CHAPTER 1

Benefits and Challenges in Clinical Work with Adolescents
AN OVERVIEW

Youth are on a voyage of self-discovery. If you work with youth, or you want to become a youth-focused practitioner, you will necessarily be following them on this voyage. Since adolescence generally incudes youth ages 12 to 21 years old, you may see them at the beginning of the voyage, midvoyage, or near the completion of the journey toward adulthood. Throughout that journey, youth face many ups and downs. Often they find themselves in your company, as a helping professional, at a time when their lives seem to be overflowing with challenges. In your role as the practitioner, you will need to understand these challenges as well as be aware of the strengths that adolescents frequently lose track of when they are in the depths of testing options and becoming who they need to be. Your open mind and open heart, in addition to your solid knowledge of adolescence and skills for successfully engaging them, will serve to facilitate this period of self-discovery. It will also plant the seeds for the healthy choices they will need to make in the future.

Many practitioners are apprehensive about working with youth because adolescence has frequently been viewed as a period of "stress and storm," beginning with some of the earliest scholars on adolescent development (e.g., Hall, 1904). The myth of youth as "rebels without a cause" continues to be perpetuated in films and literature, even though scholars have refuted it for nearly 60 years (e.g., Bandura, 1964). Clearly, many youth face angst and stress as their bodies and minds mature beyond childhood, but contemporary theorists believe adolescence is not uniquely a stressful time. In fact, youth who have high aspirations and positive self-esteem as they enter

high school are likely to be well adjusted upon leaving high school (Jessor, Turbin, & Costa, 1998). As a helping professional, you are likely to meet youth who may have had inadequate support and resources, a limited number of caring adults in their lives, and experiences of discrimination due to racism, sexism, or queerphobia, thus making their journey more complex. For these clients, the passage to adulthood can be risky and difficult. Therefore, it is key that you, the practitioner, identify and hold fast to the strengths each adolescent has and assist them in using those strengths to successfully navigate their unique journey.

Adolescence is a time of amazing growth and vitality. Adolescents can think in new and exciting ways, they are usually in the peak of health, and they are often involved with a wide network of people—from the family, neighborhood, and school to afterschool activities, peers, work, and religious affiliations. It can be an exciting, satisfying, and happy time. However, for some youth, adolescence can be a period of profound loneliness, depression, and ostracism. These youth may feel they do not fit in with their peers; others may feel the experiences they have had in their childhood keep them from meaningful relationships. They might believe no one can really understand them or the events they have endured. They fear rejection if they reveal their "true selves." To the casual observer, these youth may seem to scoff at and deride others who hold more conventional views or try to reach out to them. But frequently, this voiced disdain covers their own feelings of inadequacy, vulnerability, and pain. You, as the practitioner, will be most helpful when you are able to understand and view each of the youth you meet from the contexts that shape them. The knowledge and skills you gain from reading this book and applying its content to each of the case examples will prepare you for this challenge and also remind you of the amazing benefits of a youth-focused practice. This chapter sets the stage for your learning about adolescence in context and the multisystemic–ecological approach, which will engage you in considering the many facets of youth, from their private worries to their most challenging experiences of community.

Adolescence in Context

All people grow up in particular contexts including the family, school, and neighborhood. In turn, the media influence each of these contexts. This book offers clinical strategies to assess teens and create interventions that are appropriate in these different contexts. Additionally, the book focuses on both positive influences (*protective factors*) and negative influences (*risk factors*) in each of the environments or contexts in which a youth develops. We promote a holistic assessment of the youth, one that enables you to

become familiar with them in multiple contexts, and the strengths, supports, and challenges of their experiences in each context. From this perspective, we discuss how to support growth in each context, as well as appropriate interventions to employ.

A Multisystemic–Ecological Approach

The multisystemic–ecological approach to practice with teens accounts for the numerous contexts described above in combination with the psychological and social factors that affect youth. Throughout the book, we use the term *M-E approach* as shorthand for the multisystemic–ecological approach. Ecological theory is the foundation for the M-E approach, which requires clinicians to consider not only clients' psychological experiences but also the social, cultural, and political influences that create context and meaning.

Consider an adolescent, Rafael, who is truant at school. The M-E approach leads practitioners to assess not only psychological reasons for not attending school (such as a behavioral disorder or an undiagnosed learning disability), but also broader systems as influences on his behavior (such as the experiences of poverty, immigration, racism, bullying, or homophobia). Acknowledging and understanding the impact of these broader systems do not mean condoning the truant behavior or ignoring psychological factors. But, they do lead to a more thorough evaluation of the presenting problem, which then has a greater chance of guiding interventions that will be meaningful, effective, and long-lasting.

Rafael's parents Javier and Lola emigrated from Guanajuato, Mexico, before he was born. Recently, Javier was picked up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and sent back to Mexico because he was undocumented. Javier had always been the provider for his family and had worked for 18 years in a meat factory. Javier and Lola have four children: Rafael (16), Lupita (12), Angel (8), and Nicolasa (4). With Javier in Mexico, he no longer can provide for his family. Thus, the responsibility falls to Rafael to support them.

This expanded assessment has the potential to open up multiple options for intervention aimed at changing the psychological *and* social, cultural, and political influences on Rafael's current behavior. For example, the clinician may help connect Lola to an immigration attorney and to other public-sector or nonprofit financial services. The practitioner might also intervene at the school level if peers are taunting Rafael for his dirty clothes, after coming to school directly from an overnight shift at the meat company. Rafael's experience illustrates the complexity and multiple contexts that may influence clients' behaviors and feelings. It is our hope that

the M-E approach to understanding teen clients will increase your ability to build cross-system relationships that lead to positive outcomes for youth.

How Ecological Theory Illuminates Adolescent Development

Human ecology is the science of interrelationships among living organisms and between organisms and their natural, built, and social environments (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Hayword, 1994). Ecological theory proposes that the characteristics of the individual interacting with characteristics of the environment over time influence development (Barrows, 1995; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Griffore & Phenice, 2001). Bronfenbrenner (1979), the originator of the term *human ecology*, speaks of the developing person "as a growing dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the milieu in which it resides" (p. 21). The environment transforms and accommodates the individual, and the individual transforms and accommodates the environment. Neither the environment nor the individual is the same due to the interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1989). A human ecological perspective allows the clinician to assess and intervene at the multilevel interactions between a teen and their environment.

Time is an important ingredient in ecological theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) uses the term *chronosystem* to denote generational influences affecting the individual, critical events, and everyday stresses that contribute to human development. *Generational influences* become more apparent during adolescence and young adulthood. The environmental factors of an era have an impact on that generation for the rest of their lifespan. In the United States, such generational influences include the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the fall of the Berlin Wall, September 11, Black Lives Matter, the MeToo Movement, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These events changed the nature of society and have had an impact on the developing teen and their worldview as adults.

Critical events are particular life experiences that influence an individual, though not necessarily their contemporaries. They include events such as the cessation of a relationship (even intermittent, due to incarceration, deployment, or immigration), the death of a loved one, serious illness, moving, the birth of a sibling, an auto accident, new employment, a new relationship, attending a new school, or graduating from high school. Such events have an enormous impact on the development of the individual, but not on the wider society in which that person is developing. When you ask teen clients to make timelines of their lives, you can assess for the effects of critical events. Ask what each event on their timeline meant to them

and what they learned from it. As the intervention continues, ask how the critical events they experienced shaped them to become the person they are today.

Everyday stresses refer to the daily issues individuals face, such as money problems, traffic difficulties, time pressure, poor sleeping patterns, homework, work conflicts, family coping styles, aggravations from parents, struggles in a relationship, a quarrel with a friend, neighborhood violence, school dangers, and dietary problems. The ability to cope with these frequent and sometimes chronic issues helps to mold the individual. Asking the youth, "What hassles do you have to deal with every day?" can begin to give some insight into their everyday stresses.

The chronosystem has a profound effect on the development of the adolescent. It also helps to form their identity through the connection to their generation, personal experiences, and life stresses. The chronosystem helps define their worldview and the understanding of their place in that world.

The Microsystem

The individual develops in a number of different contexts. The initial structure where development occurs is the microsystem. It involves the reciprocal interplay among people, objects, and symbols. The *microsystem* has been defined "as a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical and material features and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief" (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 227). The initial microsystem that the infant inhabits is the home, where the majority of interaction takes place between the infant and the parent, or primary caregiver. As the child grows and enters other microsystems, they have interactions with different people and objects. Examples of these other microsystems include their school, church, synagogue, or mosque; their neighborhood; their sports team, school club, or job; or hanging out with their friends.

In adolescence, youth participate in a multitude of microsystems. We address youth development and resilience in the family, school, and neighborhood microsystems. In any of these systems, development is bidirectional; that is, the family and school influence development of the teen and the teen, in turn, influences the family and school. As the teen moves from one setting to another, relationships may change. One microsystem, such as their neighborhood, may be a venue where they flourish; another, such as the school, may be a location where they feel stifled, lost, or stigmatized. Understanding youth in each clinical context requires information about

activities, roles, and relationships in each microsystem. This knowledge provides insight into social, cultural, and emotional functioning of youth across microsystems.

The Mesosystem

The *mesosystem* refers to the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing adolescent actively participates. The connections between settings provide continuity for the developing person, but also insight for all members of the microsystems to understand the adolescent and how they develop in the other context. The positive interface of these spheres is a source of support for the adolescent. The adolescent needs the interaction between these two important spheres of their life to achieve a greater degree of adjustment.

If the important people in the adolescent's life know each other, the youth feels more secure and more supported. For instance, if the parent and the teacher come together to discuss the student's academic progress with the student present, the student is aware not only that these important players in their life care about and are interested in them, but also that these individuals will hold them accountable. This is especially important if the student has tried in the past to triangulate parent and teacher so that they were at odds with each other, instead of working together as a team. The adolescent now understands that the possibility exists for ongoing discussion, information sharing, and dialogue between these members of the two microsystems. Understanding and support promote communication between a teen's microsystems and avoid possible distrust, animosity, or disregard for members from separate microsystems. Greater knowledge and trust across each microsystem enhance adolescent functioning.

An example of a mesosystemic interface is the relationship between home and school. In the case of Rafael, this interface broke down. Rafael's mother speaks only Spanish and grew up in Mexico, where there was a traditional understanding that parents were in charge of behavior at home and teachers were in charge of behavior at school. Lola did not consider calling the school when Javier was picked up by ICE. Thus, the school was unaware of the profound loss Rafael and his family were feeling. The school secretary left messages in English on Lola's cell phone informing her that Rafael was missing school. Lola deleted the messages because she did not understand them. Lola knew that her family was grieving the loss of Javier, emotionally, physically, and financially, but she did not know how to connect to another microsystem for support. She felt extremely isolated.

Clinicians should assess the varied activities, roles, and relationships a teen maintains in each microsystem and how these activities, roles, and relationships support or undermine their development in another microsystem.

For example, how the adolescent makes and retains friends in the neighborhood microsystem may be quite different from how they make and retain friends in the school microsystem. What is the relationship between the youth's work life and school life? What is the relationship between home and school, work life and home, school and neighborhood, neighborhood and school, peers and school, peers and home, peers and neighborhood? Helping the youth understand the similarities and differences in how they "operate" in each microsystem will improve their social functioning, and help them better understand who they are in each microsystem. Additionally, understanding how they have to modify who they are in different environments can help the individual become successful in a different or new microsystem in the future.

The Exosystem

The *exosystem* does not involve the developing person as a participant. That is, the adolescent does not influence events in the exosystem, but nonetheless those events potentially affect their development. Some examples of the exosystem are parent's work, parent's school or extrafamilial activities, the local board of education, the state and federal legislature, Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), unemployment, immigration policies, and Medicaid. For example, decisions to lay off employees at a parent's workplace can have profound effects on family finances and, in turn, a teen's options for present and future choices. Additionally, parent stress due to job loss can filter down to the teen, resulting in strained parent–child relations.

Other exosystem stressors include residing in a food desert, defined as a location where there is little to no access to quality food such as fresh vegetables. The digital divide, defined as disparities in access to the Internet, is also an exosystem factor that influences youth. For example, many queer youth find hope and support via the Internet, but those who perhaps reside in a rural area and do not have Internet access will be even more isolated.

Returning to Rafael, the exosystem is having a major impact on him. The federal government's policy by which ICE was able to carry out workplace raids on undocumented individuals has greatly impacted his life.

The Macrosystem

The *macrosystem* is the cultural environment that permeates the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. It is the cultural setting that includes social expectations for individual and group behavior. Macrosystems include tenets of behavior; rules (both spoken and unspoken); morals of a particular time, place, generation, and environment; and attitudes toward

diversity and civil rights. Macrosystem expectations can be universal or pertain to a particular subset of any population. A society's biases and prejudices undergird these expectations. As a result, some values and behaviors are the "norm," while others are considered aberrant.

The adolescent perspective on expectations of the macrosystem is often in flux. They may subscribe to rules, morals, and tenets of behavior that differ somewhat or drastically from parental and societal expectations. Youth ostracize peers who exhibit behaviors and attitudes that differ from some macrosystem norms, but celebrate peers who deviate from other macrosystem norms. Youth may feel a great deal of tension between the expectations and norms of behavior in the family, as compared to the neighborhood or school.

In the example of Rafael, he is influenced by the traditional value that as the eldest male of the family, it is now his role to be the breadwinner. Since his father is no longer present, Rafael must assume the role as the head of the family. He also believes that his family's well-being requires him to fulfill this role. Thus, for Rafael, he is following the rules and values prescribed by his culture. He is doing the right thing by working night shifts. If he does not have time to go home and shower and change clothes before school, or decides to work a double shift to make extra money, he is doing what is culturally expected. Thus, for Rafael, truancy is not an important issue, and neither is wearing dirty clothes to school; the survival of his family is.

Practitioners who understand the effects of macrosystems and the pressure youth may experience from these effects will have a greater appreciation about the adolescent's sense of identity, purpose, and values.

Case Study: Applying Ecological Theory and the M-E Approach

Ecological theory and the M-E approach highlight the multiple systems that influence an individual's relationships and the myriad of opportunities for assessment and intervention beyond a teen's psychological status.

Rafael has accrued 10 absences from school. Lola receives a letter from his school requiring her and Rafael to attend a school meeting to discuss his absences. The school principal invites a bilingual social worker to be present at the meeting. At the meeting, the microsystem of the school and the microsystem of the home finally interface. The school system is finally made aware of the circumstances impacting Rafael and his family. The family is finally made aware that Rafael has missed a lot of school. And, Rafael is made aware that the relevant actors in the school system and the family system are concerned about his absences from school and will be working in concert.

QUESTIONS TOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

1. What microsystems does Rafael inhabit?

2. How do Rafael's activities, roles, and relationships support or undermine development in the other microsystems?

3. What generational issues, critical events, and everyday stresses does Rafael experience?

4. To what other microsystems can the bilingual social worker act as a bridge for Rafael and his family?

5. What insights into Rafael will you miss developing if you don't apply an ecological perspective?

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we discussed the M-E approach to practice with teens. Additionally, we discussed how using a human ecology lens, we can learn much about the ways in which the individual behaves and interacts in the many systems that they are developing within and the systems that are influencing them. In the next chapter, we will discuss adolescent development.