

# Epistemological Issues of the Ecological Perspective for Social Work Practice\*

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## INTRODUCTION

Since Gordon (1969) suggested that the distinctive domain of social work should be placed in the interface between persons and environments, the ecological perspective has become one of the significant frameworks for social work practice. The main view of Gordon is that “the transactions between a person’s coping patterns and qualities of the impinging environment constitute the person-situation duality and become the social worker’s unit of attention” (Germain & Gitterman, 1987; 488).

In Japan, the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program has been making emphasis more and more on the eco-system perspective in practice courses. The educational system increasingly requires a variety of course work that includes practice methodologies from macro to micro in order to produce “generalists.” “A person in environment”, “the transaction between persons and environments”, and “the holistic perspective” have become the key concepts in BSW curriculum, as if a social worker could work with a full range of clients’ psychosocial problems. In addition, the annual conference of Japan Social Work Practice in 2001, which set the “Identities of Practice Theories” as a main theme, decided to take the ecological framework into account as a consistent practical viewpoint for social work practitioners.

The ecological perspective has been applied to various fields in social work. There are, however, two practice approaches that have emerged from the ecological framework directly. These are the life model approach (Germain, 1979; Germain and Gitterman, 1980) and the family-centered approach (Hartman & Laird, 1983). The life model approach focuses on “improving the adaptive fit so that reciprocal processes between people and their environments will be more conducive to the development of human potential and the improvement of environments” (Maluccio, 1981: 2). The family-centered approach employs the ecological system’s model of practice that places the family at the center of concern, and integrates and applies theories and techniques from many different sources (Hartman & Laird, 1983). These methods belong to one of the main subjects in micro practice courses in BSW programs in Japan.

On the other hand, Wakefield (1996a; 1996b) discussed the limitation of the eco-system perspective for the progress of social work practice. He clearly mentioned that the eco-system perspective is not able to provide a theoretical framework that can lead to appropriate practice methods in any social work setting. He also pointed out that “the profession’s intellectual priorities should shift from generic theory to intensive development of, and training in, domain-specific theories and interventions, substantive integration 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” (Wakefield, 1996b: 207). He clearly cautions us not to regard the ecological perspective as the only coherent practical framework of social work.

## THE AIM OF THIS STUDY

The aim of this paper is to review the bodies of knowledge in the ecological perspective and reexam-

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ine the applicability of its framework to social work practice. In order to accomplish this aim, I make a critical review of the life model approach as well as the family-centered approach. This paper also proposes “hermeneutics” as a scientific paradigm for the inquiry of these ecological approaches. Hermeneutics can supposedly provide an inquiry method that fits the epistemology of the ecological framework, and indicates an alternative way to enhance and formulate the ecological approaches. This inquiry may also reveal the way to establish more applicable practice methods and problem-specific practice theories.

In the following, this paper first focuses on the critiques concerning the ecological perspective in social work practice. The critique will be provided by analyzing the following areas: 1) the horizon of the framework; 2) the assumption of the framework; and 3) the bodies of knowledge. Secondly, I introduce hermeneutics, a scientific paradigm underlying theory development, and discuss the inquiry method based on the paradigm. Finally, I summarize the latent abilities of the ecological approaches in social work in the future.

## THE CRITIQUE OF THE ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

### 1. The horizon of the framework

Ecology is defined as “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” (Germain, 1973: 326). In this sense, if ecology is adopted for practice in social work as an analogical metaphor, we must pay attention to the complex ecological system as a unit that includes the individuals, the families, the salient environments, and the transactional relationships among these systems (Pincus & Minahan, 1973). As the ecological point of view confirms that an individual cannot be understood without regard to the context of the intimate environment, a family can be understood only in the context of the larger environment (Hartman & Laird, 1983).

In the life model approach, Greif & Lynch (1983) conceptualized the systems available for change in four ways: “1) the personal level, which involves the individual only; 2) the family level, consisting of the people in the home; 3) the group or community level, the networks or neighborhood that affect the client; and 4) the institutional level, which includes agencies, laws, schools, city halls, welfare bureaus, and so on. In this framework, the social worker’s intervention repertoire includes casework, group work, community organization, and the administration” (p. 66).

The ecological perspective breaks through the limitation of narrow focusing on the target of interventions but enables practitioners to see the intervention targets on a broad range of view. The ecological perspective “not only provides a formulation for understanding the need for broadly based, comprehensive assessments, but also provides an organizing, integrating framework that can be adopted to a broad range of practice concerns and intervention approaches” (Fischer, 1981: 204). Indeed, the ecological perspective offers a conceptual framework for understanding the context of social work and the problems with which social workers are dealing.

There are, however, some concerns regarding this wide range of applicability in the ecological perspective. First, although the ecological perspective assumes that the targets of interventions should be placed on the transaction between the clients and environments, the model never explains the targets with “which transaction should be taken into account”. As Greif & Lynch (1983) note, the ecological perspective covers the whole systems that are available, from an individual level to an institutional level. This perspective, however, imposes a tremendous burden for us to establish the base of social workers’ knowledge as well as their practice skills, since it does not provide guidance on which relationships may be given to them in any particular case. As a result, there is no limitation to practices and we found that “there is more to be done than they had noticed before” (Meyer, 1979: 271).

Secondly, relating to the first point, because the ecological perspective tries to explain whole transac-

tions between clients and environments, from the individual level up to the institutional levels, the model has the same problems as “metatheories” or “grand theories”. Mills (1959) criticized the characteristic of grand theory by targeting Talcott Parsons’ “The Social System” by stating:

“The basic cause of grand theory is the initial choice of a level of thinking so general that its practitioners cannot logically get down to observation. They never, as grand theorists, get down from the higher generalities to problems in their historical and structural contexts. This absence of a firm sense of genuine problems, in turn, makes for the unreality so noticeable in their pages. One resulting characteristic is a seemingly arbitrary and certainly endless elaboration of distinction, which neither enlarge our understanding nor make our experience more sensible” (p. 33).

This critique against grand theory can be applied to the ecological perspective as well. The wide ranging scope of the ecological perspective is so arbitrary that groping for social work practice lapses into a squirrel cage-like effort without an objective. It leads us to develop uncertain and unrealistic models, which cannot delineate any specific targets of social work intervention.

This aspect also makes it difficult for practitioners to clarify their social work methodology, the way of analyzing data, and to formulate plans of intervention, in ways which are consistent with targeted problems. In the life model approach, for example, although the intervention is placed on enhancing relatedness, self-esteem and competence as well as providing social resources, the horizon of intervention is too broad and too vague for social workers to practice in the real social work settings. In short, the ecological perspective, like grand theories, neither includes the methodological implications nor indicates any criteria for practitioners to plan or select their intervention strategies.

Greif & Lynch (1983), however, defended the ecological perspective against such criticisms by stating that it is not a “model” but a “perspective”, and that a perspective cannot dictate what the practitioner should do. They emphasized, “a perspective only offers a lens ” (p. 56). Hartman (1970) also recommended looking upon the ecological perspective as “a conceptual model”. She pointed out that an ecological or systemic point of view could move social work practitioners to “a broader conception of practice, to see practice in relation to multiple possibilities for intervention” (p. 470).

However, as Wakefield (1996a) stated, the critical point is that even though they thoroughly emphasized the benefit of the ecological perspective as an assessment tool, they never indicate how they can integrate the conceptual framework into the conventional social work intervention such as the psychoanalytic, the behavioral, and the psychosocial approaches. In real social work settings, what is needed by practitioners are problem-specific models which can be utilized to formulate practice methodologies as well as indications of ways to apply those methodologies to various psychosocial problems.

## **2. The theoretical assumptions in the framework**

In an ecological view, practice is directed toward improving the transactions between people and environments in order to “enhance adaptive capacities and improve environments for all who function within them” (Germain, 1973: 121). This perspective is totally different from the view of the traditional approaches to practice, which have been based on a medical, or disease metaphor that tended to place a client in a passive or dependent position and tended to make our attention more focused on the person rather than on his situation.

Based on this stance, the ecological perspective defines problems not as reflections on pathological states but as consequences of interactions among elements of the eco-system or the ecological perspective including other people, things, places, organizations, ideas, information and values (Germain, 1979; Germain & Gitterman, 1980; Greif & Lynch, 1983). In other words, problems are conceptualized as problems in living, not as personality disturbances.

Germain & Gitterman (1987) clearly explained their assumptions as follows:

When transactions are adaptive, for example, people's growth, development, and physical/emotional well-being are promoted or supported by significant others, social organizations, and political/economic structures and policies, and by the temporal, spatial, and other dimensions of physical settings. On the other hand, when transactions are maladaptive, people's emotional, biological, cognitive, and social development and functioning may be impaired and environments may be damaged. Such untoward outcomes increase people's burdens and tasks to make the transaction adaptive (p. 489).

In this assumption, social work intervention should focus on the dysfunctional patterns between clients and environments as well as aim at enhancing the client's adaptive capacities. This perspective is close to the epistemology of the circular model, which has been applied to the family systems approach. The circular model clearly indicates that "meaning is derived from the relation between individuals and elements as each defines the other. Causality becomes a reciprocal concept to be found only in the interface between individuals and between systems as they mutually influence each other" (Becvar & Becvar, 1988: 62).

There are two problematic aspects in the ecological perspective regarding this theoretical assumption. First, the ecological perspective fails to deal with a significant point that "a change in one part of a system has an impact on all other parts of a system", which is the key concept of the circular perspective. To this point, Hartman (1983) emphasized that the family-centered approach is able to see the total family system in the ecological context in order to minimize the unpredictable outcomes from every intervention. Her approach, however, is limited only to classify the target systems for intervention as: 1) the intergenerational family system, 2) inside the family system, and 3) the environmental system. She discusses the intervention methods separately in accordance with each target system. However, she indicates no practical implication about how to reduce the unpredictable impact on other systems caused by the intervention. In fact, it is often impossible to predict or to observe the various outcomes caused by only one intervention.

Secondly, its theoretical assumption fails to include the relationship between practitioners and clients. That is to say, the theoretical assumption of the ecological perspective assumes that practitioners are taking an "objective" or "neutral" position in relation to their clients when they work with the transactional aspects in clients' lives. This is contradictory to the circular perspective. Regarding this point, Keeney (1983) introduced the concept of "higher order punctuation" that connects the practitioner and the client" (p. 158). This means that social workers "no longer view the system only in the context of the inputs and outputs, or relationship with other systems" (Becvar & Becvar, 1988: 75). The ecological perspective, on the other hand, assumes the system to be autonomous or a closed organization.

That is, a social worker cannot be a changing agent who has completely neutral or objective independence from a client. The life model approach, which emphasizes that intervention must be in the human transaction, also never indicates the interactional aspect between clients and social workers. Rather, the approach merely aims at enhancing clients' adaptive abilities and their relationship with communities or competence, which are simply based on the linear model! I should note that failing to include the aspect of practitioner-client interaction causes a contradiction to the circular epistemology model, which is the basis of the theoretical assumption in the ecological perspective.

### 3. The bodies of knowledge

The ecological perspective is interrelated with the general systems theory, the ecological theory, and the other knowledge bases such as transaction, the key concept of the ecological approaches.

First, "the general systems theory provides an epistemological point of view or a way of thinking, and means to organize our perceptions" (Hartman & Laird, 1983: 62). The origin of the theory derived from the works by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy. Bertalanffy (1968) introduced the concept of the open system "in which there is a mutual exchange of energy and information between an organism and the environment, and this concept explained how biological systems survived more clearly" (Greif & Lynch, 1983: 41). Focusing on the six basic concepts that define the identity of the open system, such as boundaries, structure, hierarchy,

transactional, frame of reference, and time, Greif & Lynch (1983) described the role of the general systems theory in social work practice in the following way:

Based on these six concepts, the general systems theory has provided all disciplines and a framework for understanding the interaction of living organisms for the social work. Because of its widespread reach, it has been applied in diverse fields such as economics, anthropology, engineering, sociology, architecture, biology, psychiatry, psychology, and social work. The general systems theory explains what happens when two or more organisms interact with each other and offers a scientific perspective that can explain relationships and transactions among variables on an individual, family, community, and organizational level (p. 49).

Secondly, the general systems theory then included an “ecological” or “transactional” systems perspective, which was developing in social work and in the field of social psychiatry (Hartman & Laird, 1983). Ecology is defined as “the science concerned with the adaptive accommodation of organisms and their environments and with the means by which they achieve a dynamic equilibrium and mutuality” (Germain, 1973: 326). It is similar in ways to the general systems theory principles, but focuses on the junction or the interface of organisms and impinging environments (Greif & Lynch, 1983).

The ecological perspective should “avoid the seemingly dehumanizing language of the general systems theory and should be less abstract and closer to human phenomena” (Germain and Gitterman, 1987: 488). Thus, “an ecological perspective enables us to reach toward a complementarity between our scientific and humanistic concerns between cause and function” (Germain, 1973: 326).

According to Germain (1973), other bodies of knowledge related to the concepts of transaction can be found in Maslow’s (1954) studies of “motivation”, Erikson’s (1964) idea of ego development, Hartmann’s (1958) study for the concept of “adaptation”, and the concepts of ethology that have been applied to the knowledge of transaction, especially in the field of family therapy (Becvar & Becvar, 1988).

There are three concerns regarding these bodies of knowledge. First, Hartman (1970: 467–468) pointed out three major difficulties that are derived from the application of the general systems theory into social work practice. The first one is regarding the highly abstract level on which the systems theory has been conceptualized. This makes the task of integrating the theory with actual practice ideas very difficult. Social workers cannot figure out how to utilize these abstract concepts in social work practice. In addition, the systems theories confused by many different views and interpretations lead to even more applications. Lastly, the language used by the systems theorists has been difficult to assimilate into social work. This semantic confusion adds a burden to the theory and obfuscates its integrative capacities.

The second concern with the bodies of knowledge is that although the ecological perspective is developed through combining general systems theory principles with ecological theory that is more focused on the interface of the organism and the impinging environment (Greif & Lynch, 1983), the model fails to integrate the significant concepts of the general systems theory such as structure, hierarchy, and boundary. In fact, the two approaches, such as the life model approach and the family-centered approach never demonstrate how to apply these three system’s concepts into real practice.

The third concern is obvious. The eclectic nature of the ecological perspective, like a grand theory, consists of too many knowledge bases. The ecological perspective also includes the bodies of knowledge whose theoretical paradigms are different from each other. The general systems theory is, for example, based on a circular perspective which enables one to see the connection or relatedness in a particular context. However this perspective is totally different from other knowledge bases that are based on linear models such as motivation and ego development. In other words, the ecological perspective cannot avoid an eclectic nature, which encompasses conflicting theoretical paradigms or knowledge. At the practice level, Hartman & Laird (1983), for instance, actually demonstrated the multi-generational approach derived from the psychodynamic perspective, the structural or strategic family therapy techniques, as well as outreach methods in the family-centered approach. I should ask a question here: What is the inherent facet in those approaches?

Fischer (1981) noted that the major value of an eclectic approach to practice is that it offers differential responses for practitioners to make interventions based on differential assessments of needs and problems. However, how useful is this for actual practice? It is difficult to envision using a range of presumably divergent procedures in an integrated way in practice. Eclecticism has also been criticized by many scientists as well as philosophers of science. Positivists, for example, caution that eclecticism is a product of relativism and only leads to mixed bodies of knowledge. They stress that eclecticism never brings about any scientific developments (Guba, 1990). Post-positivists take the absolute position of one paradigmatic position and they adopt a relativist standpoint which says all positions are necessary and interdependent for the development knowledge (Peile, 1988). However, post-positivists never support the eclectic perspective, which tends to blend the bodies of knowledge. They emphasize the importance of trying out new ways that can create more consolidated theoretical frameworks.

In short, the bodies of knowledge in the ecological perspective are not well integrated but are mixed with many knowledge bases that come from different theoretical paradigms. This fusion of knowledge bases leads to eclectic approaches such as the family-centered approach and the competence approach. These approaches consist of many dimensions of intervention that make it difficult for social work practitioners to apply them at their actual practice settings.

## THE INQUIRY OF THE ECOLOGICAL APPROACH

The above critiques show that the ecological perspective can neither delineate any concrete prescriptions nor predict any outcomes of any social work intervention. Furthermore, it puts a heavy burden on practitioners because of the endless scope of available resources as well as connections, i.e. all those which should be taken into account to work with clients. At the same time, the critiques also reveal that neither the life model approach nor the family-centered approach has reached the level of a consolidated social work method yet because neither is a theory-driven methodology, but just random and eclectic in nature.

For the development of these ecological approaches, what should we do in the future? First, we should take a systematic inquiry procedure to describe the overall interventions and changes in a client's system brought by these approaches. Next, one can generate a hypothesis through an examination of the holistic description of practice activities. Furthermore, these hypothesis can be operationalized and tested out in practice as well as research. In this way, we can advance the innovation of new practice approaches and the development of new knowledge or practice theories.

Greif & Lynch (1983) took the position that the model can provide the practitioner with guidance as to what needs to be done without the need for validation studies because the ecological perspective is wide in its scope. They stated that "what is effective is what should be done, and it does not have to have a knowledge base" (p. 67). Even though they admitted the data-based practices or the use of clinically proven techniques which are introduced by Bloom (1978), they clearly stated that "the ecological perspective enables the intervention to become capable of managing the emergence of new needs as well as covering the broad spectrum of phenomena it has already managed successfully" (p. 67).

This is a serious error. This statement merely implies that "we be permitted to use untested theories of practice, intervention strategies that may do no one any good, and even that we use unreliable and invalid data or observations" (Brekke 1986: 542). As Schuerman (1981: 145) stated, "There are many example of scientific 'findings' that turned out to be flukes or hoaxes when replication was attempted". As long as the validation and replication studies have not been accomplished, it cannot be assumed that the ecological perspective can bring about effective social work intervention strategies as well as practice theories.

In this section, the scientific paradigm for the development of the ecological approach is discussed. First, the hermeneutic perspective is introduced as a suitable scientific paradigm for the inquiry of the ecological approach. Importantly, the hermeneutic inquiry is the focus here because this inquiry method makes it possible to understand the nature of the ecological approach, in order to develop more effective

practical methods, and to facilitate the formulating process of problem-specific practice theories. Secondly, the basic implication of the hermeneutic approach is briefly indicated. Thirdly, the hermeneutic inquiry process is described. Finally, other possible inquiry methods are discussed.

### 1 . Hermeneutics as an inquiry method

I propose a scientific paradigm called “hermeneutics” for the inquiry of the ecological approach. The hermeneutic perspective is selected as a suitable scientific paradigm because it is explicitly related to the theoretical assumption of behavioral change indicated in these approaches.

There are four crucial essences by which the hermeneutic perspective can be suitably used for the inquiry of the ecological approach (Gergen, 1985, 1986; Packer & Addison, 1993; Phillips, 1992). These essences are summarized as following:

- 1) *Events or people cannot be understood by departing from contexts.* All elements have to be recaptured by the relatedness with its context. This is the basic assumption that the ecological perspective holds.
- 2) *Time is an important factor.* The interpretive inquiry and evaluation need to be repeated interactively because the context is constantly changing. The life model approach, for example, emphasizes the “growth” of a client through intervening in the transaction between the client and his environment that is not stable but regularly transformed.
- 3) *Understanding or interpreting is the key factor in methodology.* The concept of understanding can be replaced as the “assessment” in the ecological perspective. The ecological approach, such as the family-centered approach, thoroughly emphasizes the assessment aspect.
- 4) *Reality is a social construction.* The important aspect of the family-centered practice is, for example, that the intervention is directed not only to change the family-environment transactions but also to change the family’s perception of its environment and their views of how they were perceived by those environments (Hartman & Laird, 1983). That is, the family-centered practice is focused on changes in the family-environment transactions and ultimately on a shift in the family’s construction of reality.

Moreover, because the operationalization of a wide range theoretical framework for the ecological perspective has not yet been accomplished, we can apply the empirical approach to the inquiry of the ecological approach in a very limited degree. The hermeneutic approach, on the other hand, can be utilized for the inquiry in a way that makes it possible to see the interactional aspects of clients, uniqueness of clients’ reality, and the contexts of clients’ problems.

### 2 . The basic implications in the hermeneutic inquiry

Orcutt (1990) clarifies that the hermeneutic approach is described as a naturalistic case research with a method of participant observation or reflective clinical work. This approach is based on a dialogical-dialectical dimension “which allows for a subjectivity that brings about a fusion of the subject-object horizons in a participatory observational understanding of the client-situation in its contextual and historical reality” (Orcutt, 1990: 109).

This approach is related to major implications of qualitative research. Ruckdeschel (1985) indicates the methodological implications of the qualitative research as follows: 1) people are essentially interpretative and symbol constructing, 2) knowledge is gained most directly by the process of participation and involvement, 3) reality is multilayered and multiperspectual, 4) perception and behavior are strongly influenced by the context in which they occur, and 5) data gathering must involve the use of multiple sources and multiple methods. This methodology, therefore, includes the essences of the hermeneutic perspective as an inquiry method.

The hermeneutic approach also has a great necessity for self-reflective efforts in a practitioner him/herself. The practitioner has to reflect on the effect of his/her intervention and open him/herself to unexpected outcomes (Schon, 1983). The practitioner should not assume an unexpected outcome as a mistake or error but reframe it and try to discover a new way of understanding the object.

### 3. The process of the hermeneutic inquiry

In the hermeneutic inquiry for the ecological approach, some case records can be utilized as data sources for the inquiry. Case records make it possible to proceed with the hermeneutic inquiry because it can reflect the dialogical-dialectical style itself and practitioners can use it to reflect their practices as well. The well established case records can also reflect the following points: 1) the relationship between practice methodology and its theoretical framework, or how well the methodology is originated by the theory, 2) the effect of the practice methodology, 3) the factors working on the effect of practice methodology, 4) the required revision of theoretical framework, and 5) the alternative theory or paradigm.

In the ecological approach, it is necessary to develop the format of case records called “ecological case records” in order to apply the hermeneutic approach to an inquiry. The basic implications in the ecological case records should encompass the following aspects: 1) the targeted transaction for intervention, 2) the criteria for selecting the transaction as a primary target, 3) expected behavioral change, 4) applied practice methodology or intervention, 5) the client’s opinion about the intervention, 6) the client’s reaction to the intervention, 7) the degree to which the targeted transaction changes, 8) the degree to which the targeted behavior changes, 9) the unexpected outcomes, and 10) the alternative interventions.

There are two processes in which the information obtained by the case records can be utilized in order to accumulate knowledge as well as to develop the theoretical framework of the ecological approach. First, the information can be used for the assessment of effectiveness. In the hermeneutic approach, the effectiveness of the ecological approach is evaluated by the case studies that are derived from the ecological case records. The criteria of evaluation includes the level of a client’s satisfaction as well as the degree of change in the targeted behavior. The effectiveness studies can reveal the implications for developing credibility of the ecological perspective for social work practice. Secondly, the effectiveness study can also be applied to cross-sectional research, which includes ethnicity, gender, community and the type of presenting problem. This cross-sectional study can show the applicability of the ecological perspective more concretely. Thus, new understanding and discoveries can be utilized for the revision and development of the theoretical framework of the ecological approach through the hermeneutic inquiry.

### 4. Other possible inquiry methods

At the practice level, however, there are some studies of the evaluation by both clients and workers for the effectiveness at the end of the contact through client satisfaction studies (Maluccio, 1979), problems-oriented recording (Martens & Holmstrup, 1974), or comparative examination of before-and-after eco-maps (Hartman & Laird, 1983).

Related to the hermeneutic approach, many writers have suggested how best to “contextualize research” (Davis, 1986). For example, Bronfenbrenner (1979) called for an “ecologically valid” research that explores the reciprocal relationship between persons and their environments. Gibbs (1979) advocated the use of a “transactive epistemology” that combines deductive and inductive methods into a theory, manipulation, and control mixed with holistic data, concern for ecological validity, and a focus on how to discover. In those contextual research efforts, the way in which context becomes a central focus of research is mainly dependent on a qualitative approach or narrative approach to collecting data.



## CONSIDERATIONS

As discussed above, the ecological perspective is considered as a “meta-model” or a “paradigm” for social work practice, rather than as a model which originates a way of analyzing data and a methodology of social work practice. Both the life model approach and the family-centered approach remain vague, so that practitioners’ discretion must be prior to any other factors in the decision-making process.

In the real social work settings, the “practice model” which can direct the effective intervention activities for social work practitioners is strongly required. In order to accomplish the task, it is expected that the essences of the ecological approach, such as the life model approach and the family-centered approach, that are closely explored by hermeneutic investigation; be operationalized.

The hermeneutic approach tends to lack in the empirical inquiries and risks overidentification with problems, which can obscure objectivity and interfere with the helping process. However, it must develop better methods in order to pursue validation studies for the ecological perspective. Hermeneutics is discussed from a historical and methodological perspective with implications for interpretation and understanding of client systems within a dialogical or dialectical model (Orcutt, 1986). “The exploration of thoughts, actions, and situations can yield insights and meaning as gleaned from the dialogue of the practitioner-client relationship” (Orcutt, 1986: 111). Through the hermeneutic inquiry, the ecological approach can be utilized to develop problem-specific practice models which enable practitioners or researchers to see more innovative ways for restructuring the prevailing ecological systems. At the actual level, it is required to accomplish: 1) many rigorous case studies, 2) exploration into defining the criteria for rigorous case studies, and 3) qualitative data analysis utilizing the methodologies in sociology or anthropology.

In addition, research is required into the effectiveness of the approaches with different populations experiencing different stressors and functioning in different environments (Germain & Gitterman, 1987). If the ecological perspective remains without being examined for its applicability to current social work concerns such as the multi-cultural approach, feminist movements and lesbian/gay male issues, the model no longer implies any useful theoretical framework for recent social work practice.

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## Epistemological Issues of the Ecological Perspective for Social Work Practice

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine the epistemological issues of ecological perspective and explore the inquiry method for the future development of ecological approaches in social work practice. The ecological approaches include the life model approach and the family-centered approach, each of which has directly emerged from the ecological framework.

First, this paper critically reviews the epistemology of ecological perspective by focusing on the following three aspects: 1) the horizon of the framework, 2) the theoretical assumptions, and 3) the bodies of knowledge. This review delineates that the ecological perspective can neither guide social workers to any specific intervention methods, nor foresee any outcomes of social work interventions. Next, the applicability of the hermeneutic approach is discussed for the inquiry of ecological approach. It is considered that the hermeneutic inquiry makes it possible to develop problem-specific practice models that can minimize the discretion of practitioners as well as direct them to more concrete intervention strategies in real social work settings.

**Key Words:** Ecological perspective, Epistemology, Hermeneutics, Social work practice