



HUMAN BEHAVIOR IN THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

John F. Longres

Second Edition

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John F. Longres

University of Washington, Seattle



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*I dedicate this edition to my
three wonderful sisters*

Betty

Elsa

Vikki

Preface

The second edition of *Human Behavior in the Social Environment* maintains the thrust of the original in that it continues to combine a critical perspective with a broad understanding of a systems framework. This is the strength of the book and a reason for its success.

A Critical Approach

I begin with a statement about the importance of social criticism for a practice profession. A critical approach emphasizes the search for social progress through evaluation of the effects of existing social structural arrangements on society and on individual well-being. The study of human behavior and development cannot stop at mere description but must proceed to prescription. When social service workers make policy, design and administer programs, and assess, analyze, and intervene in the lives of individuals and families, they cannot help but participate in the major debates taking place in society. The debates that we find ourselves in often focus directly or indirectly on those systems of inequality associated with class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and age. As social workers, we must struggle with the ongoing conflict produced by inequality and with determining ways to alleviate and eradicate it. In our everyday practice with families; people of color; the homeless, unemployed, underemployed, and the poor; lesbians and gays; people with disabilities; the young and the elderly, we are at once hoping to strengthen their ability to function while helping to build a better world in which they may live. In this respect social workers are reformers operating as much from values as from knowledge.

A Systems Approach

Social service workers take on diverse roles in their practice. Most work directly with individuals, families, and groups. Some work with communities as organizers and planners. Others promote social policy, develop and administer programs, or supervise these programs. Increasingly, social workers are likely to be generalists, moving from one level of practice to another. Thus, this book is organized around levels of systems. The theme of social systems is introduced in Part One, followed by chapters on communities (Part Two), families (Part Three), large and small groups (Part Four), and individual development across the life span (Part Five).

Although I take a “systems approach,” I do not rely exclusively on what many refer to as “systems theory.” Systems theory is the application of a functionalist framework as developed in sociology, anthropology, and biology. A systems approach, on the other hand, aspires to be a content-free model for examining human behavior. At its core, it guides the social worker to look simultaneously at the environment of a system and at the system itself. My definition of a systems approach acknowledges that the behavior of any particular system—be it an individual, family, group, organization, or community—is always a function of the transactions between it and its environment. This definition allows me to introduce a number of functionalist and nonfunctionalist approaches to the study of systems, including such “conflict perspectives” as social exchange and Marxian theories, perspectives that many believe are more in keeping with critical thinking. I also incorporate ideas about systems into psychological theories and the study of the individual. In so doing, I get away from the idea that socialization takes place within a society marked by consensus, stability, and harmony.

What Is New?

One of the joys of having written the first edition is the contact it gave me with students, instructors, and educators from schools other than my own who sought me out and gave me feedback. This input from letters and telephone calls and encounters at conferences has been very important to me, and I always learn from it.

When I was a doctoral student, I once wrote a professor telling him I was using an article he had published and asking his advice on how to apply it to the research I was doing. He wrote back answering my questions but telling me how threatening it felt to be taken seriously, to actually influence other people. Like him, I have felt very humbled by the feedback I have been given. Those who have praised my work have obviously made me feel great, but it has also made me feel somewhat awkward to know I have influenced their own or their students’ thinking. When the criticism has been negative I have been humbled, not antagonized nor humiliated, because I realize how seriously I have been taken and how much I still need to learn.

Three criticisms led to this revision. First, in the original edition, content on small and large groups was obscured by its inclusion in chapters on interpersonal relations. In this revision, a new chapter, “Social Interaction in Groups and Organizations,” is added, and the chapters on theories of social interaction were rethought so as to highlight organizational and group issues. These three chapters make up Part Four, “Large and Small Groups.”

Second, in the first edition the life span was treated in a single chapter, although the chapters on community and family life also contained material on life-span issues. Some have suggested that the book therefore failed to meet the curriculum policy standards of the Council on Social Work Education. There are those who claim that the Council requires courses on human behavior in the social environment to be organized around life-span development, but that is not my reading of the standards, nor is it the reading of most educators, accreditation commissioners, and site visitors to whom I have spoken. The standards indicate that life-span issues must be included along with content on various social systems. Courses organized around the life span tend to be weak in their handling of social systems, especially macro systems. Courses organized around systems often end up shortchanging the individual. Both styles of organizing human behavior in the social environment content have their strengths and weaknesses.

In this edition, much more attention is given to the individual. The two theory

chapters in Part One are built around understanding the individual in the context of society, and Part Five incorporates four chapters on individual behavior and development. Three of these chapters are specifically devoted to the life span: prenatal influences and infancy; childhood and adolescence; and early, middle, and late adulthood.

The other parts of the book also carry information on the life span. Content on every phase can be found in the chapters on family life, and much of the discussion of community life and life in large and small groups is easily understood within the context of child and adult development. Community, especially the social class and ethnic and racial communities, forms a central context for understanding child and adult development. The historical and cultural background of children and adults bears directly on their ability to progress psychologically and socially throughout life. The experience of many populations as targets of continuing prejudice and discrimination must also be understood. The context of organizations and small groups is especially important in understanding adult development; Erik Erikson emphasizes that generativity—involvement in productive and creative activity—is a central issue. In industrial societies, the workplace and family life are the major factors in the “radius of significant relations” within which adults deal with the need for creativity and the fear of stagnation.

The third criticism has to do with a perceived weakness in the attention given to women’s issues. In the first edition, there was no chapter, for instance, that specifically focused on women. The practice in the first edition of incorporating women’s issues in the discussion of many topics has been carried over into this one. I take this approach because I do not see women as making up a unique level of social systems (a woman is or, in the case of organizations, increasingly can be a part of most systems in American society), and I believe that gender relations, rather than women’s issues, is and should be the dominant concern in a book on human behavior. Nevertheless, in this edition I have incorporated more content on women’s issues and have tried to make the content more visible.

Aims and Objectives

In spite of my own theoretical preferences and critical inclinations, I try hard to present both theory and substantive material as impartially as possible. I believe that the use of a systems and critical approach is enhanced by recognizing the contributions of a number of theories. I have been a social work practitioner and educator long enough to know that yesterday’s passionate solution often becomes today’s crushing problem. Since so many of the theories of social scientists have not been completely tested, it is premature for social workers to be committed to any particular viewpoint. Since so many well-intentioned reforms create their own, sometimes worse, problems, social workers must always turn their critical eye on their own thoughts and ideas.

Using a critical approach and trying to be balanced at the same time creates many dilemmas. I often find myself walking a tightrope and receiving criticism from both the right and the left. Some will find the ideas promoted in this book too radical, while others will complain that they are not radical enough. I would like instructors and students to keep their eyes on the two main objectives of this book: to create social workers with good critical thinking skills, and to promote the idea that social workers should be involved in progressive social reform. In my opinion, a good text is not one that you necessarily always agree with. There must be a rapport between a text and the aims of an instructor, but a good text is one that you talk to and even argue with, one that involves students and provokes debate.

I hope instructors who use this text will not be telling students “I am only presenting what Longres says.” I do not know it all, nor do I pretend to. I am an educator who is trying to engage readers in material that I think is important. Instructors should try to engage students in the material and encourage them to put their own thoughts forward and articulate them as best they can. Students should selectively integrate the values, theories, and research they encounter into their own personal models of practice.

Style

Throughout the text I have tried to create a readable and lively style. I present theory and findings from studies and tackle controversial issues in ways that I hope will keep students interested. Each chapter begins with an introduction of the major themes discussed. Key concepts are highlighted and defined within context. New in this section are a glossary of important terms and an index that includes authors. To assure that human behavior content is bridged to practice, all chapters are introduced with a discussion of how they relate to social service work and end with a discussion of implications for practice. Each chapter also has study questions, not only to stimulate an identification with social work issues but also to help instructors organize class discussion and construct examinations. An instructor’s manual to facilitate the development of tests is also available.

Acknowledgments

The task of rewriting this book has been helped along greatly by the comments received from students. They are indeed our hope for the future, and I thank them for making me be a better and more sensitive instructor. It has also been helped along by my colleagues at the University of Wisconsin, where I wrote the first edition, and at the University of Washington, where I finished the second edition. I have been blessed by the support of colleagues at both schools. I am also very grateful to my reviewers, Libby Zimmerman, Charles Cowger, Jack Findley, and Hugh Horan.

I have come to realize that books like this cannot become successful without a good editor and without the backing of a good publishing house. In this regard I have enjoyed more than I could have ever expected. This edition, as well as the first, is brought alive by the strong editorship of Gloria Reardon, the editor assigned to me by F. E. Peacock Publishers. She not only improves the mechanics of my writing but is wonderfully perceptive and instructive about content and its placement. The success of this book is attributable as much to her as to me. I reserve my special thanks for selecting her and for being so supportive of me as an individual author for Ted Peacock, my publisher. I feel that “I am in good hands” with Ted and his superlative staff.

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March 1994

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A Critical Perspective on Social Systems



A Critical Perspective

MAJOR THEMES DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER

1. **A THEORY FOR PRACTICE.** The groundwork for a reform-oriented social service practice is laid by distinguishing among three kinds of theory: a theory for practice, a theory of practice, and a theory of caring.
2. **THE CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE.** A theory for practice and a theory of caring merge to form a critical perspective. In this perspective, social service workers participate in debates about social problems and take sides in building a better society.
3. **QUESTIONING THE CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE.** A critical perspective is not without detractors. As students begin social service practice, they must develop their own ideas about the strengths and limitations of a particular perspective.
4. **THE INTERACTION BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY.** Those who accept a critical perspective must recognize that social conditions, good or bad, are not the product of either individuals or society alone. Individuals influence society just as they are influenced by society, and the troubles individuals face in their own lives are as a rule inseparable from the problems society experiences as a whole. Social workers must try to understand the private troubles of individuals in terms of the social problems that are affecting them.
5. **CRITICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL CHANGE.** A critical theory of social service practice calls for action on the basis of study of the transactions taking place between the individual and the social environment. It can provide social workers with a comprehensive basis for resolving the difficulties of an individual in need by taking into account the individual's interactions with society.



THE IDEA THAT REAL SOCIAL PROGRESS is possible underlies social welfare institutions and social work practice. Social service policymakers and practitioners truly believe that if the right programs are developed and delivered effectively, clients, be they individuals or communities or whole societies, can progress from a relatively negative to a relatively positive condition.