The ecosystemic approach to changing chronic problem behaviour in primary schools

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The Ecosystemic Approach

to Changing Chronic Problem

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by Ken Tyler

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fulfilment of the requirements for the award of

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, to my brothers

and their families, to Joby, Clare and Ali, to Gwen

and Mark and above all to Cath.

CONTENTS

The Ecosystemic Approach to Changing Chronic Problem Behaviour in Primary Schools

Abstract

This thesis presents nine papers that consider the ecosystemic approach. The first five deal with a range of theoretical issues including the development of the approach and aspects relating to personality, phenomenological psychology and systems theory.

These papers show that ecosystemics is part of the tradition of humanistic educational psychology and more particularly that it is closely related to the work of George Kelly and Carl Rogers. They also show that the approach is based on the phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and aspects of phenomenological interpretation and on a systems theory which takes an interpretive frame of reference.

Four further papers deal with two studies with teachers in Leicestershire that relate theory to practice. The first considers a small-scale study involving twelve primary teachers. The third and fourth relate to a larger study involving 35 teachers. The second paper in this group considers both studies from a Rogerian point of view.

These papers demonstrate the effectiveness of the approach in primary schools, its impact on teachers and links with the person-centred approach.

Key Words

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This introductory chapter sets the papers included in this collection within the general field of knowledge to which they relate. This chapter will, where not apparent from the papers themselves, explain a number of points. Specifically, the objectives, as specified by university regulations, are

- to explain the common theme of the papers linking them into a coherent whole;
- to explain the methodology;
- to place the papers in a theoretical context provided by the wider literature;
- to suggest what further work needs to be done;
- to indicate the author's contribution to co-authored publications.

The common theme of the papers

The common theme of this collection of papers is the "ecosystemic approach to changing problem behaviour in schools" as developed in the United States by Molnar and Lindquist (1989). This approach specifically considers the use of ecosystemic perspectives within the classroom and is not concerned with the wider aspects of ecosystemics relating to the larger systems of schools and the wider educational community. Apart from the present papers, no research has been published on this approach in this country. The first five papers deal with different theoretical aspects of the approach, detailing background and development, psychological and

philosophical aspects and systems theory. The last four papers present details of two studies undertaken with primary teachers in Leicestershire schools.

The ecosystemic approach is based on a phenomenological systems theory derived from the work of Gregory Bateson (1972) and systemic family therapy. Briefly, it is a pragmatic approach to changing established problem behaviour in schools which does not depend on punishment or control. The method depends on the teacher reframing the problem behaviour in a positive way and then communicating the reframing to the individual or group concerned. The techniques are very straightforward and are based on a series of discrete steps which can be taught to teachers through a series of conferences and workshops. The small scale pilot study and the follow-up study have shown that primary teachers have been able to understand and use the approach in their classrooms. The method depends on the teachers being able to look at the problem situation in a positive way and formulating an intervention to actually change the problem.

Additionally, it should be noted that the ecosystemic approach is concerned solely with changing chronic problem behaviour, i.e. problem behaviour which has become established over a period of time and has become part of a stable system. For this reason, it is designed to be used alongside other approaches to managing problem behaviour. This is one of the strengths of this approach, as it does not prescribe a particular style of dealing with problem behaviour, and is designed to help teachers deal with those problems that have not responded to other strategies.

Although the approach is based on ideas derived from systemic family therapy it does not require any specialised background knowledge or subject specialism nor long term training programmes.

1. The Development of the Ecosystemic Approach as a Humanistic Educational Psychology.

This paper provides an overview of the development of ecosystemics as a systems approach which is appropriate to human situations. It presents brief outlines of systems theory, human behaviour and phenomenology in relation to the development of ecosystemics. By further considering key aspects of this development, particularly the importance of combining systems theory and phenomenological perspectives, the paper shows that ecosystemics can be considered to fall within the traditions of humanistic approaches to education.

This was the first paper to consider the development of ecosystemics and the first to identify its main theoretical referents. Subsequent papers in this collection (chapters 2, 3 and 4) extend this original contribution by developing these theoretical aspects in much more detail.

2. The Ecosystemic Approach to Personality.

This paper outlines the connections between ecosystemics and the humanistic personality theories of George Kelly and Carl Rogers. In this way, further light is thrown upon the nature of ecosystemics by identifying four characteristics of an ecosystemic perspective, as follows.

Firstly, small changes in any part of the system can affect the rest of the system in complex ways. Secondly, ecosystemics focuses on the stability of systems and the difficulty of promoting change in such systems. Thirdly, the ecosystemic approach is based on the balance between differentiation and integration and the relationship to assigned meanings. The fourth characteristic is made up of three interlocking perspectives; (i) ecosystemics is based on indirect approaches to change, (ii) change is promoted by constructing alternatives, (iii) effective alternatives are based on acceptance and co-operation.

This paper shows that ecosystemics is based on techniques which were developed initially by George Kelly and Carl Rogers. It provides detail to show that ecosystemics is part of the humanistic tradition. The paper also shows that the central tenets of ecosystemics can be applied to the personality system.

The paper refers to an unpublished paper (Tyler, K. (1993) The psychology of personal constructs as a systemic personality theory. *Papers in Education*, Loughborough University, Department of Education) which is presented as an appendix for completeness.

3. Phenomenological Aspects of Ecosystemics.

The third paper considers the phenomenological issues relating to ecosystemics. It starts by outlining key ideas in phenomenology and phenomenological psychology in order to clarify some of the processes which are used in ecosystemics. Sometimes it is assumed by commentators that a phenomenological approach indicates simply that

we are concerned with an individual's experiences or that we are dealing with subjective perspectives. This paper shows that the theoretical perspectives and specific techniques of phenomenological psychology provide the basis for important aspects of the ecosystemic approach. Specifically it shows that ecosystemic techniques are based on (i) the phenomenological reduction or epoché, (ii) imaginative variation and (iii) aspects of phenomenological interpretation. By identifying these core themes in phenomenological psychology and their connection to the ecosystemic approach, this analysis provides an original contribution by the author to the theoretical basis of ecosystemics.

4. Systems Thinking and Ecosystemic Psychology.

This paper examines systems theories in some detail and shows that ecosystemics can be seen as an example of a hermeneutic systems theory. It starts by considering open and closed systems and shows that human systems cannot be observed and controlled in the same way that closed systems can. This discussion is then extended to a consideration of the objective nature of some approaches to human systems particularly in the social sciences, general system theory and some approaches to family therapy.

The paper then focuses on the systems aspects of ecosystemics and considers the perspectives of social constructionism and hermeneutics. Social constructionism is shown to be used in a general descriptive way in ecosystemics. Finally, the paper shows that ecosystemics is a hermeneutic systems approach where the emphasis is on an involvement in the system rather than a detached observation of the system.

5. A Comparison of the No Blame Approach to Bullying and the Ecosystemic Approach to Changing Problem Behaviour in Schools.

This paper, although a theoretical discussion, deals with more practical issues and compares ecosystemics to the "No Blame Approach to Bullying." In this way many of the aspects discussed in the previous four papers are set within a practical framework and show that ecosystemics (i) depends to a large extent on the people using it, (ii) eschews punishment and issues of truth and control, (iii) challenges basic assumptions which teachers make about children and problem behaviour.

6. Using the Ecosystemic Approach to Change Chronic Problem Behaviour in Primary Schools.

This paper presents the findings of a small scale study in which twelve primary teachers were asked to try ecosystemic interventions in their classrooms. In every case, the teachers were experiencing problems and difficulties in their classrooms which they simply could not solve, despite all their experience and despite their knowledge of other available approaches and techniques. The fact that successful interventions were produced indicates that ecosystemics can deal with chronic problem situations effectively. Although the results are by no means conclusive, they are very promising and provided the basis for a more extended study.

7. Changing Chronic Problem Behavior in Primary Schools: A Client Centered Ecosystemic Approach for Teachers.

This paper outlines the importance of Rogers' conditions for personality and behaviour change that emerged in the studies with primary teachers. The paper also

presents an important critique of some of Molnar and Lindquist's case examples. The teachers in our studies felt that empathy was an important aspect of implementing genuine interventions. A closer examination of the case examples presented by Molnar and Lindquist (1989) showed that two main types of intervention are possible, namely those based on (i) positive attribution and (ii) empathy. The teachers we worked with, who worked from an empathic perspective in their own interventions, found the first type to be artificial and manipulative. This was an important finding and one that made teaching the approach to teachers more straightforward.

8. Implementing the Ecosystemic Approach to Changing Chronic Problem Behaviour in Schools.

9. Teachers' Responses to the Ecosystemic Approach to Changing Chronic Problem Behaviour in Schools.

The findings of the main study are presented in the two final papers. The first paper details the impact of the approach on chronic problem behaviour in the classroom and the second describes teachers' responses to the approach.

In summary, this collection of papers presents a pioneering and original contribution to knowledge, both in relation to the development and elaboration of theoretical ideas and in terms of presenting the results of the first studies into ecosystemics to be undertaken in this country.

Methodology ·

Because of the practical importance of these techniques, it was decided to use an action research approach; this is the most widely used and accepted method in the field of education particularly in relation to the professional development of teachers and the introduction of new approaches into the classroom (Cohen and Manion, 1994, pp. 192-194). Action research is a situational procedure concerned with diagnosing a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context; this is ideally suited to the current research which is concerned with teachers changing problem behaviour in their classrooms.

Furthermore, this approach is appropriate to the present study for several other reasons: because of the nature of this work, action research is often collaborative (teams of researchers and practitioners work together on a project), participatory (team members themselves take part directly in implementing the research) and self-evaluative (modifications are continuously evaluated within the ongoing situation). Each of these features is particularly relevant to the task of studying ecosystemic techniques in the classroom, as they all contribute to the ultimate objective of improving practice, of adding to the practitioners functional knowledge of the phenomena and developing theoretical perspectives which are accessible to other teachers. Cohen and Manion (1994, pp. 188-189) detail five features of action research in educational settings; these are included here to demonstrate both the range and relevance of this approach to the present study. Action research:

1   is a means of remedying problems diagnosed in specific situations, or of improving in some way a given set of circumstances; (this research is concerned with just such a situation, i.e. remedying the specific situation of chronic problem behaviour in schools, and improving through ecosystemic interventions the problem behaviour and the classroom ethos);

2   is a means of in-service training, thereby equipping teachers with new skills and methods, sharpening their analytical powers and heightening their self-awareness; (this is precisely the approach which the study used by setting up a series of in-service training conferences which dealt with the new techniques and the observation and monitoring of classroom behaviour);

3   is a means of injecting additional or innovatory approaches into an ongoing system which normally inhibits innovation and change; (the techniques we introduced are certainly innovatory as well as counter-intuitive, and are therefore suitable for action research);

4   is a means of improving the normally poor communications between the practising teacher and the academic researcher, and of remedying the failure of traditional research to give clear prescriptions; (by it very nature, this study will improve communications between the two cultures, as well as provide practical guidelines for teachers, and a review of the main theoretical perspectives);

5   although lacking the rigour of true scientific research, it is a means of providing a preferable alternative to the more subjective, impressionistic approach to problem solving in the classroom; (there are major problems in trying to undertake "true scientific" research in a study of this kind, including: problems

relating to volunteer groups, the difficulty or impossibility of creating effective control groups, the number of uncontrolled variables and problems of observation, and problems relating to sampling, validity and consistency. These can be overcome in various ways, but for the present study, which tries to consider wider issues at this stage, the action research approach provides a practical alternative to more interpretive or heuristic approaches).

The papers presented in this collection represent the work from two small-scale studies. The first study was a pilot study involving twelve teachers (Chapter 6) and the second was a larger study involving 35 teachers (Chapters 8 and 9). The approach used in both studies was substantially the same except that the second involved (i) a wider range of sources for data collection, including focus groups, (ii) the use of two independent research groups, (iii) a more substantial training element in terms of the provision of conferences and support in schools. In the account that follows, detailed comments refer to the second study.

In order to produce an element of triangulation in the second study, a series of workshops for two parallel groups of teachers was planned. Separate but identical workshops were provided for each group of teachers. This effectively established two independent co-operative research groups. The results from each group were compared and contrasted in order to give an extra dimension to the analysis.

The current research was designed to address three aims:

(i) To describe and analyse the responses of primary teachers to the ecosystemic approach to changing problem behaviour in schools.

(ii) To analyse and evaluate the impact of ecosystemic techniques on problem behaviour in primary schools.

(iii) To refine and adapt the theoretical ideas which underpin the ecosystemic techniques.

However, these are substantial aims, all of which could be the sole focus for a proposal of this scope and size. After a great deal of deliberation, it was decided that, as this is the first piece of work to be undertaken in this area, it was more important to address each of these aims to some degree, rather than to simply select one for detailed study. This meant, inevitably, that the project would develop an overview of the area and would not produce a detailed evaluation at this stage. Action research is also relevant here as it focuses on specific problems in specific settings; the emphasis is not so much on obtaining generalisable scientific knowledge as on precise knowledge for a particular situation and purpose. These aims will now be discussed in more detail, together with the principal sources of data, methods of data collection and analysis.

The responses of primary teachers to the ecosystemic approach

The ecosystemic techniques are based on paradoxical intervention strategies developed initially in the field of family therapy. The particular interventions are very difficult to explain using the normal approaches and points of reference, as

found, for example, in behavioural or cognitive approaches. For these reasons it was decided that primary teachers' responses to the techniques would be an integral part of the research. The focus for this part of the study was on the developing perspectives and understanding of classroom teachers.

Teachers were asked to complete questionnaires on their attitudes towards the approach during the period of field work. The information from these questionnaires was collated so that the baseline data collected would provide an indication of how teachers' views changed and developed over the period of the research. This provided the basis for the major areas of inquiry, and the themes to be explored in focus groups. These were held two months after the final conference, thus providing long-term evaluations. Focus group size was planned to be eight to twelve co-researchers, this being the recommended size for an effective focus group discussion (Fern 1982). The relatively small group size made it important that the sample be properly selected. The composition of the groups was selected to reflect the diversity of the points of view held. The characteristic responses of the co-researchers to the ecosystemic approach (as identified by the questionnaires), were used as the basis for selection. Members from each identified characteristic group were randomly selected.

In addition, each conference was evaluated through the use of questionnaires completed by teachers about the usefulness of the various components of the conferences including the theoretical introduction, discussions, the literature provided and the introduction of the various techniques.

The impact of ecosystemic techniques on chronic problem behaviour

The second aim was an analysis and evaluation of the impact of ecosystemic techniques on problem behaviour in primary schools.. Teachers were asked to complete detailed activity sheets for each technique implemented in their schools throughout the period of the research. The format and content of the activity sheets were based on those suggested by Molnar and Lindquist (1989, pp. 173-178). Teachers were also encouraged to keep diaries of their work in the classroom and to write up case-examples of individual problems.

Analysis of the activity sheets, diaries and case examples provided quantitative data on the implementation of the techniques, such as: the proportion of teachers using successful interventions, the particular techniques used, the types of problem behaviour involved and the recurrence of problem behaviour. Case examples were also useful in their own right in demonstrating the impact of the ecosystemic techniques to changing problem behaviour in English schools.

The theoretical ideas which underpin the ecosystemic techniques.

The third aim relates to the theoretical ideas which underpin the ecosystemic techniques. Many of the techniques are counter-intuitive. It was anticipated that studying teachers' responses to the ecosystemic approach would allow us to review the theoretical perspectives and reconsider the presentation of these ideas to teachers. This was done through the use of reflective discussion groups and focus groups, together with a comparison of the findings and patterns which emerged from the two groups.

Limitations in the present methodology

There are several limitations in the methodology of the current study, largely due to the limited scale and scope of the research, which will now be considered in turn. As an approach to research, action research has many strengths in an educational setting but also a number of shortcomings. The main problem (Winter, 1982) relates to the problem of interpreting data in action research settings. Indeed, in relation to this question, one of the acknowledged strengths of action research (that it is situational approach and concerned with specific problems in specific settings) is also often identified as its main weakness (how can we carry out an interpretative analysis of data that makes no claim to be generally representative?). Although this problem cannot be solved within the context of action research, some steps can be taken to minimise this problem. In the current study, the use of two independent parallel research groups and the use of parallel focus groups shows that almost identical issues arose for both groups despite the fact that the problem behaviour and the particular settings were unique to each teacher. It should also be pointed out that because of the nature of the research and given the general nature of the aims, the data do not require complex analysis in order clearly to present the findings.

However, another way to deal with this problem of generalisability would have been to collect data that are far more rigorous on the sample of schools used in the research. This could have included data on classroom approaches used by the teachers and thereby provide a clearer picture of the selection of schools and classroom settings. Although this may be seen as a shortcoming of the present study, research of this kind is extremely demanding in terms of time, energy and resources.

In seeking funding for this research from ESRC, it was felt that an introductory study of the kind undertaken was more appropriate given the high level of uncertainty surrounding this approach and the exploratory and pioneering nature of the enquiry. Consequently, we sought modest funding and decided on the appropriately limited aims mentioned above. The outcomes are modest and the conclusions are tentative but this is all that could be reasonably expected from a project of this scale.

Another area of concern relates to the second aim, to evaluate the impact of the ecosystemic techniques on chronic problem behaviour. It was thought at one stage in the planning that the researchers would observe teachers using the ecosystemic techniques in their classrooms. Such observation would provide a consistent measure of the implementation of the techniques by the teachers and provide information about the chronic nature of the problem behaviour and other factors that may have influenced the outcomes of the interventions. However, on reflection it became apparent that this would affect the delicate ecosystem of the classroom. The presence of an observer would itself be sufficient to change the classroom ecosystem. As the theory predicts that any change in the system is likely to produce complex changes, it was felt that the presence of an observer was inappropriate. We decided that we would have to rely on teachers to plan and make the interventions themselves and then record the outcomes.

Although this may be perceived as a weakness by some commentators, (that we are only presented with the teachers' perceptions and that we have only their claims that they applied the techniques and achieved the results reported) the theoretical

considerations make this decision inevitable. In addition, it needs to be pointed out that such a relationship of trust between researchers and teachers and a fundamental trust in teachers' authenticity is a central aspect of the action research philosophy. Within such an approach, it is entirely appropriate for the practitioners to be the focus of both action and evaluation. Although there is generally a need in research settings for clear procedures for maximising the authenticity of self-report data, the peculiar requirements of the ecosystemic approach make this difficult to achieve.

A further issue relates to the enthusiastic reception of the approach and the high level of involvement by the teachers who took part in both studies. Again, this may be interpreted as both a strength and a weakness. The high level of involvement could be attributed to the finding that the approach is very effective in changing chronic problem behaviour and is indeed relevant to teachers. On the other hand, this enthusiasm could be attributed to the Hawthorne effect. The teachers found the conferences and the focus groups supportive and this may have been a factor in influencing the data. Although, the studies combined individualised and group forms of data collection in order to minimise this distortion, it still remains a problem in the area of action research and one that is not able fully to be resolved given the scale and scope of the present studies.

Another shortcoming here is the lack of any long term follow-up studies, particularly in relation to the longer term effects of the interventions, both with regard to the original chronic problem behaviour and also to the overall effect on the classroom ecosystem.

The theoretical context provided by the wider literature

There is very little context provided in the literature. The primary text is Molnar and Lindquist (1989) which presents aspects of the theoretical background and the use of this approach in schools in the United States. The limited number of other papers and texts concerned with the use of ecosystemics by teachers in the classroom (Ayers, Clarke and Murray 1995, Cooper and Upton 1990a, 1990b, Cooper, Smith and Upton 1994, Charlton and David 1995, Fontana 1994, Upton and Cooper 1990) are mostly concerned with general background issues, introductions to the underlying theory and practical descriptions for implementing the approach and are based on the work of Molnar and Lindquist (1989). The main texts, which are considered here, are Molnar and Lindquist (1989), Cooper, Smith and Upton (1994) and Fontana (1994). This short list defines the main contributors to this area.

As the current research is only concerned with the application of ecosystemic approaches in the classroom, the literature concerned with the wider aspects of ecosystemics, (relating to the whole school community or the larger social setting involving pupils' families), is not dealt with. The very specific focus in the present study on the classroom ecosystem and the management of chronic behaviour by teachers means that these wider aspects are beyond the area defined for investigation. This is an area that a much larger study may well be able to consider in future.

Although Molnar and Lindquist (1989) provide the impetus for the current interest in ecosystemics, they do not present a coherent account of the theoretical basis of this approach. In their account, they initially seem to be taking a phenomenological view

by referring to "von Uextall's concept of umwelt" (p. 2) to explain how humans organise their experience of the world. They then go on to consider cognitive aspects (pp. 5-6) and note that "change is difficult in chronic problem situations because the points of view and the behaviors of the people involved, sustained by prior learning, social support and cause and effect reasoning, become liabilities" (p.9). Here we can see the obvious influence of cognitive-behavioural approaches that other writers have noted.

When Molnar and Lindquist (1989) in their account go on to consider systemic dimensions, they refer to "a teacher's perception and classroom behavior are part of a pattern of perceptions and behaviours that influences and is influenced by (but does not cause) the perceptions and behaviors of everyone else in the classroom, and vice versa" (p. 11). Although this is clearly a systems view of the situation, there is still a strong element relating to the cognitive-behavioural tradition, and the nature of the system is not made clear. Their themes are further developed by referring to Bateson's "ecology of ideas" (p. 12) which seems to place their approach within the phenomenological tradition. Later, however, they refer to ecosystemics as a cognitive-behavioural approach (p. 41), referring to the work of Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck, both well known for developing cognitive-behavioural approaches in counselling and psychotherapy. Perhaps it is not important for Molnar and Lindquist to clarify these issues, for they maintain (possibly suggesting a phenomenological perspective again) that "the same intervention can be interpreted from a variety of perspectives" (p. 41).

In the present study a phenomenological systems view of theory is developed in some detail. Such a view can be seen to combine behavioural and cognitive perspectives through the importance placed on our fundamental relatedness to each other and to the world in which we find ourselves. From this perspective, human behaviour is seen as constituting a complex system of intentions and experienced meanings (cognitions). However, phenomenology is based upon a fundamentally different frame of reference to either behaviourism or cognitive approaches.

Fontana (1994) has also noted that the ecosystemic technique spans the gap between the two methods that are currently established in English schools, namely the behavioural and cognitive approaches. He notes that what is new about ecosystemics, however, is that it helps formulate guidelines for analysing and modifying the interaction between internal motivation and environmental influences. As such, it adds to the teacher's repertoire of classroom management skills, and helps her or him to recognise how problem behaviour is a product of the interactions of the child with teachers, parents and other significant people in their lives. Fontana's section on ecosystemics, or the ecobehavioural approach as he also calls it, is only two pages long and, although it presents an excellent summary of the ideas, does not develop these introductory comments to any degree.

Fontana's statement that ecosystemics combines behavioural and cognitive aspects is quite accurate given that phenomenology is often seen as a way of acknowledging the common origin of objective and subjective perspectives in a more fundamental

dimension. These ideas are also elaborated in the theoretical papers presented in this collection.

The most comprehensive coverage in the literature to date is the book by Cooper, Smith and Upton (1994). This book introduces essential parameters of ecosystemics that are not considered elsewhere in the literature. These same areas are developed and elaborated in several of the papers presented in this collection and are now considered in turn.

The authors point out, correctly in my view, that ecosystemics combines elements of behavioural analysis with an emphasis on the importance of interpersonal relationships that is often associated with humanistic psychology (p. 85). They further note that it is the humanistic dimension that distinguishes this approach from behaviouristic "ecological" perspectives (p. 86). The present study also emphasises the importance of the humanistic perspective, both in terms of theory (particularly Chapters 1 and 2) and in terms of the practice that was developed by teachers working on this approach (Chapter 7).

Their account considers the place and importance of family therapy in the development of the approach and the importance of systemic theory in understanding the dynamics of stable interactional patterns (pp. 87-93) characteristic of chronic problem behaviour. The current study shares these perspectives and elaborates on them in detail (Chapters 1, 2 and 4).

Cooper, Smith and Upton (1994) also consider the larger school system (p. 93) and the "mesosystem", i.e. the interaction among systems, (p. 99) in their account, thus covering the whole spectrum of ecosystemic interventions. These aspects are not covered here, as the present study is not concerned with the wider aspects of ecosystemics and only considers the use of ecosystemic perspectives within the classroom.

They also consider the importance of teachers becoming aware of their "phenomenological interpretation of the situation, and to set this against those of others involved, particularly students" (p. 98). Again, the current study shares these perspectives and elaborates on them in detail (particularly Chapter 3).

The authors also present an observational study to illustrate an ecosystemic analysis of classroom behaviour and to suggest intervention strategies that might arise. The present study supplements this approach by presenting actual case examples of teachers changing chronic problem behaviour in the classroom.

In the concluding section to their chapter on ecosystemics, Cooper, Smith and Upton (1994) reiterate the importance of the humanistic perspective both in general terms and particularly in relation to ecosystemics (p. 111). They also point to the importance of empathic understanding, which is supported by our work with teachers (Chapter 7).

Further Study

Many aspects can be considered for further work in this area. As mentioned above, it may well be possible to look at the larger aspects of ecosystemics, those aspects that relate to the larger systems of the whole school and the local educational community and possibly including the families of the children involved. Such research goes well beyond the scope of the current study and initially there would have to be some preliminary work in order to define the focus for the research. Perhaps further extended studies on the use of ecosystemics by teachers within the classroom would be needed before large scale research involving such an interdisciplinary approach could be considered.

However, given these reservations, Cooper, Smith and Upton (1994, p. 112) have indicated some specific areas for investigation in this particular area. Drawing on important aspects of the theory underlying the approach, they suggest that teachers may well develop their use of the ecosystemic approach "in the context of staff support groups (as recommended by the Elton Committee), with access to a specialist family therapist (and/or educational psychologist trained in family therapy), who could perform the dual roles of professional supervisor and training consultant". If such an arrangement could be set up, it would undoubtedly be an ideal focus for an extended research study.

Some of the published material suggests that this approach will also be of use to secondary teachers in dealing effectively with chronic problem behaviour (Upton and Cooper 1990, Molnar and Lindquist 1989). The current research could provide a

basis for further study in this field, both in mainstream and in special schools. Two of the teachers on the present study were secondary teachers working in a special needs school and they both found the approach effective and useful.

The current studies have involved one or, on a few occasions, two teachers from a school. There is a need for larger-scale research in primary and secondary schools, particularly involving whole-school approaches, although the focus would still be on teachers using the ecosystemic approach in their classrooms for dealing with chronic problem behaviour. A useful study would be to introduce all the teachers and support staff in a school to the approach and to monitor the effect on chronic problem behaviour in the school. This would require a major commitment from a school, or a number of schools, and a substantial team of researchers in order to support and monitor the process effectively.

The current study has drawbacks in relation to the lack of follow-up studies with the present cohorts of teachers. There is a need to also provide longer term evaluations and to consider the long-term changes that arise from the interventions, both with regard to the original chronic problem behaviour and also to the overall effect on the classroom ecosystem.

In relation to work in schools, the differences between the various classrooms and the teachers' usual approaches to managing problem behaviour need to be considered in more detail. For example, teachers may use a predominantly behavioural or cognitive approach, or they may use a very specific method or a combination of

methods to manage classroom behaviour. Even within a fairly well defined approach, there will be considerable variation between teachers due to teachers' different influence styles. How will these factors affect the outcomes of the ecosystemic interventions and teachers' attitudes towards the approach? Such a piece of research would involve extensive observation of classroom practice and may well consider the dimension of gender as well.

An important dimension that is lacking in the present study is the experiences and perspectives of the pupils involved. There is a need to study how the children themselves react to the interventions and how they perceive the changes that took place. This is an important dimension, given the importance, in the theory, of both the teachers' and children's points of view, and the meanings that individuals give to behaviour.

Although it is difficult to see how the methodological shortcomings of the action research approach could be effectively overcome for small scale projects, it may be possible to develop alternatives, perhaps involving the use of observers in the classroom as well as more rigorous procedures for collecting data. However, this would require significantly increased funding and resourcing and clear rationales will need to be developed concerning observation procedures to ensure consistency between observers. The increased cost of such research would need to be balanced by the possible advantages. Also, as was noted earlier, the presence of observers may pose problems from a theoretical point of view.

Another issue which is relevant here in relation to the overall methodology is the need to find a research paradigm and methodological approaches which are consistent with the underlying theoretical issues, particularly the importance of phenomenological perspectives.

Other procedures for maximising the authenticity of self-report data may also be considered. For example, the use of audio or video recording may be possibilities but these also threaten the stability of the ecosystem unless they are familiar features of the classroom. Teachers who work in a team teaching situation or in an open plan area would offer one solution to this problem, as interventions and outcomes could be observed and monitored by the teaching colleague without affecting the ecosystem in any way.

One possible way of producing more data on the implementation of the ecosystemic techniques in the classroom would be to focus more closely on the "sharing of phenomenological constructs of the classroom situation between pupils and teachers" (Cooper, Smith and Upton, 1994, p. 111). This in itself would be a valuable exercise in helping to understand the nature of interactions in the classroom and their contribution to the stable ecosystem that develops in any classroom over a period of time.

In addition, Cooper, Smith and Upton (1994, p. 111) connect this to the development of empathic understanding on the part of teachers, and suggest that teachers be trained in the use of some of the counselling skills of humanistic psychology,

particularly the skills of active listening, reflection and paraphrase. This is a particularly interesting suggestion and perhaps could lead to several avenues of development. Firstly, it would appear from the present studies that some teachers found the ecosystemic approach easier to implement than others. One dimension here would be to investigate the degree to which successful teachers used the counselling skills mentioned above in implementing their interventions. This could also be extended to those teachers who find the approach difficult to implement. The second possible avenue is, as suggested by Cooper, Smith and Upton (1994), to evaluate the impact on teachers of teaching them counselling skills. From the present study, it does seem that the following is very plausible indeed:

> The use of empathy by teachers would add to the reflexive quality of the ecosystemic approach with regard to teacher behaviour, by encouraging teachers to continually analyse the experience of schooling from the student's standpoint. (Cooper, Smith and Upton, 1994, p. 111)

This would be an ideal focus for an extended study as it so clearly incorporates an essential aspect of ecosystemics.

The final point to be mentioned in relation to further study relates to the finding that teachers experienced an improvement to their occupational health. This is an important dimension and one that could be a focus of studying the nature of chronic problem behaviour itself and the use of the ecosystemic approach in the classroom to change this behaviour.

The author's contribution to co-authored publications

Three papers included in the present collection were co-authored with Brynley David Jones. Brynley David Jones worked directly under the author's supervision initially as a research student and subsequently as a research assistant. The author originated the research and obtained research funds from Loughborough University and ESRC in order to support the work.

Brynley David Jones helped with the presentation of the conferences, visited teachers in schools and conducted the focus groups. He also carried out the preliminary analysis of the data and worked closely with the teachers to draft the first versions of the case examples presented in the papers. He was named as joint author fully to acknowledge his contribution but he did not originate the research or write the text of the papers presented. Ken Tyler is therefore the primary author and responsible for the published work in this thesis.

A signed statement from Brynley David Jones is included on the following page.

The ninth paper in this collection has not been published yet. A letter is included from the Editor of *Pastoral Care in Education* indicating that the paper has been accepted for publication in 2002.

Loughborough University

A Note on Joint Authorship

I, the undersigned, worked alongside Ken Tyler, initially as a research student and subsequently as a research assistant, in relation to the work that was undertaken for the following papers:

6. Using the Ecosystemic Approach to Change Chronic Problem Behaviour in Primary Schools.
8. Implementing the Ecosystemic Approach to Changing Chronic Problem Behaviour in Schools.
9. Teachers' Responses to the Ecosystemic Approach to Changing Chronic Problem Behaviour in Schools.

Ken Tyler originated the research and obtained research funds from Loughborough University and ESRC in order to support my contribution to the work. In all cases, I worked directly under his supervision. As well as helping with the presentation of the conferences, visiting teachers in schools and conducting the focus groups, I also carried out the preliminary analysis of the data and worked closely with the teachers to draft the first versions of the case examples presented in the papers. I was named as joint author to fully acknowledge my contribution but I did not originate the research or write the text of the papers presented. Ken Tyler is therefore the primary author and responsible for the published work in this thesis.

Brynley David Jones ....*B. D. Jones*..

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Dear Ken

Regrading your paper

Teachers' Responses to the Ecosystemic Approach to Changing Chronic Problem Behavior in Schools

This wll be published in the journal, probably in the first half of 2002.

Yours,

Peter Lang

Features Editor Pastoral Care in Education

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Chapter 1

The Development of the Ecosystemic Approach

as a Humanistic Educational Psychology

1992

The Development of the Ecosystemic Approach

as a Humanistic Educational Psychology

ABSTRACT   This article is a response to the call for further discussion which was recently made in a paper on the ecosystemic approach to emotional and behavioural difficulties in school (Cooper and Upton, 1990a). It is of a primarily theoretical nature and presents some further perspectives on the development of the ecosystemic approach. Specifically, it shows that ecosystemics has arisen from the need to develop a systems theory which does not contradict the traditions of a humanistic educational psychology.

1 The Development of the Ecosystemic Approach

Introduction

Although the ecosystemic approach has develop from family therapy (Cooper and Upton, 1990a, 1990b; Upton and Cooper 1990), it has resulted primarily from a recognition by some family therapists (Auerswald, 1968, 1971; Hoffman, 1988) that the systemic approach was in danger of becoming too mechanistic, prescriptive and dehumanised. Because this crisis in the development of family therapy is paralleled by a fundamental inconsistency in systems theory itself, this article will begin by outlining the main features of systems theory and the early attempts to make the theory appropriate to human situations. By considering the contribution from phenomenological psychology, it will be shown how the ecosystemic approach has developed in the field of family therapy. An understanding of the origins of ecosystemics can help us to clarify its rationale and to develop this important contribution to educational and humanistic psychology.

Systems Theory

The early work of Bertalanffy (1950) provided the main impetus in the development of the systems view. Bertalanffy's original goal was to develop an all embracing General System Theory (1968) which would elucidate the principles common to all kinds of systems, animal or human, living or mechanical. The theory was developed primarily as

an interdisciplinary doctrine, elaborating principles and models that apply to systems in general, irrespective of their particular kind, or the particular element and forces involved. (von Bertalanffy, in Laszlo, 1972)

The systems approach has been used in many fields in order to provide an alternative to the well-established modes of scientific analysis. The Gestalt of a complex system is not generally accessible to analytical enquiry, as the very act of analysis often destroys the organisation which characterises the system in a fundamental way. By eliminating the complex interactions in a system, we are effectively eliminating the system itself.

An understanding of the elements of a system may, of course, be necessary, but is not a sufficient basis for developing an overview or for understanding a system as a whole. The systems view considers the world in terms of relationships and interactions, so that the properties of a system cannot in fact be reduced to those of smaller units.

General system theory is the scientific exploration of "wholes" and "wholeness" which, not so long ago, were considered to be metaphysical notions transcending the boundaries of science. (Bertalanffy, 1968)

The concept of system constitutes a new "paradigm", to use Kuhn's phrase (1962), or a "new philosophy of nature" (Bertalanffy, 1967). There are a large number of

publications devoted to "systems", "systems theory", "systems analysis", "systems technology" and so on, which are predominantly developments in engineering science. These tend to be centred on computer technology, cybernetics, automation and control, and have largely been necessitated by the enormous complexity of technological systems. These approaches have been used very effectively within the bounds of technology and systems engineering, especially in computing and robotics.

However, where they have been extended beyond the purely technological field (Beer, 1975) they appear to make the systems idea look like yet another technique to shape people and society into the "mega-machine" which Mumford (1967) has so impressively described in its march through history. Such a systemic approach is dominated by concerns about power and control (Cooper and Upton, 1990a) and is essentially depowering and dehumanising.

> Perhaps the most notable difference to be found between the classical system designers and their contemporary counterparts (systems engineers, data processing specialists, computer manufacturers, and system designers) consists precisely in the fact that the humanitarian bent has disappeared. The dominant value orientation can best be described as "efficiency" rather than "humanitarianism". (Boguslaw, 1965)

The Human Element

Here we can see that there is a fundamental contradiction in General System Theory. On one hand Bertalanffy (in Laszlo, 1972) is concerned with principles

> that apply to systems in general, *irrespective* of their particular kind, or the particular elements and forces involved.

On the other hand, he considered that "the particular elements and forces involved" in human systems are of prime importance:

> This humanistic concern of general system theory as I understand it makes a difference to mechanistically oriented system theorists speaking solely in terms of mathematics, feedback and technology and so giving rise to the fear that system theory is indeed the ultimate step towards mechanisation and devaluation of man and towards a technocratic society. (Bertalanffy, 1968)

Wherever the cybernetic principles of technological systems are applied to the fields of psychology and sociology they necessarily impose a mechanistic model on people and their interactions. People, like machines, become replaceable and expendable. It is the "human element" which is unreliable and unpredictable, and, where control is the prime concern, unreliability and unpredictability need to be minimised.

> [The human element] either has to be eliminated altogether and replaced by the hardware of computers, or it has to be made as reliable as possible, that is, mechanised, controlled and standardised. (Boguslaw, 1965)

It is interesting to note here that although models which are based on deterministic and mechanistic constructs have limited value in the study of human systems, there are many aspects of human behaviour which do in fact have, or develop, pseudo mechanical features. This tendency corresponds to a well known systems principle of progressive hierarchical differentiation and mechanisation.

Despite the efforts of some authors, most notably Laszlo (1972), it is difficult to show that the systems view itself embodies humanistic values. Crucial factors in developing these ideas are the freedom of the individual in society and the notion of control.

> ...the preference for freedom is anchored not in systems theory, but in the values of the systems theorists or their readership ... systems theory might well provide the same anchorage for other values [which are] inimical to freedom. (Lilienfeld, 1978)

We find ourselves face to face with the problems inherent in any so called value-free theory or perspective, and it is this possible misuse of systems theory which was to concern Bertalanffy in his later writings.

1 The Development of the Ecosystemic Approach

It is empirical fact that scientific achievements are put just as much to destructive as constructive use. The sciences of human behaviour and society are no exception. In fact, it is perhaps the greatest danger of the systems of modern totalitarianism that they are so alarmingly up to date not only in physical and biological, but also in psychological, technology. (Bertalanffy, 1981)

Indeed, it could be argued that the psychological technology of modern totalitarianism is in fact firmly based on key ideas of systems theory, especially those aspects concerning the regulation, control and suppression of large numbers of people. There is a dark side to the holistic paradigm, an unexpected application of the notion of wholeness:

> ... the authoritarian principle is inherent in the very fact of placing oneself at the point of view of the ensemble, the totality and the efficient functioning of the whole. In fact, the preoccupation with the totality implies the idea that human society is an organism whose laws are essentially known and that one can, indeed one must, modify it from on high by means of more or less violent external means. (Chiaromonte, 1976)

Phenomenology

The systems view needs to take the distinctly human phenomena expressed in personal interaction into account: individuals' behaviour and experiences cannot be

simply translated into the language of mechanistic systems models without destroying their uniquely human character. If we wish to understand human systems *and* the individuals within the system, we need to consider a phenomenological approach to systems theory.

Phenomenological psychology, like systems theory, provides a alternative to the prevailing paradigms of modern scientific thought. Kuhn (1962) has shown that paradigms operate as a complex set of assumptions which affect our particular ways of seeing and thinking.

Broadly speaking, the term "paradigm" stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community (Kuhn, 1962). Paradigms underpin our thinking and feeling at such a fundamental level that they are often difficult to articulate. Paradigms are often invisible and unnoticed and yet they largely determine the way that we interpret our experiences. In science, or any other discipline which tries to establish patterns or meanings, paradigms determine the nature of the theories and models we develop and use (Bohm, 1980).

Husserl (1970), who is often regarded as the most important and influential of the early phenomenologists, saw the classical scientific paradigm as emerging from the assumptions, values and thoughts of the sixteenth century. Heidegger (Steiner, 1978) traces the roots back even further, to Plato and beyond. One of the basic ideas

in phenomenology, and one which is central to the ecosystemic approach, is that these underlying paradigms affect our thinking and our understanding of experience as well as our interaction with the environment and our relationships with each other.

Phenomenologists criticise the disregard by traditional psychology of our fundamental relatedness to each other and to the world in which we find ourselves (Keen, 1975). Phenomenological psychologists are concerned with how individuals live as "embodied subjectivity in the world" (Steiner, 1978) and how they experience themselves and others in their interactions. Individuals are considered as conscious subjects who act intentionally and who give meaning to their own and to each others' actions and experiences. In phenomenology, human interaction can be seen as constituting a complex system, an ecosystem, of intentions and experienced meanings.

> The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the meaning which appears at the intersection of my experiences with those of others by the enmeshing of one with the other, (Merleau-Ponty, 1962)

The major implication of this perspective is that whenever we, as individuals, interact with a human system, i.e. a system of intentions and meanings, our own expectations and interpretations automatically become part of the system. We are always already part of the system. The idea that the system is in some way an

independent object which we can merely observe cannot be applied to human systems. To paraphrase the quotation above we could say that the phenomenological system is not an independent object, but the system of intentions and meanings which appears at the intersection of my experiences with those of others.

Merleau-Ponty, with his extensive experience of Gestalt Psychology, and his concerns with "form" (Lauer, 1965) has developed phenomenology in a way that parallels a great deal of systems theory. The main similarities between systems theory and phenomenology are their common emphasis on contextual and relational reality and their search for underlying structures.

Apter (1981) has defined "Structural Phenomenology" as the "search for pattern and structure in the way in which experience is interpreted". He points out that his use of the word "structural" is not deterministic in any way but related to aspects of systems theory.

> "Phenomenological" implies a primary concern with experience rather than behaviour, and phenomenological psychology then becomes the study of the way in which the individual himself understands what he is doing, and how he feels about it. "Structural Phenomenology", seen as the search for structure underlying the complexity of experience, is a meaningful and distinctive area of study. (Apter, 1981)

The ecosystemic approach can be seen as a form of structural phenomenology in that it avoids mechanistic perspectives and focuses on the beliefs, values and meanings of individuals within the system. This is an important aspect of the ecosystemic approach which has been well illustrated by Cooper and Upton (1990a, 1990b) and Upton and Cooper (1990).

The Development of the Ecosystemic Approach

Using the systemic approach, family therapists have been able to redefine the therapeutic task at a very fundamental level. Although the leading proponents in the field may disagree with one another on points of detail or overall approach, they do agree that by considering the family rather than individuals in isolation they have made a major breakthrough.

The main developments in family therapy, which parallel those in general system theory concerning the relationship between the individual and the overall system, have resulted in the emergence of the ecosystemic view, which combines systems theory and phenomenology. In this paper, I will describe only the main features of this development in outline. Further detail can be found elsewhere in, for example, Hoffman (1988), who has considered this development in relation to her own experience as a systemic family therapist and Mook (1985) who has discussed the issues more specifically in relation to phenomenological perspectives.

1 The Development of the Ecosystemic Approach

The need for a phenomenological perspective in family therapy and the notion of an "ecological systems approach" was introduced by Auerswald (1968, 1971), and developed by other in the field, most notably Keeney (1979) and de Shazer (1982).

Any problem arising in a complex situation, such as a family system, is likely to required an approach which combines different theoretical points of view. However, the traditional disciplines are based on paradigms which limit their use in an interdisciplinary setting and contribute to the many problems that arise between professional groups (Campion, 1985). In discussing the limitations of the interdisciplinary approach, Auerswald (1968) urges the use of an "ecological systems approach" which will constitute

> a re-examination of human behaviour within a unifying holistic model, that of ecological phenomenology.

This re-examination was to include a consideration of the underlying assumptions and theoretical perspectives of the ecological approach (Keeney, 1979, Keeney and Sprenkle, 1982) and was based to some extent on the influential, but somewhat obscure, work of Gregory Bateson (1972).

The major outcome was a re-valuation of the early mechanistic systems view where the family was considered to be a self-stabilising machine operated by error-activated feed-back loops (Jackson, 1957). Such models were concerned primarily

with homeostatic mechanism within the family system, the therapist being placed outside, or above, the family in order to control it.

> ...the therapists job was to "fix" the problem the family came in with. The therapist was a sort of repairman - a social engineer. The assumption was that the therapist knew what a "functional" family structure should be and should change the family accordingly. (Hoffman, 1988)

When the family did not change accordingly, then the family was said to be presenting "manoeuvres" or various forms of "resistance" to the therapist. The issue of power, control and manipulation, which this approach focuses on, was of concern to many therapists (de Shazer, 1984, Hoffman, 1988), and was a major factor in the search for new models.

> The concept of resistance locks many family-systems-based therapies into the prevailing epistemology of linear causation, "force" or "power", because it implies a separation between the therapist and the family system. When homeostasis is used the organising concept ... the "resistance" is seen as located in the family and is described as something the family is doing. It is not seen as a product of therapist-family interaction. (de Shazer, 1984)

One of the major contributions of the ecosystemic perspective relates to the distinction made between systems which can be programmed or controlled and those

which regulate themselves. Varela (1979) contrasted "allopoietic systems" (which can be controlled from the outside) with "autopoietic systems" (which are self-organising and self-maintaining). Autopoietic systems include biological systems of all kinds as well as social and ecological systems. However, social and ecological systems do not have the same coherence as biological systems and Varela referred to these as "autonomous systems". Ecosystemics is concerned with human autonomous systems.

One implication of these ideas is that the autonomous system of the family is not amenable to manipulation and control by the therapist, but rather that the therapist is considered to be part of the system. This idea was worked out in practical terms by the so called Milan team (Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin and Prata, 1978) and further developed by Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman and Penn (1987) who emphasised the phenomenological perspective. This has resulted in a move away from the adversarial language derived from game theory and an increasing emphasis on ideas and individual perspectives. Instead of seeing everything in terms of manoeuvres, coalitions and games, the system is now considered in terms of beliefs, premises and myths. This approach, according to Hoffman (1988)

> was influenced by Bateson's own constructivist belief that the abstract premises that have to do with survival are laid down at a deep structure level. Thus, rather than attempting to change family structures and

interaction patterns, Boscolo and Cecchin aimed at the governing ideas that held many lesser attitudes or behaviours in place.

The Phenomenology of Ecosystemics

This model has been referred to under many names in the past; these include ecological phenomenology and the ecological systems approach (Auerswald, 1968) the ecostructural approach (Aponte, 1976), structural phenomenology (Apter, 1981), systems or systemic psychology (Plas, 1986) and the constructivist systemic approach (Hoffman, 1988). The term ecosystemics does seem to be the most appropriate to use in conjunction with complex autonomous systems such as families, classroom groups, schools or other organisations.

These systems are comprised of individuals (Autopoietic subsystems) which are loosely coupled in various ways. Any individual or group of individuals will belong to several larger autonomous systems and will behave in different ways which are in part determined by the larger systems. However, behaviour of individuals will, of course, also determine aspects of the larger system. Not only are the individuals in a system influenced by each other but they are also influenced by the overall systemic environment. The overall environment is in turn dependent on the individuals within the system and the nature of the interactions between them. Trying to explain these interactions and connections in terms of cause and effect patterns becomes hopelessly complicated.

1 The Development of the Ecosystemic Approach

The ecosystemic model combines the general ideas of a systemic theory with a phenomenological perspective on the interrelations between individuals within a system and their reciprocal interactions with the environment which they inhabit. Whereas systemic approaches in the past have virtually ignored the individual in favour of the system, or at least considered individuals to be "black boxes" (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967), ecosystemics considers the individual *and* the system. Furthermore, and most importantly, it considers an autonomous system not as an object but as a phenomenological event - that is, in terms of the individual's own experiences, beliefs and personal meanings.

> The world does not present itself to us neatly divided into systems, subsystems, environments and so on. These are divisions we make for ourselves for various purposes. It is evident that different observer communities find it convenient to divide the world in different ways and they will be interested in different systems at different times. (Varela, 1979)

This concern with individuals' perception of the system also effectively defines the boundaries of the system for each person within it. Traditionally, in systems theory, there is a problem in clearly defining the boundaries between subsystems and in defining the relationship of the subsystems to the larger superordinate systems. So, for example, the family system can be considered within the system of the local community, which can in turn be considered within still larger superordinate social and cultural systems. The phenomenological approach effectively brings these larger

17

perspectives into the system itself through the beliefs and expectations of the individuals within the system.

> This is a perspective which, starting from the recognition of the constructive matrix of the system, centres attention on the observers and thus on the way in which they construct the system in a reflective dynamic between behaviours and epistemological premises. (Fruggeri ad Matteini, 1988)

It is important to emphasise a major feature of the ecosystemic approach. As the system is regarded primarily as a phenomenological construction, it is not necessarily identified with a particular social grouping or level of social organisation. There is a tendency in many systems theories to reify the system in some way: to consider it as an object, a concrete reality.

This may not always be inappropriate; for example, it may in fact be useful to consider some allopoietic and autopoietic systems as a set of interactive elements with intrinsic characteristics inside a well defined boundary separating the system from the environment. It may be reasonable to regard such a system as a concrete reality.

However, when we are considering autonomous systems, as we are in ecosystemics, there are likely to be many different constructions and interpretations of the system.

In this perspective, the system exists only through the operation of drawing differences on the part of the observer. The system, being strictly dependent on the observer, is not therefore identified with a social organisation ... the system is not a datum, but is a way of organising the data that the observer chooses to take as elements of the system. (Fruggeri and Matteini, 1988)

As Hoffman (1988) says, we can usefully consider that "the problem creates a system" rather than thinking in terms of a particular system creating a problem. In practical terms, it is often convenient to consider a particular social group or organisation as the system under consideration, but this should not be seen as the only way of looking at or defining the problem situation. Individuals within the group may have alternatives which are equally valid and which can all be confirmed through experience.

In constructing a picture of a problem situation it is necessary for the teachers to establish awareness of his/her phenomenological interpretation of the situation and to set this against those of others involved, particularly students. (Cooper and Upton, 1990a)

Ecosystemics is not interested in changing forces and patterns in reified systems, because such action will often result in the patterns becoming even more entrenched, established and self perpetuating.

These approaches, far from changing problem behaviour, can serve to maintain and promote the behaviour they seek to alter. (Cooper and Upton, 1990a)

The phenomenological perspective points to the need to redefine or reframe the situation (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989), or to place a positive connotation on the whole interaction (Hoffman, 1988). This is an important principle of the ecosystemic approach, that the energy which maintains patterns can be used to change them.

The ecosystemic approach [changes] the problem behaviour, not by challenging the behaviour overtly, but by utilising the systemic principles which sustain interactional patterns. One of the major aims is to assist teachers in redefining oppositional behaviour in terms which lead the teacher and the perpetrator to see the behaviour as co-operative or positive, rather than oppositional and negative. (Cooper and Upton, 1990a)

As Cooper and Upton have pointed out (1990a, 1990b) ecosystemics offers a new perspective on understanding complex systems, a perspective which can be effectively developed only through research. Although there are many differences between the role of family therapist and the role of the teacher, there is still a great deal to learn from the field of family therapy. Hoffman's (1988) summary of

constructivist family therapy could also serve as a very effective summary of the ecosystemic approach:

> It avoids the implication of fixing something that has broken down or is not functioning, and comes closer to becoming some kind of hopeful discourse. It is, as far as possible, non-judgmental and non-pejorative. It is not control oriented. It is wary of an instructive stance. It shrinks away from an influence which is primarily intentional. It is pluralistic in nature focusing on many views rather than one.

This quotation highlights the humanistic and phenomenological nature of ecosystemics, which other authors have also noted.

> It would seem [that there are] links between the ecosystemic approach and humanistic approaches to education. (Cooper and Upton, 1990a)

It seems to me that this link, which Cooper and Upton so clearly identify, is not merely a coincidence of views and values: it is an essential aspect of the development of ecosystemics. In short, ecosystemics has developed as a humanistic systems theory precisely because both the system and the individuals in the system are considered to be important. The ecosystemic approach is fundamentally a humanistic approach, one that can be seen as continuing and developing the tradition of humanistic educational psychology.

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Chapter 2

The Ecosystemic Approach to Personality

1994

The Ecosystemic Approach to Personality

ABSTRACT   There has been considerable interest recently in the ecosystemic approach, particularly with regard to interpersonal relations and groups (Cooper & Upton, 1990a, 1990b; Upton & Cooper, 1990; Tyler, 1992). This paper shows how the personality theories of George Kelly and Carl Rogers embody many of the principles of ecosystemics. By considering the work of these two important figures in this way, further light is thrown on the nature of the ecosystemic approach itself and its connection with humanistic psychology.

Introduction

The ecosystemic approach considers open systems at particular levels; for example, social systems can be considered in terms of interpersonal relationships, families, groups, organisations and societies:

> .... system theory allows any ecosystem to be entered at several different levels, one of which, in the case of schools, may be the institutional level. Other levels might include the classroom, the tutorial group or an interactional dyad (Cooper & Upton, 1990a, P. 307).

Similarly, personality systems can be considered as cognitive systems, attitude systems, belief systems, value systems, and so on. Although the recent literature on ecosystemics has been concerned with interpersonal relations and groups of one kind or another, the central tenet of ecosystemics - that changes in one part of the system affect the rest of the system, often in a paradoxical and unpredictable way - can also be applied to the personality system.

In this paper I will show how an ecosystemic view of the individual can enhance our understanding of the ecosystemic approach to solving problem situations in school by examining the systemic personality theories of George Kelly and Carl Rogers. Although there are major differences between these two theoretical perspectives, they both demonstrate how key ecosystemic principles can be applied to the study of the individual. Of course, these theories were developed long before the emergence

of the ecosystemic approach (Tyler, 1992), but it is interesting to note in retrospect that, like ecosystemics, they combine aspects of systems theory, phenomenology and humanistic psychology.

Rogers' approach was initially based on the 'phenomenal field' of Combs and Snygg (1959), which emphasised the subjective aspects of the self and the experienced world. His later work, which was influenced by the European phenomenologists, resulted in an interactive and systemic personality theory which dealt with the Cartesian mind-body problem in a new way. It is perhaps unfortunate that Rogers' therapeutic and counselling work has been popularised to such an extent that his theoretical ideas on the personality system have not received serious consideration. The personal construct psychology of George Kelly, which he referred to as 'neophenomenology' (Kelly, 1955), also focuses on the individual's perception of the world. A construct is a category of meaning by which we construe ourselves and our environment. A person's constructs form a coherent system which both reflect and determine how we behave. The essence of therapy, according to Kelly, is to reveal alternative ways of construing the world.

This paper is divided into three main sections, Sections One and Two deal with the personality theories of George Kelly and Carl Rogers, and the third section, which contains the main arguments of this paper, discusses these theories in the light of the ecosystemic approach. The paper concludes with a short discussion relating to

the important work of Molnar and Lindquist (1989), which has provided one of the main inspirations for this paper.

The Psychology of Personal Constructs

Kelly's theory is based on the idea that we cannot contact an interpretation-free reality directly, but that we can only make assumptions or build constructs about the world.

> .... the assumptions is that whatever nature may be, the events we face today are subject to as great a variety of constructions as our wits will enable us to contrive ... This philosophical position we have called constructive alternativism. It can be contrasted with the prevalent epistemological assumptions of accumulative fragmentalism (Kelly, 1980 p.102).

Kelly's work is remarkable for many reasons, but perhaps most impressive of all is the way that he was able to develop and refine many important systems ideas in his personality theory. His achievement in this area has not been adequately acknowledged in the literature. *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* was published in 1955. At that time, General System Theory was still at an early stage of development (Von Bertalanffy, 1950) and the *General Systems Yearbook* was still one year away (Hall & Fagan, 1956). Although some basic systems principles were incorporated in Gestalt Psychology (for example, Koffka, 1935) and other

fields (for example, Feibleman and Friend, 1945; Parsons, 1945), these contributions were only of a general and explanatory nature. Even as late as 1968, von Bertalanffy in his *General System Theory*, a book which is often regarded as representing the state-of-the-art in system theorising at the time, does not acknowledge Kelly's outstanding work in this area. In the section of the book which deals specifically with personality theory, he states that "few attempts have been made to apply systems theory to personality theory" (von Bertalanffy, 1968, p. 112) and cites as examples a few obscure papers from the General Systems Yearbooks of 1956 and 1957. He then more or less dismisses the possibilities in this field:

> We cannot expect that General System Theory can present solutions where personality theorists from Freud to Jung to a host of modern writers have been unable to do so (von Bertalanffy, 1968, p. 112).

This view provides an interesting contrast to his claim in other parts of the book that General System Theory can be applied effectively to any complex system. It may have been von Bertalanffy's preoccupation with general theory which allowed him to overlook Kelly's pioneering work in this area.

Kelly outlines the systemic nature of his theory at the very beginning of his book in just a few pages (Kelly, 1955, Vol.. 1, pp. 8-12). In one paragraph, for example, he refers to all the major aspects of systems theory - goal-directed open systems; hierarchical structure; structural change; self-maintenance and self-regulation;

dynamic equilibrium; equifinality; differentiation; and integration (see Tyler, 1993, for a full discussion of this passage). Many systems theorists mention the importance of concepts such as 'pattern', 'organisation' and 'interaction' within a system, but they rarely develop these ideas beyond vague generalisations. Kelly's theory, on the other hand, deals with these underlying ideas in considerable detail. However, for the purposes of the present paper, a very brief overview will be presented which focuses on the dimensions of the system.

System Differentiation and Integration

Personal constructs are arranged into complex hierarchies, with superordinate constructs subsuming subordinate ones. Very often, in terms of predicting events, a whole group of what appear to be independent and alternative constructs may, in fact, be almost equivalent. For example, it is rare to find individuals with more than three independent dimensions to their construct system:

> Most adults find that more than half of their constructs are being used in similar ways. This dominant grouping has an overriding influence on how they perceive other people. Depressingly, it is rare for more than two further clusters to emerge (Hall and Hall, 1988, p. 73)

In structural terms, there are two extremes for system development. On the one hand, there may be so few relationships between the constructs that the system fails to function as a whole. In this situation the system is fragmented to such an extent

that it corresponds to clinical thought disorder. Kelly refers to an extreme "loosening" of the system:

> Loosening is characteristic of those constructs which lead to varying predictions. Nothing remains firmly in place ... loose construction seems like an ever shifting accumulation of irrelevancies, miscellaneous fragments and syncretisms. Undoubtedly it was this feature that led Bleuler to suggest the term 'schizophrenia' (fragmented mind) as applicable to a large group of disturbed people whose thinking was characterised by looseness (Kelly, 1955, Vol. 2, p. 1031).

At the other extreme, the constructs in the system are so closely connected as to make the whole system unidimensional. Effectively, all the constructs in such a system are subsumed by one monolithic superordinate construct:

> In general, the more unidimensional the structure of an individual's system, the fewer the alternatives which are available to him in interpreting events since, the more closely related all constructs constituting the system, the more his successive constructions will fit the logical constraints of a single set of construct relationships (Adams-Webber, 1970, pp. 35-36).

If a system is unidimensional, then the superordinate constructs need to become more permeable to allow alternatives to emerge and the system needs to be more differentiated. If a system is too fragmented, then the constructs need to be brought together into a hierarchical relationship and the system needs to be more integrated:

> ... the normal course of development of a personal construct system involves the progressive differentiation of the system into relatively independent, internally organised subsystems and increasing functional integration of subsystems within the overall system as an operational whole (Adams-Webber, 1970, p.36).

We can see from this discussion that Kelly's theory of personal constructs assumes that we can change our construct system if we actively choose to do so, and maintains that the essence of therapy is to reveal alternative ways of construing situations. Rogers' theory of personality, with its emphasis on the client-centred approach and an individual's feelings and values, is also a phenomenological systemic view of the individual; it can be seen as a complement to Kelly's ideas, a theory with a different focus and range of convenience, but one that is also based on ecosystemic principles. Rogers considers the self as a subsystem of the larger organismic and interpersonal systems.

A Phenomenological Systemic Theory

It is interesting to note that Rogers' theory of personality and behaviour (1951) is, like Kelly's, based on a series of propositions. His theory is concerned with the interaction of biological and social influences on behaviour, particularly as it relates to a person's awareness of self. An individual's self-concept depends on direct experience together with the evaluations of significant others. Much of Rogers' theory centres on the problems which arise when a person's self-concept, developed in this way, conflicts with his organismic or experiential functioning.

Rogers' theory is also systemic, but it is developed with a stronger emphasis on phenomenological perspectives. His first proposition defines the individual's whole world experience, including those "sensory and visceral sensations (which) are not symbolised", as the figure and ground of the theory. The second and third propositions go on to emphasise the phenomenological and systemic perspectives respectively:

> The organism reacts to the field as it is experienced and perceived. This perceptual field is, for the individual, 'reality' ... The organism reacts as an organised whole to this phenomenal field (Rogers, 1951, p. 484).

Rogers maintains that a simple stimulus-response model is inadequate as an explanation of human behaviour and stresses the interactive and interdependent aspect of the ecosystemic view:

> The outstanding fact which must be taken into theoretical account is that the organism is at all times a total organised system, in which alteration of any part may produce changes in any other part. Our study must start from this central fact of consistent, goal-directed organisation (Rogers, 1951, p. 487).

Systems and Subsystems

From a systems perspective, Rogers sees the personality as two main subsystems - the conceptual and the experiential - contained within an overarching interpersonal system. In an undeveloped individual these two subsystems are highly differentiated and may also function independently of each other. Individual development is seen in terms of the integration of these two subsystems - the self and the organism - and is closely connected to Rogers' belief in the goal-directed nature of the personality system and the tendency of people to strive for wholeness or 'self-actualisation':

> (Self-actualisation is) the urge ... to expand, extend, become autonomous, develop, mature - the tendency to express and activate all the capacities of the organism (Rogers, 1961, p. 351).

Individual development is related to the important system concepts of the self-assertive and integrative tendencies of subsystems. Koestler (1967) has shown that all subsystems in an open hierarchical structure have two sides to them, by virtue of their systems nature; on the one hand there is a self-assertive drive to autonomy and independence and, on the other, an integrative tendency towards dependence and a sense of belonging to a large whole:

> Every (sub-system) will tend to persist in and assert its particular pattern of activity. This self-assertive tendency is a fundamental and universal characteristic of (subsystems) which manifests itself on every level of the systemic hierarchy ... The integrative tendencies reflect the 'part-ness' of an individual, their dependence on and belonging to a more complex whole .... integrative tendencies of the individual operate through the mechanisms of empathy, sympathy, projection, introjection, identification - all of which make him feel that he is a part of something larger which transcends the boundaries of the individual self (Koestler, 1967, p. 242).

Differentiation and Integration of the Self

The concept of 'self' and the balance between autonomy and heteronomy are central to Rogers' theoretical ideas. Not only is the whole organism "at all times a total organised system", but so also is the self, which Rogers sees as gradually becoming differentiated from the total perceptual field. This is the most fundamental

difference between Kelly's and Rogers' theories. Kelly's theory is a systemic theory of personality, whereas Rogers' theory is a systemic theory of the whole organism, with particular reference to the self as a subsystem within the organism. Furthermore, Rogers considers the organism as a subsystem within an interpersonal value system, which is developed through the interaction of the individual with others. Central to Rogers' theory are the values which become part of the self structure through significant interpersonal relations:

> As a result of interaction with the environment, and particularly as a result of evaluational interaction with others, the structure of self is formed - an organised, fluid, but consistent conceptual pattern ... together with values attached to these concepts (Rogers, 1951, p. 498).

The values which become part of the personality system are either experienced directly by the organism - that is by the complete individual - or introjected or taken over from others. Such introjected values become separated from the individual's complete experiential functioning. As the system of self differentiates more and more, to it takes on a sort of regulatory function with regard to organismic functioning. In a phrase which is a reminiscent of Kelly's theory, Rogers (1951) states that this regulation or distortion of direct experience takes place through "channels which are consistent with the organised concept of self".

The 'self' which is formed on this basis of distorting the sensory and visceral evidence to fit the already present structure acquires an organisation and integration which the individual endeavours to preserve (Rogers, 1951, p. 501).

In maintaining the self-concept, individuals tend to reject a part of their experience:

Inherent in all personal problems is a rejection of a part of ourselves that is too real to be ignored but too unacceptable to be admitted - unacceptable because we are all busy maintaining our concepts of ourselves. The therapeutic task is to bring implicit meanings, like our feeling angry, into implicit awareness. The most significant achievement in therapy, according to Rogers, is therefore self-acceptance (Keen, 1975, p.63).

As in Kelly's theory, there is a need for the personality system to be integrated as well as differentiated.

The best definition of what constitutes integration (is) that all the sensory and visceral experiences are admissible to awareness ... and organisable into one system which is internally consistent and which is the structure of the self (Rogers, 1951, p. 154).

This integration of the conceptual and the experiential selves is the goal of Rogers' approach to personality development.

Ecosystemics

In this paper I have considered two major systemic personality theories. In broad terms, both theories are ecosystemic to the extent that they are humanistic and phenomenological systems theories; however, if we examine them in more detail we find four important points of correspondence. In this section I will show that both theories share the same practical approaches to changing problem behaviour.

System Dynamics

The first point of correspondence is that both theories consider the personality as a complex system where changes in one part of the system can affect the rest of the system in complex ways. Cooper and Upton have identified this as an important feature of ecosystemics:

> The chief characteristic of an 'ecological' perspective is a concern for the way in which small changes in any part of the ecosystem, have consequences which are amplified throughout the global environment (Cooper & Upton, 1990a, p. 306).

As we have seen above, Kelly's theory, concerned as it is with the complex interactions between constructs, takes the form of an open hierarchical system

model. In this model, the effects of small changes in the personality system are largely determined by such factors as the hierarchical nature of the system, the relative importance of superordinate and subordinate constructs, and the dimensions of the system. Above all, his theory is concerned with the personality in the context of interpersonal relationships:

> The system or theory which we are about to expound and explore has a limited range of convenience, its range being restricted as far as we can see at this moment, to human personality and, more particularly, to problems of interpersonal relationships (Kelly, 1955, Vol. 1, p. 11).

Rogers' theory is also concerned with the effects of changes within the system, focusing as he does on the interactions between the two main subsystems of the personality - the conceptual and the experiential - which is considered as a subsystem within an overarching interpersonal system. We have seen how important the interpersonal system is in Rogers' theory - it provides the key to "growth and change and personal development" (Rogers, 1961).

Both theories are based on the premise that a change in the way we relate with a person not only produces small changes in the overall social ecosystem of the dyad or group, but also produces changes in the personality ecosystem of the person concerned. These changes to a part of the personality ecosystem can affect the rest of the personality, as well as the larger social ecosystem, in unexpected ways.

Molnar and Lindquist (1989) present many fascinating examples of the surprising and often paradoxical effects that these small changes can have on behaviour. The ecosystemic approach to solving problems is concerned with the way that changes in social interaction and predictable behavioural patterns produce change in individuals within the system.

Stability and self-regulation

The second point of correspondence stands in stark contrast to the above considerations relating to the effects of changes with ecosystems. Both theories stress the stability and self-regulating nature of the personality system, which effectively prevent changes occurring within the system. Cooper & Upton (1990a) have shown how groups of all types exhibit forms of stability and self-regulation:

> Human systems constantly adapt in order to minimise the destructive
> effects of change, and in so doing create new patterns of interaction
> (Cooper & Upton, 1990a, p. 306).

As we have seen, Kelly and Rogers both deal with this issue at great length in relation to the individual. Kelly focuses on the importance of personal investment and dependence upon superordinate constructs. In Rogers' approach, the system of the self progressively differentiates and, as it does so, it regulates and controls the functioning of the organismic system. In both approaches, the stability and self-regulating nature of the personality system lead to the rejection of experiences in

order to maintain the self-concept. The stability of the individual personality is a key feature in ecosystemic stability, particularly when we are trying to change problem situations:

> Change is difficult in chronic problem situations, because the points of view and the behaviours of the people involved, sustained by prior learning, social support, and cause-effect reasoning, become liabilities. Each of these factors functions to maintain the problem by locking in people's perceptions. Chronic problem situations are characterised by stability (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p. 9).

It is interesting to note in passing that Molnar and Lindquist explain the stability of the personality system by attributing various causes (prior learning, social support and cause-effect reasoning), whereas Kelly and Rogers both see this stability as a characteristic of the systemic nature of the personality. Whichever view we take, it is clear that when we refer to the stability of ecosystems we must consider the stability of the individual personality as well as the stability of predictable interaction and behavioural patterns. The interrelationships between individual and group change and between change and stability are areas which merit further investigation. To a certain extent, these issues are also reflected in the following discussion, which looks at the third point of correspondence between the two theories.

Differentiation, Integration and Assigned Meanings

Both theories consider system development, function and pathology in terms of differentiation and integration. For example, the development of a construct system involved the progressive differentiation into subsystems as well as the functional integration into hierarchies. Kelly comments extensively on system disintegration, where there are so few relationships between constructs that the system fails to function effectively (too highly differentiated), and unidimensional systems where the constructs are too closely connected to allow alternatives to emerge (too highly integrated). In both extreme cases, individuals experience a lack of meaning in their lives, either through fragmentation (system disintegration), or through an inflexible perspective and a closed mind (unidimensional system). In terms of system function and development, Rogers is primarily concerned with the balance between self-assertive and integrative tendencies; integration of the individual personality leads to greater autonomy, a sense of belonging or community, as well as a clarification of personal values and meanings.

There is an interesting parallel here which needs developing at some length at this stage; the main aspect of the ecosystemic approach which relates to differentiation and integration also has to do with meanings and values - particularly assigned meanings within groups. Bateson (1972, 1979) considered groups as constituting an "ecology of ideas":

Simply put, individuals have ideas about the behaviour of other group members, they have ideas about group actions, they have ideas about the idea of others, and so on. The interaction of these ideas via behaviour constitutes the ecology of ideas that is the experienced social context of individuals (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p. 12).

A social group is defined by the predictable interaction or redundancies (Watzlawick et al, 1967) which occur among group members. These interaction patterns depend on the meanings assigned by individuals, even though individuals in the group may assign widely different meanings to these behaviours.

Predictable patterns of behaviour can occur without a common idea about the meaning of individual behaviours. It is necessary, however, that each individual regard his or her own behaviour and the behaviour of others in the group as generally consistent with the meaning he or she has assigned to those behaviours. Thus, in any group, a single behaviour may be consistent with and therefore supportive of a variety of divergent meanings (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, pp. 12-13).

Anyone who has worked with groups over an extended period of time, for example as a school teacher, will know that the main patterns of group interaction which support these divergent meanings and interpretations (alternative constructions) relate to the formation of groups and subgroups within the overall population. The

differentiation of any grouping of individuals into subgroups is to be expected, as it supports both the self-assertive tendencies (standing out from the mass of the larger group), as well as the integrative tendencies (being part of a subgroup which shares one's own interpretations and meanings). However, these subgroups need to be effectively integrated if they are to function as a coherent whole, as, for example, in a classroom situation.

As we have seen, both Rogers and Kelly consider the balance between differentiation and integration of the personality system to be crucially important. They both consider that the personality needs to be well differentiated, as well as effectively integrated, to function adequately. Groups are also characterised by a degree of differentiation and integration, which emerges from the differing meanings assigned to individual behaviour. Normally this issue of assigned meanings is not important as the development of various subgroups merely reflects and monitors the development of assigned meanings within the group. However, in dealing with problem situations the assigned meanings are often at the heart of the situation.

For the most part, the fact that individuals assign widely divergent meanings to the same behaviour is of little practical interest, because the patterns of group interaction that support these interpretations are not considered problematic. However, considering the meanings assigned to behaviour deemed problematic is important, because in problem situations

these assigned meanings are part of the problem (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p. 13).

The fourth point of correspondence is slightly different from the ones we have considered so far as it produces three important themes for discussion. Both Kelly and Rogers stress the goal-directed and proactive nature of the personality, where individuals have the choice and the power to make *changes*. Kelly is concerned with psychological reconstruction based on *constructing alternatives* and Rogers with the integration of the personality based on the *acceptance* of the self. These themes - change, constructing alternatives and acceptance - which are central to the work of Kelly and Rogers will now be considered in turn. The discussion will show that they are also of paramount important in the ecosystemic approach.

Change

Ecosystemics is not concerned with diagnosing or 'treating' problem individuals, but rather with changing problem situations. Nor is it concerned with explaining or finding the causes for individual behaviours; such approaches often contribute little to actually changing the situation even when what has been said about the situation is true. Such 'truths', explanations and causes are often no more than a justification for the problem continuing. Molnar and Lindquist consider the example of an adolescent boy or girl who is often aggressive or sarcastic in school. They describe the normal course of events:

> ... (the individual) will tend to (1) be identified as the person with the problem, (2) be assessed as having one of any number of deficiencies (attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, learning disability, and so on), and/or (3) have events and circumstances from his or her past (for example, coming from a broken home) used to explain the aggression and sarcasm (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p. xv).

Even though what has been said about the child may be true, it is often unhelpful in producing positive change; after all, how can anyone do anything to remedy the assessed deficiencies or to change the child's social background or events that may have occurred in the past? In the ecosystemic approach, the individual is not considered in isolation and identified as the problem, but rather the problem is identified with the larger ecosystem:

> From an ecosystemic perspective, problems are not seen as the result of one person's deficiencies or inadequacies. Instead, problems are viewed as part of a pattern of interpersonal interaction (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, P. xvi).

Both Kelly and Rogers were aware of the importance of considering the individual in the wider interpersonal and social context rather than in isolation, and Rogers' approach in particular was based on the conviction that establishing a particular type of relationship would be sufficient to promote growth and change in others.

This indirect method is at the heart of the ecosystemic approach. Very often when someone wants to change a problem situation they will use all kinds of techniques and approaches to directly change someone else's thinking or behaviour, whilst tacitly assuming that they themselves will remain the same. Ecosystemics use a completely different approach:

> Thinking about schools and classrooms as ecosystems is a hopeful way of approaching problems because it tells you that you can influence problem behaviours by what you do in school. As a part of the ecosystem of the classroom or school, your thoughts, attitudes and behaviour influence the thoughts, attitudes and behaviour of the people with whom you share the classroom and school. In other words, you can influence problem behaviour by changing yourself (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p.16).

The whole ecosystemic approach hinges on this important point; no-one can use any of the ecosystemic techniques without changing their own perception of the problem and their behaviour in relation to the problem. Anyone finding it difficult to change their own point of view or to consider alternatives will also find it difficult to use the ecosystemic approach to solving problems. Molnar and Lindquist give their own views on why people find it so difficult to change (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, Chapter 1), whilst Kelly's and Rogers' ideas were mentioned earlier in this paper in the discussion on the stability and self-regulating nature of the personality system.

Constructing Alternatives

Having established that the key to the ecosystemic approach is changing one's own behaviour, and that changing one's own behaviour may be difficult, how can we move forward and promote effective change? Molnar and Lindquist, in their book *Changing Problem Behaviour in Schools* (1989) provide some answers. The whole of Part two ('Techniques for Promoting Change') is concerned with ways of changing our own perspectives and behaviour by finding alternative ways to construe problem situations.

> In order to try reframing, positive connotation, symptom prescription, or any of the other techniques in the following chapters, you will, of necessity, change your perception of the problem and your behaviour in relation to it. Thus the techniques explained in Part Two are methods of helping you change your ideas about and your behaviour in relation to a chronic problem you want to solve. In this way, they are also methods of influencing the behaviour of another person (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p.43).

All of the methods described involve finding another perspective on the situation:

> Any alternative explanation that helps you to behave differently in relation to the behaviour you consider problematic has the potential to lead to a solution (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p. 19).

In looking for alternative explanations, it is not necessary to reject old ones; we simply need to construct views which will produce a change in our own behaviour and may help to solve the problem. Kelly's theory of personality is, as we have seen earlier in this paper, also based on 'constructive alternativism' - the idea that personal change and development are made possible through the construction of alternative points of view. Exactly the same approach is used in the ecosystemic techniques of reframing and positive connotation. The main perspective in Kelly's theory, the idea which underpins his whole approach, is also a central feature of ecosystemics, particularly in relation to its practical application. Also, just as Kelly believes that some alternatives are more useful than others, in ecosystems only certain types of alternative behaviours are effective.

Acceptance

Effective alternatives are not evaluative or judgmental, nor are they concerned with control or with taking an instructive stance. They are, above all, based on acceptance - acceptance that the problem behaviour is in some way appropriate for the person concerned and, by implication, acceptance of the person. This is, as we have seen, also one of the central aspects of Rogers' approach to personality development:

(In Rogers' technique) there is no attempt at interpretation by the therapist. His task is to provide the atmosphere of acceptance and non-evaluation

which is an essential context for the client to develop fuller integration and understanding of himself (Brown & Stevens, 1975, p. 252).

This theme of acceptance is also closely connected to the ecosystemic technique of adopting a co-operative perspective, based on the idea that we need to consider the other person's point of view, the other person's construction of reality:

> In general, seeing the problem as others in the situation might see it can help you see the rational and understandable reasons for behaviour you had previously considered irrational or negative. The ability to regard a person's problem behaviour as understandable, given that person's perception of the situation, is the essence of what we call a cooperative perspective in problem solving. A cooperative perspective follows logically from the ecosystemic view that all behaviour has multiple meanings and functions (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p. 21).

The idea of adopting a co-operative perspective is at the heart of all the main ecosystemic methods presented by Molnar and Lindquist, and in practical terms leads to reframing techniques based on positive connotation of the problem behaviour. Once this positive alternative interpretation, motive or function of the behaviour has been found, it must be used as the basis for changing behaviour. If a teacher is using this approach in the classroom, then he or she will somehow need to communicate this new interpretation to the person concerned through social

interaction. Even though this communication is likely to be quite unusual, and may even be considered to be somewhat eccentric, it will not be evaluative and it will in some way be accepting of the so-called problem behaviour.

One of the major themes which emerges from the many case examples given by Molnar and Lindquist (1989) is that ecosystemics offers a hopeful and positive approach to solving school problems. It certainly represents an alternative to methods based on confrontation and conflict.

> Since the concept of cooperation encourages the use of positive explanations of the behaviours of others, it also helps to avoid struggles and to construct solutions in which there are only winners instead of winners and losers (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, pp. 24-25).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how the theories of George Kelly and Carl Rogers are firmly based on ideas which relate very closely to ecosystemics. I have also demonstrated how the ecosystemic approach, as described by Molnar and Lindquist (1989), is based on techniques and perspectives which have their genesis in humanistic personality theories. These connections are perhaps most important for the person whose wishes to use the ecosystem approach, because, unlike other methods, this approach depends on the person actually making changes to her or his own perceptions and behaviour with regard to the problem situation.

As a final point of discussion, presented here in the form of a personal note, I would like to address an issue which will, I hope, forestall any misunderstanding regarding the overall framework and intention of the present paper. Molnar and Lindquist (1989) warn against trying to understand ecosystemics in terms of other methods or approaches:

> ... although the ecosystemic approach we are describing is not well developed enough to lay claim to sharply defined conceptual boundaries, we do not think it will be helpful for you to try to understand ecosystemic techniques in terms of a way of explaining problem behaviour that you will find more familiar. The risk is that, if you do so, you will actually strengthen a way of characterising a chronic problem behaviour that has already proven unhelpful to you and misuse the ecosystemic technique you want to employ by trying to make it conform to the rules imposed by another approach to changing behaviour (Molnar & Lindquist, 1989, p. 41).

Misunderstanding the ecosystemic technique is certainly a possibility with regard to the examples cited by the authors (reinforcement, cognitive behaviour modification, attribution theory, behaviour management, motivation theory and Adlerian approaches) as these forms of behaviour modification have a different conceptual basis.

In their book *Changing Problem Behaviour in Schools* (1989) Molnar and Lindquist present an account of the systems perspective and its implications for changing behaviour. However, many of the perspectives they discuss and the paradoxical techniques which are described in some detail reminded me quite vividly of my own experiences as a primary school teacher. My own approach to dealing with chronic behaviour problems was based on the ideas of Kelly and Rogers, together with techniques derived from the field of family therapy. In terms of the actual procedures and techniques, I felt that there were sufficient similarities to warrant the closer examination presented here.

The present paper, then, is not an attempt to make ecosystemics "conform to the rules imposed by another approach to changing behaviour", not to deny its importance: rather, it outlines the similarities between two systemic personality theories and the ecosystemic approach, and shows how ecosystemics fits within the framework of humanistic psychology; perhaps more importantly, it shows how ecosystemics, as presented by Molnar and Lindquist, has effectively refined, synthesised and extended approaches which were initially developed from systemic personality theories.

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Chapter 3

Phenomenological Aspects of Ecosystemics

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Phenomenological Aspects of Ecosystemics

ABSTRACT: This paper outlines key ideas in phenomenology and phenomenological psychology in order to clarify some of the processes which are used in ecosystemics. Occasionally writers take the view that a phenomenological approach indicates simply that we are concerned with an individual's experiences or that we are dealing with subjective perspectives. This paper shows that the theoretical perspectives and specific techniques of phenomenological psychology provide the basis for important aspects of the ecosystemic approach.

Introduction

> Many contemporary authors do not hesitate to speak of "phenomenological psychology", "phenomenological anthropology" or "phenomenological psychiatry", but the fact that they use these modern terms does not guarantee that they understand exactly what these expressions mean .... It is wholly legitimate to ask what possible meaning could be attributed to such terms (Strasser, 1963, p. 245).

Strasser's challenge is as relevant today as it was thirty years ago. The term "phenomenological" is in danger of becoming ubiquitous, and phrases such as "the phenomenological view" have become very modish and seem to crop up more and more frequently in article and book titles, particularly in the fields of sociology and psychology. A reading of recent literature shows that there are many interpretations of the term "phenomenological", and the main function of this paper is to help to clarify this situation with regard to ecosystemics. We may not be able to respond to Strasser's challenge in a general way, but within the local area of ecosystemics we can show the relevance of the phenomenological perspective. However, it is important to state at the outset that we cannot answer Strasser's challenge within the positivist frame of reference he implies; the idea that we can "understand exactly what these expressions mean" is in many ways the antithesis of the phenomenological perspective:

The notion of "correctness" is avoided in phenomenology due to its implications of the ultimate knowability of "truth" or "reality" (Spinelli, 1989, p. 5).

This is a complex area which comprises two main themes - general considerations and systemic ideas. In this paper I will discuss the general phenomenological aspects of the ecosystemic approach by considering the theoretical background as well as specific approaches and techniques. The other main issue, the relationship of phenomenology to the development of systems theory, will be dealt with in another paper.

Rather than defining phenomenology in any rigorous way, (see, for example, Hammond, Howarth and Keat, 1991, for a discussion of the problems and difficulties inherent in this approach) I will outline the general principles that are relevant to ecosystemics and the particular techniques that the phenomenological method embodies:

It is more helpful and accurate to consider phenomenology not strictly as a school or doctrine possessing a set body of agreed-upon tenets, but, rather, as a general approach which encompasses a variety of doctrines whose common focus is directed toward the investigation of our experience of the world (Spinelli, 1989, p. 3).

This view is not peculiar to Spinelli, and the widespread insistence that the terms "phenomenology" and "phenomenological psychology" should signify a general approach rather than a strictly defined philosophical cannon is based on the fact that phenomenology is still developing. In many important ways phenomenological psychology is at a pre-paradigmatic stage, although it is obvious that it challenges and offers alternatives to the paradigms of classical science:

> Among those who call themselves phenomenologists there are many different and often opposing views. Common in the views of all of them is a rejection of scientism, particularly the reductionistic, mechanistic version typical of nineteenth century materialism. Furthermore, there is a rejection of naive objectivism and, in its place, an acceptance of man as the measure of things - not as an abstraction but as a living, feeling, concrete everyday human being - you and me (Weckowicz, 1981, p. 50).

Phenomenologists criticise the disregard by traditional psychology of our fundamental relatedness to each other and to the world in which we find ourselves. Phenomenological psychologists are concerned with how individuals live as embodied subjectivity in the world and how they experience themselves and others in their interactions. Individuals are considered as conscious subjects who act intentionally and who give meaning to their own and to each others' actions and experiences. Phenomenologically, human interaction is seen as constituting a complex system of intentions and experienced meanings.

As the above paragraph suggests, it is often claimed that phenomenological psychology is based on the content of consciousness itself, on everyday personal experiences - ideas, feelings, values, intentions, and, principally, meanings:

> "Phenomenological" implies a primary concern with experience rather than behaviour, and phenomenological psychology then becomes the study of the way of which the individual himself understands what he is doing, and how he feels about it (Apter, 1981, p. 176).

However, although necessary, it is not sufficient to state that phenomenology is concerned with subjective experience, personal understanding and feelings. Even though this is a starting point, we need to clarify and elaborate upon this fundamental idea to see how it can provide the basis for the coherent theoretical ideas and techniques of ecosystemics.

General Themes of Phenomenology

The Influence of Descartes

Husserl (1960), a major figure in the origins of phenomenology, believed that the classical scientific paradigm emerged from the work of the seventeenth century philosopher René Descartes. Heidegger, one of Husserl's pre-eminent students, who presented a reinterpretation of phenomenology and its method in his book *Being and Time* (1962), traces the roots back even further, to Plato. Whichever view we take,

Descartes must be considered as a central figure in any discussion relating to the development of science and philosophy in the twentieth century:

> Descartes was the watershed of all modern philosophy. His bold scheme was to bring the same kind of certainty to philosophy that characterised the mathematics of his day; his method was the now famous "Cartesian Doubt". Descartes' questions are still our questions: how can we have *certain* knowledge of the world, of the self, of God? (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974, p. 15).

The basis of Descartes' method was radical doubt, a process which led him to his celebrated formulation, *"Cogito, ergo sum", "I think, therefore I am"*. Descartes deduced that the way to find to truth and knowledge was by a process of analytical thought, and he based his whole view of science on a fundamental division between two independent and separate realms; that of mind, or *res cogitans*, the "thinking thing", and that of matter, or *res extensa*, the "extended thing". Thus he maintained that "there is nothing included in the concept of body that belongs to the mind; and nothing in that of mind that belongs to the body" (Sommers, 1978, p. 225). The Cartesian division between mind and body has had two profound influences on Western thought. Firstly, it provided the basis for unparalleled progress in science and technology. Secondly, it posed questions which would occupy philosophers for centuries, the so-called mind/body problem: how can these two separate and independent realities have a relationship at all?

Among other things, Descartes divided reality into two poles - mind and body - and created a dualism which introduced two seemingly irreconcilable schools of philosophy, rationalism and empiricism (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974, p. 16).

Descartes' vision was essentially a mechanistic one, where nature worked according to mechanical laws, and everything in the material world could be understood as if it were a machine. This mechanistic picture of the world became the dominant paradigm of science and guided all scientific observation and the formulation of all theories of natural phenomena. The influence of Cartesian dualism produced a major shift in emphasis away from conscious experience to objective realities, and was vitally important in the development of psychology. Descartes' method proved to be very successful and produced advances in all areas of traditional science; however, another result was that consciousness was virtually ignored as a valid area of investigation in psychology. According to R. D. Laing, nothing has changed our world more during the last four hundred years than the preoccupation of scientists with measurement and quantification:

Out go sight, sound, taste, touch and smell and along with them has since gone aesthetics and ethical sensibility, values, quality, form; all feelings, motives, intentions, soul, consciousness, spirit. Experience as such is cast out of the realm of scientific discourse (Laing, 1982, quoted in Capra, 1982, p. 40).

Phenomenology, by taking a different approach from traditional science, does not limit its investigations only to those realities which are objective in a materialistic or naturalistic sense, and consequently offers a considerable broadening of the range of philosophical enquiry. However, the diversity of the subject makes any summary of phenomenology very difficult. In the following section I will outline only the most important themes of phenomenology which are of relevance to the ecosystemic approach. I shall begin by considering Husserl's reflections on the nature of assumptions in philosophy which led him to formulate his ideas on the "natural attitude" and intentionality of consciousness.

Assumptions in Philosophy

All forms of inquiry, such as philosophy or science, begin by making basic assumptions about the nature of reality as well as the methods and techniques which are appropriate. As we have seen, Descartes' view of science and the scientific method produced two realms of existence - the realm of mind, the *cogito*, and the realm of matter, the *cogitatum*. Because of the philosophical difficulties of explaining the interaction between these two kinds of reality, Descartes also effectively produced two realms of philosophy. Idealism produced an account of reality solely in terms of minds and ideas through the process of reflection, whereas naturalism considered reality solely in terms of matter through empirical investigation. In both approaches, the underlying assumptions about reality and the presuppositions inherent in the methods of investigation are obviously of crucial importance.

Husserl developed phenomenology to challenge and clarify these basic assumptions and presuppositions. However, in recognising the importance of paradigms in any philosophical system, Husserl realised the paradox of developing a coherent phenomenological philosophy which was itself free of all assumptions and presuppositions. There are very many different kinds of assumptions we can make, but a philosophy which is completely free from all assumptions is not possible. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, such a situation would be paradoxical. For example, taking the view that such a philosophy, which is free from presuppositions, is possible, is itself a major assumption. It is as if we were assuming that a philosophy could be constructed without making any assumptions.

The Natural Attitude

The second reason why a philosophy which is free from presuppositions cannot be developed has to do with what Husserl called the "natural attitude" or the "natural standpoint". The way that we experience the world at all depends on a whole range of assumptions and anticipations that we make about ourselves and about the world and our relationship to it.

As an example of this natural attitude, we can consider for a moment Husserl's discussion (1960) of the Cartesian dualism mentioned above. We can get an idea of Husserl's line of thought if we consider an everyday experience such as seeing a tree:

In having this experience one "naturally" assumes that the tree one sees exists, that it belongs to a world that is independent of one's perceptual experience of it. This is a central assumption of what Husserl terms the "natural attitude" (Hammond et al, 1991, p. 26)

Rather than use the process of radical doubt to arrive at certainty (for that leads to either accepting or rejecting the independent existence of the perceived object) Husserl simply suspends judgement about the nature of the world's existence. It is important to emphasise that Husserl is not denying the independent existence of the world, but simply noting that, in everyday non-reflective experience, we accept it without question. We cannot be sure about the nature of the world, but we can be sure that it "claims being":

Instead of simply existing for us - that is, being accepted naturally by us in our experiential believing in its existence - the world is for us only something that claims being (Husserl, 1960, p. 18).

Instead of talking about the world as if it does exist, we merely observe that in everyday experience it is taken to exist without question.

Husserl develops his analysis by considering the important concept of intentionality. In the Second Meditation (1960), Husserl credits his teacher, Franz Brentano, with the "significant discovery" that consciousness is intentional or possesses

intentionality. Brentano, and Husserl, consider "conscious acts" (*cogitationes*) to be intentional not in the sense that they are deliberate or intended acts but that they "reach out towards" or "point to" an object: this may seem like a straightforward idea, but it overcomes at a stroke the Cartesian dilemma, for consciousness is always conscious of something. As consciousness is always directed towards an object there is an indissoluble unity between the conscious mind (*cogito*), that of which it is conscious (*cogitatum*) and the thoughts or "acts of thinking" (*cogitationes*). The other main implication of the intentionality of consciousness is that it shifts the emphasis away from the reality and existence of the world towards the meaning of that which appears to consciousness:

> The world gets its whole sense, universal and specific, and its acceptance as existing, exclusively from such *cogitationes* ... by my living, by my experiencing, thinking, valuing, and acting. I can enter no world other than the one that gets its sense and acceptance or status in and from me, myself (Husserl, 1960, p. 21).

Husserl is not maintaining that one can only know about the world through one's conscious experiences, but that conscious experiences provide the very sense or meaning of "the world" and its "existence":

> To make the world appear as phenomenon is to understand that the being of the world is no longer its existence or its reality, but its meaning, and that this

meaning of the world resides in the fact that it is a *cogitatum* intended by the *cogito*. (Thévenaz, 1962, p. 47)

To phenomenologists, these considerations point to the absurdity of dividing up reality into mutually exclusive categories such as mind and body, subject and object, and so on. Yet, these are deeply ingrained ideas, which we often take for granted, concepts that we use everyday, almost "without thinking". The ways in which we think about our world, the concepts we use and the questions we consider valid are all a part of the natural attitude.

Obviously, any theory which is developed on the basis of the natural attitude will be influenced by a whole range of presuppositions. It seems, that given this state of affairs, it is impossible to begin the process of philosophical inquiry at all, unless all judgements about such matters are put to one side or "suspended". This is, in fact, the essence of the phenomenological approach - the so-called epoché, or the suspension of the natural attitude. This gives phenomenology a starting point free from any hidden assumptions about the nature of reality:

What is assumed at this point? Not the spatio-temporal world; none of the scientific theories which are used to interpret the world of existence; no independent or continuous existence or empirically conditioned ego; not the ideal science of pure logic, or any of the idealisations of theoretical knowledge; in short nothing is assumed, and as a beginning there is only the self-validating

cognitive experience itself (Farber, 1967, quoted in Stewart and Mickunas, 1974, p. 8).

This may look at first just like Descartes' process of radical doubt, but in fact nothing is doubted, for this in itself would be a type of assumption. What we need is a way of disengaging ourselves from the natural attitude which does not commit us to a particular judgement or point of view. We need to take up a perspective which is "disinterested" or "detached" in the sense that it is not committed to a particular ideology or belief system:

> What is required, then, is a 'suspension of judgement': not because these assumptions are inherently dubious, and need to be critically assessed as to their truth or falsity, but solely in order to achieve a reflective standpoint which is appropriately `uncommitted'. And this is precisely what is achieved by the phenomenological epoché (Hammond et. al., 1991, p. 42).

This theme will be picked up again when we come to consider the phenomenological reduction in more detail later in this paper, but for the moment we can say that the aim of phenomenology is to suspend the natural attitude and to turn to the content of consciousness itself - to the phenomena.

Basic Concepts in Phenomenological Psychology

In this section the main ideas of phenomenological psychology will be developed. I will show how the ideas of phenomenology discussed above provide the basis for psychology, both in terms of a unique set of concepts, as well as particular approaches which relate to ecosystemic psychology. I shall begin by considering one of the central themes of phenomenological and ecosystemic psychology - the meaning of experience.

Meaning and Horizons.

Meaning is more or less implicit in experience. Phenomenological psychology seeks to articulate explicitly the implicit structure and meaning of human experience (Keen, 1975, p. 19).

If we were using the perspectives of systems theory, then we would be concerned with wholes and parts - with systems and sub-systems. Whenever we consider a particular system, we need to consider the environing system as there are always significant interactions between the two, and in some situations the environing system may be a very important factor in understanding the system itself. From a phenomenological point view, we also consider the importance of the environment - the psychological environment which surrounds events. All experiences are considered against this backdrop, or "horizon", which is not the focus of attention but is nevertheless a major factor in determining the meaning of experience. For example, imagine two people observing a particular incident. Each person has his or

her own thoughts and feelings, expectations and memories, likes and dislikes and so on - in other words, they experience the incident against different personal horizons. Not surprisingly, each person may respond quite differently, and the incident may have quite a different meaning and significance for each of them. Just as in systems theory, where the part cannot be separated effectively from the whole, in phenomenology, particular events cannot be separated effectively from horizons. This concept can be compared to the "behavioural environment" of Koffka (1935), which represents the environment from the point of view of the person's own experience:

> The "geographical" environment refers to the objective physical and social environment in which the individual is immersed. The "behavioural" environment refers to the environment as it is perceived and reacted to by the behaving individual; it may bear little resemblance to the geographical environment, being an organised interpretation of the latter based on recollections, anticipations, perceptual distortions and omissions. The point of Koffka's distinction is that behaviour can be far more meaningfully understood if it is related to the behavioural rather than the geographical environment (Chein, 1954, p. 158).

However, we do not simply provide an interpretation of an objective event which exists independently "out there"; the interpretation is in the phenomena, which

depend upon the interactions between the event and the personal horizons in order to appear at all:

> Spatial and temporal horizons, memories and expectations, relationships with significant others, and affective nuances all originally belong to whatever human phenomena is under investigation (Giorgi, 1981, p. 40).

To develop this idea, we can say that the nature of an experience depends to a large extent on the anticipations of the event, on what is expected to happen. It also depends on memories of similar events or similar people in the past. This can be extended to include memories of previous anticipations, and anticipations of future memories. This may sound complex, but it's the sort of thing we do all the time. The following quote from Keen (1975) illustrates concisely the interaction of past, present and future and also shows very clearly how the temporal horizon also contributes to our sense of self:

> The experience of being a self in time is quite complex. Right now I have a sense of myself. What is involved in that sense of self? I remember my childhood and I anticipate that I shall die. When I was a child I anticipated finding a job, and now I remember finding a job; I also remember anticipating finding a job. I compare my memory of how I anticipated finding a job to my memory of finding a job, and it either lives up to my expectations or I am somehow disappointed. I made retirement plans when I found my job and now

I remember making them and now make new ones. I shall look back at having

done that, and in the future I shall remember looking back. Not all these

horizons are equally important for how I understand myself in my job. But they

are all implicitly part of my understanding (Keen, 1975, pp. 83-84).

Phenomenology considers experience to be an orderly whole, of which temporal,

spatial, personal and interpersonal horizons are only analytically separable aspects.

An experience, as it is lived, synthesises all the horizons into a unity. And yet, this

is to put things back to front in a way because it suggests that the fundamental units

of experience are the parts, or the various horizons, and that the whole is somehow

made up of their combination through a complex process of synthesis.

Although personal horizons are fundamental to our experience, phenomenologists

believe that we need to look further to a larger horizon, one which includes the

temporal, spatial and personal horizons. In phenomenology this is known as the

"world" and is the basic horizon of all experience and perception. More strictly

speaking, it is one's orientation to the world, or "being-in-the-world" as it is called,

which is the horizon from which one ultimately derives meaning.

Both [Husserl] and Heidegger discovered that it is the experience of "world"

which is the horizon for any particular experience at all. They found that the

horizon of the world is, in ordinary experience, implicit and difficult to

articulate, and that it is not only essential to but fundamentally present within every perception (Keen, 1975, p. 141).

Being-in-the-world.

Heidegger's influence has been particularly important in the development of psychological approaches based on phenomenology:

> Heidegger's influence in psychology is, in a sense, an unplanned one, yet the themes with which Heidegger deals are broad, and psychology and other human sciences made ready use of them ... By dealing with such themes as Being and being-in-the-world, Heidegger places man and his psyche in a context which psychology had never before considered. He has shown that a real understanding of man, be it normal or abnormal, is possible only by seeing him in relation to his world context (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974, pp. 120-121).

"Being-in-the-world" is one of several hyphenated phrases which occur throughout the phenomenological literature. From the traditional perspective it looks like an attempt to combine the subjective (being) and objective (world) aspects of experience. But the subjective and objective aspects are the result of reflective analysis, they are abstractions and not separate realities. These phrases do combine being and place, subject and object, consciousness and thing, because in experience they occur together. Their separateness in our language is the result of the western

tradition that has made these abstractions into realities. These hyphenated phrases convey the wholeness of experience before it is broken into abstract concepts. The tyranny of language is such that abstract concepts can be mistaken for the pre-reflective reality of experience itself:

> New thoughts and new ways of thinking require new terms that sometimes
>
> make distinctions formerly unmade and sometimes combine things formerly
>
> distinguished (Keen, 1975, p. 140).

However, the phrase "being-in-the-world" cannot be understood by understanding "being" or by understanding "the world" - but, strange as it may sound, it can be understood by understanding "in", as Heidegger (1962) has shown. Being-in-the-world indicates an experiential unity from which "being" and "world" are abstractions. The "in" is not the same as when we say "the apple is in the bowl" - the sense of physical proximity. Also if we say that the "in" signifies a particular relationship between "being" and "world" this suggests that "being" and "world" are indeed separate and need to be brought together and related in some way. The phrase does not indicate proximity or relationship but rather it is an expression of the experiential presence of the world to consciousness, and the fact that neither makes sense apart from the other.

> Being-in-the-world determines my behaviour. Being-in-the-world is what is
>
> revealed by my behaviour. When I understand behaviour I am understanding

the being-in-the-world which is revealed. It is only in the context of being-in-the-world that behaviour is intelligible or has meaning. These four interrelated ideas give something of the flavour of phenomenological psychology (Keen, 1975, p. 27).

The Approach of Phenomenological Psychology

In this section I will focus on the particular techniques of phenomenological psychology. In ordinary everyday language, we might express the central consideration by saying that we, the investigators, like those we investigate, are people and that our considerations and approaches should therefore be appropriate to people. However, this would imply a more humanistic perspective than a phenomenological one. In phenomenological terms we would refer to our "being-in-the-world" which we have seen is central to the phenomenological method:

[The phenomenological approach] is not to explain man and the world on the basis of the results obtained by scientific induction, for all scientific theories implicitly presuppose man and his world. Phenomenology interprets all human forms of existence, including that of pursuing science, on the basis of man's being-in-the-world (Strasser, 1963, p. 277).

This person-world or person-environment perspective of being-in-the-world, which mirrors systems and environing systems in systems theory, is a central aspect of

understanding the phenomenological approach. Many authors have pointed out that this combination of internal and external factors is the main element which distinguishes phenomenological from behaviourist and humanistic psychologies:

> Behaviourists ignore human subjectivity in favour of the external variables of organism and environment. Humanistic psychologists tend to ignore human activities in concrete meaningful situations in favour of inner experiences and individual capacities. But the phenomenological conception of the situation has been offered as a possible alternative to the one-sided behaviourist concern with the controlling power of the environment and the equally one-sided humanistic concern with the potentialities of the individual (Graumann, 1981, pp. 14 & 16).

There are three important strategies in phenomenological psychology which will now be examined: the phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and phenomenological interpretation. It will be evident to those who are familiar with the ecosystemic approach that these strategies, which mirror Husserl's method in the *Cartesian Meditations* (1960), are the same as the techniques developed by Molnar and Lindquist (1989) and discussed by Cooper and Upton (1990a and 1990b). In the following sections these similarities will be touched upon briefly.

The Phenomenological Reduction

> The phenomenological reduction is a way of listening. [It] is a conscious,
> effortful, opening of ourselves to the phenomenon *as a phenomenon.* We do not
> want to see an event as an example of this or that theory that we have; we want
> to see it as a phenomenon in its own right, with its own meaning and structure
> (Keen, 1975, p. 38: emphasis in original).

As this quote demonstrates, the phenomenological reduction is based on suspending "the natural attitude", which we discussed earlier. We have to put aside any preconceptions about the people concerned or the situation, we have to avoid seeing the people or the situation in terms of stereotypes, we have to avoid positive or negative value judgements, and we have to be as open as possible. When we start to use the phenomenological reduction, we become acutely aware of how often and how quickly we jump to conclusions in interpreting events, and how often our own perceptions are coloured by our attitudes and assumptions.

In the normal course of events, we see a situation develop and put it into a particular category; once this has been done, we are no longer open to the situation and it is modified by our preconceptions and expectations, either in favourable or unfavourable ways. In suspending the natural attitude, we try to see the situation for what it is, rather than trying to fit it into any preconceived ideas we may have about it.

Even though the process of the phenomenological reduction can be very effective and, incidentally, produce quite a change in our being-in-the-world, we cannot possibly remove all preconceptions, and they will remain as horizons to our own experience:

> The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction. Radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiv).

The phenomenological reduction lies at the heart of the ecosystemic approach to changing problem behaviour in schools (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989); all of the techniques described by Molnar and Lindquist depend on the ability to suspend the natural attitude. They show that an important feature of the natural attitude is a pre-occupation with explaining or finding the causes for behaviour and a concern for "truth". They demonstrate that approaches based on the natural attitude do little to change situations and often contribute to their perpetuation. More than this, however, the ecosystemic approach depends on people changing themselves in order to change problem situations:

> As a part of the ecosystem of the classroom or school, your thoughts, attitudes and behaviour influence the thoughts, attitudes and behaviour of the people with whom you share the classroom and school. In other words, you can

influence problem behaviour by changing yourself (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 16)

By suspending the natural attitude, by putting our assumptions and preconceptions, our explanations and answers to one side we can take the first step in using the ecosystemic technique. It is important to stress that we are not doubting or denying our previous perspectives; if a particular point of view does not facilitate change in a situation which requires change, then it is simply put to one side, not in order to dismiss it as misleading, inaccurate or false but to create a clearing for the next step in the process, that of imaginative variation.

Imaginative Variation

Imaginative variation is closely allied to the phenomenological reduction; in the reduction we suspend the natural attitude, in imaginative variation we try to see an event from as many different points of view as possible. This corresponds very closely to Kelly's "alternative constructivism" (1955), which has been discussed in another paper (Tyler, 1994).

Imaginative variation is imagining the appearance of the phenomena against the backdrop of various horizons in an attempt to see what the total phenomenon means (Keen, 1975, p. 38).

Each particular horizon presents an important perspective and a set of coherent ideas and feelings. Phenomenological psychology is not concerned with explaining things in terms of cause and effect, or with apportioning blame. Understanding a situation depends on the disclosing and revealing of intentions and meanings, and increasing the number of vantage points helps to develop this sense of understanding:

> A phenomenological psychologist attempts to see an event in as many different ways as possible, he seeks to make explicit as many different meanings as possible, and he seeks to organise an understanding around the most basic context of meaning there is: being-in-the-world (Keen, 1975, p. 37).

Sometimes, considering alternative points of view will produce contradictions, but if we try to eliminate such contradictions we may also eliminate layers of meaning. Of course, all theoretical points of view involve a particular perspective, and all knowledge is relative to that perspective. Whereas the natural sciences have developed techniques to minimise error, increase certainty and to approximate truth as closely as possible, phenomenology has developed techniques to minimise the limits of a single perspective, increase our vision of the various layers of meaning and to present not only what is understood but also the way in which it is understood.

We established in the previous section that the first step in the ecosystemic approach is to suspend the natural attitude by bracketing our assumptions and preconceptions. The second step is to generate alternative points of view or alternative descriptions of a situation. However, as both Kelly and Rogers have noted (see Tyler, 1994) changing one's own point of view may be problematical. Add to this the pervasive nature of the natural attitude, and the impossibility of a complete reduction mentioned above, it may seem that the ecosystemic approach is almost impossible to put into practice. Suspending the natural attitude and using the process of imaginative variation to generate alternatives is certainly difficult as it involves a change in our own being-in-the-world. However, Molnar and Lindquist (1989) address this difficulty most effectively by providing a whole range of techniques for setting aside our preconceptions, changing our perspectives and finding alternative ways to construe problem situations:

> In order to try reframing, positive connotation, symptom prescription, or any of the other techniques in the following chapters, you will, of necessity, change your perception of the problem and your behaviour in relation to it. Thus the techniques explained in Part Two are methods of helping you change your ideas about and your behaviour in relation to a chronic problem you want to solve (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 43).

All of the methods described involve finding another perspective on the situation and are effectively techniques to help the process of imaginative variation:

Any alternative explanation that helps you to behave differently in relation to the behaviour you consider problematic has the potential to lead to a solution (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 19).

In looking for alternative explanations it is not necessary to reject old ones; we simply need to construct views which will produce a change in our own behaviour and may help to solve the problem. This does not mean, however, that all alternatives are equally valid or useful. The types of alternatives which are appropriate for the ecosystemic approach are discussed in the following section, which deals with the phenomenological concept of interpretation.

Phenomenological Interpretation

The particular approach we use to try to understand our world will always affect our interpretation:

Husserl's central argument was that we do not experience the physical world as it actually is in its "pure" or "real" state, but that the world we experience is an interpreted world that has been shaped both by in-built biological invariants and by the experience-based psychological beliefs and biases that we continuously generate (Spinelli, 1989, p. 179).

An important characteristic of phenomenological interpretation is the assumption that people experience events as meaningful and that there is an invariant human tendency to create meaning from our experience:

> As human beings, we attempt to make sense of all our experiences. Through our mental acts, we strive to impose meaning upon the world (Spinelli, 1989, p. 1).

One of the implications of this view is that whatever we think of an event, we also need to consider it in terms of the individual meanings of the other people involved. This is contrary to many other interpretative systems, where the objective is to fit experience into an established framework or predetermined pigeon-holes. This aspect of phenomenological interpretation leads directly to the ecosystemic technique of positive connotation, where problematical behaviour is construed in a positive light. Positive connotation is based on the assumption that other people construe situations in a way which is meaningful for them, even though their point of view may be very different to our own.

Interpretations should also try to consider, as far as possible, the grounds for interpretation and the coloration which the experiences of the interpreter are likely to bring into the picture. The interpretation will include the conclusions as well as the perspectives from which the conclusions were drawn. Because of this, every phenomenological analysis is also a form of self-analysis. This approach is probably

more important in a rigorous, philosophically based phenomenological reduction, but it does inform the process of positive connotation to some extent.

A major factor in considering phenomenological interpretation is that a particular situation never means just one thing to the participants. There may, for example, be a whole range of quite different meanings for a number of different people in a group; each of these conflicting meanings may be considered to be equally valid - not in terms of objective reality, for that is not what phenomenology is concerned with, but in terms of meaning and significance for the individuals concerned. The interpretation of each individual depends to a large extent on that individual's "being-in-the-world". The remarkable thing is that a particular event may well confirm quite different meanings for each of the participants in a group, and each person will see the event as confirming his or her own particular interpretation (Bateson, 1972).

Finally, the ecosystemic approach is based on communicating effective interpretations to others. We can say that an interpretation is effective if it is based on the idea that all people experience events as meaningful. In this sense, effective alternatives are not evaluative or judgmental, nor are they concerned with control or with taking an instructive stance. They are, above all, based on acceptance - acceptance that the problem behaviour is in some way meaningful or appropriate for the person concerned. This theme of acceptance is closely connected to the ecosystemic technique of adopting a co-operative perspective:

The ability to regard a person's problem behaviour as understandable, given that person's perception of the situation, is the essence of what we call a co-operative perspective in problem solving. A co-operative perspective follows logically from the ecosystemic view that all behaviour has multiple meanings and functions (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 21).

The co-operative perspective is at the heart of all the main techniques presented by Molnar and Lindquist, and leads to reframing techniques based on positive connotation of the problem behaviour. It is important for a phenomenological investigation to remain open to a particular situation in order to avoid pigeon-holing it in some way. This means that the ecosystemic approach cannot be defined by a prescriptive methodology, or by standard procedures; if it could, there would always be the possibility that an event was being forced into existing categories, thereby distorting its meanings and significance.

Conclusion

Phenomenological psychology deals with meanings, intentions, ideas, feelings, memories, expectations - aspects of experience and behaviour which cannot be quantified without distortion. What is understood in psychology is only ever understood interpretively, and in phenomenology that interpretation must include the grounds for the interpretation and the perspectives and experiences of the investigator. Phenomenological psychology is not concerned with predicting and controlling behaviour, and these objectives are not seen as criteria of knowledge; a

phenomenologist would not agree that we understand something only when we can predict and control it. Ecosystemics, which is a form of phenomenological psychology, is concerned with changing situations, particularly those situations which are experienced as problematical by the participants. However, the approach does not depend on prediction and control of the system, but, as we have seen, on the phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and phenomenological interpretation.

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Chapter 4

Systems Thinking and Ecosystemic Psychology

Systems Thinking and Ecosystemic Psychology

ABSTRACT: This paper outlines the systems aspects of ecosystemic psychology. The terms "system" and "systemic" have a wide range of meanings and the main purpose of the present paper is to clarify the way in which these terms are used in ecosystemics. A general review of systems theory is provided in order to identify those issues which are relevant to the present discussion. The paper shows that although social constructionist views are relevant, hermeneutic considerations are far more important in ecosystemic psychology.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the systems aspects of ecosystemic psychology. A previous paper (Tyler, 1994) has shown how the ecosystemic approach developed my Molnar and Lindquist (1989) is based on three key techniques of phenomenological psychology. The present paper goes on to consider the systems nature of the theory.

By way of introduction, it will be useful to comment briefly on some other systemic approaches. This serves the purpose of clarifying the nature of ecosystemic psychology itself as well as placing certain themes within the framework of the present paper. Firstly, the ecosystemic approach owes a great deal to systemic family therapy, but as this aspect has been covered elsewhere (for example, see de Shazer, 1982; Mook, 1985; Hoffman, 1988; Cooper and Upton 1990; Tyler, 1992) it will only be mentioned here in passing.

Secondly, it should be pointed out that, despite similarities in name, there are only superficial similarities between ecosystemic psychology and ecological psychology, both in its general form (Barker, 1968) and specifically in relation to visual perception (Gibson, 1979). Both these forms of ecological psychology can be said to explore "information transactions between living systems and their environments" (Lombardo, 1987: vii). However, unlike ecosystemic psychology, which is based on phenomenological perspectives, ecological psychology is based on the philosophical

stance of naïve or direct realism (Gibson, 1982 and Lombardo, 1987: 309-333). This is also the main distinguishing feature between ecosystemic psychology and other so-called system or systemic psychologies (see, for example, Fruggeri and Matteini, 1988 and Plas, 1986).

Thirdly, Checkland's work on the implications of Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1981: 245-285) has done a great deal to clarify key issues in systems thinking, and the perspectives he has developed are particularly relevant to ecosystemic psychology. However, although Soft Systems Methodology and ecosystemic psychology are both based on phenomenological perspectives and may be considered in terms of interpretive sociology and radical humanism (Checkland, 1981: 280), there are differences between the two approaches which will become clear in the present paper.

Ecosystemic psychology, like Soft Systems Methodology, cannot be used in any situation, as it has a specific range of application; its use is limited both to certain situations and to certain types of people who may wish to use it:

> ... soft systems thinking will not appeal to determinists, dictators, or demagogues. It *will* appeal to all those people in any discipline who are knowledgeable enough to know that there is much they do not know, and that learning and re-learning is worthwhile. For such people a systems approach is not a bad idea (Checkland, 1981: 285; emphasis in original).

This paper is divided into three main sections: the first provides the background by considering relevant aspects of systems thinking, particularly with regard to human systems. The second section provides a brief discussion of social constructionist views and the third outlines the hermeneutic approach which is the basis of ecosystemic psychology.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking has been used in very many fields, including engineering, technology, control and automation, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, economics, geography and ecology. The common thread that runs through this diverse range of disciplines is the idea of an irreducible whole, "a system", and its characteristic properties. Even very basic systems ideas provide novel ways of thinking about situations and provide perspectives that can lead to different ways of understanding and tackling problems. This section will outline key concepts in systems thinking particularly in relation to human systems. This will serve a twofold purpose. Firstly, it will outline the relevance and highlight the difficulties of applying systems theories to human situations, and secondly, it will provide a theoretical background against which the systemic ideas used in ecosystemics can be more readily understood.

General system theory

General system theory (Bertalanffy, 1950, 1968) considers systems in general terms; in other words, it considers all types of system, whatever their particular area of

application. One of the objectives of this approach was to clarify the nature of a whole range of different systems, and many general classifications have been suggested (Boulding, 1956; Burton, 1968; Jordan, 1968; Checkland, 1981). Examples include: living and non-living systems, concrete and abstract systems, structural and functional systems, organismic and mechanical systems, natural and designed systems. All attempts to find a satisfactory taxonomy assume that systems can be analysed into simple types or placed within a monolithic hierarchy, ranging from soap bubbles to galaxies. However, as Checkland (1981: 102) points out, with his usual blend of pragmatism and insight, most classifications "reflect a particular outlook, interest or purpose", and we still do not have a valid general description of all system types. In the present paper several classifications are used (such as open and closed, objective and hermeneutic) in order to provide a framework for the discussions. However, it should be pointed out that these classifications are not meant to represent a coherent taxonomy that could be applied to all types of system; they are used simply as a heuristic device to serve the particular purpose of the present paper.

In summary, we can say that the methodology of general system theory has not received the universal application which was intended by its founders; although it remains a contradiction in terms, general system theory is only appropriate for the systems of technology and engineering. However, it has become obvious that systems ideas can be applied most effectively to many other disciplines, as long as the nature of the particular system is taken into account:

Progress in the systems movement seems more likely to come from the use of systems ideas within specific problem areas than from the development of an overarching theory. (Checkland, 1981: 94)

Open and closed systems

It is well known that classical science is based on the study of closed systems - i.e. systems that are isolated (or can be isolated) from their environment, systems that can be observed, controlled and manipulated. Descartes' principle of reductionism (see Rée, 1974: 44 et seq.) became the key to complex situations. The method was straightforward and was based on a mechanistic interpretation of reality, where complex situations were broken down into smaller units and considered in isolation like the parts of a machine. The strength of the scientific method is that the system can be considered as a collection of independent parts which can be analysed separately. By understanding the elements of the system, a picture of the whole can be built up piece by piece.

The analytical approach has proved to be very successful regarding the closed systems of chemistry, physics, engineering, and technology but has proved to be problematical when applied to open systems such as psychology, psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, economics, geography and ecology. There are two main reasons for this. First, the assumption that underlies the reductive approach - that the division into parts will not change the phenomena being studied - does not apply to open systems. The system needs to be considered as a coherent whole and is

founded on a holistic rather than a reductionistic paradigm. If the system were to be reduced to its constituent parts then the interactions in the system would also be eliminated, and we would effectively eliminate the system itself. An important aspect of systems thinking is that the interrelationships between the parts and their overall organisation characterise the system in a fundamental way.

Second, as open systems are in constant interaction with the environment they cannot be observed or controlled in the way that closed systems can. A standard approach in science is to control the environment or certain variables in order to discover underlying patterns. The investigator can remain outside the system and carry out the necessary scientific procedures without affecting the system unduly. However, if this approach is applied to human systems the results can be misleading. As the system is in constant interaction with the environment, the investigator cannot remain "outside" the system, and controlled experimentation is virtually impossible. Probably the best known example of this is the Hawthorne effect, so called after the work of Elton Mayo (1933) at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant in Illinios, USA. An experiment over an eighteen month period with a group of employees, which focused on the effects of improving working conditions, was producing strange and inexplicable results. The researchers decided to take away all the improvements that had been introduced and return to the original working conditions. It was expected that this change would reduce output to its original level. Instead the output jumped to a new all-time high.

Elton Mayo, who led the research team, explained these results not by considering the "task" aspects (the changes in physical working conditions) but by considering the "human" aspects (particularly changes in relationships amongst the employees, and the feelings of importance of being involved in an experimental study). This work dramatically highlighted the importance of personal and interpersonal factors in groups and is generally regarded as marking the beginning of the human relations movement: it also demonstrated two important features of human systems. Firstly, it showed that human systems cannot be observed, controlled and manipulated in order to understand how they function. Secondly, the work showed that interventions in human systems can have unexpected and often paradoxical results. We cannot understand human systems by applying the mechanistic principles that are appropriate to closed systems.

As soon as the team of researchers became involved in the situation, the whole system that was supposedly being investigated had already changed. The researchers could not conduct their experiments without changing the system they were trying to investigate. Their presence and intentions alone were enough to affect the employees and change the system in unexpected ways. These features are at the heart of the ecosystemic approach, and will be developed more fully later.

Mayo's work shows that human systems are open systems which cannot be observed or controlled in predictable ways. As Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) have

pointed out, the distinction between open and closed systems was an important step towards developing a coherent theory of human systems:

> This distinction between closed and open systems can be said to have freed the sciences concerned with life-phenomena from the shackles of a theoretical model based essentially on classical physics and chemistry: a model of exclusively closed systems. (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967: 122)

Although the distinction between open and closed systems has important consequences for the human sciences, this does not mean that all open system models are appropriate for "the sciences concerned with life-phenomena", and the following section will consider another important dimension.

Objective systems

So far in this paper, open and closed systems have been discussed using the terms of reference that one normally finds in the literature. However, this discussion has depended to a certain extent upon a range of implicit assumptions based on the naturalistic perspective. In order to move forward, one assumption in particular needs to be made clear. This will help to prepare the way for the interpretative accounts of systems later in this paper. This assumption, which is implied in a great deal of the current systems' literature, is that both open and closed systems are objective systems. In other words, systems are considered to be objective realities

which do not depend on individual observers or observer communities in any way. This corresponds to the position of naïve or direct realism, which was mentioned earlier with regard to ecological psychology, and which informs the approach of classical science, technology and engineering. In the previous section it was shown that scientific methodology can only be applied to closed systems and is therefore inappropriate for human systems: this section will go on to show that some open system theories, namely those based on *objective* open systems, are also inappropriate for a number of reasons. Even though we may base our ideas on the theory of open systems, there will be important implications if we assume that the system is an objective reality.

Objective open systems are characterised by a monolithic or complex hierarchical organisation of sub-systems which are open to each other and to the environment and which cannot be reduced to their constituent parts. Interactions between the various sub-systems and between the system and the environment are important factors in the operation of the system; this inner activity of the system results in stability and self-regulating behaviour. Well known examples of objective open systems are living organisms and social systems.

Although it is not appropriate to discuss this aspect in any detail here, it is interesting to note that many of the ideas which were developed in the social sciences, and in general system theory as well, derive directly from biological models. For example, many systems ideas from the biological sciences were

borrowed and extended to provide the basis for Durkheim's work on social systems, which often reflects an organismic approach to society; indeed, he often refers in his writings to the "social organism" (see, for example, Durkheim, 1964). However, Durkheim was concerned above all with the objective study of social facts. His theory, which is generally referred to as structural functionalism, considered society to be an open system and an objective fact.

Durkheim's ideas were adapted by Parsons (1970) who developed an elaborate theory of all social and human activity systems. His theory, which, like Durkheim's, also considers society to be an objective open system, is not only influenced by biological and organismic models but also by technological ones, particularly those deriving from cybernetics and information theory. His theory is concerned with the hierarchical organisation of social systems, and is based on the idea that levels of social organisation are objective systems which can be studied using the scientific method. Anderson, Goolishian and Winderman (1986) refer to Parsons' approach as the "onion theory" of social systems and feel that it is primarily responsible for establishing the idea that social groupings are in fact objective social realities. The structural functionalism of Durkheim and Parsons still has value as an explanation of social order and integration but has largely been replaced, at least in Britain and Europe, by the more radical approaches of Marx and Weber (Craib, 1992).

These sociological perspectives are mirrored in those forms of systemic family therapy which are based on the naturalistic paradigm. The family group is

considered to be an *objective* system which can be controlled and manipulated from the outside. The family therapist, with his or her understanding of how a family system operates and ideas about what a "functional" family should be, can fix the family machine through a process of systemic social engineering (see Hoffman, 1988 for a discussion of these issues). Moreover, if the family does not change in the ways anticipated, then it is considered to be presenting "manoeuvres" or "resistance" to the therapist. The resistance is seen as being located within the family system rather than as a product of the interaction between family and therapist (de Shazer, 1984).

From this discussion we can see that some systems in sociology and family therapy are *objective open* systems: *objective* because they are based on naïve realism, and which can therefore be observed and controlled like a self-regulating machine; and *open* because they are based on the holistic principle that the whole cannot be understood by considering the constituent parts in isolation.

However, although science and technology have shown that *closed* systems can be observed and controlled effectively, the claim that objective *open* systems can also be observed and controlled is more problematical. Critics maintain that human systems such as social systems and family systems cannot be controlled in the way that these theories predict, simply because the systems do not exist as objective realities. So far in this paper we have considered the *objective closed* systems of classical science, engineering and technology (referred to as *hard* systems by

Checkland, 1981) and the *objective open* systems of structural functionalism and certain approaches to family therapy. Checkland's own work, (Checkland, 1981, Checkland and Scholes, 1990) which focuses on changing the structure and procedures of commercial and industrial organisations, has demonstrated how inadequate the hard systems approach is in such situations, and led to the development of his well known Soft Systems Methodology. He rejects the hard systems approach because his research experiences show that the social sciences are intrinsically different from natural sciences in many important ways. He mentions the dangers of applying reductionistic and mechanistic models to human situations in his discussion of the anti-technology movement, which maintains that

> the imperatives of scientific thinking serve to diminish our humanity and to subordinate our personalities to technology. If we are to improve systems analysis and to prevent its misuse, we can no doubt learn from this school of thought, which attacks as anti-human the whole notion of applying scientific thinking in human affairs. (Checkland, 1981: 145)

If systems thinking is to be applied successfully to human systems, and more particularly, if we are going to understand the place of systems thinking in ecosystemics, then we can no longer continue to adopt the perspectives of naïve realism. In other words we can no longer assume that human systems are part of the natural order and consider them as objective realities. In order to move forward we need to consider the nature of systems more carefully. However, this is particularly

difficult in relation to ecosystemics because the word "system" is used in two quite distinct ways in the literature. The first is based on social constructionist perspectives and the second on hermeneutics; these two views will now be examined in the following sections.

Social Constructionist views

So far in this paper we have been considering an objective point of view which is based on naturalistic perspectives. Social constructionists take issue with the modernist idea that the world can be known with objective certainty (Gergen, 1985), and maintain that "all social phenomena are *constructions* produced historically through human activity" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 123; emphasis in original). This leads to the well known paradox that "man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 123; also see Thomason, 1982, for an enlightening discussion of this view).

The theoretical ideas of Alfred Schutz have been particularly influential in shaping phenomenological approaches in the social sciences (Schutz, 1967; Schutz and Luckmann, 1973; Thomason, 1982 and Luckmann, 1983):

Schutz's writings are based upon Husserl's distinction between the natural attitude of common sense belief about the world and the phenomenological attitude in which that belief is suspended. But where Husserl considers the

lived-in everyday world of experience only as a preliminary to making the 'phenomenological reduction' to the pure data of consciousness, the lived-in world, or *Lebenswelt*, is Schutz's main concern. (Checkland, 1981: 275)

With regard to the nature of the social world, Schutz takes a stance of "ontological agnosticism (i.e. the suspension of judgement about what society really is)" (Thomason, 1982: x). This follows the Husserlian epoché, which is not a denial of objective reality but a *methodological* suspension or bracketing of the question:

[Schutz's] constructionist position always retained its bracketed, as-if, character and never masqueraded as the *really* real account of the social world. (Thomason, 1982: xii; emphasis in original)

Checkland (1981: 247) takes this position in his Soft Systems Methodology by maintaining that we are not making ontological claims by saying "it *is* a system" but an epistemological statement of the kind "it may be *considered as* a system". The following short discussion, using the family system as an example, will demonstrate the importance and relevance of this approach. Saying that the family *is* a system means that, like all objective reality, its existence does not depend on individual observers or observer communities. Whatever we do, whatever our own particular point of view, whether we give it our attention or not, the family exists there as a system, as an objective reality, quite independently of us. If we, as therapists or observers, are outside the system, then we can observe it, predict its behaviour and

control it in various ways. We can then create new theoretical ideas, such as the concepts of resistance, manoeuvres and games, to explain the effects of our interventions. It is only a matter of time before we understand the nature of the system so well that we can control it as if it were a machine. On the other hand, by saying that the family *can be considered* as a system, we are taking the point of view that the system is constituted by the observers of the system. In his discussion of "as-if" models of human activity systems Checkland points out that

> they are mental constructs, not would-be accounts of reality. Our purpose in building them cannot be to grope towards a systemic ontology. They are the tools of an epistemological kind which can be used in a process of exploration within social reality. (Checkland, 1981: 247)

However, as Berger and Luckmann (1966: 208) point out, even if we start out by using this particular approach it "is endemically in danger of reifying social phenomena", one of the problems they associate with a purely structural sociology:

> Even if it begins by modestly assigning to its constructs merely heuristic status, it all too frequently ends by confusing its own conceptualizations with the laws of the universe. (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 208)

The Soft Systems approach has built-in safeguards in its methodology to prevent the reification of the system in this way, but without such safeguards there is the ever

present danger that we will slip back into a naturalistic frame of reference and treat the system as an objective reality (Berger and Pullberg, 1966). This process is very closely related to the persistence and pervasiveness of the natural attitude. Despite conscious efforts to move away from the naturalistic standpoint (where one "naturally" assumes that the system exists, that it belongs to a world that is independent of one's perceptual experience) it seems that in our non-reflective everyday experience, we are constantly brought back to this perspective and accept the objective status of the system without question.

As mentioned above, this "as-if" approach is just one way of characterising systems in the literature on ecosystemics. For example, it is commonplace in ecosystemics to identify particular social groupings as a system, and select particular levels of the hierarchy on which to focus:

... system theory allows any ecosystem to be entered at several different levels, one of which in the case of schools, may be the institutional level. Other levels might include the classroom, the tutorial group or an interactional dyad. (Cooper and Upton, 1990: 307)

As Varella points out, we can decide for ourselves on which divisions we make:

The world does not present itself to us neatly divided into systems, subsystems, environments and so on. These are divisions we make for

ourselves for various purposes. It is evident that different observer communities find it convenient to divide the world in different ways, and they will be interested in different systems at different times. (Varela, 1979: 83)

So far in this paper we have established three quite distinct positions: the first two, closed system models and objective open system models, have both been shown to be inappropriate for ecosystemic psychology. The third position, which has been characterised in terms of social constructionism, can be very useful in helping us to avoid the pitfalls of assuming the objective nature of systems, even though there is a tendency to reify the system in this approach. As we have seen, this approach is very important in Soft Systems Methodology, but is only used in a general descriptive way in ecosystemics. In order to get to the heart of the systems thinking used in ecosystemic psychology we need to extend the "as if" view of social constructionism and turn to the interpretative tradition of hermeneutics. It should be mentioned in passing that some of the ideas developed in the following section are similar to Kenneth Gergen's conception of social constructionism (Gergen 1993, 1994), although Gergen explicitly rejects Gadamer's extension of Heideggerian themes (Gergen, 1994: 256-259).

Hermeneutics

Ecosystemic psychology aims to resolve the problems discussed so far in this paper that are inherent in the naturalistic standpoint by moving to an interpretative frame

of reference; this helps to overcome the dichotomies of objective and subjective perspectives, and of holism and individualism. Above all, hermeneutics is concerned with the theory of understanding and interpretation rather than "explanation":

> Its central proposition is that the social worlds must be understood from within, rather than explained from without. Instead of seeking the causes of behaviour, we are to seek the meaning of action. Actions derive their meanings from the shared ideas and rules of social life and are performed by actors who mean something by them. Meanings ... range from what is consciously and individually intended to what is communally and often unintendedly significant. (Hollis, 1994: 16-17)

Although the approach stems from Hegel and Dilthey, it is the work of Heidegger which has provided the basis for a whole range of interpretative approaches:

> Heidegger's influence in psychology is, in a sense, an unplanned one, yet the themes with which Heidegger deals are broad, and psychology and other human sciences made ready use of them ... By dealing with such themes as Being and being-in-the-world, Heidegger places man and his psyche in a context which psychology had never before considered. He has shown that a real understanding of man, be it normal or abnormal, is possible only by seeing him in relation to his world context. (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974: 120-121)

In order to introduce this change of perspective, we need briefly to consider Heidegger's hermeneutic perspectives which are most explicitly set out in Sections 31 and 32 of Being and Time (Heidegger, 1962; see also Bauman, 1978: 148 et seq.), and show how they relate to the earlier discussion of systems thinking.

From Descartes to Husserl, human beings were seen basically and primarily as subjects in a world of objects, where the main concerns were the nature of perception and knowledge. Heidegger took the view that this perspective only arises as a secondary level of concern and that more fundamental and characteristic features need to be addressed. By following Husserl's phenomenological approach of letting things show themselves as they are rather than as an example of this or that theory, Heidegger found that people in their everyday activities do not relate to things as subjects related to objects:

> ... in our most characteristic modes of being, we are not subjects, spectators, observers, separated by an invisible plate-glass window from the world of objects in which we find ourselves. We are not detached from external reality which is 'out there', trying to gain knowledge of it as something categorically different from ourselves, and trying to relate to it. On the contrary we are part and parcel of it all, and from the very beginning we are in amongst it all, being in it, coping with it. (Magee, 1988: 258)

In systems terms this translates to the view discussed earlier that human systems cannot be considered as independently existing objective realities. Such a view was identified with naïve realism which informs the approach of classical science, technology and engineering. However, it is also important to stress that Heidegger did not want to deny the value of the traditional stance, and he believed that there was an important place for the objective claims of science. He wanted to demonstrate that a great deal of human activity is not guided by conscious choice or rational processes and that the scientific view was secondary and dependent upon a background of shared skills and practices. First and foremost, we are coping beings always already involved in the world, and therefore we cannot expect the scientific view, or any other view based on the subject-object dichotomy, to explain the meaning and significance of our everyday world:

> What makes possible my relation to objects, then, is not something *in* my mind, as Husserl held, but something *outside* my mind - the world of shared things and practices. Heidegger calls the shared meaning in our shared practices our understanding of being. (Magee, 1988: 263; emphasis in original)

It will be seen later that this 'world of shared things and practices' can be equated with the 'ecology of mind' which is at the heart of ecosystemic psychology. Furthermore, these basic considerations led Heidegger to make his so called hermeneutic turn, where he "makes interpretive understanding the central mode of

human existence (Dasein)" (Hoy, 1993: 170). Heidegger's hermeneutics is radical in that it avoids the ideas of subject and object, the knower and the known:

> His hermeneutic turn shows both that the mentalistic vocabulary of the subject-object model is not the only possible starting point for philosophy and that this vocabulary is derivative from the more basic starting point where Dasein and world are coterminous in understanding. Heidegger conceives of Dasein and world as forming a circle, and he thus extends the traditional hermeneutic circle between a text and its reading down to the most primordial level of human existence. (Hoy, 1993: 172)

Gadamer (1989), who was the first philosopher to develop Heidegger's ideas on interpretation into a general hermeneutics, has argued that trying to understand social action is not in the least concerned "with the search for causes or the framing of laws, but entirely with the circular process of seeking to understand a whole in terms of its parts, and its parts in terms of the contribution they make to the meaning of the whole" (Skinner, 1985: 7). As Gadamer develops his analysis, he emphasises the limitations of our own horizons and preconceptions which we inevitably bring to any form of understanding, and discounts the possibility of finding an independent "objective truth":

> The most we can ever hope for is a fusion of horizons, a partial rapprochement between our present world, from which we can never hope to

detach ourselves, and the different world we are seeking to appraise. (Skinner, 1985: 7)

One of the most important influences on these developments has been Wittgenstein's later philosophy, with its anti-positivist view that meaning is a matter of use and that the understanding of any meaningful episode is always dependent upon the particular "form of life" in which the episode occurs (Wittgenstein, 1958: pp. 8-12). The importance of a framework which gives meaning and significance to phenomena is common to other perspectives deriving from Heidegger: Hussserl's *Life-world,* Kuhn's *paradigms* and Foucault's *discourses*:

> The framework notion of understanding is something [Gadamer] shares with the rest of the hermeneutic tradition; the stress on understanding as a matter of commitment is a theme he has taken from Heidegger, but made very much his own. (Outhwaite, 1985: 23)

This means that Gadamer considers it impossible to understand a text or social practice without preconceptions or prejudices; furthermore these preconceptions or prejudices

> are what make understanding possible in the first place. They are bound up with our awareness of the historical influence or effectivity of the text; and without this awareness we would not understand it ... Our 'prejudices' are not

an obstacle to knowledge so much as a condition of knowledge, since they

make up the fundamental structure of our relationship with our historical

tradition. (Outhwaite, 1985: 25-26)

However, the situation with regard to the social sciences is more complicated by

virtue of what Giddens (1993) has called "the double hermeneutic". Put in simple

terms this means that the phenomena being studied (interpreted) are always

critically bound up with the interpretations of the phenomena given by the members

of the society being studied:

> Sociology, unlike natural science, deals with a pre-interpreted world, where
>
> the creation and reproduction of meaning-frames is a very condition of that
>
> which it seeks to analyse, namely human social conduct: this is why there is a
>
> double hermeneutic in the social sciences ... the observing social scientist has
>
> to be able first to grasp those lay concepts, that is, penetrate hermeneutically
>
> the form of life whose features he or she wishes to analyse or explain.
>
> (Giddens, 1993: 166-7)

We saw in the previous section how the constructionist approach to systems

effectively moves away from ontological considerations (making claims that the

social world *is* a system) and takes on a more epistemological stance (maintaining

that the social world *may be considered as* a system). It will help to develop these

ideas further at this stage by contrasting epistemology and hermeneutics, following

Rorty (1979: 315 et seq.). Whereas epistemology describes how knowledge is possible, hermeneutics describes how understanding is possible –

> with the reservation that understanding is not reducible to knowledge, as some epistemologists hold, but on the contrary that knowledge is best seen as a subdivision of understanding. (Hoy, 1985: 50)

This is an important distinction in relation to ecosystemics, particularly with regard to the issue of representationalism. Epistemology is concerned with finding valid representations of reality (the *"may be considered as"* approach mentioned above) and is a "foundational enterprise attempting to separate knowledge from other forms of belief with the intention of ascertaining what is objectively certain" (Hoy, 1985: 51). Hermeneutics rejects foundations and guarantees of certainty, and sees knowledge relative to contexts or frameworks of understanding. Whereas the paradigm of knowledge is based on visual perception and representation, the paradigm of understanding is based on reading a text:

> Reading a text is different from seeing a physical object in many respects, but one important difference is that there seem to be no special problems about whether the object exists independently of perception. Reading is not the same as seeing black marks on a page ... a text and its meanings come to be only in acts of reading. Even in cases where what is being understood is not a written document (for instance, in understanding an action or a society)

> hermeneutic theorists may treat what is being understood as a text-analogue
> and the process of understanding it as like reading. (Hoy, 1985: 52-3)

As was noted above, Checkland (1981: 247) formulates "as if" models of human activity systems not as a systemic ontology but as epistemological tools which can help us to explore social reality. Ecosystemic psychology is based on a form of systems thinking that is neither ontological nor epistemological but hermeneutic in nature. For example, rather than seeing a problem as existing independently in a system, the hermeneutic view maintains that our considerations of the problem and our conversations about these considerations create the system within the hermeneutic framework. This point of view produces a radical reformulation of the system, which is now seen in terms of a narrative or, to use the phrase first used by Bateson (1972), an ecology of ideas. The following quotation from the field of family therapy outlines this ecosystemic conception in relation to the family system:

> Instead of conceiving of the unit of treatment as the "family system", there is
> no unit of treatment at all. Instead we see that there is a group of people who
> are having a conversation about a problem. This conversation is defined as a
> particular kind of ecology of ideas, one where there are some people who are
> complaining and (usually) some who are not. If therapy is successful, the
> conversation ends up being one in which no problem is being discussed.
> Therapy is, in this view, a narrative or text. There is not the usual cut

between the ones who treat and the ones who are treated, because all are

contributing to this text. (Hoffman, 1988: 124-5)

The therapist, or other observers such as teachers, are not outside the system but are
part of the system. Ecosystemics takes the view that within the hermeneutic
framework, the idea of an independent or detached observer can no longer apply:

... the experimenter or observer has to enter into a discourse with the people

being studied and try to appreciate the shape of the subject's cognitive world.

But at this point it no longer makes sense to talk of observers and subjects at

all. There are only coparticipants in the project of making sense of the world

and our experience of it. (Harré and Gillett, 1994: 21)

Rather than considering people as isolated interpreters of an independently existing
world, the hermeneutic approach considers that the discourses constructed jointly
"within sociocultural groups become an important part of the framework of
interpretation" (Harré and Gillett, 1994: 22): this perspective provides the key to
understanding Bateson's conception of an ecology of mind:

If the mind is to be understood as a domain of skills and techniques that

renders the world meaningful to the individual, then our conception of the

mind as a Cartesian entity sealed into its own individual and self-contained

subjectivity must be revised. We must learn to see the mind as the meeting

point of a wide range of structuring influences whose nature can only be painted on a broader canvas than that provided by the study of individual organisms. (Harré and Gillett, 1994: 22)

A previous paper (Tyler, 1994) outlined the phenomenological basis of the ecosystemic techniques developed by Molnar and Lindquist (1989). It showed that the techniques are based on the Husserlian epoché, imaginative variation and phenomenological interpretation. The present paper has shown that the systems thinking which is incorporated in ecosystemics is based upon a radical Heideggerian reformulation of interpretation and meaning. The emphasis in ecosystemics is on an *involvement in* the system rather than a detached *observation of* the system. The nature of the involvement is an active interpretative engagement through discourse; such an approach helps people to explore the system as a lived reality rather than observe or describe it in an objective way. The change of perspective which the hermeneutic approach brings about enables people to think and behave differently in relation to their experiences. The circular process of trying to understand the whole in terms of its parts, and the parts in terms of the contribution they make to the whole, provides the basis for the ecosystemic approach to changing problem behaviour in schools (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989). In addition to this, the hermeneutic systems approach can also provide the basis for a wider application of these ideas to a general ecosystemic psychology.

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Chapter 5

A Comparison of the No Blame Approach to Bullying and the Ecosystemic Approach to Changing Problem Behaviour in Schools.

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A Comparison of the No Blame Approach to Bullying and the Ecosystemic Approach to Changing Problem Behaviour in Schools.

ABSTRACT This paper compares the No Blame approach to bullying with the Ecosystemic approach to changing problem behaviour in schools. It begins by considering congruence in interpersonal communication, and goes on to discuss the use of the phenomenological reduction and systemic perspectives. The comparison reveals several similarities and shows that both approaches can be considered as a form of phenomenological psychology.

Introduction

The No Blame approach to bullying (Maines and Robinson, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1994, Robinson and Maines, 1994) is part of an overall strategy for dealing sensitively and effectively with bullying in schools. Most schools recognise the importance of these issues and many have developed whole school policies that aim to raise awareness and develop preventative strategies (see, for example, DFE, 1994, p. 73 et seq.). However, a school policy is not likely to eradicate bullying completely, and teachers need an effective way of dealing with bullying incidents whenever they occur. The No Blame approach has been used effectively in primary and secondary schools as well as in college environments (Maines and Robinson, 1994) and has been described as "a counselling method which stresses a non-punitive response to bullying" (DFE, 1994, p. 51)

The ecosystemic approach to changing chronic problem behaviour in schools was first developed by Molnar and Lindquist (1989) in the United States and has received some attention in this country (Cooper and Upton, 1990a, 1990b; Charlton and David, 1993, p. 115; Fontana, 1994, pp. 94-95, Cooper, Smith and Upton, 1994, pp. 85-113). The approach is based on a phenomenological systems theory derived from the work of Gregory Bateson (1972) and systemic family therapy (see, for example, Tyler, 1992). Briefly, it is a pragmatic approach to changing established problem behaviour in schools that does not depend on punishment or control. Unlike other approaches, the problem is not identified with the individual in isolation nor with the particular environment, but with the social ecosystem in

which the chronic problem behaviour shows itself. In ecosystemics, we are concerned with an ecology of mind (Bateson, 1972) - the system of values and meanings generated by the participants through their interpersonal and group interactions. In situations where the problem behaviour has become established over an extended period of time, the actions of all the people within the group contribute to the maintenance of that behaviour. The interested reader is referred to the book by Molnar and Lindquist (1989) for a full discussion of this approach.

There are many similarities between the No Blame approach to bullying and ecosystemics; there are also some differences to be noted. However, it should be made clear at this stage that this paper is not an attempt to demonstrate, for example, that the two approaches are equivalent, that they deal with the same situations, that one was derived from the other or that they are based on the same theoretical foundations. Further, the present paper develops a conceptual language for discussing these counter-intuitive approaches and aims to show that they both (i) have a particular range of application, (ii) depend to a large extent on the people using the techniques, (iii) eschew punishment and issues of truth and control, and (iv) challenge basic assumptions which teachers make about children and problem behaviour.

The paper is divided into three main sections; the first deals with congruence in interpersonal communication, the second with the natural attitude and the third with the relationship between the individual and the system. Apart from an initial

reference to the work of Anatol Picas (1989), whose Common Concern method is often compared to the No Blame approach, the paper concentrates mainly on a discussion of texts by Molnar and Lindquist (1989) and Maines and Robinson (1991a, 1991b, 1992) as these are the only primary sources which are relevant to the present discussion.

A great deal of the language used in the present paper derives from phenomenological psychology and ecosystemics but this should not be taken to imply that the No Blame approach can simply be reduced to a form of ecosystemics. However, ecosystemics is the starting point for the paper and defines the basic frame of reference; in this sense it may be more useful to think of this paper as an evaluation of the No Blame approach from an ecosystemic point of view.

Interpersonal Communication

This section examines the theme of congruence in interpersonal communication. A useful point of reference here is the work of Carl Rogers. Nearly all modern texts on the role of the counsellor recognise the importance of three core conditions of effective counselling; the counsellor needs to demonstrate congruence, empathy and acceptance (Rogers, 1959). Although all three conditions are necessary for the counsellor to establish positive relationships and effective communication, congruence is probably the most important:

Rogers came to believe that congruence or genuineness is the most fundamental of the attitudinal conditions that promote therapeutic growth. Congruence means that the therapist is what he or she is in the relationship without façade and without any attempt to assume or hide behind a professional role. (Thorne, 1992, pp. 36-37)

According to Rogers, the counsellor's intentions should be open and not hidden from the client; this means, for example, that if the counsellor has decided to take a particular course of action, she should not try to hide this from the client if she wants to maintain congruence.

To highlight this theme, it will be useful at this stage to compare the No Blame approach with the Common Concern method, which was developed by Anatol Picas (1989). Both the Common Concern method and the No Blame approach to bullying are "scripted" in the sense that discrete stages are outlined and the purpose of each stage is clearly elaborated:

The teacher follows a structured script with each pupil that leads to mutual agreement that the bullied pupil is unhappy at the present time, and is concluded by each pupil agreeing to help improve the situation in some way. (DFE, 1994, p. 49)

However, the difference between the two approaches can be demonstrated by considering the phrase "which leads to mutual agreement that the bullied pupil is unhappy" in the above quotation. How exactly do we achieve mutual agreement in each case?

It appears that the initial individual interview with the bully or "mobber" in the Common Concern method is a process of coaxing or manipulation, where the objective is to get the bully to see things in a particular way. The use of the word *manipulation* here denotes simply that the process that the therapist is using is not revealed to the bully:

> The task for the therapist, then, is to reinforce the mobber's answers with comments and further questions in such a way that the dialogue works towards the predetermined goal: the situation of the victim is something to be concerned about. (Picas, 1989, p. 95)

In a sense, there is a certain amount of pretence on the part of the therapist in conducting the interview:

> Though the whole purpose of the talk is to arrive at a common feeling, the therapist should never express verbally the notion that "we share a common problem"; this has to be conveyed through implication and non-verbal signals. (Picas, 1989, pp. 95-96)

Clearly the therapist has quite specific goals and expectations during the initial interaction that must remain concealed. For many teachers, particularly those who recognise the importance of congruence in interpersonal communication, this technique of trying to get the bully to see a particular point of view in this way may prove to be very difficult: Picas makes the point that, unlike psychologists, many teachers need training in this approach (Picas, 1989, p. 96). It is noteworthy that Picas implicitly criticises the "counselling" skills of teachers rather than reflecting on the actual process or the particular counselling approach the teacher is expected to undertake:

Many school teachers, however, need to work more fully with their own thoughts and feelings in order to discover in practice how to express the guiding theme of common concern for the victim. (Picas, 1989, p. 96)

Although the No Blame approach shares the same goal as the Common Concern method, (i.e. to achieve the realisation by the bully that the situation of the victim is something to be concerned about) the No Blame approach uses a much more direct strategy. During an initial individual interview, the teacher talks to the victim about his feelings and asks him to try to express these in a poem, a piece of writing or a drawing that the teacher can use when talking to those involved in the bullying. In a separate meeting, the group of pupils involved in the bullying are told about the way the victim is feeling and the way his life is being affected. The use of a piece of writing or a drawing is a very powerful way to help the teacher communicate this

message to the group. Those involved in the bullying can now see their own behaviour in a new light and can begin to understand the situation in a new way. Their own behaviour, their own beliefs and values have all been "reframed" directly by the feedback about their actions. However, there is nothing here that is manipulative, or that requires specific training beyond an understanding of the seven steps of the approach. The No Blame approach does not assume that teachers are, or can become, therapists. The approach is based upon those skills which teachers already possess - the ability to work effectively with individuals and groups. Congruence will help the teacher in this situation to communicate the thoughts and feelings of the victim to the group most effectively. Her own care and concern for all the pupils involved (i.e. bullies, bystanders and victims) will enable her to be genuine in the way that Rogers intended.

The process of reframing that is demonstrated so well by the No Blame approach is also central to the ecosystemic approach. Reframing is the key element in many of the techniques which Molnar and Lindquist introduce in their book. Throughout their discussions they stress the importance of congruence in interpersonal communication:

> ... some people initially confuse ecosystemic techniques with "reverse psychology" (saying one thing and thinking something else in order to trick another person into doing what you want) ... If, in any problem situation, you find that you cannot honestly describe the behaviour or the situation in a new

way, then you should not attempt to use ecosystemic techniques. (Molnar and
Lindquist, 1989, p. 44)

The No Blame approach and ecosystemics both emphasise the importance of
congruence and reframing, where the meanings associated with certain behaviours
are changed by an authentic positive communication. Moreover, in the ecosystemic
approach, positive connotation and reframing derive from the phenomenological
reduction, where the "natural attitude" is suspended. The following section goes on
to discuss this aspect more fully and relate it to three key areas in the No Blame
approach.

The Natural Attitude

A key feature of the ecosystemic approach to changing problem behaviour in schools
is based on the phenomenological reduction or the suspension of the "natural
attitude" (Tyler, 1994). Phenomenological psychology maintains that our everyday
non-reflective experience depends on a whole range of assumptions and
anticipations that we make about ourselves and the world. To be able apply the
ecosystemic approach we need to be able to put our assumptions and presuppositions
to one side:

What is required, then, is a "suspension of judgement": not because these
assumptions are inherently dubious, and need to be critically assessed as to

their truth or falsity, but solely in order to achieve a reflective standpoint which is appropriately "uncommitted". (Hammond et. al., 1991, p. 42)

We need to take up a perspective that is "disinterested" or "detached" in the sense that it is not committed to a particular ideology or belief system.

Likewise, in order to use the No Blame approach to bullying, teachers need to change the way they normally respond to particular situations. Maines and Robinson acknowledge that their approach provides a challenge to school practice, and they specifically urge teachers to set aside particular feelings in their dealings with bullies:

> ... the measure of the success of our intervention has to be the degree to which it stops the bullying. Some of the responses often made by teachers are not successful in achieving this ... Please try and set aside any feelings of retribution towards the bully - your aim is justice not morality; it is to change behaviour and thus achieve the best outcome for the victim. (Maines and Robinson, 1992, p. 6)

The No Blame approach not only asks teachers to set aside certain feelings about the bully, but also asks them to suspend the natural attitude in three quite specific ways: these relate to (i) the perception of bullying as "normal" behaviour, (ii) the

role of "truth" and (iii) the place of punishment. The following sections will focus on these aspects of the No Blame approach and relate them briefly to ecosystemics.

Bullying is "normal"

A common attitude among teachers is that bullying is an abnormal or evil thing to do. Maines and Robinson (1992, p. 10) maintain that, whether or not it is true, this view does not help us to stop the bullying. Recognising that bullying is a widespread problem associated with childhood and adolescence may make it easier for us to suspend the natural attitude and consider bullying to be a "normal" occurrence. Seen in this way, bullying can be considered as part of the normal process of growing up, and the way that we, as teachers, deal with it can be considered as part of the personal and social development of all those involved - the victim, the bystanders and the bullies.

> Because we all have such strong reactions of anger, distress and even revenge when we encounter bullying, it is hard to take a clear view of the "normality" of the behaviour. To say that something is normal means that it frequently occurs even when there is no pathological deviance. This does not mean it is desirable. (Maines and Robinson, 1992, p. 10)

This is not to deny that bullying can cause a great deal of pain and distress; on the contrary, the recognition of these factors is an important part of the approach. However, above everything else, the No Blame approach is a pragmatic one; its

prime objective is to stop the bullying, and Maines and Robinson maintain that considering bullying as "abnormal" does *not* help this process:

> We believe that it is not helpful to regard bullying as abnormal or evil ... (We) suggest that the primary focus of our plan to reduce bullying should be upon the feelings and status of the bully. She should be given the opportunity to acknowledge that there is a problem, to understand the degree of distress suffered, and to feel that her ability to change her behaviour is recognised. (1991, p. 6)

This perspective mirrors the co-operative approach in ecosystemics, which is based on the recognition that in any situation events may have different meanings for different participants:

> A co-operative perspective follows logically from the ecosystemic view that all behaviour has multiple meanings and multiple functions ... in solving problems, it is helpful to accept that each person is behaving in a way that is understandable given her or his perception of the situation. (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 21)

However, it is important to point out that neither approach tries to find out exactly what these multiple meanings and multiple functions are. As we shall see in the next section, the search for the truth does not always help to change the problem. It

is sufficient to recognise that multiple meanings and functions may well contribute to the problem situation. For example, in relation to the present discussion, our natural response may be to consider the bully to be abnormal or evil in some way. This will relate to the particular meaning the event has for us and the functions we attribute to the bully's behaviour. Acknowledging that the bully may not share our perceptions can help us to see the bully in a much more positive light. The No Blame approach assumes that the bully, or more correctly the bullying group, will co-operate in finding a solution to the problem:

> Convey throughout this process your belief that the young people involved are not "bad", are capable of kind behaviour and that they will help [the victim]. (Maines and Robinson, 1991, p. 16)

This is an important feature of both the No Blame approach to bullying and the ecosystemic approach to changing problem behaviour. The tendency to consider the individual abnormal in some way and in need of treatment needs to be put to one side.

Both approaches depend on a form of the phenomenological reduction and in order to use the techniques we need to suspend the natural attitude and to consider the multiple meanings and functions that may be operating within a group. Although it may be possible to speculate on the nature of these multiple meanings, neither

approach tries to establish what they are: both approaches recognise that finding the "truth" does not always lead to a solution to the problem.

"Getting to the bottom of it"

When dealing with specific bullying incidents or other forms of problem behaviour on a day to day basis, many teachers see their first priority as establishing "exactly what happened" by questioning all the pupils involved. As any experienced teacher knows, this is often an impossible task as children present so many different perspectives and conflicting points of view:

> It seems like common sense to question students about facts and reasons when bad behaviour is brought to our attention. When we talk to the young people they often report that they give teachers the answers they want - the answers that will let them out of the room as soon as possible. When you question young people about the facts they will give you their own perspective and these are often contradictory ... You may then be distracted from effective action in your quest for the truth. (Maines and Robinson, 1992, p. 6)

The idea that we need to establish the truth (or, indeed, that we *can* establish the truth) depends upon a positivist frame of reference. Picas (1989, p. 97), for example, in maintaining that we do not *need* to know the truth if we do not intend to punish, implies that we *could* find the truth if we so wanted. The No Blame approach assumes that the search for the truth is likely to be fruitless and, quite possibly,

counterproductive. The focus in the first stage of the approach is on the feelings of the victim rather than the various accounts about what happened: "Facts can be denied but feelings cannot" (Maines and Robinson, 1994). Communicating the victim's feelings to the bullying group is the main element in the reframing process. The first stage is not to get to the truth but to encourage the victim to tell his or her own story.

This process is an example of the reduction discussed above; the issue about the truth of what happened is placed on one side. The belief in the need for the truth needs to be suspended as the approach deals with the feelings involved rather than objective reality.

The ecosystemic approach to changing problem behaviour is based on a form of phenomenological psychology that maintains that the goal of a single independent objective truth is illusory. This point is connected closely to the concept of multiple meanings discussed above. Rather than maintaining that there is a single true statement that can be made about a situation, the approach accepts that there will be a whole range of such statements that can be made quite legitimately without contradiction:

> ... an ecosystemic approach allows people to adopt a new explanation about behaviour without rejecting old ones. Instead of rejecting your current interpretation of the problem behaviour, you are asked to entertain the

possibility that other explanations can also be true and that some of them may help you solve your problem. (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 20)

As this quotation demonstrates, the emphasis is on how effective the particular interpretation will be, because valid interpretations do not always lead to a solution of the problem. For example, disruptive behaviour is often explained in terms of a child's social background. Although this "explanation" may be true, it does not help to change the problem behaviour and may even serve to perpetuate it:

Explaining a problem in this way has several negative consequences. First, although much of what might be said about the child may be true, it is often unhelpful as a guide to positive change. The information does not give much practical guidance about changing the problem behaviour. Second, the educator is denied the opportunity to do something about the problem. After all, how can the educator alter a child's personality or events that occurred years in the past? (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, pp. xv-xvi)

A key idea in ecosystemics is that we need to consider alternative points of view, not because others are inaccurate, but simply to elaborate our range of options. As we have seen, a particular point of view may be true, but may not help us to change the situation. So, rather than trying to establish "the truth", the method depends on elaborating as many points of view as possible. In phenomenological psychology this process is referred to as the technique of imaginative variation which produces rich

descriptions of the world that can lead to a more co-operative way of dealing with the problem. Neither ecosystemics nor the No Blame approach depends on establishing a single, independent objective reality, and both consider that this can be counterproductive to finding a positive solution to the problem.

Punishment

Maybe the biggest challenge for us is to advise you to abandon punishment as a response to the bullies. We take a pragmatic approach and suggest that punishment simply does not work; in fact it will often make things worse when the bully takes further revenge on the victim. (Maines and Robinson, 1992, p. 7)

Many of the teachers I work with find this aspect of the approach quite difficult to accept initially. They often feel that it is right to punish the bully and feel that the approach is likely to be ineffective unless the bully is punished appropriately. However, once they become familiar with the approach and its effect on the bullying, many see this aspect as its main strength. As Maines and Robinson point out (1992, p. 7) some recommended approaches to bullying do depend on punishment and on making the situation as unpleasant as possible for the bully. However, such approaches, based on policing, sanctions and punishment, are unlikely to be effective:

A process which fails to engage the bully and makes no attempt to enhance feelings of concern and understanding is unlikely to bring about any

fundamental change in behaviour ... If the preventative policy depends on policing the environment, forbidding the behaviour, encouraging the victims and punishing the perpetrators then no lasting change can be expected. (Maines and Robinson, 1991a, pp. 16 and 17)

In establishing the No Blame approach in a school it is important to respond appropriately to the bully and to make it clear that effective action will be taken even though punishment will not be involved:

Bullying is an antisocial behaviour resorted to by inadequate people and we must respond in a way which will be helpful to their learning of improved behaviour ... If you want to encourage disclosure and you want to work positively with bullies then everyone in school must know that effective action will be taken but that it will not lead to punishment. (Maines and Robinson, 1992, p. 7)

It has already been shown that the ecosystemic approach does not use punishment or control but rather a co-operative approach based on reframing problem behaviour. Molnar and Lindquist do not even mention punishment in their account of ecosystemics and this reflects their predominantly positive tone. Their approach was developed from systemic family therapy; the following quote by a well known and highly respected practising therapist could equally well apply to ecosystemics:

It avoids the implication of fixing something that has broken down or is not functioning, and comes closer to becoming some kind of hopeful discourse. It is, as far as possible, non-judgmental and non-pejorative. It is not control oriented ... It is wary of an instructive stance. It shrinks away from an influence which is primarily intentional. It is pluralistic in nature focusing on many views rather than one. (Hoffman, 1988, p. 127)

In this section, the similarities between the two approaches have been illustrated with reference to the natural attitude and the phenomenological reduction. If we are to use these approaches then we have to suspend the natural attitude and in so doing become far more receptive to the positive possibilities in any situation:

The phenomenological reduction is a way of listening. [It] is a conscious, effortful, opening of ourselves to the phenomenon *as a phenomenon*. We do not want to see an event as an example of this or that theory that we have; we want to see it as a phenomenon in its own right, with its own meaning and structure. (Keen, 1975, p. 38: emphasis in original)

The final section of this paper will discuss the importance in both approaches of the individual and the group.

The Individual and the System

In the No Blame approach, the bully is not considered in isolation, but as part of a larger group. Even if "bystanders" are not actively engaged in the bullying they may be colluding in the action to a greater or lesser extent:

> If the witness supports the bully, however passive the support might be, then the behaviour is in some way owned by the whole group and the strengths of the group can be encouraged in order to confront the behaviour (Maines and Robinson, 1992, p. 18)

This is a key part of the strategy. After talking to the victim and getting her or his permission to talk to the bullying group, the whole group is seen by the teacher. By communicating the thoughts and feelings of the victim to the group, the event is reframed and takes on new meaning. As the discussion develops through the various stages, the members of the group are asked for their suggestions for solving the problem and the whole group accepts the responsibility to do something about it. The process works through the direct communication of concern by the teacher and, as this is done in a group setting, the responses of the members of the group help to establish a positive and co-operative atmosphere:

> Taking the view that bullying is an interaction which establishes group identity, dominance and status at the expense of another, then it is only by the development of higher values such as empathy, consideration, unselfishness,

that the bully is likely to relinquish her behaviour and function differently in a social setting. (Maines and Robinson, 1991, p. 16)

The ecosystemic approach also considers problems in terms of interpersonal factors rather than isolated individuals:

> From an ecosystemic perspective, problems are not seen as the result of one person's deficiencies or inadequacies. Instead problems are viewed as part of a pattern of interpersonal interaction. (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. xvi)

All members of a group have ideas about the nature of the group, the behaviour of themselves and other group members, and so on:

> The interaction of these ideas via behaviour constitutes the ecology of ideas that *is* the experienced social context of individuals. By describing the school or classroom as an ecology of ideas, we can make a clear distinction between its physical artefacts ... and the meanings those artefacts and the behaviours that occur in that space have for the individuals who occupy it. (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 12)

The ecology of ideas is the basis of the ecosystemic intervention. If we have been responding to a problem in a way that has not changed the problem, then our

behaviour will become part of the ecosystem and thereby become part of the problem. To change the problem we need to change our own behaviour:

> When an educator finds himself or herself repeatedly doing the same thing in response to a problem behaviour without satisfactory results, that pattern is at once a stable characteristic of the ecosystem and a reason to change. (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 14)

Both the No Blame approach and the ecosystemic approach do not consider the individual in isolation. On the contrary both approaches are based on the interpersonal factors operating in groups, particularly concerning the meanings which individuals attribute to the problem situations. Both approaches use a systemic approach to changing the problem behaviour.

For the purposes of the present discussion, I have considered a range of factors in this paper that demonstrate the similarities between the No Blame approach and ecosystemics. However, these factors are very closely related to each other, and often overlap. For example, although both approaches can be described as systemic, they both represent a novel formulation of systems thinking which derives from family therapy. Although this aspect is too complex to discuss in the present paper (see Tyler, 1996, for a detailed discussion of phenomenological systems) it can be seen that both approaches consider that the individual *and* the system are important factors. Not only is the individual important but so is the particular environment,

whether this is formulated in terms of the bullying group or as an ecology of ideas. Many authors have pointed out that this combination of internal and external factors is the main element that distinguishes phenomenological from behaviourist and humanistic psychologies:

Behaviourists ignore human subjectivity in favour of the external variables of organism and environment. Humanistic psychologists tend to ignore human activities in concrete meaningful situations in favour of inner experiences and individual capacities. But the phenomenological conception of the situation has been offered as a possible alternative to the one-sided behaviourist concern with the controlling power of the environment and the equally one-sided humanistic concern with the potentialities of the individual (Graumann, 1981, pp. 14 & 16).

As we have seen, both approaches depend on a form of the phenomenological reduction, or the Husserlian epoché (see Tyler 1994), and therefore challenge basic assumptions that teachers make about children and problem behaviour. Both approaches also depend upon a version of hermeneutic systems thinking which is based upon a Heideggerian reformulation of interpretation and meaning (see Tyler, 1996). In this way, both approaches can be considered as a form of phenomenological psychology.

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Chapter 6

Using the Ecosystemic Approach to Change

Chronic Problem Behaviour in Primary Schools.

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Using the Ecosystemic Approach to Change Chronic Problem Behaviour in Primary Schools.

ABSTRACT   This paper discusses a small scale study of the ecosystemic approach to changing chronic problem behaviour undertaken with a group of twelve Leicestershire primary teachers. A brief outline of the technique is presented as an introduction. Teachers' responses to the approach and the effectiveness of the techniques are discussed. Four case examples are presented and conclusions are drawn on the potential of the approach.

Introduction

Although there has been some research into ecosystemics in the United States (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989: 26-27), the approach has not been investigated in English primary schools. Consequently, many authors have pointed to the need for further research in this area (Cooper & Upton 1990a, 1990b; Cooper, Smith and Upton 1994; Fontana 1994). This paper presents the findings from a small scale study in which primary teachers were asked to try ecosystemic interventions in their own classrooms. As an introduction, this section presents a brief account of the ecosystemic technique itself. Those who would like a more detailed account are referred to the literature, particularly Cooper and Upton (1990b), Cooper, Smith and Upton (1994: 85-113), and Molnar and Lindquist (1989).

First of all, it should be pointed out that ecosystemics is specifically concerned with changing *chronic* problem behaviour, i.e. problem behaviour that has become established over time and has become part of a stable, self perpetuating cycle of events. The techniques have been developed specifically to help teachers deal with those problems that have not responded to other strategies or approaches.

The main techniques of ecosystemics are based upon the process of *reframing* the problem behaviour. The first stage is to think about a particular problem situation and to reflect on exactly what happens. It is important to focus on quite specific *chronic* situations, i.e. those which are predictable and occur with some regularity. The second stage is for the teacher to consider his or her normal *responses* to the

problem situation: What exactly does the teacher do or say and what are the results of his or her interventions? As can be seen, the whole problem situation is considered here, not just the pupil's problem behaviour but also the teacher's behaviour as well.

So, after considering the behavioural aspects of the situation, the teacher now considers his or her current *explanations* for the problem situation. From this stage, ecosystemics moves away from the approach of many behavioural interventions; the focus now becomes the teacher's own perceptions and evaluations of the situation. This makes the process reflexive in the sense that the teacher's own responses to the problem behaviour are considered to be part of the stable system and are also the subject of observation and reflection.

The first three stages described above prepare the way for the reframing stage itself. Unlike some other approaches, ecosystemics does not depend at this stage on blame, control or punishment. The teacher has to *reframe* his or her perceptions of the chronic problem situation in a positive and cooperative way (stage four), and then communicate this to the individual concerned (stage five).

In order to reframe the situation, the teacher needs to be empathic and be able to see the problem situation from the child's point of view. An important idea here is that a child's own interpretation of a situation may be quite different from a teacher's:

A child often interprets a situation in a very different way from the teacher, as for example when the child thinks a teacher's response to a question in class is a reprimand, when the teacher intended it as guidance. Both interpretations may be 'correct', in the sense that the child genuinely felt shown up and emotionally bruised in front of the rest of the class, while the teacher genuinely intended to be helpful. (Fontana, 1994: 94)

By considering the child's frame of reference, the teacher tries to construct positive interpretations of the problem behaviour. This, however, is not easy to do. Generally, teachers find the first three stages of the technique quite straightforward but, particularly when they are new to the technique, they usually need to spend several days observing the child and looking at the situation from different points of view in order to be able to develop an empathic perspective and reframe the behaviour positively.

However, once a positive interpretation has been found, the teacher can implement the last stage of the process. By considering alternative positive explanations, the teacher finds new ways of responding to the problem behaviour. This can vary from case to case but generally involves the teacher communicating the new interpretation to the child in some way and changing his or her own behaviour accordingly. In summary, the gist of the technique is that the teacher changes the stable problem situation by:

- finding positive interpretations of the problem behaviour

- communicating these to the child, and

- changing his or her behaviour in the light of the new interpretations.

Previously, the teacher's responses were part of the stable problem situation and were helping to maintain it. By changing this behaviour in an accepting and positive way, the teacher changes conflict into co-operation. The impact of such an intervention is often quite striking as the case examples at the end of this paper will show. Having outlined the main stages of the approach, we now move onto the details of the research.

Method

Sixty schools in Leicester and the north of the county were sent invitations to attend a series of conferences on changing chronic problem behaviour in schools. Fifteen primary teachers signed up for the conferences. Ten other teachers made enquiries about the conferences but were unable to attend for a variety of reasons including lack of funds to pay for supply cover and clashes with other commitments.

The teachers attended three half-day conferences which covered the ecosystemic approach and techniques. The conferences were held every four weeks to give teachers time to implement the ecosystemic techniques in their classrooms. Three handbooks describing the techniques (Jones and Tyler 1995a, 1995b, 1995c) were written to provide a source of reference and support for teachers when they returned

to their schools after each conference. For each attempted intervention, teachers were asked to complete activity sheets which were used as the basis for case examples. Through discussion, the case examples were verified and authorised by the teachers concerned. In addition, teachers completed questionnaires at the end of each conference so that their views on the approach could be monitored over time. Informal interviews and recorded discussions were used to supplement the information from the questionnaires to give a more detailed picture. Finally, two months after the final conference, co-researchers were invited to attend a follow up meeting to discuss further the approach and techniques.

Results and Discussion

The shortcomings of a study involving only a very small self-selected group of enthusiastic teachers are well known. Although the results are not conclusive, they have shown that the use of the ecosystemic techniques by teachers is an area worthy of further investigation. The present study was concerned with two main areas: (i) primary teachers' responses to the ecosystemic approach; and (ii) the impact of the techniques on chronic problem behaviour.

Teachers' responses to the ecosystemic approach

Of the fifteen co-researchers who attended the first conference, twelve continued with the research and attended the following two conferences. Of the three teachers who did not attend after the first conference, one wanted to continue but was unable to for several reasons:

- *The approach looks very useful ... I would have liked the opportunity to continue with the research, but due to several factors (staff illness, code of practice commitments and lack of supply cover) I'm afraid I shall probably fail to manage it.*

The other two felt that the approach was unrealistic and would not be successful:

- *As a school we are familiar with similar strategies - e.g. The No Blame approach - and there was a certain amount of scepticism, given our own circumstances, needs and thinking.*
- *After consultation with the staff, it was felt that ecosystemics would not fit in with our current thinking. However, I am sure that many other schools will find that the systems approach will meet their particular needs.*

In addition they had misunderstood the original information sent to schools and were expecting strategies for dealing with *severe* problem behaviour. Several other teachers had also misunderstood the term "chronic" in the conference details, even though the meaning of this term had been carefully explained. This theme will also be mentioned in the next section, which deals with the impact of the techniques.

Nine of the fifteen teachers who attended the first conference felt very sceptical about the approach. Many of the case examples, taken from Molnar and Lindquist

(1989), seemed to be unrealistic and even fanciful or absurd to most of the teachers, who felt that the examples were "too good to be true":

- *Some of the case studies were very hard to believe.*

- *The examples from the book you mentioned do not inspire me with confidence.*

However, all of the teachers, apart from the two mentioned above, expressed a willingness to try the reframing technique in their own classes even though it seemed very paradoxical and did cause considerable hesitation and scepticism:

- *I intend to continue with the research because I feel that once I fully get to grips with the ideas of reframing it will be of great value to me and my class.*

- *I am prepared to give it a try on the basis that it's better than continuing to bang my head against a brick wall!*

- *I would like to try the reframing technique in order to judge for myself how effective it is. I am interested in using this approach with a number of children whose behaviour has not been modified by other techniques.*

Despite their reservations, many teachers found the approach intriguing and six expressed more positive views that demonstrate a good grasp of the method and the underlying philosophy:

- *The approach looks excellent and reflects some of my own thinking about managing chronic problems. Such behaviour is probably reinforced by my failure to change it previously. Over a period of time the behaviour has almost become a learned response.*

- *The ideas were very useful and I welcome another positive approach to dealing with the difficult child.*

- *I like the way that the technique encourages us to stand back and take a different point of view rather than perpetuating the classroom situation.*

At the second conference, six teachers talked about their attempts at the reframing technique and this had an impact on those who had not at that stage tried any interventions. Hearing colleagues relate their experiences helped them to accept the techniques more fully:

- *The most useful part, for me, was listening to the experiences of other teachers when they were describing reframing situations.*

- *I found other people's comments and experiences very useful and was pleased that the people who had tried the reframing technique were able to speak at length.*

- *The whole thing started to make so much more sense hearing others talk about their attempts. I was very impressed with how effective the interventions were.*

Eight of the twelve teachers who attended the second conference were much clearer about the technique of reframing, but most (eleven teachers) found it difficult to understand the new techniques that were introduced.

- *I felt too rushed to take in the new techniques - too much to do - we need more time.*

After the third conference, many teachers were still finding the reframing technique the most useful and were continuing to find it difficult to take on board any new approaches in the given time. All the teachers on the course expressed this need for more time:

- *It would have been useful to have full days rather than half days to fit in all the new ideas.*
- *We need more time for discussion - a lot of good work went on during the coffee breaks!*

Teachers' responses to the techniques had changed considerably during the period of the fieldwork. Scepticism about the techniques decreased in the group as more case studies were presented, and the examples presented by colleagues were seen to be far more believable than those presented by Molnar and Lindquist.

- *It is interesting to hear other people's interpretation of the methods, both as a fund of possibilities for ourselves and as an affirmation of our own methods. It's always nice to know you're on the right track.*

- *The examples the others talked about were far more convincing than the American ones we looked at in the first conference. Maybe it's a difference of cultures - maybe it's hearing it from the horses mouth ...*

From questionnaire responses and from recorded comments made at the third conference and at the final review meeting, it was clear that by the end of the study, nine of the twelve teachers felt that the reframing approach offered an effective way of dealing with chronic problem behaviour:

- *I find myself thinking of reframing whenever a problem situation arises. I shall be thinking of positive alternatives now as a matter of course.*

- *Although I feel it is an approach that needs careful thought and some time spent in preparation, I have found it very useful and effective. It highlights the need for teachers to alter their responses to situations and their attitudes towards problem behaviour.*

- *This work has made me consider more carefully how I perceive problem behaviour and the ways in which I react to it. I realise now that the way I handle situations causes or aggravates problem behaviour.*

However, six of the twelve also found the terminology rather daunting:

- *Some of the jargon was difficult to absorb - is it possible to put things into more every-day language?*

- *I understand the basic reframing process now and that is very useful. However, I'm really not sure about the other techniques. Too much jargon - very off-putting - I couldn't see the wood for the trees.*

It is worth noting that the three teachers who were still unsure about the technique were all in their first or second year of teaching and had not tried any interventions of their own. This may indicate that the ecosystemic approach is an advanced technique that is only appropriate for more experienced teachers.

- *I am aware that I haven't tried any interventions at all. I seem to have too many other things to think about at the moment.*

- *Perhaps trying the interventions is the key to understanding them - I haven't tried any (too busy!) and still feel unsure about them.*

The impact of ecosystemic techniques on chronic problem behaviour

Of the six co-researchers who had attempted the reframing technique after the first conference, four reported successful interventions. They felt that they had dramatically changed chronic problem situations and were surprised by how effective the interventions had been. They had tried so many techniques for changing the problem behaviour in the past and really did not expect such

immediate results. They all expressed considerable relief at having changed such long standing situations, and their enthusiasm was obvious as well as infectious.

- *Well, it took me quite a while to find that positive perspective with Jason, but the intervention itself was so successful - well worth the effort - I could hardly believe it!*

- *It really does make sense when you try it - it felt so odd being so positive about such a negative situation, but it worked so well.*

- *I realised that I had just given up with changing Mark's behaviour because I had tried everything. I told myself that I would just have to live with it. It is such a relief to have changed something that has been going on for so long.*

As was mentioned briefly above, there was some confusion among teachers about the type of problem behaviour that could be changed using ecosystemics. Care was taken to explain the nature of *chronic* problem behaviour and to emphasize that the approach was not recommended for *severe* problem behaviour nor designed to replace therapeutic interventions. Through informal interviews and an analysis of the activity sheets accompanying each intervention, it became apparent that physical violence and other forms of destructive and extremely disruptive behaviour did not respond as well to the reframing technique as more commonplace problems. These results correspond to those found by Molnar and Lindquist (1989: 42), who suggest that the techniques are best used in "chronic problem situations in which the problematic behaviour and the response to it are predictable". Despite this

reservation, it must be made clear that although the ecosystemic techniques did not stop the problem behaviour in these extreme cases, in every case where it was used alongside other long term therapeutic interventions and when the technique focused on quite specific aspects of the problem situation, it helped to improve the situation significantly (see case example 4). Again, this supports the assertion that the techniques can be used alongside other approaches, "as part of a larger plan" (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989: 41).

By the end of the study, the group of co-researchers had used three of the techniques successfully and produced fifteen case examples: reframing (12), positive connotation of motive (2) and positive connotation of function (1). None of the teachers had attempted to use symptom prescription, storming the back door, locating exceptions or predicting and handling a relapse. As mentioned above, many of the teachers commented that not enough time had been allowed in the conferences to introduce these approaches effectively.

Of the fifteen case examples produced, ten were completely successful and five partially so. In the successful cases the problem behaviour stopped completely, and in the partially successful ones there was a significant improvement in the situation. Four other cases were attempted which had not been successful. The partially successful and unsuccessful examples proved to be very useful in analysing and clarifying the techniques.

- *It was when we discussed my unsuccessful attempt that I really started to understand the importance of being sincere in looking for positive explanations.*

- *It was really useful to see where others had gone wrong - it made me feel more confident about trying the process myself.*

- *I thought it was interesting to see why an intervention hadn't worked too well, and reassuring that the problem hadn't got any worse.*

Case Examples

In this section, four of the case studies produced by teachers are presented, along with discussions which highlight aspects of the technique. The first shows how the approach can be used to deal with a common form of chronic problem behaviour.

Case Example 1: First at everything.

Matthew, a year three pupil, always wanted to be first at everything - first to line up, first to show his work and first to answer questions. He also persisted in answering questions directed at other children during class discussions, as well as when children were working individually or in groups. He would often push others out of his way in order to be first in line.

Sue, his teacher, had tried telling him quite firmly that he must wait his turn and insisted that he put up his hand and wait until she had asked him a question. When he pushed others she reprimanded him and made him wait until the other children had lined up. Sue felt that the reason for his behaviour was that he was seeking

attention from both herself and other children. He clearly wanted to be first on every occasion and was happy to dominate others by answering questions or by his physical presence. Sue had tried positive reinforcement, for example by giving Matthew turns at being first, or by directing questions at him before he could shout out an answer and then giving positive feedback whenever his behaviour was appropriate, but there had been no change in his behaviour.

As these attempts had produced little change in the situation, Sue decided to use the reframing technique. She tried to find some positive alternative explanations for his behaviour, and after some hard thinking came up with the following plausible ideas: more than anything else, Matthew wanted to please his teacher and his fellow pupils, and he wanted to win their approval. He tried to do this by demonstrating his knowledge by answering questions correctly; in this way he hoped to win praise from his teacher and admiration from other children. He also demonstrated his eagerness to please by lining up quickly, wanting to be seen to be the first to do as Sue asked.

Sue implemented her reframing by telling Matthew that she understood his enthusiasm and that she was very pleased that he really wanted to help her and to do what she wanted. They discussed answering questions in discussions and Sue told him that she would say quite clearly when she wanted Matthew to answer. (She had made up her mind that she would respond with praise for a correct response or help to provide the right answer if his initial one was wrong.) In addition, she told

Matthew that she would also ask him to choose the next person to answer a question in these situations. In relation to lining up she told him that she would be asking him to go and line up first, hold the door for others and select the order in which other children lined up.

These interventions were very successful during the question and answer sessions. However, there was still a problem with the lining up situation. Many of the other children felt that it was unfair that Matthew was always first in line. In response to this Sue explained to the class how pleased she was that Matthew wanted to do as she asked so quickly and readily, and explained that she would give others the chance to be first in line and see if they could organise the line as efficiently. Rather than letting Matthew always be first in line, she now asked him to walk to the line in an orderly fashion to show the other children how to behave. She also extended the idea of letting Matthew choose the next person to answer a question in group discussions by asking him to select the next person to be first in the line.

Sue was part of a group of teachers who were researching the reframing technique and she first told the group about this situation just after she had implemented the second stage of this process; she also said that she wasn't sure whether it would be successful. At the following meeting of the group a month later, Sue did not mention this particular example, and a colleague from another school asked her what the outcome had been. After a brief pause, Sue replied that she had forgotten all about that particular problem because it had gone away. Matthew no longer

called out to answer questions and lining up was not a problem any more. She was surprised at herself for not remembering because it had been a considerable relief at the time.

Discussion: This is quite a complex example because of the way that the teacher was able to modify her original intervention due to unforeseen problems. However, she did not change her positive alternative explanations for Matthew's behaviour, only the practical application of those ideas. The teacher in this situation demonstrates a real understanding of the processes which are operating in the complex ecosystem of the classroom.

The particular interventions which produced such a positive result may at first look very similar to Sue's previous strategies. Sue had already tried positive reinforcement by giving Matthew positive feedback for appropriate behaviour when she gave him "turns at being first, or by directing questions at him before he could shout out an answer". This technique, which is often successful, is quite different from reframing as it focuses solely on the behaviour of the pupil rather on the teacher's interpretation of that behaviour. In this example, Sue had had to rethink her own point of view and try to look at the situation in a positive way. And, of course, the key to the difference here is that Sue then communicated that positive view of his behaviour to Matthew by talking the situation through with him, and used that as the basis for moving forward.

As we have seen, the initial intervention was successful in terms of Matthew's behaviour but caused problems with some of the other children in the class who felt that it was unfair that Matthew should always be first in line. This is not uncommon with ecosystemic interventions as the outcome cannot be predicted with any certainty. This is an example of the *ripple effect*, where effects of the intervention can be seen in other parts of the ecosystem.

However, Sue was able to maintain her alternative explanation that Matthew really wanted to help her and to do what she wanted by first of all saying to the whole class how pleased she was that Matthew wanted to cooperate with his teacher (this is an example of repeating the original intervention) and then by asking them if they could organise the line as efficiently. Matthew was then given the responsibility of showing the other children how to line up properly and of choosing the next child to be first in line. This new intervention gave Matthew further scope for demonstrating his willingness to please his teacher. The boy who would once call out in discussions and who would push and shove to be first in line now seems to thrive on his new responsibility and his improved relationships with his teacher and his peers.

The story around this case example also shows how easy it is to forget problems once they have gone away. Once the ecosystem has adjusted, the new behaviours become stable and a part of a new classroom atmosphere. Within this new framework people behave, feel and relate in different ways.

Of course, problem situations are not always to do with disruptive behaviour. This next example shows how the technique was used to change a pupil's work patterns.

Case Example 2: The daydreamer.

Richard, a seven year old, was apparently bright and capable yet produced very little work. He did not chatter and was not disruptive in class but did appear to daydream a lot. This resulted in his work being rarely complete, with a number of tasks being left unfinished at the end of each day. His teacher, Anne, responded to this behaviour by reprimanding him and reminding him to concentrate on the task in hand. However, the effects of these reprimands were short lived; although he did begin to work for a short period of time, as soon as his teacher was involved with others he stopped working. This meant that the reprimands and reminders became an almost constant feature of their interactions.

The teacher's initial understanding of the situation was that Richard lacked the ability to concentrate for sustained periods of time. He seemed to have only a little interest in the work he was given and would try to avoid work if he could. Although Anne felt that these were correct interpretations of his behaviour, it was clear to her that they were not helping to change the situation. She then decided to use the reframing technique and try to find other explanations for his behaviour.

Anne identified three possible alternative explanations for his inability to complete work. Firstly, he thought deeply about his work and found it difficult to record his

thoughts quickly. Secondly, that because his work was always neat, he was very particular about presentation. Finally, perhaps he felt overwhelmed by the task and needed more help. Once she had been able to find positive alternative explanations for his behaviour, Anne decided to talk to Richard about the unfinished tasks in order to introduce the reframing of his behaviour to him.

She complimented him on the fact that his work looked very neat, but as he took such a long time maybe he needed more help. They talked about daydreaming, and Richard said he was thinking about their topic on Space and how he would like to be an astronaut when he grew up. He also said he liked this work, enjoyed finding out about lots of things and liked to produce good work. Anne was really surprised by these comments as she had no idea that he felt this way about his work. She promised to help him begin pieces of work and asked him to come to her if he found it hard to continue.

This discussion showed Anne that Richard did indeed think deeply about his work, although she was somewhat surprised that he talked so enthusiastically about it. As promised, Anne helped Richard for a short time (four or five minutes) at the beginning of each session and found that he did his work more quickly. After their discussion, Richard seemed happy to work a little longer on tasks than usual. He also started to come to Anne for help more frequently rather than spending long periods of time daydreaming. There has been a significant improvement in this

situation - Anne doesn't need to help Richard at the start of every session now and most of Richard's work is being completed or almost completed.

Discussion: The stages that Anne went through in dealing with this problem are a good illustration of the reframing process. This case is also a good example of how an ecosystemic intervention can help in those chronic problem situations which have not responded to other approaches. Although Richard's behaviour was not disruptive, it had become a source of concern for Anne. She knew that Richard could do more work - but she did not know how to achieve this.

There seem to be several clear stages in this example. First, Anne recognised that the problem situation was stable - the same things were happening over and over again: - daydreaming and little or no work being done; reminders and reprimands from Anne; only immediate or short term improvements; return to daydreaming and no work; more reminders, and so on. The teacher's response in this setting had become part of the problem situation. This was a sign that the problem had become a stable ecosystem and was a cue for using the reframing technique.

Second, she identified her existing interpretations of the problem situation; and although she felt that they were true, she realised that they were not helping to change the problem. Her interpretations of Richard's behaviour may also have been helping to perpetuate the situation. Third, Anne was able to identify three possible positive interpretations for the problem behaviour. She found this quite difficult to

do at first, as in order to do this she had to suspend her previous ideas about Richard's behaviour, she had to put her preconceptions on to one side so that other, more positive perspectives could be found. It was also important for Anne to frame these alternatives in an honest and plausible way; she needed to feel that they were genuine alternatives in which she could believe.

Fourth, once genuine positive alternatives had been found, Anne was able to communicate them to Richard during a discussion about his work. By changing her own behaviour in the problem situation and by maintaining a high level of support initially, Anne was able to change the problem behaviour itself.

The solution to the problem seems simple and straightforward once it has been found. The difficulty is in being able to set aside our natural responses to the situation and in finding positive alternatives. However, once these have been found and communicated to the child the whole nature of the problem changes. Occasionally interventions need to be repeated, but in this case Anne was able to monitor the situation and provide the agreed level of support to effect the change. Incidentally, Anne noted that although this could be regarded as a small or even trivial problem, it was a considerable relief to see Richard taking a more active role in his school work and contributing more to the class. Not only had the problem situation improved significantly but so had her relationship with Richard, which was no longer characterised by constant reminders and reprimands.

Case Example 3: The key holder.

Hazel is a special needs teacher in a large primary school, who works with small groups of children in her own specially appointed classroom. Her normal routine is to go to each class to collect a group of pupils and take them back to her room. As it is such a large school, this often means walking a considerable distance through the school with a group of five or six children. Normally this is not a problem, but it does feature in the present case study. As she is away from her classroom for some time whilst she is collecting her group of pupils she always locks the door.

Bradley was a year six pupil in one of the groups which Hazel collected from the other end of the school. The group normally worked very well together and looked forward to their sessions. The pupils were now in the second term of the school year and they were used to the routine of walking over to the room with Hazel. When they arrived at the room, several of the children would want to use the keys to unlock the door and arguments would often start. Bradley was usually at the centre of any dispute and would often become quite angry and subsequently uncooperative if he was not the one to unlock the door. This situation had got the point where the arguments about who was going to use the keys would start as soon as Hazel had collected the group from their classroom. The arguments would then continue all the way to the classroom and sometimes continue into the main teaching session. The issue of the keys was becoming quite disruptive to the smooth running of the group and to the enjoyment of some of the pupils.

Hazel's initial response was to explain to the group that everyone should have a turn at using the keys but Bradley seemed to become more and more persistent about being the one to unlock the door. When it came to Bradley's turn to open the door he ran off with the keys, unlocking and entering the classroom some time before the rest of the group arrived. This behaviour concerned Hazel for a number of reasons, but mostly because she felt that it was unsafe for Bradley to rush through the school with her keys and then enter the classroom on his own. Even though she had reprimanded and talked to him about the seriousness of this situation and stressed the consequences of doing it again, Bradley continued in the same manner and even ran off with the keys a second time. Hazel was annoyed by his behaviour and felt that Bradley couldn't be trusted to be on his own in this way; she was also becoming tired of the way that he constantly pestered her for the keys and refused to do as she asked. Hazel was also starting to feel powerless in the situation as she realised that her interventions were not effective and were creating a highly charged confrontational atmosphere.

It was at this stage that Hazel was introduced to the reframing technique and realised immediately that she could use it in this situation. The first step was to try to think of plausible positive explanations for Bradley's behaviour. After giving the situation a lot of thought, she came up with several positive alternatives and used these for the basis of her intervention. Her main ideas were that Bradley was being helpful and that he was very keen to please her by unlocking the door.

She told him quite clearly that she was pleased that he was trying to help her by taking responsibility for opening the door for everyone, and because of his enthusiasm she had decided that he should be "the key holder". When Hazel collected the group from the class, she gave the keys to Bradley to hold. Carrying the keys, he would walk over to the classroom with the rest of the group. He would then decide who would unlock the door, ensuring over the course of time that everyone had a turn.

Hazel was amazed at how effective this intervention was. There had been a transformation in Bradley and the problems he was having simply disappeared. There were no longer any arguments about the keys and the atmosphere in the group sessions were vastly improved. Bradley seemed genuinely pleased by this development and took his new role very seriously. Hazel complimented him on how well he did his job and felt considerably relieved that this problem had been solved in such a positive way.

Hazel was a member of a group of primary teachers who were trying the reframing technique and the group had been discussing the idea of an ecosystem (particularly in relation to the classroom ethos) in order to help teachers understand the approach. When she reported the above case study to the group, someone said that it was interesting that the intervention had been so successful as she didn't have her own class. Her response was that even though she didn't have her own class, she did have her own ecosystem.

Discussion: This is a good example of how the reframing technique can change an established pattern of behaviour. As Hazel said, even though she didn't have her own class, the group had got used to the routine of going to her room on a regular basis and had worked together as a unit for some time and had thereby formed a stable ecosystem. During the spring term the problem behaviour had become part of that stable system and Hazel was having difficulty in changing that behaviour. As many other teachers have commented, the hard part about using this technique (especially for the first time, as in this case) is being able to break away from normal responses and explanations, which tend to be negative (i.e. Bradley was being difficult and not doing what his teacher told him) and finding positive perspectives (i.e. Bradley was actually being enthusiastic and trying to help his teacher). This may even take a couple of days of mulling the situation over until plausible alternatives come to mind. However, once this positive view has been found, implementing the technique is quite straightforward. Teachers are often surprised at how effective an intervention can be; when the intervention is successful the situation seems to switch to a completely different level rather than simply producing a slight improvement in the situation. A more positive climate is established which bears little relationship to the original problem.

So far we have looked at examples of chronic situations. The last example shows how reframing can be used alongside other approaches for chronic problem behaviour which is also severe.

Case Example 4: Telling tales or concerned helper?

Martin, a year two pupil, had been very disruptive in class and he was a problem both for the teacher and other children. Martin had always been a rather difficult boy, but recently his behaviour had become quite extreme. He often refused to listen, sitting with his back to the teacher or putting his hands over his ears. If this behaviour was ignored then he would begin to make noises, disturb other children, climb on furniture and even throw objects and furniture around the classroom. The teacher, Jenny, had tried to deal with these problems with a whole range of non-confrontational approaches, including positive reinforcement; although these approaches were not completely effective, there was a significant improvement in Martin's behaviour. He certainly seemed much more aware of his own behaviour and the types of behaviour that were inappropriate in the classroom.

The improvement continued over time, but as he began to conform more and more to acceptable forms of behaviour he became concerned about the behaviour of other pupils in the class. He repeatedly drew Jenny's attention to what he perceived to be inappropriate behaviour by his classmates and took it upon himself to suggest punishments. He also reprimanded children himself, threatened to smack them and on occasions did so. A typical scenario occurred recently when he overheard Jenny telling Matthew that his writing was a little large. Later, Martin came to tell Jenny that Matthew's writing was still too large and asked her to tell him off. Not only did this kind of behaviour demand a disproportionate amount of Jenny's time, it was also distressing some of the other children in the class.

Jenny usually objected to "tale telling", and she suggested that Martin made sure *he* was behaving properly and leave her to decide if others were naughty. This only seemed to exacerbate the problem, as Martin subsequently smacked Peter on the hand when he was fetching felt pens from a table. As Peter was behaving quite appropriately, Jenny reprimanded Martin, which he saw as unfair. Such behaviour became persistent and resulted in some of them retaliating directly against Martin.

Jenny's initial reaction was to feel irritated by Martin's behaviour, especially as his views were frequently misplaced. She thought that he was trying to draw her attention to the behaviour of other pupils because he was so often seen as the "naughty boy" by other children. As she often had to discipline him it seemed that he wanted her to discipline others for actions he believed to be wrong.

After being introduced to the ecosystemic approach, Jenny decided to try the reframing technique and identify other, positive, explanations for his behaviour. She considered that this child, who had a long history of behaviour difficulties, may be attempting to change his own behaviour by observing others and her reaction to them. By telling her of problems in the class, perhaps he hoped to find out how she would solve them so he could modify his own behaviour accordingly. He was also trying to help her by telling her if others were causing problems. On the basis of this new perspective, Jenny was able to formulate a way to change her response.

Jenny decided that when Martin told her about other children's behaviour her reaction should be one of concern rather than irritation. Instead of reprimanding him for 'telling tales', she would say that he was good for sharing his concern for others and that he was being helpful to her and other children in doing this. She also decided actively to encourage the boy to assist her in helping the other children.

When she put these ideas into practice the outcome was very successful. The next time she responded to Martin's concern, he came with her and behaved in a supportive way; on another occasion he put his arm around the other child. He seemed to be reassured by Jenny's new approach when she interpreted his behaviour as concern for others. He became more considerate, cooperative and tolerant. The smacking and threats of punishments had stopped. Tale telling was much less frequent.

Discussion: This is a good example of how ecosystemics can be used as part of a larger plan for dealing with problem behaviour. Ecosystemic interventions are not appropriate for extreme problem behaviour but can be used to focus on specific situations within that context. Martin was responding well to a variety of strategies but this new problem behaviour began to develop once he had started to become more cooperative. As soon as Jenny became aware that his behaviour and her response to it were becoming persistent and predictable, she realized that she could try the reframing approach. By seeing the "tale telling" in a positive light, i.e. as an

expression of concern for other children and an attempt to help the teacher, Jenny was able to change the problem situation by changing her own behaviour.

When Jenny told us about this example she remarked that she was quite surprised at how effective the intervention was, because Martin was not normally an easy boy to get along with. This was the first time that Jenny had used an ecosystemic technique and she found it hard to find the key to reframing. The difficulty was in being able to see the problem situation in a positive way because to do this she had to change her normal response to the situation. Although it had taken Jenny some time to think the method through and to find a positive interpretation, once this had been done the intervention itself took little time to carry out and had a real impact on the problem situation. Jenny feels that her relationship with Martin has improved which has helped her to deal more effectively with other aspects of his behaviour.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that all of the teachers involved felt that they needed more time to learn the techniques, it is evident that that the ecosystemic approach has a great deal of potential for changing chronic problem behaviour in schools. The reframing approach was particularly well received and widely used by the teachers. We feel that it is important not to underestimate the importance of this situation. Only the nine experienced teachers were actively involved in the research. In every case, they were experiencing problems and difficulties in their classrooms which they simply could not solve, despite all their experience and despite their knowledge of other

available approaches and techniques. The fact that successful interventions were produced indicates that ecosystemics can deal with chronic problem situations effectively. There are still very many questions to address, but the implementation of this approach is worthy of further investigation. Based on these preliminary findings, a larger study is now being funded by a grant from ESRC.

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Chapter 7

Changing Chronic Problem Behavior in

Primary Schools: A Client-Centered

Ecosystemic Approach for Teachers

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Changing Chronic Problem Behavior in Primary Schools:

A Client-Centered Ecosystemic Approach for Teachers

ABSTRACT   This paper presents the findings from two studies in which primary teachers were asked to try ecosystemic interventions in their own classrooms. The paper focuses on the main parallels between the Ecosystemic Approach and the Person-Centred Approach. In particular, the paper considers the importance of Rogers' core conditions for personality and behaviour change in using the Ecosystemic Approach

Introduction

This paper is divided into four main sections. The first presents an introduction to the Ecosystemic approach itself and covers our work with primary teachers in the past. This will be a fairly detailed presentation in order to familiarize readers with the main features of the approach.

The paper continues with some theoretical issues, by considering the process of change from the point of view of ecosystemic theory as outlined by Molnar and Lindquist (1989).

The third section considers the practical importance of Rogers' (1957) conditions for personality and behavior change, which emerged in our work with primary teachers. It became clear that, for our teachers, the core conditions were the key to making successful ecosystemic interventions in the classroom.

Finally, I will consider the implications of these ideas for further research into ecosystemics, with particular reference to Rogerian perspectives.

The Ecosystemic Approach

This section presents an account of the ecosystemic technique itself and incorporates the findings from two studies in which primary teachers were asked to try ecosystemic interventions in their own classrooms (Tyler and Jones 1998, 2000). However, this is not as straightforward as it may appear, as the method is counter-

intuitive and the vast majority of teachers who hear about it are very sceptical or even cynical about its use and effectiveness in the classroom. Those who would like a more detailed account are referred to the literature (especially Cooper and Upton, 1990, for a good summary, and Molnar and Lindquist, 1989).

Chronic problem behavior

First of all, it should be pointed out that ecosystemics is specifically concerned with changing *chronic* problem behavior, i.e. problem behavior that has become established over time and has become part of a stable, self perpetuating cycle of events. For this reason, it is designed to be used alongside other approaches for managing problem behavior, and is designed to help teachers deal with those problems that have not responded to other strategies.

Stages one and two: clarifying the problem behavior and teacher responses

The main ecosystemic techniques, which are based upon the process of *reframing* the problem behavior, can be broken down into five discrete stages. The first stage is to think about a particular problem situation and to reflect on exactly what happens. It is important to focus on quite specific *chronic* situations, i.e. those which are predictable and occur with some regularity. The second stage is for the teacher to consider his or her normal responses to the problem situation. What exactly does the teacher do or say and what are the results of the interventions? It must be stressed at this stage that we need to consider the teacher's normal, every-day, *unreflective* responses to the situation. We found that in very many cases the

teacher's response had become established through the long term interactions with the pupil, and was often something that the teacher was not consciously aware of.

Stage three - establishing current explanations

So, after considering the behavioral aspects of the situation, the teacher now considers his or her current explanations for the problem situation. From this stage on, ecosystemics moves away from the approach of many behavioral interventions; the focus now becomes the teacher's own perceptions, evaluations and explanations of the situation. This makes the process reflexive in the sense that the teacher's own responses to the problem behavior are considered to be part of the stable ecosystem, and are also the subject of observation and reflection.

Teachers' explanations for chronic behavior typically, and understandably, tend to be based on negative evaluations of the problem behavior. It is perfectly natural for chronic problem behavior to be construed negatively, as these situations often prevent teachers from fulfilling one or more of their many roles in the classroom. In addition, because teachers feel that they need to be effective managers of problem behavior, they often find chronic situations particularly stressful.

Common explanations

There are many ways in which teachers explain chronic problem behavior, each one based on particular questions they may ask themselves in order to help them understand the situation. We will consider the main ones here. The first type of question focuses on particular attributes of the child concerned: "What is it about

this child that makes him or her behave in this way?" There are a range of responses. For example, the child may be lazy, aggressive, immature and so on. Or the child may have poor social skills, a learning disorder or a negative view of authority for example. Or, finally, the child's behavior may be related to his or her present social situation, home environment or events which occurred in the past.

The second type of question asks, "Why does this child do this? What are his or her motives?" Common responses include attention seeking, needing to withdraw, or seeking power or revenge in some way.

The third question considers the outcome of the behavior: "What is the payoff for the child?" The most common responses from teachers were: making other children laugh, getting attention or approval from other pupils, getting other children or the teacher annoyed, and providing a distraction from work.

The need to change ineffective explanations

It is important to make something clear at this stage of the process. Ecosystemics does not take a critical view of negative interpretations per se. In fact, such interpretations of chronic problem behavior are quite natural and understandable and sometimes they can help the teacher to deal effectively with problem situations. For example, by understanding something about the child, or the relevant background factors, teachers often gain an insight into the child's world which can help them to manage the situation more effectively.

Obviously, however, in the case of chronic problem behavior, these explanations, no matter how true or well founded they may be, are simply not helping the teacher to change the situation. In cases where existing (and usually negative) explanations are not facilitating change, ecosystemics can be used. Ecosystemics helps teachers see the whole problem and to see how the stable behavior patterns are often linked to their (usually stable) explanations of the situation. Ecosystemics asks teachers to change only those explanations which are not proving *effective* in changing the problem behavior.

Reframing

The three stages described above prepare the way for the reframing stage itself. Unlike many other approaches to managing problem behavior in schools, ecosystemics does not depend on reward or punishment, apportioning blame, enforcing sanctions or seeking to take control of the situation in some other way. Rather, it is informed by a trust in the child's actualizing tendency, which is the "foundation block of Client-Centred Therapy" (Bozarth, 1996, p. 45) together with a belief that the child's behavior is valid and meaningful to the child given his or her own interpretation of the situation. The teacher has to *reframe* his or her perceptions of the chronic problem situation in a positive and cooperative way (stage four), and then communicate the reframing to the individual concerned (stage five).

In order to reframe the situation, the teacher needs to ask the question, "What positive alternative explanations might there be for this behavior?" (Molnar and

Lindquist, 1989, p. 173). An important idea here is that a child's own interpretation of a situation may be quite different from a teacher's, and that long term established behavior may be positive and meaningful in some way for the child. The teacher needs to *entertain the possibility* that different but equally valid interpretations exist, and that positive interpretations of the problem behavior can be found.

> A child often interprets a situation in a very different way from the teacher, as for example when the child thinks a teacher's response to a question in class is a reprimand, when the teacher intended it as guidance. Both interpretations may be 'correct', in the sense that the child genuinely felt shown up and emotionally bruised in front of the rest of the class, while the teacher genuinely intended to be helpful. (Fontana, 1994, p. 94)

The difficulty of finding positive interpretations

By finding a new frame of reference and by changing our interpretation to a more positive one, we can find a solution to the problem by substituting co-operation for conflict. This, however, is not easy to do. Generally, teachers find the first three stages of the technique quite straightforward. When teachers are new to the technique, they usually need to spend several days looking at the situation from different points of view in order to be able to reframe the behavior positively. As was discussed earlier, teachers' usual explanations of problem behavior are negative. However, in chronic situations, these negative views also become entrenched and stable themselves. It is these entrenched views about problem behavior which

become the obstacles to implementing the reframing technique. After such a long time, the very idea of finding a positive interpretation for the problem behavior may seem quite absurd. The difficulty that teachers experience in using this technique is the difficulty we all experience in trying to change stable aspects of ourselves, the difficulty of trying to *reinterpret* our entrenched experiences in a new light.

However, once a positive interpretation has been found, the teacher can go onto the last stage of the process. Based on the alternative explanation, the teacher finds a new way of responding to the problem behavior. This can vary from case to case but generally involves the teacher communicating the new interpretation to the child in some way and changing his or her own behavior accordingly.

In summary, the gist of the technique is that the teacher changes the stable problem situation by:

- finding a positive interpretation;
- communicating the new interpretation to the child;
- changing his or her behavior according to the new interpretation.

Previously, the teacher's responses were part of the stable problem situation and were helping to maintain it. By changing his or her behavior in an accepting and positive way, the teacher changes conflict into co-operation. The impact of such interventions are often quite striking as many of the case examples produced by

primary teachers show (see Tyler and Jones 1998, 2000). There is not space in the present paper to present detailed cases, but a short discussion of one example may help to illustrate the main stages outlined above.

Stages one and two: clarifying the problem behavior and teacher responses

Mark was a nine year old boy who was always calling out in class discussions, constantly interrupting the teacher as well as other children. Sue, his teacher had tried a range of strategies. She would remind Mark that he should raise his hand rather than call out. She told him that she would not consider his response if he called out. She told the group that it was good to see children raising their hands to answer questions. She had also tried ignoring the interruptions as far as possible. At times she would explain that this was a class rule which everyone needed to follow because she wouldn't be able to hear anyone if everyone called out. The situation had become chronic and had escalated to the extent that his interruptions became so frequent that she often had to remove Mark from the group during discussion times.

Stage three - establishing current explanations

When Sue reflected on the situation she realized that she had a range of explanations for Mark's behavior. In the past she had felt that he was immature and attention seeking, and had a very short concentration span. As the situation had become persistent and predictable, she saw him as a very annoying child who seemed to be intent on being a disruptive influence during class discussions. She

had almost come to expect the disruptions and believed that Mark was simply a disruptive boy who could not control his impulsive behavior.

Stage four - finding positive interpretations

Sue found it difficult at first to find positive interpretations of Mark's behavior, but knew that this was a sign that her views had become entrenched. After observing Mark closely at other times of the day she was eventually able to formulate more positive interpretations of his behavior. She noticed that Mark was always helping other children in the class and was also happy to do things for her. His written work showed that he had lots of interesting ideas. Based on further reflection, Sue's new interpretation was that Mark was in fact very enthusiastic in discussions and wanted to contribute his ideas.

Stage five - communicating the new interpretation to the child

Sue had a conversation with Mark at lunch time as they were due to have a class discussion session first thing in the afternoon. Sue explained that she had been thinking about the situation and realized that Mark was keen to take part and to make suggestions during discussion times. She explained that she would call on Mark for his ideas during discussions and that if he called out she would listen to what he had to say. Mark seemed pleased with this and during the session his interruptions were far less frequent. Sue started the discussion by asking Mark directly for his ideas and then periodically asked him to contribute more to the discussion. Mark still calls out occasionally, but Sue makes a point of listening

carefully and giving him feedback on his contribution. Sue was amazed at how effective this approach was and felt relieved that such a long standing problem could be resolved in such a positive way.

Having described the reframing technique, I now go on to consider this process of change from the point of view of ecosystemic theory as outlined by Molnar and Lindquist (1989).

Theoretical considerations

The stable interpersonal system

One of the main theoretical ideas in ecosystemics is that chronic problem behavior is not seen as the result of one person's deficiencies or inadequacies. Instead, such problems are seen as part of a stable system of interpretations, beliefs and interpersonal interactions. Ecosystemics stresses the interpersonal nature of chronic problem behavior as it is often not the situation itself that causes the problem, but the interaction between the teacher and the child which arises from it. In ecosystemic terms, as long as something changes in this stable interpersonal system, then the problem behavior will change. The thing that distinguishes ecosystemics from all other approaches to changing problem behavior in schools is that the teacher changes the system (and hence the problem) by changing his or her own perceptions and behavior, and by substituting co-operation for conflict. The key to producing constructive changes is to find positive interpretations of the problem behavior and to replace the negative or hostile relationship with a positive and

understanding one. This corresponds with the concern that person-centered counsellors have for providing a particular type of relationship for the client (Rogers, 1957), particularly in relation to empathy and unconditional positive regard. The teacher needs to be able to trust in the child's actualizing tendency, rather than try to manipulate or control the situation in some way.

However, ecosystemic theorists stress that it is not important to find out why a child is interpreting a situation differently, or to find out what that interpretation is. As long as the positive alternatives are plausible or possible, then they can be used to change the situation. In addition, it does not matter if the new interpretations are the same as those held by the child. Obviously, this is different from the person-centered approach and it was a major difficulty for the teachers we worked with. As we shall see later, teachers only felt comfortable with attempts to be genuinely empathic.

Our interpretations affect our interpersonal relationships

In the example discussed above, of a child who consistently disrupted the class, the teacher's new and positive interpretation was that she no longer saw calling out as deliberately deviant behavior but saw it instead as an expression of enthusiasm and a desire to take part. We saw that by communicating this new interpretation to the child, the problem behavior changed. It is worth looking at this example a little more closely in order to develop some important theoretical perspectives. Basically

we have the teacher's old and new interpretations of the problem behavior as follows:

TEACHER'S OLD INTERPRETATION	TEACHER'S NEW NTERPRETATION
(negative)	(positive)
Child is being deviant by engaging in deliberately disruptive behavior.	Child is actually being enthusiastic and showing that he wants to take part.

Ecosystemics takes the view that both of these interpretations are hypothetical and that, "it is not possible to know if the [interpretations], either positive or negative, attributed to the student's behavior were accurate" (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 67). Ecosystemics is not concerned with accuracy or objective truth but with the beliefs of the people involved in this stable interpersonal system. So, ecosystemically, it is not important to know whether the negative interpretation of the behavior was true or not. What is important is that the teacher's interpretation has been communicated to the child by the teacher's behavior. For example, in this case, the teacher continually reprimanded the child for being disruptive. Consequently, the child constructed a belief about what the teacher's interpretation was, and acted on the basis of that knowledge.

So, in a chronic problem situation in the classroom, we can not be sure whether our interpretations are correct; all we can know is that they have affected the

interpersonal relationships which are part of the problem dynamic. So, in this way, we can see that our interpretations affect our interpersonal relationships, and that if we change our interpretations we will also change the nature of the interpersonal relationships which surround the problem situation.

Changing our interpretations will change our interpersonal relationships
In this particular example, let us consider two possible scenarios. First, take the view that the teacher's *old* interpretations were correct, and second, take the other view that the teacher's *new* interpretations were correct. In each case we need to consider what happens to the stable interpersonal system when the teacher changes her interpretation and communicates the new interpretation to the child.

In the first case, the child is deliberately trying to be disruptive. As long as the teacher communicates that the behavior *is* disruptive, for example by reprimanding the child and trying to get the behavior to change, then the system remains stable. However, as soon as the child believes that his disruptive behavior is in fact considered to be positive and is *accepted* by the teacher, the whole interpersonal dynamic changes. The important point here is that the child must believe that the teacher's new interpretation is *genuine*. Consequently, the child can no longer be disruptive by behaving in that way, so the behavior tends to cease. If the problem behavior does not cease, then the teacher will remind the child that the behavior is acceptable by repeating the new positive interpretation in order to further decrease

its usefulness as a deviant act and to further redefine it as a co-operative one (this is known as the "Handling a relapse technique", Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 144).

In the second case, the child is in fact being enthusiastic and really wants to contribute. However, as long as the teacher communicates that the behavior is disruptive, the child will increase his attempts to demonstrate his enthusiasm. This, in turn, increases the teacher's determination to stop the disruptive behavior. The child then becomes more "disruptive" because his contributions are not being heard and appreciated because the teacher is consistently reprimanding him. In this way the situation escalates until a stable system develops. In addition, the child will feel frustrated at having his contributions ignored and his behavior consistently misconstrued in a negative way, and the teacher will feel frustrated because she is unable to stop the disruptive behavior. This frustration, and other secondary feelings associated with the conflict, will also become part of the stable ecosystem. However, as soon as the teacher communicates acceptance through the new positive interpretation, the child will feel that he is being understood at last and is having his enthusiasm recognized and appreciated. As his responses are now acknowledged and accepted by the teacher, this makes it less necessary for him to keep trying to show his enthusiasm, and the exaggeration and escalation of his behavior that became part of the chronic situation is no longer necessary. Molnar and Lindquist (1989, p. 108) also became aware of this in their own work, noting that when a child's behavior is interpreted in a positive way, the child "reacts by indicating that for the first time she or he feels understood. Interestingly, people often change

when it is no longer necessary to convince others of the validity of their behavior in the problem situation."

Summary: If you want something to change, change something

So we can see that in each case, even if the new interpretation is not correct, the intervention produces a change in the problem behavior and conflict is replaced with co-operation. However, this does not mean that there are not important differences between these two situations. Although not always entirely reliable, the child's immediate response to the intervention is a guide and can help us decide which type of change has occurred.

If we consider the case where the teacher's new interpretation was in fact correct and the child was being enthusiastic and wanting to contribute all along, we find that the child's response is one of relief, or feeling pleased and accepted by the teacher. There is often a discussion which confirms for the teacher that her new interpretation was accurate and that her own negative interpretation in the past had probably contributed to maintaining the problem situation.

In the case where the child was being deliberately disruptive, the new interpretation was not correct but still produced a change in the problem situation by attributing positive reasons to the behavior. As long as the child believes the teacher's new interpretation, the disruptive potential of the behavior is dramatically attenuated. However, because chronic problems are so long-standing, children in this situation

often forget the new interpretation and revert to old patterns of behavior through

force of habit. In such cases, the teacher needs to repeat the intervention as

mentioned above. In addition, the response of children in this situation is often one

of surprise, shock or complete disbelief at the intervention. As we can see the child's

response to the intervention and whether or not the intervention needs repeating

both give us clues about the change process that is occurring.

The Core Conditions

Having outlined the stages of ecosystemic interventions and considered the

theoretical ideas, we now move onto the importance of the core conditions in

implementing the approach which emerged in our work with primary teachers.

Genuineness

Molnar and Lindquist (1989, p. 44) refer to the need to be honest and sincere when

using the techniques, and point out that ecosystemics is not a form of "reverse

psychology" (saying one thing and thinking something else in order to trick another

person into doing what you want):

> If, in any problem situation, you find that you cannot honestly describe the
>
> behavior or the situation in a new way, then you should not attempt to use
>
> ecosystemic techniques. These techniques are not mind games used for
>
> saying one thing while thinking another. Reverse psychology is best left to
>
> Tom Sawyer. (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 44)

However, we also found that genuineness was very closely linked to empathy for most of the teachers we worked with. Basically, teachers found that they could not be genuine unless their new, positive interpretation of the behavior was also based on empathy.

Empathy

The place of empathy as an important factor only emerged gradually over the period of the research. It became clear that teachers found some of the case examples presented by Molnar and Lindquist very hard to believe. There are far too many to consider here, but the following discussion may help to illustrate this point more fully. The first extract is from a discussion of a problem situation where a student repeatedly does not complete his homework:

> The student's not doing homework can be characterised as communicating to the teacher that the work is too hard or too easy. Or, looking at the larger ecosystem of the classroom, the student's not doing homework can be characterised as *a sacrifice he is making that helps to demonstrate to classmates the problems that not doing homework can create for students.* (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 24; emphasis added)

For most teachers, the first alternative relating to the difficulty of the work seemed quite plausible and likely to be based on empathy. However, the second alternative, that the student was demonstrating to others what happens when homework is not

completed, seemed hardly plausible at all and very unlikely to be based on empathy. Another example concerned a child who was always talking to other children. The teacher formulated her positive alternatives as follows:

> First, I would let Betzadia know how much I admire the great emphasis she places on friendship *(as evidenced by her willingness to risk poor grades in order to nurture her friendship by talking)*. Second, I would help her classmates understand that, even though at times her talking disturbs them, *she is also helping us all learn how to cope in a world filled with distractions.* (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 36; emphasis added)

Although the teachers we worked with could believe that friendship was important to Betzadia, they found that the other comments ("her willingness to risk poor grades" and "she is helping us learn how to cope with distractions") were examples of the mind games that Molnar and Lindquist warn against.

Two types of ecosystemic intervention

A close reading of these and other cases showed that two main types of ecosystemic intervention are presented in their book:

1) The first type of intervention may be described as "positive attribution", where the positive interpretation of the problem behavior has to be "plausible" to the teacher and the child concerned. As long as it is "a possible truth" (1989, p. 40)

the new interpretation does not need to be based on the child's own experience of the situation.

2) The second type of intervention is based on an empathic response, where the teacher's new interpretation of the problem behavior is based on a genuine attempt to understand the child's point of view.

The key to the ecosystemic techniques is being co-operative rather than empathic (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 24) as we saw in the earlier discussion. In fact, Molnar and Lindquist do not refer to empathy in their book, even though some of their cases are very good examples of using an empathic response (see, for example, the cases on pages 47, 49 and 55). In such examples, the positive interpretation is clearly based on looking at the situation from the child's point of view and, in some cases, on talking to the child in order to understand his or her frame of reference.

However, those cases which were not empathic were based on looking at the larger ecosystem of the classroom rather than the stable interpersonal system, and were therefore much more abstract. The teachers we worked with found this type of intervention to be artificial. To simply find a "plausible" interpretation seemed, indeed, to be playing mind games and being manipulative. They also felt that they could only be genuine if they believed that their reformulation of the problem situation was based on empathy. The successful reframings they carried out in their own classrooms were all based on empathy.

Trying to be empathic is what is important

In formulating interventions, Molnar and Lindquist suggest finding a 'new perceptual "frame" for problem behavior' (1989, p. 46). As outlined above, this is accomplished by reflecting on the situation almost as an intellectual exercise, by using informed guesswork and by asking the question, "What positive alternative explanations *might* there be for this behavior?" (1989, p. 173; emphasis added). As one of the teachers using this technique said, "Why all the guesswork? Trying to see things from the child's point of view is at the heart of the technique, so why not use counselling skills and listen to the child's experience? This should make it easier for us to change our negative perceptions of the behavior. *Trying* to be empathic is what is important."

Other teachers found it useful to combine these approaches by first of all reflecting on the situation as suggested by Molnar and Lindquist, but then *checking out* the new interpretations with the child rather than *imposing* them on him or her. Of course, there is no guarantee that the teachers were being accurately empathic in formulating their interventions, but as we saw earlier the method does not depend on this aspect. What is important, however, is that the teacher believes that the new interpretation is genuinely based on the child's own frame of reference. In addition, teachers also need to believe that the child's frame of reference is valid and meaningful for the child. In other words, teachers needs to be able to accept the child's perception of the situation, which leads us on to consider the third core condition.

Unconditional Positive Regard

When we analysed case examples produced by teachers that were only partially successful, it became apparent that interventions need to be unconditional.

In all cases where conditions were part of the intervention, the changes to the problem situation were not as effective. By being conditional, teachers were not communicating acceptance of the child's point of view; not only do we need to be empathic to understand the child's frame of reference but we also need to accept that frame as valid. Our interventions need to implicitly, or even explicitly, "acknowledge that the person has good reasons for behaving the way he or she does" (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989, p. 103).

It is interesting to note that many other techniques for changing problem behavior in school depend on being conditional. For example, positive reinforcement, a technique with which all our teachers were familiar, can be seen as offering *conditional* positive regard. In other words, behaviors which are 'required' or 'acceptable' are rewarded with positive interactions, whereas problem or other unwanted behaviors are not.

Many teachers had used conditions as part of their repertoire of behavior management techniques in the past and continued to do so when using ecosystemics, even though they were often not aware of this. It emerged that teachers need to stop being conditional if ecosystemic interventions are to be more effective.

Implications

A person-centered slant

It will be clear from the above discussions that the teachers we worked with had given ecosystemics a person-centered slant. This may have been partly due to the bias of their trainers, who both subscribed to the importance of humanistic and person-centered perspectives in education, or partly due to the strong child-centered tradition in English primary schools. However, whatever the reason, it is clear that the changes were produced by the teachers as they tried to make sense of the ecosystemic techniques by putting them into practice in their own classrooms. The importance of being unconditional became clear when it was noted that so many partially successful interventions had in fact been conditional. More importantly, teachers found that they could only be congruent if they were also genuinely trying to be empathic.

This work raises a number of questions for further research into this area:

- Would other groups of teachers working with other trainers also give ecosystemics a person-centered slant? Would such groups also find that the core conditions are the key to ecosystemic interventions?
- Does the person-centered emphasis change ecosystemics in an important way or is this just a slight variation? Does the focus on the relationship aspect of the ecosystem change any of the underlying theoretical ideas?

- Can the ideas developed by Rogers on personality change be applied to ecosystemic interventions? How do these ideas compare to ecosystemic theory?
- One aspect which was not included in the studies was the child's view of ecosystemics. How did the children involved think and feel about the ecosystemic interventions? How did they perceive the changed practices upon their own behavior?

Even though these questions will need addressing in a number of diverse settings, it is clear that ecosystemics offers a range of techniques for changing chronic problem behavior in schools, techniques which can easily be adapted to incorporate important aspects of the person-centered approach.

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Chapter 8

Implementing the Ecosystemic Approach

to Changing Chronic Problem Behaviour

in Schools.

Implementing the Ecosystemic Approach to Changing

Chronic Problem Behaviour in Schools.

ABSTRACT   The present paper discusses a study of the ecosystemic approach to changing chronic problem behaviour in schools undertaken with a group of thirty three primary and two secondary teachers. The impact of the ecosystemic techniques and the main theoretical issues are discussed. Three case examples are presented and conclusions are drawn on the potential of this new approach.

Background

The present study relates to an innovative approach for dealing with chronic problem behaviour in schools which was developed in the United States by Molnar and Lindquist (1989). The approach provides seven distinct but related techniques which enable teachers to address chronic problem behaviour. The techniques are based on a sequence of structured steps which can be taught through a series of conferences.

There has been considerable academic and professional interest in the approach. It has featured in a number of recent texts on the management of problem behaviour in schools (Charlton and David 1993, Cooper, Smith & Upton 1994, Fontana 1994, Ayers, Clarke and Murray 1995) and work has been undertaken with regard to the theoretical perspectives (Cooper and Upton 1990a, 1990b, Upton and Cooper 1990, Tyler, 1994, 1996, 1998). Many of these authors have pointed to the need for further research and the present paper follows on from preliminary work undertaken in English primary schools (Tyler and Jones, 1998).

The ecosystemic approach, which is based upon the process of *reframing* the problem behaviour, will briefly be outlined here to provide a introduction and a context for those not familiar with the techniques.

The approach can be broken down into five discrete stages. The first stage is to think about a particular chronic problem situation and to reflect on exactly what

happens. In the second and third stages, the teacher considers his or her normal responses to, and current explanations for, the problem situation. These stages prepare the way for the reframing stage itself. Unlike many other approaches to managing problem behaviour in schools, ecosystemics does not depend on reward or punishment, apportioning blame, enforcing sanctions or seeking to take control of the situation in some other way. The teacher has to *reframe* his or her perceptions of the chronic problem situation in a positive and co-operative way (stage four), and then communicate the reframing to the individual concerned (stage five).

In order to reframe the situation, the teacher needs to ask the question, "What positive alternative explanations might there be for this behaviour?" (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989: 173). An important idea here is that a child's own interpretation of a situation may be quite different from a teacher's, and that long term established behaviour may be positive and meaningful in some way for the child. The teacher needs to *entertain the possibility* that different but equally valid interpretations exist, and that positive interpretations of the problem behaviour can be found.

> A child often interprets a situation in a very different way from the teacher, as for example when the child thinks a teacher's response to a question in class is a reprimand, when the teacher intended it as guidance. Both interpretations may be 'correct', in the sense that the child genuinely felt shown up and emotionally bruised in front of the rest of the class, while the teacher genuinely intended to be helpful. (Fontana, 1994: 94)

In summary, the gist of the technique is that the teacher changes the stable problem situation by (i) finding a positive interpretation; (ii) communicating the new interpretation to the child; (iii) changing his or her behaviour according to the new interpretation. Previously, the teacher's responses were part of the stable problem situation and were helping to maintain it. By changing his or her behaviour in an accepting and positive way, the teacher changes conflict into co-operation. A full discussion of the techniques can be found elsewhere (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989; Tyler, 1998).

Objectives

The main objective of the study was to evaluate the impact of ecosystemic techniques on chronic problem behaviour in schools. A secondary objective was to refine and adapt the theoretical ideas which underpin the ecosystemic techniques. As the ecosystemic approach was developed in the United States, it was important to evaluate the effectiveness of the techniques in English schools and to develop the theoretical framework and its presentation to suit the English education system.

Method

An action research approach was used for the project. This is the most widely accepted method in educational research and one that is particularly suited to the present study. Within this overall structure various research tools were utilised.

Conferences

Details of the proposed research were sent to every primary and Special school in Leicestershire. The 35 respondents, who were divided randomly into two parallel research groups, attended a series of separate but identical conferences. Based on previous experience (Tyler and Jones 1998) time was set aside for group discussions to allow the teachers to come to terms with the approach, which many found counter-intuitive and difficult to understand. After the first conference, part of each day was also set aside to allow teachers to share and discuss their own experiences of using the techniques in their schools. Conference handbooks outlined the main themes and approaches for the day (Jones and Tyler 1996a, b, c, d).

The conferences provided an important forum for addressing the key research aims. Questionnaires, record sheets and evaluation sheets together with recorded discussions and interviews provided data on the participants' responses to the ecosystemic approach, the impact of the approach on problem behaviour, as well as the main theoretical issues that needed addressing. Finally, teachers' responses provided the baseline data from which the core themes to be explored within the focus groups were identified.

Focus Groups

The present study used Phenomenological focus groups (Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub 1996: 25) which are suited to understanding particular interventions from the point of view of the everyday knowledge, expertise and perceptions of the

participants. A representative sample of seven co-researchers from each independent research group was selected to take part in two parallel focus groups which took place five weeks after the final conference. The focus groups were conducted with an interview schedule of open questions being asked over a period of two hours. Each focus group session was tape recorded, allowing for transcriptions to be subsequently analysed.

Questionnaires

The co-researchers' responses to the ecosystemic approach were monitored through the use of questionnaires administered and completed at the end of each conference. The questionnaires were based on the use of open questions so that co-researchers could define their own concerns, categories and priorities; this approach minimises the distorting effects of demand characteristics that are often associated with the use of closed questions.

Record Sheets

In order to assess the impact of the ecosystemic approach on chronic problem behaviour, the co-researchers were asked to use the techniques in their classrooms and record their interventions. Data was collected in the form of record sheets which also provided a structured format from which the co-researchers could plan their interventions. The record sheets were used to produce case examples which were then returned to the co-researchers for discussion, verification and authorisation.

Evaluation Sheets

The presentation and content of the conferences were monitored through the use of evaluation sheets which were administered and completed following each conference. Data from these sheets was also used to improve subsequent conferences according to the expressed requirements of the participants. In addition, the responses also highlighted theoretical issues and points of interest relating to the presentation of the ecosystemic approach in the conferences.

School Visits

The co-researchers were visited in their schools in the periods between conferences. This was seen as a support mechanism, offering the co-researchers an opportunity to discuss particular problem situations, possible interventions, theoretical ideas and any other issues that may have arisen in their practice. The recorded informal and unstructured interviews were primarily led by the requirements of the co-researchers.

Results and Discussion

Background Factors

The research attracted a broad selection of school types: thirteen suburban schools, eight town schools, five rural schools and five inner city schools. Twenty-eight of the schools catered for mainstream primary children, two for primary children with moderate learning difficulties and one for secondary children with moderate learning difficulties.

The research also attracted a broad selection of teachers: four Head teachers, four Deputy Head teachers, six Special Educational Needs co-ordinators, and twenty class teachers. Of the class teachers, ten taught at Key Stage 1, eight at Key Stage 2 and two were secondary teachers. In addition, a lunch time supervisor also responded to the invitation.

The Impact Of The Ecosystemic Techniques On Problem Behaviour

Of the 35 co-researchers that attended the conferences, 31 (89 per cent) attempted ecosystemic interventions. A total of 51 interventions was recorded, 23 from group A and 28 from group B. Of these, 47 (92 per cent) resulted in a positive outcome.

TABLE I. Problem behaviours addressed in case examples

Problem Behaviour	Number of cases
Various forms of disruptive behaviour	18
Calling out/Chatting/Attention seeking	14
Slow/Poor motivation/Poor concentration	13
Various forms of violent behaviour	4
Difficult Adult Colleagues	2
TOTAL	51

Table I summarises the type of problem behaviour which the co-researchers addressed successfully using ecosystemic interventions. These categories were taken

from an analysis of the case studies. However, the researchers had difficulty negotiating some of these categories as, in many of the case examples, the problem behaviour was complex. After carefully sifting through the evidence, the five categories presented in Table I were agreed. The first category, "Various forms of disruptive behaviour," refers to complex situations including wandering around the classroom, distracting other pupils from their work, annoying other pupils during carpet time, arguing with other pupils, disobeying rules and refusing to tidy up. The overall result was that these particular chronic behaviour patterns disrupted normal classroom routines or the flow of a particular lesson. Although problem behaviour from some of the other categories, "Calling out" or "Poor Motivation" for example, could be just as disruptive for the teacher or the rest of the class, these are considered separately as they are easier to identify, and the categories describe the problem behaviour more accurately.

It can be seen that a wide variety of problem behaviour was addressed. It is noticeable that the vast majority of the problem behaviours are commonplace within schools (see, for example, DES 1989: 61). It is also important to note that 13 (25 per cent) of the cases focused on problem bevahiour that was not related to discipline problems but to work problems. Many of the teachers reported the dramatic improvement which resulted when the ecosystemic approach was used to address this issue (see case example 3).

It is also noteworthy that four *severe* problem situations, relating to various forms of violent behaviour, were addressed using the approach. Molnar and Lindquist (1989: 41-42) state quite clearly that the ecosystemic approach is not designed to change severe problem behaviour unless the problematic behaviour and responses to it are predictable. In all four cases the situation was regarded by the teachers involved as being serious. However, after learning about the approach, all the teachers were able to identify the chronic nature of the problem and choose particular aspects of the problem system upon which to focus. In each case the teachers found the approach to be surprisingly effective (see case example 2).

Table II summarises the number of interventions attempted by the co-researchers, highlighting the particular techniques used and the outcome of the attempts.

TABLE II. Attempted interventions and outcomes

Ecosystemic Technique	Number of interventions attempted (A/B)	Successful interventions	Unsuccessful interventions
Reframing	18 (9/9)	16	2
Symptom prescription	16 (8/8)	15	1
Finding a positive outcome	6 (1/5)	5	1
Storming the back door	3 (1/2)	3	0
Finding a positive motive	2 (1/1)	2	0
Locating exceptions	1 (0/1)	1	0
Combination: Finding a positive motive & Symptom prescription	3 (1/2)	3	0
Combination: Finding a positive outcome & Symptom prescription	1 (0/1)	1	0
Combination: Finding a positive motive & Finding a positive outcome	1 (1/0)	1	0
TOTAL	51 (22/29)	47	4

In Table II, the heading *Successful Interventions* indicates that a definite and clear change of behaviour occurred. Of the 47 successful interventions, 32 (68%) were completely successful in bringing the chronic problem behaviour to an end and 15 (32%) were partially successful, producing positive changes in the problem behaviour but not solving the difficulties completely. Given the long term nature of these problems, even this partial success made a great deal of difference to the teachers and pupils involved. Many teachers reported that even when an intervention was not completely successful there was always a significant improvement in their relationship with the pupil concerned.

The four unsuccessful interventions recorded in Table II were all implemented with major shortcomings with regard to important aspects of the techniques. All the techniques depend on a *positive* reframing of the situation, and a *genuine* and *unconditional* communication of the new perspective. In one case, the reframing of the situation was not *positive* and the problem situation did not improve. Such a negative intervention can make situations far worse both for the teacher and the pupil. The other unsuccessful Reframing was not communicated *genuinely* to the pupil. Molnar and Lindquist (1989: 44) point out that a reframing will not be effective unless it is genuine and communicated to the pupil in a sincere manner.

The other two unsuccessful interventions listed in Table II were positive and genuine but they were not communicated *unconditionally* to the pupils. This is another important feature of ecosystemic interventions and one that some teachers

found particularly difficult to put into practice. For example, of the 15 interventions mentioned above which were only partially successful, most also had shortcomings in relation to this aspect of unconditional communication. By introducing conditions (an approach which many of the teachers in the groups had used frequently in the past) the impact of the intervention is diminished. However, these unsuccessful and partially successful interventions were invaluable for the development of the groups. By discussing them, participants were able to see the relevance of these crucial aspects more clearly and were able to ensure that their own interventions fulfilled all of the requirements.

Table II also shows that the Reframing and Symptom-Prescription techniques were the most popular approaches implemented by the co-researchers, accounting for two thirds of the case examples (see case examples 1 and 2). Five of the case examples also used a combination of approaches.

By analysing the 51 successful interventions it was found that 42 (82%) involved individual pupils. However, a positive benefit was often experienced beyond the immediate target individual or group, and 20 (48%) of these cases reported positive benefits for the whole class. In addition, two of the successful interventions were targeted on the whole class, four on groups of pupils, two on adult colleagues and one on the whole school.

The Focus Groups also provided data on the impact of the ecosystemic techniques. Twelve of the fourteen co-researchers in the focus groups (86%) experienced an improvement in their occupational health; in particular, a belief that they felt more relaxed:

'It does make you more relaxed when you stop seeing it as a problem. I stopped thinking I was in a hole and couldn't get out.'

'Sometimes things are difficult in the classroom, but since I have been coming on this course, I look at my nursery nurse and just say, "Ecosystemics!" That is enough to lighten it a lot for us.'

'They (the class) did say to me once, 'are you going on that relaxing day again?' I think they thought I went off to some wonderful health farm. There was certainly a difference, I felt it myself - more relaxed - and the class were more relaxed.'

'I have never been so ill as I have been these last eighteen months. I really did think it was all falling away. I hated going to school and I have never, ever, been like that in my life and now I am all right again since I came on the course.'

As well as being personally affected, the co-researchers reported significant effects on the pupils themselves. There was the self evident change in behaviour following a successful intervention but there were also more subtle effects. The most prevalent

of these was the way in which the ecosystemic techniques offered pupils self control and confidence in changing the problem behaviour.

'In a sense you are putting the control into a different court. You are giving it back to the students really, to control their own situation.'

'It gives them the confidence. They need the confidence before they can actually start the learning process. It does it in such a way that you build that confidence, that self-esteem.'

The Theoretical Ideas

The focus groups also highlighted the difficulties that co-researchers had in getting to grips with the ecosystemic approach and techniques. The approach depends upon teachers being able to break their usual patterns of interaction within problem situations. This proved to be very difficult for 3 (21%) of the co-researchers attending the focus groups. This is an important finding as we were dealing with a representative sample from a self selected group of teachers who had a vested interest in making the approach work. In light of this, and based on comments also made by co-researchers on the difficulties of introducing the techniques to colleagues, it was suggested that the ecosystemic approach was not one which all teachers would be able to adopt;

'I don't think it is an approach that all people would feel comfortable with.'

'I think that you have got to be a confident person in the first place. I think that with ecosystemics you could feel as if things were running away with you, that you were out of control.'

This response confirmed the belief of the researchers that ecosystemics should not be seen as a universal approach which everyone should, or indeed could, adopt. Instead it is seen to be an additional approach which may prove to be successful in addressing problem behaviours which have failed to respond to teachers' 'usual' interventions.

Furthermore, 36 per cent of the co-researchers found that the amount of preparation time which the ecosystemic interventions required was a hindrance. The successful outcome of ecosystemic interventions often depends upon the amount of background work which has been undertaken. In this respect, the approach was generally not seen to be appropriate for spontaneous interventions, even though a number of successful interventions employed by the co-researchers towards the end of the project had been spontaneous.

This confirms the expectations of the originators of the method (Molnar and Lindquist 1989: 170-171) that the approach takes a considerable investment of time to teach effectively. The focus groups also highlighted some of the factors which helped the co-researchers to understand the theoretical perspectives. The most influential of these was the pragmatic emphasis and the structure of the ecosystemic

approach itself. All of the co-researchers who attended the focus groups commented on the importance of the structured format that ecosystemic interventions followed and the guidance that the approach offers with regard to this.

The second most influential factor in helping the co-researchers to understand the approach was discussing the approach and techniques with fellow colleagues attending the conferences: eleven (79%) of the co-researchers commented on the importance of sharing ideas, thoughts and concerns with colleagues and the researchers.

The Case Examples

Detailed notes for the case examples were produced by teachers and the final versions were discussed with them in detail. The first example demonstrates the use of the reframing technique.

Case 1: 'The IT Enthusiast'

St. John's College is a newly established Moderate Learning Difficulties school that caters for secondary aged pupils from the whole county. At the end of each day, students attending the College wait in a designated classroom for their escort to collect them and take them to their buses for transport home.

Paul, who his teacher described as a hyperactive student, proved to be problematical during this waiting time. He had a tendency to rush into the designated room and

start playing with the class computers. This was not his usual classroom and the computers often had other pupils' work on them. Richard, the teacher, explained the situation and asked Paul to leave the computers alone. Typically, Paul would leave them for a few minutes and then return, sometimes having been encouraged by the other students. This, much to Richard's frustration, often resulted in work being lost.

Having attended the first conference on the ecosystemic approach, Richard realised that a chronic problem situation had developed. Paul's behaviour and his response to it had become predictable and he knew that this needed to be changed. Richard thought about reframing Paul's behaviour and decided that a possible positive explanation for 'playing with the computers' was that Paul wanted to show the teacher how well he could use them.

The next time Paul rushed into the class at the end of the day and started to play on a computer, Richard had a quiet word with him and explained his new perception of the situation. Richard said that he thought he knew why Paul was so keen to go on the computers, that he thought it was because Paul wanted to show him how well he could use them. Richard then went on to suggest that if Paul came in and asked if he could use the computers he would make sure that any work was saved and then Paul could gladly use them.

Paul responded to Richard's new explanation and suggestions with caution and didn't touch the computers for two days. On the third day Richard was busy tidying up the classroom when Paul asked if he could use the computer and waited patiently while Richard saved the work. Paul then sat down and wrote a story.

The change had been quite dramatic. Richard reported that two weeks later Paul was still asking to use the computers and had begun to involve other students in taking turns to use them. Paul had found a new role for himself at home time, he was computer monitor and advisor.

Discussion

This case is a good example of the reframing technique, and the stages that Richard went through illustrate the reframing process very well.

Richard began the process by sitting back and reflecting upon the problem. By doing this, he was able to recognise the stability of the situation. He found that a predictable pattern of interactions was occurring between himself and Paul. Once Richard had made this connection it was clear to him that something had to change in order for the cycle to be broken.

Richard then placed his annoyance of Paul 'playing' on the computers in his room to one side and opened himself to the possibility of other positive explanations. In this case, Richard found that it was possible that Paul actually wanted to

demonstrate how well he could use the computers. This was a dramatic change in Richard's perspective of the problem situation and now needed to be articulated to Paul himself.

When Richard told Paul of his new perspective Paul responded with caution. This type of response is common in ecosystemic interventions. Such is the radical change in the usual pattern of interaction between teacher and pupil that the pupil is often left somewhat stunned (see Tyler 1998 for a discussion of pupils' responses).

With ecosystemic interventions it is the sincerity with which you are able to articulate your new explanation that determines the impact of the intervention. If you do not believe genuinely in your new alternative explanation then the intervention is unlikely to be successful. Richard was sincere when he told Paul of his new ideas and we can see from the way Paul came up to his teacher and asked if he could use the computers that he believed what the teacher had told him.

Finally, this case illustrates the potential benefits of co-operation within a chronic problem situation. Richard was able to empathise and then co-operate with Paul. The change in Richard's response was such that it changed the whole ecosystem surrounding the problem. The ripple effect was that Paul had now begun to involve others in using the computers as well.

The next case is an example of the *Symptom Prescription* technique, which was the second most widely used technique in the study. This technique is particularly useful where teachers find it difficult or impossible genuinely to reframe the behaviour by finding positive alternative explanations. Instead the teacher looks for ways in which the behaviour can be performed differently, for example, at a different place or time or in a different way. The example deals with aggressive behaviour which the teacher could not reframe positively.

Case 2: 'Kicking the Habit' (Symptom Prescription)

John was a small, five year old who frequently lashed out at play times by kicking other children. This unacceptable behaviour got him into a lot of trouble and he often missed play times or was sent to the Head Teacher. These reprimands seemed to have no effect and the problem continued on an almost daily basis. It was a common sight to see John waiting outside the Head Teacher's office and had almost become the norm.

John's teacher had been concerned about him for some time and really wanted to help in some way. As reprimands were not working, perhaps an ecosystemic approach would. First she did some detective work on the problem. Through this, it struck her that John did not have any friends and he seemed to have a lot of anger and frustration inside. She had noticed that John seemed to become aggressive as he walked out of the door for playtime but he was not aggressive or angry in the classroom. Primed with this information, the teacher decided to try the Symptom

Prescription technique and give John the opportunity to fulfil his need to kick, but in a different place.

She explained to John that she had noticed how angry he became when he went out to play and that she understood that he needed to let out some of his angry feelings by kicking. It was not however, acceptable to go around kicking other people as they didn't want anyone injured. She then suggested that he go into the PE store and kick the crash mat for five minutes before he went out to play. John was somewhat taken aback by this suggestion, but agreed. There was considerable force and feeling in his kicks initially but they gradually became less aggressive. John then went out to play and had a 'kick free' play time.

This was repeated on the next four days. On every day John had trouble free times on the play ground. This was such a startling change from his previous behaviour that the Head teacher and other teachers asked about what had caused the change. The teacher then asked John if he needed to kick on this day and he said that he didn't. The teacher accepted this and added that she would leave the mat ready just in case he felt angry during play time. If he did feel angry at any time he could come in and have a kicking session. The teacher reports that since these interventions, John has only kicked another child once. A knock-on effect has also been that, because he isn't so aggressive, the children are more willing to play with him. Consequently, John now has friends to play with most of the time, he is less frustrated and angry and does not need to kick other children.

Discussion

This is a good example of the Symptom Prescription technique and one which highlights the essential elements of the technique very well. It is also quite a unique case because of the severity of the problem that is addressed. It is not recommend that the ecosystemic techniques be used with severe behaviour. However, symptom prescription did lend itself well to the violent outbursts of kicking in this particular case.

It clear from the description of the problem at the start of the case that a chronic problem situation has developed. The teacher's reprimands were having no effect and the kicking behaviour continued on an almost daily basis. It is commonplace with chronic problems for teachers to express their demands louder and harder - with the belief that eventually the message will get through. Unfortunately, the stable characteristics of a chronic problem situation often result in exactly the opposite occurring.

In this case the teacher decided to act by introducing Symptom Prescription. The teacher's first aim was to find clues that might offer her an insight into John's perspective of the problem situation. Her efforts paid off and she discovered that John was not simply a violent child but actually appeared to have a genuine need to kick.

The detective work also allowed her to find a way of sincerely communicating her positive interpretation of John's behaviour. She told John that she had noticed how angry he became when he went out to play and that she understood that he needed to let out his angry feelings by kicking. In many chronic problem situations this 'simple' acceptance and acknowledgment of the child's needs is often enough to change the stable cycle in a constructive way. However, in this case the teacher goes one step further and prescribes the kicking behaviour - she allows the kicking to be performed but in a different place (the crash mat). It is this step that distinguishes the symptom prescription technique from the reframing technique.

One of the effects of ecosystemic interventions is that the benefits of change are often felt within the larger ecosystem. In this case, John ceased kicking his peers and because he was less aggressive, his peers were more willing to play with him. Allowing such violent chronic problem behaviour to continue but at a different place and in a different context may seem a risky proposition. However, as this example shows, it can be surprisingly effective.

A key stage in the Reframing and Symptom Prescription techniques is when the teacher has to find a new positive explanation for the problem behaviour. As the two previous cases demonstrate, this new perspective on the problem behaviour is often communicated orally to the child concerned. However, the following case shows how the reframing can be communicated more indirectly by a change of behaviour. It is also one of thirteen cases presented by teachers which deal with children's work

problems. Many of the teachers reported the startling improvement which resulted when the ecosystemic approach was used to address these issues.

Case 3: 'Lacking the confidence to even begin' (Reframing)

Asha, a seven year old, attended a primary school for children with moderate learning difficulties. She was a very quiet child who day dreamed instead of getting on with her work. At times she didn't even manage to get started at all. On these occasions it seemed to Asha's teacher, Ruth, that she lacked the confidence even to begin, although the work was set at an appropriate level. Asha did not ask for help either but would watch the other children in her class, sometimes following them for clues.

Ruth usually responded to Asha's behaviour by encouraging her to 'have a go'. Ruth also admitted to nagging Asha to get on with her work, saying to her that she *could* do the work. Asha would sometimes try to get on but often continued to sit and look around the room. If urged to get on too often, Asha would become even quieter and her eyes would fill with tears. It was clear to Ruth that Asha lacked confidence and was fearful of getting things wrong. Yet such explanations and Ruth's way of responding to them had little positive effect upon Asha. In fact they had quite the opposite, and only served to perpetuate the problem situation to the extent that it had become chronic.

It was at this stage that Ruth decided to try the reframing technique and tried to identify some positive alternative explanations for Asha's behaviour. She concluded that Asha might be very concerned about getting her work right. It was also possible that Asha wanted recognition and praise from the adults in the classroom. Finally, it was possible that Asha's understanding of verbal and written instructions was poor as English was her second language.

These new and positive explanations allowed Ruth to formulate a way of changing her usual response to Asha's behaviour. She decided that, instead of the usual nagging, she would give Asha a few minutes of reassurance and extra explanation before asking her to start work. Ruth aimed at ensuring that Asha understood exactly what to do. She also utilised an NNEB student that was currently training in her class to provide Asha with additional support. Finally, Ruth decided to ask Asha to work with Claire, another child who had more learning difficulties than herself, and to help her as much as she could.

Once Ruth had introduced these changes into the problem situation she began to see a more confident Asha emerge. In fact, Ruth actually had to ask Asha to stop talking once or twice. Ruth explained that working with Claire really helped Asha as it helped her overcome her own fears of getting things wrong. As a result of the intervention Ruth reports that Asha does far more work and is generally happier and more confident in class.

Discussion

It is often frustrating when a pupil fails to get on with her work, especially when she is capable of doing so. Sometimes reminders and the occasional nagging is sufficient to get a 'day dreamer' back on task. However, as was the case with this example, at other times we find that no matter what approach we try the lack of work continues. This is a sure sign that a chronic problem situation has been established and that the ecosystemic approach may be a way forward.

Here, Ruth decided to try the reframing technique. She began by sitting back from the problem situation and identifying some alternative and positive explanations for Asha's behaviour. She found that Asha wasn't simply day dreaming but also wanted to get her work right. Asha also wanted the adults in her class to see her getting things right and perhaps she found it difficult to achieve this aim because she had a poor understanding of spoken and written English.

It was the identification of these explanations that showed Ruth the way forward. In this example Ruth decided not to communicate her reframing orally by discussing her new perception with Asha. Rather, she implemented changes in her own behaviour which reflected the changes in her perception of the situation. It is often sufficient to choose a single alternative explanation and act upon it. However, in this case Ruth was able to co-operate with Asha on a number of different levels. She was able to offer Asha a few minutes of reassurance and extra explanation. Ruth also showed a real understanding of Asha's needs by suggesting that Asha work with

and help a fellow pupil. This would allow Asha to see that she was not alone in her perceived limitations. It also gave Asha an opportunity to gain recognition and praise from the adults around her.

Each part of Ruth's intervention was a new and positive way of responding to the problem situation. These changes had a dramatic effect and, as with all successful ecosystemic interventions, turned a chronic problem situation from one of conflict into one of co-operation.

General discussion

Certain conclusions can be drawn despite the limited nature of the present study. The findings from the two parallel groups supported each other on all points of comparison. Both groups of co-researchers showed the same concerns and experienced the same difficulties at the beginning, with the majority of teachers being initially sceptical about the effectiveness of the approach. However, despite this, the majority of teachers in found the structure provided by the ecosystemic techniques useful and were able to use the techniques successfully. Teachers were able to change chronic problem behaviour that had not responded to any other type of intervention and were impressed and surprised by the positive results. A small number of teachers felt initially that the approach was not new and mistakenly identified it with Positive Reinforcement. Most teachers found the theoretical ideas difficult to understand, and even after implementing a successful intervention, most still had difficulty explaining the counter-intuitive and paradoxical nature of the

approach. In addition, they also had difficulty trying to disseminate the approach to colleagues. Most of the teachers experienced an improvement to their occupational health and many commented upon the positive ripple-effect on the ecosystem of the classroom. Finally, there was agreement that the ecosystemic approach would not be suitable for all teachers but only for those more adventurous teachers who were prepared to try something challenging and different from normal interventions.

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Chapter 9

Teachers' Responses to the Ecosystemic

Approach to Changing Chronic Problem

Behaviour in Schools.

2002

Pastoral Care in Education.

Teachers' Responses to the Ecosystemic Approach to Changing

Chronic Problem Behaviour in Schools.

ABSTRACT   This paper discusses teachers' responses to the ecosystemic approach to changing chronic problem behaviour in schools undertaken with a group of thirty three primary and two secondary teachers. This study follows on from the work reported in Pastoral Care, December 1998 and presents three case examples and related discussions which illustrate the approach.

Introduction

The main stages of the process of Reframing, which is central to many ecosystemic interventions, will be outlined here to provide an introduction and a context for those not familiar with the approach.

Teachers who want to use the ecosystemic approach start by thinking of a specific chronic problem situation that they are unable to change. They then ask themselves a series of questions to help them to reflect on the situation more fully, both in terms of events and their own feelings and responses. These questions help teachers to focus on the chronic patterns, and guide them through the stages of phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and phenomenological interpretation (see Tyler 1994 for a full discussion).

1. Describe what happens in the problem situation in specific terms. Who does what? When do they do it? Who else is involved?

2. How do you usually respond to the behaviour, and what is the usual result?

3. What is your current explanation of why the person behaves this way?

4. What positive alternative explanations might there be for this behaviour?

5. Based on one of these positive alternatives, how could you respond differently from the way you have previously? What might you actually say or do?

6. What was the result of your reframing? Was it successful? If so, what were the changes that took place? If not, how might you use this result to inform your next reframing?

The key in the Reframing process is step 4, where teachers have to find possible positive alternative explanations. This may take some time to do, as our normal way of viewing chronic problem behaviour is often negative and entrenched. It is important to emphasise at this point that the normal (usually negative) perceptions and explanations of chronic problem behaviour that teachers may have are not being challenged or criticised in this process. These negative explanations may well be valid, but they are not helping to change the problem behaviour. This reflective process of looking for positive explanations usually takes some time and is often supported by careful observation of the particular situation together with a critical examination of the teacher's own perception of the situation. Teachers in the present study reported that they would often try to think of positive alternatives over a period of two or three days before they were successful. It is also important to point out that teachers need genuinely to believe in these new interpretations. These genuine, positive alternatives often strike other people as far fetched or even ridiculous. It is certainly most unusual to describe chronic problem behaviour, which is often linked to occupational stress for many teachers, in such positive terms. Indeed, many of the pupils involved also find the interventions most unusual. However, it is the communication of the positive alternative explanation to the pupil which often produces a dramatic change in the situation.

Method

The 35 teachers who took part in the research were divided randomly into two parallel research groups and attended a series of four separate but identical conferences. The conferences were held at monthly intervals to allow participants to try interventions in their classes. Based on previous experience (Tyler and Jones 1998) considerable time was set aside for group discussions to allow the teachers to come to terms with the approach, which many found counter-intuitive and difficult to understand. After the first conference, part of each day was set aside to allow teachers to share and discuss their own experiences of using the techniques.

Focus Groups

There is a growing recognition of the usefulness of focus groups in educational research. The present study used the phenomenological approach (Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub 1996: 25) which is suited to understanding particular interventions from the point of view of the everyday knowledge, expertise and perceptions of the participants. A representative sample of seven teachers from each independent research group was selected to take part in two parallel focus groups which took place five weeks after the final conference. The focus groups were conducted in an informal setting with an interview schedule of open questions being asked over a period of two hours. Each focus group session was tape recorded, allowing transcriptions to be subsequently analysed by defining categories and identifying themes.

School Visits

The teachers were visited in their schools in the periods between conferences. This was seen as a support mechanism, offering the teachers an opportunity to discuss particular problem situations, possible interventions, theoretical ideas and any other issues that may have arisen in their practice. The recorded informal and unstructured interviews were primarily led by the requirements of the teachers.

Results and Discussion

Three hundred schools were contacted within Leicestershire. Thirty five teachers from thirty one schools expressed a desire to take part in the research. The response rate was considered adequate in terms of the number of teachers required to establish two independent research groups. In addition, given the level of commitment required from schools in terms of both time and financial support, the response was satisfactory.

The research attracted a broad selection of school types: thirteen suburban schools, eight town schools, five rural schools and five inner city schools. Twenty-eight of the schools catered for mainstream primary children, two for primary children with moderate learning difficulties and one for secondary children with moderate learning difficulties.

The research also attracted a broad selection of teachers: six Head teachers, four Deputy Head teachers, six Special Educational Needs co-ordinators, and twenty class teachers. Of the class teachers, ten taught at Key Stage 1, eight at Key Stage 2

and two were secondary teachers. In addition, a lunch time supervisor also responded to the invitation.

TABLE I. Attendance at conferences

Conference	Group A	Group B	Total
One	16	19	35
Two	15	18	33
Three	14	15	29
Four	11	16	27

Table 1 shows that attendance at the conferences dropped as the research progressed. This corresponds to a drop-out rate of 31 per cent for group A and 16 per cent for group B over the four month period of the research. Most non-attendance was the result of problems encountered with supply cover. Of the total of 16 absentees throughout the duration of the research, six were due to three teachers who permanently withdrew from the research after the second conference, nine were due to difficulties in arranging or funding supply cover and one was due to a residential visit.

The three teachers who permanently withdrew from the groups were head teachers who felt that the techniques were not appropriate for their schools. It was apparent after discussions that they were far too sceptical about the approach to believe that it could be effective. As will be seen later, many of the teachers were very sceptical

about ecosystemics until they had actually tried the approach themselves. It is often only when the results of ecosystemic interventions have been seen in the classroom that teachers can start to see its potential. It may be that the head teachers who withdrew from the course did not have the same opportunities as the class teachers to try the approach themselves. It is clear that the initial scepticism, or even cynicism, that most people experience on hearing about the techniques is a major barrier to its implementation in the classroom.

Teachers' responses to the ecosystemic approach

This section considers the results from the questionnaires and the focus groups. All participants were given time to complete questionnaires immediately after each conference, giving a response rate of 100 per cent. In each of the questionnaires, the categories used in the results emerge from a detailed analysis of responses to open questions, i.e. these categories were introduced by the teachers themselves and negotiated by the researchers rather than being defined by the questionnaire. This approach minimises the distorting effects of demand characteristics such as defining key parameters, isolating particular themes or asking leading questions. The responses to the questionnaires were collated into core themes for each group and for each conference. These are presented and compared below.

TABLE II. Responses to the ecosystemic approach after the first conference

Response	Group A (16)	Group B (19)	Total (35)
Sceptical	3 (19%)	7 (37%)	10 (29%)
Ecosystemics is not a new approach	3 (19%)	3 (16%)	6 (17%)
Positive ·	10 (62%)	9 (47%)	19 (54%)

In the first conference, participants had been introduced to the main theoretical ideas as well as the Reframing and Positive Connotation of Motive and Function techniques. At this stage they had not had the opportunity to try any of the interventions in school. Table II illustrates that there was a major difference between the two groups as well as major differences within each group. Within each group there was a split between those teachers whose first impressions were positive and those who were either very sceptical or felt that they were already using the techniques and that Ecosystemics was not a new approach.

Positive responses included comments relating to the underlying philosophy which appealed to many participants, particularly the systemic view of social interaction, the child-centred empathic approach and the fact that the approaches complemented and supported the teachers' existing strategies.

It can be seen from Table II that teachers in Group B were more sceptical about the effectiveness of the techniques than teachers in Group A. The scepticism in both groups was expressed quite strongly in some cases; teachers felt that the case studies

were unrealistic and even fanciful and believed that the interventions described could not possibly produce positive results. In addition, many teachers in this group felt that such interventions could be counterproductive.

Molnar and Lindquist (1989) have noted that many teachers were initially very sceptical of the techniques, so this finding was not unexpected. However, we had not anticipated that three teachers in each group would consider that they were already using the approach. After analysing comments recorded during discussions it was apparent that most teachers in this group thought that the techniques were effectively the same as Positive Reinforcement. Although there are some similarities, this point of view represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the ecosystemic techniques. That such a misunderstanding could occur highlighted a shortcoming in the way that the techniques were described to participants in the first conference. We would monitor this situation after the second conference.

Although nearly half of the teachers expressed doubt over the approach, the questionnaire revealed that all were willing to attempt ecosystemic interventions on their return to school. The main reasons expressed for this were:

- the techniques were structured into easy to follow stages;

- teachers wanted to try the approach before rejecting it;

- teachers felt that they had nothing to loose given the chronic nature of the problems being encountered.

TABLE III. Responses to the ecosystemic approach after the second conference

Response	Group A (15)	Group B (18)	Total (33)
Remain sceptical	0	2 (11%)	2 (6%)
Ecosystemics is not a new approach	1 (7%)	3 (17%)	4 (12%)
Remain positive	6 (40%)	5 (28%)	11 (33%)
Feel more positive	7 (47%)	7 (39%)	14 (42%)
Feel much more positive	1 (7%)	1 (6%)	2 (6%)

Table III illustrates that there was a shift towards a more positive response to the ecosystemic approach: nearly half of the teachers (48 per cent) expressed feeling more, or much more, positive. Eighty one per cent of teachers now felt positive or more positive than they had after the first conference. There was also a drop in the number of teachers who felt sceptical (from 29 per cent down to 6 per cent). This drop in the number of sceptical participants cannot be explained by those not attending the second conference.

There were three main reasons for these changes. First, many of the teachers had tried ecosystemic interventions successfully and had been able to share their experiences with the group. Most of the teachers who had tried interventions were surprised by how effective they had been. Second, those who had not attempted interventions were encouraged by the success of others in the group. From recorded discussions and questionnaire responses it was clear that hearing of others' experiences had a powerful impact on those who were unsure about the techniques

and had not tried them in school. Third, many teachers reported that their understanding of the ecosystemic approach had been consolidated during the second conference.

Table III also shows that four teachers still believed that ecosystemics was not a new approach. Based on the analysis of recorded discussions, three main perspectives emerged. First, all the teachers in this group felt that they had used some, but not all, of the techniques before. Second, they all found the clear structure, with each technique broken down into clear steps, very useful , even for those techniques with which they felt they were familiar. Third, some teachers in this group were still confused about similarities with Positive Reinforcement approaches. It was agreed that this issue would be considered in some detail in the third conference.

TABLE IV. Responses to the ecosystemic approach after the third conference

Response	Group A (14)	Group B (15)	Total (29)
Remain sceptical	0	0	0
Ecosystemics is not a new approach	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	2 (7%)
Remain positive	2 (14%)	4 (27%)	6 (21%)
Feel more positive	2 (14%)	3 (20%)	5 (17%)
Feel more confident	10 (71%)	8 (53%)	18 (62%)

Teachers' responses following the third conference are summarised in Table IV

which shows that there was a positive response to the ecosystemic approach, with all participants recording feeling positive or more positive about the techniques. Of particular interest is the high percentage of teachers who now expressed an increase in confidence about using the approach. The principal reason given for this was the continuing implementation of successful ecosystemic interventions by the teachers and the significant number of case examples being shared within the groups. It will be noted that none of the teachers who attended the third conference expressed scepticism over the approach. This was because the two sceptical teachers in Group B (see Table III) permanently withdrew from the course after the second conference as mentioned above in the section on attendance rates.

The confusion over Positive Reinforcement techniques was addressed in a session dedicated to looking at the similarities and differences between the approaches, which are summarised in Figure 1 Many teachers found that this helped to clarify their own understanding and two teachers reported that the session had helped them to see the source of their confusion and were now clear that ecosystemics was in fact a new approach to them. Two teachers still felt that the reframing approach was something they had used before even though they were now more confident about using the approach in different situations.

Figure 1

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT	ECOSYSTEMICS
Positive interventions conditional upon problem behaviour stopping	Unconditional positive interventions
Based on common sense	Some interventions are paradoxical
Problem behaviour ignored if possible	Problem behaviour accepted
Focuses on the child's behaviour	Focuses on the teacher's interpretation
Based on changing child's behaviour directly	Based on changing the ecosystem by changing teacher's behaviour
Interventions linked to problem behaviour	Interventions linked to the ecosystem
Can be used for a range of problem behaviours	Can only be used for chronic behaviour problems
Programme of interventions needs to be applied consistently and maintained	Often, only one intervention is needed to change behaviour
Outcome is predictable	Results of interventions are sometimes unexpected
Based on praise or various forms of "reward" for appropriate behaviour	Based on empathy, acceptance and genuineness

The questionnaires completed after the final conference are summarised in Table V, which shows that most of the teachers felt that Ecosystemics was a new (93 per cent) and positive (100 per cent) approach to addressing chronic problem behaviour. In addition, over a third of all teachers also felt that the approach was pragmatic (41 per cent) and reflective (37 per cent). Finally, all of the teachers felt that they were confident about using ecosystemic techniques in their own classrooms.

TABLE V. Responses to the ecosystemic approach after the fourth conference

Response	Group A (11)	Group B (16)	Total (27)
Ecosystemics is not a new approach.	1 (9%)	1 (6%)	2 (7%)
Ecosystemics is a new approach.	10 (91%)	15 (94%)	25 (93%)
Ecosystemics is a positive approach.	11 (100%)	16 (100%)	27 (100%)
Ecosystemics is a pragmatic approach.	5 (45%)	6 (38%)	11 (41%)
Ecosystemics is a reflective approach.	5 (45%)	5 (31%)	10 (37%)
Confident about using Ecosystemics.	11 (100%)	16 (100%)	27 (100%)

The focus groups provided further data on the teachers' responses to the ecosystemic approach and allowed a more in-depth analysis. A selection of quotes that illustrate the core themes which arose from the focus groups is now presented.

First, it was found that the structured nature of the techniques helped the teachers' attempts to use the ecosystemic techniques:

- 'What ecosystemics actually does is give you a structure to manage the whole situation.'

- 'I think ecosystemics is like a little package because it does give you a structure of how to look at the behaviour.'

- 'I've seen my own development, being able to structure my management of the behaviour by that (ecosystemic) method.'

Second, successful interventions proved to be very influential in boosting enthusiasm and confidence in the ecosystemic approach:

- 'When I tried another one that I had partial success with, I really got into it.'

- 'I began to believe in myself, and that I could do it after a few successes.'

- 'It worked so well. It really, kind of just, encouraged me on and on and on.'

Third, the teachers believed that being able to discuss the approach and their attempts in a supportive setting proved to be beneficial:

- 'It was encouraging hearing other people's successes and realising that you could do something like that with your own children.'

The focus groups also provided data on the teachers' overall perspectives of the ecosystemic approach. It was found that 86 per cent felt the approach to be totally new and innovative. The remaining 14 per cent felt that the emphasis on the development of positive relationships between teachers and pupils was not new, although they did concede that the ecosystemic procedure was new. In light of this, all of the teachers in the focus groups felt that they had gained new insights into chronic problem behaviour and had developed new ways of addressing situations. These included being non-confrontational, empathic, unconditional, positive and paradoxical in chronic problem situations. For all of the teachers, this combination of factors resulted in a radical adjustment to their usual way of dealing with problem situations:

- 'Standing back from it and looking at my role in it - I think that's when the shift came for me. Understanding the ecosystem and my role in it and not harping on about a particular problem or child but shifting perspective'
- 'It has really made me look at myself and what I do in my class and how I treat these problems'
- 'It stopped me focusing on a problem as a problem - or a child as a "problem child" '

- 'It really made me think hard about what I had been doing beforehand and certainly my attitude has changed a lot since.'

- 'Stepping back and saying , "I'm not helping by thinking as I have in the past, I am going to see this from a different perspective". Ecosystemics has definitely made me see things in a different way.'

Finally, when asked whether or not they felt they would use the ecosystemic approach in the future, all of the teachers felt sure that they would. Furthermore, 43 per cent felt that colleagues at their respective schools would also use the approach in the future. This was balanced by the experience of some in the groups who had tried to introduce the technique to interested members of staff in their schools. They discovered that colleagues found it very difficult to believe in the approach and that it "sounded too good to be true". This of course reflects the sceptical point of view that was prevalent in the first conference, and highlights one of the major difficulties in introducing the ecosystemic approach to teachers. As one of the teachers explained, it was the paradoxical and counter-intuitive nature of the interventions that puzzled many colleagues:

- 'Somebody who doesn't know anything about it could watch you working with a group and think, "Goodness, he's reinforcing that bad behaviour!" because that happened to me with a classroom assistant. The first time, I could see her looking at me and thinking, 'What's he saying to these kids?' I was actually giving positive reasons for their

behaviour (reframing) and in the beginning she felt, and quite rightly so, that I was encouraging them just to continue that bad behaviour all the time. I have taken time to explain reframing and she has seen the results and actually understands it now, but in the beginning when it first happened, it was, 'What's he doing there?' But it was only because I had done the detective work beforehand and had fully prepared the interventions, that I felt confident in doing it that way.

The Focus Groups showed that, as well as effectively addressing chronic (and severe) problem behaviour, the techniques affected individual teachers in unexpected ways. Twelve of the fourteen teachers in the focus groups (86%) experienced an improvement in their occupational health; in particular, a belief that they felt more relaxed:

- 'I think it has done wonders for my blood pressure. It does make you more relaxed when you stop seeing it as a problem. I stopped thinking I was in a hole and couldn't get out.'

- 'When things have been bad in the classroom, since I have been coming, I look at my nursery nurse and just say, 'Ecosystemics!' That is enough to lighten it a lot for us.'

- 'They (the class) did say to me once, 'are you going on that relaxing day again?' I think they thought I went off to some wonderful health

farm. There was certainly a difference, I felt it myself - more relaxed - and the class were more relaxed.'

- 'I have never been so ill as I have been this last eighteen months. I really did think it was all falling away. I hated going to school and I have never, ever, been like that in my life ... and now I am all right again since I came on the course.'

In addition, 43 per cent of the teachers felt that the ecosystemic approach gave them permission to fail at solving particular problem situations, where previously they felt there had to be an expectation of immediate success:

- 'I think it puts it in the context of the whole - of everybody's behaviour together, rather than you seeing yourself as the one person who is responsible for all of the behaviours that go on in that room, which is an awful burden for anyone to carry.'

As well as being personally affected, the teachers reported significant effects on the pupils themselves. There was the self evident change in behaviour following a successful intervention but there were also more subtle effects. The most prevalent of these were the ways in which the ecosystemic techniques offered pupils self control and confidence when changing their behaviour and the way the interventions had far reaching implications for the rest of the class or school (the ripple effect):

- 'In a sense you are putting the control into a different court. You are giving it back to the students really, to control their own situation.'

- 'It gives them the confidence. They need the confidence before they can actually start the learning process. It does it in such a way that you build that confidence, that self-esteem.'

- 'They feel that they are changing it (the problem behaviour) and they know the reasons why and they see it as being positive.'

- 'The children with a particular problem have become aware of their own problem but other children around them have also become aware of it. The children's problem behaviour has become more acceptable (reframed) within the whole group. So the whole set up is different in my classroom now.'

- 'The children see that you are not being so punitive and then they are more pleasant. Their faces are like flowers up to you, instead of scowls.'

Case Examples and Discussions

During the course of this project, teachers attempted a total of 51 interventions, 47 of which were successful. A summary of these interventions are given in Tables VI and VII. Full details of these interventions can be found elsewhere (Tyler and Jones, 2000).

TABLE VI. Problem behaviours addressed in case examples

Problem Behaviour	Number of cases
Various forms of disruptive behaviour	18
Calling out/Chatting/Attention seeking	14
Slow/Poor motivation/Poor concentration	13
Various forms of violent behaviour	4
Difficult Adult Colleagues	2
TOTAL	51

TABLE VII. Attempted interventions and outcomes

Ecosystemic Technique	Number of interventions attempted (A/B)		Successful interventions	Unsuccessful interventions
Reframing	18	(9/9)	16	2
Symptom prescription	16	(8/8)	15	1
Finding a positive outcome	6	(1/5)	5	1
Storming the back door	3	(1/2)	3	0
Finding a positive motive	2	(1/1)	2	0
Locating exceptions	1	(0/1)	1	0
Combination: Finding a positive motive & Symptom prescription	3	(1/2)	3	0
Combination: Finding a positive outcome & Symptom prescription	1	(0/1)	1	0
Combination: Finding a positive motive & Finding a positive outcome	1	(1/0)	1	0
TOTAL	51	(22/29)	47	4

The following case examples illustrate three examples of the reframing technique, which help to illustrate key aspects of the approach.

Case 1: 'The Grinner' (Reframing - conditional)

Lewis, who was in year one, put up his hand to answer every question his teacher asked but he rarely had an answer to give. If the teacher choose him to answer he either grinned at her or echoed anything he heard spoken by those around him. This produced bizarre results as he would often hear comments that were not connected with the question being asked. Lewis was also reluctant to answer questions about his work and usually made wild guesses rather than thinking things through.

His teacher, Rachel, tried choosing Lewis only when she was confident that he knew the answer to her questions. Lewis would still give his grin or take a wild guess. Sometimes, when Rachel questioned him directly about his work, she got quite cross in order to make him think properly. She would forcefully encourage Lewis, saying that she knew he had the correct answer in his head. Lewis usually responded to this by eventually giving the correct answer but it was a real struggle and Rachel wanted to try to find another way of dealing with the problem. Having been introduced to ecosystemics some weeks earlier, Rachel decided to try the reframing technique.

For some time Rachel had thought that Lewis was a nervous boy who was keen to please. She thought that he put up his hand in order to win approval from her for

answering a question. However, his nerves would get the better of him and the grinning would be used as a defence mechanism to mask his fear of getting things wrong. This fear also made Lewis panic and guess wildly as he apparently lost the ability to think rationally. Although Rachel had had these ideas for some time she had not communicated them to Lewis until now.

Rachel began by telling Lewis that she liked the way that he tried to answer her questions but that it was a shame that he didn't give her an answer, especially when she knew he had one in his head. She then told Lewis that she wanted him to carry on putting his hand up but to think first before he answered.

When Rachel wrote up this case for us it had only been a few days since she had spoken with Lewis. She explained that his response to her ideas was one of embarrassment but that he appeared to listen and take in what she had said. She also said that, although she felt it was too early to confidently say that the intervention had been successful, she had observed on two occasions that Lewis had answered a question correctly.

Discussion

In the past Rachel had been frustrated by Lewis's grins and lack of answers - especially as she felt that he often did know the answers to her questions. She also felt that it was probably Lewis's fear of 'getting things wrong' that made him grin or guess wildly. It was not until Rachel was able to step back and see the situation from Lewis's perspective that she could find new ways of dealing with the problem.

Instead of challenging Lewis's concern for getting things wrong, Rachel let him know that she liked his enthusiasm for answering questions. She even asked him to keep on putting up his hand. These are big changes in Rachel's usual response and they seem to have had quite an impact upon Lewis who was initially 'very embarrassed'. But why should Lewis have been embarrassed by Rachel's comments? Was it because she had shown a real understanding of his needs? We will never know for certain but what we do know is that for the first time Lewis' teacher showed signs of cooperating with him. This must have been quite an event for Lewis and, he has begun to answer questions correctly.

However, it should be mentioned that Rachel did make mistakes in her intervention. Unfortunately, she made her acceptance of Lewis' behaviour conditional. She said that she 'liked the way that he tried to answer her questions *but* that it was a shame that he didn't give her an answer'. She also told Lewis that she 'wanted him to carry on putting his hand up *but* to have a think first before he answered'. With both of these statements, what would have been a simple case of acceptance and cooperation becomes a case of conditional acceptance.

With the ecosystemic approach the focus is on the way that we, as adults, need to change our usual response to chronic problem situations. *These changes should not be based on the condition that the child also needs to change.* Indeed, with ecosystemics the very fact that you have initiated changes in the ecosystem by changing you own behaviour means that the problem situation will probably change. The teacher's role in this process is not to tell the child how to make that change but

to give him the opportunity and space to change of his own accord. This is the paradoxical nature of ecosystemics and this is what makes the approach so difficult for many teachers to understand initially.

The next example, which was unsuccessful, illustrates another common error in implementing ecosystemic interventions. Not only is it important for an intervention to be unconditional, it also needs to be sincere.

Case 2: 'Everything takes forever' (Reframing - insincere).

Joanne is a year six pupil who seems to do everything at a totally different pace to other children. Some children are slow, but Joanne is almost stationary; metaphorically speaking, she always seems to be standing still and unable to be moved on by others. No matter how much encouragement she is given, Joanne still takes forever to do the simplest things. Mike, her teacher, finds that Joanne's reluctance to do anything at a reasonable pace is really starting to annoy him. He especially finds it frustrating when he spends time trying to hurry her along and she almost appears to be slowing down. Whatever action Mike takes has no impact at all, and Joanne responds with a slow reluctance. She is the last to arrive in the morning, the last to go out to play, and the last to leave the dining hall. She will often be sorting out her books and other belongings at the end of the day when everyone else has gone home.

Mike decided that, as he was getting nowhere in trying to change Joanne's behaviour, he would try the reframing technique. He decided that he would select one particular situation to start with, and one for which he could find a positive interpretation. Joanne was always the last child in the class to emerge from the changing rooms at the weekly swimming sessions, and Mike decided to use this as a focus for his intervention. After the next swimming session he told Joanne that he realised that it *was* important that she made sure that she was really dry and that she should take all the time she needed to do this. Joanne was incredulous, and took even longer than usual to get dry and join the other children on the coach. The intervention did not have the desired effect and a few days later Joanne told Mike that her mum thought that he was "taking the mickey". One result of this intervention, even though it had been unsuccessful, was that Mike no longer felt so frustrated by Joanne's behaviour and this was a significant change for him. By stepping back from the situation, he realised that in the past he had become too concerned and anxious about his inability to get Joanne to hurry up. Even though Joanne was taking as long as ever, Mike felt a lot more relaxed about the situation.

Discussion:

Mike reported to the group on this example as an unsuccessful intervention. Later in the discussion, the group looked at the importance of being sincere in communicating interventions and the importance of really believing in the positive perspectives which were being presented. It was stressed that ecosystemics is not a form of "reverse psychology" where you say one thing and mean another in order to

manipulate people. The ecosystemic techniques depend on this genuine and sincere form of communication to be effective.

Mike pointed out that this could be an important factor in his own case example. Mike explained that he was the sort of teacher who had very light and humorous relationships with his pupils. He found that this communication style had developed over the years and was one that suited him and the children he worked with in this inner city school. Most of his interactions with children were characterised by a light banter, half-serious comments and a strong element of irony. The children enjoyed this form of communication and would relate to Mike in an almost playful fashion.

As he reflected on this and discussed it with the group, he realised that Joanne may well have thought that he was being sardonic and that he really wasn't serious at all. She may have thought that he was just joking and being ironic, and so when he said that she should take as long as she needed to get dry, he obviously meant that she should hurry up. As far as Joanne was concerned he was simply using an ironic way of telling her to hurry up. If this was the case then there was a useful lesson in the case example, as it reinforced the importance of being sincere in reframing children's behaviour. Molnar and Lindquist point out (1989: 44) that if, in any problem situation, you cannot honestly describe the situation in a new way, then you should not try to use the ecosystemic techniques at all. This is particularly important when the intervention seems to contradict or ignore common sense, as

reframing often does; if the communication is not sincere then it is unlikely to be effective.

Mike had highlighted an important point for the group in focusing on this aspect and said that he would need to think carefully about whether he could use this approach given his own style of interacting with children. Ecosystemics is a technique which cannot necessarily be used by everyone; it depends on a particular view of children and a particular way of communicating with them. At the same time it does not seek to undermine or criticise those who cannot use, or choose not to use, the approach. Ecosystemics is just one among a whole range techniques which depend upon the personality, values and manner of the practitioner for their success.

Case 3: 'Thinking Time' (Reframing)

Martin, who is in Bev's year 1 class, was a quiet child and presented no problems in class. He was however very slow to complete a task, often not finishing at all. Nothing Bev did seemed to speed him up (e.g. time checks, warnings and incentives) and she began to feel quite exasperated. Things eventually came to a head when Martin took two days to finish a single piece of work. Bev was very frustrated by this and launched into the usual tack of venting her frustration on the child - Why had he taken two days to finish one piece of work!? Had he spent the time talking!?

When Martin said with all sincerity that he had not been talking, it stopped Bev and made her think more carefully about how she had responded. Bev asked Martin if he had been looking out of the window, daydreaming instead of working. Again Martin replied 'no' in a very sincere way. This made Bev realise that the child was not being intentionally lazy or tiresome and helped her to realise that there might be positive explanations for his slowness. Responding to this new insight, Bev asked if Martin liked to think carefully about his work. He immediately replied 'yes!' The penny dropped. Bev told Martin that thinking carefully about his work was a good thing and that in the future he must take thinking time before he did his work. She also told him that if he encountered a problem during the 'thinking time' he must come and ask for help.

The following day, Bev had forgotten all about their chat until Martin brought up his work for marking, long before the end of the session. The work had not only been done fairly quickly but was also of a good standard for Martin. Thinking time had obviously worked.

Discussion

This case provides a good insight into the workings of the reframing technique and into possible ways that such interventions can be implemented.

Although Martin's behaviour did not present any problems in class, it did present problems for himself and his teacher. Martin was not completing much of his work

and was therefore underachieving academically. Martin's teacher had been trying to address this issue but had become increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress. Over time, the interactions in and around the problem situation became increasingly entrenched and a stable, chronic ecosystem developed.

It was not until Martin took two days to complete a single task that something different happened. In chronic problem situations changes are often only introduced when the teacher feels that there is no other way forward. Initially, Bev's response was nothing new and she '*launched into her usual tack of venting her frustration on the child*'. However, when Martin explained with all sincerity that he was not chatting or daydreaming instead of working it made Bev stop and think.

Bev then did something which is quite unusual within an ecosystemic intervention, she responded to the problem situation immediately. In our work with teachers we strongly recommend some detective work prior to the intervention. This not only helps teachers to find alternative ways of responding to the problem but also provides insights into how a new response can best be implemented. However, as this case illustrates, it is feasible for some teachers, and with some chronic problem situations, to respond without doing detective work. The teacher in this case was quite familiar with the reframing technique and had been thinking of alternative explanations for problems in her class for some time. She was also confident in her ability to articulate sincerely her instantaneous re-evaluation of the situation.

Bev's instantaneous response showed a real understanding of the child's perspective. It was new, positive, and cooperative. In addition, her response contained a statement of support for Martin's behaviour. In so doing, Bev acted in ways that were consistent with her new interpretation by offering Martin help during his 'thinking time'. These changes in the teacher's response were clearly very powerful in altering the stable cycle of interaction which had surrounded the problem for some time. Indeed, although Bev had forgotten all about it the next day, Martin had not. No longer feeling the need to illustrate the rationality of his slow behaviour, Martin came up to his teacher having finished the work quite quickly. The work was also of a good standard for Martin. The cycle had been broken and a new ecosystem based on cooperation was developing.

General discussion

Despite the limited nature of the present study, certain conclusions can be drawn about teachers' responses to the ecosystemic approach.

- Both groups of teachers showed the same concerns and experienced the same difficulties at the beginning.

- The majority of teachers in both groups found the structure provided by the ecosystemic techniques useful and were able to use the techniques successfully.

- In both groups there was a dramatic change of attitude towards the approach as the research progressed.

- A small number of teachers in both groups felt initially that the approach was not new and identified it with Positive Reinforcement.

- Members of both groups found the theoretical ideas initially difficult to understand, and even after implementing a successful intervention, most still had difficulty explaining the counter-intuitive and paradoxical nature of the approach.

- Many teachers in both groups had difficulty trying to disseminate the approach to colleagues.

- All were impressed with the way that the approach could deal so effectively with problem behaviour that had not been changed by other approaches.

- Most of the teachers in both groups experienced an improvement to their occupational health.

- Many teachers in both groups commented upon the positive ripple-effect on the whole ecosystem of the classroom.

- Finally, in both groups there was agreement that the ecosystemic approach would not be suitable for all teachers but only for those more adventurous teachers who were prepared to try something challenging and different from normal interventions.

As well as conducting follow up studies with the present group of teachers, further research into ecosystemics is needed by introducing the approach to all of the teaching and helping staff in a school. This will allow the impact on the school ecosystem to be more fully assessed.

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Appendix

The Psychology of Personal Constructs

as a Systemic Personality Theory

1993

The Psychology of Personal Constructs

as a Systemic Personality Theory

ABSTRACT   There has been considerable interest recently in the ecosystemic

approach, both with regard to interpersonal relations Cooper and Upton 1990a and

1990b, Upton and Cooper 1990, Tyler 1992) and the personality system (Tyler,

1994).   George Kelly has made important contributions to the development of

systemic personality theory that have not been acknowledged in the literature. This

paper considers the systemic aspects of his theory by examining a short extract from

The Psychology of Personal Constructs (Kelly, 1955) in some detail, and by

providing an overview of the concept of unidimensionality.

Introduction

The personal construct psychology of George Kelly, which he referred to as "neophenomenology" (Kelly, 1955), focuses on the individual's perception of the world. The basic phenomenological idea of temporal and spatial horizons is embodied in Kelly's fundamental postulate:

> A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events (Kelly, 1955).

A construct is a category of meaning by which we construe ourselves and our environment. A person's constructs form a coherent system which both reflect and determine behaviour. The essence of therapy, according to Kelly, is to reveal alternative ways of construing the world.

The theory of personal constructs provides the basis for a systemic psychology which is concerned with people rather than with analytical abstractions:

> Currently many psychologists feel that psychology should concern itself more with "whole" people. It should centre more on "real human experience". This is comical in one sense - it is as if sailors suddenly decided they ought to take an interest in ships - but necessary in another. A variety of vanities have caused psychologists to turn their backs on the complete and purposeful person. (They) favour the clockwork doll, the

chemical interaction or the environmentally imprisoned rat as their models of humanity (Bannister and Fransella, 1986).

Kelly's theory asserts that we cannot contact an interpretation-free reality directly, but that we can only make assumptions or build constructs about the world:

> ... the assumption is that whatever nature may be, the events we face today are subject to as great a variety of constructions as our wits will enable us to contrive. This philosophical position we have called constructive alternativism. It can be contrasted with the prevalent epistemological assumptions of assimilative fragmentalism (Kelly, 1970).

Constructive alternativism emphasises two very important themes in Kelly's work - the inner activity of human systems and the element of choice.

> Our formulation ... emphasises the creative capacity of the living thing to represent the environment, not merely to respond to it. Because he can represent his environment, he can place alternative constructions upon it and, indeed, do something about it if it doesn't suit him (Kelly, 1955).

Kelly's work is remarkable for many reasons, but perhaps most impressive of all is the way that he was able to incorporate the systems perspective into his theory of personality. However, it is misleading to say that he simply incorporated systems

theory into his framework, as he actually developed a great many of the key ideas in the course of his book. This has not been adequately acknowledged in the literature. In this paper I will set these issues in a historical perspective and then examine a short passage from *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* to illustrate Kelly's overall contribution to systems theory. Finally, I will examine the concept of unidimensionality to show how Kelly was able to develop basic systems concepts well beyond vague generalisations.

A Systemic Theory of Personality

The Psychology of Personal Constructs was published in 1955. At that time, General System Theory was still at an early stage of development (Von Bertalanffy, 1950), and the "General Systems Yearbook" was still one year away (Hall and Fagen, 1956). Although the basic systems principles were incorporated in some early writing on Gestalt Psychology (for example, Koffka, 1935) and some other fields (for example Feibleman and Friend, 1945: Parsons, 1945) these contributions are only of a general and exploratory nature, apart from Lecky's ideas (1945) on self-maintenance of personality systems, which Kelly (1955) does in fact acknowledge.

Systems are difficult to describe briefly, but the idea that "the whole is more than the sum of its parts" expresses an important theme of systems theory in a nutshell. The relationships between the various "parts" of a system as well as their mutual

interdependence are important features of any "whole", even though they may be difficult to characterise.

The systems we are concerned with here are never static, but always in a state of flux, and an important systems idea was nicely captured by the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, when he said that we can never step twice into the same river. Although the river looks the same from one moment to the next, with well defined and characteristic currents and eddies, it is constantly changing with regard to the actual substance. The forms of a system is more enduring that the individual elements which constitute it. The patterns of organisation are more characteristic of the system than that which is organised. A biological system, for example, maintains its form over long periods of time even though the individual cells are constantly being replaced. Many social groups and organisations seem to maintain a definite character even though the people involved in the groups may change.

> Systems theory looks at the world in terms of the interrelatedness and interdependence of all phenomena, and in this framework an integrated whole whose properties cannot be reduced to those of its parts is called a system. Living organisms, societies and ecosystems are all systems (Capra, 1982).

The interesting thing about all the systems mentioned by Capra is that, despite their obvious differences, they have many similar properties and characteristics. These

similarities even extend to mechanical and technological systems as well. Indeed, some of these similarities are so striking that a comprehensive theory was developed to elaborate the principles which apply to all systems, irrespective of their particular kind. Bertalanffy (1950) provided the maim impetus for the development of this General System Theory, as it was known, and although there were many positive outcomes with regard to technological systems, the theory was never able to deal effectively with human systems as well.

Even as late as 1968, Von Bertalanffy in his *General System Theory*, a book which is often regarded as representing the state of the art in many fields of system theorizing at the time, does not acknowledge Kelly's outstanding work in this area. In the section of the book which deals specifically with personality theory he states that "few attempts have been made to apply system theory to personality theory" (Von Bertalanffy, 1968), and cites as examples a few obscure papers from the General Systems Yearbooks of 1956 and 1957. He then more or less dismisses the possibilities in this field, which provides an interesting contrast to his claim in other parts of the book that General System Theory can be effectively applied to any complex system:

> We can therefore not well expect that General System Theory can present solutions where personality theorists from Freud to Jung to a host of modern writers have been unable to do so (Von Bertalanffy, 1968).

It may have been Von Bertalanffy's preoccupation with **general system theory** which allowed him to overlook Kelly's work, which does not pretend in any way to be all inclusive, or in any way general:

> The system or theory which we are about to expound and explore has a limited range of convenience, its range being restricted as far as we can see at this moment, to human personality and, more particularly, to problems of interpersonal relationships (Kelly, 1955).

There is no room here to discuss systems theory, but it is perhaps worthwhile for the purposes of this paper to outline the main features of human systems:

> All human systems are examples of goal directed, open hierarchical systems: they cannot be observed or controlled in the way that closed systems can.

> An open hierarchial system is a dynamic, organised coherent whole which cannot be understood by reducing it to its parts.

> Systems develop through a process of progressive differentiation and integration producing a hierarchy of sub-systems and sub-sub-systems, and so on, on many levels. Parts and wholes do not exist in any absolute sense.

Sub-systems are open systems which display the autonomous, self-assertive properties of wholes on the one hand and the dependent, integrative properties of parts on the other. This dichotomy is present on every level of the system.

An open hierarchial system is self-monitoring and self-regulating and returns to a well defined, predictable steady state condition. This gives such systems their characteristic stability.

Changes in one part of the system can affect the rest of the system in unexpected, complex and often paradoxical ways. Changes in the system can be dynamic or structural, and in some situations may produce a new steady state condition.

Human systems of all kinds have a tendency to develop pseudo-mechanical, automatic and predictable features in the lower levels of the hierarchy, whilst on the higher levels we find more complex and more flexible patterns exhibiting a higher degree of freedom.

Theory as Metasystem

The most outstanding early example of a theory of personality which attempted to incorporate the systems perspective is found in Angyal's "Foundation for a Science of Personality" (1941). Although this book addresses the main issues from a

systems perspective, and does so quite thoroughly, it does not have the same

coherence and conviction of the psychology of personal constructs.

Just about every aspects which Angyal discusses in his book is developed and

extended and, most importantly of all, integrated into Kelly's overall system. The

only theme which does not feature explicitly in Kelly's work is that of autonomy and

homonomy. Kelly is not presenting us with disconnected theoretical ideas about the

complex system of personality and human interactions as so many writers do: even

his theory itself has the wholeness and characteristics of a system. Kelly's theory is

a system about a system.

One reason why Kelly's theory is so effective is because it is also a system, or, more

strictly speaking, a metasystem. Kelly refers to the theory as a system repeatedly in

his writing, a system which is built up, or constructed, from a series of propositions:

> In building the system which we call the psychology of personal constructs
>
> we have chosen to rely on one basic postulate and to amplify the system by
>
> stating certain propositions and, in part, elaborate it in greater detail
>
> (Kelly, 1955).

Kelly outlines the systemic nature of his theory at the very beginning of his book in

just a few pages (Kelly, 1955, Volume 1, pages 8-12). To illustrate the nature of

Kelly's approach I want to include one paragraph from this section and consider in

detail the systems ideas which are contained or implied in it. A great deal of his writing is just as authoritative and concentrated as this example; he often mentions key ideas in passing, almost incidentally or by subtle implication.

> In general man seeks to improve his constructs by increasing his repertory, by altering them to provide better fits, and by subsuming them with superordinate constructs or systems. In seeking improvement he is repeatedly halted by the damage to the system that apparently will result from the alteration of a subordinate construct. Frequently his personal investment in the larger system, or his personal dependence upon it, is so great that he will forego the adoption of a more precise construct in the substructure. It may take a major act of psychotherapy or experience to get him to adjust his construction system to the point where the new and more precise construct can be incorporated (Kelly, 1955, page 9).

In the first sentence man is portrayed as a goal directed system with clear intentions ("seeks to improve his constructs"). The constructs form an open system (open because he individual is "increasing his repertory") which is characterised by the potential for structural, rather than simply dynamic, change ("by altering ... and subsuming them"). It also points to a hierarchial organisation of subordinate and "superordinate constructs or systems"; in other words, it is not only individual constructs which can be superordinate but systems (and subsystems) as well.

In the second sentence, Kelly again refers to the importance of structural change, and also mentions the self-maintaining nature of the personality system. He relates change in a subordinate construct to a change in the whole system. It is the change to the whole system that "repeatedly" halts improvement. Although he does not refer to dynamic equilibrium and equifinality as such, there are the underlying system concepts.

Individuals have an investment in, or a dependence upon, the "larger system" according to the third sentence, which now turns to the phenomenological aspects of the theory. Without this dependence on the larger system, most of these ideas would simply remain obscure abstractions. Superordinate systems are experienced by an individual in terms of meanings, intentions, investment and dependence. This attachment to the larger system makes it difficult for the individual to adopt "a more precise construct in the substructure"; in other words the system stability or self-regulation makes it difficult for the differentiation of the system to take place.

The fourth sentence points out that changing a person's construction system can very often only be achieved through an experimental process, which again links the whole process to the individual's conscious experience, self-awareness and unique personal perspectives. Having referred to differentiation in the previous sentence, he now emphasises the importance of integrating the construct into the system ("... construct can be incorporated"). By suggesting intention here ("... to get him to adjust his construction system"), it's as if Kelly is taking us back to the first

sentence of the paragraph to remind us that "in general man seeks to improve his constructs". The individual is the only one who can change his constructs, no one else can do it for him.

In this one paragraph Kelly has referred to major aspects of systems theory – goal directed open systems, hierarchial structure, structural change, self-maintenance and self-regulation, dynamic equilibrium, equifinality, differentiation and integration – as well as to phenomenological ideas such as intention, personal investment and dependence and individual experience. Although he has developed a comprehensive systemic approach throughout his work, he does not stress this aspect whatsoever. He is also very aware of the dangers of trying to make any theory too comprehensive and all embracing:

> No one has yet proved himself wise enough to propound a universal system of constructs. We can safely assume that it will be a long time before a satisfactorily unified system will be proposed. For the time being we shall have to content ourselves with a series of miniature systems, each with its own realm or limited range of convenience (Kelly, 1955).

System Dimensions

Many systems theorists mention the importance of concept such as pattern, organisation and interaction within the system – concepts which are central to systems theory. However, few writers in the field of systemic psychology are able to

develop these ideas beyond vague generalisations. A distinctive aspect of Kelly's systemic perspective is his ability to discuss these interactions in a detailed and comprehensive way. One of the most important aspects of his theory, and one which illustrates this point very well, is the concept of the dimensions of the system.

Personal Constructs are arranged into complex hierarchies with superordinate constructs subsuming subordinate ones. Very often, in terms of predicting events, a whole group of what appear to be independent and alternative constructs may in fact be almost equivalent. For example, if my constructs "kind", "helpful", and "considerate", are very closely interrelated, then I will tend to expect helpful and considerate behaviour from someone I construe to be kind. On the other hand, if I construe someone to be unkind then I will not expect him to be either helpful or considerate. Whereas it may appear that I have three alternative ways of construing a situation, in effect I have only one. In such a situation each group of constructs, therefore, defines only one dimension of my construct space. It is rare to find individuals with more then three independent dimensions to their construct system:

> Most adults find that more than half of their constructs are being used in similar ways. This dominant grouping has an over-riding influence on how they perceive other people. Depressingly, it is rare for more than two further clusters to emerge (Hall and Hall, 1988).

In structural terms there are two extremes for system development. On the one hand there may be so few relationships between the constructs that the system fails to function as a whole. In this situation the system is fragmented to such an extent that it corresponds to clinical thought disorder. Kelly refers to extreme loosening of the system:

> Loosening is characteristic of those constructs which lead to varying predictions. Nothing remains firmly in place ... loose construction seems like an ever shifting accumulation of irrelevancies, miscellaneous fragments and syncretisms. Undoubtedly it was this feature that led Bleuler to suggest the term "schizophrenia" (fragmented mind) as applicable to a large group of disturbed people whose thinking was characterised by looseness (Kelly, 1955).

At the other extreme, the constructs in the system are so closely connected as to make the whole system unidimensional:

> In general, the more unidimensional the structure of an individual's system, the fewer the alternatives which are available to him in interpreting events since, the more closely related all constructs constituting the system, the more his successive constructions will fit the logical constraints of a single set of construct relationships (Adams-Webber, 1970).

Putting this in terms of systems theory, extreme differentiation of the system results in disintegration, whereas extreme integration results in a monolithic, unidimensional system.

If a system is unidimensional, then the superordinate constructs need to become more permeable to allow alternatives to emerge; the system needs to be more differentiated. If a system is too fragmented, then the constructs need to be brought together into a system of hierarchies; the system needs to be more integrated:

> ... the normal course of development of a personal construct system involves the progressive differentiation of the system into relatively independent, internally organised subsystems and increasing functional integration of subsystems within the overall system as an operational whole (Admas-Webber, 1970).

An important idea which Kelly refers to use rather than "stability", is the "permeability" of superordinate constructs. A construct is permeable when "new experiences and new events can be discriminatively added to those which it already embraces" (Kelly, 1955). Here the phrase "discriminatively added to" indicates that the dimensions of the sub-system are being increased, thus providing real alternatives rather than duplicating existing structures.

This is an important elaboration of the term "stability", for a system can be stable and permeable, as well as stable and impermeable. Obviously, impermeable systems are not open to the inclusion of new ideas, and therefore are stable in a rigid way. Kelly maintains that the "brittleness and impermeability" of construction systems do not facilitate change (Kelly, 1955). Permeable systems, on the other hand, may be considered as being stable in a flexible and open way, as they tend to maintain their basic identity:

> ... a permeable construct ... may be quite definite; it may have little tendency to vary; and it may be persistently held ... a construct is permeable (when it has) the capacity to embrace new elements (Kelly, 1955).

Conclusion

In this paper, George Kelly's contribution to the development of systems theory has been evaluated by examining a short extract from *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* and by providing an overview of the concept of unidimensionality. This evaluation has shown that Kelly was able to apply systems theory to the study of the personality and to develop basic systems concepts well beyond vague generalisations. By setting these issues in a historical perspective I have shown that Kelly's overall contribution to systems theory has not been adequately acknowledged in the literature.

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