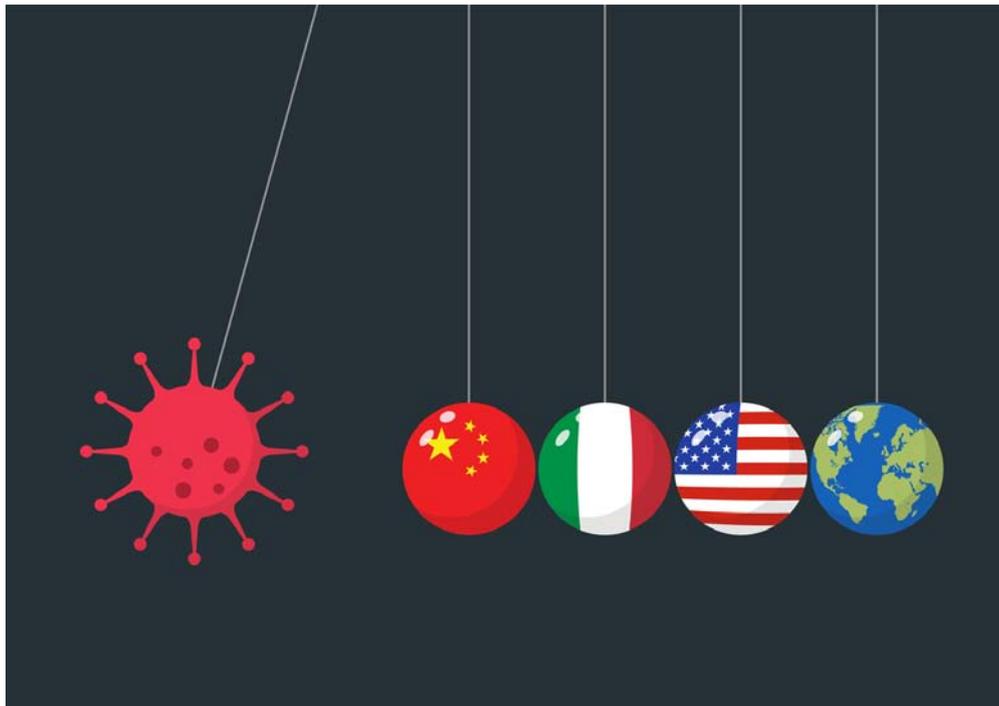


The Corona crisis reflects our inability to cope with a normal state of social complexity

by Bengt-Åke Wennberg



In any social context, the individual – partly to be able to act wisely but also to maintain one's self-image – needs to understand and find a meaning in the social events one participates in.

When society changes, knowledge widens and individuals' opportunities to act are increased, new ways of reasoning and new thinking figures are needed, of course, that take account of the new circumstances that have arisen. Complexity reductions used previously no longer work ([Wennberg 2020a](#)). People and society then feel powerless and confused in the face of the new difficulties that arise. The Corona crisis shows the disasters that can then occur.

A common idea used in reasoning, conversations and analyses is that social events could be controlled from above and outside through management priorities and experts' recommendations. Dave Snowden has in his model Cynefin shown that it is only in social contexts that belong to the categories "simple" and "complicated" that the conditions for this control possibility are met ([Wennberg 2020b](#)). To argue that such a governance would work even in complex contexts is then a misleading reduction of complexity.

The categorization in four different social contexts that David Snowden makes is a concession to how to organize the industrial society and to his ambition to describe how "leadership" should be exercised. Snowden points however out, that nowadays there are no longer any social contexts of the kind he calls simple and complicated. We can therefore no longer ignore the existence of complexity. Thus, the old arguments on governance and leadership become irrelevant.

We all have to get used to, live with and learn how to deal with the complexity of society. Responsibility for this does not rest solely on one management. It rests on all of us. If we do not make it, the crises will arise every time something unexpected and unplanned occurs.

What we are experiencing at the moment, then, is not a temporary crisis that passes and means that everything can then be as before. The crisis shows that we have arranged society in a way that is based on non-functioning complexity reductions. This leaves us vulnerable to all kinds of unexpected disturbances. The military research institute (FOI) has drawn attention to and is concerned about this.

In the anthology "Perspectives on the Pandemic", 26 FOI researchers shed light on how they view the events during the corona crisis with regard to how we should build our total defense system in the future (Mittelmeier et al. 2020). Much of the report is then, of course, about physical resources and how to secure their availability and make the staff more qualified and the equipment more sophisticated.

FOI also analyses the crisis from an organisational perspective. According to them, the new interaction that needs to arise between people, groups, entities and between entire institutions must be changed. Some researchers in the FOI report go in Durkheim's footsteps and talk

about a strengthened and better functioning hierarchy, while others talk about the need to establish a completely new *mindset* that means that all concerned must be given the opportunity to understand and deal with the new challenges that complexity brings.

One of the principles that is a consequence of previous reduction in complexity, and which, according to some researchers in the report, now needs to be revised, is the so-called principle of hierarchical responsibility. FOI points out in its report that a serious problem is that this long ingrained and for many of us obvious principle did not work during the corona crisis.

The principle of liability means that the subunits responsible for an activity in a normal situation also does so in the event of a crisis. The principle of responsibility is one of the basic complexity reductions that make the hierarchical thought model possible.

FOI believes that with the current "*mindset*" and existing complexity, this principle of responsibility becomes impossible to uphold. The need to take a position on and to actively prioritize in the many unique situations that arise from an external disturbance overloads management and staff. Instead of being actively involved with their experience and knowledge of local decisions, they are because of the complexity forced to use administrative tools such as instructions, directives, checklists, regulations and regulations.

Such measures do not increase the ability of operators to respond wisely to the unique and unforeseen situations in which they need to take a professional position ([Wennberg 2020b](#)). One reason for this is that de recommendations and directives that can be given by people higher up the hierarchy are becoming less and less entrenched in reality. With today's mindset, it becomes impossible to function well as a management or hired expert. This is a direct consequence of the increased complexity of the situation.

If the old mindset is maintained, our operations become less and less able to do what they are expected to do. Players are becoming increasingly frustrated at either having to violate the directives or act contrary to their professional perception and knowledge of what would be possible in the unique situations they have to deal with. More and

more detailed instructions won't help. Abstract references to morality and values do not create the common understanding that is needed. Overall analyses as those presented today become too abstract to be useful.

This is clear from the accounts made by the crisis by mass media. If the actors involved in the event do not understand the complex nature of the cooperation required is the events that have arisen quite understandable. In a complex context, persons higher in the hierarchy can't make things right. In a complex context, it is difficult for people on the ground to translate various general verbal regulations into practical action. Instead, the interventions from higher in the hierarchy are perceived as restrictions and make no room for maneuver's that they feel they need. Often what they do, when they follow the instructions, instead leads to catastrophic mistakes and poor quality of handling.

Confidence in the establishment is then diminishing. The feeling of being "governed" and being victim of authoritarian decisions when you just want to do a good job creates a latent anger. The distrust and the anger characterises communication and makes it difficult to exchange important knowledge.

FOI points out that in the past, actors – including management – were expected to be able to train and prepare for *specific crises* by dealing with pre-developed scenarios. The problem is that these exercises rarely provide good enough guidelines for action as the predictions made about the current future still are unclear and uncertain. They are rarely better than each citizen could figure out by themselves. The result tends to be minor corrections in an already given configuration.

Experience also shows that such training does **not** mean that one can better overcome the always existing inherent *complexity*. To be able to do this – says FOI – requires a completely different "mindset".

FOI's criticisms therefore concern not only physical preparedness in the form of emergency stocks, staff availability, formal training requirements, etc. It also concerns how the staff of the business, the relevant activities and the Swedish public *need to prepare for this new type of challenge*. In this case, it is not enough to distribute brochures and information.

The reports by mass media show that the information about the virus and its spread has been too general and too slow. There were major organizational barriers to straight communication. Concerned officials denied the facts and

showed major defence mechanisms when it came to absorbing information about the situation.

The accounts also show that the activities in question lacked an ability to generate the local and *practical knowledge* that could have made it better for those who should and could take local responsibility to deal with the situations they faced.

It is precisely around this type of problem that Emile Durkheim's and Gabriel Tarde's approaches differ ([Wennberg 2020c](#)). By applying Durkheim's approach, it is possible to use complexity reductions that make important aspects of social interactions invisible. The reduction of complexity makes it possible to reduce man to an abstract "object" that can be controlled from above and from the outside. The reduction allows everyone to turn a blind eye to what is actually happening.

This leads to an ontological problem – that is, to the question of how the individual perceives that the world or things are constituted and what their essence-related features are. Genom Tarde's approach becomes a *subject* who, through her interactions with other subjects, creates the social system in which she exists. Through Durkheim's approach becomes man an *object* whose behavior is governed by external legality or an overall structure.

The epistemological problem with the approach of Durkheim has become apparent through the corona strategy. The knowledge gathered has been perceived relevant *only* if it is directed at a superiority which then is expected to implement measures. Knowledge has of this authority only been accepted if it could be formulated in statements that disregard people's subjective interpretations. Human interaction has thus come to be interpreted as something that it is not true to reality.

An alternative perspective that is consistent with Tarde's approach is to assume that mpeople *interpret the interaction in their surroundings using language and the conversations they have with each other*. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has in his research dealt with how linguistic descriptions can be transformed so that they have an impact on the individual's actions here and now. The translation between words and actions created in special situations in which what happens is highlighted by the dialogues that are being conducted – for example in games and plays. This

transformation of language into action Wittgenstein calls "language games" (Janik 1995).

The need for a translation from espoused theories in action has been described by many researchers and has given rise to several research programmes on practical *knowledge*. These research programmes indicate that theories and descriptions of social events developed by the established research methodology cannot always be transformed into action as imagined.

Such research results are not sufficiently "translatable" to provide relevant guidance to the individual to enable him to constructively deal with the individual *cases* he encounters in interaction with others. For the results to be useful, the research methodology as such must also take this aspect into account (Stengers 1991; Gibbons 1994;1999). A misguided research strategy can also seriously affect the interaction of a business.

A common example of a result of traditional organizational research is, for example, that the management or participants are recommended to begin their cooperation by formulating an external common goal to strive towards. However, if, in accordance with Tarde, the participants are regarded as actors in an interactive social system, such an externally formulated goal is not immediately transformable into individual actions.

One must instead already *from the beginning* take the premises that the individual *himself* has his own and unique ambition in the situation and his own unique idea of where the system you participate in is going. First through conversation and communication between the actors, these *individual* beliefs and objectives of each can be made compatible.

If, like today's conventional research, those social systems which work well – best practice – are studied then of course common goals can be discerned. These are however not there from the beginning They do not arise from being formulated by a superiority. The key to constructive cooperation is therefore not the common goal as such, but the communication and conversations that need to be conducted in order to generate it. The perception of the constructive cooperation is an individual mental construction which has to be formed in the head of each member.

Such communication must be established in all complex contexts. It requires practice and flexibility of the individuals but also a completely different type of knowledge about what to do together, about each other and about relevant

interactive processes. In a complex social interaction, therefore, as FOI states, a completely different mindset must be established in which the individual himself is expected to take a personal position to the events in which he participates.

There is then, in order for the individual to be able to take a stand, need to jointly explore what knowledge needs to be generated in order for the interactions between the members to be constructive. There is a need for a better understanding of who in the system has access to such knowledge and which people would be important contributors in order to generating it.

It is usually said that there is a difference between *knowing something* about diabetes and knowing *what it's like to be* a diabetic. Sweden prides itself on the fact that our handling of the crisis was "knowledge-driven". But it's a truth with modification. It has only been guided by scientific descriptions and data produced in the traditional way.

It has focused on what is known about the virus and its spread – not what is needed to cooperate on how its spread can be limited or accumulated important local experience in the interventions in different activities and the treatment of patients. It has limited itself to general recommendations such as keeping distance and reducing crowds, etc. In order to arrive at such conclusions, there is no need for sophisticated exploration of actual events.

For example, instead of merely statistically measuring death rates in relation to different groups and other variables in order to be able to deploy relevant external measures, it could also in principle have been possible to follow patients on their journey towards death or health and from the experience of the actors *involved*, been able to draw conclusions on what different options of action could have been considered in practice.

Now all participating actors were limited by the fact that such recommendations would be medically based and "scientifically" verified in order to be applied everywhere and always – a process that can take months and years.

The forms of serious investigative activities based on individuals' combined practical experience and thus contributing practical knowledge have long been conducted in several institutions and have been described by many authors (Bradford 1964; 1974; Argyris 1983; 1990; Archer 1994; [Whitaker 1997](#); Göranson 2004; [Wennberg 2005](#); Tillberg 2007).

In this blog, I illustrate a way to analyze social events in activities and society based on Tarde's approach. What distinguishes this type of analysis from others is that it aims to present a knowledge that gives the individual – in whatever position in the business and in society he finds himself – increased opportunities to act wisely, understand and find meaning in the course of social events that he participates in.

If such analyses can become more common, then I believe that the trend towards increased opportunism and totalitarianism that dominates today's political discussion – and which is a consequence of social complexity – can be broken. Perhaps this type of analysis can offer a new role for consultants, researchers and journalists who, through their efforts, want to contribute to a more efficient and humane society.

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