

Didactic Fragments

Mental Health Court Concept Mapping and Complexity Theory

A particular teaching/learning tool that stems from constructivist learning theory is the concept map. Concept maps represent an intuitive visual knowledge technique. These are graphical tools used for organizing and representing the construction of knowledge and are useful in the processes of conceptual planning, conceptual learning, and conceptual study. Concept maps were first developed as early as 1972 in the course of Joseph Novak's research program conducted at Cornell University where he sought to explore and understand changes in children's knowledge of science (Novak & Musonda, 1991).

Novak's research program was based on the learning theory of David Ausubel (1963; 1968; Ausubel et al., 1978) which proposed that learning was a process of the assimilation of new concepts and propositions into existing conceptual and propositional frameworks held by the learner. This preexisting knowledge base held by the learner, according to Ausubel, is referred to as the individual's cognitive structure. Subsequently, in the search and research for more effective ways to represent, as well as evaluate, an individual's conceptual understanding, emerged the idea of knowledge representation in the form of graphic mapping as a tool for meaningful learning.

A concept map visualizes an overall system at a level of complexity not usually captured in a narrative description. Only when the learner begins to understand relationships between ideas, principles, concepts, and meanings, is information then constructed into knowledge.

The conceptual map of the mental health court program illustrates the dynamics of relationship between criminal justice and mental health as a complex adaptive system that represents a fusion of psycho-legal theory and practice that surrounds each participant in the program.

In essence, a complex system is defined as a functional whole, consisting of interdependent and variable parts. The parts of this adaptive system need not have completely fixed relationships, fixed behaviors or fixed quantities, but are flexible and interactive and thus able to respond and adapt to both individual and system changes that may occur relative to the court population and/or community need. Complexity Theory essentially states that critically interacting components self-organize to form potentially evolving structures exhibiting a hierarchy of emergent system properties.

Complexity theory takes the view that systems are best regarded as wholes, and should be studied as such, rejecting the traditional emphasis on over-simplification and system-reduction as inadequate techniques on which to base the work of any truly complex social system. Such reductionistic approaches, while valuable in investigation and data collection, fail in their application at a systems level due to the inherent nonlinearity of complex systems that are critically interconnected. Generally, the causes, effects and outcomes of any system are not separate variables and the entire system is not merely or exclusively the sum of its parts. The approaches used in complexity theory are based on a number of techniques and perspectives, originating from fields as diverse as physics, biology, artificial intelligence, politics and telecommunications. This interdisciplinary viewpoint is the crucial aspect of a complex system, reflecting the general applicability of the theory to systems in all areas of the social spectrum, including the mental health court system.

The application of a complexity theory perspective in working with the mentally ill provides an alternative framework that can reveal useful insights into a more effective way of dealing with the seriously mentally ill in the criminal justice arena. An effective complex adaptive system must possess strong autonomy and efficient connectivity. Crime or any public or social offense may be conceptualized as a fundamental violation of the autonomy or connectivity of another member of the society, whether that violation is relative to property or personal injury.

Work with mentally ill offenders essentially focuses on restoring the autonomy and connectivity of those involved in the offense as well as a reintegration of the judicial and clinical community, better enabling the dynamics of self-organization and psycho-legal restitution to occur. Mentally ill offenders are viewed as developing beliefs and social values supported by cognitive distortions or patterns of thought and behavior that allow them to evade the psycho-social barriers that deter most people in the general population from committing criminal offenses. Subsequently, the mental health court program, through its rehabilitative and clinical component, attempts to diminish the barriers of denial that interfere with the exercise of appropriate individual autonomy, social connectivity, as well as responsibility and accountability necessary for social harmony.

Human beings, as consistent with all complex adaptive systems (Stacey, 1996), require effective autonomy and connectivity to operate optimally. As previously indicated, a crime is committed whenever a person's autonomy is violated or their connectivity with others is significantly disrupted. Work with mentally ill offenders targets the repair of functional autonomy and a reconnection with the social principles of responsibility and accountability as the pathway of integration with their community. The optimal results in working with offenders are theoretically achieved when the dynamics of self-organization and self-determination are recognized and supported through the process of therapeutic jurisprudence.

However, two considerations must be taken into account since the likelihood of any social outcome relative to any particular behavior in complex systems cannot be predicted with mathematical certainty, so at times, positive behaviors which seem to support self-organization will occasionally work to defeat it, and seemingly destructive behaviors will sometimes unexpectedly produce positive outcomes. Secondly, autonomy and connectivity do not operate independently as they are dynamically interconnected and each force will in effect influence the other. Enhancing the individual's community connection and social integration can significantly impact the autonomy of individual agents and vice versa. With these considerations in mind, however, some basic principles can be developed, which are consistent with those used in real-world judicial and clinical practice, providing both a theoretical and practical basis for work with mentally ill offenders in complex and adaptive court and mental health systems.

References

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