

OVERVIEW OF THEORIES OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR & THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

APPLICATIONS TO SOCIAL WORK GENERALIST PRACTICE

The following is a very general outline summarizing the theories covered in the NCSWS foundation classes of SSS 571: Human Behavior & the Social Environment. Theory application & integration with practice are demonstrated. This outline is only a summary of highlights; all theorists, ideas, and concepts are not included.

Because human behavior is complex and the social work profession is broad, numerous theories are utilized for social work practice at the micro-meso-macro levels. These theories focus on human growth and development, psychological and social functioning, and social service delivery. Some theories emphasize social and economic justice. All theories are value-laden and come out of a socio-historical context. Thus, all theories should be critiqued with attention paid to their cross-cultural applicability.

DEFINITIONS:

Theory—*interrelated sets of concepts and propositions, organized into a deductive system to explain relationships about certain aspects of the world (e.g., the theories listed below).*

Perspective—*an emphasis or point of view; concepts at an earlier level of development (e.g., a “strengths perspective”) or at a broader and higher level of abstraction (ex: a “humanistic perspective” or a “developmental perspective”)*

Paradigm—*an archetype or mode of thought; a general way of seeing the world (e.g., “modernism” or “post-modernism”)*

Practice Model—*a guide for practitioner interaction that operationalizes theory; includes concrete actions and techniques (note: some theories have more well-developed practice models than others)*

Dimension—*a feature that can be focused on individually or separately, but can only be understood in relation to other features (as in “dimensions of human behavior” or a “multi-dimensional approach” to human behavior)*

[**Sources:** Hutchison, E. D. (2003). *Dimensions of human behavior: Person and environment* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
Robbins, S., Chatterjee, P., & Canda, E. (Eds.) (2005). *Contemporary human behavior theory: A critical perspective for social work* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.]

THEORY OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR	FOCUS OF THEORY	MAIN CONCEPTS RE: HUMAN BEHAVIOR	SOME THEORISTS	SOME PRACTICE APPLICATIONS	SOME PRACTICE INTERVENTIONS
SYSTEMS THEORY Includes: Ecological Systems <i>[Systems Perspective]</i>	How persons interact with their environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Persons are in continual transaction with their environment *Systems are interrelated parts or subsystems constituting an ordered whole *Each subsystem impacts all other parts and whole system *Systems can have closed or open boundaries *Systems tend toward equilibrium 	Parsons Merton Germain Gitterman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Useful for developing holistic view of persons-in-environment *Enhances understanding of interactions between micro-meso-macro levels of organization *Enriches contextual understanding of behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Strengthen one part of the system or subsystem to impact the whole system *Ecomaps & genograms for understanding system dynamics *Networking & referrals to facilitate change
Includes: Family Systems <i>[Systems Perspective]</i>	How the family system affects the individual and family functioning across the life-span	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Individual functioning shapes family functioning and family systems can create pathology within the individual *Boundaries, roles, communication, family structure influence family functioning 	Bowen Satir Minuchin Carter & McGoldrick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Useful for understanding family systems and life cycles over multiple generations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Assessment of family development and life-cycle transitions *Use of multi-generational genograms *Use of family and parent coaching
BEHAVIORISM & SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY Includes: Cognitive theory, Behavioral theory, Social Learning theory <i>[Social Behavioral Perspective]</i>	How individuals develop cognitive functioning and learn through acting on their environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Imitation & reaction to stimulation shape behavioral learning *Knowledge is constructed through children physically and mentally acting on objects *Intelligence is an evolutionary, biological adaptation to environment *Cognitive structures enable adaptation & organization 	Pavlov Skinner Watson Piaget Bandura Beck	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Useful for enabling behavioral & symptomatic change *Useful for assessing individual cognitive functioning, group & family interactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Behavioral interventions such as classical or operant conditioning, positive or negative reinforcement *Time-limited, problem-focused interventions *Cognitive reframing of automatic thoughts about presenting problems to facilitate change

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<p>PSYCHODYNAMIC THEORY</p> <p>Includes: Classical psycho-dynamic theory, Ego-psychology, Object-relations theory, Self-psychology</p> <p><i>[Psychodynamic Perspective]</i></p>	<p>How inner energies and external forces interact to impact emotional development</p>	<p>*Unconscious and conscious mental activity motivate human behavior *Ego functions mediate between individual and environment *Ego defense mechanisms protect individuals from becoming overwhelmed by unacceptable impulses and threats *Internalized experiences shape personality development and functioning *Healing occurs through attention to transferences and the treatment relationship</p>	<p>S. Freud Adler Jung Horney A. Freud Kernberg Kohut Klein Mahler Bowlby</p>	<p>*Useful for understanding inner meanings & intrapsychic processes *Useful for understanding motivation, adaptation, & interpersonal relationships *Useful for assessing strengths & ego functioning</p>	<p>Ego supportive treatment:</p> <p>*Clarification, education, & support of adaptive functioning</p> <p>*Empathy & attention to affects and emotions</p> <p>*Understanding of ego defense mechanisms & underscoring of ego strengths</p> <p>*Establishing, building, & using the treatment relationship to facilitate change</p>
<p>PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY</p> <p><i>[Developmental Perspective]</i></p>	<p>How internal & external forces shape life development, generally by life stages</p>	<p>*Human development occurs in defined & qualitatively different stages that are sequential & may be universal *Individual stages of development include specific tasks to be completed & crises to be managed *Time & social context shape & individualize the meaning of life stages</p>	<p>Erikson</p>	<p>*Useful for understanding individual growth & development across life cycle *Beneficial for assessing individual strengths & deficits</p>	<p>*General assessment of developmental functioning that can be compared with chronological age of the client</p>

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<p>TRANSPERSONAL THEORY</p> <p><i>[Developmental Perspective; built upon Humanistic Perspective]</i></p>	<p>How the spiritual and religious aspects of human existence can be understood</p> <p>How spiritual development builds upon and goes beyond biopsychosocial development</p>	<p>*Focuses on meaning, connection, and purpose</p> <p>*Some people achieve developmental level beyond the <i>personal</i> (ego-based) level into <i>transpersonal</i> (beyond self or ego) levels of consciousness and functioning.</p> <p>*There is an inherent tendency to express innate potentials for love, creativity, and spirituality</p> <p>*There is a difference between psychopathological phenomena and spiritual growth experiences</p>	<p>Maslow Jung Fowler Wilber Washburn</p>	<p>*Provides nonsectarian frame for understanding spiritual aspects of human experience</p> <p>*Describes developmental process beyond self actualization</p> <p>*Provides guidelines for clinical discussions of spiritual or transcendent experiences</p> <p>*Stresses the importance of spiritual and religious support systems for life meaning and well-being</p>	<p>*Assess and understand client's spiritual & faith development</p> <p>*Ethically and appropriately utilize spiritually-derived interventions</p> <p>*Understand and support clients' spiritual and religious beliefs, practices, and support systems</p>
<p>SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY</p> <p><i>[Rational Choice Perspective]</i></p>	<p>How persons minimize costs and maximize rewards through social exchange</p>	<p>*Antecedents, consequences, personal expectations, and interpretation shape and maintain behavior in the present</p> <p>*Self-interest determines social exchange</p> <p>*Unequal resources determine power inequities and reciprocity is essential</p> <p>*Six propositions: --Success proposition --Stimulus proposition --Value proposition --Deprivation-satiation --proposition --Aggression-approval proposition --Rationality proposition</p>	<p>Homan Thibault Kelley Blau</p>	<p>*Useful for assessing and understanding power inequities and distributed justice</p> <p>*Basis for cost-benefit analysis</p>	<p>*Assess resources and power inequities at the meso-macro level</p> <p>*Facilitate group and community interaction</p> <p>*Maximize costs, minimize rewards in the macro environment</p>

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<p>SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM</p> <p><i>[Social Constructionist Perspective]</i></p>	<p>How sociocultural and historical contexts shape individuals and the creation of knowledge</p> <p>How individuals create themselves</p>	<p>*All experience is subjective and human beings recreate themselves through an ongoing, never static process</p> <p>*Knowledge is created through an interplay of multiple social and historical forces</p> <p>*Social interaction is grounded in language, customs, cultural and historical contexts</p> <p>*All phenomenon, including the sciences, must be approached with doubt in order to understand how people construct reality</p> <p>*Humans are self-interpreting beings</p>	<p>Foucault Berger Luckmann Gergen</p>	<p>*Enhances understanding of individual and cultural connection</p> <p>*Useful for understanding non-dominant and oppressed groups in a non-marginalized manner</p>	<p>*Listen for cultured narratives</p> <p>*Approach practice with a stance of “not knowing”</p> <p>*View practice as “mutual interchange” because relationships have “mutual influence”</p> <p>*Recognize how individuals and groups construct their identities through an ongoing, fluid process</p>
<p>SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM</p> <p><i>[Social Constructionist Perspective]</i></p>	<p>How the “self” is influenced and shaped by social processes and the capacity to symbolize</p>	<p>*Human action is caused by complex interaction between and within individuals</p> <p>*Dynamic social activities take place among persons and we act according to how we define our situation</p> <p>*We act in the present, not the past</p> <p>*Individuals are actors on the stage and take on roles, interacting with the environment</p>	<p>Charon Mead Goffman</p>	<p>*Enhances understanding of the relationship between the individual and society and the “self” as a social process</p> <p>*Provides framework for individual, group, and societal assessment</p> <p>*Provides alternative view of deviance and psychopathology</p>	<p>*Formulate assessment and intervene through understanding roles assumed by individuals and groups through individual and society interaction</p> <p>*Focus on diminishment of the sense of stigma for individuals, families, groups, and communities</p>

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CONFLICT THEORY <i>[Conflict Perspective]</i>	How power structures & power disparities impact people's lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *All societies perpetuate some forms of oppression & injustice and structural inequity *Power is unequally divided & some groups dominate others *Social order is based on manipulation and control by dominant groups *Social change is driven by conflict, with periods of change interrupting periods of stability *Life is characterized by conflict not consensus 	Marx Marcuse Habermas Feminist theorists and GLBT theorists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Informs policy and may guide macro-level practice *Useful in formulating assessments involving oppression and client vulnerability *Enhances understanding of conflict between persons, ideas, groups, classes, & larger social structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Listen for evidence of oppression within individuals, groups, and communities *Pay attention to the role of conflict leading to client vulnerability *Organize to alter power relationships *Recognize that dominant and subordinate groups compete for resources
CONTINGENCY THEORY <i>[Systems Perspective]</i>	How individuals & groups gain power, access to resources, & control over their lives, often through collective action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Groups are open, dynamic systems with both change and conflict present *Groups are stratified, with different and unequal levels of power and control *High discrimination and low privilege equals low opportunity *Oppression occurs when upward mobility is systematically denied *The social context must be critiqued and deconstructed *Assumptions for analyzing organizations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> --there is no best way to manage organizations --there must be a match between the environment and internal resources --the design of the organization must fit with the environment 	Weber Scott Lawrence Lorsch March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Useful in macro practice through providing framework for community work on behalf of the powerless and stigmatized *Provides assessment for identifying power blocks contributing to powerlessness *Provides understanding of the objective & subjective dimensions of empowerment *Useful in administering programs by requiring a review of the organizational-environmental fit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Explain & map the direction & role of collective action *Assess power blocks *Build individual & community strengths *Support upward mobility of oppressed groups *Empower oppressed & vulnerable populations through collective action *Assess internal and external resources to make structural and process decisions within a organization