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Theories and Methods of Clinical Sociology

The Theoretical Base of Clinical Sociology: Root Metaphors and Key Principles

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical base of clinical sociology is analyzed through Pepper's root metaphor method. Practice is found to be framed by the analogy between society and a complex ecosystem. The resulting world hypothesis is identified as Ecologism, within which the four relatively adequate world hypotheses identified by Pepper (Formism, Mechanism, Contextualism and Organicism) take their place as complementary alternatives differentially informing or guiding practice with respect to the analysis of categories, evaluation of linkages, intervention at the microsocial level of social actors and mesosocial level of organizations and other integrated social systems, respectively. Examples are drawn from the literature, and key analytical and methodological principles are identified for practice at each level.

“Clinical sociology . . . is identified as the application of the sociological perspective to interventions or social change. . . . The field of clinical sociology . . . might be distinguished . . . by its systematic theoretical base” (Gondolf, 1985:144). As the subdiscipline moves into an increasingly formal state of institutionalization, we need to specify that theoretical base as a guide to both thinking about and practicing clinical sociology.

Glassner and Freedman (1979), Cohen (1981) and Straus (1985) have demonstrated the clinical implications of social theory. The next step is to identify the theoretical frame and basic premises of sociological practice as it has been conceived in its period of rebirth, 1977–1986. Following Pepper's (1942) “root metaphor” method, we begin with an analysis of world theories in social science,

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articulate the specific world hypothesis of Ecologism, which frames clinical practice, then show how this model of the human world informs, structures and guides formulation and practice of sociological interventions at every level of social organization.

Root Metaphors in Social Science

Philosopher Stephen C. Pepper (1942) argues that humans make sense out of the world by analogy with some aspect of common experience: "all the world's a stage," for example. Around this "root metaphor" philosophers and scientists proceed to build up theories about the world—world hypotheses—from and within which we develop paradigms (Kuhn, 1970) and the very understandings guiding our notions of truth, evidence and reality. Pepper identifies four relatively adequate, autonomous and nonreducible world hypotheses in scientific thought: Formism, Mechanism, Contextualism, and Organicism (to which we will add a fifth, Ecologism).

Western science and philosophy until the Industrial Revolution were dominated by *Formism*, a world theory revolving around the observation that, while every object of experience is unique, we nevertheless perceive types of things—blades of grass, stars in the night, eagles on the wing. It is as if each kind of thing were a more or less perfect copy of an ideal Form. Around this root metaphor of *similarity*, Formism analyzes the world in terms of underlying patterns or templates giving structure to experience (Pepper, 1942). Exemplified by Plato's parable of the cave, Formism views the world from the exalted heights of pure mathematics. It reenters modern science and scholarship as symbolic logic and the concept of "norms." Both interpret observed phenomena with reference to an ideal type and proceed to describe observed relationships in terms of abstract categories.

With the triumph of classical mechanics and subsequent emergence of industrial society, *Mechanism*, another world theory with Hellenic roots, supplanted Formism as the dominant world view in Western civilization. Based on the root metaphor of a *machine*, Mechanism depicts an orderly universe maintained by underlying cause-and-effect relationships involving material forces following the determinate laws of Newtonian science. If only we can figure out the "blueprint," humankind can predict and control the world. It was this root metaphor which inspired Comte's positivism and which has been more recently championed by proponents of "empirical sociology" (Straus, 1985). In both the lay and scientific cultures, "science" is generally equated with Mechanism. Similarly, the sociologist, by virtue of professional training, is steeped in mechanist categories, logic and methods.

Rejecting the static determinism of that world view, James, Dewey and Mead made the analogy between the world and a series of *acts* (e.g., Mead,

1938). Chicago School social psychology is premised upon their world hypothesis of *Contextualism*. Exemplified by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), it replaces the mechanist "universe" with a "multiverse" characterized by ever-emergent patterns of order shaped by the contexts within which they form and into which they are integrated as the context for subsequent action. Humans are seen as relatively autonomous subjects weaving the fabric of "society" out of their individual and joint lines of conduct, so that the separation between the "individual," "group," and "society" becomes largely arbitrary, depending on how much of the context one wishes to consider (Straus, 1981). Social reality is seen as a matter of consensus, social facts are always negotiable, the concept of a fixed, external reality irrelevant. Thus, Contextualism falters when it comes to dealing with social structures and orderly processes, generally. The concept of structure is essentially alien to this perspective. As Pepper put it, "The cosmos for these theories is not in the end highly systematic. . . . They regard system as something imposed upon parts of the world by other parts, so that there is an inherent cosmic resistance to determinate order in the world as well as a cosmic trend to impose it" (1942, p. 143).

Von Bertalanffy (1968) recognized that an entirely different logic and method from those of Mechanism or Contextualism is required to deal satisfactorily with integrated systems of interdependent elements or parts. This is the province of *Organicism*, a world hypothesis which initially likened the world to an *organism*. As we will see, the dominant metaphor in contemporary Organicism has shifted to that of a *system*. We are immediately drawn to the classical sociologies of Spencer and Durkheim and Parsons' (1951) structure-functionalism as examples of how "the organicist believes that every actual event in the world is a more or less concealed organic process" (Pepper, 1942:281). In his exegesis of Organicism, however, Pepper identifies this organic process with the dialectical working out of contradictions. In other words, both Durkheim's sociology and that of Marx are rooted in the same biological metaphor!

A Fifth Metaphor: Ecologism

When taken to the extremes of their logical development, however, Contextualism and Organicism prove only partially adequate to the task of dealing with social reality. To understand routinized patterns of joint action, the Contextualist must come to grips with the observation that people act as if there were social structure and as if human phenomena were commonly organized as described by the term "systems." Organicist systems theorists, on the other hand, must recognize the relatively autonomous, situated action of social actors and grapple with the problem of whether or to what degree observed phenomena can be profitably analyzed as "a(n integrated) system."

When we examine what sociologists working in either vein actually do, it seems that they overcome these limitations by organizing their practice theory as if they were likening the social world to an *ecosystem* displaying elements of both integration and dispersiveness, interdependence and autonomy. In fact, when Chicago School pioneers turned their attention to problems of the industrial city, this was precisely the root metaphor around which urban sociology was organized. They made the analogy between the human community and the natural ecology, i.e., the more or less systematic relationships between plant and animal populations within a specific environment (Park et al., 1925).

Flowing from this root metaphor emerges a new world hypothesis, *Ecologism*, differing from Pepper's four world theories in two basic ways. First, it seems to be restricted to a narrower universe of discourse, that of *creatura* (Bateson, 1979), the living world. Secondly, within its framing assumptions, Ecologism more or less systematically integrates discrete elements drawn from Organicism, Contextualism, Mechanism, and Formism. Just as ecology draws upon the fullest range of the natural sciences, Ecologist social science organizes a syncretic, nonlinear, multicentric picture of reality by putting together information generated by strategies and concepts from seemingly contradictory orientations. This is, in fact, the method known as complementarity, which seems necessary to obtain a clear picture of intersubjective reality (Bohr, 1958). Following this logic, the other world hypotheses take their place as complementary perspectives, each applicable to a different level or aspect of the whole, while Ecologism, itself, supplies the "big picture."¹

Ecologism, then, provides our most complete analysis of the multifaceted *contexts* within which social life takes place. The basic premise of Ecologist sociology is that situations, communities, and whole societies can be analyzed in terms of differentiated groups interacting with one another and with their social and material environments in pursuit of optimal survival in a world of limited resources. In considering each of these elements and their interactions one must take into account the factors of autonomy, purposiveness, time, and contingency as suggested by Contextualism. As groups emerge and interact within their historical and material contexts, various relatively stable patterns of social relations are created. These tend toward the formation of multicentric human systems (Duhl, 1983) of increasingly wider scope, which are best understood and dealt with as suggested by Organicist systems theory.² Emergent social structures, however, are not necessarily "functional." Rather, they frequently represent instrumental arrangements by which powerful groups maintain and further their own interests at the expense of others, as even Sumner (1906) recognized.

The emergence of an ecological world view integrating the new American social psychology with the Organicism of classical European sociology seems to have triggered the development of clinical sociology as practiced by members

of the Chicago School and described by Wirth (1931). The clinical implications of urban structure upon its inhabitants were directly explored by Faris and Dunham (1965) among others. For Wirth (1931) behavior problems could only be understood in terms of a multicentric and many-leveled social ecology, from the microenvironment of the individual classroom to the person's location within the total community.

An Ecologist concern with the socially structured environment and with the biological organism also underlies the contribution of W. I. Thomas (1923). Far less phenomenological or relativistic than is commonly accepted, his approach differs from Mead's Contextualism in stressing the primacy of the definitions imposed upon the individual by the structure of his or her social situation. For example, in their manifestly clinical work on child behavior problems, W.I. and D.S. Thomas (1938:571) champion a "situational approach" in which statistics and life study methods are combined to examine the shaping of individuals' conduct "partly by institutions, taken as situation, and partly by behavior of others, taken as situation." The oft-quoted statement "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" is to be found as a generalization at the end of a paragraph describing a specific case in the methodological discussion at the end of this volume (p. 572). Merton (1968) holds the Thomas Theorem to be one of the central premises of sociology; it might therefore be said that Ecologism has yielded the paramount contribution of clinical sociology to the social sciences at large!

Another ecologist paradigm, conflict theory, even more strongly influences clinical macrosociology. While influenced by Marx, this paradigm is more directly related to Veblen (1899) and Simmel (1950), among others. Society is viewed in terms of a social order maintained in large part by the structural power exercised by elites controlling vital resources. On the one hand, conflict is seen to be a basic driving force behind social change, as suggested by the dialectical model in Organicism. On the other hand, the social order is seen in terms of more or less ad hoc arrangements created and maintained to support and further the interests of powerful groups. Lee's (1983) study of the origins and dynamics of terrorism in Northern Ireland, for example, attempts to clarify the realities of the situation by demonstrating that beneath all the rhetoric and violence lies the problem of a status quo enforcing historically rooted class differences.

As Mills (especially 1959) and Lee have made clear, this mode of analysis leads directly to a humanist concern with social justice and the relationship between specific social arrangements, social problems, human suffering, and/or well being:

To be an effective clinical sociologist, even on the micro level, one has to be able to perceive as accurately as possible the social controls, manipulations, exploitations, and opportunities in a given

social situation, and has to be willing to intervene in a constructive manner on behalf of one's client. (Lee, 1984:45)

As I point out elsewhere . . . (1978:14-15), "sociological scientists who wish to continue to function as creative contributors to their discipline do not sell or knowingly give their services to those whose activities they diagnose as antisocial". . . . What these points suggest is that a long-term professional career in clinical sociology can only be an ethical one, ethical in the sense of serving humane goals. (Lee, 1979:508-509)

Thus, conflict theory can be said to supply the ethical basis for clinical sociology.³

ECOLOGISM, COMPLEMENTARITY, AND PRACTICE THEORY

The Ecologist paradigm provides our most comprehensive perspective on the social order. It contributes three overarching principles of practice theory. One is that sociological interventions create social change by operationally redefining the situation (Straus, 1984), that is, changing the pattern of social relationships and, consequently, of action and interaction between and within acting units. Second, clinical sociology employs the "cultural approach" (Wirth, 1931): the conduct and perspective of the individual can only be understood in terms of the culture and social structures of the concatenation of social groups in which that person holds statuses. Third, clinical sociologists rely on the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959), analyzing the specific problem or predicament (Brenner, 1985) in social and historical context, with particular attention to the consequences of clients' location within the social order (Glassner and Freedman, 1979). Ecologism also supplies the methodological frame of sociological practice, described by Freedman and Rosenfeld (1983) as "integrated levels of focus." The clinical sociologist approaches the specific case, taking into account the total social ecology, viewing the context of problem and resolution in terms of the manifold social groups, layers, and levels of social organization in which the client individual or system participates.

Ecologism, then, does not dismiss but subsumes the four relatively adequate alternatives described by Pepper (1942). Sarbin (1977) implies that each may "fit" a specific part or aspect of the whole; for example, he suggests that Mechanism is valid for limited parts of the human context, such as muscular reflexes or the firing of nerves. Extending his adaptation of Pepper, we find that each world hypothesis provides the categories, logic and method for dealing with a specific aspect or level of social reality as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1**WORLD HYPOTHESES AND CLINICAL SOCIOLOGY PRACTICE**

Hypothesis	Root Metaphor	Function	Domain
Formism	Similarity	Informs	Patterns
Mechanism	A Machine	Informs	Linkages
Contextualism	An Act	Guides	Actors
Organicism	An Organism	Guides	Systems
Ecologism	An Ecosystem	Frames	Contexts

Formism

Too abstract to serve as a guide for clinical practice in and of itself, Formism provides a framework for clear thinking while enabling us to analyze process and relationship in terms of pattern. Its domain is that of *categories*. Weber's "ideal type" method (Gerth and Mills, 1947) is framed within this world hypothesis as is cybernetics (Wiener, 1948), from which we derive the concept of feedback. Formism also supplies a less well-known conceptual tool useful at any level of analysis: Bateson's integration of symbolic logic (Whitehead and Russell, 1910–1913) with communications theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). Bateson's (1972) "theory of logical types" provides a method of differential analysis based on the proposition that a set, class, or category exists in its own right, but at a "higher" (more abstract) level than the elements constituting that set. In other words, an organization as "social system" exists at a higher level of logical type than the "actors" and "interactions" constituting that system. Difference in "logical type" has practical relevance; phenomena at different levels exhibit different properties and operate according to different principles. "Strategic Brief Therapy" and other methods developed by the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto (Fisch et al., 1982) are based upon an integration of Bateson's analysis with cybernetics and an abstract (hence, compatible) form of General Systems Theory.

Defining primary group members as participants in an interactional system created by the pattern of their communications, the Palo Alto group focus on bringing about change at the "higher," system level to resolve even "personal" problems. For example, get group members to change whatever they have been doing about a problem and that problem will tend to go away because their attempts at solving it have only served to maintain the problem by directing effort at the wrong level of logical type, since the substantive problem is a lower order manifestation of the pattern of interpersonal exchanges. Symptoms are best eliminated by changing that pattern at its own level of logical type (Watzlawick

et al., 1967). While its application to sociological intervention remains to be more systematically developed (Tiemann, 1985), this approach has already influenced contemporary practice on the part of many clinical sociologists, creating a modern role for an ancient perspective.

Voelkl and Coburn (1984), for example, attribute their "strategic communication approach to family therapy" to the Palo Alto group, although they seem more strongly influenced by Haley (1981), who has come to stress coalitions and structures of power within families over structures of communication. Formalism structures their definition of the situation and overall strategy, but ecologically tinged Organicism seems to guide their substantive analysis of family dynamics. Thus, they view substantive complaints as metaphors for systems problems and seek to alleviate those problems by directing members to act in ways that will indirectly resolve underlying issues of power within the family. Their example is paradigmatic in showing that, whatever the central theoretical orientation brought to bear upon the problem, the clinical sociologist ends up following Pepper's (1942) dictum of "purity in theory but reasonable eclecticism in practice."

Mechanism

While a truly Mechanist approach to intervention might be derived from the "empiricist" tradition within behavioral psychology, socially oriented researchers and clinicians have long argued that people cannot be reduced to stimulus-response machines (Wirth, 1931; Sarbin, 1977; Straus, 1977). Therefore, while not providing an adequate basis for sociological practice, Mechanism takes its place in elucidating the *linkages* between elements of situations—in determining the objective facts of the case and whether correlations between observed phenomena can be ascribed to mere chance. Mechanism contributes the "hard science" component to sociological thought and practice. Quantitative methods and, more generally, commitment to precision and rigor in defining, operationalizing, measuring, and evaluating phenomena and relationships are essential to clinical sociology, although the mechanistic interpretation of social dynamics is generally treated with some scepticism.

Practitioners such as Brian Sherman (1985) specialize in the clinical application of methodology without adopting a Mechanist world view or its associated instrumental values. In any case, it is not necessary to follow Comte and Marx to the point of a deterministic materialism while accepting the premise that we cannot ignore biology, demographics, economics, the physical environment, or other material "facts of life." One must, in other words, take into account the material elements of social situations.

Another Mechanist concept, functional analysis, strongly informs sociological thinking at every level. Originally derived from an interpretation of the

organism as a system of material parts—note, for example, Durkheim's (1964) use of "mechanical" to describe the form of solidarity marked by a high division of labor—functional analysis influences clinical sociology in two major ways. One is to provide the strategy of generating the operational definition of social phenomena by inquiring as to their functions, "What do they do?" In the classic sociological tradition this is usually specified further as "What is its function in terms of the whole?" Clinical sociologists, however, are also likely to draw upon Malinowski's (1944) variant, in which we ask "What basic human need does this serve?" Functional analysis, however, is not identical to "functionalism" as an explanatory paradigm wherein its essential Mechanism is subordinated to an Organicist systems logic, implying a recognition on the part of the vast majority of social scientists that Mechanism as such is inadequate to the task of explaining social phenomena.⁴

Functional analysis also informs practice in that we tend to make the assumption that form follows function or at least that some arrangements are better suited to carrying out specific functions than others. In this regard, Merton's (1968) concepts of functional alternatives and latent versus manifest functions have strongly influenced clinical sociological analysis. For example, Warren analyzes the problem of maintaining a professional division of labor between sociological researcher and therapist when interviewing mental patients:

The clinical and research functions of interviewing tend to overlap, despite the interest of sociological researchers in avoiding clinical interpretations or interventions. These interviews indicate that being therapeutic is often as much a matter of function as intention, as much an issue of being cast into a role as taking one on. (1985:83)

While Warren leaves unasked and unanswered the question of what, if anything, could or should be done about such functional crossover, this is just one example—cautionary, in her particular case—of how functionalist analysis can inform sociological practice.

Contextualism

Contextualism provides the sociological clinician's basic logic and approach when dealing with discrete *social actors*, substantive interactions between actors, or the construction of joint conduct and consensus reality. Its strength lies in generating understandings concerning how things work (albeit not "why" they do so—a mechanistic question in which the strict contextualist has no interest). From the beginning contextualism has been associated with qualitative methods including case studies and other observational strategies (Lofland, 1976). There is a close fit, then, between contextualist social science and the need of the

sociological clinician for tools facilitating the process of analyzing the emergence of the specific situation or problem, in asking how it has come about, in sensitizing us to process, contingency, and possibility at the substantive level.

Qualitative methods are used at every level of practice to construct a substantive model of the client's situation used to develop and guide intervention. Kleymeyer, for example, describes how he trained interviewers hired for a quantitative evaluation of a South American medical center's ambulatory care unit to do qualitative observation and interviews in their spare time, producing some 2,000 descriptions of problematic staff-client interactions, which he then coded and grouped into "emergent analytical categories relevant to patient's use and disuse of the health services being studied" (1979:594). When these findings were presented to them, medical school administrators encouraged Kleymeyer to implement an actual intervention project described in his paper; the original evaluation project, on the other hand, was never completed.

Contextualism supplies the concept of conduct, which is central to clinical sociology at the microsocial level (Wirth, 1931). The sociologist examines the client's conduct both in terms of how the person constructs actions and in terms of the social context of action. Contemporary practitioners often describe their approach as applying symbolic interactionism, since both analysis and intervention tend to focus on meanings, motivations, attitudes, personal culture, and taking the role of the other.

Depending on the particular contextualist paradigm being drawn upon, more or less attention may be placed on the structure of the situation, on the negotiation of intersubjective realities, or upon the strategies actors employ to accomplish their purposes. Hurvitz (1979) describes a symbolic interactionist approach to marital counseling focusing on discrepancies in how partners perceive their role and the role of the other, with the goal of working out joint meanings and lines of action. Church's (1985) sociotherapy with couples employs dramaturgical analysis and the "social construction of reality" perspective. In the author's own "social behavioral" approach, explicit attention is placed on the situated nature of conduct and the ecological structure of its context, while the focus of intervention remains getting the client to change his or her act from the inside, so to speak, utilizing a cooperative form of hypnosis to reconstruct self-interaction (Straus, 1977, 1982).

Organicism

When focus shifts to organized collectivities—conventionally regarded as the sociologist's proper domain—Organicism supplies the most useful, hence prevalent, categories and analytical strategies. Had *World Hypotheses* been written subsequent to the development of general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968), Pepper might well have described the root metaphor of Organicism as *systems*.

Many of the weaknesses he finds in this hypothesis seem to have been corrected or at least shored up by contemporary systems theory. In any case, an Organicist paradigm based upon the modern conceptualization of "open systems" operating according to the principles of general systems theory (Katz and Kahn, 1966) has become the guiding perspective for clinical sociologists working with collectivities from the level of secondary groups through the most complex formal organizations.

Those sociologists, however, who work within two earlier paradigms emerging out of 19th Century Organicism, structure-functionalism and Marxism, generally do not engage in clinical sociology. Practitioners adopting some variant of Parsons' (1951) analysis are more comfortable with the "applied research and policy consultation" role employing a paradigm of the adaptive upgrading of a generally benign status quo (e.g., Freeman et al., 1983). On the other hand, Marxists of the Old or New Left, tend to favor an "activist" role (Glassner and Freedman, 1979). For them, anything less than social revolution is unacceptable due to the inherent contradictions of capitalist society. Clinical sociologists tend to steer a middle course between these positions, seeking to resolve contradictions while conducting interventions designed to change or upgrade the structure and function of the client system. While some are more grounded in functionalism, adopting a "technical" discourse or approach and others are more "politicized" in orientation, their focus is upon changing the patterns of action and reaction forming the operational definition of the situation (Straus, 1984).

By defining relatively stable patterns of interpersonal conduct as social systems, Organicism enables us to deal with the situation at a higher level of logic type—as an integrated whole rather than an emergent aggregate of joint action. This concept of an integrated system as a unit of social life is one of Organicism's major contributions to practice. At the same time, Organicism contributes the principle of dialectical analysis, in which the sociologist studies contradictions within or between systems and how they are integrated into the organic whole. Dialectical analysis, we should note, may be conceptualized either in conventionally Marxian terms of contradictions between groups within the formal organization or in the mixed metaphor favored by contemporary "systems theorists" where these matters are described in terms of feedback, homeostasis, and negative entropy.

Exemplifying this latter type, Capelle's (1979) "systems analysis" treats client systems at any level of complexity in terms of boundaries, inputs, internal process and structure (including both developmental stages and subsystems), outputs, feedback, and articulation with other systems. On the other hand, Benello's (1982) description of his experiences in attempting to develop democratic, self-managed business organizations reveals an underlying systems model seeking to grapple with problems of contradictions self-consciously defined in politicized terms (as opposed to the technical discourse employed by more

conventional systems theorists such as Capelle). Gutknecht even more explicitly integrates Ecologist concerns with culture, power and authority into an expanded "systems theory perspective [which] allows the clinical sociologist to operate at a variety of levels, drawing connections among them" and offers a unique, sociological base for effective organizational development practice (1984:103).

In many other cases, clinical sociologists working at this "meso" level incorporate these Organicist concepts, but apply them more generally as a method for systematically tracking dynamic relationships between structure and function, between elements of the whole, between acting unit and environment, and between units of social organization, regardless of whether or not they are considered to be "systems" in the technical sense of the word. Rice (1985) describes a rational planning model for public policy along these lines. Once again, while such practitioners draw heavily on concepts and strategies appropriate to the level of social organization being dealt with, there is explicit attention to integration of levels of focus and the ecological context of the problematic situation.

Ecologism

While many of the interventions we have described exhibit an overtly ecological awareness, when the sociologist turns attention to the broadest social canvas, entire *contexts* such as the great institutional structures of a society or of our planet as a whole, the assumption of systemic integration falters and microsocial contextualism clearly does not apply. Consequently, the clinical macrosociologist tends to fall back onto some form of critical analysis focusing on the arrangements between interest groups (Lee, 1979, 1983). Ecologism is also the model of preference in certain other types of clinical sociological endeavor.

Jones (1984) describes the role of "environmental sociologists" working as consultants to architects and community planners in terms of the Ecologist principles that (a) there is a reciprocal, interactive relationship between conduct and physical settings, and its corollary that (b) all physical designs emerge from social processes. Going beyond the role of sociological consultant, Preister and Kent describe an "issue-centered" approach to social impact management focusing on working with extant social networks in a way that "emphasizes the ecological process working with rhythms and multilevels of interaction. The ecological focus replaces the mechanistic and hierarchical focus of past sociological concentration . . . [and] offers a model for intervention at the community and organizational levels" (1984:121).

Ecologism, however, transcends both direct concern with environment issues and the macrosocial, policy oriented research exemplified by Lee. As we have seen, ecologically informed practice at any level relies heavily on strategies and concepts derived from this world hypothesis. Where problems of intergroup relations are central, however, an Ecologist perspective is utilized directly. This

can take the "technical" orientation, as in conflict intervention (Laue, 1981). For example, Laue successfully piloted a "Negotiated Investment Strategy" in Gary, Indiana wherein the mayor, governor, and representatives from the city's major industry, U.S. Steel, were brought together to work out a framework for cooperation in dealing with major issues of joint concern (described in Fritz, 1985). In other cases, due to the nature of the problem and/or the practitioner's orientation, a more politicized discourse drawn from conflict theory will be employed. An exemplary paper by Hoffman, for example, describes working as an "acculturation specialist" with Cuban refugees in Los Angeles utilizing a model of "empowerment . . . the provision of information which is useful to help reach the goals and objectives desired by the client" as opposed to the model of behavior modification adopted by social workers dealing with the same population (1985:55). Other clinical sociologists engaging in cross-cultural interventions similarly tend to directly rely on the Ecologist perspective.

DISCUSSION

Practice is the ultimate test and corrective for theory; sociological practice has the effect of forcing one to recognize the contrived and partial nature of our theories about the world: there are no pigeonholes in reality, only in our schemata for reality. Analysis of the author's own career development and others' published and unpublished remarks suggest that clinical sociologists, if not initially (being trained within the theoretically Balkanized context of academic sociology), increasingly come to recognize that all theories are incomplete maps of overwhelmingly complex territories. While they might work from one or the other perspective with regard to any specific case or type of case, mature clinical sociologists do so in full cognizance of the overarching ecological frame of social life. Whatever their formal theoretical stance or discourse, in practice they come to, at least implicitly, incorporate Ecologist principles and operate in terms of integrated levels of focus.

We need to be realistic both in practice and in speaking about practice. Different hypotheses inspire different strategies, but in the end they boil down to accomplishing the same task of changing the operational definition of the situation (Straus, 1984). For example, while most sociologists working with individual social actors tend to employ a Contextualist analysis, a minority (e.g., Capelle, 1979; Lippitt, 1985) prefer to define individuals as systems and employ an Organicist discourse. How does this affect their practice?

The Contextualist, for whom order and stability are problematic, would focus on the divergent sequences leading up to the fixated line of action adopted by the subject, while the Organicist would assume that problematic conduct flows from the client's orderly systems of relationship. In either case, the sociologist would form a strategy to get the subject to act differently and to establish

an appropriate support structure within the person's context. The Contextualist would be more likely to focus on redefining the operational situation through the subject's own action, the Organicist on restructuring the context. However, unless invited to intervene at the level of the interpersonal context (as in family therapy or doing stress management with organizations) one generally must begin with the subject's own act; even when one is in a position to intervene directly in the interpersonal system, implementation requires working with the individual participants (Goldman, 1984; Gutknecht, 1984). The difference, in other words, would mainly be in how one defines the change process, interprets, understands and talks about situation and intervention. Contextualist and Organicist might disagree in theory but they would end up doing much the same thing, as can be seen from the literature.

Why? Because, in practice, theory is merely a tool for making sense of the empirical situation; the test of practice theory lies in results and results depend on changing that situation as it happens to be, however we define it. The sociologist must take into account the ecological structure of the situation and deal with both the relatively autonomous conduct of the social actor and the definitions of the situation imposed by the socially organized context.

Our point, then, is not that radically different strategies are utilized depending on the analytic perspective employed, but rather that Ecologism best describes the whole, while the four relatively adequate alternatives represent divergent lines of theoretical development systematically explicating and defining points of leverage and appropriate strategies for dealing with specific aspects of that whole. Problems centering around the relatively autonomous conduct of individual actors dealing with their contexts are most profitably dealt with through the Contextualist metaphor, while complex phenomena characterized by relatively stable patterns of relationship between acting units tend to exhibit integrated, systems properties and are most suitably treated in terms of Organicism. In the first case we are dealing with the emergence of orderly relationships through situated action, in the second we are dealing with the emergence of situated action as a consequence of ongoing, orderly relationships. These views are complementary not contradictory; each selects out, highlights or downplays certain aspects of the whole according to the logical structure of their perspective. However, where the sociologist is dealing with interpersonal or intergroup problems of conflict over power or cultural difference—that is, when joint action becomes problematic or relationships themselves are central issues of concern—both perspectives falter and must be supplemented with Ecologist concepts. As a “second order” world hypothesis, Ecologism fills in gaps between these complementary alternatives and provides an expanded frame of reference subsuming the others.⁵

Granted that eclecticism is confusing; practice, as Pepper (1942) remarks, involves other than cognitive considerations, so that pragmatism (as well as the

background and predilection of the individual practitioner) often overrides both theoretical purity and any neat categorizations the analyst will make. Generalization of an Ecologist frame represents a strategy for minimizing self-contradictions stemming from the eclecticism of practice while providing our best approximation to the true complexity of social life. Elucidation of this theoretical framework, it is hoped, will both enhance the subdiscipline's claims to professional validity and provide a more solid base for training within and the future development of the field.

NOTES

1. This discussion of Ecologism does not seek to develop the world hypothesis in as systematic a matter as Pepper's analysis of the other four. It remains uncertain as to whether Ecologism can meet all of Pepper's (1942) criteria for adequacy; however, our purpose here is to identify the practice theory of clinical sociology as opposed to formal philosophical discourse.
2. Evolution toward a single, tightly coupled system encompassing the total biosphere is complicated or neutralized by various anabolic and self-limiting processes as well as the tendency of open systems to "break" and reform into new systems as internal and external conditions change (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984).
3. Two other major theoretical paradigms, exchange theory (Blau, 1967; Homans, 1973) and "human ecology" (Hawley, 1950) are framed within an Ecologist perspective. Both are drawn upon by sociological clinicians, exchange theory in particular (Cohen, 1981). However, as their application is generally subordinated to the overarching Chicago School and Conflict perspectives and space is limited, we shall not elaborate on their contribution at this time.
4. As a humanist, von Bertalanffy (1968) recognized and decried the Mechanist interpretation of systems. While evolution toward a more thoroughgoingly Organicist systems theory can be seen in writings of structural-functionalist exemplars, theirs remains a mixed paradigm. Mechanism's continuing influence on systems thinking is critiqued by Glassner and Freedman (1979) in terms of the computer as root metaphor.
5. Previously, the author (Straus, 1984) identified four levels of sociological intervention: persons, groups, organizations, and social worlds. Persons represent the ideal type of an acting unit dealing with its environment; conduct, or social action is the primary focus of Contextualist social theory. Organizations, on the other hand, represent an ideal type of integrated, multicentric human system and are the focus of Organicist social theory. Primary groups may be considered either as structures of joint action or as relatively integrated systems and treated in terms of either perspective according to the needs or interests of the sociologist. Communities or whole societies as ecological contexts comprised of both integrated and nonintegrated acting units are directly handled through Ecologist paradigms, while social worlds might be treated either in terms of integration or joint action of emergent collectivities and may be conceptualized in either Organicist or Ecologist terms.

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