Figure 3.1   Period-Doubling Cascade

Applying Complexity Theory to Safeguarding and Protecting Children
A proposed Study

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Aims of the study

To examine with safeguarding practitioners the contribution and value of complexity theory in re-defining our understanding of, and re-shaping our approach to, safeguarding practice;

Objectives

To introduce and outline complexity theory to safeguarding practitioners; involve them in evaluating the usefulness of complexity theory; evaluate a way of introducing new theory to safeguarding practice.

Aims of the study

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Background to the study

For social work, there is a growing body of theoretical material in relation to safeguarding and protecting (Stevens & Hassett 2007), but this lacks empirical application. The concepts of compl;exity theory can be applied to safeguarding practice – emergence, autopoeisis, linearity, complexity, chaos, attractor spaces etc It needs testing in practice.

Methodology

This exploratory study involves a qualitative design which records the transformative process as researchers and practitioners negotiate

Method

Collaborative enquiry, involving two meetings with a team of social work practitioners from a safeguarding team - tools include case vignette, discussion group based on responding to vignette (taped and transcribed), theoretical presentation, researchers re-interpret case vignette in terms of complexity theory, second discussion (taped and transcribed).

Stage 1 – practitioners are given the case vignette to study and to make notes on their reflections

Stage 2 – practitioners are asked "what is going on here – taped discussion

Stage 3 – practitioners are asked to study the following complexity perspective privately and to make notes on their reflections

Stage 4 – taped discussion

Stage 5 – researchers offer systematic feedback on transcripts – taped discussion

Data Analysis

We will examine thematically transcriptions from both discussion groups, focusing particularly on before and after narratives, explicit messages from practitioners about the application of the new theory, levels of understanding of new theory, implicit messages, serendipity and surprise. Group members will participate in feedback and final write-up.

Dissemination of Findings

The findings will be shared with participants and it is proposed that if appropriate the study will be written up and will be submitted for publication in a reputable academic journal. Moreover the lessons from process, findings and data are likely to form part of an application for an enlarged study.

Using the Case Vignette

Two stories about Grainne and Tom

First story:
Grainne and 6 year old Tom were referred to social care by the school, reporting a whole catalogue of symptoms of neglect, but it was not thought to match the threshold of harm and the school "raised a CAF". Regular professional participants included school staff including Head as lead, SENCO, counsellor, HV, and a social worker joined in once. It resulted in an active school programme for Tom and two filial play therapy sessions. Vague and reluctant knowledge emerged about mother's male partner, Vincent, a crane driver. Tom seemed unable to be drawn about Vincent other than the crane. Vincent came to the school once, physically huge and was verbally aggressive. After three months and few tangible outcomes, a GP, presented with a query about Tom's enduring cough, spotted finger tip bruising, referred, and X ray revealing two other arm fractures. The subsequent year leading to trial and Vincent's imprisonment was characterised by many challenges, not least for two lead social workers. Challenges included removal of Tom to foster carers, judicial matters (including EPO and Care order, multiple roles including GAL) , quasi legal/administrative matters (working together protocol) and assessment process (including expert testimony), resistance and adult alliance by mother and partner, and fear of Vincent by many professionals, as well as negotiating family links, projective aggression from every quarter and widespread anxiety, organisational re-structuring, staff mobility, anticipation of serious case review, to name but some.

Second story:
Grainne engaged with the centre a year ago, soon after the trial, referred, "dragged there" by the social worker, she admits ruefully. Initially Grainne was angry, fearful, challenging, but over time developed a reflective self which enabled her to manage hitherto angry and ambivalent relationships with two now adult children, to a degree of satisfaction. She drew on all the interventions of the centre – women's group, parenting, counselling, friendships, recreational activities and received a great deal of practical support. It was a topsy-turvy time but staff and Grainne agreed that it had been an overall trajectory of progress. Grainne claims that the centre had "saved my life." In particular her youngest (8) was fostered and she evolved over time from a rejecting mother and poor collaborator with the foster carer to enjoy something of a triangular partnership with the foster home. To an extent she came to share the parenting and worked well with the carer. During the year the key worker, Zoe, concentrated on a counselling, cognitive-behavioural, practical support package, and in particular guided Grainne to a more productive child/mother/carer partnership. Zoe attended placement reviews and got to know the carer too. During this time, Grainne had three bureau-based social workers, one after the other, with responsibility for the placement, who surfaced at the time of the review, completed the meeting and the paperwork, and then, Grainne claims, 'disappeared.'

Complexity Commentary on Case Vignette – concepts and

metaphors

a) **Synergy** – Corning and others talk of a meta state which develops from co-operative activity amongst separate biological systems. At its best this is what the office and centre based settings will aspire to, *within* and *between* systems. It implies particularly implicit communication which is not amenable to recognition by reducing the centre or office activities to their component parts.

b) **Emergence** – this explains the transformative process which leads to the above. One implication is that it is not helpful to freeze frame *office* or *centre* activity as ideal states; rather to think of both systems and their inter-relationships as constantly emergent, in negotiation, and therefore they need constantly to be worked at (see cascade below).

c) **Linearity/non-linearity** – linearity means a straight line form A-B, non-linearity means a complicated or complex route from A-B. This has implications for setting goals and outcome evaluation for example unrealistic goal setting at Grainne and son's review, judging the centre's therapeutic intervention by top down outcome setting and measures which make no sense to the process of helping.

d) **Attractor patterns** – like much of this theory this is based in physical sciences. The *strange attractor,* looks like a sink or basin where the water spins and gurgles downward, constantly on the move, deepening, getting shallow, engulfing when deep and strong or being engulfed when shallow and weak, by neighbouring attractors. They fragment, *bifurcate* in the jargon. As a metaphor in social work practice, the *attractor patterns* help to explain the way problematic behaviour perpetuates itself despite well meaning intervention. For Grainne this may apply to her parenting. For the centre and office, long term attractor patterns

like values and containment can be engulfed by deepening anxiety or external policy imperatives.

e) **Self-organisation** – complex organisations (most and certainly the centre and office) have a capacity for self organisation, subject to only half recognisable explanation. Mature management makes the most of this whilst insecure management is inclined to retreat, like trying to net the irrepressible flocking of starlings.

f) **Cascade pattern of organisation** – complex organisations are said to be constantly on the move exhibiting a cascade pattern from linearity, to complexity, to creative complexity on the edge of chaos, to chaos. Creative complexity may be desirable, but in the face of anxiety within and without, as well as unmanageable behaviours, the instinct is to retreat to linearity sometimes (inevitable and maybe desirable) or most or all of the time (not desirable). Office based safeguarding protocol may be understood in this way. Munro's discretionary practice and reflective spaces may be crushed by this process.

g) **Hysteresis** – means resistance to intervention, and is a reminder that expected trajectories following intervention may develop inbuilt resistance. Here this may be due to the transformative processes set in train by the intervention and/or in tandem with contextual influences. For example, noting the evolving and emerging story of Grainne, from S17 to S47 and the rest, this is a sobering message for those who put their faith in protocols, conference plans, and favoured therapies.

h) **Coupling and buffering** – Perrow's work talks of organisations as loose coupled and tight coupled. C*oupled* describes the way organisations, units of organisations, sub-units, are interconnected in degrees of association and dependency. For example the global financial system is described as tight coupled where one glich in the system brings down the house of cards. Analogies are made with welfare organisations which are insufficiently resourced with time, personnel, experience, buoyancy, spaces, to manage the inevitable waves of additional pressure. The office staff might well compare themselves

unfavourably with centre staff who experience buffers, spaces in between, as characteristic of their setting. Thus the stage is set for envy

i) **Psychodynamics, roots in Complexity -** from the attractor process of the brain onwards. Containment, object relations and anxiety are classic *feed*-back processes. One attractor study shows the way the deep attractor of anxiety sabotages progressive ambitions for the organisation, connecting us to the second story above

j) **Fractal patterning** – meaning patterns of self-similarity at many levels, for example, people's behavioural patterns reproduce throughout the organisation – control. anxiety, sloppiness and so on

k) **Tipping points** – now in common parlance, the timing and trigger of an event – abuse, recovery, new knowledge - may be anticipated but not precisely, as in the change of narrative above.

l) **BrightonToolkit**
- *Resources and their use*
- *Types of change*
- *Use of information*
- *The rules*
- *Empowering self-organisation*
- *Directions and purpose*
- *Radical change*

References

Stevens I & Hassett P. (2007) Applying complexity theory to risk in child protection practice, *Childhood*, Vol 14, No. 1, 128-144.