



Systems of care, featherless bipeds, and the measure of all things

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ABSTRACT

For more than 20 years, the system of care philosophy has comprised a central strategy of service reform in children's mental health at the federal, state, tribal, and local levels. System of care terminology has become widely used in many different service sectors but often without a shared understanding of what a system of care is. This manuscript, the feature article for this special issue of *Evaluation and Program Planning*, briefly traces the history of the system of care movement, discusses the more widely used definitions in the field of children's mental health, and offers an expanded version of the definition that takes into account the complex nature of systems of care. This manuscript was the product of a process used by the *Case Studies of System Implementation* research team to identify established system of care communities for inclusion in the research study. The purpose of this manuscript is to describe the process the research team engaged in while developing the revised definition and to open a public dialogue about how to characterize the essential properties of a system of care.

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1. Introduction

Plato's definition of human as animal, biped and featherless was celebrated in ancient Greece. As the story goes, Diogenes of Sinope demonstrated his dissent by plucking a fowl and bringing it into the lecture room with the words, "Here is Plato's human being." (Laertius, 1979). The dialogue of ancient Greek philosophers regarding the essential properties of human beings and other featherless bipeds provides useful, if humorous, impetus for exploring the definition of systems of care, our understanding of the essential properties of this concept, and its impact on the field of children's mental health.

The system of care concept was initially defined by Stroul and Friedman in 1986¹ in response to the crisis of inadequate and fragmented services for children with serious emotional disturbance. For more than 20 years, the system of care philosophy has

comprised a central strategy of service reform in children's mental health at the federal, state, tribal, and local levels. The impact of the system of care concept is evidenced by the use of this term as a referent in the Surgeon General's report on children's mental health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999) and the report of The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2003). It has been used to frame federal and state legislation (Comprehensive Services Act, 1992; Public Law 102-321, 1992; The California AB 377 Evaluation Project, 1988; Vermont Act 264, 1988) through funding and regulatory mechanisms that enable providers to work with families in a more collaborative, culturally sensitive manner. It is present in court rulings mandating services for children and youth with serious emotional disturbance (Felix v. Cayetano Consent Decree, 1993; Katie A. v. Bonta, 2002; Rosie D. v. Romney, 2006).

Although it originated in the field of children's mental health, the term 'system of care' is now in use across the United States as a common referent for other public child-serving sectors such as education (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), child welfare (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Administration for Children and Families, 2003), and juvenile justice (Skowrya & Coccozza, 2006). Given the time and distance this concept has traveled since its inception, we should consider whether there exists a common and

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¹ "A comprehensive spectrum of mental health and other necessary services which are organized into a coordinated network to meet the multiple and changing needs of severely emotionally disturbed children and adolescents." (Stroul and Friedman, 1986).

shared understanding of systems of care. We might also consider whether the definition for systems of care, like Plato's definition of human, should be expanded to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this concept in its current use and application.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process that our research team used for defining systems of care and to open a public dialogue about how to characterize the essential properties of this concept. An expanded definition of systems of care was developed by the authors as part of a national investigation of system of care implementation funded through the [Research and Training Center for Children's Mental Health \(2004\)](#). This paper reviews the existing definitions for systems of care and presents an expanded definition that attempts to capture the complexity and dynamics of ongoing system development. The authors analyze the components of their definition for the purpose of articulating a logic regarding the essential properties of the system of care concept. The authors believe that clarity around the definition will increase fidelity of system of care implementation across diverse and evolving community contexts. Readers should note that the process and results described in this paper reflect the point in time at which this research study was initiated and aspects of the definition may have since evolved.

The immediate question raised by such an undertaking is, "What use is a definition, much less a redefinition?" Practically, defining a concept facilitates the efficient communication of a set of information. Definitions provide a basis for common understanding of phenomena. For systems of care, clarity about the concept of systems of care facilitates our understanding of the purpose and goals of such a system reform as well as our evaluation of its impact ([Rosenblatt, 1998](#)). As a scientific enterprise, defining a concept also opens it to logical, empirical, and experiential challenges. These challenges may serve as catalysts for re-examination and revision of the content and scope of a concept, as well as its lawful relations with other concepts. This has practical implications for service providers and families to the extent that new definitions of concepts are translated into structures, decision rules, and new concepts that are translated into novel action.

There are a number of reasons that this is an appropriate juncture to examine the definition of systems of care. The concept has been redefined since 1986, and multiple versions are currently in use. The initial concept of systems of care was redefined in an updated monograph by Stroul and Friedman ([Stroul & Friedman, 1994](#)). The Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS) has subsequently articulated a definition for systems of care that includes processes for family and youth involvement as well as cultural competence.² Second, the term "systems of care" is sometimes used without specific reference to its definition, such as in the report of [The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health \(2003\)](#) and the [No Child Left Behind Act \(2001\)](#), implying shared understanding of its meaning. System of care implementation has been funded in 144 communities nationwide through the federal Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families program ([Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2008](#)), making this term part of the lexicon of a broad range of public agencies and community-based organizations that may not know either its history or the issues surrounding the development of the concept.

Although the concept has been further operationalized by [Pires \(2002\)](#) and [Stroul and Blau \(2008\)](#), such common usage across multiple settings assumes a shared meaning of this term that may or may not be widely held. Finally, recent advances in the scientific understanding of complexity and systems development ([Holland, 1995](#); [Plsek, 2003](#)) as well as rapidly shifting demographic, political, and funding landscapes indicate that this is an opportune time to examine the definition of systems of care in the current context.

2. Review of definitions currently in use

The system of care concept was conceived as an organizational philosophy that involves collaboration across agencies, families, and youth for the purpose of improving access to an expanded array of coordinated community-based services and supports for children with serious emotional disturbance (SED) and their families ([Stroul, 1993](#); [Stroul & Friedman, 1986](#)). Historically, this concept emerged from the work of [Knitzer \(1982\)](#) in her seminal book, *Unclaimed Children*. In response to *Unclaimed Children*, the Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP) of the [National Institute of Mental Health \(1983\)](#) undertook the development and description of the system of care model, and this effort resulted in the widely read monograph, *A System of Care for Severely Emotionally Disturbed Children and Youth* ([Stroul & Friedman, 1986](#)). These early efforts to conceptualize systems of care shared a focus on the need to create systemic change in child-serving organizations in order to expand and improve service delivery ([Hernandez & Hodges, 2003](#); [Lourie, Katz-Leavy, De Carolis, & Quinlan, 1996](#)). Both Knitzer and Stroul and Friedman placed an emphasis on issues related to the organization and delivery of community-based services that relied on interagency collaboration in order to provide community-based care in less restrictive settings. Early definitions of systems of care focused on organizational change and the reduction of "bureaucratic turf and other organizational barriers" as a central concept ([Lourie et al., 1996](#), p. 105).

The term "system of care" appears, at first glance, to have a common and accepted meaning. A closer look at the definition and its uses indicates that the definition has changed over time, both in its explicit definition and its use in policy documents. The definition of systems of care was first expanded in a follow-up monograph by [Stroul and Friedman \(1994\)](#). In this monograph, the originators introduced person- and family-first language in the core definition and added cultural competence to the Core Values that describe the operational philosophies of a system of care ([Stroul & Friedman, 1994](#), p. xii). This revised definition has been widely adopted and was cited in the Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999](#)). In more recent documents widely distributed by CMHS, authors have paraphrased and re-worded the original definition. These new definitions ([Pires, 2002](#), p. 4; [Stroul, 2002](#), p. 3)³ are cited as the 1986 Stroul and Friedman definition, but do not include reference to serious emotional disturbance. These occurrences indicate that there has been some 'drift' from the original definition of a system of care. Definition drift and variation can create challenges to a field's shared meaning of the concept.

Even more fundamental changes to the definition were incorporated into the official definition of systems of care used by CMHS, the agency that administers the funding and oversight for the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families program ([Center for Mental Health](#)

² "A system of care is a coordinated network of community-based services and supports that is organized to meet the challenges of children and youth with serious mental health needs and their families. Families and youth work in partnership with public and private organizations so services and supports are effective, build on the strengths of individuals, and address each person's cultural and linguistic needs. A system of care helps children, youth, and families function better at home, in school, in the community, and throughout life" ([Center for Mental Health Services, 2006](#)).

³ "A comprehensive spectrum of mental health and other necessary services which are organized into a coordinated network to meet the multiple and changing needs of children and their families."

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