

# COMMENTS ON "DIAGRAMATIC ASSESSMENT OF FAMILY RELATIONS"

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Dr. Hartman's article was originally published in the October 1978 edition of *Social Casework. Reflections* would like to thank *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services* (formerly *Social Casework*) for allowing us to reprint the article in its entirety, exactly as it appeared 25 years ago.



## Introduction

It is not difficult to trace the routes that led me to the ideas presented in "Diagrammatic Assessment." I started doctoral training at Columbia in 1966. Carel Germain was in the class before me and had an enormous impact on my thinking and my experience at Columbia. She had been in the last doctoral class Lucille Austin taught before her retirement. In that class, Austin, always open to new ideas, had brought in some material about general systems theory. Carel was very excited about it and she loaned me a dog eared mimeographed copy of Werner Lutz's monograph "Concepts and Principles

Underlying Social Case Work Practice." This was a very early effort to bring GST to social work.

Carel, her classmate, Sister Mary Paul Janchill, and I became enormously interested in the potential of general systems theory in conceptualizing "person in situation," social work's historic focus. All three of us soon published articles in which we explored the possibilities in the application of systems theory to social work practice. Carel (1968) looked at social study from a systems perspective. Sister Mary Paul (1969) presented a very useful general introduction to systems theory for practice. I (1970), perhaps because of my background in philosophy, wrote about the epistemological issues and the way GST could alter and expand our thinking processes. We all struggled to make the theory more accessible, more clearly related to human experience, but the high level of abstraction and the language made that difficult.



It was Carel, with her introduction of the ecological metaphor into practice, that humanized systems theory and made its experience near. It was understandable that she would make that leap. She, a native Californian, had always had a deep love of



nature and her studies in ecology and of the works of many biologists and ecologists led her to see how useful this would be. Carel continued throughout her career to expand and deepen this approach and had an enormous impact on the field. She remained my teacher, my colleague, and my dear friend until her death in 1995.



In the early '60s, I had also become very involved in the early family therapy movement. Sanford Sherman, a colleague of Nathan Ackerman, came to the community mental health of which I was executive and began training us to work with families. Family therapy felt for me, and for many other social workers, like going home, as it was socially oriented clinical work with emphasis on both the current and the historical social world of client families. Mary Richmond would have been delighted!

By the time I joined the University of Michigan faculty in 1974, I was an "ecologically oriented family centered social worker." Joan Laird and I, with three other family-oriented practitioners, founded the Ann Arbor Center for the Family where we did training and practice, bringing in leaders in the family therapy field for teaching and consultation and learning from each other in our weekly staff meetings. I was also very involved developing training materials with Lynn Nybell in the University of Michigan's Child Welfare Learning Lab and in training child welfare staff for the Michigan Department of Social Services.

The eco-map, which is presented in "Diagrammatic Assessment," was developed out of my experience of working with child welfare workers. With my commitment to an

ecological perspective and my interest in epistemology and the importance of "thinking differently", I wanted to find a way to help workers think about and organize the overwhelming amount of data that confronted them in their work with complicated, stressed, and over burdened families.

Being a visually minded "right brained" person, I turned to the possibility of drawing a picture to capture the family's world, and this picture quickly turned into the eco-map. When you added the genogram, you had a comprehensive picture of the family in space and through time. The eco-map was first intended for use by the social workers in organizing the data they had collected. However, we soon realized that its greatest strength was in its use as an aid in interviewing. We tested the eco-map throughout the State of Michigan in child welfare training and with child welfare leaders from around the country who participated in Project CRAFT at the University of Michigan. Finally, in 1978, I put the years of work and thinking together in "Diagrammatic Assessment of Family Relationships."

The response to this piece over the years has been amazing and a total surprise to me. There have been more requests for reprints and republication for it than for any other article in the history of *Families in Society* and its predecessors. The eco-map has turned up everywhere in social work, nursing, psychology, and all over the world. It is now a fixture in the public domain, as if it had always been there.

Why? I was enormously puzzled by the response to the eco-map. Why was it so widely adopted? Recently, I think perhaps I have discovered why. Michael White, Australian post structural social worker and family therapist, has described most usefully the qualities that should exist between a worker and a client. As I learned about White's work, I realized that the use of the eco-map promoted the kind of relationship he and other



postmodern therapists have described. First, the relationship should be collaborative. The eco-map promotes collaboration. As people do eco-maps they quickly begin to sit shoulder to shoulder, rather than face to face, working jointly on the project. All of the information is shared, which leads to shared discussion and planning. Second, the relationship should be reciprocal. Doing the eco-map is a two way process. Both the worker and the client change. I remember the child welfare workers saying, after they used the map in interviewing, "I never saw that family like that before." They too had changed. Third, the worker should be appreciative of clients as experts on their own lives, their own experience. In both the eco-map and the genogram, the client is the expert and the worker is in the learning position. Fourth, the worker should be decentered. The use of the eco-map and the genogram puts the client in the center as the expert, the planner, the one who does a lot of the work. Finally, the worker should be acknowledging and addressing issues of injustice. We were very aware of this when we first started to use the eco-map. Doing the eco-map helps the worker to experience what it is like to live in the client's world. The emphasis immediately shifts from assumed deficits in the client and the family to the tension, stress, lack of resources, and supports in the environment. Not only is it not pathologizing, but it illuminates possibilities in the environment for advocacy and in the relationship between the environment and the client for change.

I think the eco-map was widely adopted partly because it is a simple visual aid, but even more because of the impact it had on the "positioning," on the stance of the worker that in turn, produced a positive response from the clients.

It was strange to read the article for the first time in many years. To some extent it was a nostalgia trip, as rereading it, I revisited many old friends and colleagues and a rich

learning and teaching experience. In the past years, I have been increasingly aware of and concerned about power issues in practice. I was pleased that without even being aware of it, I developed something that led to collaboration, a definition of the client as expert, something which emphasizes the social environment and the injustices many face in trying to cope with depriving and demeaning life situations.

However, my thinking has also changed and so has the world. I now prefer the metaphor of the anthropologist rather than the ecologist. As Bateson said, "mind is a part of nature." The ecological surround continues to be important but so are meanings, values, beliefs, and the power of discourse. I still think the eco-map can be useful, but it must be postmodernized. It must be expanded to include a much more complex view of environment, an environment that is largely socially constructed, an environment that includes very powerful discourses such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, agism, and all the other "isms" that create identities, shape lives and limit options.

## References

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