

ROBERTA R. GREENE

editor

# Human Behavior Theory and Social Work Practice

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SECOND  
EDITION

**Human Behavior Theory  
and  
Social Work Practice**

Second Edition



Taylor & Francis

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# **Human Behavior Theory and Social Work Practice**

Second Edition

**Roberta R. Greene, editor**

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*This book is dedicated to David Greene  
whose unconditional love and support  
helped this project come to fruition.*

R.R.G.



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## PREFACE

This text is intended as a source book in human behavior for students preparing for professional social work careers. The opportunity to critique a select number of human behavior theories is provided. Each chapter provides an introduction to the theory's basic terms and assumptions and discusses the theory's utility for understanding the person-in-environment, explaining development across the life cycle, understanding cultural differences, and understanding how humans function as members of families, groups, communities, and organizations. The theory's usefulness to social work practice in various helping situations is examined through case studies.

This learning opportunity is dependent on a student's willingness to establish a critical posture in which a theory's contributions to the profession are examined and the theory's potential for enhancing the student's social work practice skills is explored. It also requires that the student read selections from the many journal articles and books cited in each chapter to further clarify how a particular theory may shed light on different aspects of human functioning.

A theory has inherent usefulness to the degree that it gives direction to a social work plan of action. However, learning human behavior for social work practice means that the student first must become well grounded in the theory and be able to distill its basic assumptions. To evaluate a theory's utility for his or her social work practice, a student also must examine his or her values and skills and determine if the theory is congruent with personal beliefs and helping style.

In the final analysis, most social workers practice is eclectic or a creative selection of theories and techniques. An eclectic approach to social work practice brings with it the responsibility to integrate effectively a number of theories and to determine the theoretical orientation's suitability for what Fisher (1978) terms intervening in "the client-problem-situation configuration" (p. 237).

I hope that this text will contribute in some small way to the education and service delivery skills of future professional social work colleagues.

Roberta R. Greene



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# 1

## Human Behavior Theory, Person-in-Environment, and Social Work Method

ROBERTA R. GREENE

*Practice is always shaped by the needs of the times, the problems they present, the fears they generate, the solutions that appeal, and the knowledge and skill available.*

—B. C. Reynolds, *Learning and Teaching in the Practice of Social Work*

Social work is a young, evolving profession characterized by a dynamic helping process and a diversity of roles, functions, and career opportunities. The aims of social work—to improve societal conditions and to enhance social functioning among individuals, families, and groups—are put into action across all fields of practice and realized through a variety of methods in a range of settings.

For today's social worker to pursue a career in any one of the profession's diverse service arenas, he or she will need to acquire conceptual frameworks that provide the context for understanding the complexities of contemporary practice. Throughout the profession's history, social workers have turned to a number of theoretical approaches for the organizing concepts needed to define their practice base. This book is concerned with the application of knowledge about human behavior in the social environment that serves as the theoretical underpinning for direct practice in social work. This book focuses on selected conceptual frameworks that have made a major contribution to the profession's understanding of human functioning and examines the ways in which these frameworks have shaped social workers' approach to enhance client functioning. The main theme of this book is that the person-in-environment perspective has been a central influence in the formation of the profession's knowledge base as well as its approach to practice. The chapters explore

ways in which specific theories have contributed to understanding the person-in-environment construct and examine the idea that all clinical social work intervention is anchored to a common paradigm: to reshape the context of the person-in-environment configuration (Bartlett, 1970; Saleeby, 1993; Van Den Bergh, 1995).

This book also explores the manner in which a particular theory offers explanations about the biopsychosocial development of individuals across the life cycle and on their functioning as members of families, groups, organizations, and communities. The book addresses a theory's universality, its utility in addressing cultural and ethnic diversity, and its assumptions about what constitutes adaptive behavior. Each chapter outlines the central frames of reference and concepts of a particular theory. Its salient constructs are then applied to practice approaches in selected settings with various client populations. Suggestions are provided about the ways in which practitioners may use the various frameworks to structure professional activities, to guide the practitioner through the social work processes of conducting assessments and selecting interventive strategies, and to create new meanings through discourse. Studies illustrate different ideas for helping individuals, families, and groups.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE CHAPTERS

This chapter introduces the organizing principles of the book. Chapter 2 discusses the relationship between human behavior theory and professional social work practice. Chapters 3 through 10 present a series of theories (or a selection from a particular school of thought). The historical context, its philosophical roots, and major assumptions of each theory are discussed. The chapters examine how social workers can use a theory to shape direct social work practice by increasing the practitioner's understanding and potential to enhance human situations. The chapters also explore the challenges and limitations of each theory and address the following questions:

- What does the theory offer for understanding development across the life cycle? Life course?
- What does the theory suggest about the interaction among biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors of human development and functioning?
- What does the theory suggest about healthy/functional and unhealthy/dysfunctional behaviors or wellness?
- What does the theory say is adaptive/maladaptive? How does the theory present stress factors and coping potentials?
- Is the theory universal in its application? How does the theory lend

itself to cross-cultural social work practice or various life contexts? Does the theory address social and economic justice?

- What does the theory propose about individuals as members of families, groups, communities, and organizations?
- How does the theory serve as a framework for social work practice?
- How does the theory lend itself to an understanding of individual, family, group, community, or organizational behavior?
- How does the theory suggest the client and social worker go about defining presenting situations, problems, or concerns? Does the theory suggest a strengths perspective?
- What are the implications of the theory for social work interventions or practice strategies? Do the principles of the theory emphasize a client's capabilities and resources?
- What does the theory suggest the social worker do? What does it suggest the client (system) do?
- What role does it propose for the social worker as change agent? What is the aim of treatment/intervention or meaning creation? What does it suggest enhances functioning or promotes change in the client? In society? In societal institutions?

The chapter also provides examples in which a theory is used to “direct” or guide the social worker-client interchange. Each situation suggests how the theory can be used to shape the social worker's role. Examples use individual, family, and group methodologies and are chosen from among the fields of practice. Clients in a variety of contexts—setting, age, and culture—are addressed.

## CHANGES IN EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACHES

*It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet.*

—T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

The use of human behavior theory needs to be understood within the context of the history of scientific thought. That history suggests that the social work profession has moved from a position of little practice theory to more than twenty major theoretical approaches (Turner, 1995). Each theory stems from a particular *paradigm*, the configuration of beliefs, values, and techniques that are shared by members of a professional community. Each paradigm is a reconstruction of prior thinking (Schriver, 1995) and may have dramatically different philosophical assumptions.

Guba (1990) has described the shifts in paradigm—from positivism, to

postpositivism, to constructivism—that have most affected social work practice. Social work’s interest in science and the scientific method brought the profession into a world of inquiry and technology. Entry into the university setting in the early 1900s—an era of positivist science—meant that social workers adopted theories that rest on the belief that universal laws guide human behavior. It also meant that the social worker’s role was to discover objective facts and to use preestablished theoretical assumptions to understand client concerns. Positivists also argued that objective laws and universal truths discovered through scientific-like activity, logic, and reason would lead to objective social work practice (see Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Martin & O’Connor, 1989). Postpositivists suggest that although natural laws exist, people cannot possibly perceive them. Social worker objectivity would be an ideal. On the other hand, constructionists have proposed that many realities are created at the local level through human interaction (Foucault, 1980). Therefore, no social work endeavor is value free, but must be understood through individual mental frameworks. These philosophical assumptions, as they relate to the role of the social worker, are explored further in the following chapters.

### HUMAN BEHAVIOR THEORY, POSITIVIST TRADITION, AND RELIANCE ON SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT

*At the very least we ought to know what concepts we are utilizing, and where the concepts come from, and the state of their verification.*

—S. Firestone, “The Scientific Component in the Casework Field Curriculum”

Social workers who use theories of human behavior that stem from positivist tradition, such as Freudian theory and systems theory, rely on information, facts, and data to guide their clinical practice. They view *theory*—a logical system of concepts that provides a framework for organizing and understanding observations—as the primary tool in planning assessment and intervention processes (Table 1.1). Theories—intended to offer comprehensive, simple, and dependable principles for the explanation and prediction of observable phenomena—assist practitioners in identifying orderly relationships

Theories provide the framework for organizing social work practice.

(Hempel, 1960; Newman & Newman, [1979] 1987).

Just as social scientists used theories to deal with vast quantities of data by formulating significant questions, selecting and organizing data, and un-

Table 1.1. Definitions of Theory

<i>Author</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Chess and Norlin (1988)	A theory offers an explanation for an idea and a set of related assumptions and concepts that explain a phenomenon being observed. Theory should give meaning and clarity to what otherwise would appear to be specific and isolated cases.
Compton and Galaway (1994)	A theory is a coherent group of concepts or propositions that explain or account for phenomena and their interrelationships. A theory may contain both confirmed and assumptive knowledge and provide a rational way of ordering and linking observed phenomena.
Kelly (1955)	A theory offers a way of binding together a multitude of facts so that one may comprehend them all at once.
↷ Newman and Newman ([1979] 1987)	A theory is a logical system of general concepts that provides a framework for organizing and understanding observations. Theories help identify the orderly relationships that exist among many diverse events. They guide us to those factors that will have explanatory power and suggest those that will not.
Saleebey (1993)	Theories are perspectives, not truths. Theories are texts, narratives, and interpretive devices.
Shaw and Costanzo (1982)	Theories allow us to organize our observations and to deal meaningfully with information that would otherwise be chaotic and useless. Theory allows us to see relationships among facts and to uncover implications that otherwise would not be evident in isolated pieces of data. Theories also stimulate inquiry about behavior.
Specht and Craig (1982)	Theories provide us with a means of formulating significant questions, to select and organize data, and to understand the data within a larger framework.

derstanding the data within a larger framework, social workers also sought theories to help guide and organize their thinking about a client's presenting problem. Theories also helped social workers explain why people behave as they do, to better understand how the environment affects behavior, to guide interventive behavior, and to predict what is likely to be the result of a particular social work intervention (Fischer, 1981). For example, those social workers who base their practice on Freudian theory may choose to help a client examine the uses of defense mechanisms in the belief that modification of overly rigid or particularly deficient defenses will lead to a healthier personality configuration (see Chapter 3). In contrast, the practitioner who bases practice on a social systems approach may evaluate the relative closed or open quality of a family system with the perspective that helping a family communicate more openly will improve its functional capacity (see Chapter 7). Each theory has a set of assumptions about the cause of the presenting problem and its resolution. Questions that guide the interview suggest that the social worker has an understanding about what constitutes a healthy individual or well-functioning family.

Positivist theorists suggest the social worker take a neutral stance during the helping process and that theory can help the social worker guard against the temptation to act on personal bias. Briar and Miller (1971) underscored the idea that a social worker needs to be able to separate fact from inference and to make explicit his or her assumptions about human behavior to make sound professional judgments:

The choice for the practitioner is not whether to have a theory but what theoretical assumptions to hold. All persons acquire assumptions or views on the basis of which they construe and interpret events and behavior, including their own. These assumptions are frequently not explicit but are more what has been called "implicit theories of personality." Thus, the appeal for practitioners to be atheoretical amounts simply to an argument that theory ought to be implicit and hidden, not explicit and self-conscious. It is difficult, however, to defend an argument favoring implicit theory that, by definition, is not susceptible to scrutiny and objective validation and therefore cannot be distinguished from idiosyncratic bias. (pp. 53–54)

The usefulness of theory to social work practice can be viewed in a number of ways (Table 1.2). Social workers often turn to those theories of human behavior in the social environment they believe will provide a knowledge base for understanding and action (Bloom, 1984). Those theories that help in understanding the

The use of theory is the hallmark of professional helping.

causal dynamics of behavior that has already occurred and in predicting future behavioral events meet this definition for action-oriented knowledge. In short, theoretical frameworks are useful to those in the helping profes-

Table 1.2. Value of a Theoretical Framework

<i>Author</i>	<i>Value</i>
Bloom (1984)	The study of human behavior (theory) is an attempt to provide a knowledge base for understanding and action.
Compton and Galaway (1994)	The social work knowledge base should encompass concepts that explain how human systems develop, change, and dysfunction, and how the interrelationships work among systems.
Newman and Newman (1987)	Theories should provide explanations about the mechanisms that account for growth from conception to old age, and the extent that these mechanisms vary across the life span. They should account for stability and change, the interactions among cognitive, emotional, and social functioning, and predict the impact of the social context on individual development.
Specht and Craig (1982)	Theories should be universal and apply to different ethnic, racial, and social class. This allows for the understanding of general cultural differences in child rearing, cognitive training, and family structure. Theories also account for the particular, thus enabling an understanding of similarities and differences.
Turner (1986)	A theory by virtue of its ability to explain should better enable practitioners to offer responsible, effective intervention.
Zanden (1985)	Theory is a tool. The value of the knowledge yielded by the application of theory lies in the control it provides us over our experience. It serves as a guide to action.
Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (1987)	Theories of human behavior in the social environment provide a foundation knowledge for assessment and intervention.

sions to the extent that they provide a conceptual foundation that shapes the direction of professional activities and gives context to specific actions.

Whatever the choice of theory, a social worker's actions are not random but tend to reflect the theories, implicit or explicit, that he or she accepts and uses. Theory tends to shape the practitioner's viewpoint, what he or she makes of it, and what he or she decides to do about it. How the practitioner defines a need, situation, or problem largely determines the action he or she will take. If the practitioner views the problem as being within the person, he or she will take a different course of action than if the problem resided within the environment. The social worker who does not believe in a problem-laden social work approach will take another course of action.

During the past three decades, there have been several concerns about the use of theory. There are, of course, limitations to the rigor of scientific theories and their capacity to explain or account for events. No single theoretical construction can encompass all aspects of a phenomenon (Turner, 1995). By their very nature, theories are selective about the factors they emphasize and those they ignore. In addition, a growing number of social work theorists have challenged positivist tradition. This challenge has involved an interest in and a shift to theories that are more *contextualized*, that is, theories that emphasize multiple, individualized perspectives.

The complexity of human concerns with which social workers deal argues against a "hit or miss" approach to their solution. Rather, this complexity makes imperative the need for a consciously held and purposeful conduct of practice. The conscious, explicit application of human behavior theory enables the social worker to carry out his or her responsibility to assist individuals, families, and groups by improving or preventing loss of functioning through a planned, professional process. This approach contrasts with a friendly, helping relationship that may be caring, but is not guided by an awareness of how intervention skills are "used selectively and differentially as determined by a body of theory and a process of deciding" (Compton & Galaway, 1994, p. 34).

## DIFFERENT VIEWS ON THEORY

*Because a large number of combinations of value orientations exist . . . the search for a proper and helpful fit between client, social worker, and theory of intervention is complex. . . . It presents a highly exciting potential for enhancing effectiveness in a multicultural society.*

—F. J. Turner, "Social Work Practice: Theoretical Base"

Over the past two decades, social work theorists have challenged the philosophical assumptions of the traditional use of theory (Dean & Fenby,

1989; Wakefield, 1996). While Marxism and critical theory have received some attention, a major shift in theoretical emphasis has been to equate and further delineate the person-environment with the ecological perspective. The ecological perspective provides a holistic framework; is inclusive of various theory bases and strategies; includes attention to larger geographic, political, and economic environments; and is suitable for practice across cultural and diversity groups. Because the ecological perspective addresses culture, historical eras, gender, ethnicity, and other diversity dimensions relative to political power and worldview, it is thought to expand the contextual variables included in social work practice (Germain, 1979; Germain & Gitterman, 1987; Greene & McGuire, 1998).

Social workers have historically sought theory that provides a contextual understanding of human behavior.

Among the other benefits thought to derive from the ecological perspective are the transactional approach, referring to the person and environment as one inseparable unit; a positive view of growth, reinforcing the innate healthy nature of human development; the conception of adaptiveness across the life course, relating to the attainment of well-being as a life-long process of active person-environment exchanges; and its emphasis on a multilevel assessment and intervention, guiding the activity of the social worker to multiple systems analysis for understanding client functioning (Greene & McGuire, 1998; see Chapter 7).

Social work theorists also have challenged the hegemony of Eurocentric models of social work practice (Schiele, 1996; Swigonski, 1996). For example, Schiele (1996) has contended that Eurocentric theories of human behavior emphasize concepts developed in Europe and in the Anglo-American culture and "are implicitly oppressive" (p. 286). On the other hand, *Africentricity* (as spelled by Schiele) offers an emerging paradigm that infuses the values of people of color. From an Africentric perspective, one theory cannot explain all human phenomena and provide explanations of peoples' similarities and differences. The emphasis of Africentricity is on the collective nature of human identity, involving interconnectedness and group ethos; the spiritual component of people's lives, encompassing the link between humanity and the universe; and the validity of affect in understanding life events, including an acceptance of emotions as well as rationality. Africentric theory also can be used to understand how certain groups in society are privileged or have unearned advantage, whereas others are marginalized or have less access to social, economic, and political resources (Swigonski, 1996). Swigonski (1996) has suggested that privilege is invisible unless social workers make a particular effort to ask "what are some of the advantages of being white, male, middle-class, and so forth" (p. 154; see Table 1.3) At the same time,

*Table 1.3. Types of Privilege Reflected in Statements from McIntosh, White Privilege and Male Privilege (1988)*

<i>Type of Privilege</i>	<i>Sample Statement</i>
The freedom to associate exclusively or primarily with members of your own group	I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time. (p. 5)
The level of social acceptance one can presume across varying contexts	If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area in which I want to live. (p. 5) Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability. (p. 6) I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily protection. (p. 6)
The ability to see members of your groups in a positive light, in the records of history, in texts, in media, and as role models	When I am told about our national heritage or about civilization, I am shown that people of my color made it what it is. (p. 6)
The freedom from stereotyping	I can be pretty sure that if I ask to speak to the person in charge, I will be facing a person of my own race. (p. 7) I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morale, poverty, or illiteracy of my race. (p. 7) I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race. (p. 7) I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race. (p. 8)
The ability to be oblivious of other groups	I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of people of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion. (p. 7) My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspective and powers of people of other races. (p. 8)
The ability to feel at home in the world	I will feel welcome and normal in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social. (p. 17)

*Source:* McIntosh, P. (1988). *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies* (Working Paper 189, pp. 5–8). Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. Copyright 1988. Adopted with permission.

Africentric theory is based on the values of Africans and African-Americans, and uses their history, culture, and worldview as a frame of reference.

Postmodern theorists, such as some branches of feminism, also have a strong interest in how personal and societal power is distributed. Events that the client describes are to be understood within the client's particular sociopolitical context. This strategy is based on the idea that the "personal is political"—or that there is an inevitable connection between individual concerns and societal power structures and institutions (Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1986, p. 9). The feminist practitioner seeks to combat oppression, particularly of women, redress societal inequities, and empower persons who may be marginalized (Van den Bergh, 1995; see Chapter 10).

Feminists and other postmodern thinkers reject the idea that there are universal truths or laws (Gordon, 1984). Most of the knowledge used in social work practice, including systems and ecological theories, ego psychology, object relations, self-psychology, and cognitive theory, is based on a positivist view of fixed theoretical assumptions (Fleck-Henderson, 1993; Van Den Bergh, 1995). Social workers who use postmodern theory argue that content—information or facts—is only the starting point in the helping process. Practitioners may view different theories as providing more or less useful ways of helping clients. The idea is to avoid clinging to one theory; rather, the emphasis is on alternative explanations and multiple meanings of events and on preserving those aspects of theories that "focus on the viability of multiple perspectives" (Dean, 1993, p. 59).

Postmodern theorists question the linear (deterministic) or cause-and-effect thinking of the positivists. Postmodern thinkers do not subscribe to the view that behavior *a* causes *b*; rather, behavior is an outcome of complex personal, social, cultural, and historical contexts and meaning is personal—created through language and social interactions. "Social workers should not expect to know in advance what the outcome of clinical interactions will be" (Pozatek, 1994, p. 397). Social workers should take a "not-knowing" stance.

Another shift in emphasis from the constructionists viewpoint is the importance of intuitive knowing (Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1986; Weick, 1993). Social work theorists are increasingly engaged in a debate about whether social work is an applied science based on empirical knowledge or a process or an art understood by analyzing and codifying the performance of master practitioners (Weick, 1993). Postmodern thinkers have proposed that knowledge is created through social discourse within a historical and sociopolitical context. That is, practitioners may create knowledge at the local level or at the front line of practice. Knowledge thus becomes a process of creation in the client-social worker interaction, or

what Schon (1983) has so aptly called “knowing-in-practice” (p. 62). From this perspective, social work may be considered an art: students learn knowledge and skills from master artists (Weick, 1993).

Human behavior theory must be used in conjunction with critical thinking and reflection.

Schon (1983), who examined paradigms for professional practice, has acknowledged the need for specialized knowledge in professional education.

However, he has contended that the types of real-world problems that are at the core of the profession require “reflection-about-action”:

Increasingly we have become aware of the importance to actual practice of phenomena—complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict—which do not fit the model of Technical Rationality [positivism]. (p. 39)

Postmodern theory does not accept the premise that the social worker is an expert; rather, it proposes that social workers view clients as experts on their own behavior. Postmodern practitioners maintain that the central purpose of the therapeutic relationship is creating a therapeutic partnership and new client meaning through dialogue or conversation. This approach is in contrast to a client-social worker relationship in which the client may gain insight into his or her behavior through many practitioner interpretations. In such a positivist stance, the social worker promotes insight based on questions derived from his or her theoretical orientation. In contrast, the postmodern practitioner’s goal is to obtain client-generated meaning to enable a positive reframing of events (Duncan, Solovey, & Rusk, 1992). Clients’ ability to re-create their life story or rename their problem also enables them to gain a sense of empowerment (White & Epston, 1990).

The practitioner’s goal is to set in motion a change process to help the client revise the negative internalized meaning of problems, develop a sense of agency, and find solutions—a client-directed therapy (Lax, 1992). The social worker assumes that each client has unique personal resources as well as the ability to create new stories or life views. Therefore, the practitioner adopts a learning stance and acts as a “participant manager of the conversation” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1990, p. 384). That is, the practitioner is in the position of being informed.

Postmodern theorists have argued that theories as social constructions created during a particular time and place have inherent biases and cannot be value free. Rather, human behavior content may often reflect prevailing social and political contexts (Allen, 1993). For example, feminist practitioners are particularly concerned with how negative ideas about

women intrude into the client-social worker relationship. If such biases are understood, social workers can try to avoid mirroring these stereotypes and societal power structures in their practice (Greene, 1994). In short, practitioners must examine all theory for its political biases and ethical implications (Allen, 1993; Weick, 1993). Postmodern practitioners are among an increasingly large number of social workers who, no matter what their theoretical base, aspire to culturally competent social work practice by equalizing power in the client-social worker relationship, creating personalized meaning in the helping relationship, and taking responsibility for their biases. In these ways, practitioners focus on both the person and the environment.

### CRITIQUE OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR THEORY

*[Use of theory involves] a constant critical stance toward one's own ideas as well as those embedded in the formal theories. . . . [A]ll of our theories, our "texts", our "codes," our languages, contain built-in biases*

—J. Laird, *Revisioning Social Work Education: A Social Constructionist Approach*

Critiquing theories and the paradigm from which they are derived is a key requirement of human behavior and the social environment curriculum (CSWE, 1992; see Table 1.4). Evaluation of theory may take several forms including a critique of its underlying paradigm, its usefulness in serving diverse constituencies, and its underlying value base.

A critique of theory involves a process of "thinking paradigm" or a process of "continually asking questions about what the information . . . we send and receive reflects about our own and others' views of the world" (Schriver, 1995, p. 7). For example, theorists should not view the descriptions of positivist and postmodern theoretical approaches as absolute. Many theorists have looked for ways to consider variables important to social work, such as social class, ethnicity, and gender as well as the ethical implications of social work practice. Therefore, when coming to grips with whether knowledge is "real or socially constructed, the best a practitioner can

By critically evaluating theories, practitioners can make the choice of what theory(ies) best work for them.

do is to thoughtfully and critically analyze each theory" (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1998). A review of the theory may allow for consideration of both positivist and postmodern viewpoints (Dean & Fleck-Henderson, 1992). The ability to join alternative helping strategies holds the promise of

*Table 1.4. Theory Critique*

- 
- Describe the author's background, credentials, and demographic characteristics.
  - When was the model developed? What prompted the author to develop it? What important social, cultural, or historical events surrounded the model's development?
  - Are the ideological biases of the theory or model articulated? If so, what are they (e.g., differential emphasis on person and the environment, use of a particular knowledge base)? What psychological or social sciences theory or theories does the model draw?
  - What is the purpose of the model?
  - What is the real value system of the model? What consideration does the model give to the role of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental challenge, or socioeconomic class?
  - What are the client characteristics (e.g., demographics, skills, knowledge, personality type) thought to be necessary for appropriate use of the model?
  - What unit(s) of attention is/are addressed by the model?
  - How are problems defined?
  - What causes psychological or interpersonal problems according to the model?
  - How is assessment defined and conducted within the model?
  - What interventions are described within the model? What skills are required by the practitioner of the model?
  - What is the role of the practitioner and what is the role of the client? How is the professional relationship defined and described?
  - What is/are the desirable outcome(s)/goals of the model?
  - How is time structured within the model?
  - Are there any personnel exclusions stated or implied by the model?
  - Is the model consistent with collaboration and referral to other agencies or practitioners?
  - To what extent can the model be evaluated for effectiveness? What research has been done to evaluate it?
  - How is the model similar to or different from social work's person-in-situation paradigm?
  - How is the model consistent or inconsistent with the social work code of ethics?
- 

*Source:* Meyer (1983).

developing the reflective practitioner, one who is both artistic and disciplined (Dean, 1993, p. 57).

Saleeby (1993) has suggested ideas to consider in that regard:

- Theories are associated with power and the dominant culture. The origins of theories of human behavior are sociocultural, political, and relational.
  - Theories offer multiple, not singular, views. Practitioners must consider theories in light of the uniqueness of individuals and cultures.
  - Theories best address individuals as social phenomena. Theories need to address people as interdependent beings or as persons-in-environments.

- Theories reflect language and intersubjectivity. Language is the basis for the exchange and creation of meanings. Theories imply or reflect values. (pp. 205–212)

Another aspect of evaluating theories is recognizing that they may be culture-bound. For example, Trader (1977) has suggested practitioners use the following four criteria for effective social work practice with oppressed minorities, particularly African-Americans:

- (1) Pathology-Health Balance: Does the theory have a balance among well-being, strengths and illness, and deficits?
- (2) Practitioner-Client Control Balance: Does the theory allow for shared control?
- (3) Personal-Societal Impact Balance: Does the theory take into account the historical, political, and economic influences on behavior?
- (4) Internal-External Change Balance: Does the theory emphasize internal change in preference to societal change?

Robbins et al. (1998) have pointed out the importance of understanding the philosophical underpinnings of a theory. Are people assumed to be basically good or evil? Is behavior primarily shaped by nature or nurture? In evaluating a theory's usefulness for social work practice, it is also important to examine the theory's values and ethical base. The Council on Social Work Education (1992) has delineated the values inherent to social work practice as follows:

- Social workers' professional relationships are built on regard for individual worth and dignity and are furthered by mutual participation, acceptance, confidentiality, honesty, and responsible handling of conflict.
- Social workers respect people's right to make independent decisions and to participate actively in the helping process.
- Social workers are committed to assisting client systems to obtain needed resources.
- Social workers strive to make social institutions more humane and responsive to human needs.
- Social workers demonstrate respect for and acceptance of the unique characteristics of diverse populations.
- Social workers are responsible for their own ethical conduct, the quality of their practice, and seeking continuous growth in the knowledge and skills of their profession. (p. 7)

A working knowledge of human behavior theory will allow practitioners to ethically carry out their profession's mission to help individuals, families, and groups. The conscious use of a theory requires that the prac-

itioner become well-grounded in it and distill its basic assumptions. A practitioner then must critically evaluate what he or she thinks about that theory's utility and its connection to social work's value base. This critical posture involves becoming sufficiently knowledgeable to decide whether the theory is one that the practitioner can adopt for practice. If indeed the theory is, or a number of theories are, congruent with the social worker's personal practice approach, he or she can begin to think about how to apply different theoretical constructs in a particular context.

The following sections examine the relationship among the knowledge of human behavior theory, the use of social work method, and ability to intervene effectively in the person-in-environment configuration (Figure 1.1).

**PERSON-IN-ENVIRONMENT: THE  
DUAL FOCUS OF SOCIAL WORK**

*The enhancement of interaction between people and environments can be strongly reaffirmed as the primary mission of social work.*

—P. Ewalt, NASW Conference Proceedings: Toward  
a Definition of Clinical Social Work

A continuing and unifying theme in the historical development of social work has been its interest and concern for the person-in-environment.

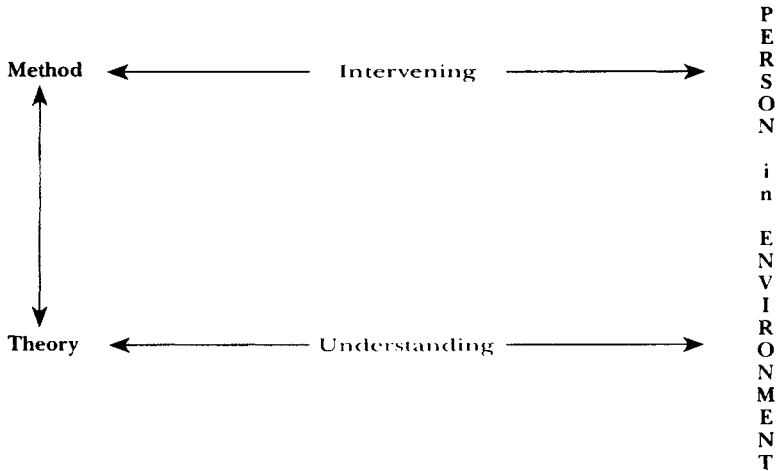


Figure 1.1. Person-in-environment, theory, and method.

The person-in-environment perspective has been a central influence on the profession's theoretical base and its approach to practice. This perspective is based on the belief that the profession's basic mission requires a dual focus on the person and the environment and to a common structured approach to the helping process (Gordon, 1962). By serving as a blueprint or an organizing guide for social work assessment and intervention at a multiple systems level, the person-environment focus has allowed for social workers to intervene effectively "no matter what their different theoretical orientations and specializations and regardless of where or with what client group they practice" (Meyer, 1987, p. 409). The person-environment is a multisystems, eclectic mind-set that allows social work educators to build curricula within the broad context of all pertinent social systems. In short, the person-environment perspective has established social work's conceptual reference point and has delineated the practitioner's role (Greene & Watkins, 1998).

The dual concern and need for effective intervention in the person and situation has been expressed by a number of critical thinkers. For example, Bartlett (1970) emphasized the relationship between the coping activity of people and the demand from the environment. Germain (1979) focused on the duality of the adaptive potential of people and the nutritive qualities of their environment, whereas Germain and Gitterman (1980) stressed the interplay of human potential and the properties of the environment that support or fail to support the expression of that potential.

Through the use of the person-environment perspective, social workers are able to attain their dual mission of personal and societal change.

Furthermore, postmodern social work theorists have remained steadfast to social work's person-in-environment approach (Collins, 1986; Freeman, 1990; Gould, 1988; Wetzel, 1986). For example, Van Den Bergh (1995) has argued that the person-environment "many layered" approach is "syntonic" with postmodern thought (p. 8), and Land (1995) has contended that "the cardinal principles of clinical social work as we know them today: the biopsychosocial approach, the person-in-situation paradigm, and empowerment practice can be attributed to feminist pioneers" (p. 4).

No single theory to date has been able to provide the organizing principles to meet the challenge of understanding fully the person as well as the systems with which he or she interacts. The dual goals of improving societal institutions and assisting clients within their social and cultural milieu has led to the mining of concepts from different disciplines. Each concept or theory attempts to explain the complex interplay of physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and cultural variables that shape human behavior. As a result, the profession's theoretical base has come to incorporate a

number of theories, each with its own constellation of values, purposes, assumptions, and prescriptions for interventive behavior (Northen, 1982).

Contemporary social work practice covers a wide range of purposes, organizational structures, client systems, and specific fields. As is expected, each field has its own history. Some, such as the health care field, antedate modern professional social work by millennia. Others are still in the process of emergence. Still others, such as the prevention and amelioration of child abuse, were part of social work's history but disappeared from prominence for a period, only to be rediscovered. What makes a social problem visible is itself a complex question (Blumer, 1969); the answers certainly involve the macrosocial processes of history, human ecology, and economics.

This book explores the way in which particular theories have contributed to the person-environment view of social work practice. The remaining chapters explore the way in which specific theories have contributed to the profession's understanding of the person-in-environment construct "to effect the best possible adaptation among individuals, families and groups and their environments" (Meyer, 1987, p. 409).

### **DIRECT PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK: INTERVENING IN THE PERSON-SITUATION TO ENHANCE PSYCHOSOCIAL FUNCTIONING**

*At that level of abstraction, . . . the different modes of practice share a common methodological framework, . . . that is, study, diagnosis, and treatments.*

—N. Gilbert and H. Specht, "Social Planning and Community Organization"

Historically, social workers in the direct practice of social work have tended to be identified by a particular method, field of practice, or agency function. More recently, many social workers have come to believe that it is inappropriate to base a definition of social work on method—case work, group work, community organization—on the number of people with whom the social worker interacts. Rather, they have proposed that method be defined as so aptly stated by Schwartz (1961)—as "a systematic process of ordering one's activity in the performance of a function" (p. 148).

Direct practice in social work today is characterized by a wide diversity of immediate professional activities designed to help individuals, families, groups, or communities improve their social functioning. Because the profession has become so broad in scope, commonalities and centrality of purpose may be obscured. Nonetheless, common features bind the profession and are constant no matter what the setting or service. These features include the social worker's purpose and his or her comprehensive

professional role (Anderson, 1981; Meyer, 1987). Guideposts also include a foundation of shared knowledge, values, and skills (Bartlett, 1970; CSWE, 1971, 1974, 1984) (Figure 1.2). In addition, it generally is accepted that the purpose of social work is to promote a mutually beneficial interaction between individuals and society (Karls, Lowery, Mattaini, & Wandrei, 1997).

In a discussion of the status of direct practice in social work, Meyer (1987) underscored the central purpose of the profession:

The central purpose of social work practice is to effect the best possible adaptation among individuals, families, and groups and their environments. This psychosocial, or person-in-environment, focus of social work has evolved over the last 70 years to direct the explorations, assessments, and interventions of practitioners—no matter what their different theoretical orientations and specializations and regardless of where or with what client group they practice. (p. 409)

In essence, all social work method is grounded in a common paradigm: to intervene effectively in the person-in-environment configuration. Ex-

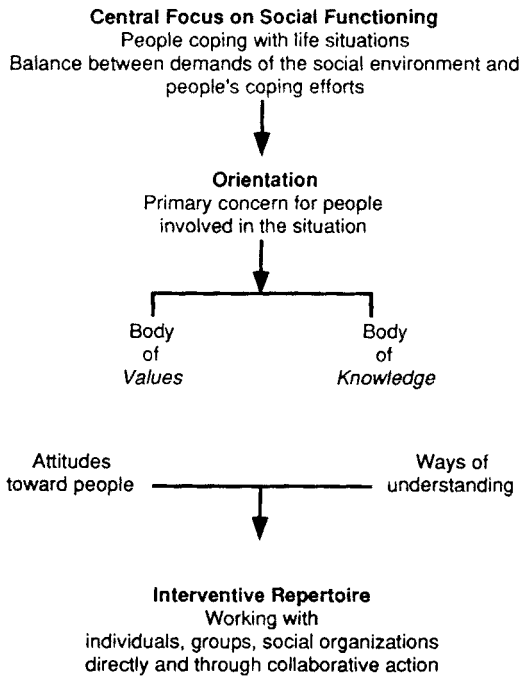


Figure 1.2. The common base of social work practice. From Bartlett (1970).

panding on this point, Germain and Gitterman (1980) insisted that the social worker should be competent enough to intervene in any part of the person-group-environment gestalt.

A person-environment perspective is also well accepted among post-modern theorists, as expressed by feminist Barbara Collins (1986):

Social work's integrated thinking with its ecological view (person-environment) of process between individual and the environment is consonant with feminist thought. Both ideologies envision the desirable as transactions between people and their environments that support individual well-being, dignity, and self determination. (p. 216)

Although both positivist and postmodern theorists have accepted the centrality of the person-environment perspective, they may disagree about the therapeutic method. Positivist theorists have suggested that a unified perspective of social work practice also implies that there are core professional tasks. The idea of core professional tasks calls for a closer examination of the historically described phases of the helping process. Beginning with the work of Mary Richmond in 1917, if not earlier, the general approach to practice has been to collect the "nature of social evidence" and to interpret the data leading to the "social diagnosis" (pp. 38–40, 342–363). Perlman (1957) later echoed this theme in the following description of social casework: Casework begins with a study phase to clarify the facts of the problem, followed by a diagnosis during which the practitioner analyzes the facts; casework finishes with treatment, during which the practitioner and client attempt to resolve the problem (pp. 88–95).

Ewalt (1980) made a similar proposal that the concern of clinical social work is the ability to conduct a biopsychosocial assessment of the person-in-situation and to carry out interventions based on this assessment. Likewise, Meyer (1987) argued that the "core professional task" in the direct practice of social work is

to assess the relationships among the case variables. The practitioner must determine what is salient or prominent and in need of intervention, what is relevant and therefore appropriate to do, and what balance or imbalance must be maintained or introduced. Thereafter, the introduction of interventions can be drawn from the repertoire of approaches. (p. 415)

The assertion that social work methods involve common elements that cut across all professional divisions and boundaries is based on the idea that there is a common structured approach to the helping process. Although phases of the change process have been conceptualized somewhat differently over the years, most conceptualizations found in methods texts

have retained the study-diagnosis-treatment format originally described by Richmond (Germain & Gitterman, 1980; Hepworth & Larsen, 1982; O'Neil, 1984; Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi, 1988; Siporin, 1975; see Figure 1.3). However, with the emergence of postmodern forms of practice, a new view of direct practice has been suggested. Postmodern practitioners have questioned the traditional social work assessment and intervention process. Dean (1993) captured the postmodern view:

The expressions "diagnosis," "assessment," "therapy," and "treatment" derived from the medical and research models . . . suggest that the client is sick and needs to recover. In addition, these terms turn the client or problem into a finite entity to be studied and diagnosed. Similarly problematic, the term "interventions" defines a process in which the clinician does something to the client (or situation). (p. 60)

The following section broadly differentiates the relationship of positivist and postmodern human behavior theory to the helping process.

## SOCIAL WORK METHOD AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR THEORY

*To intervene effectively in the person-in-environment configuration, the social worker must be guided by theoretical understanding.*

—H. S. Strean, *Social Casework Theories in Action*

Practitioners and students alike often are puzzled by what questions to ask during interviews: Should I encourage the client to talk? Should I interrupt with a question? Is some information more relevant than other information? What do I need to know about the client to properly understand the problem or situation? The social worker may answer such questions more easily if he or she comes to the interview with sufficient guidelines for helping strategies. No matter what the practice paradigm,

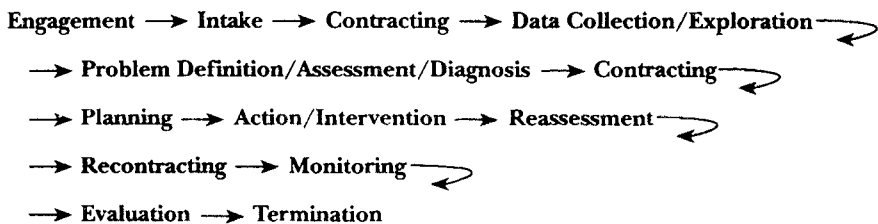


Figure 1.3. Phases of the social work helping process.

theories of human behavior influence the social worker's thinking about the helping process in important ways.

Having an orientation to the helping process is one of the most critical aspects in the professional use of self (Greene, 1986). A theoretical model of human behavior is a point of departure in social work practice. Having a working knowledge of a theory's assumptions provides guidelines about how to carry out the social work role. Whom to include in an interview, how to conduct it, and what activities and resources the social worker may use successfully are among the issues that may be answered by the practitioner's chosen theoretical orientation.

### *Assessment and the Positivist Tradition*

Meyer (1982) best summed up the need for a set of human behavior assumptions, a system for data collection, and a basis for making decisions in the situation. She suggested that "what one is trained to see one addresses in assessment and intervention" (pp. 19–20). For social workers who have chosen a positivist theoretical practice approach, *assessment* is a procedure used to examine and evaluate the client's problem or situation. Through assessment, the social worker identifies and explains the nature of a problem or dysfunction, appraises it within a framework of specific elements, and uses that appraisal as a guide to action (Perlman, 1957). The purpose of an assessment, whether the problem originates with an individual, family, or group, is to bring together the various facets of a client's situation, and the interaction among them, in an orderly, economical manner and to then select salient and effective interventions (Greene, 1986).

Assessment is "differential, individualized, and accurate identification and evaluation of problems, people, and situations and of their interrelations, to serve as a sound basis for differential helping intervention" (Siporin, 1975, p. 224). Accurate assessment requires sufficient information about a problem or situation. It also requires theoretical frameworks to guide how the practitioner will gather, analyze, and interpret the information.

An appraisal of a problem depends on achieving a process through which the practitioner obtains clarity about what "the client and the case-worker both hold in the center of focus" (Perlman, 1957, p. 119). Maintaining that focus is made possible not only through proper interviewing techniques but through an explicit assessment format that is based on a theoretical orientation. Throughout assessment, the practitioner collects data or "facts" about the client's situation. The theoretical assumptions adopted by the practitioner should guide how the practitioner selects pertinent data, and how he or she evaluates and relates the data to problem solving (Greene, 1986). From the initial client contact, the perception of in-

formation and professional decisions in response to this information are shaped by the social worker's theoretical orientation. That orientation allows the practitioner to select from the data he or she has gathered about the client those that are important and suggest what additional information needs to be gathered to complete the assessment.

Practitioners need to know, at least in general terms, what it is they hope to accomplish, what information (data) they need to obtain, and what plan for successive interviews they need to implement. For example, the social worker who uses a social systems approach knows that he or she wants to obtain information about the family's interactive and communication styles and that the goal is to educate the family about what is dysfunctional about these patterns so that the family may change or modify those patterns. "Assessment is a process and a product of understanding on which action is based" (Siporin, 1975, p. 1).

Human behavior is used in conjunction with social work methods to assess and intervene on behalf of clients.

In essence, assessment in the positivist tradition is an information-gathering process in which the ordering of data gives direction to the action to be taken by the social worker and client. An important value orientation in social work is the participation of clients in the development of an intervention or treatment plan. Although there is no clear-cut demarcation of phases, there usually is a time when client and social worker agree on treatment goals.

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### ***Assessment and the Postmodern Tradition***

Postmodern practitioners have challenged social work's traditional approach to assessment and problem solving. For the postmodern therapist, the major goal is to help the client externalize the problem rather than view the problem as an inherent or fixed part of self:

Questions are introduced that encourage clients to map the influence of the problem in their lives and relationships. . . . This identifies the problem-saturated description of . . . life. This practice facilitates a mutually acceptable definition of the problem, and the exploration of new possibilities. (White, 1994, p. 89)

In the postmodern approach, the social worker generally does not ask predetermined interview questions, but encourages a search for understanding (for an invaluable description of postmodern ideas, see Laird, 1993). That is, the practitioner explores the client's ideas about the nature of "individual dysfunction" (McNamee & Gergen, 1992). Social workers who have adopted a postmodern approach to "assessment" focus on the

client’s definition of the situation, emphasize the client’s unique meaning of events, and ask questions that lead to a collaborative view of solutions.

The manner in which the practitioner works with the client to define the situation may be portrayed as circular (Figure 1.4). Tomm (1994), who has provided an example framework of circular questioning, has distinguished four major groups of questions that practitioners may ask:

**Lineal orienting questions:** those that presuppose normative data can be collected about each client provided, such as “What problems brought you to see me today?”

**Circular questions:** primarily exploratory, “How is it we find ourselves together today?”

**Strategic questions:** based on an assumption the practitioner holds about the client, such as “When are you going to take charge of your life and start looking for a job?”

**Reflexive questions:** intended to place the client in a reflexive position or to trigger the consideration of new options, such as “If your depression suddenly disappeared, how would your life be different?”

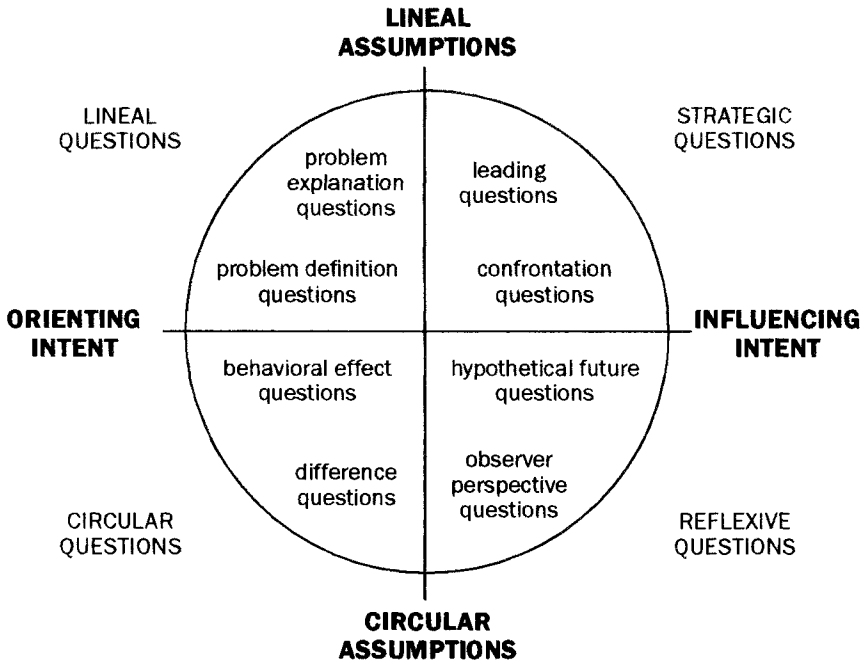


Figure 1.4. A framework for distinguishing four major groups of questions. From Tomm (1994).

### *Treatment/Intervention in the Positivist Tradition*

As with assessment, social workers use different approaches to intervention according to the theoretical framework that guides their helping process. Intervention strategies also differ according to their specific purpose, a client's problems or life situation, and the organizational or agency context. A spectrum of activities, ranging from interventions aimed at making social institutions more responsive to the needs of people to therapies focused on developing individual insight, compose social work treatment.

Generally, treatment that begins at the initial client-social worker contact should seek to enable clients to improve their psychosocial functioning. Helping people increase their problem-solving and coping capacities, obtaining resources and services, facilitating interaction among individuals and their environments, improving interpersonal relationships, and influencing social institutions and organizations all come under the rubric of social work treatment (Lowy, 1979).

In the complex practice world, the seasoned practitioner may use an eclectic orientation that involves "the technical flexibility of selecting interventions on the basis of specific client/problem/situation configuration" (Fischer, 1978, p. 237). An eclectic orientation also carries with it the need for the effective integration of a number of theories. Nonetheless, those helping strategies must be guided by the disciplined and continuous effort to make explicit how human behavior theory rather than personal bias influences the decision-making process.

### *Renaming a Postmodern Tradition*

In the postmodern tradition, the therapeutic conversation is the primary vehicle for helping the client be more efficacious. The client-social worker dialogue sets in motion a helping process that reframes a problem-laden client narrative with little or no sense of agency to a new story with a client sense of empowerment (McNamee & Gergen, 1992). Postmodern theorists Duncan, Solovey, and Rusk (1992) have suggested that the common thread uniting client-centered therapies is the practitioner's suggestions that help the client formulate "competing experiences—[those] that compete in some way with the client's actual experiences of the presenting problem" (p. 92, see Figure 1.4)

To create competing experiences, the practitioner adopts a nonpathological posture and focuses on client resources, learns client goals or what the client wants, collaborates with the client in the description of the problem and selection of solutions, interrupts negative solutions or counterproductive behavior, helps seek new meaning of events, and validates client experiences.

The major therapeutic tool in client-centered postmodern approaches is the conversational question. Anderson and Goolishian (1988) described this approach:

The therapist develops the art of asking questions that are not focused on discovering information and collecting data. Questions are not considered interventions, searches for preselected answers or checking out hypotheses. Questions are the tools of the therapist in a therapeutic conversation, and they are to be guided and informed by the views of the clients so that the conversation is geared toward maximum production of new information, understanding, meaning, and interpretation. (p. 383)

Meaning and understanding comes about through therapeutic conversations between client and social worker. "Not-knowing questions" are central to helping a client "bring into the open something unknown and unforeseen into the realm of possibility" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992, p. 34). Thus, the reconstruction of the client's story or narrative and the client's ability to carry these new meanings forward into action is the major goal. In the ultimate sense, this is the use of the *strengths perspective*—an empowering process by which clients transform themselves personally and collectively (Albrecht & Brewer, 1990; Saleeby, 1992; Sullivan, 1992; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989).

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## 2

### Human Behavior Theory and Professional Social Work Practice

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*The purpose of human behavior and the social environment content within the social work curriculum is to provide us with knowledge for practice.*

—J. Schriver, *Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Shifting Paradigms in Essential Knowledge for Social Work Practice*

*[T]he human behavior sequence . . . requires all educational programs to develop a coherent approach to selecting research and theories in the social, behavioral, and biological sciences, and to present them in a way that will illuminate divergencies and interrelationships.*

—C. Germain, *Human Behavior in the Social Environment: An Ecological View*

The expansive person-in-environment perspective, which is central to the social work human behavior and the social environment theoretical base and the profession's approach to practice, has led to an equally broad knowledge base. Meyer (1982) noted that what the social worker is supposed to do should dictate the boundaries of the profession's knowledge base. However, the definition of social work activities is so broad that "there are hardly any boundaries to knowledge that social workers need to get through the working day" (p. 27). Goldstein also (1980) defined the lack of precise knowledge boundaries as a concern: "It becomes necessary for each practitioner to be expert in understanding individuals, their environment, the society, and the transactions among people and environments. One might ask, what else is there?" (p. 43).

Postmodern theorists have further complicated the question of what theories—knowledge—are needed for social work practice. Because they have given less credence to normative theories based on a specific body of

scientific knowledge and, rather, have emphasized individual knowledge and belief, postmodern theorists also have taken exception with the view that universities are the only seats of learning. Instead, postmodernist thinkers have argued that knowledge is a process or art involving intuitive thinking and interpretation developed within a cultural, historical, and sociopolitical context (Weick, 1993).

Despite the lack of consensus about how social workers acquire the knowledge of human behavior needed for social work practice, answers are suggested in the widely accepted person-in-environment perspective reflected in the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 1992) curriculum policy statement:

The professional foundation must provide content about theories and knowledge of human bio-psycho-social development, including theories and knowledge about the range of social systems in which individuals live (families, groups, organizations, institutions, and communities). The human behavior and social environment curriculum must provide an understanding of the interactions between and among human biological, social, psychological, and cultural systems as they affect and are affected by human behavior. The impact of social and economic forces on individual and social systems must be presented. Content must be provided about the ways in which systems promote or deter people in the maintenance or attainment of optimal health and well-being. Content about values and ethical issues related to bio-psycho-social theories must be included. Students must be taught to evaluate theory and apply theory to client situations. (p. 8)

This chapter outlines and critiques the broad content areas noted in the policy statement and discusses their relationship to social work practice.

## EXPLAINING DEVELOPMENT ACROSS THE LIFE CYCLE

*[The concern of clinical social work is] the assessment of interaction between the individual's biological, psychological and social experience which provides a guide for clinical intervention.*

—J. Cohen, "Nature of Clinical Social Work"

*The idea is . . . that these [family] stages, with some acknowledgment of biological realities, are social constructions that have political, economic, social, and ethnic meaning.*

—D. Saleebey, "Notes on Interpreting the Human Condition:  
A Constructed HBSE Curriculum"

### ***Developmental Theory: A Positivist/ Traditional View***

Positivist theorists have proposed that developmental theory offers a means of understanding the client's behavior within the broader context