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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 8
Issue 4 *December*

Article 4

December 1981

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Recommended Citation

Mancoske, Ronald (1981) "Sociological Perspectives on the Ecological Model," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol8/iss4/4>

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SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ECOLOGICAL MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Germain and Siporin have written social work practice texts which seek to integrate diverse material into practice through an ecological model. Part of the integration deals with the issue of micro-macro practice which has been a dichotomous issue throughout social work traditions. Four perspectives which Kemeny used to analyze a similar dichotomy in sociology offer insights and caveats for social work to consider as it uses general systems theory as a framework for practice. The four perspectives are called the competitive, the inclusive, the exclusive, and the cumulative. This paper traces similar developmental notions in the sociological literature and notes ideas of possible interest to social work.

The challenge of social work professionalism is to incorporate into practice the skills and knowledge acquired from experience in helping people and also the knowledge base of the social sciences in order to enhance practice effectiveness. A framework offered to service these ends is the general systems theory as found in two major works, the "life model" of Germain

and Gitterman and the practice model delineated by Siporin.¹ Both refer to this framework as an ecological model. Germain titles one of her books as an "ecological perspective"² and Siporin in the introduction to his work states the model is based on the ecological systems view.³

The Ecological Perspective

Germain states that the ecological perspective is an outgrowth of general systems theory and an attempt to improve on several limitations of the theory. Three shortcomings of general systems theory she notes are that it is not able to prescribe interventive measures; its mechanistic vocabulary is repugnant to some; and that its abstract constructs are difficult to apply in practice.⁴ The ecological perspective is a form of general systems theory with guides for action in a vocabulary expressive of meaningful human interactions and needs.

In describing the social work knowledge base, Siporin talks of the value of general systems theory. He discusses general systems theory, social systems, and ecological theories together.⁵ He acknowledges some of their separate features and distinctive areas, but feels their commonalities warrant their use together under a common rubric.

One of the features of Siporin's work and also of the life model is that it attempts to integrate some of the vast social science knowledge base into a practice model useful to practitioners in various settings. This paper will illustrate that this integrative effort is part of a traditional effort in the

social sciences not unique to social work by comparing this to ideas from the sociological literature. Problems, issues, and caveats in the application of general systems theory to social work practice emerge when using this comparison. The ecological perspective is a positive contribution to social work practice but one needing to be integrated with caution and with acknowledgement of limitations. A model is included comparing four perspectives in the micro-macro distinction from the sociological literature as means of analysis with comparative perspectives in social work practice.

Understanding human nature is the essence of human inquiry. But how to order knowledge to make sense of its finer points and extensive varieties has led to proliferations of disciplines and methodologies. Some elements are ignored, trivialized, or revered. Some paradigms appear immortal at times.⁶ When ideas are beyond explanations, we attribute meanings to eschatological beliefs or to free will in human nature. Sarte said "what we call freedom is the irreducibility of the cultural order to the natural order."⁷ He delineates in his works problems of mediating the complexities of social forces with the existential nature of human beings. This is a part of the classical sociological tradition as well.

Several writers attribute the basic development of systems thinking to the early writings of Vilfredo Pareto.⁸ Pareto studied cycles of change using what he called a logico-experimental method which combined both grand theory and observation in the study of nations as systems of power relationships. Pareto postulates that attention must be paid to the total system of

action, both subjective and objective, in order to understand the dynamics.

General systems theory has a strong organismic base in both classical and modern writers. Leighninger traces the roots of the theory to the classic writings of organismic sociology. He particularly notes the pre-Darwinian writings of Spencer which compares society with a biological organism in its complexity, interdependence, and its evolutionary adaptability.⁹ The history of general systems theory as outlined by Leighninger traces the influence of the organismic philosophy on the functionalist sociological theory with the incisive warning that a failure to appreciate this organismic analogy in the literature leads to underestimating difficulties of integration of system theory to practice settings. This "tradition" needs further development.

Parsons' pioneering work in systems of action in the 1930's attempted to integrate the diversity of social science knowledge into the understanding of human action.¹⁰ He establishes functional relationships between concreteness and abstractions in a classification scheme looking at the basis of action in biological, personality, cultural and social realms in an integrated approach. He developed methodological tools by exploring functionalities within these systems. By the early 1950's, he and his followers developed a range of applications of functional systems theory-- of social action; of biopsychological and social causation; of value orientations; of interactions, behavior and personality development; and of role development.¹¹

The theory of action which was a functional explanation of classifications of influence on behavior lead Parsons to be a prime intellectual source of systems theory. He states that:

System is the concept that refers both to a complex of interdependencies between parts, components, and processes that involves discernible regularities of relationship, and to a similar type of interdependency between such a complex and its surrounding environment. System, in this sense, is therefore the concept around which all sophisticated theory in the conceptually generalizing disciplines is and must be organized.¹²

He thus argues that social theories must be studied in both structures and processes. To isolate systems from their relations into an "act" or a "structure" destroys the scientific study base. It is not the structures of the interconnectedness but the process of interaction via the cultural milieu which gives meaning to the person and to her or his acts. From this it is clear that general systems theory is the primary framework of sociological literature among the dominant school of sociology in the 1940's and 1950's, the functionalist school.

Criticisms of structural functionalism have evolved from various quarters. Some of the major ones include change theorists, conflict theorists, quantitative critiques, and the existentialist schools.¹³ Critics claim Parsons' action theory is less a systems theory than a statics theory, it is not empirically verifiable as

developed, and is so abstract and vague that concepts are undefineable.¹⁴ The emphasis of the action theory is on function, not process of interaction, and this negates the meaning of systems.

In the 1930's, von Bertalanffy developed ideas of a general system theory as a framework which were incorporated into the literature in the 1950's.¹⁵ The promises of a theory to unite the increasingly complex natural sciences with the diverse interests of the social sciences excited many. The knowledge explosion was felt to be leading to a breakdown of science by separation, isolation, and trivialization. Efforts in many fields to unite were visible--ecology in biology, gestalt in psychology, social action theory in sociology. The developments in information theory, operations research, and computer analysis provided a stimulus for this emerging unity amidst diversity and complexity. General systems theory converged with a wide range of applications.

A systems view found applications in social work theory also. In tracing the historical development of the application of general systems theory in social work practice, Peterson shows how it was compatible with the systems views of pioneer social workers such as Richmond and Hamilton.¹⁶ Her conclusion was that problems with the medical model analogy could be averted with an ecological analogy and thus the ecological model is needed in the theory base.

Social work practice has been interested traditionally in a unified approach as was seen in the early Milford Conference, in

the cause-function debates, in Bartlett's common base of practice, and in the unification attempts with the ecological models of Siporin and of Germain and Gitterman. General systems theory is compatible with the practice needs of social workers in times of transience, novelty and diversity.¹⁷ There is a need to look critically at the general systems theory in light of other social sciences in how they have incorporated the model. This can provide guidance in developing the model appropriate to social work's practice needs. It can also help avoid problems others have grappled with and studied. This does not argue for rejection but for critical review and for use where indicated.

Four perspectives on the adaptation of general systems theory into sociology are offered by Kemeny.¹⁸ These four perspectives are reviewed in this study. These perspectives explore the attempts to integrate general systems theory with the diverse knowledge base of sociology. There are parallels with the similar endeavors of integrating the ecological theory with the social work knowledge base and comparisons are offered. This is illustrated using the life model and Siporin's work comparing these with sociological material while viewing these from Kemeny's four perspectives. These four perspectives on how general systems theory is incorporated into sociological literature are: the competitive, the inclusive, the exclusive, and the cumulative perspectives.

Competitive

The competitive perspective sees different levels of analysis as detracting from each other. Diverse elements are viewed as conflicting and incompatible. Interest at one level of analysis implies a sense that other levels are irrelevant. Examples of this would be the divisions in sociology between the grand theorists such as Marx, Weber, Spencer and Durkheim who explored large scale social structures, and other views such as the fundamental laws of social interaction developed by Mead, Cooley and Simmel. Perhaps a symbol of this perspective is in the discomfort with social psychology in some academic departments.

In tracing the development of the social sciences, Parsons argues that the most important movement to develop the social sciences originated with the concern for both the physical and the social environment at one time; with the redefinition of persons as driven by consumptive needs; and with persons as searching and motivated by other wants.¹⁹ This fits with Parsons' systemic views on integrating competitive perspectives in an inclusive perspective. But competitive views persist.

There are features of the competitive perspective in social work traditions. Early debates over social work as a cause-function helped draw the lines. The debates between micro and macro levels of analysis persist even though the focus of the issues shift. For example, some see macro social work practice as lacking theory and others see micro practice as suffering from

a Freudian deluge.²⁰

Two issues are raised here. First, because of divisions in social work practice theory, is general systems theory accepted uncritically as a healing of divisions? Second, is general systems theory as a competitive perspective more compatible with social work philosophy? The convergence of general systems with sociology did not heal divisions over fundamental questions of focus or scope. Parsons' integrative work, central to the development of sociological literature as described earlier, is criticized on an array of fronts. Sarte described this dilemma in dialectic terms--knowing of the actor and of the experience in interaction is essential to knowing of the totality of the situation, or of the wholeness. The knowing of one or of the other is not knowing until the dialectical interplay is acted out.²¹ Particularity can not be replaced by universality, and yet the human epiphenomenon is guided by universal forces. This process must be mediated by knowing both, despite its limitations. The dilemma is that the methodology determines conditions and the conditions the methodology. Hence, we can not expect a methodological or theoretical view to take away contradictions inherent in theory or in practice. But, an improved theoretical framework can guide in the process of knowing, and general systems theory can be of value in this process. A competitive perspective is not required to accept the reality of divisiveness.

Social work is accused of uncritically picking up general systems theory from social science theory in an attempt to bridge incompatible theories.²³ One writer describes Janchill's integrative article as nearly verbatim borrowing of concepts. This

notion is unfounded given the history of systems thinking in social work literature, such as in the writings of Richmond, Hamilton and Austin.²⁴ But what is of importance to note is that because social work practice finds general systems theory to be comforting in dealing with competitive perspectives, how can it be put to practice? This will be developed when discussing the inclusive perspective.

A second question: is general systems theory or competitive theory more compatible with practice needs. This question receives some guidance from the sociological literature. In it general systems theory is criticized as being overly concerned with order, stability, and social control. Since social work practice contains elements of these functions, it needs to be of similar concern with adaptation of this framework. Also, is this framework quantifiable in any sense or just a guide? If it does not readily lend itself to measurement, and social work practice needs to quantify to demonstrate effectiveness, then this concern may be central to incorporation of the model into the field. Problems with models need not be all or none propositions, however.

Inclusive Perspective

The inclusive perspective sees an overall framework which can be applied to all social phenomenon at all levels. This model in sociology is described by social action theory. All systems are seen as subsystems of the social system. This is similar to Comte's hierarchy of science. Polarities are seen as issues of range and scope, not incompatibilities. This is the basis of

structural functionalism, which has wide appeal because of the breadth of interests it fosters under its global umbrella.

It is in this perspective that both Siporin and the life model advocate an ecological perspective and are thus located. Siporin's generalist approach attempts to integrate clinical practice with social change in the environment via community practice. This framework depicts practice at integrated levels--with basics at a first level and specializations at a second level. He suggests by focusing on problems that practice can develop from a social science knowledge base. He strives to form a single base of social work practice throughout his text including his notes and glossary.

Critics of Siporin, though impressed with the breadth of content of the work, question whether he achieves his integrative, unitary goals.²⁵ His attempts are admired though the fulfillment is questioned. This is less a criticism of Siporin's success at an inclusive perspective than problems inherent in the perspective itself.

A sample framework of the complexity of the phenomenon considered may inherently bring descriptive simplicity and ambiguity. Statements may be unverifiable because of their abstractions and may be impossible to unify. This is similarly noted in criticisms of Parsons' systems analyses²⁶ and of general systems theory.²⁷ Commonality among divergent systems is an ideal--one modestly verified by study. Reading Siporin, one is amazed at the breadth of theoretical material and yet the dearth of practice applica-

tions. Other issues arise--boundaries are in reality impossible between systems yet theoretically they exist. Also, the elements within the system to be considered are arbitrarily set.²⁸

Siporin rightly does not argue that all phenomenon are of a unitary nature. His scope recognizes the diversity of influencing factors. He describes various practice approaches. The unifying principles are not saying all is one, only that there is an order to the many. His work is weakly criticized as being static, neglecting guides to social change.²⁹ He extensively refers to change and reform. This compares to the criticisms of structural functionalism.

The life model develops the inclusive perspective more tangibly than does Siporin. Germain wrote an article in which she directly confronts the inclusive perspective by examining the compatibility of ego psychology with general systems theory. She highlights the conceptual developments, relates them to each other, and concludes that first, they are compatible but second, their separateness should be maintained because of different origins and assumptions.³⁰ She appropriately warns against accepting diversity with uncritical eclecticism.

The problems found in the sociological literature and related to Siporin's work is relevant to the discussion of the life model also. The problem of abstraction providing little prescriptive value for practice is noted in reviews of Germain's book on practice even though a range of modalities are presented.³¹ In the later book on the life model, more attention is given to

this problem.

The life model seeks to integrate practice skills linking them to divergent theoretical areas with applications to work with individuals, groups, families, organizations, neighborhoods, and communities. The model is not a means to settle interdisciplinary issues or micro-macro distinctions. Interdisciplinarity in essence maintains boundaries.³² The inclusive perspective can help defray some of the polemic over whether social problems originate in the person or the social order. This is a concern in sociological and in social work theories. The deftness of the life model is in its ability to move in and out of this fray while maintaining credibility in unique applications and in generalizability. This is the particularity and the universality Sartre's "method" envisages. The ecological metaphor provides guidance in applications which are inclusive of a range of theories thus continuing social work's value of assessment while broadening its domains.

The value placed on linkages is critical to assessment in the life model. Networks take on increased importance. The questioning of linkages development as unprofessional is rejected by the life model. However, problems in application persist. Only when contributions from all systems are assessed and interrelations explored can the context be useful in helping an individual with problems in social functioning.³³ However, persistent problems with the inclusive perspective remain. Tangible guidance in practice is required--abstractions and diffuseness are remotely meaningful. The efforts of researchers must be of

relevance at this juncture or they loose credibility with practice. It is here where the life model and Siporin's ideas of practice need most refinement.

Two issues emerge in this need for refinement of a framework of general systems theory to be applicable to social work practice needs. First, factors which inhibit the development of the model need to be addressed. This analysis could lead to improvement of the area. Several features include: improved dialogue between structuralists and systems advocates; clarification of concepts and measures; less focus on goals and more emphasis on foundations; continued concern over the nature of statics and of change; and emphasis on application relevance and less on theoretical rationale.³⁴

The greatest problem with the inclusive perspective is that it assumes parts are related to the whole without being able to measure how.³⁵ How the parts interrelate is not predefined. Siporin denotes the relationships between value orientations, norms, and facts amidst the diversity of parts.³⁶ The nature of the relationships is not, however, delineated. One way to view this is as an intricate webb of values, norms, and facts. However, this does little to prescribe interventive measures.

The second issue questions whether an inclusive perspective is logically possible. Blasi and others note this inclusive perspective to be complicated by various fallacies which caution in its uncritical acceptance.³⁷ They cite six fallacies:

- 1) ecological fallacy--assumed transitivity of attributes from beyond individuals to the individual
- 2) reductionism--social transitivity to ontological primacy, thus determinency is categorically assigned
- 3) genetic fallacy--the opposite of the ecological fallacy; limited transitivity to inclusive features
- 4) causal imperialism--mediation of person and situation is underplayed or overlooked
- 5) ambiguity of inclusiveness--theory not as rich as the experience
- 6) path analysis--desire to have predictiveness overworks this technique in science.

The desire for and value of an overall framework is popular. The cautions in uncritical application do not denigrate the inclusive perspective but provide guides to strengthen it which can be used to enhance the knowledge base and increase the effectiveness of interventive efforts. Siporin's generalist approach and the life model move in this direction.

Exclusive Perspective

The exclusive perspective sees various analyses as mutually exclusive representing qualitatively different phenomenon. This all or none argument is not prevalent though it seems to resurface occasionally. Kemeny traces this argument in the perspective taken on the sociometric analysis developed by Moreno in the sociological literature. This is more pronounced than in the comparative literature of the competitive model. The most prominent

feature of this approach is seen not in outright dismissal of ideas but rather in the ignoring of the relevance of ideas in relationships that have potential value.

The search for causation and predictive value pressures the social sciences to develop models which emerged in the natural sciences. However, the models must retain their justification relative to questions asked both in the natural sciences and in the social sciences. This search has made unidimensional answers seem appealing though general systems theory commands opening to question this approach in both the natural and the social sciences.³⁸ It is in the integration of theory with practice that the exclusive perspective is most susceptible to challenge.

Germain attempts to bridge the theory of ego psychology with general systems theory to show the applicability of the two in practice--to move away from those who feel the theories are exclusive.³⁹ Webber views this as a synthesis with a broader range of theories but contingent upon the actual development of useful organizing concepts.⁴⁰ The developments in the field at this time seem to discard an exclusive perspective, warn of the dangers of eclecticism, and call for an integrative theory. Siporin provides a meaningful set of principles to consider for maintaining an eclectic position:

- 1) complex issues require diverse intervention repertoires
- 2) wholism counters the blinders of limited helping modes
- 3) different orientations help people in different ways
- 4) various theories offer various practice guides, concepts,

and principles which are complimentary and compatible to different people's needs

- 5) eclecticism is a sign of professional adaptiveness.⁴¹

To achieve these principles, and to avoid an exclusive perspective is to value the integrative perspective. This requires bridging concepts which demand caution. General systems theory is not a bridge but it provides conceptual tools for integrating knowledge; it is not a body of knowledge but a methodological tool.⁴²

Cumulative Perspective

The cumulative perspective avoids distinctiveness of various levels of analysis and applies a gradation of increasing complexity. Some sociologists start with a psychological entity--the person, accept the interaction of person with context, and view this in context of social forces. This is the basic view of the ethnomethodologists who view the person as creating the rules of structure by virtue of the interaction of structure with action. This approach is fairly broad in its inclusiveness. The question again arises as to what are the relationships of the parts to the whole. But all events or properties can not be compatible with all other interests. Conflicts are a part of reality that the desire for unity can not submerge.

In practice, decisions need to be made--this is the basis of intervention. The accumulation of evidence needs to be limited in scope. It is not a ritual. All events need not nor can be considered. The demands of practice are not open to eschatolo-

gical wonderings. Science has demands to partialize, and so does practice. The general systems framework can be helpful to consider perspectives but more limited in incisive partializing. It is a protection against myopic vision. This is the value and strength of ecosystemic views. The cumulative approach does offer scope and breadth to the integrative task and is an element valued in social work practice.

Summary

Kemeny's four perspectives viewing the micro-macro distinctions in sociological literature offer a means to compare the levels of integrative features of the sociological and social work theories. Two major practice texts by Siporin and by Germain and Gitterman fuse the knowledge base of social work practice with an ecological systems approach. This parallels experience in the sociological literature with integrating broad data to existing theory. Some of the caveats from the experience of sociology are applicable to social work practice theory also. The result will be a more open, adaptive practice yet one guided by reason, values and experience.

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