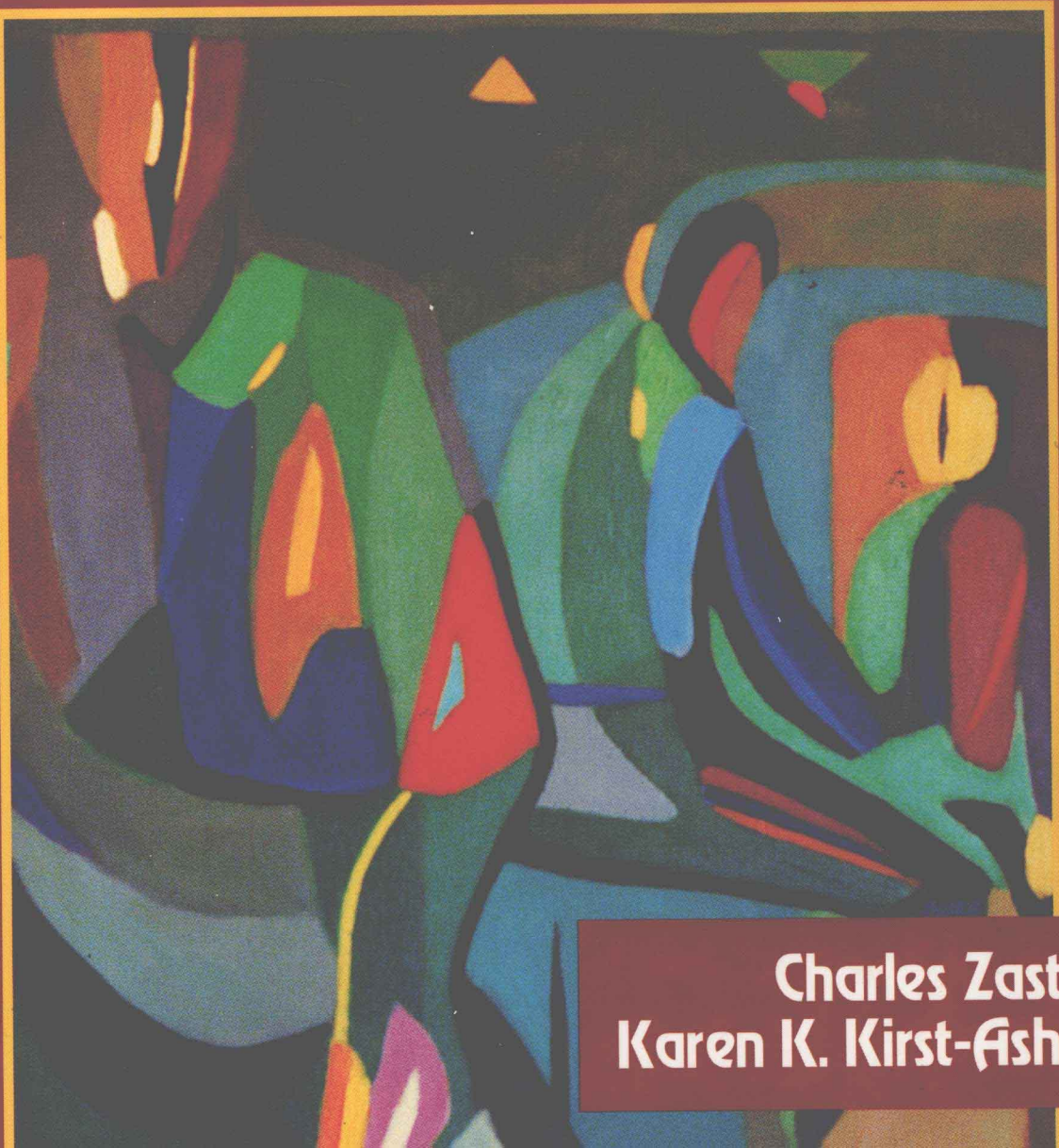


Fourth Edition

# UNDERSTANDING HUMAN BEHAVIOR AND THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT



Charles Zastrow  
Karen K. Kirst-Fishman

FOURTH EDITION

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# **UNDERSTANDING HUMAN BEHAVIOR**

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**AND THE**

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# **SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT**

**Charles Zastrow**

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NELSON-HALL PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

## Nelson-Hall Series in Social Work

Consulting Editor: Charles Zastrow  
*University of Wisconsin—Whitewater*

Project Editor: Dorothy Anderson  
Production/Design Manager: Tamra Phelps  
Typesetter: E.T. Lowe  
Printer: Courier Companies  
Cover Painting: *Triangle* by Ivan Whitkov

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Zastrow, Charles.

Understanding human behavior and the social environment / Charles  
Zastrow, Karen K. Kirst-Ashman. — 4th ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and indexes.

ISBN 0-8304-1483-5 (hard cover)

1. Social psychology. 2. Behavioral assessment. 3. Developmental  
psychology. 4. Social work education. 5. Life change events.

I. Kirst-Ashman, Karen Kay. II. Title.

HM251.Z37 1997

302—dc21

96-47768

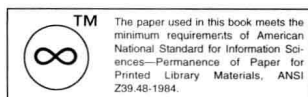
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address Nelson-Hall Publishers, 111 North Canal Street, Chicago,  
Illinois 60606.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6



# Preface

An eighteen-year-old man, who sees no reason to live anymore, threatens to kill himself. A couple suddenly separates after twenty-three 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 African American workers. Why do people do what they do? The main focus of this text is an *assessment*; that is, material is presented to help readers understand the underlying reasons why people act the way they do and to evaluate the strengths and deficits in the development of people. A 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 undergraduate and graduate courses in human behavior and the social environment (HBSE). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the national accrediting body, provides the following guidelines for HBSE content in its Curriculum Policy Statement for Baccalaureate Degree Programs:

Programs of social work education 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 the 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 individuals 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.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Council on Social Work Education, "Curriculum Policy Statement for Baccalaureate Degree Programs in Social Work Education," in *Handbook of Accreditation Standards and Procedures*, 4th ed. (Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education, 1994).

The Curriculum Policy Statements also require that content on the following be incorporated throughout the curriculum: social work values and ethics, diversity, promotion of social and economic justice, and populations-at-risk.

For a number of years social work programs have struggled to develop a HBSE curriculum that covers the extensive content mandated in the Curriculum Policy Statements for HBSE. This text is designed to facilitate the coverage of such content. The text has the following thrusts:

- It uses a systems model, entitled the Systems Impact Model (described in chapter 1), which incorporates some ecological concepts. This model allows the authors to present a vast array of theories and research to explain and describe human development and behavior. It focuses on individual functioning within various size systems (including families, groups, organizations, and communities).
- It presents substantial information on human diversity and populations at risk, including material on groups distinguished by gender, culture, class, religion, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, and national origin.
- It uses a life span approach that allows for a description of human growth and development from conception through adulthood.
- It identifies biological, psychological, and sociological systems that influence development for each age group.<sup>2</sup> Interactions among these systems are discussed in some depth. For many of the bio-psycho-social theories described, content about values and ethical issues is included.

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2. 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 strong case can be made that it should be covered under some other heading (that is, psychological aspects or sociological aspects).



- It presents material on strategies to promote social and economic justice.
- It describes normal developmental tasks and milestones for each age group.
- It describes the impact of social and economic forces on individuals and social systems.
- It presents material on the attainment and maintenance of optimal mental and physical health and well-being. It also describes the ways in which systems promote or deter health and well-being.
- It presents material using a four-faceted approach to evaluate theory, and describes how diverse theories can be applied to client situations.

A major thrust of this text is to present the material in a readable fashion. Numerous case examples, photographs, and 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 theory.

It should be noted that the accompanying Student Manual has been designed to enhance students' ability to comprehend and assimilate course content. Use of this Student Manual also minimizes the need for supplementary handouts. All chapters are outlined to assist in note-taking during lectures and while reading the text. Additionally, a variety of classroom exercises, role plays, and issues for discussion are included for each chapter. The authors have found that student involvement through the use of such experiential exercises and classroom discussion greatly improves both students' understanding of content and their ability to relate content to social work practice.

In those instances where the text is used for a one semester course, the authors have found that it is useful to divide the text into four components for the purpose of administering examinations. Each component focuses on one of the four specified phases of the lifespan. These phases are infancy and childhood (chapters 2 through 4), adolescence and young adulthood (chapters 6 through 8), middle adulthood (chapters 10 through 12), and later adulthood (chapters 14 through 16). The text is composed of sixteen chapters. A fourth chapter chosen from the remaining chapters may be added to each component. The remaining four chapters are: chapter 1, Theoretical Perspectives on Human Behavior and the Social Environment; chapter 5, Ethnocentrism and Racism;

chapter 9, Gender Roles and Sexism; and chapter 13, Sexual Orientation.

In those programs which use the text for more than one semester (for example, those programs which spend one semester on each half of the lifespan), the four lifespan phases can be broken down even further in a fashion similar to that mentioned above. The authors have been asked how so much material can be covered in such relatively little time. When told the topic of the text, a friend (who happens to be an accountant) asked, "Human behavior? Well, isn't that everything?" Our response must be that, yes, it involves everything about people that social workers need to know. We have found that we must make choices regarding what content is most important to cover. Those programs that allow more time for HBSE can address the significant issues and topics examined in the text much more thoroughly. We ourselves have found that requiring prerequisite courses in biology, psychology, and sociology has allowed us to spend more time focusing on issues critical to social workers in practice.

Our overall intent is to provide a dynamic, interesting, and relevant social work perspective on human behavior and the social environment. We strive to enhance students' understanding of social work values, develop their ability to empathize with people in situations different than their own, and help them focus on the need for changes in the impinging environment and sometimes in the client. We hope students will be able to relate these values and this knowledge to how social workers make assessments in real practice situations. We endeavor to portray social work as the fascinating, useful field it is.

## Acknowledgments

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We wish to express our heartfelt appreciation to the following people for helping to conceptualize various chapters and for assisting in a number of ways with the writing: Nick Ashman, David Cohen, Patricia Danielson, Karen Fisher, Rachel Kolberg, Tim Larson, Phil McCullough, Kathy Moretz, Steve Noll, and David Runyon. We also want to express our indebtedness to Steve Ferrara, Libby Rubenstein, and the staff at Nelson-Hall, who were invaluable consultants in writing this revision.

# Contents

Preface	xiii
Acknowledgments	xiv

## CHAPTER 1 Theoretical Perspectives on Human Behavior and the Social Environment 1

A PERSPECTIVE	2
Foundation Knowledge and the Purpose of Social Work	3
Foundation Knowledge and the Process of Social Work: The Importance of Assessment	4
Impacts of Systems in the Environment	5
<i>The Ecological Perspective: Important Concepts</i>	
People's Involvement with Multiple Systems	13
<i>Micro, Mezzo, and Macro Systems</i>	
<i>The Social Environment</i>	
<i>Interactions Between Micro Systems and Mezzo Systems</i>	
<i>Interactions Between Micro Systems and Macro Systems</i>	
<i>The Impact of Social Forces</i>	
<i>The Relationships among Biological, Psychological, and Social Systems</i>	
<i>Bio-Psycho-Social Systems Affect Each Other</i>	
<i>Diversity, Oppression, and Populations-at-Risk</i>	
The Systems Impact Model	24
<i>The Client System</i>	
<i>The Relationship Between Organizational Macro Systems and Client Systems</i>	
<i>The Relationship Between the Community Macro System and the Client System</i>	
<i>The Relationship Between Organizational and Community Macro Systems</i>	
<i>Institutional Values Macro System</i>	
<i>The Effects of Institutional Values and Organizational Macro Systems on Clients</i>	
<i>The Social Worker System</i>	
The Impacts of Organizations	28
<i>What Are Organizations?</i>	
<i>Organizational Theories</i>	
Viewing Organizations from a Systems Perspective	31
<i>Resource Input</i>	
<i>Process</i>	
<i>Output</i>	
<i>The Exceptional Problems of Social Service Organizations</i>	
<i>Goal Displacement</i>	
Communities and Human Behavior	35
<i>Theoretical Perspectives on Communities</i>	
<i>Social Work Practice With and Within Communities</i>	

Social Worker System Roles	41
Problem Solving and Social Work: The Underlying Theme	45
Summary	47
• Case Example: Child Abuse	
• Application of Values and Ethics to Bio-Psycho-Social System Assessments	
• Hispanic Women, Community Development, and Social Action	
• Case Example: Unplanned Pregnancy	

---

## Part One Infancy and Childhood

---

## CHAPTER 2 Biological Systems and Their Impacts on Infancy and Childhood 51

A PERSPECTIVE	52
The Dynamics of Human Reproduction	52
<i>Conception</i>	
<i>Diagnosis of Pregnancy</i>	
<i>Fetal Development during Pregnancy</i>	
<i>Prenatal Influences</i>	
<i>Prenatal Assessment</i>	
<i>Problem Pregnancies</i>	
<i>The Birth Process</i>	
Early Functioning of the Neonate	65
Developmental Milestones	65
<i>Growth as a Continuous, Orderly Process</i>	
<i>Specific Characteristics of Different Age Levels</i>	
<i>Individual Differences</i>	
<i>The Nature-Nurture Controversy</i>	
<i>Relevance to Social Work</i>	
<i>Profiles of Normal Development</i>	
Significant Issues and Life Events	72
The Abortion Controversy: Impacts of Social and Economic Forces	72
<i>The Impact of Macro System Policies on Practice and Access to Services</i>	
<i>Incidence of Abortion</i>	
<i>Methods of Abortion</i>	
<i>The Importance of Context and Timing</i>	
<i>Long-Term Effects of Abortion</i>	

*Arguments For and Against Abortion**Social Work Roles and Abortion***Infertility 85***Causes of Infertility**Psychological Reactions to Infertility**Treatment of Infertility**Alternatives Available to the Infertile Couple**The Effects of Macro Systems on Infertility**Social Work Roles and Infertility***Summary 95**

- Developmental Milestones for Children from Age Four Months to Eleven Years
- Case Example: Single and Pregnant
- Abortion Related Ethical Dilemmas in Practice
- A Feminist Perspective on Infertility Counseling
- An Ethical Dilemma: Fertility Doctor Allegedly Uses His Own Sperm to Impregnate Unknowing Patients

**CHAPTER 3****Psychological Systems and Their Impacts on Infancy and Childhood****97****A PERSPECTIVE 98****Theories of Psychological Development 99***Psychodynamic Theory**Evaluation of Psychodynamic Theory**Neo-Freudian Psychoanalytic Developments**Behavioral Theories**Phenomenological Theories: Carl Rogers**Being Sensitive to Diversity When Examining Psychological Theories***Cognitive Development: Piaget 111***The Sensorimotor Period**The Preoperational Thought Period**The Period of Concrete Operations**The Period of Formal Operations**Evaluation of Piaget's Theory***Emotional Development 118***Infants' Emotions**Infants and Temperament***Self-Concept and Self-Esteem 121***A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Self-Esteem***Significant Issues and Life Events 124***Intelligence and Intelligence Testing**People Who Have Mental Retardation: A Population-at-Risk**People with Learning Disabilities: A Population-at-Risk***Summary 141**

- Definitions of Common Defense Mechanisms Postulated by Psychoanalytic Theory
- The Relevance of Theory to Social Work: Evaluating Theory
- The Effects of Positive and Negative Self-Concepts
- The Americans with Disabilities Act: A Macro System Addresses a Population-at-Risk
- People with Developmental Disabilities—Populations-at-Risk
- The Effects of a Learning Disability

**CHAPTER 4****Social Systems and Their Impacts on Infancy and Childhood****143****A PERSPECTIVE 144****Socialization 145****The Family Environment 145***Membership in Family Groups: Variations in Family Structure**Positive Family Functioning**Effects of Social Forces and Policies on Family Systems: Helpful or Hurtful?**The Dynamics of Family Systems***The Family Life Cycle 149****Learning Theory 154***Evaluation of Theory**Respondent Conditioning**Modeling**Operant Conditioning**The ABCs of Behavior**Reinforcement**Punishment**Extinction***Applications of Learning Theory to Practice 162***The Use of Positive Reinforcement**Types of Positive Reinforcers**Secondary Reinforcers**Reinforcers versus Rewards**Suggestions for Using Positive Reinforcement**The Use of Punishment***Additional Issues 170***Accidental Training**Behaviorally Specific Terminology**Measuring Improvement**The Importance of Parental Attention***A Specific Treatment Situation: Time-Out from Reinforcement 173***Improving Effectiveness**"Grounding"***Impacts of Common Life Events on Children 174***Membership in Family Systems**Membership in Sibling Subsystems**Gender Role Socialization**Ethnic and Cultural Differences in Families***The Social Environment: Peers, Television, and School 180***The Social Aspects of Play with Peers**The Influence of Television**The School Environment***Child Abuse and Neglect 187***Incidence and Demographics of Child Abuse and Neglect**Physical Child Abuse**Child Neglect**Sexual Abuse***Summary 200**

- The Application of Systems Theory Principles to Families
- Consequences and Recurring Behavior
- Accidental Training
- Suggestions for Talking to Children Victimized by Sexual Assault

## CHAPTER 5

### Ethnocentrism and Racism

201

<b>A PERSPECTIVE</b>	202
Ethnic Groups and Ethnocentrism	202
Race and Racism	203
Aspects of Social and Economic Forces: Prejudice, Discrimination, and Oppression	205
Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes	207
Racial and Ethnic Discrimination Is the Problem of Whites	207
Race Is a Social Concept	208
Institutional Values and Racism: Discrimination in Systems	208
<i>Discrimination and Oppression in Organizational Macro Systems</i>	
<i>Discrimination and Oppression in Community Macro Systems</i>	
Sources of Prejudice and Discrimination	210
<i>Projection</i>	
<i>Frustration-Aggression</i>	
<i>Countering Insecurity and Inferiority</i>	
<i>Authoritarianism</i>	
<i>History</i>	
<i>Competition and Exploitation</i>	
<i>Socialization Patterns</i>	
<i>Belief in the One True Religion</i>	
<i>Evaluation of Discrimination Theories</i>	
Impacts of Social and Economic Forces: The Effects and Costs of Discrimination and Oppression	214
The Effects of Discrimination on Human Growth and Development	215
<i>History and Culture of African Americans</i>	
<i>Effects of Discrimination on Development of Self-Concept</i>	
<i>The Africentric Perspective and Worldview</i>	
Strategies to Promote Social and Economic Justice	221
<i>Mass Media Appeals: Striving to Change Institutional Values</i>	
<i>Greater Interaction Between Minority Groups and the Majority Group</i>	
<i>Civil Rights Laws: Changing the Legal Macro System</i>	
<i>Activism</i>	
<i>School Busing: A Community Initiative</i>	
<i>Affirmative Action: A Macro System Response</i>	
<i>Confronting Racist Remarks and Actions</i>	
<i>Minority-Owned Businesses</i>	
<i>Confronting Community Problems: Inner Cities</i>	
<i>Grass-Roots Organizations: Implementing Change in Community Macro Systems</i>	
Social Work Practice with Racial and Ethnic Groups	229
<i>Ethnic-Sensitive Practice</i>	
<i>Learning the Culture of the Group</i>	
<i>Self-Awareness of Values, Prejudices, and Stereotypes</i>	
<i>Application of Theory to Practice: Techniques of Intervention</i>	
<i>Social Work Roles to Counter Discrimination</i>	
The Future of American Race and Ethnic Relations	234
<b>Summary</b>	236
• Violence Against Minorities in the United States	
• Is Racial Discrimination Based on Criminal Thinking?	
• Kwanzaa	
• Rosa Parks' Act of Courage Sparked the Civil Rights Movement	
• A Dream of the End of Racism	

## Part Two

### Adolescence and Young Adulthood

## CHAPTER 6

### Biological Systems and Their Impacts on Adolescence and Young Adulthood

239

<b>A PERSPECTIVE</b>	240
Adolescence	241
Puberty	241
<i>The Growth Spurt</i>	
<i>The Secular Trend</i>	
<i>Primary and Secondary Sex Characteristics</i>	
Psychological Reactions to Physical Changes	244
<i>Body Image and Self-Concept</i>	
<i>Weight Worries</i>	
<i>Weight, Women, and Eating Disorders</i>	
<i>Early and Late Maturation in Boys</i>	
<i>Early and Late Maturation in Girls</i>	
Young Adulthood	248
<i>Physical Development</i>	
<i>Health Status</i>	
<i>Life-Style and Good Health</i>	
Significant Issues and Life Events	254
<i>Sexual Activity in Adolescence</i>	
<i>Unplanned Pregnancy in Adolescence</i>	
<i>Teenage Fathers</i>	
<i>Why Do Teens Get Pregnant?</i>	
<i>Sex Education</i>	
<i>Sex Education in the Age of AIDS</i>	
<i>Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)</i>	
<i>Major Methods of Contraception</i>	
<b>Summary</b>	273
• Masturbation	
• Breast Cancer	
• Portrait of a Single Father	

## CHAPTER 7

### Psychological Systems and Their Impacts on Adolescence and Young Adulthood

274

<b>A PERSPECTIVE</b>	275
Identity formation	275
<i>Erikson's Psychosocial Theory</i>	
<i>Implications of Identity Formation in Adolescence</i>	
<i>Marcia's Categories of Identity</i>	
<i>The Evaluation of Theory and Application to Client Situations</i>	
<i>Race, Culture, Ethnicity, and Identity Development</i>	
<i>Lesbian and Gay Adolescents</i>	
Moral Development	283
<i>Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development</i>	
<i>Evaluation of Kohlberg's Theory</i>	
<i>Moral Development and Women: Gilligan's Approach</i>	
<i>Evaluation of Gilligan's Theory</i>	
<i>Application of Theory to Client Situations</i>	



## Significant Issues and Life Events: Suicide and Assertiveness 288

### Suicide 288

*Incidence of Suicide*

*Causes of Adolescent Suicide*

*Suicidal Symptoms*

*How to Use the SAD PERSONS Scale*

*Guidelines for Helping Suicidal People*

*Community Responses to Suicide: Prevention and Crisis Intervention*

### Assertiveness and Assertiveness Training 297

*The Relevance of Assertiveness*

*Nonassertive, Assertive, and Aggressive Communication*

*The Advantages of Assertiveness*

*Assertiveness Training*

*Application of Assertiveness Approaches to Social Work Practice*

*Women: A Population-at-Risk*

### Summary 302

- Erikson's Eight Stages of Development
- How to Determine Who You Are
- Kohlberg's Six Stages of Moral Development
- Joany—A Victim of Suicide
- Suicide Notes
- The SAD PERSONS Scale
- Each of Us Has Certain Assertive Rights

## CHAPTER 8

### Social Systems and Their Impacts on Adolescence and Young Adulthood 303

#### A PERSPECTIVE 304

#### Social System Changes in Adolescence and Young Adulthood 305

*Movement from Dependence to Independence*

*Interaction in Peer Group Systems*

*Intimacy versus Isolation*

#### Interaction in Family Systems: Choosing a Personal Life-Style 311

*Marriage*

*Cohabitation*

*Single Life*

*Parenthood*

*Childless Couples*

#### Social Problems 319

*Eating Disorders*

*Emotional and Behavioral Problems*

*Macro System Problems: Crime and Delinquency*

*Macro System Problems: Delinquent Gangs*

#### Summary 341

- Interaction in Families: Effective Communication Between Parents and Children
- An Educational Program for Ethnic Minority Adolescents That's Making a Difference
- Theories about Why People Choose Each Other as Mates
- Romantic Love versus Rational Love
- Predictive Factors Leading to Marital Happiness/Unhappiness

- Guidelines for Building and Maintaining a Happy Marriage
- Parental Sex Preferences
- Major Mental Disorders According to the American Psychiatric Association
- Format for Rational Self-Analysis
- A Rational Self-Analysis of Emotions Associated with Ending a Marriage
- Our Thinking Determines Our Behavior and Our Emotions
- Self-Talk Explanation for Multiple Forgeries

## CHAPTER 9

### Gender Roles and Sexism 343

#### A PERSPECTIVE 344

#### Gender Role Stereotypes 345

*Childhood*

*Adolescence*

*Adulthood*

#### Male/Female Differences 348

*Ability Level*

*Communication Styles*

#### People 350

#### Significant Issues and Events in the Lives of Women 350

#### Comparable Worth and Economic Inequality 350

#### Sexual Harassment 353

*The Definition of Sexual Harassment*

*Strengthening the Definition: A Macro System Response*

*The Extent of Sexual Harassment*

*Effects of Sexual Harassment*

#### Sexist Language 357

#### Rape and Sexual Assault 358

*Incidence of Rape*

*Theoretical Views of Rape*

*Common Myths about Rape*

*Additional Facts about Rape*

*Profile of a Rapist*

*Survivors' Reactions to Rape*

*Suggestions for Counseling Rape Survivors*

#### Battered Women 370

*The Abusive Perpetrator*

*The Battering Cycle*

*Why Does She Stay?*

*Community Responses to Battered Women: Their Alternatives*

#### Special Counseling Needs of Women 378

#### Working with Women 379

#### Summary 380

- Anita Hill versus Clarence Thomas: A Case of Sexual Harassment?
- Vignettes of Sexual Harassment
- Sexual Harassment Allegations Plague High Places
- Confronting Sexual Harassment
- Using Nonsexist Language
- Suggestions for Rape Prevention
- "My Place"
- O.J. Simpson—Revered American Hero and Spouse Batterer
- Prince Charming Redefined
- Strategies for Combating Sexism and Achieving Sexual Equality

## Part Three Middle Adulthood

### CHAPTER 10 Biological Systems and Their Impacts on Middle Adulthood 383

<b>A PERSPECTIVE</b>	384
<b>The Age Span of Middle Adulthood</b>	384
<b>Physical Changes in Middle Age</b>	384
<i>Changes in Physical Functioning</i>	
<i>Health Changes</i>	
<i>Changes in Physical Appearance</i>	
<i>The Double Standard of Aging</i>	
<i>Changes in Sense Organs</i>	
<i>Changes in Physical Strength and Reaction Time</i>	
<i>Changes in Intellectual Functioning</i>	
<b>Female Menopause</b>	388
<b>Male Climacteric</b>	391
<b>Midlife Crisis: True or False?</b>	392
<b>Sexual Functioning in Middle Age</b>	393
<i>Sex in Marriage</i>	
<i>Extramarital Sexual Relationships</i>	
<i>Sex Following Divorce</i>	
<i>Sex in Widowhood</i>	
<i>Sex among the Never-Married</i>	
<i>Celibacy</i>	
<b>People Living with AIDS: A Population-at-Risk</b>	397
<i>What Causes AIDS?</i>	
<i>How Is AIDS Contracted?</i>	
<i>Diagnosis</i>	
<i>Origin of AIDS</i>	
<i>The Effects of HIV</i>	
<i>Treatment and Prevention of AIDS</i>	
<i>Impacts of Social and Economic Forces: AIDS Discrimination and Oppression</i>	
<i>Professional Values and AIDS</i>	
<i>Ethical Dilemmas: Confidentiality</i>	
<i>Ethical Dilemmas: HIV Testing</i>	
<i>Macro System Responses to AIDS</i>	
<i>Social Work Roles: Helping Persons Living with AIDS</i>	
<b>Summary</b>	413
• An Identity Crisis: When the Applause Stops	
• Cultural Differences in Women's Experience of Menopause	
• Osteoporosis	
• The Coolidge Effect in Males Who Join Swinging Groups	
• Magic Johnson, an American hero, Joins the Battle Against the AIDS Virus	
• When a Friend Has AIDS	
• Persons Living with AIDS	

### CHAPTER 11 Psychological Systems and Their Impacts on Middle Adulthood 414

<b>A PERSPECTIVE</b>	415
<b>Generativity versus Stagnation</b>	416
<b>Peck's Theories of Psychological Development</b>	416
<b>Levinson's Theories of Life Structure, Life Eras, and Transitions for Men</b>	417
<b>Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs</b>	420
<b>Game Analysis and Script Analysis</b>	421
<i>Game Analysis</i>	
<i>Life Scripts</i>	
<b>Mezzo System Interactions: Nonverbal Communication</b>	427
<i>The Functions of Nonverbal Communication</i>	
<i>Posture</i>	
<i>Body Orientation</i>	
<i>Gestures</i>	
<i>Touching</i>	
<i>Clothing</i>	
<i>Personal Space</i>	
<i>Territoriality</i>	
<i>Facial Expressions</i>	
<i>Voice</i>	
<i>Physical Appearance</i>	
<i>The Environment</i>	
<b>Control Theory</b>	435
<b>Intuition</b>	437
<b>Chemical Substance Use and Abuse</b>	437
<i>Specific Drugs—What They Are and What They Do</i>	
<i>Dependence on Alcohol and Other Drugs</i>	
<i>Interaction in Family Systems: A Theoretical Approach to Drug Abuse</i>	
<i>Application of Theory to Client Situations: Treatment for the Chemically Dependent Person and His or Her Family</i>	
<i>Understanding and Treating Codependency</i>	
<i>The Relationship Between Knowledge and Assessment</i>	
<b>Summary</b>	459
• Application of Levinson's Theories to Women: An Evaluation	
• Nonverbal Behavior among Poker Players	
• Drugs of Abuse: Facts and Effects	
• Crack Babies	
• An AA Meeting	
• Working with Alcoholic Clients: The Problem of Denial	

### CHAPTER 12 Social Systems and Their Impacts on Middle Adulthood 460

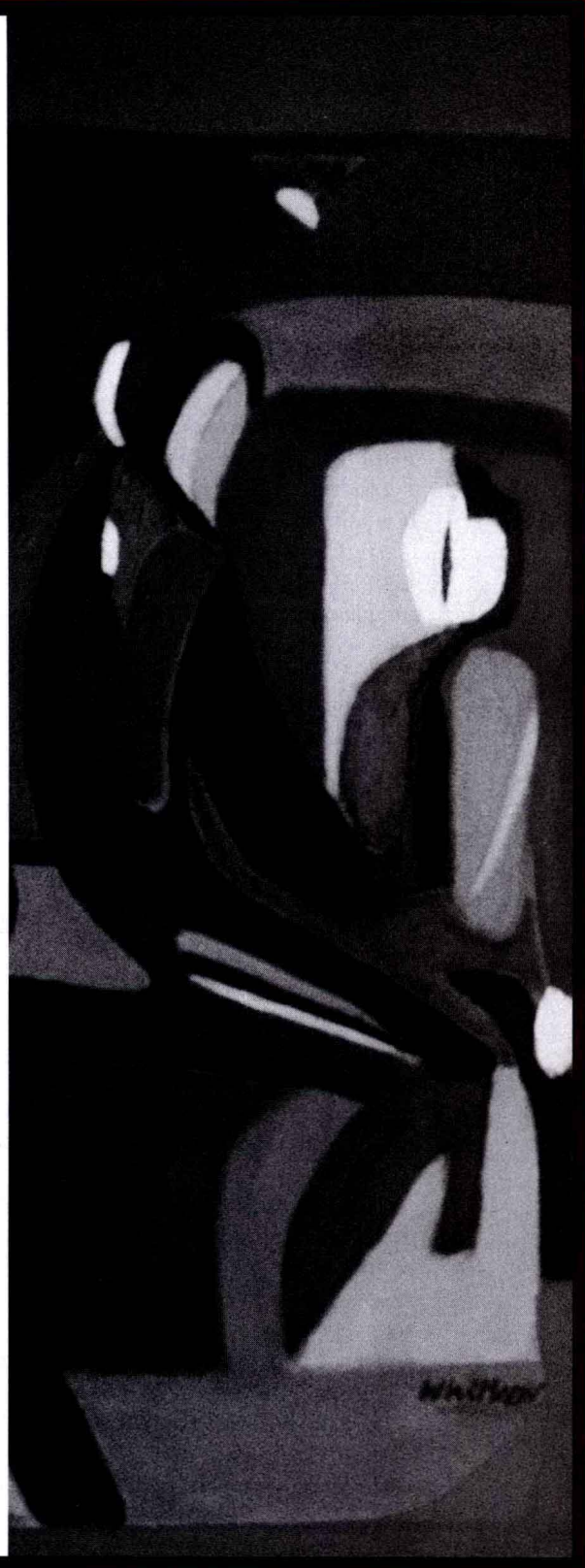
<b>A PERSPECTIVE</b>	461
<b>Macro Social System Theories</b>	461
<i>The Functionalist Perspective</i>	
<i>The Conflict Perspective</i>	
<i>The Interactionist Perspective</i>	
<b>Poverty: Impacts of Social and Economic Forces</b>	465
<i>The Rich and the Poor</i>	
<i>The Problem</i>	
<i>Who Are the Poor?</i>	

<i>What Causes Poverty?</i>	
<i>The Culture of Poverty: Evaluation of Theory and Its Application to Client Situations</i>	
<i>Poverty Is Functional</i>	
<i>Application of Functionalism to Poverty</i>	
<i>Application of Conflict Theory to Poverty</i>	
<i>Application of Interactionist Theory to Poverty</i>	
Liberalism versus Conservatism: Application of Theory to Social Welfare	476
Unemployment	477
<i>The Costs of Unemployment</i>	
<i>Who Are the Unemployed?</i>	
<i>Factors That Reduce Unemployment</i>	
Family Mezzo System Problems	482
<i>Empty-Shell Marriages</i>	
<i>Divorce</i>	
<i>Single-Parent Families</i>	
<i>Blended Families</i>	
<i>Mothers Working Outside the Home</i>	
<i>The "Sandwich" Generation</i>	
Assessing and Intervening in Family Systems	500
<i>Verbal and Nonverbal Communication</i>	
<i>Family Norms</i>	
<i>Family System Assessment: The Eco-Map</i>	
<i>Family System Assessment: The Genogram</i>	
<i>Family Problems and Social Work Roles</i>	
Summary	510
• Personal Income Disparities Are Astounding	
• The Ideology of Individualism	
• Poverty Perpetuates Poverty	
• The Poverty Trap	
• Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic	
• The American Dream Becomes an Economic Nightmare Through Unemployment	
• Conflict Resolution Strategies	
• Analyzing Love Relationships	
• Facts about Divorce	
• The Effects of a Divorce on Children Depend on What Happens after the Divorce	
 <b>CHAPTER 13</b>	
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>512</b>
A PERSPECTIVE	514
Homosexuality and Bisexuality	514
<i>What Does Being a Homosexual Mean?</i>	
<i>Definition of Bisexual</i>	
<i>Numbers of Lesbian and Gay People</i>	
Why Are Some People Lesbian or Gay?	518
<i>Biological Theories</i>	
<i>Psychosocial Theories</i>	
<i>The Evaluation of Theory: What Is the Answer?</i>	
<i>Interactionist Theory</i>	
<i>Ethical Issues Related to Theory</i>	
<i>Other Research on the Origins of Homosexuality</i>	
Discrimination: The Impacts of Homophobia	521
The Lesbian and Gay Life-Styles	523
<i>Lesbian and Gay Relationships</i>	
<i>Sexual Interaction</i>	
<i>Gay and Lesbian Pride and a Sense of Community</i>	
Significant Issues and Life Events	526
<i>The Impacts of Social and Economic Forces: Legal Issues</i>	
<i>Community Responses: Violence Against Lesbian and Gay People</i>	
<i>Coming Out</i>	
<i>Lesbian and Gay Parents</i>	
<i>As Lesbians and Gay Men Age</i>	
<i>Gay and Lesbian People and AIDS</i>	
<i>Social Work with Lesbian and Gay People: Promoting Optimal Well-Being</i>	
Summary	539
• Stereotypes about Gay and Lesbian People	
• Cheryl's Exploration of Her Self-Identity and Sexual Orientation	
 <b>Part Four</b>	
<b>Later Adulthood</b>	
 <b>CHAPTER 14</b>	
<b>Biological Systems and Their Impacts on Later Adulthood</b>	<b>543</b>
A PERSPECTIVE	545
What Is Later Adulthood?	546
<i>Senescence</i>	
<i>What Causes Aging?</i>	
<i>Factors That Influence the Aging Process</i>	
Diseases and Causes of Death of the Elderly	555
Life Expectancy	556
Wellness: The Impacts of Different Systems on Health	560
<i>Physical Exercise</i>	
<i>Mental Activity</i>	
<i>Sleep Patterns</i>	
<i>Nutrition and Diet</i>	
<i>Stress and Stress Management</i>	
Summary	569
• Values and Aging: The Myth of Senility	
• Health Practices and Longevity	
• Leading Causes of Death among the Elderly	
• Alzheimer's Disease	
• Cultural Differences in Longevity	
• Conceptualizing Stressors, Stress, and Stress-Related Illnesses	
 <b>CHAPTER 15</b>	
<b>Psychological Systems and Their Impacts on Later Adulthood</b>	<b>570</b>
A PERSPECTIVE	571
Developmental Tasks of Later Adulthood	572
Theoretical Concepts about Developmental Tasks in Later Adulthood	574
<i>Integrity versus Despair</i>	

<i>Three Key Psychological Adjustments</i> <i>Life Review</i> <i>Self-Esteem</i> <i>Life Satisfaction</i> <i>Low Status and Ageism</i> <i>Depression and Other Emotional Problems</i> <i>Spirituality and Religion</i> <b>Theories of Successful Aging</b> 579 <i>Activity Theory</i> <i>Disengagement Theory</i> <i>Social Reconstruction Syndrome Theory</i> <b>The Impact of Life Events on the Elderly</b> 584 <i>Marriage</i> <i>Death of Spouse</i> <i>Widowhood</i> <i>Never Married</i> <i>Remarriage</i> <i>Family System Relationships</i> <i>Grandparenthood</i> <b>Guidelines for Positive Psychological Preparation for Later Adulthood</b> 588 <b>Grief Management and Death Education</b> 589 <i>Death in Our Society: The Impact of Social Forces</i> <i>The Grieving Process</i> <i>The Kübler-Ross Model</i> <i>The Westberg Model</i> <i>Application of Grief Management Theory to Client Situations</i> <i>How to Relate to a Dying Person</i> <i>How to Relate to Survivors</i> <i>How to Become Comfortable with Your Own Eventual Death</i> <b>Summary</b> 596 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Triple Jeopardy: Being Female, African American, and Old</li> <li>• Spirituality and Religion</li> <li>• Questions about Grief, Death, and Dying</li> <li>• Life after Life</li> </ul>	<i>Emphasis on Youth: The Impacts of Social and Economic Forces</i> <i>The Increasing Elderly Population</i> <i>The Fastest Growing Age Group Is the Old-Old</i> <i>Early Retirement: The Impacts of Social and Economic Forces</i> <i>Financial Problems of the Elderly</i> <i>The Social Security System</i> <i>Death</i> <i>Elder Abuse</i> <i>Where the Elderly Live</i> <i>Transportation</i> <i>Crime Victimization</i> <i>Malnutrition</i> <i>Health Problems and Cost of Care</i> <b>Current Services: Macro System Responses</b> 610 <i>Older Americans Act of 1965</i> <i>Old Age, Survivors, Disability, and Health Insurance (OASDHI)</i> <i>Supplemental Security Income (SSI)</i> <i>Medicare</i> <i>Medicaid</i> <i>Food Stamps</i> <i>Adult Protective Services</i> <i>Additional Programs</i> <i>Nursing Homes</i> <b>Social Work with the Elderly</b> 616 <b>The Elderly Are a Powerful Political Force</b> 617 <b>Changing a Macro System: Finding a Social Role for the Elderly</b> 618 <b>Summary</b> 619 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High Status for the Elderly in China, Japan, and Other Countries</li> <li>• Critical Thinking about an Ethical Issue: Should Assisted Suicide Be Legalized?</li> <li>• Adult Protective Services</li> <li>• Community Options Program: Providing Alternatives to Nursing Home Placement</li> </ul>
<b>CHAPTER 16</b> <b>Social Systems and Their Impacts on Later Adulthood</b> 598  <b>A PERSPECTIVE</b> 600 <b>The Elderly: A Population-at-Risk</b> 600 <b>Problems Faced by the Elderly</b> 601	<b>Bibliography</b> A-1  <b>Name Index</b> B-1  <b>Subject Index</b> C-1

**1**

**Theoretical  
Perspectives on  
Human Behavior  
and the Social  
Environment**





*A midwestern farm family goes bankrupt after losing federal financial support and protection. The family is forced to pack up all of its belongings, leave its home state, and move to Florida, where they can afford only a canvas tent in which to live.*

*A two-and-a-half-year-old baby girl has not yet begun to take her first steps or to say more than the words “mama” and “dada.” She is an only child. Her parents worry that she seems to be lagging behind other children her age and wonder if something is wrong.*

*Two teenagers feel they are deeply in love. They struggle with many issues. Should they “make love”? Should they use some method of birth control? What if pregnancy should occur? Should they get married?*

*A seventy-five-year-old widower finds his health failing. He has trouble reading and is beginning to stumble frequently. He has lived alone in his modest home since his wife died twelve years ago. His two 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 involving individual persons, each with unique qualities. Additionally, all of them are addressing issues which are related to their current period of life. In each situation people are raising questions, facing crises, or making decisions. Human behavior is often complicated and confusing. Why do people behave the way they do? The basic task of social work is to “help people meet their needs and carry out their responsibilities” throughout their life spans (Siporin, 1975, p. 3). In other words, social workers help people enhance their own functioning. Yet, in order to help people do this, social workers must first understand the process themselves. Only then can they apply techniques and skills in order to help clients make decisions and solve problems.

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## A PERSPECTIVE

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The goals of this text are to explore the dynamics of human behavior and prepare a foundation of knowledge upon 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 evaluation of some human condition or situation. It also involves making decisions about what aspects of the behavior or situation need to be changed.

Social work is unique in that it emphasizes a focus that stretches far beyond that of the individual. Assessment in social work addresses all aspects of clients’ situations. Social workers need to concentrate on understanding the many aspects of any particular client problem. A social worker assesses not only the individual client’s behavior but also aspects of all the social systems in which the client is involved. These systems include families, work groups and environments, social agencies, organizations, neighborhoods, communities, and even local, state, and national government.

In many cases it is not the client’s “fault” that problems exist. Rather, something outside of the client may be causing the problem. The client’s whole family may not be functioning well. There may be difficulties beyond the client’s control in his or her workplace. Existing social service organizations may not be providing what clients need. Resources may be too difficult to obtain, inadequate, or even nonexistent. Organizational policies or laws affecting the client may be unfair. Thus, assessment in social work targets clients’ relationships with in-

dividuals, groups, organizations, and communities. Deciding what to do about any specific problem may directly involve any of these systems.

This chapter will:

- Discuss the importance of foundation knowledge within the purpose and process of social work.
- Explain the significance of foundation knowledge for assessment.
- Describe general systems theory and its relevance for social work.
- Formulate a model for viewing, assessing, and understanding human behavior that concentrates on the interactions of micro, mezzo, and macro systems.
- Define organizations as macro systems and explain their involvement with clients.
- Discuss communities as macro systems and examine their impacts on human behavior.
- Describe some of the major roles assumed by social workers as they practice within the context of micro, mezzo, and macro systems.

## Foundation Knowledge and the Purpose of Social Work

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In order to recognize the significance of foundation knowledge, the purpose and process of social work need 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 more effectively and cope with their situations. Second, social workers can work with systems, such as social agencies, organizations, communities, and government bureaucracies, so that people can have better access to the resources and services they need. Third, social workers can “link people with systems” (Baer and Federico, 1978, p. 68), so that clients have access to resources and opportunities. Much of social work, then, involves people’s social functioning.

People interact with other people and with organizations such as government and social service agencies and also with small groups such as families and colleagues in the workplace. Social work targets not only how individual persons behave but also how these other systems and people affect each other.

An example is a family of five in which both parents work at low-paying jobs in order to make a marginal living. The father works at a small, nonunionized leather processing plant. The mother works as a waitress at a short-order diner. Suddenly, through no fault of his own, the father is laid off. For a short time the family survives on unemployment compensation. When that runs out, they face a serious financial crisis. Despite great effort,

the father is unable to find another job. In desperation, the family applies for public assistance. Due to some unidentified error in the lengthy application process, which involves much “red tape,” the payments are delayed for two months.

Meanwhile, the family is forced to eat poorly and is unable to pay rent and utility bills. As a result, the phone is disconnected, the electricity is turned off, and the landlord threatens to evict them. Reacting to the externally imposed stress, the parents begin to fight verbally and physically. The children complain because they are hungry. This intensifies the parents’ sense of defeat and disillusionment. Out of stress and frustration, the parents hit the children to keep them quiet.

Although this example has not been presented in detail, it nonetheless 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 the environment have had an impact on each other. First, the father’s life is seriously affected by his place of employment, the leather factory, when he is laid off. He then seeks unemployment compensation, which affects that system by dipping into its funds. When those benefits cease, the family goes to the public assistance system for financial help. The family then affects this system by drawing on its funds. The public assistance system, in turn, impacts the family by delaying their payments. The resulting frustration affects all family members, as the parents are unable to cope with their stress. The entire situation can be viewed as a series of dynamic interactions between people and their environment.

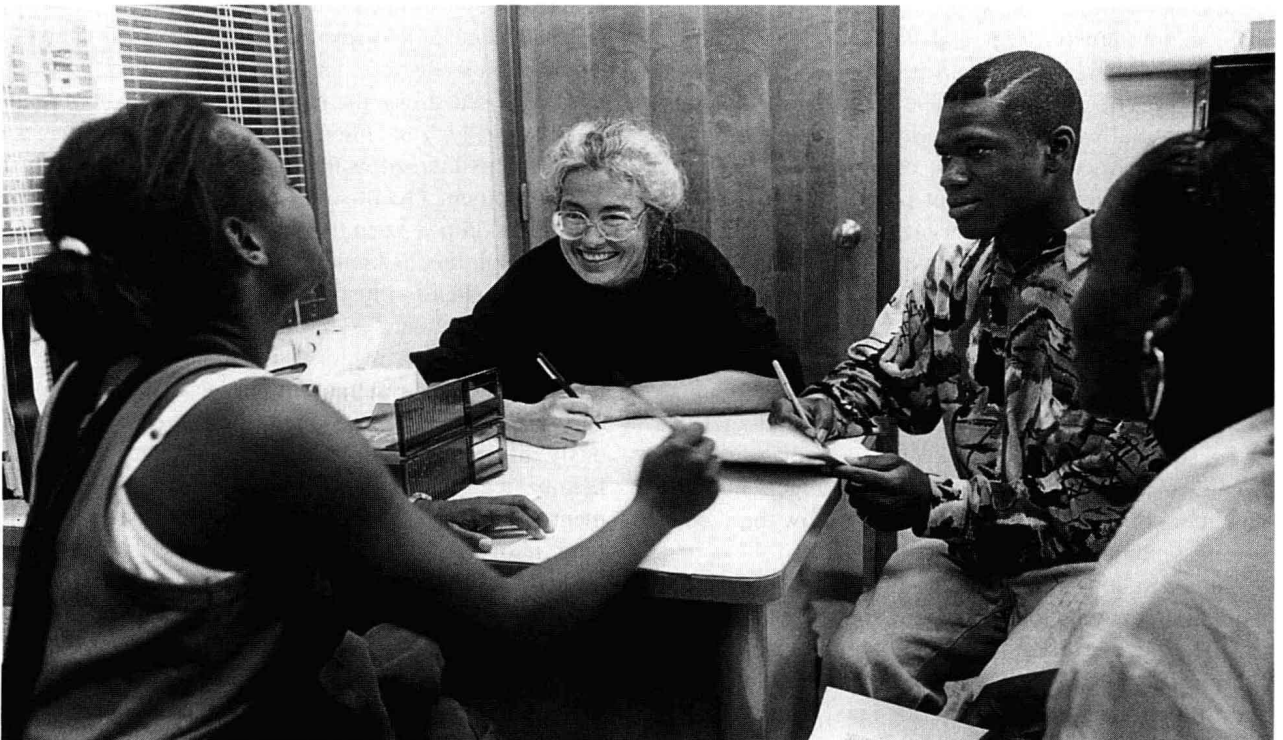
Social workers today are generalists. A generalist practitioner is one “whose knowledge and skills encompass a broad spectrum and who assesses problems and their solutions comprehensively” (Barker, 1991, p. 91). Social workers must be able to view a problem situation from multiple perspectives in the context of the entire social environment. This sets the stage for numerous intervention approaches.

### Foundation Knowledge and the Process of Social Work: The Importance of Assessment

Social work practice usually involves several basic steps. First, the problem or situation is scrutinized and understood. In other words, an *assessment* of the problematic situation is made. Second, a specific *plan* of action is developed in which goals are carefully selected and clearly specified. Third, the actual *intervention* occurs; this is the “doing” part of the process. It may in-

volve providing counseling to an individual, or it may entail working with a large organization to change its policies so that the organization better accommodates its clients’ needs. Fourth, progress toward solving the problem is subject to *evaluation*. To what extent have the goals established with the client been met? Fifth, the social work process calls for a *termination* of the intervention. This includes talking about ending the process and summarizing what has been accomplished (Kirst-Ashman and Hull; 1993).

Accurate assessment of the person, problem, and situation is well documented as a critically important step in the social work process (Hepworth and Larsen, 1993; Sheafor, Horejsi, and Horejsi, 1991; Richmond, 1917). Information about the problem or situation needs to be gathered, analyzed, and interpreted. Such situations may involve parents who have difficulty controlling the behavior of their children or families not receiving the public assistance they desperately need for survival. Regardless of the type of situation, careful thought is necessary in order to make effective decisions about how to proceed.



*Working with clients whose racial and ethnic backgrounds differ from yours requires at least general information about clients’ values and potential experience.*

According to Meyer (1995, p. 260), social work practitioners base their interventions on assessments that, in turn, involve “an understanding of the situation, need, or problem to be addressed.” This process involves basic knowledge and assumptions about human behavior. Knowledge about how people normally function provides the structure into which bits of information can fit. Social workers need to have a foundation of information and understanding about human behavior 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 certain types of information. The worker needs to know some of the reasons why people commit suicide so that he or she knows what questions to ask, how to react to and treat the person, and what alternatives and supports to pursue. Working with clients whose racial and ethnic backgrounds differ from the worker’s own provides another example of the importance of foundation knowledge. The worker needs to have at least general information about clients’ cultural values and the potentially differential treatment they have experienced (for example, racial discrimination). Only then can the worker empathize with a particular client’s situation and help the client identify realistic alternatives.

Additionally, the worker must be able to identify what resources are readily available to suicidal adolescents. How can the crises be addressed immediately, simply to keep them alive? What supportive resources are available to keep them from suicidal thoughts in the future? Where can a social worker refer them to get help?

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 decisions about what to do in his or her own life. This base also involves common skills. For example, social workers need to know how to conduct an interview and how to help people identify and evaluate their various alternatives. Finally, social workers need a common base of knowledge. They must have access to certain types of information in order to plan effective interventions. They must be educated in the basic knowledge of human behavior before any skills can be applied.

The text focuses on how people act within the context of their environments. People are dramatically affected by the other people, groups, and organizations around them. A young child may be devastated by a sharp scolding from a parent. The presence or absence of friends and social supports within office work environments

may determine whether employees love or hate their jobs. Which candidates are elected to Congress may affect the taxes an individual is required to pay, the types of freedom a person can enjoy, and the absolute quality of life itself.

This text aims to clarify some of the reasons why people behave the way they do. It will present basic concepts in human development and examine normal developmental life events. It will do so within the context of the communities and environments in which people live. It will also concentrate on the impacts that organizations, policies, and communities have on individuals.

## Impacts of Systems in the Environment

Because the environment is so important in the analysis and understanding of human behavior, the conceptual perspective must be clearly defined. Social work focuses on the interactions between individuals and various systems in the environment. Such a conceptual perspective provides social workers with a symbolic representation or picture of how to view the world.

Systems theories make up a broad category of such symbolic representations. They involve concepts that emphasize interactions among various systems. They stress “the relationships among individuals, groups, organizations, or communities” (Barker, 1995, p. 375). Systems theories provide a broad approach to understanding the world and can be applied to a multitude of settings. This text assumes a systems theory approach. It also incorporates some basic concepts from the ecological perspective (which will be discussed in the next section). Such a perspective provides a way for social workers to interpret and examine their clients’ situations. People are thought of as being involved in constant interaction with various systems in the environment. These include family, friends, work, social service, political, employment, religious, goods and services, and educational systems. Systems theory portrays people as being dynamically involved with each system. Social work practice is directed at improving the interactions between clients and systems.

A number of terms are important to an understanding of general systems theory and its relationship to social work practice. They include *system*, *boundaries*, *subsystem*, *homeostasis*, *role*, *relationship*, *input*, *output*, *feedback*, *interface*, *differentiation*, *entropy*, *negative entropy*, and *equifinality*.