

**Comment on Public Participation:  
Finding Knowledge and Clarity in Chaos**

**Donald R. Officer, MA**  
**Editor and Publisher**  
*Strategicpraxis.com*  
Ottawa, Ontario

E-mail: [donald.officer@gmail.com](mailto:donald.officer@gmail.com)

## **Comment on Public Participation: Finding Knowledge and Clarity in Chaos**

### **ABSTRACT**

Intuition is a difficult concept to define but one that most people recognize as an important factor in thought and judgment. Intuition permits the acceptance of logic and mathematics as both true and valid realities without material evidence. Psychologists have tended to avoid the topic of intuition considering it as just one of many unobservable mental entities scientists are therefore unable to test.

However students of innovation see an interesting connection between innovation and intuition. Intuition may even exert a paranormal or magical influence according to certain philosophies. Yet no such belief is essential to an understanding of what most people mean by it. In *Educating Intuition* Robin Hogarth describes various ways that intuition might be improved or educated. There are two notable impediments to the education of intuition. One is the presence of confusing or “wicked” environments where feedback is unreliable. The other is the limited scope or “domain specific” nature of intuition. Intuition can also inhibit innovation because such obstacles exist.

There are also notable examples of regressive or perverse innovation where the intuitive impulse to resist would be only appropriate. Nevertheless intuition remains a part of who we are and an extension of what we imagine. As such it is inextricably involved with innovation and personal empowerment.

*Key Words:* Chaos, intuition, innovation.

Dr. Patricia Crawford, the author of this playful yet reflective paper looks at chaos as a metaphor to help explore the multiple, complex aspects of public participation. Despite its more modern uses, chaos as an idea retains a somewhat mythological undertone representing the very darkest depths of the unformed and unknown predating rational philosophy. Furthermore, that old sense has proven to be of continuing importance in the more empirical ways we now tend to configure the universe and its challenges. In the extraordinary if idiosyncratic manner in which language evolves, the ancient associations of a reified, frequently personified, primeval Chaos still persist as well as those more subjective, more figurative senses, this author intends to invoke.

Deconstructing chaos is a project fraught with irony, the intellectual equivalent of trying to contain the universal solvent. I would surmise from the way this paper is written that the author is a social constructivist. From such a perspective, chaos would resemble any experience of events that will not conform to an existing framework. As such, chaos is optimistically a prelude to a new and improved reality. The great challenge in policy creation is leaving the “good enough” comfort zone of the pragmatic, a departure usually

forced involuntarily by the shock of the new and rising tides of change. Dr. Crawford exhorts us to embrace the discomfort courageously and to step into the chaos.

In this psychological sense in particular I would concur with what we are being exhorted to consider in “Public Participation: Finding knowledge and clarity in chaos”. The existential search for personal meaning is painful but essential for personal growth or day-to-day adaptation as well as vocational development at certain transformative stages (Van Deurzen: p.165-167). However, to avoid exhaustion and burnout on all fronts there is a point where we must seek threads of coherence in the brutal give and take of life’s frontlines. Success and especially excellence in either a worldly or subjective sense requires years of focused practice. Chaos within must therefore be dealt with early and not allowed to overwhelm the individual. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has written in *Flow, Creativity* and his other works based on extensive research with peak experience, that both quality and quantity in personal production demand an unrelenting synergy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996: p. 192-301). Furthermore, to achieve such output requires exceptional motivation so the individual does not veer to either extreme of boredom or anxiety, a tightrope act that excessive amounts of free floating chaos could easily unbalance. Csikszentmihalyi believes we must learn to cheat chaos if the quality of our experience, indeed our values, matter to us (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996: p. 362). Excessive, unmanaged chaos is a dangerous thing. Distraction can be bad for your health.

Is chaos, as the author suggests, primarily a metaphor? Maybe the world is more fundamentally chaotic than our perception of it. In other words, rather than a marginal experience or biosocial phenomenon, is chaos instead the ocean in which we swim? Such questions bring us closer to the inquiries of chaos theory. As its proponents maintain, chaos theory can be as much concerned with human affairs as with physical world phenomena (Wheatley: p-163-168). That would include public policy and participation. Notwithstanding, the term chaos theory is misleading in one key sense. The task in every realm the chaos theorist scrutinizes is to move beyond the apprehended chaos to a more fulsome if more complex order. For the scientist, as for Dr. Crawford, chaos is typified as a challenge to be overcome. The chaos theorist therefore really begins his or her serious theorizing on the far side of nasty disorderliness.

Despite our inclination to indulge exuberant optimism regarding the possibility of order, can the biggest of all chicken and egg questions ever be permanently resolved? Does some ultimate order reconcile the apprehended chaos of complex phenomena or is order at best an epiphenomenon in a disorderly world? This conundrum which starts to look like a snake trying to swallow its tail is a special case of the more usual ontological question: Is there a subset of universal laws that flow from the existence of the universe or is there an overriding set of laws that make the universe possible? We might as readily ask whether the world makes chaos possible or chaos generates a world, a question that physicists are just starting to see has to be asked. (Barrow 2007: p. 43-92).

To be fair, this paper does not delve too deeply in such directions nor need it do so to affirm the key aspects of its argument. Dr. Crawford begins instead with a threefold epistemological proposition regarding the transitory nature of knowledge to help the reader appreciate the ‘value’ of chaos as a heuristic tool. Using this strategy, chaos is not only necessary to create significantly new thinking, but also the gateway to greater clarity. Her view of chaos is not some description of primordial origins, a theoretical approach to complex systems or a philosophical conundrum. Rather, she seems to view

chaos as process resembling a variation of the “freeze-unfreeze-refreeze” phases Kurt Lewin introduced early in the twentieth century to describe the developmental change process in both individuals and organizations (Lewin, 1997: p. 212-230).

However, there is a different aspect to the variant configuration presented in this paper. Chaos is a broader, more frightening idea than thaw, although both properties may prefigure the ultimate consequences of climate change. Chaos is transition without a big picture safety net. It represents the down side of social constructivism, that learning theory which hypothesizes that as young individuals or under developed civilizations we invent stories, rationales, grammars etc. to hold our observations together. Later, as we gain a more complete and coherent perspective, we compose a clearer, wider context. Dr. Crawford does offer the carrot of harmonious cooperation in a bright new vision of a broader framework, but I find this promise somewhat romantic. What if the light at the end of the tunnel is an approaching train?

We might individually have a great deal to do with how we each personally configure the layout of the world, but something of some sort is probably actually functioning out there since we all keep continuously bumping into it and then complaining about it somewhat sympathetically to one another. This crude irreducible input seems to exist in some sense regardless of how clever we might be at imagining it away. To entertain the possibility of chaos is to appreciate that the rudimentary something presents believable obstacles and that things might not always end well. Admittedly, that’s a quick and dirty overview of a convoluted epistemological labyrinth. Forgive me, but it needs to be alluded to in the interests of sniffing out chaos and making meaning of it (Van Deurzen, 2009: p.121-125).

The author invokes a rather romantic vision of chaos. Among the brooding images that come to mind: “Sturm und Drang” from continental literature or darkly pregnant clouds moiling over a forlorn landscape where “Chaos” would serve as an à propos title. Some of the romantics succumbed to the shadows of their imaginations just as many moderns have been eaten up by the overly complex creations of their minds. I do not bring up such allusions to disparage, but to urge caution when considering the inspiration of chaos.

Some commentators claim governance is sabotaged by over control or hyper complexity as often as it is by the more obvious challenges of the social or physical environment. The polycentric authority of an over-credentialed society has led institutions to adopt rigid smoke stack cultures where communication among communities is poor. This isolation in turn spawns an appearance of chaos, which is really only the complication of internecine confusion (Qvortrup, 2002: p. 6). As noted above, existential chaos may prove to be a healthy “growing” pain for the person when it leads to positive, comprehensive resolution. Unfortunately for proponents of this process, the personal growth of the individual in an organization is seldom presumed justifiable when it undermines coherence of purpose in the team. Nor do all people confronted with chaos respond that positively. A psychologist once told me (echoing Csikszentmihalyi) that clients hearing information they found deeply distressing (i.e. chaos inducing) reacted by yawning, looking away distractedly or otherwise appearing bored. Such clients thus exhibit a subdued but still dysfunctional form of denial. That too is a common if unproductive way to face chaos.

Still, there are reasons we should not summarily toss out the positive energizing potential that chaos offers even where it seems more likely that it will eventually be evicting us. I find the author's core idea riveting in a disturbingly important way. Friendly or alien but definitely unexpected: the truth is out there in all its chaotic glory.

**About the Author:**

**Donald Officer** is an Ottawa, Canada coach, consultant, facilitator, student of strategy and writer who delivers strategic thinking workshops and helps clients face major life transitions or otherwise grapple with strategic issues.

**References:**

Barrow, John D. 2007. *New Theories of Everything: The Quest for Ultimate Explanation*. New York: Oxford University Press

Crawford, Patricia. 2011. "Public Participation: Finding Knowledge and Clarity in Chaos," *Innovation Journal*, 16(2), article 7.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1996. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: HarperCollins

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 2008. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: HarperCollins

Hogarth, Robin M. 2001. *Educating Intuition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Kauffman, Stuart. 1995. *At Home in the Universe: The Search for Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity*. New York: Oxford University Press

Lewin, Kurt. 1997. *Resolving Social Conflicts: Field Theory in Social Science*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association

Qvortrup, Lars. 2002. *The Hypercomplex Society*. New York: P. Lang

Savoie, Donald. 2010. *Power: Where is it?*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press

Van Deurzen, Emmy 2009. *Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness*. London: Sage Publications

Wheatley, Margaret J. 2006. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler