

Does Social Work Need the Eco-Systems Perspective?

Part 1. Is the Perspective Clinically Useful?

Jerome C. Wakefield
Rutgers University

This is the first part of a two-part article in which I analyze the arguments for the eco-systems perspective. In Part 1, I consider four arguments for the clinical usefulness of the perspective: (1) it helps the clinician to identify circular causal connections, or "transactions," between persons and environments; (2) it helps in formulating a comprehensive assessment; (3) it integrates other social work theories; and (4) it corrects clinical biases toward individualistic therapeutic intervention. A close examination of these arguments demonstrates that they are invalid and that the claimed clinical usefulness of the perspective is an illusion. The clinical benefits can, in fact, come only from the use of substantive, domain-specific theories

Does social work need a generic practice perspective in order to be a coherent, unified, and clinically effective profession? Social workers rely on many theories and methods, ranging from psychoanalysis to cost-benefit analysis, that are "domain specific" in the sense that they deal with specific domains of social work concern, such as psychopathology or social policy, rather than being generic to all social work concerns. For several decades, social workers have been hearing from leading thinkers in the field that, in addition to this array of domain-specific theories and methods, the profession also needs a generic account of social work practice that applies to all of its domains. According to generic thinkers, social work must have an overarching, comprehensive perspective if it is to be a conceptually coherent profession serving one purpose and if it is to correct a clinical bias toward individual therapeutic intervention. From Gordon Hearn's collection

2 Social Service Review

of essays exploring general systems theory as a framework for practice and Howard Goldstein's attempt to formulate a "unitary" practice model to the currently popular eco-systems and ecological perspectives, the creation of such a generic account has been central to social work's recent intellectual agenda.¹

At present, the eco-systems perspective stands out as the most influential and widely accepted generic view. In this two-part article, I analyze the arguments offered for this perspective by its proponents. The arguments fall into two broad categories: some defend the perspective's clinical usefulness, and others its conceptual importance. Here in Part 1, after an introduction setting out the overall issues, I take up the arguments for the clinical benefits of the perspective. The arguments for the perspective's conceptual benefits are considered in Part 2, to appear in the June 1996 issue of this journal.

Because the eco-systems perspective incorporates the central principles of the ecological perspective, and because the ecological perspective implicitly adopts much of systems thinking, I will also evaluate central elements of the ecological perspective in the course of evaluating the eco-systems perspective.² The analysis of the eco-systems perspective will also have implications for generic theory as a whole, to be noted in the conclusion of Part 2.

My analysis concentrates on the writings of Carol Meyer, who has most vigorously developed and forcefully defended the eco-systems perspective. Meyer is generally acknowledged to be one of the originators of the perspective, and she has edited and contributed several chapters to the only book-length presentation of the perspective.³ However, my focus on Meyer's writings is justified by more than her central position in the perspective's development. Eco-systems thinkers differ somewhat in their statements of the tenets of the perspective, and they rarely offer serious arguments for its various features. Thus, to construct an illuminating and persuasive analysis, it is necessary to focus on one particular eco-systems thinker and probe deeply into the logic of that thinker's arguments, which will at least tend to form a reasonably consistent whole. The version that is selected for analysis must be prototypical or representative in the sense that it clearly expresses what is most essential and novel in the perspective. The selected version must also offer explicit and systematic justifications for the perspective's doctrines, so that the reasoning behind the perspective can be plausibly reconstructed. Finally, in order to avoid a straw-man argument, one must consider a thinker who presents as strong a case as possible for the perspective. On all these counts—prototypicality, explicit attempts at justification, and vigor of argument—Meyer's work offers the version of the perspective that is most worth analyzing. So, although I will cite other thinkers, Meyer's claims and arguments will be my primary focus.

The evaluation presented in this article is conceptual and theoretical in nature because that is the nature of the arguments for the eco-systems perspective. There exists no empirical literature on the perspective. In the course of the analysis, I quote extensively from the writings of Meyer and other relevant thinkers because, in a theoretical critique, such citations are the only "data" by which the reader can judge whether the analysis is based on a representative and plausible reading of the concerned thinkers.

The question to be considered here is whether the eco-systems perspective, taken seriously as a systematic, interrelated body of propositions that is proposed as a basis for social work practice, warrants acceptance. As with any complex theory, there are many important elements of truth to be found in one or another of the assertions that make up the perspective. For example, one can easily agree with the perspective's assertion that social workers should approach their cases with a comprehensive knowledge base and with their minds open to a variety of explanations of clinical phenomena. However, this could be true for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the perspective's overall argument. The fact that the perspective contains some assertions that are true does not show that the overall perspective should be accepted or that the perspective provides the correct reasons for believing the truths that it contains.

Initial Doubts about the Eco-Systems Perspective

The eco-systems perspective is essentially a combination of ideas from the ecological perspective and general systems theory, each of which has been quite influential in its own right. From the ecological perspective, the eco-systems perspective borrows the notion that there are mutual adaptations between individuals and their social and physical environments: "The central concept in ecology is goodness of fit with the environment, or state of adaptedness, achieved over evolutionary time in the case of species and over the life span in the case of individuals. As a metaphor developed for social work, the ecological perspective focuses on the degree of person:environment fit and on the reciprocal exchanges (transactions) between people and environments, which either support or inhibit the striving for adaptedness."⁴

Ecological thinkers emphasize that, in the course of evolution, the human species has adapted in complex ways to its environment and sometimes has changed its environment to fit human needs. Also, in the course of a life span, the individual adapts to his or her environment and changes that environment to fit his or her changing needs. The environment, especially the social environment, adapts, in turn, to the individual, bringing about a mutual fit between the two. As a consequence of both evolutionary and individual adaptation, there is

4 Social Service Review

a mutual sensitivity between person and environment in which changes in one have consequences for the other. These “circular” causal relations, in which each of two systems influences the other, are distinguished by ecological thinkers from “linear” causal influences that go in one direction, from one system to another, and are said to characterize most previous social work theories.⁵

From general systems theory, the eco-systems perspective borrows a variety of notions regarding systems: systems are sets of interacting elements; systems can be open or closed to interaction with the outside world; systems are linked hierarchically; systems can possess states of homeostasis and equilibrium or can be in disequilibrium; systems are regulated through positive and negative feedback; and, again, causal influences are circular, in that changes in one system have consequences for other linked systems that, in turn, through feedback, have consequences for the first system. Systems theory emphasizes that a given effect might be brought about in many ways (“equifinality”) and that a change anywhere in a system can have unexpected consequences for linked systems.

These ecological and systems concepts are claimed to provide a comprehensive framework for social work practice. Meyer maintains that this framework does not constitute a model or theory that requires empirical testing but is merely a perspective, that is, a useful way of looking at practice.⁶ Carel Germain and Alex Gitterman similarly describe the ecological perspective as a useful “metaphor” rather than a model or theory.⁷ This means, however, that the eco-systems perspective is not claimed to have any scientific explanatory power of its own. It provides a set of categories to guide thinking about cases but says nothing about the nature of specific causal processes; it does not actually explain why or how the person and the environment respond to each other in a specific case. The perspective is nonetheless claimed to be of value because of its ability to conceptually unify the profession and improve clinical assessment by providing a framework for organizing and integrating the use of the profession’s many domain-specific explanatory theories.

The eco-systems perspective has had a particularly powerful effect on social work education, shaping the way students are taught, curriculums designed, and schools accredited. The perspective is routinely disseminated to students through practice textbooks and is commonly cited in the profession’s literature. Most important, the language and concepts of the perspective are regularly used in case discussions and are deemed to be an illuminating way of understanding a case. Indeed, with increasing frequency, the eco-systems perspective is the main or only view that students or practitioners cite when asked about their theoretical framework. Moreover, the arguments presented to support the perspective are also used to support the need for “generalist” practice and education, with wide-ranging implications for the profession.

The influence of the eco-systems perspective on social work has been sufficiently profound that the intellectual credibility of the profession has to some degree become linked to the perspective's validity. Yet sustained critical analyses of the perspective have rarely been undertaken.⁸ As a result, the arguments offered for the perspective have not been clearly reconstructed or carefully evaluated.

There are good reasons to be initially skeptical about the usefulness of the eco-systems perspective and other generic approaches. The main reason is that theories must reflect the nature of the underlying reality that they are about, and social work encompasses very different kinds of realities. The basic needs that are the concern of social work—economic, social, and psychological—are so dissimilar and operate according to such different laws that one would not expect that any one approach could encompass them all in an informative and fruitful manner.

Of course, any set of ideas, however different, can be put together under one overarching concept if the concept is abstract enough. However, high-level abstractions are unlikely to yield insight relevant to practice. When it comes to an applied field, it is the distinctions between things that often matter the most, and focusing on broad commonalities can be misleading or even dangerous. As David Howe puts it: "By definition, generic qualities are wider and more encompassing than specific characteristics. But merely to say that all lions and tigers are just cats . . . might confuse those who wish to know how to catch mice or go big-game hunting."⁹ Similarly, whatever abstract properties poverty and debilitating anxiety have in common in virtue of the fact that they can both be described as "systems" or as "adaptations" are probably not of much practice relevance, and drawing attention to these properties may obscure what is professionally important.

It is also noteworthy that no other major profession rests its knowledge base on a generic perspective. Other professions such as medicine, law, and education possess a defining purpose, such as health, legal justice, and knowledge, respectively, and specific theories and methods that they use in pursuing that purpose, such as in medicine the techniques of surgery, pharmacology, and radiology. These other professions appear to be coherent and effective even though they have no all-encompassing perspective beyond their definitions. This suggests that the claim that such a perspective is needed in social work to establish a coherent professional identity and achieve clinical effectiveness may not be as plausible as it seems.

So, the question is, Why does social work, unlike other professions, need a perspective in addition to its theories and methods? An adequate definition of social work's purpose and a set of domain-specific theories and skills to pursue that purpose would seem to provide all that the profession needs to function coherently and effectively. The

6 Social Service Review

test of the usefulness of the eco-systems perspective, one might say, is whether it adds anything important to these more usual elements in a profession's knowledge base. On the surface, it is not obvious that it does.

These doubts are initial concerns, not conclusive objections. To see whether the doubts are justified, one has to evaluate the validity of the arguments presented by eco-systems thinkers.

There are seven arguments for the eco-systems perspective that can be discerned in or reconstructed from the writings of its proponents. Four of the arguments are designed to show that the eco-systems perspective is clinically useful. These arguments are based on the following claims about the perspective: (1) it helps the practitioner to see that all aspects of an individual's problem involve circular connections between individual and environment, leading to a "transactional focus" for practice that is consistent with social work's dual concern with person and environment; (2) it offers a comprehensive and clinically useful method of assessment; (3) it provides a way to fruitfully integrate all domain-specific social work theories; and (4) it corrects practitioner biases toward person-centered intervention.

It may seem surprising that, in summarizing the clinical arguments for the eco-systems perspective, I do not consider any claim concerning the ability of the perspective to guide intervention. The reason is that eco-systems thinkers themselves, and especially Meyer, consistently maintain that the perspective offers no help whatever in deciding what intervention to use or in otherwise guiding practice: "It offers no predictable judgments, and it provides no model of intervention";¹⁰ "Such a perspective cannot prescribe interventions";¹¹ "It does not take a stand on processes required to intervene";¹² "It does not prescribe what to do";¹³ "It is not a model, with prescriptions for addressing cases . . . it does not specify outcomes";¹⁴ "It can lay no claim to being a practice theory."¹⁵ I accept this verdict and examine the clinical benefits that eco-systems writers do claim for the perspective.

In addition to the four clinical arguments, there are three further arguments for the eco-systems perspective that concern conceptual issues. The first is that the eco-systems perspective saves the social work profession from incoherence by linking the profession's various interventive methods, each of which has its own idiosyncratic goals, to the profession's common, defining purpose. The second conceptual argument is that the perspective operationalizes the profession's purpose and identifies social work's unique domain, thus providing a fuller definition of the profession. The third argument, really a response to objections that the perspective lacks empirical support, is that the perspective is literally just a perspective, that is, a useful way of looking at social work cases, and not a substantive theory or model that makes specific empirical claims, so it does not require empirical evaluation.¹⁶

The claim that the eco-systems perspective makes social work practice more clinically effective, and its four supporting arguments, are considered below. The three arguments concerning the conceptual usefulness of the perspective will be examined in Part 2.

Connectedness Claim, Circular Causality, and the Transactional Focus

A common reason for the acceptance of the eco-systems perspective is the belief that it is useful in producing more effective clinical interventions. But is it? The heart of my argument is that, in the case of each proposed clinical benefit, the perception that the perspective provides the benefit is an illusion. In actuality, each proposed benefit, to the degree that it is real, comes entirely from the proper use of multiple domain-specific theories that are independent of the perspective. I begin by examining the most fundamental clinical claim of the eco-systems perspective, that it usefully captures the mutual connectedness of the individual and the environment. First, in the section immediately below, I uncritically review the perspective's connectedness principle and transactional focus and try to explain the great importance attached to them by eco-systems thinkers. Then, in the next section, I assess these claims.

From Interaction to Transaction: Connectedness as the Foundation of the Perspective

Eco-systems thinkers assert that, consistent with social work's person-in-environment focus, the eco-systems perspective emphasizes the true interconnectedness of the person and the social and physical environment, although it is admitted that the perspective says nothing about the specific nature of the hypothesized connections: "General systems theory and ecology . . . , together, in the eco/systems concept, . . . provide a helpful perspective for viewing the interconnectedness of variables in cases."¹⁷ "The underlying philosophical position of the eco-systems perspective is that the person is connected to others, as well as to the social institutions, cultural forces, and the physical space that make up his or her environment. Although there is no explicit assumption about the substantive nature of things or people, there is, in this perspective, heavy reliance upon the person's *connectedness*";¹⁸ "the perspective induces one to notice the relatedness of case variables."¹⁹ Connectedness is asserted to be a feature of all aspects of a case: "Once we have decided what the boundaries of a system are in a particular client's case, we can demonstrate that *all* of the components are tied together. . . . There is *always* a systemic explanation for behavior and events in the life of a case."²⁰ The assertion of universal interre-

latedness of case variables and drawing the practitioner's attention to such relatedness is acknowledged to be the essence of what the eco-systems perspective can provide to practitioners: "Such a perspective . . . can only focus our vision and lead us to notice the presence and interrelatedness of the features of a case."²¹

The connectedness claim derives from the nature of the concepts that compose the eco-systems perspective. Concepts such as circular causality, mutual adaptation, and positive and negative feedback all express a mutual, circular form of connectedness. These concepts, applied universally, imply the principle that every aspect of the person is richly and mutually connected to the environment. This "connectedness principle" is critically important to eco-systems thinkers because it is the basis for most of the perspective's other claims.

The postulation of circular causal connections between all aspects of person and environment leads directly to the eco-systems perspective's most distinctive innovation, its "transactional focus." "Transaction" is used by eco-systems thinkers to refer exclusively to circular causal connections, in contrast to the broader concept of "interaction," which can refer to any kind of causal relationship, whether one-way, two-way (but still linear in the sense that each of two elements has an independent one-way influence on the other), or circular. The connectedness principle builds the transactional focus into the eco-systems perspective. The value of the transactional focus is claimed to lie in its ability to rid the profession of a bias toward individual therapeutic intervention. (The claim that the eco-systems perspective corrects biases toward individual treatment will be evaluated in a later section.)

Robert Woodrow, in a chart reproduced in figure 1, usefully summarizes the intimate relationship between the claimed circular connected-

Person-in-Situation




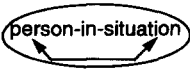
<i>Concept</i>	<i>Practice Implications</i>
	Problems defined primarily within the person; treatment focused on changing the person
	Problems defined primarily within the situation; interventions focused on environmental/social change
	Problems defined within the person/problems defined within the situation; two separate clusters of professional activities (or functions)
	Problems defined in the transaction between person and situation; one professional function, multiple professional activities

FIG. 1.—Adapted from Robert D. Woodrow, "Casework: A Psychosocial Therapy," in *Clinical Social Work in the Eco-Systems Perspective*, ed. Carol Meyer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), table 3.1, p. 84. © 1983 by Columbia University Press. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

ness of person and environment and the eco-systems perspective's transactional focus, and compares the perspective's approach to other approaches. The first two steps in Woodrow's chart represent obviously "biased" approaches to practice. In the first approach, the clinician, on the basis of theory or ideology, always defines the problem as originating in the individual and always defines the goal of intervention as changing the person (this is the form of bias with which eco-systems thinkers are primarily concerned). In the second approach, the clinician shows a similar partiality toward environmental causes and interventions.

The traditional response to these biases was to insist that social work, by definition, deals with problems in the *interactions* between individuals and their environments, where such problems can originate either in the person or in the environment or both (step 3 in fig. 1). It was thought that the focus on interactions would force clinicians to attend to both interacting elements and would therefore eliminate intervention biases. But there was a flaw in this reasoning. The fact that both elements are involved in the interaction does not imply that both must be causes of the problem in the interaction; the problem between the two might be entirely caused by factors in one and not the other. Given this possibility, theory or ideology can still lead the clinician to consistently locate the primary or most changeable cause of a problem in the individual and to focus intervention on the individual. Thus, the same old biases can readily reappear. For this reason, eco-systems thinkers reject the interaction approach.²²

To ensure the eradication of bias and a balanced consideration of individual and environmental factors in a case, eco-systems thinkers insist that each social worker must be a "generalist" who focuses on and assesses both elements of the interaction in every aspect of a case.²³ To guarantee this dual focus, they attempt to eliminate the possibility of locating the cause of an interaction problem on either side of the person-environment boundary; in effect, they try to eliminate the distinction between individual and environment. They claim that the person and the environment form one unified, causally interconnected, circularly related system, or "transaction," in which the elements can no longer be distinguished as separable causal influences in an interaction (step 4 in fig. 1). As Meyer puts it: "An interactional lens, however, is still too narrow in its scope. . . . In order to grasp the meanings of these multiple elements in every case, one needs to change to a *transactional* lens. . . . A transactional view of the case does not mean a mere addition of components, but rather a reconceptualization of them, so as to be able to view a *system* of interweaving forces, all having reciprocity and feedback with each other."²⁴

In a circular transaction, the causal contribution of one element to the problem in the interaction is itself shaped by the causal contribution of the other element; therefore, the problem must be caused by

factors in both elements. Eco-systems thinkers claim that, because the transactional approach makes it impossible to isolate the individual as the place where the cause of a problem originates, it also becomes impossible to separate the individual from the environment for purposes of assessment and intervention. Consequently, all individualistic therapeutic bias is eliminated: "Once one utilizes an *eco/systems perspective* and transactions among persons and environments are the salient constructs, then a medical model and disease metaphor are obviously impossible to use."²⁵

The transactional nature of social work problems is a root assumption that ecological theorists share with eco-systems thinkers. For example, Germain and Gitterman assert that an ecological perspective is "transactional as opposed to . . . linear," and they, too, see the transactional focus as more or less universally applicable: "in the ecological perspective, the development and functioning of individuals and collectivities are *always* viewed as transactional outcomes."²⁶ They describe the nature of transactions, and the rejection of the interaction approach, in terms quite consistent with Meyer's and Woodrow's presentations: "Transactions must be understood as continuous reciprocal exchanges in the unitary person:environment system, through which each shapes, changes, or otherwise influences the other over time. Thus transaction is different from the more familiar concept of interaction—a form of linear causality in which one entity affects one or more others in a particular episode without itself being changed in the process. . . . Transactions are actually circular feedback processes taking place in the person:environment interface and giving rise to reciprocal causality. In such instances, cause can become effect and effect can become cause all around the circular loop."²⁷

Evaluating the Connectedness Claim

Does the connectedness principle really do for clinical practice all that eco-systems thinkers claim? Unfortunately, the connectedness principle cannot provide the claimed clinical benefits. The main problem is that the principle is an abstract assertion of connectedness without any substantive account of the nature of the hypothesized connections. The eco-systems perspective merely asserts that there exist circular connections between all aspects of the individual and all aspects of the individual's environment. Because the principle makes "no explicit assumption about the substantive nature" of the connections, it is entirely empty of explanatory content.²⁸ Consequently, domain-specific theories must be used to determine which possible connections actually exist and the nature, strength, and likely responsiveness to treatment of such connections. Thus, everything of real clinical importance regarding causal connections is derived from domain-specific

theories. Adding an abstract Hegelian assertion of the connectedness of everything to the sum of these specific causal theories adds nothing of clinical value.

Perhaps it is true in some weak sense that everything is connected to everything else in one way or another. But, in a practical sense, most possible connections are irrelevant or unchangeable in a given case. The challenge is to decide where among the infinite possibilities to focus finite diagnostic and interventive attention. This is exactly where domain-specific clinical theories are designed to be helpful. Such theories attempt to identify the causal connections in a domain and to specify which causes are important and changeable; they describe what we actually know or believe about such connections. From the ethereal stance of the eco-systems perspective, sexual abuse and the gravitational pull of Jupiter are equally parts of the environment that are causally interacting with a child's behavior; there is nothing in the perspective to tell us which of these is more important. Only domain-specific knowledge obtained independently of the perspective tells the practitioner that physical abuse is relevant and that the gravitational pull of Jupiter is not.

It is thus an illusion to think that the perspective can "focus our vision and lead us to notice" relevant connections.²⁹ To focus or to notice, one must distinguish a salient target from among a background of many possibilities, and the perspective does not help in doing this. If anything, the assertion of many connections without guidance as to their importance is likely to blur the practitioner's vision.

The problems with the connectedness principle arise directly out of the structure of the eco-systems perspective, which is essentially just a collection of concepts and a general assertion that the concepts are applicable to all social work practice situations. Theories generally place boundary constraints on the applicability of their concepts. By placing no constraints on the application of the connectedness principle, the perspective's claims become overly universalistic and implausible, and its concepts become useless for making critical distinctions. These concepts certainly can be illuminating and useful when appropriately applied to a specific domain, as in family systems theory. However, the concepts become empty of content when deployed in an unrestrained fashion.

But what about the argument that the connectedness principle provides social work practitioners with a transactional focus? No evidence is offered for the general existence of the proposed circular transactions in social work cases. Presumably, it does not enhance clinical effectiveness to give practitioners an incorrect understanding of their cases. Whether a particular causal relationship is linear or circular can only be established by domain-specific theory and research, not by conceptual fiat. (Labeling the connectedness claim "philosophical"

does not relieve one of the need to defend the truth of such an important assertion about client problems.)³⁰ To support the transactional approach, eco-systems thinkers cite specific kinds of social work cases in which there clearly are circular causal relationships (e.g., a mentally disturbed patient's behavior affects the community, and the community's stigmatization exacerbates the patient's symptomatic behavior; or, a change in one member of a family can affect other members of the family, which can, in turn, affect the first individual). However, in such cases it is not the perspective itself but always some additional domain-specific theory or theories (e.g., sociological theories of social stigma along with psychological theories of reactions to stigmatization; theories of family dynamics) that suggest the existence of a circular causal relationship. The perspective takes selected examples that have domain-specific theoretical support and uses them as a basis for a generic, universal generalization regarding all aspects of all social work cases for which there is no theoretical support.

The eco-systems perspective's blanket endorsement of circular causal connections and the transactional focus is misguided. Some circular causal hypotheses are right, many are wrong, and a good number are outrageous. Here, for example, are some circular causal hypotheses: Institutionalized mental patients' symptoms are due to feedback from the asylum's social structure and would, therefore, disappear if the patients were deinstitutionalized; men and women are mutually adapted to one another with complex feedback mechanisms of dominance and submission so as to have natural dispositions to play different roles at home and work; a husband's physical abuse of his wife is caused, in part, by his wife's defiant behavior; the sexual abuse of a child is caused, in part, by the child's seductive behavior toward the adult abuser; a woman's provocative clothing causes the rapist to choose her as his victim; and, children with schizophrenic symptoms have those symptoms because of their attempt to adapt to their parents' double-binding communication patterns.

Each of these circular causal hypotheses has been claimed to be true at one time or another, and each is consistent with an eco-systems perspective. Yet, none of them is generally supported by social work practitioners or researchers today. In some cases, linear rivals are favored. The fact that a hypothesis is circular in itself gives the hypothesis no special scientific standing over linear rivals. The decision as to whether a circular hypothesis or a linear rival is more plausible must be based on domain-specific knowledge, theory, and research, with no dogmatic prejudice about the kind of causal model that will prove correct or useful. The mechanical application of the notion of circular causality to social work cases is neither plausible nor benign.

If eco-systems thinkers do not justify the transactional focus by research or theory, how do they justify it? Social work, by definition,

is concerned with certain kinds of interactions between the individual and the social environment. Eco-systems thinkers sometimes present the circularity hypothesis as if it were a conceptual elaboration on or a correction of social work's concept of person-in-environment interaction. That is, they suggest that social work, *by definition*, deals only with circular transactions: "In social work, the psycho-social unit of attention indicates an eco-systems perspective."³¹

Eco-systems thinkers here confuse conceptual issues with theoretical issues. Causal claims like the circularity hypothesis are theoretical hypotheses about reality that must be supported with evidence and compete with other theories. There is nothing in the profession's definition in terms of "interaction" that demands any particular kind of causal relationship between interacting elements. It is perfectly possible to have interactions that fit social work's definition but where the elements are not related in a circular causal manner. For example, many instances of social injustice to individuals and almost all instances of abuse of children seem to be best explained by linear causal processes originating entirely in the environment. These are no less social work problems because of their linear causal structure. Consequently, eco-systems thinkers cannot derive the transactional focus from a conceptual analysis of social work's domain or purpose; they can legitimately invoke a transactional approach only when domain-specific knowledge indicates that there is indeed such a structure in reality. The impression that the perspective itself can legitimately establish a transactional focus for the profession is an illusion.

When eco-systems thinkers treat the circular causality hypothesis as if it were a conceptual truth, they confuse the field's intellectual discourse and incorrectly suggest that the hypothesis is beyond empirical dispute. It is a way of trying to force their theoretical agenda on the profession despite a lack of appropriate evidence. One cannot simply conceptually legislate that one's theoretical beliefs are true; to do so, as Bertrand Russell once remarked, has all the advantages of theft over honest toil.

The connectedness claim, circularity thesis, and transactional focus are motivated by the desire to correct what is perceived to be an individualistic bias in practice. However, eco-systems thinkers put the cart before the horse when they insist without evidence that the world is a certain way in order to influence social workers to approach intervention in a certain way. The process should be the other way around; we should open-mindedly determine the nature of the world and design our interventions to be consistent with what we discover. The danger of asserting a position about the world to justify one's preferred approach to practice is evident; one is likely to describe the world inaccurately and ultimately undermine the effectiveness of practice.

Assessment Claim

Eco-systems thinkers frequently claim that, although the eco-systems perspective cannot help with intervention, it is useful for assessment: "Its major claim is that it is a model for assessment";³² "The eco-systems perspective can be used as an assessment tool so as to determine what is needed";³³ "The eco-systems framework is essentially an assessment tool";³⁴ "An ecological systems model of social functioning is directly useful as an assessment instrument."³⁵ These claims about assessment are closely related to the connectedness claim; the awareness of connectedness is supposed to guide assessment, and the connectedness of all aspects of a case is supposed to lead to the comprehensiveness of eco-systems assessments.

In fact, the eco-systems perspective is not really helpful in assessment except as a general reminder that causes may be more complex and wide-ranging than one might have thought. (And for that reminder, one does not need the perspective.) It is not helpful because, once one has been alerted that anything might be connected to anything else, one then has to start the real work of assessment, which is to make judgments in a particular case about what is actually connected to what in what ways. Because the eco-systems perspective makes no substantive claims about causal connections, it cannot "determine what is needed" in a case. Consequently, every meaningful step of an assessment has to be guided by specific substantive theories and expertise; the perspective never actually enters into the process. The perspective's influence on assessment, like the Cheshire cat's smile, hangs in the air without any substance.

Assessment is, to a large extent, a matter of defining the client's problem. Thus, a framework that does not help with problem definition cannot be said in any significant sense to help in assessment. Yet Meyer freely affirms that the perspective is of no help in problem definition: "The eco-systems theory . . . does not specify the *what* (problem-definition)";³⁶ "It does not tell what to do or how to define problems."³⁷ The perspective cannot help in identifying the nature of the problem in any particular case because it makes no substantive assertions about specific causal processes. The perspective's claim to be an assessment instrument is therefore spurious.

But, are not the eco-systems perspective's concepts, like positive and negative feedback, or adaptedness, quite useful in assessment? They are useful if they are applied appropriately in a domain-specific theory. The problem is that, in elevating these particular concepts to a generic perspective, eco-systems thinkers dogmatically assert that these kinds of connections exist everywhere and that older, "linear" concepts never apply. These universal assertions are not helpful in performing an assessment because, as universal generalizations, they are simply false.

Not every possible aspect of individual and environment is circularly connected. For example, consider the case, recently reported in the newspapers, of a woman who was a victim of a rape and beating in Brooklyn by four youths.³⁸ Her attackers admitted that they were standing around talking and simply decided on the spur of the moment to rob someone, then looked around and chose the victim entirely at random because at that moment, she happened to be jogging nearby. Subsequently, when she did not have any money and could not speak English, they became angry and physically and sexually assaulted her. Should the practitioner approach this case with the assumption, demanded by the eco-systems perspective, that there was a circular causal connection with some kind of feedback between the victim's traits or behavior and the decision of the youths to assault her, or that there is some kind of mutual adaptation between victim and perpetrators? The essence of assessment lies in making relevant distinctions between cases, and the perspective's overly general claims confuse rather than advance this task.

Meyer illustrates eco-systems thinking about assessment with the following example:

For example, in the case of a problem of truancy, one might treat a child and help him to remain in school, or intervene with a schoolteacher to improve the school environment. It is possible that either one of those interventions will eventuate in the child returning to school, and even more possible that both interventions will guarantee success if the child returns problem-free to an improved school environment. However, other multiple intervening events would always affect the outcome of either intervention in unpredictable ways. In such a case, one might consider the family's concerns and behavior, the responses of the child's school friends, the culture and safety of the neighborhood, and the support systems in the school, as variables that could combine to chart the course of the case, and even explain its outcome.

The linear, one-to-one relationship between cause and effect, or child and schoolteacher, is difficult to establish. *At the least, a practitioner would need a clear picture of the complex, interrelated components in the case before determining which methodological intervention to use.* In the example just described, multiple interventions might be more appropriate. Depending upon the needs and resources, one could envision casework methods with the child, family treatment with the family, group work with the child and his friends, and/or organizational intervention with the school bureaucracy.³⁹

Throughout the discussion, Meyer refers to what is "possible" or what "might be" the case. At no point does she identify or describe actualities; that would require a different kind of inquiry in which domain-specific theories are applied to the specifics of the case, as Meyer notes in the emphasized sentence. The example displays all that the eco-systems perspective can offer with respect to assessment, namely, a reminder about the possibilities that might, or might not, play a role in a case. Thus, it is misleading when Meyer elsewhere

asserts that “the eco-systems perspective draws attention to what is.”⁴⁰ At best, the eco-systems perspective draws attention to what is possible, and other theories distinguish the possible from the actual and describe what is.

But, in the above passage, was not the eco-systems perspective at least useful in enabling Meyer to identify possibilities in preparation for using other theories to formulate an assessment? In reality, even identifying specific possibilities depends entirely on knowledge other than the eco-systems perspective. How did Meyer quickly alight on the specific environmental aspects of the case situation that she selected for attention, such as the teacher, the friends, and the community, rather than the infinite number of alternative possibilities? In a later passage she reveals how, namely, by using her domain-specific “knowledge of family theory, organizational theory, theories about support networks, theories of the physical environment, and so on,” as well as practice wisdom and just plain common sense about what might be relevant (e.g., talking to the teacher).⁴¹ Meyer’s truancy example is misleading in this regard because it cultivates the illusion that somehow she gets from the problem situation to the identified variables by using the perspective. In fact, she singles out these variables because, on independent grounds, she happens to know that they might be relevant.

In her recent book on assessment, Meyer claims that “the [eco-systems] perspective . . . enlarges the unit of classification,” leading to better assessments.⁴² She offers the following illustration: “For example, to classify a child as a behavior problem of some sort would be insufficient in this perspective. More aptly the classification scheme would locate a child’s behavior in school, at home, or with friends, etc., so as to take account of the person-environment configuration, and to make the child’s behavior specific to an event.”⁴³ However, such specification has long been a part of thorough assessments simply because clinical wisdom and theoretical knowledge suggest that problem behavior may be triggered by specific situational cues. It is this knowledge, and not the perspective’s unsupported assertions, that justify taking situations into account in diagnosis.

The same conclusion is supported by a further example of Meyer’s:

Thus, in a drug clinic, addiction to cocaine, for example, would be an anchoring description. *Clinical experience and theory suggest multiple permutations of this problem*, all of which could be subsumed under the rubric of cocaine addiction: the person’s drug-taking habits—alone, with friends? all of the time, after work? at work, at home on the streets? the family’s response—supportive or nonsupportive of the habit? tolerant or intolerant of the drug user? involved or not involved in the drug habit? the client’s functioning—relates effectively to others? attends school, work? has other social outlets? This suggestive, nonexhaustive list of behaviors, *its evidence supported by clinical experience and*

elaborated upon by theory and researched data, could serve as a psychosocial classification system in a drug clinic.⁴⁴

Meyer's list of questions is obviously a good one for the clinician to keep in mind. However, as the emphasized phrases indicate, in creating this list, Meyer does not rely on or cite the propositions of the eco-systems perspective; those propositions would not single out the mentioned factors as more important than others. Rather, Meyer consults her clinical wisdom, her knowledge of theory and research, and her commonsense understanding of human life.

One can easily fall prey to the illusion that the eco-systems perspective, by suggesting endless possible connections, at least helps to develop a *comprehensive* assessment. This is not true. Obviously, no meaningful assessment can be infinitely complex. The eco-systems perspective suggests that connections are everywhere, and the practitioner must use domain-specific theories to decide which factors are significant. The degree of the assessment's comprehensiveness derives entirely from the comprehensiveness of the clinician's survey of relevant domain-specific theories. Other than suggesting that the practitioner should be as comprehensive as possible in surveying domain-specific theories (a suggestion that is sensible without the perspective), the perspective adds nothing to the comprehensiveness of assessment. (More will be said about the perspective's claims about comprehensiveness in Pt. 2.)

At one point, Meyer argues that assessment of environmental systems is important even if such systems cannot be changed in individual intervention: "There is an ethical issue involved here: it is one thing to find that something is unsolvable through the efforts of the clinician—like institutional racism or poverty—and it is quite another thing to avoid recognizing, and thus to deny, the impact of these problems at the outset because they are unsolvable by the clinician."⁴⁵ First, the fact that most clinicians do not attempt to directly intervene at the social level into such factors as poverty and institutional racism does not mean that clinicians "deny the impact" of such factors. Clinicians generally attempt to deal with the impact of social factors by changing the client's reactions and exposure to such factors, which can all be done within a framework focused on the individual's meanings and behaviors without directly confronting or assessing larger systems. So, the issue raised by the eco-systems perspective is not whether clinicians should ignore social factors—they cannot afford to do so because such factors heavily influence the client's meaning system—but whether it is essential for the clinical practitioner to directly assess environmental systems, even when it is known that nothing can be done about such larger systems in the context of clinical practice. Contrary to Meyer's suggestion, it is not at all unethical for

the clinician to focus assessment on the changeable aspects of the client's problem rather than dogmatically following the connectedness principle in all directions. Indeed, it may be unethical to do otherwise. Just as a Federal Aviation Administration investigator would be wrong to waste time focusing on gravity's causal role in an airplane crash, so sometimes the clinician would be wrong to spend time directly focusing on unchangeable community and social factors in themselves rather than identifying how the individual can best be helped to overcome, avoid, or cope more effectively with such background factors.

Some of the problems noted here with the eco-systems perspective's assessment and connectedness claims were earlier observed by Richard Roberts in his commentary on generic theory:

It has been shown that while these approaches increase the number of variables to be taken into account, they provide no criteria to assess the relevant importance of these variables. For example, they provide no criteria by which to develop a hierarchy of importance of factors to influence an assessment. Thus the practical implications of this is to widely increase the number of variables required to be considered by the practitioner but to provide no tools as to how this might be achieved systematically and within realistic constraints of time and personnel. While this approach has the advantage of delaying assessment until all "relevant" factors are taken into consideration, it does not give any assistance in the determination of what is "relevant". Thus the assignment is complex, but in the end other factors have to be invoked, such as other theory, ideology of the practitioner, and so on.⁴⁶

Nothing I have said here disputes that eco-systems thinkers may be excellent at assessment and may have much wisdom in this area to offer other social workers. For example, Meyer's recent book on assessment contains many useful insights.⁴⁷ My argument is only that any such assessment wisdom cannot be derived from the perspective itself but must be due entirely to other knowledge because, by its very nature, the perspective cannot help in assessment. No matter how hard eco-systems thinkers may try to maintain the illusion that the perspective is guiding their assessments, in fact, the sources of their insights lie elsewhere, in domain-specific knowledge.

Theoretical Integration Claim

Aware that the eco-systems perspective itself provides no guidance for intervention, proponents of the perspective rely heavily on the claim that the perspective unifies and integrates other practice theories that do provide such guidance: "We are attempting to show that the eco-systems perspective . . . can be viewed as a unifying construct in social work";⁴⁸ "Because it can encompass *any* treatment model, it has the potential for serving as a unifying perspective in social work practice";⁴⁹ "The perspective is meant to provide a way of integrating

knowledge and skills. . . . The eco-systems perspective can serve as an integrating force for social work practice models, coordinating assessment and various conceptualizations of knowledge and methods";⁵⁰ "We perceive it to be a theory that can help social workers to organize and integrate a multitude of perspectives and methodological approaches that may be used in attempts to achieve change of various kinds."⁵¹ The integration claim is based on the assessment claim; the integrative capacities of the perspective are supposed to be due to the comprehensiveness of its assessments, which, because they cover all aspects of a case, allow all theories and methods to be potentially relevant to the assessed problem and to intervention.

However, it is an illusion to think that the eco-systems perspective is capable of integrating practice theories, at least in any theoretically interesting way. The perspective makes no substantive theoretical claims and thus provides no way of reconciling the substantive differences among practice theories or between those theories and the perspective itself. Eco-systems thinkers claim that other theories deny the connectedness principle and adopt linear causal laws, but it is never explained how these supposedly flawed linear theories, which are directly contradicted by the perspective's connectedness principle, are to be integrated within the perspective.

Meyer seems to think that such integration is possible because linear processes can be parts of larger circular processes: "No linear perspective can explain systemic events, although systemic perspectives can allow for linear interventions."⁵² The idea seems to be that, for example, the linear laws of psychoanalysis, in which internal conflicts cause symptoms, can be encompassed by a broader perspective in which inner conflicts, symptoms, and environmental factors enter into circular causal relations.

This way of thinking about integration is confused. It is true that a systemic perspective can encompass linear *interventions*, as Meyer says, because interventions directed at one system can of course be used to change a circular interaction between systems (e.g., if you "linearly" intervene and simply take a child out of his or her family of origin and place him or her in a foster home, you will certainly change the circular causal relationships between the child and his or her original family). However, a systems perspective cannot coherently encompass a linear *theory*. Such a theory asserts that a certain phenomenon can be understood and explained by linear causal laws. These linear laws are claimed to be sufficient explanations of the phenomenon in question. Thus, by its very logical structure, a linear theory of a phenomenon will generally preclude and reject a circular interpretation of the same phenomenon. To place such a linear theory within a systemic context is to change and essentially abandon the theory. The theory's laws would have to be entirely rethought to make them fit coherently

within the new framework. There is nothing in the eco-systems perspective that explains how these linear theories are to be adjusted to be consistent with systemic principles while preserving their essential insights.⁵³

For example, eco-systems thinkers do not explain how conflicting theories like psychoanalysis and behaviorism, let alone myriad other theories that are in opposition to both of these, are all to become reconciled under the perspective. Each of these theories makes universal or near-universal generalizations about the causes of certain conditions, and these generalizations cannot all be true. To integrate these theories with one another or with the perspective involves changes with complex theoretical implications that are tantamount to the construction of a new theory. In trying to integrate several theories, the problem is compounded because the changes in all of the theories must be coordinated so as to give rise to a consistent overall theoretical structure. The obstacles to such an integration are tremendous, as is indicated by the fact that theoreticians have intensively pursued this challenge for decades without success. Indeed, there is a large and active scholarly organization, the Society for the Exploration of Psychotherapy Integration, that grapples with this problem just in the area of psychotherapeutic theories. The challenge of integrating theories at all interventive levels within the constraints of the perspective is even more daunting. Meyer notes that one cannot directly integrate these theories without the perspective because they "are inherently different in a number of dimensions."⁵⁴ However, the eco-systems perspective offers no magical way to overcome these differences.

There is a common distinction in the psychotherapy literature between integration and eclecticism (eco-systems theorists appear to use these terms interchangeably, but the distinction still applies). Integration refers to the construction of a new theory that incorporates the legitimate insights of various competing theories into one coherent approach. In contrast, eclecticism refers to the use of techniques from many different theories, where one uses whatever technique seems appropriate at a given time without any consistent theoretical rationale for the choice. The eco-systems perspective offers no way of putting together the theories from which various techniques are taken, so it leads to eclecticism of technique, not theoretical integration. What eco-systems theorists call "integration" or "unification" of theory is really just standard atheoretical eclecticism with eco-systems terminology added to give the illusion of integration. However, to adopt atheoretical eclecticism as one's interventive approach, no generic theory is necessary; by its nature, eclecticism does not require an overarching intellectual framework. The turn to eclecticism under the rubric of the eco-systems perspective is not an integrative theoretical advance but, in effect, an abandonment of the attempt to integrate theory.

Bias Correction Claim

The eco-systems perspective is claimed by its proponents to correct widespread practitioner biases against environmental intervention and for individual treatment. The perspective thus follows a tradition of systems-oriented attempts to rid social work of what is perceived as an excessive focus on psychotherapy and individual change (more will be said about this tradition in Pt. 2). As noted earlier, the acceptance of the connectedness principle, the postulation of circular causality, and the resultant transactional focus are all largely motivated by the belief that they correct such biases.

The biases that require correction are described, for example, as follows: "The temptation for clinicians is to draw upon a narrow skills repertoire, biased in the choice by the power of existing knowledge";⁵⁵ "Social workers approached their cases with fixed methodological commitments, and in a sense they shaped their view of cases to their predetermined technologies. This made it difficult to encompass the yet unknown or unrecognized events that were not addressed by those technologies. Thus, many potential clients with problems that were unresponsive to particular methods were simply left out of social work's purview and services";⁵⁶ "The inherent limitation in all practice models is their selective attention when looking at the person-in-situation and deciding what to do. Use of the eco-systems perspective avoids the limitation of methodological closure and permits more specific individualizing of the case through eclectic selection of one or more practice models or other interventive techniques";⁵⁷ "Systems theory . . . provides a redress of the balance between sociological and psychological emphases which was swung in the latter direction by the psychotherapeutic preoccupations of the 1940's and 1950's";⁵⁸ "In social casework, in particular, a treatment emphasis on personality change was sometimes uppermost, causing a tendency to view the environment as a static setting in which people lived out their lives dominated by internal forces."⁵⁹

The bias correction claim is derived directly from the connectedness, assessment, and integration claims. If the person is connected to all aspects of the environment, and all of these connections are included in a full assessment, then techniques at all intervention levels are potentially relevant to the assessed problem and may be used within the perspective's integrative framework. Thus, the perspective is unbiased because it "does not assign priority to interventions with the person or environment side of the psychosocial equation, but it directs attention to the multiplicity of events and levels of events."⁶⁰

There is no doubt that theoretical and intervention biases exist in social work and that corrective efforts are necessary. Consider a simple example. Based on criteria in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of*

Mental Disorders, 4th ed., the practitioner may assume that an adolescent's antisocial behavior is an instance of conduct disorder, a mental disorder, and that psychotherapy rather than environmental intervention is the appropriate treatment.⁶¹ However, such behavior could also be a normal response to a dangerous neighborhood or intense peer pressures, and environmental intervention could well be appropriate. (Even if the problem is environmental, it is possible that the adolescent might be taught in individual treatment to respond differently to the environment, but that is another matter.) Clinicians should routinely examine alternative etiologies, including environmental etiologies, before making treatment decisions. The eco-systems perspective is, in part, a response to the abuses resulting from psychotherapeutic ideologies and dogmas taking precedence over an open-minded approach to helping that includes environmental assessment.

However, a lack of bias by the eco-systems perspective itself is not the same as a correction of bias in the theories used by practitioners or in the way that practitioners use the theories. That is, the bias correction claim is based on a confusion of two different questions: (1) Is the eco-systems perspective itself unbiased? (2) Does use of the eco-systems perspective correct the biases that now beset the field? Regarding the first question, Meyer is correct that the perspective itself is unbiased and does not favor interventions with the person or environment. As explained earlier, the perspective provides no guidance as to which causes at which levels are relevant, important, or changeable, so it can hardly have a built-in bias.

The second question is an entirely different matter. Eco-systems thinkers readily admit that problem definition and choice of intervention depend wholly on the practitioner's use of domain-specific theories and not on the perspective itself. But, the biases of which eco-systems thinkers complain derive from just such theories about the nature of problems and the effectiveness of treatments. Because the perspective allows for the use of all such theories and does not directly challenge any theory's assertions, the perspective is helpless to correct the biases inherent in such theories. Indeed, one cannot even *recognize* a theoretical bias without a substantive theory to indicate that something false has been assumed, and the perspective has no such substance.

For example, dogmatic psychodynamic theorists are biased *not* because they are unaware of the possibility that there are circular causes of a client's symptoms. They are biased because their theory, as they interpret it and believe in it, asserts that, of the sources of certain problems, intrapsychic causes are the most common, the most powerful, or the most responsive to treatment. That is, their theory unreasonably elevates specific kinds of causes to virtually the only important causes for purposes of assessment and intervention. To correct such

a bias, one needs to correct the errors in the theory. Simply placing such a theory within the context of the eco-systems perspective does nothing to correct the theory's excesses. An eco-systems practitioner who is psychodynamically biased will dutifully list all the potentially relevant causes of a problem at various levels, but then will consistently conclude, on the basis of substantive theoretical beliefs about the importance of various factors, that an intrapsychic problem definition is the correct one and a psychotherapeutic intervention is the best one. There is nothing in the eco-systems perspective that would contradict the claim that of all possible connections in a given situation, intrapsychic causes are the strongest and most responsive to intervention.

Thus, once an eco-systems assessment is performed, it becomes essentially a diagnostic Rorschach test onto which the clinician, in the problem-definition and treatment-choice phases, can project his or her biases. Only an array of domain-specific theories about the nature and strength of various causes can correct such therapeutic biases. For example, in the earlier example of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual's* diagnostic bias in prematurely interpreting antisocial behavior as a mental disorder, the clinician is alerted to possible alternative environmental explanations, not by abstract eco-systems notions, but by a specific body of developed social science theory regarding social networks, peer pressure, and gang phenomena, supplemented by clinical wisdom and common sense. The only cure for bad theories is better theories; nothing in the eco-systems perspective will transform foolish overgeneralizations into balanced considerations.

The impotence of the eco-systems perspective in correcting intervention biases is evident from the fact that other beliefs, and not the perspective itself, determine choice of intervention. Meyer acknowledges that even when a systems assessment is made, the choice of intervention depends on other factors: "The decision as to what to do, and what practical approach to use, once having recognized the relatedness of the variables, will depend upon considerations of salience, accessibility of various actors, potential for improvement, available resources in the client and in the environment, and the practitioner's competence";⁶² "It is left to the practitioner's system of values and thought as to what she or he will address in the case."⁶³ These factors are where biases enter, but they are not touched by the perspective. Moreover, Meyer notes that, in choosing among possible treatments, theories that focus on individual intervention have an edge because they are much better developed and possess more sophisticated techniques: "In the balance between person and environment theories person-oriented skills are the easiest to develop and master because they are derived from clear and concise theoretical implications. . . . Personality theories have offered definition to practice skills, while the 'vast blue sky' of the environment, not yet clearly subject to

direct interventions, is left to chance attention."⁶⁴ Consequently, a bias toward individualistic intervention can continue to exist no matter how comprehensive is a systems assessment. As Meyer puts it, "to know all is not to do all."⁶⁵ Meyer notes that, even if the clinician recognizes that certain environmental problems exist, these problems may be judged to be "unsolvable" or "intractable" and thus not addressed in treatment.⁶⁶ Yet beliefs about the solvability of problems through certain treatments are a large part of practitioner bias. Meyer's comments make it clear that such biases can continue to flourish even after a systems assessment.

The Myth That "Linear Theory" Is the Cause of Clinical Bias

At one point, in defending the importance of circular causality for bias correction, Meyer claims that the linear causal approach of traditional theories is *entirely* responsible for the profession's bias toward person-oriented treatment: "It becomes clearer why it has been so tempting for caseworkers to become preoccupied with the person side of the equation. As long as the linear equation exists, linear, either/or choices have to be made. . . . *This has all occurred because of the structural limitations of linear methods*; it has not been necessarily due to mischievousness on the part of caseworkers, nor a bias against environmental concerns. The bias may be in the structure of the models, not in the intentions or value commitments."⁶⁷ If true, this would imply that the perspective's turn to circular causality would correct the biases.

However, there are several problems with Meyer's claim that the linearity of traditional theories is responsible for casework's individualistic focus. First, it is just not true that traditional person-focused theories are so utterly linear. Psychoanalytic theory, for example, attributes neurotic symptoms in part to the feedback of "secondary gain," where attention from the environment due to the symptoms encourages the retention of the symptoms. And, a child's problematic behavior may be attributed by a psychoanalyst to subtle feedback from the parents due to the parents' unconscious desires.⁶⁸ The individual intervention bias of psychodynamic approaches is based not on the linearity of the theory but on beliefs that intrapsychic causes are particularly important, that individual therapeutic interventions are particularly effective, and that environmental influences are generally best addressed by helping the individual to be aware of those influences and cope more effectively with them.

Second, Meyer's claim that linear theory demands an "either/or" choice between individual and environment is clearly false. It may be true that each specific intervention has to be aimed at either the individual or the environment, but this is true even after a systems assessment, as Meyer notes: "Cases can be defined transactionally . . . but

in the end, interventions have to be directed to the person or environment—there are, after all, boundary conditions involved. . . . Skills cannot transcend the person-environment boundaries.”⁶⁹ However, a practitioner can use several linear models together to get an overall view of individual and environmental influences on a problem. For example, in dealing with adolescent antisocial behavior, one might use theories of moral development and developmental psychopathology that focus on internal causes, and socialization theories, social network theories, family theories, and community theories that focus on environmental influences. Whatever biases exist in the profession, there is no principled resistance to such combined approaches; it is not at all unusual in casework to combine individual treatment with environmental interventions such as school visits, home visits, family consultations, and child placements. One need not adopt a circular causal theory to address both sides of the person-environment equation.

Third, and most important, the “linearity” diagnosis of what is wrong with traditional theories misses the real problem. Many traditional theories make untenable universal claims that problems are caused entirely in a certain way (e.g., by inner conflict, or reinforcement, or social role definition), and these excessively universal claims discourage practitioners from using a broad range of theories in thinking about a case. However, this is a problem not with the linearity of the theories but with the unfounded universality of their causal claims, a problem that can be fixed only by improving the substance of the theories and widening practitioners’ knowledge of other, counterbalancing, domain-specific theories. There is no reason to think that linearity itself plays a pivotal role in intervention biases.

Note that, in its zeal to correct perceived biases, the eco-systems perspective falls into exactly the same kind of universalistic error or “bias” as that of its accused rivals. The perspective rejects all linear causal assertions and insists that all problems are circular in nature, rather than making a more measured and plausible statement about the potential variety of causes. The perspective never indicates how to determine whether it is *true* that causality is linear or circular in a given instance. It is obvious that circular causality is not involved in every aspect of every case, as is illustrated by the earlier-cited case of the woman victimized at random by four youths as well as by many cases of abuse, injustice, and biological disorder. Dogmatic circularism can lead the clinician just as astray as dogmatic linearism. It appears that, rather than eliminating biases, the perspective’s circularity thesis trades old biases for new ones.

The Failure of the Transactional Focus to Eliminate Bias

But what about the argument, which emerged in the earlier discussion of Woodrow’s chart (fig. 1), that only linear theories allow one to

localize the cause of an interactional problem on one side or the other of the person-environment matrix and thereby allow individualistic bias? In contrast, transactional theories, which imply that each and every causal process involves both interacting elements as active causal sources, are supposed to make it impossible to localize the source of a problem in person or environment and thus make it impossible to focus treatment on the person. Indeed, as suggested by the fourth step in Woodrow's chart, eco-systems thinkers seem to believe that circular causality somehow eliminates the very distinction between person and environment and makes them one unified entity, thus rendering bias toward one or the other logically impossible. Meyer notes: "In a systemic view there is no inner or outer, but rather an operational field in which all elements intersect and affect each other";⁷⁰ "To pursue the person *and* system notion is to return us to the old, plaguing dichotomous thinking of person and situation. We seek instead to erase the 'and.'"⁷¹ Germain and Gitterman similarly state that, within an ecological perspective, the person-environment system becomes "unitary."⁷²

However, the use of the transactional focus to correct perceived person-centered interventive biases is no more than a semantic trick. After all, however we talk about them, persons and environments are real entities with nonarbitrary boundaries. Even Meyer notes, in an earlier-cited passage, that the person-environment distinction maintains its importance because "there are, after all, boundary conditions involved."⁷³ Despite the great faith that eco-systems thinkers put in diagrams, the fact that Woodrow draws one circle around both person and environment in the fourth step of his chart does not make them one entity or erase the real boundaries that distinguish the person from the environment. A similar magical belief in the power of language seems to afflict Germain and Gitterman, who state: "In the ecological perspective, the equation denoting people:environment relationships substitutes a colon for the hyphen to underscore their transactional nature and to signify repair of the former discrete person-situation relationship."⁷⁴ But, a change in notation from a hyphen to a colon provides no evidence that reality is transactional rather than interactional or that the commonsense boundaries between person and environment are invalid. As Meyer admits, despite all the talk about transactions, "in the end, interventions have to be directed to the person or environment."⁷⁵ Thus, even with a transactional focus, practitioners still have to decide whether to attempt to change the transaction by intervening with the person or the environment or both. But, if the transactional focus cannot eradicate the distinction between persons and environments in assessment and intervention, then it fails to make individualistic bias conceptually impossible. Such

bias can still enter into the choice of interventions for changing transactions. “Selective attention” remains potentially as problematic as ever.⁷⁶

The flaw in attempting to use the transactional focus to correct bias is directly parallel to the flaw noted earlier in attempting to use the interactional focus to correct bias. Even if one’s goal is to change circular person-environment transactions, one’s theory or ideology might consistently lead one during assessment to locate in the person the most important causal contributions to transactional problems, or the most changeable links in the circular causal chain, and thus to focus intervention exclusively on the person. Reliance on circular causality to correct interventive bias confuses means with ends; the end may be defined as the changing of a circular transaction, but the means to that end is still either to intervene in the person or in the environment or both. Thus, the change from linear interaction to circular transaction does not eliminate the possibility of bias.

I conclude that the claimed bias-correcting advantages of the eco-systems perspective are an illusion. The supposedly vast difference with respect to bias correction between the interactional and transactional frameworks simply does not exist. Assessment and intervention are determined not by the perspective but by domain-specific theories, so theoretical biases can retain their influence even if the perspective is used. Real bias correction occurs when practitioners recognize the limitations of their individual-oriented theories and correct them or supplement them with further domain-specific theories that adequately take account of environmental influence.

Conclusion

Eco-systems thinkers offer several arguments for the clinical utility of the eco-systems perspective. I conclude from the analysis above that these arguments are without merit. The perspective adds nothing essential to the array of domain-specific theories and methods available to practitioners. The perception that social work needs the perspective to ensure clinical effectiveness is an illusion fostered by a series of intellectual errors in which the clinically useful powers of domain-specific theories are misattributed to the perspective.

The perspective’s lack of explanatory power—that is, its lack of substantive assertions about the nature, strength, or changeability of specific causal processes—is its undoing. This lack is the ultimate reason why the perspective cannot contribute to assessment, integration, or bias correction, which all depend on the practitioner’s beliefs in specific causal hypotheses. Thus, the way to improve assessment, integrate theories, and correct biases is to make progress in the formulation and teaching of domain-specific theories.

A careful reading of eco-systems writings, from student papers to published analyses of cases, readily reveals the clinical vacuity of the perspective. The perspective is often cited at the beginning of a discussion as the framework to be used in approaching a problem, with the real point being the notification of readers that the writer will not be limited to the dogmatic use of just one theory. But after the perspective is cited, it is rarely used again except as a kind of verbal genuflection to justify introducing considerations from another domain-specific theory. The perspective plays no concrete role in the case analysis. Relying on the perspective to excuse one's use of multiple theories is better than dogmatism, but it damages the field's progress in the long run. One should use such theories, not because one has an eco-systems perspective, but because the theories appear to be *true* and have something *useful* to offer in understanding the case at hand. Citing the eco-systems perspective has become the "theoretically correct" way of avoiding censure for being eclectic, but the perspective is not needed to justify use of multiple theories or techniques.

The eco-systems perspective no doubt played a useful historical role as a counterweight to the biases of dogmatic psychodynamic thinking and made important contributions to the development of social work theory by emphasizing the need to be comprehensive in assessment and to integrate the field's many theories into one coherent approach. However, the downside of these contributions is that, by falsely claiming to have solved these problems without developing or testing substantive hypotheses, the perspective distracted the field from grappling with the true intellectual challenges posed by these problems.

If these conclusions are justified, then the continued widespread acceptance of the eco-systems perspective could have dire consequences for the social work profession, potentially diverting attention from domain-specific knowledge building and distorting the profession's educational priorities. The perspective could give rise to the illusion that one can teach generic practice theory that applies fruitfully to diverse areas of social work concern, and such a view could undermine the quality of professional education by leading to an emphasis on generic frameworks and a de-emphasis on substantive domain-specific theories. Mastering the perspective's way of talking about cases may take up sufficient time that students are less likely to develop a sophisticated understanding of the many existing nongeneric, domain-specific theories of cause and intervention. Moreover, the use of the perspective's terminology to give the appearance of understanding, along with the perspective's disparagement of "linear" theories, may undermine the student's motivation to master a variety of complex domain-specific theories. Yet, as the analysis above indicates, the practitioner's claim to clinical competence depends entirely on the mastery of such theories.

In addition to the grains of truth in many of its overly universal claims, the eco-systems perspective is appealing to many social workers because there is clearly a noble purpose behind it, namely, the desire for clinicians to practice in a more open-minded, humble, and self-critical manner in which the complexity of cases is fully recognized. But, as the analysis above shows, intellectual virtues like humility and open-mindedness cannot be guaranteed by the perspective; arrogance and closed-mindedness can still hold sway. To make practitioners more intellectually virtuous, one must develop and teach a variety of domain-specific theories so that practitioners have the knowledge that forms the basis for such virtue. And, one must directly educate practitioners about the limits and uncertainties of current knowledge and the necessity for a flexible approach in dealing with the diverse clients and situations that practitioners face. The only way to ensure that practitioners possess humility and open-mindedness is to cultivate these virtues; the perspective cannot do this for us.

In sum, the eco-systems perspective yields nothing more than could be obtained by an in-depth understanding of many domain-specific theories. Although it is true that "no single interventive method can be stretched to encompass complex problems," a combination of different intervention methods can do so, and, in fact, is the only way to do so.⁷⁷ The true challenge is to master, improve, and integrate the many domain-specific clinical theories available to practitioners, rather than to inculcate in practitioners a nonsubstantive perspective.

In the end, however, the most powerful arguments for the perspective have nothing to do with its clinical usefulness. Those arguments concern the perspective's power to resolve certain enduring conceptual problems facing the social work profession, especially the need for a unifying framework that defines the profession and brings coherence to the profession's diverse methods. I will analyze those conceptual arguments in Part 2 of this article, in the June 1996 issue of this journal.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented in an invitational session at the annual program meeting of the Council on Social Work Education, March 4, 1995, in San Diego, California.

1. Gordon Hearn, ed., *The General Systems Approach: Contributions toward an Holistic Conception of Social Work* (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1969); Howard Goldstein, *Social Work Practice: A Unitary Approach* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973); Carol H. Meyer, ed., *Clinical Social Work in the Eco-Systems Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Carel B. Germain, "An Ecological Perspective in Casework Practice," *Social Casework* 54, no. 6 (1973): 323-30.

2. The point is often made that the ecological perspective is a systems approach that avoids the dehumanizing jargon of systems theory. See, e.g., Carel B. Germain and Alex Gitterman, "Ecological Perspective," in *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, 18th ed., ed. Anne Minahan (Silver Spring, Md.: National Association of Social Workers, 1987),

1:488–99. The mentioned point is made on p. 488. Note that when I refer to the “ecological perspective,” I refer specifically to the perspective and not to the Life Model of practice, which is a practice model loosely related to the perspective. For the Life Model, see Carel B. Germain and Alex Gitterman, *The Life Model of Social Work Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

3. For an early statement, see Carol H. Meyer, *Social Work Practice*, 2d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1976); the edited book is Meyer, ed. (n. 1 above).

4. Germain and Gitterman, “Ecological Perspective” (n. 2 above), p. 489.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 488.

6. Carol H. Meyer, “The Eco-Systems Perspective,” in *Paradigms of Clinical Social Work*, ed. R. A. Dorfman (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1988), pp. 275–94.

7. Germain and Gitterman, “Ecological Perspective” (n. 2 above), p. 488.

8. For some critical commentary on the eco-systems perspective, see L. Leighninger, “Systems Theory and Social Work: A Re-examination,” *Journal of Education for Social Work* 13 (1977): 44–49; Richard Roberts, *Lessons from the Past: Issues for Social Work Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Max Siporin, “Ecological Systems Theory in Social Work,” *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 7 (1980): 507–32.

9. D. Howe, “Inflated States and Empty Theories in Social Work,” *British Journal of Social Work* 10 (1980): 317–40, quoted in Roberts (n. 8 above), at p. v.

10. Meyer, *Social Work Practice* (n. 3 above), p. 129.

11. Carol H. Meyer, “The Search for Coherence,” in Meyer, ed. (n. 1 above), pp. 5–34, quote on p. 26.

12. Carol H. Meyer, “Introduction,” in Meyer, ed. (n. 1 above), pp. 75–80, quote on p. 77.

13. Robert D. Woodrow, “Casework: A Psychosocial Therapy,” in Meyer, ed. (n. 1 above), pp. 81–116, quote on p. 101.

14. Meyer, “The Eco-Systems Perspective” (n. 6 above), p. 275.

15. Carol H. Meyer, *Assessment in Social Work Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 103.

16. A point about terminology: in characterizing the eco-systems view, I mostly use *perspective* rather than *theory* because Meyer insists that this is a crucial distinction. However, I occasionally use *theory* for variation, both because there is a broad sense, applied even to interpretations in the humanities, in which any intellectual structure that purports to offer understanding can be considered a theory even if is not a *scientific* theory and because, as I will show later in Part 2, the claim that the eco-systems view is a perspective and not a theory is spurious. Meyer herself sometimes slips into referring to “eco-systems theory”; e.g., see Meyer, “The Search for Coherence” (n. 11 above), p. 29.

17. Meyer, *Social Work Practice* (n. 3 above), p. 129.

18. Meyer, “The Eco-Systems Perspective” (n. 6 above), p. 276 (emphasis in original).

19. Meyer, *Assessment in Social Work Practice* (n. 15 above), p. 103.

20. Meyer, “The Eco-Systems Perspective” (n. 6 above), p. 276 (emphasis added).

21. Meyer, “The Search for Coherence” (n. 11 above), p. 26.

22. As figure 1 indicates, Woodrow also suggests that the interaction approach is problematic because it leaves social work with two different professional functions, namely, individual and environmental intervention, which seems to imply that the profession incoherently possesses two purposes. Part of the rationale for going on to step 4 is to get rid of the bifurcation of professional functions at step 3. However, in Part 2 of this article, I will argue that the “two functions” problem is spurious. While at one level there may be two professional functions, there need not be two professional purposes; both functions can be ultimately directed at the same shared social work purpose of improving person-environment interactions.

23. This is one of two lines of argument that leads to the “generalist” model of practice favored by eco-systems thinkers. The other argument is a conceptual one, that a generalist model is necessary for social work to be a coherent profession pursuing one purpose. The conceptual argument will be commented on in Part 2.

24. Meyer, *Social Work Practice* (n. 3 above), p. 135 (emphasis in original).

25. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

26. Germain and Gitterman, “Ecological Perspective” (n. 2 above), p. 490 (emphasis added). I say that Germain and Gitterman see the perspective as “more or less” universal

because they elsewhere admit an exception, namely, that sometimes injustice by society to an individual is not a response to anything in the individual.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 489.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 26.
30. Meyer, "The Eco-Systems Perspective" (n. 6 above), p. 276.
31. Meyer, *Social Work Practice* (n. 3 above), p. 201.
32. Meyer, "The Eco-Systems Perspective" (n. 6 above), p. 277.
33. Carol H. Meyer, "Beginning Again," in Meyer, ed. (n. 1 above), pp. 238–54, quote on p. 242.
34. Meyer, "Introduction" (n. 12 above), p. 77.
35. Siporin (n. 8 above), p. 517.
36. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 29 (emphasis in original).
37. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
38. Joe Sexton, "Jailed Youth Recalls Whim That Led to Robbery and Rape," *New York Times* (May 14, 1995), p. 29.
39. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), pp. 21–22 (emphasis added).
40. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
42. Meyer, *Assessment in Social Work Practice* (n. 15 above), p. 103.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 103–4.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 105–6 (emphasis added).
45. Meyer, "Beginning Again" (n. 32 above), p. 241.
46. Roberts (n. 8 above), pp. 230–31.
47. Meyer, *Assessment in Social Work Practice* (n. 15 above).
48. Meyer, "Introduction" (n. 12 above), p. 75.
49. Meyer, "The Eco-Systems Perspective" (n. 6 above), p. 275 (emphasis in original).
50. G. L. Greif and A. A. Lynch, "The Eco-Systems Perspective," in Meyer, ed. (n. 1 above), pp. 35–71, quote on pp. 35–36.
51. A. Vickery, "A System Approach to Social Work Intervention: Its Uses for Work with Individuals and Families," *British Journal of Social Work* 4 (1974): 389–404, quote on p. 390.
52. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 21.
53. The chapters in Meyer, ed. (n. 1 above), where the integration task is attempted for a few theories, illustrate the contortions that systems thinkers must go through to make it appear that various theories fit comfortably within the eco-systems perspective.
54. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 5.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
56. Meyer, "The Eco-Systems Perspective" (n. 6 above), p. 277.
57. Greif and Lynch (n. 50 above), p. 63.
58. Leighninger (n. 8 above), p. 45.
59. Germain and Gitterman, "Ecological Perspective" (n. 2 above), p. 488.
60. Meyer, "Introduction" (n. 12 above), p. 79.
61. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association Press, 1994).
62. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 22.
63. Meyer, *Assessment in Social Work Practice* (n. 15 above), p. 103.
64. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 23.
65. Meyer, "Introduction" (n. 12 above), p. 78.
66. These terms are quoted from Meyer, "Beginning Again" (n. 33 above), p. 241, and *Assessment in Social Work Practice* (n. 15 above), p. 19, respectively.
67. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 23 (emphasis added).
68. See, e.g., Herbert S. Streean, "Psychoanalytic Theory," in *Social Work Treatment: Interlocking Theoretical Approaches*, 3d ed., ed. Francis J. Turner (New York: Free Press, 1986), pp. 19–45; point is made on p. 20.
69. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 25.
70. Meyer, *Social Work Practice* (n. 3 above), p. 138.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
72. Germain and Gitterman, "Ecological Perspective" (n. 2 above), p. 489.
73. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 25.

32 Social Service Review

74. Germain and Gitterman, "Ecological Perspective" (n. 2 above), p. 489. Note that Meyer, in *Social Work Practice* (n. 3 above), uses the same language: "Our task is to intertwine the useful person-in-situation concept in such a way that the hyphen is no longer needed" (p. 138); "The erasure of hyphens in person-in-situation (a linear concept) has been a conceptual goal in social work" (p. 201).

75. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 25.

76. Greif and Lynch (n. 50 above), p. 63.

77. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 11 above), p. 26.

Copyright of Social Service Review is the property of University of Chicago Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.