

# Ecological counseling as an integrative cognitive complexity intervention framework for students with COVID-19 pandemic-caused mental health challenges: A practical perspective

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## Abstract

This article aims to present a practical conceptual perspective on ecological counseling as a theoretical framework for counselors' integrative cognitive complexity to work with students who experience mental health challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition of educational activities into virtual learning has caused various challenges for students worldwide that risk their mental health. Indonesia is one of the countries implementing virtual learning for more than a year with various social, technical, and environmental obstacles. Besides the benefit of distanced learning, this online learning model has widely caused mild to severe anxiety among students. Although researchers have investigated the impacts of virtual learning on mental health problems, the intervention strategies to help students with mental health issues remain lack attention. Ecological counseling has been known for its principles of seeing individuals' mental health issues involving a broader milieu that allows counselors to understand clients according to their contextual living systems. This framework offers a culturally sensitive perspective to help counselors withdraw appropriate and best available information for intervention purposes. This article also includes an application illustration of the ecological counseling framework in the Indonesian community as a practical guideline. It is expected that this article provides academic supports for academics to work with students dealing with their mental health challenges during this pandemic adhere to the counselors' integrative cognitive complexity functions.

**Keywords:** *ecological counseling, cognitive complexity, COVID-19 mental health, counselors, Indonesia*



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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused various changes in human life aspects, and Indonesia is one of the countries worldwide that is still struggling to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic situations. The pandemic does not only cause high risks for people's physical health, but its infectious and lethal impacts lead to policies on social distancing, self-isolation, and

quarantine which then heighten the potentials for sadness, fear, frustration, feeling of helplessness, loneliness, and nervousness (Ahorsu et al., 2020). These situations have led to various mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Abdullah, 2020), suicidal thoughts (Bhuiyan et al., 2020), suicide (Dsoiza et al., 2020), and domestic violence (Kofman & Garvin, 2020). Among the impacted populations, students experienced various psychological challenges due to their virtual education activities. Pramukti et al. (2020) compared the psychological responses toward COVID-19 among university students in Indonesia, Taiwan, and Thailand. The researchers described that Thailand students experienced the highest level of anxiety and suicidal thoughts and less perceived satisfactory support link with a higher level of suicidal thoughts among both Indonesian and Thailand Students. Information from the internet and medical staff, on the other hand, negatively influences Taiwan students. In Indonesia, Putra et al. (2020) identified news and report showing that students from both schools and universities experienced technological constraints, family difficulties in supporting the learning activities, and internet access challenges. Ardan et al. (2020) identified that 12,9 % of 248 university student participants experienced severe anxiety issues. In addition, Setyawan's and Lestari's (2020) phenomenological research involving 30 university students revealed that students began to experience boredom of virtual learning, shortage of internet access due to financial issues, and mood fluctuation due to the abundance of online learning assignments.

The transition to virtual learning activities constitutes a prevention strategy to reduce the spread of the coronavirus among people since the virus causes pneumonia and risks people's lives. The spread may result in lethal risks and catastrophize people's lives in society (Torales, 2020). When an individual experiences COVID-19 caused mental health problems, the situation may influence the function of the community in broader scope due to the potential spread of the virus and may result in fear or anxiety among people. Conversely, the community system also influences the function of individuals due to the need to do social distance, isolation, or even change their daily activities in localized activities such as at home for recovery purposes. Due to these systemic and integrated functions between individual(s) and the community, a framework to approach the mental health issues caused by this COVID-19 pandemic needs to address the individual(s) position within the system. Counselors need to understand how the system works, its meaning for the client and articulate the clients' experience with their phenomenological perspective as individuals with their identities in Indonesian settings. Ecological counseling theory offers a contextual approach to understand and provide counseling services for individuals in their environment (Cook, 2012). More specifically, counselors would need to integrate and utilize all of the intersecting contexts for intervention purposes. Scholars in the counseling field have theorized this notion as a domain of counselors' cognitive complexity (Wilkinson et al., 2020) which would be essential to embrace this pandemic situation and students' experience due to the clients' diverse background ecological situation in their environment. Both ecological counseling and cognitive complexity shares fundamental philosophies with the gestalt theory. The cognitive complexity development emphasizes the necessity for a counselor to integrate clients' characteristics into meaningful understanding (Wilkinson et al., 2020), while ecological counseling provides structures to construct the process of meaning drawing involving clients and their ecological systems (Cook, 2012).

The impact of COVID-19 on mental health has gained tremendous attention from researchers in various countries. However, the strategies to approach the mental health risks intervention within the counseling profession still gain little attention. This conceptual article aims to provide an alternative intervention framework of a counseling practice utilizing ecological counseling that supports counselors' integrative cognitive complexity in providing counseling services for clients with COVID-19 pandemic-related mental health issues. Falco and Mearthy (2013) defined practice article as a scholarly work that consider the "counseling professional's experience with the client(s), including techniques and approaches, program applications, training and supervision, and ethical issues that are grounded in theory and empirical knowledge" (p.

344). This is a potential framework for counseling services by which counselors can understand clients for the mental health issue or the individual and the broader system that influences the individual function (Cook, 2012). This framework also offers counselors to utilize their metacognition function as the center of cognitive complexity ability since the theory requires counselors to oversee how a client withdraws the meaning as an individual within a community system during this pandemic COVID-19. Counselors would need to absorb the contextual and best available information for intervention purposes and make intervention decisions accordingly. As an illustration, this article also presents a practical example of counseling intervention based on the ecological counseling framework for counselors and other related mental health practitioners.

Indonesia has been known as a country with diverse cultural backgrounds (Bazzi et al., 2017), which necessitate counselors to be aware of their working within a counseling session (Goodman & Gorski, 2015). The diversity of the Indonesian population in terms of ethnic, culture, religion, social, economy, and geographical location is a portrayal of whatever Indonesian counselors need to be aware of and utilize them to understand and facilitate the flourish of their clients. This is why employing a counseling theory to approach a client in Indonesia would require a comprehensive framework that includes considering the intermediate system where a client is living for effectiveness purposes. Therefore, utilizing an ecological counseling framework in counseling services for Indonesians constitutes a potential alternative to support counselors utilizing a more culturally sensitive approach and promote counseling intervention effectiveness. It is hoped that this article offers an alternative perspective on supporting counselors and other mental health practitioners in Indonesia to understand clients through a more holistic lens in articulating the case of clients and withdraw a contextual meaning that work in the self of the client and formulate a more accurate needed counseling intervention. In addition, it is also expected that counselor education students and other related mental health professionals could develop intervention strategies that involve the function of ecology within clients' systems.

### **Counselors' Cognitive Complexity**

Granello (2010) defined *cognitive complexity* as "the ability to absorb, integrate, and make use of multiple perspectives (p. 92)." This ability is essential for counselors in understanding clients and formulates a more comprehensive conceptualization for practical intervention purposes (Welfare & Borders, 2010). Cognitive complexity constitutes an essential dimension of counselors' development, especially concerning clinical skills performance for effective counseling and a key consideration for clinical supervision (Ridley et al., 2011). Castillo (2018) identified that counselors with a higher level of cognitive complexity have greater empathy, provide various responses toward clients, more tolerable with ambiguity, less biased clinical judgments. Brendel et al. (2002) found that individuals with a higher level of cognitive development show more adaptive behavior and more complex reasoning for problem-solving, greater autonomy, flexible counseling methods, value diversity, and equitable and fair decision making. Ridley et al. added that cognitive complexity constitutes an essential aspect in promoting the expertise of counselors since its role is a central component for metacognitive function. The metacognitive function allows counselors to reflect on their clinical experience and develop their expertise. Skovholt and Jennings (2005) described that the experience could improve counselors' expertise through self-reflection. According to these notions, the relationship between the ecological counseling framework and cognitive complexity lies on the way ecological counseling offers a holistic framework that counselors need to deconstruct the meaning of clients' experience of being in a pandemic COVID-19 situation that inseparable from their various layers of intersecting systems. The ability to integrate the clients' characteristics in this pandemic into meaningful understanding is the key component for more effective interventions (Wilkinson & Dewell, 2019).

Gentner and Stevens (2014) presented the two forms of cognitive complexity: differentiation and integration complexity. Wilkinson and Dewell (2019) described differentiation complexity as the process of identification of clients' relevant information comprising their experiences, characteristics, and concerns. In comparison, integration complexity is a mental model to refine data into an appropriate solution. Wilkinson and Dewell explained that a counselor needs to process this integration through processing thematic connections across the available data, combine them into a case conceptualization, and use it for clinical decision-making purposes. Besides the forms of cognitive complexity, researchers in the counseling field typically categorize the counselors' level of cognitive complexity based on the epistemological model developed by William Perry (1970). This model clustered individuals' views on the world of knowledge into levels such as dualistic, multiplistic, relativistic, and committed relativistic. Granello (2010) described dualistic thinking as simplistic, dichotomous, or black or white thinking. This thinking style leads individuals to perceive world events as absolute right or wrong to decide. While dualistic thinking functions based on an absolute view, individuals with multiplistic thinking perceive all information seems similarly acceptable and do not search for the correct answers. Consequently, individuals with multiplistic thinking could be overwhelmed by the information and unable to decide on the available choices based on the obtained data (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Individuals with relativistic thinking perceive knowledge as contextual and use the best available information to make a decision. Furthermore, they can involve metacognition for self-reflection (Wilkinson, 2011). Thus, Wilkinson added that individuals with committed relativistic thinking have more lifelong and ethical stances according to their beliefs and understand that they need values and knowledge to make a decision. Perry (1981) identified that not many people achieve the last level, so this was the last category still in Perry's theoretical model.

Regarding the pandemic COVID-19 situation in Indonesia, which has changed primary students' learning and community activities, the role of counselors to approach clients contextually becomes an essential framework for counseling purposes. Counselors will need to involve the best available information that intersects with clients' conditions and understand their experience within the ecological system of their environments. Therefore, counselors would need a higher level of cognitive complexity to comprehend the situation and make intervention decisions according to the available characteristics, which may lead to understanding the meaning the client attributes toward the situation they have encountered.

### **Ecological Counseling Frameworks**

Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979; 1992) has popularized the ecological model in developmental psychology. This model assumed that human behaviors are influenced by a series of four dynamic connections between social systems consisting of microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Microsystem comprises interpersonal interactions of an individual within a given environment such as home, school, workplace, or neighborhood. Mesosystem is an outer layer of a microsystem that consists of interaction between two or more microsystems. For example, the interaction between home and school, home with a workplace, or neighborhood. Exosystem is also the outer layer of the mesosystem. This system is the relationship between subsystems that indirectly influence an individual, such as the health care system, educational system, or social services. The next outer layer is the macrosystem. This system includes the ideological aspect of society, norms, and values existing in the community. Neville and Mobley (2001) explicated that this ecological theory provides a flexible framework to understand human conditions in which multiple social identities shape human behavior. Bronfenbrenner (1986, 2005) also include the chronosystem into the ecological perspective. Chronosystem is the dimension of time that include change the characteristics of the person and the environment. This is the reference to understand the psychological changes of individuals when they grow older.



Conyne and Cook (2004) developed ecological counseling theory according to the ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979). Conyne and Cook described ecological counseling as a framework to understand individuals from their individuality and a system component. The ecological perspective is not merely a specific counseling theory, but it is a way of thinking about human behaviors about a varying counseling theory. Cook (2012) argued that most counseling theories view individuals are responsible for their problems. Cook (2012) stated that every person "stood at a crossroad between individual needs and societal mores and customs (p. 4)." Cook (2012) also highlighted that many theorists usually have attributes such as drives, traumas, beliefs, and other elements that cause problems that verbal investigation and emotional expression can remedy the emerging issues. These notions are the essential views to understand individuals and their problems, but without ignoring their contexts.

Cook (2012) explained that the term ecosystem refers to the sum of total of interactive influences operating within an individual's life in various degrees of proximity, ranging from his or her biologically determined characteristics to the broader socio-cultural context structuring human interactions" (p. 5). The ecological viewpoint is a framework for understanding human actions grounded on the guiding vision (or essential assumption) that human life is inextricably linked to the natural world. According to this definition, the ecological perspective of counseling departed from the notion of humans' cohabitation with all creation since the beginning of life in the world (Cook, 2012). Cook, furthermore, argued that living on a "planet consists of interlocking systems of living creatures, each depending on other living and nonliving features of the environment for sustenance" (p. 5). This means that life follows natural laws, and everyone is a part of the constantly changing living and nonliving things. Cook further said that what happens to a person is shaped by the confluence of events, proclivities, relationships, experiences, and other aspects of a person's life as they evolve over time and through contexts.

### Basic Principles of Ecological Counseling Theory

A wide range of fields has utilized ecological principles such as counseling, psychology, and social work. The ecological perspective mainly proposes three aspects of human behavior: the belief that human behavior is personal and contextual nature, interactional nature, and the importance of meaning-making. These aspects are the bedrock of the ecological perspective.

This article covers reviews the basic principles of ecological counseling implementation, and exemplifies a case example as an illustration of the ecological counseling framework. The implementation will demonstrate how the ecological counseling framework is applied for a mental health issue caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this implementation theory, some intervention strategies will be used as the guideline in the intervention process. A counselor would need to follow the ecological counseling procedures and respect the basic principles in the process of counseling services from the stage of assessment to intervention. As a practical reference, this article will present a case of Sally as an illustration of the implementation of ecological counseling framework. The following vignette is a fictional story about a high school student, Sally who develops anxiety because of the online learning during the school closure of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia.

#### *Behavior is Personal and Contextual*

They believe that behavior is personal and contextual, departed from the view of clients' problems that emerge from the interaction between individual characteristics such as traits, learned behaviors, low self-esteem, and other related traits. This perspective considers the client's problem in a broader way that identifies personal characteristics as only one part of human behavior. This principle is rooted in Kurt Lewin's (1935) formula. Cook (2012) quoted the formula as "All human behavior must be understood as the outcome of a human being's interaction with his or her environment" (p. 6). Furthermore, Cook described that understanding an individual's s function requires an understanding of the unique biological, psychological, and

social makeup functions to interpret an individual's context and understand interpersonal relationships within everyday life that directly influence the individual. Cook also mentioned that counselors need to be aware of the physical environment, such as natural or human-made environment, influencing people's behavior even subtly.

According to this view, working with clients with mental health issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic needs a contextual understanding by considering their environment and regulations. Counselors would need to be aware of how the societal system works in dealing with the pandemic to influence people's behaviors. It requires counselors to explore the system function to articulate the interlocking functions so that an individual perceives how the system influences how they draw the meaning of being a part of the society through the function of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

#### *Behavior is Interactional*

This ecological perspective proposed that individuals are not passive beings, but they actively interact within the environment. This means that the environment influences individuals, and in turn, individuals influence the environment or the context where they live (Cook, 2012). Cook argued that although individuals have some genetic susceptibility that influences their behaviors, how they actualize the behavior would depend on their interactions with their contexts. Since how the influence works between individuals and the environment are reciprocal, individuals in a similar event may similarly or indifferently perceive the event. This premise is even more diverse when the individuals come from a different cultural background that constructs the experience according to their unique beliefs or values (Hofstede et al., 2010). Counselors who have an ecological perspective would be aware of it and utilize the appropriate approach to understand the interaction between individuals with their environment (Cook, 2012).

This principle offers a relativistic perspective for counselors to recognize the diverse interaction patterns of individuals with the COVID-19 pandemic. Counselors will need to identify client's interactions with their environment and at the same time examine how the environment influences the clients. For example, a counselor will need to analyze how a lost-job client is depressed by the economic turmoil since the virus COVID-19 outbreak and how the client views the situation according to their current position as a part of the whole economic community. Utilizing this ecological perspective would allow counselors to understand the big picture of the situation's causal effect and the client's possibilities to cope with the situation under the pandemic situation. Counselors will have the outline to explore the level of hope they have, the possible strategies to work on the core of the problem, and how they can accept the reality of pandemics as a part of the client's responsibility.

#### *Behavior is Meaningful*

Cook (2012) proposed that the ecological perspective underlines the meaning-making process. This focus postulates that individuals respond to an event based on how they understand them. The contextual level of the individual is the factor determining individuals' meaning-making, for example, spiritual development, family values that lead to career choices, or organizational mission that shape the working behavior of the workers. Besides, other exemplified factors contribute to the meaning-making of individuals; Cook also mentioned biological sex, physical markers of race, culture, political rights, and career opportunities. However, there are also various possibilities for individuals within a similar group to have a different meaning because of the diverse interaction with their contexts.

Since making meaning relies on how each person interacts with the context, a counselor needs to identify which meaning a client draws from the COVID-19 pandemic situation. It would primarily depend on the interaction between a client, the context they live, and how they draw meaning from it to influence their mental health state. A counselor can understand the client better when the meaning-making path is clear, and the client can understand where the client is

amid the system and the meaning-making in his or her life. Therefore, a counselor will need to be aware of the factors that predominantly influence client's perspectives about their behavior meaning and relate the meaning with the desired change for a better mental health state during the pandemic.

### *Goals of Ecological Counseling*

Cook (2012) proposed that the purpose of ecological counseling is to use the ecological perspective to help individuals develop more satisfying, productive, and meaningful lives through understanding how their lives are rooted in a different context, interactions with the world around them, and their meaning-making processes. These goals represent each principle of ecological counseling comprising the personal and contextual interaction and meaningful behavior, which serves as the essential elements of ecological counseling.

Besides, in the previous work, Conyne and Cook (2004) mentioned that the goal of ecological counseling is to maximize *concordance* within individual lives, defined as "mutually beneficial interaction between person and environment" by involving a "harmonious balance between challenge and support" (p. 24). This definition shows mutual benefit between individuals and the environment, which can drive balance when challenge and support are well managed. According to these definitions, Cook (2012) highlighted the possibility for counselors to appreciate various ways to facilitate clients' changes. Counselors can improve their ability to capture the complexity of clients' ecosystems that influence their behavior from immediate contexts such as groups, neighborhoods, and communities to further economic system and political system contexts. Cook also emphasized that the utilization of ecological perspective is to appreciate the complexity of clients' live and generate intervention strategies that respect the interconnectedness of individuals across situations wherever and whenever. In addition, Cook explained that the ecological counseling perspective must reflect the substantial role of social power, economic resources, politics, and other dynamics that usually invisible influencing people's lives over time.

### The Case of Sally

Sally is a Javanese high school Muslim female student in Indonesia. She lives in a suburban with her parents and a younger brother. Her environment is primarily Muslim with various occupation backgrounds such as farmers, manufacturing labor, and local entrepreneurs. Since the pandemic COVID-19, Sally has been joining virtual learning since the virus outbreak in her province. Everyone should follow the rules of the Indonesian government for social distancing, limit outdoor activities, and interacting with other people. This situation has caused her anxiety because she has dealt with some challenging situations following the online classes due to using an old cellphone and unstable internet connections. She also needs to help her mother working on the farm, do chores at home, and share her cellphone with her younger brother, who is also doing virtual learning. Sally has been trying to manage this situation, but she had many things to do. She is overwhelmed with the virtual learning, her brother's device need, and any situation at her home. Moreover, she also thinks that the teacher in the distanced learning typically gives students more assignments due to the curriculum standard. She has not known what she needed to do, but she contacted a school counselor for a counseling session.

### Procedures

The purpose of this article is to present a practical perspective in utilizing ecological counseling as an integrative cognitive complexity framework for students with pandemic COVID-19 caused mental health challenges. The explication of cognitive complexity and ecological counseling theories has provided a guideline in conceptualizing the case of Sally as an intervention illustration. The author has had implemented the ecological counseling framework in the counseling practice for university students before the pandemic COVID-19 outbreak. The

framework has helped the author to understand clients from various cultural backgrounds. In addition, the clients showed positive signs of progress during the counseling sessions. The following stages is the process of counseling service for Sally.

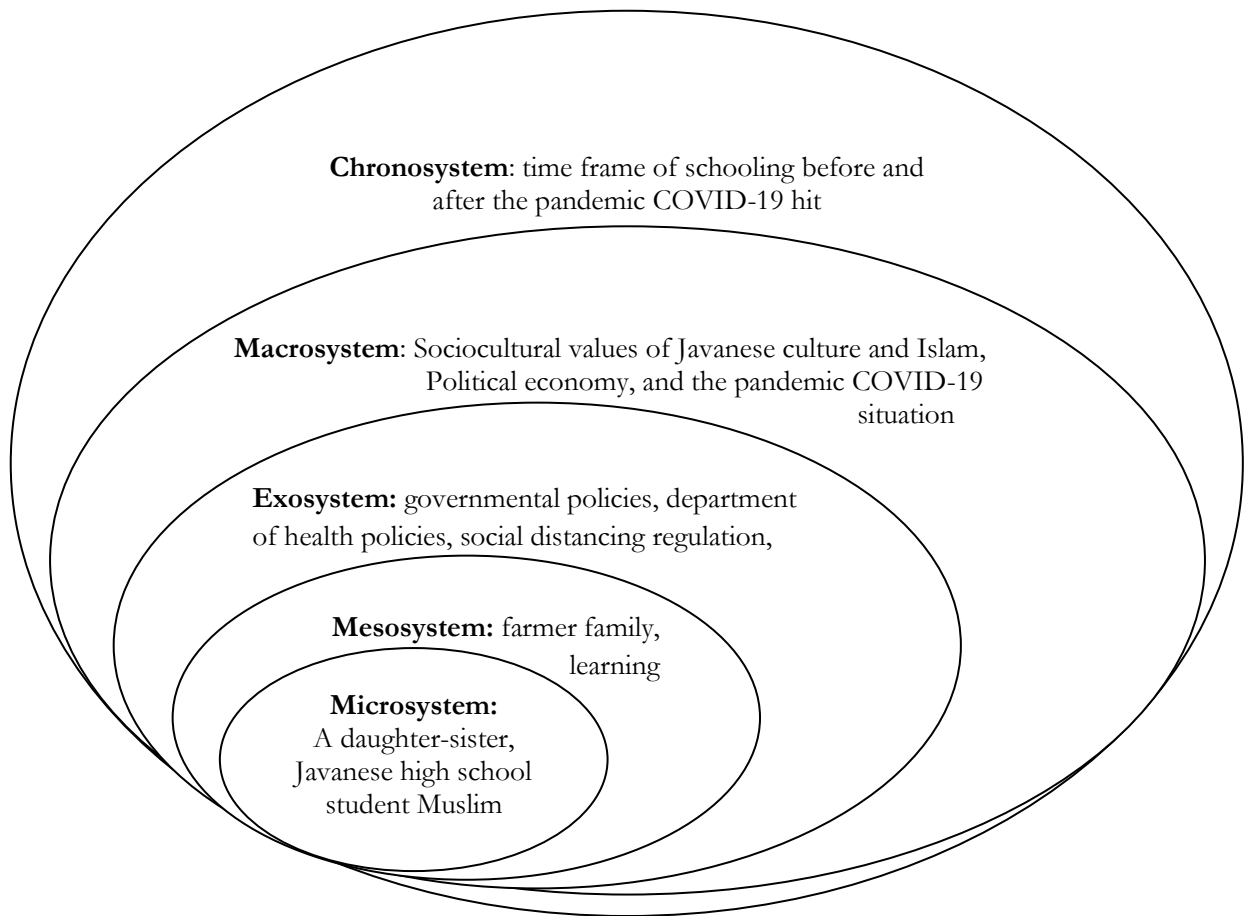


Figure 1. Ecological model for the case of Sally

Sally has several identities embedded in her as an individual, such as being a female, Muslim, Javanese, high school student, daughter, and big sister. Her identities are indispensable with the outer layers of systems in the environment where she lives from the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. All of these layers interconnect to shape the way Sally draws meaning of her existence holistically. The counselor would need to take into account each of those layers in performing the ecological counseling procedures to conceptualize Sally's meaning given to experience according to the principle of the abductive reasoning process.

According to the case of Sally, the following stages would be a possible step of a counselor following the procedure presented by Cook (2012), such as assessment, diagnosis, and treatment planning, and intervention. The figure 1 is an illustration to understand the case of Sally in ecological counseling framework. The figure is the visualization of the framework that can be used as a guidance for the counselor to identify the characteristics of Sally and then draw the meaning of the interconnecting characteristics into a meaningful case conceptualization.

#### *Assessment*

Cook (2012) referred to Lewin (1935) regarding the synergistic, ecological model. Lewin mentioned that a person's behavior is a function of the pattern of interaction. There are two assessments in this approach: an ecological framework for assessing health and illness and an ecologically grounded assessment of decision making. The ecological framework comprises the



premise that mental health is best studied by assessing the person-environment fit. Wilson (2004) suggested that a counselor can examine the clinical intrapsychic sphere (construct from the basis of client's intentions, plans, and actions), ecological niche (with whom the client interacts and the construct that guides the client's intentions, plans, and actions), and interactional sphere (repeating patterns of interactions between the client and the client's niche mates).

While the ecologically grounded assessment views assessment as a process for assembling co-collected data and developing constructed meaning (Cook, 2012), utilizing this assessment, furthermore, a counselor can explain the purpose of the assessment with the client, define the problem, separate the fault for the problem from the responsibility for the solution, explore the meaning of the problem to the client, explore the motivation for presenting for counseling.

According to these types of assessment, the counselor who works with Sally may utilize these two assessment paths. Figure 01 illustrates the ecological system of Sally's current situation. A counselor can approach the case of Sally from the ecological framework for assessing health and illness. The counselor will explore the issues from Sally as a person by investigating any types of mental health challenges caused by biological function or personality characteristics that allow the client to share and understand the person's perspective. Furthermore, the counselor will investigate the client's interaction with the environment consisting of living and nonliving beings, such as how Sally interacts with her parents, brother, the home, and the school. This exploration allows the counselor to recognize how the interaction between Sally and her ecological system has shaped her meaning about being a student with overwhelming virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The counselor will need to understand Sally's situation as a phenomenological experience that gives her meaning and show the counselor a pattern for a case articulation utilizing abductive reasoning skills (Wilkinson & Dewell, 2019). Magnani (2009) interpreted the abductive reasoning definition from Pierce (1931-1958) as an "inferential" creative process of generating a new "explanatory" hypothesis. Wilkinson and Dewell argued that this abductive reasoning is withdrawing a meaning based on the phenomenological experience that does not necessarily adhere to a particular counseling theory.

### *Diagnosis and Treatment Planning*

The ecological counseling approach utilizes the Ecological Perspectives on Diagnosis. The diagnosis may comprise the problem arising from within the person, the pressure of client environments, and the pattern of interpersonal interaction. A counselor can identify the within-person problems that make meaning for understanding under client's life story and how this shapes the diagnosis.

There are tools to support the counselor in developing a treatment plan for the case of Sally. Cook (2012) proposed three tools for ecological counselors: *the problem list*, *the Ecologically Grounded Problem Guide*, and *the Progress Evaluation Scales (PES)*. In collaboration with a client, Cook (2012) exemplified that the counselor may list client problems by asking some questions such as "*What brought you here to see me today?*" The counselor will identify the problems according to the category, such as intrapsychic problems, interpersonal problems, or environmental problems.

The counselor can also use the Ecologically Grounded Problem Guide (Cook, 2012). This guide is to support the developed problem list. The guide constitutes an expansion of the critical element of diagnosis from the American Psychiatric Association (2000) with Lewinian ecological formulation (Lewin, 1935). The counselor may use this guide to sort a client's problem into three categories: *psychodiagnostics category* comprising painful symptom, social impairment, occupational impairment, risk of heavy loss, and environmental threat. The next category is the *temporal triage* category, such as the need for primary address, which can be delayed, and need a more extended intervention or can be delayed. Third, an *ecological structure* comprises the intrapsychic, intrapersonal, and environmental that support the treatment for the client.

A counselor can also do the Progress Evaluation Scales for initial treatment planning and follow-up evaluation of the intervention. Cook (2012) utilized the seven scales covering several disturbances typically experienced by individuals with mental health problems. The scales include:

1. Family interaction. This scale comprises interpersonal relationship quality between a client and family members. Specifically, this scale assesses the dependence-independence between a client and family members.
2. Occupation (school job). This scale assesses the functional level of an individual's primary roles that include productivity level.
3. Getting Along with Others. This scale focuses on measuring the ability of individuals to develop and maintain a satisfying relationship beyond the family environment.
4. Feelings and Mood. This scale assesses the expression flexibility and adaptive integration of feelings.
5. Use of Free Time: This scale measures inner and outer resources for having fun and pleasure activities.
6. Problems: This scale assesses individuals' ability to work effectively on daily life's problems.
7. Attitude Toward Self: This scale identifies the balance between negative and positive attitudes expressed about the self.

These scales used a 5-point scale and presented with statements according to each of the scale focus. The counselor may use these scales as an intake assessment or evaluation at the end of the counseling sessions. Besides, Sally does not answer all the scales, but Sally can only pick one area that matches her situation. According to the intake and evaluation results, the counselor can process the counseling dynamic according to the ecological counseling perspective.

Once Sally completes an assessment, the counselor may employ an analysis based on the emerging characteristics intersecting with the ecological layers from microsystem to macrosystem. A counselor with dualistic thinking will identify the client's characteristics into diagnosis criteria and provide treatment or, even worse, advice (Brendel et al., 2001). In comparison, a counselor with relativistic thinking would need to step beyond identifying the result of the diagnosis and formulate an intervention. The counselor will incorporate the client's characteristics from the assessment and diagnosis into an articulation that portrays the meaning of the current experienced mental health challenge with a phenomenological perspective. This means that the meaning does not necessarily fit into a particular counseling theory that the counselor has. The counselor will need to implement epoch by holding any speculative explanation, interpretation, and preconception (Wilkinson et al., 2020).

### *Intervention*

Cook (2012) described that a counselor and a client would work together to plan the intervention or treatment comprising broad goals and specific actions the client can take. The goal setting is the key for developing an agreement between the counselor and client to specify what they will work on and how to do it. The goal may comprise the change within the person, environment, and interaction pattern with the environment, including alleviating symptom distress, reducing social impairment, reducing school or occupational impairment, reducing the risk of heavy loss, and defining and stabilizing sense of self (Cook, 2012 p. 197).

In terms of environmental goals, Cook (2012) focuses on identifying nutrients and toxins within the person's current niche environment, broadening the person's niche to include missing nutrients, and redefining niche boundaries to eliminate toxic elements (p. 197). Cook exemplified the avoidance of people, places, and things that trigger unwanted behavior and find other potential supportive elements in the ecosystem to develop the desired behavior change. Counselor and client will need to map this ecosystem to identify an ecological element that is toxic and unsupportive in the ecosystem. Furthermore, they work on identifying the ecological element that is supportive and nutritious.

For the interpersonal goals, the counselor and client will focus on how people interact to derive the nutrients they need and avoid toxins that may not support them. Cook (2012) referred to the work of Schutz (1958) on a tripartite guide for interpersonal behavior. Schutz proposed three interpersonal needs that shape people's interpersonal styles, including *inclusion*, *control*, and *openness*. *Inclusion* mainly focuses on maintaining a satisfactory level of contact, interaction, and association with others. A person will need comfortable balance in starting and develop interactions. When there is a congruency between inner needs and the people in the environment, the person can be happier.

The focus on inclusion also associates with *control*. Control primarily focuses on maintaining a comfortable balance of influencing and being governed by others while maintaining a satisfactory degree of authority and strength. Cook (2012) described that a counselor might incorporate the focus on inclusion and control so that the treatment may focus on within-person problems, including boundary awareness, management, and strong boundary defense. In comparison, environmental issues may include selecting other people (niche mates) with democratic attitudes rather than autocratic or abdicatic. Therefore, the client can share control through a democratic problem-solving approach.

Also, *openness* constitutes an interpersonal need. This need mainly focuses on maintaining a satisfactory level of relationship openness. Counselor and client may focus on developing an inner sense of client acceptance that supports openness with others. Thus, the client can select other people who are not impulsively disclosing and withholding. Therefore, they can develop an ongoing pattern of coevolutionary and interpersonal growth.

The counselor will work with Sally on determining the within-person goals, environmental goals, and interpersonal goals. The counselor will identify which goals Sally prioritizes to cope with her situation as a daughter, older sister, Javanese, and Muslim female. Sally and the counselor can focus on the symptom alleviation regarding her anxiety, reduce social impairment by developing interpersonal skills, reduce school or occupational impairment with better time management, or aim for any risky behavior that may appear and strengthen the boundaries between her and other people in her family or with her teachers. The counselor also needs to explore the psychological change that Sally has experienced before the pandemic to the current condition. After determining the within-person goals, thus, the counselor will work on identifying the environmental goals. This goal may include any possibility of nutrients within Sally's environment during school from home and avoid any toxic factors that worsen her anxiety. Sally can develop better device sharing strategies with her brother also find a different place for studying when she feels more comfortable. Finally, the counselor will work with Sally to develop interpersonal goals such as inclusion by developing a possible comfortable balance between her and other people in the environment, controlling guidance and leadership to others, and openness regarding accepting oneself and others.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The ecological counseling framework offers a potential approach through which counselors can work with clients with integrative cognitive complexity domain so that the counseling process can embrace the COVID-19 situation and context. The ecological counseling has a promising potential of utilization in Indonesia, or other countries with different cultural background since this framework involves the broader view on the intersecting system toward an individual. Moreover, the principles of this theory also overlapping with the principles of integrative cognitive complexity. Therefore, counselors can promote their counseling service effectiveness through cognitive processing that embraces the available information, integrate them, and formulate the counseling intervention. A future study examining the model according to the ecological characteristics would be an excellent opportunity for counseling researchers. In addition, evaluating and developing the implementation of the ecological counseling framework may provide a valuable resource for counselors to improve their professional development.

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