

Ecological Systems Approach in Sociology

Diana Hincapie, B.A., Lisa K. Lashley, Psy.D., Charles J. Golden, Ph.D.

Nova Southeastern University

Sociology as a philosophy is highly concerned with the collaboration of the environment and how the environment's transactions with the individual affect one another. The Ecological Systems theory, as it is known today, speaks on the interaction between different sociological environments and how it affects the developing individual. Thanks to the work of Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree, in the United Kingdom, alongside Paul Kellogg in the United States, there is a better understanding about how an individual affects their environment and vice versa. Their work, specifically their research in assessing the needs of low socioeconomic status (SES) individuals in urban communities, led to the creation of the systems theory and its research.

Charles Booth's work provided a turnover in the widespread belief that poverty in London was finite and could be managed by charitable aid. Booth and his research team found that 35 % of the population in London was living in severe poverty. He published his findings in a series of 17 volumes, *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1889-1901), in which he objectively provided data regarding the standard of living for individuals in low SES. He maintained that it is the government's responsibility to take care of social issues, such as poverty, in order to avoid socialist revolutions. His work is distinctive as he provided social classes by the scientific method and began to postulate the effects of social structures on individuals. With his work, Booth established that the extent of poverty could not be met by mere charitable aid from the public.

Encouraged by the work of Booth, Seebohm Rowntree corroborated research by assessing levels of poverty in York. His findings were published in *Poverty, a study of Town Life*

(1901), and projected comparable results. Rowntree concluded that wages of a full-time employee would not provide habitable conditions. He defined specific boundaries (i.e. primary or secondary poverty), implications, and repercussions of living in scarcity. Moreover, Rowntree's work defined protective and risk factors that led away from the notion of poverty equating laziness. He suggested that people are at higher risk for poverty during different stages of their lives, especially old age. Finally, Rowntree's work aided in creating a concrete figure on what the minimum wage should be to maintain a specific standard of living.

Comparably, Paul Kellogg, director of the *Pittsburgh Survey* (1914), attempted to influence government policy through scientific inquiry of industrial America. Kellogg felt that the population was greatly divided in terms of standard of living, despite Pittsburgh's alluring prototypical industrialism. The magazine published six volumes depicting corruption within the work force and poor working environments. Research concluded that the typical American worker was working long hours at extremely low wages. Researchers also highlighted the poor working conditions and challenges faced by the work force.

The volumes were intended to provide data in layman's terms to the general population. They strongly believed that awareness would provide the social reform needed to bring safer labor conditions. The surveys identified how massive corporations affected the life of the everyday worker and used its findings to reform laws against child labor, sanitation, and the inclusion of immigrant workers. Kellogg's work continues to be unique as it provided sociologists with how the work force was functioning and how it can be improved. The results of this study eventually became to be known as the American version of Booth's publications and were regularly used as campaigning tools by officials running for office.

Booth, Rowntree, and Kellogg all produced research that aided in social reform, in their respective countries, by making poverty a social issue that needed government attention. The findings of their investigations have set laws in place for protection and provided government funded aid for its citizens. Their work identified different factors and established the main causes of poverty: illness, unemployment, and age. Additionally, they established that poverty is not caused by specific personality traits but elements outside of an individual's control. The aforementioned researchers examined the relationship of how the socioeconomic factors and the influence of mass corporations affect individuals in their particular environment. Their work, in conjunction, has laid the foundation for systems theory through their ecological methodology. Researchers today are able to identify how different systems in the environment affect the developing individual.

Further Readings:

Anderson, M. J., & Greenwald, M. W. (1996). *Pittsburgh Surveyed: Social science and social reform in the early twentieth century*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Midgley, J., & Livermore, M. (2009). *The Handbook of Social Policy*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Social Welfare History Project. (2011). Paul U. Kellogg (1879-1958) — Journalist, editor, and social reformer. Social Welfare History Project. Retrieved March 01, 2018, from <http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/people/kellogg-paul-underwood/>