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## AN ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS APPROACH TO FAMILY COUNSELLING

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### Abstract

In counselling, the unit of treatment may involve the individual, family, school and community. This article proposes an outline for a counselling model which combines individual and ecological approaches to assessment and intervention. The principles of general systems theory are presented, followed by an application of these principles to family assessment and intervention. Case examples are provided to further illustrate how the ecological systems model is translated into clinical practice.

### Résumé

Les cibles habituelles d'intervention en counselling sont l'individu, la famille, l'école et la communauté. Cet article pose les grandes lignes d'un modèle de counselling qui allie les approches individuelles et écologiques à l'évaluation et à l'intervention. L'auteur présente les principes de la théorie générale des systèmes et en tire des applications en termes d'intervention auprès de la famille et de son évaluation. Des exemples de cas servent enfin à illustrer davantage la façon dont un modèle systémique peut être transposé dans les interventions cliniques.

In the last several decades, the mental health field has undergone considerable progression toward adopting broader views of the biology and treatment of emotional and behavioral disorders. The focus of traditional theories such as psychoanalysis, client-centered therapy, and gestalt has been on the individual. The growth of family-oriented counselling and therapy and the impact of research in cognitive and behavioral psychology and in experimental social psychology has led to expanded understandings of the problems

and challenges faced by the helping professions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1981).

Currently, considerable confusion exists regarding the integration of individual, family, and community approaches to counselling. Many counsellors have adopted individual counselling models, while others express deepening dissatisfaction with the answers generated by such models. Some counsellors are unsure about what is the appropriate unit of counselling or treatment. Depending on the counsellor's frame of reference, the unit of treatment may vary from the individual, to the nuclear family, to kinship systems, to networks, and even to the community. Speck (1967), for example, advocates a network approach, while community psychol-

ogists shift the emphasis even further from the individual to community agencies and institutions.

Howells (1971), a leading British family psychiatrist, makes the observation that:

Individual psychiatry taking the adult as the functional unit, the child as the functional unit, or the adolescent as the functional unit, is obsolete. Individual psychiatry is replaced by family psychiatry. (p. 75)

Klein (1968), a community psychologist, arrives at another conclusion:

I have come to believe that the community represents the single most important social matrix which man has invented and that it is only in this matrix that the concept of mental health can be developed most fruitfully. (p. 5)

The reliance on individual models of counselling is contrary to the antecedents of the counselling profession (Blocher, 1981). Historically, counsellors associated with the guidance movement were concerned with the natural contexts of the school, family, and workplace. This viewpoint was supported in the counselling literature by writers such as Wrenn (1962), McCully (1965), and Shoben (1962) who pointed to the roles that counsellors can and should play in shaping educational systems to the needs of learners. Blocher (1974) pointed to an integration of theoretical models to provide the foundation for an ecology of human development. Banning and Kaiser (1974) proposed an ecological model for the design of campus environments. Blocher (1981) points out that, unfortunately, much of the direction given to counselling psychology by its historical roots appears to have been ignored, or at least not carefully noted.

It is the purpose of this article to present an outline of an ecological systems model which combines individual and environmental approaches to counselling assessment and intervention. The term "model" as used here refers to an abstract and theoretical representation of reality and provides a useful means of organizing and structuring the psychological world of the individual, family, or group. Psychological health and dysfunction from an ecological systems perspective is viewed not only as a condition of the person himself but as a reflection of the properties, deviance, and equilibrium in the series of systems with which

the individual interacts. It provides a different view of reality than, for example, the medical model with its emphasis on the treatment of the individual, or the crisis-intervention model with its focus on adaptational responses, or the metabolic-nutritional model with its emphasis upon toxins, allergies, and drugs, or the educational-socialization model with its focus on role learning and fulfillment. Following Bronfenbrenner (1979), the point of view presented here is concerned with the reciprocal influences that the individual, family, school, and community have on one another and the role of the counsellor providing meaningful intervention both at the remedial and developmental level.

It is a further purpose of this article to illustrate how the ecological systems model may be applied to family counselling. Specific family assessment and intervention strategies are identified to illustrate how the model may be used in family counselling.

As is evident from the case examples provided in the latter section, an understanding of both individual and environmental factors cannot be obtained from any one theory. Consequently, it becomes necessary for the practicing counsellor to sacrifice theoretical "purity" for clinical comprehensiveness. As Stanton (1981) points out, the clinician cannot always wait for the emergence of theoretical harmony in order to do the job and must proceed with the tools available. In other words, theory must catch up with practice.

Recognizing the present theoretical inadequacies, the thesis of this paper is that a variety of assessment interventions and counselling goals, although theoretically divergent, are in many ways compatible on an operational level and thus it is possible to construct a general paradigm which allows utilization of assessment and intervention techniques from various schools of psychological thought.

The ecological systems perspective perceives behavior as arising from the interaction between the individual and the physical and social environments. The individual is assessed in relationship to his transactions with the environment. For example, Stanton (1981) discusses the case of a white, blue-collar family with an 11 year old boy, John, who has a behavior problem in school (individual level of analysis). The nuclear (family system level of analysis) consisted of John's 5 year old half brother and mother and dad. Mother had been married before and John was the

### *Ecological Systems Model*

child of the previous marriage. The school complained that John had been stealing money and jewelry from friends and was not working in the classroom (school level of analysis). The school informed the police (community level of analysis) who had become involved in the problem. Thus one could not accurately assess John's state of affairs, nor adequately intervene in an effort to improve matters, without an understanding of both the individual, family, school, and community factors that were influencing John.

School counselling is largely organized on an individual basis. Many school counsellors see their role as working with the individual student in educational planning, personal problems, and career planning (Brown, 1980). In such an individually oriented model, the family and parental concerns are largely neglected or at best dealt with sporadically and superficially. Similarly, very little time may be spent in teacher consultation, community involvement, or even nurturing a healthy school climate. The counsellor with such an individually oriented model works out of the office and conducts individual interviews with little regard for ecological factors operating in the student's life.

#### *Systems Theory*

The concept of social system is widely regarded as an important heuristic device in the behavioral sciences (Conger, 1981). Scholars representing a wide variety of academic backgrounds use the term differently, resulting in considerable confusion concerning just how the construct relates to particular empirical phenomena. For example, those interested in a general theory of systems (Bertalanffy, 1968) will often use concepts such as morphostasis or morphogenesis which may be foreign to the behavior analyst studying processes of social reinforcement (Staats, 1975) or the sociologist concerned with interpersonal exchange (Emerson, 1972). Nevertheless, the basic principles of a systems perspective are reflected across disciplines.

Gray, Duhl and Rizzo (1978) describe systems as:

... a logical-mathematical field which deals with the new scientific doctrines of wholeness, dynamic integration and organization. It is a new approach to the unity-of-science problem which sees organization, rather than reduction as the unifying principle and which therefore

searches for structural isomorphisms in systems. (p. 7)

As is evident from the above definition, a systems orientation is concerned with the relationships between elements. Thus the activities of one element (e.g., the son in a family) cannot but have a direct or indirect influence on other elements in the system and through feedback loops on the first unit itself at some other time.

The components that describe the ecological systems model which will guide the present discussion are listed in Table 1. Following Bronfenbrenner (1979) we are concerned with individual, family, school, and community transactions and how each system influences the other. Bronfenbrenner (1979) has argued that studies of children should regard the family unit as one among many microsystems that are important for the developing child. In addition, he suggests that the family be studied as a small group nested within larger social structures. But, not only must the family be considered a microcosm within the larger community, but each family member also must be studied as a behavioral system in his or her own right. For the purposes of this paper, the systems approach will incorporate information concerning the individual, the family, school and community functioning within an interactive framework.

As is evident from Table 1, the individual, the family, the school, and the community form the human eco-system encompassing sets of systems of varying levels of complexity. The levels of complexity identified in the present model reflect distinctions in current conceptualizations of mental health and represent increments of increasing complexity in social interaction. The individual level constitutes the lowest level of complexity and is defined as a behavioral system consisting of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components in which personal problems may result from individual-environmental interactions. The second level, the family level, views mental health from the perspective of naturally occurring, long-enduring small groups which have a major role in the socialization and education of children. The third level is the school which has considerable and increasing influence on the behavior of children. Finally, the community level constitutes the highest level of complexity and involves broad social and institutional issues.

Table 1  
An Ecological-Systems Approach to Assessment and Counselling

Level of system analysis	Illustrative assessment domain	Counselling goal
Individual		
(a) cognitive	Intellectual functioning Beliefs Experiences in family or origin Socio-economic factors Interests	Gain greater self-understanding  Obtain information about careers, self and others Explore irrational beliefs and values Understand private logic and life style
(b) Affective	Temperament: depression, anxiety, selfthoughts Emotional awareness and response patterns	Establish atmosphere of trust, caring and acceptance Release repressed feelings, explore feeling states Correct displaced emotional responses, learn appropriate emotional responses, and change overly intense emotional reactions
(c) Behavioral	Behavior deficits Inappropriate behaviors	Strengthen appropriate behaviors and extinguish inappropriate behaviors Explore consequences of behavioral alternatives Reduce anxiety and symptomatic behaviors
Family	Family developmental issues System functioning issues Communications Relational and interactional issues	Resolve interpersonal conflict Open channels of communication Gain understanding of presenting problems and new ways of relating Develop interpersonal skills Develop effective problem-solving strategies Untangle enmeshed relationships Clarify family rules, expectations, myths and secrets
School	School climate Teacher-student relationships Parent-teacher cooperation Discipline Morale	Consult with teachers, and parents in order to improve the learning environment Develop cooperative working relationships between the school and families Assist schools to develop attitudes and behaviors in students conducive to family and individual health Develop courses designed to strengthen family life and responsible interpersonal behavior
Community	Contacts with social agencies Social networks Economic and social status Employment opportunities Crime and violence	Coordination of involved professionals Referrals to community agencies Working with the police and other institutions Train paraprofessionals in the community

### *Ecological Systems Model*

Each system, although maintaining specific boundaries, is interdependent and part of the total environment that comprises the human eco-system. It is assumed in this analysis that each system functions under general systems theory principles governing open systems. These principles define an open system as having the ability to 1) obtain input from the environment; 2) maintain a certain form and structure which makes up the system; 3) grow and develop a more differentiated structure; 4) produce output which can affect its environment.

As mentioned above, the first principle of systems theory addresses the importance of input from the environment. This principle may be applied to the family. For example, research has identified significant relationships between family isolation and adjustment of children (Jackson & Yalom, 1966). Counselling approaches based on this research emphasize the importance of breaking down barriers between families and community services, establishing cooperative working relationships between schools and parents, and assisting parents to relate more appropriately to neighbors, friends, extended families, and community members. The research into family networking (Speck, 1967; Aponte, 1976) emphasizes the importance of significant others in generating change in family structure. Based upon this approach, counselling may involve bringing extended families into the counselling session.

The effectiveness of this type of relationship building depends upon the family member's ability to enter into meaningful encounters with others through effective communication. Several family intervention approaches have been developed based upon communication skills training (Gordon, 1970; Mir, 1972). This training involves helping clients develop skills in acceptance and communication of individual feelings, awareness of communication patterns, resources in resolving family conflicts and learning how to make requests by use of "I" statements. Interventions include structured communication exercises, direct analysis of family interaction processes, and teaching models of effective interaction.

A second principle of systems theory is that individual and family change is dependent upon restructuring the system. Structure in family theory refers to the pattern of roles, relationships, rules, and responsibilities which have been established in the family to accom-

plish certain tasks. A large body of literature has examined the relationship between structural properties of families and the well-being of children. In this regard, the research of Patterson (1976) on the relationship between family structure, aggression, and academic progress in children is particularly noteworthy.

The work of Minuchin and associates (1976) from the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic also addresses the issue of family structure. They have identified maladaptive structural patterns of families and related these to health and adjustment problems in children. Family structural theory views families as hierarchical systems with parents or parent surrogates responsible for the executive functions. Counselling involves restructuring the family by use of such procedures as parent education and child management training and the development of attitudes that establish lines of responsibility between children and parents.

A third principle of systems theory is that organisms grow by the development of more differentiated structures. The ability of a system to grow and differentiate allows the system to change. The seminal work of Bowen (1978) demonstrates the importance of differentiation in relationships. As Bowen suggests, the more the basic differentiation of people in a relationship, the more their relationship is balanced towards individuality. Such a relationship is less emotionally intense and the togetherness manifestations are not so prominent. For example, while the need for another person exists in a differentiated relationship, that need is not so strong that it impairs independent functioning. In such a relationship, there is less psychic energy tied up in concerns about whether each person is paying enough attention to the other, being rejected by the other or being understood.

### *Assessment*

Based upon systems theory, Friesen and associates (1981) have developed a family assessment model which identifies five major subscales, namely: (1) family developmental issues; (2) system functioning issues; (3) communications; (4) relational and interactional issues; and (5) individual issues.

By use of this model, each family may be assessed after the first session in the five areas identified above. The assessments may involve an analysis of the multigenerational trans-

mission system, the identification of the presenting problems, analysis of communication skills and decision-making procedures, identification of the structural components in the family, observation of the interactional patterns and seating arrangements. In order to obtain a reliable understanding of family dynamics, it is expected that all members of the family attend the assessment session. A profile of family functioning is then prepared by the counsellor and a treatment plan generated specifying process goals and interventions for each family and individual family members.

After the assessment interview has been completed, a time limited, usually 5 session, counselling program is initiated. This program may involve individual, small group, or entire family counselling depending on the process and outcome that has been identified. On occasions, the teacher and significant others, in addition to parents and children, are included in the sessions. The focus during the sessions is to foster growth by use of a wide array of interventions involving the individual, the family, the school, and community.

After the initial set of sessions have occurred, a second assessment of the family may be undertaken to determine the effectiveness of the interventions. This assessment usually includes an evaluation by the family members of their reaction to the counselling sessions and an identification of behavioral and attitudinal changes that may have occurred during the counselling period. Based upon this information, the counsellor and the family may enter into another time limited counselling contract.

The counselling model suggested above is an example of an ecologically oriented family counselling program. It employs a wide range of techniques drawn from a variety of theories. The model allows the counsellor to frame interventions to enhance individual, family or community functioning. For example, in a given family, the initial phase of counselling might focus on the individual to engage him in behavioral techniques designed to decrease his negative and coercive behaviors in relationship to his family. The second phase might approach the family from a structural perspective and provide experiences and information for a restructuring of the communication system. The third phase might be to include teachers and other community persons in the counselling process. All the interventions are designed to foster growth-inducing patterns

of interaction within and around the family system. Examples of this process are given below.

#### *Case Examples*

Mr. and Mrs. J. came to the clinic to receive help in raising their hyperactive child who was negativistic, angry, and destructive. The parents had difficulty setting effective limits and providing consistent consequences for his misbehavior. The parents had feelings of defeat, confusion, anger and resentment towards their child whom they perceived being immature, disruptive, disobedient, aggressive and inadequate. It soon became evident that Mr. and Mrs. J. had serious marital problems which began early in their relationship.

According to systems theory, their hyperactive child may be symptomatic of the ineffective interpersonal relations between the spouses. The child was placed into the play therapy room where he received assistance. The parents became involved in marital therapy at the clinic. As a result of being better able to deal with the marital problems, the parents became more effective and consistent in setting limits, in avoiding counter-productive interactions with the child and in asserting more control.

Another example of the use of the model is the case of Mrs. S., a single mother, who came to the clinic because she had reached an impasse with her 14 year old daughter, Mary. Mary was an impulsive teenager who was struggling for independence. She felt her mother was far too constraining, inflexible, and authoritarian. This created a family atmosphere characterized by many negative interactions such as yelling, nagging, throwing objects, and physical violence. By working with the mother on an individual basis, the counsellor was able to clarify her feelings of inadequacy as a mother and as a person. She was further given assistance to differentiate herself from her daughter and establish mother/daughter boundaries. The next goal of counselling was to help her work through her unresolved anger towards her former husband and accept her daughter's need for greater autonomy and independence.

As mother became better able to deal with her personal problems, she was able to relate more effectively to her daughter. Mary, too, was seen in individual counselling. She had serious problems relating to authority and

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overreacted to parental and school guidance. After establishing a relationship with Mary, the counsellor helped her understand her feelings of anxiety, fear of rejection, and inability to express herself in a suitable assertive manner.

The school, too, had grave concerns about the academic progress of Mary. She seemed to spend much of her energy "fighting the system" instead of cooperatively using the school as a place of learning and enjoyment. Individual counselling with the mother and daughter using a psychodynamic model led fairly quickly to an understanding of the personal issues underlying the interpersonal conflict. Consultation with the school helped clarify and pinpoint issues, and develop better teaching and learning strategies. Family counselling provided the opportunity to identify ineffective interpersonal interactions and develop better ways of being together as a family.

In summary, the model presented in the above discussion provides a structure for intervening at different levels of system complexity. The use of this model in a counselling center makes it possible to assist clients with a variety of problems and provides a flexible yet realistic approach to working with the individual, the family, the school, and the community.

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