Clinical Process in Mentoring: A Theoretical Process

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The ecosystems perspective is a metaphor that provides an understanding about the reciprocal transactions that take place between people and the social environment in which they function. Therefore, people and environments are part of a holistic system in which each shapes the other. This paper suggests that this perspective can be elucidated and adapted to conceptualize the environmental component of mentoring focus. The paper further proposes that such a conceptual perspective will provide mentors with a symbolic representation or picture of an individual's view of the world.

From the beginning, ecological theory has focused on the interdependence that seems to characterize everything sharing the same habitat. Anthropologists, Sociologists and Social work theorists have shown a growing interest in ecological theory or more particularly, an ecosystems perspective because it offered a way of examining the effects of environment on human behavior (Germain, 1991). This paper suggests that this explanation should be a source of the mentoring position that human behavior is to be understood within the social environment in which the behavior takes place.

The conceptual framework will provide mentors with a symbolic representation or picture of an individual's view of the world and the social environment. Furthermore, the perspective underscores the need for mentors to pay particular attention to the trans action or interdependence between people and various systems in their social environment. Thus, entailing a comprehensive view of person-in-situation context, in which mentoring focus encompasses individual, familial, interpersonal, institutional, societal, and cultural systems. Critical to the ecosystems perspective is the holistic view of people: the interrelatedness and interdependency of social phenomena (Germain. 1991). Similarly, this perspective can be related to mentoring process.

In the human services, the ecological or the ecosystem perspective (as the terms are used interchangeably in this paper) suggests that the source(s) of a system's difficulties may be located anywhere within the system, its environment, or both. This view suggests that the psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems people experience are not necessarily the result of individual pathology, as the medical model would emphasize, but may be due to dysfunctions located anywhere in the ecosystem surrounding them. This paper holds that this way of thinking and organizing knowledge would facilitate a more empathic understanding in the mentoring relationship in several ways. The concept of these (interaction or transaction) interrelatedness or interdependency with people and their environment is well illustrated in Figure 1. For example, one who is mentoring an adolescent who may be having suicide ideations needs to have information about many shared properties of social system, whether they be families,

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Figure 1
Multiple Interacting Systems in the Social Environment
(Adapted from Charles Zastrow and Karen Kirst-Ashman (1998)
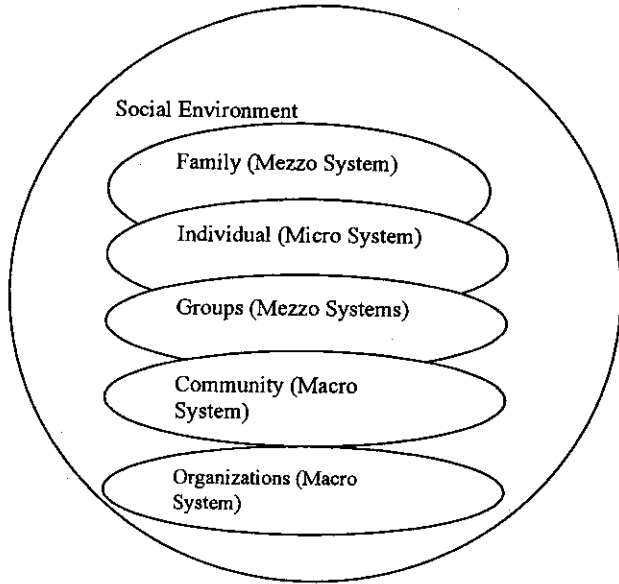
The mentor needs to know some of the reasons why people commit suicide so that he or she knows what questions to ask, how to react to and relate to the teenager, and what alternatives and supports to pursue.

Mentoring an individual whose racial and ethnic backgrounds differ from the mentor's own provides another example of the importance of foundation knowledge. The mentor needs to have at least general information about the individual's cultural values and the potentially differential treatment they have experienced (for example, incest and child sex abuse survivors, and victims of racial discrimination.) Only then can the mentor be able to empathize with a particular individual's situation

(Erikson 1963).

Several important contributions from ecosystems perspective and the helping professions — including the concepts of transaction, empathy, and the systems theories — will now be discussed and illustrated in greater detail. All of these concepts are especially relevant to the theme of the paper in regards to mentoring process.

Transaction

Perhaps the most basic principle formulated by human ecologists is that people and their physical-social-cultural environments form an integrated ecosystem in which each influences the others. In other words, people are engaged in continuous transactions with one

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another and with the physical, social, and cultural systems in their environments. Each influences one another continually and reciprocally (Dubos, 1968; Germain & Gitterman, 1987). To illustrate this concept of transaction, consider the child socialization process within the Scull family.

Mr. And Mrs. Scull have been teaching their three children appropriate behaviors and values. In the process of rearing and socializing the children, they have become more responsible, more giving and loving, more willing to sacrifice, more patient, and sensitive to the needs of others than they used to be. The Sculls are having much influence on their children, but the children are also having considerable impact on Mr. And Mrs. Scull. In technical terms, we may say transaction involves a circular feedback process (Maruyama, 1968) whereby cause becomes effect (e.g., the Sculls, in the process of rearing their children, are being affected by them). This process of reciprocal causality or mutual influence may be negative as well as positive. A harshly punitive father may generate a great deal of hostility and resentment in his son. In turn the son may rebel against his father, causing the father to become even more abusive towards him.

In applying this case to a mentoring situation, ecological concept of transaction would enlarge the focus of attention of the mentor from the individual viewed in isolation to the person-in-environment context. Accordingly, it shifts the emphasis in mentoring from identifying individual causal factors to looking at the interrelationship of all elements the least general information about the individual's situation and circumstances in order to be able to empathize with this

situation—intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental. The emphasis on transactions among systems highlights the importance of the mentor's "boundary" roles, such as enabler, adviser, cultural translator, and conferee. These contextual roles are as important for the mentor as the more conventional role of conferee or person with whom the difficult adolescents discuss their problems (Pardeck, 1988; Chau, 1991). Understanding the interactions between people and their environment would no doubt help in mentoring.

Empathy

Here, empathic mentoring will be comparable to a "Therapeutic alliance" in which a caring mentor and an individual work together in a realistic, collaborative relationship based on mutual liking, trust, respect and commitment. According to Keefe, such relationship arises from the use of a well-developed empathic skill (Keefe 1980). Keefe further explains that when experiencing and providing empathy, the counselor facilitates the helping relationship in several ways. First, the individual learns he or she is not wholly alone. Another person senses the suffering and the dilemma. Second, the individual will share more about him or herself because of this empathy. Moreover, the individual's disclosure of feelings and personal history builds trust and facilitates problem solving in the helping relationship (Erera 1997).

Similarly, this type of trust or rapport will help the mentoring relationship. As noted above, the mentor needs to have at person. The systems perspective will now be considered.

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The systems theory became popular in the 1960s as a possible successor to structural functionalism, which had come under attack particularly by conflict theorists. Combining a variety of ideas from several fields such as cybernetics, information theory, economics and operations research, systems theory yielded a more dynamic assessment of the social world than structural functionalism. However, after the initial excitement and impetus, the theory has experienced few additional developments and has generated limited research (Ritzer 1992).

Several system theories have been given considerable prominence in the field of social work. Alex Glitterman, for example, is known for his applications of this theory to practice situations. The theory remains popular in the field because its conceptual base is highly compatible with generalist practice, as it elucidates the many areas commonality among individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities and society as a whole and emphasizes the interrelationship between people and their social environments.

Consequently, how mentoring could be conceptualized through the interaction between people and the various systems within their environment will be further examined and illustrated below.

Individual Transaction Within Varied Systems

To understand the structure of the various social contexts, mentors need a deep understanding of the social system. A system represents any set of elements that affects or influence one another. In order to experience empathic mentoring, a mentor must take into account all the factors that influence the system and its components (Bronfenbrenner 1999; Churchman 1978). People participate in a number of social systems that influence their development—family, school, work setting, neighborhood, community, nation and so forth. We cannot understand human development by focusing merely on the psychological dimensions of individuals. For this reason, mentors need to develop knowledge of the key dimensions of the social systems, their interrelations and their environment.

Brim (1975) and Bronfenbrenner (1977) identified four categories, or levels, of system that are useful in this context: Microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems.

Microsystems represent any system that involves face-to-face or direct contact among the system participants. As mentors, we are interested in having categories that would enable us to classify behavior that takes place in these systems. This type of analysis is limited, however, if it neglects the relations between the microsystem of primary attention and other key microsystems. If we have an understanding of how our multiple microsystems are inter connected, we can have a more informed understanding of the behavior in a particular microsystem.

Mesosystem is the category system theorists use to address this level of analysis. It refers to the network of personal settings in which we live our personal lives. Each person lives in a similar but different mesosystem. It is critical to have an understanding of the network of personal settings affecting a particular microsystem when mentoring.

Individuals are members of a number of different Microsystems. What happens to them in any one microsystem can influence their behavior in other settings. For example, if you are mentoring an adolescent, you should not ignore the fact that events in his or her peer group can influence the degree of conflict observed in his or her school or family setting. The makeup of the mesosystem must be taken into account in analyzing any identified microsystem issue.

The exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's scheme refers to the larger institutions of society that influence our personal systems. This includes institutions like government agencies in which we do not directly work but have profound effects on our lives. Exosystems are considered to be any of the systems in which an individual is not directly involved. For instance, parents' work settings can affect the life of their children in many ways, yet the children have no direct involvement in the work settings of their parents. An exosystem level of analysis stresses the need to take into account the broader social environment of people we mentor by examining the influence of significant social institutions.

Last, the macrosystem represents the larger subcultural and culture contexts in which the Microsystems, mesosystems and exosystems are located. This system has the most pervasive level of influence on social activities. Culture is defined as a system of meaning and values shared by a population and transmitted to future generations (Sigelman & Shaffer 1995). It includes all the key artifacts developed during the history of a population—all its material and nonmaterial (symbolic) products.

Every sociocultural group has its own history, but recent years scholars of race, class, and gender studies have pointed out, through the voices metaphor, that many of these histories have been silenced. The voices metaphor comes from efforts of scholars to challenge the silence that has surrounded the experiences of many groups in our society. These scholars focus on ignored representatives of the silenced groups (Anderson & Collins 1995; 1998). The material and symbolic aspects of culture influence all facets of our behavior, and they should be given significant attention in mentoring.

Bronfenbrenner used these four systems to describe the environmental contexts of human development. This paper maintains that the same systems could be adopted to conceptualize the environmental component of our mentoring focus. Ecological systems thinking, unlike other approaches, would enhance mentor's ability to look at the environment in a way that allows its modification. This perspective directs the mentor's attention to the transactions between persons and their social environment. The model proposed in this paper emphasizes several aspects of this interaction. Systems theory provides us with the basis for empathizing and mentoring effectively. As established above, people are constantly and dynamically involved in interactions with their social environment. There is constant activity, communication and change. A mentor in this instance should try to answer the question, "What is it in any particular situation that causes a problem to continue despite the individual's expressed wish to change it?"

A system approach to mentoring provides a perspective for assessing many aspects of a situation. Individuals are affected by and in constant dynamic

interactions with other systems in their social environments. As indicated earlier, these include families, groups, organizations, institutions and communities. Take the following case illustrations.

Case Examples

An example is the case of Alberta Benson. Alberta Benson is nineteen years old and is wondering what the future holds for her. She lives with her parents and has a job as a hotel maid for which she receives the minimum hourly wage. She has frequent arguments with her mother, and both of her parents have encouraged her to get a better paying job so that she can become self-supporting and move out of the house. She realizes that a minimum wage job will not *allow her to live in an apartment, buy a car, buy clothes and food and have sufficient money for entertainment.*

Alberta was raised in a middle-class family. Her brother is attending college to become a minister. Religion has always been an important aspect of Alberta's parent's lives, but not of Alberta's. She detests going to church. She would rather party. Her parents have often called her "stupid" and negatively compared her to her brother who they believe can do no wrong. This disparagement of Alberta has in many ways become a self-fulfilling prophecy. She repeated a grade in elementary school, seldom studied and often received failing grades.

In school, she saw herself as a failure and hung out with other students who viewed themselves as failures. In high school, she frequently skipped school and partied. Eight weeks before graduation, she was expelled for skipping too much school. Her parents

and the school system had tried numerous times to motivate Alberta to apply herself in school; she even had a number of sessions with 3 different social workers and a psychiatrist. Alberta knows that her parents want her to leave home. Her parents are especially irate when she leaves home for three or four days at a time and parties in an abandoned house in the inner city of Chicago. She had lied to her parents about her sexual activities, when the truth is she has a variety of partners. Fortunately, she is taking birth control pills. Some of Alberta's male friends are putting excessive pressure on her to become a prostitute so that there will be more money to buy drugs and party. Alberta and her friends have had several encounters with the police officers while being arrested and high speed auto chases after radar detected they were speeding.

Alberta is asking herself a number of questions. Should she prostitute herself? Or, should she stop associating with her friends and try to make peace with her parents by seeking a high school education and a better paying job? Whenever she has tried in the past to achieve the middle-class goals set by her parents she has been criticized by her parents as being a failure—she wonders what her chances of making it this time are? The one thing she found enjoyable in life is partying with her friends, but she realizes her friends are getting her in trouble with the police. She is worried that cutting ties to her friends will result in living a life in which she will be continually rejected and put down by others. She wants a better paying job but realizes her chances are not good, especially since she has not completed high school. She wants a one-to-one relationship with a caring male, but

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because she has a low self-concept, the only thing she feels that males will find attractive about her is sexual intercourse. This has been a factor in her having multiple sex partners. She is increasingly concerned that being so sexually active is not right and may result in her acquiring a sexually transmitted disease (such as AIDS.) What should she do about all of these concerns? She is deeply perplexed and confused.

This example illustrates how a person is integrally involved with other systems in their environment. A mentor working with Alberta might assess how Alberta (the individual system) and other systems in the environment have had an impact on each other. Thus, mentoring Alberta in this instance should target her relationships with her family, friends, the school system, employer, the police, the social workers, and psychiatrists she had seen, as well as her middle-class community values. Deciding what to do about any of Alberta's specific problems will directly involve all of these systems.

The mentor needs to have all of the above information about Alberta's situation and circumstances, as well as the potentially differential treatment she had experienced. Only then can the mentor empathize with Alberta's situation and help her identify realistic alternatives.

Another illustration of the concept of transaction is the case of a seventeen-year old John Wilbor and his five younger siblings. *Both parents work at low-paying jobs in order to make a marginal living. His father works at a small machine repair shop. His mother store. Suddenly, through no fault of his own, his father is laid off For a short time, the family survives on unemployment compensation. When that*

runs out, they face a serious financial crisis. Despite great effort, the father is unable to find another job. In desperation, his family applies for public assistance. Due to some unidentified error in the lengthy application process, which involves much "red tape," the payments are delayed for two months.

Meanwhile, the family is forced to eat poorly and is unable to pay rent and utility bills. As a result, the phone is disconnected, the electricity is turned off and the landlord threatens to evict them. Reacting to the externally imposed stress, the parents begin to fight verbally and physically. John and his siblings complain because they are hungry and could invite their friends to sleepover. This intensifies the parent's sense of defeat and disillusionment. Out of stress, the father hit John and yelled at him to move out of the house and find a job. John realizes that he will have to quit school in order to find a paying job that helps support his family. John had never seen his parents quite this way before. He *is deeply perplexed and confused.*

Although this example has not been presented in detail, it nonetheless illustrates how John is abstractly interwoven with the exosystems in his social environment. Mentoring John in this case would involve assessing how his parent's work settings had affected his life.

It is obvious that John is not directly involved in his parent's work settings, but these have profoundly affected his young life. First, his father's life was seriously affected by his place of employment, the small *works as a cashier at a local convenience* engine repair shop, when he was laid off. As his parents were unable to cope with their stress, the resulting frustration affected John and his five siblings. A mentor who

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is using the ecosystems perspective would view the entire situation as a series of dynamic interactions between people and their environment.

Implications for Mentors

This paper has defined and described how ecological systems framework can guide mentoring process in a multidimensional environment. As can be deduced from above, empathic mentoring response requires careful thought and consideration of how an individual is integrally involved with all of the systems discussed in this paper. This paper provides framework necessary for a realistic, collaborative mentoring relationship based on mutual liking, trust, respect, and commitment. As shown by our case illustrations, the context of mentoring can be perceived as interacting micro, mezzo, exo, and macro systems. A teenager may be devastated by his or her parent's lost of employment. A parent's sharp scolding can also have a devastating impact. The presence or absence of friends and social supports in their environments may determine whether teens love or hate their neighborhood. There is no question that people are dramatically affected by the four systems described in this article (other people, groups and organizations around them). Finally, this paper asserts that the ecosystems concepts can be adopted to conceptualize the environmental component of our mentoring focus.

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