

Ecological systems approach: Anthony

In this paper I will apply an ecological systems approach to my former student, Anthony. First I will give a brief background about Anthony describing his individual characteristics, our relationship and what time period I am referring to in this paper. Next, I will define and explain his microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem in that order (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In each system I will identify and examine at least one risk factor and one protective factor. A risk factor as defined by Masten and Wright is a person, relationship or entity that could be detrimental to a developing person (2009). A protective factor is a person, place or resource that predicts resiliency in spite of the presence of risk (Masten & Wright, 2009). Finally, I will discuss the utility of recognizing and understanding factors in all specified contexts to more effectively promote the healthy development of an individual.

Background

Anthony is an 18 year-old black male. I mentored, tutored, and taught Anthony from November 2011 until July 2012. I first met Anthony when he was placed in my alternative computer-based schooling program because he re-entered a large comprehensive public high school from a high security juvenile detention center. While Anthony was amazingly intelligent he had problems with aggression and impulse control. He made significant gains both academically and socio-emotionally in the program and enrolled in mainstream classes for spring semester. At that time our relationship shifted from teacher to mentor. I monitored his grades, worked with him to develop positive coping skills to deal with his aggression, and collaborated with school staff to ensure his continued success.

In this paper I focus on May-July 2012. The district police ran an undercover operation focused on reducing drug dealing on campus. Anthony, although he had finished probation and improved academically and behaviorally, was targeted and ultimately arrested two weeks before graduation. I chose this time period because it was a challenging time for Anthony. It was unclear whether he was going to graduate and forces beyond his immediate setting greatly impacted his future.

Microsystem

As stipulated in Bronfenbrenner's (1977) "Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development," a microsystem is the context an individual is in immediate and frequent contact with. For Anthony this system included people such as his mother, probation officer, "gang" or peer group, history teacher, and school staff. It included activities like court ordered anger management sessions and drug/alcohol abuse (see Appendix A for more factors).

One important risk factor in Anthony's microsystem was his involvement with a local gang. This gang normalized and promoted violent and illegal behaviors. Most of the members were not academically inclined and discouraged Anthony from trying hard at school. His identification as a gang member also led him to be one of the top targets in the under cover police operation. However, Anthony had many protective factors that served to counterbalance his negative peers. Anthony's mother was a huge protective factor for him. She loved him unconditionally and ensured his attendance in school. Also, with the help of government aid, she provided him with a consistent home.

Mesosystem

After identifying factors in Anthony's microsystem, one can begin to see how each factor interacts with others. These relationships between two settings, both of which directly connect or impact the developing person, create what Bronfenbrenner calls a mesosystem (1977). Anthony's mother's relationship with school officials, his probation officer's cooperation with school personnel, his peer's relationship with school and police (shown by green arrows in Appendix A) all directly effected Anthony in his daily life.

Within this system Anthony's friend's negative interactions with school officials and police were risk factors because every time one of the gang members was disrespectful, disruptive or delinquent it encouraged staff to make assumptions about the group as a whole. Anthony, who was the leader of the gang, was often seen as directly involved in any gang action. This caused Anthony to be punished for actions he was not personally responsible for. It also hindered the creation of a positive learning environment and thus impeded his cognitive development. Conversely, his probation officer's collaboration with school staff served as a protective factor. She worked with school personnel to ensure Anthony was doing well academically and behaviorally. School personnel also alerted the probation officer of any problem behavior before it became criminal. This communication and concern for Anthony's well-being enabled him to successfully complete probation.

Exosystem

Even though Anthony technically completed the mandated punishment for his crime, his gang affiliation made him a target of the district wide campaign to "crackdown" on drugs in school. This is an example of a specific social structure that did not directly contain Anthony but effected his immediate context and life path

quite severely. These types of links make up the ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

More succinctly, the exosystem is composed of relationships between two contexts, “at least one of which” is not directly connected to the person (Jones, 2012). To view Anthony’s exosystem refer to the orange arrows and circle in Appendix A.

Anthony’s mother, Latoya, dropped out of high school and had no occupational training. The unemployment rate in the United States in May 2011 was high, especially for unskilled workers. Latoya was one of those workers. Latoya’s unsuccessful relationship with the labor market directly impinged on Anthony in several ways. Latoya’s ability to provide services for Anthony that may have helped him deal with his emotional and behavioral issues was negatively impacted by limited resources. She could not afford to move Anthony away from the gang members that populated their government assisted living complex. Also, her ability to provide Anthony with a private attorney will surely effect the outcome in his upcoming trial. For these reasons, Latoya’s relationship with the labor market was and continues to be a risk factor in Anthony’s exosystem.

While Anthony’s socio-economic status was a serious risk factor for healthy development, he had many protective factors in his exosystem (see Appendix A). Mr. Mar, Anthony’s history teacher, is an African American male who developed a mentoring relationship with Anthony. He taught Anthony 11th grade American history and 12th grade African American history. Mr. Mar’s experiences with racism, his pedagogy and care for students of color influenced his curriculum decisions. His interactions with the school board led to the implementation of African American history class that creates a positive frame of reference about the African American community. Anthony used this

framework to combat the widely held negative stereotypes about black men popularized by American media and reinforced by his peer's illegal actions. Mr. Mar directly impacted Anthony but the school board itself is not involved in Anthony's daily life. Thus, this teacher-school board relationship was a protective factor in Anthony's exosystem.

Federal student aid could also serve as a protective factor for Anthony. Anthony's low socio-economic status makes it harder for him to obtain higher education. The free financial aid for college the US government offers based on family income will increase Anthony's chances of enrollment and completion of post secondary education. This policy serves as a protective factor for Anthony because higher education is valued in America and is often seen as a way to ensure healthy intellectual development.

Macrosystem

The policy of government funded financial aid for educational attainment is a tangible manifestation of the value Americans place on education. This value can be positioned in a larger system Bronfenbrenner called the macrosystem (1977). Refer to Appendix A to view Anthony's macrosystem. This system encompasses cultural ideology and "overarching systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). Another value Americans generally agree on is that independence and personal responsibility are positive characteristics. Accordingly, many people have a negative view of long-term recipients of government aid; being poor is viewed as a deficiency. Anthony was often embarrassed that he received free lunch because he was afraid that his peers might judge him. As a result of these biases his self-image may have been damaged. This possible detrimental effect indicates that this cultural view was a risk factor for Anthony.

A value that served Anthony as a protective factor is that Americans view children as developing beings, not fully responsible for their own actions. This is exemplified in our legal system. We have one system for children and one for adults, with some overlap depending on crime, recidivism, and age of the offender. Anthony committed a felony when he was 15. While the consequences were not necessarily positive, his actions could have more severely harmed his development if he was not tried as a juvenile. However, because the beliefs held by the majority of Americans and the current legal system, Anthony's record was expunged after he turned 18. This increased his ability to gain employment, allowed him to vote in elections, gain access to federal financial aid and many other opportunities currently denied to adult felons. This value clearly served as a protective factor in Anthony's life.

Significance of Ecology for Prevention

Given the multitude of factors that influenced Anthony's life, a recognition and understanding of all these components and their interactions enables adults to individualize a plan that successfully promotes Anthony's development across all domains. Such a plan might include encouraging Anthony to get involved in sports. Contact sports may be good to release aggression; however, when one looks at other factors in Anthony's life (see Appendix A) perhaps karate would be a better option. Karate will help Anthony relieve aggression but also promote self-control and discipline, thus supporting his physical, social and cognitive development.

To combat a prominent risk factor in Anthony's microsystem, adults in his life could review literature on why children become involved in gangs. Many studies have found that a sense of inclusion and belonging precipitate gang involvement. School

officials could suggest that Anthony join a club but by using an ecological systems approach they could attempt to build a club around Anthony's specific risks. A Black mens group led by Anthony's history teacher to promote knowledge and appreciation about black culture would fulfill Anthony's need for inclusion and promote a positive self-image in the face of a dominate risk factor from his macrosystem, structural racism. This group would directly support his social and emotional development. By utilizing a protective factor from his microsystem to create a club we construct a protective factor in his mesosystem that will impact the efficacy of a macrosystem risk factor.

Utilizing Anthony's exosystem and macrosystem adults will be able to address factors beyond Anthony's immediate surroundings that shape his daily life. A school counselor who recognizes Anthony's mother's unemployment as a risk factor could refer her to an employment agency, help her fill out applications or utilize social networks to find her a position. By providing comprehensive family services instead of only school based interventions the counselor would make a more significant, positive change in Anthony's developmental trajectory.

Conclusion

I have described Anthony's microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. In each of these structures I have examined a risk factor and a protective factor. By referring to Appendix A, one can see that there are many more factors in each system. While all these systems and factors may seem overwhelming they are important to analyze when describing the pathway of Anthony's development. Most importantly, by identifying and addressing factors in all systems, counselors, scientists, policy makers and researchers can plan more effective and comprehensive prevention strategies.

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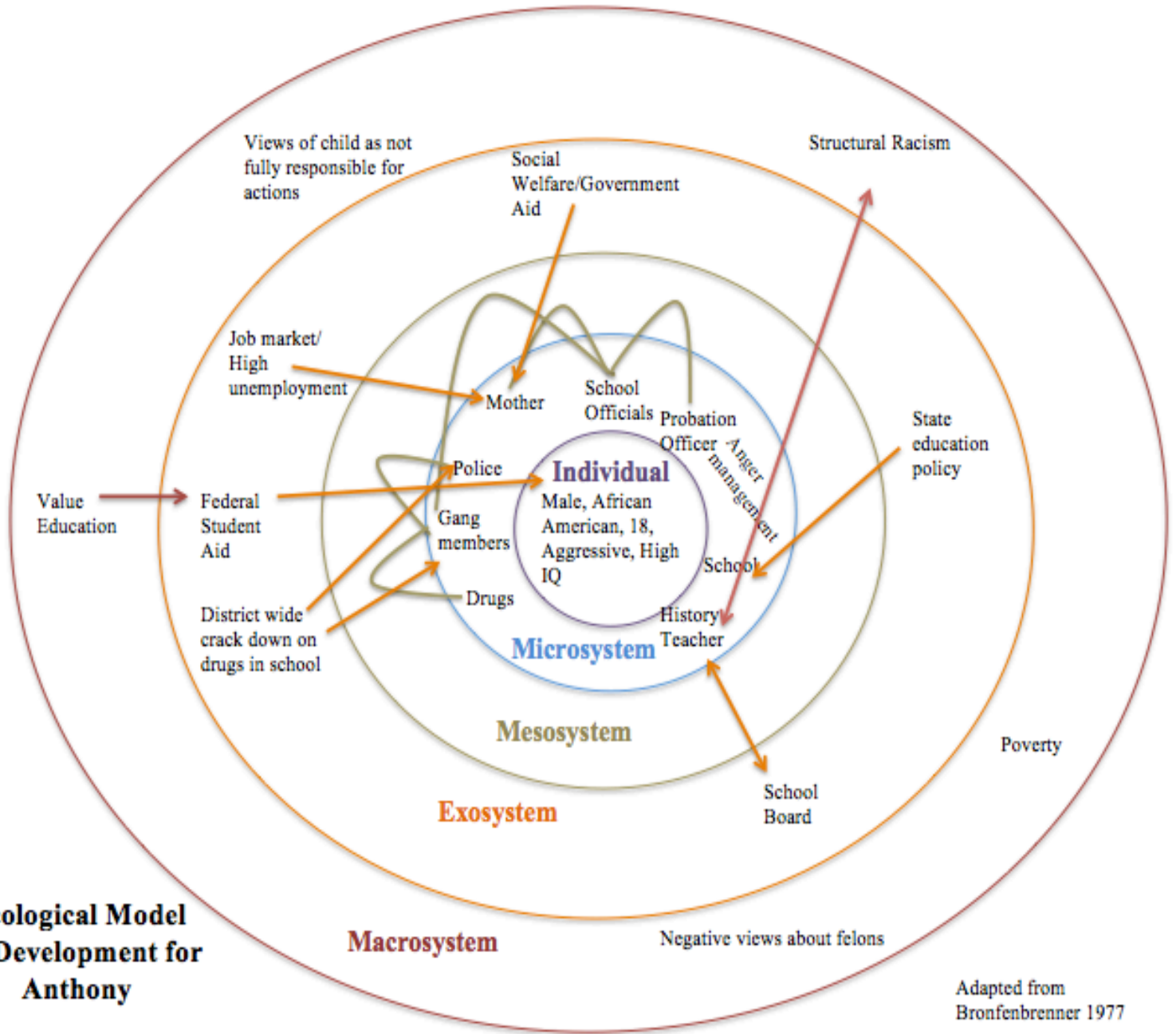
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Appendix A



**Ecological Model
Of Development for
Anthony**

Adapted from
Bronfenbrenner 1977