

The ecological perspective also challenges social workers to think in much more complex patterns that capture the mutually shaping back and forth interactions among individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions (German & Gitterman, 2011). Logical thinking tends to be linear, where we assume a cause-and-effect relationship between two events, whereas “ecological thinking” requires that we understand the back-and-forth interactions of a person in the environment. In logical thinking, A causes B, and that’s the end of the story. In ecological thinking, A has an impact on B, which changes B, which in turn has an impact on A, which changes A, which in turn changes B, and so on. For example, a mother who views the challenges of toilet training her two-year-old as a normal developmental stage and major developmental accomplishment for her child will approach the task with greater ease and excitement than a mother who interprets her child’s inconsistency in toileting as defiant behavior. The latter mother sees her child as a problem, while the first mother does not. Clearly, the mother who views toilet training as a normal part of her child’s growth and development will be able to create a more supportive environment for the child (good fit) to complete this critical task than the mother who sees the lack of toileting mastery in her two-year-old as a discipline problem (bad fit). Each mother’s responses shape the child’s sense of self and feelings of competence. To the extent to which we experience success in shaping our environments, we grow in self-esteem and feelings of competence (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Zastrow, 2013).

This mother-child scenario reflects Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory and how the relationships among systems and system components impact a child’s development. A new component recently added to this model is the awareness of the child’s biology, which interacts with his or her environmental systems and affects the child’s development. Renaming the theory *biocological systems theory* has brought new attention to the study of a child’s development and the need to consider the child in his or her immediate environment as well as the interaction with the larger environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Gulm & Goelman, 2011; Paquette & Ryan, 2001).

From a social work perspective, mothers are part of the environment that either enhances or deters their child’s developmental potential. The reciprocal nature of the relationship between individuals and their environments means that as individuals we move and shape our surroundings and that our surroundings have a profound effect on us as well. For example, the mother who acknowledges and praises her child’s mastery of toilet training affects the child’s sense of competence and self-worth. As the child responds with pride in his or her accomplishment, the mother feels competent in her role as a mother. Both the mother and the child mutually shape their sense of well-being. Conversely, the mother who sees toilet training as a discipline problem and responds with anger and punishment equally influences her child’s sense of self-worth. The child may respond with fear, confusion, and a feeling of inadequacy in meeting his or her mother’s demands. The child’s failure at toilet training may affirm the mother’s suspicions of her own inadequacies as a parent. In both cases, the child and the mother mutually contribute to the stress or satisfaction they individually experience around the task of toilet training and the role of mothering. Box 3.3 provides a summary of important concepts central to understanding the ecological perspective in assessing the goodness of fit between a person and his or her environment. The case study in Box 3.1 demonstrates how the theory of ecological perspective can inform practice with a grieving client.

Box 3.3 Ecological Perspective Concepts

Person-Environment Fit: The relationship between an individual or group and his or her physical and social environment within a historical and cultural context. When the environment supports growth and health, then a good fit between the person and the environment is said to exist.

Adaptations: Internal or external changes to self or one’s environment that maintain or enhance the goodness of fit between an individual and the environment.

Life Stressors: Critical life events or issues that disrupt the goodness of fit between an individual and the environment. Common issues include traumatic events, such as the loss of a loved one, one’s job, or one’s health; major life transitions, such as marriage, divorce, or retirement; or larger issues that impair the goodness of fit and often bring on other life stressors, such as poverty and oppression.

Stress: An internal response to life stressors that produces negative emotions, such as guilt, anxiety, depression, despair, or fear, and result in a person feeling less competent, producing a lower level of relatedness, self-esteem, and self-direction.

Coping Measures: Behaviors that individuals initiate to respond to life stressors in ways that restore or heighten the goodness of fit between an individual and the environment.

Relatedness: One’s ability to form attachments to friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors and attain a sense of belonging in the world.

Competence: When individuals are provided with opportunities to shape their environment from infancy on, they have the opportunity to develop a sense of efficacy. Ongoing experiences of efficacy accumulate to provide a feeling of competence at shaping and managing one’s environment.

Self-Esteem: Represents an assessment of oneself as worthy of love and respect. People with high self-esteem feel competent, valued, and respected. Those with low self-esteem perceive themselves as inadequate, unlovable, inferior, and unworthy and often experience depression.

How we feel about ourselves deeply influences our thinking and behaviors.

Self-Direction: The capacity to make decisions, take control of one’s life, and direct it in desired paths while taking responsibility for one’s decisions and managing one’s life with respect to others’ rights and needs. The ability to self-direct is strongly related to feelings of power and powerlessness. If individuals are not provided with opportunities to make decisions and direct their own lives, they will likely feel powerless and lack self-direction. Living in oppressive conditions often robs people of their power and can profoundly influence their ability to self-direct.

Habitat: Refers to the nature and location of the person’s “home” territory or where he or she feels most at home. Some terms often applied to habitat are “nesting places,” “home range,” or “territory.” For humans, it may include home, community, school, workplace or local hangout and people’s behaviors within these spaces.

Niche: Social position or ranking within one’s community or the status one holds within the family, with coworkers, or in the community. For example, a man may be a patriarch at home, the boss at work, and a coach at the local pub, all indicating high levels of status across his habitat. Conversely, a man might be a draftee in his family, undependable at work, and homeless in the community, all of which signify low status across the habitat.

Source: German and Gitterman (2011).

Life Model of Social Work Practice

In response to changing practice needs in the 1970s, German and Gitterman (1997, 2008) developed a life model practice method that implemented the concepts of the ecological perspective into a practice approach. It differed from popular practice approaches in that it did not focus on the deficits of a person but rather modeled interactions in the practice relationship around life processes and focused on client strengths. The goals of the life model are not to provide remedial treatment but rather to do the following:

- Promote health, growth, and the expression of one’s potential
- Make changes to the environment that will promote and sustain growth and well-being
- Improve the person-environment fit (German & Gitterman, 1997, 2008)