



empowerment series

FIFTH EDITION

# Human Behavior in the Macro Social Environment

An Empowerment Approach to Understanding  
Communities, Organizations, and Groups

Karen K. Kirst-Ashman ♦ Grafton H. Hull, Jr.



# Council on Social Work Education's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* by Chapter



The Council on Social Work Education's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* requires all social work students to develop the nine competencies listed below. The Council also identifies 31 related component behaviors that help operationalize the nine competencies. The competencies and component behaviors are listed below, along with the book chapters that address them in whole or part. In addition to the information shown below, multicolor icons throughout chapters and "Competency Notes" at the end of each chapter help identify these connections.

Competencies and Component Behaviors The 9 Competencies and 31 Component Behaviors (EPAS, 2015):		Chapter(s) Where Referenced:
<b>Competency 1</b>	<b>Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior:</b>	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13
	a. Make ethical decisions by applying the standards of the NASW <i>Code of Ethics</i> , relevant laws and regulations, models for ethical decision making, ethical conduct of research, and additional codes of ethics as appropriate to context	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13
	b. Use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations	1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
	c. Demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior; appearance; and oral, written, and electronic communication	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
	d. Use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes	
	e. Use supervision and consultation to guide professional judgment and behavior	1, 7
<b>Competency 2</b>	<b>Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice:</b>	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13
	a. Apply and communicate understanding of the importance of diversity and difference in shaping life experiences in practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels	2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13
	b. Present themselves as learners and engage clients and constituencies as experts of their own experiences	2, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13
	c. Apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse clients and constituencies	2, 3, 7, 12, 13
<b>Competency 3</b>	<b>Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice:</b>	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13
	a. Apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels	1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13
	b. Engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice	4, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13
<b>Competency 4</b>	<b>Engage in Practice-informed Research and Research-informed Practice:</b>	1
	a. Use practice experience and theory to inform scientific inquiry and research	1, 11, 12
	b. Apply critical thinking to engage in analysis of quantitative and qualitative research methods and research findings	
	c. Use and translate research evidence to inform and improve practice, policy, and service delivery	1, 11, 13





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EMPOWERMENT SERIES

# HUMAN BEHAVIOR IN THE MACRO SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

An Empowerment Approach to Understanding  
Communities, Organizations, and Groups

FIFTH EDITION



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University of Wisconsin – Whitewater Professor Emerita

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Australia • Brazil • Mexico • Singapore • United Kingdom • United States

***Human Behavior in the Macro  
Social Environment: An Empowerment  
Approach to Understanding Communi-  
ties, Organizations, and Groups, Fifth  
Edition***  
**Karen K. Kirst-Ashman and Grafton  
H. Hull, Jr.**

Product Director: Marta Lee-Perriard

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Marketing Manager: Zina Craft

Photo and Text Researcher:  
Lumina Datamatics LTD.

Art Director: Vernon Boes

Production Management and  
Composition: MPS Limited

Text Designer: Lisa Delgado

Cover Designer: Lisa Delgado

Cover Image: Daniel Truta/EyeEm/  
Getty Images

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2017962368

Student Edition:  
ISBN: 978-1-305-38950-2  
Loose-leaf Edition:  
ISBN: 978-1-337-56858-6

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Printed in the United States of America  
Print Number: 01      Print Year: 2018

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*To Susan and Jim Spielman, and Gary and Linda Kirst—with much love  
To Patrick, Tatiana, Gregory, Ilsa, Marcus, and Michael Hull and Savannah  
and Jonah Hurn, grandchildren all.*

# About the Authors

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Dr. Hull has taught at Fort Knox Community College, Morningside College, the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater, the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, Missouri State University, Indiana University Northwest, and the University of Utah. He has been a faculty member, department chair, program director, director of a school of social work, and special assistant to the senior vice president for accreditation. He has taught BSW, MSW, and PhD courses in social work.

Professional activities include serving as president of the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD); as site visitor, nominations committee member, accreditation commissioner, and board member of the Council on Social Work Education; and as president of the Wisconsin Council on Social Work Education and Missouri Consortium of Social Work Education Programs. He also served as a board member of the Indiana Association for Social Work Education, and the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research.

Dr. Hull has been a consultant to over 50 social work programs in the United States and Canada and has served as a member of the editorial board or consulting editor for the *Journal of Social Work Education*, *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, *Journal of Teaching*

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His scholarship includes nine books in social work coauthored with esteemed colleagues, multiple book chapters, and more than two dozen publications in social work journals. He was a founder and principal in the Baccalaureate Educational Assessment Project (Now SWEAP). Dr. Hull's honors include the Mary Shields McPhee Memorial Award for Faculty Excellence in Research (Utah), Significant Lifetime Achievement Award (BPD), Social Work Educator of the Year (Wisconsin CSWE), President's Medal of Honor (BPD), and multiple certifications of appreciation and achievement for community and professional service. His biography is included in *Who's Who in America* and *Who's Who in the World*.





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# Preface

Focusing on empowerment and stressing critical thinking, this book explores human behavior in task groups, organizations, and communities. The intent is to provide a sound knowledge base for understanding how the macro social environment works and make it easier for students to apply theory in subsequent practice courses. Theories and major concepts concerning communities, organizations, and groups are explained. A strengths perspective, empowerment, and resiliency are underlying themes throughout the book. Applications of how macro systems operate and impact human behavior are examined. Critical thinking questions are posed throughout to stimulate students' understanding of content and exploration of issues. Professional ethics are accentuated throughout in *Focus on Ethics* segments. Human diversity is consistently emphasized and highlighted. Content reflects the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) requirements for accreditation. A chapter on social justice and the global community stresses the need to advocate for social and economic justice and human rights at the international and global levels.

Numerous case examples are presented of how communities, organizations, and groups can enhance people's optimal health, well-being, and quality of life. These include how macro systems affect the lives and behavior of people of color, women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) people, people in spiritual communities, older adults, and people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.

A major concern in social work education today is the strong tendency for students to veer away from thinking about how communities and organizations affect human behavior. Instead, students are frequently drawn to the perceived psychological drama and intensity of more clinically oriented practice with individuals, families, and treatment groups. This book relates content about the macro social environment directly to generalist social work practice. Applications of content to practice settings are integrated throughout. Students should clearly understand why a macro focus is a necessity in practice, in addition to their acquisition of micro and mezzo skills.

This book is especially written for undergraduate and graduate courses in human behavior and the social environment (HBSE) that incorporate content on communities, organizations, and task groups. It can be used independently to teach HBSE from a macro perspective, or in conjunction with other textbooks that include content on biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development throughout the life course. The intent here is to emphasize the dynamic interaction among systems in the macro social environment and provide breadth and depth of insight into the functioning of communities, organizations, and task groups.

A major thrust of this text is to present the material in a readable, interesting fashion. It uses numerous case applications and jargon-free language so that the reader can readily grasp theory and concepts. The three adjectives the author hopes best describe this text are *relevant*, *practical*, and *readable*. The macro social environment and the social forces acting upon it are clearly defined. Theory and major concepts are presented in a straightforward and thought-provoking manner. Applications to actual macro practice situations are emphasized throughout, as is the importance of client system empowerment. Concepts that students can readily understand, such as power, leadership, and interpersonal dynamics in macro settings, are stressed to enhance students' ability to grasp their relevance and practical significance.

In summary, the overall intent is to provide a dynamic, interesting, and relevant social work perspective on human behavior in the macro social environment. The authors strive to enhance students' understanding of social work values, develop their ability to empathize with people's situations and conditions in the macro environment, critically think about issues, and help them focus on the need for macro change in local, organizational, neighborhood, community, international (involving designated nations), and global (involving the entire world) contexts. Students should be able to relate these values and this knowledge to how social workers make assessments in real practice situations. They should have a glimpse into the vivid and fascinating macro environment in which social workers practice.

## The Relationship between Content and EPAS Competencies and Practice Behaviors

It has been established that this book is oriented to following CSWE's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS).<sup>1,2</sup> The entire book addresses EPAS guidelines for content regarding human behavior and the social environment, as follows:

**Educational Policy 6a, 7b, 8b, and 9b** each involve “applying knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in interventions with clients and constituencies” to the steps in the planned change model of Engagement, Assessment, Intervention, and Evaluation and this book helps ensure that students have the requisite knowledge to demonstrate these competency components. Moreover, the EPAS notes that “social workers understand theories of human behavior and the social environment, and critically evaluate and apply this knowledge” throughout our work with all size systems.

The EPAS (2015) also requires that students demonstrate a wide range of competencies that encompass the ability to “demonstrate ethical and professional behavior, engage diversity and difference in practice, advance human rights and

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<sup>1</sup>Please note that this content addresses standards posed in the EPAS. In no way does it claim to verify compliance with standards. Only the Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation can make those determinations.

<sup>2</sup>Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). (2015). *Educational policy and accreditation standards (EPAS)*. Alexandria, VA: Author.



social, economic, and environmental justice, engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice, engage in policy practice,” and engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate their practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Content on all of these topics is presented in this text.

Altogether, the EPAS has identified 31 component behaviors that operationalize 9 core competencies, which are critical for professional practice. These competencies are reflected in the content just summarized. (See <http://www.cswe.org/> for access to the full EPAS document.) Accredited programs must demonstrate that they are teaching students to be proficient in these competencies and their associated component behaviors. Students require knowledge to develop skills and become competent. The intent here is to indicate what chapter content and knowledge coincides with the development of specific competencies and component behaviors. (This ultimately is intended to assist in a social work program’s accreditation process.)



**EP 1**

To establish the linkage between EPAS competencies/component behaviors and chapter content, “**helping hands**” icons of two hands embracing a sun are located next to content throughout the book. Each icon is labeled with the competencies and component behaviors related to the content. For example, an icon might be labeled EP (Educational Policy) 1, which is the competency “Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior” (CSWE, 2015). (See the icon on the left-hand side of this paragraph.)

The EPAS document uses bullets to identify the component behaviors related to competencies. For clarity, we have alphabetized in lowercase the component behaviors under each competency to replace the bullets. For example, EP 2 has three bullets, and for convenience sake we have labeled them EP 2a, 2b, and 2c in this book. These bullets are considered collectively and have been alphabetized from EP 1a to EP 9d. Whenever we address the competencies and component behaviors, an appropriate icon will appear on the page.

For all icons, **Competency Notes** are provided at the end of each chapter. These Competency Notes, which follow the competencies’ order in the EPAS, explain the relationship between chapter content and CSWE competencies and component behaviors. The notes also list page numbers where icons are located in the book, and this content is discussed.

A summary chart of the icons’ locations in all chapters and their respective competencies and component behaviors is placed in the inside front covers of the book.

## Changes and New Additions

The book continues to link content to EPAS competencies and component behaviors using the most recent CSWE 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). Overall, content has been updated to reflect changes at the national governmental level and key information on state and local actions affecting human behavior. Material on environmental justice has been added. Chapter openings have been changed by placing revised Learning Objectives at the beginning of the chapter. As needed, portions have been revised to increase clarity and provide additional examples of concepts. Callouts have been added in each chapter to identify content relevant to chapter learning objectives. Specific content has then been added in the following respective chapters:

## Chapter 1

- Addition of brief case examples of typical situations social worker may encounter that reflect macro issues in human behavior

## Chapter 2

- Addition of definition for environmental justice
- Addition of example of oppression from the 2016 presidential campaign

## Chapter 3

- Addition of example of the importance of group cohesion from the 2016 presidential campaign
- Update of the usefulness of cognitive restructuring for specific problems

## Chapter 4

- New example on how barriers to successful teamwork must be addressed
- Expanded list of characteristics of effective teams

## Chapter 5

- Additional examples of proprietary or for-profit agencies
- Example of organizational culture becoming a problem

## Chapter 6

- New examples of mission statements for social services agency
- More discussion of faith-based social services
- Discussion of NIMBY within the context of social service organizations in a community
- New definition of managed care
- Comparison of US health care system with those of other nations
- More discussion of managed care trends in the United States

## Chapter 7

- Discussion and example of a climate of trust and openness issue
- Expanded list of worker's expectations for supervisors
- Discussion of environmental justice in a new Highlight

## Chapter 8

- Additional material on the benefits of diversity in an organization
- Updated statistics on discrepancies in pay for women in the workplace
- New example of TQM in social services

## Chapter 9

- New examples of potential community change activities for social workers
- New examples of situations with blurred boundaries within communities and the concept of sanctuary cities

- Additional perspectives on spirituality and spiritual communities
- Updated information on population characteristics and trends in rural areas

## **Chapter 10**

- Additional examples of the power of youth
- New examples of using the Internet for social change
- Additional information on asset mapping and environmental influences on communities

## **Chapter 11**

- Expanded list of empowerment activities that can be undertaken by neighborhood residents
- Examples of situations where neighborhood groups can assist other residents
- New examples of services provided by neighborhood centers in urban centers
- New examples of neighborhood community building projects

## **Chapter 12**

- Additional examples of empowerment projects undertaken by racial and ethnic groups
- Example of intersectionality of race and religion in debate over immigration
- Discussion of Black Lives Matter and police violence
- Reorganization of chapter to first identify populations-at-risk and then discuss new empowerment examples
- More examples of current discrimination against LGBTQ community members
- Updated information on people with developmental disabilities and physical impairments

## **Chapter 13**

- New examples of globalization and the interconnectedness of the world
- Examples of how actions in one country impact economic conditions in others
- Introduction of iatrogenic effects concept
- Discussion of definitions of poverty
- More discussion of immigration and immigration rates to the United States
- Discussion of sustainability in a global society

As was just described, “Helping Hands” icons are incorporated throughout the book that link content with EPAS competencies and component behaviors. “At a Glance” boxes are included periodically to summarize theories and other more complicated issues. Content has been thoroughly updated throughout and intermittently reorganized to enhance clarity.

## Chapter Learning Objectives

Also note that each chapter in the book begins with learning objectives. These are reiterated at the end of each chapter with a summary of relevant content. Exam questions available in the supplementary resources are linked to the attainment of specific chapter learning objectives. The intent is to assist in demonstrating and articulating the acquisition of knowledge and attainment of competencies identified in accreditation standards.

## Supplement Package

Note that the supplements include the Practice Behaviors Workbook, which contains dozens of classroom exercises related to the book's content. These exercises are intended to enhance students' knowledge base of human behavior in the macro social environment. Most of the exercise objectives are intended to comply with required competencies cited in the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2015). (Please note that in no way do these exercises claim to *verify* compliance with EPAS standards. Only the Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation can make those determinations.) Rather, the exercises are designed to help provide potential means of measuring various competencies related to human behavior and the social environment.

## MindTap

MindTap®, a digital teaching and learning solution, helps students be more successful and confident in the course—and in their work with clients. MindTap guides students through the course by combining the complete textbook with interactive multimedia, activities, assessments, and learning tools. Readings and activities engage students in learning core concepts, practicing needed skills, reflecting on their attitudes and opinions, and applying what they learn. Videos of client sessions illustrate skills and concepts in action, while case studies ask students to make decisions and think critically about the types of situations they'll encounter on the job. Helper Studio activities put students in the role of the helper, allowing them to build and practice skills in a nonthreatening environment by responding via video to a virtual client. Instructors can rearrange and add content to personalize their MindTap course, and easily track students' progress with real-time analytics. And, MindTap integrates seamlessly with any learning management system.

## Online Instructor's Manual and Test Bank

The online instructor's manual contains a variety of resources to aid instructors in preparing and presenting text material in a manner that meets their personal preferences and course needs. It presents chapter-by-chapter suggestions and resources to enhance and facilitate learning. The manual includes an introduction, chapter outlines/objectives, chapter strategies, supplementary readings, and a test bank featuring multiple-choice, matching, and essay questions.

## PowerPoint® Slides

These vibrant Microsoft PowerPoint® lecture slides for each chapter assist you with your lecture by providing concept coverage using images, figures, and tables directly from the textbook!

## Online Curriculum Quick Guide

The Instructor's Online Curriculum Quick Guide correlates the core text and accompanying Practice Behaviors Workbook to the EPAS 2015 requirements. The Quick Guide is designed to assist faculty and their social work departments in monitoring the implementation of the EPAS 2015 competencies and component behaviors. The Quick Guide details where in the text content is located on the 41 practice behaviors and provides a table that identifies where the Dynamic Case Exercises align with those practice behaviors.

## Acknowledgments

Karen Kirst-Ashman wishes to express her heartfelt appreciation to Nick Ashman, who cooked for and supported her throughout the writing process. Special thanks and appreciation go to Susan Spielman, who carefully and conscientiously edited and significantly improved the content of this book.

Grafton H. Hull Jr. would like to thank his wife, Jannah Mather, for her support and patience in revising this edition of the text and to Dr. Dena Ned, University of Utah College of Social Work, for her helpful suggestions in Chapter 12. The authors also express special gratitude to Julie Martinez, product manager; Alexander Hancock, associate content developer; and Ali Balchunas, product assistant, for their creativity, enthusiastic help, and thoughtful support. Thanks also to Karen Thomson and Sandra Wenham, who did excellent work while assisting her. Many thanks to Rita Jaramillo, senior content project manager, for her careful oversight of the production process.

The author would also like to thank the following reviewers of the fifth edition of this book for their help and input.

Lorraine Marais  
*Hawaii Pacific University*

Kelly Reath  
*East Tennessee State University*

Karen Martin  
*Eastern Kentucky University*

Pam Clary  
*Missouri Western State University*

Dory Quinn  
*Pittsburg State University*



# 1 | Introduction to Human Behavior in the Macro Social Environment



Social workers can address important social issues in the macro social environment.

## **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

After reading this chapter you should be able to ...

- 1-1 Define and explain the macro social environment.
- 1-2 Describe the ecosystems theory as a useful conceptual framework for understanding the macro social environment, and discuss relevant concepts derived from systems theory and the ecological perspective.
- 1-3 Discuss people's involvement with multiple systems in the macro social environment.
- 1-4 Describe generalist practice and explain the relationship between some of its major concepts and the macro social environment.
- 1-5 Define critical thinking and discuss its use in generalist practice.
- 1-6 Discuss critical thinking questions that will be raised throughout the book.
- 1-7 Identify differences between historical approaches to social work practice in the macro social environment and contemporary macro practice.

*A social worker employed by a large public social services department hears increasing numbers of complaints from clients about drug houses popping up in their residential neighborhoods. The worker identifies clients and other concerned citizens in the communities and organizes a community meeting. She then assists community residents in formulating a plan to band together, identify drug house locations, and establish a procedure to report such houses to the authorities.*

- *The main tasks of a foster care unit are to assess potential foster parent applicants, monitor placement, and manage cases as they move in and out of foster care, and train foster parents in parenting and behavior management skills. The unit social workers hold biweekly meetings where they discuss how to improve agency service provision. The workers take turns organizing the meetings and running the discussions.*
- *A social worker employed by a neighborhood center determines that the professionals working with various adolescent clients within the community are not communicating with each other. For example, school social workers have no established procedure for conveying information to protective services workers, who in turn do not communicate readily with probation and parole workers. This is despite the fact that most of these professionals are working with many of the same clients. The neighborhood-center social worker decides to pull together representatives from the various involved agencies and establish more clearly defined communication channels.*
- *A social worker employed by a large private family-services agency specializes in international adoptions, especially those involving countries in the former Soviet Union. He discovers that many adoptive children are experiencing health problems resulting from early nutritional deprivation. The worker feels that the problem goes beyond one or two cases, and reflects a serious pattern. No referral process is in place to automatically assess adoptive children and refer them to needed resources, including designated medical specialists. The worker begins to establish a systematic process for assessment and referral.*
- *A school social worker notices that during the past two years, all of the students expelled from the school were African American when less than one-half of the school population is composed of African American students. She also notices a similar disproportionate pattern with other disciplinary actions meted out by the school system. He considers the most effective way of addressing this problem and eliminating what appears to be racial discrimination.*
- *A social worker at a public assistance agency is terribly troubled by the conditions of the agency's waiting room for clients and by the tedious process required for clients' intakes. She explores the issue, develops a proposed plan for improvement, and makes an appointment to speak with the agency's executive director about it.*
- *A local charitable funding organization decides to cut off its funding contribution to a Planned Parenthood agency that has three satellite clinics in addition to its larger, centrally located main clinic.<sup>1</sup> The result would be a severe*

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<sup>1</sup> **Planned Parenthood** agencies assist people in making decisions about pregnancy and promote birth control and contraception.



*cutback in services, including the closure of at least two of its satellite clinics. Many clients would find it difficult if not impossible to receive adequate services. A social work counselor at one of the clinics, with the support of her supervisor, gathers facts to support her argument that funding is necessary and arranges a meeting with the funding organization's leaders to discuss the cuts and try to persuade these leaders to change their minds.*

- *A juvenile probation officer is distressed by a proposed legislative action to delete a vocational training program for juvenile offenders because of its expense. He talks to other workers and administrators in his state agency, and gathers facts and statistics that support the program's cost-effectiveness. He then begins calling and writing involved legislators and sets up a meeting with the chairperson of the legislative committee that recommended the program's deletion. Additionally, he contacts other concerned social workers and encourages them to participate in similar activities.*
- *A group of community residents approach a social worker about starting a Neighborhood Watch program.<sup>2</sup> The worker provides them with both encouragement and some information about how to go about it.*
- *The city is proposing to create a landfill within a few blocks of a low-income neighborhood, and the residents are concerned about the impact on their quality of life and the safety of their children. A social worker notes that the proposal is yet another example of poorer areas being further blighted by government and business decisions and decides to help the residents fight city hall.*

None of the vignettes just described involves direct service to clients. Yet, all are examples of social workers undertaking necessary activities as part of their daily role in providing effective service. Each scenario describes how social workers can help people within the context of larger macro environments, namely, organizations and communities. Generalist social work is much more than working with individual clients and families. It also is working in and with larger systems to pursue social, economic, and environmental justice.

People do not function in a void. They interact dynamically on many levels, assuming structured behavior patterns and having active involvement in various interpersonal relationships. Mary Beth is a sister, a mother, an aunt, a member of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), a Republican, a member of St. Mary and St. Antonious Coptic Orthodox Church, and a dentist, all at the same time. Understanding everything about human behavior, with all its complexity, is a vast task.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) that accredits social work programs requires that students “apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in interventions with clients and constituencies.” This is an acknowledgment that people live in many social systems and that these systems can promote or block people from attaining and maintaining health and overall well-being.

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<sup>2</sup> *Neighborhood Watch* programs involve neighborhood residents coming together and making a commitment to prevent crime in their neighborhood. They devise a system for observing any suspicious behavior, especially on the part of strangers, and for alerting the proper authorities in order to deter crime. Members also usually educate new people moving into the neighborhood about the program and publicize that the program exists via window decals and signs.

The intent is to provide a foundation so that social workers can practice and intervene with systems of all sizes. Thus, social workers must understand multiple theories and frameworks to assess individuals, groups, families, organizations, and communities.

Social workers practice *in agency organizational settings* to help clients *who live in communities*. The work environments of social work practitioners provide the structure and resources allowing them to help clients. A healthy organizational work environment permits social workers to function effectively and get things done for clients. An unhealthy work environment (e.g., one with few resources, poor morale, or policies not supportive of clients) interferes with social workers' performance and their potential to assist clients. Clients, in turn, live in communities that enjoy various degrees of prosperity and offer their citizens diverse levels of resources, support, and safety. Social workers must understand and negotiate the mazes of these macro environments in order to do their jobs effectively.

This book focuses on understanding human behavior in the *macro* social environment. How do communities, organizations, and groups serve as the background for human behavior? How do individuals and macro systems reciprocally influence each other? How do these organizations and communities operate to keep themselves and society going? What are the internal environments of communities, organizations, and the groups within them like? Exactly how and why do the answers to these questions affect how social workers can do their jobs?

Several terms reflect the meaning of *macro*, including large scale; affecting many people; emphasis on social, political, and economic forces; and a focus on community and organizations. In addition, we all live in a global community where actions occurring elsewhere can have profound implications across the world. For example, a war occurring in the Middle East forces people to become refugees because their homeland is destroyed by one or both sides in the dispute. These refugees become a challenge to the humanitarian values of other nations wanting to provide services, supplies, and a safe environment. If the other countries offer asylum or admittance to the refugees it will likely result in increased financial cost and may spark prejudice and discrimination within their own citizens. Failing to help creates a situation where more people are injured or killed trying to survive in refugee camps while the war further destroys the country.

Another example of how the global community produces challenges is through global warming. Most environmental scientists see global warming as a problem that is caused by, or contributed to, by human action. Protecting Earth from our continued influence on the environment is not just a problem for a specific portion of the planet, although poorer countries will be hurt the most. If predictions hold true, the rise of water levels from melting glaciers and related changes will result in communities across the globe being submerged under seawater. These include over 60 million residents of China, 20 million in India, 12 million in the United States, and 18 million in Japan (World Economic Forum, 2015). Other effects of global warming include droughts, more storms, rising temperatures, and an increase in wildfires, flooding, and landslides in unlikely places. Social workers must be aware of the kinds of difficulties that environmental issues can produce for the most vulnerable people, not just the clients we serve. We are all in the boat together.

It is social workers' responsibility to seek changes in the macro social environment that improve services, increase resources for clients and citizens, and change policies to implement improvements. This contrasts with a *micro* perspective, which emphasizes the actions and personal issues of individual clients. Micro practice skills focus on interventions with individuals that help them solve their problems. However, even individual problems may be caused or exacerbated by conditions in other systems such as the family, organization or community.

Communities, organizations, and the task groups functioning within them are important in understanding human behavior because they consist of individuals. Comprehending the nuances of behavior involves not only the psychological makeup of individuals and the interpersonal dynamics of intimate relationships, but also the interaction of these individuals with all the macro systems with which they're in contact.

## In This Book

Note that “helping hands” icons are placed throughout the chapter to highlight information and skills important for attaining the nine core competencies and component behaviors designated by the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). *Competencies* are basic capabilities involving social work knowledge, skills, and values that can be demonstrated and measured by component behaviors. Competencies reflect more general expectations for proficient social workers. *Component behaviors*, by contrast, are measurable actions that demonstrate the application of social work knowledge, skills, and values for effective social work practice. These behaviors are more specific and are used to operationalize and measure competency.

Students require knowledge to develop skills and become competent. The intent here is to specify what chapter content and knowledge coincides with the development of specific competencies and component behaviors. (This ultimately is intended to assist in a social work program's accreditation process.)

Throughout each chapter, icons call attention to the location of EPAS-related content. Each icon identifies what competency or component behavior is relevant by specifying the designated Educational Policy (EP) reference number beneath it. “Competency Notes” are provided at the end of each chapter that describe how EPAS competencies and component behaviors are related to designated content in the chapter. You might observe that the EPAS document lists component behaviors as bulleted items under each of the nine core competencies. To clarify the “competency notes” at the end of each chapter, the bulleted component behaviors have been alphabetized under each competency. Component behaviors are alphabetized both under the icons placed throughout the book and in the “competency notes” cited in each chapter.

The EPAS competencies and component behaviors are summarized in the inside cover of this book. The chart also indicates in which chapters icons for specific competencies and component behaviors are located throughout the book. In addition, the book includes several items designed to assist learning by providing examples, questions, scenarios, and summaries of materials. These include Highlights, At a Glance, Focus on Ethics, and Critical Thinking Questions.

## What Is the Macro Social Environment? LO 1-1



EP 6a, 7b,  
8b, 9b

The **social environment** is the sum total of social and cultural conditions, circumstances, and human interactions that encompass human beings. The *macro* social environment, for our purposes, is the configuration of communities, organizations, and groups within the latter that are products of social, economic, and political forces and social institutions. The following breaks down the definition of the macro social environment into various facets and explains what each means.

### Communities

The macro social environment involves communities, organizations, and groups and how these systems affect people. A **community** is “a number of people who have something in common that connects them in some way and that distinguishes them from others” (Homan, 2016, p. 10). The concept of community with which you’re probably most familiar involves geographic areas. People in geographic communities, of course, share the common variable of location. A geographic community has a huge impact on its residents’ quality of life, accessible resources, available role models, and life opportunities. For example, consider the geographic community you come from. How has that community affected you, and how your life has progressed? How would you describe that community? Critical Thinking Questions 1-1 encourages you to think about the types of variables that characterize and differentiate geographical communities. (A subsequent section of this chapter will discuss the concept of critical thinking more thoroughly.)

In addition to geographic areas based on location, communities may also involve groups of people who have similar interests or who identify with each other. For example, people with degrees in social work who practice in the field are part of the professional social work community. There are communities involving scuba divers, hikers, bikers, Corvette clubs, Christmas ornament collectors, community theater groups, and any number of other groups of people who share something in common. Some communities are based on sexual orientation. Spiritual or religious communities include people who believe in the same doctrine and/or belong to the same religious denomination. Ethnic, racial, and cultural communities include people who have a similar background based on those variables. Later chapters discuss various aspects of communities, including theories, community empowerment, and neighborhood empowerment.

### Organizations

Another facet of the macro social environment concerns organizations. Various organizations exist within the community context. **Organizations** are “(1) social entities that (2) are goal directed, (3) are designed as deliberately structured and coordinated activity systems, and (4) are linked to the external environment” (Daft, 2016, p. 13). In other words, organizations are structured groups of people who come together to work toward some mutual goal and perform established work activities that are divided among various units. Organizations have a clearly defined membership in terms of knowing who is in and who is out.

Think of the organizations around you. They all are clearly defined entities made up of people with structured roles that pursue designated purposes or goals.

## Critical Thinking Questions 1-1



EP 1b,  
7a, 8

How would you describe the geographic community you come from? Think about the following aspects (that represent only some of the variables characterizing such communities) (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2018):

- *Rural or urban setting.* Would you characterize your home community as being in the country, a small town, a medium-sized city, a major metropolis, or a suburb of a bigger city?
- *Population density.* How many people live in your community of origin? Would you describe the area as being spread out, crowded, or something between the two?
- *General standard of living.* How would you describe the social class of people living in the community? Poor? Middle class? Fairly well-to-do? Wealthy?
- *Housing.* What are the residents' homes like? Do most residents own their own property, or do they rent houses or apartments? How would you describe the quality of the homes? Older? Newer? Run down? Well kept? Are dwellings bunched together and cramped, or do homes have spacious yards? Does adequate affordable housing exist to meet community residents' needs?
- *Available resources.* To what extent are hospitals, parks, police and fire protection, garbage collection, and shopping readily available? Are there services and resources accessible for people in need, including shelters for battered women, crisis intervention hotlines, food pantries, counseling, and other social services?
- *Spiritual opportunities.* Are there churches and religious organizations in the community? How many? To what extent do community residents pursue spiritual involvement?
- *Education.* How would you characterize the educational system in your home community? Is it generally considered "good," "effective," "poor," or "substandard"? How does it compare with educational systems in neighboring communities? How would you describe the education you received there?
- *Other factors.* What other aspects of your home community are important to you, and why?
- *Summary impression.* When you think of your home community, what words first come to mind? How would you describe it to a complete stranger? What would you emphasize? Was it a generally happy, pleasant place? Or was it hostile, dangerous, and impoverished?

There are many examples of organizations. Businesses are organizations that have goals of production, or sales and profit. Each person working for the business has a structured role<sup>3</sup> and responsibilities (e.g., as employee, supervisor, or manager). The schools you attended are a type of organization aimed at providing young

<sup>3</sup> A *role* is a culturally expected behavior pattern for a person having a specified status or being involved in a designated social relationship.

people with education. Students, teachers, and administrators all had defined roles and expectations. Churches, mosques, and synagogues are organizations seeking to serve their members' spiritual needs. Your college or university is also a type of organization with the ultimate goal of providing you with an advanced education. Later chapters explore different facets of organizations and how they can operate to benefit or detract from clients', citizens', and employees' best interests, health, and well-being.

**Organizations Providing Social Services** Especially relevant to social work are organizations that provide social services. **Social services** include the work that social work practitioners and other helping professionals perform in organizations for the benefit of clients. Goals include improving people's physical and mental health, enhancing their quality of life, increasing autonomy and independence, supporting and strengthening families, and helping people and larger systems improve their functioning in the macro social environment.

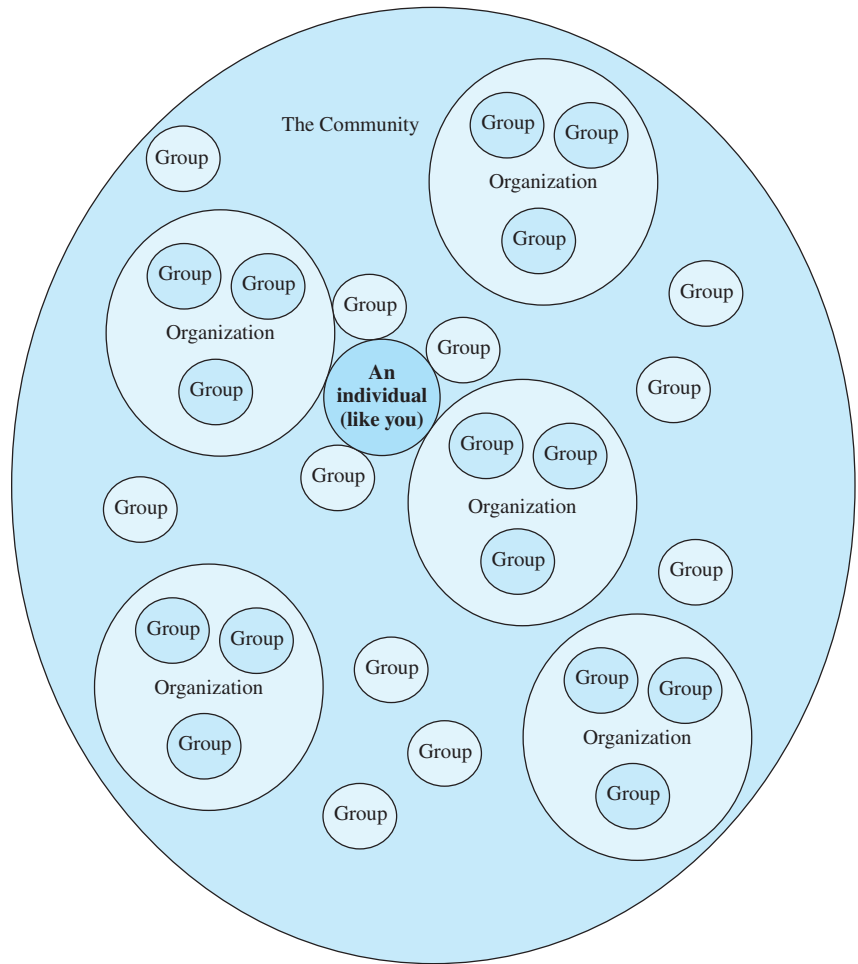
That is quite a mouthful. In essence, social services include the wide range of activities that social workers perform in their goal of helping people solve problems and improve their personal well-being. Social services can be provided to people from all economic levels and include resources and activities, such as counseling, child protection, residential treatment for emotional and behavioral problems, provision of financial resources, sheltered employment and assistance for people with disabilities, daycare, and employment coaching, among many other services.

A **social agency**, or **social services agency**, is an organization providing social services that typically employs a range of professionals, including social workers, office staff, paraprofessionals (persons trained to assist professionals), and sometimes volunteers. Social agencies generally serve some designated client population experiencing some defined need. Services are provided according to a prescribed set of policies regarding how the agency staff should accomplish their service provision goals.

## Groups

A **group** is at least two individuals gathered together because of some common bond, to meet members' social and emotional needs, or to fulfill some mutual purpose. Our concern with groups involves their significance in the context of communities and organizations. Communities and organizations are made up of groups, which in turn are composed of individuals. Chapters 3 and 4 will describe various types of groups and focus on the operation of task groups in the macro social environment.

Figure 1-1 depicts the complexity of the macro social environment. Groups, organizations, and communities are made up of individuals like you. The large outer circle reflects the geographic community in which someone like you might live. You are portrayed in the bolded circle near the center of the large community circle. Also depicted are numerous organizations within the community. Each organization is also made up of various groups (e.g., task groups, departments, units, or levels of management). The macro environment also has numerous other groups of people who are not necessarily members of organizations. These might include friendship groups, recreational groups, study groups, neighborhood groups, and any other type of group configuration you might think of. In any community, you obviously will not



**Figure 1-1** The Macro Social Environment

be involved with all groups and organizations. You probably won't even be aware of some of them. The groups and organization circles that touch the bolded circle representing you reflect those groups and organizations with which you are involved—perhaps including organizations like the college you attend and groups like your closest circle of friends. The point is that the macro social environment is a complex matrix of these various components. People don't function in a vacuum. They are integrally involved with others around them.

## Social, Economic, and Political Forces



**EP 3a, 5**

**Social forces** are values and beliefs held by people in the social environment that are strong enough to influence their activities, including how government is structured or restricted. Key words here are *values* and *beliefs*. For example, social forces fuel the debate between anti-abortion and right-to-choice factions over the abortion issue.



**Economic forces** are the resources that are available, how they are distributed, and how they are spent. The key word here is *resources*. They involve how taxes are spent at the national level and how salaries are distributed to an agency's workers.

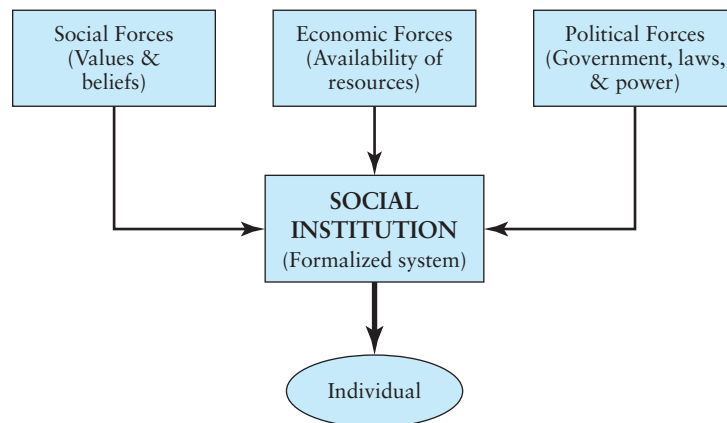
**Political forces** are the current governmental structures, the laws to which people are subject, and the overall distribution of power among the population. Political forces are reflected in laws and public policies. Here the key word is *government*. Elected politicians make decisions about what rules should govern public behavior and how to distribute resources. An example is the public welfare grant program Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), which was established by political forces. The program, discussed more thoroughly in a later chapter, structures how needy children and their families are treated.

The interplay of social, economic, and political forces is complex and often controversial. Ordinary citizens and political decision makers express huge variations in opinions over what is right and what is wrong, over what should be done and what should not be done. For instance, what should be done to address health care, the national debt, and economic opportunities? Disputes over what the various levels of government should provide and who should pay for services or benefits are common. These questions arise from our values and beliefs (social forces), available resources (economic forces), and legal decisions (political forces).

## Social Institutions

Social forces converge over time to form social institutions. A **social institution** is an established and valued practice or means of operation in a society resulting in the development of a formalized system to carry out its purpose. Examples of social institutions are families, the military, religion, education, social welfare systems, and government. See Figure 1-2.

Social institutions establish expectations and requirements for expected behavior, and govern these through policies and laws. Communities provide the macro environments for social institutions to be upheld. Organizations carry out policies



**Figure 1-2** Individual Social, Economic, and Political Forces Result in Formalized Social Institutions That Affect Individuals



## At a Glance 1-1

### Important Aspects of the Macro Social Environment

**Social environment:** The sum total of social and cultural conditions, circumstances, and human interactions that encompass human beings.

**Community:** “A number of people who have something in common that connects them in some way and that distinguishes them from others” (Homan, 2016, p. 10).

**Organization:** A “(1) social entity that (2) is goal-directed, (3) is designed as a deliberately structured and coordinated activity system, and (4) is linked to the external environment” (Daft, 2016, p. 13).

**Social services:** The work that social work practitioners and other helping professionals perform in organizations for the benefit of clients.

**Social (or social services) agency:** An organization providing social services that typically employs a range of professionals, including social workers, office staff, paraprofessionals (persons trained to assist professionals), and sometimes volunteers.

**Group:** At least two individuals gathered together because of some common bond, to meet members’ social and emotional needs, or to fulfill some mutual purpose.

**Social forces:** Values and beliefs held by people in the social environment that are strong enough to influence people’s activities, including how government is structured or restricted.

**Economic forces:** Resources that are available, how they are distributed, and how they are spent.

**Political forces:** Current governmental structures, the laws to which people are subject, and the overall distribution of power among the population.

**Social institution:** An established and valued practice or means of operation in a society resulting in the development of a formalized system to carry out its purpose.

and distribute services social institutions deem necessary. Decision-making groups and administrators in organizations and communities implement policies and distribute services based on social institutions.

For example, consider public education in the United States. The right of all US citizens to receive public education until age 18 is a social institution. Individual schools are organizations that comply with this concept. Individual communities make decisions regarding how schools will accomplish their educational goals. Community residents determine whether new schools will be built or old ones will suffice. They decide what content will be taught to students in family life education courses and whether or not to offer music or art.

Intricate interconnections exist among social forces, social institutions, communities, organizations, and groups carrying out public directives. Sometimes, forces and institutions are not clearly distinguishable from each other. All are collectively intertwined to make up the macro social environment.

Note that the macro social environment may include macro systems of various dimensions depending on your focus of attention. It may include small groups within organizations, as well as neighborhoods, towns, cities, large metropolitan areas, counties, states, nations, and the global macro social environment.

## A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Macro Social Environment and Social Work Practice: Ecosystems Theory LO 1-2

Theoretical or conceptual perspectives provide symbolic representations or pictures for how to view the world—in this case, the macro world of communities, organizations, and groups. Because the environment is so important in the analysis and

understanding of human behavior, theoretical and conceptual perspectives must be clearly defined. Social work focuses on the interactions between individuals and various systems in the environment. Both systems theory terminology and the terminology used to refer to the social environment (based in the ecological perspective) are critically important in the conceptualization of social work practice. Thus, the following sections will explore the foundation theory upon which this book is based—namely, ecosystems theory.

## Ecosystems Theory and the Macro Social Environment



**Ecosystems theory** (ecological systems theory) provides one significant means of conceptualizing and understanding human behavior (Pittenger, Huit, & Hansen, 2016; Poulin, 2010). It often serves as a conceptual framework to help social workers comprehend people's interaction with various systems in the macro social environment.

The heart of the ecosystems perspective is the person-in-environment concept, which views individuals and their environments as an interrelated whole. We recognize that human beings are systems with multiple components. These components include biological, emotional, psychological, and cognitive factors. We are continually engaging in interactions with our environments, which include our families, friends and peers, and larger social institutions such as employers, schools, and community.

As indicated earlier, ecosystems theory draws its major concepts from two other major theoretical frameworks—systems theory and the ecological perspective. Systems theory provides a very broad perspective that can be applied to living and non-living configurations of entities. (Note that the term *social systems theory* is often used when systems theory concepts are applied to groups of people and human interaction.) The ecological perspective focuses more specifically on living creatures' interaction with and relationship to their environment. However, many concepts characterizing systems theory and the ecological perspective provide a useful means of analyzing and understanding human behavior within the context of the encompassing macro environment. The following sections discuss these concepts.

## Ecosystems Theory: Basic Terms Taken from Systems Theory

It has been established that a number of terms based in systems theory are extremely important in understanding ecosystems theory and its relationship to social work practice. They include *system*, *boundaries*, *subsystem*, *homeostasis*, *role*, *relationship*, *input*, *output*, *feedback*, *interface*, *differentiation*, *entropy*, *negative entropy*, and *equifinality*.

**System** A **system** is a set of elements that are orderly, interrelated, and a functional whole. An individual person is a system with biological, psychological, and social qualities and characteristics. Examples of systems are Sheboygan, WI; a large urban department of social services; a tiny two-person, part-time counseling center in a town of 2,356 residents; Washington, DC; Buzzard, Saskatchewan; and a local chapter of Gamblers Anonymous.

**Boundaries** **Boundaries** are borders or margins that separate one entity (e.g., a system) from another. For instance, your skin provides a boundary between you as an independent, living system and the external environment. Boundaries determine who is a member of a system and who is not. If you haven't paid your dues to the National Association of Bungee Jumpers, Kiwanis, or your social work student club, you are not a member of that system. You are not within that particular system's boundaries. You are either in it or not.

**Subsystem** A **subsystem** is a secondary or subordinate system. It may be thought of as a smaller system within a larger system. The social work program, for example, is a subsystem of your college or university. Similarly, each member of the Green Bay Packers football organization from president to ticket taker is a subsystem of the overall organization.

**Homeostasis** **Homeostasis** is the tendency for a system to maintain a relatively stable, constant state of balance. If something disturbs the homeostatic balance, that system will strive to return to its prior stable state. Members of the group Neighborhood Warriors on Trash maintain homeostasis as long as they can relate well enough to stay together and pick up garbage, their designated purpose. The system, in this case, the group, must maintain some kind of homeostasis to function.

Homeostasis, however, does not mean that all group members will like each other or even talk to each other. Harry, for example, can't stand Izod, whom he feels bullies other group members by telling them the best way to organize trash collection. However, Harry feels the group and its purpose are important enough to continue his support and involvement. He simply ignores Izod. Homeostasis merely means maintaining the status quo. Sometimes, that status quo can be ineffective, inefficient, or seriously problematic.

Another example is a community that strives to maintain its homeostasis despite having corrupt political leaders. Community members may hesitate to depose their leaders because potential replacements scare residents even more. At least the residents already know about the leaders they have. The unknown is scary even though it might be better—because it also might be worse.

**Roles** A **role** is a culturally expected behavior pattern for a person having a specified status or involvement in a designated social relationship. In other words, each individual involved in a system assumes a role within that system. For instance, you assume the role of student in class. Expectations include performing required work, receiving grades the instructor assigns, and working toward your degree. If you hold a job, you assume the role of employee with whatever work expectations that job role involves. In a community, the mayor assumes a role with the decision-making responsibilities required in such a position.

**Relationships** A **relationship** is the dynamic interpersonal connection between two or more persons or systems that involves how they think about, feel about, and behave toward each other. For example, a social worker may have a professional relationship with her agency supervisor. Ideally, their communication and interaction maximizes the worker's effectiveness.

Relationships may exist between systems of any size. Workers within an agency have relationships with each other. Likewise, one agency or organization has a relationship with another. A local church may establish a relationship with a community Boys' Club. Together they could recruit and train volunteers, share activity space, and cosponsor community activities for the community's male youth.

**Input** **Input** is the energy, information, or communication flow received from other systems. You receive input from instructors regarding class assignments. Elected officials receive input from constituents when they vote on whether or not to support a referendum that allows building a new grade school. As an employee, you receive input in the form of a paycheck, not necessarily a big enough paycheck, but it is still input. Other examples include a person who breaks both arms after falling with her new 800-pound hog motorcycle who will require substantial input by others to help her take care of daily personal tasks. Still another example of input is information received from the Atlanta Centers for Disease Control about new annual flu epidemic mutations.

**Output** **Output**, on the other hand, is what happens to *input* after it's gone through and been processed by some system. It is a form of energy going out of a person's life or taking something away from it. For instance, a Moose Lodge may "adopt a highway" and take responsibility for cleaning up two miles of a local road. Another form of output is paying money to purchase a red 2016 Toyota Corolla coupe. Yet another form of output is the progress made with a client. Pablo, a worker, can expend time and energy, use his knowledge and skills, and work with a client, Astrid, to achieve the goal of finding employment. The intervention's output is Astrid's employment and her level of satisfaction with it.

At times these terms are confusing. For example, in the case above, Pablo provides Astrid with his input (time, energy, knowledge, skill, and expertise). Astrid then, hopefully, has output (seeking and finding a job). However, if we focus on Pablo instead of Astrid, we can apply the terms differently. On the one hand, Pablo's *input* includes his salary, ongoing skill development, and help from supervisors. Pablo's *output*, on the other hand, is the time, energy, knowledge, skill, and expertise he exercises to achieve intervention goals. How terms are applied and used depends on which individual, subsystem, or element of the systems involved is the focus of attention. One person's input is another's output.

A related issue critically significant in social work practice is whether the output is worth all the input. Are treatment results worth how much the treatment costs? Does a community program to fight crime (that requires significant financial input) have adequate results (output) to justify how much it costs? If 10 officers are hired to implement the program, how successful must the program be? Is it successful if crime is cut by 10 percent? Or 30 percent? What about 2 percent?

Many times, it's difficult to measure input and output in equal units. If money is the only measurement of inputs and outputs, it makes it easier. If a stockbroker invests more (input) than he earns (output), he is losing money and better change his investment strategy. In social services, it is often difficult to measure the value of a service or the extent it adds to peoples' quality of life. For example, is a hospice program geared to enhancing the comfort of terminally ill people worth the

expense? The input in terms of financial resources for treatment, care, housing, and medicine can be substantial. However, the value of such care to a dying person (the output) may be priceless.

The bottom line concerns whether the community or agency is using its resources efficiently and effectively. Or, can those resources be put to a better use by providing some other more effective and efficient service?

**Negative and Positive Feedback** **Feedback** is a special form of input where a system receives information about that system's own performance. As a result of **negative feedback**, the system can choose to correct any deviations or mistakes and return to a more homeostatic state.

For example, Natasha, a community resident, might give negative feedback to Boris, another, about how Boris's small children regularly run out into a busy street while playing and riding bikes. Natasha thinks it is very dangerous for Boris's children, so she gives Boris feedback about the problem. Hopefully, Boris will use this negative feedback to correct the problem.

**Positive feedback**, also valuable, is the informational input a system receives about what it is doing correctly in order to maintain itself and thrive. Receiving a significant pay raise resulting from an excellent job-performance review provides positive feedback to a worker that she is doing a good job. Likewise, an agency receiving a specific federal grant gets positive feedback that it has developed a plan worthy of such funding.

**Interface** An **interface** is the point where two systems (including individuals, families, groups, organizations, or communities) come into contact with each other, interact, or communicate. An interface may be the interaction and communication between an agency supervisor and her supervisee. It may also be your communication with an instructor regarding expectations for some class assignment. A board of directors may be the interface between a community and a residential treatment center for adolescents with serious emotional and behavioral problems. Such a board is usually composed of influential community volunteers who oversee agency policies, goals, and how effectively the agency is generally run.

During an assessment of a client system's strengths, needs, and problems, the interface must be clearly in focus in order to target the appropriate interactions for change. For example, a young single mother of three is homeless and desperately needs services. The interface between her and the macro systems providing human services includes those services for which she might be eligible. The interface also involves her interactions with social workers helping to provide those services.

**Differentiation** **Differentiation** is a system's tendency to move from a simpler to a more complex existence. As you grow older, get wiser, have more varied experiences, meet increasing numbers of people, and assume more responsibilities in general, your life gets more complicated. You experience differentiation. Likewise, as a social agency grows over time, it will likely develop more detailed policies and programs. A women's center might start out with one support group for battered women run by one volunteer. If that support group is a success, years later it may expand and differentiate into an entire program where eight groups addressing

other issues commonly experienced by women are run by paid program staff and supervised by a director. Similarly, as laws and clarifications to laws proliferate in the legal system, that system differentiates and becomes more complex.

**Entropy** **Entropy** is the natural tendency of a system to progress toward disorganization, depletion, and death. The idea is that nothing lasts forever. People age and eventually die. After early periods of growth and differentiation, agencies grow old, often obsolete, and disappear. As history moves on, older agencies and systems are eventually replaced by new ones.

**Negative Entropy** **Negative entropy** is the process of a system toward growth and development. In effect, it is the opposite of entropy. Individuals develop physically, intellectually, and emotionally as they grow. Social service agencies grow and develop new programs and clientele. A sheltered workshop that provides supervised training and vocational guidance for people with intellectual disabilities begins in one small building with 20 clients. Negative entropy characterizes the agency as it grows to serve over 100 clients and adds new programs. These might include an information and referral helpline, a volunteer program called Special Friends that is similar to Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs, and a wide range of supervised recreational activities.

**Equifinality** **Equifinality** is the notion that there are many different means to achieve the same end. It is important not to get locked into only one way of thinking. In any particular situation, alternatives do exist. Some may be better

## At a Glance 1-2

### Major Concepts in Systems Theory

**Ecosystems theory** (ecological systems theory): A conceptual framework to help social workers comprehend people's interaction with various systems in the macro social environment.

**System:** A set of elements that are orderly, interrelated, and a functional whole.

**Boundaries:** Borders or margins that separate one entity from another.

**Subsystem:** A secondary or subordinate system.

**Homeostasis:** The tendency for a system to maintain a relatively stable, constant state of balance.

**Role:** A culturally expected behavior pattern for a person having a specified status or being involved in a designated social relationship.

**Relationship:** The dynamic connection between two or more persons or systems that involves how they think about, feel about, and behave toward each other.

**Input:** The energy, information, or communication flow received from other systems.

**Output:** What happens to input after it has gone through and been processed by some system.

**Negative feedback:** A special form of input where a system receives information about that system's own performance.

**Positive feedback:** The informational input a system receives about what it is doing correctly in order to maintain itself and thrive.

**Interface:** The point where two systems (including individuals, families, groups, organizations, or communities) encounter each other, interact, or communicate.

**Differentiation:** A system's tendency to move from a simpler to a more complex existence.

**Entropy:** The natural tendency of a system to progress toward disorganization, depletion, and death.

**Negative entropy:** The process of a system toward growth and development.

**Equifinality:** The notion that there are many different means to achieve the same end.

than others, but, nonetheless, there are alternatives. For example, a community might need funding to start up a new community center for holding community meetings and housing social and recreational events. The end goal is establishment of a place to conduct community activities. However, there are many ways to attain this goal. A citizen group might apply for grants from public and private sources, the community might undertake a massive fundraising campaign on the center's behalf, or residents might work with county and state leaders to solicit support.

## Ecosystems Theory: Basic Terms Taken from the Ecological Perspective

It has been established that ecosystems theory incorporates basic ecological concepts in addition to those proposed by systems theory. The ecological perspective emphasizes the dynamic interactions between people and their environment. Gitterman (2014) explains that many of the problems faced by people “are outcomes of complex ecological chains that include attributes of the individual's genetic, biopsychosocial makeup; the structures of the family, social networks, community school, workplace, religious organizations, and health systems; recreational resources; general culture and subculture; (and) social class” (p. 20). He also notes that the way a government is structured can also play a role in this complexity. As you can see, people exist within multiple environments, including the physical, cultural, and social, while influenced by and influencing those who comprise their world.

We have established that concepts from both systems theories and the ecological perspective provide useful means for social workers to view the world. Both approaches focus on systems within the environment and how these systems interact with and affect people, resulting in ecosystems theory.

Some would say that subtle differences exist between the approaches and the terms inherent in each. Schriver (2011) explains:

The ecological perspective . . . explicitly defines the environment as including physical (nonhuman) elements. Social systems [theories] . . . are less explicit about the place and role of nonhuman elements in the environment. Some would also argue that social systems and ecological approaches differ in their conceptualizations of boundaries and exchange across boundaries that occur in human interactions. Recognizing these areas of disagreement, we will consider these two perspectives similar enough to be treated together here. (pp. 113–114)

Hence, we will conceptualize this as ecosystems theory.

The following concepts derived from the ecological perspective are important facets of ecosystems theory: *social environment; transactions; energy; input; output; interface; adaptation; person-in-environment fit; stress, stressors, and coping; relatedness; habitat; niche; and personal characteristics including, competence, self-esteem, and self-direction*. As noted, input, output, and interface are terms used in both approaches. See Highlight 1-1 for brief comparison of terms. To avoid redundancy, please refer to the earlier descriptions of these terms within the context of social systems theory.



## Highlight 1-1

### Comparison of Some of the Major Concepts in Systems Theory and the Ecological Perspective

Major Concepts in Systems Theory	Similar Concepts in Both	Major Concepts in the Ecological Perspective
System	Input	Social environment
Boundaries	Output	Energy
Subsystem	Interface	Adaptation
Homeostasis		Person-in-environment fit
Roles		Stress, stressors, and coping
Relationships		Relatedness
Negative feedback		Habitat
Positive feedback		Niche
Differentiation		Personal characteristics
Entropy		Competence
Negative entropy		Self-esteem
Equifinality		Self-direction

**The Social Environment** The *social environment* involves the conditions, circumstances, and human interactions that encompass human beings. Persons are dependent upon effective interactions with this environment in order to survive and thrive. The social environment includes the actual physical setting that society provides. This involves the type of home a person lives in, the type of work that's done, the amount of money that's available, and the laws and social rules by which people live. The social environment also includes all the individuals, groups, organizations, and systems with which a person comes into contact. Families, friends, work groups, organizations, communities, and governments are all involved.

The **macro social environment** extends beyond the individual's interaction with immediate friends, relatives, and other individuals. We have established that it is the configuration of communities, organizations, and groups within the latter that are products of social, economic, and political forces and social institutions.

People communicate and interact with others in their environments. Each of these interactions or types of interactions are referred to as *transactions*. Transactions are active and dynamic. That is, something is communicated or exchanged.

They may be positive or negative. A positive transaction may be the revelation that you won the lottery. Another positive transaction might be that you are named state social worker of the year. A negative transaction, on the other hand, might be receiving news that your house burned down or was ruined in an