

The Nature of Theories

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During the past few decades, the social work profession has witnessed the proliferation of textbooks on human behavior in the social environment. Although there is variation in both substance and design, these texts have all demonstrated a growing commitment to systematically integrating content about the social environment into our core knowledge of human behavior. With some exceptions, most attempts to address linkages between the person and the environment have relied heavily on functionalist systems and ecological **theories**. We believe that although this is an important theoretical perspective, it has led to a rather narrow view of both the environment and human behavior. With this text, we hope to offer a more expansive view of both.

The task of covering essential human behavior content for social work practice is a formidable one at best. As Brooks (1986, p. 18) observed:

If you are expected to be an expert on the biological, psychological, social, economic, and cultural dimensions of human behavior ... you are undoubtedly a teacher of Human Behavior and the Social Environment.

This complexity has not changed over the last several decades and, in fact, has become even more daunting due to technological advances that now allow researchers to study the brain (Johnson, 2014). Given that a single textbook cannot adequately cover comprehensive content from six or seven disciplines, we have made deliberate choices in our design of this text. We have chosen a comparative theoretical approach in which we critically compare and contrast the dominant human behavior theories primarily from the disciplines of social work, psychology, social psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Theories:

- explain and predict human behavior from micro to macro levels
- explain and predict the impact of larger social structures on human behavior
- explain and predict social problems
- guide social work practice
- inform social policy
- direct social work research
- give credibility to a profession
- are socially constructed and ideological.

Learning Outcomes

- Discuss the importance of using human behavior theories in social work practice.
- Describe the micro-macro continuum.
- Explain how theories are constructed and how this is influenced by ideology.
- Compare and contrast the ways in which the organizational and professional contexts of theory impact its development.
- Discuss how determinism and reductionism limit our understanding of human behavior.
- List questions that can be used for engaging in critical analysis of theory.

We believe that this contribution is necessary because studies on the human behavior curriculum have found social work courses and previous textbooks to be dominated by a systems or ecological perspective and a focus on individual life span development (Brooks, 1986; Fiene, 1987; Gibbs, 1986). In her analysis of course and text content, Fiene (1987, p. 17) concluded that “the addition of systems theory has not altered the continued dominance of the Neo-Freudian, life stages orientation.” Although several recent textbooks have attempted to introduce a somewhat broader scope of theory and have included frameworks such as feminist theory, symbolic interactionism, and social constructionism, among others (Greene & Schriver, 2016; Kirst-Ashman, 2014; Payne, 2016; Rogers, 2016; Schriver, 2014; Thyer, Dulmus & Sowers, 2012), the overall orientation in social work has not changed significantly. An overriding psychological orientation to human behavior continues to persist, we believe, because of our failure to systematically incorporate substantive interdisciplinary theories into the human behavior curriculum. We hope that the theories presented in this text lead to a broader understanding of many of the complex forces that shape people’s lives.

A number of social work publications have discussed and debated the role and definition of theory and its utility for social work practice (Forte, 2006; Gomory, 2001; Simon, 1994b; Turner & Maschi, 2015; Thyer, 1994, 2001). Although there are clearly different and contradictory viewpoints on this topic, we believe that a sound knowledge and understanding of theory is essential for social work practice. We discuss the reasons for this in this chapter.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK AND RATIONALE FOR SELECTION OF THEORIES

Chapter 1 presents a detailed discussion about the nature of theory, its **social construction**, the role of ideology in theory and practice, and the issues we believe need to be considered in a critical assessment of theory.

Chapters 2 through 6 draw from sociological, anthropological, feminist, empowerment, and social psychological theories as well as theories of political economy that teach us about various sociocultural contexts, structures, processes, and the dynamics of social life. These theories assist us in understanding persistent social conditions and problems such as oppression, poverty, homelessness, violence, and others that are particularly relevant to social work practice. They also aid us in our quest to more fully understand and appreciate human diversity, resiliency, and empowerment.

Chapters 7 through 13 draw from psychoanalytic, psychological, social psychological, and transpersonal theories that teach us about human growth, development, and functioning in various contexts. Although we do not include a separate chapter on biological theory, we do present discussion on the ongoing debate about nature versus nurture and explicit content on physical, biological, and motor changes over the life span. We also present findings of contemporary research about prenatal, neonatal, early childhood, and older age development, normal sexual development in children, and the nature and development of memory.

Finally, Chapter 14 summarizes the previous chapters, compares and contrasts the various theories, provides an application of the theories to a case situation, and outlines some challenges for achieving theory-based practice in social work.

To allow for critical comparison among and between theories, every theory chapter is organized to reflect the following common content:

- A brief overview of the theory
- A discussion of the theory's historical context
- An overview of the theory's key concepts
- A discussion of the theory and its variants
- A discussion of contemporary issues related to the theory
- A discussion of the theory's application to social work practice
- A critical analysis of the theory (which we discuss in more detail later in this chapter)
- A summary
- A case vignette and exercises for application to practice.

The theories contained in this book represent a wide range of historical and contemporary thought that we believe to be essential in understanding human behavior. We also include some insights from time-tested philosophical and cultural traditions that help stretch understanding beyond conventional Eurocentric thinking. Human behavior is complex; the numerous internal and external forces that interact and shape our personalities, preferences, ideas, beliefs, and actions cannot be explained by any one theory or discipline. With great deliberation we have chosen theories that help us understand the relationship of the individual to society and the relationship of society to the individual. In addition, these theories should help us to achieve a fuller understanding of the complex biological, psychological, social, cultural, spiritual, economic, political, and historical forces that shape our behavior as human beings.

However, this book's organization according to theories rather than levels of social systems (as is common in many human behavior and social environment texts) may present a challenge to readers who are accustomed to analyzing human behavior in terms of its relationship to discrete and separate systems levels. As a profession, we have become so reliant on systemic approaches to human behavior content that it is sometimes difficult to see or appreciate other possibilities. In choosing a comparative theory approach that includes but is not limited to systemic thinking, we hope to open up new possibilities that include a critical approach to studying human behavior. Although this has long been debated in the literature (Gibbs & Tallent, 1997), we concur with Gibbs and Tallent that this is an area in which critical thinking is necessary.

To help the reader identify content relevant to individuals, groups, families, organizations, institutions, and communities, Table 1.1 indicates the chapters containing relevant content on each

TABLE 1.1 Chapter Content on System Levels

System Level	Chapter
Individuals	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
Groups	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, 13
Families	2, 5, 6, 8, 10
Organizations	1, 2, 3, 4
Institutions	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13
Communities	2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 13

of these systems levels. In addition, in our critical analysis at the end of each chapter we evaluate how applicable each theory is to these varying levels of systems.

In addition, it is important to understand how the content of this book fits with the current Council on Social Work Education Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (Council on Social Work Education, 2015) that is based on competency-based education. Table 1.2 identifies where the competencies are addressed in each chapter.

WHY STUDY THEORIES OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR?

The knowledge explosion that has accompanied the technological advances of the 20th century has generated a wealth of information about people, their behavior, and the various contexts in which they interact and live. Theories, first and foremost, help us organize this vast information.

The term *human behavior* has classically been used in social work to refer to behavior of the individual with rather limited attention to contexts of larger social and natural environments (Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Coates, 2003a, 2003b). The concept of person-in-environment provides a good example of this individualistic focus. Other disciplines, however, use a broader definition of human behavior to include the behavior of groups, families, communities, organizations, cultures, and societies within global and earth ecological contexts. Because the focus of this text is on interdisciplinary theories, we have adopted the broader of the two definitions.

Theories help us conceptualize how and why people behave the way they do, and help us understand the contextual nature of behavior. The term **context** refers to the settings and social groups in which human behavior takes place; these contexts may be biological, physical, psychological, sociocultural, spiritual, economic, political, historical, and natural environmental. Whereas some theories focus on the individual, the family, or the small group, other theories teach us about the larger social contexts or structures in which people operate (Bloom, 1985). The term *environment* is commonly used in the social work literature to describe these contexts, groups, and structures. Because all human behavior is contextual, an understanding of people must also include an understanding of these contexts.

Theories also help us focus our attention on the intrapsychic dynamics of psychological processes as well as the interpersonal and transpersonal dynamics of social life. Knowledge of each is critical to an understanding of human behavior. The pervasive psychological orientation in social work has provided us with substantial expertise in the former while neglecting the latter. Theories that emphasize power, ideology, spirituality, political and economic differences, and the natural environment are an often excluded but necessary part of the interdisciplinary knowledge base that is essential for professional practice.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the theories we use as social workers shape the way in which we view our clients. They shape the questions we ask, the assessments we make, and ultimately the interventions we choose. We believe, therefore, that it is important for social workers to expand their theoretical knowledge base and to develop a broader understanding of human behavior.

The Macro–Micro Continuum

The wide variety of theories covered in this book represents not only different disciplines but also different levels of abstraction and explanation about contexts and social groups. **Macro level theories** are usually highly abstract and general and attempt to explain the structure and functioning of large entities such as societies, cultures, and communities. **Meso (or mid) level theories** are less abstract, are more testable, and explain “smaller components of social reality” (Chafetz, 1987). Meso level theories often focus on interactions between people, groups, and organizations. **Micro level theories** are generally more concrete and specific and are therefore more testable. They are primarily used to explain individuals, small groups, and families.

We recognize, however, that not all theories are clearly placed on this continuum; in some cases there is overlap. Macro-focused theories are sometimes applied to individuals just as micro-focused theories are sometimes applied to societies. Meso theories are often applied to both.

We believe that broadening our theoretical knowledge allows us to become more flexible in moving back and forth along this continuum. The relevance of macro theory to clinical practice and micro theory to community practice becomes apparent as we discuss the applicability of each theory to all social system levels.

THEORIES: WHAT ARE THEY?

The terms commonly used in discussions of theories are *theory*, *paradigm*, *model*, and *perspective*. Of these words, paradigm and model are often used interchangeably and usually represent a visual arrangement of two or more variables in graphic, tabular, or other pictorial form. Paradigm may also refer to a philosophical framework, such as positivist or postmodern paradigms. The word perspective, in contrast, simply translates as emphasis or view. We distinguish these from the term theory, with the acknowledgment that although we use them interchangeably, they are not in fact equivalent.

As noted in the foreword, Kerlinger’s (1979) classic definition of theory that is widely used in the social sciences posits that:

A theory is a set of interrelated constructs or concepts, definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena. (p. 9)

Discussing the process of theorizing, Forte (2014), citing Jorgenson, adds that “Theorizing is a process of making empirical observations and then constructing meaningful patterns that organize the acquired in the form of a theoretical explanation, interpretation, or critique” (p.33).

Stated more simply, Chafetz notes that theories (1987, p. 25):

... consist of a series of relatively abstract and general statements which collectively purport to explain (answer the question “why?”) some aspect of the empirical world (the “reality” known to us directly or indirectly through our senses).

Theories are constructed through a systematic process of inductive and deductive reasoning in our attempts to answer “why?” Dubin (1969, p. 9) suggested that theories are used for the pursuit

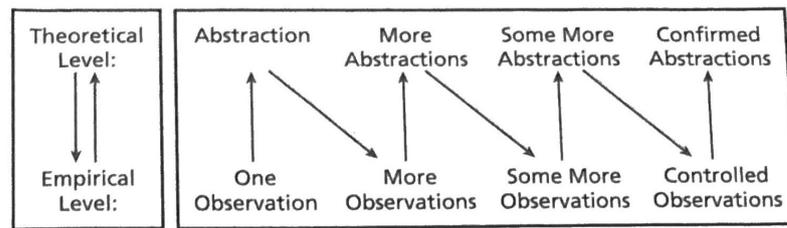


FIGURE 1.1 The interdependence between theoretical and empirical structures.

of two distinct goals in the scientific study of human behavior: explanation and prediction. To understand theory construction, *explanation*, and *prediction*, it is important to understand the differences between **empirical structures** and **theoretical structures**. Empirical structures are those that we experience through our senses, in our environment. Theoretical structures are those that we “construct in our mind’s eye to model the empirical system” (Dubin, 1969, p. 9). In addition, theories prescribe ideal goals for human functioning and offer guidelines for therapeutic and social action designed to help people achieve their goals.

Thus, a theoretical structure is an abstraction; it is both a description and a generalization that stems from our experiences. As a result, the constructs, or concepts, of a theory become the tools with which we study human behavior and attempt to influence it in social work practice.

Most scholars believe that theories are important because few scientific ventures are possible without them. In Figure 1.1, we show how abstractions develop over a period of time. Without theoretical structures, it is difficult to understand and order information about the world around us; without empirical structures, we have no basis for theory.

Further, many theories are cumulative. Initially, a theorist may make an abstraction from one observation. Subsequent observations may lead to more abstractions, and these, in turn, may lead to controlled observations and scientific studies for the purpose of confirming these abstractions. The cumulative nature of theory may be based on one person’s lifelong pursuit, or the collective pursuit of knowledge undertaken by several generations of scholars. Not all theories, however, are built cumulatively. As Chafetz (1987) pointed out, luck or serendipity often plays a role in theory development, as scholars sometimes experience a flash of insight from events or experiences unrelated to their research. Even when this is the case, the theorist must return to the process of description and generalization to build and refine the theory.

WHAT IS META-THEORY AND WHAT IS ITS APPLICATION FOR SOCIAL WORK?

There is considerable ambiguity about the development and utilization of social work theory, despite the agreement that theory is relevant and necessary for social work practice and to address complex social problems (Healy, 2005; Hicks, 2016). The contemporary social work literature often describes what is called the theory/practice divide. Practitioners and researchers may be operating from quite different **ontological** (our ‘being’ in the world) positions in terms of the weight or prominence they give to particular theories over others, which can raise important **epistemological** (our ways of knowing) questions that impact the nature and quality of practice,

service delivery, and research. Social workers are compelled to identify and critique theories that may not be adequately explicated or defined as useful theories of practice.

Meta-theories, sometimes called meta-perspectives, are rooted in the debate about the philosophy of science, ontology, and epistemology, all of which are concerned about the nature of reality, and the cognitive and ideological positions that can be both integrative and polarizing, and over time become embedded in theory. According to Bates (2009), meta-theory “can be seen as the philosophy behind the theory, the fundamental set of ideas about how phenomena of interest in a particular field should be thought about and researched” (p. 2). In contrast, it has also been defined as a broad perspective that overarches two, or more, theories (Ritzer, 2009). In a review of the literature on meta-theory, Wallis (2010) found multiple definitions of meta-theory and meta-theorizing and noted that there is a lack of a clear definition for this concept. Particularly important for our field, Hicks (2016) found that certain formal, primary theories based on **positivist epistemologies** that are associated with evidence-based practice dominate social work. A related less dominant approach includes formulating theory for social work compared with simply applying theories from outside the field, for example, the social sciences. It is noteworthy that there are few empirical studies that specifically examine how theories are developed and utilized within social work, and how theorizing or meta-theorizing actually occurs.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THEORIES

We can see from the preceding description that theories are based on constructs that arise from cognitive and experiential processes of individuals. They arise from social processes as well. All knowledge—including theoretical knowledge—is developed within a specific social, cultural, and historical context. These contexts, in turn, influence the content of theory.

In their classic book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that all knowledge, including our knowledge of what is “real,” is socially constructed. By this they were referring to the fact that we are all born into an already existing society, and thus, “a given social order precedes any individual organismic development” (1966, p. 51). Predefined patterns of conduct and group definitions of what is real are socially transmitted and reinforced by social sanctions. We learn these group definitions through the process of socialization, and this knowledge becomes part of our worldview and ideology. We rarely stop to question these group definitions and, unless challenged, we take it more or less for granted that we see the world in the same way as everyone else does.

Theorists often operate under the same assumptions. Consequently, they bring their own cultural, class, and gender biases (to name a few) into their work. Not surprisingly, theories are often extensions of the theorists themselves. They reflect their concerns, values, and overall worldviews. Although this is not unusual, it becomes problematic when a theory claims to apply to all people.

Postmodern-oriented social work theorists draw on this awareness of the **social construction** of any theory (Witkin & Saleebey, 2007). They encourage critical and creative reflection about the underlying assumptions of particular theories, the personal and cultural vantages they represent, and who is advantaged or disadvantaged when the theories are applied to practice. This requires a process of dialogue between people who hold different theories, between people of different social locations and levels of power, and between and among theorists, practitioners, and clients. Through such a process, theories can be continuously refined, rejected when necessary, and applied in ways to fit the values of our profession and the goals of our clients and their communities.

IDEOLOGY, SCIENTIFIC THEORY, AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Most of the helping professions, including social work, heavily emphasize practice that is based on empirical evidence and related scientific theories of human behavior, causation, prevention, and intervention. This is especially emphasized in the movement for evidence-based practice (Petr, 2009; Petr & Walter, 2005). This might lead us incorrectly to believe that **ideology** has no place in theory construction or in professional social work practice. To the contrary, scientific theories are not free from the influence of ideology. To illustrate, we start with this distinction: Ideology is a set of prescriptions, or “thou-shalt” and “thou-shalt-not” statements, whereas **scientific theory** is a set of abstractions derived from empirical observation that becomes subject to verification through the testing of predictions (called hypotheses).

Despite the veil of scientific objectivity, theories of human behavior are ideological in nature because they cannot be “free of material interests and uncompromised by moral and cultural commitments” (Brown & Martin, 1991, p. 11). Thus, their underlying assumptions are often associated with different political positions. As Campbell has noted (1981, p. 22):

... theories are ideological in that even the most neutral-looking factual claims about social phenomena can be taken up and used in the competition between social groups for positions of power, wealth, and influence ...

Further, theories of human behavior can become self-fulfilling or self-refuting based on our beliefs. Our beliefs about ourselves, our relationships, and our societies, for example, influence our actions, which, in turn, may serve to validate (or refute) a certain theoretical perspective (Campbell, 1981). People who believe that early childhood experiences are the root cause of problems in adulthood tend to look for previously undiscovered traumatic experiences in their families of origin. This may intensify, create, or bring to the surface unpleasant memories that may have been less pronounced if they had believed that the source of the problem was rooted in present-day stressors. Similarly, theories that promote individuation as a developmental goal lead their adherents to seek independence rather than interdependence, thus validating one developmental path while refuting the other. Theories of human behavior are “in the complicated position of being a part of the reality they purport to analyze” (Campbell, 1981, p. 22). It is important, therefore, to understand not only the content of theories but also their practical and political implications. To accomplish this, we must be aware of the ideological underpinnings that are inherent in each theory so that we can subject each theory to thoughtful and critical analysis. The literature is replete with debates about value-free social science. It is our firm position that value-free social science is simply not possible.

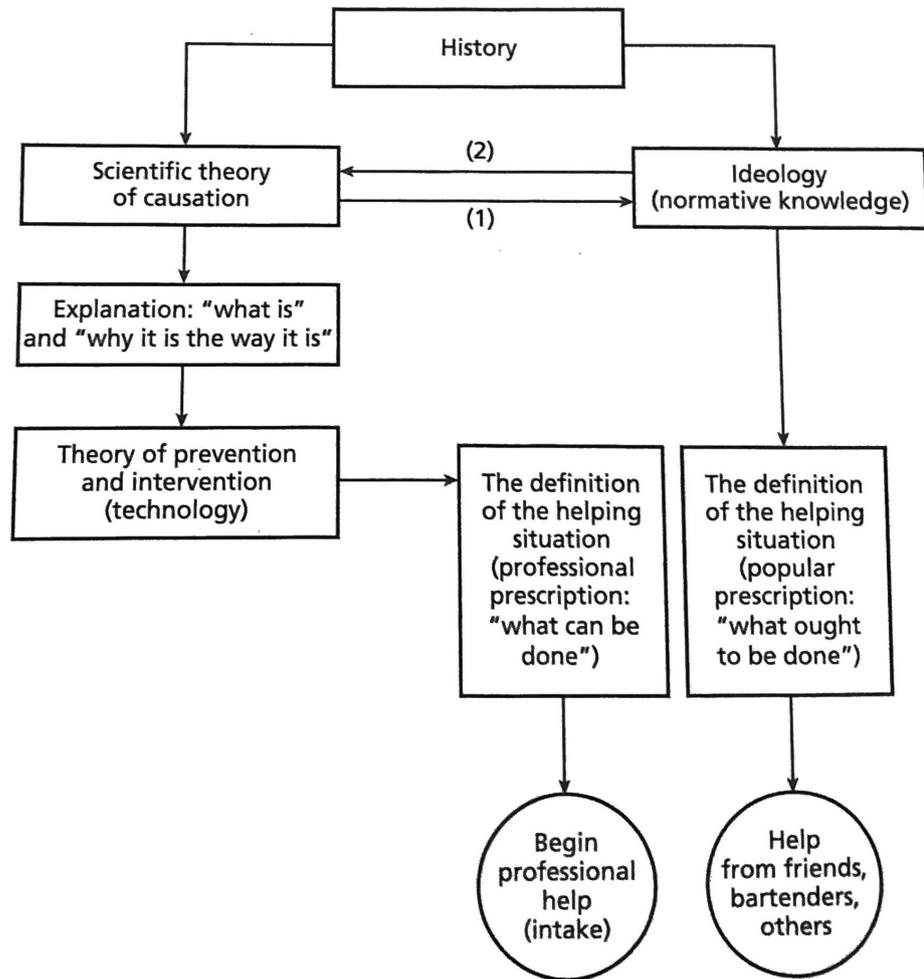
Ideology is also present in all professional social work settings. It prescribes, for example, how a client should behave; the respective status of the client and the social worker; and whether, how, and how much the social worker should be paid.

For example, various views of evidence-based practice reflect different ideologies. A positivist approach to theory in social work, strongly influenced by the traditional medical model, says that practice should only be based on information about the effectiveness of interventions as determined by a narrow range of research methods, such as experimental and quasi-experimental designs, surveys, and statistical analysis (Witkin & Saleebey, 2007). This approach derives from European philosophers of science in the so-called Age of Rational Enlightenment. They counterposed the medieval emphasis on faith and religious authority with a commitment to rational thinking and physical observation as bases for knowledge. It reflects an ideology of objectivity and power to control research and practice vested in experts. While this type of evidence is useful, it is limited

to questions and answers about human behavior framed in terms of physical observations, causality, and mechanistic interactions as determined by people who are outsiders to the situation. Hence, the understanding tends to be reductionistic and inapplicable to many real situations in practice settings.

More broad approaches, some of which are postmodern (and reacting against positivism), recognize the importance of understanding complex and dynamic behaviors and transactions in context and from the vantage point of those who actually live in the situations studied and of participants in research studies. They go beyond the previous kinds of research to also include ethical and professional value issues, client/consumer voices, culture-specific understandings, and evidence from qualitative research methods such as ethnography, grounded theory, and in-depth interviews (Petr, 2009). The understanding tends to be more situation-specific, contextual, and grounded in direct experience of clients, their communities, and human service practitioners. Indeed, various theories emphasize positivist and/or more context-sensitive types of research.

Flowchart 1.1 demonstrates how ideology directly influences the helping situation and indirectly influences both scientific theory and its related intervention strategies. Each society has its own unique history within which certain ideological traditions and scientific theories emerge. These, in turn, define the nature of the helping situation, be it medical, legal, psychological, or social.



FLOWCHART 1.1 The interplay between scientific theory and ideology. © 1998, S. P. Robbins, P. Chatterjee, & E. R. Canda.

Flowchart 1.1 illustrates that there are at least two ways to define a helping situation: (1) a **professional definition**, which emerges from the application of scientific theory but under the influence (often unknown) of existing ideologies; and (2) a **popular definition**, which develops from existing ideologies of society (or normative knowledge) and, often, a rather inadequate knowledge of scientific theory. Because there are many types of ideologies and, similarly, many types of scientific theories, we can understand why there are numerous professional definitions of the helping situation (variations of the pathway to the left) as well as many popular definitions (variations of the pathway to the right). These are not totally independent, however (as indicated by the two-way arrows between the two), and may at times influence each other directly or indirectly.

The Definition of the Helping Situation: The Historical Context

According to Choi, Martin, Chatterjee, and Holland (1978, p. 157), ideology is an important factor in social work because it "(a) prescribes care-giving systems; (b) justifies and legitimizes who shall receive and what they shall receive; and (c) serves as a means of giving people hope and consolation." Thus, ideology legitimizes the roles of the helper and the help-recipient (the social worker and client, for example) and often gives the helper authority to define the help-recipient.

The definitions and norms that govern professional practice are already present when a client comes to an agency for assistance. When the client and social worker meet, they become engaged in a helping situation that consists, at the very least, of two persons who operate in a socially designed setting replete with norms that govern their interaction; this all occurs within a pre-existing definition of the situation (Chatterjee, 1985, 1990; Chatterjee & Hilbert, 1986).

Social psychologist W. I. Thomas (1923) observed that, "preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is always a ... definition of the situation ..." provided by society (p. 42). Our actions in any context are determined, in part, by these pre-existing definitions. According to Thomas and Thomas (1928), "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (p. 572). Thus, our beliefs directly impact what we think and what we do.

To more fully demonstrate the influence of ideology on the interaction between the social worker and the client, we have modified and expanded on Beisser's (1973) "models of help" to illustrate the social construction inherent in the helping situation. These models roughly correspond to all levels of social work practice and carry with them implicit ideological definitions.

Models of Help

1. ***The evil model*** The person is seen as willfully bad or possessed by evil spirits; the response involves exorcism, incarceration, or death.
2. ***The medical model*** The person is viewed as a helpless victim of psychic trauma, psychological or physical disorder, or chemical dependency; the response involves treatment.
3. ***The problem-solving/educational model*** The person has a problem, and intellect and rational thought can be used to find a solution; the response involves technical consultation and/or education.
4. ***The crisis model*** The person has experienced recent trauma or crisis; the response involves crisis management.
5. ***The growth/developmental model*** The person should celebrate his or her uniqueness and ability to develop full potential; the response involves facilitating the individual's latent capacities.
6. ***The social issues/advocacy model*** The person is a victim of social forces or structural features of society; the response involves community organization or social advocacy.

7. *The personal responsibility model* The person is seen as unproductive, irresponsible, and dependent on society; the response involves minimal help with maximal policing.
8. *The entitlement model* The person has a right to a certain kind of help because she or he is a member of society; the response involves provision of services.
9. *The deviance model* The person is deviant and may also be sick; the response involves correction of deviant behavior and may also involve incarceration.
10. *The self-help model* The person is a victim of heredity, a dysfunctional family, external substances, or control by others; the response involves support and solidarity from like-sufferers. When guided by religious ideology, this often resembles the Twelve Step program developed by Alcoholics Anonymous.

Table 1.3 summarizes these models and their attendant ideology. Of particular importance is the second column in Table 1.3. Ideology circumscribes the roles of the helper and help-recipient by defining (1) who or what is to be blamed or held accountable for the situation, (2) what the help-recipient deserves, and (3) what the helper deserves. Ideology is also embedded in the helping situation itself because it both defines and sustains the context of helping as well as the interactions between the parties involved.

In addition to the historical context of ideological definitions, the helping situation is influenced by its organizational and professional contexts. All three are extremely important because together they encourage the use of some theories in the helping process, discourage others, and exclude yet even others.

The Organizational Context

Although different types of organizational structures have been identified in the literature, all organizations are structured in such a way as to facilitate the processing of cases (or individuals) through the system. The specific model that any one agency uses is largely dependent upon its historical context, the professions involved in service delivery, and the service(s) being offered. In any case, all agencies are faced with a common problem of people management. To ensure that the services offered are correctly matched with the clients seeking the services, agencies must, of necessity, devise categories of clients that the agency is prepared to serve. Thus, an outpatient mental health facility is structured so as to serve only clients who seek mental health services that fall within the predetermined categories.

Implicit in the categorization of clients is an ideology about which model(s) of help the agency is based upon. This, in turn, defines the roles of the helper and help-recipient. As Pfuhl (1980, p. 166) noted, the organizational context of services is based on:

... a relatively clear definition of the nature of the problem and the clientele to be dealt with. Logically, this definition precedes assigning such responsibilities since, in the absence of a definition, no rational course of action is likely. For example, assigning responsibilities for a given problem to the police, medical, social welfare, or some other specialized agency requires a prior definition of that problem.

For example, an inpatient psychiatric hospital serves categories of patients based on specific diagnoses and utilizes the illness model, in which the professional helper is a therapist and the client is a patient. In contrast, a legal advocacy agency serves only categories of clients based on specific legal problems and utilizes the social issues model, in which the professional helper is an advocate and the client is a victim. Some agencies may be based on more than one model

TABLE 1.3 The Helping Situation

Definition of the Situation	Ideology	Helper	Help-Recipient	Disciplinary Custodian
Evil	Blame a demon or the recipient. Recipient does not deserve sympathy. Helper deserves sacred status and payment from society.	Exorciser	Possessed	Medieval clergy
Personal responsibility	Blame recipient who deserves minimal help. Helper deserves low policing status and payment by society.	Policing	Chiseling	Early social work
Medical	Blame a disease. Recipient deserves sympathy. Helper deserves direct or third-party payment and high status.	Treatment agent	Patient	Medicine Nursing social work Psychology Psychiatry
Problem	Blame malfunction. Recipient deserves knowledge. Helper, direct or third-party payment, and somewhat high status.	Technical consultant	Client	Education Law Psychology Social work Psychiatry
Deviance	Blame recipient's behavior. He or she deserves to be corrected. Helper paid by society, deserves low status.	Correctional agent	Deviant	Law Medicine Psychology Psychiatry
Entitlement	Blame no one. Recipient deserves help without stigma and helper, paid by society.	Clearing agent	Receiving agent	No disciplinary custodian
Crisis	Blame source of crisis. Recipient deserves sympathy and understanding. Helper deserves pay by either recipient or society, and varying status.	Crisis manager	Crisis victim	Crisis victim Clergy Medicine Psychology Social work Psychiatry
Growth	Blame the developmental phase. Recipient deserves education. Helper deserves direct or third-party payment and varied status.	Facilitator	Responsible individual	Education Psychology Social work
Social issues	Blame society. Recipient needs restitution. Helper deserves some limited pay from third-party and varied status.	Advocate	Victim	Clergy Law Social work
Self-help	Blame outsiders (either people or substance). Recipient deserves solidarity. Helper deserves no pay, elder status.	In-group elder	In-group member	No disciplinary custodian

Source: Based on P. Chatterjee and D. Bailey, 1993.

(such as a family service center) and may use, for example, a problem model, crisis model, and growth model. Direct service agencies may also utilize a social issues model if, for example, they are providing services to persons who have been the victims of elder abuse. Thus, the organizational context has a direct influence on the models and theories used in practice.

The Professional Context

A final element that substantially influences the definition of the situation is the professionalization of the helper role. In the quest for professional status, social work's early adoption of psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory led to an individual and intrapsychic view of people and ushered in a medical model of treating people with illness. The quest for knowledge about neurosis, psychosis, and other emotional problems "helped facilitate the social workers' shift from a socio-economic to an individual-psychological base" (Trattner, 1984, p. 245).

Although our professional theory base has expanded greatly since the 1920s, psychodynamic thought, ego psychology, and psychological perspectives on the life span still dominate much of social work practice. The relatively recent addition of systems theory and the ecosystems perspective has led to a largely uncritical acceptance of these theories as the predominant paradigms used in most human behavior textbooks. An emphasis on family systems is also reflected in the contemporary literature and in the proliferation of books on that topic. To its credit, the focus on systems and ecosystems not only expanded our perspective of the environment but also shifted the definitions of the helping situation from illness to that of problem and growth. Despite this change, it is important to recognize that the current use of systems-based theories has largely retained a micro and meso level focus for direct practice rather than a broader focus for social action.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the reliance of the profession on social approval, the theories that the profession has adopted and defined as central to our knowledge base tend to be politically conservative. We discuss and critique this in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3. Clearly, in the struggle for increased professionalization, social work selected some theories of human behavior and omitted others—some by accident and others by design.

DETERMINISM AND REDUCTIONISM: A PROBLEM OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

When ideology, theory, and professional practice interact, a variety of problems emerge. Two important ones that we discuss here are **determinism** and **reductionism**. These, however, are not mutually exclusive and overlap at times. Together, they pose a very old dilemma in the philosophy of science and create a barrier to our understanding of the complexity of human behavior.

Determinism refers to the position that one phenomenon is caused (determined) solely by another phenomenon such as genetics, neurotransmission, biology, culture, or economy. Since human experience is affected by many different kinds of biopsychosocial, spiritual, and natural environmental factors, it is unlikely that any single deterministic view will provide an adequate understanding. Ideological biases sometimes establish the type of determinism involved. Take, for example, theoretical explanations of why children from poor families more often do poorly at school. Some may insist that poor performance is due to biological or genetic inferiority. Proponents of this position may even produce empirical evidence with impressive statistical armor. Others may explain the same situation by insisting that it is due to economic hardship; they too may produce equally statistical armor. Here we have examples of biological determinism on one side and economic determinism on the other. When people are at war they often justify

killing each other by insisting that they have God on their side; in controversial arguments they might denigrate each other by insisting that they have science on their side.

Differences in history and ideology lead to two basic forms of determinism: biological (including biogenetic and psychological) and environmental (including social, cultural, economic, etc.). As a consequence, we often see prescriptions and actions that claim their legitimation in scientific theory but, in reality, originate in ideology.

Reductionism, in contrast, is the problem posed by the claim that a certain phenomenon can be explained only by one specific discipline such as sociology, psychology, or economics. Not surprisingly, a person trained in a given discipline develops a great deal of loyalty to it. Loyalty to a discipline, occupational group, or a profession is often similar to that given to religion, politics, or even a football team. Reductionism also occurs when a holistic human phenomenon is reduced to simplistic explanation in terms of its component parts. For example, reductionism occurs when human consciousness is analyzed only in terms of biochemical and anatomical aspects of brain function. Thus, the human being is reduced to a machine. Of course, neurology is relevant to consciousness, but consciousness cannot be reduced to it.

To some extent, all theories are reductionist in the sense that they help us make sense of the world or some aspect of human behavior by identifying the most salient factors involved. It is literally impossible to take into account everything in the universe to understand a given topic. This is not a problem if a theory is clear in the way it is simplifying and is also clear about the usefulness and limitations of the simplification. Then, the theory is simplified but not simplistic. Unfortunately, theories and their proponents too often portray simplifications as the whole picture, which is, in actuality, an incomplete or false picture.

As we begin to better understand the role of theory in social work practice, we can expect to face ongoing problems caused by determinism and reductionism. Ideological bias, disciplinary loyalties, and simplistic analyses lead to these problems and they, in turn, shape the definition of the professional relationship.

For the most part, problems of determinism originate in various forms of ideology, whereas problems of reductionism originate from a scientific discipline that develops a given theory of causation. The two, however, may be closely related and often overlap. As we look back at Flowchart 1.1, we can see that most issues regarding determinism develop from the right pathway, whereas those of reductionism develop from the left pathway. Both have their own influences on the definition of the helping situation.

THEORIES: APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

As discussed earlier, two of the main functions of theory are to explain and predict. In addition, theories are used to inform policy, guide practice, and direct research (Table 1.4).

Because of their explanatory and predictive nature, theories can inform us about social policies that are necessary to change the conditions of target groups or vulnerable populations. Macro level theories illuminate why some problems, such as oppression, homelessness, poverty, crime, and substance abuse, occur or persist. We can then use this knowledge in our attempts to change problematic conditions through policy design and implementation, class advocacy, and social action.

Theories and meta-theories further guide practice by providing social workers with conceptual frameworks that can be used to examine the “presenting problem” or aspirations of an individual, family, group, organization, or community. They provide conceptual tools for describing what occurs in the lives of our clients and in the wider world. They are valuable tools

TABLE 1.4 Applications of Human Behavior Theories to Social Work Practice

Functions	Macro Level Theories	Micro and Meso Level Theories
Problem analysis	Social problem analysis	Personal, family, small group, or organization problem analysis
Identify vulnerability	Identify vulnerable populations	Identify vulnerable persons, families, and small groups
Develop assessments	Assess conditions of target groups and populations	Assess conditions of persons, families, small groups, and organizations
Guide practice	Guide community practice Guide social action Guide client advocacy	Guide clinical practice Guide class advocacy Guide administration practice
Inform policy	Inform social policy	Inform agency policy
Direct research	Sociological, cross-cultural, historical, political economy, and program evaluation research	Biological, psychological, clinical, historical, and organizational research

for use in assessment of clients and client groups and of their situations and their environments. Theories also guide us in developing treatment or intervention plans to alleviate problems and enhance client functioning. They help us anticipate the likely outcomes of specific helping practices. Thus, theories are an important tool in guiding all levels of professional social work practice.

Theories and meta-theories also have an important role in directing research. Without a theoretical base, it is difficult to coherently interpret our observations. Basic research guides us in our attempts to learn the cause(s) of individual and group conditions and behaviors and thus adds to our cumulative knowledge of why certain things occur. In addition, applied research can help us determine, for example, whether our programs are effective or if specific interventions are successful.

Theories and meta-theories provide languages for professional discourse about human behavior and social work practice. Their key concepts encapsulate complex ideas concisely. Once we understand the theory's terminology, we can discuss a situation using a shorthand, but in a deep and insightful manner. When we discuss with colleagues who share understanding of the theory, we can communicate efficiently. The challenge is that each theory may have distinctive terms used in specific ways. Those unfamiliar with the theory may not understand the terms and perspective involved. So once we understand the languages of multiple theories, we become able to communicate with other professionals who work from those points of view and we can help to mediate between the theoretical perspectives. For example, as we will see, the term *ego* has different meanings for Freudians, ego psychologists, and transpersonal theorists. The well-educated social worker can understand, compare, and contrast the various meanings and their implications for practice.

Finally, the use of theories is necessary for professional credibility. Historically, it was proposed that social work did not merit the status of an established profession because it did not have a theoretical knowledge base (Flexner, 1915). Social work has since borrowed human behavior theories, primarily from the disciplines of psychology and medicine. The theoretical knowledge from sociology, anthropology, social psychology, and transpersonal psychology has been used to a

lesser extent but has never been an integrated or central part of the human development curriculum (Coyle, 1988; Fiene, 1987). Although the ecological perspective is widely used as a framework for understanding human behavior, it offers little guidance in analyzing macro level social problems that have an impact on people's lives. Its primary focus is on the interface between people and their environments, which is a meso level interaction. However, its attention to the harmful effects of power disparities (Germain & Gitterman, 1995) may increase its usefulness for macro level analysis in the future. Consequently, we believe that sophistication in the analysis of both social dynamics and human behavior is essential for our knowledge base and adds credibility to the social work profession. In addition, we hope that an expanded theory base helps us gain a more holistic view of people and helps to reintegrate our profession's original concern for social justice.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THEORY: THE MISSING DIMENSION

In our attempt to compare and contrast a variety of interdisciplinary theories, we believe that it is also important to add an element that is often absent in the social work literature—an analysis of each theory based on **critical thinking**. Given the inherently ideological nature of human behavior theory, it is crucial that theories be held open to intellectual analysis, criticism, and evaluation. We believe this must go further than a simple analysis of a theory's strengths and weaknesses, which are often presented as having equal merit. According to Gambrill (2012) and Gambrill & Gibbs (2009), critical thinking is a necessary component of professional practice that goes beyond an appraisal of the claims and arguments that may be embodied in a theory. It involves, for example, the use of specific standards in evaluating evidence and requires a fair and thorough critique of alternative views. Critical thinkers “question what others take for granted” (Gambrill, 2004, p. 3).

Further, due to the individualistic and psychological orientation to human behavior discussed earlier, we believe that it is especially relevant for social work that critical thinking also draws on the assumptions of **critical theory** to analyze the social, ideological, and economic structures of society and their impact on individual problems. According to critical theory, “Most individual problems are in fact social problems, caused by an inequitable social structure” (Findley, 1978, p. 55). Given the politically conservative theory base that has predominated social work (i.e., functionalist systems/ecological and psychosocial life span theory), we believe that the addition of this perspective is long overdue. We agree with Witkin and Gottschalk (1988, p. 218) that theories for social work practice should include “a reflexive element concerning its historical, cultural, and political/economic significance.” It is only through analysis of this kind that we can demystify issues of power and truth and begin to examine alternative conceptualizations (Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988).

As we examine each theory presented in this book, we use the following questions as standards for a *critical analysis* of issues that are often taken for granted in most human behavior textbooks:

1. What specific aspects of human development and human relations does the theory address and emphasize? (a) To what extent does the theory account for biological, psychological, and spiritual factors? (b) To what extent does the theory account for social, cultural, and economic forces?

Because theorists hold a variety of personal beliefs, interests, assumptions, and worldviews, it is not surprising that they are often interested in different aspects of human behavior. This is reflected in the theories they construct and, consequently, in the dimensions of behavior that are included (and excluded) in their theories. Some theorists may focus on only one dimension (such

as psychological processes), while others focus on several (such as social processes, physical growth, spiritual development, and the cultural context). It is important to analyze the dimensions that are addressed and to be aware of those that are excluded. Theories that appear to be at odds with one another may, in fact, simply be asking different questions and addressing different aspects of development (Thomas, 1985).

In addition, theorists give different emphasis to the dimensions they cover. A theorist may acknowledge biological, psychological, and social aspects of behavior but place primary emphasis on only one of these aspects. Theories that appear to be holistic because they include several dimensions may, in fact, be reductionistic or deterministic if only one aspect is seen as primary. It is not uncommon for a theory that appears, at first glance, to be holistic to place its emphasis on nature (biology) over nurture (environment) or vice versa.

Critical analysis of theory should help us recognize problems of determinism and reductionism as we examine the dimensions of behavior that are covered and emphasized in a given theory.

2. What is the theory's relevance and application to individuals, families, groups, organizations, institutions, and communities? The contextual nature of human behavior may also vary from theory to theory. While some theories simultaneously focus on a variety of contexts or levels of social relationships and factors related to the larger environment, others do not. Previously, we referred to the level of abstraction and variety of contexts as the macro–micro continuum. Theories that start with the individual as the focal point may include either a narrow or broad range of contexts, social relationships, and environments in their attempt to explain the behavior of the individual; the same is true for theories that start with the group (such as a family, a culture, or a society) as the focal point. Similarly, some theories address a variety of contexts but place primary emphasis on only one. Analysis of theory should ideally entail an examination of the contexts and structural relationships that are included and excluded in the theory. It is especially important to know where in the micro–macro continuum the theory is most relevant and applicable.

This is extremely relevant because social work has for some time sought a meta- (or grand) theory that is applicable to all contexts and levels of social work practice. Although it has been claimed that certain theories have equal relevance and applicability to all levels of practice, critical thinking suggests that we cannot take these claims for granted.

3. How consistent is the theory with social work values and ethics? As a helping profession, social work has embodied a set of values and ethics that are uniquely expressed in the design of our professional curriculum. These values include, for example, specific emphasis on helping people achieve optimal health and well-being, promoting respect for human diversity, and working toward the goal of empowerment for individuals and groups. Ethical practice mandates adherence to the profession's values.

Our psychodynamic/life span theory base has placed great emphasis on psychological and physical well-being. The addition of systems/ecological theory has also made us more aware of the issue of goodness of fit between people and their environments—especially social and physical. To more fully address issues related to oppression and discrimination we must expand this focus to explicitly include economic well-being. Similarly, if we are to see people more holistically, it is critical to address issues of spirituality as well (Canda & Furman, 2010; Crisp 2017; Dudley, 2016).

In the social work literature there are many definitions of **spirituality**, but most distinguish spirituality and **religion** as related but different concepts. For example, Canda and Furman (2010) explain that spirituality refers to “A process of human life and development focusing on the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, and well-being...” involving relationships between

oneself, other people, the universe, and the ground of reality, understood in theistic, atheistic, animistic, or other terms (p. 275). Spirituality orients people around their most significant priorities and engages a sense of transcendence, such as experiences that are profound, sacred, or transpersonal. Spiritual development may lead to a sense of personal wholeness, involving integration and balance between the biological, mental, social, and natural environmental aspects of our lives. Spirituality can also motivate action toward social justice as well as conflicting views of morality and justice. A person may or may not express *spirituality through religion*, which refers to formalized and organized patterns of belief, morals, ritual, traditions, and mutual support shared by a community and developed over time.

Given these definitions, it is clear that there are numerous, diverse, and even conflicting religious and nonreligious spiritual perspectives that shape the lives of ourselves, our clients, our institutions, and social policies that surround us. Spirituality and religion pervade all social work settings in some way, so it is imperative that we consider the degree to which human behavior theories address these issues. The Council on Social Work Education's recent statements of educational policies (1992, 2002, 2008, 2015) re-included the topics of religious diversity and spiritual development after a gap of more than 20 years. The current policy (2015) opposes discrimination toward and supports respect for diversity, including religion/spirituality. Accordingly, we examine the issues of spirituality in each chapter and give this special consideration in the chapters on systems theories, moral development, and transpersonal theories.

Further, respect for human diversity is central to our value base. This is an important area for theory analysis because most theories claim to be universal; few are. This presents a very specific set of problems when considering human behavior in general and human diversity in particular. Because most theorists write from their personal and cultural frame of reference, attempts to generalize are often problematic, to say the least. Given that the vast majority of commonly used human behavior theories have been classically authored by White, middle-to-upper-class, Western European and American men (most of whom are now dead), it is not surprising to find biases of race, gender, culture, religion, sexual orientation, and social class inherent in most of them. Although there have been corrective tendencies in recent years (many of which contain their own—albeit different—biases), human behavior theory continues to be dominated by the ideas of dead White European American men and their protégés.

Admittedly, we use the term *dead White men* both seriously and tongue-in-cheek to make a point. The issue here is not who authors a given theory, but rather, to whom the theory is applied—and the consequences of that application. People are often seen as deficient when they do not fit a theory's constructs (Gilligan, 1982; Howard & Scott, 1981; Robbins, 1984). And because we rarely question the validity of a well-accepted theory, we come to question the validity and worth of the person instead. The ideological nature of theory often creates serious constraints on our ability to appreciate differences that do not conform to our mainstream social norms.

In contrast to other helping professions, social work has a specific commitment to understanding empowerment and human strength at both the personal and political levels (Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991; Hartman, 1993; Lee, 2001; Saleebey, 2013; Simon, 1994b; Weick & Saleebey, 1995). Empowerment is a proactive response to personal and societal forces that oppress and restrict human potential and well-being. In social work, we are especially concerned about ways to assist people who experience systematic forms of discrimination, harassment, and oppression. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the implications of theories for political consciousness-raising, enhancing self-efficacy, and supporting collective action. This is closely related to the **strengths perspective**, which guides social work practice to build on clients' personal and community talents, strengths, and resources to achieve their aspirations.

The strengths perspective emphasizes the human capacity for resiliency, courage, strength in the face of adversity, ingenuity in accessing and creating resources, and the right of individuals to form their own aspirations and definitions of their situations. As a value orientation, the strengths perspective rejects models of pathology that are widely used in medical settings and in social science to describe oppressed groups and people with disabilities and other life challenges. **Pathologizing** oppressed and marginalized populations results in a focus on deficit, illness, and problems. It also distracts from structural issues of discrimination, oppression, and restriction of resources and opportunities that may be the underlying causes of individuals' difficulties. The strengths perspective is based on the assumption that people are most likely able to recover, grow, and develop when their personal strengths and environmental resources are recognized and supported (Rapp & Goscha, 2012; Saleebey, 2013; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989). Even when people identify challenges, troubles, and obstacles, social workers should not diminish them and their situations merely to diagnostic labels, problem preoccupations, or hopeless cases (Saleebey, 2016). The strengths perspective views all individuals and groups, regardless of their histories, as having value, capabilities, resources, skills, motivations, and dreams that must be considered when working with them such that they gain more control over their lives. This perspective offers a basis from which helpers become agents and allies of the group or individual, and from which the group or individual is treated with dignity and respect and is regarded as having special expertise (Weick & Saleebey, 1995, p. 148).

Empowerment and strengths perspectives not only caution us to beware of theories that pathologize or blame the victim but also challenge us to cull the insights from theories that are conducive to self-actualization and social justice. Therefore, throughout this book we examine the implications of theories as they relate to people of color, gender issues, sexual orientation, dynamics of class and poverty, religious and spiritual diversity, and other forms of human diversity.

Thus, in evaluating a theory's consistency with social work values we must pay specific attention to the way in which it addresses—or fails to address—issues related to health, well-being, diversity, empowerment, strengths, and resiliency.

4. What are the theory's philosophical underpinnings? All theories in the social sciences contain certain assumptions that are philosophical in nature and cannot be studied scientifically. According to Haworth (1984), any scientific venture in theory construction includes assumptions that are often implicit. We have already discussed that theories contain underlying values and ideological preferences. In philosophical terms, this is the **axiology** of the theory. Two other important philosophical components are: (1) **ontology**, pertaining to assumptions about the nature of human interaction and "being" in the world, and (2) **epistemology**, pertaining to assumptions about how knowledge is or should be generated. These philosophical foundations then guide methods for research and social work practice.

Ontological statements pertain to a philosophical position or belief about the basic nature of humans and human interaction. Prior to the advent of formalized theory, philosophers throughout the centuries engaged in endless discourse and debates about subjects such as the nature of truth, the nature of people, and the nature of society. According to Durant (1961), "Philosophy is a hypothetical interpretation of the unknown (as in metaphysics), or of the inexactly known (as in ethics or political philosophy) ..." (xxvi). As scientific reasoning replaced philosophical reasoning as the primary means for understanding human behavior, theorists (either consciously or unconsciously) incorporated philosophical assumptions, usually consistent with their personal beliefs, into their work. Thus, differences in theories are often a reflection of different philosophical assumptions or underpinnings.

For example, British philosopher Thomas Hobbes depicted human nature as basically self-serving and selfish; people were brutish loners in a primeval jungle. The popular phrase “looking out for number one” typifies this view. Because people were not innately cooperative, he believed that political coercion was necessary to prevent anarchy. By contrast, German philosopher Karl Marx believed human nature to be essentially altruistic. He saw people as basically giving beings who became corrupt when separated from the fruits of their labor (Israel, 1971). It is clear that the ontological assumptions of Marx are opposite to those of Hobbes. As we evaluate and compare theories, it is important to examine each theory’s underlying ontological assumptions. The following are some questions that you might ask yourself as you read each chapter:

1. Are people assumed to be basically good or bad? Moral, immoral, or amoral? Are they born that way? Is it possible to change from this condition? How?
2. Is behavior believed to be based primarily on biology and genetics (nature) or the environment (nurture)? Is one seen as more primary than the other?
3. Do people have free will? Or is their behavior believed to be determined by internal or external forces outside their control?
4. Are people seen as ill or deviant and in need of medical, psychological, and social intervention? Or are they seen as healthy and adaptive?
5. Are social relations portrayed as being basically competitive or cooperative? Is the “glue” of society and social life based on consensus or conflict?
6. Can society and social organization be explained through an understanding of individual behavior? Or can individual behavior be explained through an understanding of society? Which takes primacy?
7. What behaviors are assumed to be inherently desirable or undesirable? Normal or abnormal? Sick or healthy? Functional or dysfunctional?
8. Is the human being portrayed only as a material creature, composed and governed by biomechanical and environmental forces? Or is the human being understood in terms of transcendent, holistic, or even sacred qualities?

As we can see, the answers to most of these questions are largely value-based and cannot be determined by controlled observation and scientific study. While most theories do not address all of these questions, all theories are embedded with at least some type of ontological assumptions. It is especially important that we recognize this because philosophical assumptions are often at the root of both theories and their attendant ideology.

5. What are the methodological issues and evidence of empirical support? Numerous methodological assumptions and issues underlie every theory. *Epistemology*, which refers to the content and basis of knowledge and standards for knowing, is at the core of these assumptions. Two contrasting methodological assumptions, **positivism** and **constructionism**, have been the issue of numerous debates in the social and behavioral sciences.

Positivism, a term originally proposed by Auguste Comte, one of the founders of modern social science, stemmed from the ideas of Claude Henri de Rouvroy Saint-Simon, who believed that every social order had a corresponding ideology; Saint-Simon proposed that science was the basic ideology of industrial societies. Comte differentiated between phenomena that are knowable (such as the laws of physics, chemistry, and sociology) and unknowable (the existence of God, afterlife, and reincarnation). Phenomena that are knowable by humans can be understood by the method of positivism, which involves a scientific sequence of observation, formation of hypotheses, and experimentation. According to the positivistic approach, all human behavior can be understood and explained by this process.

Disputing this, proponents of constructionism argued that many human experiences (such as love, grief, perception, ideological orientations) are unique and subjective and consequently cannot be understood by objective observation and measurement. Edmund Husserl (1970), the first major author in this tradition, emphasized that human behavior could be described only by detailed observation to discover the structures of different types of human experiences.

From this debate between positivism and constructionism, two schools have emerged: One emphasizes rigorous measurement and experimentation, and the other calls for detailed description of subjective experiences. The positivists argue that any scientific venture must eventually come to terms with the problem of measurement and its use as a basis of comparison between study subjects. The constructionists (sometimes called constructivists) counter this by suggesting that it is the context and uniqueness of behavior that must be understood and that an emphasis on measurement leads to a loss of too much information.

At this point we must note that problems in epistemology are not just those of objective measurement versus detailed description. They also relate to who is conducting the study, from what interest and perspective it is being done, with what mind-set the subject is being observed, and why one subject is chosen over another. Why, for example, do most social scientists study colonized or oppressed peoples, their customs, and their institutions rather than the coercive and oppressive behaviors and policies of the colonizers? The choice of a subject is an epistemological concern, because choices are often based on cultural, social, economic, and political factors.

Further, there is a relationship between any given theory and the methodology it employs. It is sometimes difficult, however, to determine whether the theory's structure defines the methods to be used or if the methods used define the theory. When analyzing a theory, one must know what methods of investigation are implicit or explicit. Despite ongoing historical debate about the superiority of one method over the other, most social scientists now acknowledge that many ways of knowing are important in our study of human behavior (Thomas, 1979; Tyson, 1995). Although social work research has been largely rooted in the positivist paradigm, the constructionist perspective is now becoming evident in the social work literature (Payne, 2005; Rodwell, 1998; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988).

In addition, it is extremely important to know the degree to which a given theory has received empirical validation. Theories, by their very nature, are part of a scientific venture and thus are more than mere opinions, ideology notwithstanding. Further, according to Cohen (1989), "evaluating theories requires evidence, and the evaluation of evidence demands an evaluation of the methods by which the evidence was obtained" (p. 22). A critical analysis of theory, then, must also include both an empirical evaluation of the central concepts and an evaluation of the adequacy of the methods used.

Empirical evidence derives from direct experience gained through systematic inquiry, including qualitative, quantitative, historical, and phenomenological types of research. Theories are not only evaluated by research, they also offer suggestions for which types of research are most useful for the phenomena under consideration. For example, behaviorist theories are both derived from and advocates of experimental and quantitative research, in keeping with their materialist and causality-based philosophical assumptions.

Because a primary purpose of human behavior theory is to explain or predict behavior, we must also examine how good the theory actually is at explanation or prediction. There is a common misconception that in the natural (or hard) sciences, behavior can be explained or predicted 100% of the time. While this may be true of certain biological or physical structures, it is

rarely true of human beings. When explanation or prediction is accurate 100% of the time, it is referred to as **deterministic**. In contrast, when accurate less than 100% of the time, it is known as **probabilistic**.

There are two reasons that probabilistic explanation exists. First, it is sometimes not possible to specify all of the variables involved, and consequently, a certain amount of information is missing. Second, certain entities (such as a pair of rolling dice or humans in social contexts) tend to behave in a probabilistic manner—or ways that we can never fully predict or understand. Thus, to better understand human behavior, researchers often choose nonconforming (or deviant) cases for special study to learn why they behave differently.

Related to this, a basic question we must consider is whether the theory is applicable to all of the people being studied or to only some of them. Because probabilistic explanation applies less than 100% of the time, it generally applies only to properties of groups and is not necessarily generalizable to all individuals within that group. Properties of specific individuals, on the other hand, may or may not apply to other group members. However, there are some situations in which there are no observable differences between properties of individuals and properties of groups. In other words, there are no deviant or conforming cases. Given a specific group, all members of that group may share a certain behavior or trait; the behavior or trait of the individual is found in all group members. In this case, deterministic explanation applies because no differences exist.

Many human behavior theories are **heuristic**, meaning they are provisional but useful guides for understanding human behavior and for opening up avenues for exploration in research and practice. In this sense, even theories with concepts that cannot be tested empirically can still be useful. For example, the concept of the unconscious cannot be verified empirically. The unconscious cannot be directly observed or measured. Yet it is a very useful metaphorical construct for understanding certain aspects of psychodynamics. Likewise, the concept of human potential in humanistic theories is similar. Potential cannot be measured because it refers to a future possibility, not a present condition. However, the metaphor of human potential offers an optimistic, growth-oriented, strengths-based view of human behavior. So theories and concepts can also be evaluated for their heuristic value for research and practice. A theory's heuristic value relates to its ability to generate new lines of inquiry and knowledge.

We have presented some basic considerations for criteria that are necessary to empirically evaluate a theory. To determine whether a theory's central concepts and main hypotheses are scientifically well grounded, it is also necessary to evaluate the adequacy of the proposed methods, the degree to which it is supported by evidence, and the theory's explanatory and predictive power. If science is to inform practice, it is critical to be able to distinguish between what a theorist has claimed and what has actually been empirically demonstrated.

6. On what grounds does the theory base its appeal for acceptance? As we summarize each theory, an important consideration is the theory's appeal for acceptance. What leads us to choose one theory over another? What type of evidence do we need to convince us of a theory's worth? Theorists use different approaches in their appeal for acceptance of their theories. Their ideas about what constitutes a good explanation affect their selection of facts and words. Ultimately, whether a theory appeals to any individual is a personal matter. It is largely determined by its match or mismatch with the individual's convictions about the type of evidence that should be accepted as proof (Campbell, 1981; Thomas, 1985).

A person who believes that the subjective nature of experience is more important than quantifiable observations is not likely to accept behavioral theory. Likewise, a person who insists on

quantifiable observation is not likely to accept humanistic or existential theory. Thus, our choice of theories is a subjective process and is largely determined by our beliefs. Not surprisingly, we are much more likely to accept a theory that fits with our life experiences and worldview. It is important, therefore, to understand the basis of any theory's appeal.

AN AFTERTHOUGHT: PATHS TO HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

The establishment of knowledge through the use of scientific theory, as we have described, is derived primarily from Western European thought. By contrast, a sentiment often credited to Albert Einstein proposes: "At times, imagination provides a superior form of knowing than hypotheses-testing science." In social science, this matter was called to attention by conflict theorist C. Wright Mills and others. As we examine Buddhist, Hindu, or Islamic ways of knowing, we find that not all paths to human knowing are empirically based. Our discussion of transpersonal theory and Buddhist thought in Chapter 13 attests to this as does our discussion of social constructionism in Chapter 11. As we will see, an understanding of the self based on Eastern thought or on transcendental philosophy presents a very different approach from that of the Western empirical social scientists.

Summary

Theories are a basic tool in social work practice. They help us organize our thoughts, evaluate and interpret the world around us, and explain and predict human behavior. Theories, however, develop in a social, cultural, and historical context. Despite the fact that they are scientific in nature, theories are a product of social construction and consequently contain ideological underpinnings. The underlying assumptions and biases inherent in theories often lead to explanations of human behavior that are reductionistic and deterministic.

We believe it is essential to recognize that social work theory and practice are ideologically based. Our choice of theories (with their inherent ideologies) influences our definition of our clients, their situations, and the interventions we choose. Ideology also constructs the definition of the helping situation as it defines the parameters of the professional relationship, its legitimacy, and the role and status of both the social worker and the client.

As we begin to analyze the assumptions underlying our theories, we must be cognizant of these potential ideological biases. We must also understand the relationship between the power of theory to define reality and the impact this has on persons who do not share

in this reality. Quite simply, this often leads to negative stereotyping and labeling of persons who operate from a different framework. Their inability or reticence to act or develop appropriately (according to our theories) is often seen as problematic or pathological.

Finally, the biases that may be the most difficult for us to detect are those that relate to our taken-for-granted cultural norms. Most theory, by its very nature as a scientific endeavor, is permeated with Western value assumptions that we rarely think to question. Western values of individuality, mastery, capitalistic democracy, logic and rationality, self-development, a future time orientation, and the primacy (if not superiority) of the nuclear family structure are ingrained in us throughout childhood and later life socialization. Because these values play a significant role in our overall worldview, it is often difficult for us even to detect these cultural biases when they are incorporated into theories of human behavior (Howard & Scott, 1981; Triandis, 1990). It is our firm position that we must become aware of these biases if we are to serve our clients in ways that can lead to empowerment.

The cultural anthropologist Gregory Bateson popularized the expression that "the map is not the territory." Each theory is a map of human behavior

that suggests possible routes and goals of development and the life terrain through which we must pass. Like a road map, "there is nothing so practical as a good theory," as Kurt Lewin said, for helping social workers consider how to get from here to there in working with clients. But when we mistake the map for the territory, we make a grave error. A road map is not much use for a cross-mountain hike. For that, one needs a trail map, showing topography and water availability. Even when a car is guided by a satellite's global positioning system, the driver is not forewarned of an impending traffic accident. As Karl Popper said, "There is no theory that is not beset with problems." And perhaps more problematic, as Thyer warned, "There is nothing as harmful as a bad theory." We hope that this book helps readers

to identify the insights revealed by each theory as well as the important aspects of human behavior that are concealed or omitted. Although we firmly believe that one must be open to a variety of ways of knowing, it is equally important to not harm clients with theories that may be novel or popular, but repeatedly fail to hold up to scientific scrutiny.

In the chapters that follow, we present a broad base of human behavior theories from the social and behavioral sciences that includes a discussion of their historical context, key concepts, primary authors, and application to social work practice as well as a critical analysis as previously outlined. One of our primary goals is to encourage you, the reader, to engage in critical thinking about the theories you will use in practice.