



7 The social ecological model as theoretical framework in community psychology

Maretha Visser

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After you have studied the contents of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Understand the development of the social ecological theory.
- Understand the principles of the social ecological theory.
- Conceptualise the different levels of interaction in a community.
- Critically discuss the use of the ecological framework in understanding communities.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the development and principles of the social ecological theory, as one of the theories used in community psychology, will be discussed. This theory opened doors in psychology to conceptualise the individual in interaction with his or her social and physical environment. Moving beyond a focus on the individual, this theoretical approach formed part of a paradigm shift, which opened new and diverse ways of conceptualising community interaction, so as to improve the quality of people's lives.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL THEORY

Community psychology practice began to evolve in the 1960s in the United States of America when psychologists saw the need to move beyond one-to-one therapy session modalities and to become more involved in outreach and health promotion programmes in schools, workplaces and communities. This expanded the role of the psychologist into that of a consultant, a trainer and a facilitator assisting people to improve their quality of life (Caplan, 1970; Cowen, 1982; Dougherty, 1995).

Initially, community psychology relied significantly on the mental health model (see chapter 6) in offering psychological help to individuals, families and groups in community settings. Somewhat simplistically stated, the mental health model developed as an extension of the medical model to address the needs of individuals and groups in a community setting. Considered by many to be conceptually fraught, the mental health model is the target of serious criticism. Three of the key points of criticism directed at the model are (a) that it is relatively resource intensive, (b) that it is too reliant on the expertise of professionals, and (c) that it pays insufficient attention to the socio-economic and political determinants of people's problems and well-being (see Ahmed & Pretorius-Heuchert, 2001; Appelbaum, 1995; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). It was largely on the basis of the inadequacies of the mental health model that the social ecological model of community psychology was developed.

THE SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL MODEL

The ecological model originated in the studies of Charles Darwin, who investigated the development of species as a function of their adaptation to changes in their environment. Environmental elements such as the soil, water and temperature determine what types of plant and animal will thrive in a particular environment, and these plants and animals will in turn affect their environment's capacity to support them. In order to survive changes in the environment, such as droughts and temperature changes, animals have to adapt to these changes (Heller, Price, Reinharz, Riger & Wandersman, 1984):

To understand a tree, it is necessary to study both the forest of which it is a part as well as the cells and tissue that are part of the tree. (Levine & Perkins, 1997, p. 113)

It is assumed that there are sufficient similarities between social and biological systems to use the concept of ecology to understand interactions in social systems (Levine & Perkins, 1997). The focus of the social ecological model is the interaction between the person and the environment. The fundamental assumption is that behaviour is the result of the interaction between individuals and the contexts they are exposed to.

in terms of a series of nested systems fitting into each other (see figure 7.1). Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the environment in which development takes place

BRONFENBRENNER'S THEORY OF ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

(1979) proposed one such theory, which focuses on the complexity of interaction between the individual and her or his environment. Various theories use ecological principles to explain human behaviour. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed one such theory, which focuses on the complexity of interaction

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Succesion

Environments are not static, but change continuously. Succession refers to the orderly process of community change as a way of adapting to new situations. A community's history may affect the way in which it will respond to new situations. For example, a community that has successfully managed to weather earlier crises is more likely than other communities to manage new crises. Consequently, when intervening in a community may affect the way in which it will respond to new situations. A community's history may affect the way in which it will respond to new situations. A community's

Adaptation

Adaptation refers to the process by which people cope with available or changing resources in their environments. Any environment promotes certain behaviours and constants others. A person may behave differently in different situations or in different cultural contexts. It is often the loss of resources that triggers adaptive responses. For example, when a person loses his or her job, there are various ways to adapt to the situation - or she may become creative or may succumb to feelings of hopelessness. Communities also adapt in different ways to maintain their functioning through generating social rules, structures and beliefs. This principle creates an awareness and acceptance of diversity in human behaviour.

Distribution of resources

Prioritising aids in this way will obviously mean that fewer resources may be available for addressing other community needs, such as helping people with disabilities.

Priority spending most of its available funds on efforts to combat community. If a community spends most of its available funds on efforts to combat the funds at its disposal may also indicate which issues are considered important in that community. This may also be the way they are distributed. How a community spends created and defined as well as the way resources are used.

According to the social ecological model, all communities have different sets of

vacuum, but rather it is rigorously situated within a socio-historical and cultural context of meanings and relationships. An ecological context is the setting that influences an individual, such as the physical and social, economic and political

environment (Dutton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001). It means that behaviour can be better understood if the context in which it takes place is understood. For example,

if you watch a person standing next to the road talking loudly and making wild gestures, it may not make sense. However, if two cars that had collided and one

person accusing the other ofreckless driving were to be added to the scenario, the

stress levels of the workers may also change. This means that psychological interventions should not

focus on individual behaviour alone, but should also be introduced at broader levels

of the social organisation. This way of thinking opens new ways of conceptualising

behaviour, because problems are not seen simply a result of intra-individual processes,

but also as incomparabilities between individuals and their environment, or as

dysfunctional adaptations to a particular set of environmental circumstances. For

example, child abuse is not only associated with individual characteristics, but can also

be related to various other factors such as parental style, lack of support networks,

economic factors such as unemployment, and socio-cultural forces such as a climate

of violence (Dutton et al., 2001). Moreover, thinking in ecological terms also opens up

multiple ways of encouraging individual and community change through changing

aspects of the individual-social context interface (Levine & Perlmutter, 1997).

Interdependence

The social ecological model holds that the multiple components of a social context

are interrelated and influence the other parts. Changes in one part may produce change in other parts of the context. For example, if one member of a family gets the

four principles that form the cornerstone of the social ecological model are relevant

when approaching community interventions (Kelly, 1986; Trickett, 1984; Trickett,

Kelly & Vincent, 1985). These principles are described below.

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL MODEL

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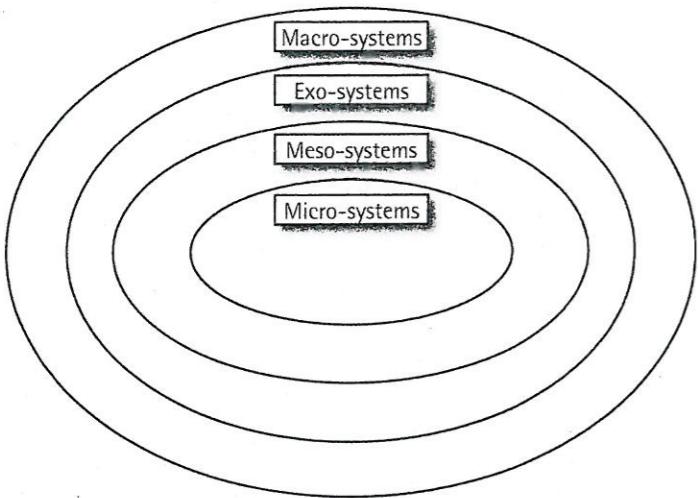


Figure 7.1 Levels of community interaction

An individual exists within layers of social relationships: the family, friendship network (micro-systems), organisations, neighbourhoods (exo-systems) and culture and society (macro-systems). Each layer has an impact on the other layers in an interdependent way. An individual thus lives in a constantly changing context influenced by the changing relationships between individual-level contexts and the macro-context within which these micro-contexts develop. Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified basically four environmental systems that are important in understanding individual behaviour, namely micro-systems, meso-systems, exo-systems and macro-systems.

Micro-systems

A micro-system is defined as the immediate system of which the individual is a part. This includes all the people with whom the individual has direct interactions. For a child this would be, for example, her or his family, classroom, school, friendship network and sports team.

Meso-systems

The meso-system is defined as the set of linkages between the micro-systems or settings in which the individual is located. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that development during childhood would be enhanced if the different settings in which the child interacts were strongly linked. For instance, when the values taught at school

and at home correspond, the child will probably adjust well to these values; when the values do not correspond, the child may become confused. Young people who move out of the house to start their own lives, on the other hand, may require exposure to diverse micro-systems in order to expand their experiences, so as to better adjust to their complex world.

Exo-systems

These systems influence behaviour in micro-systems, but the individual does not have direct contact with or influence over them. For example, while school governing bodies, church councils, town councils and parents' places of employment may have an impact on the lives of young children, the latter do not ordinarily have direct contact with these systems.

Macro-systems

The macro-system includes large-scale societal factors that have an impact on people's lives, such as governmental policies and decisions, as well as ideologies and belief systems. It includes the attitudes and values of people in a particular socio-economic position, ethnic group or culture, as well as economic trends and gender roles. Bronfenbrenner (1979) therefore recognised the influence of socio-cultural and economic factors such as poverty and oppression, as well as large-scale social change on behavioural patterns.

Through defining the various environmental interaction systems, Bronfenbrenner (1979) recognised the influence of the wider environment and higher-order systems on human behaviour. These levels constantly interact with and influence each other. Blocher (1987, p. 120) accordingly describes communities as 'complex human systems that depend on collective and co-operative efforts to achieve their objectives. They are formal organisations of organisations. The patterns of organisation of the communities people form to meet their needs have almost an infinite variety.'

Using this theory, the interventions to address the underlying causes of psychosocial problems are also almost infinite in variety. For example, interventions at the following levels may influence drug-related behaviour amongst young people:

- **The micro-level:** Micro-level interventions may include education about the dangers of drug use for teenagers, improved family communication, discussion groups consisting of young people and peer education to change the peer group norms.
- **The exo-level:** A school can actively address the problem of drug abuse amongst learners by developing a drug policy, and learners' parents' places of



Image 7.1 Community psychology believes in the importance of people receiving help in the context in which they live their lives

Trickett et al. (1985, p.1) summarise the spirit of ecological inquiry as follows:

To think ecologically is ... to consider how persons, settings and events can become resources for the positive development of communities;... to consider how these resources can be managed and conserved; and ... to approach [interventions] so that the effort expended will be helpful to the preservation and enhancement of community resources.

This perspective underlies many of the aims of community research (Dalton et al., 2001).

CASE STUDY USING SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

The case study described in box 7.1 illustrates the application of the principles of the ecological theory in a micro-context to address the emotional needs of individuals. In a particular community, support groups for HIV-positive women were established to assist the women in working through the ambivalences related to their diagnosis and to redirect their lives to live positively with HIV.

Box 7.1 Developing support groups for women diagnosed as HIV positive

Due to perceived stigmatising attitudes, women diagnosed with HIV anticipate that partners, family and friends would discriminate against them. For this reason, they do not easily disclose their HIV status and consequently do not get support from family and friends when they need it. A support group intervention programme was developed to assist women to deal with and adjust to their diagnosis.

The process started with a needs assessment conducted by means of interviews with a large group of women diagnosed as HIV positive at various clinics in Tshwane. The most important needs that were identified were the following:

- The participants wanted to understand the facts of HIV, how it would affect their lives, and how to stay healthy.
- They needed assistance with decision making in relation to disclosing their status to their partners and/or family members.
- They needed coping skills to deal with their emotional reactions to their diagnoses, such as depression, stress and anger, as well as the stigma they were experiencing in their communities.
- They needed support and needed to share their experiences.
- They needed help to get their lives back on track.

With the needs of these HIV-positive women in mind, an intervention programme was developed to use as content for discussions in groups of women sharing the same experiences. Specifically, a 10-session programme was developed to deal with the most important needs identified by these women. Sessions were planned to enhance participation through group activities, such as games, role-plays and discussions.

Two groups were formed with 10 members each. The women participated in the group activities, shared their experiences and supported each other. The groups were facilitated by post-graduate psychology students and co-facilitated by HIV-positive women from the targeted community. The HIV-positive co-facilitator made it possible for women to share their experiences in their own language. She also modelled ways in which to cope positively with HIV.

All the women reported benefiting from participation in the support groups. They gained knowledge about HIV, healthy living and how to cope positively. They felt free to talk about their experiences and the problems they experienced, made friendships and gained support and self-acceptance. The women were allowed to deal with the reality of their diagnosis, rather than denying their HIV status, as many other

reactions, it encouraged more women to disclose their status (*interdependence*). Women became resources for each other, because they could learn from each other's experiences. The session on coping skills also enhanced the women's own self-esteem through a process that allowed them to adapt to their diagnoses and to develop new resources. The goal of the intervention was to assist women to develop new coping styles through a process that allowed them to adapt to their diagnoses and to develop new life style. The principle of success can be seen in the continuous processes of intervention (whether real names are substituted with pseudonyms):

The content dealt with in the support group sessions was based on the needs identified by HIV-positive women. Group activities encouraged participation and the role of the facilitators was initially that of knowledgeable persons (*experts*) who could assist in developing a supportive climate in the group and provide the participants with resources, such as possible coping strategies. However, as the intervention unfolded, the facilitators became part of the process in direct interaction with the participants, adopting a learning attitude and respecting the limits of their expertise. They used the women's experiences, knowledge and wisdom to facilitate discussions and encourage support. The relationship between the facilitator and the participants encouraged the latter to take responsibility for their own healing and to help one another.

One of the facilitators, who was from the participants' community and also sustimed. The use of group processes empowered the HIV-positive women participants to access more information that was shared by their peers. Group cohesion provided a secure sense of being understood and of having a valued social support system. This enhanced a sense of community among the members and fostered a sense of collective mental health. The intervention, which started to address the psychological needs of individuals, had sustainable and expanded effects in the wider community.

As a result of the nature of their interpersonal interaction, a cohesive group developed where women could share their feelings and experiences. In this way, the experiences of each woman influenced all the others and they could learn from one another. For each woman could share their feelings and experiences. In this way, the experiences of each woman disclosed her status to her mother and received a supportive example, when one woman disclosed her status to her mother and received a supportive example.

People in other micro-systems and, in the process, create supportive meso-systems statuses to partners, family and friends. They could thus also share experiences with they felt comfortable among other women, most had the courage to disclose their mental health focus. The initial focus was on the individual in her context. Once the intervention was to help women to come to terms with and accept their diagnosis and to promote their psychological well-being. Therefore, embedded experiences, build their self-esteem and reconsider aspects of their lives. The goal of a supportive micro-system) provided them with an opportunity to share their creating a context for women to interact with other women in similar situations systems.

In view of the perceived stigmatization of HIV and AIDS by communities and broader society (part of the macro-system), the women in this case study expected they would get appropriate treatment in the health care system and in their work to be rejected by their family and friends (micro-system). They were unsure whether they feel alone but when you join the support group you can talk to people and develop self-confidence.

You feel very alone but when you join the support group you can talk people in the same situation. When you find out about your status Babs: It was very helpful. I am not alone anymore. There are other feel alone and embarrassed anymore. I can stand on my own. Yoliswa: It was a shelter to hide away where I could talk freely I can tell others now that I am HIV positive. Now I am stronger! I do not feel embarrassed anymore. I can do for other people. Eunice: I felt free and safe at home. I have learned to accept myself. I know now there is something I can do for other people.

intervention (their real names are substituted with pseudonyms):

HIV was painful at times, the programme had positive long-term effects for the women. The women had the following to say subsequent to their exposure to the

CONCLUSION

The social ecological theory is applicable to interventions at various levels. In the case study, it was shown that an intervention on the micro-level could also have an impact on a broader community level. Although the social ecological theory contributes to asking new questions, making different observations, and applying different research methods in community psychology, it is still limited as an epistemological framework. It focuses on change at the micro-level, the meso-level and sometimes the exo-level, but is criticised for not being sufficiently transformative at the macro-level (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). It also does not sufficiently consider the complexities of the experiences and shared realities within communities. Appelbaum's (1995) evaluation of the ecological theory is pertinent here:

Whilst it is able to lead community psychology along the bridge towards new epistemological territory (towards a new way of understanding and knowing) ... [the social ecological theory] has not provided community psychology with a sufficiently clear map of the new territory to enable it to, at some stage, cross the bridge towards the realisation that knowing is indeed being and that the territory becomes ... synonymous with the map. (1995, p. 72)

Critical thinking task

Using the following questions as points of departure, analyse a specific context in your community, in terms of the various levels of interaction that influence behaviour in that context:

- (a) Who are the role players and what are the relationships that connect them?
- (b) What are the effects of these relationships?
- (c) What resources exist in the context?
- (d) How are these resources exchanged?
- (e) How could these resources be better used in the context?
- (f) What demands does the context place on participants?
- (g) How can adjustment to the context be promoted?
- (h) How has this context changed over time?
- (i) What characteristics have remained stable over time?
- (j) What do you foresee for the future of this context?
- (k) If you were to facilitate change in this context, on what level could change be initiated. Why?

GLOSSARY

Ecological context: This is the setting or surroundings that influence behaviour. The ecological context can include the physical environment, the social occasion and the social rules involved (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001).

Exo-system: This is a system that influences behaviour in micro-systems, but the individual does not have direct contact with or influence over it.

Macro-system: The macro-system includes large-scale societal processes or phenomena that have an impact on people's lives.

Meso-system: This system involves the set of linkages between the micro-systems or settings in which the individual is located.

Micro-system: A micro-system is defined as the immediate system which the individual is a part of.

Paradigm: A paradigm or epistemological framework can be defined as a set of rules according to which a scientist defines the nature of reality, what is regarded as knowledge and how knowledge can be gathered.

Paradigm shift: A paradigm shift refers to the process of change from using one way of looking at the world to another way of looking at the world (Kuhn, 1962).

Social ecological theory: This theory informs the study of the interaction between the social and physical environment and human behaviour (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001).

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Critical psychology is a branch of psychology that challenges the idea that communities have no mainstream psychology and aims to challenge the idea that deliberately falls outside of assimilation of fixed information.

The process of reading or encountering standard records of knowledge suggests the created in this book. This may seem counterintuitive to most of us as, conventionally, reading-writing community, a community that collectively authorizes the knowledge created in this book is who we are now. As writers and readers of this book, we form a

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand the concepts of conversation, performance and activity through psychology
- Engage in a process of critical reflection on possible alternative ways of thinking about community participation.
- Identify and assess your values in respect of community work
- Identify and assess your values in respect of community participation.
- Reflect on your values in respect of community participation.
- Contibute to negotiating and understanding the critical approaches to community psychology
- Identify and assess your values in respect of research in community psychology
- After you have studied the contents of this chapter, you should be able to:

Gerhard Völjen, Annale Pistorius and Linda Eskell-Blokland

PSYCHOLOGY

A critical orientation to community



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