Generalist Social Work Practice

An Empowering Approach

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“What’s working well that you would like to see continue?” With this question, Andrea Barry, a family preservation worker, shifts focus in her work with the Clemens family. She carefully studies the reactions to her question on the faces of the family members who are gathered with her around their kitchen table. She reads caution, apprehension, maybe even a little anger, and yes, there it is, a growing sense of surprise, of intrigue with her approach. As a social worker with the family preservation program of Northside Family Services, Andrea has seen this before. Preparing to fend off the blame of abuse or neglect, families involved with the program are often taken off guard by the careful, nonjudgmental phrasing of her questions. With the query about “what’s working well,” Andrea recognizes family strengths and looks toward the future, toward things families can still do something about. In other words, she sets the stage for empowering families by focusing on their strengths and promoting their competence.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

• Describe the value base and purpose of the social work profession.
• Explain generalist social work as an integration of practice at multiple client system levels, policy, and research.
• Compare and contrast the multiple functions and roles of generalist social workers at various system levels.

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Andrea’s question embodies her view of how families might find themselves in this predicament. To continue to focus on “What are your problems?” doesn’t make sense to Andrea, who sees family difficulties arising from the challenge of scarce resources rather than resulting from something that the family is doing wrong. As reflected in her question, Andrea believes that even those families referred by the Child Protective Unit for work with the family preservation program are actually doing a lot right. She regards families as doing the best they can with currently available resources. So, of course, in trying to overcome their present difficulties, the subsequent question becomes, “What can we do to build on your strengths?” rather than “What else is wrong?” Her approach presumes that all families have strengths and are capable of making changes; it prompts them to collaborate with her as partners in the change process.

Andrea has learned from experience that different families benefit from different constellations of resources for optimal functioning. Some family members need to understand themselves and each other better. Others need information about how to cope with the inevitable, and also the unexpected changes that occur throughout their lives. Often, isolated families benefit from connections to the support of interpersonal relationships. Still other families need to access resources from within the community. Andrea teams with families to manage a network of social services, selecting among possibilities ranging from housing assistance to job training to crisis child care to child abuse prevention.

Andrea also recognizes that to serve their best interests, she must broaden her focus and look beyond the needs of individual families. Many times, families confined by forces they consider to be beyond their personal control seek a professional voice to speak for them at the levels of government, policy, and resource allocation. They certainly need power and resources to take charge of their own direction in a world that continues to grow more complex and confusing.

As Andrea provides opportunities for the members of the Clemens family to respond to her questions she reminds herself that this family is unique. She knows to attend to the ways that her clients are similar as well as to the ways they are different. As an African American woman, Andrea herself is sensitive to the confinement of prejudices. The strengths the Clemens family members have to offer and the challenges they face are particular to their own situation. Demonstrating her cultural competence, Andrea thoughtfully examines the assumptions she makes about people based on their obvious similarities so that she will not ignore their inevitable differences.

Clients have taught Andrea that individual differences themselves can be the key to solutions. Social work practitioners accept the challenge of enabling each client system to access its own unique capabilities and the resources of its particular context. Andrea’s role in the professional relationship is that of a partner to empower families with their own strengths, not to overpower families with her own considerable practice knowledge and skills. Andrea has learned to depend on each family system’s special competencies to guide her in this empowering process.

Even though Andrea considers the Clemens family as a whole, she will not neglect her professional mandate to act in the best interest of the Clemens children. Ethical considerations and legal obligations compel Andrea to protect the children in this family. However, family service social workers simultaneously focus on the preservation of families and the protection of children. Andrea sees the needs of families and children as convergent.
What benefits the family will help the children's development. What benefits the children will contribute to the cohesiveness of the family. Theoretically, she sees the whole family system as her client and knows that any change in the family system will create changes for individual family members.

Andrea's work with the Clemens family reinforces her opinion that social policy that aims to keep families together is good policy. She always feels best when implementing a policy that reflects a professional philosophy that so neatly fits her own values. The policy of family preservation makes sense in Andrea's practice experience as well. She has observed the trauma for families and children when children at risk are removed from their own homes. Reuniting them, even after positive changes occur, always seems to be a difficult transition. Research in the field of child welfare confirms Andrea's practice observations and lends support to the current policy of family preservation. Andrea believes that keeping families together makes good economic sense, too. She suspects that economic considerations are a major force motivating the development of policies that favor family preservation.

"What's working well that you'd like to see continue?" This is a simple question, yet it reflects Andrea Barry's empowerment orientation toward social work practice. Andrea has learned that even simple questions can have dramatic effects. Simple questions set the tone, bond relationships, and lead to successful solutions.

This overview of social work practice describes the underlying values, purposes, and perspectives that contribute to the empowering approach used by Andrea Barry and articulates what generalist social workers do. The outcome is a foundation on which to build an understanding of social work practice from a generalist perspective.

**SOCIAL WORK VALUES AND PURPOSE**

Andrea Barry practices in family services—one of the many fields of social work. Other practice arenas include school social work, medical social work, probation and other criminal justice services, mental health, youth services, child welfare, community organizing, and housing and urban development, to name a few. The predominant fields of social work practice, representing more than 70 percent of the professional workforce, are mental health, medical health, child welfare, and aging services (Whitaker et al., 2006).

All social work practitioners, regardless of their particular field of practice, share a common professional identity and work toward similar purposes. The National Association of Social Workers (1999), in its Code of Ethics, defines this unifying purpose, or mission, of all social work as "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" (Preamble). To meet this purpose, social workers recognize that personal troubles and public issues are intertwined.

Thus, social workers strive to both strengthen human functioning and promote the effectiveness of societal structures. This simultaneous focus on persons and their environments permeates
all social work practice. As a social worker, Andrea Barry works with the Clemens family to facilitate the adaptive functioning of their family and preserve its unity. She also works to create a resource-rich and responsive environment that will contribute to the development and stability of the Clemens family. Both of these activities reflect Andrea’s integration of the fundamental values of the social work profession. The overarching values of human dignity and worth and social justice shape her attitudes; the purpose of the profession directs her actions.

Human Dignity and Worth

Valuing the inherent human dignity and worth of all people reflects a nondiscriminatory view of humankind. The Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999) ensures social workers treat clients with respect, attend to individualization and diversity, promote self-determination, strengthen clients’ capacities and opportunities for change, and responsively resolve conflicts between the interests of clients and those of society. Similarly, in their joint statement on ethics in social work, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) affirm that human rights follow from respect for the inherent dignity and worth of all people. As such, social workers are expected to defend and uphold the physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual integrity and well-being of all persons by

1. Respecting the right to self-determination—Social workers should respect and promote people’s right to make their own choices and decisions, irrespective of their values and life choices, provided this does not threaten the rights and legitimate interests of others.

2. Promoting the right to participation—Social workers should promote the full involvement and participation of people using their services in ways that enable them to be empowered in all aspects of decisions and actions affecting their lives.

3. Treating each person as a whole—Social workers should be concerned with the whole person, within the family, community, societal and natural environments, and should seek to recognise all aspects of a person’s life.

4. Identifying and developing strengths—Social workers should focus on the strengths of all individuals, groups, and communities and thus promote their empowerment. (IFSW & IASSW, 2004, Sec. 4.1)

Respectful interaction with others affirms a person’s sense of dignity and worth. Social workers treat people with consideration, respect their uniqueness, appreciate the validity of their perspectives, and listen carefully to what they have to say. Ultimately, according people dignity and worth affords them the opportunities and resources of a just society.

Social Justice

Social justice describes circumstances in which all members of a society have equal access to societal resources, opportunities, rights, political influence, and benefits (DuBois & Miley, 2014; Healy, K., 2007). Social justice prevails when all members benefit from the resources that a society offers and, reciprocally, have opportunities to contribute to that society’s pool of resources.
The philosophy of social justice is deeply rooted in the social work profession; however, political realities and ethical dilemmas confound workers’ attempts to apply the principles of social justice in practice. For example, Reisch (2002) describes two problems associated with relating social justice principles to the social policy debates taking place in today’s political and economic environment. First, Reisch notes a paradox of defining justice principles based on a socio-political-economic system that for the most part perpetuates injustice. Additionally, Reisch highlights the tension between asserting individual rights and advancing the common good in allocating societal resources. Group and individual interests do not always converge. Clearly, social workers face dilemmas when choosing actions in practice that promote a social justice ideal. The International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work (2004) detail the fabric of social justice:

1. Challenging negative discrimination—Social workers have a responsibility to challenge negative discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ability, age, culture, gender or sex, marital status, socio-economic status, political opinions, skin colour, racial or other physical characteristics, sexual orientation, or spiritual beliefs.

2. Recognising diversity—Social workers should recognise and respect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the societies in which they practise, taking account of individual, family, group and community differences.

3. Distributing resources equitably—Social workers should ensure that resources at their disposal are distributed fairly, according to need.

4. Challenging unjust policies and practices—Social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where distribution of resources, policies and practices are oppressive, unfair or harmful.

5. Working in solidarity—Social workers have an obligation to challenge social conditions that contribute to social exclusion, stigmatisation, or subjugation, and to work towards an inclusive society. (Sec. 4.2)

Social injustice prevails when society infringes on human rights, holds prejudicial attitudes toward some of its members, and institutionalizes inequality by discriminating against segments of its citizenry. Encroachments on human and civil rights deny equal access to opportunities and resources, limiting full participation in society. Collectively, the injustices enacted by advantaged groups create conditions of discrimination and oppression for disadvantaged groups. Members of oppressed groups often personally experience dehumanization and victimization. Social workers understand the consequences of injustice and intervene to achieve individual and collective social and economic justice.

Defining Social Work

Social work is a profession that supports individuals, groups, and communities in a changing society and creates social conditions favorable to the well-being of people and society. Social workers strive to create order and enhance opportunities for people in
Part One: Social Work Practice Perspectives

an increasingly complex world. The social work profession charges its members with the responsibility of promoting competent human functioning and fashioning a responsive and just society. To achieve these goals, social workers require a clear understanding of the way things are and a positive view of the way things could be. Social work practitioners fine-tune their vision by incorporating professional perspectives on human behavior, cultural diversity, social environments, and approaches to change. The International Federation of Social Workers (2014) defines social work as:

a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (Global Definition section, ¶ 1)

Similarly, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), which accredits undergraduate and graduate social work programs, describes the dual focus of the social work profession as promoting the well-being of individuals and the collective betterment of society through the “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” (2015, p. 1).

Framing social work’s commitment to respect the dignity and worth of all people and the profession’s quest for social justice, the core values of the social work profession also set the standards for what is desirable in practice. Based on the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics (1999), the professional values that guide social work practice include:

- Service—Helping people and solving social problems
- Social justice—Challenging injustices
- Dignity and worth of the person—Respecting inherent dignity
- Importance of human relationships—Recognizing the importance of belongingness
- Integrity—Being trustworthy
- Competence—Practicing competently

Achieving the Purpose of Social Work

Social work focuses on releasing human power in individuals to reach their potential and contribute to the collective good of society; it emphasizes releasing social power to create changes in society, social institutions, and social policy, which in turn create opportunities for individuals (Smalley, 1967). This view conceptualizes the purpose of social work in relation to both individual and collective resources. The trademark of the social work profession is this simultaneous focus on persons and their impinging social and physical environments.

To this end, practitioners work with people in ways that strengthen their sense of competence, link them with needed resources, and promote organizational and institutional change so that the structures of society respond to the needs of all societal
members (NASW, 1981). Additionally, social workers engage in research to contribute
to social work theory and evaluate practice methods. To achieve these purposes, social
workers engage in a variety of activities.

First, social work practitioners engage with clients to assess challenges in social func-
tioning, process information in ways that enhance their ability to discover solutions, de-
develop skills to resolve problems in living, and create support for change.

Second, social workers link people with resources and services, a vital strategy in
any change effort. More than simply connecting people with services, workers advocate
optimal benefits, develop networks of communication among organizations in the social
service delivery network, and establish access to resources. When necessary resources do
not exist, practitioners generate new opportunities, programs, and services.

Third, the NASW charges practitioners to work toward a humane and ad-
eysate social service delivery system. To accomplish this, social workers cham-
ion the planning of pertinent programs by advocating client-centeredness,
coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency in the delivery of services. Importantly, they strengthen lines of accountability and ensure the application
of professional standards, ethics, and values in service delivery.

Fourth, social workers participate in social policy development. In the
area of social policy, workers analyze social problems for policy ramifica-
tions, develop new policies, and retire those that are no longer productive.
They also translate statutes, policies, and regulations into responsive pro-
grams and services that meet individual and collective needs.

Finally, practitioners engage in research to further the knowledge and
skill base of social work. Effective and ethical social work depends on prac-
titioners using research-based theory and methods as well as contributing to
the knowledge base of the profession through their own research and evalua-
tion activities.

**GENERALIST SOCIAL WORK**

**Generalist social work** provides an integrated and multileveled approach for meeting
the purposes of social work. Generalist practitioners acknowledge the interplay of per-
sonal and collective issues, prompting them to work with a variety of human systems—
societies, communities, neighborhoods, complex organizations,
formal groups, families, and individuals—to create changes that
maximize human system functioning. This means that generalist
social workers work directly with client systems at all levels, con-
ect clients to available resources, intervene with organizations to
enhance the responsiveness of resource systems, advocate just so-
cial policies to ensure the equitable distribution of resources, and
research all aspects of social work practice.

The generalist approach to social work practice rests on
four major premises. First, human behavior is inextricably con-
ected to the social and physical environment. Second, based on
this linkage among persons and environments, opportunities for

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**Policy Practice**

**Behavior:** Assess how social welfare and
economic policies impact the delivery of
and access to social services

**Critical Thinking Question:** Generalist social
workers practice in the context of personal
and collective issues. In what ways does policy
practice impact their work with clients in direct
practice?
enhancing the functioning of any human system include changing the system itself, modifying its interactions with the environment, and altering other systems within its environment. Generalist practitioners implement multilevel assessments and multimethod interventions in response to these possible avenues for change. Third, work with any level of a human system—from individual to society—uses similar social work processes. Social work intervention with all human systems requires an exchange of information through some form of dialogue, a process of discovery to locate resources for change, and a phase of development to accomplish the purposes of the work. Finally, generalist practitioners have responsibilities beyond direct practice to work toward just social policies as well as to conduct and apply research.

Levels of Intervention in Generalist Practice

Generalist social workers look at issues in context and find solutions within the interactions between people and their environments. The generalist approach moves beyond the confines of individually focused practice to the expansive sphere of intervention at multiple system levels. In generalist social work, the nature of presenting situations, the particular systems involved, and potential solutions shape interventions, rather than a social worker’s adherence to a particular method.

The perspective of generalist social work is like the view through a wide-angle lens of a camera. It takes in the whole, even when focusing on an individual part. Workers assess people in the backdrop of their settings, and interventions unfold with an eye to outcomes at all system levels. They visualize potential clients and agents for change on a continuum ranging from micro- to mezzo- to macrolevel interventions, small systems to large systems, including the system of the social work profession itself (Figure 1.1). Generalist social workers view problems in context, combine practice techniques to fit the situation, and implement skills to intervene at multiple system levels.

**Microlevel Systems Intervention**

*Microlevel intervention* focuses on work with people individually, in families, or in small groups to foster changes within personal functioning, in social relationships, and in the

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*Figure 1.1*  
System Levels for Social Work Intervention
ways people interact with social and institutional resources. Social workers draw on the knowledge and skills of clinical practice, including strategies such as crisis intervention, family therapy, linkage and referral, and the use of group process. For instance, in this chapter's introductory example, Andrea Barry could work with Mr. and Mrs. Clemens to improve their parenting skills or refer them to a parent support group.

Although microlevel interventions create changes in individual, familial, and interpersonal functioning, social workers do not necessarily direct all their efforts toward changing individuals themselves. Workers often target changes in other systems, including changes in the social and physical environments, to facilitate improvement in an individual's or family's social functioning. These activities involve work with systems at other levels.

**Mezzolevel Systems Intervention**

**Mezzolevel intervention** creates changes in task groups, teams, organizations, and the network of service delivery. In other words, the locus for change is within organizations and formal groups, including their structures, goals, or functions. For example, if, in working with the Clemens children, Andrea learns of their embarrassment at receiving lunch subsidies because the school physically segregates the "free lunch" students from the "full pay" students in the cafeteria, she can help them and other families who report similar concerns by working directly on the school's policy. Andrea's work with the school to address this demeaning and discriminatory practice represents a mezzolevel intervention. Effecting change in organizations requires an understanding of group dynamics, skills in facilitating decision making, and a proficiency in organizational planning. Working with agency structures and the social service delivery network is essential for developing quality resources and services.

**Macrolevel Systems Intervention**

**Macrolevel intervention** addresses social problems in community, institutional, and societal systems. At this level, generalist practitioners work to achieve social change through neighborhood organizing, community planning, locality development, public education, policy development, and social action. A worker's testimony at a legislative hearing reflects a macrolevel strategy to support a comprehensive national family welfare policy. Working with neighborhood groups to lobby for increased city spending on police protection, street repair, and park maintenance is another example of a macrolevel intervention. Social policy formulation and community development lead to macrosystem change.

**Professional-Level Intervention**

Finally, when working with the social work profession, generalist practitioners address issues within the system of the social work profession itself. These *professional-level intervention* activities project a professional identity, define professional relationships with social work and interdisciplinary colleagues, reorient priorities within the social work profession, or reorganize the system of service delivery. For instance, by supporting social work licensure and the legal regulation of practice, practitioners use their collective influence to ensure the competence of those persons who become social workers. Standard setting and accountability call for social workers to be actively involved in the system of the social work profession.
Policy and Generalist Practice

Social policy determines how a society distributes its resources among its members to promote well-being. Social policies direct the delivery of health and human services, including mental health, criminal justice, child welfare, health and rehabilitation, housing, and public assistance. Social workers press for fair and responsive social policies that benefit all persons and advocate changes in policies affecting disenfranchised and oppressed groups whose dignity has been diminished by injustice.

Social welfare policies affect all facets of social work practice (Schorr, 1985). First, value-based policies implicitly guide how we orient social workers to the profession, the ways we educate workers for practice, and the choices we make to define the dimensions of practice activities. Second, policy shapes bureaucracy and the structure of agency practice—a culture that ultimately defines who gets services and what services they get. And, finally, in their own practice activities, social workers unavoidably make policy judgments by attending to or overlooking constantly changing social realities. To this list, Specht (1983) adds other major policy decisions that arise in the sociopolitical context of social work practice. These policy choices determine eligibility requirements, the array of programs and services offered, the structure of the social service delivery system, financing for health and human services, the form and substance of educating social work practitioners, and the regulation of social work activities.

To understand the impact of social policies on social work practice, consider how policy affects all aspects of Andrea Barry’s practice in family preservation. Social policies, framed at the legislative level in the amendments to the Social Security Act and implemented through state administrative procedures, define the goals and processes that Andrea implements in family preservation. Agency-level policy to design programs and services consistent with empowering principles and a strengths perspective further refines Andrea’s approach to working with families. As a professional social worker, Andrea’s direct practice with families falls within the policy guidelines established by the NASW standards for child protection. Policy choices at many levels—federal, state, agency, and worker—influence the day-to-day practice of social work.

Research in Generalist Practice

Research is a method of systematic investigation or experimentation, the results of which can enrich theory and refine practice applications. When clients are integrally involved in designing and implementing research, research processes themselves empower clients. Research informs social work practice in several ways. It contributes to the theoretical base for understanding human behavior and change. Further, research is a tool for designing intervention strategies, measuring intervention effectiveness, and evaluating practice. Research is essential for program development and policy analysis. Aware of the integral relationship between theory and practice, generalist social workers use research-based knowledge to support practice activities and directly conduct their own research and analysis. The press for evidence-based practice attests to the importance of the research–practice connection. The goal of evidence-based research is to identify effective intervention strategies and robust program models. Based
The social work profession today faces a confusing and inaccurate public image, an image perpetuated by the portrayal of social work in the media (Freeman & Valentine, 2004; Zugazaga et al., 2006). To address this concern about image, social work professionals may need to look inward. The bifurcation of the social work profession into two mutually exclusive divisions, one focusing on clinically based (micro) practice and the other on policy-oriented (macro) practice, dilutes the social justice image of social work (Dennis et al., 2007; Dessel et al., 2004; Olson, 2007; Reisch & Andrews, 2004; Specht & Courteny, 1994). Social workers debate questions that reinforce the notion of a dichotomy in social work practice. Should social work’s emphasis be clinical work or policy practice? Does facilitating individual adaptation mean succumbing to social injustice? Do the long-range solutions of macropractice address the immediate needs of social work clients? Are social work solutions best found at the microlevel or macrolevel?

The past several decades have shown social work leaning more toward clinical than political practice, leading Karger and Hernandez (2004) to suggest that the profession has abandoned its engagement in public discourse, social commentary, political and social activism, and intellectual life. As a result, social workers “have little influence on the pressing issues of the day” (p. 51), particularly with respect to policy concerns about social justice. Searing (2003) charges social work “to reclaim its radical tradition. This asserts that the assessment of clients’ ‘needs’ should not only be driven by the availability of resources but should also be concerned with the reduction of inequality and social justice” (¶ 4). Furthermore, “if we want the profession of social work to pursue a social justice mission, which our official and espoused position suggests, then we need to take steps to ensure that the way we frame and conceptualize our practice is congruent with, and furthers, social justice principles” (Hawkins et al., 2001, p. 11).

A generalist, empowerment method bridges the micro–macro split within the social work profession; it frames social work practice to meet the social justice mandate based on the following principles:

- The unifying purpose of social work is to enhance human well-being and to promote a mutually beneficial interaction between individuals and society.
- The social work profession maintains an integrated view of persons in the context of their physical and social environments.
- Social workers practice at the intersection of private troubles and public issues.
- Social workers work with people to enhance their competence and functioning, to access social supports and resources, to create humane and responsive social services, to influence social policy, and to expand the structures of society that provide opportunities for all citizens.
- Social workers have a partisan commitment to people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. The mandate of the social work profession is to ensure the fulfillment of the social justice contract between individuals and society, particularly for those groups that are disenfranchised.
- A just society is one in which all members of society share the same rights to participation in society, protection by the law, opportunities for development, and access to social benefits, and who, in turn, contribute to the resource pool of society.
- Empowerment social work is simultaneously clinical (personal) and critical (political) (Miley & DuBois, 2005).

On rigorous client outcome studies, best practices are emerging in all fields of social work practice.

Research enhances social work effectiveness, as illustrated in the example of Andrea Barry's work with clients in family preservation. Her coursework on empowerment-based practice, theories about families, and the dynamics of child abuse and neglect—all...
information rooted in decades of social work research—informs Andrea each time she interacts with her clients. Andrea regularly reads professional journals, especially *Social Work, Child Welfare, The Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work, The Journal of Evidence-Based Practice*, and *Families in Society*, to keep up with best practices within the field of child welfare. She also uses evaluation and research techniques to monitor her clients’ progress toward goals and to assess her own practice effectiveness. Additionally, Andrea’s work presents opportunities to add to the knowledge base of the profession as she and other family preservation workers carefully document the results of a new intervention program piloted by her agency. Research supports practice, and practitioners conduct research.

**Advantages of a Multifaceted Approach**

Social workers realize many advantages from their generalist practice approach. Inevitably, changes in one system ripple through other interrelated systems. In other words, a significant improvement in a client or environmental system might precipitate other beneficial changes. A single policy change may have far-reaching benefits for an entire society. Research demonstrating effective change strategies in one situation may lead to broader implementations to assist others in similar situations. Because of their multidimensional perspectives, generalist practitioners are likely to uncover more than one possible solution for any given problem.

Generalist social workers see many possible angles from which to approach any solution. They analyze the many dimensions of any challenging situation to discover entry points for change. They also align the motivations and efforts of client systems with systems in their environments, synchronizing the movements of all involved to achieve the desired outcome. Generalist social work frames a way of thinking about both problems and solutions in context, and it describes a way of working with clients at a variety of system levels.

**SOCIAL WORK FUNCTIONS AND ROLES**

Generalists work with systems at many levels, but what does that actually mean in their daily practice of social work? As a family preservation worker, Andrea Barry intervenes directly with individuals and families. She provides them with education, counseling, and linkage to needed community resources—activities associated with roles at the microlevel.
Yet, Andrea's work encompasses more than microlevel intervention. In her position, Andrea identifies gaps in the social service delivery network when resources families need are not available. As a result, she works with other professionals in child welfare to address social service delivery issues—a mezzolevel intervention. She and her interdisciplinary colleagues are developing a community education plan to promote effective parenting—a macrolevel strategy. Finally, Andrea systematically evaluates the effectiveness of her work and keeps abreast of child welfare policy initiatives. In doing so, Andrea demonstrates the integration of research, policy, and multilevel intervention that characterizes generalist social work practice.

Activities of generalist social work practice fall broadly into three related functions: consultancy, resource management, and education (DuBois & Miley, 2014; Tracy & DuBois, 1987). Within each function are associated roles that explicate the nature of the interaction between clients and social workers at various system levels. These roles define responsibilities for both client systems and practitioners. Interventions designed within this model cover the range of issues presented to generalist social workers by clients at all system levels.

Consultancy

Through consultancy, social workers seek to find solutions for challenges in social functioning with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Within the roles of the consultancy function of social work, workers and clients confer and deliberate together to develop plans for change. Practitioners and clients share their expertise with one another for the purpose of resolving personal, family, organizational, and societal problems. Consultancy acknowledges that social workers and clients and constituencies bring information and resources, actual and potential, that are vital for resolving the issue at hand.

As a collaborative process, consultancy draws on the knowledge, values, and skills of social workers and clients to clarify issues, recognize strengths, discuss options, and identify potential courses of action. As consultants, social workers empower clients by respecting their competence, drawing on their strengths, and working with them collaboratively to discover solutions. These consultancy activities cast workers into the roles of enabler, facilitator, planner, and colleague and monitor (Table 1.1).

Enabler Role

In the enabler role, social workers engage individuals, families, and small groups in counseling processes. An enabler encourages action by engaging in a helping relationship, framing solutions, and working toward constructive and sustainable change. In other words, enablers are change agents who "use varying approaches in order to provide the conditions necessary for clients to achieve their purposes, meet life challenges, engage in their natural life development processes, and carry out their tasks" (Maluccio, 1986, p. 19). In the context of work with groups, social workers enable supportive interactions
among group members to facilitate problem solving. As enablers, practitioners consult with individual and family client systems to improve social functioning by modifying behaviors, relationship patterns, and social and physical environments.

Facilitator Role
Through the facilitator role, social workers activate the participation of organizational members in change efforts. By facilitating group processes, social workers encourage competent group functioning, stimulate intragroup support, observe group interaction, offer constructive feedback, and share information about group dynamics. As facilitators, social workers enhance linkages within organizations and help them counteract apathy and disorganization. In this role, practitioners may even target their own agency settings to increase the cooperation of staff and ensure the effectiveness of social service delivery.

Planner Role
Social workers, in their planner role, understand community needs, recognize gaps and barriers in service delivery, and can facilitate a process for community-based or social change. Techniques to understand social problems and develop innovative solutions at the macrolevel include needs assessments, service inventories, community profiles, community inventories, environmental scans, and field research to understand social problems and develop innovative solutions at the macrolevel. As planners, social workers often participate in community organizing efforts to recommend changes.

Colleague and Monitor Roles
Through their colleague and monitor roles, social workers uphold expectations for the ethical conduct of members of their profession. Consultative relationships among social work practitioners lead to sound practice and professional development. As colleagues, social workers develop working partnerships with other practitioners through their participation in professional organizations such as the NASW and its local membership groups, and through their everyday contacts with other professionals. The Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999) specifically casts social workers as monitors, charging them to

Table 1.1 Consultancy Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Micro-</td>
<td>Enabler</td>
<td>Empower clients in finding solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mezzo-</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Foster organizational development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro-</td>
<td>Planner</td>
<td>Coordinate program and policy development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>through research and planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Profession</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colleague/Monitor</td>
<td>Mentor, guide, and support professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>acculturation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

review the professional activities of peers to ensure quality and maintain professional standards.

Resource Management

In the resource management function, social workers stimulate exchanges with resources that client systems already use to some extent, access available resources that client systems are not using, and develop resources that are not currently available. Resources are sources of power and provide the impetus for change at any system level. Resources are found within individuals, in relationships, and in social institutions.

Resources are not gifts bestowed by social workers. Instead, both social workers and clients play active roles in managing resources. Clients, as resource managers, take action to explore existing opportunities, activate dormant supports, and assert their rights to services. Social workers bring the resources of professional practice—the value imperative of equitable access to societal resources, the broad knowledge of the availability of resources, and a repertoire of skills to access and develop resources. Resource management is empowering when it increases the client system's own resourcefulness through coordinating, systematizing, and integrating rather than through controlling or directing. Social workers as resource managers function in the roles of broker, advocate, convener, mediator, activist, and catalyst (Table 1.2).

Broker and Advocate Roles

The professional mandate of the social work profession, to help people obtain resources, lays the foundation for the roles of broker and advocate. In the broker role, social workers link clients with available resources by providing information about resource options and making appropriate referrals. Competent brokers assess situations, provide clients with choices among alternative resources, facilitate clients' connections with referral agencies, and follow up to evaluate their efforts.

Social workers act as intermediaries between clients and other systems to protect clients' rights in their advocate role. Frequently, advocates function as spokespersons for clients in the bureaucratic maze of governmental structures. Advocates intervene with

---

**Table 1.2  Resource Management Roles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broker/Advocate</td>
<td>Link clients with resources through case management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convener/Mediator</td>
<td>Assemble groups and organizations to network for resource development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>Initiate and sustain social change through social action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalyst</td>
<td>Stimulate community service through interdisciplinary activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

social service delivery systems or policy makers on behalf of clients. Circumstances often press social workers to take on advocacy roles because the rights of social service clients have often been abridged.

Convener and Mediator Roles

Social workers often adopt convener and mediator roles with formal groups and organizations to coordinate the distribution and development of resources. Conveners promote interagency discussion and planning, mobilize coordinated networks for effective service delivery, and advocate policies that promise equitable funding and just service provisions. As conveners, social workers use networking strategies to bring together diverse representatives to address collective goals, such as in the examples of community task groups, interagency committees, and United Way panels. When controversy or conflicts of interest arise, social workers as mediators use their skills for negotiating differences and resolving conflicts. Conveners-mediators ally service providers in identifying service delivery gaps and encouraging proactive interagency planning, activities that are central to prevention efforts in social work.

Activist Role

Generalist social workers are in positions to identify societal conditions detrimental to the well-being of clients—a view that defines the social worker as activist. Strategies employed through the activist role include informing citizens about current issues, mobilizing resources, building coalitions, taking legal actions, and lobbying for legislative changes. Activists create just social policies as well as initiate new funding or funding reallocations that address their identified priority issues. Engendering community support, activists empower community-based efforts to resolve community issues, redress social injustice, and generate social reform.

Catalyst Role

The catalyst role implies a change motive that compels social workers to team with other professionals to develop humane service delivery, advocate just social and environmental policy, and support a worldview acknowledging global interdependence. Through professional organizations, social workers lobby at the state and federal levels and provide expert testimony. As catalysts, social workers initiate, foster, and sustain interdisciplinary cooperation to highlight client, local, national, and international issues.

Education

The social work function of education requires an empowering information exchange between a client system and a social work practitioner. Mutual sharing of knowledge and ideas is central to the educational function. Educational processes at all system levels reflect partnerships of co-learners and co-teachers. Collaborative learning presumes that client systems are self-directing, possess reservoirs of experiences and resources on which to base educational experiences, and desire immediate applications of new learning. The education function of social work respects the knowledge and experience that all parties contribute. Functioning as educators involves social work roles of teacher, trainer, outreach, researcher, and scholar (Table 1.3).
Table 1.3 Education Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Micro-</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Facilitate information processing and provide educational programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mezzo-</td>
<td>Trainer</td>
<td>Instruct through staff development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro-</td>
<td>Outreach</td>
<td>Convey public information about social issues and social services through community education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work Profession</td>
<td>Researcher/Scholar</td>
<td>Engage in discovery for knowledge development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Teacher Role
The teacher role in social work empowers client systems with information to stimulate competent functioning in all domains of living. Through teaching strategies, social workers strengthen clients with information to resolve current issues and to prevent other difficulties from emerging. To affirm clients' existing knowledge and skills, social workers select collaborative learning strategies to implement educational activities. Educational exchanges may occur in structured client–worker conferences, in formalized instructional settings, or in experiential exercises such as role plays.

Trainer Role
As educational resource specialists for formal groups, social workers in their trainer role make presentations, serve as panelists at public forums, and conduct workshop sessions. Sometimes, trainers are organizational employees; at other times, organizations contract with social workers to provide specific training experiences. Effective trainers select methods and resource materials based on research about adult education, attitude change, and learning modalities. Successful training strategies require a careful assessment of staff-development needs, clear goals of what the organization seeks, the ability to convey information through appropriate training formats, and a concrete evaluation process.

Outreach Role
In outreach roles, social workers inform a variety of audiences about social problems, describe social injustices, and suggest services and policies to address these issues. Workers disseminate information to inform the community about public and private social service organizations, thereby enhancing service accessibility. At the macrosystem level of community and society, the outreach role supports the prevention of problems. Increasing awareness of such issues as poverty, health care, disease control, stress, suicide, infant mortality, substance abuse, and family violence leads to early intervention and stimulates support for preventive actions. Using mass media, distributing posters and leaflets, conducting mailings, staffing information booths, and engaging in public speaking all bolster community members' awareness about programs and services. Sensitive to the unique needs of potential clients, outreach social workers provide multilingual, signed, Braille, and large-print announcements.
Ethical and Professional Behavior

Behavior: Use supervision and consultation to guide professional judgment and behavior

Critical Thinking Question: As illustrated in Table 1.4, generalist social worker Andrea Barry engages in the functions of consultancy, resource management, and education at all client system levels. Based on the knowledge, values, and skills that Andrea uses in this example, create a plan for your own continuing education for professional development and use of supervision to become an informed and effective generalist practitioner.

? Assess your understanding of social work functions and roles by taking this brief quiz.

Researcher and Scholar Roles
The social work Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999) specifically describes how professional knowledge and scientific research form the basis for practice. The Code of Ethics obligates social workers to contribute to the profession by conducting their own empirical research and sharing their findings with colleagues. Through researcher and scholar roles, professionals also critically examine the social work literature to integrate research findings with their practice. Social workers contribute to and draw on research related to human behavior and the social environment, service delivery, social welfare policy, and intervention methods.

Integrating Generalist Functions
In practice, social workers interweave the functions of consultancy, resource management, and education. For example, in addition to counseling, consultancy may involve linking clients with resources and teaching them new skills. Similarly, even though education is identified as a separate function, educational processes are inherent in all other social work activities as well. Rather than compartmentalizing these roles, this trilogy of social work functions provides an organizing schema for generalist social workers to construct and integrate multifaceted interventions. Table 1.4 offers examples of how family service worker Andrea Barry engages in consultancy, resource management, and educational interventions at all system levels.

Table 1.4 Family Service Interventions—Case Example: Andrea Barry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microlevel</th>
<th>Mezzolevel</th>
<th>Macrolevel</th>
<th>Social Work Profession Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultancy</td>
<td>Counseling with families</td>
<td>Facilitating organizational change</td>
<td>Addressing ethical and legal issues in mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to prevent burnout in child protective workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource</td>
<td>Linking families with additional community</td>
<td>Coordinating service delivery planning among</td>
<td>Stimulating interdisciplinary cooperation to develop resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>resources</td>
<td>local agencies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Providing opportunities for learning anger</td>
<td>Leading staff development training on mandatory</td>
<td>Presenting family preservation research at a regional conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>control and positive parenting</td>
<td>reporting at local day care centers</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
LOOKING FORWARD

Generalist social work describes a multifaceted approach designed to help people overcome challenges in their lives. Guided by the core values of human dignity and social justice, generalist practitioners perform many professional roles, apply and develop social work research, and improve social policy. Proficiency as a social worker requires a coherent practice framework and resourceful ways of looking at human systems to effect change in individual and social functioning. A competent generalist approach interweaves consultancy, resource management, and education strategies at all levels of practice (micro, mezzo, and macro) to enhance the lives of individual, family, group, organizational, community, and societal clients.

This book explains the processes essential for an empowerment-oriented method of social work. This first chapter provides an overview of the purposes and values of the social work profession and describes generalist social work. Chapter 2 discusses social work theory and articulates how various views, including the ecosystems perspective, biology, feminism, life course theory, and critical theory, support a generalist approach. Chapter 3 describes the ways in which values, expectations, and diverse cultural influences filter perceptions and affect social work practice. Chapter 4 explains how the strengths perspective and the ideal of human power shape an empowerment method of generalist practice.

Chapter 5 introduces this text’s empowering method of social work practice framed within three concurrent phases—dialogue, discovery, and development—each explicated by discrete practice processes. Through dialogue (engagement processes), workers and clients develop and maintain collaborative partnerships, exchange relevant information, and define the purposes of the work. In discovery (assessment processes), practitioners and clients locate resources on which to construct plans for change. During development (intervention and evaluation processes), workers and clients activate resources, forge alliances with others, and create new opportunities to distribute the resources of a just society. Chapters 6 through 16 delineate each of these phases, examine each process in detail, and apply these processes at all levels of social work practice.
LEARNING OUTCOMES

• Compare and contrast the contributions of theories and perspectives that support generalist social work, including ecosystems, social constructionism, a feminist perspective, life course theory, critical theory, biology and behavior, and a trauma-informed perspective.

• Delineate concepts from social systems theory to frame an understanding of human functioning.

• Apply the ecosystem perspective as an assessment tool and practice framework for generalist social work practice.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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Social Constructionism
Feminist Perspective
Life Course Theory
Critical Theory
Biology and Behavior
Trauma-Informed Perspective
Applying Theory in Practice:
A Case Example
Social Systems 33
System Defined
Dimensions of Systems
Ecosystems: Perspective and Framework 39
Ecosystems Perspective
Ecosystems Framework: As an Assessment Tool
Ecosystems Framework: As a Practice Model
Looking Forward 45

Generalist social work, with its multileveled focus with clients and constituencies, requires extensive knowledge about the functioning of many types of human systems, and demands a multidisciplinary preparation for practice. Fundamental to a social work view, the ecosystems perspective offers an adaptable framework for integrating other useful views of human functioning. Practitioners need to understand the dynamics of human system behavior and the impact of the sociopolitical, economic, and physical environments. Competent social workers apply this enhanced ecosystems perspective throughout the practice process as they build relationships, assess client situations, and determine the most promising interventions to achieve desired outcomes.

KEY PERSPECTIVES FOR EMPOWERING PRACTICE

No single theory or perspective represents “the generalist social work view.” Instead, social workers draw upon diverse theoretical perspectives to construct an integrated approach. Derived primarily from
the social and behavioral sciences, theories about human systems provide a cogen understanding of how biological, environmental, psychological, social, cultural, economic, and political systems affect and are affected by human behavior and social structures. Effective social workers critically analyze the theories and perspectives they apply to client situations. To evaluate a theory's efficacy in practice, workers examine its relevance, universality, utility, reliability, integrity, and impact (Table 2.1). The choices social workers make about theory determine whether they function as agents of social control or empower clients to make changes in themselves, their situations, and social structures.

The ecosystems perspective represents the predominant way generalist social workers frame their practice; however, it is frequently integrated with other useful views to support an empowering generalist social work practice method. Several key perspectives support empowerment based social work practice. Among these are social constructionism, the feminist perspective, life course theory, critical theory, including critical race theory, biology and behavior, and a trauma-informed perspective. A case example demonstrating how a social worker applies these theories in practice follows descriptions of these key perspectives.

Ecosystems

The ecosystems perspective centers on the exchanges between people and their physical and social environments by combining key concepts from ecology and general systems theory (Germain, 1979, 1983; Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Sipurin, 1980). Ecological theory stresses the simultaneous nature of interaction between people and their environments. General systems theory offers principles about how human systems operate and interact with one another. Together, ecology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Key Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>What is the main focus of the theory? Is it relevant to the situation? To what system level does the theory apply?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universality</td>
<td>Does the theory apply widely to diverse situations or narrowly to particular cases? Is the theory culturally sensitive? What is the differential impact of applying this theory to various cultural groups?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utility</td>
<td>Does the theory further the worker's understanding of human system behavior or guide the worker's efforts in change activities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>What research and evidence support the theory? Are the samples in the research studies representative of diverse groups or of only particular segments of the population?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Is the theory congruent with the professional values and ethics of social work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>What assumptions does the theory make about clients, including their power, expertise, and roles?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The choices made about theory determine whether social workers function as agents of social control or empower clients to make changes in themselves, their situation, and social structures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior: Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the evaluation of outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking Question: Social workers analyze the underlying assumptions of theories and practice frameworks they use. In what ways does this initial analysis inform the eventual evaluation of client outcomes?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and systems theory describe the functioning and adaptation of human systems in their social and physical environments.

In the ecosystems view, persons and environments are not separate but exist in ongoing transactions with each other. We cannot simply add an understanding of persons to an understanding of environments. Instead, we must also examine the reciprocal interactions or transactions between the two. The ecosystems perspective describes the ways that environments affect people and the ways people affect their environments.

Three compelling reasons support an emphasis on the ecosystems view to frame generalist social work practice. First, because of its integrative nature, the ecosystems view draws on the strengths of many helpful theories to describe human behavior in all of its complexity. Second, it describes the interconnected functioning of individuals, families, groups, organizations, local communities, and international societies, thereby supporting the multilevel strategies of generalist social work intervention. Third, the ecosystems view clearly focuses on how people and their environments fit, rather than forcing social workers to place blame on either the person or environment for problems that arise (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). This accepting posture toward human behavior reflects the value base of social work; it directs workers and clients to join forces against the problematic fit of clients in situations rather than judge clients themselves to be deficient.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism focuses on how people understand themselves and interpret what is happening in their lives. Each of us selectively attends to, interprets, and acts on our beliefs about ourselves and the world around us, a concept embodied in the theory of social constructionism. Social constructionism centers on how people construct meaning, emphasizing social meaning as generated through language, cultural beliefs, and social interaction (Gergen, 1994). Each person understands events only as they are filtered through the ecosystemic layers of the social and cultural environment.

More than the simple telling of one’s story, discourse constitutes a process of continuous reinterpretation of the socially constructed meaning of that story as developed in conversation with others. Through such social exchanges, people expand their perspectives as they willingly incorporate divergent points of view and new ideas that validate their behaviors and perceptions, or they yield to pressure from others to adopt alternative interpretations.

Cultural identity and social position influence the person you believe yourself to be and therefore the way you interpret the events in your life. The privilege of membership in an advantaged group offers a sense of fit with the world; it reinforces well-being and validates feelings of control. Through social interaction, discourse becomes the means by which dominant groups promote self-serving ideologies, limit social participation, impose meaning, and construct “realities” for less powerful others. In contrast, members of cultural groups disadvantaged by oppression, prejudice, and stereotypes are likely to be encumbered by dominant cultural views. This control over norms held by the majority group is known as hegemony—an invisible force that offers privilege to dominant groups and maintains oppressive beliefs about nondominant groups (Mullaly, 2002). “Consequently, a person from an ethnic group in the minority may construct a sense
of self that is influenced by this devaluation, lack of power, and discrimination in the societal context" (Greene et al., 1996, p. 2).

Applying a social constructionist view, social workers see two distinct intervention points in the lives of clients who are oppressed. First, workers can interfere with the internalization of disempowering beliefs by collaborating with clients to question socially generated “truths” and their relevance for the particular client. For example, the practitioner who questions how a female client’s love of another woman can be “wrong” and validates the experience as “maybe something to celebrate” works to disable the heterosexist bias that undermines the client’s emotional experience. Second, workers can advocate for social and political changes to liberate disadvantaged groups from the kind of oppressive belief systems and discriminatory laws that undermine this client’s happiness. Interventions at both the individual and societal levels apply social constructionist thinking to overturn the hegemony that distorts the client’s emotional reality and inhibits her free choice.

Similar to social constructionism, the psychological theory of constructivism questions the assumption of a fixed and objective reality. Constructivism holds that two people can interpret the same event very differently because each experiences a personalized, idiosyncratic view of what has occurred. Each person’s unique perspective is rooted in individual history, current expectations, and sense of self. Like social constructionism, constructivism favors the idea of each individual’s creation of a unique reality (Gergen, 1994). Both theories also view reality as maintained through language (Greene & Lee, 2002). In social work literature, the terms constructivism and social constructionism are frequently used interchangeably.

Feminist Perspective

A feminist perspective provides a political foundation for social workers striving to achieve a just society (Baines, 1997; Carr, 2003; Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1998; Saulnier, 1996; Turner & Maschi, 2015). Consistent with the ecosystems perspective, a feminist view concretely links individual experiences with social forces. In essence, gender is a defining factor in how power is distributed at all levels of society. From a feminist perspective, the personal is political. Social forces perpetuate the subjugation of women, and this oppression plays out in interpersonal relationships and interactions. The feminist perspective aligns with social constructionism, proposing that the oppressed position of women in our society results from a patriarchal construction of reality. To ignore this social reality is to participate in it. Feminism forces social workers to turn from a stance of neutrality to a position of advocacy for gender equality.

Feminism does not offer a singular view, but rather a set of perspectives that have a core consistency. In their review of the history of feminisms, Kemp and Brandwein (2010) note five prevalent themes: (1) efforts to include women in all aspects of society, (2) a goal of solidarity among women, (3) the elevation of women’s perspectives and experiences in shaping a just society, (4) an emphasis on the intertwined nature of
This video focuses on gender identity. How do you understand the child's preference for male-associated toys when he was raised by two mothers? personal and political experience, and (5) a focus on praxis, the process by which people take action, critically reflect on their experiences, and determine new strategies to advance personal and political goals.

Translating these ideas into practice, Bricker-Jenkins (1991) recommends that feminist practitioners “reflect and express ideologies, relations, structures of power and privileges, or other salient features of the cultural milieu” (p. 279). To align with the value placed on egalitarianism by feminists, Hyde (2008) states that tenets of feminist practice should include

- incorporating democratized processes and structures that promote collaboration, networking, and relationship building;
- extending the focus beyond gender and white middle-class perspectives to eliminate all forms of oppression; and
- understanding the transformational nature of change in social, economic, and political structures inherent in pursuing justice for all those who experience oppression and discrimination.

Disempowering views held toward women are rooted in the constructions of dominant groups who ignore the experiences of those who are disadvantaged. The social worker's task becomes one of “deconstructing” a disempowering reality for women and “reconstructing” a new one that is sensitive to diversity and honors unique experiences.

**Life Course Theory**


Four main themes frame life course theory: the historical influences on life course, timing of life events, linked lives, and human agency. A fundamental force, the historical context provides both opportunities and restraints that expand or limit life choices. Those born about the same time, or cohort groups, experience the influence of a similar sociopolitical-historical milieu throughout their lives. However, the individual life trajectories of cohort members may differ depending on the exact timing of their life events, such as marriages, deaths, births, education, employment, and retirement. Whether the timing meets the social expectations of “on time” or “off time” influences the individual's experience of the event. The theme of linked lives calls attention to how networks of social and intergenerational relationships influence human development. For example, the effects of family caregiving responsibilities for an aging parent reverberate throughout the family system. Finally, human agency highlights the power of personal decision making that gives direction to lives within the boundaries set by contextual opportunities and constraints.

Findings from large-scale longitudinal studies reveal many variations in life trajectories among cohort group members based on diversity in trajectories and the influence of risk and resilience (Hutchinson, 2005). For example, locale, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and immigration all generate differences in a person’s sense of agency,
potential choices, and opportunities, which, in turn, lead to differences in timing, linkages, and experiences of turning points. Finally, life course theory underscores the significance of protections or resilience for attenuating developmental risks and altering life course trajectories.

By emphasizing the integral relationship between the social and historical contexts and development over the life course, life course theory fits with social work’s person: environment construct, extending our understanding of the dynamic elements involved in this reciprocal interaction. According to Hutchinson (2005), this theory may bridge the micro–macro divide, as it offers various vantage points from which to view both the microlevel event history of individuals and families, and the macrolevel influences of sociocultural-historical forces on entire cohorts and individual trajectories. Hutchinson recommends applying life course theory to social work practice at the microlevel by focusing on turning points in clients’ lives that reset their trajectories and at the macrolevel by altering contexts to increase the prevalence of resources and opportunities.

Critical Theory

Critical theory directs practitioners to examine the significance of power differentials for clients in their lives and in their relationships with social workers. This theory examines the interconnections between people and their environments (Gray & Webb, 2013; Kondrat, 2002; Salas et al., 2010; Wheeler-Brooks, 2009). Adding a significant element to person–environment interactions, critical theory highlights how “everyday practices operating in multiple locations…enact relations of culture, power, identity, and social structure” (Keenan, 2004, p. 540). Some of these interactions serve as resources; others promote privilege and sustain oppression.

To apply critical theory, social work practitioners first acknowledge that the relationship between human actions and social structures is a recursive process in which each produces the other (Keenan, 2004). Second, workers recognize that repetitive actions can lead to stable social structural arrangements; some arrangements are good, some not so good. Shifts in detrimental patterns can lead to improvements in people’s lives. Third, intercultural power relationships arise as products of many interactions. These interchanges elevate some beliefs to positions of truth and invalidate others. This system of beliefs about truth and reality is social construction, not reality. Critical theory offers a perspective for “examining institutional and social practices with a view to resisting the imposition of oppressive and dominant norms and structures” (Salas et al., 2010, p. 93).

Informed by critical theory, empowerment-oriented generalist practitioners take actions to collaborate with clients, thus asserting their human rights. Critical theory directs social workers to analyze the sociopolitical and economic arrangements that define human identity, beliefs, and interactions. A critique of these arrangements focuses on issues of hierarchy and privilege, class distinctions and distortions, definitions of power, and the culture of silence and domination (Baines, 2007; Fook, 2002; Gray & Webb, 2013; Williams, 2002). Critical questions for social work practitioners include the following:

- Who defines the structural arrangements?
- Who holds the power?
- Who controls the resources?
Informed by critical theory, empowerment-oriented generalist practitioners take actions to collaborate with clients, thus asserting their human rights.

- Which groups benefit or suffer?
- Whose voices are valued?
- Who has the most to gain or lose from changing the social arrangement?
- In what ways do various diversities influence structures?
- What actions can lead to change?

In effect, “critical reflection seeks to challenge the prevailing social, political, and structural conditions which promote the interests of some and oppress others” (Ruch, 2002, p. 205). Application of critical theory corresponds with the profession’s core value of social justice and aligns with such practice strategies as anti-oppression, antidiscrimination, advocacy, human and social rights, democratic participation, and redressing social injustice.

Critical Race Theory

Closely related to critical theory, critical race theory emphasizes social structures and everyday patterns of action as forces behind racism. In essence, race defines access to resources and power. Tenets of critical race theory include the ideas that (1) racism is an ordinary, everyday experience of most people of color, originating in social interactions and embedded in the institutional structures of society; (2) interests of majority group members converge to maintain the status quo favoring those in positions of power; (3) race is socially constructed rather than biologically determined; (4) driven by self-interest and economics, dominant groups differentially racialize members of minority groups; and (5) no one has a singular identity that can be easily described (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007, 2012). Critical race theory challenges the myth of objectivity and “color-blindness” (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Social workers apply critical race theory to understand power, privilege, oppression, and diversity and to inform social work practice (Daniel, 2008; Kolivoski et al., 2014; Sisneros et al., 2008). Both critical race theory and critical multicultural social work see racism as embedded in racist social structures; they prompt social workers to take actions to redress these institutionalized injustices.

Biology and Behavior

For decades, social workers have claimed the biopsychosocial realm of human behavior as a foundation for understanding clients’ situations but have generally emphasized psychosocial domains over biological determinants. However, emerging scientific evidence increasingly reveals the extensive biological underpinnings of behavior, pressing social work professionals to understand more fully the reciprocal interaction of behavior and biology. Occurring throughout the life span, biological effects on behavior can be positive or negative, subtle or dramatic, short or long term. Salient examples of the interdependence between biology and behavior include epigenesis and stress.

Epigenesis

Epigenesis describes how genetics and human behavior are connected. Recent research sheds new light on the ways physical and social environments influence physiological and behavioral adaptation through the phenotypic expression of a person’s genotype.
Completed in 2003, the Human Genome Project mapped the genetic code, creating a representative blueprint identifying and sequencing the totality of genes in the human genome (NIH, 2015). Knowing the specific function of certain genes can predict genetic expression. Research on epigenosis, a biochemical process that regulates cells and their phenotypic expression without altering the genetic instructions on the DNA molecule, holds promise for understanding the impact of environmental influences on behavior (Combs-Orme, 2012; Cooney, 2007). Epigenetic changes may be inherited, or they can occur at any time during the life span, most likely during critical developmental phases such as prenatal development, growth spurts, or the slow-down of cell division associated with aging.

Features of both the physical and social environments fuel epigenetic changes that create vulnerability to risks or buffer resilience. Combs-Orme (2012) notes the epigenetic hazards in physical environments associated with inadequate nutrition and exposure to toxic chemicals and the social justice issues related to disadvantage, poverty, and discrimination. Social environmental factors such as nurturance and support for attachment during infancy, quality of interpersonal relationships, exposure to stress, and the experience of trauma can influence epigenetic change. Research reveals the genetic and epigenetic factors associated with many challenges social work clients encounter, including fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (Tunc-Ozcan et al., 2014), alcohol dependence (Diaz-Anzaldua, 2011), mental health (Sasaki et al., 2013), responses to stress (Radley et al., 2011; Tyrka et al., 2012), aging (Cortes & Lee, 2012), and health status (Gilbert, 2009; Kalil, 2015).

Stress

We are all likely familiar with some facet of stress. According to a recent large-scale survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (2015), Americans rank money, work, family responsibilities, and health concerns as the top four stressors. Overall reported stress levels are trending downward, with ratings of stress on a 10-point scale reported at 4.9 in 2014 as compared to 6.2 in 2007. However, stress levels remain higher among people with lower incomes, parents, those in younger generations, and persons reporting fewer sources of emotional support.

Although we often think of stress as problematic, it can actually have positive benefits. Moderate degrees of stress motivate us to complete our work and to initiate desired changes in our lives. However, stress resulting from overwhelming or threatening experiences has a negative impact that is amplified when stressful experiences are long-lasting, chronic, and/or compounded by other stressors. The more unpredictable and uncontrollable a situation seems, the more likely we are to perceive it as a major stressor. Usually affecting large groups of people, catastrophic stressors include such events as natural disasters, tornados, floods, and large-scale violence. Major life events, transitions, and the accumulation of daily hassles typify stressors in more personal circumstances. Qualities of physical environments such as noise, pollution, violence, food insecurity, impoverished resources, and safety issues likely exacerbate any experience of stress, personal or catastrophic.

How does stress affect us? Psychosocial signs may be irritability, sleeplessness, withdrawal, or moodiness. Biologically, our bodies show stress with increased heart rate and breathing, tense muscles, and elevated blood pressure, all of which are related to the evolutionary “fight or flight” survival response. These physiological responses to hormonal changes induced by our perception of stressors produce a cascading chain reaction. For
example, the hormone cortisol functions effectively under “normal” conditions of stress but may cause harm when we experience chronic stress (Staufenbiel et al., 2013; Teixeira, 2015). High levels of cortisol increase susceptibility to disease, impede memory, and impair the hormonal feedback loop, which further stimulates the release of cortisol. A vicious cycle is set in motion in which stress affects biological, psychological, and social functioning. This in turn creates more stress. The reciprocal impact of biology and behavior continues.

Research provides evidence that chronic exposure to stress significantly affects health and wellness (Schneiderman et al., 2005) by contributing to obesity (Sominsky & Spencer, 2014; Talbot et al., 2013), drug and alcohol abuse (Rodrigues et al., 2011), mood disorders (Heim & Binder, 2012; Sousa & Almeida, 2012), posttraumatic stress disorder (Sareen, 2014), and cognitive issues such as Alzheimer’s disease (Sotiropoulos, 2011).

Trauma-Informed Perspective

Stress elevates to the level of trauma when we experience overwhelming threats, with elements of terror, helplessness, and loss of control. Examples include military combat, rape, terrorism, disasters, forced migration, child maltreatment, sexual abuse, and violence. Trauma will likely interfere with a person’s ability to cope with even mundane daily activities. Reactions to trauma can occur whether one has experienced it firsthand, vicariously as a witness, or by hearing others’ personal accounts. The traumatic events experienced by clients may have far-reaching impact for both social workers and clients.

The cumulative effects of multiple experiences of trauma, sometimes called polyvictimization, increase vulnerability for longlasting physical and psychological effects (Finkelhor et al., 2011). To retrospectively assess adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as child abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, family dysfunction, and their relation to health and well-being in adulthood, a large-scale 1998 epidemiological study surveyed a predominantly White sample of late-middle-age, well-educated enrollees in a health maintenance organization (Felitti & Anda, 2010). Even in this privileged sample, two-thirds reported experiencing at least one ACE, one-fourth experienced substance abuse in their family of origin, and 10 percent tallied five or more ACEs (Anda, n.d.). Further analysis revealed that high ACE scores were associated with problems as adults such as health risks, addictions, psychiatric disorders, and shorter life expectancies (Felitti & Anda, 2010). Again, we see the connection between social experiences and biological outcomes.

Another comprehensive study, the National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence, confirms that childhood exposure to violence is widespread (Finkelhor et al., 2009). When queried about their experiences in the past year in their homes, schools, and communities, more than 60 percent of respondents indicated they had directly or indirectly experienced violence. Forty percent reported multiple experiences of victimization. Because the development of the brain and neural pathways that regulate emotions and behavior are critical during early developmental stages, infants and children are particularly susceptible to the deleterious effects of chronic stress, adversity, and exposure to violence (NCSDC, 2005/2014; Putman et al., 2013; Thompson, 2014; Tyrka et al., 2013).

The adverse reactions to trauma vary considerably, depending on an individual’s age, socioeconomic status, history of adversity, current life stressors, resiliency, coping capacities, optimism, and access to social support (Booth et al., 2012; Lai et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2014). Research provides evidence of posttraumatic growth, the potential of positive life trajectories, and resiliencies emerging from surviving trauma (Li et al., 2012; Rodgers, 2014).
A negative potential outcome of trauma is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The incidence of PTSD is increasing in the general population and occurs at an alarmingly high rate among military personnel and veterans. Results of a large-scale representative national survey indicate that 50 percent of adults in the United States have a history of trauma, with 25 percent experiencing more than one trauma event (Hamblen, 2013). Of this number, 7 percent develop PTSD, though the rate among male military combat veterans is much higher, at 39 percent. Four clusters of behaviors indicate PTSD: (1) reliving the trauma through spontaneous memories, recurrent dreams, and flashbacks; (2) avoidance of persons, experiences, places, and objects that are reminders of the trauma and trigger adverse reactions; (3) negative changes in mood and cognitions, such as distorted beliefs, self-blame, estrangement, and diminished interest in activities; and (4) changes in arousal and reactivity, including aggression, reckless behavior, sleep disturbances, inability to concentrate, hypervigilance, and an intensified startle response (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). PTSD is associated with an increased risk for depression, suicide, substance use disorders, impulsivity, and aggressive behavior (McGovern et al., 2015; Kotler et al., 2001; Olutunji et al., 2014; Oquendo et al., 2005).

People of all ages with histories of trauma are overrepresented in the various fields in which social work professionals practice (CSWE, 2012). For example, trauma, more likely than not, intersects with issues clients present in child welfare, criminal justice, family and aging services, mental health, school social work, employee assistance programs, public health, and social work in medical settings. Consequently, social workers need to tune in to the difficulties that trauma can engender. At the same time, workers should remain alert to client strengths and resilience, another potential outcome of trauma. Since they are vulnerable to secondary trauma as a result of their emotional reactions to working with traumatized clients, social workers should practice trauma-informed self-care (Salloum, 2015).

Applying Theory in Practice: A Case Example

Theory informs practice. When social workers critically examine client situations from relevant theoretical perspectives, they generate many potential approaches for assisting clients. Consider the example of social worker Megan Camden as she applies social work theory to guide her work with client Gero Hudson.

Megan is a social worker at the regional Veterans Administration (VA) treatment center located in the Northside community. Her client Gero is a veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom. After his second deployment to Afghanistan, Gero received an honorable discharge from military service, yet he struggles to reintegrate into civilian life. Previously, Gero intended to pursue a lifelong military career, so he has no plan for a postdischarge vocational alternative.

Gero seeks treatment for multiple problems, including nightmares, an inability to sleep, irritability accompanied by outbursts of anger and aggressiveness, and withdrawal from nearly all social activities. After administering an evidence-based structured interview called the CAPS-5, Megan concludes that Gero's symptoms fit the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Megan's comprehensive assessment also includes the VA screening for a history of sexual harassment and assault. Megan poses her interview questions with sensitivity, knowing that for male veterans, military sexual trauma (MST) carries a high degree of victim shame and social stigma. Although initially reluctant to self-disclose, Gero now shares that he once attempted to report his victimization and received a degrading response.
The complexity of working with veterans' issues is well known to Megan. The intense experience of combat, the separation from family and friends followed by the difficulty of reintegration, and the dissonance between military and civilian cultures—all present unique challenges to social workers and their military clients. In analyzing Gero's situation, Megan considers several theoretical perspectives that shape her practice approach.

Applied Ecosystems

As a social worker, Megan first looks at a client's situation through an ecosystems lens. Characteristic of an ecosystems view, the simultaneous focus on client and environment distinguishes social work from other helping professions. Megan will best understand what is happening when she puts the personal problems Gero is experiencing into an environmental context. An ecosystems view focuses on the interrelationships of social systems. Gero’s reintegration into civilian life requires him to negotiate many levels of social interaction. He returned home to live with his wife, Renee, and their 2-year-old son, Niko. Gero’s parents and extended family celebrated his return but express concern about his withdrawal. His previous friendships are strained by his irritability and increased consumption of alcohol. And although Gero is hailed as a hero by the community at large, he has yet to secure a job.

From an ecosystems perspective, Megan sees what is happening at each system level. Within the level of his immediate family, Megan recognizes three significant shifts. First, Renee was in charge and on her own with Niko during Gero’s deployments. A shift in the family structure has occurred, leaving all family members to wonder what Gero’s role should be, especially in light of his emotional and social withdrawal now that he is home. Second, Gero missed significant family events—Niko’s birth, his first steps, holidays, and birthdays. Gero’s son Niko bonds with his mother Renee but reacts to his father as somewhat of an outsider. Third, the intimacy that Renee and Gero previously experienced as a married couple has been shattered by Gero’s pronounced irritability, outbursts of anger, and occasional aggressiveness toward Renee.

Extended family members also recognize changes in Gero. Their joy about his safe return from war transitioned to concern about his well-being. The previous closeness they experienced with him has dissipated. Megan knows that war changes everyone. The military experience shifts people culturally. Sexual assault assails identity. Gero, the man who went to war, is not the same man who has come home. Megan sees that her task is to help the family support the person that Gero has become, rather than to question the person they lost. Resolving the difficulty in relationships with family and friends will likely involve a remediation of Gero’s PTSD symptoms, but it may also require their increased understanding about how trauma and combat exposure shift a person's worldview.

Communities appear to revere veterans, applauding them at airports and thanking them for their service. Yet, in contrast, community members also suspect veterans. Public knowledge about combat-related PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI) creates ambiguity about whether a particular veteran is psychologically okay and builds significant barriers to full social participation. Despite government programs to help veterans get jobs, the unemployment rate among veterans exceeds the average. Megan recognizes this paradoxical treatment of veterans by the community and assesses the impact of this bias with each of her clients. Supplementing her role as an interpersonal therapist, Megan acts politically to advocate support for veterans in the community at large.
Social Constructionism Applied

Social constructionism emphasizes how individuals interpret events and ascribe meaning to their personal experiences. When something happens, we interpret it, and that interpretation becomes a reality in our lives. Megan recognizes that both his combat-related and sexual assault traumas have shifted Gero's understanding of who he is. As a civilian, Gero always experienced himself as strong, a belief fueled by his accomplishments as an athlete in high school. As a soldier, Gero saw himself as tough, a combatant inured to battlefield injuries and death. Even the name Gero has roots in an African word meaning “fierce.” As a victim of sexual assault, Gero now reexperiences himself as weak, not able to protect himself, less of a man. The assault casts doubts for him about his masculinity and toughness.

Gero's military training prepared him to engage in dangerous situations, and the military culture instilled a certain stoicism and machismo response to war experiences. In his civilian life, Gero is now expected to construct a new identity as a returning veteran with PTSD. Help-seeking behaviors are new to him. Gero learned to distrust authority after receiving a negative response when he divulged his sexual victimization, but he now needs to trust that Megan and other professionals at the VA have genuine concern for his well-being.

Feminist Perspective Applied

A feminist perspective definitively states that gender matters. Who you are as a woman or man makes a difference in how society treats you and how you view yourself and others. What Megan knows is that Gero is not alone in his sexual victimization. Even though women in the military are sexually harassed and assaulted at a much higher rate than men, numerically, more male than female veterans have been sexually assaulted during their service (Street, 2013).

Sexual assault is traumatic for all victims, male and female. However, because sexual victimization is so contrary to prescribed male gender roles, the experience is likely even more stigmatizing for men. Gero's response to victimization is not just personal, it is also contextual, rooted in the culture of military society. Even though they may experience more severe symptoms than women, in the warrior culture of the military, male victims of MST are more reluctant to divulge their trauma history or file official reports. In addition, because of the stoic expectations embedded in their military training, men are also less likely to seek professional help for behavioral health issues.

Life Course Theory Applied

Considering Gero's situation with respect to life course theory helps Megan recognize Gero's strengths. Life course theory postulates that current situations in people's lives are shaped by previous events, both personal and sociocultural-historical. Gero was born after the civil rights movement, so there was hope that he would have equal opportunities. He comes from supportive nuclear and extended families and a community that celebrates him as a high school athlete, all of which contribute to his resilience. His identity as African American—a source of pride to Gero—places him at risk in the larger environment. Megan acknowledges the discriminatory treatment of young African American males by schools, police, and courts. However, she understands that Gero has previously navigated these life challenges, a strength to build on in her work with him.
Critical Theory Applied

Critical theory postulates that all social structures and social relationships are inherently hierarchical. Any examination of social structure requires critical reflection to explore structural inequities and unjust practices. As a social institution, the military is notably characterized by a clear hierarchical structure of authority and power differential between ranks. But within troops, particularly those in combat, there is also an expectation for cohesion. Megan questions whether Gero’s naming of a fellow serviceman in a sexual assault claim, given his vulnerable social position in a subordinate rank and the solidarity of his own troop, left him ostracized. She acknowledges there may be an unwritten code of silence about MST. Although Gero experiences his problem as an individual one, Megan knows the solutions may be structural. The challenge for Megan is how to empathize with the personal dilemma that Gero has experienced and also to advocate for him at the wider institutional level. From her understanding of critical race theory, Megan is also mindful of embedded racism in social structures and patterns of interaction. For that reason, she will be attentive to ensure that Gero’s interactions with her and others in the VA system neither diminish nor oppress him.

Biological Perspective Applied

Megan acknowledges that Gero’s current problems also spring from changes in biological functioning. Survival in war requires hyperarousal. One must stay alert, sleep lightly, and be prepared to fight at any moment. Suspicion of other people and situations is absolutely necessary to survive. These postures, adaptive in battle, set up Gero for difficulties in civilian life. His body is constantly on alert. He is vigilant and suspicious, leading to irritability and quick acceleration to anger. While deployed, Gero’s body ran on adrenaline to keep him alert. Upon his return home, the desire for the rush of adrenaline and constant stimulation continues. Gero craves excitement and cannot sleep—problems he solves with alcohol to mitigate his tension and temper his need for adrenaline-fueled action.

Veterans who, like Gero, were deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan are also at risk for biomechanical trauma caused by explosions and blast waves. Severe trauma to the brain is termed traumatic brain injury (TBI). TBI and PTSD are often closely linked; even mild TBI elevates the risk of PTSD (Hurley, 2013). TBI is characterized by cognitive, emotional/behavioral, and somatic symptoms that include, for example, memory problems, irritability and impulsivity, and insomnia—many of the symptoms reported by Gero. Working with a multidisciplinary team that includes medical personnel, Megan knows that the effects of trauma physiology will impact any treatment intervention.

Trauma-Informed Perspective Applied

Trauma shapes subsequent experience. Gero is forever changed by his experiences of sexual victimization and on the front lines of war. All people interpret and respond to current events based on what they have experienced in the past. Persons exposed to trauma develop a heightened sense of threat, possibly overreading the danger of current events because of the harm they experienced in the past. Though protective at one level, this sensitivity can interfere with effective functioning overall. Gero has learned not to trust, especially people in power. He avoids situations where he might be alone with those who are more powerful and has withdrawn his trust from many people he formerly trusted.
Megan recognizes that some of Gero’s seemingly maladaptive responses actually make sense in terms of the trauma he has experienced. As Megan explores his misperceptions, she will be patient as she helps him see more functional interpretations that lead Gero to more positive interactions with family, friends, and others in his community.

**Applying Theories to Practice**

In her role as a VA social worker, Megan comfortably melds the overarching ecosystems perspective with other practice theories and her extensive training on PTSD to assist military veterans. This integrated multitheoretical view fortifies Megan’s practice with many intervention possibilities for her clients and their environmental systems.

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**SOCIAL SYSTEMS**

The systems with which practitioners work may be as small as a single element of the internal processes of one individual or as large as the entire human population. Generalist social workers develop skills to understand, support, and facilitate change at all system levels because systems at all levels are potential clients and targets for change.

**System Defined**

Technically speaking, a system is “an organized whole made up of components that interact in a way distinct from their interaction with other entities and which endures over some period of time” (Anderson et al., 1999, p. 294). More simply, a *social system* is a structure in which interdependent people interact. For example, groups of people are identified as systems because they interact with each other in some definable way or are associated with each other because of shared attributes. In other words, a pattern of relationships or shared characteristics separates one group from other groups. Note how this definition encompasses groups as different as a family, a street gang, residents of a nursing home, employees of a corporation, and social work professionals. These and all other social systems, small and large, share common features.

**Systems as Holons**

All social systems are *holons*, meaning that each system is a part of a larger system, while, at the same time, it is composed of smaller systems (Anderson et al., 1999). For example, a family is a social system that is only one part of the neighborhood supersystem in which the family resides. Children and parents within this family are also systems themselves within the context of the larger family system. All of these systems—the children, the parents, the family, and the neighborhood—are holons that share systemic properties.
No human system thrives in isolation. The successes or failures of individuals, families, groups, organizations, neighborhoods, and communities result from their unique interactions within their environments. The effective functioning of social systems is determined by the relative balance or imbalance of resources, opportunities, and demands within and between systems. Risks present within these interactions increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, whereas protective factors mitigate risks (Little et al., 2004).

Interestingly, research shows that even people who have experienced extreme difficulties have the capacity, or resiliency, to overcome them (Carp, 2010; Greene, 2010; Harris, 2008; Mancini & Bonanno, 2009). Resilience is the ability to manage positively, even in the face of adversity. Resilient people are characteristically hopeful; have a sense of mastery, self-efficacy, and meaning in life; and they are effective problem solvers. Based on a 20-year longitudinal study on competence and resilience, Masten (2005) identifies several environmental factors that enhance resilience in children. These factors include connections to adults who are competent and caring, connections with faith communities, availability of community resources, and educational opportunities.

The macrolevel environment is a source of both risks and opportunities (Garbarino, 1983). Environmental opportunities are those resources available to systems in their social and physical environments that foster well-being. Examples of such macrosystem opportunities include governmental assistance in times of emergencies, legislative support for social programs, and budgetary allocations for community infrastructures. In contrast, environmental risks, such as oppression and discrimination, disenfranchise many from society’s opportunity structures. Environmental risks are ideologies or cultural alignments that work against the well-being of individuals and society. Shortages and barriers in resource provisions, social inequities, and lack of opportunities create social problems and pose environmental risks. Other examples of such risks include national economic policies that create inequities and increase poverty for some, and social policies that magnify racism, sexism, or other discriminatory practices. Limiting environmental risks while expanding environmental opportunities promotes social justice and supports empowerment.

Creating responsive environments rich in opportunity is a policy issue. Access to health care, adequate education, technical training, child care, civil rights, jobs, transportation, and comprehensive community-based services all benefit individual citizens and contribute to the general good. The lives of individual clients cannot improve without the opportunities of resource-rich environments to contribute to their clients’ sense of power and well-being. This posture “embody[s] the profession’s mission to improve societal conditions and to enhance social functioning. A resilience-enhancing approach underscores the need to seek resources and sources of natural support within clients’ environments” (Greene & Cohen, 2005, p. 369).

Perspectives on risk, opportunity, and resilience have both research and policy implications for social work practice. Informed by research evidence about risk and resilience factors in individuals, families, neighborhoods, faith communities, and schools, social workers craft strategies that span system levels (Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt, 2004). With respect to policies, social workers draw on research evidence and practice experiences to advocate social policies that provide the infrastructures for resource-rich environments.

Subsystems and Environments

Two important concepts clarify the idea of systems within systems: subsystem and environment. Smaller systems within every system are subsystems. For example, children and parents make up subsystems of the larger family system. Similarly, each individual within a family is actually a subsystem. Conversely, the larger system that
encompasses a social system is that system’s environment, which influences and provides the context for the systems functioning within it. Schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods are all examples of a family system’s social environment. Broadening the focus to an even larger picture, the community is the social environment for both neighborhoods and families (Figure 2.1).

All systems have subsystems and environments. All systems are also subsystems, while, at the same time, they are environments. For example, the family is a system itself, but, in switching the focus, this same family is also the environment of the children within it. Another perspective shift leads us to describe this family as a subsystem of the neighborhood in which it lives. Whether we label a system a “subsystem,” a “system,” or an “environment” is relative and changes as we shift our point of focus.

Dimensions of Systems

The complex behavior of human systems gives rise to several helpful ways for viewing them, including the system’s structure, interaction, biopsychosocial dimensions, and
cultural elements. Each dimension helps social workers describe human behavior in productive ways and conceptualize creative possibilities for change.

Structural View of Systems

How individuals and subsystems within a system arrange themselves is the structure of the system. Structure is not actually visible; we discern it by observing two variables that characterize the structural arrangements of any system—closeness and power. Closeness refers to the closed or open nature of system boundaries, whereas the distribution of power aligns the system hierarchy. When we ask, “How close or distant are members?” we discover the boundaries of a system. When we ask, “Who’s in charge?” we uncover the hierarchy for distributing power within a system. Considering both boundaries and hierarchies offers a complete picture of a system’s structure.

Boundaries  Boundaries define systems. They distinguish the interior of the system from its environment. Boundaries vary in permeability or, in other words, in how many transactions they allow between systems. Open systems interact frequently and exchange resources with their environment, offering the potential for meeting systems’ needs and the risk of being overwhelmed by demanding environments. Having no access to the environment, closed systems may seem protected, but they must meet all of their needs by drawing on resources from within their own systems. With such limited access to additional resources, closed systems may deplete their resources.

Boundaries also differentiate people within a given system. Internal boundaries, those that exist around various individuals and subgroups within a larger system, define subsystems. For example, for most social agencies, boundaries define administrative, supervisory, and direct service subsystems. Particular agencies may also distinguish other subsystems such as experts and novices; professionals, paraprofessionals, and clerical staff; or direct and indirect service providers. These internal boundaries have different degrees of permeability. Like boundaries that define systems, subsystems’ boundaries vary on a continuum from open to closed. The level of closeness within a system is a significant element in understanding the system’s structure.

Hierarchy  Hierarchy indicates which individuals and subsystems have status, privileges, and power within a particular system. Typically, hierarchy describes who is in charge. For example, organizational charts, formalized procedures, and position titles such as president, director, or supervisor clearly define hierarchy in formal organizational systems. Discerning hierarchy in other systems may be more difficult. Although titles such as mother, father, or ringleader may give clues about power and control within the system, these titles may not match the system’s actual distribution of power. Observing who makes decisions and who initiates actions provides a more accurate picture of hierarchy.

Interactional View of Systems

In contrast to structure, which offers a static look at systems, the interactional view places the structure in motion. It examines the way in which people relate within a system and with their environments. The interactional perspective focuses on the ways systems maintain equilibrium, provide feedback, and understand circular causality and wholeness.
Equilibrium  Systems tend to interact in ways that maintain balance, or equilibrium. In collaboration with clients, social workers attempt to stabilize productive interactional patterns while interrupting those where difficulties reside. Events that temporarily knock a system out of balance leave it scrambling to regain its previous equilibrium or lead it quickly toward establishing a new one. For example, funding cuts require a social service provider's immediate response. Likely, the agency will first act to maintain the status quo by locating new funds. Otherwise, the agency may look internally, cutting staff positions and redistributing the workload to ensure the organization's survival and maintain system balance. Rebalancing can also occur if this agency system changes its relationship to the environment. The agency may decrease the services it offers to the community, thereby reaching a new balance without overloading the remaining staff. Whatever the agency does to regain equilibrium, one thing is clear—changes in funding, staffing, or programming create other changes in the internal functioning of the agency as well as in its ability to work successfully with clients.

Feedback  Feedback provides a continuous flow of information. Two forms of feedback exist—information that maintains the existing equilibrium and information that induces change toward a new equilibrium. First, some information fits neatly with the system's existing way of doing things. The system assimilates this feedback, reinforcing the current pattern. Second, incompatible information forces the system to change to accommodate the discrepancy. Social workers provide both kinds of feedback as they work toward desired goals. They offer reinforcing feedback to maintain the existing strengths and introduce system-altering feedback to disrupt problematic patterns, clearing the way for new possibilities.

Circular Causality  Human systems influence their environments and are influenced by them. One person does not directly cause the behavior of another; instead, behavior occurs as a response to multiple social and structural influences. This concept is described as circular causality. Although, theoretically, all system members share some responsibility for interactions within the system, there is an important note of caution here! Social workers remain particularly vigilant when weighing causality in relationships with large discrepancies in power among the players. Clearly, persons who are victimized hold no responsibility for the acts of others. The principle of circular causality does not free abusers from accountability for their own behaviors or blame victims for having no access to power.

Wholeness  Closely related to circular causality, the axiom of wholeness postulates that a change in one part of a system will precipitate changes in other parts and in the system as a whole (von Bertalanffy, 1968). In other words, altering one part of any person:environment transaction affects the other transactional elements. Prompting one productive change can initiate a cycle that may subsequently benefit the entire transactional system. This rule extends beyond the system's boundary to describe how a system changes in response to its environment, as well as how an environment responds to changes in those systems within it. Consider the previous example of the agency and its funding cuts. Reduced funding, a change in the environment, reverberates internally with changes throughout the agency system and subsequently reemerges to affect the environment in terms of the agency's abilities to serve its clients.
Biopsychosocial Dimensions

All social systems have distinctive human qualities based on the biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual characteristics of their individual members. A biopsychosocial view of systems holds special significance for change processes. As thinking and feeling beings, humans have options and to some extent the power to choose responses to what is happening in their lives. These options may be limited by individual and environmental conditions, but, within a reasonable range, people are able to make choices about how they view themselves and interpret the events around them.

The biopsychosocial view applies to more than individual functioning in that multiperson systems, composed of thinking and feeling individual members, also have cognitive and affective dimensions that can lead to change. The neighborhood whose residents “believe” that a neighborhood watch program can ensure personal safety and property rights will activate and participate in such a program. Families who “feel” pride in their reputation and accomplishments will risk activities that have the potential to add to their accomplishments, further contributing to a greater sense of pride. This biopsychosocial view expands the options for social workers and clients to construct new ways of perceiving and responding to events.

Cultural Influences

Every human being identifies cultural memberships in multiple contextual systems. Race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, religion, sexual orientation, age group, geographic location, political affiliation, occupation, and lifestyle are several of the cultural dimensions that influence human behavior. Cultural influences are profound. Not only do we build our own identities around the various groups of which we are members, but frequently others also view us more in terms of our general cultural attributes than of our own unique identities.

Our cultural memberships affect the way others treat us. Human societies do not afford the same status and privileges across cultural categories. Privileged groups sometimes disenfranchise members of other cultural groups. For example, in the United States, someone identified culturally as male, White, and heterosexual simply has more opportunities and fewer constraints than someone whose cultural group memberships include female, African American, and lesbian.

Generalizations based on memberships in cultural systems also obscure individual differences. Although membership in a particular cultural group usually indicates certain similarities among group members, individual members hold other cultural group memberships as well. Add these multicultural influences to each person’s unique physical, cognitive, and affective attributes, and the result is diversity among members within even the most influential of cultural groups. Simply put, no two people are alike! The multiple influences of simultaneously intersecting cultural contexts individuate even members of the same family.
ECOSYSTEMS: PERSPECTIVE AND FRAMEWORK

The ecosystems perspective contributes to generalist social work practice in three major ways: It provides a way to comprehend human diversity and explicate the relationship between humans and their physical and social environments. Additionally, it offers an organizing framework for comprehensive assessment. Finally, social workers can use an ecosystems view to elucidate each phase of generalist practice processes.

Ecosystems Perspective

The ecosystems perspective conceptualizes a dynamic view of human beings as systems interacting in context, emphasizes the significance of human system transactions, traces evolutionary change in systems over time, and describes current behavior as an adaptive fit of "persons in situations."

Humans in Context

The ecosystems perspective describes humans as multidimensional biological, psychological, spiritual, social, and cultural beings with thoughts, feelings, and observable behaviors. We are initiators within our environments as well as responders to those same environments. We create our own traditions and legacies just as we inherit and respond to our cultural and ethnic heritage. The ecosystems view acknowledges that we not only react consciously and intentionally but also act unconsciously and spontaneously. We are complex wholes with internal parts and, at the same time, we are parts or members of larger groups. In the ecosystems view, humans are neither completely powerful nor powerless. Instead, humans play an active role in creating events that shape their lives, a role tempered by environmental forces and conditions.

How we work with people and their situations logically follows from how we perceive human behavior. If we believe the ecosystems model cogently explains how people develop strengths and vulnerabilities, then the choices we make in supporting growth and change will reflect this perspective. Ecosystemically oriented social work practice centers on changing and maintaining both client and environmental systems.

Multiple Possibilities for Change

The interdependent functioning of human systems offers many entry points for social work intervention. Because altering one part of any person:environment transaction affects the other system elements, workers and clients may choose a particular strategy from among several intervention targets that may be most amenable to change or have the greatest potential benefits.

Consider the example of Dorothy Masters, a disgruntled resident of Northside Care Center. She complains about nearly every aspect of her care. Social worker Jan Kim sees several options for addressing Dorothy's concerns, including individual counseling support, family involvement to enhance the frequency and quality of family interaction, or social network intervention to help Dorothy find other residents who share her interests. When Dorothy chooses to organize a resident's council, a variety of related changes occur. Dorothy's mood improves as she redirects her energy toward relating with the other residents. Council members take charge of planning recreational and social events
to match their own interests. The members also lobby the management team to change policies regarding menu choices and roommate assignments. Dorothy's son reports that he now enjoys his visits with Dorothy and will likely come more often. Count all of the positive changes! Recognize how these changes originated from interventions within Dorothy's ecosystem, efforts not simply focused on the "individual" issue of Dorothy's unhappiness. Prompting one productive change within an ecosystem initiates a cycle of changes that may have subsequent benefits throughout the entire system.

Focus on Transactions
Humans and their environments evolve in continuously accommodating responses to one another. Notice this two-way influence when you visualize the connection of a person interacting with the environment. These reciprocal interactions are transactions—"the processes by which people continually shape their environments and are shaped by them over time" (Germain, 1983, p. 115). The term "person-environment" symbolizes this mutual relationship (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). The colon emphasizes the dynamic interrelatedness of people in transaction with their social and physical environments. Productive transactions serve as sources of energy to sustain a system's functioning and fuel change. Deficient transactions inhibit growth and possibly even threaten basic sustenance.

Recognizing the significance of transactions reaffirms social work's traditional focus on social functioning—"people coping with life situations [or the] balance between demands of the social environment and people's coping efforts" (Bartlett, 1970, p. 130). This definition describes flexible people adapting to their demanding environments. An empowerment-based view of transaction increases the emphasis on the reciprocal dimension of social functioning, the notion that both people and environments can change. Not only do people respond to environmental demands, but environments must also adapt to the demands of people.

Development as Evolutionary Change
The ecosystems perspective views human development as evolutionary. It describes how individuals and other human systems change and stabilize in response to internal and external forces. As humans grow physically, emotionally, and intellectually, their behaviors reveal and respond to these internal changes. The changes within systems are not the only determinants of human behavior. Instead, these internal experiences themselves affect and respond to contextual events.

Development in Context Individuals develop in a context in which other systems are evolving, too. Social groups, organizations, and societal and international institutions—entities that humans themselves help create—seem to take on lives of their own as they also grow and develop. These social systems act on and respond to individuals' behaviors. Neither the external nor the internal world has total responsibility for causing any particular human behavior. We create our world just as our world creates us.

When explaining human growth and development, certain contexts merit special note. Humans develop in societies that congregate individuals into categories and value certain group memberships over others. Cultural identities powerfully influence how we view ourselves and how others view us. Race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic
and gender contexts can be stepping stones to success for the power elite; however, they may function as roadblocks for those who are oppressed. Burdening individual development with stereotype expectations denies overwhelming evidence of in-group diversity and ignores other environmental influences. Assumptions and expectations arising from membership in social groups influence self-perceptions, interactions with others, and access to social and economic resources.

**Assessment**

**Behavior:** Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the analysis of assessment data from clients and constituencies.

**Critical Thinking Question:** From an ecosystems perspective, all behaviors make sense to some degree when they are considered in the context of the impinging social environment. How does this understanding of behavior as a transactional experience inform how social workers assess clients and their situations?

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**Adaptive Fit**

The ecosystems perspective explains behavior in terms of adapting to a situation. All individual and social systems evolve to fit the resources and demands of their worlds. How we interact at any specific time arises from a synthesis of what is happening in the world within us, what is happening in the world around us, and how we interpret those events. In the ecosystems view of dysfunction, the terms “maladaptive” and “dysfunctional” do not really apply. After all, if behaviors are adaptations to meet internal needs and the demands of environments, how can any behaviors be maladaptive? Even behaviors that are deemed unacceptable and have negative consequences make sense when considered in context. No human behavior occurs in isolation from other events. Rather, humans respond to multiple internal and environmental events simultaneously. In the world of gloves, we may be able to find that “one size fits all.” However, in human behavior, we often find that a behavior that may be perfectly adaptive in one specific person:environment configuration is a mismatch in another. Describing a client’s behavior as dysfunctional or maladaptive blames clients and neglects the reciprocal responsibility of environments for human behavior. The ecosystems view removes this blame from clients in favor of describing problems as transactional—a “fit” in a problem-producing context.

**Focus on Strengths**  The ecosystems perspective offers many intervention possibilities, yet social workers move cautiously to initiate change. Because human beings naturally evolve to work in harmony with their environments, it is likely that client systems are actually doing a lot right. One ecosystems practice principle mandates that social workers build on the strengths and competencies clients already have available. A strengths orientation (described fully in Chapter 4) is an essential tool for successfully applying an ecosystems perspective.

**Focus on the Environment**  Whether difficulties arise when people encounter physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, or situational challenges depends on the responsiveness of the environment and the strengths of the particular human system. A nurturing environment often compensates for a system's limitations, enabling the system to achieve the **goodness of fit** that characterizes the ecosystems view of competence (Germain, 1979). A resource-rich, **responsive environment** transforms persons who may otherwise be overwhelmed by challenges into contributors who can further enrich their environments. By considering the responsibility of environments, the ecosystems
view precludes labeling individuals or social systems as dysfunctional or pathological in favor of recognizing that simply no goodness of fit exists. That which the system lacks, the environment is not providing. What the environment fails to provide, the system cannot compensate with its own resources. Even a good adaptation in one particular context may not work effectively in others. The ecosystems view concludes that dysfunctional behavior is transitory, changeable, and related to the responsiveness of the context in which it occurs.

Ecosystems Framework: As an Assessment Tool

How we work with people and their situations logically follows from how we perceive human behavior. If we believe the ecosystems perspective cogently explains how people develop strengths and vulnerabilities, then the practice choices we make and the processes we utilize will reflect this perspective. Ecosystemically oriented social work practice centers on changing and maintaining both client and environmental systems. A simple way to organize the ecosystems perspective into a user-friendly assessment framework for generalist social work practice involves a five-point schema (O’Melia, 1991):

- Identify the focal system.
- What’s happening inside the system?
- What’s happening outside the system?
- How do the inside and outside connect?
- How does the system move through time?

A closer look reveals the universality and usefulness of this simple framework (Table 2.2).

Identify the Focal System

All aspects of generalist practice involve human systems. Social workers practice within systems such as agencies, departments, institutions, and various other organizations.

| Table 2.2 Ecosystems: Conceptual Practice Framework |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Questions                              | Description                      |
| What’s the focal system?               | Identifies the system on which the ecosystems analysis will focus—can be an individual, family, group, organization, or community. |
| What’s inside the system?              | Explores the structure, interaction, biopsychosocial dimensions, and cultural features within the focal system. |
| What’s outside the system?             | Delineates the network of other systems and resources in the focal system's environmental context. |
| How do the inside and outside connect? | Examines the transactions between the focal system and systems in its context. |
| How does the system move through time? | Observes adaptation and changes occurring in the process of the focal system's development. |

From Generalist Perspectives in Case Coordination by M. O’Melia (May 1991). Used with permission of the author.
Social workers interact with client systems, including individuals, couples, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers also target changes in environmental systems to benefit their clients. Practitioners themselves are members of personal and professional systems that may support or inhibit their work. In effective generalist practice, workers understand the functioning of and resources within each of these systems, including their settings, their clients, their communities, and themselves.

The ecosystems view recognizes the complex configuration of these nested and interlocking systems. To ignore the multiple influences present in any situation is to offer only a partial account of why things are the way they are, what resources exist, and how things might change. Acknowledging these influences requires a step-by-step analysis that begins with a well-defined reference point, which we call the focal system. Any of these systems can be identified as the focal system.

What’s Happening Inside the System?
After determining the focal system, we next analyze the system’s internal functioning. A structural perspective offers information about the system’s membership, boundaries, and hierarchies. Highlighting the interactional view provides information about how system members communicate, the patterns they develop, and the ways they maintain balance. Exploring biopsychosocial dimensions provides information about system members’ physical health, thoughts, and feelings. Considering the cultural influences of values, beliefs, attitudes, communication patterns, and norms adds to our understanding of functioning inside the focal system.

What’s Happening Outside the System?
All systems exist in the context of an ecosystem—a set of interconnected, interdependent, and interactive systems that affect one another. Identifying important environmental influences begins to explain the focal system’s behavior and reveals possible targets for intervention. Because ecosystems are also systems, workers can describe and analyze ecosystems by applying the same perspectives used for describing any system—structural, interactional, biopsychosocial, and sociocultural.

Although many systems share aspects of the same environments, the particular ecosystem of any focal system is a unique configuration, idiosyncratic to that system. Consider the following examples of the ecosystems of potential client systems. For one 8-year-old child, relevant environmental systems may be the child’s immediate family, extended family, peer group, neighborhood, school, and church. For a different 8-year-old child placed in foster care, relevant environments include the child’s biological family, foster family, social worker, case management team, foster children’s support group, and the family court system. On another level, significant contextual systems for a public housing project include the community, city government, local social agencies, and federal housing departments.

How Do the Inside and Outside Connect?
The viability of any human system depends on its success in interacting with its environment. For example, social workers need personal and professional backing. Clients need information, resources, and support. This interface of the system with the environment—the system:environment transaction—is a major target for assessment and intervention.
To illustrate how this relates to professional practice, consider the example of Tony Marelli. As a social worker for the Northside Addictions Recovery Center, Tony is experiencing feelings of burnout. Significant events in Tony’s connections to his environment contribute to this situation. The Addiction Recovery Center’s loss of a state grant has forced layoffs and a redistribution of work to remaining staff. Tony’s workload has increased from 25 to 35 clients as a result. Normally, the agency has a supportive collegial and supervisory system with which Tony exchanges ideas about his experiences with clients, but the overload has sent everyone scrambling. Consequently, the workers hardly have time to talk to one another.

Look closely at the changes in Tony’s connections to the world around him. The previous balance of Tony (the inside) with his clients and co-workers (the outside) is now skewed. His boundaries have opened wide to clients and have closed with respect to his professional support network. For Tony, more resources are going out, and fewer are coming in, obviously contributing to his burnout. This ecosystems analysis also points the way toward what might be done to ease Tony’s situation. Changes in Tony’s workload or his relationships with colleagues may be solutions. Analyzing Tony’s transactions with his environment offers insights into what is currently happening and stimulates thinking about the possibilities for change.

How Does the System Move Through Time?

Systems at every level, from individual to society, move along their developmental paths in response to expected and unexpected events. Both kinds of events, predictable and surprising, affect systems. How systems negotiate these changes as they move through the context of time merits careful review. Social workers incorporate historical and developmental contexts by gathering enough information about the focal system to understand the system’s evolution.

Many evolutionary changes occur naturally, including physical maturation and other developmental transitions. Erikson (1963) describes expected stages of psychosocial development for individuals. McGoldrick and colleagues (2015) expand this notion of developmental change to families and examine the mutual influences of individual and family life cycles. Another theorist describes the natural path of group development as sequential, passing through stages of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman, 1965, as cited in Schriver, 2015). Systems at all levels evolve in predictable and adaptable ways.

Nodal Events Other changes, some unexpected, can create temporary havoc in systems, leaving system members struggling to regain equilibrium. Consider how the sudden death of a child in a family system immediately disrupts the family’s sense of how things should be and requires extensive adjustment in the way the family operates. These changes, called nodal events, have a dramatic effect on a system’s development (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). The addition or loss of a member or a significant change in a member’s role profoundly affects the system as a whole. Such is the case in birth, marriage, death, and serious illness. Examples of nodal events in larger systems are organizational expansion and downsizing. In a community, nodal events can include a change in leadership, plant closings, or the receipt of federal grants. Nodal events can improve a system’s functioning or challenge its capabilities.
Ecosystems Framework: As a Practice Model

As an assessment tool, this ecosystems framework provides ways for social workers to organize information about "what is" in a way that hints at "what might be." As a practice model, this framework guides practitioners as they build effective relationships with clients through dialogue, assess client functioning through discovery, and develop and implement change activities.

Dialogue: Building Relationships with Client Systems

By identifying the professional relationship as the focal system, workers can monitor how they relate to clients. The structural perspective allows workers to question issues of power and closeness: Does the client system have sufficient power in the relationship with the worker to ensure feelings of control, an experience of competence, and a guarantee of self-determination? Is the relationship sufficiently close to encourage an open and honest sharing of information yet distant enough to ensure professional integrity and encourage independence? By applying this framework, workers can construct empowering and respectful relationships with client systems.

This framework also helps workers monitor the effects of outside forces on their work with clients. Obviously, the relationships of social workers and clients respond to influences in their respective ecosystems. Cultural contexts are particularly important. Analyzing cultural dimensions can help workers recognize and confront their own biases and sensitize them to relate to clients in culturally appropriate ways.

Discovery: Assessing Functioning

The ecosystems framework is a tool for assessing a client's situation, regardless of the particular level of client system. Observing a system, from structural, interactional, biopsychosocial, and cultural perspectives, offers considerable information for understanding individuals, families, groups, and communities. Assessing the client system's progress over time contributes additional clues about important historic events, the system's ability to adapt, and its future direction.

Development: Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating Change

Knowing the specific ways that systems function reveals multiple entry points for social workers and clients to initiate change. Altering internal aspects of a system's functioning, changing environments, or modifying the connections between the two all hold potential for creating change. Social workers and clients carefully analyze these possibilities to construct plans and carry out activities, enhance client competence, activate environmental support, create alliances, and expand opportunities.

LOOKING FORWARD

Human behavior theory guides and justifies actions that social workers take to help clients. Social work draws from many disciplines to flesh out an ecosystems view of human functioning. These perspectives include ecosystems, social constructionism, feminism, life course theory, a critical perspective, biology and behavior, and a trauma-informed
view. The person:environment construct, a concept emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between persons and their impinging social and physical environments, remains central to social work practice. Social systems theory helps social workers decipher this symbiotic and evolutionary relationship. An ecosystems view provides a guiding framework for all social work activities from engagement through assessment, intervention, and evaluation.

Research-tested hypotheses are essential for establishing evidence-based practice. But ethical workers should take caution here—clients deserve their say. Favoring a professional view over a client’s perspective may be oppressive, contradicting the key social work values of acceptance and client self-determination. Effective practitioners also recognize other important influences on interactions with clients. Chapter 3 describes how attitudes, expectations, values, and cultural identities affect professional practice. Social workers must inventory their own beliefs and cultural backgrounds to prepare for value-based, culturally competent practice.