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Theory Paper

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Abstract

This paper discusses my life experiences, as they relate to various social work theories, between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. Each system of my life is briefly summarized and then connected to a relevant theory. First, my microsystem which is connected to the fuzzy set theory, next, my macrosystem that aligns most with the cognitive social learning theory, then, my exosystem which is associated with the symbolic interaction theory, and finally my chronosystem which is explained through feminist theories.

As humans, we are extremely complex beings that all live very different lives and experience many different things. There are many theories that have been developed and applied to these patterns of experiences that we all have. The theories I will be discussing are ones that can help analyze some of the events that I experienced in my life between the ages of thirteen and seventeen.

My microsystem has been greatly influenced by many variables in my life, including my parents, school, and community. I grew up in a very small, conservative town that was influenced greatly by the idea of community. It was the kind of town where everyone knew each other. All of the kids grew up together and there was always some type of sports game going on down the street that everyone was invited too. My family was known to be a pillar in the community and for most of my life, and it seemed like the perfect place to grow up. It wasn't until I was "outed" at school as gay that I started to feel isolated from the community that I had once feel so secure in. I was quickly dismissed by my friend group and became a target at school. This harsh reality aligns with the fuzzy set theory which focuses on how one's membership within a set is not binary, meaning you either are a member of the group or you are not (Hutchison, 2017). Being forced out of one group allowed me to be introduced to another and through my this experience I was able to venture out and become a part of a more inviting and accepting online community specifically for LGBTQ+ people.

This time in my life was also heavily influenced by the humanistic perspective which emphasizes an individuals search for meaning within their life (Hutchison, 2017). I have battled severe mental illness most of my life and for many years I lived each day without purpose. Although I pretended like I had my life all planned out, I truly believed that I would not survive long enough to graduate high school. It wasn't until I received the help that I needed that I

actually started to search for some kind of meaning in my life. During this search, I have found that my true purpose for being alive is to serve others, and through this service, I am able to make an impact on other people who are struggling to find their place in the world just as I once was.

At a very young age, I suffered a significant trauma at the hands of a family member. As a result of the trauma, I unknowingly developed a variety of ways to cope with that which I had endured. Looking back at this time in my life, I can see how Eco-Psychology was very evident in my life as a direct result of this trauma. Eco-Psychology is the idea that we use defense mechanisms both consciously and unconsciously to cope with difficult experiences within our lives (Hutchison, 2017). To avoid feeling the pain of abuse, my brain simply suppressed all memories of my trauma until I was thirteen and in a safe enough place to process it. The defense mechanisms I was able to develop allowed me to survive through the trauma. In a way, Eco-Psychology was my brain's way of keeping me alive. It wasn't until my abuser passed away when I was a teenager that the memories began to come back and I was in a place mentally where I could begin to safely process them.

My macrosystem is one overcome mainly by privilege. I was born into a white, middle class, two-parent household in a safe neighborhood. My family was very active in our church which was an important aspect of being apart of our community. Both of my parents held stable jobs as teachers and were able to receive a consistent salary. We defiantly weren't rich, and there were a lot of things we weren't able to have, but in the end, we always had enough. Though my social interaction with those around me, I perceived my family as having less money that we really did. As a young teenager, I always felt as though we were poor because I was surrounded by people that I thought had nicer stuff than I did. Many of my friends lived in bigger houses and had nicer toys. This idea that human behavior is learned as an individual interacts with their

surrounding environment aligns most with theories within the social behavioral perspective (Hutchison, 2017). More specifically, the cognitive social learning theory, which stems from the social behavioral perspective, focuses on the concept that behavior is driven by observation, expectations, imitation, and beliefs (Hutchison, 2017). My family has always been financially secure, but because of learned expectations and observations of other families in my community that security was never evident to me. Over time, I have come to understand that we were, in many cases, actually more financially secure than some of my friends that appeared to have nicer stuff than we did. Many of those people were in debt and overcome by monthly payments, and continued to spend money they didn't have because of their own expectations and observations of those around them and their learned need to imitate others perceived success.

My parents have always been some of my greatest supporters, but my exosystem was also made up of a larger group within my community. One of the groups that have made the most impact on me is a group of family friends consisting of three families that I call my "tri-family". The symbolic interaction theory considers that as humans interact with one another, we develop symbols that we attach meaning to (Hutchison, 2017). This is the case with my "tri-family". Although these people are not biologically related to me, I would consider them my family. Just as in the case of my "tri-family", there have been many people in my life that have I have attached greater meaning too and have become a symbol for hope. A lot of people in my life have taken the time to help me become the person I am today, even when it wasn't necessarily convenient to them, it is because of their kindness that I am still here today.

My mezzo system was greatly impacted by the way my parents interacted with peers, school, community and other family members, specifically when it came to supporting me and my needs. Growing up gay in a small town, there were a lot of factors working against me. Very

early on, my parents made the decision to stand by my side and support me, no matter whom they would have to stand against. Whenever I was faced with inequity, my parents used empowerment theories to help advocate for my needs. Empowerment theories emphasize the idea that individuals and groups are able to recognize patterns of injustice and inequity and take action over the situation, thus increasing their own power (Hutchison, 2017). This theory is especially visible in how my parents responded to the inequality I was facing at my high school when I tried to start a gay-straight alliance club. I was met by an extreme backlash, both from students and administration. My parents and I were able to recognize this inequality and take action by advocating for this club to the administration and school board until it was finally formed three years later.

Looking at these years through a much wider lens, I am able to see just how much my chronosystem, what the world looked like at the time, influenced the way I viewed the world. The 2016 election was a very difficult time for my family because we were some of the only people in my small community that weren't in support of Donald Trump. This was especially difficult for me because of the backlash I received from my peers. My school was ruled primarily by "alpha males" and left very little room for women, specifically LGBTQ women, and women of color. The day the election results came in, students followed me around school chanting "build the wall" while teachers and administration did nothing. My school, and in many ways my community, can be explained through feminist theories. These theories focus primarily on the male domination of society and strive to achieve an equal world for all genders (Hutchison, 2017). This is something that my family has advocated for within my school and community for most of my life.

Each of these theories can be connected to the systems in my life in countless ways. When working in the field of social work, it is important to recognize the ways in which we can use theories like these to best serve our clients. Although not all theories can be applied to all situations, each theory, in its own right, can help further the understanding of our lives and experiences and the lives and experiences of those around us.