Centre for Organising Health and Care Research

COHCR Seminar: Ann Langley, 3 November

Speaker: Ann Langley, Emerita Professor, HEC Montréal; Distinguished Research Environment Professor, Warwick Business School

Time and Location: 13:00-14:30, Tuesday 3 November 2026. In-person at WBS in Room 1.007.

Register: Please email cohcr@wbs.ac.uk to book your place. Refreshments will be provided.

Child protection as a wicked problem: Discovering islands of coherence

In search of insight into approaches to understanding and addressing wicked problems, Malvina Klag and Ann Langley explore the issue of child protection and welfare, drawing on data from a comprehensive Commission of Inquiry set up by the government of Quebec, Canada. To capture and illustrate the 'wicked' dynamics of the child protection system, we apply an existing heuristic framework for diagnosing and intervening in complex systems that focuses on the rules, forms of agency, feedback mechanisms, frames and tensions underpinning such systems. We then identify two small scale innovations in the Quebec child protection/ welfare system that appear to have achieved unusual success, and show how they reconfigure the dynamics of rules, agency, feedback, frames and tensions in novel and more internally coherent ways. We draw on the notion of 'islands of coherence' suggested but never empirically articulated by advocates of systems thinking to better understand these innovations. We conclude by arguing that efforts to address wicked problems might be enriched through an enhanced emphasis on nurturing the propagation of islands of coherence rather than a primary [top-down] focus on lists of discrete correctives to fix the unfixable.

Ann Langley is Emerita Professor of Management at HEC Montréal and Distinguished Research Environment Professor at University of Warwick. Her research deals with strategic processes and practices in complex organizations, with an emphasis on qualitative methods and a particular interest in health and care organizations. Recent co-authored publications in this area focus on reconciling practice differences in a merged NICU, on meta-organizing to promote evidence-informed practice during the Covid-19 pandemic, and on boundary work in mental health teams. She is also co-author with Charlotte Cloutier and Kevin Corley of the 2026 book "How to Design, Write and Publish Qualitative Research for Insight and Impact" published by Edward Elgar.