Book Review of
*Crisis and Trauma: Developmental-Ecological Intervention*

Douglas Guiffrida and Kathryn Z. Douthit


Mental health assessment and intervention are increasingly informed by broadly based biopsychosocial theory. The counseling profession, in particular, has taken a leading role in moving mental health practice and theory beyond the realm of intrapsychic phenomena to a vision that encompasses clients’ relationships to their rich and complex sociocultural context. The benefits of this holistic conceptualization of psychological functioning include (a) assessment techniques that more accurately capture sources of client distress, (b) expanded intervention options that address injurious contextual conditions, and (c) challenges to psychopathology models that assume that psychological distress is a reflection of individual mental “illness.” Thus, biopsychosocial theory contributes to more effective practice while honoring client dignity and diversity.

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory of human ecology, also called ecological theory, has emerged as one of the preeminent theoretical frames used to conceptualize multidimensional development. Ecological theory broadly conceives of psychological development as the interplay of the biological self with an array of nested interacting environmental systems ranging from family to community, school, church, and other proximal systems to larger social, cultural, political, and historical structures. Bronfenbrenner’s work thus provides a rationale for a broad range of interventions that consider individual social, emotional, and cognitive development in a wide range of interrelated systemic contexts. It is upon this ecological canvas that the Collins and Collins’s text paints a comprehensive, multisystemic approach to crisis intervention.

The critical and multisystemic nature of crisis intervention is made immediately apparent to readers in the beginning of the book with the presentation of gripping newspaper headlines from several recent, horrific world tragedies, including the massacre at Columbine High School and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The introduction is followed by a thoughtful, critical review of crisis intervention literature, which provides readers with a solid understanding regarding the need for a framework that is more comprehensive and holistic than current intrapsychic models. Next, the authors introduce the Affective Responses, Behavioral Responses, Cognitive Responses, Developmental Assessment, and Ecological Assessment (ABCD/E) model of crisis assessment and intervention. This perspective augments traditional approaches to crisis intervention with a more holistic approach that recognizes the interplay between emotional, behavioral, and cognitive developmental factors within a multisystemic context. Explicit in the model is the need to understand clients’ cultural backgrounds as well as to recognize their unique personal, social, and material resources.

In chapters 2 through 4, the authors present an overview of the ways in which the ABCDE model can be used to assist counselors in conducting thorough crisis assessments and interventions with clients. To illustrate their rationale for the developmental-ecological approach, the authors present salient theories of human development, including the work of Erikson, Piaget, and Bronfenbrenner. After clearly articulating the need to combine developmental theory with ecological/systems thinking, the authors provide a list of suggested responses that assist crisis counselors in assessing the various dimensions of client crises and planning their intervention strategies using the developmental-ecological approach. Critical differences between assessing and intervening immediately following a crisis and helping clients with longer, ongoing crisis management are highlighted. Written at a level appropriate for graduate students and seasoned practitioners, these sections also emphasize the complexities involved in assessing and intervening in client crises.

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Chapter 5 begins with several real-world examples of clients who present as potentially harmful to themselves or others. Next, the authors present general descriptions of several of the more common diagnoses related to suicidal/homicidal behaviors, while, at the same time, cautioning neophytes about the dangers of relying too heavily on diagnosis in one’s assessment. The authors then list and methodically deconstruct several of the most common myths about suicide, including the false assumption that people talk about suicide only to “get attention” and the fear that asking clients about suicide will “give them the idea.” After dispelling these common misconceptions, a comprehensive approach for assessing suicidal and homicidal behaviors is presented along with recommended guidelines for preventing such events from occurring. The section concludes with a powerful case example of a crisis hotline worker assessing and intervening with a potentially suicidal client.

Chapter 6 begins the second section of the book, in which information about specific types of crises are identified and described in detail. One main strength of the book is the comprehensive list of crises that are covered, including distinct chapters on sexual assault (chapter 6); domestic violence (chapter 7); substance abuse (chapter 8); health crises (chapter 9); crises of death (chapter 10); child abuse and neglect (chapter 11); school crises (chapter 12); and disasters, including natural disasters, accidental disasters (e.g., radioactive contamination), and acts of terrorism (chapter 13). Although the text is somewhat longer than competing introductory crisis counseling texts, the additional coverage allows readers to gain a detailed understanding of each of these important types of crises. For example, whereas other texts tend to condense sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse into one section, Collins and Collins have devoted separate chapters to each of these distinct and, unfortunately, too common types of domestic crises.

Each chapter, although somewhat unique in addressing the complexities of particular categories of crisis, follows a similar format, beginning with a definition and overview of the specific type of crisis followed by a brief section in which myths about each crisis are explained and dispelled. Each chapter also provides comprehensive suggestions for a developmental-ecological assessment and treatment of clients, including understanding how the developmental and systemic needs of each client may affect his or her adjustment to such events. The chapters all conclude with poignant case examples that vividly illustrate how counselors can effectively deal with such complex, yet common, crisis scenarios.

Another strength of the book rests in the fact that each chapter is written or cowritten by practitioners who are seasoned experts in that particular aspect of crisis counseling. As counselor educators who teach crisis counseling, we have learned how important it is for students to hear from practitioners with expertise in the field. We have also learned that theories, although providing a critical foundation to students’ learning of crisis counseling, must be supplemented with practical information, suggestions, and realistic case examples. By incorporating the expertise of practitioners into the sections devoted to unique types of crises, Collins and Collins offer counselor educators and their students a healthy balance of theoretical underpinnings wedded with practical, real-world expertise.

Although no introductory course or text can fully prepare students and practitioners for assisting clients in dealing with the diverse crises they will encounter in contemporary society, this book expands the scope of more traditional crisis counseling texts by elucidating the profound impact that interacting systems variables have on crisis client outcomes. Likewise, there is no single theory of human development that can fully prepare counselors for the range of insight and clinical skills necessary to address the broad spectrum of crisis assessment and intervention questions. Although human ecology theory lends an expanded, comprehensive vision to crisis counseling, as is often the case with ecological theory, translating the theoretical foundations into practical applications presents a considerable challenge. The authors of this ambitious text have made great strides toward helping counselors conceptualize their clients-in-relation and have paved the way for more theoretically refined models of systemic assessment and intervention.

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