measured by the size of shock or disturbance that can be absorbed before the system changes structure or function, shaped by a different set of processes).

For the purposes of this chapter, we adopt the definition of resilience from Edson (2012), as adaptation that supports successful achievement of goals and objectives, as well as learning for future planning and preparation. This definition accepts the Simmie and Martin requirement that the concept of resilience should incorporate learning and adapting and, in addition, gives some clear pointers as to how it can be made operational.

Whose resilience?

A key political question in relation to the concept of resilience is whose resilience is being assured? We need to distinguish between the resilience of individuals and communities to the risks which eventuate (both those arising from the external environment and those which arise from agency decisions and actions) and the resilience of public agencies and their individual stakeholders – policymakers (politicians and top managers), senior managers, frontline staff, etc.

The current balance of public policy in relation to the resilience of these different stakeholders is questionable, often appearing to give more weight to the risks and resilience of public service organisations than to those of the citizens and clients they serve. Mitchell and Glendinning (2007: 71) talk of “continuous risk assessment but actually very little time to sit down and work directly with clients in thinking and planning ways to address the risks users have identified in their own lives”.

In practice, there is a conflict of interest between stakeholders in the choice between risk avoidance and resilience strategies. Service users are likely to feel that their outcomes are most likely to be protected and enhanced by a focus on strategies of resilience and risk enablement, which offer the potential for minimising the damage done by the risks they face, while, where appropriate, trading off potential benefits against potential risks. Yet the choice of strategies is typically dominated by internal stakeholders, who are naturally keen to avoid those elements of risk that affect themselves – particularly financial risks (e.g. where redress has to be paid) or “reputational” risks to the agency (e.g. from court cases or “scandals” highlighted in the media), and personal risks to top agency managers (e.g. through scapegoating by political leaders) or to staff (e.g. by losing their professional registration). For example, Ellis (2013: 10) summarises previous research as suggesting that UK frontline social workers, managing (under pressure of severely limited resources) the reputational and financial risks of giving personal budgets to their clients, are more likely to act defensively to avoid risk, rather than seek proactively and creatively to promote choice and control – and may even behave in actively obstructive ways (such as not informing their riskiest clients of the choices available to them).

This highlights the importance of a mature approach to accountability, rather than an immature blame culture, if approaches to risk and resilience are to be improved. This is only likely to be achieved if the power imbalance in public agencies is directly addressed, so that users and communities become directly involved in the strategic decisions around risk, in an explicit strategy of co-production of outcomes (Loeffler 2015). Only then will the risks to users and communities be foregrounded and their views on those risks enter directly into the decision-making calculus of the public agency. As Quirk (2011: 158) says, in relation to public risks, “Government’s first role is to help people reckon and reduce risks for themselves.” Moreover, co-production allows users and communities to participate in decisions about the trade-off between perceived risks and the potential payoffs which they might experience,
something that may be particularly important to many service users, as highlighted in a recent Department of Health report:

there was a very clear message from people that they wanted to be able to choose what they thought was right for them. Many reported they were offered “safety” often at the expense of other qualities of life, such as dignity, autonomy, independence, family life and self-determination – and many older people and people with learning disabilities said this was a very high price to pay.

(DH 2009: 16)

Embedding resilience within the service system: the “resilience chain”

The current systems-based literatures around urban, environmental and economic resilience tend to ignore that these systems comprise socially constructed organisations and social networks of people, which means that systems are shaped by the characteristics of constituent agents. Consequently, a truly resilient system of public services, fashioned to achieve publicly desired outcomes, also requires attention to the resilience of the agents within the system, specifically citizens (both individually as service users and collectively as communities) and organisations (both service providers and commissioners). Taken together, these form the “resilience chain”.

User resilience: Clearly people who use services may already be partially resilient, if they have private resources to buy alternative services when public services fail. However, public organisations need resilience mechanisms to go further, so that they offer protection to a high proportion of citizens, especially the most vulnerable users of services. The most direct mechanism for improving resilience of users is likely to be a co-production approach. This includes the role of citizens in co-deciding risk levels in the policy process, but can go much wider. Service users know things that many professionals don’t (“users as thinking people”), can make a service more effective by the extent to which they go along with its requirements (“users as critical success factors”) and have energy and skills which they may be prepared to devote to ensuring higher outcomes from services, both for themselves and others (“users as resource-banks and asset-holders”) (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). When these assets and potential contributions are identified and harnessed, users are more able to take on some of the functions that professionals play, if those professionals become unavailable or can only play a more limited role. In this way, user co-production through co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and co-assessment of services can build up the capacity of service users to cope with less input from public services and to adapt to different configurations of services – or their sudden absence. Similarly, it makes sense to build upon the capacity of users’ direct support network – their family, friends, neighbours and the volunteers who help them.

Community resilience: Communities, like users, know and understand things that go beyond the knowledge bases of professionals (“It takes a village to raise a child”), can exert social pressure to alter anti-social behaviour (“Notice: The following people are not welcome in this pub because of misbehaviour in local pubs during the past year”) and can mobilise effort and skills to help achieve publicly desired outcomes (“Emergencies and disasters bring out the best in folk”). Identifying community assets and potential contributions and mobilising them in community co-production means that communities are more able to cope when public services fail to deliver as expected (Wilding 2011) – they must “plan for not having a plan” (Norris et al. 2008: 127). This is a role long played by community capacity building, which has been topical sporadically since the 1960s, although not widely funded from mainstream public budgets. As Demiroz and Kapucu (Chapter 19 in this handbook) suggest, policy makers can
Resilience in public administration

access community resources via inter-organisational and cross-sector networks for managing complex issues.

Service provider resilience: Service providers have an interest in ensuring resilience in the face of potential service failure – as, of course, do service commissioners. As well as encouraging user and community resilience, providers can build resilience into their services through their own internal mechanisms. These start with flagging up potential failure sufficiently early for appropriate avoidance action to be taken, e.g. performance management frameworks and feedback channels from users and staff. Moreover, it is important that providers have functional quality assurance systems (e.g. ISO 9001: 2015) to ensure that service delivery does not fail, together with recovery mechanisms (such as membership of provider networks, so that alternative provision can be arranged quickly in emergencies). Service commissioners need to insist that potential service contractors show they have credible mechanisms such as these in place. The UK Cabinet Office (2013) defines business continuity management (BCM) as “a process that helps manage risks to the smooth running of an organisation or delivery of a service, ensuring continuity of critical functions in the event of a disruption, and effective recovery afterwards”. However, this government guidance does not identify the need for BCM in organisations to encourage both user and community resilience as part of an integrated resilience policy.

Service system resilience: Service commissioners can build resilience into the overall service system both by ensuring that mechanisms for resilience of service users, communities and service providers have been put in place but also by implementing system-wide mechanisms, such as:

- System entry barriers: restricting potential bidders to those who can prove financial stability, successful track record and high staff qualifications (“vigilant gatekeeping”).
- Structural solutions: several suppliers, retainer arrangements with alternative suppliers, residual in–house capability, emergency budgets (“system redundancy”).
- Complexity solutions: accepting some promising “black box” approaches, which have a plausible narrative, with quasi-grants and rigorous evaluation (“meta-planning”).
- Process solutions: compulsory insurance bonds, several different supply methodologies or “pathways to outcomes” (“built-in flexibility”).

The overall “resilience chain” depends on each link in the chain of user-community-organisation-system being sound and strongly connected to the next link. In the words of Coaffee (2011: 335): “the governance of resilience … is progressively ‘responsibilizing’ and increasingly putting the onus of preventing and preparing for disruptive challenges onto an array of institutions, professions, communities and individuals, rather than the state—the traditional provider of citizens’ security and emergency planning needs”.

It is clear that public agencies too often have given more emphasis to embedding resilience into the formal service provision process rather than ensuring that all the links in this resilience chain are effective. For example, the Cabinet Office (2011) guidance on resilience of critical infrastructure and essential services emphasises information sharing amongst organisational stakeholders about their infrastructure but not joint planning for building citizen or community resilience in the event of major crises. While understandable, given the potential for damage to agencies and their staff when service provision fails, this narrow approach to resilience, with its under-emphasis on ensuring the resilience of service users and communities, is logically indefensible.

Moreover, refusing service users the right to make their own service decisions (e.g. through control over personal care budgets), on the grounds of the potential risks involved, ignores the
“inherent risks” of conventional services, determined by professional staff, that “do not always meet people’s needs and sometimes are abusive and neglectful” (Manthorpe and Samsi 2013, 898). However, we should not underestimate the magnitude of a cultural change towards co-production of risk and resilience decisions. Public agencies in the past have often refused to accept that people should have the right to influence decisions concerning their welfare and have even actively connived at the disenfranchisement of citizens in risk and resilience policy decisions (Bovaird and Quirk 2013). Of course, there is also a danger that the scales can be tipped in the other direction – if citizens are given a greater role in decisions about the risks they can take and the resilience strategies they adopt, public agencies could seek wholly to “privatise” the risk by offloading all of it onto service users, carers and their support networks (Stevens et al. 2011; Ferguson 2007). Here, too, a co-production approach is important to ensure that citizens have the power to resist such “risk-dumping” (Bovaird and Quirk 2013).

Of course, relying on resilience to cope with risks of service failure brings its own risks. Resilience can never be assumed to be fully reliable. When novel threats appear, they may be distinctively different and render some resilience mechanisms useless. Indeed, as resilience is about adaptation, the potential for embedding it in the service system will differ markedly, depending on the knowledge domain in which we are operating – it will be easiest in the Simple domain and increasingly difficult as we move from Complicated through Complex to Chaotic domains. Resilience, as with all features of the service system, emerges as well as being planned. The emergence of resilience cannot be predicted but it can be facilitated by appropriate approaches, particularly design-based experimentation.

The design approach: experimentation as antidote to service failure

We have argued that there needs to be radical change in public policy to reorient resilience approaches and risk strategies towards a focus on achieving the outcomes most desired by service users and their communities, taking on board the emotional as well the “rational” elements of risk. This needs to build encouragement of user and community resilience into the risk policies of public agencies. The implications of such a radical policy shift will be substantial, so far relatively unexplored and therefore only partially understood. In a period of such radical change, experimentation is essential. By their very nature, not all experiments are successful. The key design principle of experimental approaches to policy learning is: “fail early, fail fast, fail cheap … and learn how to correct quickly”. In the words of Samuel Beckett (1984):

Ever tried. Ever failed.
No matter. Try Again.
Fail again. Fail better.

Experimentation is hard in the public sector. The very thought of failure is often anathema, even if it is intellectually understood as part of the path to learning. Each time failure occurs it is liable to be highlighted – by opponents and the media – as a “scandal” or as evidence of incompetence. Hindsight shows us the mistakes, errors, omissions and commissions of the past – these can then be ascribed to failures of foresight. One example of this can be found in the serious case reviews of deaths of children and adults. These case reviews attempt to draw general conclusions from individual cases of the most serious and tragic circumstances. And while it is essential to investigate and learn from operational failings, too often these reviews draw the same narrow conclusions. They tend to list the number of “missed opportunities to intervene” that (with the benefit of hindsight) could have prevented the incident or at least led to a less
serious outcome. This search for operational errors is right and understandable. But the method used is a form of analysis using a backward-looking narrative as though it were a predetermined plot from a novel or a film. The real lessons ought instead to involve the separation of human error from process or systemic failure and the search for ways in which each of these in turn can be reduced (not eliminated), with an understanding of what the cost will be, both in terms of resources used up and potential outcomes no longer available under the new, more constricting system.

Experimentation means that there will be multiple approaches to policy and to service delivery, only some of which will prove cost effective. Naturally, multiple approaches to policy and service delivery can easily be parodied, by opponents or the media, as an admission of ignorance or dithering. However, ensuring resilience in all the links of the resilience chain allows a strategy of risk enablement to be adopted, in which experimentation, which is fundamental in the Complex and Chaotic knowledge domains (and may even be valuable in the Complicated domain), can be protected and encouraged.

Towards a strategy of risk enablement within the context of a resilience chain

We are not suggesting that public organisations or staff should launch into accepting radically higher levels of risk – what we are proposing is more likely to result in a different portfolio of risk, enabled by having an appropriate resilience chain in place. Indeed, this analysis mainly suggests that we own up to the current facts – namely, that service users are already facing quite high levels of risk to their desired outcomes, that they are already putting in place some (imperfect) resilience mechanisms at the individual and community levels, and that the interventions of the public sector are generally only achieving limited risk reduction. The key is that the appropriate risk reduction and resilience strategies should be negotiated with users and communities, not just imposed by agency leaders (based on organisation-based interests).

This “risk enablement strategy” builds on innovative risk enablement practices already being used in adult safeguarding in social care. It involves taking a balanced and proportionate approach to risk, finding ways to enable individuals, communities and organisations to achieve what is important to them, while considering preventative and resilience mechanisms which keep individuals and the community safe from harm in a way that makes sense for them (Neill et al. 2008: 7). It requires public agencies to foster a culture of positive risk taking, where these risks are inherent in policies that nevertheless, on balance, are likely to improve outcomes for citizens. Kaplan and Mikes (2012) suggest that this focus on the “positive risk- negative risk” trade-off be done by anchoring risk discussions within strategic planning, which already brings together organisational goals and objectives and points to positive action rather than constraints, thus aligning the risk conversation with a “can do” culture, rather than a “must not do” culture.

Social construction of resilience approaches

Clearly, decisions on risk and resilience are not simply based on technical assessment of options. Government strategies around risk and resilience have to recognise the importance of views that citizens hold for emotional reasons. For example, public resilience initiatives to save loss of life in some contexts are likely to be much more acceptable than in others (Tengs et al. 1995), as the value placed by the public on the possibility of saving a human life varies hugely between public programmes – some save more than they cost, while others cost over $2bn per life saved.

Consequently, the social construction of risk and resilience (as shaped by the media) is a key driver of public policy. Indeed, Beck (1992: 49) argues that modern welfare society, based on
Tony Bovaird and Barry Quirk

an underlying public concern with equality, is being replaced by the “risk society”, where the public’s overriding value is safety, which is “peculiarly negative and defensive”.

Unpacking the processes behind the social construction of resilience, research shows that recent personal experience strongly influences how people evaluate risky options and therefore their commitment to achieving greater resilience – low-probability events generate less concern than their probability warrants on average, but more concern than they deserve after those rare instances when they do occur (Weber 2006: 103).

However, effective risk communication can influence the social construction of risk and resilience (Chenok 2013), so that agencies can analyse the risks as seen by their constituents, the public can increase its preparedness and, if the risks become realities, the public discourse is built around a sound response to an expected problem, rather than focusing on reactions to an unanticipated event.

The resilience chain is damaged when either citizens exhibit an emotional rejection of “scientific” evidence or organisations refuse to take full account of the evidence. The legitimacy of policy decisions is further undermined where states and localities are clearly ill-equipped to make the political judgments required or, even more damagingly, where “expert” assessments of risk and the results of intervention policies exhibit disagreement rather than scientific consensus, thus undermining their own credibility.

Public decision making may be made even more difficult by the ideological responses of many citizens – and indeed many of their representatives and even some top managers – to “reject science” altogether, i.e. refuse to accept propositions which are supported by strong evidence bases conforming to conventional scientific criteria. Public reluctance to support scientific advice on the risks of specific interventions rules out resilience options which are strongly supported by the evidence and privilege some resilience interventions which seem unlikely to succeed.

The public’s emotional response to risk is even more problematic with issues which are sudden, highly dangerous and dramatic (e.g. unexpectedly frequent hurricanes on the Eastern USA seaboard or outbreaks of mass shootings in public places in the USA, UK and Sweden). Here, public reaction is often emotionally highly charged and demands new interventions to protect against future occurrences. Where the risk of further occurrences appears low, most systematic interventions are likely to be disproportionately expensive, compared to likely benefits.

Conclusions

Resilience strategies have typically been based on the traditional approach to risk management, which is founded in audit and has privileged financial control by pricing future uncertainties in a measurable way. It fosters managerial compliance strategies that attempt to reduce or avoid repeated or systemic operational errors as well as measure foreseeable hazards and harms. These approaches are useful up to a point. However, they have also resulted in constrictive “blame avoidance strategies”, where a public agency attempts to minimise damage to itself and to deflect blame for failure, rather than systematically preparing to deal with anticipated risks in a way which will maximise expected outcomes.

A radically new approach to risk and resilience is urgently needed, enabling a responsible risk culture, proportionate responses to risk and the building of robust resilience chains. Risk assessment and resilience management have to be tailored to the knowledge domains within which they operate. In a world where there is major uncertainty, not only about the consequences of known risks but also about how amenable they will be to public sector
interventions, many of the probability-based instruments of current risk assessment and resilience management are simply irrelevant.

A systematic approach to the resilience chain requires a transformation from risk avoidance strategies towards risk enablement strategies, focusing on citizen outcomes as well as organisational outcomes, a culture of taking collective responsibility for improving publicly desired outcomes, transparency about risks actually existing and likely to be tackled by proposed interventions, user and community co-production of agreed interventions to deal with risk, and a wide-ranging set of measures to increase resilience across the resilience chain, at user, community, organisational and service system levels.

However, this new approach must itself be seen as tentative and unproven. The uncertainty in complex and chaotic knowledge domains requires us to be humble about how much we can know, how much we can change and how cost-effective public interventions are likely to be. Indeed, for all the excitement in the UK over the new approaches to risk enablement and resilience, there has still been little investigation into their effectiveness.

Consequently, this new approach requires both experimentation and research. Until better evidence is available, we need to own up to how little we really know about the risks we face in relation to the outcomes that matter to citizens, the unknowns which can undermine even the best thought-out services and the likely effectiveness of resilience mechanisms that can protect us from future harms. Such humility is a prerequisite to learning. Refusing to acknowledge the limitations to our knowledge is perhaps the biggest threat of all to building appropriate and proportionate resilience systems.

Acknowledgements

This chapter has been developed from the short paper by Bovaird and Quirk (2013) published online by the Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham.

References