

A Reply to Geoffrey Greif

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I would like to thank Geoffrey Greif for his clarification concerning the roots of ecological models of social work practice. His considered defense of Carol Meyer's work, his own, and that of his colleagues helps to remind me again of the large strides by which ecological theory advanced in the 1970s and 1980s. That work broke the ground for a less hierarchical and circularly causal theory for social work.

Greif shows us that Edgar Auerswald and Meyer, among others, effectively challenged calcified systems-based theories that emphasized causal relationships without sufficient attention to broader social (and environmental) issues. This became the hallmark of ecological social work practice. He is right to remind us that there is a continuum, not a disjuncture, between the "old" and the "new" ecological practice models I discuss. However, far from making a "straw man" argument, the article I wrote was intended to present a paradigmatically different approach to ecological social work than one anchored to systems theory. While Greif makes several important points, he has not addressed my core argument, which is that new ecologies provide us with a very different basis for practice.

I recall hearing Michael White, the Australian narrative therapist and social worker, speak in Toronto in the mid-1990s. He was asked about the links between his Foucauldian-inspired approach and brief strategic models of therapy. While White recognized that the work of brief therapists resembles his own, he insisted that his approach had very different roots, stemming from his Ph.D. studies in anthropology. Similarly, the differences are most apparent between previous models of ecological practice and the model I propose when both roots are fully understood.

For example, even the most progressive of systems-based ecological social work approaches (e.g., Germain and Gitterman 1996) rely on a language of otherness that situates the social worker as somehow distinct from the client. This dichotomous thinking, no matter how much it is couched in a critical discourse, shows the lingering influence of a mech-

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anistic ecology in which one can be in a complex system but still somehow distinctly apart. In proposing an ecological social work practice rooted in deep and social ecologies, I have intended to strip away false boundaries and distinctions not only to see the common links between social workers and clients but also to use these connections to create a more equitable and nonhierarchical approach. As I state, “a social and deep ecological response to a systems-based ecology does offer a better understanding of the context and power of the social worker in transaction with those with whom he or she works” (Ungar 2002, p. 484).

This difference between the two models is more than semantic. New ecologies challenge dualism, challenge the construction of relationships as having endings and beginnings, and reject causality in preference to chaos. I express practice principles that are congruent with the post-modern, critical, and feminist turns now being taken by social workers, but that still are ecological. As I note in a forthcoming publication (Ungar, in press), social work’s historical claim to be the profession most dedicated to serving the person-in-environment suggests positioning the profession on the leading edge of progressive ecological thought, as both consumers of and contributors to theory. I base my argument on three axioms for an ecologically based philosophy for the human services: the necessity of a communal rather than hierarchical and bureau-centric perspective, the recognition of the intrinsic value of individuals and their communities, and the importance of mutuality and cooperation. These principles reflect advances both in the theory and practice of social work over the past several decades, as well as the shift in ecological thinking away from systems-based models. It is this shift that I hope helps to inspire others to revisit ecological social work practice in light of other advances in our field by complimentary theorists. In the process, I agree with Greif that we will need to value the earlier roots of ecological social work theory for their very substantial contribution.

Even as we look backward, I am hopeful that we will take ecological theory further forward than I have attempted thus far. Common among other writers concerned with ecology and social work, including Frank Tester, Marie Hoff, John McNutt, Fred Besthorn, and John Coates, is a push for a broader definition of ecological practice that explicitly embraces an understanding of the connection between the health of our physical environment and human beings’ social and psychological well-being. In making such a connection, social workers will come even closer to an ecological practice that explicitly engages the messiness of the physical environment, as well as the problems raised by such challenges as the Kyoto Accord and environmental racism (see Tester 1994).

Finally, I am grateful to Greif for clarifying who among the earlier proponents of an ecosystems theory were and were not social workers by profession. However, I would like, in my own defense, to say that I consider as part of the social work pantheon a number of individuals

whose contribution to our body of knowledge is significant, even if they held different professional titles. Greif is correct in noting that Salvador Minuchin is a psychiatrist, Auerswald an M.D., and Deborah Luepnitz a psychologist. However, I have never seen our discipline to be limited in its scope to theories generated by only those with a social work degree. To my mind, Minuchin's work is as much foundational to almost every social worker's practice as is work by theorists who, like Meyer, were trained as social workers. As an eclectic field, social work's knowledge is rooted in a number of professional discourses, with our own contributing a much needed holism.

I would like to thank Greif for his thoughtful comments and hope that my response will encourage a critical review of the latter part of my article, as well as its account of social work's history.

References

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