

Towards a rhizomatic understanding of the desistance journey

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Towards a rhizomatic understanding of the desistance journey

Abstract: Although the ‘desistance as a (zigzag) journey’ metaphor has proved useful in terms of translating theory into practice this article makes the case that it is insufficient for conveying the truly complex, social, unpredictable and ‘messy’ process of desistance from crime. The article uses what we know about the process of desistance to discuss the utility of Deleuze and Guattari’s (2013) rhizomatic theory in recasting the desistance journey metaphor. In doing so I suggest that the desistance journey should be understood in terms of its endless and multiplicitous nature, a symbol of metamorphosis and argue that our focus should be on understanding the ‘desister as nomad’. This, the article concludes, holds important ramifications for the way in which we understand and implement desistance focused practice in the criminal justice system.

Keywords: Desistance, Rhizomatic theory, Metaphor, Practice

Introduction

This article argues that much of the work on desistance (how and why people stop offending) has been translated into policies through the use of metaphor which has unwittingly obfuscated the truly complex nature of desistance. Thus, the article offers a recasting of the desistance journey metaphor using Deleuze and Guattari’s (2013) book *A Thousand Plateaus*, to consider what ‘rhizomatic’ desistance might look like. The article begins by discussing some of the main theories of desistance and the ways in which they have been translated into practice through the use of certain metaphors. Whilst acknowledging that these metaphors have been useful in enabling practitioners to make sense of theories of desistance, I make the argument that they risk being simplistic, obscuring the truly complex nature of desistance. Thus I offer a possible means of extending the way in which the metaphor of the ‘desistance journey’ is considered. In doing so I use rhizomatic theory to help us think about desistance as a multifaceted process which has no discernible beginning or end and comprises multiple paths. In this model, desistance is seen as a process of metamorphosis, highlighting the paths between turning points rather than the turning points themselves. All in all, I argue, this reflects more accurately the way in which people desist from offending.

Theories of Desistance

It is not necessary to go into great detail on the ways in which desistance has been conceptualised as this has been done elsewhere (Farrall, 2002; Farrall et al., 2014; Farrall and

Calverley, 2005; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001; Weaver and McNeill, 2010). That said, it is necessary to pick up on some of the key points from the literature. Weaver and McNeill (2010: 37) point out that 'there is no agreed theoretical or operational definition of desistance' and so we should be careful about portraying the research that has been conducted in this area as monolithic. In spite of this, it is fair to say that a body of work has emerged in recent years which sheds light on the processes of desisting from offending in which the key source of knowledge has been 'offenders' themselves. This more recent body of work has its origins in the Gluecks' work of the 1930s and 1940s in which they developed their theory of maturation (Glueck and Glueck, 1937). Gottfredson and Hirschi's *A General Theory of Crime* (1990) is also important in our understanding of the history of desistance theories. They argued that reductions in criminal activity over the life course can be explained with reference to reduced opportunities rather than maturation *per se*. Sampson and Laub's (1993) later re-analysis of the Gluecks' data resulted in the development of their age-graded theory of informal social control which suggests that life events such as marriage, having children and increasing social capital result in greater bonds with society which, in turn, act as inhibitors to offending.

Desistance theorists have sought to understand how, and to some extent why, offenders desist from offending when they do. Such a process of change (rather than a particular event) occurs as a result of a range of factors that happen both within and without an offender's life. The theories can be and often are broken down into three broad themes: the significance of age and maturation, of life transitions and the social bonds associated with them, and of narrative changes in personal and social identity (McNeill, 2012). The first perspective represents desistance as an almost naturally occurring phenomenon which comes with maturation and 'growing out of crime'. The second represents desistance as a result of life events such as marriage, having children or finding employment and the notion that such changes give someone something to lose if they commit crime (Maruna, 2001). In the third perspective, desistance is represented as requiring a change in an offender's identity, encouraging us to look at the way in which offenders use this new identity to forge a new life using their own agency.

Key to the understanding and experience of desistance is the concept of agency. Although agency has been, arguably, oversimplified in the context of such debates, Healy (2013) has gone some way to synthesising the different ways in which agency is considered and brings them together in a unified framework of identity capital. Ultimately, at the heart of desistance

theories is the idea that desistance is a process of growing up associated with both identity change and changing social networks (McNeill, 2006: 49). The most important point, though, is that there is an increasingly important acknowledgement that desistance occurs as a result of the *interplay* between these factors – and between personal agency and the social structures that shape, enable and constrain it (Laub and Sampson, 2001; McNeill, 2006).

The desistance journey metaphor

One of the main ways in which this complex body of evidence and theory is translated into policy and practice is through the use of metaphor. Metaphors can be useful heuristic devices through which to communicate complex ideas. Bessant (2002) analyses the use of metaphor in a different context, that of higher education reforms in Australia, to understand the function of metaphor in the policy making process. Although her work focuses on the use of metaphor and rhetoric by politicians, her argument that metaphors are employed to convince an audience is important. In this case, though, the metaphors under scrutiny are those used by academics to convince their audiences of politicians, policymakers and practitioners. The use of metaphors in the field of desistance is not inherently problematic, especially in a field which is complex and emerging because ‘Metaphors have intellectual, emotional, creative and illustrative functions. They allow us to understand and imagine in ways a literal reading cannot’ (Bessant, 2002: 92). Although metaphors are useful in illustrating potentially complex subjects, their use also raises the risk of oversimplification because ‘the metaphors we use structure our thinking, hiding some features of the phenomena we apply them to, and highlighting others’ (Goatly, 1997: 2). As Maruna and Roy argue:

metaphor is at the heart of theory building and allows social scientists to make the complexities of the world understandable and explainable. From strain theory to social capital to the Matthew effect, almost every powerful, explanatory framework in the social sciences draws on a variety of crucial metaphors. (Maruna and Roy, 2007: 106)

Metaphors are thus important to both the process of theory building and the translation of theory into policy and practice. However, metaphorisation is an inherently political process which works to clarify some concepts whilst ignoring others:

...metaphorisation acts to position the thing being articulated through metaphor as unexplained or unknown, and the thing being used as the metaphor as familiar or known. This highly political process of problematisation sets up certain ideas and objects as in need of investigation or explanation and others as self-evident or commonsense. (Moore et al, 2015)

It is argued below that the use of certain metaphors in the field of desistance obscures the messiness of processes of desistance and risks resulting in policy which does not take this

complexity fully into account. The following section unpicks the most commonly used metaphor in this field before introducing Deleuze and Guattari's (2013) notion of the rhizome as a way of refining the way in which desistance is presented as a journey.

The journey metaphor is used to illustrate the way in which desistance is a process rather than an event. It critiques the notion that people can stop offending overnight. As such, it is useful for rethinking the way in which governments measure recidivism, for example, through one year reconviction rates, or depend upon relatively short term programmes to 'treat' offenders. Notwithstanding the argument that conviction rates fail to capture recidivism accurately (Merrington and Stanley, 2007), the journey metaphor is used to signify the idea that, particularly for people who have been involved in persistent offending (and have been persistently penalised), it can sometimes take a long time to become a non-offender and undergo the process of identity change that is inherent to that process. It is, thus, relatively easy to appreciate the reason for using the journey metaphor particularly when attempting to convince an audience comprised of politicians and policymakers that their methods for measuring recidivism and desistance are inadequate and short-termist. Moreover, it is a useful concept with which to argue in favour of the need for continuity of care through the criminal justice process. Thus it provides justification for policies such as the Offender Management Model in England and Wales (NOMS, 2005) whereby someone who is sentenced to a custodial sentence is supervised by the same community-based probation officer during the prison sentence as well as the period of post-release supervision (Maguire and Raynor, 2016). The journey metaphor is also used to signify the idea that people do not desist in a vacuum; that there are social and cultural contexts to everyone's life and that people start the process of desistance at different places:

Understanding where they started, how far and how fast they have come, grasping the significance of the terrain through which they have travelled, and on which they now stand, as well as the nature of the terrain and the likely pleasures and pains of the journey ahead - all of these are essential aspects of being an effective guide. (McNeill and Weaver, 2010: 55)

We can see in the above quote how it can be used to illustrate the role of, for example, a probation officer as a guide on the journey, supporting the argument that people should be assisted rather than treated as though they are ill. Such a metaphor allows the offender to be seen as having the agency to travel their own journey whilst acknowledging that they may need support in travelling it successfully (Healy, 2013).

However, the use of the journey metaphor is problematic in several ways. Whilst the journey can be seen as an apt one, it implies an 'end point' which can be defined, and worked towards. Thus, McNeill and Weaver have acknowledged that the metaphor 'breaks down at the point of arrival' at its end point, because it is 'hard to determine unequivocally that someone has arrived' (2010: 5). Moreover, it is difficult for the offender him- or herself to ascertain where exactly the journey will end. This is all the more important in the context of criminal justice, because evidence suggests that desistance is unlikely to occur during a period of supervision and that the 'journey' continues beyond any formal intervention by the state: 'the worker may need to maintain a role in helping the ex-offender find or build and settle into and a new home' (McNeill and Weaver, 2010: 7). The goal of criminal justice, arguably, is to help people reduce their levels offending, yet this critique of the journey highlights the difficulty in highlighting the end point for which practitioners are striving. McNeill and Weaver (2010) overcome this objection by advocating the idea that the practitioner's job should be to ascertain where an offender is on their journey, although this does little to overcome the problems with identifying the end of point of desistance per se.

In much of the literature, the desistance journey is not portrayed as a straightforward journey from A to B via the shortest route. Rather, it is depicted as a zigzag journey which will almost always include relapses, lapses, dead ends and bad choices (Glaser, 1964; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Matza, 1964; Weaver and McNeill, 2010). However, the desistance process may in fact consist of many journeys, each of which ends with a new destination. In Weaver's (2015) book on the importance of social relations in the desistance process, many of her participants underwent multiple journeys throughout their desistance process. For example, Seth was involved in 'interpersonal conflict' and a continuation of his offending at the same time as finding employment which was central to a changing social identity. To put it simply, Seth appeared to be journeying along several paths at the same time.

The non-linear nature of the desistance process is also highlighted by Shapland and Bottoms (2011) who have developed a model of desistance in which the process is more circular than linear. In their model, a desister's 'journey' around the circle might come to an end or start at any point and may shoot off at a tangent as a result of triggering events, difficulties, temptations or 'failure' to maintain a change. Thus, there is no clear beginning or end. Moreover, 'If relapse occurs... it does not necessarily push the would-be desister right back to his starting point; and this is how gradual desistance is possible' (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011: 69). It is important to note that it is almost impossible to know when those triggers

might appear: ‘Achieving desistance is not, for most recidivist offenders, a straightforward process’ (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011: 66). Indeed, desistance is often described as a chaotic and unpredictable process and the journey metaphor serves to obfuscate this. Importantly, Shapland and Bottoms’ quasi-circular model of desistance captures some of the unpredictability of desistance, it is still, at heart, a linear model in which someone becomes increasingly desistant, whether that be a gradual reduction in offending or a change in mind-set or lifestyle. As Farrall et al (2014: 291) have argued, ‘change may not be a linear process’ but the journey metaphor implies linearity, albeit with caveats around lapses and relapses.

As mentioned above, the journey metaphor has been useful in terms of translating a complex theoretical idea into policy and practice. However, the simplistic nature of the journey that is conveyed risks resulting in policy and practice which cannot sufficiently respond to the way in which people desist from offending, nor can it be used to create policy which can truly support, or help, the desistance process. Moreover, the journey metaphor does not encapsulate the non-linear nature of desistance nor acknowledge the argument that although probation practice, for example, *might* help people who are on probation, such an effect is ‘contingent upon other social and personal changes’ (Farrall et al, 2014: 290).

The Rhizome

The journey metaphor has proved useful in terms of enabling policymakers and practitioners to conceptualise desistance-based practice. Metaphors can, and do, have purchase when it comes to explicating complex ideas. However, one can argue that the journey metaphor does not do justice to the complexity of desistance itself and needs recasting. A rhizomatic form of the desistance journey offers one possibility of doing so and in the following section I capture some of the ways in which Deleuze and Guattari’s work provides us with a set of analytic tools with which to think about desistance and refine the desistance journey metaphor.

Deleuze and Guattari (2013) advocate the use of the rhizome to philosophise the non-linear nature of time, development of knowledge and behaviour. A rhizome is ‘an elongated, usually horizontal, subterranean stem which sends out roots and leafy shoots at intervals along its length’ (rhizome, n., 2010). Examples of rhizomes include: root ginger, potatoes and other tubers, and Japanese Knotweed. Deleuze and Guattari offer six principles of the rhizome to critique modern thought: 1 and 2) connection and heterogeneity; 3) multiplicity; 4) asignifying rupture; and 5 and 6) cartography and decalomania (2013: 5-13). Their work offers a framework with which to rethink the way in which people grow. Within their work

we can identify four features of the rhizomatic concept that can be useful when considering the process of desistance. Firstly, that growth is an endless process; secondly, that it is a process which occurs along several paths at any one time; thirdly, that the process of growth is also a process of metamorphosis and; fourthly, the idea of the desister as the nomad. In the following recasting of the desistance journey, I argue that if we are to understand the desistance process as a journey, then we should consider it a journey of growth which comprises a multitude of pathways, turning points, dead ends and relays. These concepts work together to convey a more complex version of the metaphor for the desistance process.

The endless journey

I argued above that one problem with the journey metaphor as currently used is that it is difficult to identify the end point of a desistance journey. This is problematic because it means that we, and desisters, do not necessarily know when 'success' has been achieved. Indeed, success in the field of desistance is notoriously difficult to define, partly because of its subjective nature. This has presented problems for policymakers seeking to capture and evaluate the work done by agencies such as probation or prisons and has been a key critique of practice over recent years (see, for example, Farrall 2002; King 2015). Indeed, as Farrington (2007: 129) highlights, there are many factors that need to be considered for someone to be identified as a 'true desister'. A rhizomatic approach allows us to foster this ambiguity because it is less teleological. It allows us to see that, perhaps, we should not be too concerned about the end point but instead to acknowledge that people are always changing, growing and developing regardless of whether they are desisters or not. Thus, the idea that the rhizome 'has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo' might allow practitioners to become less focused on achieving a particular goal, or aim.

We can learn from the way in which rhizomatic theory has been operationalised in the field of education to help us here. Rather than seeing learning as a journey with an end (for example, successful achievement in exams or other assessment) rhizomatic learning sees learning as an open ended process which is always being built upon:

The rhizome models the unlimited potential for knowledge construction, because it has no fixed points...and no particular organization. (Driscoll, 2004: 389)

Rhizomatic learning takes place within a social context - the growth of the rhizome is unpredictable and can go wherever, but it cannot go beyond its context. Thus rhizomatic

desistance would consider both the individual, who grows into society through, for example, the process of generativity or redemption, but also attempts to understand the networks and relationships which feed into and underpin the process of desistance. To argue otherwise would belie the social context in which desistance occurs (McCulloch, 2005). This relates closely to the way in which desistance is conceptualised whereby relationships and networks are valued over and above time and chronology: 'we emphasize the quality, strength and interdependence of social ties more than the occurrence or timing of discrete life events' (Sampson and Laub, 1993: 21).

Multiplicitous paths

The notion of a zigzag journey has introduced some nuance into the journey metaphor but it still conveys the desistance process as one singular line, which drifts from the positive, or desistant, to the negative, or persistent. The rhizomatic approach allows us to see both 'positive' and 'negative' developments that occur in people's lives simultaneously. For example, it is reasonable to assume that a desister may, simultaneously, continue offending whilst, at the same time, embarking on a relationship which, in turn, provides an impetus for a reduction in reoffending at an as yet undefined point in the future. Indeed, Weaver found just this in her study of the importance of social relations in desistance as highlighted above. Similarly, we can identify both negative and positive implications of developments which are traditionally seen as inherently positive. Employment is acknowledged to be an important turning point in a desister's life (Laub and Sampson, 2001) but to suggest that it is wholly beneficial masks some of the problems of finding and holding down a job. Moreover, it fails to acknowledge that, for example, job insecurity and work intensification are associated with poor general health and tense family relationships (Burchell, 1999). As many of the jobs which offenders find are likely to be at the lower end of the salary scale, lack security and be informal (Katungi et al., 2006), these issues are likely to present greater barriers than for non-offending members of the community. Thus, finding a job can lead people down more than one path (or, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, lines of flight) - one path which is supportive of desistance (through increased human and social capital) and another which might inhibit or frustrate desistance (through increased levels of anxiety). As Farrall (2002: 42) argues, 'complex social processes have multiple causes' and the image of the unidirectional desistance journey fails to capture this. This can be applied to both the onset of offending as well as desistance from it, yet the unidirectional desistance journey metaphor does not encapsulate this multiplicitous nature of desistance. Rhizomatic thought asks us to

think about, and allows us to visualise, the multiple paths along which people travel simultaneously.

Metamorphosis

Another commonly used metaphor in the field of desistance is that of 'knifing off'. Although the metaphor of knifing off is useful in terms of how desisters might separate from a previous offending identity, much research suggests that the 'underlying process [of desistance] involves continuous change' rather than the discontinuous change implied by 'knifing off' (Farrington, 2007: 124). Maruna and Roy (2007) have critiqued and clarified the metaphor's use. It is argued that through its imagery of amputation, 'knifing off' leads readers to expect the removal of 'the more extreme structural and social impediments' to desistance (Maruna and Roy, 2007: 120) when, in actuality, knifing off tends to be more endogenous than exogenous. Moreover, it might not be wholly appropriate, desirable or possible to totally leave one's identity behind. A rhizome encapsulates this image and complicates the notion of knifing off, reflecting Maruna and Roy's finding that 'almost all of the individuals in our research eventually found a way to work with the past rather than knife it off or deny it altogether' (2007: 117). Certain events in one's life allows one to rewrite one's identity and Deleuze and Guattari's work allows us to capture this. They use the term 'lines of flight' to denote the shoots which grow from a rhizome and they highlight the fact that a rhizome can grow in any direction. Importantly, a line of flight may carry on growing, or it may get stopped (for example, if it hits the side of the plant pot). If the shoot gets stopped, the rhizome will carry on growing, from the *milieu*, in a different direction but the stopped shoot remains and serves to remind us that the plant attempted to go in a direction but stopped (for whatever reason). Thus, such shoots, or lines of flight, serve to demonstrate that the plant has changed, irrevocably, through that attempt to grow in a particular direction. For every failed or successful attempt to grow in a particular direction, the plant undergoes a process of metamorphosis - of continuous change. What's more, a successful shoot (one that does not get stopped) will produce more shoots, while the stopped shoot will slowly shrink in terms of its relative size to the plant as a whole. Thus:

failing parts in a person's history are contracted while the reinterpreted, reconstructed parts are expanded to create a more congruent life story dialogue between the future-oriented present new 'I' and the past 'thou'. (Rotenburg (1987) as cited in Maruna and Roy, 2007).

Thinking about the way in which lines of flight might get stopped, or might turn back, or proceed into a new space means that such experiences are not forgotten because a rhizome

will always grow from the middle. Such an understanding of the process of knifing off is more easily illustrated through the rhizome because the process of rewriting one's past is there to see via the changed shaped of the rhizome after a line of flight which either stops, or returns to the *milieu*:

It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows... When a multiplicity of this kind changes dimension, it necessarily changes nature as well, undergoes a metamorphosis. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 22)

People (or things) travel down lines of flight when they grow. In doing so, they 'de-territorialize'. The process of de-territorialization is a process of coding, de-coding and re-coding in much the same way that desisters rewrite their histories, redeem and condemn themselves (Maruna, 2001). Desisters travel down lines of flight in order to reterritorialize their identity and their difference:

the extreme lines of flight Miranda seeks to become relevant are reterritorialized but also position her as someone new. Among some in her peer networks, and at some times, her violent acts function to make her worthy of allegiance. Yet, this is a precarious and unstable positioning, as others position her as abject and monstrous, with potential psychiatric diagnoses threatening to adhere to her a stable position as 'sick'... Simultaneously, these interactions create multiple new becomings for Miranda, including that which she seeks—becoming relevant, and the unexpected—becoming pathological. (Henriksen and Miller, 2012: 454)

Thus, travelling down lines of flight with a view to de-territorialization becomes a generative exercise. In the example above, Miranda's line of flight has both negative and positive consequences. Moreover, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) demonstrate that desistance is not a wholly positive experience, and that desistance can be both positive and negative, sometimes simultaneously. We can see this as a process of metamorphosis - whether an offender travels down a positive or negative line of flight, it changes them:

lines of flight are often broken... Rhizo-analysis allows us to see violent conflicts as multi-linear, multi-causal, and involving multiple becomings, thereby complicating linear, causal and chronological explanations and representations of violence. (Henriksen and Miller, 2012: 455)

Henriksen and Miller further argue that 'Such an approach pushes us to avoid conceptualizing physical violence in terms of fixed positions such as 'victim' and 'perpetrator'; a binary which often imbues some with agency while denying it to others (2012: 455). Such a rhizo-analysis can also be applied to desistance. Rather than desistance being metaphorised as a zigzag journey, those instances of lapse, for example, can be seen as broken lines of flight, in which the process of enactment changes people. Rhizomes can grow in many directions at once; people can grow in different directions at once. The unidirectional

image of the desistance journey does not allow for this because desistance involves multiple becomings.

Desister as Nomad

But we are not just interested in the points in a person's life and the way in which they affect behaviour, beliefs, relationships and the myriad other things that are correlated with desistance. Rather, desistance theories foster understanding of the importance of the way in which desisters go between those points. Healy (2010) has described desisters as being in a liminal space - somewhere between an offender and non-offender. Rhizomatic theory helps us to visualise this particular notion through the concept of the nomad:

The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.). But the question is what in nomad life is a principle and what is only a consequence. To begin with, although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse happens with the sedentary. The water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo. (Deleuze and Guattari: 443)

Deleuze and Guattari ask us to think about what happens between the turning points which have, thus far, been seen to be critical to 'successful desistance'. But what happens after a desister leaves a relay behind - it is this kind of narrative which contributes to our understanding of desistance. Desistance is more than correlations; it is, as desistance theorists have argued, a process. Indeed, much of the research on desistance is underpinned by narrative methods, yet analyses often focus not so much on the gradual evolution of shifting narratives as on turning points and abrupt transitions:

To move from, say, unemployment to crime, or deprivation to crime, you need narratives; correlation alone cannot assure causality, it is only the narratives which link factors to outcomes that can do this. (Young, 2003)

A rhizomatic approach requires that we take those narratives, the multiple journeys between the factors, or points, seriously. It is only then that we have an adequate metaphor for desistance. To apply this more specifically to desistance research we should be less interested in whether people *have* a job, a house or a spouse (the relays) and more interested in the multiple paths that they might take to get there and the ramifications thereof. Weaver (2015) does the former to considerable effect in her work which focuses on the importance of social relations and how such objective and subjective relations enable, or inhibit, the progression of desisters along certain lines of flight whilst Nugent and Schinkel (2016) consider the latter.

Conclusion

Deleuze and Guattari's work encourages us to recast the desistance journey in rhizomatic terms: to think about desistance as a non-linear and non-ending process and acknowledge that any change that happens in a person's life contributes to their change; their metamorphosis from offender to non-offender. Rhizomes highlight the multiple paths along which people travel at any one time, acknowledging the fact that desisters might be making 'progress' in one element of their life whilst heading towards entropy in another. Rhizomes encourage us to see the whole person, their whole circumstances, the paths they have trodden and the relays they have traversed. Rather than seeing people at a singular point in their life, rhizomes remind us that we are dealing with people in a holistic sense. Finally, rhizomes remind us that we are dealing with individuals, with people who grow at different rates and in different ways.

The rhizome holds the potential to break free from the linear way in which desistance is portrayed and (re)enacted through policy and criminal justice practices and discourses. For all the nuances and the caveats inserted into research on the models and pathways of desistance, the chaotic nature of desistance is often 'tidied up' in the process of its depiction as a journey. The rhizome offers a more useful means with which to represent and understand the process of desistance. Moreover, it offers a way of translating this complex field of academic research into a model which can be more easily utilised by policymakers and practitioners which also avoids the simplification and obfuscation of the metaphors currently in use.

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