

Empowerment Series



11th EDITION

# Understanding **HUMAN BEHAVIOR** and the **SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT**

**CHARLES H. ZASTROW | KAREN K. KIRST-ASHMAN | SARAH L. HESSENAUER**



# Council on Social Work Education 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 nine competencies and recommends teaching and assessing 31 related component behaviors, listed as Educational Policy (EP) Competencies 1–9 below. The multicolor icons (see figure at right) and end of chapter “Competency Notes” connect these important standards to class work **in the chapters**

**identified below with bold blue type.**

| The 9 Competencies and 31 Component Behaviors (EPAS, 2015)                                                                                                                                                                               | Chapter(s)<br>Where Referenced                               |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Competency 1—Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior:</b>                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16</b> |
| a. Make ethical decisions by applying the standards of the NASW Code of Ethics, relevant laws and regulations, models for ethical decision making, ethical conduct of research, and additional codes of ethics as appropriate to context | <b>1</b>                                                     |
| b. Use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations                                                                                                                      | <b>1</b>                                                     |
| c. Demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior; appearance; and oral, written, and electronic communication                                                                                                                            | <b>1</b>                                                     |
| d. Use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes                                                                                                                                                            | <b>1</b>                                                     |
| e. Use supervision and consultation to guide professional judgment and behavior                                                                                                                                                          | <b>1</b>                                                     |
| <b>Competency 2—Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice:</b>                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 13</b>                               |
| 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                                                                       | <b>1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 13</b>                               |
| b. Present themselves as learners and engage clients and constituencies as experts of their own experiences                                                                                                                              | <b>1, 5, 13</b>                                              |
| c. Apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse clients and constituencies                                                                                     | <b>1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 13</b>                               |
| <b>Competency 3—Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice:</b>                                                                                                                                                | <b>1, 5, 9, 13</b>                                           |
| a. Apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights at the individual and system levels                                                                                             | <b>1, 5, 9, 13</b>                                           |
| b. Engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice                                                                                                                                                          | <b>1, 5, 9, 13</b>                                           |
| <b>Competency 4—Engage in Practice-informed Research and Research-informed Practice:</b>                                                                                                                                                 | <b>1</b>                                                     |
| a. Use practice experience and theory to inform scientific inquiry and research                                                                                                                                                          | <b>1</b>                                                     |
| b. Apply critical thinking to engage in analysis of quantitative and qualitative research methods and research findings                                                                                                                  | <b>1</b>                                                     |
| c. Use and translate research evidence to inform and improve practice, policy, and service delivery                                                                                                                                      | <b>1</b>                                                     |
| <b>Competency 5—Engage in Policy Practice:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                           | <b>1, 16</b>                                                 |
| a. Identify social policy at the local, state, and federal level that impacts well-being, service delivery, and access to social services                                                                                                | <b>1, 16</b>                                                 |
| b. Assess how social welfare and economic policies impact the delivery of and access to social services                                                                                                                                  | <b>1</b>                                                     |

## The 9 Competencies and 31 Component Behaviors (EPAS, 2015)

|                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Chapter(s)<br>Where Referenced                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| c. Apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice                                                         | 1, 16                                                 |
| <b>Competency 6—Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities:</b>                                                                                                                | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 |
| a. Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks to engage with clients and constituencies                          | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 |
| b. Use empathy, reflection, and interpersonal skills to effectively engage diverse clients and constituencies                                                                                                 | 1                                                     |
| <b>Competency 7—Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities:</b>                                                                                                                     | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 |
| a. Collect and organize data, and apply critical thinking to interpret information from clients and constituencies                                                                                            | 1                                                     |
| b. Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the analysis of assessment data from clients and constituencies | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 |
| c. Develop mutually agreed-on intervention goals and objectives based on the critical assessment of strengths, needs, and challenges within clients and constituencies                                        | 1                                                     |
| d. Select appropriate intervention strategies based on the assessment, research knowledge, and values and preferences of clients and constituencies                                                           | 1                                                     |
| <b>Competency 8—Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities:</b>                                                                                                             | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14         |
| a. Critically choose and implement interventions to achieve practice goals and enhance capacities of clients and constituencies                                                                               | 1                                                     |
| b. Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in interventions with clients and constituencies                   | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14         |
| c. Use inter-professional collaboration as appropriate to achieve beneficial practice outcomes                                                                                                                | 1                                                     |
| d. Negotiate, mediate, and advocate with and on behalf of diverse clients and constituencies                                                                                                                  | 1                                                     |
| e. Facilitate effective transitions and endings that advance mutually agreed-on goals                                                                                                                         | 1                                                     |
| <b>Competency 9—Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities:</b>                                                                                                     | 1                                                     |
| a. Select and use appropriate methods for evaluation of outcomes                                                                                                                                              | 1                                                     |
| b. Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the evaluation of outcomes                                      | 1                                                     |
| c. Critically analyze, monitor, and evaluate intervention and program processes and outcomes                                                                                                                  | 1                                                     |
| d. Apply evaluation findings to improve practice effectiveness at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels                                                                                                          | 1                                                     |



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Empowerment Series

ELEVENTH EDITION

# Understanding Human Behavior and the Social Environment



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*To Taylor Grayson, Sydney Harper, and Aiden Joel Pauley  
and Kathy Zastrow*





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# Preface

## Introduction and What's New in the Eleventh Edition

An 18-year-old man, who sees no reason to live anymore, threatens to kill himself. A couple suddenly separates after 23 years of marriage. A young family plagued by unemployment is evicted from their apartment, and moves into a tent. A demonstration is staged because a local factory refuses to hire African American workers.

Why do people do what they do? The main focus of this text is on assessment—that is, this text presents material to help readers understand the underlying reasons why people act the way they do, and to help them evaluate the strengths and deficits in their biological, psychological, and social development. A variety of theories and research about human growth and development is presented. The theories cover both the internal and external variables that influence human behavior.

*Understanding Human Behavior* is especially written for undergraduate and graduate courses in human behavior and the social environment (HBSE). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the national accrediting body, provides the following guidelines for HBSE content in its 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS):

*“Social workers understand theories of human behavior and the social environment, and critically evaluate and apply this knowledge in the assessment of diverse clients and constituencies, including*

*individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.”*

*“Social workers apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the analysis of assessment data from clients and constituencies;”*

*“Social workers apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in interventions with clients and constituencies;”*

*“Social workers apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the evaluation of outcomes;”<sup>1</sup>*

The EPAS (2015) also requires that a wide range of additional content be incorporated into the social work curriculum. Examples of this content are: social work professional roles; social work ethical principles; impact of the natural environment on humans; human diversity; human rights and social and economic justice; mechanisms of oppression and discrimination; research-informed practice and practice-informed research; evidence-based interventions; policy practice to advance social and

<sup>1</sup>Council on Social Work Education, *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education, 2015).

economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services; environmental justice; and engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Content on all of these topics is presented in this text.

For a number of years, social work programs have struggled to develop an HBSE curriculum that covers the extensive content mandated in the EPAS. This text is designed to facilitate the coverage of such content. The text has the following thrusts:

- It presents a vast array of theories and research that seek to explain and describe human development and behavior. It focuses on individual functioning within systems of various sizes (including families, groups, organizations, and communities).
- It presents substantial information on human diversity, including material on groups distinguished by “age, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status.”<sup>2</sup>
- It uses a lifespan approach that allows for a description of human growth and development from conception through adulthood.
- It identifies biological, psychological, sociological, cultural, and spiritual factors that influence development for each age group.<sup>3</sup> Interactions among these systems are discussed in some depth. For many of the bio-psycho-social theories described, content about values and ethical issues is included.
- It presents material on strategies that promote social and economic justice.
- It describes typical developmental tasks and milestones for each age group.
- It describes the impact of social and economic forces on individuals, social systems, and societies.
- It presents substantial material on self-care strategies for social workers. These strategies are also

the strategies that social workers need to convey to their clients so that the clients can make positive changes.

- It presents material on the attainment and maintenance of optimal mental and physical health and well-being. It also describes the ways in which systems promote or deter health and well-being.
- It presents material, using a four-faceted approach, to evaluate theory, and describes how diverse theories can be applied to client situations.

A major thrust of this text is to present the material in a readable fashion. Numerous case examples, photographs, and illustrations are used in presenting provocative and controversial issues about human behavior. As much as possible, jargon-free language is used so that the reader can readily grasp theory.

The following new and expanded content has been added on a chapter-by-chapter basis:

## Chapter 1

- The importance of the “natural environment” and “environmental justice” in the practice of social work
- Specification of the 9 competencies and 31 behaviors in the 2015 *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS)*

## Chapter 2

- Discussion of pregnancy apps

## Chapter 3

- Outcome of receiving client-centered therapy

## Chapter 4

- Head start and cultural responsiveness
- Trauma informed care

## Chapter 5

- The key to improving the lives of others is the strengths perspective
- Cultural humility
- Black Lives Matter

## Chapter 6

- Initiating kissing and sexual intimacy

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>In some cases, the biological, psychological, and sociological variables overlap. For example, a midlife crisis often involves a combination of biological, psychological, and sociological variables. Therefore, the authors may, rather arbitrarily, cover some material under one heading (e.g., biological aspects) when a strong case can be made that it should be covered under some other heading (e.g., psychological aspects or sociological aspects).

**Chapter 7**

- Glasser's theories on why some people develop a "success identity," while others develop a "failure identity"
- Guidelines on assisting clients, and other persons, to become more assertive

**Chapter 8**

- Self-injury in adolescents
- Cyber bullying
- Sex trafficking

**Chapter 9**

- Stalking

**Chapter 10**

- Cyber affairs
- PrEP, a medication taken to lower the risk of HIV infection

**Chapter 11**

- Allegations of the use of date-rape drugs by Bill Cosby to commit sexual assaults
- States that have legalized the sale of marijuana

**Chapter 12**

- Guiding principles of Total Quality Management in human service agencies

- New material on surviving, and thriving, as a social worker in an agency

**Chapter 13**

- Gender identity
- Dimensions of sexuality
- The fluidity of sexuality
- New material on transgender persons
- Arguments for and against same-sex marriages
- New material on violence against LGBT people

**Chapter 14**

- The importance of social workers placing the highest priority on their self-care
- The self-care strategies used by social workers are precisely the strategies that social workers should convey to their clients
- Update leading causes of death among older people in the United States
- Mindfulness

**Chapter 15**

- June 2015 United States Supreme Court decision that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry

**Chapter 16**

- Affordable Care Act
- Supplemental Nutrition Program (SNAP)





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# INTRODUCTION TO HUMAN BEHAVIOR AND THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT



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*Why do people behave the way they do? Are behavior and personality caused mainly by a person's genetic makeup and given nature? Or are they due to the environment and a person's treatment in that environment?*

*Human behavior and its dynamics can be remarkably complex. A fascinating example concerns the case of a boy, sometimes referred to as "the wild boy of Aveyron," who grew up alone in the Aveyron forest of southern France at the end of the eighteenth century (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007). On various occasions, French villagers sighted*

*the boy, who was naked, filthy, and covered with scars, as he roamed through the wilderness, foraging for roots, nuts, and whatever other food he could find (Yousef, 2001).*

In January 1800, the boy, eventually named Victor, was caught burrowing for vegetables in a tanner's garden in the French village of Saint-Sernin. Although he was only about four and a half feet tall, he appeared to be about 12 or 13 years old (Lane, 1976). He had "delicate white skin, a round face, long eyelashes, a long, slightly pointed nose, an average-sized mouth, a rounded chin, generally agreeable features, and an engaging smile." Externally he appeared much like any other boy; however, he could make "only weird, meaningless cries," could not speak, vehemently refused to wear clothing, and rejected any prepared food (Saskatchewan Psychology Portal, n.d.; Shattuck, 1980). Victor also failed to respond to others, neither communicating with them nor paying attention to what they were doing. It became apparent that Victor had been abandoned at an early age and, without human company, had learned to fend for himself in his own way.

Victor was eventually sent to Paris, where he came to the attention of two important Parisian physicians, Philippe Pinel and Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard. A basic question they addressed was the reasons for Victor's behavior. They focused on the nature–nurture controversy. In other words, was Victor's behavior the result of nature (i.e., inborn traits), or was it a consequence of nurture (i.e., the influence of his background, experience, and environment)? Pinel, a psychiatrist, determined that Victor was not really wild, but rather mentally deficient and an "incurable idiot" (Human Intelligence, 2004). He believed that nature had caused Victor's pattern of behavior. But Itard, who was chief physician at the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes in Paris, disagreed. Itard credited Victor for his self-sufficiency and survival, asserting that Victor's deprivation of human interaction had denied him the opportunity to learn how to fit into society. Itard believed that Victor could learn to interact, communicate, and conform if he were taught to do so. He argued that Victor's behavior resulted from the nurturance, or lack thereof, he received from his environment.

More specific questions can be raised. Why couldn't Victor speak? He had a horizontal scar across his throat, apparently caused by a knife, that may have damaged his vocal cords (Yousef, 2001). However, he could utter some sounds, which suggested that his vocal cords were not damaged. Could Victor hear? He would often ignore human speech and even the sound of a gunshot (Human Intelligence, 2004), yet would react to the sound of a walnut being cracked behind him, an unseen dog barking outside, or a door creaking open in the dark (Yousef, 2001). Was Victor autistic (a condition characterized by intense inner-directedness that is discussed further in Chapter 3)? Some believe he presents the first documented case of autism (FeralChildren.com, 2005; Human Intelligence, 2004).

Far ahead of his time, Itard worked with Victor for five years, using behavior modification principles to teach and reinforce desired behavior (Chapter 4 elaborates on behavior modification concepts and techniques). Victor learned to "read and speak a few words, demonstrated affection for his caretakers, and could carry out simple commands" (Human Intelligence, 2004). Consider what great accomplishments these were! However, Itard was greatly disappointed that Victor could not achieve much more and become "normal." Victor never learned to communicate well; nor did he care much about interpersonal interactions. His focal point continued to be his own desires. Ultimately, he could not survive independently in the civilized world as he had in the wild. Victor spent the remainder of his life being cared for by Madame Guerin, who had been Itard's housekeeper. He was in his early forties when he died in 1828.

### Ethical Question 1.1<sup>1</sup>



*Was it ethical for Dr. Itard and the others to remove Victor from the wild against his will?*

*Victor's story raises many questions about how human behavior and personality develop. Why do we behave the way we do? How much of our behavior is a product of our genetic heritage? To what extent do we think, feel, and interact the way we do because we've been taught to do so by other people—our family, school, the media, our culture, and our government? Understanding Human Behavior will explore various dimensions of human behavior to enhance your understanding of why people have developed as they have and why they behave the way they do.*

## A Perspective

The goals of this book are to explore the dynamics of human behavior and prepare a foundation of knowledge upon which to build social work practice skills. What do we mean, exactly, by human behavior and the social environment, the title of this book? First, let's break down and define the terminology. Human behavior involves people's actions, conduct, and responses as they go through life. Individuals, of course, demonstrate human behavior. Groups of people ranging from couples to families to communities to nations also exhibit human behavior. People, then, behave within the context of their environment. An environment includes "the surroundings or conditions" in which people or other organisms live and function (Lindberg, 2007, p. 460). For our purposes, the social environment involves the systems of other people, including economic, political, legal, social, spiritual, and cultural, with whom any individual interacts as he or she operates within the encompassing environment.

Why is understanding human behavior and the social environment important for social workers and other helping professionals? Social workers help people solve problems and get access to resources. They must recognize what conditions people are faced with in their social environments and how these conditions affect people's behavior and functioning. The social environment may vary on many levels. It may be urban or rural. It may be wealthy with many resources or impoverished with very few. It may be liberal or conservative. On an international level, it may be democratic, socialist, or communist. Social workers must understand the social environment in order to help people figure out what options are available to them and get the resources they need.

<sup>1</sup>Ethics are standards that guide behavior. Ethical questions such as this will be raised throughout this book to encourage students to engage in ethical decision making by addressing professional values and using professional ethical standards.

One of the primary steps in the helping process—and the focus of this book—is assessment, the identification and exploration of variables affecting people’s behavior, functioning, and well-being. Assessment for social workers entails investigating people’s strengths, problems, needs, and issues to begin understanding how to help people and improve their lives.

Human behavior can be fascinating and, sometimes, quite puzzling. For example, I (Karen Kirst-Ashman) once got home from work, walked into the master bedroom, and observed my partner ironing the mattress. Befuddled, I thought, “This is a new one. What in the world is he doing?” Mattress ironing had never been part of my repertoire of logical behavior. As it turned out, my partner, who is an engineer, explained his actions quite rationally. We had recently bought a new mattress, and its covering was so slippery that neither a mattress cover nor sheets would stay in place. This was quite annoying when we were trying to sleep. My partner was using the iron to attach a sheet with Stitch Witchery, a bonding tape that melts and secures materials like hems after heat is applied to it. It’s an easy way to get cloth materials to stick together if you don’t want to bother with needle and thread. My partner’s idea was that we’d put another sheet over the one bonded to the mattress; in effect, the bonded sheet would be a permanent—and nonslippery—mattress cover. As it turned out, his plan worked. The sheets no longer slipped off. This experience reinforced my hypothesis that people always have a reason for doing what they do, as baffling as it might appear at the time.

Social work is unique in that it emphasizes a focus that stretches far beyond that of an individual. Assessment in social work addresses all aspects of a client’s situation. Many times, it’s not the client’s fault that problems exist. Rather, something outside the client may be instigating the problem. The client’s whole family may not be functioning well. There may be difficulties beyond the client’s control in his or her workplace. Existing social service organizations may not be providing what clients need. Resources may be too difficult to obtain, inadequate, or even nonexistent. Organizational policies or laws affecting the client may be unfair. As part of assessment, social workers focus on families, work groups and environments, social agencies, organizations, neighborhoods, communities, and even local, state, and national government in addition to the individual. Figuring out what to do about any specific problem may directly involve any of these entities.

## Learning Objectives

This chapter will help prepare students to



**EP 6a,  
EP 7b,  
EP 8b,**

**LO 1** *Explain the importance of foundation knowledge for social work with an emphasis on assessment*

**LO 2** *Review the organization of this book that emphasizes lifespan development*

**LO 3** *Describe important concepts for understanding human behavior (that are stressed throughout the book and include human diversity, cultural competency, oppression, populations-at-risk, empowerment, the strengths perspective, resiliency, human rights, and critical thinking about ethical issues)*

**LO 4** *Employ a conceptual framework for understanding human behavior and the social environment: ecosystems theory*

**LO 5** *Recognize people's involvement with multiple systems in the social environment*

**LO 6** *Recognize social worker roles*

**LO 7** *Identify knowledge, skills, and values necessary for generalist social work practice\**

## **LO 1 Explain the Importance of Foundation Knowledge for Social Work with an Emphasis on Assessment\*\***

In order to recognize the significance of foundation knowledge, including that presented in this book, the purpose and process of social work must be understood. Social work may be viewed as having three major thrusts (Baer & Federico, 1978, p. 68). First, social workers can help people solve their problems and cope with their situations. Second, social workers can work with systems, such as social agencies, organizations, communities, and government bureaucracies, so that people can have better access to the resources and services they need. Third, social workers can “link people with systems” (Baer & Federico, 1978, p. 68), so that clients themselves have

access to resources and opportunities. Much of social work, then, involves social functioning.

People interact with other people, with organizations (such as social service agencies), and with small groups (such as families and colleagues in the workplace). Social work targets not only how individuals behave, but also how these other systems and people affect each other.

An example is a family of five in which both parents work at low-paying jobs in order to make a marginal living. The father works at a small, non-unionized leather-processing plant. The mother works as a waitress at a short-order diner. Suddenly, the father is laid off. For a short time, the family survives on unemployment compensation. When that runs out, they face a serious financial crisis. Despite a great effort, the father is unable to find another job. In desperation, the family applies for public assistance. Due to some unidentified error in the lengthy application process, the payments are delayed for two months.

Meanwhile, the family is forced to eat poorly and is unable to pay rent and utility bills. The phone is disconnected, the electricity is turned off, and the landlord threatens to evict them. Reacting to the externally imposed stress, the parents begin to fight verbally and physically. The children complain because they are hungry. This intensifies the parents' sense of defeat and disillusionment. As a result of stress and frustration, the parents hit the children to keep them quiet.

Although this example has not been presented in detail, it illustrates that people are integrally involved with other systems in their environment.

A social worker reviewing this case might assess how the family and other systems in the environment have had an impact on each other. First, the father's life is seriously affected by his place of employment, the leather factory, when he is laid off. He then seeks unemployment compensation, which affects that system by dipping into its funds. When those benefits

\*Note that “helping hands” icons of two hands embracing a sun are located next to the learning objectives just cited and other content throughout the book. Accredited social work programs must demonstrate that they're teaching students to be proficient in nine core competencies that are operationalized and the 31 behaviors designated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). Students require knowledge in order to develop skills and become competent. Our intent here is to specify what chapter content and knowledge coincides with the development of specific competencies and behaviors. (This ultimately is intended to assist in a social work program's accreditation process.) Throughout each chapter, icons such as those located on this page call attention to the location of EPAS-related content. Each icon identifies what competency or 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 behaviors are related to designated content in the chapter. EPAS competencies and their alphabetized behaviors are cited in the inside covers of this book.

\*\*Note that content headings in chapters throughout the book are tagged with learning objectives (e.g., LO 1-1, LO 1-4). These indicate what content relates to which learning objective.

cease, the family then affects the public assistance system by drawing on its funds. The public assistance system, in turn, impacts the family by delaying their payments. The resulting frustration affects all family members, as the parents are unable to cope with their stress. The entire situation can be viewed as a series of dynamic interactions between people and their environment.

## The Profession of Social Work

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the primary professional organization for social workers in the United States. NASW (1982) defines **social work** as follows:

*Social work is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups, or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and to create societal conditions favorable to their goals.*

*Social Work practice consists of the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to one or more of the following ends: helping people obtain tangible services; providing counseling and psychotherapy for individuals, families, and groups; helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in relevant legislative processes.*

The profession of social work is recognized as having the primary responsibility to implement society's mandate to provide safe, constructive, and effective social services. Social work is thus distinct from other professions (such as psychology and psychiatry) because it has the responsibility and mandate to provide social services.

A social worker needs training and expertise in a wide range of areas to effectively handle problems faced by individuals, groups, families, organizations, and the larger community. Although most professions are increasingly becoming more specialized (e.g., most medical doctors now specialize in one or two areas), social work continues to emphasize a generic (broad-based) approach. The practice of social work is analogous to the old general practice of medicine. A general (or family) practitioner has professional education to handle a wide range of common medical problems; a social worker has professional education to handle a wide range of common social and personal problems.

The foundation of social work is described in Highlight 1.1. The knowledge, skills, and values needed for generalist social work practice are described in greater detail later in the chapter.

## The Process of Social Work: The Importance of Assessment

Accurate assessment is a critically important step in the social work process. Information about the problem or situation needs to be gathered, analyzed, and interpreted. Regardless of the specific type of situation, careful thought is necessary in order to make effective decisions about how to proceed. Assessment also involves basic knowledge and assumptions about human behavior. There are always reasons why people behave the way they do.

For example, a social worker who is trying to help a potentially suicidal adolescent needs certain types of information. The worker needs to know some of the reasons why people consider committing suicide so that he or she knows what questions to ask, how to respond to and treat the person, and what alternatives and supports to pursue.

Additionally, the worker must be able to identify what resources are readily available to suicidal adolescents. How can the crises be addressed immediately, simply to keep them alive? What supportive resources are available to keep them from suicidal thoughts in the future? Where can a social worker refer them to get help? (Chapter 7 explores adolescent suicide in greater depth.)

## Identifying and Evaluating Alternative Courses of Action

Clients come to social workers with problems and needs. The worker must understand these problems and needs in order to help the client. One primary task for the practitioner is to help the client define the alternatives available to him or her. Often people have tunnel vision: because of stress or habit or lack of experience, they can fail to realize that various alternatives exist. Not only must alternatives be defined, but they also must be evaluated. The positive and negative consequences of each alternative should be clearly stated and weighed. Figure 1.1 illustrates the process of evaluating alternatives.



## HIGHLIGHT 1.1

## Generalist Social Work Practice

There used to be an erroneous belief that a social worker was a caseworker (who worked with individuals and families), a group worker (who worked with groups), or a community organizer (who worked on people's behalf in organizations and communities). Practicing social workers know that such a belief is faulty because every social worker is a change agent working with individuals, groups, families, organizations, and the larger community. Social workers today are generalists. A *generalist* practitioner is one who uses a wide range of knowledge and skills to help people with an extensive array of problems and issues. These include anything from personal issues that affect an individual to extensive, far-reaching problems that involve entire communities. The amount of time spent at these levels varies from worker to worker, but every worker will, at times, work at each of these levels and therefore needs training in all of them.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, the national accrediting entity for baccalaureate and master's programs in social work) requires that all bachelor's (BSW) and master's (MSW) programs train students in generalist social work practice. MSW programs, in addition, usually require students to select and study in an area of concentration. They generally offer several choices, such as family therapy, administration, corrections, or clinical social work.

The Council on Social Work Education (2015), in *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards*, defines generalist practice as follows:

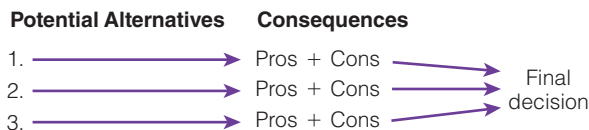
*Generalist practice is grounded in the liberal arts and the person-in-environment framework. To promote human and social well-being, generalist practitioners use a range of*

*prevention and intervention methods in their practice with diverse individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities based on scientific inquiry and best practices. The generalist practitioner identifies with the social work profession and applies ethical principles and critical thinking in practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Generalist practitioners engage diversity in their practice and advocate for human rights and social and economic justice. They recognize, support, and build on the strengths and resiliency of all human beings. They engage in research-informed practice and are proactive in responding to the impact of context on professional practice.*

This text focuses on the generalist-practice approach in social work by describing a variety of assessment strategies. Once you have learned these strategies, you can select the approaches that hold the most promise in facilitating positive changes in your clients.

In working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities, social workers use a problem-solving approach. The process can be described in a variety of ways, but includes these steps:

1. Identify as precisely as possible the problem or problems; in other words, conduct an assessment of the situation.
2. Generate possible alternative solutions, evaluate their potential effectiveness, and establish a plan of action for intervention.
3. Implement the plan and carry out the intervention.
4. Evaluate the intervention's effectiveness.
5. Terminate the process.



**FIGURE 1.1** Social Workers Help Clients Identify Alternatives and Evaluate the Consequences of Each

Much of generalist social work practice involves individual clients and small groups. Highlight 1.2, “Case Example: Unplanned Pregnancy,” shows how an individual client might be helped to identify the various alternatives available, evaluate the consequences of each, and finally select a course of action.

## LO 2 Review the Organization of This Book That Emphasizes Lifespan Development

Understanding and assessing human behavior includes being knowledgeable about human development. It also involves comprehension of the wide range of issues facing people as they progress through life. For a coherent approach to changes that take place during a person's lifespan, this text will assume a chronological perspective. The lifespan is divided up into four main phases: **infancy and childhood, adolescence, young and middle adulthood, and later adulthood**. Three chapters, respectively



## HIGHLIGHT 1.2

## Case Example: Unplanned Pregnancy

Mona, 16, is a high school sophomore who has just found out that she is two months pregnant. The father is Fred, a 17-year-old high school junior.

Mona and Fred have been dating for two years. They think they love each other. Mona is a vivacious, outgoing cheerleader, and Fred is a muscular, handsome quarterback on the school football team. They are both involved in school activities and have never thought very much about the future.

Mona hasn't told Fred about being pregnant. She's very confused about what to do. She doesn't know how he'll react. Mona shares her shock and dismay over what is happening, and Mona is afraid they'll be terribly disappointed in her. She doesn't know what to do.

Mona finally gets up enough courage to talk to the school social worker, Ms. Peterson. Ms. Peterson is a warm, empathetic individual who encourages Mona to talk about her situation. Mona shares her shock and dismay over what is happening. She had simply avoided thinking about contraception or possible pregnancy. It had been easier not to worry about it.

With Ms. Peterson's encouragement, Mona considers her alternatives. One alternative would be to have an abortion. The positive consequence of that would be a relatively fast termination of the problem and its implications. The negative consequences would include the cost, any difficulty Mona might encounter in setting up an appointment, and any physical discomfort the procedure would cause. The most serious negative consequence for Mona would be the guilt she says she would feel. She believes that abortion is morally wrong.

A second alternative would be to keep the baby and raise it herself. The positive consequence would be the fact that she

would accept responsibility for the child she has conceived. The negative consequences would be the financial, social, and educational difficulties she would have to face in order to support and care for her child.

A third alternative would be to keep the child and eventually marry Fred. Mona feels that this is a rather uncertain alternative. She doesn't know if Fred would want to get married. Although the positive consequence would be a two-parent home for the baby, Mona doesn't feel that either she or Fred would be ready for the responsibilities of marriage, and she would have to live with her parents until they were ready.

A fourth alternative would be to have the baby and place it up for adoption. The positive consequences would be that her baby would live and have a home. The negative consequences would be that she would have to face the social consequences of being a pregnant high school sophomore. The other major negative consequence would be the pain and regret she would experience when she gave up her baby.

Ms. Peterson should not, nor does she want to, make Mona's decision for her. It is up to Mona to weigh the positive and negative consequences of each alternative and make a decision. However, Ms. Peterson helps Mona think through her situation and her various alternatives.

Mona finally decides to have the baby and place it up for adoption. After weighing each positive and negative consequence within her own personal value system, she decides that this is the best route for her to take. She knows she will have to talk to Fred and to her parents first, but feels that at least she has defined her own perspective.

focusing on biological, psychological, and social development, address each life phase.

**Biological development** and theories concern the physical aspects of a person's life. For example, biological dimensions for children include when they begin to walk and develop coordination. For adolescents, biological development includes puberty and the physical changes related to it. Biological aspects for older adults concern the physical changes that normally occur as people age.

**Psychological development** and theories emphasize individuals' functioning and cognitive or thought processes. Psychological aspects concern how people think about themselves, others, and the environment around them. For children, this includes the gradual development from more concrete to more abstract

thought. Development of a sense of morality is involved. As life progresses, people may make great intellectual contributions involving scientific discovery or artistic expression. They may also experience issues concerning mental health, such as depression or eating disorders.

Finally, **social development** and theories address people's interaction with others around them in the social environment. Children live within the social context of their family. They develop their social lives as they start interacting and playing with other children. As people continue through life, social dimensions include interaction with friends and participation in work groups. They may find significant others as partners and/or start families of their own. Many join organizations for political, social,



## HIGHLIGHT 1.3

## Bio-Psycho-Social Developmental Dimensions Affect Each Other

Because people are complex, social workers should focus on the dynamic interaction among biological, psychological, and social aspects of development. Various aspects of development act together to affect an individual's overall growth and maturity.

Consider a depressed adolescent. Although his psychological state, or depression, may be the presenting problem, problems related to other systems may also be evident. His psychological depression may cause him to withdraw from others and become isolated. Thus, his social interaction may be drastically affected. He may stop eating and/or exercising, which would have a significant impact on his biological system. (Chapter 6 explores the biological development and Chapter 7 the psychological development of adolescents in much greater detail.)

Another example involves an alcohol-addicted adult. Her drinking affects her biological, psychological, and social development. Biologically, she loses weight and has frequent physical problems such as severe hangover headaches. Her physical health affects her psychological health in that she frequently becomes disgusted with herself. Her psychological condition affects her interactions with those close to her, and they begin to avoid her. Hence, her social interaction and development are affected. Social isolation, in turn, enhances her psychological desire to drink and escape, and her physical condition continues to deteriorate. (Chapter 11 discusses further the dynamics of alcoholism and its effects.)

recreational, or professional reasons. Some become great leaders who initiate and implement major social change.

Considered together, these aspects of development may be referred to as **bio-psycho-social development**. As Highlight 1.3 explains, these three dimensions integrally affect each other. Sometimes, the dividing lines among them are not clear cut. For instance, where does psychological development end and social development begin? Consider young people who attend school. Children first begin to attend school when they reach a certain biological age. A goal is to learn and develop thinking ability, a psychological dimension. Yet, school also provides a major social context in which children develop communication and interaction skills. People *psychologically* think about both gaining knowledge and developing their *social* relationships during this period of *biological* development.

Because of the importance of human diversity and its effects on human behavior, three chapters on this topic are interspersed throughout the book. These chapters focus on ethnocentrism and racism, gender roles, and sexual orientation. (Note that content on various aspects of human diversity, including aspects of cultural and spiritual development, are also infused throughout the chapters on biological, psychological, and social development.) Figure 1.2 summarizes the chapter layout of this book.

### Common Life Events

Throughout each of the life periods—infancy and childhood, adolescence, young and middle adulthood, and later adulthood—people tend to experience common life events related to biological, psychological, and social development that occur at certain times of life. For example, adolescence is a time when people establish an identity. Adolescents strive for independence and search for a place to fit into social peer groups. Sometimes adolescence is even more stressful. It may be marked by running away from home or by delinquency.

Marriage and having children are often characteristic events of early and middle adulthood. Sometimes people face unplanned pregnancy and single parenthood during this time of life. Some people must deal with divorce. Life events in later adulthood include retirement and readjustments to married life when children leave home. Many older adults remain deeply involved in family and community life, as predicted by activity theory. However, disengagement theory predicts that others will become increasingly isolated and detached from society (Santrock, 2012b). Additionally, many older adults must cope with increasingly more serious health problems and illnesses.

These experiences or life events—identity crises, marriage and children, retirement, and detachment—all tend to happen during certain periods of life. Each of these common events will be addressed within the context of the time of life when it generally occurs.

| Lifespan Development      |                              |                      |                                   |                          |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
|                           | Infancy & Childhood Chapters | Adolescence Chapters | Young & Middle Adulthood Chapters | Later Adulthood Chapters |
| Biological development    | 2                            | 6                    | 10                                | 14                       |
| Psychological development | 3                            | 7                    | 11                                | 15                       |
| Social development        | 4                            | 8                    | 12                                | 16                       |

| Aspects of Human Diversity |          |
|----------------------------|----------|
|                            | Chapters |
| Ethnocentrism & racism     | 5        |
| Gender roles & sexism      | 9        |
| Sexual orientation         | 13       |

FIGURE 1.2 Organization of the Text

The variety of experiences that may be considered typical is great. However, there are certain life events that social workers are frequently called upon to help people cope with. We will arbitrarily select and focus on some of these experiences because of their relevance to practice.

Typical Developmental Milestones

Typical developmental milestones include those significant biological, psychological, emotional, intellectual, and social points of development that typically occur in a person’s lifespan. This category focuses on the individual as a distinct entity. It provides a perspective on what can be considered typical. Topics include motor development, personality development, motivation, social development, and learning.

For example, consider a young child’s typical motor development. By age three or four, most children begin to jump, hop, run, operate a tricycle, employ a fork effectively, and use a pair of scissors (Berk, 2012a). (Chapter 2 profiles typical developmental milestones for children.)

Or consider the typical developmental occurrences for older adults. Older persons tend to have important changes in their sleeping patterns, such as taking longer to fall asleep and typically sleeping for shorter time periods at night (Ancoli-Israel & Alessi, 2005; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2013). (Chapter 14 further discusses the changes in sleeping patterns commonly experienced by older people.)

In order to distinguish between what is typical and what is atypical, one must have a clear understanding of typical developmental milestones at any age. The term **typical** is used here to refer to levels of functioning that are considered appropriate for a particular age level. Social work practitioners must be able to distinguish between situations that merit intervention and those that do not. Much time and effort can be wasted on trying to solve problems that are really not problems at all. For instance, it is needless to worry about a baby who is not walking at the age of 12 months. However, it may merit investigation if that baby is still not beginning to walk by the age of 24 months. Likewise, consider the older adult with sleeping problems. It may be senseless to

worry about a tendency to sleep lightly when that is simply a typical sign of age. Social workers may help people adjust their expectations so that they are more reasonable. People can be helped to stop worrying about what is really the typical state of things. On the other hand, sleeping problems at the age of 50 may merit further exploration. At this earlier point in life, such problems may be caused by stress or some physiological problem.

Typical developmental milestones provide a baseline for assessing human behavior. The extent of the problem or abnormality can be assessed only to the extent that it deviates from what is typical.

## LO 3 Describe Important Concepts for Understanding Human Behavior

Because of their significance in assessing and understanding human behavior, we will spend some time introducing several major concepts here. They involve themes that will be addressed throughout the book. The first cluster of ideas includes human diversity, cultural competency, oppression, and

populations-at-risk, all of which are somewhat related. The second grouping entails empowerment, the strengths perspective, and resiliency, which are also interconnected. The third important dimension discussed here involves critical thinking about ethical issues.

### Human Diversity, Cultural Competency, Oppression, and Populations-at-Risk

Social workers must be aware of human differences and the effects they have on human behavior. **Human diversity** is the vast range of differences among groups, including those related to “age, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status” (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). Highlight 1.4 elaborates on the importance of one aspect of human diversity—culture.

Anytime a person can be identified as belonging to a group that differs in some respect from the majority of others in society, that person is subject to the effects of that diversity, including discrimination and oppression. **Discrimination** is the act of treating



#### HIGHLIGHT 1.4

### Culture and the Importance of Cultural Competency

One significant aspect of human diversity is **culture**, the configuration of shared attitudes, values, goals, spiritual beliefs, social expectations, arts, technology, and behaviors that characterize a broader society in which people live. It's vital for social workers to learn to understand and appreciate the various cultural values, beliefs, and practices of their clients. A goal is to achieve **cultural competency** “the mastery of a particular set of knowledge, skills, policies, and programs used by the social worker that address the cultural needs of individuals, families, groups, and communities” (Lum, 2005, p. 4). Cultural competency involves cross-cultural understanding, the ability to appreciate and compare differences and similarities between and among different cultures, including your own. Winkelman (2005) explains the significance of cultural competency:

*A general cross-cultural orientation covers the general dynamics of intercultural interactions . . . [It provides] perspectives for developing productive and less-stressful*

*relations with members of different cultures by understanding the dynamics of cross-cultural contact . . . A central aspect of general cross-cultural orientation is an understanding of the culturally relative nature of beliefs and behavior. This perspective provides a basis for acceptance of other cultures as meaningful and rational. Another important aspect is development of cultural self-awareness, particularly of one's values, prejudices and beliefs. Effective intercultural relations require an awareness of one's cultural biases that can block acceptance and understanding of other cultures. Specific cross-cultural orientations provide information about a particular culture, region or ethnic group, covering information such as the group's history, cultural system, normative social behavior, politics, beliefs and other information necessary for successful adaptation to interpersonal interaction with people from that culture. (p. 13)*

people differently because they belong to some group (e.g., racial or religious) rather than on merit. Oppression involves putting unfair and extreme limitations and constraints on members of an identified group. Picture a woman in an all-male business establishment. Think of a 62-year-old person applying for a sales job in a department store where everyone else is under 30. Or consider an African American applying for membership in a country club that has no other members who are people of color. (People of color “is a collective term that refers to the major groups of African, Latino, Asian, and First Nations Peoples [Native Americans] who have been distinguished from the dominant society by color” [Lum, 2011, p. 129.]) A **population-at-risk**, then, is any group of “people who share some identifiable characteristic that places them at greater risk of social and economic deprivation and oppression than the general mainstream of society” (Kirst-Ashman, 2007, p. 57).

### Privilege, Power, and Acclaim

People in any society might be placed on a continuum based on social status and the amount of influence they have over others. People who experience discrimination and oppression might be placed on one end of the continuum. People who have exceptional “privilege, power, and acclaim” might be situated on the other. **Power** is “the ability to achieve one’s goals despite the opposition of others”; in other words, power involves “the ability to do whatever you want because no one can stop you” (Leon-Guerrero, 2011, p. 48). Power may entail using “force, authority, manipulation, or persuasion” to make others alter their behavior (Eitzen, Zinn, & Smith, 2014, p. 45).

**Privilege** entails special rights or benefits enjoyed because of elevated social, political, or economic status. Privilege is often related to **prestige**, “the amount of social respect or standing given to an individual based on occupation. We assign higher prestige to occupations that require specialized education or training [e.g., physicians], . . . or that make more money [e.g., CEOs of major corporations]” (Leon-Guerrero, 2011, p. 48). **Acclaim** is “enthusiastic approval or praise” (Nichols, 1999, p. 8). People who experience acclaim, such as high-level politicians and famous entertainers, maintain broad influence over what other people think. People who have privilege and acclaim have greater power to influence and control the destinies of others.

Eitzen and his colleagues (2014) make several points regarding power, wealth, and status in the United States:

- “The inequality gap in the United States is the widest of all the industrialized nations. The gap continues to grow especially because of tax benefits for the affluent . . .
- These tax policies, in addition to increasing the unequal distribution of wealth, increase the national debt, reduce government spending for programs to help the less fortunate, and weaken public institutions<sup>2</sup> that benefit [all members of] society. The widening gap increases the political influence of the wealthy . . .
- The power elite in society (those who control the government and the largest corporations) tend to come from backgrounds of privilege and wealth. Their decisions tend to benefit the wealthy disproportionately. The power elite is not organized and conspiratorial, but the interests of the wealthy are served, nevertheless, by the way in which society is organized. This bias occurs through influence over elected and appointed officials, . . . [social and economic policies that affect the distribution of wealth, and prestige and acclaim that serve as a] control of the masses.” (p. 52)

### Group Membership and Values

Membership in any group provides a certain set of environmental circumstances. A Chicano adolescent from a Mexican American inner-city neighborhood has a different social environment from that of an upper-middle-class adolescent of European descent living in the well-to-do suburbs of the same city.

Sensitivity to group differences is critical in understanding any individual’s behavior. This is important from two perspectives. First, the values or orientation of a particular group will affect how an individual behaves. For instance, an individual with a sexual orientation for the same gender may very well choose to participate in social activities with others of the same orientation. The individual might tend to avoid bars and nightclubs where heterosexual singles meet and might join activities or social clubs aimed at helping people with a sexual orientation toward the same gender to meet each other.

<sup>2</sup>In this context, an *institution* is a well-established custom or cultural expectation in a society; examples are public education and public assistance (welfare).

### The Societal Perspective on Group Differences

There is a second important perspective concerning sensitivity to group differences. The first perspective focused on how the group member feels and chooses to act. The second perspective directs attention to how other people and groups in the social environment view the (diverse) group in question. The diverse group may be the object of **prejudgments** (predetermined assumptions made without assessing facts) and **stereotypes** (standardized views about people who belong to some group that do not take into account individual qualities and differences). Each group member tends to lose his or her individual identity and assume the group identity in the eyes of others in the environment. To these outsiders, the characteristics of the group become the characteristics of the individual, whether or not the individual actually has them.

For example, consider a young, single African American mother of three young children who is receiving public aid. She applies for a service job behind the counter of a local delicatessen. The deli is run by a lower-middle-class white family that holds many of the larger society's traditional values. These values include the outdated ideas that the head of the household must be a man and that women should stay home and take care of the children. The owner of the deli, a man and head of the family, interviews the young woman and makes several assumptions.

The first assumption is that the woman has no business not being married. The second is that she should be staying at home with her children. The third assumption is that the woman, because of her color, is probably lazy and undependable. He uses the excuse that she has no experience in this particular job and refuses to hire her.

This young woman has run up against similar, serious difficulties in her job search. In addition, she may have problems getting adequate day care for her young children. Taken together, all these difficulties may prevent her from finding a job and getting off public aid.

In assessing behavior, then, one must be aware of limitations imposed by the environment. Otherwise, impossible alternatives might be pursued. In the case we presented above, for example, a social worker who does not understand these things might continue to pressure the young woman to go out and get a job. Since she was already trying and failing, however, this additional pressure might make her turn against the social worker and the social service system. She might just give up.

Awareness of how prejudgments and stereotypes affect people forms the basis of **professional values**, one of the foundation blocks of social work. These values include respect for each individual and that individual's right to self-determination; the importance of confidentiality; commitment to social justice, advocacy, and positive social change; the appreciation of human diversity; and the right to equal treatment and equal opportunity (CSWE, 2015; Reamer, 2013).

### Focus on Empowerment, the Strengths Perspective, and Resiliency

The second cluster of vital concepts for understanding human behavior includes empowerment, the strengths perspective, and resiliency. These constitute ongoing themes stressed throughout social work practice.

#### Empowerment

**Empowerment** is the "process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations" (Gutierrez, 2001, p. 210). The empowerment approach is a perspective on practice that provides "ways of thinking about and doing practice" (Lee, 2001, p. 32). Throughout the assessment process and our quest to understand human behavior, it's critical to emphasize, develop, and nurture strengths and positive attributes in order to empower people. Empowerment aims at enhancing the power and control that individuals, groups, families, and communities have over their destinies.

We have also determined that some groups of people suffer from stereotypes, discrimination, and oppression. It is social work's task to empower clients in general and members of oppressed groups in particular.

Cowger and Snively (2002) explain further:

*Promoting empowerment means believing that people are capable of making their own choices and decisions. It means not only that human beings possess the strengths and potential to resolve their own difficult life situations, but also that they increase their strength and contribute to the well-being of society by doing so. The role of the social worker is to nourish, encourage, assist, enable, support, stimulate, and unleash the strengths within people; to illuminate the strengths available to people in their own environments; and to promote equity and justice at all levels of society. To do*

*that, the social worker helps clients articulate the nature of their situations, identify what they want, explore alternatives for achieving those desires and then achieve them. (p. 110)*

### The Strengths Perspective

Focusing on strengths can provide a sound basis for empowerment. Sometimes referred to as the **strengths perspective**, this orientation focuses on client resources, capabilities, knowledge, abilities, motivations, experience, intelligence, and other positive qualities that can be put to use to solve problems and pursue positive changes.

Assessment of human behavior establishes the basis for understanding people's problems and issues, and subsequently helping them improve their lives. Social workers address people's problems every day, but it's the identification of people's strengths that provides clues for how to solve their problems and improve their life situations. Saleebey (2013, pp. 17–20) cites at least four principles involved in the strengths perspective:

1. *Every individual, group, family, and community has strengths.* The case example in the next section concerning the Fernandez family will illustrate this idea.
2. *Trauma and abuse, illness and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity.* Have you ever experienced a serious problem or disappointment that turned out to have opened other, perhaps better, opportunities for you? Days after my 16th birthday, I was in a car accident in which my face was crushed. (It happened at about midnight on Friday the 13th, amazingly enough.) My injuries were painful and required four years of plastic surgery. This experience taught me the value and superficiality of exterior beauty, gave me a much more realistic approach to viewing and understanding people, and made me tougher.

Another trauma occurred when I applied for a second master's degree after receiving my MSW, and was turned down. I was devastated. However, the experience forced me to get out of school and into social work practice, which turned out to be by far the more gratifying and constructive choice.

3. *Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change, and take*

*individual, group, and community aspirations seriously.* You don't have a crystal ball telling you what opportunities and choices will confront you in your life. So many students come to me worrying about their choice of major or what will happen after they graduate. It's important to appreciate the strengths you have and to grasp opportunities as they occur. You don't yet know what chances will present themselves to you or where your career will take you.

4. *Every environment is full of resources.* Resources can provide great strengths. One of social workers' major roles is to link clients with the resources they need to empower them to improve their lives.

### Multiple Sources of Strengths: A Case Example

As mentioned, empowerment through focusing on strengths can occur on the individual, family, group, organizational, and community levels (Saleebey, 2013). For instance, consider the following case situation of a family coming to the attention of a social service agency (Haulotte & Kretzschmar, 2001, pp. 30–31). This provides an example of how a strengths perspective is helpful in assessment:

*The Fernandez family consists of Carmen, the 35-year-old wife and mother; Juan, the 36-year-old husband and father; and their two daughters, Oralia, 13, and Mari, 14. The family had immigrated to the United States seven years ago from Mexico. Both Carmen and Juan had finished primary school, which is equivalent to attaining a sixth-grade education. In this country, they had been taking English lessons and were becoming quite fluent. Oralia and Mari both attended the same school and were doing reasonably well. When Juan and Carmen immigrated here, they had high hopes of attaining a better life for themselves and their daughters.*

*Three months ago, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service officers found Juan doing construction work at a site near the Fernandez apartment. After determining that his papers were not in order, the officers then deported Juan to Mexico.*

*Although the family has always experienced financial problems, these problems got much worse when Juan had to leave. Carmen is finding it very difficult making ends meet without her husband being with her. Juan did get a low-paying,*

*part-time job in a Mexican border town. He is sending his family some money, but not much. He also must support himself and is trying to save money to return to the United States. Carmen works as a checker in a grocery store and just got a second part-time job as a janitor. She thus works from 6:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. on most days. Fortunately, bus transportation to and from work is readily available.*

*The current crisis is that right after Carmen got home last night, a police officer arrived at her door with Oralia. He had found her alone in a nearby park, which violated the local curfew. Apparently, Oralia and Mari had been arguing intensively about something when Oralia stomped off. (Now neither of them can remember what the argument was about.) Carmen told the officer that she was sick to death of listening to the girls' continuous squabbling. She threw up her hands and said she didn't know what to do. Carmen had to work long hours to keep the family afloat. She was forced to expect the girls to take care of themselves when she was gone.*

*The Fernandez family has no relatives in town, although they do have friends in the neighborhood. Juan and Carmen had attended services at a local Pentecostal church, but had not made the final decision to become members. At one point the couple met with the church's pastor, who suggested that counseling for the girls might help the family. He had referred them to a local social service agency that provides a range of services to immigrants including counseling, legal advice, and help in finding employment. Carmen emphasized, however, that she wanted no one to ask questions about the family's immigration status.*

*Carmen finally decides to seek outside help. She is experiencing horrible headaches from all of the stress. She is considering going to see a neighborhood curandera (a traditional unlicensed healer who typically uses herbal remedies and traditional cultural healing practices). Carmen is already taking manzanilla (chamomile, an ingredient found in herbal teas that is thought to calm anxiety in addition to easing stomach aches and intestinal cramping). She also plans to contact the social services agency that provides help to immigrants.*

Problems in this case are fairly obvious. They include fighting between Carmen and the girls, financial difficulties, immigration status, Juan's absence,

and Carmen's headaches. However, focusing on the Fernandezes' strengths can provide clues about how to deal with the issues.

**Individual strengths** include the facts that both Juan and Carmen have completed middle school and are literate; both had been attending English classes; both have jobs (this is also a family strength as it directly affects the family's well-being); both Oralia and Mari are doing fairly well in school; and Carmen is motivated to seek family counseling.

**Family strengths** include strong family bonds, mutual concern among family members for each other's welfare, and the parents' pride in their daughters and high hopes for their futures.

**Group strengths** include any support and help family members can get from friends and others at work, school, and church, and in the neighborhood. **Organizational strengths** include the fact that the family plans to become involved with the agency serving immigrants, is willing to get counseling, and can use this agency as a resource to help Juan return to the United States. Another organizational strength is that family members can be involved with a church if they choose to do so.

**Community strengths** include having a social services agency, a church, public bus transportation, and access to a *curandera* to provide alternative health care. (Note the importance of appreciating cultural differences when focusing on natural support networks such as the *curandera*. A **natural support network** or **helping network** is a group of people—including family, friends, neighbors, work colleagues, and fellow members in organizations such as churches and other community groups—who informally provide help and support.) Communities and their significance are covered in greater depth later in this chapter. Can you see any other strengths in the Fernandez example that have been missed?

Consider also that sometimes a strength may overlap two or more categories. For example, spiritual involvement with a church may reflect individual, family, group, organizational, and community strengths. How the strength is labeled is not important. The essential thing is to consider all potential categories of strength when trying to understand human behavior.

### Individual Strengths

Individual strengths can include educational background, work history, problem-solving and



Stock Connection/Supershot

*Communities provide an important context for human interaction and cultural celebrations. Here a crowd awaits the Chinese New Year's parade in front of the main entrance to the Los Angeles Chinatown*

decision-making skills, personal qualities and characteristics, physical and financial resources, and positive attitudes (Jones & Biesecker, 1980; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012b). This text will explore many aspects of empowerment with individuals. Examples include infertility counseling (Chapter 2); appreciation of ethnic and cultural strengths in families (Chapter 4); culturally competent practice (Chapter 5); sex education for Native Americans (Chapter 6); spiritual development (Chapter 7); women and sexual equality (Chapter 9); persons living with AIDS (Chapter 10); promoting optimal well-being for LGBT people (Chapter 13); and theories of successful aging (Chapter 15).

Understanding yourself enhances your ability to understand others. Other people deal with many of the same feelings, issues, and problems that you do. Recognizing strengths in yourself is just as important as recognizing them in others. How would you answer the questions about your personal strengths posed in Highlight 1.5?

### **Empowerment Through Groups**

An example of using strengths to pursue empowerment for people from a group perspective involves the use of **support groups**. These are made up of people with similar problems or issues who come together and provide each other with support, information about how to cope with difficulties, and suggestions for resources (Toseland & Rivas, 2012). Such groups emphasize the identification and use of strengths. Examples given by Toseland and Rivas include the following:

- “A group of children meeting at school to discuss the effects of divorce on their lives.
- A group of people diagnosed with cancer, and their families, discussing the effects of the disease and how to cope with it.
- A group of recently discharged psychiatric patients discussing their adjustment to community living.



## HIGHLIGHT 1.5

### Assessing Your Strengths

How would you answer the following questions in assessing your own array of strengths?

#### Individual Strengths

- What are your best qualities?
- What are you most proud of about yourself?
- What skills do you have (e.g., educational, work, leadership, communication, social, technological)?

#### Family Strengths

- To what extent do you receive support from your family of origin, current family, or significant other?
- In what ways do you rely on family members for help?
- What are the best characteristics about your family?

#### Group Strengths

- How do your friends, neighbors, colleagues at work, or fellow students help and support you?
- Do you belong to any social, recreational, or counseling groups?
- If so, how does each serve to meet your needs, provide support, or offer opportunities for self-fulfillment, new experiences, or pleasure?

#### Organizational Strengths

- Do you currently belong to any organizations, or have you in the past?
- If so, what benefits and support do or did you receive?
- Do you receive any special advising, support, or financial help from school? If so, in what form?
- If you're working, what are the strengths in your work environment?

#### Community Strengths

- What services and resources are available to you in your community?
- What do you like best about your community?
- What cultural opportunities are available in your community that you appreciate?

What other strengths do you have that you can draw upon as you interact with others in your environment? Who and/or what helps you pursue your plans and dreams? Who and/or what helps you get through each day and, hopefully, make the most of it?

- A group of single parents sharing the difficulties of raising children alone.” (p. 20)

Chapter 8 elaborates more fully on empowerment through social work with groups.

### Organizational and Community Empowerment

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) suggest a strengths perspective for enhancing communities and empowering community residents. They stress using potential community assets, including the following: citizens’ “religious, cultural, athletic, [and] recreational” associations; “private businesses; public institutions such as schools, libraries, parks, police and fire stations; [and] nonprofit institutions such as hospitals and social service agencies” to improve a community’s functioning and quality of life (pp. 6–8).

McKnight and Block (2010) refer to “the abundant community” that is full of potential and strength (p. 65). They describe communities as unique entities, each having special characteristics and strong points,

noting that “[a] competent community takes advantage of its abundance” (p. 65). Its residents strive to identify the community’s positive attributes and use them in creative ways to improve the quality of life.

The following are examples of using the strengths of an abundant community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993):

- “About 60 youth leaders are trained to teach a youth empowerment curriculum to 700 younger kids. The curriculum, which develops self-esteem through a variety of nontraditional classes, offers youth alternatives to crime, gangs, and drugs. The project is sponsored jointly by a community college and the neighborhood police precinct.” (p. 37)
- “Seniors organize and convince the Department of Aging to open an alternative nutrition site after two have already been closed down.” (p. 56)
- “A group of homeless women with children are working together to create a housing cooperative in which they will provide care for each other’s

children and also share in community meal preparation several days a week. Their combined effort means that they will be involved in every aspect of planning, purchasing, remodeling, and maintaining their new home.” (p. 89)

- “A group of recently graduated college students created an association that collected information from the people in their neighborhood who were willing to teach others what they knew, either for pay or for free. The group identified thousands of things local people could teach, from how to play a guitar to the works of Aristotle. This ‘library’ of community knowledge became a major new resource for local learning, discussion, and recreation.” (p. 136)
- “A coalition of local churches provides sanctuary for refugees from Central America.” (p. 149)

### Resiliency: Using Strengths to Fight Adversity

A concept related to the strengths perspective and empowerment is resiliency. **Resiliency** is the ability of an individual, family, group, community, or organization to recover from adversity and resume functioning even when suffering serious trouble, confusion, or hardship. Whereas the “strengths perspective focuses on capabilities, assets, and positive attributes rather than problems and pathologies,” resiliency emphasizes the use of strengths to cope with adversity and survive, despite difficulties (Greene & Conrad, 2012; Gutheil & Congress, 2000, p. 41).

The following scenarios provide an illustration of the concept of resiliency:

*When a pitched baseball hits a window, the glass usually shatters. When that same ball meets a baseball bat, the bat is rarely damaged. When a hammer strikes a ceramic vase, it too usually shatters. But when that same hammer hits a rubber automobile tire, the tire quickly returns to its original shape. The baseball bat and the automobile tire both demonstrate resiliency. (Norman, 2000, p. 3)*

Resiliency involves two dimensions: risk and protection (Greene & Conrad, 2012; Norman, 2000). In this context, risk involves “stressful life events or adverse environmental conditions that increase the **vulnerability** [defenselessness or helplessness] of individuals” or other systems (p. 3). **Protection**, on the other hand, concerns those factors that “buffer, moderate, and protect against those vulnerabilities” (Norman, 2000, p. 3).

On the individual level, an example of a resilient child is one who, despite being shunted from one foster home to another during childhood, still completes high school, enters college, and later begins a healthy family of her own. Regardless of the risks to which she’s been exposed, she uses her strengths to protect her and struggle through her adversity. Such strengths might include positive self-esteem and self-worth, good problem-solving ability to address the difficulties confronting her, a positive sense of direction, the ability to empathize with others’ situations, the use of humor, high expectations for personal performance, and the ability to distance herself from the dysfunctional people and negative events around her (Norman, 2000). A key to stressing resiliency is the identification and use of clients’ strengths to overcome problems.

Examples of resiliency on the individual level can also include older adults (Lewis & Harrell, 2012). For example,

*79-year-old Steven R. has been lovingly caring for his 80-year-old wife in their home since she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease 2 years ago. 68-year-old Juan T., having vowed to rebuild his business after it burned to the ground, reopened to great fanfare. 73-year-old Eudora B. has been raising her two teenage grandchildren since their mother died. 87-year-old Rose N. continues to write and publish short stories despite her recent stroke which left her wheelchair-bound and nearly totally blind. (Gutheil & Congress, 2000, p. 41)*

An example of resiliency at the organizational level is a public university experiencing budget cuts of several million dollars. That university can be resilient to the extent that it responds to the risk of loss, protects its most important functions, makes plans to adapt to the shortfall of resources, and continues providing students with a quality education. Resiliency in this case involves focusing on its strengths to maintain basic functioning.

Resiliency in a community is illustrated by a group of urban neighborhoods that address increasing crime and drug use, problems that put the community at risk of disorganization and destruction. Community strengths include availability of organizations that provide resources, residents’ expectations for appropriate and positive behavior, and opportunities for “neighborhood youths to constructively participate in the community” (Greene & Livingston, 2002, p. 78). A resilient community

might use its concerned citizens to form neighborhood organizations that oversee community conditions and upkeep, work with public services to improve conditions, and advocate for increased resources (Homan, 2011). Neighborhood Watch programs may be formed in which residents volunteer to keep an eye on each other's premises to prevent and combat crime. Community residents might work with local police and schools to establish drug education and prevention programs for young people. They might also advocate for more police to increase the surveillance and apprehension of drug dealers. A resilient community uses its strengths to address the risks threatening it and to protect its residents.

### Critical Thinking About Ethical Issues

Another important dimension necessary for understanding human behavior and social work practice involves critical thinking about ethical issues. Values and ethics serve as a major foundation of the social work knowledge base. **Values** are perceptions and opinions held by individuals, professions, and cultures about “what is *good* and *desirable*” (Dolgoft, Harrington, & Loewenberg, 2012, p. 25). For example, our culture values education and offers it to everyone. Similarly, you value college or you wouldn't be here. **Ethics** are principles based on values that guide behavior and determine “what is *right* and *correct*” (Dolgoft et al., 2012, p. 25). Values are concerned with ideas, while ethics have to do with the appropriate behavior based on those ideas.

Social workers must be vigilant concerning their adherence to professional values. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008) has a professional **code of ethics** that specifies the following six basic ethical principles to guide practitioners' behavior (access the entire Code at <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp>):

1. “Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.”
2. “Social workers challenge social injustice.”
3. “Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.”
4. “Social workers recognize the centered importance of human relationships.”
5. “Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.”
6. “Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.”

Although the NASW Code of Ethics is the code followed by social workers in the United States, note that other ethical codes also are available (CSWE, 2008). Consider, for example, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) code of ethics, available at [http://www.casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/attachements/CASW\\_Code%20of%20Ethics\\_0.pdf](http://www.casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/attachements/CASW_Code%20of%20Ethics_0.pdf). Highlight 1.6 addresses the ethical responsibilities of social workers at the international and global levels and discusses an international social work code of ethics.

Throughout a social work career, professionals must face and address **ethical dilemmas**, situations in which ethical principles conflict and all solutions are imperfect. For example, a 16-year-old client tells her social worker that she hates her stepfather and plans to poison him. The social worker is supposed to maintain **confidentiality** (being trustworthy and keeping information in confidence). However, this is a situation where a person's life may be in danger, which must take precedence over confidentiality. In this case, the worker decides to break confidentiality in order to preserve the stepfather's life.

Consider another example of an ethical dilemma:

*A client told the [social work] field student intern that she was pregnant and was planning to marry the father of the baby. The student also was working with this client's mother, who had told the student about her own sexual relationship with the same man that her daughter was going to marry. The mother did not want to tell her daughter that she was having a sexual relationship with her daughter's boyfriend. (Abels, 2001, p. 9)*

What should the student intern do? Tell the daughter about her mother's relationship with her boyfriend? Or maintain confidentiality, remaining silent and letting the family work it out for themselves?

The social work student decided to “ask the mother to consider telling the daughter about her relationship, and to ask the boyfriend to do the same. Neither agreed. Because the daughter was 18, the agency could not identify a legal violation of sex with minors” (Abels, 2001, p. 9). The student social worker had tried her best. Maybe things would work out over time. Eventually, “the mother told her boyfriend that she was no longer going to see him” (p. 9).

As this story illustrates, social workers are bound to run into problems with no perfectly satisfactory solution. When this occurs, they must use critical thinking