

Diagramming of Intersecting Processes (a teaching activity under development)

Peter Taylor, Draft 8 Feb 2004; revised 17 April 2005 and adapted for 2010 class 19 Feb 2010.

Acknowledgement: This unit draws inspiration and some ideas from Matthew Puma's adaptation of my teaching about intersecting processes in CrCrTh 640 (<http://www.faculty.umb.edu/pjt/640-02.html>) during Spring 2002.

Goals for students

1. to understand the development of scientific and social phenomena in terms of linkages among processes of different kinds and scales that build up over time—science, policies, places, government agencies, economics, wider cultural shifts,
2. to use graphic organizers to help them visualize such “intersecting processes” and to identify places where detail is missing and where further inquiry is needed.
3. [depending on level of students and prior preparation] to contrast the implications of thinking in terms of direct causation (like spokes going to a hub) with “heterogeneous construction,” my term for the following ideas:
 - “a) Without any superintending constructor or outcome-directed agent,
 - b) many heterogeneous components are linked together, which implies that
 - c) the outcome has multiple contributing causes, and thus
 - d) there are multiple points of intervention or engagement that could modify the course of development. In short,
 - e) causality and agency are distributed, not localized. Moreover,
 - f) construction is a process, that is, the components are linked over time,
 - g) building on what has already been constructed, so that
 - h) it is not the components, but the components in linkage that constitute the causes. Points c) and f–h) together ensure that
 - i) it is difficult to partition relative importance or responsibility for an outcome among the different types of cause (e.g., 80% genetic vs. 20% environmental). Generally,
 - j) there are alternative routes to the same end, and
 - k) construction is “polypotent,” that is, things involved in one construction process are implicated in many others. Engaging in a construction process, even in very focused interventions, will have side effects. Finally, points f) and k) mean that
 - l) construction never stops; completed outcomes are less end points than snapshots taken of ongoing, intersecting processes” (Taylor 2001).

Instructions

a) Read excerpt [below] from Taylor (2001) on the development of severe depression in a sample of working class women. Your intersecting processes diagram will be made up of very different things and processes, but the excerpt and diagram conveys the idea of intersecting processes.

b) for your chosen chapter of Dickson:

1. List the kinds of things mentioned and classify them into categories or strands.
2. Identify important connections mentioned in the chapter between things in those categories or strands.
3. Arrange the things as well as you can given the information available on parallel strands according to year (from 1940s to 1980s).
4. Draw dotted lines to show connections between things.
5. Identify connections about which you want to know more. Use the ideas under goal 3 as a checklist.
6. Note where these instructions were hard to put into practice.

Excerpt from Taylor, P. J. (2001). Distributed agency within intersecting ecological, social, and scientific processes. Cycles of Contingency: Developmental Systems and Evolution. S. Oyama, P. Griffiths and R. Gray. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press: 313-332

Case I. The development of severe depression in a sample of working class women

A body of research initiated by the British sociologists Brown and Harris in the 1960s, has interpreted the social origins of mental illnesses in a way that undercuts the persistent dichotomization of genes vs. environment. This "life events and difficulties" research, which is not well known in the United States, allows one to conclude that apportioning behavior to genes or environment is, at least for those seeking to reduce the incidence of mental illness, at best, not very informative or helpful. To see how this follows, let me sketch their explanation of acute depression in working-class women in London (Brown & Harris 1978, 1989). I will also work in the extensions of their findings and generalized narrative contributed by Bowlby, a psychologist who focused on the long term effects of different patterns of attachment of infants and young children to their mothers (Bowlby 1988). Four factors are identified by Brown and Harris as statistically more common in women with severe depression: a severe, adverse event in the year prior to the onset of depression; the lack of a supportive partner; persistently difficult living conditions; and the loss of, or prolonged separation from, the mother when the woman was a child (under the age of eleven). Bowlby interprets this last factor in terms of his and others' observations of secure versus anxious attachment of young children

to caregivers. In a situation of secure attachment the caregiver, usually the mother, is, in the child's early years, "readily available, sensitive to her child's signals, and lovingly responsive when [the child] seeks protection and/or comfort and/or assistance" (Bowlby 1988, p. 167). The child more boldly explores the world, confident that support when needed will be available from others. Anxious attachment, on the other hand, corresponds to inconsistency in, or lack of, supportive responses. The child is anxious in its explorations of the world, which can, in turn, evoke erratic responses from caregivers, and the subsequent attempt by the child to get by without the support of others.

The top three strands of figure 1 [on next page] (class, family, psychology) combine the observations above to explain the onset of serious depression. The factors are not separate contributing causes, like spokes on a wheel, but take their place in the multistranded life course of the individual. Each line should be interpreted as one contributing causal link in the construction of the behavior. The lines are dashed, however, to moderate any determinism implied in presenting a smoothed out or averaged schema; the links, while common, do not apply to all women at all times, and are contingent on background conditions not shown in the diagram. For example, in a society in which women are expected to be the primary caregivers for children (a background condition), the loss of a mother increases the chances of, or is linked to, the child's lacking consistent, reliable support for at least some period. Given the dominance of men over women and the social ideal of a heterosexual nuclear family, an adolescent girl in a disrupted family or custodial institution would be likely to see a marriage or partnership with a man as a positive alternative, even though early marriages tend to break up more easily. In a society of restricted class mobility, working-class origins tend to lead to working-class adulthood, in which living conditions are more difficult, especially if a woman has children to look after and provide for on her own. In many such ways these family, class, and psychological strands of the woman's life build on each other. Let us also note that, as an unavoidable side effect, the pathways to an individual's depression intersect with and influence other phenomena, such as the state's changing role in providing welfare and custodial institutions, and these other phenomena continue even after the end point, namely, depression, has been arrived at.

