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THE DOMINO EFFECT: IMPACT OF AFRICAN- AMERICAN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT ON SYSTEMS

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THE PROGRAM ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT ALTERNATIVES

The Program on Conflict Management Alternatives was established in January, 1986 by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and additional funds from the University of Michigan. These basic grants were renewed in July, 1988 and again in July, 1991. The Program supports an agenda of research, application, and theory development. PCMA also establishes links among other university research and teaching efforts relevant to conflict management alternatives, and maintains liaison and collaboration with similar efforts in other Universities and Practitioner agencies. The Program staffers own work focuses explicitly on the relationship between social justice and social conflict, specifically: (a) the use of innovative settlement procedures and roles for disputants and third parties; (b) the institutionalization of innovative mechanisms and the adoption of organizational and community structures that permanently alter the way conflicts are managed; and (c) the fundamental differences and inequalities between parties that often create conflict and threaten its stable resolution.

We examine these issues primarily in United States' settings, in conflicts arising within and between families, organizations and communities, and between different racial, gender, and economic constituencies. These specific efforts are supported by a variety of research and action grants/contracts with governmental agencies, foundations, and private and public organizations/agencies.

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THE DOMINO EFFECT: IMPACT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S
EMPOWERMENT ON SYSTEMS

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INTRODUCTION

The empowerment literature has grown dramatically in recent years, and social work has made major contributions. (Gutierrez, 1990; Gutierrez & Lewis, 1990; Lewis & Ford, 1990; Solomon, 1976). Social work practitioners and scholars alike have noted that effective individual empowerment means that clients, or more appropriately, consumers begin to think of themselves as able both to influence outcomes in their own lives and to act on this information to affect change around them. While most definitions of empowerment are tied to changes at the individual level, the concept has also been linked with family, community and societal systems.

"Empowered" families are those able to view themselves as effective socialization and protective agents, which can influence other systems effect members. For example, an empowered family could participate in case conferences relating to one member's problem, with family members redefining or clarifying the extent of the problem and offering potential strategies for problem resolution.

Attneave's work on network therapy provides another example of family empowerment (1969). Effective community empowerment has long been the goal of community organizers and activists. Examples at this level include the organization of the United Farm Workers by Cesar Chavez, the formation of the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party, and the organization of Save Our Son and Daughters (SOSAD) by Clementine Barfield. Furthermore,

the United States system of government can be viewed as a societal empowerment strategy, in which the population as a whole can view itself as a powerful entity worthy of influencing the policy and behaviors of other countries (Weingarten, in press). We are also moving toward a period of international empowerment, illustrated by the recent changes in eastern Europe, the development of the European Common Market in 1992, and the 90-country pact to ban ozone-damaging chemicals within the next decade (New York Times, June, 1990).

The empowerment literature to date contains two major flaws. First, it treats the outcomes as affecting single systems only, and does not acknowledge the impact that change in one system has on the systems adjacent to it. It treats as an afterthought, for example, the impact of maternal poverty on the labor force, and neglects to consider how a change in affirmative action legislation will affect African-American male workers. In addition, despite strong support for and sensitivity to individual ethnic, racial and gender differences, these issues are often not specifically addressed in empowerment programs or research (Levis & Kissman, 1989). While there are a number of articles describing empowering practice with individuals, attention to the unique cultural characteristics of these individuals is not always addressed.

This paper takes the position that interaction among systems always exists and must be anticipated by empowered individuals and by those who may be in positions to facilitate that empowerment process. Using a multi-system

intervention with low-income women as a case example, it outlines the outcomes of empowerment for the individuals, their families, their community, and the city in which the intervention research took place. A special focus is the interaction effects. Lack of specific attention to these "domino effects" leaves the intervention open to sabotage from the other layers of the system. To facilitate the discussion, a model of the process of the domino effect is presented.

THE MODEL

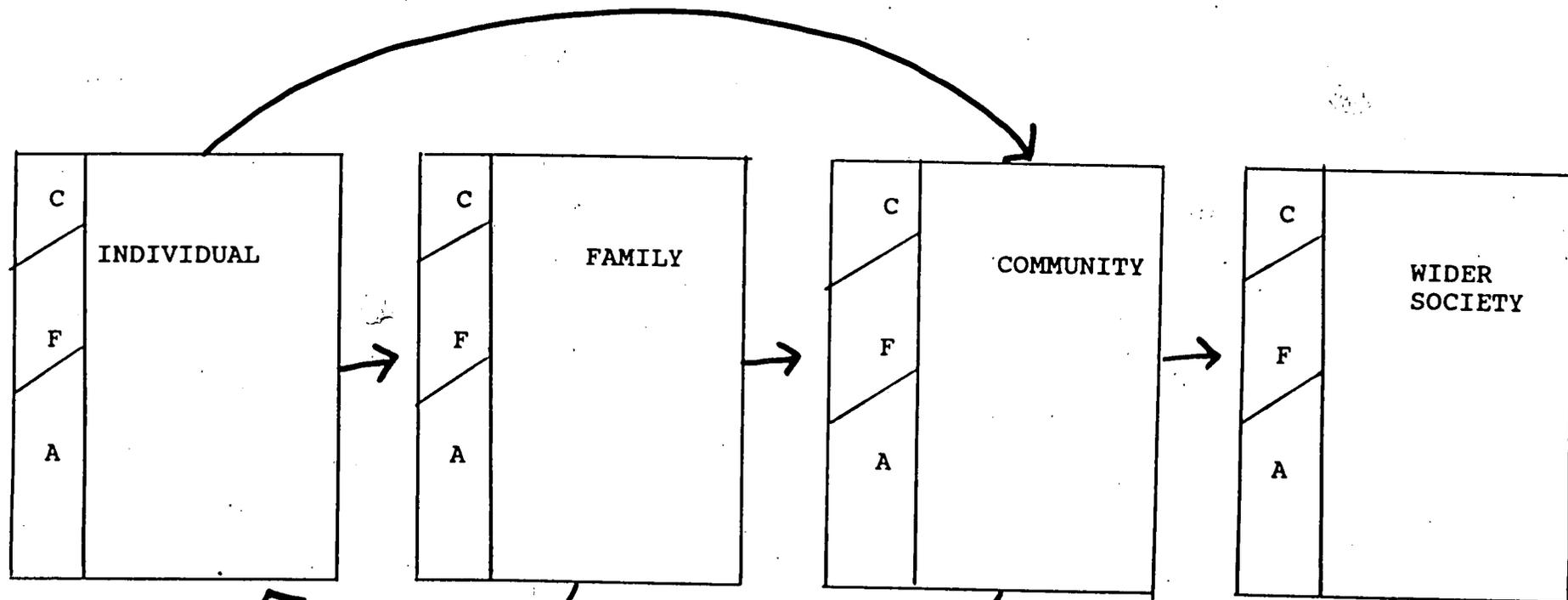
The model forming the base of this paper draws from the social work and family literature, and assumes both the symbolic interactionist and systems perspectives (Lewis, 1988, 1989; Burr et al., 1979). It suggests that individuals may be viewed as systems which are parts of other system (i.e. family, community, society). The most noted model of these interacting systems is described by Billingsley (1968) who includes the family, community of origin, and wider society as systems or layers affecting the particular individual. A symbolic interactionist perspective, complementing this description, suggests that individuals have the ability to process information (or symbols) provided them by the other systems in their lives. They may accept, reject, or modify the symbol set they are exposed to (Burr, et al., 1979), and they may act upon the new or refined definitions.

For the purposes of this study, the model assumes that the empowerment process affects individuals who, in turn,

affect their families, friends, and communities. Radical changes in communities inevitably affect the wider society, as has been the case in recycling laws, for example. At each layer in the system, new information is provided the recipients as a result of their interaction with the empowered person, and that information must be processed by the recipients. In processing the information, the recipient may accept the new information as it is presented, modify it to fit some existing understanding of the symbol, or completely reject it.

The model posits that an interim period occurs between receipt of a new symbol and a system's response to it, during which recipients decide how or whether to use these new symbols. There are three possible subsequent responses to the new symbols: cooptation, flight, and adaptation. The recipient might, first, change the new information to fit some existing understanding of the symbol, or "coopt" it. A second response might be complete rejection of the newly empowered system, or "flight". Finally, acceptance of the new information or symbol as it is presented is designated "adaptation". Figure 1 outlines the process of the domino effect.

FIGURE 1: DOMINO EFFECT MODEL



Key

C = cooptation
F = flight
A = adaptation

WORKING WITH AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND LOW-INCOME WOMEN: A CASE
STUDY AND APPLICATION OF THE MODEL

Procedures

The Network Utilization Project (NUP) was designed as an intervention to assist families of color by building on the traditional strengths of African-American families (Lewis & Ford, 1990; Gutierrez & Lewis, 1990). The primary focus of the intervention was strategically to build subsystems of extended kin, friends, partners, and churches into effective support networks for project participants, enabling them to meet individual, family, and community change goals. NUP was designed to be used in existing programs within or adjacent to participants' homes in such places as community centers or churches.

The project used a group work format and included role-playing, strategic problem-solving and cognitive-behavioral techniques. Participants used a functional analysis of behavior exercise to identify goals, objectives and task analyses of individual target problems. An adapted genogram, called an ethnographic chart, was then completed, listing family, friends, partner, church, and other possible areas of support for the participant. After completing this exercise, group members went through the important process of identifying whether or not a network member should remain in the network developed for dealing with *that particular*

problem. Participants could eliminate network members based on their utility for a particular problem while understanding that they might be of assistance in other areas. At the end of this process, those network members remaining on the chart were asked for their assistance with the target problem.

During the first two weeks of group meetings, the author and a group co-facilitator explained and led exercises using the written instruments described on the participants. Each instrument was read aloud for participants to help offset any difficulties with reading or writing ability. An emphasis on weekly homework assignments rounded out the procedures. Participants chose activities to complete during the week and report it back at the next session. Often, activities that had been practiced during the group meeting would be attempted as homework assignments; for example, daily use of a deep-muscle relaxation procedure.

Access to the participants was gained by the author's work with a community-based recreational center for several months prior to beginning the program. The author provided assistance to the center by working with an art program for toddlers, which allowed her access to mothers picking up or dropping off their children, and allowed community residents to assess the author's willingness to be a part of the community. Potential participants were invited to an informational meeting about the project, and many later stated that their decision to participate was influenced by the author's initial work with their children.

Participants

The case study presented here involved the initial presentation of the NUP model with a group of women living in a low-income housing project in a small midwestern city during 1988 (Lewis & Ford, 1990). Individuals attending the group committed themselves to work for 17 weeks on the systematic identification of problems and solutions, with a focus on developing specific social support networks to assist with the specific solution sets. In all, 10 women participated in the intervention: 8 African-American and 2 Caucasians. They ranged in age from 22 to 64, with half of the participants being less than 32. Seven of the participants were unemployed, two were employed part-time, and one reported being employed full-time but was working with other residents in the community and not otherwise earning a wage. Four of the women were single, 3 were separated, 1 was married and 2 reported themselves to be widowed. Of the 4 never married women, 3 were involved in long-term relationships. Annual household income for all was less than \$10,000, and 3 participants listed incomes of less than \$5,000 per year. This last response is particularly significant when coupled with the women's household compositions. The number of minor children per participant household ranged from 2 to 7, with a mean of 4. These children included 2 informal adoptions. Two other children were born during the course of the

intervention. Nine of the children were between 2 and 6 years, 9 between 6 and 11, 3 between 12 and 16 and 4 between 17 and 19 years.

The initial project design included 8 weeks of work on individual problems followed by 8 weeks focusing on community problems. This strategy was abandoned during the second week of group meetings, however, because some of the group members decided that many of their individual problems were related to their community problems (i.e. drugs on the site, lack of apartment maintenance, and lack of a safe environment for themselves and their children). As a result of this system interaction, both the community and individual interventions took place simultaneously.

Impact of Change on Individual and Family Systems

Individual change began very early in the group process, and with it began the first influences on another system, that of the women's families. The women began to view themselves as a cohesive group within the third week of the intervention, and during the third week, as the author began to orient a last new group member to the process, other group members took charge and began to explain in detail the NUP procedures and to assist the new member in completing her initial problem sheets. From then on, the author served as a group coordinator only; group members took responsibility for group facilitation tasks.

This change in the women as individuals began to influence familial change in a number of ways. For example, one woman who had been living in an abusive situation for several years had her male partner removed from the home, much to the surprise of her relatives and friends who had been trying for years to convince her to do so. The partner's departure may be viewed as a "flight" reaction to the empowerment of the group member. A second woman brought her problems with her caseworker and the child welfare system to the group. Within two weeks, her daughter came to the group and asked members to provide emotional support for the woman over a particularly difficult weekend, an adaptation response in terms of the model. Two new people joined the group because relatives were members.

Not all of the effects of individual change on family systems were positive. An alcoholic partner of one of the group members began to drink more heavily and escalated his abusive behaviors after the member began attending the group until she was forced to have him removed from the home. His behavior may be viewed as an example of cooptation, in which the partner attempted to respond with existing behaviors to the woman's empowerment.

Community Change

As the group began to be viewed by the remainder of the community as a cohesive unit and one that would represent

their concerns, other major changes occurred. Of most interest were changes in practitioners who had been working with the community for some time. These took place in two stages.

One of the most frequently voiced concerns of group members was their perception that the community center director, a social worker, would not interact with them as human beings able to think and plan for themselves. As related by the group, with all members present, this had been a problem for several years. Of the small number of staff, only the director had a poor working relationship with the residents. The director had been overheard disparaging the intellectual ability of those living in the community, planned projects in which the residents had no interest, misused agency funds, and was condescending in public forums.

An interesting example of the director's behavior involved the author and another group participant. The group member had her child removed from her home due to sexual abuse by another household member. In trying to identify ways to get her child returned to the home, the participant brought these concerns to the group. The group went through the procedures of identifying the tasks related to the problem solution and made the observation that the director, who had supposedly been working with this woman for 3 years, had done nothing to assist her in meeting her goal of having the child returned to the home. The director had, in fact, suggested to the court that the woman was not high-functioning enough to

understand the needs of her child. The director refused to help the woman understand the court procedures, found a personal friend who had never practiced law to handle the woman's case, and had not helped the woman develop an appeal to the Department of Social Services. Her assistance had been terminated due to the removal of the child so that the woman had been without income for the two months before the group began meeting. Perhaps one of the most revealing actions of the director was to pick up the woman for her court hearing, take her downtown and then leave her at the courthouse to find her own way home - without bus fare - on a winter day.

The group's reaction to this behavior was to suggest that the director, who had described herself as the woman's only friend, was in actuality not a friend and that the woman might be better off without the director's assistance. Group members then offered to assist her in filing appeal documents with the Department of Social Services, and in finding an attorney who would represent her interests and help clear her of any charges of participation in the alleged abuse of her child. They also offered to provide emotional and physical support to her through visits, food, and clothing while her appeal was being heard. The group member agreed and within two weeks no longer manifested the outward depressive behaviors that had marked her interactions upon entering the group. In addition, she began to speak assertively about her plans for the future.

Within 24 hours of this group meeting, however, the author, in her capacity as intervention director and group facilitator, received a telephone call from the community center director. The director began the conversation by noting how pleased she was that the group had begun and congratulating the author on the work to date: "I'm so excited that you're doing this group." The director next commented that there was an "information leak" in the group and that members were talking about one another's problems to others outside the group. The author knew that the group had guarded its confidentiality so closely that this was not a possibility, (Lewis and Ford, 1990). The director suggested that the author persuade this group member to stop talking about her problems in the group and "encourage" her to be "happy" in her situation. The author, struck by the absurdity of "encouraging" someone to be happy when she recently had her last child removed from the home and had had no income for two months, refused on the grounds that the group worked on whatever problems women brought to it. When informed that the author did not formulate the group members' problems for them, the director asked, "Won't you even try to shift her?"

The above is an example of attempted cooptation, in which the director had a clear picture of the way things in the organization were supposed to be done and of who was in charge of making decisions for the "clientele." The director's attempt to mold the new information to fit the preexisting

behavioral options was a typical response and one that was anticipated by the group members in the next example.

As the group continued, it became apparent that NUP participants believed that the director of the community center was a primary threat to their continued ability to plan and operate programs based on their perceived community needs. They began to organize an effort to confront the director and hold her accountable for her public behavior with respect to community center programming and funding. The initial plans for this confrontation were made in the group; however, members began to think of themselves as leaders in a community movement and used portions of the group time to plan strategy, which was then explained to other community members at tenants' meetings. Group members established Tenant's Council to develop a mechanism for working on community problems.

During the course of the group, members role-played the behaviors of the director, other staff members and themselves. It is notable that the behaviors they anticipated from the director were the exact ones she demonstrated when confronted. The members also anticipated that their needs would not be met unless influential individuals outside of the community center staff and tenants' organization could hear their grievances. Thus, they strategically invited members of the city council and city services staff to a meeting of the community center staff and tenants.

The meeting was well attended. As it was an election year, not only elected officials but candidates for office

were in attendance. The community leaders began the meeting by outlining procedures that allowed concerns to be pinpointed and called for a specific response from each of the parties in question. They raised maintenance requests first and heard from city services officials to their satisfaction. They then raised questions about the programming and funding of the community center. When called upon to respond, the director attempted to avoid talking in front of the officials by stating, "Well, I didn't know I was going to have to talk at this meeting. And I guess I didn't know you (the community) were so upset." These statements were made in the most condescending tones, as if the director were talking to a group of two-year-old children.

The community leaders were prepared for this eventuality, however, and pinpointed several issues to which the director could respond without additional preparation. Until this point, the director had been going in and out of the meeting to answer the telephone. She attempted to leave the room again, and was presented with a copy of a petition (also given to city council officials) signed by all of the tenants on the site. The petition specified several instances of funding abuse, breaches of client confidentiality, and misuse of the center facilities by the director. It further stated that the tenants had been boycotting the limited center services that had been available and wished to have the center staff summarily dismissed. They also listed an alternative structure for services which were to be provided by new center

staff members and included services that the tenants actually wanted at the center.

Within the two weeks following this meeting, the behavior of the center director predictably exemplified the second alternative in confronting an empowered system, that of flight. The director called in the group participant with the child welfare case cited earlier and remarked to her, "You made me lose my job." The director later called in the same woman on the pretense of showing her some pictures and then attempted to have her register for some classes that no one in the community wanted to take. Finally, the director made it known that she had decided to take a new job at another agency and had been contemplating this decision for a year; thus she would no longer be interested in the center's directorship after the end of the fiscal year. The timing of this announcement, however, coincided with the end of the funding period for the center and with a notice from the city that funding for the center under its current structure would not be renewed.

The success of this concerted effort was celebrated by tenants and group participants for several weeks. There was a new energy level in the community as people prepared to identify and work to resolve new problems in the community. The tenant's organization became more visible and vocal in the concerns of the city as a whole. The community center, in addition, began to be staffed by individuals the community

tenants considered understanding of community needs and capable of providing culturally-sensitive programming.

The new staff initially began with gestures of "adaptation." They consulted the tenants' organization when attempting something new on the site, held regular meetings in which they informed the community about their programming, and had parents participate in staffing the center activities. Everyone involved helped to foster an atmosphere of collaboration in all activities related to the center.

Before the end of the first fiscal year, however, something unanticipated began to occur. Center staff members began to look outside of the community, to other center staffs for assistance in designing programs and identifying funding sources. As this happened, they also began spending less time in the center and more in other parts of the community. When beginning new programs, the center staff began to inform the community members of what would be offered rather than working jointly with them to develop new programs. Community residents were particularly offended when one of the staff members, a former resident, made what were taken as pronouncements about how the center would be operated. A conflict between center staff members and community residents developed.

From the staff members' point of view, finding ways to fund the programs was a continuous struggle, one that the residents did not appreciate. Also at stake was what the staff considered to be their professional training, which made

them more "expert" than community members thought in what the community needed. The professional staff believed that the community residents should trust that they would work in the community's best interests and let them work uninterrupted. They continued to view themselves as having demonstrated "adaptive" responses to the new community situation.

From the residents' point of view, however, the ability to speak for themselves had been a continuous struggle, and they were not about to transfer that right to anyone else. Their self-determination was fueled by new knowledge that other tenants' organizations around the country were operating clothes and food exchanges, recreation programs and self-help groups. This was new information in that the first individuals from the city ever to attend a national grass-roots leadership conference did so during the period of this intervention group. The empowerment of the individuals and community could not be easily reversed. There could be no return to the status quo; in other words, no further "cooptation" would be allowed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Social workers are often taught to operate within a model emphasizing the problems faced by individuals and families rather than their strengths. At the same time, however, practitioners are admonished to foster the "client's self-determination." The individual, group and community

intervention described in this paper illustrates some of the tensions involved in using an expert role to foster the articulated needs of a group of individuals.

As has been noted in this paper, one can very easily relegate service consumers to lower developmental levels than the practitioner. This tendency is reinforced by other "experts" and allows practitioners to think of themselves as being at one end of a continuum which places "clients," unable to think for themselves, at the other end. Practitioners who are socialized effectively to this continuum are likely to respond to consumer empowerment with cooptation. If efforts to coopt the situation with a false view of reality are not successful, the flight response still allows practitioners to hold their erroneous views of reality. This results in a self-fulfilling prophesy. Those who are viewed as disempowered will over time become unable to think or act in their own behalf. This in turn, allows practitioners to become agents of disempowerment and social control.

It is also necessary to think of the ways in which an agency's activities can be disempowering. When programmatic planning is taking place, who is involved in the process? In the case study presented here, the concern for funding and legitimacy moved the center from its concern for others to concern for its own perpetuation. In this way, the agency of organizational disempowerment process mirrors that of the individual practitioner. The outgrowth of this may be an

organization that exists only for its own purposes, no matter how it might argue to the contrary.

Change agents must reflect on and anticipate the disempowering behaviors of either individual practitioners or agencies. In the case study, the tenants were able effectively to meet their goals of center staff change by anticipating the behavior of the center director and having alternatives available. A later problem developed, however, because the group had not anticipated the possibility of cooptation on the part of the new center staff, nor had the center staff seen that their adaptation behaviors would have to be sustained over time. Certainly it is a basic principle of social skills training that rehearsal and feedback enhance one's ability to demonstrate a range of behavior when necessary. Constant reflection on possible consequences of that course of action is a necessary skill for practitioners engaged in empowerment work.

In summary, it is important that both practitioners and those who are working to maintain gains achieved as a result of empowerment acknowledge the domino effect, as well as the potential for cooptation, flight and/or adaptation that their work might bring about. The extent to which players can anticipate the changes may well reflect the longevity of the empowerment itself.

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