Exploring the moral dimension of wicked problems*

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the relevance for sociologically minded planners
and policy analysts of the neglected moral dimension of wicked problems.
Design/methodology/approach – A review of the literature on the wicked-tame problem
distinction reveals three critical deficiencies: a fixed focus on dynamic complexity; a neglect of the
applied knowledge market and the assumption that wicked problems, in time, are tamable. These
deficiencies, in light of the call to dialogue and participation in working through wicked problems,
result in four interrelated normative problems.
Findings – These normative problems are: the responsibility nexus; risk of false assurance; politics
of urgency; and claim to be on the knowledge frontier.
Practical implications – Addressing these normative problems in working with wicked problems
requires less marketing of the silver bullet elements of the solution and more attention to that portion
of the wicked problem which still requires attention.
Originality/value – This is the first work to return to Churchman’s call to policy analysts, planners
and designers to take the moral dimensions of wicked problems in hand when working with
intractable network-based problems requiring ongoing client/user participation.
Keywords Ethics, Knowledge management, Problem solving
Paper type Conceptual paper

The moral principle is this: whoever attempts to tame a part of a wicked problem, but not the
whole, is morally wrong (Churchman, 1967, p. 142).

Introduction
Reacting to a faculty seminar given at The University of California at Berkeley,
Churchman (1967) commented on the centrality of the moral dimension in Rittel’s then
unpublished but soon to be agenda-setting work on the distinction between tame and
wicked problems (Buchanan, 1995; Rith and Dubberly, 2007; Skaburskis, 2008).
Churchman noted that Rittel’s selection of the adjective “wicked” to describe intractable
and unavoidable problems faced by sociologically minded planners, designers and
policy analysts served two functions. It signaled not only the dynamic complexity of
wicked problems but also, within the varying knowledge contexts of tame vs wicked
problems, the moral dimension that inevitably accompanies working with wicked
problems. Churchman highlighted the view that in applied multi-disciplinary fields,
claims by problem solvers to be working at the knowledge frontier carry a set of moral
responsibilities different from those who are working on routine, or tame, problems.

What remains of interest from a sociology of knowledge perspective is that the
growing literature on the wicked-tame problem distinction ignores Churchman and the
moral dimension of wicked problems. In contemporary uses, the term “wicked” stresses

*Dedication: This paper is dedicated to the memory of Dr H. Peter Oberlander, a friend,
mentor, planner, designer and champion of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme
(UN-Habitat); a man who continually wrestled with the moral dimension of wicked problems.