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# Understanding Behavior in the Social Environment

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Charles Zastrow  
Karen Kirst-Ashman

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# **Understanding Human Behavior and the Social Environment**

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**Nelson-Hall Publishers/Chicago**



Copy Editor: Sandi B. Schroeder  
Designer: Claudia von Hendricks  
Production Manager: Pamela Teisler  
Cover Designer: Brand Communications Group

Sections of Chapters 2, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13 & 14 were adapted from *Introduction to Social Welfare Institutions*, 2d ed., 1982 by Charles Zastrow. Adapted by permission of the Dorsey Press, Homewood, Ill.

Sections of Chapters 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14 & 15 were adapted from *Social Problems: Issues and Solutions*, 1984 by Charles Zastrow and Lee Bowker. Adapted by permission of Nelson-Hall, Inc., Chicago.

The material on Freud in Chapter 3 and the material on parent effectiveness training in Chapter 7 were adapted from *The Practice of Social Work*, 2d ed., 1985 by Charles Zastrow. Adapted by permission of The Dorsey Press, Homewood, Ill.

Sections of the material on identity formation in Chapter 6 were adapted from "Who Am I: Quest for Identity" by Charles Zastrow. In *The Personal Problem Solver*, Charles Zastrow and Dae Chang eds., 1977, pp. 365-370. Adapted by permission of Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

The material on the format of a Rational Self-Analysis (p. 269), the material on love relationships (p. 249); and material on the Richard Speck case (pp. 275-276) were adapted from *Talk to Yourself: Using the Power of Self-Talk*, 1979 by Charles Zastrow. Adapted by permission of Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Zastrow, Charles.

Understanding human behavior and the social environment.

Bibliography: p.

Includes indexes.

1. Social service. 2. Behavioral assessment.

3. Life change events. I. Kirst-Ashman, Karen Kay.

II. Title.

HV40.Z28 1987

361.3'01'9

86-23832

ISBN 0-8304-1122-4

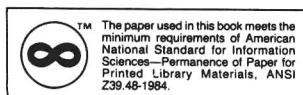
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Reprinted 1987, 1988, 1989

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Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5



# Preface

An 18-year-old man, who sees no reason to live anymore, threatens to kill himself. A couple suddenly separates after 23 years of marriage. A young family plagued by unemployment is evicted from their apartment and moves into a tent. A demonstration is staged because a local factory refuses to hire black workers. Why do people do what they do? The main focus of this text is on *assessment*; that is, material is presented to help readers understand the underlying reasons for why people act the way they do and to evaluate the strengths and deficits in the development of people. A wide variety of theories and research about human growth and development are presented. The theories cover both the internal and external variables that influence human behavior.

This text is especially written for use in undergraduate and graduate courses in human behavior and social environment (HBSE). As stated in the following accreditation guidelines, a curriculum requirement of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is that every accredited social work program must provide content on human behavior and social environment:

In keeping with social work's person-in-environment focus, students need knowledge of the relationships among human biological, social, psychological, and cultural systems as they affect or are affected by human behavior.

The curriculum design by each program should identify a coherent approach to selecting research and theories that constitute the systems of knowledge in the social, behavioral and biological sciences to be offered to students. It should specify how this knowledge will be presented in a way that illuminates divergencies and interrelationships (Council on Social Work Education, 1984, Appendix 1, p. 7).

The person-in-environment focus is a key component of an ecological model of human behavior. For many years social work programs have struggled to develop a HBSE curriculum that covers all the extensive content desired in the Council's HBSE accreditation guideline. This text seeks to meet this guideline with the following thrusts:

- An ecological model entitled The Behavior Dynamics Assessment Model (described in Chapter 1) is used which allows the authors to present a vast array of theories and research to explain and describe human development.
- A life span approach is used which allows for a description of human growth and development from conception through later adulthood.
- For each age group, separate chapters identify biological, psychological, and sociological variables that influence development.\*
- Normal developmental tasks and milestones are described for each age group.
- Theories of abnormal development are presented.
- Human diversity factors (involving racial groups, ethnic groups, gender, and sexual orientation) are described.

A final thrust of this text is to present the material in an educational and readable fashion. Numerous case examples, photographs, and line illustrations are used in presenting provocative and controversial issues about human behavior. As much as possible, jargon-free language is used so that the reader can readily grasp the theory.

## ■ Acknowledgments

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We wish to express our heartfelt appreciation to the following people and organizations:

The illustrator, Robert Gustafson

*The following who gave special permission to reproduce photographs:*

Nick Ashman, Fran Buss, Kevin Drollinger, Knute Jacobson, Stirling Johnson, Marge Kaneiss, Gary Kirst, Ruth Kirst, Kristine Koch, David Runyon, Gregg Theune, United Way of America, Wisconsin State Journal

A sincere thank you to Kristine Koch, Vicki Vogel, Nick Ashman, Susan Drollinger, Kevin Drollinger, and Phil McCullough for helping to conceptualize various chapters and for assisting in a number of ways with the writing. A warm thank you to the following who were invaluable in helping us to acquire photographs: Andrea Drollinger, Kevin Drollinger, Susan Drollinger, Helen Eger, Arnold Kirst, Ella Kirst, Gary A. Kirst, Gary S. Kirst, Linda Kirst, Ruth Kirst, Christopher Koch, Kristine Koch, Jon Koch, Scott Kreider,

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\*In some cases the biological, psychological, and sociological variables overlap. For example, a midlife crisis often involves a combination of biological, psychological, and sociological variables. Therefore, the authors may, rather arbitrarily, include some material under one heading (for example, covering biological aspects) when a reader can make a strong case that it should be covered under some other heading (that is, psychological aspects or sociological aspects).

and Mabel Scholtka. Finally, we want to express our indebtedness to Ronald Warncke who encouraged us to undertake this project, and who was an invaluable consultant in helping us to write this text.

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Karen K. Kirst-Ashman  
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# **Understanding Human Behavior and the Social Environment**



# Introduction: The Behavior Dynamics Assessment Model

A midwestern farm family goes bankrupt after federal financial support and protection is withdrawn. The family is forced to pack its belongings and move to Florida, where they can only afford to live in a tent.

A two and one-half-year-old girl has not yet begun to walk or say more than “mama” and “dada.” She is an only child. Her parents become worried because she seems to be lagging behind other children her age and wonder if something is wrong.

Two teenagers, who feel they are in love, struggle with many questions: Should they “make love?” Should they use birth control? What if she should get pregnant? Should they get married?

A 75-year-old widower finds his health failing. He has trouble reading and is beginning to stumble. He has lived alone in his modest home since his wife died 12 years ago. His adult children are pressuring him to sell his house and move into a nursing home. He likes both his home and his independence. What should he do?

Each of these vignettes reflects a real-life situation. Additionally, each situation addresses different issues.

Human behavior is complicated and often confusing. The basic task of social work is to “enhance the social functioning of all age-groups” (Zastrow, 1982, p. 3). Yet, in order to enhance this functioning, one must first understand it. Only then can techniques and skills be applied to make wise decisions.

## ■ A Perspective

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This text will explore the dynamics of human behavior and prepare a foundation of knowledge on which to build practice skills. Social workers assist people in making decisions and in solving their problems. One of the primary steps in the helping process is *assessment*. Assessment involves evaluating some human condition or situation and making decisions about what aspects of the behavior or situation need to be changed.

This chapter will

- Discuss the importance of foundation knowledge within the purpose and process of social work.





# Chapter 1

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- Explain the significance of foundation knowledge for assessment.
  - Describe the ecological perspective and the person-in-environment focus of social work.
  - Formulate a model for viewing, assessing, and understanding human behavior.
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## Foundation Knowledge and the Purpose of Social Work

In order to recognize the significance of foundation knowledge, the purpose and process of social work needs to be understood. Social work may be viewed as having three major thrusts (Baer and Federico, 1978, p. 68). First, social workers can help people solve their problems and cope with their situations more effectively. Second, social workers work with public and private agencies and organizations so that people can have better access to the needed resources and services. Third, social workers can “link people with systems”, so that they have access to resources and opportunities. Much of social work, then, involves social functioning. People interact with other people and other organizations, such as government and social service agencies, but also groups such as families and fellow workers. Social work targets not only how individual persons behave, but also how these other systems and people impact each other.

For example, in a family of five where both parents work at low-paying jobs in order to make a marginal living, the father works at a small, non-unionized plant and the mother as a waitress. Through no fault of his own, the father is laid off, and for a short time the family survives by collecting unemployment. However, when that runs out, they face a serious financial crisis. The father is unable to find another job, and the family applies for public assistance. But due to red tape, the payments are delayed. Meanwhile, the family is unable to pay its rent and utility bills and has to cut back drastically in its food choices. The phone is disconnected, the electricity is turned off, and the landlord threatens to evict them. Reacting to these external stresses, the parents begin to fight both verbally and physically. The children complain because they are hungry, which only intensifies the

parents' sense of defeat and disillusionment. Out of frustration, the parents hit the children to keep them quiet.

This situation illustrates how people are integrally involved with other systems in their environment. A social worker reviewing this case might assess how the family and other systems in their environment have impacted each other. First, the father's life was seriously affected by his work when he was laid off. The father then sought unemployment compensation, which affected that system by dipping into its funds. When those benefits ceased, the family went to the public assistance system for help. The public assistance system, in turn, impacted the family by delaying their payments. The resulting frustration affected the entire family as the parents were unable to cope with their stress. The entire situation can be viewed as a series of dynamic interactions between people and the environments.

## Foundation Knowledge and the Process of Social Work

Social work practice involves several basic steps.

1. The problem or situation should be scrutinized and understood.
2. A specific plan of action should be developed. Goals should be carefully selected and clearly specified.
3. The actual intervention occurs. This is the actual "doing" part of the process and may involve providing counseling to an individual or working with a large organization to change policies so as to better accommodate client needs.
4. The social work process calls for terminating the intervention in an organized manner (Shulman, 1981, pp. 17–28).

Accurate assessment of the person, problem, and situation is well documented as critically important in the social work process (Baer, 1979; Loewenber, 1977; Richmond, 1917). Information about the problem or situation needs to be gathered, analyzed, and interpreted.

Siporin (1975, p. 119) states that assessment is "a process and a product of understanding on which action is based." This process involves basic knowledge and assumptions about human behavior. Social workers need to have this information so that they can help clients identify and select alternatives. For example, a social worker who is trying to help a potentially suicidal adolescent needs to know why people commit suicide so that he knows what questions to ask, how to react to and treat the person, and what alternatives and supports to pursue. In working with clients of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, the worker needs to have at least general information about the clients' cultural values and potentially differential treatment they've experienced (for example, racial discrimination). Only then can the worker empathize with a particular situation and help the client identify realistic alternatives.

Bartlett (1970) calls for a common base of social work practice. This base involves common values such as the belief that each individual has the right to make his or her own decisions. This base also involves common skills. For example, social workers need skills for conducting interviews and for helping people identify and evaluate their various alternatives. Finally, a common base of knowledge is necessary. For example, social workers must