

Book reviews



Person-environment practice. The social ecology of inter- personal helping

*Susan P. Kemp, James K. Whittaker,
Elizabeth M. Tracy. (1997) New York,
Aldine De Gruyter, xiv-263.*

The importance of the ecological-environmental approach for the practice of care is being acknowledged more and more these last years. This approach, of which Nicolas Hobbs (1966) is generally considered to be one of the major pioneers, advocates helping the client or the client system by changing the outer, or ecological factors that influence behaviour. Bronfenbrenner's paradigm of the 'ecology of human development' that he described in *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979) has been very influential in the social sciences. A concretely developed method for the treatment of 'troubled children' on the basis of ecological principles is already to be found in Apter *et al.* (1984). A sound survey of child mental health practice from the ecological perspective has been published by Munger (1991).

In this book the authors intend to give an overview of environmental assessment and intervention within the social work's domain.

They define person-environment practice (P.E.P) (p.2-3) as a model of direct practice that makes strategic use of time to accomplish three things:

1. Improving a client's sense of mastery in dealing with stressful life situations, meeting environmental challenges, and making full use of environmental resources.
2. Achieving this end through active assessment, engagement and intervention in the environment, considered multidimensionally, with particular emphasis on mobilization of the personal social network.
3. Linking individual concerns in ways that promote social empowerment through collective action.

In the *short first* chapter they explain this description, they shortly mention the so-called key building blocks (partnership, mutuality, reciprocity, social assets, resilience, optimization, natural helping, social integration, coherence, hope), they give some specific rationales for P.E.P. and identify a number of challenges to P.E.P.

In the *second chapter* a sketch is given of what the authors themselves call the historical legacy of 'environment in the social work practice tradition of the progressive era (from the late 1890s until the entry of the United States into World War I) until now'. The authors try on the one hand to identify issues that over time have constrained its commitment to environmental intervention and on the other hand to bring to the surface the contributions of past generations of direct practitioners to current thinking on the environment and environmental practice. The individuals that are discussed here such as Mary Richmond, Gordon Hamilton, Ada Sheffield and Bertha Capen Reynolds are

not familiar to many European colleagues. The authors have taken this into account and in separate text blocks they have given short biographical notes on these precursors.

In *chapter three* the authors set out the theoretical and empirical sources for the chapter on environmental assessment and the chapter on environmental interventions. From the multitude of literature on the interactions between people and their environment the authors have made a choice that is most relevant to direct social work practice, but that also pays attention to material that will stimulate new thinking about the environmental contexts of social work practice. For instance attention is paid to the relationship of the strengths, empowerment and ecological-systems perspectives to environmental practice and key definitions are given for environment, environmental assessment and environmental intervention.

In the *fourth chapter* the authors present a rational of strategies for conducting environmental assessments in social work practice settings (p.90). They state that it is their intention to bridge the gap between micro and macro approaches to assessment (p. 89). Active client involvement in the generation and analysis of environmental information are considered to be the backbone of the assessment (and the intervention). They emphasize that more should be done than just let the client complete an inventory of types and categories of environmental resources but rather conducting a critical analysis with clients of their transactions with their environments (p. 92). The emphasis should be not only on the environmental threats and deficits but should attend equally to the strengths and the resources, in individuals and communities, that form the basis for new connections and relationships (p. 94). Next a

detailed examination is given of environmental assessment at five key levels: perceived environment, physical environment, social/interactional environment, institutional/organizational environment and sociocultural environment. Most of the attention in this chapter is given to the analysis of social support and the personal network making use of the social network map (Tracy & Whittaker, 1990). The chapter ends with a rather extensive annotated list of environment assessment tools and methods. A somewhat more penetrating discussion of some relevant instruments would have been more useful than this uncritical encyclopaedic listing. The short illustrative 'case vignettes' did not convince me of the importance for treatment of these tools of environment assessment. This chapter has however made me aware that in intakes, either with individual clients, or with client systems, sufficient time should be spent on a systematic exploration of social support and the personal network.

The *fifth chapter* deals with the environmental intervention in social work practice. The heart of this chapter starts from the 'building blocks' of person-environment the authors have identified in the first chapter and comprises the four major approaches to social network intervention: in the first place the natural-helper interventions by which is meant that people who are in contact with everybody, such as the postman and the barber, are brought into action; secondly skills training and network facilitation which expands the boundaries of current networks by introducing new helpers and by identifying new helping resources among present network members (p.131); in the third place mutual-aid groups or self-help groups; and in the fourth place social network skills training which intends to teach social skills to estab-

lish and to maintain relationships, in a larger sense, to enable clients to gain a better control over their environment (p.155). The chapter is concluded by going through the points once again in a schematic and practical way.

In *de last two chapters* a reflection is given on the diversity of environmental experience and a short summary of the current issues and future challenges for person-environment practice.

This clearly written book gives practitioners a sound survey of what an environmentally oriented approach to interpersonal helping has to offer in reality. The importance of an ecological approach is recognized by many but its application in practice often remains largely undone or is very superficial. Thanks to this book the diagnostic as well as the therapeutic process can be coloured 'ecologically'. We however wonder to what degree the interventions that are proposed here are attainable in European practice, it all sounds simple but is certainly is not. Personality problems and family pathology are problems that in my opinion cannot be treated by a purely ecological approach, the environment's impact on the other hand should not be forgotten either.

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Erratum:

At page 74 of volume three, number 1 of the *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare* the first and last name of the author were unintentionally interchanged. The precise reference of the article should be:

Gordon Jack

The social ecology of parents and children: implications for the development of child welfare services in the UK.