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Abstract

Ecological systems theory is explicated as a current form of successive systems models used in social work. Behavior principles assumptive in this model are identified: of exchange balance, inner consistency, and dialectial change. Several misconceptions of ecological systems theory and a cultist aspect of its current popularity are addressed. Advantages, including the emergence of practice principles derived from this model, as well as its limitations are then discussed. The charge that systems theory helps maintain the status quo and the use of systems theory by radical proponents of system change are considered in terms of the dual function of social work: to serve as an instrument of both social stability and social change. It is suggested that both conservative and radical contributions to current systems theory and practice are needed in order to implement this dual function.

Introduction

In our media-controlled society, intellectual fads seem to be taking on the character of dress fashions. Their life times and careers seem to be subject to similar passing fancies, and to rapid, noisy cycles of birth, popularity, and death. They swing through intense phases, with a pell-mell, band-wagon acceptance of key words and phrases, and a massive attitudinal and behavioral conformity. Then follow reactions of disenchantment, rejection, and withdrawal, and a banishment of the concepts and theories into limbo, though with later revivals in some instances. Or they may fade, and be transformed or integrated, into new fashionable products.

This process may be observed to be taking place in regard to general systems theory. In successive forms, systems theory has had a long heyday, an enthusiastic popularity, an aura of a holy cause, especially on the part of faculty members of schools of social work. For a time, general systems theory was hailed as "the" unitary theory for social work. Now there is a shift to "ecological systems theory." There are increasing expressions of doubt, disinterest, and disillusion about systems theory. Along with these symptoms, there seems to be a belief that "to be out of fashion is to be out of this world." Such extremist, faddish gyrations may well result in over-reactive counter-phobic behavior. Defensive behavior of this kind can be expected to have self-destructive consequences, and may jeopardize

an important paradigm shift that has been taking place within social work. The term, paradigm, is used here to refer to the set of models and theories that identify the functions, domain and rationale, the appropriate problems and their definitions, the indicated solutions and procedures, that characterize a profession and are accepted by its members. [1]

It would seem helpful for us to consider here the nature and functions of systems theory for social work practice. The current ascendant form of ecological systems theory will largely be the focus of our discussion. We are particularly interested in its relation to the emergent new paradigm of social work professional practice. We will sort out some of the advantages and limitations of systems theory and then consider some current issues around its use in social work practice.

Ecological Systems Model and Theory

What is now called "Ecological Systems Theory," and the models of practice associated with it, have a long history in social work. Systems theory itself may be traced to diverse intellectual sources, particularly to organismic biological ecology, the social survey movement in social work, "human ecology" in sociology, information theory, and cybernetics. [2] In social work, there was from the beginning of the profession a concern for character and circumstance, for people and environment. Therefore there also was a concern for their interrelations, and for the whole unit which encompasses them. This orientation had one form of expression in the surveys of the needs of the poor in urban communities, as done by Booth, Rountree and Kellogg, which studies influenced the development of the "ecological method" of community research in sociology. [3] Another form of expression was the emphasis given by Mary Richmond to the notion of "charitable cooperation," which integrated and utilized the "forces" and "resources" internal to a client family, and those external to it: of kindred and friends, neighborhood, civic, private and public charitable people, agencies and institutions. [4] Later, Ada Sheffield suggested the concept of a "total situation," of a "dynamic field of experience," involving "sub-situations" in which people and their physical-social settings are inter-related. [5] The idea of "total situation" became very popular in the social sciences, and was adopted by such theorists as W. I. Thomas and Kurt Lewin. [6] Situation theory suffered a decline during the psychoanalytic era in social work, though Hamilton and then Hollis forged what is now called a "psychosocial approach" to casework, in which, for Hollis and also for Turner, systems theory has a central place. [7] However, for a long period, psychoanalytic personality theory dominated the accepted "skill and method" paradigm of practice. [8]

During the 1950s, the trend to put the social back into social work, and to develop a more realistic and profession-wide conception of practice, marked a new paradigm shift in social work. This led to the widespread embracement of "social system theory," and of the structural-functionalist models of Parsons and Meton. [9] During the 1960s "general systems theory" became the rage in social work and psychiatry. [10] It served major purposes in supporting the development of family therapy, and also of the community mental health movement, with their expanded focus on the family unit and on the community as targets and contextual systems for the care and treatment of the mentally ill. [11]

In more recent years, a further extension has emerged in the form of "ecological systems theory." This is in the process of being widely adopted, much more so in social work than in the other helping professions. Perhaps this is because social workers like to think of themselves as being more "down to earth," and they feel more partial to the "earth-consciousness" of an ecological view. Perhaps also, this model is congenial to the self-image as "earth-mothers" held by many social workers.

An ecological model of man and society, and of how to help people in current behavioral and ecological sciences, as well as in social work, refers to a conceptual system about mind-body-environment in transactional relationships. [12] People and their physical-social-cutural environment are understood to interact in processes of mutual reciprocity and complementary exchanges of resources, through which processes the systemic functional requirements are met, dynamic equilibrium and exchange balance are attained, and dialectical change takes place.

Ecological theory includes and adds dynamic and humanistic dimensions to general and social system theories. It is concerned with people interacting in real life time and space, within territorial habitats, so that there is a renewed emphasis in social work on the concepts of reciprocal complementarity, of resource exchange, and adaptive fit between sub-systems of person and situation, of client and milieu. It also is concerned with processes: of mobility and distribution of populations; of the use of land, technology, energy, social organization, and other resources in natural input-output flows; of life-cycles and developmental tasks in evolution, adaptation, deviance, conflict, feedback, self-regulation, and change. Ecological theory thus deals with the web of life, at the interfaces between systems and subsystems, so that it relates to "open, self-organizing, self-regulating, and adaptive complexes of interacting and interdependent subsystems." [13] As Germain points out, this is an appropriate metaphor for social work, which seeks to enhance the quality of transactions between people and their environment. [14]

For our practice purposes, an ecosystem consists of people, their life situations, and the well-functioning or dysfunctioning behavior patterns that result from their interaction. This is a problem(s) - person/people - situation unit that is basic in social work thinking, and that is basic to a needed comprehensive approach to assessment and intervention. Social functioning refers to a system's integrated, coordinated application of well-developed, well-working capacities and abilities, within basic social relationships, utilizing internal and external resources, so as to accomplish life task-functions, meet needs, and perform life roles.

There is an exchange principle derived from this theory: The well-functioning of a system - in the sense of satisfying and socially approved performances, productions, and states of being - is the result of an exchange balance, or positive reciprocal complementarity, in mutual need-meeting relationships, between sub-systems, and between the ecosystem and its environment. Conversely, the dysfunctioning of a system - in the form of such deviance as mental disorder, physical disease, criminal behavior, as well as in the form of social disorganization, such as high rates of divorce, crime, warfare - results from a mis-match and lack of fit between the sub-systems and between the ecosystem and its environment.

This exchange balance needs to take place in terms of a goodness of fit and resource reciprocity, between parallel characteristics of sub-systems, of:

a) their directional, motivational tendencies, in terms of given task-functions (or systemic functional requirements of adaptation, integration, pattern-maintenance, and goal-achievement), and of conscious goals, interests, needs, and expectations for carrying out such tasks.

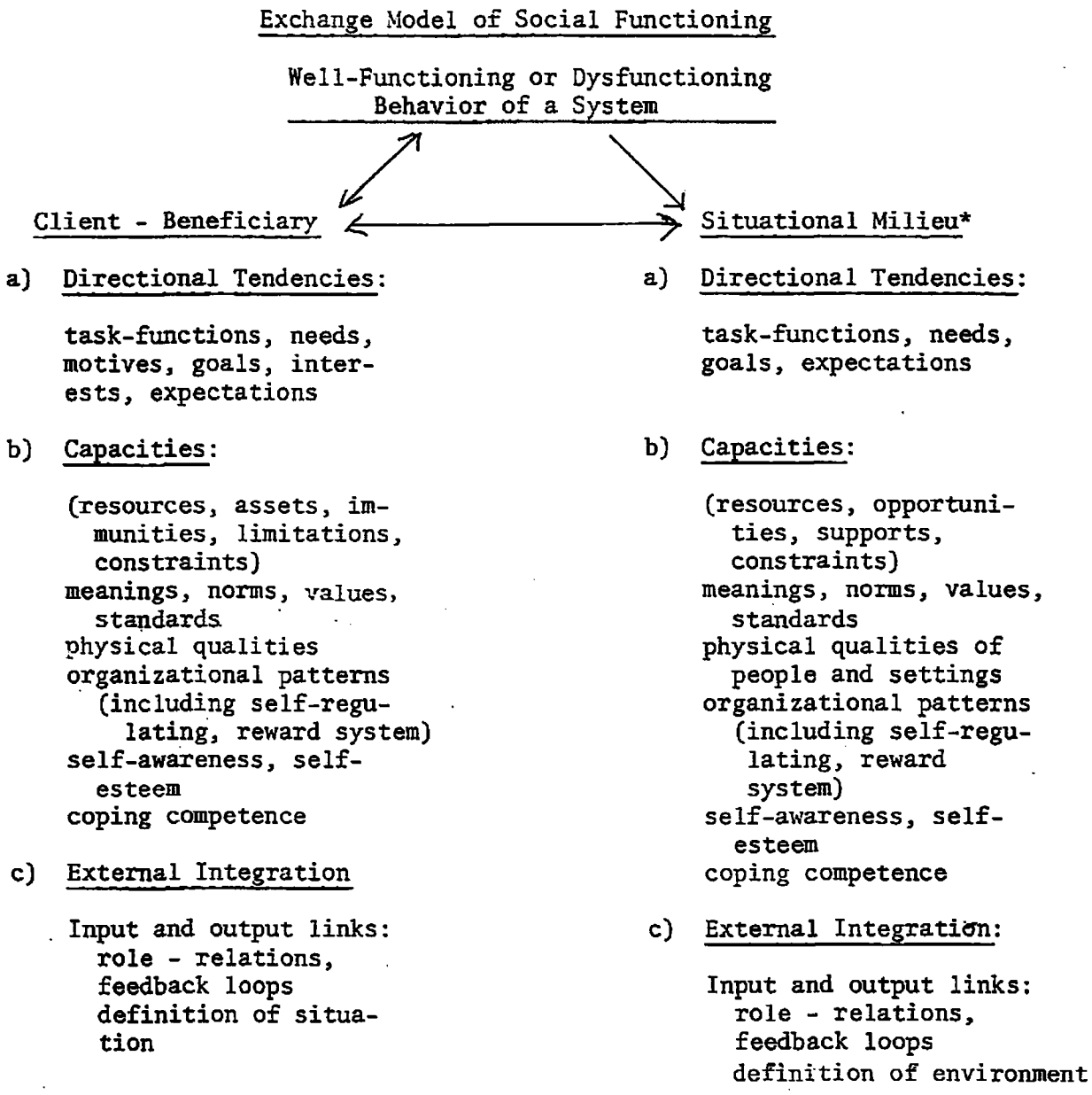
b) their internal capacities and resources, including their organizational-structural patterns and operational processes, their coping competence and self-esteem.

c) their integrative linkages with external systems in the milieu or environment, such as through input-output relations, feedback loops, and situational definitions.

This ecological systems model and exchange principle are represented in Figure 1, in terms of generic variables and categories.

This principle asserts that the adaptive fitness between subsystems requires matching external relationships, so that the attributes of each unit are positively complementary, and the resource exchanges between them is in a state of exchange balance. For example, a woman who wants to be a successful engineer can meet her expectations only in work situations that provide the institutional needs for such

Figure 1



*This refers to family/work/educational/community/health-care/welfare/housing/legal, and other significant situations

qualifications as she possesses, and the opportunities, resources and supports to enable her to utilize her competence effectively. Within the larger ecosystem, the subsystems - as of person and situation - are viewed as bound together in reciprocal interdependence as a necessary condition for their own optimal functioning.

This model is applicable to a wide range of service situations, where the client may be an individual, or a corporate person, such as family, a friendship group, a work organization, a community, or a welfare service system. Depending on the nature of the client, the situational milieu has a different character. Where the client is an individual, there may be significant dysfunctional family, work, school, neighborhood, and legal situations. Where the client is an organization, there may be dysfunctional situations in regard to its interorganizational service network, its governmental relations, its local community and economy.

A second behavior principle we can identify in the ecological model is that the attributes of person-client and of situation need to be internally consistent, coherent, and positively complementary. Thus, a person's expectation of becoming a successful engineer needs to be consistent with his capacities and resources, his commitment to the values of the engineering profession, his physical stamina, his learned competence, his positive definition of his vocational situation as one that encourages a successful and satisfying career, and his development of positive role linkages to a social network that can support such a vocation and career.

With these two principles, we recognize that each subsystem - such as an individual, family, organization, or community - requires the access to and the utilization of adequate and well-matched internal and external demands, to take and to give from within and without, so as to cope with life tasks and stresses, in effective, efficient, and satisfying ways, and thus to attain growth and self-fulfillment. Therefore, each subsystem requires adequate and well-working, input-output, integrative linkages with other subsystems and with the larger environment, for adequate, equitable exchanges of resources. An individual person can function well only if he has mature internal abilities and competencies, and has access to needed social resources in the way of positive, nurturing supports, facilities, opportunities, demands. A well-functioning family requires competent and coordinated role-performances by its members, as well as the input of community resources and supports, from kinfolk, community groups and organizations representing the wider social structures and institutions. A well-functioning community requires competent performances of citizen and neighbor roles by its individuals, families, groups, and organizations, as well as adequate cultural, institutional structures and adequate social provisions from city, state, and federal governmental systems. Conversely, social dysfunctioning is understood in terms of a lack in such reciprocal interdependence, internally and externally, and a lack of adequate, equitable resource exchanges between systems.

A third principle of the ecological model may be termed a dialectical principle of change. This states that systemic change and transformation of the structure, elements, and processes of a system stem from the inherent dialectical forces expressed in the discrepancies, contradictions, and conflicts to which we have just referred. The ideal state of complementary exchange balance - between internal and external attributes and resources that has been presented as characteristic of well-functioning systems - is often disrupted or not fully attained because of the inevitable changes that occur in life processes of adapting, becoming, and being. The natural polarities and dichotomies of life forces pose thesis and anti-thesis, bi-modal oppositions, between inherent tendencies for growth and decline, control and deviance, freedom and necessity, identity and difference. This results in continuing transactions of positive and negative feedback, of transitions and transformations. [15] Outcomes of diffusion and definition, differentiation and complexation, assimilation and accomodation, make for a dynamic emergence of new forms of integration and synthesis in system structure and operating processes.

The dialectical principle of ecological system development and change has much interdisciplinary support. Thus, Marxian "dialectical materialism" refers to a process of socio-economic, political, and cultural transformations and productions, in structures and in human consciousness, that results from contradiction in the very essence of things"; this dialectic constitutes "the motor of all development."[16] Lester Ward, the pioneer sociologist, asserted that the "universal," and basic organizing principle" in nature and society is the dialectical process between antagonistic forces that achieve balance and integration, and what he called a creative "synergy" of their teamwork. [17] He emphasized this particularly for the social institutions and structures that utilize and channel the social energies and psychic powers of men for social ends. Biological ecologists similarly emphasize that system development, productivity, and innovation are emergent properties resulting from symbiotic and competitive linkages and mutual adaptation between organisms and environment that maintain efficient energy exchange and nutrient recycling. [18] Current dialectical psychology also gives salience to continuing developmental changes in human beings that are brought about by inner and outer polarities and contradictions; such changes are generated by discordance, conflicts, and disruptive crises. [19] Developmental progressions may thus take place through stages and lines of activity that are linear and multi-dimensional as well as non-linear, recursive, and cyclical. [20] What Mancusco calls "Dialectic Man" uses biopolar mental constructs and schemes in perception and reasoning, and, according to Rychlak, makes use of a "transcendental dialectic" to perceive and create new realities. [21]

Misconceptions and Cultism

In the process of social work adoption of ecological systems theory that now is taking place, there are certain misconceptions and usages that merit our attention because their amplification may lead to serious and costly difficulties.

One misconception of ecological systems theory relates to an understanding of its origins, theoretical nature, and domain. Although organismic biologists early developed certain ecological concepts and theories about animals in transaction with environment, sociologists developed "human ecology" as a theoretical and research model, applied to the study of human communities. [22] General systems theory was a later development, addressed to a larger concern, not only to the living, open systems of organisms and environment, but also to closed and non-organic systems, and thus to systems in general. [23] However, general system theorists, such as von Bertalanffy, Grinker, and Miller, have given much more attention to living systems, and to the application of general system concepts and principles in psychology and psychiatry, including to an understanding of individual psychopathology. [24] Both ecological and general systems theories thus apply to the individual person and to social systems. They have analogous and common concepts and principles (such as structure, functioning, development, adaptation, complementarity, exchange) which have conceptual and practical validity, and which are generic across systems while avoiding reductionism and reification.

In contrast, ego psychology is concerned with the domain of inner structures and processes of the individual person, though in relation to the environment. Certain concepts of ego psychology correspond to or are parallel to those of general and ecological systems theories, as Germain has usefully demonstrated. [25] For example, there are significant connections between the ideas of exchange, adaptation, and ego adaptive processes, and between the concepts of equilibrium, adaptive balance or goodness of fit, and ego autonomy. Yet Germain somehow considers these sets of ideas, and thus the three models, as discrete, with different origins, assumptions, and domains, so that she favors maintaining their separateness. This kind of misunderstanding is further reflected in the artificial distinctions she makes, as in attributing exchange and adaptation concepts to different theory categories. As a result, there is an avoidance of necessary integrative tasks in identifying analogies and developing a common conceptual language and framework, needed to facilitate practice applications.

There are other kinds of misunderstandings and misconceptions as well. Thus systems theory refers to a cognitive construction of reality, involving a selection of some area of reality for understanding and operation, including in some cases, for redefinition. The identity,

boundary, and environment of the system vary with the identity of the client and problems to be tackled. Many concepts, such as a client or situation, are "holons" in the sense that, conceptually, such system elements may be both a component "part" of a suprasystem and a "whole" suprasystem for its own components, at the same time. [26] The use of such a high level theory and its concepts therefore requires a specification of significant operational variables and principles for practice applications, but little of this has been done. Although Meyer and Germain have provided important and helpful explications of ecological theory, and discussed or presented discussions by others of its practice applications, neither have yet presented systematic assessment or intervention schemes. [27] System theorists generally have rejected operational concepts of resources, or of situational assessment and intervention, though such terms are frequently used in social work discourse. There is a lack of recognition of how we distinguish between and utilize behavior and practice theories, or between developmental, structural-process, and conflict models, based on ecological theory. The persistently abstract level of explication at which ecological theory is so often presented maintains it at a metaphorical, non-empirical level, and has a quality of grandiose rhetoric.

In addition, there is a continued adherence to inappropriate medical models of social problems and social functioning, with inhibiting effects on the needed development of ecological theory and methods. Thus there is a renewed effort to revive and to espouse epidemiological and public health concepts as primary models for social work research and practice. [28] Though certain concepts and procedures in this orientation have some value, there is a neglect of valuable and more germane ecological methods and techniques for research and practice purposes. Also, social change considerations, particularly in regard to social structural reform, get short shrift. The focus of concern remains upon the individual, as disease host, carrier, or victim.

Still further, there is an aspect of cultism about the major presentations and discussions of ecological theory. Thus, most of the publications concerning this orientation have come from a close-knit coterie. A doctrinal sect atmosphere is indicated in the lack of regard for outsiders who have contributed to an ecological systems orientation for social work practice. For example, Germain's "life model" of treatment, (which is a direct-service application of ecological system theory), could profit from some integration with similar models developed by Oxley and Strean. [29] This kind of exclusivism does not encourage the open dialogue and creativity that furthers real progression in either theory or practice. It may repeat the cultism that was characteristic of the psychoanalytic and behaviorist schools of thought in social work's historical development.

Positive Contributions

Notwithstanding the above aspects of current ecological theory development, we can identify certain positive results of the adoption of general and ecological system theories, without attempting to differentiate the relative powers or contributions of either of them. There also are limitations and dangers to be noted. Yet the advantages are substantial and definite, and we deal with these first.

The ecological systems approach has enabled us to gain a larger perspective, a more unitary and comprehensive unit of attention, for a holistic and dynamic understanding of people and the socio-cultural-physical milieu. We can apprehend common properties of subsystems, and common behavior principles. We understand more clearly, for example, how the dysfunctional behavior of a child can help maintain the pathological balance of a family system. [30] This includes a concern for the social structures, for social class, ethnic, sexual, economic factors and for the social institutional organizations - such as school, work, family, welfare, legal systems - as they operate in and powerfully affect the lives of clients. Such a perspective avoids blaming the victim, and places responsibility on systemic relationships, rather than upon any evil motives of men.

The ecological model is, like general systems theory, a "metatheory," an "overarching global theory which embraces several limited theories."[31] This umbrella of a general theoretical framework permits a "strategy of multiple perspectives," and is "a way of thinking of relationships, or parts and wholes, and of inputs and outputs." [32] Thus multiple dimensions, levels, and factors of a case or program system can be grasped and interrelated, using the same concepts and variables, as they apply for different subsystems, whether this be an individual and situation, or a community and milieu. A variety of functions, purposes, objectives, and activities can be accommodated within such a super-structure, to meet the developmental, maintenance, integrative, and problem-solving/goal-achievement needs of different systems. Having such attributes and capable of parsimonious and generic use with many types of systems, the ecological model provides a common core of knowledge, attitudes and skills, a basic perspective and helping approach for the social work profession as a whole. [33] Within this basic approach, more specific theories, methods, and techniques can be utilized, from a range of behavior, personality, and social system theories. Upon this base, social work has developed a variety of specialized helping approaches: psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, interactional, humanistic-existentialist, social provision-radical, and problem-solving.

Such an orientation encourages the social worker to be theoretically and technically eclectic, in the best sense of the term. This means to take and test the best of the various schools of therapy, administration,

planning, as they are consistent with the basic social work value system and conceptual framework and as they are validated through practice experience and research. Thus, we now see emerging new syntheses of practice models, new formulations of practice methods, principles, and operational procedures. A new practice principle, for example, is to respect the worth and integrity of the ecology. This means to respect the balances and processes through which people and environments have adapted to each other's needs, while attempting to improve transactional patterns that are maladaptive. As we noted, a fundamental behavior principle is that optimal system functioning requires a positive reciprocal complementarity of client-worker role expectations. [34] Applying such a systems view, Hasenfeld has suggested a set of such principles for organizational helping behavior, for example, that "The greater the perceived congruency of the client's personal goals and the organization's output goals, the greater the degree of trust between them." [35] Other principles have also emerged: A social study needs to be done from a systemic perspective, and to include a concern for people-milieu variables and their interaction. Monitoring and evaluation of intervention efforts need to be concerned with unintended as well as intended consequences. Intervention needs to be both people-helping and system-changing, not only to effect change, but also to ensure that the altered, new state of affairs will last and be self-maintaining within the selected ecosystem.

Significant advances have been made in theory and operational procedures for understanding and dealing with environmental-situational subsystems. Both personality and social institutional system changes are pursued and effected through situational assessments and interventions. [36] This trend is expressed in the new approaches to short-term treatment and crisis-intervention, in work with victims of natural disasters, in family therapy and network intervention, in organizational and neighborhood development. Socio-behavioral therapy in social work expresses a systems orientation in its assumption that changing the behavior of a person requires situational change in the contingency reinforcement system, as well as change in such personality variables as situational perceptions, cognitive beliefs and expectations, interpersonal competence, social-self identity. Still further, we are learning how to transform aspects of macrostructures of sociocultural institutions - of complex service organizations and systems - into the immediate, cognizable forms of social situations that are amenable to influence and intervention. Thus, institutional policies and programs, organizational and family group interaction patterns and operating processes, are altered so that they may be more supportive and nurturing of parents and children, as individuals and as family-community members.

An ecological systems model of social functioning is directly useful as an assessment instrument. It enables the identification of consistencies, strengths, and complementarities, as well as of inconsistencies, discrepancies, and conflicts, in regard to particular systemic attributes and in their relationships. The strengths and weaknesses involved in the internal structures and operating processes of subsystems also become evident. One

can clarify how well a system is structurally adequate and operating effectively in order to meet systemic functional requirements, or basic task-functions: of adaptation, integration, pattern-maintenance and goal-achievement. A person's directional tendencies - of motivation, needs, goals, and expectations - may be unrealistically high or low in relation to internal capacities and resources; these may be impaired or undeveloped. Social situational demands upon a group's capacities may be too stressful in being over- or under-demanding, or conflicting; external resources, opportunities and supports in a milieu may be inaccessible, lacking, or inadequate. Systemic linkages between an organization and a community may be weak and defined in negative and unrealistic terms. Such discrepancies and inconsistencies are signified by tension, strain, conflict, and other maladaptive behavioral symptoms of dysfunctioning and disorganization.

This model also is directly useful as a treatment planning instrument. It enables an identification of actions to be taken to alter systemic attributes and the nature of inter-systemic relationships, in order to establish an optimal goodness of fit between person and situation, or between the client system and its milieu. This means altering directional tendencies, such as perception, decision-making, role performance; and external linkages, such as definitions of one's life situation. One then can choose from alternative objectives, levels, strategies, and tactics of intervention to formulate an interventive plan.

Because an ecological approach to intervention is multi-factorial and is addressed to systemic attributes and intersystem relationships, social workers have been encouraged to develop and utilize a strong and varied repertoire of assessment instruments and helping interventions. We now make use of a wide range of strategies, roles, and techniques, through which to work with a person, a family, a work situation, a neighborhood organization, a welfare service system. We are less apt now to select cases or program tasks, or to define problems, so as to suit narrow methods or techniques.

It is in accord with the requirements of an ecological systems model of practice that new forms of service and manpower patterns have appeared. Comprehensive, systemic approaches to programs and cases need social work and inter-disciplinary teams with many different kinds of knowledge and skills. As Carol Meyer has pointed out, "A systems perspective permits the argument that imaginative use and deployment of manpower teams ...where an array of competencies can be made available to clients, would also enhance the quality of services.... The framework makes possible imaginative uses of all levels of manpower...." [37] This trend has led us to utilize technicians, paraprofessionals, indigenous workers, as well as to develop case management forms of service. There also is an increasing emphasis on an enriched use of volunteers, and on the development of, and assistance to, self-help and natural support groups. [38]

Some Limitations

Recent critiques of systems theory have identified a number of limitations and difficulties that relate to its application. Systems analysts assume that all systems are similar, but actually there are important differences between a person and a work organization, between the design of aerospace hardware and of a social service program, between mediating a national labor dispute and a marital conflict. As Robert Leighninger observes, systems theorists "do not have a terribly impressive track record," considering such examples as the War in Vietnam, or the Pentagon's cost-benefit planning for military equipment. [39] Leighninger further states that systems theory is deficient in its conception of society in normative terms; its overconcern with self-regulating homeostasis; its lack of recognition that feedback may be deviance-amplifying or not result in corrective action; its neglect of control issues about local, decentralized control and participation; its overestimation of subsystem integration, which leads to "conservative, status-quo, political positions," and a discouragement of constructive conflict and variety.

We can note here a tendency on the part of systems theorists to overestimate the rationality of human beings and particularly of decision-making and problem-solving in organizational behavior. Thus, there is an effort to impose an unrealistic kind of rational image upon organizational life. There is increasing evidence that our communities and our bureaucracies, including the universities and the military services, actually are "organized anarchies." [40] They actually are difficult to understand and often intractable to administer because they require endless and complicated processes of negotiation between opposing interest groups, who often are unwilling to recognize a superordinate authority or accept common interests and objectives.

The pretense to rational administration is associated with a use of systems models, particularly in industry, that has operated to exacerbate certain establishment tendencies. One pernicious trend has been the increase in bureaucratic, centralized control, with power placed in the hands of "systems-experts" rather than managers, with escalated costs due to overstaffing of non-productive personnel and to reams of paperwork. [41] The increased bureaucratization and authoritarianism in our society have been hidden by the use of systems theory as an ideology, and as part of a claim that it would provide greater effectiveness in societal efforts against social problems. [42] Such a technocratic approach is also seen to attempt to paper-over real conflicts in values and interests.

Another difficulty posed by the systems model is the assumption that systemic components are so interdependent that impactful intervention at some crucial point should affect other elements, and set off rippling, reverberating effects that will alter systemic structure and processes. We do not have many more points of entry and levels of intervention into systems, with individuals, dyads, families, groups, organizations, communities, etc. But we often do not know just what these critical

pivotal points may be. Also, we do not know how to control the consequences so that they consistently follow predictions and have positive, constructive results, in the immediate, as well as in the long-term, future. Unintended and negative consequences are a common result of planned systemic change programs, as in the classic example of how street gangs were weaned from gang warfare against each other, yet wound up addicted to drugs. [43] Or how the de-institutionalization of mental hospital patients has resulted in serious dumping of severely handicapped and incompetent people into hostile communities, and into revolving-door type of treatment experiences for such people. [44]

One implication of systems theory is an encouragement of the practitioner to see things big: to think and plan and try to act in comprehensive, systemic terms. One result has been the use of systems theory to justify a generalist kind of social work practice, and for practitioners to believe that they need to be, and to be equally expert as, social planners, family therapists, community organizers, psychotherapists, etc. The result of such grandiose pretensions has been an increasing disenchantment of service agencies and of the public with the insubstantial rhetoric and lack of competence in the effective provision of basic social services that is exhibited by many mental health and social service practitioners. A more recent reaction has been the scaling down of claims for a generalist practice, and a recognition of valued specializations and of individual talents to be confirmed within service teams. [45]

A major limitation of systems theory is held to be its seeming inability to deal with subjective experience, and thus with meanings, aspirations, and values. [46] A system design may be technically and aesthetically elegant, scientifically and statistically reliable and valid. But without a value system that can give it constructive direction and purpose, it will lack meaning, will not motivate its members productively, and therefore will follow an entropic course into stagnation and decline. The popularity of systems theory has been associated with a prevailing adversary, competitive culture and a dominant value system that features prominently a narcissistic hedonism, individualistic autonomy and freedom, and materialistic achievement. [47] Such a value system is now held to be influential in contributing to the increased level of communal and family disorganization in our society, in low birth rates, and in high rates of divorce, family violence, child abuse and neglect, and criminal behavior. This kind of personalist, hedonistic value system - that gives primacy to self-actualization, autonomy, and present gratification - is also accepted and endorsed by many social workers. It appears to underlie certain harmful aspects of social work practice, a fact that now is being openly discussed and criticized. Glasser and Glasser, for example, charge that social system theory, as applied in social work, has focused on family functions for the good of individual members with a neglect of the needs of the society and of a proper balance between them. [48] There is an increasingly evident contradiction between this individualistic, "self-fulfillment" orientation

expressed by many social workers and the humanistic values of equality, democracy, justice, altruism, social responsibility, and mutual aid, which are publicly and ritually professed by the social work profession.

The Dialectic of Stability and Change

The criticism of systems theory as reinforcing the maintenance of the status-quo is at variance with the use of systems theory by radicals and reformists, who characteristically proclaim the need to reform and "change the whole system." Thus Karl Marx did make use of systems theory. He spoke of the "capitalist system," and apparently did use a systems analytic model as a basis for developing his theory of historical materialism, and for his view of the key subsystem of economic production. This is well argued by McQuarie and Maburgey, who also find that Marx conceived of the key system elements as the economic forces and social relations of production, and the political-cultural superstructures and forms of consciousness in a society which are derived from them. [49] They suggest that economic factors were actually understood by Marx, not as a sole determinant, but as a dominant determinant, of the limits within which a society functions, and within which limits a dialectical process takes place between the means and relations of production. Social change was viewed by Marx as taking place as a result of the dialectical process concerning these inherent contradictions and resultant class conflicts.

In addition, Marx and Engels were committed to what we now call an ecological systems conception of man in relation to fellow man and to nature, as is well demonstrated by Howard Parsons. [50] Both were severely critical of the exploitation, pollution, waste, and destruction of people and natural resources by capitalism. They viewed and affirmed man in dialectical relations with nature, whereby each reciprocally creates and transforms the other. Their vision of a communistic society encompassed a "socialist ecology," to use Parsons' phrase, in which there would be "real human freedom" in a harmony between man and nature. [51]

The Marxist philosopher Habermas is, however, critical of systems theory where it neglects to recognize the inherent incompatabilities of class interests, and how these block social integration within the capitalist system. [52] He also suggests that systems theory cannot deal with the issues of the validation and legitimation of normative and interpretive structures needed in a society. As a result, there are characteristic tendencies toward chronic crises, in the economy, and in regard to the rationality of organizational administration, the legitimation of social forms, and the motivational structures of the society.

We need to recall here that ecological systems theory is a general super-structure, which enables the combined and integrative use of many different types of sub-theories for different kinds of system functions. This applies particularly to the systemic functions of pattern-maintenance, and of adaptive change, for individuals and social systems. It allows, as Leighninger points out about general systems theory, "both conservative and radical interpretations of the same situation." [53] Such usage results from the differences in functions that are being pursued: to reinforce the status-quo and stability of the social order or to support radical, reformist efforts. The dialectical life process, as we noted, involves bi-polar oppositions between inherently contradictory tendencies, such as for conformity/control and deviance/change. The ecological model thus can subsume structural-functionalist and conflict theories. [54] It can accommodate what looks like contradictory motivational rationales and belief systems for different systemic purposes.

Social work is an institutional instrument for both social stability and social change. [55] It is charged, in its social contract, with a crucial societal function: to mediate between the opposing forces in this dialectical process within our human ecology, and thus to facilitate the progressive forces of social evolution and of community and individual development. Social work arose as a response to the inherent contradictions of the capitalist system and its socio-economic modes of production and relationships. Society has supported the development of the social work value and knowledge base, and of its ideology and interventive forms, so that these were and are integrative, meliorating, protective and controlling, as well as consciousness-raising and oppositional in regard to poverty, discrimination, injustice, alienation, as well as reformist of such basic social practices. Social work has contributed greatly to the development of the social welfare system, and to positive changes in societal attitudes and practices in regard to the poor, disadvantaged, and deviant members of society. [56] Yet social work did and continues to reflect the inherent contradictions in our society, and in our welfare system, between the forces for social control and social change. [57]

One important function of social work, essential to the dialectical social process, is to aid people with their difficulties around deviant behavior and careers. [58] Deviant behavior is norm-violating action that often arouses negative, punitive or repressive community reactions, and is a form of non-complementarity in subsystem relationships. It represents a potentiation of essential tendencies for development and change, and thus a potentiation and amplification as well of inherent polarities and contradictions. In mediating deviance-control processes in our society, social workers are concerned to help people achieve constructive outcomes. They are norn-senders and rule enforcers as well as norm-changers and value stretchers. They have become noted as a particularly receptive, caring, supportive group of

professional helpers, accepting the ambiguity of deviance, tolerating the contradictions, ambivalences, paradoxes, and conflicts involved until its consequences can become probable or manifest; and permitting as well as encouraging the creative emergence of new forms and functioning processes for growth, living, and relation. In addition to a characteristic person-in-situation perspective, social workers have a dialectical vision, one that identifies discrepancies and contradictions in terms of polarities, and also identifies the "unity of opposites" in their essences. [59] This is part of an approach that "comprehends the unfolding of oppositions and aims at a new synthesis which negates and affirms." [60] Such a dialectical vision enables social workers to help people negotiate conflicting necessities; and to integrate opposing interests, values, and beliefs into complementary, synergistic relationships and productive transactions.

By its very nature, then, social work practice is a praxis, a union of practical, instrumental theory and practice, through which social workers act and intervene to help people consciously shape their life conditions and history, to change both their consciousness and their reality. [61] Praxis, explains Avineri, "revolutionizes existing reality through human action," and does so in terms of a dialectic process, in a "reciprocal relation between man and his circumstances."[62] This takes place through mutual and transactional processes of transformations and productions, to achieve liberating changes both in societal conditions and in the inner consciousness of people, including in the structures and interpersonal relationships of our social economy. As Marx and Engels said of this process, "in revolutionary activity the changing of oneself coincides with the changing of circumstances." [63]

This conception of social work as a praxis expresses a traditional social work orientation, what we now call an ecological helping approach. It aims to effect change in person and situation and in their transactional relationships for an optimal and equitable exchange balance, as well as to help people "achieve at one and the same time their own and society's betterment." [64] Social work thus is an institutionalized, self-regulating force in our society for both social integration and radical change. Its societal tasks call upon the social worker to be a social conscience, a moral and educative agent, an advocate and liaison for the dependent and deviant, a caretaker and social reformer. These responsibilities are bounded by social work's essential function in the societal dialectic, to balance individual and community rights and interests, and to mediate personal and community trends for stability and change, toward a just, pluralistic and integrated, peaceful, communal society.

Such task-functions are complex, have interdependent moral and political dimensions, are role-conflicting and stressful for social workers to implement. To be influential and effective in accomplishing them, and to have public legitimation and support, social authority and resources, social workers need to be highly credible, unified, and competent. They are required to provide efficient and beneficial social services, and to present expertly organized and persuasive evidence of unmet needs and for requisite changes in social welfare policies and programs.

Social workers therefore need to understand and to utilize both control and reform types of strategies, principles, and procedures, as they are appropriate in helping situations. Social work practice needs both conservative and radical contributions. We note, however, that the contributions of the establishment-practice approaches have for a long time been extensive and predominant. Part of the appeal of establishment-oriented psychoanalytic and behaviorist approaches has been the operational, technical, and thereby useable, nature of their practice theories and procedures. These approaches and procedures actually are as capable of application for social reformist purposes, and they merit such a development.

It is only now that radical, social-provision, and reformist social workers are beginning to translate ideological rhetoric into the development of specific, realistic, operational theory, principles and procedures. The lessons and advances of what was effective social work practice during earlier social reform eras are valuable but as yet neglected resources. It is from current perspectives that Leonard declares, "viewing social structures in terms of systems is not necessarily a means of justifying them," and he urges the use of systems theory to understand and change existing institutions. [65] He and a number of fellow radicals are clarifying for practice purposes the importance of identifying the differential distribution of power and interests within social systems, as well as its consequences, particularly in terms of conflicts and strains as they affect people. [66] They suggest the use of dialogical relationships with clients, the raising of group consciousness about the destructive effects of capitalism upon person, family, and community, and the building of collective counter-systems for social institutional change.

We need here to recognize that many truly radical social work programs are developed and implemented without a "radical" label, such as a number of effective systems-based projects that have been realized in public welfare, industrial, health, and other institutional organizations and settings. [67] A dogmatic doctrinal approach to what constitutes systemic change or how to accomplish it poses the same dangers of cultism and of giving priority to narrow ideological considerations,

as we noted about psychoanalytic, behaviorist, and ecological systems theory advocates. An intellectual and attitudinal openness is needed to clarify and resolve what are presently confused and controversial matters: for example, about what are appropriate and effective moral and political roles consistent with the social work profession's social contract and mission, and with the professional, agency, and citizen roles of the social worker.

Conclusions

In this analysis of ecological systems theory, of its advantages and disadvantages, it is evident that these refer to their usages and applications, much more than to the inherent nature of the theory or model itself. We observed that the ecological systems model has advanced the evolution of systems theory and therefore of basic social work practice theory. It is meeting social work perspectives and purposes and its present contributions outweigh its limitations. Social work is a societal instrument that serves people in their efforts to maintain, restore and enhance their individual and collective social functioning and that mediates dialectical social control and deviance-change processes. Social work task-functions require a general conceptual framework as well as a set of theories and models that can enable social workers to deal with varied and complex types of people and systems, to understand and meet their common and different structural, processual, and developmental-change characteristics, and their adaptive, maintenance, integrative, and problem-solving/goal-achievement needs.

Ecological systems theory is such a general meta-theory, one that provides for the many, and at times contradictory, purposes and activities of social workers. It constitutes an essential element of the generic core of social work knowledge, of its common person-in-situation and dialectical perspective, and of its basic helping approach. It supports the social work assessment and interventive focus on people transacting with others in their situational milieu, utilizing inner and external resources to develop and to function well. From this base, social work practice has developed and adapted a variety of specialized helping models and approaches.

The ecological model itself is not a helping approach per se, although in recent years it has been conceptualized at less abstract and more operational levels, and we have identified certain behavior and practice principles that have emerged. However, ecological systems theory will continue to be used primarily as a framework for a complex and changing set of theories and models needed for the ever-evolving nature of social work practice. It therefore encourages an eclectic orientation

to practice theories and should help us avoid the kind of faddism and cultism that have characterized certain eras of social work history.

The current awareness of the sharp conflict in the social work value system - between individualistic, self-fulfillment orientations and the socially responsible, altruistic orientations - should help us arrive at new balances and syntheses of ethical and value positions, more in keeping with current reality needs. Social workers then can be of better help to clients with such value dilemmas and conflicts. The ecological systems model, by implication, gives priority to certain values: social integration and constructive conflict; a harmonious interdependence of parts that includes apparent contradictions or competition for resources; a goodness of fit between sub-system needs and competencies; a balanced complementarity of resource exchange that makes for reciprocity, mutual aid, and mutual need-meeting.

Ecological systems theory can provide support for the mediating function of social work in regard to the dialectical forces of social stability-control and social deviance-change, and in furthering the processes of social evolution. The predominant use of systems theory has seemed to favor the control-care responsibilities of practice, although the social-provision, radical, and reformist responsibilities have recently and currently been given more attention. Social work needs both control and reform types of strategies, principles, and procedures, including from conservative and Marxist persuasions. Ecological systems theory not only expresses a traditional social work orientation to man and nature, but it now can support a conception of social work practice as a praxis, as an instrumental theory and practice to help people shape their history and life conditions, and to change both their consciousness and their reality.

Such a conception of social work practice makes use of the ecological system as a metaphor and symbol for a social work utopian vision of good people in a right, just, democratic society. It is such a symbol that is needed at present in social work to help us resolve current value and ideological conflicts, and to advance the effectiveness of social work practice. It can enable social work as a profession to regain its esteemed and central place in society's effort to enhance the quality of individual and social welfare.

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