HUMAN BEHAVIOR

A Social Work Perspective

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Figure 3.1 taken from Effie Hanchett, *Community Health Assessment: A Conceptual Tool Kit* (New York: John Wiley, 1979.)

Introduction

This book is intended to help social workers and other social welfare professionals become better able to utilize knowledge as a guide to practice. Understanding human behavior in its social context in order to make informed decisions about appropriate intervention requires familiarity with an extensive and diversified body of knowledge. In carrying out this goal, several assumptions are made:

1. Knowledge is fundamental for professionally responsible helping efforts.

2. Some knowledge is more useful for practice than other knowledge. This reflects a particular stance toward the goals of practice. In this book the purposes and values of the profession of social work will be the primary context within which knowledge and practice are related. Since social work is such a wide-ranging and integrating profession, social work knowledge and practice will have utility for a variety of other social welfare professions.

3. In order to be useful for practice, concepts must be learned, related to each other, and applied to actual life situations. The practitioner must also know how to determine which concepts are most useful in specific practice situations.

4. Ultimately, not all human behavior is knowable. We encourage the student and the social work practitioner to maintain a

sense of awe and wonderment when confronted with complexities of human behavior. At the same time, this book will try to illuminate as much of this behavior and the richness of its social context as our present knowledge makes possible.

The book's three principal objectives derive from the above assumptions. These objectives are the following:

1. To systematically review and summarize concepts that have particular relevance for practice. Useful concepts have been developed by various disciplines in the biological, social, and behavioral sciences. In this book concepts will be drawn primarily from sociology, psychology, political science, economics, anthropology, and (human) biology. In addition to summarizing selected concepts, the book will discuss their utility for social work practice.

2. To develop a framework that can be used to integrate the concepts. While individual disciplines concentrate on the teaching of discrete concepts and theories, this book will focus on finding relationships between them. This will make it easier to perceive and understand human behavior as a totality rather than as discrete, or separate, actions.

3. To demonstrate how integrated knowledge may be used by social workers to establish a context for the analysis and decision making that are essential components of social work practice.

It may sound as if this book is going to be more encyclopedic than it will be. The focus is as wide-ranging as it needs to be to provide a basis for understanding human behavior useful for generalist social work practice. However, there is much that is not appropriate in such an approach. For example, though knowledge of theories of personality development is important, knowledge of abnormal psychology is much less so. This is because the generalist social worker focuses on strengthening people's resources in their social/cultural/biological richness, rather than emphasizing personality weaknesses isolated from their environment. Similarly, an

understanding of organizational structures is basic to successful functioning within them, but exhaustive knowledge of organizational and administrative theories is well beyond the usual practice responsibilities of the generalist social worker.

Understanding this book, then, depends on an understanding of its view of generalist social work practice. The knowledge presented here has been selected because of its relevance to that type of practice. The view of generalist social work out of which the content of this book grows is the one developed by the Undergraduate Social Work Curriculum Development Project.* Two parts of the Project's findings are particularly significant for understanding this book: the statement of the purposes of social work and the competency areas that, taken together, define the competent generalist social worker. Each will be described below.

The Project defines the purposes of social work as follows:

> Social work is concerned and involved with the interactions between people and the institutions of society that affect the ability of people to accomplish life tasks, realize aspirations and values, and alleviate distress. These interactions between people and social institutions occur within the context of the larger societal good. Therefore, three major purposes of social work may be identified:
> 1. to enhance the problem-solving, coping, and developmental capacities of people;
> 2. to promote the effective and humane operation of the systems that provide them with resources, services, and opportunities;
> 3. to link people with systems that provide them with resources, services, and opportunities.†

This view of social work focuses the profession's primary responsibility on the point at which people and the institutions of society come together. People are basic to the mission of social work since the profession attempts to help them better meet their needs

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*This project was funded by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare from 1975 to 1978 for the purpose of improving the quality of undergraduate social work education. Betty L. Baer was the project director. See the project report, Betty L. Baer and Ronald C. Federico, *Educating the Baccalaureate Social Worker*, vol. I (Cambridge, Mass: Ballinger Publishing Co., 1978).

†Baer and Federico, p. 68.

and achieve their life goals. However, the profession also recognizes that people develop in, and resources and opportunities are provided or denied them through social institutions like the family, the economy, and the polity. Efforts to help people require an understanding and respect of their own goals for themselves. Helping also necessitates an understanding of how the social and physical environments operate and how these environments may need to be modified in order to support people's efforts on their own behalf. Social work helping, then, most frequently involves work at both the individual and environmental levels.

The Project's view of the purposes of social work also begins to define the breadth of knowledge used by social workers. An understanding of people is basic to social work — but an understanding of people within the social and cultural contexts in which they live. These contexts help determine *what goals* are desirable and *what strategies* can be used to attain the goals. They also help social workers understand *what resources* are available to various groups in different situations — as well as what resources are not available. Finally, they help explain *the way resources are made available* to people, an important determinant of whether or not they will be used.

People, then, are linked to idea systems and resource structures that influence their lives in important ways. However, internal biological and psychological factors are also important determinants of behavior. People's problem-solving, coping, and developmental capacities are in part established by a complex interplay between heredity and environment. The personality characteristics which develop as a result of this interaction become further variables influencing behavior. Therefore, the practice of social work as defined above is built on an understanding and use of biological, psychological, cultural, and social-structural factors.

The second part of the Undergraduate Social Work Curriculum Development Project report basic to this book is the list of competencies that every social work practitioner must have. Taken together, these competencies define what social workers must be able to do in order to carry out the purposes of the profession. Naturally, many social workers will have competencies in addition to those listed here, but every social worker should be able

to do at least the following:

1. Identify and assess situations where relationships between people and social institutions need to be initiated, enhanced, restored, protected, or terminated.

2. Develop and implement a plan for improving the well-being of people based on problem assessment and the exploration of obtaining goals and available options.

3. Enhance the problem-solving, coping, and developmental capacities of people.

4. Link people with systems that provide them with resources, services, and opportunities.

5. Intervene effectively on behalf of populations most vulnerable and discriminated against.

6. Promote the effective and humane operation of the systems that provide people with services, resources, and opportunities.

7. Actively participate with others in creating new, modified, or improved service, resource, and opportunity systems that are more equitable, just, and responsive to consumers of services, and work with others to eliminate those systems that are unjust.

8. Evaluate the extent to which the objectives of the intervention plan were achieved.

9. Continually evaluate one's own professional growth and development through assessment of practice behaviors and skills.

10. Contribute to the improvement of service delivery by adding to the knowledge base of the profession as appropriate and by supporting and upholding the standards and ethics of the profession.*

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*Baer and Federico, pp. 86–89.

These competencies enable the social work practitioner to achieve the purposes of the profession as discussed above. They reflect the profession's dual focus on people and the environments that either facilitate or obstruct their efforts to plan and attain satisfying lives. Alone, each competency includes knowledge from the social, biological, and behavioral sciences. When aggregated, they prove once again how broad is the knowledge needed by social workers. Throughout this book the purposes of social work and the competencies of the professional social worker will provide the focus for the analysis and application of knowledge. Without adequate supporting knowledge, social work practice is impoverished. Without the purposes of the profession as a guide, knowledge remains primarily theoretical, difficult to relate explicitly to practice. It is this essential link between knowledge and practice that makes the whole area of human behavior and the social environment such an important one in the social work curriculum.

Plan of this Book

This book is divided into three principal sections. The first explores in more detail the ways in which knowledge relates to practice. This includes a summary of basic concepts from the biological, behavioral, and social sciences of particular relevance to social work practice. Also presented in this section is the conceptual framework that will be used throughout the book to identify relevant concepts, relate them to each other, and derive their applicability to practice.

The second part focuses on identifying biological, social, and behavioral science concepts of particular use for generalist social work practice. These are systematically summarized and then interrelated using three integrating perspectives: systems, human diversity, and goal directed behavior.

The book's third part is concerned with the application of knowledge. The concepts discussed and integrated in Part II are used to analyze the life tasks, life resources, and potential service delivery needs of people throughout the life cycle. The book ends with a discussion of knowledge areas relevant to practice that are still only

poorly developed and demand further research.

A number of resources are provided throughout the book to aid readers. Illustrations of concepts and conceptual frameworks are provided so that readers can grasp better the points being discussed in the text. Study questions are provided to guide the reader's thinking about the content of each chapter. Bibliographies for each chapter are also provided so readers can pursue in more depth topics that interest them.

Educational Outcomes

Upon completion of this book, the reader should have a better grasp of the relation between knowledge and practice. He or she should also understand the biological, psychological, cultural, and social-structural components of human behavior well enough to see practice situations automatically in those terms. But perhaps most importantly, the reader should be committed to professional helping as a thoughtful activity, one which joins caring and interpersonal skill with knowledge and professional values. Although it is systematic, practice requires more than the use of formulas. Skillful use of knowledge and analysis is needed to understand particular practice situations in all of their biological, psychological, cultural, and social-structural uniqueness.

Finally, it is hoped that this book will contribute to its readers' commitment to lifelong learning. Learning how to use knowledge for decision-making purposes can help readers become more active consumers of knowledge and more active decision makers in the course of practice activities. Understanding the complex interplay of biological, psychological, cultural, and social-structural variables, should enable readers to identify when and how systems disadvantage and demean people. Once the knowledge pertaining to particular parts of human behavior is clarified, each part can also be understood as part of a multifaceted whole.

Beyond achieving the overall objectives outlined in this chapter, it is our hope that this book will encourage and support the development of further knowledge to improve the human condition. But it is

also hoped that readers will use fully the knowledge they already have at the same time that they seek to know more so that even more knowledge can be brought to the service of social work practice.

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Social-structural				
Political	Party	Stability/change	Input (community)	Subculture values affect formation of social structures; existing social structures control individual behavior;
Economic	Class structure		Process (adherence to norms) Output (group identity)	Individual behavior can challenge values.
Cultural				
Ideological	Ethnic groupings	Group identity	Input (values/beliefs)	Technology affects quality of life; values affect development and use of technology;
Religious	Cohesion		Process (internalization)	
Value framework			Output (solidarity)	Technology affects biological survival.

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PART I

Summarizing Basic Concepts