CHAPTER 1

Theory: The Foundation of Social Work

Janice is a single, 21-year-old mother of two. She is talking with her case manager at the local Department of Human Services office about her welfare benefits, which will be cut if she doesn't find steady work. Janice is having trouble finding and keeping jobs, and she is struggling to pay for rent, food, and day care for her children. Although Janice wants to work, she finds it difficult because of the depressed economy in her town, her lack of job skills, and several health problems. Among other symptoms, Janice suffers from severe migraine headaches, and she has trouble sleeping and concentrating. The stress caused by unemployment and health problems has also made parenting more difficult, and Janice finds herself becoming depressed because she is unable to meet her responsibilities as a parent. Although Janice receives Medicaid, she is unable to follow through with recommended diagnostic tests for her health-related symptoms because of transportation and child care issues. Janice frequently feels overwhelmed with all of her responsibilities, and she often wishes she had only herself to support, which would give her time to go out with her friends and experience life.

JANICE'S STORY EXEMPLIFIES THE COMPLEXITY OF HUMAN problems. Rarely in social work will you find yourself working with people whose problems are straightforward. When you carefully examine Janice's situation, you will probably identify several major issues: health and parenting problems, potential mental health issues, developmental issues associated with Janice's age, program policies (such as welfare policies), cultural expectations of parenting and self-sufficiency, access to affordable housing and day care, and employment availability and policies. Regardless of the type of agency in which you work or the population with which you work, you will find people's problems to be multifaceted and interconnected on many different levels. Because the human condition is so complex, social workers need to understand human behaviors in their social environment.
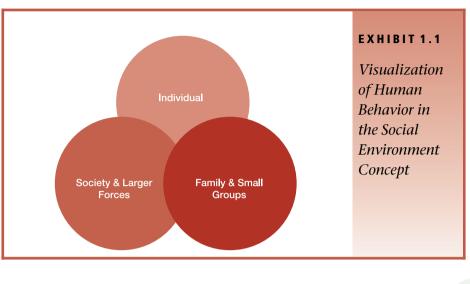
DEFINING HUMAN BEHAVIOR IN THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

No single definition for "human behavior in the social environment" exists. Nevertheless, the social work profession agrees on the importance of understanding how individuals interact both with other people and with their environment as well as how individuals are affected by these interactions. For this reason, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the body that accredits undergraduate and graduate social work programs, requires that programs prepare students to apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment. Specifically, this policy articulates that, "social workers are knowledgeable about human behavior across the life course; the range of social systems in which people live; and the ways social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and well-being. Social workers apply theories and knowledge from the liberal arts to understand biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development" (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p. 6). Social workers use this knowledge in their work with clients—from assessment to evaluation of intervention—and they have the ability to critique knowledge that is applied to practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). Further, this knowledge is based in and supports a core value system of the profession, which promotes such things as social justice, dignity and worth of people, and scientific inquiry to help promote effective and ethical practice (National Association of Social Workers, 1996). So, students of accredited social work programs must learn about the interrelationships between individual behavior and larger social environments. This includes content on various theories that explain human behavior and social dynamics; ways in which developmental factors affect people in their environments; how these factors play out on different levels, including the individual, family, small group, community, and societal levels; and promote social justice and the dignity and worth of people.

Exhibit 1.1 illustrates the concept of human behavior in the social environment. Each circle represents a level of practice on which social workers might focus. This visualization also shows you how the different areas of people's lives and environments can intersect. The intersections are those areas in which social workers generally focus their assessments and interventions. Depending on the agency or population, though, social workers sometimes move outside the overlapping areas to focus on issues related to a specific circle or realm. For example, a social worker might be employed to conduct mental health assessments for children. Her main focus thus would be on the individual level, specifically, each child's mental health issues. Nevertheless, she would probably still consider issues in the realms of family and small groups and society and larger forces. For instance, she may attend to issues relating to the child's family, peers, school, economic status, cultural background, and so on. Moreover, she might consider other factors on the individual level besides mental health, such as the child's coping skills and physical health. The

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EXHIBIT 1.1

Visualization of Human Behavior in the Social Environment Concept

Individual

Society & Larger Forces

Family & Small Groups

complexities and intricacies of this conceptualization should become clearer to you as you move through this chapter and the remainder of the book.

Learning about human behavior in the social environment will help you to place your knowledge into a meaningful and coherent context as you work with clients, organizations, and communities. It will challenge you to use your existing knowledge of human behavior and social environments while incorporating it into new ideas and perspectives on the human condition. It will give you more complex ways to think about assessment and intervention, which in turn will help you to become a more creative and effective social worker.

Knowledge, Theories, and Social Work

While the core value system of social work means that, as a profession, it tends to generate, draw from, and apply knowledge based in strengths, empowerment, and social justice tenets, it is also inclined to incorporate knowledge from many different disciplines that may not explicitly adhere to these tenets. *Knowledge* in this context refers to a wide range of information such as theories, empirical research, and practical experience that might be generated from different disciplines. Given the complexity of individuals' lives and the multifaceted nature of the problems that clients bring to the working relationship, social workers need to have a broad knowledge base in many different areas—such as politics, biology, psychology, sociology, and economics—and they need to understand how aspects from these different realms interact with and influence one another in ways that affect the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. In other words, social workers must be able both to think comprehensively and creatively and to access their knowledge and "pull it all together" to assess and intervene with client problems. Further, because social work is concerned with social justice and the dignity and worth of

people, among other values, social workers must also understand how to incorporate strength-based and empowerment concepts into their work. This is why a strong liberal arts base in your education is so helpful. The more you know about different areas such as history, government, and philosophy, for example, the better the foundation you will have for conceptualizing and intervening with client problems. You can be more helpful when working with a client if you are familiar with some basic facts or updated research on the particular problem with which the client is struggling. Other times, you can use your knowledge to offer a client a different viewpoint on a particular problem, no matter how technical or philosophical, to give the client a new way to think about the problem. These are situations in which your familiarity with different theories will be useful.

To see the benefits of drawing on a broad knowledge base, let us consider how practitioners from other disciplines might approach Janice's situation. A physician may be concerned only with identifying and alleviating Janice's physical symptoms. A psychologist may attend only to the individualistic or psychological aspects of Janice's case. These might include her potential for developing depression or other mental illness, her emotional and cognitive development, her issues of self-esteem and self-efficacy, and the quality of her attachments with children. After pinpointing these problems, the psychologist might focus on improving Janice's functioning in these areas. An economist may concentrate on employment prospects, economic conditions of the community, and the costs of maintaining Janice on welfare. Economic interventions would include activities to improve employment conditions in the community and to curb costs by reducing the amount of time that Janice spends on welfare rolls. A sociologist may be more interested in examining the larger social and cultural dynamics that contribute to poverty for single mothers. Interventions might include helping Janice adapt to cultural expectations of employment and parenting, or working to change societal attitudes toward poverty and single mothers. Although all of these perspectives are important, considering them in isolation contributes little to understanding the scope and complexity of Janice's problems and, consequently, to the effectiveness of the interventions.

Use of Theories and Empirical Knowledge in Social Work   To help pull sources of information together when working with clients, social workers need to understand basic theories in different areas, how theories can be applied to problems, and how theories' limitations can affect their explanations of problems. A **theory** is a set of ideas or concepts that, when considered together, help to explain certain phenomena and allow people to predict behavior and other events. Theories differ from other types of knowledge in that they allow you to organize knowledge on a particular issue or topic. If theories are well developed, they provide a blueprint for testing hypotheses or hunches about behavior and other phenomena, predicting certain events, and validating assumptions and knowledge about certain issues. Without theories, knowledge about human behavior and social issues would remain

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unwieldy; you would not be able to make connections among related facts and information to form ideas that could help you advance your knowledge about human behavior and social issues. A variety of theories can help social workers organize information and make sense of certain problems. Theories can offer social workers contexts from which to approach problems with the confidence that interventions are sound. Of course, some theories are more valid than others, but part of being a skilled social worker is knowing how to evaluate theories for their strengths and limitations and how to apply them responsibly.

Theories are often developed and refined through the process of empirically based (or experimentally generated) research and investigation. Beyond its use for theory development, **empirically-based knowledge** is often used to provide the most updated, valid, and reliable information on issues to help guide practice. Keep in mind that the idea that social work practice should be informed by (1) theory and (2) empirically based knowledge is relatively recent. Historically, social work was rooted in charity and volunteerism, and only recently did it become more rationalized and scientific (Fischer, 1981). As the disease model emerged and other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and economics began using more scientific methods to advance knowledge and theory, social work moved away from relying solely on **practice-based knowledge**, or practice wisdom, which is knowledge generated from practice experience. Practice-based knowledge tends to be anecdotal and ambiguous and cannot always be generalized to new situations. Though practice-based knowledge can be based on theoretical foundations, it often is not subjected to controlled tests to verify how valid and reliable it may be for work with clients outside of a particular practice context. However, it certainly has its value; throughout practitioners' careers, they may work with thousands of people, giving them rich insights into various issues and problems. And, practice-based knowledge can lead to hunches, questions, and curiosity about various problems, which can lead to scientific exploration that can generate science-based knowledge and the development of theories about particular issues.

Science-based knowledge relies more on empirical or experimental research and theoretical tenets on which to base ideas about certain issues. It is knowledge that is developed over time using objective methods to test hypotheses that allow practitioners, with some degree of reliability and accuracy, to generalize their knowledge beyond single-client cases. It also allows people to modify existing theories about certain issues as well as develop new ones that might explain issues more accurately. The movement among social workers to use more scientific approaches has also been driven by **evidence-based practice**, or an increased responsibility by social workers to document that their interventions are effective.

The Debate over Theory in Social Work   Despite this trend toward science-based knowledge, there has been and currently is considerable debate about how much the social work profession can and should rely on empirical and theory-based knowledge—particularly as it relates to some entrenched, classic theories of human

development—given the complexity of human behavior (Osmond & O'Connor, 2006; Parton, 2000; Sheppard, 1998). On one end of the continuum is the idea that theory, or some guiding set of principles about certain phenomena, is needed to help social workers organize concepts and offer principles from which intervention outcomes can be tested. This line of thinking supports the belief that social workers need some kind of guiding conceptualization of client problems, which can support empirical testing of interventions, which can lead to the modification of theoretical conceptions and ideas and, ultimately, to better and more effective interventions (Simon & Thyer, 1994).

On the other end of the continuum is the argument that many of the theories from which social work borrows are outdated and ineffective for social work practice. This line of thinking suggests that many theories taught in social work curricula have no utility when students begin their practice. Those arguing from this standpoint posit that many constructs or concepts in these theories have not been (and probably cannot be) supported through empirical research. They point to various limitations in the development of many theories, making them biased and inappropriate for use with people who come from diverse situations. For instance, Freud's theory of psychosexual development and Piaget's theory on cognitive development were developed in specific time and cultural contexts. This issue and others call into question the appropriateness of using these theories in work with clients who come from backgrounds and generations different from the people who were studied to develop these theories. At best, such theories need additional testing to understand how well they help to explain problems of clients who come from contexts other than the typical Eurocentric ones in which these theories have been developed and often are employed. Further, because of the sheer number of theories that could be related to social work practice, this argument points out that these theories cannot be taught in sufficient depth for students to understand them well enough to apply them effectively in practice (Simon & Thyer, 1994).

The reality is that because of the scope of problems with which social workers grapple, theories do come in handy. Moreover, because social work is such a broad field, social workers can rely on a vast number of theories when working with clients. Regardless of your particular view on the usefulness or appropriateness of theories in your work, you are likely to deal with them. Thus, you will find it helpful to think about theories in broad categories based on which aspects of human behavior they address. For example, does a theory explain personality development or economic development? Does it explain causes of racism or causes of obsessive-compulsive behavior? You will see by looking at this book's table of contents that Chapters 2 through 5 are organized on this basis. Chapter 2 discusses broad organizing theories used in social work, while Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on theories that are more specific to other disciplines. Each set of theories offers a different lens through which to view problems.

Of course, this is just one way to organize the many theories with which social workers are likely to come in contact. Another way would be to group theories in

EXHIBIT 1.2

Theoretical Interactions in Social Work

Individual

Human Development:
Physical processes of growth and aging,
Cognition/Emotions, Morality,
Attachment, Learning, Spirituality,
Self-actualization and well-being

Sociological Theory:
Social action, Racism, Conflict,
Functionalist, Interactionist,
Community organization,
Social justice,
Social constructionism

Small Systems Theory:
Family systems,
Group dynamics,
Ecological theory

Society & Larger
Forces

Family & Small
Groups

terms of whether they address individual, familial, or larger social issues or some combination of these. Alternatively, theories can be grouped into subcategories according to the specific area or problem that they address. For instance, some theories explain personality development while others address social development. Some theories explain how social change occurs while others explain why social dysfunction is resistant to change.

As you can see in Exhibit 1.2, sometimes concepts from different theoretical frameworks overlap; theories can explain aspects of problems in different realms. For example, theories that address how children and their caregivers establish attachments to one another might be informed by theories that explain how people in a relationship interact with one another, how they perceive these interactions, and how attachments impact these interactions. Attachments and interactions can also be explained by broader family system dynamics. Social workers' understanding of learning processes can be augmented by understanding how family systems may impact the development of their members. Family systems might be improved by theories addressing social justice (for example, to improve access to resources that support families), which can indirectly impact the nature and quality of

attachments, interactions, and learning that take place within families. Of course, these are only a few of the many ways in which theories might be used in combination to help explain various problems that occur at individual, familial, and social levels.

As another example of how theories might overlap, the case manager who is working with Janice could rely on various theories that explain not only individual development and functioning but also social problems and change. Because some of Janice's problems surrounding unemployment are interrelated with problems such as parenting, physical health, and larger social forces like the economy, the case manager can incorporate theoretical concepts from all of these areas to better explain how problems on different levels contribute to Janice's situation as well as to develop interventions that will help to alleviate these problems.

For many social workers, the sheer amount of knowledge that is available for use with clients can seem overwhelming at times. Keep in mind that many disciplines have established and well-known theories whose concepts tend to be used more than others. One approach is to learn these theories well and then expand your knowledge base on other theories depending on the type of agency and problem with which you will be working. Further, to augment theoretical knowledge, social workers acquire a lot of knowledge about problems (such as facts, statistics, new research findings) from their experience, education, and other sources that can inform their thinking. Thus, problem conceptualization and intervention in social work are part of a dynamic process. Social workers' thinking needs to be flexible as they work with clients because there can be many different ways to work toward problem solving. As you read about theories in the next several chapters, think about different aspects of social work for which these theories might be useful. You may come up with better ways to group or conceptualize theories that are more meaningful to you and that you can use in practice.

What It Means to Be Eclectic

As we have been discussing, social work is naturally informed by multidisciplinary knowledge. For example, social work with children and families might borrow from psychological theory that deals with aspects of development and behavior change. Social work with communities might rely on sociological theory that addresses group dynamics and social change. Administrative social work might be heavily informed by economic or organizational theory. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that some social workers describe themselves as **eclectic practitioners**; that is, they borrow ideas and constructs from several theories when working with clients.

Nevertheless, some social workers, regardless of the population or problems with which they work, adhere to a particular theory. For instance, some social workers might describe themselves as behaviorists, psychoanalysts, or family system theorists. These theoretical preferences tend to be influenced by the political and philosophical climate in which social workers received their training (Saltman &

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Greene, 1993) as well as the contexts in which they work. Naturally, social workers' tendencies to use some theories more than others influence the ways they conceptualize clients' problems, the ways in which they move through assessment, and the types of interventions they choose.

To study the ways in which social workers' theoretical biases might play out in practice, Saltman (2002) surveyed 175 social workers in Jewish Family and Children's Agencies in the United States and Canada. She administered questionnaires and case vignettes to explore workers' theoretical orientations and interventions in practice. Based on self-report, the results indicated that respondents tended to show flexibility between their personal theoretical orientation and the types of interventions they chose to use in the case vignettes. Specifically, respondents did not necessarily choose interventions whose theoretical underpinnings were the same as their stated orientation. A majority (87.5 percent) of respondents reported having a psychosocial orientation, for example, but they applied a family systems intervention to the case in the vignette. According to Saltman, it may be that respondents were using theories that best "fit" clients' problems rather than forcing the problems to fit respondents' favored theories. In other words, respondents probably were relying on practice knowledge, empirical knowledge, or both, rather than their personal preferences, to guide their decisions about which theoretical approaches to use in their interventions.

Although results from studies like this one cannot tell us whether all social workers would respond to client situations in the same way, especially when faced with real versus contrived situations, they do help us to understand the reality that social workers often rely on multiple theories when working with clients. The results also suggest that other forces from sources such as the client, the agency, the political sphere, and even popular opinion might influence the theories that social workers use in their interventions with clients. For example, a social worker might use a particular theory for a specific problem because of recent empirical research that supports its effectiveness in explaining that problem. Similarly, an agency or funding source may only pay for the use of treatments based on a particular theory or set of theories. In these cases, social workers may be dealing with outside pressures to pick one theory over another, or even to use certain constructs from multiple theories, regardless of the social workers' personal orientations or biases.

The Single Theory Argument   There is considerable debate about how effective social workers (or any professionals who work with people) can be if they are "pure theorists" as opposed to eclectic. One side of the argument posits that to thoroughly understand the essence of a theory and to apply its constructs effectively and appropriately, social workers must study and adhere to only that particular theory when working with clients. For example, a social worker who uses behavioral theory to assess children's behavior problems needs to have a deep understanding of the underlying tenets of behaviorism (its history, developers, applications, constructs, and limitations) to use it appropriately when working with clients.

Proponents of adhering to a particular theory maintain that social workers who try to borrow constructs from many theories can never really know each one sufficiently or thoroughly enough to use parts of it correctly. Proponents also argue that in order to remain valid, theories must be used as a whole; they become invalid when only parts of them are used in isolation. Using just one behavioral technique, for example, such as time-outs, in work with children should not be done without using other related techniques supported by behavioral theory. This is especially true when the person using the technique does not adequately understand the underlying assumptions of behavior as explained through behavioral theory. Other arguments along this line of thinking include the following (Payne, 1997):

- Social workers get their training early in their careers and are likely to stick to the ways of thinking and practice that they learned in school. Thus, they are unlikely to be familiar with new knowledge across a range of theories and therefore cannot integrate this knowledge into their practice.

- There are no guidelines or rules about how to choose concepts from one theory or another, making the use of different theories rather haphazard and unsystematic.

- Social workers are unlikely to get needed supervision on using multiple theories and techniques, so relying on multiple techniques in practice can be risky.

- The underlying philosophies about human behavior tend to differ from one theory to the next; trying to integrate their concepts may lead to disjointed practice or even contradictory applications.

The Argument for Eclecticism   The other side of the argument states that because social work is concerned with people and problems on many different levels, the need to be flexible and comprehensive is inherent in the work. The nature of the work is such that if social workers try to use one theory for all types of populations and problems, they will inevitably be ineffective. Proponents of this argument state that social work should not adhere to a "one theory fits all" policy. In fact, some might argue that rigidly adhering to only one perspective can be oppressive to clients, forcing the unique characteristics of clients and the human condition into a uniform mold. Further, because uncertainty is a constant in the social sciences, particularly when it comes to human behavior and social issues, relying on a single theory to explain all problems will cause social workers to miss the bigger picture. Consequently, they will be more likely to misinterpret problems and apply inappropriate interventions, potentially doing more harm than good for clients. Being eclectic, flexible, and comprehensive allows social workers to be creative and resourceful in finding solutions to their clients' myriad problems. Indeed, some social workers argue that doubt, ambiguity, and uncertainty are hallmarks of the

profession. Thus, social workers should be equipped with a broad "toolbox" of theoretical knowledge to work effectively with clients.

This line of thinking supports the idea that clients should benefit from all of the theoretical knowledge available to social workers. And because every theory has its limitations with regard to what it explains, social workers need additional resources when working with clients. Social work processes such as intake (initial client inter- views and information gathering), relationship building, assessment, planning, intervention, evaluation, and follow-up are commonplace in many agency settings and working relationships. To guide these processes, social workers tend to rely on theories to inform the way they approach client situations. Because client problems and situations are complex, just one approach from one particular theoretical orientation might not be all that social workers need in certain circumstances or at different places in the working relationship (Payne, 1997).

Regardless of which perspective you take on this debate, it is obvious that to be an effective social worker, you must have at least a working knowledge of various theories that explain human development and behavior. Without this knowledge, you will not be able to make informed decisions about how to use theory, whether that means taking the eclectic approach or the pure theorist or single theory approach. Moreover, it is likely that the educational and work settings in which you find yourself will dictate, to some extent, how theories get used in practice. For example, some treatment programs for children with behavioral problems only use behavioral theory in their interventions, while some social workers in private practice may only use Freudian psychoanalysis. To be adaptable, as well as to serve clients ethically and responsibly, you need to understand multiple theories as well as how to use them in the appropriate context.

Evaluating the Quality of Knowledge and Theory

Previous sections discussed the need for social workers to use a broad range of knowledge, including empirical and theoretical knowledge, in their work with clients. You also learned about some of the debates regarding how to apply this knowledge, particularly theoretical knowledge, to work with clients. In this section, we will turn our attention to evaluating knowledge to determine how appropriate it is for use with clients.

With regard to how we know what we know, there are many ways in which we gain knowledge and develop theories. One way to do this is through experience. This is similar to the ideas of practice-based knowledge and practice wisdom discussed earlier. It also refers to the experiences that we gain as we live life. How we construct our reality and perceptions of things is often based on the types of experiences we have. These experiences allow us to feel that we "know" things. Alternatively, knowledge can be constructed through what we have been told to be true. This includes knowledge that is transmitted through (1) *tradition*—our culture and what we learn from others—and (2) *authority*—what we are told by experts.

Knowledge transmitted through authority is akin to the idea of empirical or science-based knowledge, also discussed earlier.

Unfortunately, these avenues of transmitting knowledge are full of pitfalls. For instance, how do you know that you can rely on information given to you by those you know? How might your culture influence various facts and ideas? Do you consider celebrities, athletes, and the media to be experts? How do your own values and beliefs bias the knowledge that you seek or the way in which you interpret it? To make matters more complicated, there are yet more debates within the social work discipline about what kinds of knowledge are appropriate for practice. Should you rely on experts, even if what they say does not seem to fit with the problems of your clients? Alternatively, should you rely on practice or experiential knowledge, even if its effectiveness cannot be proved? What role should social work values, which are difficult to measure and observe, play in applying knowledge to your work? If some of the knowledge used in practice is potentially biased or suffers from other problems, is it ethical to use it in work with clients? All of these questions have implications for the effectiveness of social work and the policies and funding that support it.

Given the myriad theories from which to learn and choose when practicing social work as well as the ongoing debates about the utility of learning one or more theories (or even learning any theory at all), where do you go from here? One place to begin to tackle these issues is to think about how to arm yourself with skills to understand what knowledge, theoretical and otherwise, is valid and what is not. An understanding of the characteristics of a useful theory (and well-designed empirical research that assists in theory development) can help you to wade through the flood of knowledge that you will encounter as you move through your career.

There are a lot of ways to judge the accuracy and applicability of knowledge, particularly theoretical and empirically based knowledge. And there are a lot of ideas about what makes knowledge "good," or valid for practice. Box 1.1 displays some basic guidelines for evaluating theoretical knowledge. These guidelines are generally accepted in many disciplines as the standards by which to determine the quality, usefulness, and applicability of theories in explaining certain phenomena (Homans, 1967; Lenski, 1988; Popper, 1959). Based on these guidelines, a theory should be able to offer information that allows you to reasonably predict and explain behavior in a way that will help you develop appropriate and effective interventions for your clients.

You should also be aware that people make all kinds of judgments when they conduct research to develop theories and generate knowledge about social and other issues. Consequently, there is a lot of room for bias, error, and misinterpretation, which can affect the quality of research and its outcomes. When you evaluate research, you need to be clear about factors such as which variables are being manipulated and controlled and which have not been accounted for. You also need to recognize how researchers' biases, values, methods, and motives for doing research can influence outcomes. A number of human errors can affect the way

When judging the usefulness of a theory, think about the following criteria:

B O X   1 . 1

Evaluative Criteria for Theory

- **Is it functional?** Does it clearly explain how concepts are related to one another and to the phenomenon it is trying to explain?

- **Is it strong?** Is it able to make certain predictions about behavior that can be confirmed through empirical observation?

- **Is it parsimonious?** Do the theory's concepts explain a lot about the phenomenon in clear, simple, and straightforward terms?

- **Is it falsifiable?** Can it be tested and refuted by empirical observation?

- **Does it make practical sense?** Does it inform your work with clients and relate to what you already know about various phenomena?

- **What are the philosophical underpinnings of the theory?** Does it fit with and promote social work values and ethics?

research is developed, carried out, interpreted, and applied to human situations. Here are some of the more common ones:

- *Problems with observations:* Human beings have notoriously faulty memories, and our own experiences of events can be very unreliable. Moreover, we tend to look for evidence to support our assumptions about certain phenomena, ignoring evidence that contradicts what we think we know.

- *Overgeneralizations:* We tend to assume that what we experience can be generalized to other people and circumstances.

- *Biases and value judgments:* We often impose our own values, inclinations, expectations, and experiences onto an event to help make sense of it.

- *Lack of inquiry:* We stop asking questions about an event because we think we understand it or have pursued it sufficiently.

Any of these pitfalls can result in the development of faulty knowledge, which in turn can lead to problems with accurately assessing and intervening with clients. For instance, many feminist scholars and others working in minority research argue that, historically, a great deal of empirical and theoretical knowledge that has been generated in social and other sciences has focused on the concerns of white males. Knowledge and theoretical developments coming from this research really only apply to people who have been studied (usually white men), but this knowledge is often applied to minority groups (such as women and ethnic and sexual minorities). This does not take into consideration biological, cultural, economic, and other

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BOX 1.2

Evaluative Criteria for Research

Some criteria to consider when evaluating research:

- **How current is the information?** If it's not current, is it likely to still be valid? Is there a good reason why it hasn't been updated?

- **Who is the intended audience?** Is the research conducted for the purposes of a particular interest group? Are the results biased to serve the needs of a particular group?

- **Who is the author?** What is the author's expertise and affiliation?

- **Are original sources of information listed?** Can you locate original works cited by the author? Are you given other sources where you can check facts and statements or do further research?

- **Is the information peer reviewed?** Have other experts in the field reviewed the information?

- **Is the information biased?** Does the language seem biased or slanted to suit particular purposes?

- **What is the purpose of the information?** Is it to inform, teach, entertain, enlighten, sell, persuade?

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differences that might invalidate the use of this knowledge with diverse groups (Reinharz, 1992; Solomon, 1976). Thus, many classic theories and empirical research on human behavior have been criticized because of the pitfalls listed earlier.

When evaluating empirical research that is being used to support or discredit a theory or that might be used for practice, there are other questions to ask yourself; Box 1.2 outlines some of them. Keeping these criteria in mind and posing some well-thought out questions as you read through the mounds of information you will find in newspapers, on the Internet, in agency and government reports, and even in scholarly journals will help you to avoid the pitfalls just discussed as well as to make some educated decisions about which information is appropriate to use in your practice. The complexity of information about human behavior and social issues makes this sort of scrutiny essential.

In thinking about how this information might be useful in Janice's case, the case manager may want to think about whether the theories and other knowledge used to work with Janice's problems are appropriate. For instance, some theories and other knowledge may be biased toward their applicability to men, or they may focus solely on individual responsibility while overlooking social contributions to the problem. The latter might happen if the case manager has extensive training in mental illness. She or he may focus more on Janice's physical and mental issues and not attend as much to broader issues, such as a poor economy, which are outside of Janice's control but still may add to her problems.

RELATING KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR TO OTHER SOCIAL WORK CONTENT AREAS

You can see how having a broad knowledge base in human behavior and the social environment can be useful for social work practice. Social workers can never know enough about the many facets of human life. Fortunately, the core courses in social work, as well as the electives, offer a foundation on which to apply knowledge of human behavior and to build new knowledge that is more specifically related to various aspects of your work. The following are a few of the courses you will encounter in the social work curriculum:

- Policy courses prepare you to develop, interpret, analyze, and apply social policies, which in turn influence the well-being of individuals, families, and communities on varying levels. You need to understand the interrelationships between policy and human behavior and how to apply perspectives on social policy to client problems.

- Research courses are an important facet of social work education because they teach you how to conduct research to evaluate practice as well as how to incorporate research into practice for more effective results. Research skills are the key to building theory and to ensuring that the approaches and outcomes built on theory are effective. Moreover, social workers need to keep themselves up to date on research in various fields that relate to their practice. New data or research on certain disorders or programs, for example, are constantly being produced, and social workers must be able to evaluate this research to ensure that it is valid, reliable, and sound and to understand how it can be used to inform practice.

- Practice courses rely heavily on theory to teach you empirically based practice methods in working with clients. Depending on the level of the program (undergraduate or graduate), you will learn either generalist or specific theories to help guide your assessments, planning, and interventions with clients, agencies, and communities. Often, these courses are paired with your field experiences and related seminars, which give you opportunities to apply your knowledge of human behavior and various theoretical approaches to your work and to integrate your knowledge with your practical experiences.

In addition to the core courses in the curriculum, social work programs also must incorporate certain content into courses throughout the curriculum. These areas deal with diversity, populations at risk, and values and ethics. All of these areas are crucial components of human behavior and the social environment because, when you consider human development and social problems that affect

development, you run into ethical issues, questions of how diversity influences people and their surroundings, and how people can be marginalized by personal and social problems and situations.

USING THIS BOOK TO THINK ABOUT HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

This book is organized to help you think about how theory and other knowledge relate to human development and social problems that affect people. It presents information sequentially, discussing theory first as a base on which you can build your knowledge about specific issues relating to human development. This chapter sets the stage for thinking about knowledge and how it is applied to social work practice. While you keep in mind the debates about how knowledge of human behavior in the social environment should be evaluated and used, you will be able to use this information to think about practice applications.

Chapters 2 through 5 present some of the many theories that are commonly used in practice or whose concepts serve as a foundation for interventions. The discussion in these chapters reviews popular theories that can inform practice and describes some of the limitations to using these theories.

Once you have a handle on theory, you will be better prepared to read the remainder of the book. Chapters 6 through 12 take you through common human developmental processes across the life span. Along with developmental information, these chapters introduce issues that tend to present themselves during various life stages and discuss specific theories that help explain these issues. To help you conceptualize the issues within the practice context, they are presented as they relate to different levels—individual, families and small groups, and society and large groups. These chapters will also improve your understanding of how theory, research, and practice inform one another. The goal is to learn to think critically about the debates discussed in this chapter and to develop your own opinions regarding the role of theory and other knowledge in practice.

CONCLUSION

Understanding human behavior in an environmental context is a crucial aspect of good social work. To be an effective social worker, you need a broad knowledge base that incorporates information on theories of human behavior, basic human development, and social issues that affect people in various stages of life.

There are many debates in the social work discipline about what kind of knowledge is needed to be an effective practitioner. Most social work scholars would agree, however, that social workers should be able to evaluate the quality of the knowledge they encounter and to determine whether it is appropriate to use in practice.

As a social worker, you also need to be aware of how your own values, experiences, and training have influenced your perceptions of people and social problems. These biases and preferences for certain ways of perceiving social issues affect the work that you undertake and how you interpret and use information. Having a solid and broad knowledge base as well as consistently questioning and evaluating knowledge and motivations for pursuing certain avenues when working with clients will help to ensure that you are doing all you can to be an effective social worker.

MAIN POINTS

- Human behavior in the social environment is a core content area in the social work curriculum that includes content on human development and various theories that explain interactions between behavior and social dynamics.

- More so than other disciplines, social work requires a broad knowledge base in many different areas such as politics, biology, psychology, sociology, and economics. Moreover, social workers need to understand how aspects from these different disciplines affect the well-being of individuals, families, and communities.

- Theories should allow you to reasonably predict and explain behavior in terms that are as clear and straightforward as possible. They should also be testable through empirical observation, and they should make practical sense.

- There is debate among social workers regarding whether practitioners should adhere to one theory when working with clients or whether they should rely on components of several theories.

- Knowledge comes from many sources, including experience, tradition, and authority.

- There are many pitfalls to logical thinking, including problems with observations, overgeneralizations, biases and value judgments, and lack of inquiry.

- Elements for judging the validity of knowledge include the currency of the information, the intended audience, the expertise and affiliation of the author, the availability of original sources and other related information, agreement by other experts on the validity of the information, and the purpose of relaying the information.

- Policy courses, research courses, and practice courses within the core curriculum in social work offer a foundation of knowledge that informs the conceptualization of human behavior in the social environment.

EXERCISES

1. Using the Sanchez Family interactive case (go to www.routledgesw.com/cases), review the major issues involving the Sanchez family. After giving this information thorough review, answer the following questions:

    a. What would you say are the three most crucial problems facing the family? Briefly justify your choices.

    b. In what ways might the way you've attained your knowledge affect your choices? For example, has your culture influenced the way you think about certain problems, and thus the importance you place on them?

    c. In what ways might theory help you in conceptualizing the family's situation?

2. Using the Riverton interactive case (go to www.routledgesw.com/cases), review the situation and the issues presented in the case and answer the following:

    a. What would you say are the three most pressing problems facing this community?

    b. How do you think you could use theory to help you conceptualize the situation in this case?

    c. In what ways do these two cases differ with regard to the problems they face, the complexity of the situations, and the ways in which you might approach intervention with the problems?