Interpersonal Systems Paper

Lauren Milne

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Western Washington University

“Interpersonal systems” is a term, in my own words, that represents the complex sociocultural/ecological connections between two separate entities—or, a *dyad*. Two types of dyadic relationships that can be examined for evidence of interpersonal connections are that of peer to peer and that of a Human Services professional to their client. The specific peer to peer relationship I will be focusing on is that of the one between two prisoners, as described in Eduardo Galeano’s “Celebration of the Human Voice.” This relationship focuses on two prisoners of the Uruguayan dictatorship, Fernandez Huidobro and Mauricio Rosencof, who found alternative ways to communicate in the face of their repression. They learned to communicate by tapping on the wall that separated their coffin-sized cells. This was (possibly) the only communication they had with any other living being during their sentences (Loeb 2004). The specific Human Services professional to client relationship I will be focusing on is that of the one between Marc Parent (a youth case worker) and Robby (an 11 yr. old boy), as depicted in Parent’s book, *Turning Stones*. This relationship involves Parent attempting to take Robby out of his home after several reports of the mother being drunk and ill-fit to raise him. Suffice to say, it was an invasion of strangers into a household and Robby was keen on staying right where he was—drunken mother or no (Parent 1998). For the purpose of this paper, I will be examining the health and functionality of both dyads, the different types of communication used, the interpersonal systems of both and how they are connected to the larger systems at play, existing power struggles, and how each individuals affects each other in various ways.

First, I’ll begin with the health and functionality of the dyads. It is very important to note that different dyads have differing levels of functionality and effects on the health of the individuals participating in each relationship. For the two prisoners, they’re relationship was potentially the only positive occurrence during their time in prison. I would deem their relationship as healthy. However, I would also deem it as dysfunctional. This is because they were in solitary confinement and the tapping was their only communication. For a relationship to function, I believe that more than one form of communication is necessary. In regards to the relationship between Parent and Robby, I would say it is the opposite—unhealthy, yet functional. It is unhealthy because, as Parent later realized, the boy was not unhappy in his situation with his alcoholic mother. And I doubt being ripped out of your bed and home at night by strangers is good for anyone’s health. However, it is functional because their interaction was based around a system structured to *make* things functional—Emergency Child Services. I would say that is the only reason the relationship was functional, because at the end of it all even Parent admitted that he was better off being left alone, even if protocol made it so that the invasion had to occur (Parent 1998).

The communication used in both dyads played a significant role in why both relationships were healthy/dysfunctional and unhealthy/functional, respectively. According to Stewart (2009), there are three types of methods of communication: primarily verbal, mixed, and primarily nonverbal. With the prisoners, the only communication they had was tapping—their own form of Morse code. For the purpose of defining their style of communication, I am going to define “their” version of Morse code as a written language, even though nothing is necessarily seen. That said, the prisoners were communicating primarily in a verbal fashion. In their situation, mixed communication would have greatly improved their relationship. Just being able to see someone’s expressions or feel their presence through sight and touch would have helped them communicate more ideas, opinions, and stories to each other. With Parent and Robby, there was a very strong presence of nonverbal communication along with mixed. The nonverbal communication that was used included gestures, eye gaze/contact, facial expressions, touch, and varying levels of space. The Mixed communication used included loudness, vocal pacing, and pitch. Because it was a situation of invading a home to take a child away (along with having a drunken woman in the mix), the mixed techniques of pause and silence were not as prevalent in the initial meeting between Parent and Robby. Having more mixed communication of pause and silence—and less primarily nonverbal communication of touch (there was excessive force involved during this meet) and mixed communication of loudness—would have greatly improved their communication and relationship (even if only slightly). Instead, it caused a rift between the two that was not ever repaired.

Now that we have discussed the primary interaction between the two dyads, we’ll look at how each individual’s personal systems and their larger systems affect each other in these relationships. It is impossible to define each individual’s ecological systems, because we are only given a small snippet into their lives. However, we can look at their current situation (at the moment when the relationship took place). For the two prisoners, they both have a mesosystem of the treatment they receive from the prison guards and each other. Their larger/macrosystem consists of the Uruguayan dictatorship that brought them to prison, thus allowing their paths to cross. For Parent and Robby, more information about their backgrounds were given. Therefore, I know that Parent was a case worker for Emergency Child Services in New York. His relationship with his work is part of his mesosystem at that time. The families he confronts are also part of that mesosystem, and their circumstances become part of his exosystem. For, even though he is not directly related to those circumstances, their existence greatly effects his work. Robby’s ecological systems (or what we know of them) are quite different from Parent. First and foremost, his mother and neighbors are part of his mesosystem as they live closely and have their paths cross often (i.e. Neighbors were disturbed by the noise in the apartment so they went over to check on Robby and his mother. They were also the ones that, supposedly, contacted Emergency Child Services.). His exosystem involves his mother’s alcohol consumption. Together, Parent and Robby both have the larger/macrosystem of New York culture and the media’s representation of child protection services/emergency child services and child abuse situations. I add the last part—media—because of my own experience with CPS, and the thoughts that ran through my head in two separate occasions: once, as the child in question, and another as the adult filing a report. These things would affect anyone’s perception of their mesosystems.

Through the communication and systems at play, power comes into play in these dyadic relationships. Power represents the individual that has the most effective communication skills and whose personal systems affect the other individual more greatly. With the two prisoners, I would say that, because of their situation, they both have equal power with each other. Though, I suppose, the one who taps more (or, possibly, the one who initiated the communication first), has the most power, as they can control the flow of the conversations. For Parent and Robby, Parent has the most power. Parent used more communication techniques and he is not so much affected by Robby’s presence and Robby is affected by his. Barging into someone’s home (microsystem), having the authorities (exosystem) backing you (mesosystem) takes the power away from the home’s resident.

Finally, dyadic relationships such as the two I examined have many components and each of these components affects both of the individuals involved in many different ways. They can be healthy or unhealthy, functional or dysfunctional. Different techniques, such as nonverbal, mixed, and verbal, are present. There is also a definite power struggle that occurs. These are all important aspects of dyadic relationships. Without them, the personal systems cannot become interpersonal and the relationship cannot change. I would dare to say, there would not be a relationship at all.

*References*

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