

Does Social Work Need the Eco-Systems Perspective?

Part 2. Does the Perspective Save Social Work from Incoherence?

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This is the second part of a two-part article in which I analyze the arguments for the eco-systems perspective. In Part 1, published in the March 1996 issue of this journal, I examined four arguments for the clinical usefulness of the perspective and found them to be invalid. Here, I consider three arguments for the conceptual usefulness of the perspective: (1) it is needed to make social work a coherent profession; (2) it is needed to adequately identify the unique domain of social work; and, (3) it is merely a way of looking at things and not a theory or model, so it can be used without empirical support. A close examination of these arguments demonstrates that they, too, are invalid and that the claimed conceptual usefulness of the perspective is an illusion. The conceptual benefits can be achieved only by further clarification of the purpose of social work and by directing practice interventions at that purpose. There is no need to add a generic theory or perspective to the profession's purpose and practice methods.

Does social work need a generic practice theory, in addition to the profession's defining purpose and its many nongeneric ("domain-specific") theories and methods? This is the second part of a two-part article in which I approach this question by examining the arguments for one of the most influential forms of generic theory, the eco-systems perspective. In Part 1, published in the March 1996 issue of this journal, I considered four arguments for the perspective's clinical usefulness and found these arguments to be invalid.¹ Here in Part 2, I consider three arguments put forward by the perspective's proponents for its conceptual usefulness. As explained in Part 1, my analysis fo-

cuses on the work of Carol Meyer, who has provided the most explicit defense of the perspective. This is especially true with respect to the conceptual arguments to be analyzed here.

The first conceptual argument for the eco-systems perspective, and perhaps the most fundamental argument of all, is that the perspective is needed to save social work from incoherence. This argument, which starts from the reasonable assumption that a profession's coherence lies in its pursuit of one common purpose, proceeds in three steps: (1) Social work is an incoherent profession because its various methods have their own specific purposes that are not linked to social work's overall purpose (the "incoherence claim"). (2) To link social work's various methods to its defining purpose, an intervening level of generic theory is needed (the "intervening-level" claim). And, (3) for social work interventions to be consistent with social work's person-in-environment purpose and thus form a coherent profession, the generic theory linking methods and purpose must be based on a comprehensive approach to assessment and intervention that encompasses all aspects of person-environment transactions, as is provided by the eco-systems perspective (the "comprehensiveness claim"). The comprehensiveness claim is important also because it leads to the conclusion that all social work practitioners, to be genuine social workers, must be "generalist" practitioners.

The second conceptual argument is that the eco-systems perspective operationalizes the profession's purpose and identifies social work's unique domain. The perspective is thus claimed to expand on the definition of the profession and capture its distinctive professional identity.

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. Thus, it does not require evidential support, and it is not subject to the usual theoretical and empirical criticisms.

If valid, these conceptual arguments would justify acceptance of the perspective even if, as concluded in Part 1, its clinical usefulness is an illusion. However, as I will show, these arguments are invalid and the claims on which they rest are false.

Does the Eco-Systems Perspective Save Social Work from Incoherence?

The most basic argument for the eco-systems perspective is that it is needed to save social work from the incoherence of its many conflicting methods: "The eco-systems perspective is proposed as the unifying conceptualization to make coherent and cohesive the application of

any or all of the models chosen";² "Given the proliferation of disparate treatment models, this unifying idea seems vital for the future coherence of social work";³ "The route to coherence is not through integration of practice approaches . . . , but rather is through the use of an integrating perspective."⁴ The claim is not merely that the perspective would be helpful in achieving coherence but that it is needed to do so: "Both perspective and methods are needed to achieve coherence."⁵ Indeed, Meyer aptly characterizes the generic theory movement as "the search for coherence."⁶ If there is merit to this argument, it is a compelling reason for adopting the eco-systems perspective because the quest for a coherent and unified profession is at the heart of a century of social work theory.

Background: The Search for Coherence

The attempt to formulate a generic conception of the social work profession goes back at least to the Milford Conference Report in 1929, which was concerned specifically with casework. The conference reported a consensus among conferees that "a fundamental conception which had come to be spoken of as 'generic social case work' was much more substantial in content and much more significant in its implications for all forms of social case work than were any of the specific emphases of the different case work fields."⁷

The "different case work fields" referred to in the Milford Conference Report included, in addition to the traditional charity and corrections work, the burgeoning fields of medical social work, psychiatric social work, school social work, and other such emerging specialties. The question considered by the conference was whether, in virtue of their settings, these fields must be considered parts of the medical, psychiatric, educational, and other relevant professions, respectively, or whether they possessed something in common that made them conceptually part of the social work profession. The Milford Conference Report offered no systematic answer to this conundrum, but it did assert that there were methods common to practice in all these fields that made their practitioners genuine social workers and that the differences among fields of practice lay in the specific kinds of problems to which practitioners applied these distinctive social work methods.

At the Milford Conference, the problematic diversity of social work had to do with the fields of practice, and it was asserted that the conceptual unity of the profession rested on the possession of common methods. Ironically, as the new profession grappled with its attempt to incorporate into one profession both casework from the charity and corrections tradition and community work and social reform from the settlement house tradition, the diversity of methods came to be seen

as the major challenge to the unity of the profession. The profession's purpose soon came to be recognized as the unifying thread that could transcend variations in method. Meyer comments on this history as follows: "As social work struggled to become a profession, it sought a purpose that would govern all its activities. Lacking such a common bond, caseworkers before 1929 pursued purposes that were defined by the settings in which they practiced—hospitals, clinics, family and child welfare agencies and so forth. In the last fifty years, tentative *methodological* purposes were attempted in casework, group work, and family treatment. Naturally, these could not serve as unifying professional social work purposes."⁸

Note that Meyer's interpretation of the problem is subtly but importantly different from the Milford Conference Report's. Meyer assumes that the history of social work's diverse settings and methods is necessarily one of genuinely fragmented purposes rather than, as the Milford Conference Report suggested, a history of superficial diversity hiding an actual or potential underlying unity. The quest for unity in diversity is still the major impetus behind generic theory, but the difference between Meyer's and the Milford Conference's interpretations leads to dramatically different strategies for achieving unity. Meyer's view that different methods really do represent different purposes implies that one comprehensive approach to intervention must be imposed on the entire profession to achieve coherence. The Milford view that diversity can represent an underlying unity leads to an attempt to analyze what common purpose is or ought to be guiding diverse methods.

Contemporary concerns about generic theory can be traced to reinvigorated attempts to define social work's purpose after the formation in 1955 of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). The professional diversity of the association's membership once again raised the question of the conceptual basis for attributing a common professional identity to those labeled "social workers." Of particular concern were the perceived dominance of psychoanalytic ideas in casework theory and the emphasis on individual change as the focus of casework intervention. If the profession, including its community organizers and social reformers, was to be held together, a conceptualization of the profession's purpose was needed that fully acknowledged social work's involvement in environmental intervention.

Harriet Bartlett chaired an NASW committee that grappled with these issues, and she subsequently published a highly influential article in which she put forward a "working definition" of the profession.⁹ Bartlett argued that social work must be defined by a combination of value, purpose, sanction, knowledge, and methods, but the heart of her definition is the statement that the purpose of the profession is "to assist individuals and groups to identify and resolve or minimize

problems arising out of the disequilibrium between themselves and their environment."¹⁰ The definition, framed in terms of the systems concept of "disequilibrium," remained entirely neutral on whether intervention to improve equilibrium should aim to change the person or the environment.

Bartlett's later book, in which she attempted to establish a "common base" for the profession, presaged many aspects of the eco-systems perspective.¹¹ In this book, Bartlett defined social work's purpose as creating a "balance between demands of the social environment and people's coping efforts," again emphasizing an interactional focus.¹² Bartlett's definition was heavily influenced by William Gordon's similar definition: "The central concern of social work technology is, therefore, *the matching of people's coping patterns with the qualities of impinging environment for the purpose of producing growth-inducing and environment-ameliorating transactions.*"¹³ In all these definitions, the focus of social work intervention is the match between person and environment rather than the person or the environment as such. As Bartlett noted, the point was to make an exclusive focus on individual treatment conceptually impossible: "Many earlier interpretations of social functioning centered on the functioning of individuals or groups, that is, on behavior. This concept differs in that attention is now directed primarily to what goes on *between* people and environments through the exchange between them. This dual focus ties them together. Thus person and situation, people and environment, are encompassed in a single concept which requires that they be constantly viewed together."¹⁴ Bartlett also emphasized that the profession's common purpose must encompass all forms of social work if it was to integrate the profession: "Throughout its history, social work has had no generally accepted, comprehensive concept to describe and identify its area of central concern as a profession";¹⁵ "If the concept is to be genuinely integrative for the profession, it must be comprehensive."¹⁶ Note, however, that Bartlett asserts here only that social work's *purpose* must be comprehensive and have a dual focus. Eco-systems theorists make the quite different claim that social work needs a comprehensive, dually focused *generic perspective* in addition to its purpose.

Many other attempts to define the profession followed, culminating in two special "conceptual frameworks" issues of *Social Work* published in 1977 and 1981, both of which reported the results of conferences that tried to identify the generic, unifying purpose of social work.¹⁷ Following in the Bartlett-Gordon tradition, the final "conceptual frameworks" definition held that social work aims to promote "beneficial interaction between individuals and society."¹⁸

These attempts to define social work's purpose in a way that encompasses all of the profession's methods set the stage for the eco-systems perspective and other generic theories. The perspective may be

thought of as an attempt to stretch these definitions into a generic framework for practice that imposes social work's common purpose on all social work methods. The notion that the definition of the profession must be expanded into a generic theory is also rooted in the views of Bartlett and Gordon. Although Bartlett and Gordon constructed generic definitions, they also asserted that the unity of the profession depended on the existence of a common, generic base of knowledge that distinguished the profession. Meyer notes that the development of the eco-systems perspective is to some extent based on this notion: "When Gordon and Bartlett wrote about restructuring the way in which practice should be thought about, their efforts made the next step (the development of the eco-systems perspective) possible. Bartlett and Gordon argued that it was dysfunctional for social work to continue to view methodology as the central feature of practice. They promoted, instead, the idea that *knowledge* was the common core. . . . The eco-systems perspective evolved . . . as an effort to carry forth the work of Bartlett and Gordon."¹⁹ Thus, the idea was born that defining social work's generic purpose is not enough and that the coherence of the social work profession can be secured only by creating a comprehensive generic practice theory that provides a common knowledge base for all social work interventions.

The Incoherence Argument

Did social work theory advance, or did it take a momentous wrong turn, when it moved from attempts to analyze the generic purpose underlying the profession to attempts to construct a generic theory or perspective for the profession? The only way to answer this question is to reconstruct and evaluate each of the steps in the "incoherence argument" that supposedly justifies the move to generic theory.

Primacy of purpose.—To understand the incoherence argument, one must first understand a conceptual point on which the argument rests: a profession is defined by its purpose. The shared purpose of a profession gives the profession its coherence, identity, and unity. This point gives rise to the possibility that a profession can be incoherent if its purpose is not shared by its practitioners.

Meyer recognizes the conceptual primacy of purpose: "A professional practice cannot be defined by the skills it uses, but only by the way it conceptualizes its purposes and domain. . . . Out of such a framework skills are derived and utilized in the service of those professional purposes";²⁰ "Professional purpose . . . [is] the chief defining factor of a social work case."²¹ That is, a profession's skills and methods are merely a means to achieve its purpose and, thus, are derived from and subservient to the purpose. The primacy of purpose over skills and methods in defining a profession is manifested in the

fact that skills and methods can change dramatically over time—for example, in medicine, from bloodletting to transfusions—but the profession can continue to exist if the purpose of the interventions, such as improvement of health in the case of medicine, remains the same. As Meyer notes, skills can be shared across professions, but the professions can remain distinct because they use the skills in pursuit of different purposes: “Every profession has a unique purpose. . . . Any overlapping among professional disciplines usually occurs in the area of skills or selected knowledge, but not ordinarily in the area of professional purpose.”²²

The purpose of a profession is always the pursuit of some valued social goal, or what I have elsewhere called an “organizing value.”²³ Meyer, too, notes that one must “define social work practice through its special purposes and values.”²⁴ In fact, the defining purpose and the organizing value come to the same thing.

Meyer accepts the definition of social work’s purpose put forward in *Social Work’s* second conceptual frameworks issue: “To promote or restore a mutually beneficial interaction between individuals and society in order to improve the quality of life for everyone.”²⁵ In essence, the view, much like Bartlett’s, is that social work’s purpose is to improve interactions (or “transactions,” as eco-systems theorists like to call them) between the person and the social environment.²⁶ Meyer describes the purpose as follows: “Social work claims as its central purpose the enhancement of adaptations between individuals, families, groups, communities—and their particular environments”;²⁷ “The mission of social work is clear enough, to enhance psychosocial functioning, or the adaptations of the person(s) in his/her environment.”²⁸ She observes that this is the “most widely accepted definition of social work purpose” and that with this definition “social workers have . . . finally achieved some consensus about the special purposes and values that describe social work.”²⁹ She also makes clear that the eco-systems perspective is aimed at helping social workers to bring their practice into conformity with this definition; the perspective, she says, is “a stepping-stone toward agreement with social work’s current definition of professional purpose” and produces “practice that is directed toward the transactional purposes of working with person(s) and environment.”³⁰

So, social work is defined by its purpose, and a generic practice perspective is conceived as an adjunct aimed at bringing methods into conformity with the definition. With these preliminary points out of the way, I can now reconstruct the incoherence argument, which is supposed to explain why this supplement to the definition is necessary. The overall argument, which must be reconstructed from scattered assertions, may be thought of as consisting of arguments for three claims. First, there is the claim that without the eco-systems perspective, social work is an incoherent profession because its methods do

not share one purpose. Second, there is the claim that the only way to achieve coherence is to construct an intervening level of generic theory that connects the profession's many methods to its one purpose. Third, there is the claim that the intervening generic level must consist of a comprehensive framework that applies to all aspects of person-environment interactions and all social work interventions, of the kind supplied by the eco-systems perspective. I first uncritically reconstruct the arguments for each of these three claims before critically examining each argument in the following section.

Incoherence claim.—According to Meyer, social work practice is incoherent because its various intervention methods, such as casework, group work, and community organization, each have their own idiosyncratic purposes and do not share social work's purpose. For example, the goal of social action is social reform, and the goal of psychoanalytic psychotherapy is personality change; neither method explicitly addresses both sides of the person-environment interaction indicated in social work's definition. The result is an incoherence in purpose both between these two social work methods and between each of the methods and social work's defining purpose.

Moreover, most social workers draw on only a limited repertoire of methods—often only one—for all of their interventions and, thus, do not attend to all aspects of the person-environment interaction that is social work's target. The prototype villain here is the psychoanalytically trained social worker who aims at personality change, treats every problem with psychotherapy, and ignores community work and other environmental interventions. However, the logic of the argument is such that the community organizer or social planner who does not consider intrapsychic factors or engage in psychotherapy is equally responsible for the conceptual incoherence of the field.

Meyer offers casework and psychotherapy as the prime examples of her point. She argues that social casework, by its very nature, cannot have the same purpose as social work: "The fact that casework could not deal with macro problems of poverty, racism, and other social problems was evident, for broad social change could never have been its purpose. The purpose of social casework was always narrower than the purposes of social work, in view of its boundaries that did not include community work, social policy, or social planning."³¹ Thus, according to Meyer, casework as generally practiced by social workers is not aimed at social work's full purpose and, conceptually speaking, is not really social work. In a similar vein, Meyer says that "psychotherapy as a goal of casework would not meet the requirements of the person-situation purposes of social work, if only because of the 'person' emphasis in the term *psychotherapy*" and that "psychotherapy . . . is not totally syntonetic with the professional social work definition of purpose."³² That is, psychotherapy is by definition an

intervention aimed at changing a person's mental processes, so it has a purpose different from social work's purpose of changing the person-environment interaction. Thus, exclusive use of psychotherapy by a social worker would necessarily constitute an incoherence.

The incoherence is claimed to exist not only between casework and social work but also between different approaches to casework: "Adherents to clinical practice in their use of psychosocial orientations, behavioral, and problem-solving methods, often seem to pursue individual ends, making it very difficult to affirm that there is a coherent social work practice."³³ That is, each different approach to individual intervention has a somewhat different purpose, for example, behavior change versus intrapsychic change. Thus, because caseworkers tend to be guided by one or another intervention theory, casework is incoherent, and by implication so is the profession of which casework is a part.

Intervening level claim.—How can consensus about professional purpose be achieved, given the multiplicity of methods and their inherent differences? Because the methods themselves are irrevocably different in purpose, the only way to coherence, Meyer believes, is by constructing a perspective that encompasses all the methods: "Believing that the route to coherence is not through integration of practice approaches that are inherently different in a number of dimensions, but rather is through the use of an integrating perspective, we offer the eco-systems construct as the conceptual umbrella beneath which all clinical practitioners can practice with an eclectic repertoire to carry out a common purpose."³⁴

This perspective is to be an intervening, third level of theory that forms a conceptual bridge between the defining purpose of the profession and the fragmented methods used by the profession: "It is our judgment that the intervening of a common perspective for practice is needed, because the leap from the present status of proliferating models to the status of universal professional agreement is too large."³⁵ The intervening level would consist of a shared perspective that is clearly linked to the profession's purpose and that systematically encompasses all the methods. Each social worker would approach practice through the same perspective and thus have the same purpose, and the choice of intervention method in a given case would be determined by its usefulness in pursuing this generic purpose. The intervening level is needed because no amount of tinkering with the different methods can make them transcend their own purposes and add up to a coherent profession: "Method by method and approach by approach, it is not possible through additive means to achieve a unifying professional purpose; a linkage between method and purpose needs to be established."³⁶

Comprehensiveness claim.—What must this intervening level look like? Meyer claims that it must be "comprehensive" and "all-encompassing"

and deal with all aspects of the person-environment interaction: "The underlying assumption that drives us is that an all-encompassing perspective is needed to account for the real-life person and environment complexity in social work situations";³⁷ "Commitment by practitioners to the transactional professional purposes previously described will require a comprehensive perspective that will allow the practitioner to *see* the interrelatedness of the case phenomena, and to recognize that some interventions may, under particular circumstances, serve to promote or restore transactions between the person and environment, and others will not";³⁸ "As no method is applicable to all the possibilities, a comprehensive, systemic assessment is required first."³⁹ That is, the intervening level of theory must be "generic" in the sense that it applies to all aspects of all social work interventions.

Why must the intervening link be so all-encompassingly generic? The idea seems to be that, because the purpose of social work is to improve interactions between person and environment, professional assessment and intervention must in every instance exhaustively consider that total interactional situation. Anything less, it is claimed, would constitute an incoherent approach in which a given social worker's intervention was not aimed at social work's overall purpose but at some more circumscribed purpose: "According to the purposes of social work, the required transactional focus on person-in-environment defines the way social workers perform, be it in clinical or nonclinical practice."⁴⁰ The incoherence argument thus concludes that social work cannot be a coherent profession unless practitioners are guided in their pursuit of an agreed purpose by a comprehensive generic practice theory.

The Generic Fallacy

Despite its appearance of plausibility, the argument that social work must have a generic theory to save it from the incoherence of its methods is invalid. In fact, each of the three steps of the argument involves a basic error of reasoning.

Incoherence fallacy.—First, it is a fallacy to argue that the different immediate goals of social work's diverse methods make the profession incoherent. Purposes come in hierarchies. An action may be aimed at one, immediate purpose, but achieving that purpose can, in turn, be the means to achieve yet another purpose. Social workers perform their actions with many purposes simultaneously in mind and some of these purposes form a means-end hierarchy. For example, a worker may communicate information with the purpose of providing a client with insight, provide insight with the purpose of helping the client to get control over anxiety, help the client control anxiety with the purpose of changing the client's personality, and change the client's personality with the purpose of improving the client's interactions with

the social environment. Or, a worker may consult with community leaders with the purpose of convincing them to organize community child care, organize community child care with the purpose of making affordable child care available, make affordable child care available with the purpose of enabling a client, who is a single mother, to work, and enable the client to work with the purpose of improving her interactions with the social environment. In interventions, as in other actions, many purposes can be operating at once.

Meyer argues that, because different methods have different purposes, by their very nature they cannot share social work's purpose. The argument is fallacious because the fact that two actions have different purposes at one level does not mean that they cannot also have a shared purpose at another level. To argue that, because case-work and community organization have different purposes of helping individuals and communities, respectively, they therefore cannot share social work's interactional purpose is just as fallacious as arguing that, because one investor has the purpose of accumulating IBM stock and another has the purpose of obtaining Apple stock, they therefore cannot share the purpose of making money from their investments. The argument mistakenly fixates on the chosen means and ignores the possibility that the divergent means are aimed at achieving the same ultimate end. Thus, the Milford Conference Report was right that the superficial diversity of social work interventions does not necessarily imply that the profession is incoherent, and Meyer was wrong, in her earlier-quoted comment, to assume that superficial diversity implies genuine incoherence. There can indeed be a hidden unity at a higher level of purpose.

Richard Roberts, in his book on generic theory, also falls into the error of thinking that plurality of methods must imply plurality of purposes, and he ends up criticizing generic theory on the incorrect grounds that it is inappropriate to look for unity of social work purpose: "To assume there is one social work mission . . . is problematic. What enables social workers to identify with one occupational category when one practitioner is quite content to help clients adjust to the demands of the status quo, and another is outraged by certain economic and social arrangements and does all he or she can to change them? . . . I believe it will be more productive in the long run to recognize these differences rather than imposing a false 'commonality.'"⁴¹

Roberts incorrectly assumes here that the described differences in method imply that there is no shared mission. The differences in method are real, but a commonality can still exist at a different level. Social workers who challenge the current system of distribution of goods may be aiming at the same ultimate purpose as social workers who help individual clients within the context of the current system

to obtain the basic goods that they need to function; both may be aiming at correcting distributive injustice and satisfying basic needs.

Consider an analogy. Of two physicians responding to an outbreak of cholera in a developing country, one might be outraged at the lack of sanitary conditions and try to change the sewage system to make it less conducive to transmission of cholera. The other may try to cure those who have already contracted the disease and help others to adjust to existing conditions in a safer manner by teaching them to take preventive antibiotics, wash their hands, and boil water. Despite these differences, the two physicians can still be motivated by the same professional mission, namely, the improvement of health. This shared higher-order purpose is why both are *medical* interventions. Roberts's example does not at all show that diverse social work methods imply diverse missions, and he is wrong to fault generic theorists for looking for an underlying commonality. The problem with generic theory lies not in its assumption that there exists a common purpose but in its search for an additional commonality in a generic theory or perspective, when in fact the commonality is located exclusively in the profession's purpose.

Intervening level fallacy.— Meyer claims that the only way to solve the problem of divergent methods is to construct an additional level of theory that intervenes between the profession's purpose and its domain-specific theories and methods and imposes a common purpose on the methods. But the above analysis shows that social workers using different methods can pursue the same social work purpose. So, to make social work coherent, if indeed it is not already so, one does not need to add an intervening perspective to the methods to connect them to social work's purpose. One simply needs to use the methods themselves in such a way as to serve that purpose. Meyer does not see this solution because she assumes that divergent methods cannot share social work's purpose. Once the fallacy in that assumption is exposed, one can see that all it takes to make social work coherent is for practitioners, whatever method they use, to aim their interventions at ultimately promoting social work's purpose. This has a real effect on the interventions; the same method may be used, but the specific goals, the detailed course of treatment, and the standards by which the outcome is evaluated will be quite different if the intervention is aimed at social work's purpose rather than some other purpose. Once one sees that various methods can be used to pursue the purpose of social work, the entire rationale for an intervening, generic perspective evaporates.

But how can one purpose subsume such different interventions as helping someone get a job and helping them resolve their oedipal complex? The answer is simply that superficially different things can share properties that are not obvious. Bean bag chairs do not at all

resemble formal dining room chairs but are still chairs because of the identical purpose—namely, providing a place to sit—that defines them as chairs. Resolving an employment problem and resolving an oedipal complex can share the purpose of helping a person to engage in adequate interactions with the social environment. This shared purpose can make them both social work interventions, despite their great differences.

Comprehensiveness fallacy.—Meyer also argues that the intervening level must apply to all possible aspects of every case and subsume all methods or else it would not be aimed at the entire purpose of social work. To be aimed at anything less than the entire purpose, it is suggested, is not to be aimed at the purpose at all. Of course, a comprehensive approach would be nice to have if it could be shown to be valid and useful. But is Meyer correct that such a generic approach to practice is *necessary* if social work is to be a coherent profession?

There are many means to any one end. (Indeed, systems theory emphasizes the multiplicity of means with its concept of “equifinality.”) In order to take action aimed at a given purpose, one does not have to have a comprehensive or all-encompassing approach to that purpose. One just has to have *some* approach that enables one to accomplish the purpose. One practitioner may choose to improve interactions by improving people’s psychological capacities while another may choose to improve interactions by improving the social context. Of the social workers who focus on the person, one may choose to use behavioral methods to alter interaction-relevant behavior while another may choose to use psychodynamic therapy to change personality patterns that lead to interactional problems. Different practitioners can choose different means and focus on different aspects of the overall problem and still be genuine social workers if the organizing principle behind their interventions is to improve person-environment interactions. So, it is incorrect to assume that an assessment or intervention that encompasses less than the entirety of the person-environment interaction is not truly aimed at the purpose of social work. An improvement in the interaction is an improvement in the interaction, whether it is brought about by tinkering with just one element in the interaction or by a comprehensive assault on all aspects and levels of the interactional system. In both cases, social work’s purpose is being pursued.

Meyer’s position implies that every social worker, to be a genuine social worker pursuing social work’s purpose, *must* be a “generalist practitioner” who possesses skills to intervene in both the person and the environment: “Thus, recognizing that there are skills applicable to either person *or* environment, it is a repertoire of both kinds of skills based in systemic assessments that is necessary in a practice that is directed toward the transactional purposes of working with person(s)

and environment."⁴² This is seriously mistaken. It is true that all social workers should be prepared to diagnose interactions between people and environments in their area of expertise; for example, clinicians who deal with antisocial behavior should be able to distinguish a normal response to peer pressure from conduct disorder. This requires knowledge of a broad range of domain-specific theories that apply to a given area. It is also true that the profession as a whole must have the capacity to intervene at various points in interactions. But a given practitioner can be a genuine social worker while focusing on one kind of interactional problem or specializing in one kind of interaction-altering intervention. The generalist doctrine is based on a confusion of ultimate professional ends, which are global, with interventive means, which can be limited. Bartlett seems to have understood this point: "It should be clear that in this approach the practice itself is not described as 'generic.' . . . The [common] base is not the doing but what *underlies* the doing."⁴³ That is, sharing a common underlying purpose does *not* require that all social workers be generalist practitioners.

My analysis above addresses the conceptual argument that a social worker must be a generalist practitioner to be a social worker at all. Of course, eco-systems thinkers might also make the very different claim that social work intervention is more *effective* when practitioners are generalists. The effectiveness claim is one that would have to be judged on the basis of empirical evidence. In most complex endeavors, however, specialization rather than a comprehensive approach by each individual increases efficiency and effectiveness. In particular, there is no evidence that a massive switch to generalist practice by clinicians, and particularly a redirection of clinical effort toward macro-level intervention, would make clinical intervention more effective. Moreover, the analysis in Part I cast doubt on the notion that the perspective itself can increase clinical effectiveness.⁴⁴

With all these points in mind, it is illuminating to reexamine some of the passages quoted earlier in which Meyer argues that casework and psychotherapy have intrinsic purposes different from social work. Meyer asserts that "the purpose of social casework was always narrower than the purposes of social work" because casework "did not include community work, social policy, or social planning."⁴⁵ This argument confuses means with ends (or, equivalently, immediate purposes with ultimate purposes). Casework does not include community organization because they are different means, but they are both means to the same ultimate end of improving person-environment interactions. So, it is incorrect to assume that a caseworker who does not directly intervene at the macro level in social issues like poverty and institutional racism cannot be aiming at the purpose of social work; the caseworker has merely chosen to use certain means and not others to pursue

that purpose and to focus on certain aspects of that purpose rather than others.

In a similar vein, Meyer asserts that psychotherapy “would not meet the requirements of the person-situation purposes of social work” and that “psychotherapy . . . is not totally syntonic with the professional social work definition of purpose.”⁴⁶ Psychotherapy does focus its intervention efforts on changing the person, but an intervention aimed at the person can easily satisfy the definition of social work if the person is being changed in order to improve his or her interactions with the social environment. Indeed, the most common way to change such interactions is to change the beliefs or desires of the people engaged in the interactions. It is an empirical question whether or when psychological intervention is the best way to improve such interactions, but it is certainly one way to do so. So, it is not the use of the technology of psychotherapy but the goal of the therapist in using psychotherapy that makes the intervention either syntonic or dystonic with social work’s purpose. When used to pursue social work’s purpose, psychotherapy is genuine social work. And, just as there is no incoherence in some social workers using psychotherapy and some using community work to pursue social work’s purpose, there is also no incoherence in some caseworkers using behavioral methods and some using psychodynamic methods to pursue social work’s purpose. Divergence of means is entirely compatible with congruence of ends, and comprehensiveness of method is not necessary to pursue the profession’s purpose.

In sum, shared purpose alone places all of social work within one profession. If the current definition of the profession fails to adequately specify the profession’s purpose, then the definition is deficient and should be modified. But, given an adequate specification of its purpose, the social work profession is coherent so long as its different methods are used in the service of that purpose.

Does the Eco-Systems Perspective Help to Define Social Work?

Social work, more than other professions, suffers from a lack of clarity and consensus about its essential purpose. It appears from some of Meyer’s comments that one of the goals of the eco-systems perspective is to elaborate on the current definition in a way that better identifies the profession’s unique domain: “The operationalizing of agreed-upon purposes will require a relevant perspective for practice.”⁴⁷ That is, the eco-systems perspective itself may be considered an attempt to more clearly express the definition of the profession; it “reflects the psychosocial purposes of social work.”⁴⁸ This is why the perspective is said to be “a stepping-stone toward agreement with social work’s

current definition of professional purpose."⁴⁹ Indeed, the claim that using the perspective will automatically direct all of the profession's methods at its purpose presupposes that the perspective accurately captures the purpose; otherwise, one would need yet another level of theory to connect the perspective to the purpose. So, a further argument for the eco-systems perspective is that it helps to define the social work profession by identifying its unique interactional focus.

Problems of Overgenerality and Overspecificity

However, the eco-systems perspective does not express a perspective unique to social work. How could it, when the perspective is so abstract that, as systems theorists themselves proclaim, it potentially applies to any biological system, and certainly to the human subject matter of any profession? The very generality of the eco-systems perspective, its supposed strength, makes it vacuous as a framework specifically for social work.

Not only is the eco-systems perspective too general to define the domain of social work, it is also, in other respects, too specific. Whether eco-systems concepts like circular causality turn out to be useful, they are certainly not part of social work's definition. For example, if it turns out that child abuse is generally the result of linear causal processes or that for some other reason it does not fit ecological or general systems concepts, child abuse will not, therefore, suddenly be outside the purview of social work. Do eco-systems thinkers who claim that social work is defined in terms of circular transactions really believe that the social work profession should be disbanded if social problems turn out to be linearly caused? Social work's definition, whatever it is, obviously does not presuppose such details in identifying social work's domain. Meyer states that, "according to the purposes of social work, the required transactional focus on person-in-environment defines the way social workers perform, be it in clinical or nonclinical practice."⁵⁰ If "transaction" is interpreted merely as the traditional notion of "interaction," then Meyer is correct. However, if interpreted as intended, in terms of the specific concepts of eco-systems theory, and especially in terms of the circular-causality construal of "transaction," then this description of what is universal in social work goes way beyond the plausible defining requirement that there be a problem in person-environment interaction.⁵¹

The problems with the eco-systems perspective as an attempt to capture the nature of social work go deeper than the perspective's overgenerality and overspecificity as a definition. There are two further critical objections.

Loss of Social Work's Special Concern for the Person

First, the eco-systems perspective loses the specialness of the person in social work. According to the perspective, everything is a system

within a system within a system, and the individual person is just one more system level between the external environmental system and internal systems like the ego and superego. The person system level has no special status. This is antithetical to the essence of social work's goal, which is, through all its various methods at all levels, to better the lives of individual people. This conceptual failure is reflected in the perspective's technical terminology, which many complain is unhumanistic. These complaints are perhaps a reaction to the fact that the uniqueness of the person as an entity capable of consciousness and suffering is not found in the perspective's abstractions.

Bartlett fell into the same difficulties but appears to have recognized the problem and tried to deal with it. As noted earlier, in *The Common Base of Social Work Practice*, Bartlett defined social work's domain as the interaction between a person's coping capacity and environmental demands.⁵² This description does not capture what social work intervention really aims to improve, namely, the effects of such interactions on the well-being of persons. The omission was intentional; to have mentioned the person as the ultimate unit of attention in the definition would have been to chance building into the definition a bias toward individual therapeutic intervention. Thus, Bartlett was caught in the same dilemma that faces eco-systems thinkers. She, like Gordon and Meyer, wanted to define social work in such a way as to avoid a definitional bias in favor of individual intervention. To purge the field of this possible bias, she did away with the individual as the definitional focus of social work intervention in favor of an abstraction, the interactive field between person and environment. This technical move seemed to ensure that social work is not just about individual change. The target of intervention is an abstract entity, the interaction, which can be changed in a variety of ways and presupposes involvement of both the person and the environment. The dilemma is that this successful purging of references to the person also defeats the entire purpose of any definitional attempt, namely, to capture what social work is really about. Social work is certainly not about improving societies or communities or interactions for their own sake, but only for the sake of contributing to the well-being of the people involved in these systems and interactions. Thus, Bartlett's systems-definitional solution to the problem of individual bias actually purges the field of its ultimate definitional rationale, namely, the injustices and suffering experienced by conscious, individual persons.

In an apparent effort to address this problem, Bartlett added an entire chapter to her book describing social work's "orientation to the individual."⁵³ She argued that, in addition to the profession's defining focus on the interaction between person and environment (in the specific form of the balance between demands of the social environment and people's coping efforts), the profession also possesses an orientation, described as a "primary concern for people involved in

the situation."⁵⁴ The orientation is not neutral between the people and the situation, but is decidedly aimed toward helping the people in the situation and satisfying their needs. Moreover, this is recognized by Bartlett as a pervasive feature of social work practice: "What is here called the primary orientation to the people in the situation does not seem to be a separate element but a permeating characteristic of social work and its practice."⁵⁵ The natural conclusion is that the individual orientation must somehow enter into the definition of social work's purpose. However, Bartlett's chapter was written as an afterthought, and she did not actually incorporate any reference to the person into her formal definition. Bartlett thus tried to have her cake and eat it, too; she tried to purge the definition of social work of any reference to the individual and still maintain that the individual plays a special role in social work's concerns. Of course, the formal addition of the individual orientation to the definition would have undone the main point of the systems definition. But, flawed as Bartlett's approach may have been, at least she saw the problem posed by the turn to systems language and tried to fix it.

Howard Goldstein, in his attempt to formulate a "unitary approach" to practice that encompassed social and individual interventions, also recognized the special place of the person in social work's purpose by adopting what he called an "individual-oriented tone."⁵⁶ He defined the purpose of social work as "providing the means and the opportunity by which persons can . . . deal with conditions (internal, interpersonal, or environmental) which interfere with productive social living. This purpose is in accord with and in response to individual needs, individual means, individual ends, and individual experiences expressed singly or collectively."⁵⁷ Goldstein explained his anchoring of a unitary approach to the individual level as follows: "A person-centered construct underscores the belief that, irrespective of the design and objective, whether practice is aimed at grand schemes for social change or the resolution of a commonplace problem, social work practice is ultimately concerned with persons as distinct individuals—their plans, hopes, ideals, needs, and the way they go about living them out. The final worth of the professional act can only be found in the meaning it holds for certain persons individually or in association."⁵⁸ This is exactly right; the individual level is privileged because intervention at any level is ultimately justified only by its effects at the individual level.

Roberts criticizes Goldstein's approach, claiming that "from the outset a paradox emerges: the setting of broad parameters of social work practice within a social systems framework, yet at the same time restricting this to the personal ideology of the practitioner and an individual perspective."⁵⁹ However, there is no "paradox." A theory of intervention can encompass various systems levels while retaining a clear sense that the ultimate purpose for all such interventions lies in the

effects that they have at the individual level. Goldstein's assertions are not a matter of his "personal ideology" but a recognition of an essential feature of the conceptual foundation of the social work profession. To this extent, the "individual perspective" is social work's perspective, and this is perhaps one reason why it is so easy for the profession to mistakenly focus to an excessive extent on individual interventions rather than on interventions at other levels that are sometimes more effective in resolving the individual's problem.

Thinkers like Bartlett and Goldstein grappled with the problem of how to retain the specialness of the person in a systems approach to social work practice. The eco-systems perspective suffers from the same problem but provides no solution.

The problem of losing the specialness of the person in social work's definition is a serious one. A definition sheerly in terms of improving person-environment interactions says nothing about the well-being of the person and thus places no limits on how to pursue desired interactive patterns. Once the activity of improving interactions is untethered from goals concerning individual welfare, in principle the interaction can be improved simply by suppressing individual needs in favor of social demands. This is clearly not social work. This problem reminds one of the old debate about whether social work could exist within a fascist society. The answer is surely that, if "social workers" in a fascist society were dedicated simply to forcing the individual to adapt to social demands, then that would not be true social work because, although the purpose would be improvement of person-environment interaction, the well-being of individuals would not be a primary goal of intervention.

One might recall here a reputed interchange between the eminent British philosophers Bertrand Russell and Frank Ramsey. Russell, arguing for the existential view that human beings are relatively meaningless in the grand scheme of things, reportedly emphasized how small human beings are in relation to the universe and how truly immense the stars are in relation to humans beings. Ramsey is said to have replied: "My universe is drawn in perspective; in my universe, I am big, and the stars are small." In the social work universe, too, individual persons are big, and larger systems, from families and groups to communities and societies, although important as targets of intervention, are small in the conceptual sense that they matter not in themselves but only to the degree that they bear on the well-being of individual persons. Systems definitions of social work lose this essential ingredient of social work's purpose.

Loss of Social Work's Value Orientation

In addition to the loss of the uniqueness of the person, there is a second reason for the failure of the eco-systems perspective to capture

social work's distinctive nature—the eco-systems perspective's value neutrality: "The eco-systems perspective . . . emphasizes in as value-free a way as possible the adaptive transactions among impinging systems."⁶⁰ However, social work interventions are not distinguished simply by a concern for person-environment interactions. Most other professions and social institutions are concerned about such interactions as well. Social work is distinguished by its specific focus on a distinctive aspect of these interactions in the form of an organizing value that its interventions aim to promote. Social work intervenes in person-environment interactions for specific value-laden social work purposes just as medicine intervenes in such interactions for the purpose of promoting its organizing value of health. Any account that fails to identify social work's organizing value has not adequately distinguished social work from other professions.

Elsewhere, I have argued that social work's organizing value is minimal distributive justice, which refers to the possession by all members of society of a minimally acceptable level of basic economic, social, and psychological goods.⁶¹ Because distributive justice concerns the fairness of the interaction between persons and social institutions, this account explains why an interactional focus is part of the essence of social work. Moreover, it distinguishes the purpose of social work from the purposes of other professions in intervening in person-environment interactions. In contrast, the eco-systems perspective's concepts are inherently neutral with respect to the organizing values that distinguish the professions; the perspective could apply to medical, legal, educational, or spiritual interventions into person-environment interactions as well as it does to social work interventions. Of course, one could simply add specific social work values to the eco-systems perspective, but that would be an admission that it is not the perspective itself that captures the essence of social work.

This failure of the eco-systems perspective to capture distinctive social work values can be illustrated by examining several of the central eco-systems concepts that might be thought to provide some value basis for the profession. Take, for example, the notion of *homeostasis* or *stable equilibrium*, which is often cited as a desirable state and the goal of intervention. (Indeed, Bartlett's earlier-quoted definition of the profession as concerned with minimizing "disequilibrium" between person and environment essentially construes equilibrium as the organizing value of social work.) However, homeostasis can be good or it can be bad with respect to social work's purpose. Homeostasis in the relation of the underclass to the middle class is a bad thing, as was the homeostatic relationship of masters to slaves in the antebellum South. When a homeless person learns to cope with life on the street and thus reaches a state of equilibrium, when an individual with agoraphobia reaches a state of equilibrium by never venturing out of his

or her apartment, or when a family reaches a stable equilibrium in a pathological form of interaction, that does not represent attainment of social work's purpose. Indeed, a central task of the clinician is to upset unsatisfactory states of equilibrium. Moreover, the ecological concept of equilibrium is quite distant from value concerns. If one placed lions and humans in a closed environment and let them hunt and eat each other until an ecological balance and a homeostatic equilibrium between populations of mutual predators was reached, that would represent a successful equilibrium in ecological theory, but it would not represent success for social work. Homeostasis and equilibrium are value-neutral concepts, and identifying social work goals depends on values that go well beyond these concepts.

What about *positive feedback*? This sounds evaluative because of the use of the term "positive," but as systems people know, positive feedback can be bad and negative feedback can be good. Technically, positive feedback is simply signal-amplifying feedback and negative feedback is simply signal-modulating feedback. These concepts are value neutral. Control generally requires some negative feedback to allow for the correction of errors, whether it is control of one's arm during the voluntary motion of reaching for a glass or control of a child's socialization through reprimands. Too much positive feedback, as in the excesses of the current self-esteem movement, can distort growth, reduce motivation, and make it difficult to make important evaluative distinctions. So, social work's value base will not be found here.

What of the ecological concepts of evolutionary and personal adaptation to the environment? Do these important ideas, especially critical to the ecological perspective, express anything that can serve as a value base?⁶²

Evolutionary adaptation is the prime metaphor and theoretical construct of the ecological perspective. However, evolutionary adaptation provides no ultimate value base for the profession. We evolved in a very different environment than we now inhabit, and some of our evolved adaptations may be undesirable in our current environment. If, as some evolutionary theorists maintain, such traits as male aggressiveness, ethnocentrism, and marital infidelity have roots in our naturally selected adaptive mechanisms, that does not mean that it is social work's task to value such elements of our nature and to create an environment that satisfies and supports these urges. In our current environment, it may be best to suppress these naturally selected traits. In such cases, rather than wanting to match environment to evolved human nature, we want to match environment to values and suppress human nature. Understanding evolutionary adaptation gives us critical knowledge about aspects of human nature with which we must contend, but it tells us nothing about how we should evaluate or respond to that nature. Thus, it cannot serve as an ultimate social work value base.

Personal adaptation, in the sense of a match between person and environment, is a critical concept in social work practice. Indeed, a truly interactive view of adaptation, in which contributions of the person and the environment are equally evaluated, is a highly desirable framework for approaching many clinical situations. However, people are very adaptable even to extremely noxious environments. People adapt in varying degrees to homelessness, poverty, prejudice, and other forms of injustice. The ability to adapt to such situations does not mean that injustices like homelessness, poverty, and prejudice are any less social work concerns. Spouses and children sometimes adapt to physical and sexual abuse rather than threaten cherished relationships, members of a pathologically interacting family may be exquisitely adapted to their interactions, and adolescents may adapt to dangerous neighborhoods by joining gangs and engaging in group antisocial behavior, but these adaptations do not mean that the person's situation is acceptable and less a matter of social work's concern. These situations of deprivation violate ideals of justice and are social work's concern whether people have adapted to them or not. Adaptation is just too universal a human talent to get one very far in distinguishing situations that call for social work intervention from those that do not.

Finally, what about the emphasis on *circular causal sequences*, or "transactions," involving feedback between mutually interacting systems versus the much-maligned "linear causality." Again, this distinction yields no evaluative information for social work. According to the eco-systems perspective, virtually all causal processes of interest to social workers, including the ones that cause good outcomes and the ones that cause problems, involve circular causality, so obviously this concept does not identify social work's value concerns. And certainly, for example, whether a child's abuse is caused linearly by a spontaneous pathological impulse in the abuser or circularly as an expression of a family systems pathology, the child still has a problem that requires a social worker. The circular or linear nature of the cause is not what determines whether a condition is an appropriate part of social work's domain. There is certainly nothing preferable from a value point of view about circular causal chains in themselves; it is not preferable, for example, for children or women to play a causal role in triggering their own abuse, even though that is a circular hypothesis in contrast to some linear hypotheses.

In sum, the eco-systems perspective cannot help to define the field of social work. The perspective is so general that it does not pick out anything unique to social work, and yet some of its concepts are so specific that they constrain the profession unnecessarily, construing contingent empirical hypotheses as conceptual necessities. Moreover, the perspective fails to capture the special role that the person and the person's basic needs play in the purpose of the profession. Finally,

the claim that social work's purpose, which must involve an organizing value, can be characterized by an eco-systems knowledge base does not bear up under scrutiny. The perspective fails to specify what value social workers should be aiming to promote when they intervene in person-environment interactions.

Is the Eco-Systems Perspective Really a Perspective Rather than a Theory?

A standard objection to the eco-systems perspective is that it lacks empirical support. Eco-systems thinkers answer this objection with the claim that the eco-systems perspective is not a theory or model that makes substantive theoretical or empirical claims that can be tested but is really and literally just a perspective, that is, a way of looking at cases. As Meyer notes of the perspective, "Serving merely as a perspective (a lens) for looking at phenomena, it provides no prescription for intervention. It extends one's view of case situations; it does not tell what to do or how to define problems."⁶³ The visual metaphor is central to the eco-systems notion of a perspective: "Perspectives offer vision; models offer methodology. By providing a lens through which to view the relation of parts to one another and to the whole, a practice perspective suggests what and how to see; it does not prescribe what to do";⁶⁴ "A perspective for practice provides a framework from which to view . . . what is occurring . . . helping the practitioner to focus more clearly on the observed situation."⁶⁵

A claimed conceptual advantage of the perspective's being just a way of looking at cases is that empirical research evaluating its claims or its effectiveness is unnecessary: "Because the eco-systems perspective is not a practice model, it need not be judged for its effectiveness; it is not supposed to *do* anything";⁶⁶ "As it is essentially suggestive of a way of thinking, it is hardly the stuff of research."⁶⁷ Because it is so unusual to put forward a view that claims to make no theoretical or empirical assertions, eco-systems thinkers expend much effort explaining what the perspective is not: "It is not a model, with prescriptions for addressing cases; it does not draw from a particular theory of personality; it does not specify outcomes."⁶⁸

The idea that the eco-systems perspective is not a theory, not even a vague prototheory, seems incorrect on its face. The eco-systems perspective appears to be making substantive claims about the nature of reality, which is the hallmark of theories in the broadest sense. Presumably, the perspective's way of seeing should enable one to "see" what is really there. The very claim that systems theoretic concepts such as circular causality apply to all cases is itself an empirical claim and a prototheory. After all, it is not just a matter of one's point of view whether there is linear or circular causality in a given case situation; it

is a matter of fact and reality. Indeed, the eco-systems perspective emphatically *rejects* all “linear” theories, and in rejecting such theories the perspective implicitly asserts contrary theoretical claims of its own. In making such claims about reality, the eco-systems view goes beyond the confines of a nonsubstantive perspective.

Contrary to the “perspective” notion, Meyer repeatedly asserts that the eco-systems perspective does make claims about reality: “The power of the eco-systems perspective rests in its capacity to present the client’s *reality*”;⁶⁹ “The eco-systems perspective draws attention to *what is*”;⁷⁰ “We have introduced the eco-systems perspective as a thinking style and as a framework for capturing the complexity and *reality* of clinical cases.”⁷¹ She claims that the perspective helps the practitioner in “understanding the case in its *true* complexity” and that previous practice models assumed “a linear equation between person and environment that *does not in fact exist*.”⁷²

The eco-systems perspective would seem to be a primitive form of theory despite the disclaimers. Yet the perspective’s proponents resist this obvious conclusion because it would entail the possibility that the eco-systems perspective is an *incorrect* theory. If the perspective is more than just a way of seeing and indeed makes broad factual claims about the reality of clinical cases, it requires theoretical and empirical justification. As was shown in the section on assessment in Part I, the application of eco-systems concepts can lead to results that are anything but obviously true and certainly require justification.⁷³ To deny the need for such justification is to transform a theory into an ideology, which is just the sort of thing that eco-systems thinkers rail against as “bias” when other theoreticians do it.

The essential problem with the “perspective” claim is that it is an attempt to maintain two incompatible positions. On the one hand, the eco-systems perspective is claimed not to be a theory that says anything substantive but is more analogous to a preference or a taste, so it cannot be evaluated for truth or falsity like a theory. On the other hand, it is claimed to be a unifying and integrating framework that uniquely expresses the real nature of social work problems and justifies the rejection of other views. These claims are inconsistent.

This problem is reflected in an ambiguity in the very nature of the “perspective” metaphor. On the one hand, “perspective” is used for a subjective point of view or chosen way of seeing things that makes no substantive claims about reality, somewhat like a personal taste. Construed in this way, one perspective is as objectively good as another. For example, as chosen ways of seeing things, the eco-systems perspective and psychoanalysis are equals; one can equally choose to look at cases through these two lenses. On the other hand, “perspective” can be used to refer to claims about one aspect of the truth, as in the literal case of seeing an object from one visual perspective.

Construed in this way, a perspective yields claims that can be empirically tested, and one perspective can be objectively better than another because it reveals more of the truth. Eco-systems theorists equivocate on these two senses of “perspective.” When they claim that a perspective is just a way of looking at things that does not need empirical support, they use the first sense. But the first sense does not allow for a comparative judgment that this perspective is objectively better than others. When they claim that the perspective is superior to other approaches and captures a truth missed by linear theories, they use the second sense. But, the second sense implies that the perspective must be evaluated like any other theory.

Eco-systems thinkers cannot have it both ways. They cannot claim that systems concepts really apply to cases but that it is inappropriate to empirically test whether they apply, and they cannot assert that the perspective is merely a way of looking at cases that cannot be judged as a scientific assertion while also claiming that the perspective uniquely captures the reality of cases and that all other ways of looking at things are wrong. A retreat to the perspective metaphor cannot save eco-systems thinkers from having to justify their claims. The eco-systems “perspective” must be considered to be a vague and unsupported theory masquerading as a perspective.⁷⁴

Conclusion

One cannot help but agree with many of the basic sentiments that motivated the formulation of the eco-systems perspective. These include the need to take account of the complexity and subtlety of cases, the belief that social work’s purpose should guide its interventions, and the desire to reign in clinical dogmatism and promote integrative practice that fully acknowledges the role of the environment in the genesis of clients’ problems. Eco-systems thinkers, and Meyer in particular, have made an enduring contribution to social work theory by placing these concerns squarely in the center of social work’s theoretical agenda. However, these admirable motives do not tell us whether the perspective is the correct way to achieve these goals or is worthy of the attention it has received from educators, practitioners, and students.

In this two-part article, I have evaluated the eco-systems perspective’s central arguments, both clinical and conceptual, and found them to be invalid. The idea that social work needs the eco-systems perspective or a comparable generic practice theory to establish coherence, to help define the profession, or to be clinically effective is an illusion. My conclusions suggest that the profession’s intellectual priorities should shift from generic theory to intensive development of and training in domain-specific theories and interventions, substantive in-

tegration of diverse theories and methods, and further efforts to clarify the unique social work purpose for which these theories and interventions are to be used.

The central argument for the eco-systems perspective is that it is needed in order to bring coherence and unity to the profession. The main flaw in this argument is that, as Meyer herself states, it is purpose alone that unifies and brings coherence to a profession. Rather than needing an intervening level of theory that links method and purpose, social work simply needs a clear and conceptually adequate defining purpose and the resolve to use its methods to pursue that purpose. Coherence requires no more than this, as is evident from other professions.

If one problem that prompted the creation of the eco-systems perspective is social work's lack of a clear and compelling identity, then rather than providing the solution, the eco-systems perspective has become part of the problem. The perspective has drained social work of its person-centered orientation and commonsense vocabulary, obscured social work's value-laden purpose, and made it seem that social work is an intellectually flaccid enterprise that depends on untested perspectives rather than supported theories.

Eco-systems thinkers are wrong to suggest that all social workers must be generalists using the same comprehensive perspective if the profession is to achieve coherence. It is sufficient that there be many specific theories and methods that are each used by different practitioners to pursue various aspects of the overall purpose of social work. If students are nevertheless to be trained to be generalist practitioners, they should be intensively schooled in multiple domain-specific theories, not generic theory. Otherwise, if the trend toward the educational dominance of generic theory continues, social work practitioners could increasingly suffer from a lack of incisiveness and credibility in their clinical mastery. Max Siporin has aptly described the generalist illusion and some of its negative consequences: "One implication of systems theory is an encouragement of the practitioner to see things big; to think and plan and try to act in comprehensive, systemic terms. One result has been the use of systems theory to justify a generalist kind of social work practice, and for practitioners to believe that they need to be, and to be equally expert as, social planners, family therapists, community organizers, psychotherapists, etc. The result of such grandiose pretensions has been an increasing disenchantment of service agencies and of the public with the insubstantial rhetoric and lack of competence in the effective provision of basic social services that is exhibited by many mental health and social service practitioners."⁷⁵

The objections presented here to the eco-systems perspective's "incoherence argument" also apply to many other attempts to formulate a

generic theory of practice. Recall the basic structure of the incoherence argument: (1) A profession is defined by a shared purpose. (2) Different social work methods have different purposes and therefore form an incoherent profession. (3) To achieve coherence, social work needs an intervening level of theory that links the profession's diverse methods with its common purpose. (4) The intervening level must be comprehensive and all-encompassing (i.e., generic) so as to direct assessment and intervention to all aspects of the person-environment interaction specified in social work's purpose. This argument has no unique connection to the eco-systems perspective; it is a general argument defending the need for a generic theory. I believe that this argument, more than any other rationale, implicitly underlies the generic movement that has been active in social work theory for several decades. As was shown earlier, there is a fatal flaw in every step of the argument except the first. Thus, the difficulties identified here with the eco-systems perspective indicate a broader problem at the foundations of the generic movement. That entire movement may be based on a series of intellectual errors in reasoning about the relation of professional methods to professional purpose.

We now have a tentative answer to the question I asked earlier: Did social work theory advance, or did it take a momentous wrong turn, when it moved from attempts to analyze the generic purpose underlying the profession to attempts to construct a generic practice theory or perspective for the profession? The answer appears to be that social work theory has taken a wrong and fruitless turn and should return to a focus on purpose and method, jettisoning the quest for an intervening generic theory.

I argued above that the eco-systems perspective does not succeed in defining social work's domain. Yet one gets the impression that the perspective is somehow intimately related to the nature of social work. The reason is not hard to find; whatever social work is about, person-environment interactions of some sort must play a role in defining its domain, and the perspective captures this part of social work's definition. This is what makes the perspective so plausible and appealing. What is still needed, and is not provided by either the perspective or other current definitions, is an analysis of the organizing value of social work that explains exactly which aspect of person-environment interactions is the proper and distinctive domain of the profession.

I have elsewhere provided an account of social work's organizing value.⁷⁶ I argued that social work pursues minimal distributive justice, which essentially means that social workers attempt to ensure that no one falls through the social safety net and that everyone has at least a minimally acceptable level of basic economic, social, and psychological goods necessary for being a participant in society. Consistent with the

conclusions of the above analysis, the minimal distributive justice view is exclusively about the purpose of social work and makes no pretense to be a generic practice theory or perspective. If this view has merit, then the appeal of the eco-systems perspective and other approaches to social work that emphasize person-environment interaction can be explained. The appeal of these approaches lies in the fact that distributive injustice is always intrinsically a matter of an unjust relationship between the individual and social institutions, so intervention is always, of necessity, a matter of changing a person-environment interaction. The minimal distributive justice analysis also has the potential to resolve the dilemma that drove thinkers from Bartlett to Meyer to define social work in such abstract terms that the definition no longer reflected the profession's special interest in people. It is clear that both person-centered and social-centered interventions are necessary to pursue the goal of minimal distributive justice, so this definition does not bias the profession toward individual treatment. Yet, it is also clear that justice and injustice are concepts rooted in human experience and are ultimately concerned with the effects of person-environment interactions on the basic needs of people, so the justice view retains a focus on the person despite its concern with person-environment interactions. The minimal distributive justice view is also consistent with the negative conclusions above about generalist practice; different forms of injustice are so different from each other and require such different interventive skills that it should not be expected that all social workers will be capable of addressing the entire range of such problems.

The attempt to construct generic theory results, in part, from the vague perception that current definitions fail to adequately define social work. If social work had an adequate definition, then there would be no perceived need for a perspective that defines the field and unifies the field's methods because, as in other professions, these tasks would be accomplished by the definition. Thus, whether or not the minimal distributive justice account is the answer, the conceptual analysis of social work's purpose should be high among the profession's intellectual priorities. To this extent, Meyer is surely correct that "the task ahead appears to be a conceptual one."⁷⁷

Notes

An earlier version of some of the material presented here 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. Jerome C. Wakefield, "Does Social Work Need the Eco-Systems Perspective? Part I. Is the Perspective Clinically Useful?" *Social Service Review* 70 (March 1996): 1-32.

2. Carol H. Meyer, "Beginning Again," in *Clinical Social Work in the Eco-Systems Perspective*, ed. Carol H. Meyer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 238-54, quote on p. 240.

3. 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, quote on p. 275.

4. Carol H. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence," in Meyer, ed. (n. 2 above), pp. 5–34, quote on p. 5.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

7. Milford Conference Report, *Social Case Work—Generic and Specific: A Report of the Milford Conference* (New York: American Association of Social Workers, 1929), p. 3.

8. Meyer, "The Search for Coherence" (n. 4 above), p. 6 (emphasis in original).

9. Harriet M. Bartlett, "Toward Clarification and Improvement of Social Work Practice," *Social Work* 3 (1958): 3–9.

10. *Ibid.*; quoted in Harriet M. Bartlett, *The Common Base of Social Work Practice* (New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1970), p. 222.

11. Bartlett, *Common Base* (n. 10 above).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 130, fig. 2.

13. William E. Gordon, "Basic Constructs for an Integrative and Generative Conception of Social Work," in *The General Systems Approach: Contributions toward an Holistic Conception of Social Work*, ed. Gordon Hearn (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1969), pp. 5–12; quoted in Bartlett, *Common Base* (n. 10 above), p. 107 (emphasis in original).

14. Bartlett, *Common Base* (n. 10 above), p. 116 (emphasis in original). Ironically, as I explained in Pt. 1 (n. 1 above), not only did Bartlett's attempt to prevent an individualistic focus fail, but eco-systems thinkers blame Bartlett's interactional approach for making intervention biases possible and claim that we need the eco-systems perspective's transactional focus to cure the biases allowed by the interactional approach. I showed in Pt. 1 that, in fact, the transactional focus does no better than the interactional approach at preventing therapeutic bias and that the entire notion that one can build bias prevention into the logic of the field's definition is mistaken.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

17. National Association of Social Workers, Anne Minahan and Scott Briar, eds., "Special Issue: Conceptual Frameworks I," *Social Work*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1977), and Anne Minahan, ed., "Special Issue: Conceptual Frameworks II," *Social Work*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1981).

18. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

19. Meyer, "The Eco-Systems Perspective" (n. 3 above), p. 277 (emphasis in original).

20. Meyer, "Search" (n. 4 above), p. 25.

21. Carol H. Meyer, *Assessment in Social Work Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 16.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

23. Jerome C. Wakefield, "Psychotherapy, Distributive Justice, and Social Work. Part 1: Distributive Justice as a Conceptual Framework for Social Work," *Social Service Review* 62 (1988): 187–210.

24. Meyer, "Beginning Again" (n. 2 above), p. 245.

25. National Association of Social Workers, "Special Issue: Conceptual Frameworks II" (n. 17 above), p. 6; quoted in Meyer, "Search" (n. 4 above), p. 7.

26. A word about terminology: the definition of social work's purpose accepted by Meyer is phrased in terms of "interaction." However, Meyer and other eco-systems thinkers argue that social work is concerned with a specific kind of interaction, namely, what they call "transactions," which involve circular causality. When quoting eco-systems thinkers, I will use their term *transaction*, but when discussing the issues, I will use the more general term *interaction* that appears in the definition because that term encompasses transactions but does not prejudge the scope of social work's concerns or the nature of person-environment interactions. For a discussion of the distinction between "interaction" and "transaction" in eco-systems theory, see Wakefield, "Does Social Work Need the Eco-Systems Perspective? Part 1" (n. 1 above).

27. Meyer, *Assessment* (n. 21 above), p. 18.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

29. Meyer, "Search" (n. 4 above), p. 7; and "Beginning Again" (n. 2 above), p. 245.

30. Meyer, "Search" (n. 4 above), quotes on pp. 8, 25, respectively.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
32. *Ibid.*, quotes on pp. 15, 16, respectively (emphasis in original).
33. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
40. Meyer, "Beginning Again" (n. 2 above), p. 242.
41. Richard Roberts, *Lessons from the Past: Issues for Social Work Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 242.
42. Meyer, "Search" (n. 4 above), p. 25 (emphasis in original).
43. Bartlett, *Common Base* (n. 10 above), p. 129 (emphasis in original).
44. Wakefield, "Does Social Work Need the Eco-Systems Perspective? Part 1" (n. 1 above).
45. Meyer, "Search" (n. 4 above), p. 16.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16, respectively.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
48. Meyer, *Assessment* (n. 21 above), p. 102.
49. Meyer, "Search" (n. 4 above), p. 8.
50. Meyer, "Beginning Again" (n. 2 above), p. 242.
51. In this regard, see the discussion of eco-systems thinkers' claims about circular causality in the section on bias correction in Wakefield, "Does Social Work Need the Eco-Systems Perspective? Part 1" (n. 1 above).
52. Bartlett, *Common Base* (n. 10 above), p. 130, fig. 2.
53. *Ibid.*, chap. 7, pp. 118–27.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
56. Howard Goldstein, *Social Work Practice: A Unitary Approach* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1978).
57. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
58. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
59. Roberts (n. 41 above), p. 83.
60. G. L. Greif and A. A. Lynch, "The Eco-Systems Perspective," in Meyer, ed. (n. 2 above), pp. 35–71, quote on p. 35.
61. Wakefield, "Psychotherapy, Distributive Justice, and Social Work. Part 1" (n. 23 above), and "Psychotherapy, Distributive Justice, and Social Work. Part 2: Psychotherapy and the Pursuit of Justice," *Social Service Review* 62, no. 3 (1988): 353–82.
62. Carel B. Germain, "An Ecological Perspective in Casework Practice," *Social Casework* 54 (1973): 323–30; "The Ecological Perspective," in *Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, by Carel B. Germain (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 9–37; 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.
63. Meyer, "Search" (n. 4 above), p. 31.
64. Richard D. Woodrow, "Casework: A Psychosocial Therapy," in Meyer, ed. (n. 2 above), pp. 81–116, quote on p. 101.
65. Greif and Lynch (n. 60 above), p. 35.
66. Meyer, "The Eco-Systems Perspective" (n. 3 above), p. 291 (emphasis in original).
67. *Ibid.*, p. 292.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
69. Meyer, *Assessment* (n. 21 above), p. 103 (emphasis added).
70. Meyer, "Search" (n. 4 above), p. 31 (emphasis added).
71. Meyer, "The Eco-Systems Perspective" (n. 3 above), p. 293 (emphasis added).
72. Meyer, "Search" (n. 4 above), p. 25 (emphasis added).
73. Wakefield, "Does Social Work Need the Eco-Systems Perspective? Part 1" (n. 1 above).
74. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this turn of phrase.

75. Max Siporin, "Ecological Systems Theory in Social Work," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 7 (1980): 507–32, quote on 520.

76. Wakefield, "Psychotherapy, Distributive Justice, and Social Work. Part 1" (n. 23 above), "Psychotherapy, Distributive Justice, and Social Work. Part 2" (n. 61 above), and "Is Altruism Part of Human Nature? Toward a Theoretical Foundation for the Helping Professions," *Social Service Review* 67 (1993): 406–58.

77. Carol H. Meyer, "Conclusion," in Meyer, ed. (n. 2 above), pp. 255–56, quote on p. 256.