BACKGROUND

In the previous chapter we noted that when we think in terms of human ecology we are trying to encompass the totality of relations between people and their environments, internal and external. Our central theme throughout this chapter will be that ecosystem realities continue as part of the interaction between the individuals involved in sustaining and using a therapeutic relationship. The therapist and the client form a new, somewhat unique ecosystem as the basis for having a constructive therapeutic exchange. Nevertheless, their new relationship will exist in and embody the context of their own ethnic ecosystems and the relationship between those systems. For that reason we begin this chapter by sketching out the general nature of our involvement in sustaining and using relationships in our lives quite independently of the therapeutic context.

The Individual as a Psychologically Autonomous Unit in the Ecosystem

Each of us possesses at least some capability of changing our relationship to our ecosystem or changing that ecosystem. We may change that relationship by changing our understanding of it, that is, by changing our internal reality. We may also change it by changing our pattern of interaction with it, that is, by changing the reality of our self-world relationships. We may also change our external reality itself. We may
change that ecosystem by modifying it physically, as when we remodel our home or move the furniture around in a room. We may also change it by influencing people in it. We may inform someone that we wish to be treated differently or to have a different relationship with that person. To the extent that we are persuasive and they change their way of relating to us we have changed our ecosystem. These possibilities and realities of changing the internal and external characteristics of our ecosystems are relevant during ongoing relationships as well as in the forming and dissolving of relationships. Nevertheless, we are more likely to be inattentive to them while we are in a relationship. In other words, we tend to assume that once a relationship is formed it stays formed in some unchanging fashion. We do not think of it as constantly being strengthened, weakened, or just modified. Yet it is.

The Individual Interacting with Self and Others

As we live our lives, we continue to affirm or change our selves and our reality by the ways in which we interpret self-mediated events in our lives. We also reinterpret and restructure our internal interpreting and mediating structures and processes. At the same time we are reinterpreting and restructuring ourselves as a function of our interactions with others. We acknowledge our psychosocial nature by continuing to sort out which parts of it are psychological (coming from us uniquely) and which parts are social (coming of necessity from the nature of our external world and our interactions with it).

Convergence

Convergence is an interactive process even when it occurs within an individual. Each of us has a history of experiences involving relationships with others. Further, each of us has expectations and standards concerning our own way of thinking about, guiding, and judging our feelings and conduct in a relationship. Consequently, during a relationship each of us can and does assess our contribution to that relationship and its meaning to us. That is an internal process whose nature stems from our past history with ourselves and others.

In a dyadic relationship we also monitor ourselves, the other participant, and the relationship in terms of what we see as the perspective and contribution of the other participant. For example, in the preceding chapter we mentioned Elli, a young woman who went on food binges. She learned from a friend during her freshman year in college to induce vomiting after an eating binge to control her weight. That behavior