

TITLE

'Rhizome' as a metaphor for implementation practice

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ABSTRACT

The metaphor of a tree and its roots is often referred to in public health. Above the surface the trunk and branches represent health outcomes that are a result of root causes below the surface. It is helpful in highlighting what is more or less visible and where action should be directed; to the social determinants that lie at the heart of population health. But there is much more going on below the surface when we apply this metaphor to the implementation of interventions designed to impact the root causes of ill-health. Rhizomes (a botanical concept) are rootstocks; a nonlinear interconnected root system below the surface. The idea of Rhizomes as a metaphor for understanding complexity was developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and has been applied in a range of disciplines. Here Rhizomes are in a constant state of change, where 'influence' rather than hierarchy determine shape and direction. While the turn to complexity in designing and evaluating public health interventions has elevated the importance of implementation, much of the focus has been on developing methods and theories according to conventional notions of program or project delivery. In doing so, the essence of 'complex adaptive systems' is lost. Principles of interdependence, connectedness, feedback and movement are rendered impotent by the limitations of more linear interpretations of fidelity or adaptation. In this presentation we use the metaphor of a Rhizome to investigate the complexity of implementation practice and draw on empirical examples from systems interventions to bring an alternative understanding of implementation to life.