

Strategy: Social Systems Map Exercise

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Citation:

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Context: I use this exercise in all of my social work classes undergraduate and graduate to help students.

How to use:

This exercise helps students look at the person (group, community or organization) in the context of the world around them. I typically review the concepts in Bronfenbrenner's model and define/discuss each systems level. I then provide a case example which the students' and I analyze by identifying the social forces that impact the well being of the person (group, community or organization). We continue by mapping out these social forces; positive forces are noted with plus signs while negative forces are noted with minus signs. This assignment helps the students see clients' situations and behavior is the result of more than personal attributes.

I have traditionally used this to discuss culture, but have also used it to examine economic forces. It seems to me that this systems mapping exercise could be used to identify each of the 3 components of class (economic, political and cultural) that affect people's thoughts and behavior.

Systems Theory

American Social Environment

In 3 concentric circles, micro/meso/macro levels of society:

Micro Level

- ❖ Environment of an individual and their immediate family members.
- ❖ Characterized by face to face interaction.

Meso Level

- ❖ Any small group, including extended family, work groups, other social groups and neighborhood groups.
- ❖ Includes direct (face-to-face) indirect contact with other professional on behalf on clients.

Macro Level

- ❖ Large groups and institutions that “reflect the sociopolitical, historical, economic, and environmental forces that influence the overall human condition, causing problems for individuals or providing opportunities for their fulfillment and equality” (Barker, 1999, p. 285).

THE NELSON FAMILY, LOUISVILLE, TENNESSEE

Nobody needs to tell Patricia Nelson how important health insurance is. When her husband William was just 35 years old, he developed Lou Gehrig's disease. The disability-linked insurance provided by Medicare meant that in the final months of his illness, Patricia could care for him in their own home, with doctors, nurses, and therapists stopping by as needed, at little cost to the family.

Despite Patricia's understanding of the significance of insurance, she and her son Sam have been going without it since June 2000, one month after she left a job with health benefits to help a sister and brother-in-law strengthen their family business.

Like many Americans, Patricia has found over the years that her family's access to health insurance has depended largely on the decisions of employers. For 10 years, from 1983 through 1993, Patricia worked in a restaurant, making just above minimum wage. "Sometimes there was insurance, and sometimes there wasn't, depending on who the owners were," she says.

The most costly uninsured medical expense came when Sam was five years old and had a bad asthma attack. At Children's Hospital, the billing office checked on whether Sam was eligible for Medicaid. Patricia remembers the family missing the eligibility cutoff by \$4. "We were in there for two days, and I ended up with a \$6,000 hospital bill that I'm still paying \$25 a month on," Patricia says. Her balance, after seven years of paying, is \$1,790.

She prays that she and Sam stay healthy and injury-free. "The thing is, you can't get private insurance for a price you can afford," she says.

Note: After the Kaiser report was issued, Patricia Nelson lost her job when her sister's business closed down. She has since developed a serious kidney infection, and Sam now has Bell's Palsy. Faced with over \$12,000 in medical bills, she has filed for bankruptcy.

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation Website. <http://www.kff.org/uninsured/2207-index.cfm>