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# An Ecological Approach for Social Work Practice

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*The ecological approach offers a comprehensive theoretical base that social practitioners can draw upon for effective social treatment. The critical concepts of the ecological approach are presented. It is suggested that the ecological perspective can be a useful treatment strategy for improving the social functioning of the client system.*

The earliest pioneers in the field of social work such as Mary Richmond realized the role that environment plays in the social functioning of human beings. Consequently, in the early 1970s when social work theorists began stressing the importance of the person-in-environment perspective, little was actually being added to the traditional social work knowledge base. However, during this period, writers such as Germain (1973) and Hartman (1976) through the person-in-environment perspective developed the groundwork for the ecological approach currently being stressed in the field of social work. Even though a number of significant gains were made by these writers, their early contributions to the ecological theoretical approach had a number of limitations. In particular, they did not clearly define procedures for implementing the ecological approach in assessment and treatment of client problems. Furthermore, the ecological theory that emerged from these theorists was not well conceptualized and had other notable limitations similar to those found with the social systems theory perspective.

However, what was offered by the early ecological theorists, notably Germain, was the groundwork for a new way of viewing social work practice. Her emphasis on the importance of the adaptive balance between organism and environment, referred to as a "goodness-of-fit" between the two, offered a novel way of viewing the relationship of the person to the environment.

She suggested if there is a "misfit" between the client system and the environment, social treatment should be aimed at correcting this condition. This critical insight set the stage for the development of the ecological perspective currently being used within the field of social work.

### The Ecological Perspective

The ecological approach that has emerged from the early works of Germain (1973) and others (Barker, 1973; Grinnell, 1973; Hartman, 1976) offers a rich theoretical base which practitioners can translate into effective social work practice. Presently, the ecological approach provides strategies that allow the social worker to move from a micro level of intervention to a macro level of social treatment. The ecological perspective not only helps the social worker impact a client system through policy and planning activities but also through psychotherapy and other micro level approaches. Thus, direct and indirect practice strategies for intervention can be combined into a congruent practice orientation when working with a client system through the ecological approach.

The present thinking on the ecological approach suggests that the primary premise explaining human problems is derived from the complex interplay of psychological, social, economic, political and physical forces. Such a framework accords due recognition to the transactional relationship between environmental conditions and the human condition. This perspective allows the practitioner to effectively treat problems and needs of various systemic levels including the individual, family, the small group, and the larger community. In essence, the practitioner can easily shift from a clinical role to a policy and planning role within the board framework of the ecological approach.

Presently, six distinct professional roles have evolved from the ecological framework. These roles have also been identified as an intricate part of advanced generalist practice by a number of writers (Anderson, 1981; Hernandez, Jorgensen, Judd, Gould, and Parsons, 1985). These six professional roles allow the practitioner to work effectively with five basic client systems—the individual, the family, the small group, the organization, and the community. The six professional roles are defined as follows:

1) *Conferee*: Derived from the idea of conference, this role focuses on actions that are taken when the practitioner serves as the primary source of assistance to the client in problem solving.

2) *Enabler*: The enabler role focuses on actions taken when the practitioner structures, arranges, and manipulates events, interactions, and environmental variables to facilitate and enhance system functioning.

3) *Broker*: This role is defined as actions taken when the practitioner's object is to link the consumer with goods and services or to control the quality of those goods and services.

4) *Mediator*: This role focuses on actions taken when the practitioner's objective is to reconcile opposing or disparate points of view and to bring the contestants together in united action.

5) *Advocate*: This role is defined as actions taken when the practitioner secures services or resources on behalf of the client in the face of identified resistance or develops resources or services in cases where they are inadequate or non-existent.

6) *Guardian*: The role of guardian is defined as actions taken when the practitioner performs in a social control function or takes protective action when the client's competency level is deemed inadequate.

Obviously there is a blurring of roles when a practitioner uses an ecological approach to practice. For example, the roles of conferee and enabler at times are difficult to separate. When practitioners implement the broker role, they also may find themselves enabling and advocating. The complementarity among the above roles should be noted, and the fact that they have a tendency to cluster rather than to remain distinct. This approach is a significant departure from the traditional methods (Casework, Groupwork, and Community Practice) utilized in practice, as the ecological approach results in a dynamic integration of practice roles. Along with these integrative practice roles, three concepts have evolved that serve as an organizing theme for the ecological approach; these are the *behavioral setting*, *ecosystem*, and *transaction*.

### *Behavioral setting*

An important study conducted by Barker and Gump (1964) provides excellent insight into the concept of the behavioral set-

ting. Their research focused on the impact of the little high school and the large high school on the social functioning of the individual student. They found that these two ecologies, small versus large high school, resulted in different competencies of individual students. The students from the small high school developed a different niche or functional role from those students attending the large high school. The classic conclusion drawn from the Barker and Gump study suggests that the ways an individual adapts to a behavioral setting are not totally determined by the environment. They concluded that the same environment provides different inputs to different persons, and even different inputs to the same person should the individual's behavior change.

What this research provides for social work practice is a novel way for conceptualizing the problems of clients. It suggests that the client's behavior is not only shaped by the environment, an idea long accepted in social work practice, but also that behavioral change in the client provides for different inputs from the environment. In a certain sense, the client appears to play a role in the shaping of the environment.

Through the ecological perspective, the behavioral setting can be viewed as the basic unit of analysis for social work practice. The behavioral setting of the client should be viewed in terms other than the simple behavioral approaches found in traditional psychology. In other words, the behavioral setting is more than the behaviorist's conceptualization of behavior as a stimulus-response relationship, but rather is an inextricably interwoven relationship of physical setting, time, people, and individual behavior (Plas, 1981). The conglomeration of behavioral settings of a given client forms the client's ecosystem.

### *Ecosystem*

A client functions in more than one ecology. The client's ecosystem is the interrelationships and conglomeration of these ecologies. For example, a client's ecosystem consists of the self, family, the neighborhood, and the entire community. Obviously, as stressed earlier, conceptualizing the client's relationship to the environment is not a new idea in the profession of social work. What is powerful, however, about the concept of

ecosystem is that the client's social functioning is clearly inter-related with the environment, and the client is an inextricable part of the ecological system (Hobbs, 1980). Consequently, the client's ecosystem is composed of numerous overlapping systems including the family, the workplace, and the community, as well as other critical subsystems unique to each client.

### *Transaction*

The ecological approach departs dramatically from the traditional person-in-environment orientation through the concept of transaction. The concept of transaction suggests that a bidirectional and cyclic relationship exists between the client and the environment. In essence, the environment contributes to the person's adjustment and development; the person's behaviors create unique responses with the environment, thus changing the environment and ultimately its effect on the person (Rhodes and James, 1978). Through the concept of transaction, the ecological approach shifts the focus of treatment from the client's personality and behavioral make-up to the client's interrelationship with the family, community, and other systems. The vast majority of people transact with the larger social ecology in such a fashion that the result is harmony and congruence. When this harmony no longer exists, social treatment by the practitioner may be useful.

The traditional methods of social work intervention such as casework and groupwork largely view the presenting problem of a client as individual pathology. That is, the client is viewed as deviant, behaviorally troubled, or disturbed. The ecological perspective through the concept of transaction suggests that problems of clients are not a result of individual pathology, but rather a product of a malfunctioning ecosystem. The ecological perspective suggests that emotional disturbances, for example, are disturbances resulting from a pattern of maladaptive transactions between the organism and the environment through which environmental activity shapes the person and the person's social functioning influences the environment. The practitioner may view this process as one of mutual influence; however, a more accurate interpretation may be to describe it as a sequential mutual influence where A affects B which in turn affects A or

as a simultaneous mutual influence where A and B form a unity which defines the situation. Thus problems in social functioning are viewed as interactive, reciprocal, and a dynamic set of forces operating between the client and the ecosystem.

The relationship between the ecology and problematic social functioning has been documented in a number of recent studies. For example, Nathan and Harris (1975) reported a relationship between social class and psychiatric hospitalization. The famous research by Szasz (1961) concluded that problems in social functioning do not arise until certain acts become known to others who then define or label the act as deviant or disturbed.

Clearly, the concept of transaction advances the practitioner's understanding of the relationship between the ecosystem and the social functioning of the client system. It deemphasizes the traditional approach which suggests that a negative environment creates problems in social functioning. The practitioner realizes that the transactional model assumes that the contact between the client and environment is a transactional relationship in which each is altered by the other. For example, the parent who labels a child as difficult may in time view the child's behavior as difficult irrespective of the child's actual behavior. In turn, the child in time will accept the difficult label as a central part of the child's self image, thereby becoming the difficult child for all time in all social situations.

The process of transaction has been applied to a number of problems confronting clients. In a recent longitudinal study of schizophrenic women and their children, clear evidence was found of the transaction process (Sameroff and Zax, 1978). This research concluded that the child of the schizophrenic parent learns to adapt and identify the craziness of his or her social environment and in time learns to contribute to the schizophrenic transactions with the parent. Sameroff and Chandler (1975) report a similar finding in the phenomena of child abuse. They concluded that child abuse is a transactional process between parent and child.

For the social work practitioner who is grounded in the traditional methods of intervention such as casework and groupwork, the ecological perspective offers a tremendous shift in thinking when viewing the process of assessment and treatment.

The shift is away from the individual as the core focus of intervention to a perspective defined as the individual-in-the-ecology. Obviously, traditional theories such as psychoanalysis, behavioral modification, reality therapy and so on, are dated when using the ecological perspective in social work practice. The practitioner must conceptualize treatment as a strategy that involves working with individuals, families, small groups, and larger social systems to create change that promotes the best possible transactions between people and their environments. It is an orientation that implements an integrative approach to practice stressing a dynamic combination of roles that meet the needs of clients by alleviating stress in ways that enhance or strengthen the inherent capacities of the client system. The ecological approach addresses solutions and prevention of problems at all levels of intervention—intrapersonal, familial, interpersonal, organizational, institutional, and societal. By utilizing an integrative practice approach grounded in the ecological perspective, more than one aspect of a given problem confronting a client system may be dealt with simultaneously. The practitioner using the ecological approach to practice when assessing client social functioning clearly understands presenting problems not as a result of a disturbed client, but more appropriately as a “disturbing client” confronted with a breakdown in the transaction between the client and the larger social ecology (Pardeck, 1987).

Allen-Meares and Lane (1987) in a recent article neatly summarize the core characteristics of the ecological approach to practice as follows:

1. The environment is a complex environment-behavior-person whole, consisting of a continuous, interlocking process of relationships, not arbitrary dualism.
2. The mutual interdependence among person, behavior, and environment is emphasized.
3. Systems concepts are used to analyze the complex interrelationship with the ecological whole.
4. Behavior is recognized to be site specific.
5. Assessment and evaluation should be through the naturalistic, direct observation of the intact, undisturbed, natural organism-environment system.



6. The relationship of the parts within the ecosystem is considered to be orderly, structured, lawful, and deterministic.
7. Behavior results from mediated transactions between the person and the multivariate environment.
8. The central task of behavioral science is to develop taxonomies of environments, behaviors, and behavior-environment linkages and to determine their distribution in the natural world.

Furthermore, Max Siporin (1980) concludes that the ecological approach appears to be an extremely appropriate strategy for practice given the current context of social work practice. Siporin suggests that the ecological perspective contributes to social work practice through the following points:

1. A dynamic wholistic approach is stressed emphasizing the person and the sociocultural systems surrounding the person.
2. A strategy is offered through allowing the social worker to think in terms of parts and wholes.
3. It encourages an eclectic approach to practice.
4. It allows one to move to both micro and macro levels of assessment and intervention when working with a client system.
5. It stresses treatment planning and allows the practitioner to work at altering intersystemic relationships.
6. Given its multifactorial nature, the practitioner is able to develop and utilize a strong and varied repertoire of assessment and social treatment strategies.

The ecological approach provides a balance between the person and the environment. Clearly, this balance is critical to social work treatment and facilitates practice effectiveness and accountability.

### Conclusion

The ecological approach defines the problems of clients in new ways and thus demands enlightened strategies for effective social work intervention. The ecological perspective builds on the traditional concerns of social work practice dating back to Mary Richmond. It also separates social work from the more traditional approaches stressed in psychology and psychiatry. One may also conclude that the ecological perspective makes a significant departure from the traditional methods of casework, groupwork, and community practice.

Current thinking on the ecological perspective provides practitioners with an integrative approach to practice that allows for new ways of assessing and treating problems. Given this situation, social workers can now conceptualize the problems confronting clients in such a way that effective treatment involves not only working with the client, but also the systems that facilitate social functioning including the client's family, neighborhood, community and other critical social systems.

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