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CONTEMPORARY HUMAN BEHAVIOR THEORY

A Critical Perspective for Social Work Practice

SUSAN P. ROBBINS | PRANAB CHATTERJEE
EDWARD R. CANDA | GEORGE S. LEIBOWITZ



NEW FOREWORD BY
BRENÉ BROWN

Fourth Edition

CONTEMPORARY HUMAN BEHAVIOR THEORY

A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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There is nothing so practical as a good theory.
—Kurt Lewin

There is no theory that is not beset with problems.
—Karl Popper

There is nothing as harmful as a bad theory.
—Bruce Thyer

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FOREWORD

There's no single word that strikes fear into the hearts and minds of social work students like the word *theory*. It sounds academic and inaccessible. And worse, theories feel so far removed from the passion that drives us to this profession. As a BSW and MSW student, I remember thinking, *I came to affect change, not to theorize about it.*

As a first-semester doctoral student, nothing scared me as much as theory. While I tried to play it cool, my disdain for what I called "the litany of dead, white guy theories" must have been obvious because during my second week of school, I got busted.

Two minutes after sitting down in my philosophy of science course my professor asked me how I got to school that morning. I could smell a set-up so I quickly answered, "In my car."

He smiled. "No. What route did you take?" he asked.

After delivering a detailed explanation of my route to my professor and my confused classmates, he paused and asked, "Why? Why did you take that route this morning? There must be five different ways to get here from your neighborhood."

I explained how my hacks and shortcuts saved me time and frustration in the Houston traffic. His response? "So, you have a theory on the best way to get to school on Tuesday mornings?"

There it was.

I laughed and said, "I guess that depends on how you define *theory*!" That's the moment I was introduced to this definition of theory—a definition from behavioral researcher Fred Kerlinger (1973) that would literally set the trajectory of my career. "A theory is a set of inter-related 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).

The lesson that day was simple: We operate from theories all day long. Theories inform everything from how we get to work in the morning to what we believe about a person's capacity for meaningful change. Sometimes we rely on theories developed by other people, and sometimes we develop our own set of concepts, definitions, and propositions to systematically explain what we see and believe.

The lesson was also powerful. Theory building is not the purview of men in white lab coats. I had as much right to construct and present theories as anyone else. And, I learned that I also had a responsibility to understand and make explicit the theories that informed how I understand the world, the clients I serve, and the social justice issues that drive my passion.

Dr. Susan Robbins was one of my professors in my fateful second year in the doctoral program. She introduced me to a world of theory that I didn't even know existed. It was a world of theories that reflected my reality, my experiences, and my passions. And, she empowered us to critically evaluate each of these theories and question how and why they were constructed.

The first edition of this book has long been my go-to reference for theory. In this edition (as well as each revision since then), Robbins, Chatterjee, Canda, and Leibowitz have continued to add greatly to our growing knowledge base of theory. Once you see yourself as a participant in theory construction and criticism rather than a passive consumer of other people's ideas,

things shift. Rather than seeing theory as something separate from what you love about the social work profession, it becomes the invitation and path to your passion.

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PREFACE

In revising this textbook for the fourth edition, we retained the overall structure of the first three editions and added new theory content that we believe is critical for social work practice in the 21st century. In addition to many chapter updates, exciting new additions to the theory base are:

- The addition of Social Capital Theory in Chapter 4
- New and expanded content on Wilber's full integral theory in Chapter 13
- Revised content on successful aging and gerotranscendence in Chapter 8
- New and expanded content on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons' development and empowerment in Chapters 4 and 8. Revised with gender identity affirming language
- A major revision of material on Phenomenology, Social Constructionism, and Hermeneutics in Chapter 11.
- Case vignettes and exercises for application to practice

There is no question that human behavior is complex. It is this very complexity that makes it difficult to design a single textbook that adequately covers the knowledge base necessary for courses or content in what has traditionally been the Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) curricular area. Most textbooks are based on either a social-systems perspective or a life-span development approach, although some have now attempted to incorporate a slightly broader range of theory while retaining an overall systemic or life-span approach. Books utilizing a social-systems perspective typically have been organized according to systems levels; thus, content on individuals, groups, families, organizations, institutions, and communities has been divided into separate chapters. In contrast, those texts utilizing a life-span approach have been organized the same way as life-span textbooks found in psychology, with each chapter reflecting a different stage of the life span. Although systems theory and developmental theory are important components of human behavior knowledge, we believe that by themselves, they reflect a rather narrow and individualistic definition of human behavior and an underlying ideology that is, at its heart, politically conservative.

We wrote this textbook with several purposes in mind. First, we hope to broaden the scope of our social-work knowledge base about human behavior. Rather than relying on the largely psychological (and traditional) approach to human behavior that utilizes a person-in-environment framework, we have adopted a broader definition of human behavior that focuses on the person *and* the environment, giving equal focus to each.

Second, we hope to expand our theoretical base in understanding human behavior. We have chosen a multidisciplinary theoretical approach that incorporates relevant theory from a variety of social and human science disciplines that have traditionally been omitted from most HBSE textbooks.

Third, we hope to illuminate the fact that *all* knowledge about human behavior is socially constructed and thus is inherently value-laden and ideological. As such, our knowledge base reflects the values, concerns, and ideologies of not only the authors constructing theories and studies but also the prevalent values, concerns, and ideologies of the existing social order (historical or contemporary).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we hope to encourage critical thinking about the knowledge and theories that we choose for practice. To accomplish this, we believe that it is important to use consistent standards to evaluate each theory and to provide a discussion and critique of alternative views and an analysis of the social, ideological, and economic structures of society that impact individual problems. Most often, critical thought and analysis of this nature have been omitted from human behavior textbooks in social work.

Above all, we hope that this book will be intellectually challenging to BSW, MSW, and PhD students alike and that it will encourage you, the reader, to question some of your most deeply held assumptions about why people behave the way they do and to better understand the role of various influences on human behavior.

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The Nature of Theories

1

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