



empowerment series

AN INTRODUCTION  
TO THE PROFESSION OF

# SOCIAL WORK

SIXTH EDITION

BECOMING A CHANGE AGENT

ELIZABETH A. SEGAL  
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# Council on Social Work Education’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards by Chapter



The Council on Social Work Education’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards requires all social work students to develop nine competencies and recommends teaching and assessing 31 related component behaviors, listed as Educational Policy (EP) Competencies 1–9 below. Multicolor icons and end-of-chapter “Competency Notes” connect these important standards to classwork **in the chapters identified below.**

## Competencies and Practice Behaviors

### The Nine Competencies and 31 Component Behaviors (EPAS, 2015):

- Competency 1—Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior:** 1, 5, 13, 14
- a. Make ethical decisions by applying the standards of the *NASW Code of Ethics*, relevant laws and regulations, models for ethical decision making, ethical conduct of research, and additional codes of ethics as appropriate to context. 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
  - b. Use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations. 1, 5, 6
  - c. Demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior; appearance; and oral, written, and electronic communication. 1, 6, 9, 12
  - d. Use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes.
  - e. Use supervision and consultation to guide professional judgment and behavior.
- Competency 2—Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice:** 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14
- a. Apply and communicate understanding of the importance of diversity and difference in shaping life experiences in practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 14
  - b. Present themselves as learners, and engage clients and constituencies as experts of their own experiences. 5, 6, 11
  - c. Apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse clients and constituencies. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7
- Competency 3—Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice:**
- a. Apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels. 1, 3, 4, 8, 11, 13
  - b. Engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice. 4, 5, 10, 11, 13
- Competency 4—Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice**
- a. Use practice experience and theory to inform scientific inquiry and research. 1, 10
  - b. Apply critical thinking to engage in analysis of quantitative and qualitative research methods and research findings.
  - c. Use and translate research evidence to inform and improve practice, policy, and service delivery. 1, 6, 10, 12, 14
- Competency 5—Engage in Policy Practice:** 11
- a. Identify social policy at the local, state, and federal levels that impacts well-being, service delivery, and access to social services. 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14
  - b. Assess how social welfare and economic policies impact the delivery of and access to social services. 4, 7, 10, 11
  - c. Apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice.



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CENGAGE EMPOWERMENT SERIES

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SIXTH EDITION

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*This book is dedicated to social work professionals everywhere.*

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# Preface

The twenty-first century has been a time of extraordinary social and economic changes. Hillary Clinton was the first female nominated by a major political party to run for president. She lost to the Republican candidate Donald Trump, who was elected as the 45th president. The first African American president served two terms in office. America experienced the steepest economic recession since the Great Depression in the 1930s gripped the nation for 18 months. Major health care legislation was passed, after decades of political debate and arguments, legislation that is now being challenged by the Republicans in Congress. More Americans struggle against poverty; an opioid epidemic has swept the nation; and many face oppression and violence. Millions live without adequate wages, health care, food, or education. The threat of international and domestic terrorism still lingers and challenges us to make our lives safer without turning to hate, bigotry, or repression. Social workers are called on to address these challenges.

## Why We Wrote This Book

As social work educators, we are charged with preparing a new generation of practitioners trained to help individuals, families, and communities develop and expand the strengths they need to address their problems. Today's social workers face these challenges during a time of budget constraints and vocal distrust of government and public social welfare efforts. The task of introducing students to our changing and demanding world often begins in social work classes.

Introductory social work courses attract a variety of students. Most are drawn to the profession because they want to help people. *An Introduction to the Profession of Social Work: Becoming a Change Agent* provides a foundation of knowledge about social work practice that prepares students for future social work classes and more advanced study. This book also introduces students to the process of becoming change agents. Although wanting to help people is critical for anyone working in human services, there is much more to becoming a professional social worker. The book provides students with information about the breadth of social work practice and what it means to be a social worker, helping them determine whether social work is a good fit for them. Therefore, the book is designed to encourage knowledge building and self-exploration, both of which are essential to developing good social work practice.

## Content of the Chapters

*An Introduction to the Profession of Social Work: Becoming a Change Agent*, like many other textbooks, informs students about what it means to be a professional social worker. Unlike some other books, it also instills interest and enthusiasm in students about pursuing a social work career and encourages students to take an

active role in changing social conditions for the better. The chapters include detailed, first-person stories by social work practitioners, who describe daily work in their areas of expertise and highlight cases that illustrate their work. The stories show the many sides of social work practice. The chapters also include “More about . . .” and “Point of View” boxes with additional details and differing points of view on topics of interest. Each chapter includes a box featuring an ethics dilemma, an exercise in how to become a change agent, and a concluding section on how to put into practice the concepts presented.

Pedagogically, the book includes several aids to learning and teaching. Besides the boxed material, the book features challenging but uplifting case examples. Some of them remind us why we do this type of work; others end less positively and make us wonder how to make a difference. The stories give students a very real picture of social work practice and help them better understand what it is like to be a social worker. Each chapter is followed by a conclusion and a list of key terms. Each term is set in bold type in the chapter and is also defined in the glossary at the end of the textbook

## New to This Edition

The authors added five to six student learning objectives at the beginning of each chapter. In addition, similar to the way CSWE core competencies are integrated throughout the text, symbols are used to connect the learning objectives with specific parts of the text.

The new edition includes content on the broad-ranging changes in health care, human rights, education, immigration, and other policy areas that have been put in motion since the 2016 election that will likely affect social work practice. In Chapter 4, “Human Rights and Social and Economic Justice,” content on current human rights challenges have been added, including a discussion of the record numbers of refugees seeking asylum in the United States and elsewhere, the increasing numbers of hate crimes throughout the United States, and the expanding and contracting rights based on gender identity.

Chapter 5, “Dimensions of Diversity,” offers an updated examination of the shifting demographic patterns in the United States and the likely impact they will have on social work related policy and practice and a new section on “Threats to Religious Tolerance” that became a growing concern in 2017.

In Chapter 6, “Generalist Social Work Practice,” there is an added focus on mindfulness-based theories and interventions, including mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction.

Chapter 9, “Health Care Services,” includes all the latest information about the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, more commonly known as the Affordable Care Act (ACA) or Obamacare. Students will be able to compare Obamacare to the latest Republican-sponsored health care plans, including the repeal of Obamacare, that have thus far not passed in Congress.

Chapter 10, “Mental Health Services,” now includes an expanded focus on the recovery model that is widely used in public mental health nationwide. And in Chapter 12, “Substance Abuse,” the authors have included all the latest

information about the opioid epidemic, including new case examples. Every day in the United States 100 men and women die from opioid overdoses.

Chapter 14, “Crisis, Trauma, and Disasters,” now includes a trauma-informed practice perspective. The chapter is designed to help students understand that clients may be survivors of trauma and therefore social workers need to create a safe environment for clients to explore their trauma.

## Pedagogical Features

In addition to the learning objectives at the beginning of each chapter, the book functions well as a textbook and workbook. Brief questions are interspersed throughout the chapters to encourage students to engage more deeply with the material. At the end of each chapter are questions that can be used for full-class or small-group discussions or on examinations. The questions are based on the material presented in the chapter; they encourage students to obtain additional information and explore their thoughts about important issues. The chapters end with exercises that are designed as group or individual assignments. Many are experiential and emphasize self-exploration as well as a review of the material presented in the chapter. There is also a set of ancillary materials, including exercises linked to the EPAS core competencies, an instructor’s test bank, and practice questions for students. At the end of the course, each student will have a compendium of exercises that help put into practice the material presented in the book and reflect the new CSWE core competencies.

We have deliberately included more exercises than can be done in the available time in order to provide choice and flexibility. Instructors and students can choose which exercises to complete, or individuals or groups can work on different exercises and report back to the class on their findings. The exercises can be used to stimulate discussions or can be semester-long assignments. The discussion questions, change agent activities, exercises, and stories challenge students to explore the concepts introduced in the text and relate them to their own interests.

This book was developed from our combined years of practice experience and teaching of introductory social work courses. We are appreciative of all the assistance we received from colleagues, especially those who helped write some of the chapters, and from the professional social workers who shared their experiences. We are also grateful to our students who, over the years, have let us know what does and does not work in the classroom. In particular, we thank the students who reviewed chapters and provided valuable insights from the perspective of the target audience.

An introductory textbook cannot thoroughly cover all the topics important to all social workers. Therefore, the responsibility for the content and design of this book rests solely with the authors. We hope that students and instructors alike will find *An Introduction to the Profession of Social Work: Becoming a Change Agent* useful, informative, and engaging.

Elizabeth Segal  
Karen Gerdes  
Sue Steiner

# 1 | What Is Social Work?



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## **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

After reading this chapter, students will be able to:

1. Describe and define the profession of social work.
2. Identify the key concepts and theories underlying the profession.
3. Distinguish between different terms used and how those terms reflect meaning.
4. Appraise the importance of values and ethics.
5. Identify professional social work roles and career paths.
6. Assess their own personality in relation to the characteristics that are expected of social workers and how they might fit in various social work careers.

*Jane is a 32-year-old single mother with a 5-year-old son and an 8-year-old daughter. She has supported her family by working 30 hours a week at a small local grocery store. Her job performance was excellent, but because of a decline in business, she was laid off. Now she needs to find a way to support her family. Her low-income neighborhood has very few businesses, and most of her neighbors subsist on small amounts of earned income and public social service programs.*

*Jane contacts her local family service agency for advice and direction. “My neighbor said I should come here. I just lost my job, and I have two young kids to support. My rent is due next week, and I don’t know what to do. Can you help me?”*

*If Jane came to you, what would you do?*

*This book will help you identify the resources available to Jane. You will learn about the skills that the professional social workers at the family social service agency will draw on to help Jane and her family. Social work is not only about Jane and her lost job. It is also about neighborhoods and communities. It is about the childhood experiences that have contributed to Jane’s identity and concerns. It is about government and public policies. This book is a guide to understanding how social workers fit into all these different areas.*

*Once you have learned about the resources and skills needed by a professional social worker, you will be better prepared to decide whether a career in social work would suit you. You will be ready to choose your next step in pursuing a career in this ever-changing and diverse field.*

*This chapter provides an overview of the field of social work. It defines concepts and terms that are the basis of understanding what social workers do. The structures in which services are provided and how social work is a part of social change efforts are also presented. Throughout the chapter and the book, you will explore what it means to be a social worker and whether a career in social work is right for you.*

*These notations reflect the link that the material in the book has to the professional accreditation standards of our national organization, the Council on Social Work Education. You will read more about this organization later in this chapter and how being accredited reflects the national scope of social work education.*

## Social Work as a Profession **LO 1**



EP 3a

The purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being. Guided by a person and environment framework, a global perspective, respect for human diversity, and knowledge based on scientific inquiry, social work’s purpose is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons, locally and globally (CSWE, 2015, p. 5).

Many professions participate in promoting and improving human and community well-being. For example, police officers protect people and improve safety; lawyers contribute to protecting people’s civil rights; and doctors strive to save lives and keep people healthy. People who are not professionals also help others. Neighbors watch each other’s children or prepare meals when someone is sick. Volunteers visit the elderly or serve as big sisters or big





## EP 6a

brothers. All these efforts are concerned with improving social functioning. How is the profession of social work unique?

The unique contribution of social work practice is the duality of the profession's person and environment mandate: social workers must help society work better for people and help people function better within society. Helping individuals fit better into their environments, is typically referred to as **micro practice**, and changing the environment so that it works better for individuals is called **macro practice**. In other words, social workers make a commitment through professional training to help people and to improve society, and to give special attention to the interactions between people and between people and their surroundings. In some social work literature you might see the term **mezzo practice**, which refers to work with families and small groups. Sometimes it is used to refer to practicing in between micro and macro, and sometimes you will not see it identified, and practice with families and small groups is subsumed under micro practice.

A psychologist or counselor would likely focus only on Jane's anxiety and depression as a result of losing her job. Although a social worker can also help Jane deal with anxiety and depression (micro practice), the assistance would not stop there. The social worker would also connect Jane with local, state, and federal resources, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food assistance, job training, and educational programs (again, micro practice). Connecting clients with needed resources is one of the most important things a social worker can do. For this reason, it is critical for social workers to learn about all the resources available in every community where they work or serve. In addition, if Jane were unable to get access to a needed resource, such as quality day care, or if the resource were unavailable in the community, her social worker would advocate for providing the resource and might help create it by campaigning for new social policies and programs (macro practice). Instead of working only from their offices and waiting for clients to come to them, social workers are out in the field trying to change societal structures so that fewer people like Jane will need help.



## EP 2

In addition, social workers "understand how diversity and difference characterize and shape human experience and are critical to the formation of identity" (CSWE, 2015, p. 7). As a result, we recognize how a culture's educational, economic, and political structures may oppress, marginalize, and alienate some people while at the same time creating or enhancing privilege and power for others. Social workers' keen understanding of societal forms and mechanisms of oppression has resulted in a strong commitment to human rights, social and economic justice, and the elimination of poverty. Although other professions may ascribe to similar ideals and values, there is no other profession that is as engaged and dedicated to ending injustice, discrimination, and poverty as social work.

## Who Are Social Workers?

Professional social workers hold social work degrees from accredited undergraduate or graduate programs. Baccalaureate social work (BSW) and graduate social work (MSW) programs are accredited by the **Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)** on the basis of whether they meet the criteria discussed later. Students in CSWE-accredited programs learn the knowledge, values, ethics,

and a variety of intervention techniques or skills to work with individuals, families, small groups, communities, and organizations in order to solve problems and create change.

Upon graduation from an accredited social work program, social workers must comply with state licensing or certification requirements. Most states distinguish among three levels of social work: (1) BSW, (2) MSW, and (3) MSW with two years' postgraduate clinical practice. Applicants must pass the examination appropriate to their level of practice. For clinical licensure, they must also complete at least two years of post-MSW practice experience under the supervision of a licensed clinical social worker.

MSW- and BSW-level social workers engage in micro practice or direct services to individuals, families, and small groups. They also participate in macro practice by conducting research into social problems and their solutions; engage in policy analysis and legislative advocacy; administer programs; and organize people to fight for social change. To effectively address problems, social workers must help individuals and families function better and at the same time work to change societal conditions that limit individual and family functioning. For example, a woman like Jane who has recently lost her job can benefit from job training and help with interviewing skills so that she can more easily get a new job. She and others like her can also be helped by social advocacy efforts to develop new jobs in low-income areas and by legislative efforts to provide health coverage for the unemployed and working poor.

In addition to BSW and MSW degrees, there are also two types of doctoral-level social work degrees. Students interested in pursuing a doctorate in social work can either get a doctor of social work (DSW) degree or a doctor of philosophy (PhD) degree, depending on the school they attend. Although the DSW was the original social work doctoral degree, the PhD has become more common over the years. The course work is generally the same in DSW and PhD programs, though there are recent efforts to make the DSW more of an advanced clinical practice degree and the PhD more of a research-focused degree. Social workers holding doctoral degrees generally work as social work educators, researchers, administrators, or policy analysts.

The desire to help others and change social conditions does not earn a person professional status as a social worker. The desire must be combined with the knowledge, values, and skills delivered in one of the 250 graduate and 511 undergraduate programs accredited by the Council (CSWE, 2017). Even though other human service practitioners are sometimes referred to as social workers, if they have not completed an accredited social work program and met licensure or certification requirements, they are not professional social workers.

Few careers rival social work for the diversity and wealth of opportunities offered to practitioners. Social workers operate in a variety of urban and rural settings, including public and private mental health centers, community centers, courts, prisons, schools, public welfare offices, the military, hospitals, nursing homes, businesses, and child welfare offices. They address drug and alcohol abuse, mental and physical illness, poverty, violence, lack of community

power, family conflicts, workplace tensions, discrimination, oppression, and inadequate housing, among other problems (see Box 1.1).

There are currently over 650,000 social workers employed in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Forty-seven percent of social workers are employed as child, family, or school social workers, and 43 percent are working in the areas of health or mental health. Employment opportunities for social workers are expected to grow faster than the average profession, through 2024. Social workers who specialize in services related to health care and substance abuse are projected to have the easiest time finding a job due to growing need in these areas.

The professional organization formed to support and advocate for social work professionals is the **National Association of Social Workers (NASW)**. The average NASW member holds a master's degree in social work, has practiced social work for 16 years, and earns on average \$45,000 annually (NASW, 2017a). Hospital social workers tend to have the highest median salary (\$56,650); child, family, and school social workers have a median salary of \$42,350; and practitioners in state-funded or public social work positions earn on average \$46,940 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

## Box 1.1 More About...Social Work

What people *think* they know about social work is often a myth.

**Myth** Most social workers work for the government.

**Fact**

- Fewer than 3 percent of all professional social workers work for the federal government.
- About a third of all professional social workers are employed by federal, state, and local governments combined.

**Myth** For therapy you need a psychologist or psychiatrist.

**Fact**

- Professional social workers are the nation's most numerous providers of mental health and therapy services. Professional social workers are often the only mental health care providers serving residents of many poor, rural counties.
- Social work is designated as one of the four core mental health professions under federal legislation that established the National Institute of Mental Health.

**Myth** Most social workers are employed in public welfare or child welfare.

**Fact**

- About one-quarter of all child welfare cases are handled by professional social workers.
- About 1 percent of NASW members work in public assistance.
- Professional social workers practice in many settings: family services agencies, mental health centers, schools, hospitals, corporations, courts, police departments, prisons, public and private agencies, and private practice.
- More than 200 professional social workers hold elective office, including one US senator and six representatives during the 115th Congress.

**Myth** Social service employees, caseworkers, and volunteers are social workers.

**Fact**

- A social worker is a trained professional who has a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree in social work.
- All states license or otherwise regulate social work practice.
- A social service employee, caseworker, or volunteer community worker is not a social worker unless she or he has a social work degree.

*Source:* Information drawn from naswdc.org website.

## Social Work Education

The social work profession's unique integration of knowledge from a number of disciplines with the profession's own skills, values, ethics, and knowledge can be seen in the content of social work education. Accredited BSW programs include relevant material from biology and other social sciences. Most require students to take economics, political science, human biology, philosophy, psychology, and sociology courses. This material is combined with social work-specific courses in human behavior and the social environment, research, practice, and social policy.

In addition, students in accredited BSW programs complete a minimum of 400 hours of field practicum, and MSW students complete a minimum of 900 hours. In the field practicum course, students are assigned to a social service-related agency or organization under the supervision of a social work practitioner. Field practicum organizations include child welfare agencies, schools, hospitals, mental health agencies, senior centers, homeless and battered women's shelters, and juvenile and adult probation programs, among others (see Box 1.2).

Many two-year colleges offer social or human service programs in which students can earn preprofessional degrees. These programs provide important foundation knowledge and skills that can lay the groundwork for a BSW degree. Students with degrees from two-year programs can work in most areas of social services. The positions are typically entry level, and they provide excellent work experience should the preprofessional choose to pursue a BSW degree. Many students who complete two-year degrees transfer into accredited BSW programs (see Boxes 1.2 and 1.3).

### Box 1.2 More About...Social Work Education Criteria

The criteria for social work education are outlined by the Council of Social Work Education in its "Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards." All schools that wish to be accredited must follow the guidelines. Every eight years, programs conduct self-studies and submit a comprehensive written portfolio to the CSWE accreditation board. As part of the accreditation process, a team of social work educators reviews the school and

provides a report to the accreditation board. The report and self-study documents are then reviewed, and a determination is made whether to grant accredited status. This process ensures uniform standards for training social workers. No matter where you choose to study, as long as it is in a CSWE-accredited program, your curriculum will reflect the standards and values of the profession.

### Box 1.3 What Do You Think?

What are the differences between a BSW and an MSW degree? What is the difference in emphasis between the two degrees? How might the different training affect the

type of job a BSW graduate might do compared with an MSW graduate?

## Central Concepts and Theories LO 2

Part of what defines a profession is a shared vision, typically referred to as a mission. The primary mission of social work, according to the membership of NASW, is

to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. (NASW, 2017b, p. 1)

### Person in Environment Concept

Several aspects of the mission make the profession unique. One is the focus, as stated above, on the “needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.” The profession has a clear commitment to working with members of society who are often left behind or left out. A second unique characteristic is the fact that individuals’ problems are addressed in combination with the social context. Social workers realize that they must pay attention to the environment in which people live, and they work to change the environment so that it functions more effectively for individuals, families, and communities. This dual view is known as the **person-in-environment** perspective (Karls & Wandrei, 1994).



EP 7b, 8b

The person-in-environment perspective is what sets social work apart from other helping professions. The environment is not just the physical place where people live and their relationships with those who are nearest. It is broader and includes the culture and beliefs that are part of people's lives, the impact they experience as a result of public policies, and the effects of prejudice and oppression that are part of the larger environment of our society (Langer & Lietz, 2015). If we consider Jane and her family from the person-in-environment perspective, we need to ask about relationships between Jane and her extended family, what living in their neighborhood was like before she lost her job, what activities the children have been involved in, and what those activities mean to them. Perhaps Jane and her children belong to a church, a synagogue, or a mosque that might be a place of support and resources that Jane did not think of and which her social worker can suggest she consider. Does she have social connections from her job at the grocery? Or does her former boss have connections with other businesses that might need someone, and he could recommend Jane? Are there barriers to opportunities like education so that Jane has not been able to gain skills that would prepare her for better-paying employment? When people face a crisis, it is difficult to consider the entire picture, their place in the larger environment. Social workers are trained to take that perspective. In Jane's case, maybe finding a program that will train her for a higher-paying job would be a long-term plan that could change Jane's situation.

The importance of understanding problems and directing change efforts at both the individual and environmental levels is central to good social work practice. Which approach social workers use depends on where they see problems originating. If all change efforts are directed at individuals, social workers see the causes of people's problems as being inside themselves. If they focus only on the environment, they believe that the problems begin outside the individual.

Although it is true that some problems lie exclusively within individuals and others are purely environmental, most problems have multiple causes. Some causes are individual, whereas others are societal or structural in nature. If social workers do not address both individual and environmental causes, they will not be able to solve problems effectively. For example, to help someone who is depressed, a counselor might immediately engage in therapy and refer the client to a medical doctor who can prescribe antidepressant drugs. Although these are certainly viable approaches, the person-in-environment concept dictates also considering whether something in the person's environment is contributing to or even causing the depression. If the person lives in poverty, for example, the everyday struggle to survive might result in depression. Therefore, interventions aimed at reducing poverty would also be appropriate ways to alleviate the individual's depression.

## Theoretical Basis for Social Work Practice

Social work practice is based on a number of theories developed in a variety of fields. For example, social workers rely on biological, sociological, anthropological, and psychological knowledge and theories to help them understand human development. A theory is "an organized set of ideas that seek to explain a particular phenomenon," which can help social workers understand complex situations (Langer & Lietz, 2015, p. 8). A theory attempts to explain why something is the way it is. Theories can explain social relationships; for example, some theories explain why people develop biases against members of other groups. Theories can also make predictions about the likely outcomes of people's efforts. For example, many types of therapies are based on the theory that people's understanding of what happened to them during childhood leads to improved functioning as adults. A theory must be testable, meaning that research can be conducted to see whether it is accurate. For social work, theories help us practice effectively and understand our profession (Payne, 2014).



### EP 4c

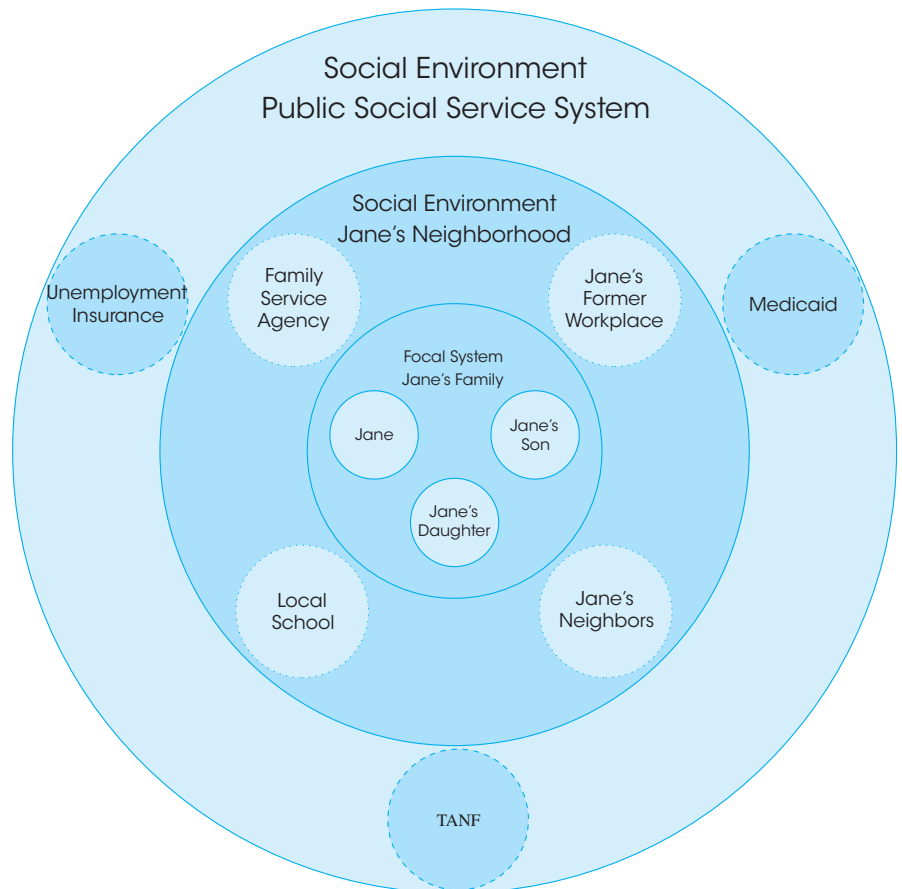
Theories help us understand human behavior, which is particularly important for social workers, who must apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment across the life span. Theories alone do not create change, but social workers apply various theories in practice settings to create desired change. Social workers use conceptual frameworks to help determine which theories to apply. A conceptual framework combines theories, beliefs, and assumptions to help us understand how people interact in their social systems and how those systems help or block health and well-being. A conceptual framework gives social workers a basis from which to view situations with clients and provides guidance for the assessment, intervention, and evaluation process.

Most of the theories used by social workers today developed from a central theoretical framework, the **general systems theory** developed by biologist

Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1971). Von Bertalanffy described the functioning of living systems, including the human body. Scientists have long realized that the systems within the human body are connected to each other. The failure of one human system often affects the functioning of other systems and of the body as a whole. Since its development, von Bertalanffy's framework has been applied to systems in many fields, including social work.

A system is a group of separate but interrelated units, or elements, that form an identifiable whole. Each of the parts in a system interacts with other parts in some way, and the various parts are dependent on each other to create the larger whole. The various parts of a system affect and are affected by one another. Social workers are most interested in social systems—the interactions and interdependence among people that together make up society. Interacting groups can be as varied as a family, residents of a group home, employees in a business, and residents in a neighborhood.

Jane's family is the point of focus for the social worker's micro interventions. Figure 1.1, Jane's System, illustrates that Jane's family system contains the



**Figure 1.1** Jane's System.