Chaos Theory and Therapeutic Community

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This young branch of science is so important for mental health and social services because it focuses on the science of how living systems change [1]. And that is what we are always supposed to be doing – helping people to make significant change in their lives.

A nonlinear system means you cannot quantify outcome based on additive equations. As a result, cause and effect are not necessarily functionally related. In linear systems, output is proportional to input. In nonlinear systems this is not the case – a little bit of input can produce an enormous change in output – or not. In linear systems change can be predicted by what has happened in the past. In nonlinear systems, change is discontinuous, with sudden unpredictable jumps, more like the change in a horse’s gait from walking, to trotting to galloping – sudden transitions resulting from dramatic reorganization [2].

A therapeutic community, like any living organism, is a nonlinear system. All kinds of unpredictable things happen when you get joint interactions between systems as when a patient makes a more significant contact with a ward clerk than with their psychiatrist, or when a television show triggers the release of long buried memories. These things that happen, although unpredictable, are quite frequently, not chaotic at all, but well organized. This has been a fundamental dilemma in researching the therapeutic milieu – how do you know what works and what doesn’t work when so much is going on all the time?

There has long been a tension in the mental health field generally, and the psychiatric field in particular, between those who favor doing whatever it takes to stabilize a patient – drugs, restraint, punishment – and those who see strategic and creative possibilities within the chaos. Many psychotherapists would agree that the proper role for therapy is to be a safe container for the chaos of the patient’s experience, validating the importance of letting change occur, despite the disruptions that may attend the process, alternating between provoking enough anxiety to propel the person, family, or group into the vortex of change while soothing anxiety that is threatening to overwhelm the system, forcing it into regressive solutions.
A therapeutic milieu that is truly working is one in which there is enough turbulence to edge people toward change, toward that critical turning point, while providing a safe enough container so that the choices are somewhat constrained, deterring a deterioration into chaos.

In a therapeutic milieu we promote that turbulence through the work of psychotherapy, through group process, through the everyday friction of social interaction, and through planned interventions. We contain the turbulence by having a clear value system and coherent practice, based on democratic principles that we all agree to share as a way of life.

Some propose that chaos and complexity are the basis for a postmodern self. In contrast to the modern man who could objectively discover the machine-like workings of the universe, a self-contained individual able to uncover the one Truth, the post-modern self is an open system, dependent on context, always in a state of becoming, actively integrating new information and exchanging that information with a changing environment [3].

This could be considered a near-perfect description of an active, engaged therapeutic milieu, the open system that Maxwell Jones referred to so often. The science of complexity can help us to understand and promote the special nature and quality of psychotherapeutic interventions that occur within a collective group experience. The biomathematician Evelyn Fox Keller has been quoted as remarking that “It amazes me how difficult it is for people to think in terms of collective phenomenon” [4] p. 12. All living systems appear to share the same self-organizing features – they solve problems by drawing on masses of relatively ‘stupid’ elements, rather than having a single, very intelligent boss. They function in a fashion that is bottom-up rather than top-down.

This movement from low-level rules to higher-level forms of functioning is what has been called emergence and is present in systems as divergent as ant colonies, human brains, urban neighborhoods, theatrical productions, and computer software programs. When a therapeutic community is working effectively, solutions to individual and group problems emerge out of the process of linked individual interactions and is the reason why democratic processes are so essential to the functioning of a therapeutic community. It is
only within the “soup” of democracy that the processes of emergence and self-organization at higher levels of intelligence, can occur.

References