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Theory in action: a community social service agency

Life model, interactionist concepts of social work prove to be effective when translated directly into action in a community social service agency

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The relationship between theory and practice in social work is often obscure, and many theories seem far removed from application to actual work with clients. Two components are necessary for sound social work practice: First, practice needs to be based in theory — a theory related to the people served. But, theory also needs to be operational. Theory about the function and the role of social work needs to be translated into the actual workings of an agency, the structure designed for the delivery of service.

An overview of agencies suggests that few are conceived out of the marriage of theoretical thoughtfulness and client need. All too often agencies grow and change in response to their own organizational interests or the political or economic conditions of the moment. Also familiar is the agency whose function is so narrowly defined that a family seeking help must actually apply to many different agencies. One-stop, full-service banking may exist, but such social agencies are a rarity. Some community mental health settings are beginning to translate the preventive public health model into practice. All too often, however, they are oriented toward the prevention or treatment of mental "disease," rather than toward the positive goal of enhancing normal development.

Recent theoretical developments in social work—the ecological perspective and the life model of practice—have dramatically shaped a view of social work as an offering of services to the whole population. This perspective views modern living as complex, constantly changing, and potentially overwhelming. It places the social worker in the midst of life's problems. It suggests that social workers can support individual coping and help make the social environment more responsive to the people in it.

The skills and role of the social worker in this theoretical formulation are not as clear as is the social purpose of the profession. A compatible forerunner of this theory is the interactionist approach. The mediation role of this approach offers a role and defines the skills which can translate the ecological perspective into practice.

This article will describe an agency that has put these ideas into practice as comprehensively as possible. The agency is located in a large public housing project in an extremely deteriorated neighborhood and serves the whole project population. Its function is to help tenants with social needs toward the end of becoming more "satisfactory" tenants. The clients in turn use the agency to obtain services which make their lives more satisfactory. All levels of relational systems—one-to-one, small group, social network, and community—are used to meet the clients' needs. The agency is designed to

meet the clients in the midst of their life struggles and to maximize their access to services. Staff consists of eight social work students, one administrator/field instructor, and one assistant/secretary.[1] Despite the serious limitations of a student-staffed agency, the workings of an agency based on life model-interactionist concepts are well demonstrated. Although these ideas were developed in this setting consistently (as much as reality constraints would allow), they are usable—and have been used in varying degrees—by social workers in many different settings.[2]

The theoretical framework

Social work has long struggled to elaborate coherently its dual concern with the individual and with society. This concern has been articulated many times, but perhaps nowhere better than by Bertha Reynolds:

> The essential point seems to be that the function of social casework is not to treat the individual alone nor his environment, but the process of adaptation which is a dynamic interaction between the two. Social casework is essentially a mediating function . . . dealing with difficulties in the relationship between individuals or groups and their physical or social environment.[3]

Social work has been hampered in developing that duality of focus by the lack of theoretical constructs which could deal with such complexity. Increasingly, social work is benefiting from advances in the larger world of theory building — of which ecological concepts are a particularly important part. As expressed by Carel B. Germain, who has developed most fully the implications of an ecological perspective for social work practice, ecology is "the science concerned with the adaptive fit of organisms and their environments and with the means by which they achieve a dynamic equilibrium and mutuality."[4] Ecology offers a theoretical framework and research techniques for exploring transactions between individuals or social units and their physical and social environments, the reciprocal interactive processes by which they achieve mutuality, and the obstacles to "goodness of fit."[5]

A broad knowledge base is potentially suggestive of new insights to the inquiring social work practitioner. For example, the fundamental ecological concepts of time and space have begun to be examined for their relevance to social work practice. The fact that arrangements of physical space or different perceptions of time can have profound and highly variable effects on behavior has begun to be considered in relation to institutional arrangements and policies, clients' transactions with their life space, and the worker-client encounter.[6]

A good deal of attention has been focused on the family as perhaps the most intimate and crucial aspect of the social environment. The interactive processes between mother and newborn infant, between schizophrenics and their parents, and within well and poorly functioning families are some of the areas of study.[7]

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[1]The authors wish to acknowledge the inspiration of Mary Maiberger, an especially talented and empathic person, who has been assistant administrator/secretary of the agency for thirteen years, providing a continuity that the more transient staff could not.

[2]Although there are a number of agency examples of the ecological perspective which have not yet been reported in the literature, the interactionist approach has been described in a variety of settings. See William Schwartz and Serapio R. Zalba, eds., *The Practice of Group Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

[3]Bertha Reynolds, "Whom Do Social Workers Serve?" *Social Work Today* 21, no. 6 (May 1935): 5-7, 34.

[4]Carel B. Germain, "An Ecological Perspective in Casework Practice," SOCIAL CASEWORK 54 (June 1973): 326.

[5]See for example, Rene Dubos, *So Human an Animal* (New York: Scribner's, 1968); and Paul Shephard and David McKinley, eds., *The Subversive Science: Essays Toward An Ecology of Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

[6]Dorothy Miller and David Ashmore, "The Ethology of Social Work," *Social Work* 12 (April 1967):60-68; Carel B. Germain, "Time: An Ecological Variable in Social Work Practice," SOCIAL CASEWORK 57 (July 1976):419-26; and Brett Seabury, "Arrangements of Physical Space in Social Work Settings," *Social Work* 16 (October 1971):43-49.

[7]The current transactional literature on the family is enormous in scope. See, for example,

Likewise, considerable attention has been paid to the most structured aspect of the social environment — formal organizations. These include social agencies, corporations, institutions, and governmental bureaucracies.[8] Frequently, the focus of this work has been how difficult it is for the individual or family and a formal organization to establish a mutually satisfactory relationship.[9]

Recently, social network theory has been used to expand the understanding of the social environment. "Social network" refers to the field of significant interactions that a person has—whether these be with primary group members, within voluntary associations, or with organizations or their representatives. The significant issue is that the parts of the ecological field are not necessarily in contact with each other, as would be the case with groups or organizations.[10] The theory provides dimensions for analysis such as density, range, and intensity. It draws attention to the richness and diversity of social interrelatedness. Natural leaders and potentials for mutual aid have been identified within networks, as well as within groups with boundaries.[11]

Individual and cultural differences in values, attitudes, and behavior are becoming topics for serious and painstaking ecological study. For example, Hope Leichter and William Mitchell studied relationships within Jewish families and found that, essentially, social workers were trying to discourage and define as problems styles of relating that their clients valued highly.[12] The "inner world" of various subcultures is increasingly being explored. Also, the very real strengths of persons who have survived in nonnutritive, hostile, or dangerous environments, such as victims of poverty, racism, or handicaps, have begun to be identified.[13]

Evolutionary or developmental concepts have been introduced into social work practice in what has been referred to as the "life model." In contrast to practice based on concepts of pathology or disease, Bernard Bandler says, "the ideal model . . . is life itself, the natural processes of growth and development and the rich trajectory of the life span."[14] Genevieve B. Oxley elaborated this idea by identifying roles in people's life space and suggesting social work interventions patterned on those roles.[15]

A life model, combined with the ecological perspective, refocuses attention on the way socially competent people live their lives and interact with their social and physical environments. The range of actions which are effective as generally well-adapted people respond to their diverse environments is truly

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David Kantor and William Lehr, *Inside the Family* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975); and Jerry Lewis et al., *No Single Thread: Psychological Health in Family Systems* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1977).

[8]See Amitai Etzioni, ed., *Complex Organizations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961); and Yeheskel Hasenfeld and Richard A. English, eds., *Human Service Organizations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974).

[9]See, for example, Robert Perlman, *Consumers and Social Services* (New York: John Wiley, 1975); and John Mayer and Noel Timms, *The Client Speaks* (New York: Atherton Press, 1971).

[10]Two classics in the field are J. Clyde Mitchell, ed., *Social Networks in Urban Situations* (Manchester, England: University of Manchester Press, 1969); and Elizabeth Bott, *Family and Social Networks* (New York: Free Press, 1971).

[11]See, for example, Alice H. Collins and Diane L. Pancoast, *Natural Helping Networks* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Social Workers, 1976); and Ross V. Speck and Carolyn L. Attneave, *Family Networks* (New York: Vintage, 1974).

[12]Hope Leichter and William Mitchell, *Kinship and Casework* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1967).

[13]See, for example, Lillian B. Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Leon Chestang, "Character Development in a Hostile Environment," *Occasional Papers*, mimeographed (Chicago: University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, 1973); and Robert B. Hill, "The Strengths of Black Families," mimeographed (New York: National Urban League, 1971).

[14]Bernard Bandler, "The Concept of Ego-Supportive Psychotherapy," in *Ego-Oriented Casework: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Howard Parad and Roger Miller (New York: Family Service Association of America, 1963), p. 31.

[15]Genevieve B. Oxley, "A Life-model Approach to Change," SOCIAL CASEWORK 52 (December 1971): 627-32.

endless. Also, actions which seem ineffective when seen out of context often appear highly adaptive when seen as transactions within an ecological field. The life model and ecological perspective also suggest that the work of modern ego psychologists may be even richer than originally had been thought.[16] As the adaptive and creative strategies people actually use to deal with their lives are documented increasingly, they can suggest new styles of relating and catalyzing growth to adaptive and creative social workers.

In the complex and often disorderly ecological field of modern persons, the social worker finds his role and the social agency its function. The mediating role, as developed by William Schwartz, arises from the fact that in our society the individual's "match" to his social environment:

> . . . grows diffuse and obscure in varying degrees, ranging from the normal developmental problems of children growing into their culture to the severe pathology involved in situations where the symbiotic attachment [between individual and society] appears to be all but severed. In this perspective, the social work function is to mediate the often-troubled transactions between people and the various systems through which they carry on their relationships with society — the family, the peer group, the social agency, the neighborhood, the school, the job, and the others. . . . The social worker's skills are fashioned by two interrelated responsibilities: he must help each individual client negotiate the systems immediately crucial to his problems, and he must help the system reach out to incorporate the client, deliver its service, and thus carry out its function in the community.[17]

The process of helping is viewed as having three phases, in all of which the principles of mutuality and reciprocity are stressed. In the beginning phase, the worker takes responsibility for "tuning in" to the client and struggling to find a common ground between the needs of the client and the resources of the agency and community.[18] They jointly define the problem, establish goals, and decide appropriate ways of accomplishing these. During the middle phase they will do "the work," which may be about life tasks or transitions, environmental obstacles, dysfunctional interpersonal processes, or a combination of these. The following skills have been identified in this phase of the work:

> . . . the ability to decode messages, to reach for ambiguities, to probe for negatives, to show love and energy in the work, to partialize tasks, to point up the connections between fragments of experience, to find and mobilize resources, and, throughout, to make the "demand for work" inherent in the contract and in his helping function.[19]

The termination phase includes separation feelings, evaluation and integration of the work accomplished, and planning for the future.

It should be clear at this point that this approach crosses professional divisions by method or field of practice and suggests flexible and creative use of helping strategies as these best meet client need. It means that, wherever possible, the social worker should be located in the usual life space of people. Services should be offered as part of normal living and without stigma.[20] They should be personally and culturally compatible. The worker will discover and support or catalyze those naturally occurring processes of helping which exist in social networks and will attempt to connect isolated persons to these.

In sum, then, the life and interactionist models of practice build from a view of the person as an active, mastery-seeking being. Problems are viewed as arising from a poor fit between the person and his environment.

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[16]See, for example, Erik H. Erikson, "Identity and the Life Cycle," in *Psychological Issues*, Monograph I (New York: International Universities Press, 1959); Robert W. White, "Ego and Reality in Psychoanalytic Theory," in *Psychological Issues*, Monograph II (New York: International Universities Press, 1963); and George V. Coelho, David A. Hamburg, and John E. Adams, *Coping and Adaptation* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

[17]William Schwartz, "Social Group Work: Interactionist Approaches," *Social Work Encyclopedia*, 16th ed. vol. 2 (New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1971), p. 1258.

[18]Ibid., p. 1260

[19]Ibid., p. 1262.

[20]Carol H. Meyer develops these ideas more fully in *Social Work Practice*, 2d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1976).

Helping is directed both at the coping capacities of the person and at the qualities of the environment, with the goal of removing obstacles to growth and relatedness. The worker-client relationship is expanded to include the client and persons in his life space as active participants in change, and the worker assumes a more flexible, reciprocal role as catalyst. Service delivery arrangements need to allow for meeting people where they live their lives and for offering a broad range of interventions in a flexible yet integrated fashion.

The agency and the community served

A major concern of an agency built on such a theoretical framework is to serve the members of the community in whatever living units they create and to engage them with whatever relational system will best meet the need. In this agency, two major programs have been services to the elderly and to children because these are such vulnerable groups. In the ghetto community in which this agency works, one of the heavy values is on education as the way to "make it out." Thus, a great emphasis is placed on working with school children and their families. Much of the service is rendered to children in small groups in the schools and in the agency.[21]

The elderly are served in groups by staff at the Senior Center, as well as individually in their homes or in the agency offices. Programs held in cooperation with community agencies such as the schools, the Senior Center, and a nearby health center and hospital are seen as a way of the agency becoming part of the service delivery system in the community and not acting in isolation. The workers consulted staff of these various systems for help in program development as well as for offering direct services in the schools and Senior Center.

Yet, the authors are reminded of William Ryan's story of "Cholera and the Pump" in thinking about their community: On discovering that the cholera epidemic could be traced to the village water pump, the young doctor ripped the handle off the pump.[22] The authors wish that there were only one pump to disarm! It is hoped that the day will come when the desperate and tragic poverty of areas like these will be eliminated through adequate social planning and policy; in the meantime, however, these communities must be provided with the social services available to other communities. The deterioration of housing, services, and living conditions here are among the most extreme in the country. The elderly, the children, and those younger families still engaged in the struggle for mobility (and some who seem to have lost out in that struggle) make up the community. Most are black and Puerto Rican; some are working class, and some are at or below the poverty level. The nonnutritive elements of the environment are innumerable. Yet, people need the overburdened social systems to work, and the social fabric cannot survive without the people. Therefore, this is a good place to demonstrate these theories in agency practice. It is perhaps an extreme example of the use of the life and interactionist models in practice. If it works here how much better it should work in communities where less individual or social breakdown occurs and thus makes for greater strength! Even elsewhere living life, developing social relationships, and finding a meaningful connectedness to the larger society are difficult.

The work

The use of time and space

In the beginning phase of work, the clients are asked where and when they would like to meet the worker. Usually, this means at their home or at the agency office, which is in an apartment located in one of the buildings. It may also mean a park bench or place of work or education. There is no test of motivation in terms of willingness to come to the agency. The workers are willing to meet the client

[21] A full description of this group approach is found in Alex Gitterman, "Group Work in the Public Schools," in *The Practice of Group Work*, ed. Schwartz and Zalba, pp. 45-72. The group service has continued in the same way as described and will not be discussed further here.

[22] William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 257.

where he or she is, literally, not accepting the frequent tendency of social workers to avoid home visits which may be uncomfortable or frightening. About 70 percent of the clients have chosen home visits rather than office visits on a regular basis, although some of this number use both kinds of visits. In the interest of developing a relationship and offering a structure, the workers generally do ask to visit once a week or once every two weeks.[23] This, however, is part of developing a contract and must be mutually agreed on. Also, there are times when other arrangements seem more appropriate. There is flexibility as to day, time, and lateness. At times lateness may be resistance or ambivalence and is explored as such, but often it is simply managing a difficult life on a day-to-day basis. When a client provides an explanation, such as "I had to wait for the welfare check," the workers do not go into psychological intent unless this reflects a pattern. The visit is rescheduled for another mutually agreed on time after determining whether the client may need help with an immediate problem. This demands sensitivity and flexibility of the workers in meeting clients where they are.

The client is also expected to structure his or her life space for the interview. Several clients prefer to cook or clean during their visits rather than sit. For example:

Mrs. N, an elderly Jewish woman, who had been mugged when entering her own apartment, preferred walking to the store or to the park as her space. Because she had been too frightened to leave her apartment for a long time, walking outside was exactly what was needed. Reminiscences poured forth and many feelings and fears were released during the course of each walk.[24]

When the worker is unable to deal with serious concerns as the client moves about, the client may be asked to sit down to discuss things. Generally, however, as the worker attempts to keep up with the client, the client lets the worker "in" in a meaningful way. Each situation must be judged for its own workability.

This is also the situation when other people are present for the visit. The client may have a sister or a friend there to give the worker the message that "you are an intruder today," or because she is there to ask for help for herself, or because she is significant in this situation. For example:

The worker for Mrs. J made the assessment that Mrs. C's presence at the interview meant something important. After the amenities, both Mrs. J and Mrs. C asked the worker to "just go in and talk a little to the children in the next room." Vera, Mrs. J's daughter, was playing with another little girl, Connie. Vera was the "hope" of the family. She did well in school and had no obvious pathology, but was understandably affected by her three mentally ill brothers and the recent death of her father, who had been in jail prior to his violent death during a burglary.

Mrs. J greatly and openly valued the worker's support and help in negotiating her complex world. The worker followed up on the request to speak to the children and began by drawing and painting with the girls. Both girls painted red and apparently violent pictures, and both had stories to tell of people getting killed. After working with the girls for one-half hour, the worker returned to the two women. They asked what she saw. She told of the paintings and wondered if Connie had also had some bad experiences as Vera had with violence. Mrs. J, clearly proud of her worker's "sharpness," nodded to Mrs. C in a "See, I told you," manner. Mrs. C then shared with controlled anger and tears that she is Connie's grandmother and that Connie and her siblings saw their father kill their mother with a knife just six months ago. The court awarded Mrs. C the children, but she does not know what to do with them. One sets fires, another wets his bed and fights, and Connie "lives in a dream world all day." The worker sat with Mrs. C and Mrs. J, who had helped Mrs. C tell her story. With great empathy, the worker related to Mrs. C's grief for her dead daughter and her feelings of being angry at and overwhelmed by the grandchildren, who "saw my daughter killed and did not even go for help."

The worker here was flexible enough to allow her client, Mrs. J, to present her friend for help and to ask for that help in her own way.

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[23]Ruth Smalley, *Theory for Social Work Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 162-68.

[24]The authors wish to acknowledge the contribution of the social work students whose case material is excerpted in this paper: Catherine T. Bush, Rosemarie Conde, Neil J. Cronin, Adrienne Dumas, Rima Finzi, Bernice Fishman, Cara Hofer, Joan Mirabile, and Nancy Sparrow.

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Had the worker been bound by a fifty-minute exclusive interview with Mrs. J and asked to see Mrs. J alone, she would have lost the opportunity to help Mrs. C, as well as the opportunity to allow Mrs. J to be an important person in the social network for her friend.

The C case was accepted, and Mrs. C readily responded to the offer of help. The second interview shows how the worker stepped in quickly and empathically. She partialized, focused, and helped Mrs. C to begin to work on mutually agreed on concerns. The principle of mutuality in contracting and working together is central to the authors' theoretical framework.[25]

The worker asked Mrs. C which one of the things she had raised as problems she wanted to begin with. She said, "Getting on Supplemental Security Income." The worker explored with her why she had been on Supplemental Security Income before, why she had been cut off (she did not go for a medical—she had too many things to do and was too upset about her daughter's murder; she was on medication then, too), what she had to do to be reinstated (get a medical), and how the worker could help (make the appointment).

Mrs. C then talked about Connie, who is good, "but she lies." The worker asked about this problem and Mrs. C elaborated. The worker said that she guessed Connie was a burden for Mrs. C, and she said Connie was. Mrs. C felt that she just was not up to handling the children. What else did the children do that made them a burden for her? She described their fights—the boy threatens the girls by telling them that he will throw them out the window and disfigure them. The worker said it really must be a burden for Mrs. C having to step in to stop such fights all the time. She said it was. The worker asked if Mrs. C had ever thought about placing them? She said yes, Larry and Connie. She could keep Nancy. She wanted to keep them all, but sometimes it seemed like too much. The worker nodded. Mrs. C said that she also thought about camp for them this summer. The worker nodded and said, "To give yourself a rest?" She nodded and said she had an appointment on Thursday at the health center for a physical and she wanted to see a psychiatrist then, too. The worker said she would help to arrange that and would also help Mrs. C plan what she wanted to do with the children. She agreed. The worker remarked that Mrs. C was still very upset about her daughter's death. She said she tried not to think about it. The worker said that she could understand that, but it was not always easy. Mrs. C said she did not let the children know that it bothered her. The worker said that they probably could still sense it, and one of the ways of helping them would be by getting over it herself. She nodded slowly. The worker said it was painful, and that she was there to share that heavy burden with Mrs. C. Mrs. C then offered more information—again trying to explain why her daughter was killed. The worker said she knew Mrs. C was trying to understand why it happened. She said it was always on her mind.

The children and Mrs. C were connected to a nearby psychiatric facility, and the worker remained active in helping Mrs. C decide what to do about caring for her grandchildren. She arranged to see Vera and Connie and one brother of each in a group. Here she used play techniques and talking to help the children until ongoing psychiatric help could be obtained. She also did grief work with Mrs. C, and there was significant improvement in this overwhelmingly tragic situation.

In another situation, a worker found Mrs. R's sister present at two interviews. She assessed that Mrs. R needed her sister's approval for the placement of her children in temporary foster care and worked with the sister accordingly, to Mrs. R's relief.

In another case, Mrs. F invited a friend to the interviews. In this case the worker assessed that the message was "help her, not me; my problems are all better now." When this was pointed out to Mrs. F she agreed laughingly, and she and the worker agreed to conclude their work together.

The use of the office as a space for the client and in terms of the client's timing was also flexible. The case of Mr. D illustrates this:

Mr. D is a tall, heavy, sixty-two-year-old, deaf and dumb black man who was referred to the agency because of "strange behavior." Once it was realized that Mr. D could neither hear nor speak, his "strange" behavior was understood and explained to the Housing Management and concerned neighbors. The behavior consisted of a silent talking to himself with some loud grunts and motions to act out what he was thinking. When,

[25]Carel B. Germain and Alex Gitterman, "Social Work Practice: A Life Model," *Social Service Review* 50 (December 1976): 601-10.

for example, he was anxious over a late check, this behavior was exaggerated. The workers encouraged him to come into the office whenever he felt like it so that they could communicate with him and offer explanation and reassurance. They learned that he could write in simple sentences and read lips when he was calm. The workers, like the tenants, were initially frightened because he appeared to be "crazy," but, as they discovered how to communicate with him, everyone relaxed, especially Mr. D, who then dropped in to "have someone to talk to" occasionally. Later, his notes would read, "How are you? It is a nice day outside." Whoever was present might reply, "It is good to see you, you make the day nicer for us!" to which he would smile and shake hands profusely all around.

Several elderly people and children "dropped in" in similar ways.

Assessing and using natural helping networks

The alert worker can find people helping each other and natural leaders in the community. Mrs. M, an elderly woman who lived across the hall from the agency, turned out to be a well-respected matriarch in the community. She functioned naturally as a broker among people in need. She cared for children on a daily basis and frequently sent their mothers to the agency for social service help. Mrs. M also began to send friends who needed jobs to see what the agency could do. She allowed herself to depend on the agency, but it was evident that many persons depended on her.

Many elderly clients were alone and isolated. Some had incomes slightly above the Medicaid level because of small lifelong savings with which they would not part. The workers were able to convince some of these clients to pay a small fee for a homemaker on a part-time basis and screened the people Mrs. M sent who were interested in caring for the elderly in this way. The workers' use of Mrs. M and her friends in this way enhanced Mrs. M's position, met the employment needs of the friends, and also met the physical and social needs of some of the most isolated elderly clients. For example:

Mrs. Z was also a leader in the building's social network. She would frequently drop in to refer clients to the agency, mostly the elderly. Mrs. Z had a large family and also had her own troubles; however, she would speak of them rarely. At one point she came to the office more frequently. A worker was assigned to her and, as a relationship was built, Mrs. Z asked for help in placing her teenage son, to "save him from the streets." She also unburdened other serious family problems. Paul, the son, was also eager for a placement. As staff mediated with Mrs. Z, Paul, and the Bureau of Child Welfare (BCW), the placement process was set in motion.

Soon, through Mrs. Z, several parents came in with similar requests. In most cases the workers were able to use themselves to mediate family strife and avoid placement. In a few desperate situations the wheels were again set in motion with BCW. Work with the whole community grew out of these initial requests. One worker was assigned to handle all of these requests. Flyers were developed and distributed about how to use BCW, the family court, and many other preventive community services for adolescents. A group of mothers of adolescents was also offered. Mrs. Z brought friends to this group.

Whenever a client with some leadership in the community was involved, her own social network was served. As her natural position was recognized, she became an outreach agent for the agency, and services were developed to meet the needs that she helped uncover.

Mrs. N also illustrates an uncovering and use of a natural helping network among the isolated Jewish elderly. Eighty-year-old Mrs. N, after being mugged in her doorway, was too frightened to go out for several months. Mr. and Mrs. T, a couple in their mid-sixties and acquaintances of Mrs. N "from the old days," lived in a nearby building and shopped for Mrs. N. After meeting with Mr. and Mrs. T, the workers learned of many other shut-in elderly persons whom the T's helped. They were glad to have the agency concerned and looking in on their other friends, as well.

Mr. E, a housing assistant, also took an active, concerned interest in the elderly. Through him the agency found Mrs. B, eighty-six years old and in ill health—someone the social network had somehow lost. She was truly isolated. These excerpts from a fourth encounter show her isolation, her response to the genuine caring of the worker,

and the worker's skillful work under "crisis" circumstances.

The worker called Mrs. B about 1 p.m. to let her know she'd be coming by. There was no answer after twenty-five rings. The worker hurried over to Mrs. B's apartment and, when she reached the door, heard Mrs. B screaming, "Help me! Help me!" Relieved that Mrs. B was alive the worker yelled back that she was there and that she would get Mr. E to open the door. Mr. E came with the building manager and broke the door open. They found Mrs. B in the kitchen sitting on the floor crouched beneath the telephone on the wall. Her face was white with fear—she was trembling and crying. Mrs. B tried to tell them what had happened—the telephone rang, she was looking forward to the worker's call and hurried to answer the telephone, forgetting to take her cane. Near the door she fell. The telephone continued to ring and she tried to slide over to the telephone on her back but could not. Mrs. B kept asking the worker if she had had another "shock" (meaning stroke). The worker kept trying to have Mrs. B tell her how she fell because, if it was a serious fall, an ambulance should be called. Mrs. B kept saying that she had just slipped and that nothing hurt. Mrs. B was able to move her limbs quite comfortably and they placed her on the couch.

The worker got another pillow for Mrs. B and propped it under her head. "You are too good to me. Why do you do this? You saved my life. You only know me a few weeks." The worker held Mrs. B's hand, told her that in the few weeks that she had known her she had grown very fond of her and wanted to help her, and that she was happy Mrs. B was all right.

The worker said that the experience today had been frightening for Mrs. B—she was alone and no one heard her—she realized that something could happen to her. The worker said that what had happened today was frightening to her as well, and that she was concerned about Mrs. B's fall and thought a doctor should look at her. Mrs. B replied, "I will listen to you. Today has shown me how much you care about me."

"You might enjoy being with other people, Mrs. B, have you thought about a nursing home?" Mrs. B said, "Sometimes; I know it is not good to be by yourself, all alone, without anyone. One of my friends once said that in those homes at least they watch out for you. But I can't go to a home. Because you have to be able to do something." "You mean, that in order to go to a home you believe that you have to be able to work there? Mrs. B, you do not have to be able to work for them. You can walk and you are able to move around. You don't have to work for them. I'll look into the possibilities and tell you about them."

Mrs. B decided to get up to see if she could walk around. The worker helped her up slowly. Mrs. B became more lively as she began moving around again.

Over a six-month period Mrs. B was helped to enter a good nursing home. The worker continued to visit her regularly in the home and helped her to make a very good adjustment.

Creating social networks for the isolated elderly

The following example illustrates what can be done socially for a person with literally no ties to the community. This approach would be effective for migrants, persons released from institutions, isolated elderly people, and others without accessible social support systems of their own.

Mr. A, aged sixty-eight, was a new tenant referred to the agency for his loud and disorderly behavior while inebriated. He had been living in a metropolitan hotel for five years after moving from the South. Finally, he was able to move into adequate housing. But he was alone in this new world. The outreach of a male worker was welcomed after an initial period of distrust. Within a few visits Mr. A was drinking only on weekends. He looked forward to the worker's visits and loved telling stories of his work on a railroad.

The same worker also worked with a group of men who lived alone as part of the agency's service to a nearby Senior Citizens' Center. He felt that Mr. A would find new friends in the group. Mr. A said he would go if the worker brought him to the first meeting. The worker agreed and soon Mr. A became a valued member of the group and a friend to Mr. G, another man who was isolated previously. The group provided opportunities to share common concerns and to build a new, small, and manageable social network. It also linked Mr. A to the lunch program and other services of the Center.

Mediation in the world of the client

The case of Mrs. H most fully illustrates the ecological balance in a client's world and the worker's mediating role in maintaining it. This case demonstrates that the worker is not a "fixer of broken objects," but a participant

in a complex network of active reciprocal relationships.

Mrs. H is a forty-three-year-old Hispanic, a mother of seven children ranging in age from two years to twelve years, and known to the Bureau of Child Welfare for alleged child neglect. She appears mildly retarded and apparently is a barely compensated schizophrenic. Efforts to maintain the family as a unit, including twenty-eight-year-old alcoholic Mr. K, the father of six of the children, were extensive. Although Mrs. H benefited from the worker's support individually, she made little progress in meeting the needs of the children. The oldest child had untreated spinal meningitis, one of the younger children had a treatable but untreated hearing loss, and another child had a serious developmental lag. Even when the worker offered to go to appointments with Mrs. H, she was unable to mobilize herself. She also kept the children home from school for lengthy periods of time.

She was not interested in homemaker services, however, and preferred the idea of placing the children "in a special school" to having "another woman" in her home. For many months, the content of the work was expressing feelings and weighing the pros and cons of placement for the children. As health and school officials made her aware of the consequences of her neglect, that is, possible court proceedings, her anxiety soared. Mr. K's alcoholic binges were frequent and he was aggressive in the home. Still she could not ask him to leave. On one occasion the worker's entrance interrupted Mr. K chasing Mrs. H with a butcher knife while the children huddled in a corner in horror. After this, Mrs. H arranged placement of the four oldest children. As the worker related to Mrs. H's feelings about this she expressed great relief, but also great fear and shame around the reactions of her husband, mother, sister, and friends. Although none of these were in any position to help her with the children, all were very judgmental.

The children themselves expressed a desire to "go away" where they would get food and clothes and go to school. The only boy, aged eight, expressed guilt about leaving his mother. The girls were quite ready to go. The boy was helped when the worker assured him that she would make sure his mother was allright. The children were seen individually and as a sibling group. They were eager to go and told their teachers at school about the move.

The school then put further pressures on Mrs. H. The guidance counselor felt that Mrs. H was "doing the best thing," and the agency used him as a source of support. Two teachers, however, stood in judgment, as did her family. Mrs. H also needed help to deal with her own ambivalent feelings. The agency worker offered to talk with each of these individuals. Mrs. H willingly accepted. The elderly alcoholic grandmother who had depended on Mrs. H's twelve-year-old daughter, who at times lived with her, was helped to obtain another living situation for herself. She began to count on the worker instead of the youngster, and was also involved in the preplacement visit of her granddaughter.

Mr. K remained closed to help in most ways, but he was involved in the preplacement visit of his three children, who were being placed together, and was impressed with the facilities. This took a lot of pressure off Mrs. H. And, as Mrs. H and the worker talked together to her husband, sister, best friends, and teachers, they also better understood that the children were not being sent away for punishment to an awful place and that family ties would be maintained. Mediation in all of these aspects of Mrs. H's world made the placement easier for all involved.

Mediation and community involvement with the housing system

All of the work mentioned was directed toward helping the clients fare better in their world, to adjust the "fit" between individual and environment and between environment and individual. The last example of theory in action will be around affecting the fit of a community of people with the most immediate part of their environment—that is, to mediate in the relationship between tenants and housing management.

A tenants' organization did exist; it was an umbrella organization with separate "councils" in each building. Some building councils were stronger and more effective than others. The building in which the agency is housed was the oldest, most notorious, and most deteriorated of all the project buildings. The tenants' group in this building was loosely organized and losing ground. The agency staff approached the leaders of this group and asked if they could be of help because they shared the same space in which there were many problems. This involvement was welcomed by the leaders, although they shared a healthy skepticism about "getting anything done."

The housing manager was actually very concerned, eager to meet with the tenants,

and potentially responsive, but understandably overwhelmed: "When we fix it they immediately break it again!"

The mediation with the housing manager and the tenants' council consisted of several stages, involving myriad social work skills. First, the tenants were encouraged to express concerns and feelings. Their anger and disgust at some of the living conditions were recognized as legitimate. Also identified was a feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness about what could be done. As this process unfolded, some concerns were identified as the most important and most immediately solvable as tasks. A sense of cohesiveness developed as the group worked together and became focused. They felt that most of the vandalism was caused by adolescents who had nothing to do. Their solution to this was to obtain a room for the teenagers to be used as a supervised recreation lounge. Additionally, building security was a main concern. They decided to ask for a secure lock on the door and to have the unsafe elevator conditions corrected. They formulated these concerns as goals and strategized and rehearsed how to express them to the housing manager. The worker was then asked to let Mr. P, the housing manager, know what the group's concerns were and to ask him to a meeting. At this meeting the worker recognized Mr. P's genuine concern for his buildings and showed understanding of the overwhelming nature of his job. The worker prepared both sides and defenses were addressed through the worker's empathy with the position of each side. Thus, the joint meeting would have a better chance of being a real opportunity to communicate and work together and not a battle or "blaming" bout in which nothing would get done.

The next stage was the worker's mediation in the actual meeting:

Mr. P arrived first with Mr. O, the president of the overall tenant association. Two leaders and five members of the tenants' council arrived shortly after. Introductions were made and the meeting began. The worker stated the purpose of the meeting as the tenants' desire for a perambulator room and some concerns about the building. Mr. P focused on the perambulator room because he had understood that they wanted to use the room for a recreation room. Mr. P said he would approve of that, and asked what they wanted in the room. Ms. E spoke about furniture, tables and chairs, games, and so forth. Mr. P said he might be able to get some chairs, a few card tables, and deck paint, and advance some money or reimburse them. Ms. W and Ms. S spoke of how they hoped to reach the adolescents through this room. Mr. O brought up supervision and security of the recreation room because vandalism was a reality. Ms. W talked about having an adult in the room to supervise the teenagers and the room would be locked during the other times and the others agreed. Mr. P said he would change the lock to the room and give them new keys. They talked about vandalism in the building, garbage on the floor, broken doors, broken mailboxes, dirty elevator floors, and people riding on the tops of the elevators. Mr. O talked about the garbage not being properly disposed of and that there was no excuse for that. The worker said that the problems were immense, but blaming was not the intention of the meeting.

They then talked about the door being broken, the lock being removed the last year, the cold air coming in, and there being no security. Mr. P talked about the door having been fixed and then broken again—as soon as the door was fixed it was broken again. He also talked about how sixty mailboxes had been fixed and how they all had been broken again. The worker focused on the door and pointed out that there might be some misunderstanding here because housing said the door was fixed and broken again, and the tenants said the door was never fixed. The worker asked for clarification and a discussion followed. Ms. E talked about the need for more building inspection to make sure repairs were made. Mr. P vouched that housing inspectors would be coming out. The council members said they hoped so because they were paying rent and expected things to be done. Mr. P and Mr. O agreed.

The discussion went back to adolescents and vandalism. Ms. W asked what the housing management was going to do about it. Mr. P and Mr. O talked about fining those involved and the others agreed. There was a discussion, and an agreement was reached that names would be turned in of families involved, a warning would be given, and then a $50 fine imposed the second time. All agreed on this. They talked about the need to reach the adolescents with the recreation room because they vandalized the buildings.

The worker reviewed their meeting's accomplishments and agreements on the recreation room, furniture, door locks, inspections, and fining and noted that they especially hoped the recreation room might keep the adolescents from van-

dalizing the building. They agreed that the meeting had gone well and they were satisfied. Mr. P and Mr. O felt it helpful and hoped they would continue the open communication because housing and tenants wanted to help make this a better place to live. All agreed.

The worker focused and defused at times, but also allowed conflict and was firm in helping the two sides to talk to each other. A once-demoralized group is seen acting on their own behalf, making an impact, and accomplishing goals. A concerned institutional representative is also seen, who wants to be able to accommodate to the extent he can and is willing to plan jointly for what he cannot immediately remedy. A beginning in real communication is made.

Conclusions

This article demonstrates the effectiveness of an agency based on the life model-interactionist concepts. The flexible use of time and space, the developmental, destigmatized view of the client, and the mediating role of the worker in the ecological field of the client have been illustrated. The use of these models in helping clients in their life roles as children, parents, and elderly has been illustrated. Transitions such as moving from community to community or from work to retirement were also described. Work with family units, within natural helping networks, with community groups and formed groups, and in connecting isolated individuals to the community has been demonstrated. Even in the midst of violence and great poverty, the model has enabled us to maintain a focus on issues of mastery and on development of the power to influence one's destiny.

The authors believe that the life model-interactionist approach offers a comprehensive but flexible approach to social need. In spite of working in a community with the greatest intensity of need and of the serious limitations of a student-staffed agency, these models have been easily translated into practice and useful in developing an effective program. An agency with greater resources, or one facing less extreme social need, would be all the more able to use this approach productively. The authors look forward to others attempting to "patch" this imperfect world through translating the theory of the ecological perspective into action in other agencies and other settings.