

A Big Picture of Small Systems

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Throughout his life, Andrew (Andy) Bridge was influenced by many things around him. There was a socially constructed view of who Andy should be as a small boy living in Los Angeles, but the events happening around him that influenced who he became sometimes contradicted what society said. As a young boy, Grandma Kate was Andy's biggest influence. She taught him to be a good, respectful boy. However, when Andy's mom, Hope, called to claim custody of him, there was a bifurcation point created in Andy's life and a huge butterfly effect was set into motion. Life with Hope was dramatically different. Hope's career and mental state determined how Andy was taken care of. After Hope proved to have a negative effect on Andy and was deemed incapable of taking care of him, Andy was taken by the state and put into custody of the Leonard's. Mr. and Mrs. Leonard were Andy's new parents, but there was always hope that his real mother would come back for him. A mesosystem was created between Mr. and Mrs. Leonard and Hope that effected Andy's life in a big way. Being in foster care also changed how Andy self-organized; Andy knew what "normal" was, and he knew he was not that. There were many influences on Andy's life, but to an extent, he was in control of who he became.

In his early life, Andy was raised solely by Grandma Kate. Grandma Kate raised Andy to be a gentleman; she taught him to be respectful, proper, responsible, and a good Christian. This made Grandma Kate a part of Andy's microsystem. A microsystem consists of "the activities and interactions that occur in the person's immediate surroundings" (Korsmo, 2012). The way Grandma Kate decided to raise Andy directly influenced who he grew up to be and what his values were. Because Grandma Kate raised Andy with these values in mind, Andy grew up embracing these traits in himself and other people. Hope was also part of Andy's microsystem.

Once Andy went to live with Hope, she taught him many things. On top of the values Grandma Kate instilled in Andy, he learned to be strong and courageous. Later in his life, those traits helped Andy stand up for himself and for the people he cared about. Hope also taught Andy that what is right is not always what is easy. This helped carry Andy through the following years in the foster care system. As Andy's foster mother, Mrs. Leonard was also part of Andy's microsystem. Above all else, Mrs. Leonard taught Andy obedience and the value of hard work. This gave Andy a sense of determination.

During dinner one evening, Grandma Kate got a telephone call from her daughter Hope. Hope was calling to claim custody of Andy, but Kate did not want to give him up because she did not think that life with Hope would not be healthy. After putting up a fight though, Kate reluctantly agreed to put Andy on a plane to Los Angeles to live with Hope (Bridge, 2008). This created a big bifurcation point in Andy's life. Bifurcation is "a scientific way to say something splits into two or braches off" (Korsmo, 2012). When Andy went to live with Hope, his life branched off and became something completely different than what it would have been had he stayed with Grandma Kate. There were a few points when Hope's parenting was clearly lacking, and Andy noticed. Living with Grandma Kate, Andy had a structured life. With Hope, though, the predictability and the safeness that came along with that were gone. Andy was often woken up by Hope, whether it was a loud fight or an invitation to go breaking and entering in the middle of the night (Bridge, 2008). Andy knew this was not something that would happen with Grandma Kate and that moving in with Hope changed his life dramatically.

The move to Los Angeles also created a butterfly effect that went through Andy's life. When Andy went to live with his mom, he quickly learned that Hope was not quite ready to be a responsible mother, and that he would need to learn to take care of himself. Andy watched his mother's decisions without comment, even though they were affecting his life. Hope's boyfriend Louis was one decision Hope had made that Andy could not take anymore. One night, Andy stood up to Louis. There was a big fight, but in the end, Louis left (Bridge, 2008). This taught Andy strength and courage. With his newfound courage, Andy was able to stand up for himself and for Hope. This helped Andy make decisions about what is wrong and right, and Andy then understood that one day him and Hope would have to be separated again. When the day came, with all of the previous events having happened, Andy knew that as much as he wanted to stay with his mother, he needed to pull away from her and let her get the help that she needed (Bridge, 2008). After being taken from Hope, Andy was sent to MacLaren where he did not fit in. They viewed him as a troubled child, and when he was sent to live with the Leonard's, they treated him as such. They did not treat him as a member of the family, and that caused Andy to be reclusive. The bad home life caused Andy to focus more on school. Andy got good grades in school, and when he graduated from high school, he went on to law school. Having lived through the foster care system, Andy was passionate about it; he saw many flaws and wanted to fix them so other kids could have a better life.

The other big influences on Andy were his exosystem and his mesosystem. An exosystem "consists of contexts that children and adolescents are not a part of but which may influence their development", and a mesosystem "refers to the interconnections among individual's immediate settings or microsystems" (Korsmo, 2012). Hope's state of mind had a

big impact on Andy's life. Hope started to hear voices in her head that drove her crazy; they would tell her that the police were coming to take Andy away from her (Bridge, 2008). She would try to shut Andy off from the world so he would not get taken; the voices got so bad that she had Andy locked in a closet thinking that nobody would be able to find him there (Bridge, 2008). Often times, Andy would not go to school, he would not get enough food and he would not go outside for days. Developmentally, this was not good for Andy, and prolonged life in this kind of environment could have affected Andy's state of mind as well. Andy's mesosystem was not any healthier. The interaction between Hope and Mrs. Leonard was not good. One night, Hope went to visit Andy. She went in the middle of the night and tried to sneak into the house. Mrs. Leonard' Hope only wanted to see Andy, but the manner in which she tried to visit him left Mrs. Leonard afraid and angry. This made Mrs. Leonard somewhat weary of Andy; some of the trust that had built up was lost, and this caused Andy's life with the Leonard's to be harder.

Andy knew that his life was not normal. There was a stigma associated with children in the foster care system; other kids thought foster children were poor, weird and stupid, and had bad parents that were probably drug addicts. Society taught Andy that in order to be a "normal" boy, one should be living with his birthparents. By not living with his birthparents, Andy was afraid that other children would assume the stigmas to be true about him. This influenced Andy in a big way. Not wanting to be judged, Andy kept his home life a secret. Andy knew that keeping secrets from his classmates would be difficult, so instead of building lie on top of lie to hide his life, Andy decided it would be best to shy away from any social interaction with his classmates (Bridge, 2008). In this way, Andy decided that the best way to self-organize

himself was to not organize at all. Instead of making friends in class and finding extra-curricular activities to meet new people, Andy would focus on school and work to pass the time.

There are a few ways in which Andy and I are similar and in which we differ. Andy and I both decided to focus more on school and less on friends. When I was eleven, my parents got divorced. At the time, I did not think it was a very common thing, so when I moved to Washington with my mom, I did not make many friends. I did not want to have to explain why I moved or where my dad was, so I never invited people over and I rarely hung out with others for reasons outside of a school project. Like Andy, I am greatly influenced by my family. My mother has been a huge influence on me throughout my life; from her I learned how to deal with my emotions, how to build relationships and how to be strong when times are tough. The big way in which I feel that Andy and I differ is in how we take control of our lives. Andy had a lot of influences in his life which directed him towards where he ended up. He couldn't control his mother's behavior or the state's decisions. All of the events in his life led him to his passion for children in foster care, but he was in control of what he did with that passion. Andy chose to go to school to learn to fight against the system that held him captive for eleven years. In my own life, I feel as if I have a little more control. Of course, I could not control the decisions my parents made, but nothing they did had a drastic effect on where I am now. My passion now is for underprivileged children, and that came from my decision to work with Compass 2 Campus. Although Andy and I have that slight difference, we are both filled with self-determination, Andy especially. I have an idea of what I want to do with my life, and with support from my family, I'm working towards it. Andy was driven by the events in his life; he knew something

needed to change and he did everything in his power to change it, and that shows a great amount of self-determination.

References

Bridge, A. (2008). *Hope's Boy*. New York: Hyperion.

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