

2013

# Utilizing the Six Generic Human Service Competencies and Ecological Systems Theory as a Basis to Understanding Barriers Faced by Marginalized Clients

Kaprea Johnson  
*Old Dominion University*

Matthew Bonner  
*Old Dominion University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/chs\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/chs_pubs)

 Part of the [Counseling Commons](#)

---

## Repository Citation

Johnson, Kaprea and Bonner, Matthew, "Utilizing the Six Generic Human Service Competencies and Ecological Systems Theory as a Basis to Understanding Barriers Faced by Marginalized Clients" (2013). *Counseling & Human Services Faculty Publications*. 31.  
[https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/chs\\_pubs/31](https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/chs_pubs/31)

## Original Publication Citation

Johnson, K., & Bonner, M. (2013). Utilizing the six generic human service competencies and ecological systems theory as a basis to understanding barriers faced by marginalized clients. *Journal of Human Services*, 33(1), 49-57.

# **Utilizing the Six Generic Human Service Competencies and Ecological Systems Theory as a Basis to Understanding Barriers Faced by Marginalized Clients**

*Kaprea Johnson, Matthew Bonner*

## **Abstract**

The term “marginalized” is used to indicate that a person or group of people have been disenfranchised from society because their identity is considered insignificant or is not valued in the surrounding social milieu. Clients from marginalized populations encounter a range of barriers and have specific needs related to being disenfranchised. This article highlights the six generic human service competencies along with ecological systems theory as a framework for understanding the barriers faced by marginalized populations. It concludes with implications for human service professionals.

## **Utilizing the Six Generic Human Service Competencies**

Human service professionals are frequently asked to provide services to marginalized clients in a variety of settings. With the increase in diversity in American society, rising rate of homelessness, and more children reporting depression by age 18, human services workers have an obligation to understand the barriers which marginalized clients face (Abrams & Theberge, 2005; Clauss-Ehlers, 2003; Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008). Marginalized clients are a part of any group that suffers discrimination, displacement, and exclusion from meaningful participation in society because of their ethnicity, beliefs, social class, or lack of desirable traits (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008; Kreek, 2011; Lynam & Cowley, 2007). This article will describe the identity of marginalized clients and the barriers that marginalized clients encounter. There will be a description of ecological systems theory and the six generic human services competencies. This article will address how the six generic human services competencies and ecological theory can be a framework for addressing barriers faced by marginalized clients. Assessment and intervention will be discussed as ways to address the barriers that marginalized clients encounter.

Marginalized groups can include the homeless, people of color, minimum wage workers, victims of violence, people with mental disorders, the elderly, the poorly educated, people with disabilities, immigrants and anyone who may be considered outside of a dominant group (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008; Koci, 2010; Kreek, 2011; Lyman & Crowley, 2007). Marginalization depends on age, race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and geography (Boardman, 2006). Marginalized clients face a significant number of complex barriers which can prevent

positive outcomes when they are seeking mental health services (Williams & Greenleaf, 2012).

A major obstacle that marginalized clients encounter is access to health coverage and mental health care (Abrams & Theberge, 2005; Clauss-Ehlers, 2003; Kreek, 2011; Paul & Saunders, 2010). Economic barriers include lack of financial resources such as low income, substandard housing, and poverty (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008; Clauss-Ehlers, 2003; Lyman & Crowley, 2007; Staudt, 2003). For many individuals in marginalized populations, psychological obstacles to positive outcomes are low self-esteem, pervasive stress and anxiety, past traumas, learned helplessness, and low expectations (Koci, 2010; Lyman & Crowley, 2007). Further barriers for the marginalized involve inferior social services from mental health community agencies, public schools, government, and healthcare benefits (Boardman, 2006; Odom et al., 2004; Paul & Saunders, 2010). Common experiences of the marginalized can include high prison rates, homelessness, chemical dependence, family violence, teen pregnancy, single parent families, and family instability (Kreek, 2011; Hong, Algood, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Swick & Williams, 2006; Williams & Greenleaf, 2012). Cultural barriers of racism, language, misdiagnosis based on ethnicity, and stigmatization also contribute to poor outcomes concerning marginalized clients (Clauss-Ehlers, 2003; Kreek, 2011).

While there are a myriad of barriers, they are not insurmountable because an ecological framework can assess and treat the barriers involved in marginalization in a systematic way (Williams & Greenleaf, 2012). Fisher and Hotchkiss (2009) urged human service workers to know the environment of marginalized clients for empowerment. Hong et al. (2011) argued the appropriateness of an ecological model to address complex issues that marginalized clients may encounter. The six generic human service competencies and ecological systems theory are outlined and can be used as a tool during practice to identify and address barriers faced by clients who identify as members of marginalized groups.

### **Ecological Systems Theory and the Generic Competencies**

The first competency of human service workers is “understanding the nature of human systems: individual, group, organization, community and society and their major interactions” (National Organization for Human Services, 2009, Generic Human Services Professional Competencies section, para. 2). Interactions that involve individuals and other entities demonstrate an ecological framework (Clauss-Ehlers, 2003; Hong, et al., 2011; Kreek, 2011; Swick & Williams, 2006). Ecological systems theory focuses on the social and cultural aspects of a person’s environment that interact together and influence systems surrounding a person’s life (Bronfenbrenner, 1988, 2005). Four inter-connected systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and exosystem. Ecological

systems theory provides a structure to understanding the major systems that affect a person's life.

The term microsystem refers to places such as church, neighborhood, school, or work (Bronfenbrenner, 1988, 2005). The first human service competency shows that a worker needs to understand how individuals interact with groups, organizations and community (NOHS, 2009). A microsystem encompasses the way in which individuals interact with their immediate environments (Abrams & Theberge, 2005; Hong et al., 2011; Odom et al., 2004; Swick & Williams, 2006). Examples of the microsystem are a person's interactions with school, family, community, peers, and caregivers (Abrams & Theberge, 2005; Paul & Saunders, 2010).

The term mesosystem refers to the links between microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1988, 2005). Mesosystem includes the interaction across microsystems such as the family impact on school or community impact on peer relationships (Hong et al., 2011; Odom et al., 2004). NOHS (2009) standards state that a human service worker needs to understand interaction of systems and interactions are included in the mesosystem aspect of ecological systems theory.

The term exosystem refers to the social system people function with directly and indirectly (Bronfenbrenner, 1988). Exosystem involves social policy, social supports, and governmental structures which can affect the quality of life for individuals (Abrams & Theberge, 2005; Hong et al., 2011; Odom et al., 2004). Finally, the term macrosystem refers to the larger system in which cultural beliefs, societal values, politics, and communities impact people's lives either directly or indirectly (Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Hong, Algood, Chiu, & Lee, 2007; Swick & Williams, 2006). Human service workers are mandated to understand the structures of community and society on the individual (NOHS, 2009). Not only is it important for human service workers to understand the interactions of systems as shown in ecological systems theory but they must also understand the barriers which clients face as a result to the interactions of the various systems (NOHS, 2009).

### **Understanding Barriers through an Ecological Framework and Generic Competencies**

Clients who are members of marginalized groups frequently face more barriers than clients who are members of non-marginalized groups when seeking services from human service professionals (Clauss-Ehlers, 2003). According to the second generic competency, human service professionals need to have an understanding of conditions that may promote or limit optimal functioning for clients (NOHS, 2009). To "understand conditions" workers need to be able to assess barriers which could prevent "desired functioning in human systems" (NOHS, 2009). Based on outcomes, Fisher and Hotchkiss (2008) supported human service workers in

assessing environmental factors which could affect levels of self-esteem in marginalized clients. Abrams and Theberge (2005) noted that ecological systems theory provides a “contextual map” for the various factors which contribute to deviations for optimal functioning. Hong et al. (2005) asserted interrelations among the different systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem) can affect outcomes optimal or deviant from desired functioning. The generic competency of knowing “conditions which promote or limit optimal functioning and classes of deviations from desired functioning” is consistent with ecological theory’s emphasis on system’s effects on outcomes (NOHS, 2009). The ecological systems theory can be used as a model for addressing and conceptualizing complex issues many marginalized groups face. Understanding the barriers facing members of marginalized groups is imperative to providing adequate care and is referenced in the second generic human service competency (NOHS, 2009). Hong et al. (2005) and Odom et al. (2004) agreed that interrelations among human systems contributed to outcomes. The second competency has demonstrated assessment of factors that contribute to outcomes was congruent with ecological systems theory.

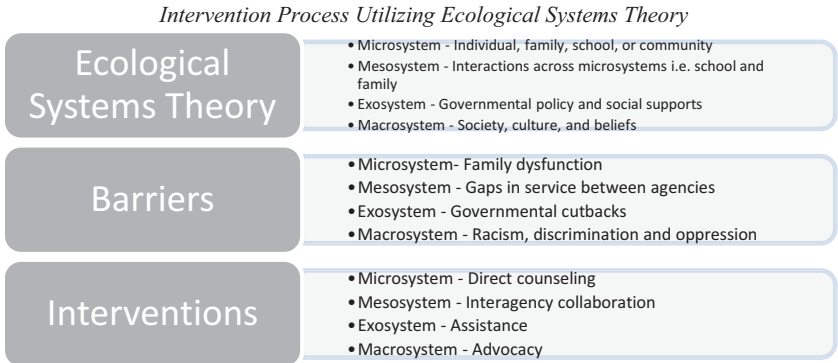
A key component to working with marginalized groups involves focusing on announced and unannounced needs. Announced needs are needs that the client is able to identify directly (e.g., client visits a job placement program requesting assistance with creating a resume). Unannounced needs frequently reinforce the announced need (e.g., client has a limited job history because of a cycle of substance abuse). This example demonstrates how announced needs may create an illusion of an “easy fix,” but underlying, unannounced needs serve as insurmountable barriers that prevent client success.

This is related to the third generic human service worker competency, “skills in identifying and selecting interventions that help clients meet a desired outcome” (NOHS, 2009, Generic Human Services Professional Competencies section, para. 3). NOHS (2009) states the intervention can encompass “assistance, referral, advocacy or direct counseling.” Fisher and Hotchkiss (2008) expressed that empowering clients to make their own decisions and set goals led to positive outcomes with homeless women. Clauss-Ehlers (2003) noted culturally relevant interventions which included collaboration among parents, human service workers, and various agencies led to empowerment in marginalized students. Various forms of interventions must be evaluated which leads to the method of evaluation.

The fourth competency in which human service workers must develop skill is in “planning, implementing and evaluating interventions” (NOHS, 2009, Generic Human Services Professional Competencies section, para. 5). To evaluate an intervention, an ecological systems framework can be helpful because it includes a broad picture of the level at which a human

services worker is intervening (Abrams & Theberge, 2005). For example, the intervention of direct counseling would be considered a microsystem level intervention (Hong, et al., 2011). Referral would be regarded as a mesosystem level intervention because it encompasses microsystems working together such as agency collaboration (Hong, et al., 2011; Paul & Saunders, 2010). Evaluation of assistance given to a marginalized person can involve social support or legal aid which would occur on the exosystem level (Hong et al., 2011). Advocacy about culture can occur on the macrosystem level, which could include addressing ethnic and racial discrimination or supporting policies that educate the public about the marginalized (Hong, et al., 2011; Paul & Saunders, 2010; Swick & Williams, 2006). Ecological systems theory provides a means to evaluate the interventions which human service professionals implement and whether these interventions are helping the individual (Abrams and Theberge, 2005).

One way to explore the ecological systems and barriers with clients includes developing a three-row approach. The first row of the table lists the system names with a clear definition of each, which involves having knowledge of ecological systems theory as shown in Figure 1. The second row would be labeled barriers. This row is used to record barriers the client anticipates as well as barriers the human service professional anticipates and Figure 1 demonstrates the various levels of barriers on the basis of ecological systems theory. The third row is labeled interventions. This row is used to combat the barriers listed in the second column. The table organizes client barriers through the ecological systems and is organized according to ecological systems. This is related to the fourth general competency, “skill in planning, implementing and evaluating interventions” (NOHS, 2009, Generic Human Services Professional Competencies section, para. 5). The table described above can be used as a part of an intervention or a treatment plan shown in Figure 1. Next, I will discuss how establishing



**Figure 1.** Evaluation of interventions process, which could be used to assess marginalized clients and examples of each system.

awareness of barriers faced by marginalized populations is essential to the work of human services professionals.

### **Implications for Human Service Professionals**

The mission statement of the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS) incorporates advocacy and social justice. In addition, the fifth generic competency states that human service professionals must adhere to national ethics as well as be aware of their clients' uniqueness. Awareness of self and awareness of others are essential components to ethical practice. To be aware of clients' uniqueness, human service workers need to have cultural competence (Clauss-Ehlers, 2003). Lyman and Crowley (2007) discussed how one barrier for positive outcomes in marginalized clients was other people's negative expectations of them. Human service workers need to have an awareness of their own values as they intervene with marginalized clients (NOHS, 2009).

Human service professionals are dedicated to improving the quality of life for all individuals. Accomplishing this goal requires advocacy on behalf of marginalized populations. Barriers at the exosystem and macrosystem levels need particular attention because lack of healthcare and financial resources can affect the quality of life substantially (Abrams & Theberge, 2005; Boardman, 2006; Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008; Paul & Saunders, 2010). The exosystem and macrosystem are areas where human service professionals can work for a client. Advocacy efforts should include empowering and educating the client, lobbying at the local and state level for policy changes, and advocating for system level changes (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008; Hong et al., 2011; Swick & Williams, 2006).

The sixth generic human service competency indicates that human service workers also are skilled in using themselves as the tool for responding to the service needs of clients (NOHS, 2009). Marginalized clients need extra help, support, and guidance in order to improve their lives. Human service professionals provide important support to marginalized individuals in their pursuit towards equality, equity, and mental health. Human service professionals use interpersonal skills, non-biased language/and behaviors, openness, unconditional positive regard, and other communication skills to establish trust, rapport, and assist in the helping process. Hong et al. (2011) and Paul and Saunders (2010) supported the idea that human service workers needed to be thoroughly educated in dealing with marginalized clients.

The six generic human service competencies are essential to success with marginalized clients. Ecological systems theory serves as an additional framework that can assist human service professionals in the process of exploring barriers that affect clients' lives as well as the lives of those around them (i.e., significant others, children, etc.). In summary, it is important to know that: (a) barriers negatively affect clients potential for

success in any form of treatment; (b) barriers need to be explored with clients but it is duly important to explore ways the identified barriers can become eliminated; (c) human service workers must maintain a positive attitude and be willing agents of change; (d) constantly engage in self-exploration; (e) awareness that professional burnout is a real possibility and engage in self-care and continuing education.

Training human services professionals to explore barriers related to the systems that impact clients' lives is critical to effective care. An ecological systems framework serves as a practical framework to address barriers with marginalized clients. In addition, applying an ecological framework encourages a strengths-based treatment modality that is holistic, culturally sensitive, relevant and empowering (Greenleaf & Williams, 2009). Ecological systems theory is an excellent starting point which is consistent with the six generic competencies to assess barriers and implement interventions which affect marginalized clients.

### References

- Abrams, K., & Theberge, S.K. (2005). Children and adolescents who are depressed: An ecological approach. *Professional School Counseling, 8*, 284-292.
- Boardman, J.B. (2006). Health access and integration for adults with serious and persistent mental illness. *Families, Systems and Health, 24*, 3-18. doi:10.1037/1091-7527.24.1.3
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1988). Interacting systems in human development: Research paradigms, present and future. In Bolger, N., Caspi, A., Downey, G., Moorehouse, M. (Eds.) *Persons in context: Developmental processes* (pp. 25-49). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). Ecological systems theory. In U. Bronfenbrenner (Ed.), *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development* (pp. 106-173). London, U.K.: Sage Publications.
- Clauss-Ehlers, C.C. (2003). Promoting ecological health resilience for minority youth: Enhancing health care access through the school health center. *Psychology in the Schools, 40*, 265-278. doi:10.1002/pits.10086
- Fisher, G. S., & Hotchkiss A. (2008). A model of occupational empowerment for marginalized populations in community environments. *Occupational Therapy in Health Care, 22*, 55-71. doi:10.1300/J003v22n01\_05
- Greenleaf, A.T., & Williams, J.M. (2009). Supporting social justice advocacy: A paradigm shift towards an ecological perspective. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology, 2*, 1-14.



- Hong, J. S., Algood, C. L. Chiu, Y. & Lee, S. A. (2011). An ecological understanding of kinship foster care in the United States. *Journal of Child Family Studies, 20*, 863-872. doi: 10.1007/s10826-011-9454-3
- Koci, A. (2010). Care of women and marginalized populations in the critical care setting. *Critical Care Nursing Quarterly, 33*, 244-247. doi:10.1097/CNQ.0b013e3181e65fb4
- Kreek, M. J. (2011). Extreme marginalization: Addiction and other mental health disorders, stigma, and imprisonment. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1231*, 65-72. doi10.1111/j.1749-6632.2011.06152.x
- Lewit, E. M., Terman, D. L., & Behrman, R. E. (1997). Children and poverty: Analysis and recommendations. *The Future of Children, 7*, 4-24.
- Lynam M. J., & Cowley S. (2007). Understanding marginalization as a social determinant of health. *Critical Public Health, 17*, 137-149 doi:10.1080/09581590601045907
- Neville, H.A., & Mobley, M. (2001). Social identities in contexts: An ecological model of multicultural counseling psychology processes. *The Counseling Psychologist, 29*, 471-486. doi:10.1177/0011000001294001
- Odom, S. L., Vitztum, J., Wolery, R., Lieber, J., Sandall, S., Hanson, M., . . . Horn, E. (2004). Preschool inclusion in the United States: a review of research from an ecological systems perspective. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 4*, 17-49. doi:10.1111/J.1471-3802.2004.00016.x
- Paul, N. A., & Sanders, G. F. (2010). Applying an ecological framework to education needs of communication partners of individuals with aphasia. *Aphasiology, 24*, 1095-1112. doi:10.1080/02687030903383720
- Staudt, M. M. (2003). Helping children access and use services: A review. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 12*, 49-60. doi:10.1023/A:1021306125491
- Swick, K., & Williams, R. D. (2006). An analysis of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological perspective for early childhood educators: Implications for working with families experiencing stress. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 33*, 371-378. doi:10.1007/s10643-006-0078-y
- The National Organization for Human Services. (2009). *What is human services?* Retrieved from [http://www.nationalhumanservices.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=88:what-is-human-services?&catid=19:site-content&Itemid=89](http://www.nationalhumanservices.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=88:what-is-human-services?&catid=19:site-content&Itemid=89)
- Whaley, A.L. (2004). Ethnicity/race, paranoia, and hospitalization, for mental health problems among men. *American Journal of Public Health, 94*, 78-81.

Williams, J. M., & Greenleaf, A. T. (2012). Ecological psychology: Potential contributions to social justice and advocacy in school settings. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 1*, 141 – 157. doi:10.1080/10474412.2011.649653