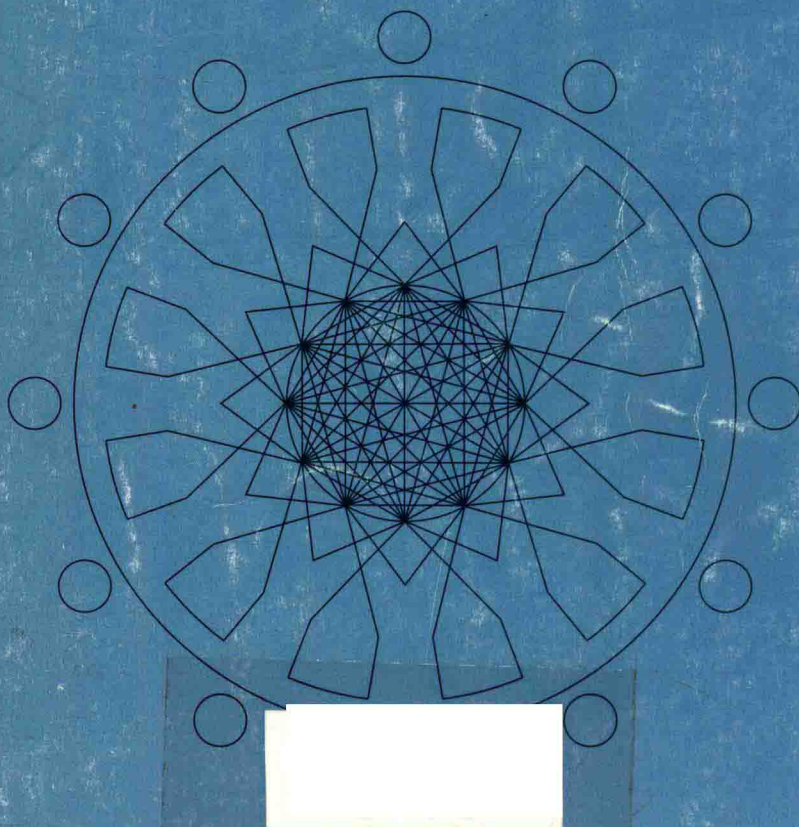


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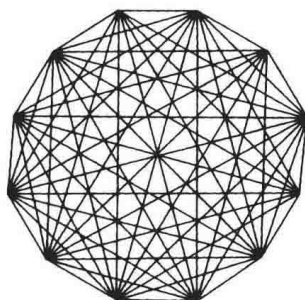
# HUMAN BEHAVIOR IN THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT



## A SOCIAL SYSTEMS APPROACH

Ralph E. Anderson and Irl Carter  
with Gary R. Lowe





# **Human Behavior in the Social Environment**

*A Social Systems Approach*

FIFTH EDITION

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**Ralph E. Anderson and Irl Carter  
with Gary R. Lowe**



**ALDINE DE GRUYTER**  
New York

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ALDINE DE GRUYTER

A division of Walter de Gruyter, Inc.

200 Saw Mill River Road

Hawthorne, New York 10532

This publication is printed on acid free paper ∞

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Anderson, Ralph E.

Human behavior in the social environment : a social systems approach / Ralph E. Anderson and Irl Carter with Gary Lowe. — 5th ed.  
p. cm. — (Modern applications of social work)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-202-36115-2 (cloth : alk. paper). — ISBN 0-202-36116-0  
(paper : alk. paper)

1. Social systems. 2. Social institutions. 3. Human behavior.

I. Carter, Irl. II. Lowe, Gary R., 1943- . II. Title.

IV. Series.

HM51.A54 1999

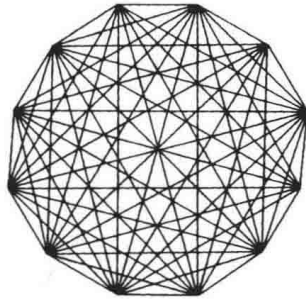
306—dc21

98-45357

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Ralph E. Anderson (1928–1997)  
The essence of Ralph by Gary R. Lowe

**FOR RALPH ANDERSON**

friend, mentor, and colleague

1928–1997

Nobody would choose to live without friends  
even if he had all the other good things

—Aristotle

# Acknowledgments

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We wish to acknowledge the inclusion of Dr. Gary R. Lowe, Dean of the School of Social Work at East Carolina University, in the authorship of this edition. Gary is our longtime colleague (at the University of Iowa), collaborator and friend. We invited him to join us in this edition, a fortunate decision, and are grateful for his contribution, both in content and in support over many years. He would like to thank Taia Younis and Sammy Dorsey for their editorial assistance in the initial and final preparation.

This edition greatly benefits from the continuing editorial and administrative support of fine people at Aldine de Gruyter: Dr. Richard Koffler, Executive Editor; Arlene Perazzini, Managing Editor; and Mike Sola, who did a superb job of copy editing. We continue to be proud of a quarter-century with a publishing company of such quality.

Finally, and most of all, we wish to acknowledge two persons who have not previously been recognized, but who have served as consultants, sounding boards, constructive critics, and contributors for the past quarter-century: Diane B. Anderson and Sharon K. Carter.

# Introduction to the Fifth Edition

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What I propose . . . is very simple; it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

The publication of this edition marks the twenty-fifth year since the first edition of this book appeared. A quarter-century ago, systems theory was a relatively obscure set of suppositions and observations, and *social* systems had little recognition or status; in fact, it was largely regarded as one more attempt to “scientize” ideas about human behavior, a fad with a short career. Early in the preparation for this edition, we raised the question whether we could now legitimately call social systems a *theory* rather than an approach. We believe the threshold for status as a full-fledged theory (or body of theories) has been reached, and we will call it an “approach” less frequently. Occasionally, we will continue to call social systems a *model*; this is consistent with its “new” status. Systems theory is an acknowledged source of some of the most exciting ideas in science, including the social sciences and the field of human behavior. We will, however, retain some modesty about the status of social systems *theory*, and skepticism regarding some applications of it to human behavior. It will, of course, be interesting to check on the status of social systems ideas in another twenty-five years. We will be glad to let you know; or *you tell us*.

Three new themes emerged as we rewrote this book: *self-development*, *caring*, and *postmodernism*. The first, self-development, has become a central theme in systems theory, notably in the work of Ilya Prigogine in



Belgium and Humberto Maturana in Chile. This concept integrated naturally with the other two themes.

The second theme, *caring*, emerged as we explored recent writings about women's development and came to see social relationships, caring in particular, as a fundamental aspect of culture that was omitted from most writing on culture, including previous editions of this book. We are indebted to these writers and theorists, in particular those cited in the section on women's development; we strongly agree with those feminist writers who assert that caring must be a *cultural* characteristic, and that men must be supported in developing and expressing this characteristic.

We discovered that the third theme, *postmodernism*, already characterized the earlier editions of this book without being explicit: we were "postmodern" twenty-five years ago! (Does that make us *prepostmodern*, or *postpostmodern*?) Our readers then (most of them coerced into reading a required text) would recognize the similarities to postmodernism as described below. The clearest, and perhaps briefest explication of postmodernism that we've seen is by W. Richard Scott:

Postmodernism is a recent intellectual movement and still a work in progress. During the past decade, a steady stream of loosely related ideas and critiques, primarily generated by European social and cultural theorists, has begun to challenge many of the central assumptions underlying contemporary social science. . . . This work shares much in common with other natural open system perspectives. . . . [I]t emphasizes the central role of power in shaping social institutions. . . . [I]t stresses the overriding importance of cultural beliefs and symbolic processes. (W. R. Scott, 1998:313–314)

In the postmodernist view, our social world is constructed socially, and "what we 'see' and believe depends on the social situation and our location in it" (ibid.:314). That is, all knowledge is *contextual*. Social science is the reporting of experience from multiple perspectives. Further, our interpretations of the world are not simply reports of events external to us, but also of *ourselves* (this adds another layer of interpretation to Arendt's comment, quoted above: "to think what *we* are *doing*"). Therefore, it is impossible to separate knowledge from power. *Who* is interpreting events, from what *perspective*, and with what *credence, authority, and power?* are questions that are as important as the "facts" being presented. Thus the emphasis on "deconstruction," to show the bases being used for such interpretations and claims to truth.

"The task of the analyst is to understand 'what is "going on" in a situation,' recognizing that there is no one correct version, including that developed by the analyst. Truth is recognized to have many aspects and to speak with many voices" (ibid.:315). A postmodernist view emphasizes *diversity*. "If uniformity exists, it is because diversity has been suppressed; if consistency dominates, it has been arbitrarily imposed" (ibid.). We

interpret postmodernism as a "view from below." Its view derives from those less powerful, as opposed to the rationalist (modernist) view "from above," by those who want or need "order" and "control." The former is an "outsider's" view, the latter an "insider's" view.

We point out the kinship of this book to postmodernism, in part, to defend it against the charge that, like macrofunctionalists or macrosystem determinists, social systems theory protects the status quo—that it favors the existing social structure and distribution of power. Not in this book—we refer anyone who holds that opinion to our first and later editions. We said then what we say now: Change is a constant, and there are no reserved seats in this arena. In fact, there are no seats; we are all participants. At least, that's *our* theory.

# Introduction\*

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When we mean to build,  
We first survey the plot, then draw the  
model.

—William Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, Part 2

This book is an attempt to map the territory of human behavior. It is intended to introduce students in the human services to ideas and theories that are fundamental to understanding human behavior. Students in social work, nursing, education, home economics, child development, and other disciplines that provide human services require an acquaintance with a vast body of knowledge about the behavior of humans. Today it is impossible to present enough information in one book to accomplish this.

In our teaching and in our students' learning, we found that we came nearest to accomplishing this task by writing this book and using it as a global map of human behavior. It designates the major levels of knowledge of human behavior and enables students to recognize the human systems that most concern them. It is designed to organize human behavior content into an understandable whole.

Along with most of our students, we have found this book useful as a large-scale map in a "survey" of human behavior. We know from our experience that its utility in any particular sector of human behavior may be limited; therefore, we provide "small-scale maps" in the suggested readings at the end of each chapter. These sources provide more detailed explorations of particular human systems. This book, however, serves to place knowledge of human behavior within a broad context to remind us

\* Revised 1999

that one's theory and one's practice are "a piece of the continent, and a part of the main," as the poet John Donne put it.

The manner in which this book and the more specialized resources fit together varies with the terrain. For example, a great many books and articles deal with *organizations* as systems, and it is fairly clear how the large- and small-scale maps of organizational behavior can be integrated. However, the integration of the two scales is less clear as they converge in the behavior of *a person*, where the relation of the part and the whole is always at issue. One recurrent question, for example, is whether a person should be regarded as the basic unit, a system capable of being subdivided, or only as a subsystem of some larger system such as society. Our intent is to demonstrate that these are all legitimate perspectives, to be used selectively in accord with the criteria explicated in this book.

Our objectives in this book are to explain how our map is designed and to establish its utility. We have sought an "umbrella" theory under which various theoretical perspectives would fit, or—to shift the metaphor—a "skeleton" framework upon which various theories can be affixed and fleshed out toward a comprehensive theory of human behavior. In our experience, no single theoretical perspective can encompass all aspects of human behavior.

Courses in human behavior have had various organizing themes, including:

1. *Normal vs. abnormal behavior.* This perspective provides knowledge of individual and family dynamics, which is invaluable in understanding and dealing with behavior of individual persons, but is of doubtful validity when applied to groups, institutions, communities, and societies.

2. *Developmental patterns of the person.* This perspective includes groups, communities, and society, but only from the standpoint of their effects on the development of the person. Inherent in this approach is a view of the person as an "adjuster" or "adapter." Human behavior is seen as adjustment to social stresses. Intervention possibilities are dichotomized, *either* working toward helping the person to adjust to the social situation *or* attempting to change the social situation so that it would be supportive to the person.

3. *Social process.* This perspective emphasizes knowledge of the social and cultural patterns that provide the social context for development and behavior. Such understanding is essential to social planning, but omits the uniqueness of the individual, and distinctiveness of patterns of living.

Each of these perspectives and others have served as a structuring theme for ordering knowledge of human behavior. Each enables scrutiny

of various theories and hypotheses. Each, however, has limited applicability to the broadening base of human services. There has been an exponential increase of social science knowledge, which varies greatly in its quality and reliability. This increase requires a more comprehensive integrative framework than that provided by any of the previously employed organizing schemes. What is now required is an approach that will foster an integration of psychoanalytic, psychological, and developmental perspectives with the burgeoning discoveries from the many disciplines that study human behavior. We have found that the social systems theory is that approach.

Social systems theory may be described as a "way of thinking," a "theory about theories," a "hypothesis about theories," which has evolved into a loosely knit body of theory. It is a particular form of *general systems theory*, which crosses physical, natural, and social sciences. Emerging findings in many disciplines buttress the validity of general systems theory.

Social systems theory has these characteristics:

1. *It is comprehensive.* It offers greater potential for description and integration of seemingly disparate theories into a single framework than any other framework we know.

2. *It provides suggestive leads* for all sectors of human behavior, even though it does not map all sectors adequately or equally.

3. *It has the potential to provide a common language* to various disciplines, both within and across disciplines. Students interested in psychotherapy, education, community development, and administration may find social systems theory a useful common framework. The psychotherapist may not be vitally interested in community development, believing that significant changes occur within individuals; the community developer may believe that significant changes occur only when groups act; while the administrator may believe that change is real only when it is structured and solidified in an institution or program. We believe that each is partially right and partially wrong. Like the proverbial blind men examining the elephant, each has part of the truth. Yet these three specialists can see relationships between and among their localities if they share a knowledge of social systems. They might prefer their "home territory," but would be aware that it was "part of the main." They can recognize that interactions of persons, groups, and organizations are integrally related in a common system.

4. *Parsimony* is the final characteristic. Social systems theory allows the student to reduce the "blooming, buzzing confusion" of theories of human behavior and methods of practice to a framework that can be mastered. Herein lies a danger, of course; through reductionism the student may be content with the global map, flying from continent to conti-

ment, coast to coast, without encountering the precipices, mudholes, and arid wastes upon which many a theory has foundered. The systems approach cannot replace detailed knowledge of at least some particular sectors of human behavior. After all, people live through the processes of human interaction, not on maps.

This book describes a systems “skeleton” and then locates important human behavior concepts upon it. The instructors and students who use this book must flesh out the skeleton so that the approach will be directly applicable to the practice of each respective profession.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is a large-scale map, intended to be supplemented in each particular sector of human behavior by more detailed maps. We have used it this way with both undergraduate and graduate students. We have guided students through the courses in modular fashion, using selected theories and indicating where each more detailed theory meshed with the large-scale map.

The first two chapters acquaint the student with social systems theory. The essential systems characteristics are introduced and explained. These concepts, which serve to draw the map, reappear in the subsequent chapters. They are the key ideas that together form the social systems approach of this book.

The subsequent chapters are modules—they can be taught as separate units, with only the first two chapters as prerequisites. The present arrangement of the chapters is only one feasible way of ordering human systems, in descending order of magnitude. If instructors using this book prefer other sequences, the order can be changed, or even reversed. In this way, a course might be better integrated with other courses during the same term, or might better convey a particular theme being emphasized. For instance, instructors in colleges of education might decide to present the chapter on the person prior to chapters on group or family.

We have found it most useful to use other texts with this book to provide additional threads of continuity through the general map, to assure degrees both of latitude and longitude, and to provide a single small-map source for each human system examined. For continuity crossing all systems, we have used *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle*, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On*. For specific systems, we have assigned Erikson's *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (1968) for the chapter on the person; Billingsley's *Black Families in White America* (1988) and Erdrich's

*Love Medicine* for the chapter on families, and Hall's *Beyond Culture* for the culture module. Again, many choices are open to the instructor.

Suggested readings, with brief commentaries on their particular usefulness, follow each chapter. The readings actually used will depend upon the instructor and students and on the clock and calendar time available. If students are unfamiliar with particular social systems (such as family or groups), the supplemental materials should be selected with this in mind. For students acquainted with particular systems, supplemental readings can give deeper insights into theoretical writings and related research. The listed films and videos may also be helpful to convey particular ideas, or as an opportunity for students to apply the concepts in analyzing the situation that is portrayed.

The glossary is designed for easy reference to the key concepts used throughout this book. The reader should consult the glossary because these are the definitions used throughout.

The book is (metaphorically) an open system. We assume that each instructor will add and substitute books, articles, films and videos, or other learning aids. This flexibility allows the book to be used in graduate schools, four-year colleges, community and junior colleges, and perhaps in-service training programs.

In other words, this work comes to you incomplete. It not only suggests that students and instructors add their own input to this study of human behavior; the book *requires* it. We hope that social systems theory will be a step toward an integrated body of social science knowledge that will reflect both the complexity of social forces and the uniqueness of the individual person.

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