

# Chapter 1

## Human Behavior and the Social Environment

### *Exploring Conceptual Foundations*

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How might the construct known as *human behavior and the social environment* be conceptualized, and what are some critical issues associated with defining it?

Social and behavioral science theories represent a key source of knowledge for social work practice. One core function of social work scholarship is to select, synthesize, and translate this knowledge for specific use within the profession, including research, practice, and social work education. Because these theories have been generated for purposes that are often loosely related to goals and needs of the social work profession, a complex set of factors shape the “borrowing” process, including assessments of fit between theories and professional values, their evidentiary base, and their applicability and transportability to practice.

There is surprisingly little social work literature explicitly addressing theory selection, synthesis, and translation in terms of constructs related to human behavior and development, environmental influences, and their interrelationship (Kondrat, 1992; Zaparanick & Wodarski, 2004). Indirect evidence related to theory *selection* can be culled from research on the HB&SE (human behavior and the social environment) curriculum and related Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) standards. Content analyses of HB&SE syllabi indicate considerable heterogeneity in theoretical approaches utilized as well as overrepresentation of explanatory theory related to human behavior and development relative to theories related to the social environment (Taylor, Austin, & Mulroy, 2004; Taylor, Mulroy, & Austin, 2004). The most recent CSWE standards (2008) call for the selection of “theories and knowledge from the liberal arts to understand biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development” (p. 6).

This volume summarizes explanatory theories that are (a) related to human behavior and development in the social environment and

(b) can be used to inform social work practice. It represents, in many ways, an important attempt at selection, synthesis (summarizing core theoretical content, assessments of the evidentiary bases of theories), and translation (assessments of applicability to practice) of key concepts that help bring theoretical depth and breadth to the person-in-environment perspective that has historically been central to the social work profession (Cornell, 2006). Although an introductory chapter to a volume such as this might attempt to classify, compare, and/or integrate the various theories presented (e.g., see Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2009), our overarching aim will be different. Because social work scholars regularly identify and describe theories of potential utility for the profession (e.g., see Green & McDermott, 2010, for a recent example), such an approach seems premature as we are skeptical that there is shared understanding and definitions of cross-cutting dimensions along which theories might be compared. Instead, our goal is to complement the theories summarized in this volume by describing key scholarly and professional dilemmas related to theorizing about human behavior and the social environment (Bloom & Klein, 1996) that we believe are important to consider prior to comparative endeavors.

Specifically, the chapter approaches constructs related to human behavior and the social environment from multiple perspectives: historical, conceptual, and empirical. It is designed to generate discussion of the critical issues that emerge from the utilization of social and behavioral science.

The chapter is organized around the following question: How might the HB&SE construct be conceptualized, and what are some critical issues associated with defining it? To address this question, the following sections include: (a) a discussion of the role of theory in social work research and practice, especially as it relates to the HB&SE knowledge base as well as enduring tensions related to the uses of theory; (b) key highlights of the historical evolution of the HB&SE curriculum as reflected in curriculum standards developed by CSWE and related debates; (c) a presentation of selected frameworks that link human behavior with the social environment in alternative ways and may assist in the translation of HB&SE knowledge into practice; and (d) conclusions and implications for further critical reflection and dialogue.

### **Scholarly and Professional Dilemmas Related to Human Behavior and the Social Environment**

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A hallmark of the social work profession is its long-standing contextualist orientation (Weick, 1999), in which so-called person-environment perspectives serve as core components of the social work knowledge base (Cornell, 2006). At the same time, there has been considerable debate about specific elaboration of the relationship between human development, behavior, and the social environment (e.g., Bloom & Klein, 1996). We briefly sketch these debates as they relate to four overarching themes:

(1) development of the social work knowledge base, (2) the utility of middle range (domain-specific) theory, (3) appropriate specification of units of analysis (individual, group, community, etc.), and (4) the nature of the relationship between persons and their environments.

### **Development of the Social Work Knowledge Base**

Goldstein (1990) uses a three-part model of explicit and implicit theories, accumulated research, and practice-related experiences and information (e.g., skills, practice, wisdom) to characterize the knowledge base of social work. This model suggests that optimal knowledge development occurs when there is a seamless interconnection between theory, research, and practice. Given that there are a variety of factors relevant to understanding the nature of linkages between theory, research, and practice, we note those that relate to knowledge development in the social sciences in general, as well as those that appear to be uniquely germane to the social work profession.

#### ***Theory–Research Linkages***

Philosophers of science generally agree that formal theory building and testing is uneven and nonlinear, often serendipitous, related to historical and social contextual factors, and dependent on methodological innovation (Committee on Scientific Principles in Education Research, 2001). Because public support for research also influences the extent to and speed with which theory is developed, limited support for social work research represents an important constraint.

Different mechanisms underlie the linkages between theory, research, and practice, and it is important to underscore key differences between basic and applied research processes. For example, strategies used to test formal theory (theory-research links) may, at times, be quite distinct from those used to assess the efficacy and effectiveness of practice (research-practice links; see Fraser & Gallinsky, 2010; Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991).

#### ***Theory–Practice Linkages***

Because formal theories are necessarily abstract, a complex set of steps may be necessary to link theoretical concepts to practice techniques and principles (Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006). Because the social work profession generally borrows formal theories from other social science disciplines, it is also reasonable to expect some degree of mismatch between available theory and practice applications. For these reasons, scholars from other helping professions (e.g., education and nursing) argue for the development and use of middle range (also referred to as domain-specific) theory because of its potential translatability into practice (Committee on Scientific Principles in Education Research, 2001; Liehr & Smith, 1999; McKenna, 1997). According to Merton (1968, p. 39), middle range theories are “intermediate to the minor working hypotheses

evolved in abundance during the day-by-day routine of research, and the all-inclusive speculations comprising a master conceptual scheme.”

Due to the heterogeneity of goals related to theory, research, and practice, the development of the social work knowledge base is complex. Some scholars find little use for the theory–research–practice model and argue that theoretical and empirical knowledge are essentially incompatible or, at best, loosely coupled with practice knowledge (Goldstein, 1990; Weick, 1999). More recently, Thyer (2001) documented fundamental misunderstandings about research processes unique to formal theory testing and a tendency toward the overvaluation of theory building in relationship to other research endeavors that support the development of social work practice.

It is notable that these sources of tension within social work stand in marked contrast to recent appraisals of knowledge development within the professions of education and nursing. In general, these appraisals reflect a shared understanding of (a) the current state of the relevant knowledge base, (b) the types of theory building and integration necessary to further the profession, (c) critical areas for research, and (d) strategies that focus on particularly promising midrange theories that promote linkages to practice (Committee on Scientific Principles in Education Research, 2001; McKenna, 1997; Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006).

The lack of consensus about the conceptual foundation of the relationship between human behavior and the social environment provides critical contextual backdrop of this chapter. Each chapter in this volume traces the development of a particular middle range theory in relationship to empirical support and applicability to practice. This approach to explicating an array of explanatory theories raises larger sets of questions about their salience for knowledge development and utilization. For example, is there a common knowledge base related to human behavior and the social environment? If there is, to what extent do we agree, as a profession, that our current theoretical coverage is complete?

### **The Utility of Middle Range Theory**

Middle range theory may be particularly amenable to translation into practice principles (Committee on Scientific Principles in Education Research, 2001; McKenna, 1997), given that constructs are often quite tightly coupled with empirical findings. A key limitation of middle range theory is that it is generally designed to explain narrow attributes (e.g., single domains or dimensions) of more complex phenomena. Relatedly, these theories are often overlapping. In this volume, for example, there are multiple conceptualizations of human development as well as how and what levels of the social environment shape behavior.

Turner (1990) argues that social work needs a diverse set of theoretical accounts to capture the complex and ever-changing nature of persons, the settings in which they are embedded, and the realities of practice, but this position poses several dilemmas. From the perspective of the social

sciences, a proliferation of theory suggests the need for pruning and/or synthesis (Merton, 1968). Synthesis and integration clearly are complex processes—especially in relation to the concepts underlying human behavior and the social environment. Drawing on the work of the philosopher David Pepper, Goldhaber (2000) argues that alternative conceptualizations of human development (genetic, psychodynamic) emerge from different explanatory mechanisms or “root metaphors” that make them fundamentally incompatible and, in some respects, virtually incomparable. A more pluralistic perspective (Cowan, 1988) suggests that alternative conceptualizations are essential to explain different domains of functioning or subgroups of persons. In this case, the key task would be to match particular theories with appropriate subdomains of individual functioning or subgroups of persons.

Reliance on middle range theory, moreover, can limit one’s capacity to conceptualize the attributes of both persons and environments simultaneously. For example, how do psychodynamic theories incorporate concepts related to the social environment? It is important to note that scholars have variously critiqued the social work knowledge base for being too individually focused (Mulroy & Austin, 2004) or too environmentally focused (Han, 2010), as well as for not attending adequately to the nature of transactions between the person and the environment (Kondrat, 2002). Indeed, this volume reflects this tension, including only a few chapters on explanatory theory (e.g., organizational theory) explicitly focused on the social environment as the primary focus of analysis.

In summary, there are two underlying issues here. The first is the extent to which multiple theoretical accounts are understood, managed, and organized. The second is consideration of the costs and benefits of utilizing particular middle range theories, especially in terms of considering which attributes of persons and/or environments are brought to the forefront, which are left in the background, and which are not included in the account.

### Issues Related to Levels of Analysis

Consideration of multiple levels of analysis (e.g., individual, family, group, community, organization) raises several theoretical and methodological issues. Social work’s long-standing focus on contextualized accounts of human behavior suggests at least two levels of analysis: person and environment. There are multiple levels of analysis within persons (e.g., genetic, psychological) and environments (e.g., families, groups, organizations, macrosocial forces). A rich literature documents the theoretical and methodological dilemmas associated with accurate specification of units of analysis, how best to characterize the nature of relationships between and among varying units of analysis. Various sources of potential aggregation and disaggregation bias (Cicchetti & Dawson, 2002; Edward, 1979) are important to consider in the study of HB&SE wherein attributions of causal leverage are erroneously pinpointed to person or environmental

levels of influence. Alternative conceptions of poverty reduction strategies, for example, may best be understood as a reflection of different levels of analysis (e.g., individual versus cultural versus structural accounts of poverty; Popple & Leighninger, 2002).

Specifying the process of selecting multiple units of analysis is highly salient to social work knowledge development. On the one hand, these processes are very relevant to maximizing ecological validity (the extent to which theories and related empirical findings reflect real world conditions) and external validity (the extent to which theories and related empirical findings reflect particular populations of interest). In essence, better specification of these processes aid in evaluating the extent to which a particular explanatory theory is universal or relevant only to individuals or subgroups of individuals (Runyan, 1988). Unit sensitivity is also critical to identifying and, in the end, selecting appropriate points of intervention.

### **Characterizing the Nature of the Relationship Between Persons and Their Environments**

It should not be surprising that tensions exist when conceptualizing the complex nature and consequences of interactions between humans and their social environments. For example, Wakefield's (1996a, 1996b) critique of the ecosystemic perspective and subsequent interchanges with Alex Gitterman (1996) capture the central theoretical challenges inherent in this endeavor, namely, the need for frameworks that can capture the complexity of person-environment interaction (Gitterman), and the need to use middle range theory to explain and/or derive practice applications for such social problems as mental illness and domestic violence (Wakefield).

At the minimum, there are multiple ways to conceptualize the nature of human behavior in its environmental context. For example, Messick (1983), writing from the perspective of child psychopathology, argues that there are at least three perspectives needed to understand persons in context: (1) *person as context*, where the attributes of persons themselves shape their behavior and development; (2) *person of context*, where development and behavior are shaped by the settings in which a person is embedded; and (3) *person in context*, which elaborates on the developmental or situational constraints under which a particular behavior or set of behaviors occurs. These considerations are useful in terms of locating the focus of a particular explanatory theory. For example, psychodynamic perspectives generally address the person-as-context, social learning perspectives are particularly salient to understanding the person-in-context, and political-economic theory provides explanations for the choices people make based on the situations in which they find themselves.

In social work and other social sciences, there is growing attention being given to the so-called reciprocal or transactional relationships between persons and their environments, that is, the extent to which both are mutually influential and in what ways. However, there are two important dilemmas here. The first relates to the definition of *reciprocity*

and how best to measure and appropriately analyze it (Lewis, 2000). Second, it is unclear how to link individual and small group functioning to larger macro forces (economic, historical) beyond more proximal environmental settings (e.g., families; Stone, 2004). Understanding the nature of these linkages directly parallels the agency-structure debate in sociology, in which there is tension between theory that emphasizes the primacy of individual agency (the extent to which persons possess free will to act) and theory that alternatively stresses the role of social structures in constraining individual action. This theoretical gap may be particularly germane to social work's concern, as there is emphasis on both the primacy of the individual as well as on the ways in which larger institutions and economic forces constrain individual life opportunities in the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, n.d.).

In the remaining sections of this chapter, we trace the evolution of the HB&SE curriculum through periodically updated CSWE standards and ongoing debates about the HB&SE curriculum. In response to these intellectual debates, we present various frameworks to approach them. The first debate relates to the attempt to link human behavior to the social environment. Second, in response to concern about the lack of substantive attention to theories focusing on the larger social environment, we present a framework that delineates key cross-cutting concepts that may be used to assess more macro-oriented theories. Third, we highlight conceptual frameworks that may aid in the translation of HB&SE knowledge into social work practice.

## **Development of the Human Behavior and Social Environment Construct**

In this section we review some of the background pertaining to the construct of human behavior and the social environment, including the role of the accreditation standards of the CSWE, empirical research on the construct, and debates around controversial issues.

### **General Background**

Although courses on human behavior and the social environment have always played a key role in the social work curriculum, they have undergone substantive change over time, from a primary focus on human behavior and development heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theory to a focus informed by ecological perspectives. This expansion reflects a confluence of historical factors and changes in social work scholarship and CSWE standards.

Key historical events of the 1960s and 1970s, including the civil rights movement, the War on Poverty, and the Vietnam War, coincided with the inclusion of varying perspectives on human development (including behavioral and social learning traditions) and theories of race, gender, and

political economy. More recently, and related to theoretical and empirical advances in biological and neurobehavioral sciences, content related to genetics and the biological bases of human behavior (Mohan, 1980) as well as critical theoretical perspectives (Nicotera & Kang, 2009; Rossiter, 1996) have been considered as key domains of knowledge.

A simultaneous shift occurred in pedagogical strategy. In the 1970s, nearly 66% of bachelor of social work (BSW)-level HB&SE courses were taught outside of social work departments (e.g., in education, psychology, or sociology; Gibbs, 1986). By the 1980s, fully 90% were being taught within social work departments. Additionally, the focus and titles of HB&SE courses changed over time. The content shifted from psychoanalytic theory to human development across the life span, as well as from one foundation HB&SE course to two courses, one focusing on human behavior and development and the other on the social environment (in many, but not all, social work programs). As a result, titles of foundation courses changed from Human Development or Human Growth and Development to Human Behavior *in* the Social Environment to Human Behavior *and* the Social Environment.

These trends reflect the scope and complexity of the theoretical underpinnings of HB&SE courses. Levande (1987) argued that this expansion created an “add and stir” approach to teaching HB&SE, especially when introducing the diversity-related constructs such as race, gender, ability, and sexual orientation along with an array of social problems.

### **Council on Social Work Education Standards**

In 1969 (revised in 1971), the CSWE outlined the content for courses on human behavior and the social environment. This first set of standards on human behavior emphasized the importance of knowledge related to multiple units of analysis (the individual, group, organizational, institutional, and cultural contexts) that impact human behavior by drawing on theories from the biological, psychological, and social sciences. The CSWE acknowledged that many relevant theories existed for possible curricular inclusion. Irrespective of the wide range of theories and systems of knowledge, students were required to master the relevant content, critically assess the content’s application to social work practice, and identify implications for theory development in social work.

In the second accreditation manual (published in 1984), standards continued to require a focus on the individual’s interactions with families, groups, organizations, and communities, but changed to reflect an emphasis on how individuals develop over the life span (CSWE, 1984). In addition to reemphasizing the importance of theory from the biological, psychological, and social sciences, the standards called for more attention to the differences between theories, as well as their interrelationships, especially those that could inform the “reciprocal relationship” between human behavior and the social environment (reflecting biological, social, psychological, and cultural systems). A new emphasis was included that



called for content on diversity related to ethnic background, race, class, sexual orientation, and culture. The standards continued to emphasize that the curriculum should reflect the goals of individual programs and the ways HB&SE content informs social work practice.

The third set of policies and standards emphasized the need to explicate the values embedded within theories (CSWE, 1994). In addition to requiring content on the interactions among biological, psychological, social, and cultural systems and their reciprocal relationship with human behavior, new standards required attention to the impact of social and economic forces and larger social institutions on individuals and how these systems impact health and well-being. Finally, there was a renewed emphasis on the evaluation of theories and their application to social work practice.

The fourth set of HB&SE accreditation standards (CSWE, 2001, p. 35; amended in 2002) were reduced to the following guidelines:

*Social work education programs provide content on the reciprocal relationships between human behavior and social environments. Content includes empirically based theories and knowledge that focus on the interactions between and among individuals, groups, societies, and economic systems. It includes theories and knowledge of biological, sociological, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development across the life span; the range of social systems in which people live (individual, family, group, organizational, and community); and the ways social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and well-being.*

The most recent set of requirements notably relax core focus on “reciprocal relationships” and focus on competencies related to this content area. Specifically, they (CSWE, 2008, p. 7) emphasize 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. Social workers utilize conceptual frameworks to guide the processes of assessment, intervention, and evaluation; and critique and apply knowledge to understand person and environment.*

In summary, over the past several decades, CSWE curriculum standards were refined and changed five times. The standards consistently emphasized theories related to biological, psychological, and social development within multiple contexts (i.e., individual, family, group, organizational, institutional, and cultural). They also emphasized the importance of theory for practice. While these elements remained consistent, key changes included an emphasis on (a) the reciprocal relationship between human behavior and the social environment, (b) life course development, (c) cultural and spiritual dimensions of HB&SE, and (d) the role of social systems in promoting or deterring individual health and well-being. Notably, the CSWE removed, then reintroduced language in the standards related to the roles of students in evaluating and developing theory.

### Empirical Perspectives

While HB&SE courses ostensibly reflect the core theoretical knowledge for the profession, there has been very little research on HB&SE content as reflected in course outlines or textbooks or its role in social work education. One way to assess HB&SE content is to review the way courses and the most frequently cited textbooks are structured. Recent research on HB&SE textbooks and course outlines reveals the lack of agreement among social work educators about what constitutes HB&SE (Taylor, Austin, et al., 2004; Taylor, Mulroy, et al., 2004). These two studies consisted of a detailed review of 14 HB&SE textbooks (most frequently used in foundation courses for MSW students) and an analysis of 117 HB&SE course outlines submitted by 60 schools of social work in response to a request sent in 2003.

In both studies, the focal point for analysis was the most current CSWE (2001) curriculum statement on HB&SE content. The studies built on previous research, primarily Brooks (1986) and Farley, Smith, Boyle, and Ronnau (2002). Farley and colleagues evaluated 116 HB&SE course outlines used in 61 MSW programs during the 1998 to 1999 academic year and found that HB&SE courses reflected a lack of agreement about core content and theoretical constructs.

Variation in HB&SE courses in social work programs mirror continuing debates about how social and behavioral science theories should inform social work practice (Brooks, 1986; Farley et al., 2002; Mailick & Vigilante, 1987). The debate focuses primary attention either on the behavior of individuals or on the impact of the social environment on the behavior of individuals and families. Since the “rise and fall” of the psychoanalytic perspective (Mohan, 1980, p. 26), social work educators have searched for ways to include more content on the social environment as well as alternative theoretical constructs, especially as they seek to balance the concepts of pathology with those of well-being. According to Levande (1987, p. 59), this process “can result in HBSE content that is contradictory [and] fragmented.”

Based on prior CSWE (2001) standards and a social environment framework discussed later in this section (Mulroy & Austin, 2004), assessment forms were developed and applied to each text and course outline to guide the analysis and ensure consistency of data collected. A summary of factors evaluated in textbooks and course outlines is provided in Table 1.1.

Based on Taylor, Austin, and Mulroy (2004), the majority of HB&SE textbooks and course outlines are organized by stages of the *life cycle*, *systems* of varying sizes, or *theory*. A small but significant number of HB&SE course outlines were described as *combination*, because they covered material in at least two of these areas but were not dominated by any one approach. The characteristics of each of these formats are described next.

The *life cycle* textbooks and outlines are organized by the developmental stages of individuals and/or families from birth through death. Some of the courses and textbooks also include sections on various systems (groups, organizations, and communities), but the majority of the

**Table 1.1 Factors Evaluated in Human Behavior and the Social Environment Textbooks and Course Outlines**

Textbooks	Course Outlines
Structure	Structure
General content	Content
Intended audience	Logical flow
Emphasis on diversity	Emphasis on:
Specific social environment content:	— Reciprocal relationship between human behavior and the social environment
— Social justice	— Well-being
— Political economy	— Comparative perspectives
— Social problems	— Diversity
— Social policies	— Theory for practice
— Collective responses	
— Communities	
— Organizations	
— Groups	

content emphasizes the life cycle. The strengths of this approach include comprehensive coverage of human development, family issues, and the biopsychosocial or ecological perspective and a format in which HB&SE theory seeks to inform social work practice. Analyses also indicated considerably less emphasis on groups, organizations, and communities. Emphasis focused on different ways the individual experiences or is affected by groups, organizations, or communities rather than treating these structures of the social environment as dynamic, interdependent systems in and of themselves.

*Systems* textbooks and course outlines are structured around the concepts of the social environment, often with one or more separate chapters on individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Many of the systems textbooks and course outlines reviewed in Taylor, Austin, and Mulroy (2004) and Taylor, Mulroy, and Austin (2004) also devote significant attention to the role of social justice issues, social work ethics, and a broad array of social science theories. They provide explicit definitions of the social environment and its structures, with detailed content on groups, organizations, and communities. Individuals are often described as being one type or size of system, and all systems are described as interdependent entities irrespective of how individuals experience them.

Finally, the *theory* textbooks and course outlines provided content on ecological, psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, and other theories commonly used in social work. They emphasize comparative perspectives and critical thinking skills needed for evaluating the usefulness of a given theory for social work practice and research. The textbooks and course outlines using this approach to HB&SE varied in their treatment of the social environment, social work ethics, and social problems.

In addition to the variation in the structure of HB&SE textbooks and course outlines, social work programs differ in how many courses are devoted to the teaching of foundation HB&SE courses. Of the 60 schools that submitted 117 course outlines for the study, 58% (35) offer two foundation HB&SE courses, 33% (20) offer one, and the remaining 8% of schools (5) offer three or more. The findings reflect a diverse array of approaches to structuring HB&SE. Of the 35 schools offering two HB&SE courses, 31% (11) devoted one semester to life cycle and the second semester to systems, and 17% (6) presented a combination of life cycle, systems, and theory material over two semesters. Another 11% of schools (4) covered life cycle in the first semester and a combination of theory, systems, and diversity in the second semester. Three schools (9%) focused on systems during the first semester and theory in the second semester. One school presented the life cycle over two semesters, and another school presented systems over two semesters. The remaining 3% (9) taught systems, theory, or life cycle in one semester and diversity, psychopathology, or a combination of topics in the other.

Of the 20 schools requiring only one foundation HB&SE course (several schools sent different versions of the same course outline, thus proportions given are based on the outlines received), 35% (9) focused on the life cycle, 19% (5) emphasized systems, and another 19% (5) presented primarily theories. The remaining outlines (8) reflected a combination of theory, diversity, life cycle, and systems.

In summary, these findings identify at least two central issues for social work scholarship in terms of ways to conceptualize (1) the *integration* of human behavior *and* the social environment and (2) the *nature of the relationship* or wholeness of understanding human behavior *in* the social environment.

### **Debates Around the Human Behavior and the Social Environment Curriculum**

Current research on textbooks and course outlines needs to be placed in historical context. Beginning in the 1920s, debates over the merits of psychoanalytic and behavioral frameworks contributed to controversies about the social and behavioral science foundation of social work practice. Mailick and Vigilante (1987) identified the following HB&SE issues: (a) overemphasis on psychoanalytic theories in the teaching of HB&SE, (b) the need for additional content on diversity and stress and coping, and (c) the limitations of organizing content by developmental stages. A more recent review of the major controversial issues in the field of HB&SE identified tensions related to the purpose, content, conceptualization, and teaching approaches of human behavior and the social environment (as noted in Table 1.2; Bloom & Klein, 1996). We summarize the key issues raised in this review in the following sections.

**Table 1.2** Controversial Issues Identified by Bloom and Klein

Topic	Issue	Relevance to the Discussion of Human Behavior and the Social Environment
Purpose	Knowledge expansion and theory assessment	Multiple purposes: theory for practice, theory for policy, theory for understanding the social science perspective, or theory analysis to refine critical thinking skills
Content	Environmental versus individual theories Specialized course content	Theories related to the individual versus the environment continue as major point of contention Tension between the use of a breadth perspective or a depth perspective in conceptualization
	Empirically supported and unsupported theories	Adding content to human behavior and the social environment courses such as religion and spirituality, disabilities, values, genetics and sociobiology, and theories of international development
Conceptualization	Epistemological framework	Distinguishing between what is believed and what is empirically supported
	Strengths perspective	Tension between a wellness or strengths perspective and a pathology or problem focus
	Developmental perspectives Life history	Stage perspectives versus life course perspectives Use of life experience to illustrate key human behavior and the social environment concepts
Teaching	Single courses versus multiple courses versus integrating theory into practice courses	Beyond the structure and curriculum, considering how socially sensitive topics are incorporated, related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and disability

Adapted from Bloom, M., & Klein, W. C. (Eds.). (1996). *Controversial issues in human behavior in the social environment*. New York, NY: Prentice-Hall.

### **Purpose**

Educators continue to struggle with the purpose of HB&SE content. Is the purpose to describe explanatory theory in order to understand problems facing client populations or to inform the assessment phases of social work practice? Or is the purpose to promote critical assessment of the theoretical social science foundation of the profession? Gibbs (1996) suggests that learning critical thinking skills is an important part of studying the explanatory theory, because these skills lay the foundation for critical thinking about the intervention theory that underlies social work practice. Others see the potential purposes of HB&SE as including a venue for promoting multiple levels of analysis (micro, mezzo, macro), different lenses, or frames of reference with which to examine behavior in context.

### **Content**

Debates also center on the extent to which emphasis should be placed on individual or environmental theories, as well as the nature of the

person–environment relationships in an HB&SE course. The theoretical content thought to be relevant to HB&SE has continued to expand, raising the ongoing need to evaluate theory in terms of its historical context, explicit and implicit values, and breadth and depth of empirical support. Of note, efforts at potential synthesis are ongoing. For example, there has recently been an attempt to synthesize each of these content emphases through Developmental Systems Theory (Greenfield, 2011).

### ***Conceptualization***

Aside from debates related to the utility of middle range versus unifying or universal theories and concepts, larger philosophical debates are also apparent. These include the relative merits of adopting strengths versus social problem perspectives and whether neopositivism is a suitable epistemological framework for HB&SE given the proliferation of postmodern (e.g., interpretive, constructionist, and constructivist) paradigms. Similarly, newer life span or life course theories raise serious concern about the utility of stage theories in characterizing developmental processes.

Our brief review of the evolution of HB&SE content from the perspective of CSWE standards, research on texts and course outlines, and debates around the general purpose, scope, and focus of courses provides a context for and explicates the larger tensions embedded in the processes through which social work scholars select, synthesize, and translate social and behavioral science theory for the professions' particular use. The next sections focus on two enduring tensions. The first concerns a search for frameworks that potentially illuminate the multiple ways in which the nature of relationships between persons and their environments can be understood. The second provides a heuristic for conceptualizing larger environmental influences.

## **A Selection of Frameworks That Address Linkages Between Human Behavior and the Social Environment**

In this section, we identify a selected group of explanatory frameworks that explicitly link individual and environmental concepts, albeit in different ways. These frameworks include the life course perspective, social capital theory, cultural understanding of human development, opportunity frameworks, neighborhood effects, and institutional theoretical perspectives. These frameworks are potentially useful in that they highlight mechanisms and processes through which forces in the social environment (and vice versa) shape behavior and development and thus may aid in clarifying potential relationships between HB&SE. In addition, they have the capacity to provide integrative functions as a superstructure for more narrowly constructed middle range theories (Merton, 1968). As an example, we illustrate the potential for integration with life course perspectives.

### Life Course Perspectives

Sociological perspectives on the life course may have particular utility in conceptualizing social environmental influences on human development. Indeed, Elder's (1995) life course perspective is increasingly viewed as an important potential explanatory framework for social work (Hutchinson, 2005; Stone, 2004). In general, Elder suggests that several overriding principles have central explanatory roles in developmental processes and outcomes. First, individual development is best understood as a trajectory. That is, prior developmental experience influences later development. Second, the timing and sequencing of developmental and social transitions influence persons' life trajectories. Third, agency-related attributes of individuals (their human capital characteristics, meaning-making abilities, and efficacy) influence development. Notably, however, human agency is constrained by the availability, structure, and quality of social opportunity structures. Fourth, according to Elder, immediate relationships represent the key context in which human development is actualized. In Elder's formulation, proximal relationships often mediate larger social forces. Finally, historical time and place shape developmental pathways. In other words, cohort effects are central to the understanding of developmental processes.

A key implication of Elder's (1995) theory is that these factors intersect to create a unique set of "turning points" for any individual life trajectory. In other words, the combination of these influences pinpoint key points of intersection between human behavior and the social environment (person-environment fit) and potential points of intervention. Elder's work is both representative and an extension of the larger sociological life course tradition, which highlights the importance of social role-related transitions. We next describe both Elder's perspective as well as a more general life course framework by Hunt (2005).

Specifically, Elder's (1995) principles include *lives in time and place*, *human agency and self-regulation*, *the timing of lives*, and *linked lives*. *Lives in time and place* refers to the interplay between human development and the larger social context, including both historical time and physical place. *Human agency and self-regulation* refers to the choices people make in their lives. Though Elder acknowledges the social constraints on these choices, he also believes that human decision plays a role in the occurrence and sequencing of life events. Individuals' ability to select and construct their environment impacts their trajectory and indeed represents a key way to conceptualize reciprocity. *Timing of lives* refers to influences of both historical time and the social timing of developmental and social transitions and normative and nonnormative events across the life span. Timing is thought to be as important as, if not more important than, the occurrence of an event. Last, *linked lives* refers to the interdependence of human beings. Relationships across generations, marriage, kin, work, and so on all relate

to the social context in which people live. Being embedded in a particular network of relationships has significant consequences for life course development. The life course can be viewed in part through social ties.

Elder's (1995) framework is useful for various reasons. It specifies mechanisms of influence between persons and their environments and, indeed, starts by explicitly including attributes of the social environment (including historical and social forces) as well as social opportunity structures (e.g., institutions, communities). In addition, the framework includes multiple units of analysis from historical time and place to more immediate relationships, such as family interactions. In particular, large or rapid changes are thought to have significant consequences on human behavior and the life course. As a perspective emphasizing transitions and life trajectories, this framework also informs our understanding of the nature of the developmental process and the related social constraints. Ultimately, this perspective provides a key set of principles from which a person and a situation can be assessed. That is, attention to social context, timing, age, and relationships is key in understanding individual behavior.

Although the life course perspective is useful, it has clear limitations. It treats human life trajectories as the primary unit of analysis, leaving less room for understanding groups, neighborhoods, communities, and other social organizations, as well as the ways they combine to create opportunity structures. This framework is also relatively new and complex. Although there is an increasing body of research in support of many of the principles, few studies consider the various perspectives simultaneously; hence, the interrelationships among concepts derived from each principle are not well understood.

### **Extensions of Life Course Approaches**

A second reconceptualization of life course theory is outlined by Hunt (2005). Hunt argues that Elder (1995) does not adequately address so-called postmodern phenomena (e.g., significant transformations of the macrosocial context). This framework focuses on the impact of institutions and processes, including economic, technological, cultural, and political, on human behavior.

This interpretation of the life course reflects the changing postmodern world. Specifically, Hunt (2005) focuses on the impact of the increased life span, changes in age-associated transitions, globalization, technology, consumerism, and individualism.

Hunt (2005) argues that a lengthening life span provides individuals with increased capacity to predict and calculate risks as well as to plan accordingly. This ability to predict future events allows us, in some ways, to control parts of our environment. In addition, these macrosocial changes impact the way people develop and behave. As life expectancy approaches life span potential, human beings begin to deny aging and believe in timelessness. This pursuit of youth and pleasure shapes human behavior. Further, Hunt challenges the notion that, in this context, human



development takes place in age-defined stages. He discusses changes in the meaning of marriage, family, and old age. In preindustrial societies, people of the same age behaved the same way and experienced things at the same time. This became less true in industrial societies and is even less true in the postmodern age. Though he acknowledges the role of biology in maintaining particular transitions in the life span, he argues that sociological constructs define the phases in the life course. Further, our perception of biology and its psychological implications are impacted by societal views.

Moreover, Hunt (2005) sees globalization as a key force. As global culture develops, systemic social ties are fundamentally altered. In short, this redefinition of society through the global marketplace influences local culture, which influences the social construction of the life course. Norms that were part of one culture may now transcend into this global culture. As a result, changes in one area bring about changes elsewhere. In no other time have global connections been available. Life course norms, which previously developed in each culture, are now part of this global culture. One of the reasons for these emergent global trends is major technological advances that have been made in recent years. Communication has grown tremendously, and technology has made it possible. Further, advances in medicine and science are, in part, responsible for the growing life span. Accompanying these technological changes is the ability to change our environment in ways that were never possible previously. All of these changes affect human behavior in a way that is unique in the current context. Last, consumerism affects the life course. Hunt argues that our new consumerism and cultural notions of choice strongly affect development. Individuals now enter life stages based on choice rather than inevitability. Stages such as marriage and parenthood have become optional. With these changes, individual development includes a new search for self-identity. Societies no longer define our identity or provide moral guidelines. Individualism also becomes increasingly important in this context. People have fewer ties to social contracts and roles. In short, Hunt argues that each of these aspects of postmodernity has changed the life course dramatically.

As we conceptualize HB&SE, we must consider the influence of these rapid cultural changes in terms of both social structures and individual behavior and development. In short, this work extends Elder's (1995) conceptualization of the life course and encourages the consideration of postmodernity as more than a cohort effect.

### **Life Course Approach: An Application**

At least three attributes of Elder's (1995) theory present challenges for translation. First, life course theory is quite complex, requiring the integration of variable individual developmental trajectories with larger structural forces. Indeed, Hutchison (2003) suggests that the complexity of Elder's framework may interfere with its practical application. Second, predicting the direction of any individual life course trajectory is clearly not an

exact science. Patterns within and across individuals generally can be discerned retrospectively, generally through longitudinal methods. Finally, key concepts in Elder's framework are quite broad and need elaboration.

Acknowledging the diversity of individual trajectories and their complex interplay with larger social forces, we employ three general strategies. First, for each life phase, we focus on a single, highly salient life course principle. Second, we identify a set of plausible sources of turning points and of structural constraints. Third, we highlight areas in which current explanatory theories presented in this volume may be particularly applicable (see Table 1.3).

### **Highlighting Historical Time and Place: Mid- and Late Adulthood**

Few would argue that dramatic growth in the aging population, its implications for the economy and the workforce, and its implications for aging policy and practice (Administration on Aging, 2002) represent a key social transformation. Moreover, gerontologists argue that this demographic change will dramatically alter public perceptions and attitudes toward those over 65 and will also dramatically alter service provision to this population. In other words, what is unique about contemporary mid- to late adulthood is that adults are moving into and through this developmental phase at the same time that there are significant demographic shifts. From the life course perspective, these demographic shifts represent a unique historical and situational context that is likely to have marked impacts on the current aging population and uniquely affect their subsequent trajectories relative to past and future cohorts.

These demographic shifts shape the current opportunity structures available to mid- and later adulthood. These generally include the formal Social Security system and social services that may be available to the elderly. Newman (2003) documents how the current formal arrangement of services for aging adults is largely mismatched to the needs of poor and minority aging subpopulations, especially in terms of the provision of health services. Of increasing relevance are existent workforce and workplace structures that may shape the timing of retirement decisions and responsiveness to older employees in the workforce. In addition, a vast majority of elderly living in the community receives key supports from relatives. The nature and quality of family caregiving support structures, as well as additional formal and informal supports to caregivers, represent an interesting set of ties between mid- and late adulthood.

Given this current social context, the period between mid- and late adulthood is associated with a unique set of physiological, biological, psychological, and social transitions. Between mid- and late adulthood there is a general move from peak physical and intellectual functioning to normative decrements in select domains of physiological functioning. For some subpopulations, aging is associated with increasing risk of particular health problems (Newman, 2003). There are also changes in memory and changes in overall rates of encoding and processing of

**Table 1.3 Summary of Life Course Concepts and Application to Developmental Stages**

Principle	Late Life	Midlife	Early Adulthood	Adolescence	School Age	Early Childhood
Time and place	Changing demographics of elderly population; Social Security resources	Women in the middle Entrance of women in the labor force Family-centered policies	Emergent adulthood; few supports when evidence of need for increased mentorship	Emergent adulthood; few supports when evidence of need for increased mentorship	Structure and quality of schooling Child and family supports	Valuation of infants Parent-friendly policies Moms and work
Linked lives	Key others (spouses, children) Caregiving relationships	Familial relationships/ parenting functions	Peer and romantic relationships	Peers, parents, teachers	Parents, teachers, peers	Caregivers
Agency and opportunities	Generative functions Differential access to resources that facilitate healthy aging (structure of work, health system)	Family- and work-related efficacies Structure of work and family supports	Cognitive skills Access to work and educational opportunity	Cognitive capacities Quality of peer, school, neighborhood contexts	Individual abilities valued by schools Parenting environments Classroom environments	Sensitivity and structure of caregiving environment
Timing and transitions	Physical: Cognitive and physical aging Social: Retirement, grandparenting, widowhood	Physical: Menopause Social: Sequencing of work and family time clocks	Physical: Identity consolidation, formal cognitive functioning Social: Leaving home, family formation	Physical: Puberty and key cognitive transitions	Physical: Cognitive change (perspective taking) Social: transition to school	Physical: Rapid physical, cognitive, social growth

information. Aside from this set of physical transitions, key social transitions (generally signaling changes in role) include retirement, widowhood, grandparenthood, and, for some, transitions into caregiving and recipient roles. Aside from these normative transitions associated with aging, Elder's (1995) theory underscores the importance of personal agency in development. Among adults, key agency-related variables include planful competence and efficacy, coping skills, and financial resources (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998).

Three sets of relationships are relevant to life trajectories at this phase. These include relationships with significant others and relationships with children. Social networks at mid- and later life are populated by family members and a few close friends. Empirical research in the life course tradition generally focuses on the relationship between supportive marital relationships and health and mental health. In other words, the nature and quality of significant relationships represent key developmentally related processes at this time period.

In summary, the application of Elder's (1995) life course perspective to mid- and later adult life features the occurrence (or nonoccurrence), timing, and specific overlap of key social transitions in the current social context of demographic change. It predicts, for example, that simultaneously experiencing retirement, the death of a spouse, and decrements in intellectual functioning will generally place a person at risk for worse outcomes. In addition, it highlights the historical time effects that will likely have salient influence on work (and retirement) trajectories and opportunities (e.g., structure and availability of services) that facilitate healthy aging.

The life course perspective also directs us to two central explanatory theoretical systems. Given work- and family-related social transitions that mark mid- to late life, role theory represents a key explanatory framework for this life stage. Psychosocial theory covers integrity and generative meaning-making strategies that are hypothesized to be particularly salient during this period (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993). In short, generative meaning-making processes and coping strategies suggest two potential domains from which to approach human behavior processes past midlife.

### **Adolescence and Early Adulthood: Timing, Agency, and Opportunity**

The period of adolescence and early adulthood is distinguished by the intersection of both developmental and social transitions. Aside from changes related to puberty, which is unique to early adolescence, two developmental processes unfold over this life phase. First, there is ongoing cognitive development between adolescence and early adulthood, marked by increasing capacity for foresight, contemplation, and abstract thinking. These changes in cognition form the basis of identity development processes. Adolescence and early adulthood represent a period when identity formation across multiple domains is under way.

As we move from adolescence into early adulthood, we enter and negotiate a series of key social transitions, from school to work, to independent living, to relationship formation (that is increasingly intimacy-based), and to parenthood.

In light of these developmental and social transitions, a key characteristic of early adulthood is that it offers unique opportunities to act as an independent person in increasingly widening, socially defined contexts outside of families. Besharov (1999) identifies differential access to work and educational opportunities by race and class as key opportunity constraints during this time. For adolescents in particular, current research indicates that peer networks (prosociality, academic orientation), junior high and high schools (safety, opportunities for challenge and support), and neighborhood contexts act as salient constraints on optimal adolescent functioning (Eccles & Roeser, 1999).

Finally, developmental theorists argue that young adults currently are experiencing a protraction in the transition to traditional adult roles (Arnett, 2000). In short, timing and sequencing of key transition-to-adulthood markers (from school to work, to independent living, to parenthood) are in flux and generally are taking place over longer periods of time. It is notable that the current historical context is unique in that key socialization units, notably schools, are peer segregated, offering few opportunities for meaningful interactions between adolescents and nonrelated adults. In addition, although there appears to be a greater need for mentorship, few formal structural arrangements are available in this respect.

In summary, adolescence and early adulthood provide important examples of the intersection between the development of individual capacity (in terms of cognitive development, increased independence, and individual identity formation processes) and situational constraints around key social structures, including the structure of the secondary and post-secondary education system and the structure of the workforce. Cognitive theory, psychosocial theory, and role theory are salient explanatory systems at this life stage.

### **Linked Lives: Infants and Young Children**

Given that infancy and early childhood are marked by rapid physical, cognitive, and social growth, the concept of linked lives is perhaps most saliently represented in this period. Parents and key caregivers represent key developmental contexts for infant and young children. Moreover, the sensitivity, structure, and responsiveness of the caregiving environments represent the key social opportunity structure for young children. Environmental forces are almost completely mediated by the qualities of caregiving and caregiver–child relationships (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Of particular relevance to school-age children, the quality of relationships with teachers and peers can generally enhance and optimize the academic and psychosocial trajectories of children. It is notable, however, that the quality

of parenting environments generally sets the stage for these relationships (Deater-Decker, 2001).

Behavioral, genetic, attachment, and social learning paradigms provide important explanatory theoretical lenses through which to understand the nature and qualities of these relationships. In short, they specify the key mechanisms by which the principle of linked lives operates by explicating the conditions under which caregiver-child relationships develop and are maintained.

### **Cultural Understanding of Human Development**

Rogoff's (2003) theoretical work is based on the premise that human development is a cultural process. Human behavior, though inherently tied to biological processes, is also bound by culture. Culture is constantly redefined in each place and time, which impacts the individual's particular experience. Individual behavior, in turn, impacts cultural processes in a reciprocal relationship. This framework suggests that human development takes place in a particular culture and that development can be understood only by understanding cultural context.

Although her work is influenced by Vygotsky (1962) and Bronfenbrenner (1979), Rogoff (2003) argues that these theorists treated person and context separately, as separate entities or as one producing the other. She describes the reciprocal relationship between culture and development, explaining that they "mutually create" (p. 37) and "mutually constitute" (p. 51) each other. Human development is the process of people's continued and changing participation in sociocultural activities. As individuals develop through this participation, culture is simultaneously developed as a result.

Rogoff (2003) defines several key concepts for understanding cultural processes and argues that the study of human development is an explicit cross-cultural endeavor. Further, it is important to be aware that culture is not constant; cultures continue to change, as do individuals. Rogoff acknowledges the importance of life transitions tied to both biology and chronological age. However, she believes that the transitions themselves are influenced by culture. Though age defines certain transitions, developmental milestones are culturally defined.

Current explanatory theories of human behavior can be enhanced by such concepts as cultural processes and cultural tools, as well as people's involvement in cultural traditions, institutions, family life, and community practices. These concepts can also inform the client assessment process. In short, the cultural processes and their evolution represent another important approach for understanding the nature of relationships between persons and their environments.

### **Opportunity Framework**

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) argue that traditional approaches to understanding delinquency relied too heavily on individual behavior and

delinquent acts. Rather, cultural norms, beliefs, and values promote a set of behaviors that allows delinquency to take place. Extending the work of Durkheim (1997) and Merton (1968), they argue that discrepancies between aspirations and opportunity are in part responsible for leading youth to delinquency. These works discuss the ways in which different opportunity structures, particularly as they relate to institutions, contribute to delinquency.

Because this earlier work could not explain why youth lacking in opportunity choose delinquency rather than other outlets (e.g., alcoholism, suicide), Cloward and Ohlin (1960) include additional concepts related to adverse circumstance (including lack of opportunity), problems of adjustment, and social conformity and norms. Youth have aspirations that go beyond what is readily available given their current circumstances. This causes major problems in adjustment, since frustration results as they are unable to achieve conventional goals. This leads to the formation of delinquent subcultures and other nonconformity. As these subcultures evolve, they create new norms that further influence these youth toward maladaptive behavior.

By theorizing on the reasons for delinquency, Cloward and Ohlin (1960) provide an additional framework for understanding person–environment relationships. Their theory suggests the importance of the relationship between the larger social context, the specific subculture, and the individual’s adjustment in this environment. Cloward and Ohlin focus on structural rather than individual forces that create disparities in opportunities.

### **Social Capital Theory**

The concept of social capital represents resources deriving from connections among individuals (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The social environment is thought to exert influences on human behavior and development through the nature and qualities of these social resources.

Loury (1977) argued that the income disparities between White and Black youth were in part related to their social context. He believed social origin and social position were related to the resources invested in an individual’s development. Bourdieu (1985) expanded the definition of social capital to include networks of institutions and group memberships that provide individuals access to resources. Coleman’s (1988) definition of social capital relies on the relationships between and among people. He identifies six forms of social capital: (1) obligations and expectations, (2) information, (3) shared norms leading to prosocial behavior, (4) transfers of power to a group member, (5) use of organizations for purposes other than or in addition to what they were originally intended for, and (6) intentional organizations created for the purpose of social capital. In these multiple forms, social capital benefits individual, groups, and the collective good. Putnam (2000), who popularized the notion of social capital, refers to social capital as the connections among individuals. These connections are further

defined as social networks, trust, and reciprocity. Putnam also links social capital to civic participation and believes that civic virtue becomes more powerful when it is part of a network of reciprocal social relationships. He sees two types of social capital: (1) that which comes from within-group relationships (i.e., bonding social capital), and (2) that which comes from between-group relationships (i.e., bridging social capital).

These varied definitions and explanations of social capital all suggest that persons and environments intersect through social ties. In this way, social capital is an important framework that bridges concepts of human behavior and the social environment. However, it is limited in its application to understanding human behavior and development. Social capital theory also fails to take into account larger dimensions of the social environment that impact its utility in a particular community. As suggested by Foley and Edwards (1999), most conceptualizations of social capital theory neglect to consider power-related contextual factors, including the availability of economic power, political power, and concrete resources.

### Neighborhood Effects

The literature on neighborhood effects outlines the social processes by which communities and individuals interact. Early research into neighborhood effects indicated that neighborhood structures and processes (norms, competition, and socialization) influence individual behaviors (Jencks & Mayer, 1990). Taken as a whole, *epidemic*, *collective socialization*, and *institutional* models suggested that the negative neighborhood effects operated through several mechanisms: peer influences on behavior, the effect of community adults on children, and the influence of neighborhood institutions, respectively. Reviewing past studies on neighborhood and school socioeconomic status and racial mix, Jencks and Mayer (1990) reported neighborhood effects related to educational attainment, cognitive skills, crime, teenage sexual behavior, and employment.

Research reviewed by Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002) highlights the importance of dynamic processes and institutional mechanisms in neighborhood settings. In their review, they noted four different neighborhood processes that influence individual well-being. The first, *neighborhood ties*, relates to social capital. This construct highlights the importance of neighborhood interactions and social relationships. The second construct, *norms and collective efficacy*, refers to the trust and expectations shared by neighborhood residents. Collective efficacy relates to the willingness to get involved for the collective good, social control, and cohesion. The third effect, *mutual resources*, refers to the availability of resources that address community needs. The presence, quality, and diversity of institutions facilitate a neighborhood's ability to support its members. The fourth neighborhood effect, *routine activities*, refers to how the patterns of land use and locations of community institutions affect daily routines. Each of these contributes to the way neighborhoods influence the individual behavior and outcomes of their members. Though these process



effects are evident, structural neighborhood characteristics are still salient in determining outcomes.

Concepts related to neighborhood effects help us understand the different mechanisms through which neighborhoods and communities influence behavior. Importantly, this model pays little attention to individual variation within a specific neighborhood context.

### **Institutional Theory**

Institutional theory emphasizes the role of societal context in understanding individual and organizational behavior (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). This approach looks to institutions in the environment as the primary source of organizing principles or logics that govern human behavior, which is often nested within organizations (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Scott & Davis, 2006). From this perspective, institutions are not physical places or even organizations, as the term is commonly employed in everyday language. Instead, the concept of institutions references *social and cultural* structures—norms and relationships that are resilient, durable and resistant to change, such as the institution of marriage (Scott, 2001). Over time, as both process and outcome, institutions “come to take on a rule-like status in social thought” through repeated interpersonal interactions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341). Institutions from the environment are then carried into organizations and affect human behavior through “symbolic systems, relational systems, routines and artifacts” (Scott, 2001, p. 76). Thus, institutional theory shifts attention away from formal goals and structures within singular organizations to the prevailing institutions and related logics in the larger social environment that shape individual relationships and organizational practices. This approach emphasizes that the organization and delivery of social services, for example, are not necessarily rational, adaptive or efficient, but are socially constructed and historically situated (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Therefore, one must consider how ideas about appropriate social work services for particular populations are linked to shifting institutions and institutional logics in the environment (Scott, 2001).

Scott (2001) provides a useful framework for conceptualizing institutions as being supported by three pillars: regulative, normative, and cultural cognitive. The three pillars are symbolic, but they interact with material conditions and human activities to give rise to institutions (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Scott, 2001). Regulative aspects of institutions include rules and laws, enforcement and monitoring systems, and associated rewards and sanctions that explicitly delineate the way things *must* be done (Scott, 2001). They induce organizational and individual behavior using coercive mechanisms of authority, force, fear and shame, and their influence can be observed in governance systems, protocols and required reports to demonstrate compliance (Scott, 2001). In contrast, the normative pillar encompasses values and norms regarding the way things *should* be done, shaping expectations and considerations for suitable behavior for actors in

particular roles and circumstances (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 2001). Finally, the cultural cognitive element refers to the way things *are* done; shared understandings, meanings and ways of seeing that are unconscious and taken for granted until they are transgressed (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 2001).

A central function of institutions is creating the symbolic conditions of legitimacy, under which some means and ends are considered appropriate and desirable, while others are rendered invisible or illicit (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001). In this way, institutions “control and constrain” certain activities, as they also “support and empower” other types of actions, shaping common understandings of what objectives, roles, and behaviors are legitimate (Scott, 2001, p. 50). Taken-for-granted notions of legitimate activities serve to render inequality natural or justified, preserving privilege and maintaining myths of equality of opportunity, thereby contributing to the reproduction of the social order (Bourdieu, 1977). Still, notions of legitimate activities are often contested across organizations; particularly when agencies are responsible to multiple stakeholders who have different values, goals or norms (Colyvas & Powell, 2006; Scott, 2001).

Institutional logics serve as the primary mechanisms by which institutions influence individual and organizational action, providing a bridge between macro and micro processes (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). They are historically situated, socially constructed “belief systems and associated practices . . . that provide the organizing principles” guiding and governing human activity, enabling certain kinds of action and not others (Scott, Ruef, Mendel, & Caronna, 2000, p. 171). Institutional logics are not personal beliefs, but they do inform the taken-for-granted notions of individuals. They are collective ideas and frameworks that emerge from the societal sectors in specific historical periods, available to individuals to elaborate on, often enacted and further developed in organizational fields (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Here, the term organizational field refers to a network “of interdependent organizations operating with common rules, norms, and meaning systems,” usually with shared governance and financing structures (Scott & Davis, 2006, p. 118). For example, the logic of program improvement through accountability and assessment of client outcomes has played out in the fields of public education, health services, and social welfare (Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002; Holmes, Murray, Perron, & Rail, 2006). Institutional logics shape cognition through socially constructed classification systems that give meaning to existing categories of people and their actions (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Institutional logics also direct the attention of individuals and organizations by providing them “with a set of rules and conventions—for deciding which problems get attended to, which solutions get considered and which solutions are get linked to which situations” (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 114).

Institutional theory is a useful framework for understanding human behavior in the social environment, as it specifies mechanisms by which the macro environment shapes both organizational (*mezzo*) and individual

(micro) actions. In particular, it asks that social workers not only consider client behavior and needs in the context of their environment, but also how social work practice and social welfare organizations are influenced by larger societal discourses and norms. However, a common critique of institutional theory is that it tends to overshadow the role of individual agency in creating and mediating social structures, emphasizing top-down (macro to micro), rather than bottom-up processes of change (Burch, 2007). That is to say, the theory tends to be overly mechanical in its view of how social structures are reproduced, with insufficient attention paid to the ways people resist and mobilize against dominant institutions. This concern is tempered by a growing recognition of institutions as probabilistic, rather than deterministic—that they can be reinterpreted in unexpected ways and manipulated by individuals and groups to serve their own interests (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Contradictions and competition between dominant and secondary institutional logics are particularly important sources of change over time, as they are openings for actors to have greater impact on prevailing paradigms (Scott et al., 2000; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

Such an understanding of institutions reflects the assumption of embedded agency—that personal motivations, aspirations and values are never fully autonomous or discrete from social context—embraced by institutional theory in recent years (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). From this perspective, theories emphasizing agency and subjectivity are seen as complementary to, rather than in contradiction with, institutional theory. Institutional theorists do not deny the possibility of individual mobility across social strata, or the power for collective movements to redress historical injustices, but they do highlight the way inequalities are reproduced by organizations and institutions, like schools, despite good intentions and actions on the part of individual agents, such as teachers (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In general, institutional theory accentuates how personal agency is constrained by the historical distribution of resources and capital within a society and the influences of social structures on individual experiences. Given this focus, institutional theorists pay less attention to the ways in which institutions are actively, in present time, produced or modified by people. In no small way, this is a response to the dominance of micro, behavioral, and individually oriented theories that have long dominated the social sciences and social work practice (Bourdieu, 1977).

In conclusion, these explanatory frameworks shed light on alternative ways in which connections between persons and their environments can be conceptualized. Life course perspectives draw attention to the intersection between current historical context, available opportunity structures, and individual agency in patterning life trajectories. The opportunity framework emphasizes the relative match between individual characteristics and aspirations and the current array of opportunity structures. Cultural psychological perspectives involve the local cultural processes needed to understand reciprocity. Both social capital and neighborhood effects frameworks underscore the importance of social relationships for understanding

person-environment interaction. Despite these various conceptualizations of reciprocity, each of these frameworks underscores the importance of social relationships (e.g., family, cultural, social, and community networks). Finally, institutional theory reminds us that persons inherently create and are constrained by social processes. However, a key limitation across all the frameworks is the insufficient attention to developmental processes. In addition, questions can be raised about the capacities of these theories to inform practice.

### **The Social Environment: Key Concepts**

Although the previous applications focused on frameworks that potentially can link human behavior and the social environment, this section focuses on conceptualization of the social environment. This approach to the social environment differs from the previous applications in that it does not rely on one specific macro linking theory. Instead, it uses the perspective of systems theory to isolate key concepts that emerge from three bodies of social science theory: group dynamics, community theory, and organizational theory.

These systems theory perspectives include such universal concepts as interactions (e.g., within and between groups), subsystems that are parts of a system (e.g., voluntary and governmental organizations), and functions and patterns (e.g., production and consumption, socialization, social control, social participation, and mutual support in communities). This approach to the social environment reflects very little overlap with the human behavior content. Some exceptions include the concept of stages of development (e.g., life span of a group, organization, or community), leadership behaviors, communications, and conflict. This situation is not ideal but needs more dialogue and instructional planning to foster integration and the identification of key concepts in multiple contexts.

In addition, a systems perspective reflects a strong orientation to the value of theory for practice, especially focusing on concepts relevant for conducting trifocal assessments at the group, organizational, and community level. This trifocal perspective is needed to understand the social environment that impacts clients, staff members, and volunteers (both governing and service delivery). The core concepts that are described in this section are placed in the context of a local community as a way to describe the social environment.

A set of concepts provides a framework for understanding the social environment at the local level (Mulroy & Austin, 2004). Because social policies are often implemented at the local level through city or county government as well as by nonprofit and for-profit provider organizations, it is important to be able to assess this community of organizations. Their interorganizational network may reflect an array of integrated and/or fragmented service delivery relationships. These relationships include contracted services with shared responsibilities for financing and client

services, co-located services with shared responsibility for maintaining access to client services, and integrated services with shared responsibility for promoting the availability of client services (e.g., one-stop shopping). All of these relationships call upon an understanding of the local perspective of the social environment, namely, the nature of community at the neighborhood level, the nature of community-based human service organizations, and the dynamics of group behavior that underlie citizen involvement in neighborhoods as well as staff involvement inside and outside human service organizations.

### **Structure and Process**

The two most all-encompassing concepts needed to understand communities, groups, and organizations at the local or neighborhood level are *structure* and *process*. Structure refers, in this context, to the arrangement and mutual relationship of the constituent parts to the whole (Brown, 1993). Process is defined, for this discussion, as a continuous series of actions, events, or changes that are directed toward some end and/or performed in a specific manner (Brown, 1993). In essence, how are community neighborhoods and organizations structured? How do groups of citizens and staff behave among themselves and with each other? These are critical questions for understanding the social environment of community neighborhoods and organizations that seek to meet the needs of their residents or clients. These community organizations can include public schools, neighborhood service centers, places of worship, child-care agencies, senior centers, group homes, women's shelters, and neighborhood health clinics.

### ***Community Neighborhoods***

The structure of a neighborhood includes both formal and informal organizations and associations. These may be an informal network of local clergy, an association of neighborhood merchants, a neighborhood after-school program, or a neighborhood substation for the police and fire department. These are all part of the formal and informal structure of a neighborhood community. The concept of structure can be used to identify and assess the processes that underlie a neighborhood's horizontal and vertical relationships (Warren, 1963). For example, the horizontal dimension of process dynamics might include regular neighborhood meetings between the clergy, police, school principals, and service center director. The vertical dimension could include the maintenance of relationships between the neighborhood and the larger community (e.g., city, county, or region). Examples of the vertical dimension are organizational relationships with the county social service and public health departments, school districts, nonprofit organizations serving the region, and city police and fire departments. These horizontal and vertical relationships provide another perspective on the vitality of a neighborhood community.

One of the process concepts applicable to a neighborhood community involves community competence (Fellin, 2001, p. 70), that is, the capacity of the neighborhood residents and service providers to engage in a process of identifying community needs, coordinating services, and/or facilitating problem solving related to community concerns or resolving conflicts.

### ***Community-Based Organizations***

Just as for neighborhood communities, the concepts of structure and process can also inform our understanding of organizations. For example, all human service organizations have a service mission or purpose. Within such a mission, they can be characterized as primarily people processing, people sustaining, or people changing (Hasenfeld, 1983, p. 5). *People-processing* organizations are structured to make sure that those who are eligible for benefits (e.g., food stamps, immunizations) are processed in an effective and efficient manner. *People-sustaining* organizations are designed to provide a level of care that is high enough to help individuals and/or families attain self-sufficiency (e.g., group homes, service centers). *People-changing* organizations are structured in a way to provide services that help individuals grow and thrive in their community (e.g., schools, mental health and substance abuse services).

In addition to the structure of the organization influencing its internal processes, organizations must also contend with their external environment. Examples of the environment that have direct bearing on their neighborhood location are accessible bus routes and well-established referral relationships with related organizations. The task environment of an agency can be defined in terms of community involvement (client advisory committees and agency boards of directors), sources of funding (city or county government, United Way), and political support (elected officials, opinion leaders, and philanthropic funds).

### ***Groups in Communities and Organizations***

In addition to their impact on the community and organizational dimensions of the social environment, the concepts of structure and process have relevance for understanding groups that operate within the social environment. How are neighborhood groups organized (by blocks or shared concerns)? What are the patterns of communications between neighborhood groups and within groups? Similarly, group process concepts focus on the array of systems and behaviors demonstrated by group members (Patton & Downs, 2003). How are leaders identified? How invested are members in their neighborhood groups? Are the behaviors of group members focused primarily on neighborhood improvement projects or on advocacy efforts focused on city hall?

These same group structure and process concepts can be applied to a neighborhood organization, whether it is the staff of an agency or its board members. How are staff members organized (organization chart, labor-management agreement)? How is the board structured (15 members meeting frequently versus 60 members meeting infrequently, or active use

of standing versus ad hoc committees)? In addition to the structural dimensions, it is important to note the process or group dynamics dimensions. What role do staff members play in organizational decision making? Are there regularly scheduled staff meetings? Who leads them? What is the nature of interdisciplinary collaboration (e.g., neighborhood health clinic staffed by many disciplines)? What is the nature of teamwork and problem solving between staff representatives and neighborhood client advisory groups? All these questions illustrate the centrality of understanding group processes inside and outside a human service organization.

As noted in Table 1.3, the concepts of structure and process are primary elements in fostering an understanding of the social environment that includes neighborhood communities, organizations, and groups. These key concepts are also connected to a set of related concepts that elaborate or drill down deeper to understand the complexity of structure and process. For example, central to the concept of structure and process are the concepts of *development*, *exchange*, and *diversity* (see Figure 1.1). Each of

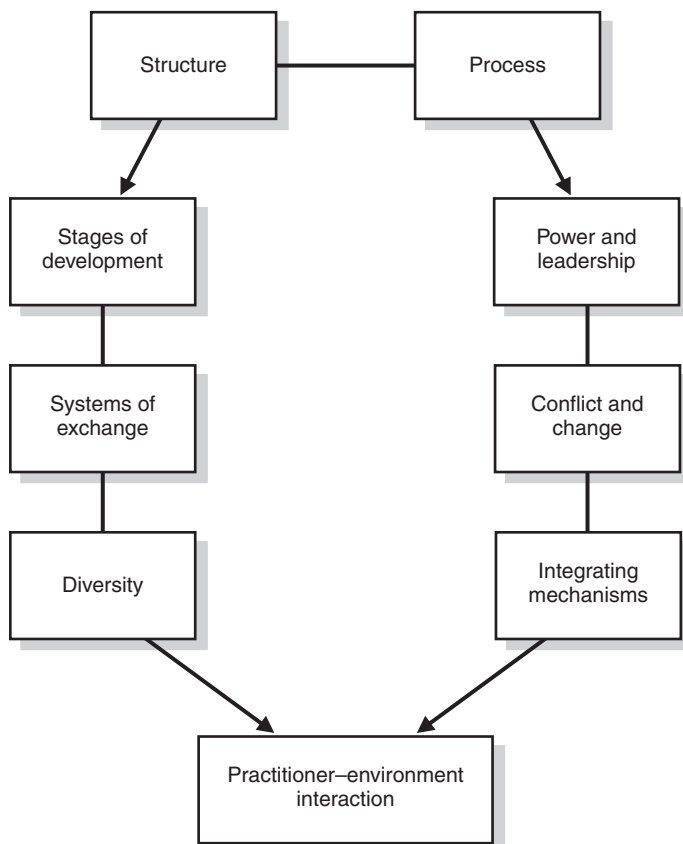


Figure 1.1

The concepts of structure and process in understanding the microsystems of the social environment.

Note. From "Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Understanding the Social Environment: In Search of Theory for Practice," by E. Mulroy and M. Austin, 2004, *Journal of Human Behavior and the Social Environment*, 10(3), pp. 25–59. Copyright 2004 by Haworth Press.

these concepts is described in the next section and illustrated in terms of a group, a community, or an organization.

### Elements of Structure

#### *Stages of Development*

The term “stages of development” refers to the location of the community, group, and organization along a continuum of time and evolution. Such a continuum is important for understanding the social environment of a community in terms of its stability over time or its changing nature (improving or declining). The same stage of development continuum applies to neighborhood organizations, whether they are new and still finding their way in terms of mission and goals or old and established. The history of an organization is important for understanding its present realities and future opportunities.

The development continuum can be seen most vividly in the evolution of a group (e.g., a citizen’s neighborhood crime watch group or an agency staff group working together to develop a funding proposal for a new service). For any group, the beginning or *forming* stage involves clarifying common interests and roles to be played (Tuchman & Jensen, 1977). The *storming* stage may involve the evolution of problem-solving processes (e.g., multiple short meetings versus fewer long meetings). The *norming* stage usually involves the clarification and codification of some rules or guidelines for future behavior (e.g., establishing an agenda, taking minutes, determining voting procedures). The *performing* stage involves the allocation, implementation, and evaluation of different group-identified tasks to be completed. Finally, the *adjourning* stage can include the celebration of project completion or the designation of further work to be done by another group.

#### *Systems of Exchange*

Systems of exchange are structures designed to foster mutual support in a social environment that recognizes the central role of self-interest. In essence, collaborators on a particular issue want to know “What’s in it for me?” In this context, self-interest is a neutral term (in contrast to some of the negative connotations associated with being self-centered) that seeks to capture the nature of exchange in all human interaction (e.g., I give you money in exchange for services). Systems of exchange involve an arrangement of reciprocal giving and receiving.

When applying the concept “systems of exchange” to understanding the social environment of neighborhood communities, several dimensions emerge in relationship to community building. According to Weil (1996, p. 482), community building involves the development of structures that include “activities, practices, and policies that support and foster positive connections among individuals, groups, organizations, neighborhoods, and geographic and functional communities.” In essence, community



building involves systems of exchange. For example, engaging members of the community to invest in the improvement of their own neighborhood includes the implicit question “What’s in it for me?” The structure might be a neighborhood advisory committee, and the exchange might be the transaction of devoting time to attend or participate in meetings in exchange for a cleaner or safer neighborhood.

### ***Diversity***

The concept of diversity has come to acquire many different meanings. Understanding and responding to the diversity of clients when providing human services represents the most prevalent meaning, but there are other meanings with respect to communities, groups, and organizations. When focusing on the neighborhood, diversity can be reflected in the different socioeconomic statuses of the residents (e.g., a blue-collar neighborhood). Diversity can also be seen in the demography of residents who are retired, single, and have young families, as well as the race and ethnicity of a diverse or homogeneous neighborhood. The extent to which neighborhoods are segregated or integrated represents another aspect of communal diversity (Fellin, 2001, p. 152).

Diversity in human service organizations can be viewed from at least three perspectives: the clients served, the staff employed, and the composition of the board of directors. The diversity of client problems or needs requires organizations to develop ways of classifying clients to provide them with the services that meet their needs. In contrast to client diversity, the diversity of staff can be understood, in part, by the organization’s commitment to affirmative action (e.g., promoting racial and ethnic diversity) and/or staff development (e.g., promoting career advancement). Clearly, the diversity of staff competence and experience affect career advancement. Other issues of diversity can be seen in the composition of the organization’s board of directors with respect to age, sex, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

This discussion of diversity completes the description of the concepts related to structure in Table 1.3. The next section focuses on the process concepts of leadership and power, conflict and change, and integration.

### **Elements of Process**

#### ***Power and Leadership***

The concepts of power and leadership are complex and can be defined in many different ways. When thinking about both concepts at the neighborhood level, the roles of political and economic power come to mind. Political power may be reflected in the capacity of the neighborhood residents to promote neighborhood improvement (e.g., through the power of a local church) or lobby city hall for changes in the zoning ordinance to promote economic development and job growth in the neighborhood. In contrast, neighborhood leadership might be reflected in the cosmopolitan

or local behaviors of neighborhood leaders (Warren, 1963). *Cosmopolitans* are those who have developed networks of relationships beyond the neighborhood with elected officials, business leaders, or leaders of nonprofit organizations. *Locals* are those who have spent most of their time cultivating relationships and coordinating local projects with less emphasis on those outside the neighborhood. Understanding these leadership styles can help explain the use of power at the neighborhood level.

In the context of groups, power can be displayed in terms of expertise, position, and access to rewards and related networks (French & Raven, 1960). Power may be displayed through the concepts of task and process, namely, the ability to help the group stay on task and/or use debriefing sessions to reflect on the dynamics of the group's process. The leadership capacities of group members are essential ingredients for understanding the behaviors of a group. Those group members who practice leadership behaviors are also able to demonstrate followership behaviors (Fiedler, 1967).

### ***Conflict and Change***

The concepts of conflict and change are also interconnected. At the neighborhood level, conflicts between renters and landlords can be a source of great tension until there is a change (e.g., housing repairs, rent adjustments). Positive and negative conflicts are important components of the social environment (Coser, 1956). Positive conflict relates to issues that help bind the community together, either in opposition to an external force or as a source for engaging in a dialogue over differences (e.g., mediating property disputes). Negative conflict relates to issues that create such polarization that resolution requires considerable time and energy to resolve.

Conflict and change in most organizations are facts of life. In essence, organizations are in a constant transition from maintaining stability (frequently accompanied by a resistance to change) to fostering improvement and change (Hasenfeld, 1983). Organizations have different capacities to manage change. This capacity is often impacted by the organization's environment (e.g., financial resources and public support). Organizational resistance to change can take many forms and needs to be understood as a critical element of the organization's internal and external environment.

### ***Integrating Mechanisms***

Integrating mechanisms can be viewed as networks of relationships that hold communities, groups, and organizations together or as institutionalized processes or procedures that can be used to monitor their health and well-being. In neighborhood communities, such networks include both formal and informal relationships that seek to foster the integration of the individual resident into the larger community. Tenant councils in housing complexes and neighborhood block watch groups serve as integrating mechanisms for a community. They can foster formal and informal

relationships over time, as do regular meetings among the clergy whose congregations are located in the same neighborhood.

The use of integrating mechanisms in a group can be seen in the use of feedback processes or debriefing sessions at the end of each meeting to gather the perceptions and concerns of the members. Other integrating mechanisms are brainstorming and problem-solving processes (Patton & Downs, 2003). These processes provide a venue to bring latent group issues to the surface and allow members to voice their concerns through a mechanism adopted by the group. In essence, the integrating mechanisms of the group provide individuals with opportunities to engage in sharing and problem solving.

This discussion of process concepts provides a foundation, along with the previous discussion of structure concepts, for integrating both of these dimensions of the social environment when focusing on the role of the practitioner.

### **Practitioner–Environment Interaction**

Different from the elaboration of the previous concepts related to the social environment, the interaction between practitioners and their environment represents a significantly overlooked dimension of the social environment. The focus here is on the degree to which a practitioner is able to conceptualize his or her role as an influential factor when engaging with neighbor residents, colleagues in a staff meeting, or the supervisor or supervisees in an organizational setting. The interaction is a two-way street whereby the community, group, and organization can also influence the behaviors of the practitioner.

The interaction represents a key element of self-reflective practice (Schon, 1984). The manager as a practitioner in a human service organization can have significant influence over how staff members are treated, issues resolved, funds allocated, and information processed. At the same time, staff members can significantly influence managerial behaviors with respect to the quality of the workplace environment, the management of conflict and change, and the representation of the organization in the larger community. An understanding of the history and customs of the organization can greatly influence a practitioner's effectiveness in working with the internal and external environment of the organizations (Austin, 1996).

The array of concepts relevant to understanding the social environment at the local level is infinite. As a result, choices need to be made. One approach to displaying those choices can be seen in Table 1.4, where the major constructs are identified on the left-hand side and the trifocal view of the local social environment is noted across the top with respect to communities, organizations, and groups. This is only one instructional approach to introducing students to the array of concepts relevant to understanding the social environment at the local level.

**Table 1.4 A Trifocal Perspective on Communities, Groups, and Organizations**

Major Constructs	Community Concepts	Group Concepts	Organizational Concepts
I. Structures and processes	Community competence Functional/geographic Horizontal/vertical	Communications Member orientation and behaviors	Types (processing, sustaining, changing) Political economy and related organizational theories
II. Stages of development	Urbanization and gentrification Population diversity/immigration	Forming, storming, norming, performing	Evolution of organizational goals and technology
III. Power and leadership	Economic power Political power Locals/cosmopolitans	Task/process orientation Leadership/followership group dynamics	Loosely coupled Sources of control Leadership styles
IV. Systems of exchange	Community building Voluntary organizations and associations Public sector organizations	Problem solving as exchange of views, expertise, resources	General/task environment Power dependence
V. Conflict and change	Positive/negative conflict Change capacity	Norms regarding managing tensions Superordinate goals	Stability/resistance Innovation capacity
VI. Diversity	Socioeconomic stratification Neighborhood integration and segregation	Diversity of members (race, gender, age, sexual orientation)	Client classification Client's organizational career
VII. Integrating mechanisms	Formal and informal networks Client reintegration	Feedback/debriefing Idea generating	Assessing performance Ongoing operations
VIII. Practitioner-environment interaction	Impact of community organizer/enabler on community and vice versa	Impact of group facilitator/leader on group and vice versa	Impact of organization's manager/leader on organization and vice versa

### Frameworks for Linking Knowledge to Practice

Although the previous frameworks provide different ways to conceptualize the interaction between HB&SE and the larger social environment, they constitute abstract theoretical concepts that are not easy to apply in everyday social work practice. One approach to utilizing these larger frameworks is to specify conceptual frameworks that operate closer to the realities of practice. The related concepts of risk and resilience and stress and coping cut across most fields of practice (e.g., child welfare, mental health, aging, and physical health). We briefly highlight them in this section.

#### Risk and Resilience

Fraser, Richman, and Galinsky (1999) define risk as the probability of a negative outcome given a set of individual and environmental circumstances. In short, risk factors may be conceptualized as causing, marking,

or correlating a particular negative outcome. Resilience refers to the process of successful adjustment given a particular risk or set of risk factors. Cumulative risk is currently considered to be a better predictor of outcomes than specific risk factors. Both types of risk (specific and cumulative) can lead to individual vulnerability, but they also can be mediated or moderated by other individual or environmental factors. Fraser et al. suggest that resilience can be conceptualized in three ways: occasional success (despite high levels of risk), continuous success (despite prolonged exposure to the risk), and recovery (e.g., from exposure to trauma). Notably, resilient behavior must be understood from the perspective of both individual and environmental characteristics.

### Stress and Coping

The concepts of stress and coping are empirical generalizations tied to practice with clients, especially in the fields of practice related to physical health and mental health. The concept of stress has varying definitions; one overarching definition “refers to that quality of experience, produced through a person–environment transaction, that through either over-arousal or under-arousal, results in psychological or physiological distress” (Aldwin, 1994, p. 22). Mason (1975) identified three causes of stress: (1) an internal state or strain, (2) an external event, or (3) an interaction between the person and environment that can lead to positive or negative responses. Internal stresses can be related to both physiological and emotional reactions. External stressors can include traumas, life events, environmental characteristics, hassles of daily life, or relationship issues. Considering stress as a manifestation of the interaction between person and environment draws attention to the fit or mismatch between individual capacities and the demands of a situation. In other words, the concept of stress is inherently “transactional” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The current conceptualization of stress and coping emerged out of earlier theoretical work in evolutionary theory and behavior adaptation, psychoanalytic concepts, life cycle theories, and case studies of how individuals manage life crises (Moos & Schaefer, 1993). Evolutionary theory proposes that organisms adapt to their environment in order to survive. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that individuals develop in order to promote personal growth. Life cycle theories promote the idea that individuals acquire skills and capacities to negotiate each stage of human development in order to move to the next stage of life. Behavioral adaptation to life crises involves the use of human competence and coping to deal with life transitions and crises. Each of these theories could contribute to a comprehensive framework of stress and coping that features the interactions among environmental systems, individual attributes, and the availability of resources. Life crises can then be interpreted by appraising the stress and coping responses that influence an individual’s health and well-being.

Coping strategies, beyond dealing with the daily challenges of life, involve actions for dealing with stressful situations that are rooted in historical and social contexts that create norms for dealing with stress. Coping also involves a learned behavior by which individuals can be taught the skills and mechanisms needed to effectively cope with stress. Resources for coping include a set of personal, attitudinal, and cognitive factors. These include demographic and personality factors, social context (including familial resources), and the interplay of personal and social factors (Moos & Schaefer, 1993). Coping processes can be thought of as both the focus of coping (the person's orientation to the stressor) and the method of coping (the cognitive or behavioral response).

Clearly, these concepts, by themselves, do not constitute explanatory frameworks. However, they provide one way of using the explanatory theories and frameworks covered in this volume to define potential sources of risk and resilience. There are multiple sources of developmental risk and stress and the mechanisms by which risk and stress lead to negative outcomes. There are also multiple sources of resilience and coping strategies. It is notable that both of these concepts indicate the importance of person-environment interactions. The complementary frameworks are suggestive of how particular person-environment interactions and attributes of the social environment may contribute to risk or stress and resilience or coping. As noted earlier, the larger frameworks identify specific social relationships and interactions, as well as environmental opportunity structures, as contexts for understanding risk and stress and resilience and coping.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted to identify the complexities of utilizing theories from the social and behavioral sciences, a set of conceptual frameworks that may aid in organizing knowledge particularly focused on the social environment side of HB&SE, an array of instructional applications, and a set of suggestions for reframing HB&SE. We noted that there are at least three tasks associated with the process of borrowing knowledge: selection, synthesis (and evaluation), and translation for social work professional use. Dialogue about these three very important and complex processes has received limited attention in the social work literature, especially as they apply to the knowledge base of HB&SE.

As social science and behavioral science knowledge develops over time, our profession will always grapple with how best to manage, organize, and use this information. Although it is unlikely that there will ever be a single metatheoretical framework that covers HB&SE (Turner, 1990), it is important to clarify how we intend to use this knowledge. Messick's (1983) distinction between person as context, person of context, and person in context may be a useful point of departure.

The central goal of this chapter is to offer several alternative frameworks for organizing, synthesizing, and translating knowledge. Three

themes cut across our discussion. The first is a need to utilize theoretical accounts that address both human behavior and the social environment, particularly as they aid our understanding of the nature of the interaction between the two. The second is a need to specify key levels of analysis and concepts related to the larger social environment. The third is for a set of concepts that aid in the translation of theory into practice.

If we truly strive to understand the nature of the varying relationships between persons and their environments, there remains considerable conceptual work to be done. We hope that social work scholars continue to not only pose frameworks that help us understand HB&SE, but also offer frameworks for integration (Greenfield, 2011). We are also aware that consideration of multiple levels of analysis complicates the process of describing how theory can inform practice. We attempted to grapple with these translation issues in two ways: (1) by presenting concepts (risk and resilience, stress and coping) that may link complex theoretical accounts back to practice, and (2) through application of the life course perspective to both the life cycle as well as relevant explanatory theory discussed in this volume. The frameworks we presented are clearly not exhaustive. We hope that they aid development of our HB&SE knowledge base by encouraging more discussion about these complexities. We ultimately conclude that the agenda for further dialogue is substantial and needs to be explored annually through special interest groups and faculty development institutes at social work professional conferences, in peer-reviewed journals, and through the wide dissemination of books like this one.

### Key Terms

Community competence	Middle range theory	Resilience
Epistemology	Norms	Risk
Institutional logics	Neighborhood effects	Social capital
Level of analysis	Opportunity framework	Stress and coping
Life course perspective	Processes in the social environment	Structures in the social environment
Life cycle		

### Review Questions for Critical Thinking

1. What factors contribute to the mismatch between available theory and practice applications in social work?

2. The most recent CSWE standards emphasize that, “Social workers utilize conceptual frameworks to guide the processes of assessment, intervention, and evaluation; and critique and apply knowledge to understand person and environment.” How might the frameworks presented in this chapter be used to guide these processes within clinical and macro social work?
3. The life course perspective presents an opportunity to consider person-in-environment through a developmental lens. Can you apply Elder’s five principles to how the experience of poverty may differ for different groups of people at particular historical time periods (e.g., men during the Depression, women in the 1970s, and the elderly today)?
4. Identify an “institutional logic” that has influenced the way services are provided in your field placement organization.
5. What are some limitations of relying on middle range theory to conceptualize the relationships between persons and their environment, including the multiple levels of analysis therein?

### Online Resources

This website details the life course research being conducted by Glen H. Elder at the Carolina Population Center. Data from the primary life course studies, including the Oakland and Berkeley Studies, the Lewis Terman Study, the Iowa Youth and Families Project, and Add Health, are included.

[www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/lifecourse](http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/lifecourse)

BetterTogether is an initiative of the Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. It supports research and practice to stimulate dialogue about social capital and its utility for American engagement.

[www.bettertogether.org](http://www.bettertogether.org)

The World Bank provides a comprehensive definition of social capital and discusses methods for measuring it.

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/EXTSOCIALCAPITAL/0,,contentMDK:20185164~menuPK:418217pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:401015,00.html>

The Social Work Podcast, hosted by Jonathan Singer, PhD, assistant professor, College of Health Professions and Social Work, Temple University, includes interviews with social work scholars and advanced practitioners on social work theory, research and practice.

<http://socialworkpodcast.blogspot.com/>



The Maternal and Child Health Library at Georgetown University provides a list of resources and information integrating life course theory and maternal and child health.

[www.mchlibrary.info/lifecourse/guides.html](http://www.mchlibrary.info/lifecourse/guides.html)

The Living Proof Podcast Series highlights the work of social work practitioners and scholars; many of the podcasts are relevant to content related to HB&SE.

[www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast)

The MacArthur Network on Transitions to Adulthood conducts research on the experience of young adulthood today as it relates to sociocultural issues, time, and place.

<http://transitions.s410.sureserver.com>

The MacArthur Research Network on an Aging Society focuses on the themes of intergenerational issues, meaningful roles, diversity, and inequality.

[www.agingsocietynetwork.org//Research\\_Network\\_on\\_an\\_Aging\\_Society.htm](http://www.agingsocietynetwork.org//Research_Network_on_an_Aging_Society.htm)

The Project for Public Spaces focuses on building healthy communities and the importance of place in human development and relationships.

[www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org)

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