"The Power of Place"1: Another Look at the Environment
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The profession of social work has long claimed its niche as that space where the traffic between the environment and individuals, families, and groups occurs. Person–environment is a code for this transactional space. The reign of the ecological/systems model of understanding and practice, and that staple of curriculum, human behavior and the social environment, all stake out in one way or another this conceptual and practical habitat for the profession. It is, in fact, one of the distinguishing marks of the helping that social workers do—that we always and ever must understand human problems, suffering, possibility, capacities, and need in terms of their context; we must understand how the environment promotes challenges and offers resources; and we must understand how the individual or family interacts with those factors. But there is a sense of the environment that social work has, to a significant degree, ignored—that is, the immediate, proximal, often small environment where people play out much of their lives. Were we to attend to elements of this aspect of the environment, some of the ways that we think about human problems and possibilities might be reshaped. In this paper I suggest some of the ways that those revisions in thinking about that environment might influence what we see and what we do as professionals.

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First, let me briefly make an accounting of some of the enduring uses of the idea of the person–environment or ecological approach to social work. As with all terse inventories, much will be left out, but hopefully the kernel of the ideas will remain. The late Carel Germain and Alex Gitterman (1996) have written as widely as anyone about the ecological approach or, in their words, the *life model* of social work practice, and when they say *environment,* they typically mean environmental resources and supports or the opposite—environmental challenges or scarcities.

> *Environmental resources* [authors' emphases] include formal service networks such as public and private agencies and institutions.... Supports also include informal networks of relatives, friends, neighbors, workmates, and coreligionists.... However, some formal and informal support systems may be unresponsive or cease to be supportive ... [and] the social and physical environments involved in coping must be assessed as well. (p. 13)

Germain and Gitterman also refer to *habitat* and *niche,* terms from ecology that amplify the idea of environment. Habitat is the place where the individual organism and its group can be found, and niche is the organisms' place in the local ecosystem.

[1] I enclose this part of the title in quotation marks because after I had begun work on this paper with this as the working title, I came across a very helpful book by Winifred Gallagher with the same name (see references).

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The heaviest emphasis in the life model is upon environmental pressures and stresses (anything from unemployment to natural disasters) and how the individual, family, or community adapts to and copes with them. The coping and adaptation can be salubrious or, at the other end of the spectrum, unsuccessful, harmful, and, perhaps, debilitating. Germain and Gitterman (1996) advocate for "life-modeled" community practice—assessing community needs and strengths, recruiting residents to participate in the development of programs, marshaling informal resources, and strengthening networks of supportive relationships to meet those needs and solve those problems, as well as working to augment the community's ability to withstand stress, whether internally or externally generated. Versions of these ideas are also found in the seminal work of Carol Meyer (1983) and Harriet Bartlett (1970), especially her notable attempt to find an essential conceptual underpinning to social work practice.

More currently, the person-in-environment (PIE) assessment protocol developed by James Karls and Karin Wandrei (1995) and meant to amend the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) is funded by the idea that the profession's distinctive orientation must be reflected in the assessments and methods that social workers employ in understanding and helping. PIE is a classification system that embodies the idea that social work's business is the interaction between persons and their environments. PIE is meant to capture both the problems and resources or strengths in (a) social role functioning (the performance of daily activities in family, intimate, interpersonal, occupational, and special roles as well as focusing on the struggles and problems in power relationships, problems of ambivalence, dependence, isolation, and the like) and (b) environmental problems and supports (including the economic/needs-meeting, judicial, educational/training, health, welfare, and safety systems). PIE is a step forward in precision and detail in the accounting of the factors and forces in the immediate and distant environments of people and groups.

There have been many critiques of the concept of person–environment including the following: (a) It supports the institutional status quo and puts the burden of change and adjustment on the individual, family, or group (Gould, 1987); (b) it provides an unneeded general perspective on the practice interests of the profession that are better served by the values of the profession (Wakefield, 1996); (c) the perspective is inattentive to the built and natural environments (Besthorn, 2002; Weick, 1983); and (d) the perspective typically does not make an accounting of other assets and resources in the environment such as the talents, interests, skills, and capacities of relatives, friends, and neighbors, and the resources inherent in local associations (Gibson, Kingsley, & McNeeley, 1997; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Each of these critiques is compelling in its own way. But the person–environment perspective is useful. It is a part of the axiological structure of the profession in that definitions and conceptions of social justice ultimately turn on the proper, principled, and productive relationship between individual, family, and group, as well as the surrounding social institutions and communal resources. The quality, equality, and durability of these relationships are at the heart of some conceptions of a democratic society (Van Soest, 1995). The ecological approach also can furnish useful conceptual tools for the professional, tools that direct us to regard the probable truism that what we become is a complex mixture of genes and environmental opportunities, resources, and pressures (Hamer & Copeland, 1998). The argument of this essay, however, is that the ecological perspective has ignored or muted many of the smaller and distinct elements of environment that may have profuse consequences, for good and ill, on people. In this essay, I examine some of these elements of environment, suggest how they interact with human experience, and offer some modest proposals for change in the person–environment perspective and social work practice.

The Power of Small

Behavioral ecologists and social geographers, observers of the human scene, have all noted that we live much of our daily lives in small compass—rooms, apartments, office cubicles, gardens, cars, atria, hallways, city blocks, cells, classrooms, restaurants, bars, neighborhood stores, and the like. We begin life in a small space, the womb—for most of us a propitious environment—where the level of stimulation and nurture is just about right. And for the rest of our lives, our well-being is dependent upon getting about the right amount of stimulation and nurturance. The places where we live—apartments, homes, boarding rooms, institutions, the street—affect us and our welfare in a variety of ways, from the number of people who live with us in a certain space to its level of stimulation (e.g., noise, color, clutter) to the symbols that are affixed in that space (e.g., pictures, flowers, icons, cultural artifacts, etc.). Of course, many of us live parts of our lives in larger expanses of environment—city streets, large malls, public plazas, country meadows, empty lots (even each of these, for example, has smaller sectors—particular shops in a mall or a single block on a city street). The sense or the reality of living in expanses with few recognizable boundaries, however, leaves us with a sense of little control or even responsibility for what happens there.

The importance of small here is at least threefold. First, attention to the more immediate physical and social environments of our lives may give us an additional focus for understanding individuals and families and their behavior and well-being. Roger Barker (1968; Schoggen, 1989) pointed out years ago in his studies of "behavioral settings" that we accommodate or, better yet, engage in a mutual adjustment with these settings—living rooms, post offices, bars, shops, clinic offices, public welfare waiting rooms—by creating systems of interaction and adjustment. Mrs.

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Johnson and her children in her apartment house in a public housing complex are, in a very important sense, different people there than they are in the classroom, the hospital waiting room, the line at the credit union, or the housing complex playground. While it might be tempting, and at one level correct, to understand Mrs. Johnson and her family in terms of larger environmental factors—institutionalized poverty and racism, lack of public resources, and high levels of environmental stress—it is equally important to understand them in the small places and spaces that are proximal and important constituents of their lives. The family pictures in the Johnson apartment, the flowers, the cooking smells, the small vegetable garden near the front porch, the crocheted spiritual and religious mottoes on the arms and backs of comfortable old chairs create a living tableau with which the Johnson family interacts and relates. There is little doubt, too, that the objects that are the scenarios of their interaction are infused with value and values, as well as history and reminiscence.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995) has written compellingly about these proximal (as well as distant) environments for years. Most recently, he writes:

> Especially in its early phases, and to a great extent throughout the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its *immediate environment* [my emphasis]. (1995, p. 620)

This leads to the second important reason for embracing the power of small: The most salubrious environments for raising, socializing, and especially educating children are modest in scope and relatively intimate. In those environments where children develop a sense of place, there is enough room to accommodate and interest most all children in the environment, and the amount of stimulation and background noise is calibrated so that the common sensory overload many of our children face on a day-to-day basis is missing,[2] as well as the starkness and spare simplicity of some special children's environments (like some day-care centers and group homes). When she asked adults to recall those places they felt safely ensconced and interested in as children, Elizabeth Prescott (1987) found, "They recall, often with great feeling, the water play in the creek, the mud pies in the backyard, being in the kitchen smelling cookies in the oven, the climbing, and indoor and outdoor secret places" (p. 86). In connection with this, she also found in her research on 50 day-care centers that "planned environments do not ordinarily permit children to become attached to places, things, or adults" (1987, p. 86).

In his landmark array of research projects on behavioral ecology (behavior settings), as mentioned above, Roger Barker (1978) has given us a way of thinking about the proximal (and distal) settings that affect our behavior. His claim provides a third reason for attending carefully to the small nooks and crannies of life: "You cannot explain differences in the conduct and interactions of people in two different behavior settings (environments, usually small) on the basis of the individuals' cognitive patterns, characters, or personalities alone (or even at all)" (p. 1). For example, in his comparison over time of two Midwest towns in the United States that he named Yoredale and Midwest, among other things, he examined those behavior settings that accept and induct children and those that ban or discourage them:

> Forces for and against children are properties of a town's settings (its school classes, its pubs, its courts, its Golden Age club ...). Transposing the children of Midwest to Yoredale, and vice versa, would immediately transform their behavior in respect to the parts of towns they would enter and avoid, despite their unchanged motives and cognitions. (Barker, 1978, p. 43)

In this sense, people's " individuality is irrelevant to behavior settings" (Barker, 1978, p. 217). Clearly, these settings are often small or contained; they are a part of the everyday life of everyone, and they can have profound influence on the behavior of their inhabitants, especially if the normative clues and symbols are many and strong. It is also important to understand such settings in terms of the degree and quality of interaction and participation that they foster. Small behavioral settings and spaces, like classrooms, waiting rooms, or offices that do not encourage much interaction or participation, will probably have a different effect on those who enter and stay in them (Goodnow, 1995).

Some years ago Harold Proshansky and Abbe Fabian (1987) proposed the importance of "place identity" in the development of children. They argued that developmental theories of identity (e.g., those of Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget) almost completely neglected the role of the physical environment in the development of the identity of children:

> If a child acquires the knowledge and understanding of who it is by virtue of its dependent and continuing relationships to significant other people, then we must assume that such identity determinations are also rooted in the child's experience with rooms, clothes, playthings, and an entire range of objects and spaces that also support [I would add that some may challenge] its existence. (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987, p. 22)

Think back on your childhood. How many memories and defining moments not only involve people but nonhuman sentient beings as well as places and spaces?

The Neighborhood and Small

A third reason for thinking small is this: For many people, one of the enduring proximal contexts for everyday life

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[2] Of course, as in all studies of transactions between individuals and their environments, it is to some degree what the individual (or the group) tends to make of it.

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is the neighborhood. It is difficult to define communities and neighborhoods with any precision. They vary with the uses and meanings afforded them by residents, the relationships to the outside world, and particular concerns and issues, and they are subject to a variety of social, political, and economic dynamics and pressures (Chaskin, 1997). But a working definition of neighborhood probably would include several attributes.

1. Neighborhoods are areas that are recognizable and usually have distinct known histories, even names. Residents and outsiders experience them as relatively discrete places. They do change and are transformed, of course, so that Deep Ellum in Dallas is not what it was 20 years ago, but it is still a neighborhood.
2. Every neighborhood is an open system. It and its residents have relationships with many other neighborhoods, institutions, and organizations, and the realities of social change, political movements, and economic transformation affect it.
3. Most importantly, many neighborhoods have an intricate filigree of relationships—intimate, proximal, and distant. Residents may have those outside of the neighborhood as well. Many of the relationships are instrumental, providing resources, support, information, and connections to outside resources. Others are more supportive. And even in stable neighborhoods, a few relationships are fraught with tension (Chaskin, 1997).

The idea of neighborhood allows us here to explore the power of geographic/interactional smallness in terms of the power of context. As intimated above, we do tend to make judgments about behavior in terms of the supposed inner dispositions of people. When we see a person acting in different ways in two different contexts (e.g., at work and at a party), we often try to integrate conflicting behaviors into a personality trait. At work, he is energetic, assertive, hardworking, and focused. In purely social gatherings where there are many people, he tends to be diffident and shy. So we surmise that he may have a kind of social anxiety or some underlying passivity and dependence. But the behaviors we see are probably a function of inborn elements (genetically endowed patterns—temperament) and learned behavior patterns (experience), as well as a function of the specific environments where he spends time. We often forget the importance of the latter. Hanging out in specific contexts, you learn to behave in particular ways and begin to develop an array of feelings that accompany the behaviors in that setting. In discussing Cinderella and her two very different contexts, Judith Rich Harris (1998), in her engaging and wry fashion, puts it this way:

> Stability of personality across social contexts depends in part on how different or similar a person's various contexts have been. Cinderella's two social contexts [cottage and castle] were unusually divergent, so there was more than the usual amount of variation in her personality. But someone who met her after the prince carried her off to the castle wouldn't know that. They would see only her outside-the-cottage personality. (p. 73)

Another point of interest about context is the elements of the environment that affect or even shape behavior, at least for the moment. Surely, interpersonal relationships, norms, and role requirements are important. But people have certain and variable margins of interpretation and choice within any given environment. It is within these that little things may mean a lot. Let us agree, at least for the moment, that people who engage in criminal or violent acts may have personal histories, learned norms, psychological problems, and dispositions that urge them to these behaviors. Even though some do, many—maybe most—of those individuals, *do not* commit crimes. So what are the factors that tip the balance (Gladwell, 2000)? The idea that it is only personality dispositions that "cause" neighborhood crime leads us down certain paths in how we think about dealing with it. But if we were to focus as well on those elements in the immediate context, the modest aspects that exude the symbolic, interactional, and structural essence of the neighborhood, those that make a difference in how people behave, we might again find the power of small. We find an explanation of those little things that make a huge difference in the controversial "broken windows" theory of crime. The idea is that the impetus to engage in a crime comes not from within so much as it does from particular and often seemingly inconsequential features of the ambient environment (Kelling & Coles, 1996; Bratton, 1998).

In their subsequent model of community-based prevention that is based on "broken windows" and the work of the chief of the Transit Authority Police in New York City, William Bratton, George Kelling (one of the authors of the original broken windows theory) and Catherine Coles suggest, among many other prescriptive ideas, that one of the keys to the control of crime is maintenance of order by the residents, which essentially means control of the "small change" of neighborhood life. This, of course, is done with the cooperation of the police and other relevant agencies, but the idea is that residents develop the terms, conditions, look, and symbols of civility in their neighborhoods and, with the help of law enforcement agencies, compel them. So the premise here, broadened from broken windows theory, is that "an epidemic [of disorder or disorganization] can be reversed, can be tipped, by tinkering with the smallest details of the environment" (Gladwell, 2000, p. 146). Another important factor in crime is the presence of uninhabited and abandoned houses and apartments; the cycle from homeowner's property, to rental, to abandonment happens very fast in many cities. When the cycle ends, there are far fewer available cues and symbols that foster and nourish positive, civic behavior. Rather, it is crime and civil disorganization and disorder that flourish (Gallagher, 1993).

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Let us send this idea away from crime and toward the immediate environment in which a lot of people live. In a large Midwestern city, there is a high school that is only now turning around after years of failure on the part of too many students, frustration on the part of too many teachers, and disregard on the part of too much of the community. Some students, spurred by a program that offers them a modest grant for projects that contribute to the well-being and life of their learning community, school, or neighborhood, are putting the idea of immediate and essential context to work. They have designated for improvement a courtyard in the school that has been left unattended for years and is an eyesore. It is common to think that students would not be sensitive to this inner place in the topography of the school, but many were (in our community projects we have found that children and youth often are keenly aware of their immediate environment and often have ideas about how it should be different). About half of all the classrooms on the four floors of the school look out on this courtyard. The students who developed the proposal see the betterment as planting flowers, seeding a vegetable garden, digging a pond, making places and creating spaces for people to sit and enjoy the surroundings. In their hearts, they know that these plain changes can make a difference, maybe only small—at least for a while—in the quality of life in this school. Another group of students in the same school took on as their project cleaning up one disheveled block of a neighborhood near the school—again propelled by the same sense of the importance of ambient factors to their sensibilities. That immediate environments (like school classrooms, hallways, the principal's office, gyms, the cafeteria) make a difference to children and youth is heard in the words of Tunisia, a third grader in Anacostia (near Washington, DC), who tells how she would fix the ramshackle school she attends:

> I'd buy some curtains for my teachers.... Blue curtains. It's like this.... The school is dirty. There isn't any playground. There's a hole in the wall behind the principal's desk. What we need to do is first rebuild the school. Another color. Build a playground. Plant a lot of flowers. Paint the classrooms. Blue and white.... Buy doors for the toilet stalls in the girls' bathroom.... Make it a beautiful, clean building. Make it *pretty*. Way it is I feel ashamed. (Kozol, 1991, p. 181)

Her immediate environment makes her feel ashamed, powerfully so, since she seems to have thought long and hard about how she would like it to be, and in a way, how she would like to be when she is there.

The Power of the Symbol

The self and others are symbolically formulated in many ways. Certainly the message of symbolic interactionism (and role and reference group theory[3]) as it has evolved and branched out over the years is that the self is founded both on shared and conflicted meanings, and these meanings are often transmitted through symbols, not just language, but also signs, works of art, sounds, depictions, media, built structures, etc., and that these symbols and the exchange of them are critically situated in time and space. The meanings that people attach to these symbols and the interactions through which the meanings are dispatched are both collective and individual. So there is an inextricable, often difficult-to-discern link between the subjective state of individuals, their relationships with others, and their immersion in particular social settings or places. In this way, the identity (or the momentary sense of self) of individuals is bound up in the places and spaces where they live. James Hillman (Hillman & Ventura, 1992), the Jungian analyst, has come to believe that the self, in important ways, is an interiorization of the community. As he says in one dialogue, "City *is* psyche" (p. 82). Some places, of course, are more important than others. For many people, home is such a place; for others, work; for yet others, the battlefield; for some, the street. "Aspects of identity or self develop in relationship to place (people [for example] make their homes), but places set a brute limit on what individuals can make of themselves (homes make people)" (Pile, 1996, p. 55).

A small fork in the road here. Let us take it as a proposition that meaning—the creation, interpretation, accepting, and contesting of it—is a consequence of three elements (or can be understood from three aspects). Jerome Bruner is very helpful in thinking about these relationships between culture and meaning (1990, 1996). First, we respond, react, and adapt to our environment (people, things, events) in terms of what we think that they mean. Meaning making and staking out meaning reflect the great evolutionary leap forward for humans—culture. Culture always depends on the capacity to make meaning and this, as much as anything, marks our oeuvre as a species. Without the urge to construct meaning, the things that we regard as necessarily human would not exist—art, storytelling, tool-making, organizing, communicating, theorizing. Second, much of the way we respond in the world, or much of the meaning that we make, is formed in league with others; that is, "we have a preternatural sensitivity to the way the world is represented in the minds of others" (Bruner, 1996, p. 165). This is the message of intersubjectivity—that "we partake ... of each other's minds" (Bruner, 1996, p. 165) and that our world is formed, to a substantial degree, in league with others. The creations of this intersubjective transaction, this collective formation, reformation, and affirmation of meaning, becomes grounded and celebrated in history and other cultural archives—from sociopolitical documents (e.g., the U.S. Constitution) to sacred texts (e.g., the Koran). Finally, and this is important for the argument of this paper, all cultural lore, all meaning-freighted transactions are contextual. Again, Jerome Bruner:

[3] These would include the works of Charles H. Cooley, George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, Herbert Blumer, and Manford Kuhn, among others.

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> It is practically impossible to understand a thought, an act, a move of any sort from the situation in which it occurs. Biology and culture both operate *locally* [my emphasis]; however grand the sweep of their principles, they find a final common path in the here and now. (1996, p. 167)

Looking at someone straight in the eye means one thing at a family reunion, another thing at 11 p.m. on the Washington, DC, metro. The biology, too, may be very different as different neurotransmitters underlie the pleasure you feel at the reunion and the fear you might feel on the subway.

So in a neighborhood, as an example, what might symbols be? Symbols stand for something; they represent some shared elements of our culture, experience, and history. Symbols can be events, structures, activities, places, historical events, celebrations, or even people. More often than not, the meanings inherent in these symbols are revealed in story, performance, and ritual. In the community work that we have done, some of the more positive symbols—symbols that affirm meaning, bring people together, seed their collective identity—have included the following: an annual parade (put together by the residents of different neighborhoods in a community); a community garden (planted and grown by adults, elders, children, and residents of different faiths and ethnicity); a mural designed and painted by children and youth but reflective of the ethos and history of the neighborhood; an annual Thanksgiving celebration where all residents are invited to contribute a dish if they are able and where awards to residents for meritorious service to the neighborhood are given; and a person (in this case a woman who has lived her whole life in the neighborhood, raised her children, and fought the good fight for neighborhood rights and security). And if these symbols exist in other communities (as they surely do), they will carry different historical and cultural freight. In most of these cases, the neighborhoods were economically distressed and marginalized by outsiders. I point this out because it is too often the case that outsiders commonly think of such spaces and places as bereft of meaning and significance, as culturally anorectic.

In understanding a neighborhood or living space, we must always be attentive to the symbols and icons that mark the distinctiveness of a place. Even before a neighborhood may deteriorate, the symbols that shroud the territory may be rent by factiousness, the intrusion of outsiders, or a change in its geopolitics.

The Media Environment

Among the most intimate and small of environments are the media: movies, TV, CDs, video games, computers, magazines, novels, music, advertising, etc. (these are not all separate but increasingly occur together). The media create a virtual wraparound environment that follows us everywhere we go. Suggesting both their intimacy and ubiquity, Clarence Page, the journalist, called the media "electronic wall-paper" (as cited in Pipher, 1994, p. 27). It would be hard to overestimate the influence of media in our lives, especially in the lives of our children. It would also be hard to inflate the pernicious effects that media can generate. In the space of a few minutes on your television set, you can see a real couple argue about the most intimate of matters; see professional wrestlers apparently banging each other into oblivion amidst a volley of threats and taunts; see a panel of so-called experts in politics yelling, screaming, and interrupting each other; see the devastation of a flood in Bangladesh or controlled snippets of the "war" in Iraq; watch a TV family hurl insults and one-liners at each other; learn how a family of mountain gorillas lives; see the police engage in a high-speed chase after alleged criminals; or see music videos that are the closest thing to sexual intercourse you can see on open channels. And in all of these instances, the shows are festooned with advertising. What sort of cognitive, emotional, interactional, and moral sculpting does this saturation bring? Can we even begin to assess this? At this point, for one example, there have been a number of studies of the relationship of exposure to violence on TV and certain outcomes for children. The evidence, at the least, suggests that the effusive presence of violence in the media, whether on a TV show or in video games or movies, desensitizes many children to its devastation, leads a few to actual violent acts, and confuses some children as to the actual frequency of violence in real life (Huston, 1992). The point is that we are only beginning to scratch the surface of the nature of the sociopolitical, moral, interpersonal, and intimate contexts that media provide. In talking about the pervasive advertisement at the heart (and maybe the soul) of many media offerings, Mary Pipher (1996) observes,

The media are a constant adjunct and companion; an accompaniment to most everything we do. And they represent a worldview or views that shape minds and hearts.

> Advertising teaches that people shouldn't have to suffer, that pain is unnatural and can be cured. They say effort is bad and convenience is good and that products solve complex human problems. Over and over people hear that their needs for love, security, and variety can be met with products." (p. 93)

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The media are a constant adjunct and companion; an accompaniment to most everything we do. And they represent a worldview or views that shape minds and hearts. The insistent beat of the media doles out meaning and values (often conflicting—and often conflicting with the values of families, communities, and institutions) in both insinuated and distinct ways. Let us briefly examine some of the effects of the media on behavior.

First, the intensity and breadth of the influence of media work to make us avid consumers. We have scores of kinds of sneakers, cornflakes, cars, Bermuda shorts, cameras, etc., all available because we are socialized to think that (a) we deserve to have this bountiful array of choices, (b) we deserve to have the objects that we choose, and (c) being a consumer is the most important civic role that one can assume. In that regard, defenders of the market philosophy believe that the marketplace itself can ensure, for example, social and economic justice.

Second, because the market can produce any and every product that anyone might want and because we can buy these (this is the market's hope, not the economy's reality), the line between fabrication and reality blurs. Want to be a rancher? Buy an SUV, a real cowboy hat, and some Tony Lama boots. Want to be Allen Iverson? Buy a replication of his jersey and the shoes that he wears—maybe even do your hair in cornrows. But you aren't really a rancher or Allen Iverson—or are you? Over time it may become increasingly difficult to determine what is real and what is a fabrication, to know who you are and who you are not, to know what you believe and what you don't. Kenneth Gergen observes,

> So powerful are the media in their well-wrought portrayals that their realities become more compelling than those furnished by common experience. The vacation is not *real* until captured on film; marriages become events to be staged for camera and videotape.... It is to the media, and not to sense perception, that we increasingly turn for definitions of what is the case. (1991, p. 57)

Oddly, sometimes the media do foster a more positive sense of community and citizenship, rather than marketing to pander to the creation of images and urges. After the malign and horrific destruction of September 11, 2001, we were frightened, angry, and in desperate need of each other. For many of us, removed geographically from the chilling scene, the media—newspapers, television, radio, even the Internet—provided a kind of ligament between people and their experiences, a palpable sense of community—a community wounded but determined to assert and resurrect itself.[4]

Third, the sheer number of options the media throw our way is mind-boggling. And it isn't just products; it is events and relationships, some evidently real, some unreal, and some maybe really unreal.

> The moreness of everything ascends inevitably to a threshold in psychic life. A change of state takes place.... The mind is forced to certain adaptations if it is to cohere at all. When you find out about the moving cursor, or hear statistics about AIDS in Africa, or see your 947th picture of a weeping fireman, you can't help but become fundamentally indifferent because you are exposed to things like this all the time, just as you are to the rest of your options. Over breakfast. In the waiting room. Driving to work. At the checkout counter. (de Zengotita, 2002, pp. 35–36)

Let us assume that although the messages, values, and images from the media may burrow into our psyche, the power of the ambient, immediate environment and the force of the symbol remain—although to what degree enhanced or compromised by the media we cannot say. In keeping with the theme of this essay, I would also argue here that the media are usually experienced in a small environment: through earphones while jogging, nestled in a living room chair, in the darkened confines of a movie theater, in a car listening to the radio. They are often experienced alone.

So, if it is true that character or self is a loosely bound parcel of traits, habits, motives, interests, and urges organized in various ways depending on the context and contingencies of one's life (Gladwell, 2000), what must we assume, what can we know about the effect of media on our behavior? We can know that the media can be used for good or ill. The effects of *Sesame Street*, *Blue's Clues*, shows on the Learning and Discovery channels, news programming and analysis on NPR and Public TV, CNN, the wry charms of Frasier and the earthiness of Raymond (whom everybody loves), and many other programs provide ample opportunities for learning, guidance, utter enjoyment, and socialization into knowledgeable and appreciative citizenship. It probably would not take much to shift the balance of the effect of TV, for example, in the lives of children. But we must be aware of and we must ask about the effect of media on the lives of the individuals, families, and communities we would help.

Thinking and Practicing Small

This is not a paper about practice, but at least some initial implications for direct and community practice are in order.

1. Thinking and practicing small means a change in the way that we consider things. Changing the proximal context or the magnitude of what we are doing can have beneficial repercussions in both understanding and creating the conditions for change. For example, in a public housing community, the urgent need according to a university-sponsored community outreach group housed in the community and to the tenant management corporation (composed of residents) was to get people involved in their community. Knocking on doors, making appeals

[4] Regrettably, the marketing impulse and the need for consumption to continue returned, maybe even a degree stronger because of the economic devastation wrought by the events of that day (although some economists believe that the troubles in the economy were a long time coming and not just a response to the terrorist murders).

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of various kinds, and scheduling grand community meetings were not producing results. Eventually, two things were initiated—small and modest in scope—that had the desired effect. One, the playground area was cleaned up, and places to sit were made available so that adults could accompany their children and have a place to sit and, it was hoped, to meet and talk (this was just done; there were no appeals to the residents to come out and meet each other). Second, a minigrant program was established to give residents a small grant for developing and completing projects that would benefit some part of the community. The word was spread, not just by the outreach group and the tenant management corporation, but also by an influential elder in the community who had many connections with families and individuals. The first was a small change in context, and the second was a change in the way that residents could begin to think about themselves in relationship to each other and the community (symbolism and intersubjectivity). These accomplishments were fragile, in one sense, because of changes in the primary influential institution outside the community—the Housing Authority—and because of the ebb and flow of an internal group—drug dealers—in the community. But it seemed to be the case that the more the community appeared to be attended to, cared for, and in the hands of residents, the less the activity of the dealers. (It was also true that the fewer the unoccupied apartments, the less the activity of dealers.) On the other hand, happenings at the Housing Authority were largely out of the control of residents.

2. It is important for social workers to be aware of the conditions of the environment of the agency in which they work. This is, in a sense, a little test of these ideas. The agency is, in many ways, for clients and colleagues alike, an intimate environment. How it appears—what meets the eye of clients and fellow workers, what its emotional and ambient atmosphere is, what its décor reflects or says to the observer, what symbolism and messages are embedded in its structure and interpersonal milieu, the attitude of staff—all may have an effect on the kind of work we do and how our clients respond to us. It may only be a coat of paint, the hanging of pictures, the placement of comfortable furniture in the reception area, the placing and arrangement of potted plants and flowers in public areas and offices, or the availability of coffee and drinks that can bring a subtle shift in the work environment. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) says that inhospitable, confusing, or low-interest environments reduce what he calls "flow," a kind of optimal experience in which people feel involved or exhilarated and find themselves unself-consciously doing something important or stimulating. Although we may not seek "flow" in agencies, we may ask, what is it we expect of our clients? How could the immediate environment of our offices and gathering areas bespeak those expectations more clearly and humanely? How can the surroundings reflect the interesting, challenging, important and helpful work that will happen here? Both clients and colleagues can have input on these simple questions, and a significant aspect of this is that it is under the control of all those involved.
3. Awareness of the near environments of clients is critical to accurate and generative assessment and the development of helping strategies and projects that might be more focused and neatly targeted. Malcolm Gladwell (2000) calls these "Band-Aid solutions." As he observes, "The Band-Aid is an inexpensive, convenient, and remarkably versatile solution to an astonishing array of problems" (p. 256). But we cannot formulate these kinds of solutions or schemes without some familiarity with the key elements of a home or neighborhood environment. It may be there that we discover, with our clients, that with some tinkering and a little ingenuity, modest changes in the quality of life or the effect of problems follow. Duncan, Hubble, and Miller (1997) report the work they did with 10-year-old Molly that underscores once again the fact that children have a keen sense of place and space. Suffering from debilitating nightmares and sleeplessness, she was unable to sleep in her own room. Part of the work that these therapists do is founded on a strengths- and solution-based model: finding out what the individual thinks is the problem and how she or he would propose to fix it. What Molly offered was a way to rearrange her room that would make it more comfortable and more defensible, to barricade her bed with pillows and stuffed animals against unwanted nightly visitors. This was a young girl who had been seen by four different professionals, was on imipramine for depression and anxiety, was thought to be from a dysfunctional family, and so on. But the Band-Aid, the rearrangement of her beloved space, her immediate context, brought a rapid end to the problems she was facing.
4. Attention to the media that surround people may provide some clues to avenues for positive change. Helping some families develop a more satisfying, sensible home life and relationships to each other may mean helping them control the flood of media and messages from the outside into their most familiar space. Although there may be some sense of this, many families, parents in particular, often don't have a clear idea of about how media affect the quality of their home life and the relationships they have with each other; they may not see how media have blurred the line between public and private, between self and other, between childhood and adulthood, and between the idea of citizenship and being an avid consumer. These are critical factors in the life of any family and any community as they refocus and redirect our eyes to things that are not real, not of value, and not in our best interests nor the best interests of children. (Huston, 1992; McLaren, 1995; Pipher, 1996) This may involve helping families monitor and assess what comes

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across the media and make deliberate, thoughtful decisions about what information, models, symbols, rhetoric, messages, etc. they want in the bosom of their family relationships. Mary Pipher (1996) says it well:

> I encourage families to examine their relationship [this is a relationship, by the way] to the media and to make conscious choices about what they will and what they won't consume. This involves research, dialogue, experiments, and oftentimes conflict resolution. But in the end the family has made decisions and not just let the outside world happen to them. It's a deeply satisfying experience. (p. 147)

Of course, in working with families we do many other things, as well—from teaching communication skills, to promoting empathy, to finding and developing individual and mutual strengths, to learning how to solve problems and to cope with stress and challenges (Pipher, 1996; Walsh, 1998). But the media may have an intimate and occasionally surpassing influence in how we think about and act toward each other; to ignore it is to ignore the power of, in this instance, a moveable place.

5. In community building and community development work, there is more attention paid now to the power of small, the effect of the modest alteration. Melvin Delgado (2000), in his work on capacity-enhancement on urban communities, discusses the importance of four kinds of projects that can have the effect of bringing a community together, raising issues, developing solutions, providing a vehicle for the development of cross-ethnic communication and relationships, and enhancing both community capacity and community spirit. These projects are community gardens, sculptures, playgrounds, and murals. It must also be said that the results of these collective efforts can have profound effects on individuals. An agency in the community where I live uses the arts to help a variety of youth in deep trouble who are referred by the courts, schools, and mental health agencies. The youth are employed and paid a minimum wage (they must meet the conditions of work—almost all do) to learn a variety of different art or craft skills from professional artists and artisans. Much of the purpose of their artwork is to enhance parts of the local environment. They make benches festooned with elaborate artwork for local organizations, agencies, and businesses who contract with them. To date these benches have been placed in about 60 sites, including social agencies, schools, senior citizens centers and nursing homes, public housing, homeless shelters, etc. These youth have also painted two murals—one on the agency's building that is in a highly visible place and one in a mental health center. This is in addition to the artwork they do to be displayed at their gallery (from paintings to sculpture to glasswork to fabric). But the root idea is not only to help these youth develop a sense of themselves, to discover hidden talents and strengths, but also to help them connect in a visceral and different way with their community—place by place and space by space.

Conclusion

The message here is a simple one:

> Change is possible, that people can radically transform their behavior or their beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus.... [That] we are powerfully influenced by our surroundings, our immediate context, and the personalities of those around us. (Gladwell, 2000, pp. 258–259)

It seems to be important for social work to extend (or, more correctly, to shrink) the person–environment perspective to include more definitive ideas about immediate environments, the small places where people live much of their lives and where they are influenced in ways we are only beginning to understand. Important, too, is the diminution of the idea of personality patterns that are for all times and all places and the expansion of the notion that different ambient contexts can elicit very different behaviors on the part of individuals and collectives. It may be that some of our schemes, whether practice- or policy-based, to improve the lives of those we seek to help focus on the wrong part of the picture—looking at what is essentially background and missing what is actually on the stage of daily life.

There is another sense in which the idea of proximal environments is important for our professional thinking. For the culture as a whole and for helping professions, the usual idea about development is that early events have a powerful effect on later events and personal outcomes, that we *progress* (and that word is important in understanding the usual developmental paradigms) in some predictable ways through our lives, accumulating and articulating the manifestations of earlier influences as they are bound, in a fairly weak manner, by current situations and experiences. To take a more contextual (Lewis, 1997) view, while early events may have a variety of influences on current behavior, the memory of them is affected by the immediate context, and the actual behavior one engages in at the moment is dramatically shaped by contingent, immediate forces.

In the end, although it is important for social workers to assess the play of social institutions, policies, agencies, and the like in people's lives, it is imperative for us to understand the immediate, varied, and shifting environs where people live day to day. In a sense, this requires of us putting the social ahead of the individual, or at least putting the social on equal footing with the individual in assessment and in practice. Poverty, for example, is usually a dreary and oppressive set of conditions of life. But the fact is that many children in these environments do better than anyone might reasonably expect (the same holds true for children who are raised in abusive relationships). It may be that some children have inborn traits that provide resilience and inoculation against stress; it may be that there are helpful social policies in place, but it also is likely that the proximal environments of children in poverty are variable and critical to the degree of their well-being, too.

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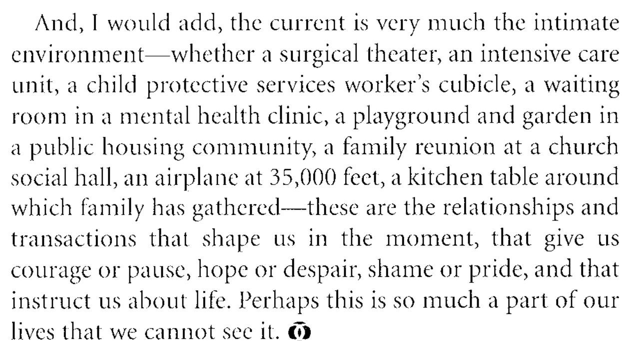
Michael Lewis (1997), in arguing for a contextual view of the self, says,



> How people act currently is determined by their attempt to adapt to situations and problems as they find them. This requires that we focus on the context in which people find themselves.... Because we cannot predict what will occur in the future, we have only the current to focus on. (p. 203)

And, I would add, the current is very much the intimate environment—whether a surgical theater, an intensive care unit, a child protective services worker's cubicle, a waiting room in a mental health clinic, a playground and garden in a public housing community, a family reunion at a church social hall, an airplane at 35,000 feet, a kitchen table around which family has gathered—these are the relationships and transactions that shape us in the moment, that give us courage or pause, hope or despair, shame or pride, and that instruct us about life. Perhaps this is so much a part of our lives that we cannot see it.

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