

Thinking about complexity in child welfare

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Outline

- Understand theoretical ideas around complexity and reflect on their relevance to child welfare practice
- Examine professional and institutional responses to complex needs and risk
- Identify key design issues in responding to complexity in services and organisations

What is complexity?

Complex or complicated?

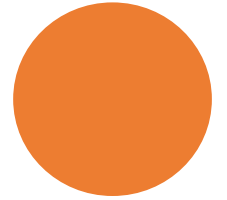
- Car engine
- The human experience of loss

'Wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973)

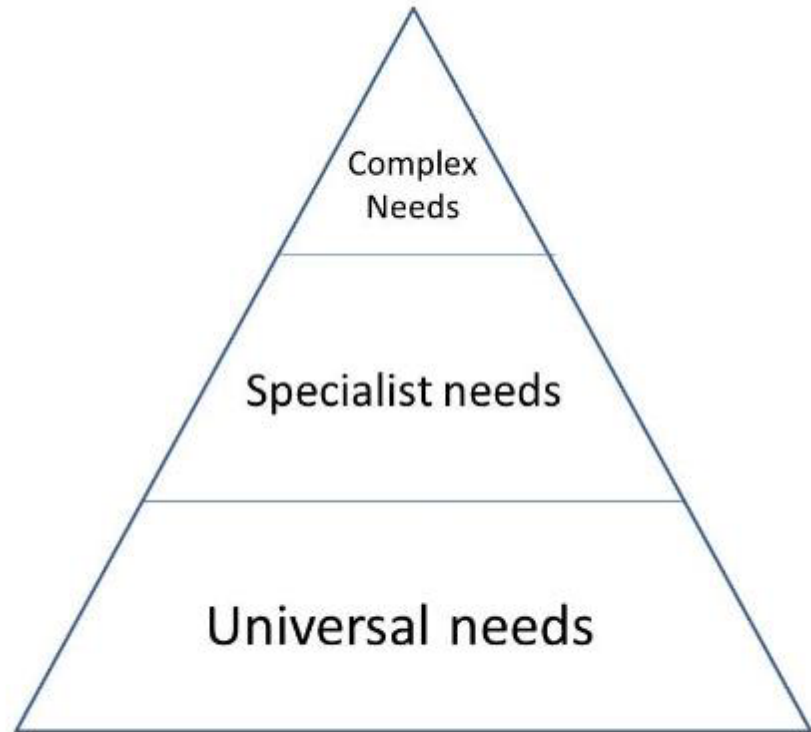
- No definitive formulation
- Difficult to recognise when an end-point has been reached
- Unique configuration, so 'solution' may not work in other cases

Systems, i.e. complex adaptive systems


- Non-linearity
- Self-organisation
- Emergence
- Evolution



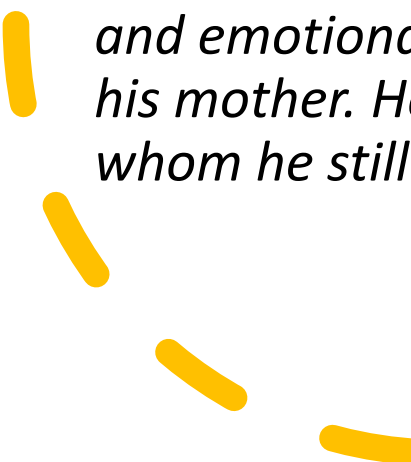
When are needs complex?



- Aren't all human needs complex?
 - Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1970)
 - Ethics of need (Miller, 2013)
- Need vs Demand
 - Specialist support
 - Multi-agency services
 - Coordination and care planning
- Complexity and risk (Hood *et al.*, 2021)



Clive is a forty-year-old unemployed man who has a long history of alcohol dependency. He has several convictions relating to criminal damage, assault and theft, and has served two prison sentences. He was recently arrested and charged with being drunk and disorderly outside a football ground. Clive suffers from alcohol related liver disease, and he has been advised by his GP to stop drinking. He is also well-known to community mental health services in his local area and has been treated in the past for bi-polar depression. However, he rarely attends appointments but instead turns up at the clinic or at A&E in a state of crisis and often intoxicated. He has a twelve-year-old daughter, who lives with her mother in Cornwall and whom he has not seen for five years. As a child, Clive experienced physical and emotional abuse from his father, who was an alcoholic and violent towards Clive and his mother. He says he drinks to 'get away' from his father, who died ten years ago but whom he still hears sometimes as a voice in his head.



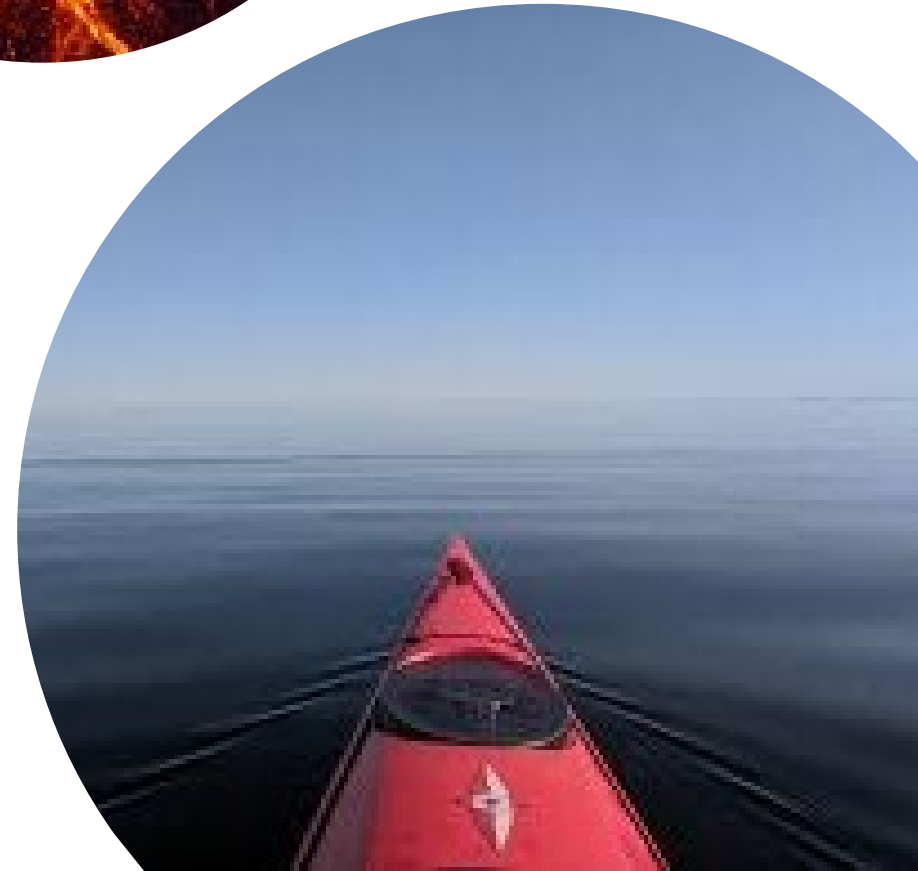
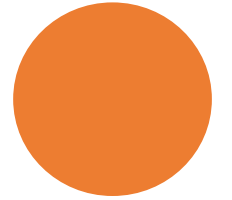
Pause for reflection: what does complexity mean to you?


Think about a complex piece of work that you have undertaken recently. What are the things that made it complex? Are there any parallels between those things and the aspects of complexity discussed on the previous slides?



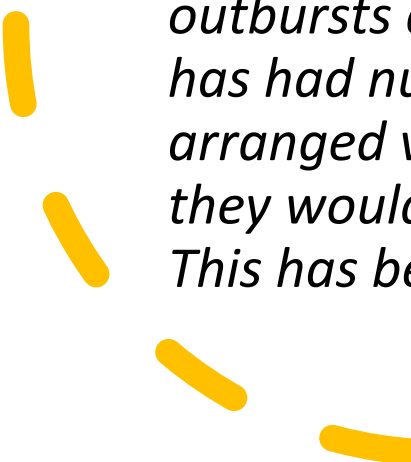
Volatility and drift

- Change and transformation in complex systems (Hood, 2018)
 - Consensus difficult to reach
 - Agency and emergence
- Escalation and crisis
 - Social work involvement can add to the mix
 - Firefighting and crisis management
 - Problems 'bubbling' under the surface
- Analysis and reflection
 - Chronologies and case summaries
 - Start again syndrome (Brandon et al., 2008)
 - Managing uncertainty

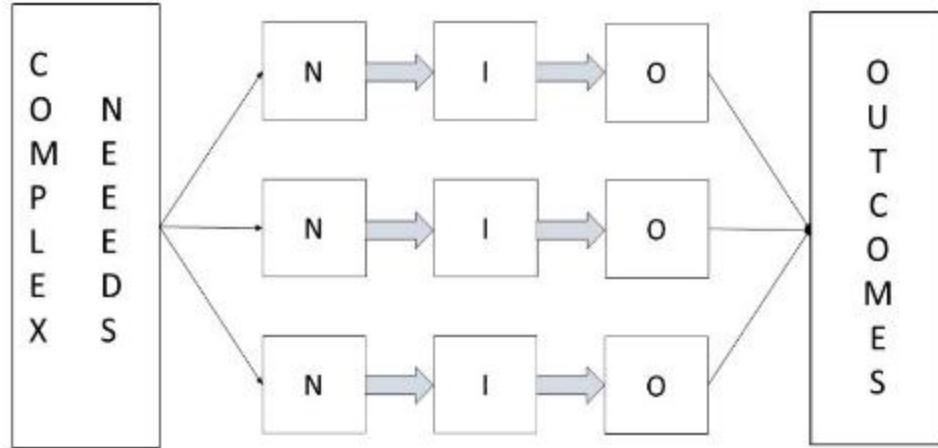




Simon is an 11 year old White British boy who experienced neglect and emotional abuse in his early childhood and has been in public care since the age of seven. During that time he has been placed with nine different foster families. He has unsupervised contact with his mother on Saturday afternoons, and sees his younger siblings at a contact centre after school once every two weeks. He has been with his current foster carers for six months. They describe him as a bright and caring boy who loves animals and enjoys outdoor activities; he also presents as temperamental and impulsive, prone to temper tantrums when he is told 'no', and can be easily led astray by his peers. He has recently started truanting from school and staying out late with a group of friends. Last week he was caught shoplifting and given a warning by the police. His foster carers report that his angry outbursts are becoming more violent, and he has damaged the furniture in his room. He has had numerous changes in social worker and is often reluctant to take part in pre-arranged visits or meetings. Simon's foster carers have told his current social worker that they would like him to stay but are finding his behaviour increasingly difficult to manage. This has been a recurrent pattern in previous placement breakdowns.

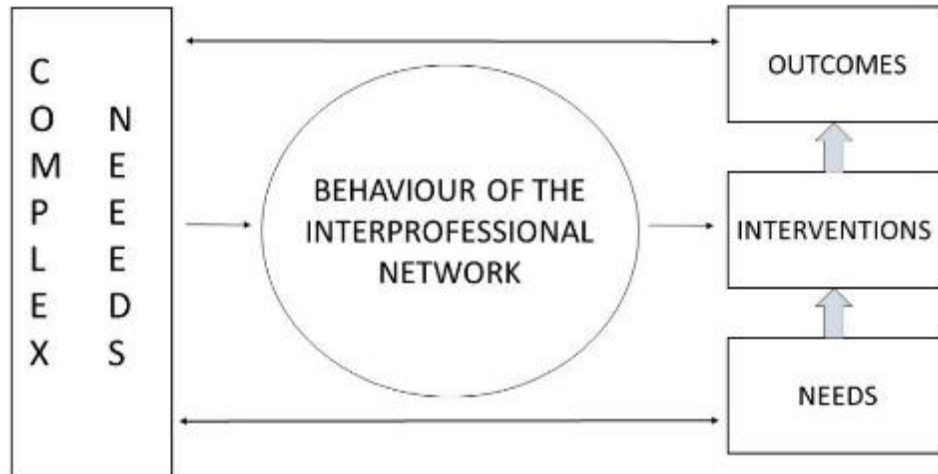


Integrated working: the solution to everything?



- Additive vs gestalt models of interprofessional working (Leathard, 2003)

- Disaggregation of complex needs (Hood, 2014)



- Holistic approach – understands child as a whole, acknowledges social complexity
- Cognitive, behavioural and emotional dynamics of working together

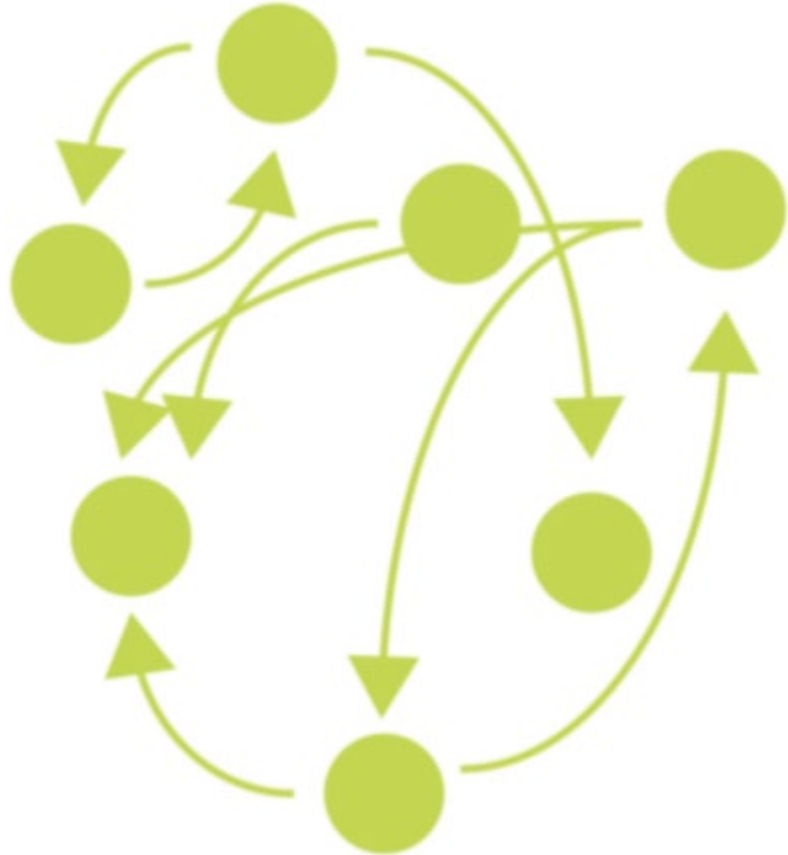
Swamp vs high ground

'On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution.'
(Schön, 1991: 3).

- Can procedures tame messy reality?
- Essential for crisis response – but what about underlying problems?
- Defensive practice and blame culture
- Morale, retention and resilience



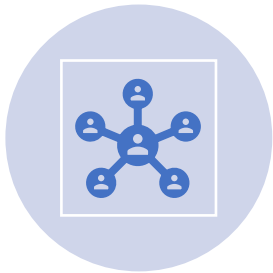
Systems thinking in social care



- Lessons from Deming (2000) and Ohno (1988)
- Problem of 'nominal value' (Freddi and Salmon, 2019)
- Design against demand (Seddon, 2008)
- Socio-technical work systems (Munro, 2010) and people-centred services (Hood et al., 2021)

Designing a work system to address complexity

Do you ask yourself:



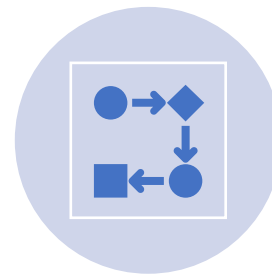
What matters to the people contacting (or referred to) our service?



How quickly and accurately can we understand what matters?



How fast and flexible can we be in finding the right expertise and resources?



How will we know if we have addressed what matters?

Designing a work system to address complexity

OR do you ask:

What information should people be giving us?



How can we screen for eligibility?



How can we match people to what we have to offer?



How can we manage demand and control cost?

What complexity (might yet) teach us

- ‘Design in’ the fundamentals of practice
- Beware ‘default’ approaches – requisite variety (Ashby, 1952)
- If you want people to do a good job, give them a good job to do
- Systems geared around the changing needs of citizens

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