CONNECTING CORE COMPETENCIES SERIES

# Human Behavior and the Social Environment

## SOCIAL SYSTEMS THEORY

SEVENTH EDITION

Orren Dale
Rebecca Smith

## CSWE's Core Competencies and Practice Behavior Examples in this Text

| Competency | Chapter |
|---|---|
| **Professional Identity** | |
| *Practice Behavior Examples...* | |
| Serve as representatives of the profession, its mission, and its core values | |
| Know the profession's history | |
| Commit themselves to the profession's enhancement and to their own professional conduct and growth | |
| Advocate for client access to the services of social work | |
| Practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional development | |
| Attend to professional roles and boundaries | 1, 14 |
| Demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior, appearance, and communication | 11 |
| Engage in career-long learning | |
| Use supervision and consultation | |
| **Ethical Practice** | |
| *Practice Behavior Examples...* | |
| Obligation to conduct themselves ethically and engage in ethical decision-making | |
| Know about the value base of the profession, its ethical standards, and relevant law | |
| Recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice | 3, 13 |
| Make ethical decisions by applying standards of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics and, as applicable, of the International Federation of Social Workers/ International Association of Schools of Social Work Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles | |
| Tolerate ambiguity in resolving ethical conflicts | 8 |
| Apply strategies of ethical reasoning to arrive at principled decisions | 2, 11, 14 |
| **Critical Thinking** | |
| *Practice Behavior Examples...* | |
| Know about the principles of logic, scientific inquiry, and reasoned discernment | 4, 13 |
| Use critical thinking augmented by creativity and curiosity | 8 |
| Requires the synthesis and communication of relevant information | 12 |
| Distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practice wisdom | 1, 10 |
| Analyze models of assessment, prevention, intervention, and evaluation | 14 |
| Demonstrate effective oral and written communication in working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and colleagues | |

## CSWE's Core Competencies and Practice Behavior Examples in this Text

| Competency | Chapter |
|---|---|
| **Diversity in Practice** | |
| *Practice Behavior Examples...* | |
| Understand how diversity characterizes and shapes the human experience and is critical to the formation of identity | 4, 13 |
| Understand the dimensions of diversity as the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation | |
| Appreciate that, as a consequence of difference, a person's life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization, and alienation as well as privilege, power, and acclaim | |
| Recognize the extent to which a culture's structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege, and power | 15 |
| Gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups | |
| Recognize and communicate their understanding of the importance of difference in shaping life experiences | 3, 9, 10 |
| View themselves as learners and engage those with whom they work as informants | 6 |
| **Human Rights & Justice** | |
| *Practice Behavior Examples...* | |
| Understand that each person, regardless of position in society, has basic human rights, such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education | 5 |
| Recognize the global interconnections of oppression and are knowledgeable about theories of justice and strategies to promote human and civil rights | |
| Incorporates social justice practices in organizations, institutions, and society to ensure that these basic human rights are distributed equitably and without prejudice | 8 |
| Understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination | |
| Advocate for human rights and social and economic justice | 15 |
| Engage in practices that advance social and economic justice | 4 |
| **Research Based Practice** | |
| *Practice Behavior Examples...* | |
| Use practice experience to inform research, employ evidence-based interventions, evaluate their own practice, and use research findings to improve practice, policy, and social service delivery | |
| Comprehend quantitative and qualitative research and understand scientific and ethical approaches to building knowledge | 7 |
| Use practice experience to inform scientific inquiry | |
| Use research evidence to inform practice | 14 |

## CSWE's Core Competencies and Practice Behavior Examples in this Text

| Competency | Chapter |
|---|---|
| **Human Behavior** | |
| *Practice Behavior Examples...* | |
| Know about human behavior across the life course; the range of social systems in which people live; and the ways social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and well-being | 4, 5, 8 |
| Apply theories and knowledge from the liberal arts to understand biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development | 6, 11, 12 |
| Utilize conceptual frameworks to guide the processes of assessment, intervention, and evaluation | 1, 3, 7 |
| Critique and apply knowledge to understand person and environment | 2, 9, 10, 13, 15 |
| **Policy Practice** | |
| *Practice Behavior Examples...* | |
| Understand that policy affects service delivery and they actively engage in policy practice | 11 |
| Know the history and current structures of social policies and services; the role of policy in service delivery; and the role of practice in policy development | 7, 15 |
| Analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance social well-being | 2, 13 |
| Collaborate with colleagues and clients for effective policy action | |
| **Practice Contexts** | |
| *Practice Behavior Examples...* | |
| Keep informed, resourceful, and proactive in responding to evolving organizational, community, and societal contexts at all levels of practice | 3 |
| Recognize that the context of practice is dynamic, and use knowledge and skill to respond proactively | 9, 10 |
| Continuously discover, appraise, and attend to changing locales, populations, scientific and technological developments, and emerging societal trends to provide relevant services | 6, 12 |
| Provide leadership in promoting sustainable changes in service delivery and practice to improve the quality of social services | 7 |

## CSWE's Core Competencies and Practice Behavior Examples in this Text

| Competency | Chapter |
|---|---|
| **Engage, Assess, Intervene, Evaluate** | |
| *Practice Behavior Examples...* | |
| Identify, analyze, and implement evidence-based interventions designed to achieve client goals | |
| Use research and technological advances | |
| Evaluate program outcomes and practice effectiveness | |
| Develop, analyze, advocate, and provide leadership for policies and services | |
| Promote social and economic justice | |
| A) ENGAGEMENT | |
| A substantively and effectively prepare for action with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities | 5 |
| Use empathy and other interpersonal skills | |
| Develop a mutually agreed-on focus of work and desired outcomes | |
| B) ASSESSMENT | |
| Collect, organize, and interpret client data | |
| Assess client strengths and limitations | 6, 9 |
| Develop mutually agreed-on intervention goals and objectives | |
| Select appropriate intervention strategies | 5 |
| C) INTERVENTION | |
| Initiate actions to achieve organizational goals | 12 |
| Implement prevention interventions that enhance client capacities | |
| Help clients resolve problems | |
| Negotiate, mediate, and advocate for clients | |
| Facilitate transitions and endings | |
| D) EVALUATION | |
| Critically analyze, monitor, and evaluate interventions | |

# MySearchLab Connections in This Text

In addition to the outstanding research and writing tools and a complete eText in **MySearchLab**, this site contains a wealth of resources for social work students.

Below is a listing of the videos and readings found in **MySearchLab**, keyed to each chapter in this text.

In addition, a wealth of assessment questions (including those based on CSWE's core competencies) and useful online resources can be found under the appropriate chapters in **MySearchLab**.

## VIDEOS

* Applying Critical Thinking (1)
  Entry to the Social Work Profession (2)
* The Ecological Model Using the Freire Method (2)
* Developing an Action Plan that Changes the Internal and External (3)
* Professional Demeanor (4)
* Professional Roles and Boundaries (4)
  Battle Between Faith and Science (5)
* Building Self-Awareness (6)
* Engaging in Research Informed Practice (7)
  Question of Identity (8)
  Working Mothers (9)
  Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren (9)
  Abortion Wars (9)
  In Crowd and Social Cruelty (10)
* Providing Leadership to Promote Change to Improve Quality of Social Services (11)
* Tolerating Ambiguity in Resolving Conflicts (11)
* Ethical Practice-Managing Personal Values: The Code of Ethics (12)
* Building Alliances (12)
* Engage, Assess, Intervene, Evaluate Community Organization (12)
* Recognizing Personal Values (13)
* Engaging Clients to Share Their Experience of Alienation, Marginalization and/or Oppression (13)
  MS13: Gang Life (14)
* Keeping up with Shifting Contexts (15)

*** = CSWE Core Competency Asset**
**Δ = Case Study**

# MySearchLab Connections in this Text

## READINGS

* Human Behavior (1)
Δ Ethical Dilemmas (2)
Δ Mothers versus the Board of Education (3)
Δ Community to Community: A Unique Response to Long Term Disaster Relief (3)
* Professional Identity (4)
Δ Volunteer Experiences with Neighbor Helping Neighbor Program (4)
Self-Psychology (5)
Object Relations Theory (5)
Δ Attachment & Grief in a Stepfamily with Children Adopted Internationally (5)
Δ A Narrative in New Masculinity (6)
Δ Elderly People (6)
Δ Impact of Childhood Trauma on Development, The (6)
Δ Dylan James: A Case in School Social Work (7)
Cognitive Theory (8)
Δ The Leon Family (9)
Δ Multigenerational Abuse: The Santiago Story (9)
Δ Family Feud (9)
Δ Group Work Ethics (10)
Δ Caregiver Support Group, A (10)
Δ Adventures in Budgets and Finances (11)
Δ Supervisory Dilemmas for a Newly Promoted Community Health Care Clinic Manager (11)
Δ Community Coalition, A (12)
Δ Golem, Albania (12)
Δ Carrie (13)
Δ Frank (13)
Δ Oliver (13)
Δ Betty and Charlie Bristol (14)
Δ Mikki's Story (14)
Δ Faith Harper (14)
Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from a Birmingham Jail (15)
Lyndon B. Johnson, War on Poverty (15)
The Gay Liberation Front, Come Out (15)
Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House (15)
Δ Veterans of the Vietnam War (15)

*** = CSWE Core Competency AssetΔ**
**Δ = Case Study**

SEVENTH EDITION

# Human Behavior and the Social Environment

## Social Systems Theory

Orren Dale
*Wichita State University*

Rebecca Smith
*Middle Tennessee State University*

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# Preface

This, the seventh edition of *Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Social Systems Theory*, marks the continuing development of our ideas on social systems theory as a foundation to generalist practice. In this book, we discuss the importance of environmental influences on the behavior of systems. That being so, it is important to note some things in the environment that have changed since the first edition appeared more than twenty years ago.

We have made significant revisions to the organization of the text while retaining the central emphasis on theories relevant to social work practice. Prior editions were formatted in parts to facilitate the teaching of the content in either one course (usually at the graduate level) or a series of two courses (usually at the undergraduate level). That format required the repetition of some material throughout the five parts of the text to ensure that students had the opportunity to review the major concepts as they progressed through the course sequence. With the elimination of parts, we have the opportunity to include both new and expanded material.

This edition is organized around the new professional competencies mandated by the Council on Social Work Education. It is apparent in the format of this text that we have worked to link the text to the relevant areas of designated core competencies, which are organized around the concept of generalist social work practice. With the help of Ashley Dodge and Carly Czech, we have formatted the text to highlight the linkage of theories to required practice skills. It is our hope that this format will help you develop a unified view of the total range of professional social work activities.

We have included a significant new section on role theory, which we present as a logical extension of systems theory concepts and dynamics. This new edition provides support for the systems thinking model presented. Following the CSWE paradigm, we have organized the discussion of theories in a roughly increasing order of magnitude from individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. As before, we have noted that many theories have implications and application to multiple system levels. We have noted where theories complement or contradict one another in our effort to promote a more systematic eclecticism among practitioners. In addition, we have added chapters on the application of theories to special populations.

This is the first edition that does not include major new contributions by Wayne Chess and Julia Norlin, the originators of this text. The original idea of the book was to develop a single volume that offers an ambitious overview of all the theories that undergird social work practice. The use of systems theory as a matrix to bring some order to this endeavor began with Wayne and Judy. This edition is very much a continuation of that conception. The work that these two valued friends and colleagues have done to apply systems concepts to theory development and presentation is part of their lasting professional legacy. In addition, we have missed arguing about whether systems concepts

are a theory or a model; whether you can write a book about human behavior without talking about individuals, and whether Talcott Parsons is a stooge for the establishment. Not many people care about such things. We have missed the mud-wrestling about these and other arcane trivia.

We want to congratulate you, the emergent social worker, on your choice of this profession. The environment in which you have chosen to begin your studies is challenging. Times have been difficult, and as always there are those who want to make the first notch in belt tightening in the services to the poor, oppressed, and needy. These are the times when the people we serve need us to be at our best and our most resolute. We welcome you to the ongoing struggle to promote human well-being and dignity.

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# 1

# Introduction

CHAPTER OUTLINE


Human Behavior Theory and Social Work Practice 2

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| [X] Professional Identity | [ ] Ethical Practice | [X] Critical Thinking | [ ] Diversity in Practice | [ ] Human Rights & Justice |
| [ ] Research Based Practice | [X] Human Behavior | [ ] Policy Practice | [ ] Practice Contexts | [ ] Engage, Assess, Intervene, Evaluate |

# HUMAN BEHAVIOR THEORY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Human behavior is, to put it mildly, a puzzle. All around us we see daily evidence that people are alternately kind and cruel, wise and foolish, generous and selfish. We are bombarded constantly with conflicting images of human nature. Consider the following headlines as illustrations:

Hero Fireman Saves Children
Father Convicted of Child Abuse
Earthquake Orphans Find New Homes in U.S., France
No Aid for Growing Numbers of Refugees

You have seen similar headlines on a daily basis. Thoughtful readers are left shaking their heads at the paradox of human nature, on the one hand inexplicably cruel, on the other inspirationally brave and selfless. Our efforts to understand and predict human behavior seem to be hopeless in the face of such contradictions. Social work practice exposes us to the best and worst in human nature on a regular basis. Despite the apparently irreconcilable extremes, it is our nature to seek some framework to understand and manage human behavior. This book is dedicated to that quest, and to providing an overview of the myriad theories that have been developed to help bring order to the apparent chaos around us.

One of the oldest attempts to understand the apparently contradictory truths of our existence is the allegory of the blind men and the elephant. You know the outlines of the story. There are versions of it in all of the world's great religious and moral traditions. In the Jain version, six blind men are asked to describe an elephant. Each touches some part of the elephant, and then relates his understanding of the animal. The man who grabs the tail believes the elephant resembles a rope. The man who strokes the elephant's ear believes the beast is like a fan. The man who touches a leg believes the elephant is like a post, and so on. Afterward, a wise man explains that each of them is correct: The elephant has all the properties described (Jain, 2006).

In this story, the wise man (presumably one with sight) represents the integration of various perspectives on the truth. In our study of theories of human behavior, we will encounter many blind men holding firmly to their own piece of the elephant, believing their own truths and discounting the theories of others. We hope that by the end of this book, you will have made peace with the fact that no one theory encompasses all of human nature. Each theory, as we will discuss, has some grasp of the truth. None has a complete or exclusive handle on the understanding of human beings. We hope that if we put together enough different partial truths, we can get at least a general picture of human nature. In epistemology (the study of knowledge in philosophy), this process of patching theories together to cover gaps is called *syncretism* (Merton, 1968).

The hodgepodge of theories relating to human behavior, like the blind men's data on the nature of elephants, leaves us with the need to develop what is called an *eclectic* perspective. *Eclectic* is derived from the Greek *eklektikos*, meaning to select (World Book, Inc., 2010). One of the goals of this book is for you to develop a systematic framework for your own eclectic view of human behavior. This will require the development of skills in *critical thinking* as you consider each theory in turn, and the uses to which you will put that theory in your social work practice. What will almost

surely emerge is a unique and personal view of human nature, influenced by your own experience and your own critical integration of existing theory and practice. It is our hope that by organizing your view according to some common principles, you will be better able to share your view with others, and test your perspective against the new approaches that will continue to emerge as long as you practice social work.

In order to foster the skills of critical thinking and the use of a common vocabulary, this book is organized around the guiding premises of social work education. These premises are developed by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), which is the organization charged with the accreditation of all social work programs in the United States. Central to the mission of CSWE is the idea of *core competencies*. Core competencies are the actual skills that are required for generalist social work practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2008).

There are ten core competencies required by CSWE, and whenever one of these competencies is addressed in this text, there will be a marginal note inserted. The appearance of this symbol (see Figure 1.1) will be accompanied by questions for reflection on the content and the application to the competency in question.

**What will almost surely emerge is a unique and personal view of human nature, influenced by your own experience and your own critical integration of existing theory and practice.**

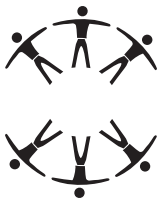

**Figure 1.1**
CSWE Core Competency

## CSWE CORE COMPETENCIES

Listed below are the ten core competencies required of all social workers by the Council on Social Work Education (2008). Each competency represents an observable skill that should be mastered at the foundation level of social work education.

1. **Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly.** Social workers serve as representatives of the profession, its mission, and its core values. They know the profession's history. Social workers commit themselves to the profession's enhancement and to their own professional conduct and growth.
2. **Apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice.** Social workers have an obligation to conduct themselves ethically and to engage in ethical decision-making. Social workers are knowledgeable about the value base of the profession, its ethical standards, and relevant law.
3. **Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments.** Social workers are knowledgeable about the principles of logic, scientific inquiry, and reasoned discernment. They use critical thinking augmented by creativity and curiosity. Critical thinking also requires the synthesis and communication of relevant information.
4. **Engage diversity and difference in practice.** Social workers understand how *diversity* characterizes and shapes the human experience and is critical to the formation of identity. The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. Social workers appreciate that, as a consequence of difference, a person's life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization, and alienation as well as privilege, power, and acclaim.

5. **Advance human rights and social and economic justice.** Each person, regardless of position in society, has basic human rights, such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers recognize the global interconnections of oppression and are knowledgeable about theories of justice and strategies to promote human and civil rights. Social work incorporates social justice practices in organizations, institutions, and society to ensure that these basic human rights are distributed equitably and without prejudice.
6. **Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research.** Social workers use practice experience to inform research, employ evidence-based interventions, evaluate their own practice, and use research findings to improve practice, policy, and social service delivery. Social workers comprehend quantitative and qualitative research and understand scientific and ethical approaches to building knowledge.
7. **Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment.** Social workers are knowledgeable about human behavior across the life course; the range of social systems in which people live; and the ways social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and well-being. Social workers apply theories and knowledge from the liberal arts to understand biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development.
8. **Engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services.** Social work practitioners understand that policy affects service delivery, and they actively engage in policy practice. Social workers know the history and current structures of social policies and services; the role of policy in service delivery; and the role of practice in policy development.
9. **Respond to contexts that shape practice.** Social workers are informed, resourceful, and proactive in responding to evolving organizational, community, and societal contexts at all levels of practice. Social workers recognize that the context of practice is dynamic, and use knowledge and skill to respond proactively.
10. **Engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.** Professional practice involves the dynamic and interactive processes of engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation at multiple levels.

Adapted with the permission of the council on Social Work Education.

## GENERALIST PRACTICE

*Generalist practice* is the perspective that forms the foundation of social work practice and is the point of departure for refining practice skills at more advanced levels. It is also the educational model that forms the foundation of all social work programs. Generalist practice is rooted in the traditions of the profession, based on the early need for social workers who could do whatever was needed for clients in a time of patchy social services and few human resources. Today, generalist practice dictates that all social workers be familiar with the various intervention methods of the profession, and have the ability to work

with social systems of all sizes. The following definition of generalist practice comes from the Council on Social Work Education:

> Generalist practice is grounded in the liberal arts and the person and environment construct. To promote human and social well-being, generalist practitioners use a range of prevention and intervention methods in their practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. The generalist practitioner identifies with the social work profession and applies ethical principles and critical thinking in practice. Generalist practitioners incorporate diversity in their practice and advocate for human rights and social and economic justice. They recognize, support, and build on the strengths and resiliency of all human beings. They engage in research-informed practice and are proactive in responding to the impact of context on professional practice. BSW practice incorporates all of the core competencies. (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p. 7)

From Education Policy and Accreditation Standards, *Generalist Practice* pp 7–8. Copyright © 2008. Reprinted by permission of the Council on Social Work Education.

Social workers are required to have the knowledge and skills to practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Most of these social systems have a body of theories that address the specific range of phenomena that define that system. This book is organized so that the theories that relate to each level of social system are grouped together. However, it will become quickly apparent that there are a number of theories that have applications to multiple levels of systems (Merton, 1968). For example, role theory applies to almost all system levels to a greater or lesser extent. So also do theories such as behavioral learning theory and psychodynamic theory. For this reason, you will find that some theories are presented in a number of chapters as they relate to the system being discussed.

Embedded in the CSWE description of generalist practice is a reference to what is usually referred to as the *strengths perspective* (Saleebey, 1996). This is a general disposition that views differences between people and groups as a potential source of benefit, rather than as a sign of defectiveness or weakness. A major example of this is found in the difference between the strengths perspective and the diagnostic approach to mental illness. The diagnostic approach collects individual behaviors into clusters of "symptoms" that are then used in applying a pathological behavior label to a client. In the past, this labeling process was used in ways that have significantly restricted or injured people to whom the label was applied. For instance, a person whose quick mind and creative energy might seem a strength to a social worker is at risk of being diagnosed as having "attention deficit disorder." The assignment of this label might well result in loss of educational opportunities and/or prescription of drugs such as Ritalin or Adderall. These medications in turn may pose unwanted and unwarranted risks to some clients (Szasz, 1977).

It is important that we discuss one other note about the CSWE definition before we proceed. The generalist practice definition states that social workers engage in research-informed practice. We believe that this has a special meaning for the theoretical content in this book. Usually, research-informed practice would mean that social workers use only practice techniques that have been shown to be effective with a client problem.

This example might illustrate the point. A woman who suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) might be expected to benefit from a technique such as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), an approach

that has been widely and positively reviewed in application to this type of problem. At this time, the underlying theory of the way that EMDR works is still unclear. As there are positive clinical indicators for this technique, we might still feel it is worthwhile to identify this technique as supported by research even though our understanding of its restorative process is still being developed. By comparison, a technique called Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, widely used to prevent PTSD, has been shown to be relatively ineffective (Mitchell, 2003) and therefore would not be utilized.

## Critical Thinking

*Practice Behavior Example: Distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practice wisdom.*

**Critical Thinking Question:** What is the relationship between human behavior and social environment theory and critical thinking?

In this book we will discuss and describe some theories or techniques whose use is not supported by current research in order to illustrate the process of validating theories and techniques through research. Sometimes there is much to be learned from a good idea that didn't work out. Finally, we will include in our discussions of all theories a reference to the current status of empirical support for the theory. Note that this will be an uneven process, since some theories do not lend themselves readily to empirical (scientific) validation by their very nature.

In order to accomplish the mastery of the generalist practice competencies, social work educators have developed a uniform approach to the organization of the curriculum. All accredited schools of social work employ some variant of the following elements in developing their curriculum. The following content areas are present in all social work curricula:

- **Values and ethics.** The curriculum prepares the student to understand personal and professional values, the role of professional ethics, and the application of the NASW Code of Ethics.
- **Diversity.** The curriculum prepares students to recognize the interaction between culture and personal identity, and to foster culturally relevant programs and practice methods.
- **Social and economic justice and human rights.** The curriculum prepares students to understand the dynamics of at-risk populations, and the impact of this status on access to productive interventions. In addition, social work is committed to combating injustice and oppression and advocating for human rights. Students are prepared to practice and advocate for nondiscriminatory social and economic systems.
- **Human behavior and the social environment.** Theories link the person to the environment and provide the empirical base to social work interventions. This includes information on life span development, the full spectrum of social systems (individual, family, group, organization, and community) and the impact of social systems on promoting or deterring the achievement of well-being.
- **Social welfare policy and services.** Programs provide content about the history of social work, the history and current structures of social welfare services, and the role of policy in service delivery, social work practice, and attainment of individual and social well-being. Understanding and skills in policy analysis or promotion of effective services is stressed.
- **Social work practice.** Social work practice content focuses on strengths, capacities, and resources of client systems in relation to their broader environments. Students learn practice content that encompasses knowledge and skills to work with individuals, families, groups,

organizations, and communities. This content includes engaging clients; identifying issues, problems, needs, resources, and assets; collecting and assessing information; and planning for service delivery. It includes applying empirical knowledge and technological advances; evaluating program outcome effectiveness; developing, analyzing, advocating, and providing leadership for policies and services; and promoting social and economic justice.

- **Research.** This content prepares students to develop, use, and communicate empirically based knowledge and evidence-based interventions. Research knowledge is used by social workers to provide services; to initiate change; to improve practice, policy, and social service delivery; and to evaluate their own practice.
- **Field education.** Field education occurs in settings that reinforce students' identification with the purposes, values, and ethics of the profession; fosters the integration of empirical and practice-based knowledge; and promotes professional competence. Field education is systematically designed, supervised, coordinated, and evaluated to promote the achievement of program objectives. (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p. 8)

## THEORY AND PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK: CONNECTING THE DOTS

This is a book about theories of human behavior, and it is worth our time to take a moment to discuss the role and value of theories in social work. In everyday conversation, many people use the word *theory* in contrast to *practical*, as in, "That's nice in theory, but that isn't how it works in real life!" Social work is a practical profession, so what need do we have for theories?

**Good theories are intimately tied to their practical applications.**

Good theories are intimately tied to their practical applications. The purpose of theory is the prediction and control of events. This is accomplished by using theories to explain the relationship among observed variables. As the world becomes more complicated, we need theories as a road map to understand how things are connected. For a simple example, we observe that some men beat their wives. We observe that many of these men drink a lot of alcohol. It is tempting to conclude that alcohol abuse leads to spouse abuse. That explains the relationship between two observed variables and constitutes a simple theory of wife beating.

Obviously, our alcohol theory is pretty basic and leaves out a lot of other variables. For example, not all men who drink also beat their wives. Moreover, not all men who beat their wives drink. Hmmm, now what? Like so many theories of human behavior, this theory does not account for all of the observed behaviors. In applying theories to human behavior, we almost never get perfect prediction. The gold standard for any theory is the ability to identify the key variables out of all the myriad possibilities that meet two requirements: A key variable will always predict the behavior, and the behavior will never occur in the absence of that variable. When we have that degree of relationship, we are pretty sure that a cause-and-effect relationship exists between the two variables.

**Human Behavior**

*Practice Behavior Example: Utilize conceptual frameworks to guide the processes of assessment, intervention, and evaluation.*

**Critical Thinking Question:** What are your views on the causes of human behavior?

In theories of human behavior, we rarely see clear-cut cause and effect, where one variable alone causes the occurrence of another. Most of the time, theories of human behavior describe contributing variables rather than cause-and-effect relationships. Thus, alcohol abuse might contribute to spouse abuse, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient to cause spouse abuse.

The process of identifying, describing, measuring, and testing the variables and their relationship is the heart of theory building. Our example leads to a conclusion: Good theory building involves careful observation, measurable description, and testing of our hypotheses about the variables we observe. An *hypothesis* is simply a hunch; based on our observations, we think that we have an idea about which variables contribute to or preclude certain behaviors. We then put that hunch to a test by creating conditions under which we can manipulate the variables and observe the outcome.

In science, the best method for hypothesis testing is to conduct experiments. This is common in the so-called hard sciences such as physics and chemistry. In the behavioral sciences, concern for the well-being of the subjects limits our ability to use experimental tests of hypotheses. Imagine the outcry if we took a group of men and randomly had some drink alcohol heavily and some not, then observed the effect on the incidence of spouse abuse. In addition, the factors involved in human behavior are so subtle and varied that it would be virtually impossible to control them all. As a result, we rely on sample size and statistical methods in many cases to provide the rigor that we lose by not using classical experiments.

As in the physical sciences, behavioral science gives rise to both grand theories and focal theories of limited range. The definitions of these terms vary, but the essence is clear. Some theories are useful for a wide range of subjects and situations, such as the notion that behavior is shaped by the positive and negative consequences that follow. This is the so-called Law of Effect, which is more properly a theory that can generate testable hypotheses. Other theories apply only to a narrow range of subjects or situations. Many focal theories of

limited range exist and have value in social work, and many are in conflict with grand theories that dominate the field.

When we have tested an hypothesis (or a number of related hypotheses) a number of times and the results consistently confirm the expected results, we arrive at a theory. A valid scientific theory then generates new hypotheses that are testable. In this way, science continually challenges its own beliefs. The scientific method, to be effective, must involve open communication of the tests and results. The values of science demand that no theory ever be considered proven. Some explanations are found to be generally useful, even when they do not strictly describe reality. These useful aggregates are sometimes referred to as models, which aid our understanding of events without precisely describing them. Useful as models are, it is theory that advances science.

## THEORETICAL RANGE

Generalist practice, you have no doubt noted, covers a lot of territory. For that reason, social work practice has always ranged broadly in search of promising ideas that offer clues on how to help clients. These theories have come from medicine, religion, philosophy, sociology, psychology, management, economics, and a host of other places. As you would expect, the varied sources of these theories makes it pretty much inevitable that they do not "speak the same language." One of the most common frustrations for beginning students of human behavior is to realize that almost everyone has different names for things, even when they seem to be addressing the same things. The process of constantly translating from one theoretical vocabulary to another is both frustrating and potentially confusing. The variety of theories employed in social work is one reason that we continually seek a unifying language that allows us to communicate more effectively about the disparate systems with which we work. We have chosen role theory as an intermediary for two reasons: First, it addresses the whole range of human social interactions with which we are concerned; and second, the language of role theory is intuitively familiar to most of us. As Shaw and Constanzo (1970) noted,

> Role theory is a body of knowledge and principles that at one and the same time constitutes an orientation, a group of theories, loosely linked networks of hypotheses, isolated constructs about human functioning in a social context, and *a language system which pervades nearly every social scientist's vocabulary.* (p. 295)

Excerpts from page 295 in Shaw and Constanzo, THEORIES OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY Copyright © 1970 The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. Reprinted by permission of The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

Selecting theories for inclusion in the social work curriculum depends in part on the conformity of the theory with the philosophy of the profession. A theory is comprised of a set of concepts and dynamics that define and explain the subject matter. If the application of the theory is consistent with the purposes and values of the profession, it may become part of the canon of practice. Some theories, however valid and useful, may be untenable as foundations for social work practice. For instance, if it were learned that beating a child regularly would increase school achievement (decidedly not true in light of current knowledge), it would be a valid predictive model. However, such treatment is inconsistent with the values and ethics of the profession, and could not be used to guide social work practice due to the value and ethical problems such a position would pose.