CHAPTER 2
The Ecosystemic “Lens” to Understanding Family Functioning

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INTRODUCTION

Context has always played a critical role in couple and family theory. Pioneers of CFT championed a view that expanded the focus from an individual level to the larger contexts that contain individuals—with, of course, a primary emphasis on the family. Even the use of the term systems, a central theoretical base of virtually every couple and family approach, is rich with an understanding of context and contextual influence.

Historically, context in CFT has not been solely limited to the nuclear family. For example, early approaches often considered the role of multiple generations within a family, other extended family members, as well as other important systems in the individuals’ and families’ social ecology in the evolution, maintenance, and treatment of a variety of problems (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987; Bowen, 1976; Framo, 1976; McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985; Speck & Attneave, 1973; Whitaker, 1975). Although this broader “ecological” focus has persisted over time, only recently has the “lens” been sharpened to include a more intensive focus on developing and testing integrated interventions that utilize social contextual frameworks for understanding and treating symptoms. Using this “ecosystemic lens,” a base of empirically supported intervention strategies has begun to emerge in CFT.

The focus of this chapter is to capture the essence of the ecosystemic movement in CFT. In doing so, we start with a brief description of factors that have influenced the rise in importance of ecological theories and interventions. Next, we present Bronfenbrenner’s theory of social ecology as a conceptual framework for organizing ecological intervention theories and implementation strategies. To Bronfenbrenner’s theory, we add a developmental component to capture the complex, dynamic, and reciprocally influencing relationships of individuals, couples, and families over time. Examples of ecological interventions are presented, including general strategies and specific techniques of prominent interventions (such as multisystemic therapy), as well as unique strategies that utilize interdisciplinary frameworks to enhance the lives of family members. We conclude with a discussion of the role that CFT may (and maybe even should) play in the future to target change at all levels of the social ecology.
THE EMERGENCE OF ECOSYSTEMIC APPROACHES

Many factors have influenced the emergence of an ecological focus in CFT. Obviously, the “systemic” foundation of CFT required sensitivity to all levels of influence on the lives of individual family members. Although intervention models typically created a boundary around the “family system” to understand family dynamics and organize intervention strategies, the systemic focus of early theorists required the inclusion of external influences on the family system. In fact, as we discuss in the next section on social ecology, the theoretical foundation of CFT in the past included an articulation of boundaries, communication flow, and the reciprocal influence of individual, family, and social contextual variables.

A sensitivity to context notwithstanding, there is no doubt that early approaches clearly emphasized the “family” as the primary unit for understanding and treating a variety of clinical problems. Some models focused on the nuclear family, whereas other approaches included diverse family compositions, such as extended family members or families of origin. Finally, some models excluded non-family members from interventions and excluded even a focus on external influences during intervention sessions, whereas other approaches included all of the relevant “players” in the lives of family members as part of treatment sessions. This rich diversity in the focus and delivery of interventions continues to persist in CFT. However, most approaches tend to be considerably more flexible in their focus and delivery, and, as noted throughout this volume, most CFT approaches explicitly include social ecological variables as a critical feature of treatment.

Many factors have contributed to the rise in importance of ecosystemic factors in CFT. One of the most powerful influences in the child and adolescent treatment arena was the emergence of the “family preservation” movement. This movement occurred in response to rising discontent about the system of child welfare practice that was common through the 1970s and ‘80s. Rejecting the old paradigm that tended to blame families for their failures in child rearing and viewed foster care or institutional placement as the best way to save children, the family preservation movement adopted the perspective that families were worth saving (Nelson & Landsman, 1992). The passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 initiated the replacement of the old system with a new model of family-centered social services. Many fundamental aspects of family preservation are not unique (e.g., focus on the whole family, rather than on the “problem” child; a recognition of both the interdependence of family members and connections between the family and its environment); however, the formal inclusion of a systematic focus on the improvement of all aspects of family functioning—social, material, or psychological—and the mobilization of relevant systems in the child’s and family members’ treatment had a profound influence on shifting the lens to the broader contexts and systems that interfered with or enhanced family functioning (Nelson, 1991; Nelson & Landsman, 1992, p. 5). The lasting impact of this movement is evident in the fact that most current family-based programs now include a focus on empowering families through increasing families’ coping skills and facilitating families’ use of appropriate formal and informal helping resources. It is worth noting that the “do whatever it takes”
mentality of the family preservation movement has also influenced the format of service delivery, with many approaches now adopting an approach where services are delivered in homes, schools, and other locations that are convenient for family members.

With respect to children and adolescents, research documenting the influence of multisystemic factors in the evolution and maintenance of disruptive behavior problems (c.f. Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992) has had a profound impact on the development of ecological intervention strategies. A core assumption of these approaches is that changing the risk to protection ratio in the child’s social ecology can dramatically reduce the odds of problem-behavior development. In general, this philosophy is most evident in the arena of family-based preventive interventions; however, a notable exception in CFT is the theoretical, clinical, and empirical work of Scott Henggeler and colleagues with multisystemic therapy (see Chapter 13).

Many other factors have also contributed to the growing support for ecosystemic approaches in CFT. These influences include but are not limited to the following: (1) the challenges of adapting or developing “specific” models for working in diverse contexts with diverse populations, (2) interdisciplinary cross-fertilization and collaboration to provide comprehensive treatment addressing the full range of symptoms related to the “presenting problem,” and (related to number 2) (3) an increased focus on modifying service delivery to provide a continuity of care, from intake to primary care to follow-up. Each of these factors has required an expansion/modification of existing approaches or the development of new approaches to provide services that meet the needs of complex problems and populations. The influence of these factors on the evolution of ecosystemic approaches has been fueled by the emergence of new theoretical frameworks (postmodernism) and a new era of accountability (efficacy, effectiveness, and transportability) in the health and mental health sciences and services.

SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL THEORY

Despite the fact that most of the early clinical models in CFT considered ecosystemic factors, very few models included an articulation of ecological variables with the same focus and theoretical grounding that guided understanding family functioning and treatment. Typically, ecological factors were included as an afterthought to make sure that the therapist did not forget to account for “external” factors that may be influencing family functioning, family members’ responsiveness to treatment, or the family’s ability to maintain changes over time or generalize changes to new contexts. Couple and family therapists were thus provided with only minimal guidance about theories and strategies for working in the family’s social ecology. Unfortunately, this situation has not been adequately addressed in CFT, and only a few comprehensive ecological intervention theories have been developed, refined, implemented, and evaluated.

Bronfenbrenner’s Theory of Social Ecology

Ecological approaches draw heavily from the theoretical work of Urie Bronfenbrenner...
Bronfenbrenner’s theory organizes social ecological influence on individuals at four different levels. Each level contains and influences the prior level and directly or indirectly influences individuals. The four levels of systems are known as microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems (see figure 2.1). Microsystems refer to systems that include the target individual directly. For children and adolescents, this might include the family, peers, the school, and the neighborhood. For an adult, microsystems might consist of the couple, the immediate family (of origin and of procreation), work, the neighborhood, and the health-care system (e.g., in the case of chronic disease). Mesosystems represent relationships between the members of the microsystems in which the individual participates but which do not involve the target individual. For children and adolescents, the primary mesosystemic relationships may involve parents’ interactions with the youth’s peer, school, and justice systems. For an adult, mesosystemic relationships might include interactions between the partner and the target individual’s parents or siblings, or between the partner and friends or doctors. Exosystems are those systems that include a member of a microsystem but that do not involve the individual directly. For children and adolescents, exosystems may include the gang of a friend or the social support network or place of work of a parent. Both of these exosystems, through their impact on the friend (gang members support the antisocial behavior of the friend) and on the parent (the parent receives support from friends/extended family or is under stress from work), respectively, may have an indirect impact on the child. Szapocznik and Coatsworth (1999) suggest that this impact occurs through the interactions between the youth and the other person. For an adult, important exosystems include the support network or place of work of the partner. Both of these relationships may serve as a critical buffer or stressor on the partner that, in turn, may dramatically influence couple interactions. Finally, at the broadest level are macrosystems, defined as the broad social forces and systems that have the most widespread impact, such as the law, as well as the cultural blueprints that pervade a family’s social environment. An example of macrosystems is the societal belief that individuals who do not speak English are less valuable to society because they do not speak English. At this broadest level, cultural factors are important in the development and maintenance of problems for individuals and families, for example, the differential levels of acculturation among parents and children in immigrant families (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993).

Cross-Domain “Cascading” Effects

Ecological interventions may address problems at all four levels of the social ecology. For example, as suggested by figure 2.1, therapists might intervene to improve family relationships (family microsystem), a partner’s relationship with his or her in-laws (family-extended family mesosystem), a behavior-problem child’s parent’s connection to Alcoholics Anonymous (exosystem), and a therapist serving on committees to shape sentencing and treatment practices for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence (macrosystem). However, it is important to note that changes often have a “cascading” effect (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). These “cross-domain effects” must be considered in

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planning and implementing ecological interventions. For example, improvements in the spousal relationship can influence improve-

Influences Within and Between Systems: Boundaries and Communication Flow

CFT’s historical and current foundation is social contextualism. What this implies is that family approaches consider larger units or contexts as a focus of intervention. CFT is rich with theoretical articulations defining the boundary between individuals and dyads, and even in definitions of the boundary separating the family from its context. An ecological focus thus adds other important contexts to understanding the functioning of each of these smaller units (individual, dyads, family). In doing so, the assumption is that the
boundaries at each level may be punctuated or defined in a relatively concrete way. This assumption is important because operationalizing boundaries ultimately defines membership at each level (e.g., sibling subsystem, family, neighborhood), as well as the parameters of communication/interactions between these levels.

Thus, the systemic notion of “boundaries” is essential for understanding how ecological approaches conceptualize etiology and treatment. Conventionally, boundaries have been seen as the metaphorical “walls” that separate people, denoting where one person or group of persons ends and where the next begins. However, a more complete view of boundaries recognizes that just as boundaries signify separateness, they also denote connectedness (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). For example, the parent-child boundary not only signifies the distinction between the parenting subsystem and the child subsystem, but it also signifies the precise point at which the two people come together to interact as parent and child. Take, for example, an analogy from biology. Initially, a cell membrane was viewed as a “wall” that helped contain the contents of the cell and that separated the inside of the cell from the outside of the cell. This view provided the membrane with a certain “concreteness.” A more contemporary view of a cell membrane, however, reveals that the “wall” is constantly negotiating a transfer of biological components from inside to outside and vice versa. Thus, the cell membrane represents the cell’s systematic mechanism for regulating transactions with its environment. This dynamic view of “boundaries” is reflected in the family systemic focus on the reciprocal process of interactions within the family, and between the family and its environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Magnusson, 1995; Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999).

Most family approaches have developed extensive theories for understanding within family boundaries. With the rise of ecological approaches, increased attention has been paid to defining the family-environment boundary and the influence of this boundary on individual and family functioning. The simplest way of identifying the family-environment boundary is by examining biological relationships, by examining who lives together and shares daily household responsibilities, or both of these (Greenwood, Hervis, Mitrani, Taylor, & Szapocznik, 1995).

Like the boundaries that separate and connect individuals and subsystems within the family, the boundary between the family and the environment is more or less permeable. That is, much like the membrane of a cell, this boundary regulates communication between the family and its environment and represents the precise point at which they intersect and reciprocally influence each other.

The family-environment boundary is considered at several levels. For example, at the microsystem level the connection between a target child and the school or between a target adult and the place of work are important. At the mesosystemic level, the target child’s relationship to the child’s school or the target adult’s partner’s relationship to the adult’s place of work should be considered. The family-environment boundary is critically related to the family’s functioning and is frequently an indication of potential problems in the family’s ability to function adaptively. For example, Alexander (1988) notes that in families in which there is incest, the boundary between the family and the environment is often rigid, resulting in increased insularity of the family and an inability of the family to receive and respond adaptively to “feedback” from the environment.
Individuals in Context

A fundamental assumption in ecological approaches is that an individual’s behavior is quite different from what it would be if it were possible for that individual to act in isolation. That is, the behaviors of individual family members are linked in an interdependent fashion, and each family member is viewed as being responsible for contributing to, maintaining, or changing the system’s interactions (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1989). As such, the family is at the core of ecological approaches. However, ecological approaches also appreciate the full range of systemic influences that affect the individual. For example, these approaches acknowledge the important influence of peers/support networks, school/work, and the neighborhood on children, parents/partners, and other family members.

Understanding individuals in context does not mean that “individual” factors are ignored. In fact, a fuller appreciation of the range of systems that influences family members also includes biological processes (i.e., genetics), as well as individual psychological processes (i.e., cognitions). For example, Magnusson (1995) proposes a modern, integrated, holistic model for individual functioning and development, in which “individual functioning is determined in a process of continuous, reciprocal interaction b/w mental factors, biological factors, and behavior—on the individual side—and situational factors” (p. 27). From this perspective, individuals develop through continuous reciprocal interactions among psychological, biological, and environmental factors. Likewise, Ceci and Hembrooke (1995) offer a bioecological perspective that considers context not only to be a basic ingredient of intellectual development but also to differentiate and actualize biological potential. Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994; Ceci, 1990) developed this theory, suggesting that proximal processes, defined as reciprocal interactions between the child and other people, objects, and symbols, are the mechanisms by which genotypes are translated to phenotypes (p. 308).

Despite rich articulations of the dynamic relationships between individual factors and contextual factors in the development and maintenance of adaptive and maladaptive behaviors, very little research has elucidated specific mechanisms in the dynamic relationship between intra-individual and contextual factors that give rise to individual and systemic symptoms. As such, much treatment at this level relies on speculation and on research findings on individuals and contexts, rather than on research evidence for understanding the differential impact of specific contexts on specific individuals. Future research must expand on these limits to develop theories and intervention strategies that are specific to individuals in context.

Developmental Considerations

Ecosystemic approaches also consider the dynamic nature and mutual influence of systemic relationships over time. That is, to understand the evolution of individual, couple, or family problems requires an examination of individual and family development, as well as of the changing nature of broader social context influences in which development occurs. For example, Szapocznik and Coatsworth (1999) use the
term **ecodevelopment** to capture the complex set of features that emerges within the target family member and in the target family member’s social ecology and the nature of the interactions within and among these systems, as they change and influence each other reciprocally over time.

The ever-changing nature of the ecosystem makes it difficult to capture the essence of multisystemic influences. However, eco-developmental theory offers a framework for understanding the evolving relationship between individual and social ecological factors. Consistent with Rutter’s (1987) transactional conceptions of risk and Cicchetti and Sroufe’s (1978) organismic developmental theory, ecodevelopmental theory considers that functioning at one point in development will influence functioning in the next, and that functioning at any one point in time is also influenced by current interactions within and between multiple systems. Thus, identifying how individual and multisystemic risk trajectories have shaped the nature of current multisystemic interactions becomes important for understanding risk and protection within the social ecology and for implementing comprehensive and appropriate multisystemic interventions.

Figure 2.1 depicts a static view of the nesting of individuals in context, providing an organizational theory of the relevant systems that influence family members frozen at one point in time. However, this view does not adequately capture the nature of changes in individuals and the social ecology that mutually influence one another over time. For example, view figure 2.1 as traveling across time in such a way that each level of the ecosystem and each domain currently influences all other levels and domains, and that each level and domain is also influenced by the trajectory of change in every level or domain that has occurred up to the present. Likewise, each domain is influenced by its own trajectory over time. Figure 2.2 adds this developmental perspective to capture the transactional nature of ecological influences. In the next section, we describe how the ecodevelopmental perspective conveyed in figure 2.2 may be applied to understanding families with behavior-problem youths and individuals in couples.

**FAMILIES WITH BEHAVIOR-PROBLEM YOUTHS**

The family is the primary context in which child development occurs, and, therefore, family functioning has a profound influence on young children. Problems in the family, such as high conflict or abuse, are related to a variety of behavioral and emotional problems manifested by the child. As shown in figure 2.2a, during infancy and early childhood, the family is the most proximal and influential system in the child’s life. During early and middle childhood, the family is still in a very influential role; however, other systems become increasingly important to the developing child, particularly the school system. During adolescence, the peer system emerges as perhaps the most salient influential system for youths with behavior problems.

Several aspects of the nature of ecosystemic influences over time must also be considered. First, current interactions are influenced by the quality of experiences in prior stages, as well as by the ongoing pattern of interaction; Pathway A in figure 2.2b demonstrates this within-domain influence over time. For example, problems in the family, school, or peer systems often persist over time (as illustrated by Pathway A in...
Second, problems in one system may be directly related (or may even predict) problems in other systems. For example, family problems may lead to current or future problems in the school system (see Pathways C and B, respectively). (Note: Family-peer relations are discussed further on.) Likewise, problems in the school system may increase the likelihood of association with deviant peers, which in turn may lead to further problems at school. This reciprocal influence between the school and the peer systems is illustrated in Pathway D. Pathway E illustrates perhaps the most important mesosystemic relationship for adolescents with behavior problems, the family-peer mesosystem (Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995; Patterson, Dishion, & Bank, 1984). In particular, this pathway captures how parenting practices (e.g., nurturance, discipline, and monitoring and supervision) influence the emergence, maintenance, or both of the adolescent’s connection to a peer group that validates the adolescent’s deviant behaviors. This influence is bi-directional, with considerable within-family conflict emerging as parents express discontent about the adolescent’s selection of peers and as peers directly support the adolescent’s rebellion against parents.
Similarly, as context for a couple evolves, so does the nature of systems of influence (see figure 2.3). Early stages in a couple’s relationship are marked by high levels of influence from each partner’s family of origin. For many young couples, this period of time is also marked by the influence of schools (e.g., college) and job placement. However, over time, as the context of the couple changes (birth of a child, new home, job promotion), so does the nature of the couple system. For example, the influences of family of origin...
decrease as the couple creates and negotiates its own procreative developmental trajectory. So, as time investment toward a child increases, time spent alone as a couple often decreases and leads to changes in the quality and quantity of the couple’s daily interactions. As figure 2.3 shows, such changes in context (birth of a child) may lead to further changes in the couple system by increasing marriage dissatisfaction and negative interactions. Likewise, as the “family” system changes over time, the couple negotiates (1) changing parenting styles to deal with raising adolescents, (2) dealing with the loss associated with their children leaving for school or to form their own families, and (3) establishing new patterns as they “enjoy the golden years.” Similar to the patterns depicted in figure 2.2b, over time the partnerships’ interactions are influenced by the quality of experiences in prior stages as well as by the ongoing pattern of interaction within their social envelope. Likewise, the relationships between systems must also be considered, such as the impact of each individual’s work/career trajectory on the couple and family. For example, an individual takes a job that requires extensive travel or long hours away from home. It is important to note that the systems of influence may also change as individuals shift responsibilities and roles or as new roles emerge. For example, as individuals retire or as health status changes, systems that were important in prior stages may no longer have a primary influence, and new systems, such as health care, may become more influential.
INTERVENTION STRATEGIES IN ECOSYSTEMIC APPROACHES

Ecological approaches primarily borrow intervention strategies from family systems models, extending interventions to the larger social context. In many ways, the only novelty of ecological interventions is the systematic focus on the family’s social context. Further on, we discuss common issues involved in working in the ecology. The theoretical base for this discussion is described in more detail in Robbins, Schwartz, and Szapocznik (2002); consequently, much of the information is presented in a manner that is consistent with an ecological version of brief strategic family therapy (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1989). However, the areas that are covered are particularly accurate in describing the range of family-based ecological approaches for behavior problem adolescents. Although other approaches may vary in the specific nature of intervention strategies, the general information presented further on is consistent with Howard Liddle’s multidimensional therapy (Liddle, Dakof, Diamond, Holt, Arojo, & Watson, 1992) and Scott Henggeler’s multisystemic therapy (Henggeler & Borduin, 1990). For example, both multidimensional and multisystemic therapy include modules and procedures for working therapeutically with extrafamilial systems, such as the peer, school, and justice systems, as well as modules for facilitating adaptive family-mesosystemic relationships with each of these systems.

Identifying Strengths and Weaknesses in the Ecosystem

Therapists must systematically examine the social ecology of individuals and the family to identify areas of difficulty or strength that may be critical to address or utilize in treatment. For example, with behavior-problem adolescents, therapists should assess the degree of parental monitoring and supervision of adolescent activities and the nature of the communication across systems. Or, in a couple in which one member has a chronic illness, therapists may seek to identify and engage a support network of the healthy partner.

Once relevant ecosystems have been identified, the therapist can work toward creating a therapeutic system that includes family members and individuals from the social ecology. In doing so, therapists must recognize that engaging ecosystems involves connecting with both individuals and the systems to which they belong. The first step in joining the ecosystem involves gaining family members’ approval to contact members of the ecosystem. This step is critical because family members must understand and approve of any attempt to involve others in their treatment process, and they should decide on the amount of personal information they choose to share with others.

The second step in engaging the ecosystem is to identify the most influential members of a particular ecosystem and to obtain their permission and willingness to participate in treatment in support of individual family members or the whole family. The therapist must assess the aspects of other systems (such as their power structure) and enter the system with the permission, approval, and sanction of its power structure—without alienating individuals who may resent the power structure.
Implementing Interventions in the Ecosystem.

In implementing ecological interventions, two kinds of interventions are typically used: those intended to enlarge positive informal social support networks and linkages with formal service delivery, on the one hand, and those intended to discourage damaging relationships, on the other (e.g., drug-using friends). Interventions aimed at enlarging systems are frequently accomplished by creating and assigning tasks to create a history of successful shared experiences on which more substantive experiences and relationships can be built. Interventions aimed at discouraging damaging relationships may utilize blocking and limit setting. Because ecological interventions usually emphasize building the system’s (in this case, the family-ecology system) inner capacity to conduct and maintain changed behaviors, the therapist best accomplishes these kinds of interventions by allying with and strengthening those subsystems that have the competence, power, and interest to undertake the limit setting.

With behavior-problem adolescents, the most prominent ecological interventions involve creating or maximizing the positive influence of mesosystemic relationships, particularly parents’ relationships with the systems that directly contain the adolescent (i.e., peer, school, and justice). In the peer system, for example, interventions systematically address parent supervision and monitoring of peer activities. Parents are encouraged to meet the child’s friends, as well as the friends’ parents, and are coached and supported in setting up procedures/rules for tracking their child’s daily activities. Likewise, parents are coached on how to effectively negotiate with the school system. Parent-teacher conferences are conducted (with the therapist present), and plans are developed for maintaining consistent parent investment in the youth’s school activities. Similarly, parents and adolescents are encouraged to interact to discuss the youth’s current criminal charges, and a plan is developed for interacting with the justice system, which will maximize the likelihood that the family’s goals will be met. Parents are coached on how to interact with the justice system, and the therapist attends these meetings to work with parents and juvenile justice representatives to facilitate interactions that ensure that the parent is able to have some influence on the judicial decision-making process. A benefit of conducting sessions with parents and justice system representatives is that a new pattern of interaction is established in the family-juvenile justice mesosystem. A secondary benefit of these types of interventions is that parents learn valuable skills that they may generalize to future interactions within important microsystems.

Exosystemic interventions typically include enhancing or supporting the connection of parents with a supportive extended network. The focus of interventions in this domain is to facilitate the enlargement of boundaries to establish a parent support system. With such supports, parents are better able to carry out their leadership and their nurturing role within the family. This may involve enlisting the support of extended family, friends, and employers, and in instances where a parent figure (or figures) has a history of drug abuse, therapists may encourage the parent(s) to attend appropriate support groups.
MULTISYSTEMIC THERAPY

The most recognized and well-researched ecological approach is the multisystemic therapy approach developed by Scott Henggeler and colleagues (Henggeler & Borduin, 1990; see Chapter 13 of this handbook). Adopting Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) social-ecological model of human development, MST proposes that behavior problems are often “maintained by problematic transactions within and across multiple systems of the social ecology of the child” (Huey, Henggeler, Brondino, & Pickrel, 2000, p. 452). Consistent with social-ecological theory, MST aims to reduce antisocial behavior and promote prosocial behavior by altering the youth’s familial and social context. For example, core principles of MST (Henggeler & Borduin, 1990; Henggeler, Melton, Brondino, Scherer, & Hanley, 1997) include (1) understanding the fit between identified problems and the broader systemic context, (2) emphasizing the positive and using the systemic strengths as levers for change, (3) intervening to target the sequences of behavior within or between multiple systems, (4) promoting change by empowering caregivers to address family members’ needs across multiple systemic contexts, and (5) implementing interventions that are developmentally appropriate and fit the developmental needs of the youths.

WORKING IN THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY: WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Certainly, the future will continue to generate more elaborate models for understanding and treating couples and families. We believe that just as this research will shed light on individual and familial processes, research will also provide a clearer understanding of processes in the family’s social ecology. In part, the rise of ecological work will occur as existing treatment models add ecological components to further enhance treatment outcome. However, we expect that with increased understanding of social ecological processes, new theories of intervention and change process are likely to emerge as well.

The expansion of ecosystemic work is also likely to occur, as ecological theories and interventions are generalized to new clinical and nonclinical populations. For example, in our own work at the University of Miami’s Center for Family Studies, we have expanded our ecological work to include interventions for HIV+ African American women and their families, as well as for primary caregivers in families with an Alzheimer’s patient or a developmentally disabled adult. In doing so, we have expanded our clinical theory to address the primary systems that influence the lives of each treatment population.

As noted earlier, interdisciplinary cross-fertilization and collaboration to provide comprehensive treatments for couples and families have also given rise to unique ecological intervention strategies. One of the most interesting and novel areas of cross-fertilization has occurred at the interface of architecture and family psychology, where new interventions have been developed to address the neighborhood context. Evidence indicating that microsystemic characteristics of neighborhoods affect individuals and families, such as social connectedness and collective efficacy of the neighborhood...
(Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997), has led to theories about how the “built environment” can be (re)designed to increase or decrease individual family members’ social connectedness and perceptions of collective efficacy. Based on these theories, interventions can be implemented at many levels, including the macrosystemic level that is governed largely by policies and cultural beliefs.

Several aspects of the “built environment” have been linked to social processes that increase or decrease youths’ risk for developing behavior problems (c.f., Gorman-Smith, Lombard, Martinez, Mason, & Szapocznik, 2002). For example, neighborhoods in which buildings are used for multiple purposes, diversity of use, ensures that streets are occupied throughout the day and night, thereby increasing supervision and monitoring of neighborhood activities (Duany & Plater Zyberk, 1992). Also, the extent to which adult residents of the community function as “eyes on the street” (Jacobs, 1992) serves to provide additional protection against youth problem behavior. Aspects of the built environment, such as the number, size, and location of windows, as well as the structure and organization of a residential building can either enhance or hinder monitoring of neighborhood activities and social interaction among residents in the neighborhood. Likewise, the character of a neighborhood can either invite or discourage social interaction among residents. Whereas poor maintenance creates concern for safety and may reduce interaction, aesthetically attractive buildings create a desire to gather outside (Jacobs, 1992; Katz, 1994). Duany, Plater Zyberk, Speck, & Langdon (2000) and Kay (1998) found that narrow streets tend to slow automotive traffic and that sidewalks also enhance pedestrian safety, thus increasing walkability. The use of open space can also reduce risk. For example, large parks that are well maintained and patrolled by police and park workers can be a very positive influence on residential interactions and can serve as a deterrent against problem behaviors. However, maintaining large parks requires considerable resources (Jacobs, 1992). For communities with limited resources, smaller plots work well. Lots that are affiliated with an institution or that are located between two buildings have a more favorable impact on youths and neighborhood residents because they increase the likelihood of adult monitoring and supervision.

Examples such as the collaboration between architecture and family psychology demonstrate that the future holds considerable promise for couple and family therapists, as clinical theorists and researchers continue to identify and integrate ecological variables into comprehensive intervention theories. The range of factors will likely be influenced by theory and research from a variety of disciplines, including family psychology; psychology; individual, couple and family therapy practice and research; developmental psychology and psychopathology; social psychology; architecture; and biological sciences, to name a few. Such diversity of findings will raise many challenges for training and research programs, as well as for practicing clinicians. For example, there will be a need for new theories (or refinements to existing approaches) and intervention strategies to address these ecological processes. At the very least, couple and family therapists will be faced with the challenge of learning to collaborate effectively across disciplines to implement integrated and comprehensive treatment programs to systematically address a full range of ecological risk and protective factors.

Central in this process will be the need to redefine the roles and responsibilities of...
couple and family therapists as agents of ecological change. For example, does an increased understanding of complex multisystemic factors put couple and family therapists in a position to systematically address these factors? Does CFT as a discipline have an ethical obligation to develop specific plans or policies to address these factors? These considerations quickly, but appropriately, spin off into discussions of the role that CFT should play in dealing with issues of social inequity, particularly as research identifies ecological factors that perpetuate the status quo, which is particularly problematic for minority groups and women. Undoubtedly, within CFT there will continue to be a movement to “take on” systems that support one group of people at the exclusion of others; consequently, the clinical focus of couple and family therapists will likely expand to the macrosystemic level to target social policies and systems that impact (directly or indirectly) individuals, couples, and families.

REFERENCES


