

ECOLOGICAL THERAPEUTIC RECREATION FOR THE TREATMENT OF YOUTH OFFENDERS

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Few treatment programs have demonstrated a clear or consistent record for preventing or curing serious problems of antisocial adolescents (Wolf, Braukman & Ramp, 1987). Behavior changes have been brief with little or no long-term effect on recidivism rates which are approximately 75 percent for youth offenders (O'Morrow & Reynold, 1989). Failure of treatment programs to yield positive outcomes may be due to the variety of serious, intractable problems of some youths as well as deficiencies in their family, school, and work environments (Wolf, et al., 1987).

Persistent offending behavior may be part of a serious antisocial handicapping condition that contributes to the severe problems of some adolescents. Such youths need to be considered "socially disabled" because they often have difficulty managing the tasks of daily living and are at risk of having serious problems in school, peer group, job, and interpersonal relationships.

Given the multivariate nature of offending behavior that is believed to be caused and maintained by the complex interaction of individual offender traits and environmental influences, it might be unrealistic to expect a permanent cure resulting from short-term treatment programs. The range of individual traits and the various environmental factors that influence such behaviors suggest long-term ecological treatments are needed. The most important factor and best target for ecological interventions is the family (Gleuck & Gleuck, 1974; Henggeler, 1982).

The purpose of this paper is to promote the idea that youth offenders with serious social disabilities need comprehensive long-term supportive care and treatment. A family-ecological systems approach to therapeutic recreation can play an important role in the treatment process.

A Family-Ecological Systems Approach

The family-ecological systems approach was derived from theory and research in human and cognitive development, child and adolescent psychology, family therapy, and



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community mental health (Henggeler, 1982). Using this perspective, the adolescent is viewed as being embedded in and interacting with various systems and subsystems. The system that is most influential is the family which includes the parents, siblings, and members of the extended family. The youth also is embedded in systems that extend beyond the immediate family including peer groups, school, and persons living in the community (Henggeler, 1982).

The theoretical basis for the ecological systems approach has been provided by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The adolescent is nested in a complex web of interconnected systems which include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem includes the relations of the adolescent within the immediate setting or environment (e.g., family, school, workplace). It includes all of the activities and roles (e.g., daughter/son, student, citizen) the adolescent plays. The mesosystem incorporates the interrelations of two or more major settings or microsystems such as the relations between parents and school personnel or interactions of peers and the workplace. Systems that do not directly involve or contain the adolescent but influence him/her include the neighborhood, mass media, and governmental agencies. The macrosystem refers to the patterns of culture, values and beliefs that are linked to the economic, legal, political, and educational systems of society.

While most attention has been placed on the influence of the environment, several writers have suggested the incorporation of an interpersonal system that would represent individual psychological development (Belsky, 1980; Schleser & Rodick, 1982). Including ontogenic and social factors has the potential to increase the explanatory power of the approach (Young, 1983). Ecological systems applications relevant to adolescent offenders have been made in counseling psychology, social work, and therapeutic recreation (Germain, 1979; Howe-Murphy & Charboneau, 1987; Young, 1983).

Therapeutic Recreation and the Family-Ecological Systems Approach

Correctional recreation services traditionally have been provided to alleviate boredom, reduce stress, and fill free time. Consequently their therapeutic potential has not been maximized (Reynolds, 1982). Comprehensive therapeutic recreation approaches are needed to provide for the total rehabilitation of the adolescent offender (Munson, 1984, 1989, 1991; Reynolds, 1982). A family-ecological systems approach to therapeutic recreation has the potential to deal with the multiple factors that cause and maintain social disabilities in youth offenders. It can provide a comprehensive perspective of the adolescent by considering interrelations among the youth, family, and extrafamilial systems (Munson, 1991).

The Role of the Therapeutic Recreator as Ecological Change Agent

Ecological therapeutic recreation is "a planned process of intervention directed toward specific environmental and/or individual change" (Howe-Murphy & Charboneau, 1987, p. 9). The therapeutic recreator acts as a change agent by focusing on dysfunctional interactions that maintain problem behaviors and working with significant persons within the system to design strategies for change. The specialist's role may include provision of direct services (e.g., therapy or leisure education) or indirect services (community awareness, advocacy, etc.) in both institutional and community settings (Howe-Murphy & Charboneau, 1987).

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Regardless of the setting, the therapeutic recreation process remains the same (i.e., assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation). The needs of the youth determine the extent to which direct or indirect services are provided (Munson, 1991).

The Ecological Therapeutic Recreation Process

Assessment. Interventions, whether institutional or community based, direct or indirect, proceed only after a thorough assessment. The assessment process in the family-ecological systems approach is comprehensive and ongoing (Schleser & Rodick, 1982). Depending on the nature of the youth's problem, the therapeutic re-creator attempts to evaluate all relevant systems.

One of the primary assessment areas is the family. Relevant family information can be accrued from referral sources, treatment team notes, family histories, and progress notes (Monroe, 1987). This can help determine family strengths, weaknesses, and needs. It also is important to interview family members to determine leisure skills, interests, and abilities as well as constraints or barriers that may be preventing them from engaging in successful leisure experiences.

Once family information has been obtained the therapeutic recreator proceeds to analyze other relevant subsystems. This may include the adolescent's school, workplace, peer groups, and community recreation agencies. Because many of these agencies are community based, it is important that the TR professional engage in field work. This allows the specialist to meet those who may be able to provide valuable support services, experiences or information relevant to the youth's individualized treatment plan. Efforts should be made to address the systems and their interrelationships rather than viewing them in isolation. Both positive and negative systemic aspects should be addressed (Schleser & Rodick, 1982).

Concurrently, or after relevant information has been obtained from immediate or extended environments, the youth's interpersonal system is assessed. Information regarding leisure functioning in all domains (i.e., cognitive, affective, psycho-motor, and social) is acquired via interviews, behavioral observations, and relevant objective measures such as leisure attitude scales. The purpose is to determine the youth's perceptions of self, leisure, and relationships with other systems.

Planning. Following the initial assessment of all systems, including information acquired from records, interviews, and objective measures, the therapeutic re-creator formulates tentative hypotheses, and generates goals and objectives for the attainment of long-term ecological intervention strategies (Munson, 1991). Goal setting ultimately provides the framework for evaluation.

Ecological treatment goals can be written in some or all of the systems in which the youth operates. Examples include:

Family

- increase positive interactions with parents
- increase leisure activities with family members

School

- increase extracurricular activities in school



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-decrease negative interactions with peers

Community

-promote successful transition from institution to community

-eliminate negative leisure experiences in the community

Intrapersonal

-increase self-efficacy in leisure participation

-increase knowledge of leisure resources

Implementation. The therapeutic recreator uses a variety of intervention strategies to help achieve the goals and objectives of the youth's treatment plan. For example, concurrent work can be done to improve the youth's functional behaviors in individual sessions with the therapeutic recreator as well as being involved in family and group leisure counseling sessions with other youths. The youth may also be required to participate in the institution's ongoing general recreation programs where his/her social interactions can be tested and carefully monitored (Munson, 1991).

When possible, field trips to leisure service agencies for youths and their families can be planned and lead by the therapeutic recreator. Guest speakers can be invited from various leisure services organizations to attend family leisure counseling sessions to inform families about neighborhood leisure resources. Following field trips and guest speakers' presentations the therapeutic recreator can collaborate with community professionals on the development of transition strategies for the youth's long-term supportive care and treatment (Munson, 1991).

Evaluation. Evaluation consists of formative, summative, and follow-up activities to determine the effectiveness of ecological interventions. The youth's program is monitored frequently to determine progress and, when necessary, adjustments are made. At the conclusion of program cycles and prior to the youth's release from the institution, goals and objectives are evaluated to determine if they have been realized. If objectives have not been achieved, attempts are made to continue working on them for the next program cycle. Following release, the adolescent's performance in various settings (family, school, work, and leisure) is monitored for at least six months by his/her parole officer to determine if the youth has made a successful transition into the community.

Summary

Strategies to prevent or cure offending behavior have resulted in short-term change and marginal effects on recidivism rates. The inability of interventions to yield positive results may be due to the durability and variety of some adolescent offenders as well as deficiencies in their natural environments.

A family-ecological systems approach to therapeutic recreation was suggested as a viable strategy for the rehabilitation of adolescent offenders because of its comprehensive perspective. The therapeutic recreator assumes the role of change agent by focusing on dysfunctional interactions and working with the youth and significant others to design strategies for change. The primary goal is to develop long-term ecological strategies and supportive environments so the adolescent can experience improved leisure functioning and a successful transition into the community.

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