Preface

John, Rick, and I have discussed several reasons for wanting to write this book. As authors, we bring a unique and rare balance of social work practice and teaching experience as well as a love of theory and philosophy to our writing. When we began to discuss a new approach to a human behavior theory textbook for social work students, which equally addressed theory and social work practice, we were already keenly aware that there were virtually no human behavior theory texts that took on this reciprocal application of theory to practice. We observed our students at all levels of the curriculum (BSW, MSW, and PhD) having difficulties making sense of theories and struggling to apply these theories and their attendant ideas and concepts to practice. Theory was often seen as cumbersome and not very relevant to social work practice. As educators, we had discovered how theory could come alive for students—once it was linked directly to social work case examples. We thought students might change their minds or at least be open to the richness and benefits of using theory if we examined a variety of case examples from social work practice through the multiple lenses of theories (e.g., critical, moral, and cognitive development; systems, empowerment, and psychodynamic). Theories could be used to understand behavior at individual, family, group, community, and even societal levels; and theories could also suggest and even point the way for social work interventions, as well as research, advocacy, and policy-based efforts.

In our teaching, we discovered it is much harder for most of our students to move from a broad theory that "takes in the kitchen sink" to its application in practice. In contrast, students are often astute in their inductive skills, moving from specific cases to more abstract ideas; they are able to discuss a case from social work practice and "back in" (with some reflection and discussion) to broader ideas and theories. And so, we were determined in this book to start with, integrate, and end with a wide range of cases from our own practice, teaching, and in some cases, our research experiences. Of course, the specifics of these cases have been disguised to protect clients' privacy, but they reflect our diverse practice experience with combat veterans, older adults, and those with head injuries, in mental health, foster care, and in private practice with survivors of sexual abuse.

Over the years, we have also interacted with numerous social work faculty members who felt that human behavior theory textbooks did not draw on original scholars and their writings and instead these primary writings were being glossed over, watered down, and treated with very little depth. It was for this reason that we agreed to not only provide a succinct theory overview within each chapter but also to feature one or two scholars in an in-depth section that typically follows the overview of every theory. This kind of writing—a thorough overview that incorporates original as well as current source material and an in-depth feature on a theorist for every chapter—was challenging, but it was very rewarding for us. We hope that our readers will enjoy these in-depth scholar features and will be less intimidated to "go to the source" and

read their original writings. Educators also told us that they wanted more theories that address macro-level practice. We have responded with robust treatment of macro theories including critical theories, systems theories, and theories of the natural environment and social work.

We have also been frustrated with the limited critique of theories and conceptual ideas for social work scholarship. Although some scholars, such as Stan Witkin, have explored critique questions that reflect the ideals and values of the social work profession, in most instances theory critique is absent from social work scholarship. This forced us to try to define key elements that reflect social work values and ethics, are rooted in our history and current understandings of social work, and that can be used for critique of any theory or idea. Our objective was not to encourage students to memorize key ideas in theories, but through a process of engaging in ongoing critique, we were hoping students might "learn how to learn." Theories and models come and go as trends in social work and our society. For those of you old enough to remember, think of neurolinguistic programming, and for those of you new to the profession, think of mindfulness, trauma-informed care models, and eye movement desensitization techniques. It does matter what theories are currently being employed and what will be reimbursed for by insurance companies in our often resource-starved agencies, but it is also important to know how consistent these theories, models, and techniques are with social work values (e.g., whether or not the theoretical premises ignore the dignity and worth of each person or encourage the social worker's ongoing competence and growth through critical self-reflection). For these reasons, we included introductory chapters that encourage students to critique theory and to understand a theory's historical context. Further, each of our theory chapters includes a separate section on theory critique.

Finally, we were also intentional about including theory overviews, in-depth features, and case examples that reflect growing human diversity within our society based on, but not limited to, race/ethnicity, gender, class, age, sexual orientation and gender expression, (dis)ability, and religion. Our goal was to let our clients and scholars speak for themselves. As authors who know white privilege, we have been witnesses to the marginalization and oppression experienced by so many and, in turn, hope to help our students and colleagues alike in waking up, in moving, as Paulo Freire remarks, from a naïve consciousness to a critical consciousness as a way to make our world a better and more equitable place to live in.

Preface to the Second Edition

In this new edition, we have addressed three major themes: (1) antiracism, diversity, equity and inclusion, and human rights issues; (2) growing research related to treatment interventions and strategies with links to our human behavior theories; and (3) expansions of our theoretical work. As consistent with the 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards, we have explicitly addressed antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion and human rights in an increasing array of theories, frameworks, perspectives and concepts. In Chapter 3, we provide an in-depth case example with reflective questions regarding anti-racist practice that have broad ranging social work practice implications at the individual, family, community, agency, and larger structural levels. In Chapter 11, we provide a summary of Ibram Kendi's antiracist "manifesto" and recognize its influence on the social work profession. In our chapter on symbolic interactionism,

we discuss the growing research efforts in social work and beyond to understand the social construction of stigma and its impact not only on marginalized communities, but on clients' willingness and ability to access treatment interventions in a range of clinical areas such as HIV and substance abuse treatment in rural settings, support for those suffering with intimate partner violence, and for those who are unemployed due to health-related issues. We also include a film discussion of the *Breakfast Club*, noting the film's shortcomings and strengths in examining the role of guilt and shame in influencing the behavior of groups that are often stigmatized in high school and beyond. In our first edition, we pointed to criticisms of systems theory in not directly addressing oppression and discrimination, but we now see this changing, albeit slowly, in that researchers and scholars are now drawing on systems theory and specifically dynamic systems theory (which integrates change and growth) to examine diverse populations and issues (e.g., ageism, spiritually diverse clients, mothers with repeated teen pregnancies, those in the child welfare system, and with those who are unhoused).

This new addition also includes some of the growing research related to treatment interventions and strategies and adeptly links these newer developments to our human behavior theories. For example, in Chapter 5, and as part of psychodynamic theory, we also include a case example and present some of the newest research on clients' use of psychedelics, often with the aid of Indigenous healers, to help loosen up ingrained, problematic thinking and behavioral patterns for people facing post-traumatic stress reactions due to combat and other forms of abuse, depression, and anxiety. Clients are pursuing this treatment whether or not our medical, social work, and other helping professions fully sanction it. In Chapter 10, we address the prominent use of acceptance commitment therapy (ACT) and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) models within many of our mental health and related agencies. These models are part of the third wave of cognitive behavior theory/therapy in that they encourage clients to develop radical acceptance of who they are in the moment, drawing on Buddhist ideas that include strategies such as meditation and breathing exercises. In the specific case of DBT, there is a powerful focus on supervision, support, and collaboration among practitioners in working with clients who often face very difficult situations. This supervisory, collaborative model reflects a kind of parallel process so that professionals are armed with the support they need to, in turn, give to clients. In Chapter 13, we incorporate newer research on multiple intelligences including emotional intelligence and acknowledge that emotional intelligence is now understood as a pivotal type of intelligence for human growth and development. We also expand this chapter to include Carol Gilligan's newest work, *In a Human Voice*, which challenges gender binaries prominent in patriarchal systems and seeks to transcend these binaries and restrictions so as to help people develop resistance to prescribed roles, ways of thinking, and ethical decision making.

We have also continued to extend and expand our theoretical work. For example, in Chapter 7 on environmental and ecological social work, we discuss the growing use of nature as a kind of treatment and healing (ecotherapy) for ourselves and clients in helping address such problems as anxiety, depression, loneliness/isolation, and trauma, and we explore the use of pilgrimages to help people connect to nature and do reflective work (e.g., on transitions, endings, and new beginnings). In Chapter 4, and based on feedback from readers like you, we have added a new summary on Karl Marx with his focus on class and economic disparities and its foundation for other critical theories. We also provide a deeper dive into queer theory, one of the newer critical

theories that has increasingly impacted social work and our society. Finally, in our chapter on life span, life course, and historical trauma, we have added a section on human sexuality as a major focus in our work with clients and have placed sexual identity development as one element of a broader, more holistic understanding of sexuality that includes not only identity but also sexualization (using sexuality to influence or coerce others), sensuality, intimacy, and reproduction. As we write this, some of our former MSW students are pursuing extensive training to become sex educators and therapists having seen the importance of addressing this topic more fully in social work practice. One of our major goals in writing this text was to discuss theoretical writings and to apply their ideas to the specifics of social work practice. We continue to teach using a range of practice examples, helping our students, many of whom learn by doing, start with a case and back into theory and see the benefit of being exposed to diverse ideas about how people change and grow.

CSWE 2022 EPAS Competencies and Corresponding Examples

CSWE 2022 EPAS Competency	Corresponding Examples of CSWE Competencies in *Human Behavior Theory for Social Work Practice*(Koenig et al., 2025)
Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior Engage in ethical decision-making, use reflection, and uphold professional values (e.g., NASW Code of Ethics).	**Chapter 1: Introduction to Theory and Its Application to Social Work Practice** includes sections on *What Is Theory?* and *Theory and Science* that discuss ethical applications of theories in practice. **Chapter 2: Critique of Theory for Use in Social Work Practice** includes a section on *How Consistent Is This Theory With Social Work Values and Ethics?* that guides ethical evaluation used in all theory chapters. **Chapter 13: Cognitive and Moral Development Theories** includes a section titled *Moral Dialogue* that provides a self-reflective tool that aids social workers in their ethical decision-making processes. **Chapters 4 to 13** include ethics spotlight case examples for ethical reflection and discussion.
Competency 2: Advance Human Rights and Social, Racial, Economic, and Environmental Justice Advocate for equitable policies and address systemic oppression.	**Chapter 4: Critical Theories** examine feminist and queer criticism, and critical race theory. Includes in-depth section on Paulo Freire's work on oppression, social justice, and critical consciousness and its links to racial and economic justice. **Chapter 7: Environmental and Ecological Theory in Social Work** includes a section on environmental ethics and an in-depth section titled *Arne Naess and Deep Ecology* that encourages social workers to expand their understanding and practice of social justice to include the natural world. **Chapter 11: Theories of Culture and White Privilege** includes sections on critical consciousness and White identity development; spotlights Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, which analyzes racial and social justice; and includes an exercise mapping racism in social institutions and policies for advocacy purposes.

(*Continued*)

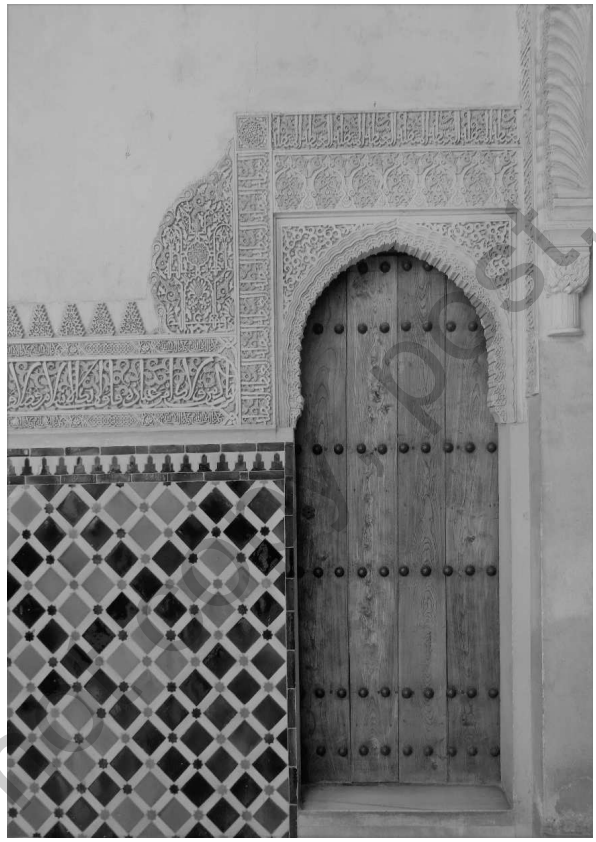
CSWE 2022 EPAS Competencies and Corresponding Examples (*Continued*)

CSWE 2022 EPAS Competency	Corresponding Examples of CSWE Competencies in *Human Behavior Theory for Social Work Practice*(Koenig et al., 2025)
Competency 3: Engage Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI) in Practice Demonstrate anti-racist practice and promote inclusive environments.	**Chapter 3: Contextualizing Human Behavior Theory** provides a substantial case example with discussion questions on anti-racism, diversity, equity and inclusion (ADEI) titled *Being African in a Dominant White School*. **Chapter 4: Critical Theories** includes a section on critical race theory that examines systemic racism, aligns with ADEI, and directly supports Kendi's antiracism framework and social work's equity focus. **Chapter 11: Theories of Culture and White Privilege** includes an in-depth section on White privilege and White identity models; both address ADEI. Praxis is also presented as an action-awareness-reflection-dialogue model that supports anti-racist practice.
Competency 4: Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice Use research to inform practice and evaluate interventions.	**Chapter 1: Introduction to Theory and Its Application to Social Work Practice** includes a section on *Theory and Science* emphasizing evidence-based practice. **Chapter 2: Critique of Theory for Use in Social Work Practice** includes a section on *What Are the Sources of Knowledge That Support This Theory?* in which theories are evaluated for their research foundations. **Chapter 5: Psychodynamic Theory** includes a section titled *Use of Psychedelics and Psychodynamic Theory* that reviews current research as it informs practice. **Chapters 4 to 13** include a section examining sources of knowledge that support each theory.
Competency 5: Engage in Policy Practice Analyze and advocate for policies that advance well-being.	**Chapter 4: Critical Theories** provide a range of practice examples that encourage policy advocacy for systemic change. **Chapter 6: Systems Theories** includes a section titled *One Final Example: Systems Theories as Applied to Alcohol and Drug Addiction* in which authors analyze and advocate for comprehensive policies that can create a robust response to enhance human well-being. **Chapter 12: Empowerment Theory and the Strengths Perspective** includes sections on historical context and the application of the strengths perspective with policy implications that support policy practice.
Competency 6: Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities Use empathy and interpersonal skills to build relationships.	**Chapter 9: Symbolic Interactionism** includes an in-depth section on George H. Mead's work on social interactions that inform engagement and the development of relational skills in practice. **Chapter 12: Empowerment Theory and Strengths Perspective** depicts strengths-based engagement strategies for individuals and groups.

CSWE 2022 EPAS Competency	Corresponding Examples of CSWE Competencies in *Human Behavior Theory for Social Work Practice*(Koenig et al., 2025)
Competency 7: Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities Conduct holistic assessments using theoretical frameworks.	**Chapter 6: Systems Theories** includes sections on a person-in-environment (PIE) perspective and the use of eco-maps and genograms as assessment tools. **Chapter 8: Life Span Theories, Family Life Course Perspectives, and Historical Trauma** includes sections on Erikson and historical trauma that serve as frameworks for holistic assessment.
Competency 8: Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities Apply evidence-based interventions tailored to client needs.	**Chapter 10: Behavior Theory, the Cognitive Turn, and the Influence of Mindfulness** includes sections on cognitive-behavioral therapies (e.g., ACT, DBT and mindfulness) as evidence-based intervention strategies. **Chapter 12: Empowerment Theory and Strengths Perspective** includes a section titled *The Strengths Model* as an evidence-based intervention for practice with diverse clients.
Competency 9: Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities Assess intervention outcomes and adjust practice.	**Chapter 2: Critique of Theory for Use in Social Work Practice** includes sections on evaluating theory effectiveness (e.g., "How Does This Theory Address Growth and Change?") and supports assessment of practice-based interventions. **Chapter 10: Behavior Theory, the Cognitive Turn, and the Influence of Mindfulness** includes a section titled *In-depth: Mindfulness East and West* in which mindfulness is presented and assessed as a cognitive and behavioral intervention for use in practice. **Chapter 4 to 13** include a critique section examining how each theory addresses growth and change that supports assessment of practice interventions.

Chapter 1

Introduction to Theory and Its Application to Social Work Practice



Opening the door to theory: Moorish palace door, Granada, Spain

©Terry Koenig

Learning Objectives

1.1 Describe the chapter organization of this text

1.2 Describe chapter summaries for this text

1.3 Define theory

1.4 Describe theory's relationship to science

1.5 Describe the importance of theory and myth busters for using theory in social work practice

1.6 Explain the interactive abstract/concrete continuum and its use in understanding theories

1.7 Explain what meta theories are and their contributions to social work practice

Case Example

Your New Client at the Community Mental Health Center

Imagine you are working in a community mental health center in your area. A new client has been referred to you for counseling. Her name is Martha, and as she walks into your office you notice she smells a bit like patchouli, is wearing a "hippie" type dress, and has matted hair. She appears to be in good spirits today, but you detect a certain sadness and anxiety as you observe her mannerisms, speech, and affect.

As you get to know this person you understand that she is Caucasian, 60 years old, recently divorced (after 40 years of marriage), has five adult children, and also recently left her lifelong, conservative religious affiliation. She reports feeling increasingly discontent with her life over the past several years, especially after her youngest child left for college 2 years ago, leaving her and her now ex-husband "empty nesters." Since the divorce last year, Martha has been mostly "couch surfing," hanging out with a much-younger crowd, smoking marijuana (something she had never tried before), and joined a drum circle that meets in the local town square. She reports feeling confused about her life and concerned for her future because she has no income, health benefits, or job prospects. She says that she has mostly enjoyed her new young friends, but she also believes their relationship is time-limited because they know she is "old." She reports feeling "lost" because she has been rejected by her religious community that she belonged to for decades, yet she doesn't "fit in" all that well with the young "partying" crowd either. Her stated goal for seeking counseling is to "figure out my life" and to "feel better," because she says she is "always tense, yet bummed—especially because my kids just don't seem to understand; I hardly see them anymore."

As we begin to think about theory and its use in social work practice, consider the following case example and the many questions it raises—questions that all relate to a variety of theoretical perspectives.

Much more could be said about this client, of course, but this should suffice to begin our discussion. At this point, anyone reading even this much about another person will have many interpretations of the situation, likely with many more thoughts about what Martha "ought" to do. But what is the role of the professional social worker when serving in the role of a counselor? Our National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* (2015) prescribes, among other things, that we focus on the relationship with the client and recognize the client's self-determination. This is a start to professional work as it moves beyond simple advice giving and imposing our own beliefs, ideologies, and agendas on other people. This is a good place to pause for just a moment—think about Martha and her situation again and note your own initial emotional reactions and thoughts about what is going on with her, and why. Do you think these thoughts and emotions have anything to do with Martha and her reality (something you presently know very little about), or do they simply reflect your own life history, personality, religious and political views, and so on? Note that I've offered a dichotomy: Either your views accurately reflect Martha's life, or they merely reflect your own biases. Strict dichotomies, of course, tend to be false, and since you and Martha are both human beings from the same planet, chances are that there will be some degree of overlap between your thoughts and her situation. With patience and good listening skills, a therapeutic relationship can develop that will hopefully benefit the client, while disabusing you of your projections and simple inaccuracies about Martha, her life, and what she should do.

But if we're not in the simple advice-giving game as professionals, does this leave us with nothing more to offer clients than the usual counseling clichés such as "how does that make you feel?" or "what do *you* think it means?" To what does a professional appeal to help their client? Or, in other words, how should we try to understand what might be going on with this person? Social workers, like psychologists and other helping professionals, always rely on the emerging (and always changing) body of empirical research related to their particular field of practice (e.g., empirically supported treatments for depression and anxiety). We also inevitably rely on a variety of perspectives or theories to help us make sense of the research information, to help us navigate the complexities of our relationships with clients, and to offer clients perspectives and information that will hopefully help them navigate their own diverse life circumstances. Most important, of course, we rely on the perspectives of clients and their own theories about what is happening in their life to guide the co-creative dialogue that hopefully typifies client–practitioner exchanges. This is the art of social work practice.

Consider Martha's case further (granting, again, that we know little about her). What thought paths did you start down? Perhaps you thought sociologically and imagined that Martha had been stuck in a prescribed, traditional familial role as wife and mother and was finally breaking free from oppression following the "empty nest" situation that changed her immediate social environment. Some feminist theorists have actually proposed that this is a developmental process that women may go through at this or other times in their lives (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Maybe you thought Martha had been caught in an abusive relationship with

her husband for all these years and finally had had enough and left once the kids had grown. On the other hand, maybe you thought more psychologically—Martha might have a diagnosable mental health disorder such as bipolar disorder. She may be in a near-psychotic state, on the "way down" from a manic episode in which she left home to pursue a fantasy dream of becoming a 1960s-style traveling musician who "cuts loose" from societal norms and experiments with mind-expanding drugs and "free love." In this case, her loved ones might be desperately seeking to find her and help her restore their view of a balanced and stable life, not hers. Or perhaps you are more existentially minded. Maybe Martha recently learned that she has cancer, and though she has no regrets about her choice to marry, have children, and lead a more conventional lifestyle, she is having a spiritual crisis because her religious community believes that if she just has more faith that she will be healed. Perhaps you have assumed that Martha is a victim in this situation or that she has the moral high ground. Maybe Martha cheated on her husband for a number of years and he divorced her when he finally found out. Maybe her religious community, and children, while seeking reconciliation, have held her accountable for her behavior. Martha, in this case, may have rejected them because she still thinks she deserves to have a husband and a lover on the side. Or perhaps Martha was an abusive mother who alienated her children over the years and finally divorced her husband, sued him, and won a large settlement of money, then blew it all doing drugs and gambling and now has nothing to show for it.

In any case, the point should be clear: There are many possibilities in Martha's case (and all others), and they all relate to different meta-theories, perspectives, theories, or practice models. At the broadest, most abstract level, we can consider meta-theories such as social constructionism, broad critical theory, or positivism that help us very broadly understand Martha's situation or just about anything else. These meta-theories may be developed and used by diverse disciplines such as psychology, sociology, culture or gender studies, biology, or political science. In addition, we may consider meta-theories or perspectives from the humanities such as philosophy, history, or theology. Each broad "angle" offers a somewhat different view of the same situation. It is very much like describing a mountain (or other geographical location)—do you focus on the trees, the wildlife, the atmosphere, the soil, the recreational possibilities, the potential timber harvest, the people who have lived there over time, or the way it feels to finally reach the summit (among many other possibilities)? Each "view" roughly corresponds to a different discipline or perspective (and likely overlaps with others): trees to botany; wildlife to zoology; timber harvest to economics; summit reaching to literature; and so on. Scientists in many fields have for many decades suggested that the best way to understand or describe the environment is to consider the situation holistically because each part and "view" is mutually interdependent with the others. This is the ecological perspective, which social work has also adopted and utilized for many years (Germain & Gitterman, 1980). Whether trying to understand the health and status of a mountain or a human situation like Martha's, we consider many points of view—or "angles"—to make sense of things.

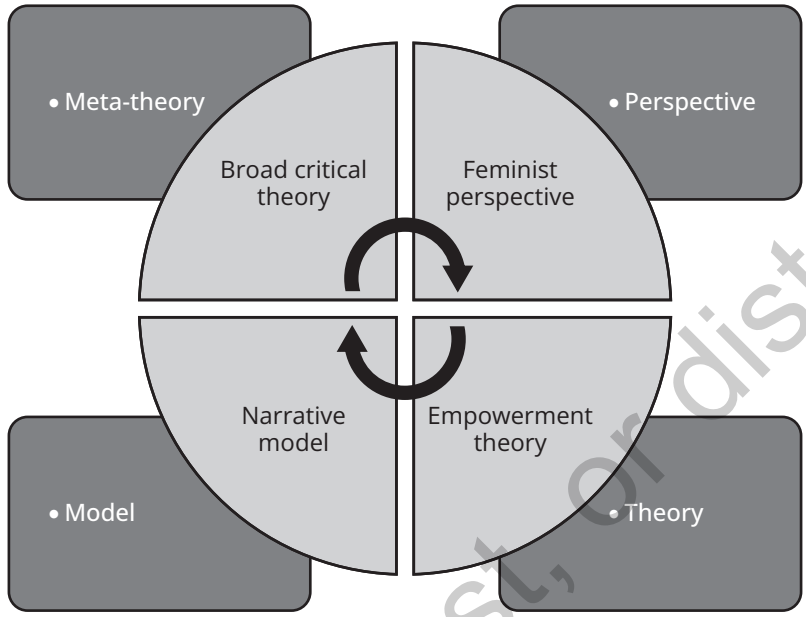
The different points of view may include, as just stated, different broad meta-theories or disciplinary perspectives within psychology or biology. They may also involve more specific theories from within such disciplines. For example, a psychological perspective may include or support psychodynamic (e.g., Freudian), humanistic, cognitive-behavioral, or community

psychology theories (among others). Narrowing further, each of these have subcategories, multiple theorists, and in our case, practice models and strategies that reflect different views. The same holds for all fields of study such as sociology or history.

Although authors have defined meta-theories, perspectives, theories, and practice models in different ways, for our purposes, a **meta-theory** is defined as a theory concerned with the investigation, analysis, or description of theory itself. For example, social constructionism, among other things, discusses knowledge, how we know what we know, and espouses multiple truths not a singular truth as a way to understand Martha's situation. Examples of meta-theories include pragmatism, positivism, broad critical theory, and social constructionism. A **perspective** is a worldview or way of perceiving the world such as the strengths perspective, ecological perspective, feminist perspective, or person-in-environment perspective. A **theory** (e.g., psychodynamic, symbolic interactionism, empowerment, moral development, and systems) is defined as a set of statements aimed at explaining or proving why something happens. A **practice model** such as cognitive-behavioral, narrative, and task-centered describes how social workers can apply and implement theories in their practice. Practice strategies flow from practice models and can include a range of skills such as active listening, advanced accurate empathy, community organizing, and the use of eco-maps and genograms. Further, meta-theories, perspectives, theories, and practice models interact with and can inform each other (refer to Figure 1.1). For example, a meta-theory such as broad critical theory can be understood as supporting a feminist perspective. A feminist perspective can support empowerment theory and a narrative model. Meta-theory is the broadest and most abstract term, while a model with its accompanying practice strategies is the most concrete term reflecting what is closest to what a social worker might do in practice. It should be noted that many of us may use a practice model without understanding its conceptual roots. We don't know what meta-theory, perspective, or theory supports the model. As we grow and develop as practitioners, we may explore or "back into" a meta-theory, perspective, or theory that supports a particular practice model, and this can deepen our understanding and use of the model with clients.

It is natural for each of us to have our own personal and cultural history, biases, and viewpoints that shape who we are and how we interpret various events and situations we encounter, including those of our clients. In addition, because we each have our own (somewhat) unique histories and ideologies, we will each have a more naturally occurring affinity toward some meta-theories, perspectives, theories, and models, and an aversion to others. One of the great benefits of having a deep and broad theoretical understanding is that it helps us develop self-awareness by recognizing where our own viewpoints fit with the multitude of theoretical ideas that are out there. When we do this we are better equipped for intentional and ethical practice with clients, individually and/or collectively. Theoretical understanding also permits us to better assist clients by enabling us to offer them theoretical concepts—as appropriate (usually informally)—as a means of facilitating interpretation, education, and action. In Martha's case, for instance, if she was experiencing a sense of existential confusion and social alienation because of a choice to explore life beyond the strict confines of prescribed gender roles, it may be liberating and empowering to learn that many other women have experienced the same thing and that those espousing a feminist developmental perspective have argued that this is a legitimate process, thus

Figure 1.1 ▪ Conceptual Relationship Among Meta-Theory, Perspective, Theory, and Model



validating her experience. As stated, there are many other possibilities, and a professional social worker will have many different ideas from which to draw. We are assuming of course that the worker always begins with the client's story and goals and does not merely superimpose a perspective or theory in an oppressive manner upon the client (e.g., Rossiter, 2011).

How This Book Is Organized

A broad and deep understanding of theory is essential for professional social work practice and is something cultivated throughout one's career. We are tempted here to say that this book represents a beginning to this lifelong study, but it is not. You have taken many courses in your life already and have likely read (or, perhaps, are currently reading, depending on where you are in your academic career) many books on topics ranging from history to world religions to statistics. As social workers we draw upon all relevant knowledge, client expertise, and practice wisdom to accomplish our goals. This book is a formal continuation of your education, focusing on theory for professional practice. Our aim is to provide you with an overview of a broad spectrum of theories, ranging from the ecological (e.g., deep ecology) to the psychological (e.g., psychodynamic thinkers such as Otto Rank) to the sociopolitical (e.g., theories of culture and White privilege). We also aim to offer significant depth to each topical area by focusing in on

one or two particular theorists and exploring their ideas in some detail. Therefore, each chapter (following the first section of the book) is structured as follows:

1. General overview of the theory that identifies basic vocabulary, historical developments, and primary thinkers
2. In-depth focus on one or two theorists, identifying key concepts, arguments, and orientation
3. Critique of the theory and specific theorist(s) including commentary, comparison, and opinion
4. Application of the theory to diverse social work practice settings, case situations, and levels of practice. This section also includes classroom exercises and/or questions for student reflection and discussion.

Chapter Summaries

We have organized this book into two main sections. Chapters 1 through 3 are introductory chapters that help set the stage for the deeper look at multiple theories discussed in Chapters 4 through 13. We have summarized each chapter as follows:

Chapter 2: Critique of Theory for Use in Social Work Practice. This chapter presents a conceptual framework (or set of five questions) for critiquing any theory. This conceptual framework is based on assumptions that have their roots in the history and philosophy of knowledge and values as understood in the profession of social work. Each question in this conceptual framework attempts to get you to look at theories through different lenses just as you would facets of a gemstone. These critique questions are discussed in every theory chapter (Chapters 4–13) and include: What does this theory say about human behavior? How does this theory address growth and change (e.g., for the individual and community)? How holistic is this theory? How consistent is this theory with social work values and ethics? What sources of knowledge does this theory support (e.g., client's voice, social worker's practice wisdom, and qualitative and quantitative research studies)?

Chapter 3: Contextualizing Human Behavior Theory. This chapter explores the impact of historical context on our understanding of human behavior. The authors discuss how larger social conditions such as trends, ideologies, and events have a direct impact on not only our understanding of human behavior, but also the theories we choose to use in social work practice. An in-depth practice case, using an anti-racist, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) framework/perspective is provided as an exemplar of the linkages among the perspectives social workers use and the social conditions they face as they work with individuals, families communities, and within agency contexts. We present an historical framework designed to ask important questions about these choices including: What are the assumptions about human behavior in the social environment that shape our responses to social conditions (policy) and

interpersonal behavior (direct practice)? Why is this particular theory or perspective emerging at this moment in time? Is this theory or perspective a new understanding of human behavior? What is it that makes this understanding of human behavior important to our current context?

Chapter 4: Critical Theories. This chapter discusses the importance of critical theory as an overarching, central theory (or meta-theory) for social work practice. Our overview examines critical theory from its inception to more current streams (e.g., critical race theory, feminist criticism, and critical queer theory). We also feature an in-depth analysis of the writings of Paolo Freire, a Brazilian educator and critical theorist whose broad international influence has also been particularly felt in American progressive education. Freire advocated for a radically different educational approach to empowering marginalized or oppressed populations. We pose questions of critical theory for its use in social work practice and examine potential applications of critical theory to a range of social work education and practice situations.

Chapter 5: Psychodynamic Theory. Psychodynamic theory is discussed from its beginnings in Freud's work (which examines intrapsychic and unconscious processes that contribute to human development) to current efforts (e.g., acknowledging people's creativity and strengths; and the crucial role of the mother–infant bond on adult development). This chapter also traces the influence of psychodynamic theory on the social work profession as it developed the diagnostic school that espoused a medical or deficit-based approach to practice. Otto Rank, as a proponent of the contrasting functional school, which emphasized individual creativity and will, is featured as our in-depth theorist. Finally, this chapter provides a critique of psychodynamic theory that takes into account its current evolutions; case examples are provided that illustrate psychodynamic theory's persistent influence on social work practice.

Chapter 6: Systems Theories. In this chapter, we explore two major system theories: structural functionalism and general systems theories (GST). GST, which views all matter as holistic systems whose elements interact with each other, combined with ecology, the study of living organisms within their environment, led to the development of social work's ecosystems theory and the Life Model. The importance of this theory and model to social work cannot be overestimated; consequently, key writers of ecosystems theory and the Life Model are featured in the in-depth section of this chapter. We draw on newer writings to address systems theories shortcomings (e.g., lack of attention to the impact of oppression on human growth), and we discuss this theory's application to social work practice (e.g., use of eco-maps and genograms).

Chapter 7: Environmental and Ecological Theory in Social Work. This chapter provides an overview of ecological theories and environmental ethics and makes a case for this foundation as a way to strengthen social work's attention to the natural world. We examine not only the impact of the natural world on humans (shallow ecology) but also the intrinsic worth of the natural world (deep ecology). Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, is featured as the progenitor of deep ecology. A critique of ecological theories incites us to expand our definitions of core social work values such as the dignity and worth of each person and social justice to include both human and nonhuman life. Several case examples are provided that reflect not only ameliorative, but also proactive social work practices as well as potential new roles for social work.

Chapter 8: Life Span Theories, Family Life Course Perspectives, and Historical Trauma. This chapter examines the prominent role of life span theories in social work education while

acknowledging its limitations (e.g., in accounting for influences of diversity, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation). We explore newer ideas about human development such as emerging adulthood as a distinct stage, nigrescence theory (which depicts Black identity development), and multiracial identity theories. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Venida Chenault, both Native American social work scholars, are featured for their work on historical trauma as it impacts human growth and development. Finally, we present a separate section on family development. Case examples are provided throughout this chapter to illustrate the application of individual and family life cycle development to social work practice.

Chapter 9: Symbolic Interactionism. This chapter provides an overview of symbolic interactionism (SI). Key ideas and assertions undergirding this human behavior theory include human behavior is an interpretation of what we do and how we perceive what others do; our minds are vehicles designed to tell us how others see things; as others act, we put ourselves into their perspective to understand the meaning their acts have for them; by taking the role of others, we engage in discovery and development of our own perspectives; and because SI is an interpretive theory it does not claim objectivity. We examine the contributions of three prominent sociologists—Mead, Cooley, and Goffman—and discuss the usefulness of SI at multiple levels (micro to macro) for social work practice.

Chapter 10: Behavior Theory, the Cognitive Turn, and the Influence of Mindfulness. This chapter focuses on behavior theory, its turn toward cognitive development, and its more recent turn toward mindfulness. Three generations of behavior therapies are also described: the first generation, which emphasized the mutual influence of environment on behavior and cognitive processes; the second generation, which introduced the pivotal role played by cognition in shaping human behavior; and the third generation, which moved away from the fundamental belief that individuals sought pleasure and/or avoided pain. The goal of third generation therapies is for clients to actively accept (through such strategies as mindfulness) psychological discomfort or pain as inevitable instead of viewing them as obstacles to achieving their goals. Our in-depth section on mindfulness features the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh and John Kabat-Zinn. The chapter concludes by applying concepts taken from behavior theory and its therapies to a series of case examples.

Chapter 11: Theories of Culture and White Privilege. This chapter examines social work's expanded view of culture as encompassing many different forms of diversity including, but not limited to, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender and gender expression, age, (dis)ability, and class. Our in-depth section features Kimberlé Crenshaw's groundbreaking work on intersectionality, and we assert that social workers need to develop their own critical consciousness through praxis, a process of action and self-awareness, self-reflection, and dialogue with others. The chapter provides examples that identify both the processes and potential outcomes that result when we begin doing our own work as it relates to diversity in social work practice. We also examine the complex interactions between our own personal narratives and our professional lives as they relate to practice at all levels.

Chapter 12: Empowerment Theory and the Strengths Perspective. This chapter closely examines the roots of empowerment theory in social work dating back to the 1890s. It looks at the evolution of the strengths perspective through the eyes of some of its major contributors

and its very close connection to empowerment theory. More specifically, we focus on a cadre of academics and practitioners over the last three decades who together developed a conceptual framework for a strengths-based approach to practice. Ann Weick and Dennis Saleebey are featured in our in-depth section as two key progenitors of the strengths perspective. Through case examples, we examine the application of the strengths-based model for case management in numerous fields of practice including mental health, child welfare, health, and aging.

Chapter 13: Cognitive and Moral Development. In this chapter, we discuss cognitive and moral development featuring Piaget, Kohlberg, and Carol Gilligan. Special attention is paid to the growth in cognitive reasoning and the concomitant progression of moral development. We examine the differences among the varying perspectives with special attention to Gilligan's challenges of Kohlberg's reliance on social justice with her emphasis on the importance of a care orientation. We identify ongoing challenges, yet to be addressed, from current theorists including questions about roles played by culture, race, and religion as they relate to cognitive and moral development. Finally, we examine the concept of moral dialogue, developed by Spano and Koenig (2003), which attempts to connect cognitive and moral development to a framework of questions used to guide a process whereby social workers can focus on cognitive and moral aspects of practice situations to manage their own interactions with clients in ways that are congruent with our *Code of Ethics*.

What Is Theory?

Perhaps the broadest definition of theory is that it simply refers to the vast array of ideas we use to make sense of ourselves and the world around us. We theorize every time we try to understand something, whether simple or complex. Our clients also develop personal theories about why they are struggling or have overcome a particular problem. For example, if we're out rowing on a lake and seem to be sinking, we might theorize that either we have a hole in the boat, letting water in, or maybe air is leaking and deflating the boat. We could theorize further that maybe we are not actually sinking, but our perception is mistaken because a wind came up and the waves are larger now, which causes them to rise higher on the sides of the boat. This is an example of simple, practical theorizing related to an immediate need. Of course, more formal and complex theories are required when we try to understand bigger questions in cosmology or human behavior, the latter being the focus of this book. Theories and models of the more simple, practical, or immediate need tend to be related to, and interdependent with more complex, overarching, and broad-reaching perspectives. In the boating example, many big ideas are in play as well, including the physics of water and waves, gravity and flotation, psychological ideas about how humans react in stressful situations, and existential ideas about the meaning of human life and death, the (possibly) sinking raft literally and metaphorically representing the precarious nature of human existence. This is to name just a few of the many practical, scientific, and philosophical ideas that are relevant. Can you think of a few more? Perhaps trauma theory (for the possible after effects), best practice ideas about small vessel rescue at sea, or even more practical ideas about when to begin bailing vs. attempting a raft repair on the water vs. paddling like hell

toward shore! Consider as well how deep and interconnected ideas can be. For instance, if the boaters come from a highly individualistic culture and (implicitly) greatly value self-sufficiency, they might, on this theory, decide not to call for help. Alternatively, they might decide not to call for help out of a sense of embarrassment because this has happened before—the idea of saving face being prioritized over personal safety. The point is to recognize the importance of our ideas, the ongoing need for "big" and "small" ideas to work together, and the necessity of our understanding of these various ideas to navigate our world. There is, of course, no substitute for good, critical thinking.

Theory and Science

Students come to social work from many different fields such as biology, theology, and English, though most tend to come from the social sciences such as psychology and sociology. All fields of study are relevant to social work, and of course all students are welcome to bring their knowledge and wisdom to bear for social work ends. It seems that the humanities tend to prepare students with a fairly broad understanding of meta-theories or perspectives, whereas the sciences (including social sciences) tend to focus more on theory (if they focus on theory at all) as it pertains to empirical research. This only makes sense, but in any case it is worth exploring the relationship of theory to science, especially since so many students come with this background and, hence, have fairly empirically focused ideas about the nature of theory.

Scientific theory typically includes overarching ideas and themes that are developed inductively based on the results of many empirical research studies (e.g., Godfrey-Smith, 2003). Consider a simple example about birds: if, say an evolutionary biologist is studying the color of a particular bird, they might scientifically observe a sample of birds in a broad geographical location and note that all of the birds in the sample are black. A second sample of the same species of bird in a different geographical location may be observed as being white. This would lead the biologist to theorize about why the colors are different. Using evolutionary theory as a broad background, the biologist might suggest that the birds in one region are white because this area is further north, or perhaps at a higher elevation, either of which could lead to snowfall, which would potentially increase the probability of survival for white birds who could therefore camouflage themselves to avoid predators. Contrariwise, the black birds may have better camouflage in non-snowy regions.

Note the different levels of theory working in this example. The most abstract, most explanatory, or broad theory, evolution must already be understood by the biologist to participate in thinking within the biological discourse in the first place. Then empirical research is undertaken that yields data about bird color and geography. The biologist must have both a broad theoretical knowledge, information about birds (e.g., anatomy and social behavior), scientific study skills, and then the ability to use critical thinking skills to synthesize all the information and offer some interpretation—this too is an idea, a theory about why some birds of the same species differ in color according to geographical region. If we take the analogy one step further, thinking of social work, we might imagine that the biologist is not just interested in understanding birds,

because social workers are interested in more than merely understanding human behavior (or birds, for that matter), but also wants to do something positive to protect the bird species. Let's say the bird being studied is on the endangered species list. Now the biologist, like the social worker, needs not only good theoretical knowledge, information about their subjects, scientific skills, and an interpretation, but also the various practical skills necessary for doing something, whether medical, perhaps aiding an individual injured bird, or political, perhaps helping pass legislation protecting bird habitat to prevent extinction.

Note as well that practical skills are often necessary for doing the science (for biologists as well as social workers). Practical strategies or skills can involve anything from building a bird blind to having basic outdoor skills to political keenness in networking. As with previous examples, the confluence of scientific information, practical skills, professional experience, and the ongoing dynamic relationships with clients (i.e., their perspectives) to make something happen denotes the *art* of social work practice. The art of social work practice involves an acknowledgment of the practice wisdom and experience of the practitioner, which may incorporate, but moves beyond empirical evidence (Gitterman & Knight, 2013). The practitioner may develop hunches or insights about what is going on with a client. For example, a social worker may sense that there is a reason why the client is not fully motivated to participate in rehabilitation (even if the client has never said anything) after having a below-the-knee amputation of his leg. They may pursue questions to ascertain what the client is thinking and feeling that may contribute to his lack of motivation, though there is no clear evidence to support their intuitive hunch. This represents their tapping into the *art* of social work and may also reflect the fact that they have worked with other unmotivated clients and knows it is important to pursue what is going on with this particular client.

Does Theory Really Matter? Theory Myth Busters

Social work is a complex field of study and social action that involves theory at multiple levels (see next section), but it always remains practical in many ways as well. Addressing human (and nonhuman) needs in society as a professional social worker requires both mind, spirit, and body: full engagement of both the intellect and practical skill sets. When the focus for social action becomes overly intellectual, or overly practical, this can cause problems. In the former case, we can lose our connection with the real lives of those whom we aim to serve. In the latter, we can become subject to all kinds of ideological agendas, marketing schemes, and even professional trends, the worst of which can lead us to unwittingly work against our clients' best interests. (See the in-depth section on Paulo Freire in our chapter on Critical Theories.) In any case, some will question the need for, and value of, theory for social work practice, so we address a few common misunderstandings here.

Myth #1 – *Theory is too difficult and complicated for social workers to understand*. This is perhaps the worst misunderstanding. Social workers, as people who bring together theory, knowledge, values, sanction, purpose, and practical skills from multiple disciplines to affect positive social change, actually have the somewhat ominous task of understanding the broadest

range of theories. Since we operate at both the interpersonal and sociopolitical levels we must learn many more theories than most to do our work. It is true that some theories are challenging to understand (at least initially) and that some are complex. This is a challenge we accept to do our work as professional social workers. It is also true in the many years of experience of the present authors that social work students are highly adept at understanding, critiquing, and applying theory in a beneficial way.

Myth #2 – *Theory is just ivory tower nonsense with no practical import*. It is true that not every theory or idea is relevant to social work practice. This holds true for every sort of practice, and just about anything else for that matter. That said, there is a surprising multitude of theories that *are* relevant and useful for social work practice. Theory is actually inescapable—even if we wanted to avoid theory, or tried to reason that theory is not necessary, we would at best be (ironically) theorizing about how theory is not necessary. At worst, we would render ourselves ignorant about key ideas, past and present, that are essential for competent, professional-level practice (not to mention that we would leave ourselves vulnerable to charges of incompetence by licensing boards or other helping professions, all of which also recognize the essential nature of theory for practice).

Consider what is called a **shared decision-making model** (SDM) in the mental health field (Goscha, 2009). This is a relatively simple, practice-level model (see next section for more on this) that basically states that there are two "experts" involved in making decisions about the use of psychiatric medications: the psychiatrist *and* the patient (or *client*—the use of terms, or labels, is also important, which comes from "labeling theory"). SDM, now a few decades in the making, contrasts with conventional psychiatric practice that did not take much interest in clients' goals, interests, and values when prescribing drugs. Research is currently being conducted to consider empirical questions about SDM, such as whether clients adhere to their medications more when SDM practices are used, or whether clients show more improvements in their symptoms when SDM practices are used instead of the older, "one expert" practice. This SDM model is consistent with social work ethics such as client self-determination (NASW, 2015) and may serve to significantly improve the lives of many people suffering with mental illnesses. In this case, it should be clear how important this realm of thought—models, theories, perspectives, and values—is to social work practice because the ideas we use (or assume, if we are not very self-aware or theoretically trained) have a dramatic impact on what we *do* with clients in practice settings.

One may argue that this SDM model involves just practical-level thinking and is therefore not really linked to one of our "academic" theories such as empowerment or psychodynamic theory. Consider then a much more complex theory (or body of theories) we tend to speak of in shorthand as "social justice." Bringing about more social justice in the world is also called for in the NASW *Code of Ethics* (2015). But what does the term *mean*? Does it mean that everyone in society should have the exact same amount of money, or assets, or property, or opportunities, or rights, or capabilities, or land? Who is responsible for social justice? Does it mean that the government should take care of all social services, or should the private sector still be involved, and at what level? Does social justice imply socialist economic policies? Does social justice include

ecological justice? If so, how? And how exactly does social (and ecological) justice shape practice for social work?

Many more questions could be asked here. Social justice is rather complex and requires additional understanding about political and economic theories, among others. The point is that if social workers are called to bring about more social justice, then the ideas—the theories—about what social justice *is* and how it shapes social work practice could not be more relevant to our profession. It is worth noting at this point that not every social worker needs to know all the same theories; nor do they all need to know them at the same depth of understanding. All professionals need at least a basic, working knowledge of a wide range of theories (such as those covered in this book), but each person will also specialize to some degree in their particular field of practice. So, for example, a social service administrator will likely need to know more about management theory than a counselor working independently in private practice, and a lobbyist will need more knowledge about political theory than a community gardener. No social worker can afford a narrow theoretical focus, however: a mental health treatment facility administrator, for instance, must maintain a high level of working knowledge of direct practice models and theories, in addition to management theories, to engage in ethical and effective decision-making processes regarding the agency's clients and mental health employees.

Myth #3 – *The use of theory in social work practice should be avoided because it leads to oppression.* This myth raises some warranted caution about the use of theory, but it is ultimately false as well. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, it is impossible to avoid theory, at least in the broadest sense, because to do so would imply that it is actually possible to approach any person, group of people, or situation with no set of theoretical ideas informing one's interaction with that person, persons, or situation—as if humans could (or would want to) become some sort of theoretical blank slate when doing social work practice. This is as absurd as it is counterintuitive—it is precisely our theoretical ideas, combined with our own history, values, and culture (including scientific knowledge), that make us who we are, and to suggest otherwise simply doesn't make sense. That said, it is also true that not every theory is applicable or relevant to every situation. And in some cases it *would* be oppressive or otherwise harmful to apply a particular theory to a particular person or situation. For example, if a case manager in a substance abuse treatment center predetermined to use Freudian theory at the expense of all other ideas, this could be potentially detrimental to the client and inconsistent with professional ethics. In this situation, the client may be a person of faith who wants to work through the 12 steps and considers God their "higher power." The case manager, applying strict Freudian principles, may then attempt to treat the patient using free association to help them with rescue fantasies of a projected ideal father figure. Here the case manager would be ignoring the client's beliefs and wishes (an ethical violation in this case—though there are exceptions to following clients' wishes), and also ignoring the potential benefits of not only an AA program, but also the many other ideas (theories) and scientific developments since Freud about the most effective treatments for substance abuse disorders.

More generally, we can say that the seemingly arbitrary application of one theory to a client or situation without considering the client's wishes (and values, goals, beliefs, etc.), the context, the multitude of other theories and scientific information (among other things like race, class,

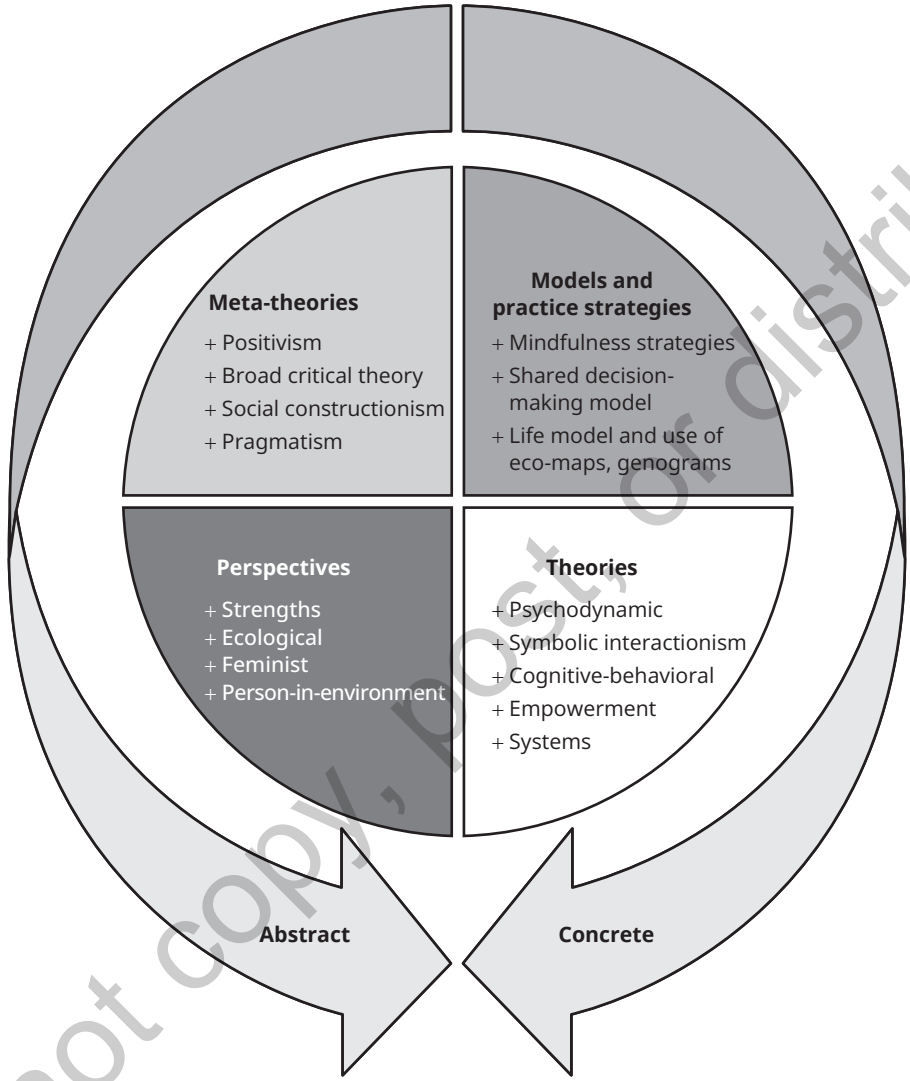
gender, age, etc.) *does* equate to an unethical and oppressive use of theory (Rossiter, 2011). It also denies the collaborative, artistic nature of social work practice. This need not be the case: With a solid foundation in theoretical knowledge, combined with a high degree of maturity and self-awareness, the dyadic (or group) interactions between social workers and clients can be ethical, healing, and helpful. This sort of positive scenario is the goal and is the type of situation where a social worker can then bring theoretical ideas to bear in a useful way, whether in making decisions about what to say or do, by explicitly offering interpretive ideas, or simply education to the client (remember the story at the beginning of the chapter).

The Interactive Abstract/Concrete Continuum

There are so many different theories out there that it can be difficult to know how to think about them, or categorize them. Even in this chapter so far we've discussed quite a variety of ideas, from ethics, to meta-theories such as social constructionism, to human behavior theories and perspectives, practice models, and strategies. So far all we know is that there are a lot of theories and that they differ from one another in a variety of ways. What we would like to do here is offer a rough sketch of how we think about theories for social work. Keep in mind that this is oversimplified and, at least in our opinion, there isn't any way to offer a comprehensive taxonomy or fully satisfactory categorization of theories. That said, we find it useful to think about meta-theories, perspectives, theories, and practice models and strategies by placing them on a broad spectrum or continuum from the more abstract, complex, and explanatory, on one side, to more concrete, simple, and practical on the other. So, for instance, the "biggest," broadest ideas out there that tend to act as umbrella or meta-theories over many others (e.g., perspectives, theories, models, or strategies) and fall on the more abstract, explanatory side of the continuum. These would include epistemological perspectives or meta-theories such as social constructionism, broad critical theory, pragmatism, or **positivism** (note the upper-left quadrant in Figure 1.2). In the lower-left quadrant are perspectives such as the strengths, ecological, feminist, and person-in-environment perspectives. In the lower-right quadrant of the spectrum are theories such as cognitive-behavioral theory, empowerment theory, and systems theory; and in the fourth or upper-right-hand quadrant are the more concrete models and practice strategies such as SDM, mindfulness, the Life Model, and the use of eco-maps and genograms.

Models and practice strategies differ from our broader meta-theories and perspectives in that they do not attempt to explain the nature of reality (**ontology**), the ways we come to know truth (**epistemology**) or even explain what ethics are and how we apply them. Instead, meta-theories examine philosophical questions or the "big" questions that continue to be addressed by theorists in every field (including social work), and the answers to them have rippling effects on many other ideas and practices. For example, if a social worker tends to be positivistic in their epistemology—or way of knowing things—this means they believe that, in large measure, there is an objective truth that can be discovered through systematic inquiry. The social worker may highly value quantitative scientific methodologies that delineate outcomes and would therefore likely utilize only social work practice methods (e.g., evidence-informed mindfulness strategies).

Figure 1.2 ▪ The Interactive Abstract/Concrete Continuum: Meta-Theories, Perspectives, Theories, and Practice Models



In the mental health field this practitioner would likely find value therefore only in cognitive-behavioral theory or similarly quantifiable practice methods. Note how the "big" ideas have a profound impact on actual practice with clients. The way we conceptualize our world—our orientation to the big theoretical questions about truth, reality, ethics, and politics—ultimately shapes how we view ourselves, other people, social situations, and also our research and practice methods. Similarly, if a practitioner is more affectionate toward **social constructionism** as a

meta-theory that acknowledges the importance of subjectivity, multiple ways of knowing, and that knowledge is time and context-bound, they would be more likely to value a different array of therapeutic methods that are conceptualized and researched to take into account a wide range of situations faced by unique client groups. Said practitioner (again thinking of the mental health field) would be more likely to use empowerment or narrative theories, which are more amenable to social constructionism.

Understanding how these meta-theories, perspectives, theories, models, or practice strategies link together provides us with a continuum for determining their rough intellectual location. This is a loose term we use to refer to where a perspective or theory fits according to the aforementioned scheme, and also to consider its assumptions and arguments for its validity. This is a dialectical process between the individual social worker's experiences and their theoretical orientation (Palmer, 1969). In other words, the individual, with their own personal history, values, culture, and personality, is in constant interaction with the ideas/theories they inherited automatically from personal history and culture, as well as those encountered (and continuing to encounter) more formally from reading and studying, or even from analyzing, synthesizing, and inventing new ideas based on their current life and professional practice. The goal, again, is understanding the diversity of ideas, and self-awareness—if practitioners are aware of the theories at play in a conversation with others, then this empowers them to make more informed, intentional choices about how to proceed with clients in any social work practice situation. A high level of theoretical self-awareness is necessary to fulfill professional ethical obligations such as avoiding the tendency to push one's own beliefs, values, and opinions onto clients. If a practitioner is unaware of their own biases in this regard, then as a matter of course they will more easily make assumptions about what clients think, how they feel, or what they should do (Levy, 1976; Spano & Koenig, 2007/2008).

For example, consider a situation where a White child welfare services worker is assisting a Native American client with various services such as housing, employment, and child care. Let's say that the social worker in this case is unable to form a positive, working relationship with the client and that overall their work is proving ineffective despite feeling that they were rather polite and really tried to be helpful. Now as always, many things could be influencing the client–practitioner relationship and the outcome of the situation overall. One of the many potential problems could be theoretical—the practitioner, despite their good intentions, may be ignorant about Native American history, spiritual beliefs, and thought, and may be making assumptions about the nature of the relationship with the client that are leading to a breakdown in the relationship. The practitioner may assume, for instance, that as an "empowerment" social worker, they have all the power (e.g., referral sources, helpful tips, a good listening ear), while the client remains in the role of a recipient to their benevolence. This sort of theoretical assumption (to be sure, a flawed understanding of empowerment theory; for example, see Pease, 2002) overlooks the possibility that this sort of power structure in the relationship may be oppressive and trigger a justifiably negative response from the client (whether Native American or not). If the practitioner had a deeper, more accurate understanding of empowerment theory (i.e., that recognizes power in the client and community as well), and also a broader understanding of, say, historical trauma theory (which recognizes the generational transmission of trauma among

Native Americans, etc.), then perhaps an ethical, effective, and healthy relationship could be formed with this client that might lead to positive outcomes. This level of theoretical awareness would, as stated earlier, include the practitioner understanding theory with some depth and breadth, including intellectual location, and an understanding, or self-awareness, of how this interacts with their own history, culture, and personal views.

Meta-Theories as Overarching Theories: Their Contributions to Practice

Thus far in the chapter we have argued for the central role played by theories, at all levels, as important sources of influence on our behavior as practitioners. The reality is that there is no one "theory of everything" that underlies all professional practice. We have identified lenses that can be useful in analyzing theories from multiple sources including economics, political science, sociology, psychology, biology, and so on. We now shift our attention to two meta-theories, pragmatism and critical theory, for their relevance and application to social work practice.

Pragmatism as an Overarching Theory for Social Work Practice

Pragmatism as an American philosophical approach or meta-theory has much to offer social work practitioners. In fact, the development of social work in the United States goes hand in hand with the development of pragmatism (Thompson, 2012). So what is pragmatism? Pragmatism is a distinctly American philosophy developed by Jane Addams and John Dewey (among others) in Chicago, Illinois, during the early 1900s (Thayer, 1982; Thompson, 2012). Both Addams and Dewey were great thinkers and practitioners, and their achievements in the development of social work and education are well known (Dewey, 1977; Fischer, 2009; Fishman & McCarthy, 2007; Franklin, 1986; Hamington, 2009; Thayer, 1982).

In short, pragmatism is a philosophical school or general orientation to thinking about ontology, ethics, epistemology, and political theory (among other things) that starts with the assumption that human beings are biological organisms (following Darwin) linked to the earth and multiple nonhuman species in various interdependent relationships (Dewey, J., in Hickman & Alexander, 1998). As such, we humans, unlike much previous thought about the "big" questions of life (e.g., how we know things, or what is really real), should not think of ourselves as having disembodied minds that are necessarily capable of somehow grasping eternal, universal, capital-T truths. Instead, with proper humility we can acknowledge our limitations and fallibility (as history has proven time and again, especially with ethical failures of various sorts) and set out to create the best society we can, given the tools (including theories) we have available (and inventing new ones!). This means that pragmatists don't start with the assumption that they have the one, true political perspective, or social theory, or knowledge-generating method (e.g., a particular approach to science), but instead start with an ethics-based quest for democracy, equality, justice, and freedom for all people. In other words, pragmatism is ultimately about

setting the conditions of society such that all people have the maximum opportunity to be healthy and thrive. Pragmatists use multiple theories, practice models, and strategies to achieve these goals. The two following examples should help illustrate how pragmatism fits with social work.

First, the origins of the current "person-in-environment" (PIE) concept—central to the NASW *Code of Ethics* (2015), and the Council on Social Work Education accreditation standards for academic programs (2015)—can be traced back to John Dewey's "organism in environment" perspective, a central tenet of pragmatism (Hickman & Alexander, 1998; Thompson, 2012). This concept, one main facet of pragmatism, states that humans are biological animals, like the rest of the animal kingdom, and are not disembodied minds seeking abstract truths. As such, we are placed within the world (not above it), originating, like other species, via evolutionary processes. But this is only half of the equation—we also originate in specific geographical, biological, and cultural *environments* that, from the outset, shape all aspects of our lives. This is not to say that we are somehow predetermined to be what we are. Pragmatists actually focus instead on our human capacity to reason, learn, and make choices that not only interact with our environments by responding, but also by acting on the environment to modify it in various ways. As organisms in our various environments—whether physical, social, political, and so on—we are influenced by the environment, yet we also shape that environment. The concern is about how and to what extent the environment shapes us, and how and to what extent we shape the environment. This is a constant and dynamic interaction that is always in process. When it comes to social work, of course we're concerned with values like justice and well-being. So we are particularly interested in how we can actualize these values. The organism-in-environment aspect suggests that change should occur at multiple levels. In other words, when looking to bring about, say, justice, we should consider both the organismic (or individual) level, as well as that of the environment(s). This is what social work is all about.

For instance, social workers interested in justice for prisoners would need to consider individual concerns such as the reasons for, and length of stay in, solitary confinement and who gets punished that way according to race, class, gender, and so on. This would be considered work at the organism level and also reflects our values such as the dignity and worth of every human being. A pragmatist understands that change needs to take place at the environmental level, too, given the perspective just discussed. So this social worker would be seeking change as well at the policy level, perhaps with the prison or with state and/or federal legislation. To sum up, the organism-in-environment perspective of pragmatism is the historical origin of current social work thinking (i.e., called the person-in-environment thinking) that continues to offer theoretical insight into how we go about achieving our ends.

Second, pragmatism considers ideas (theories and practice models) to be primarily useful as tools, or instruments, for humans (and nonhumans) to use for multiple purposes including describing the world around us, understanding ourselves individually and collectively, and for solving all sorts of problems by way of applying our ideas, or by inventing new ideas and/or physical tools of various sorts (Dewey, in Hickman & Alexander, 1998; Thompson, 2012). Consider the vast amount of thought (and variety of theories) involved in human inventions, from the wheel to the space shuttle, from the idea of democracy and individual rights to the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (*DSM-5*). These represent many ideas, many created devices, many uses. Consider again the previous example about the social worker concerned with justice in the corrections system. The worker would need to decide which ideas to use as tools to address the particular aims they had in mind. As a pragmatist, the worker would not presume to have just one tool—say a particular criminal justice theory, or perhaps a political theory—that they would use in all cases and for every reason. The worker would have many different theory tools in their "kit" that would offer the flexibility to make an informed decision about which one(s) to use.

This orientation applies to the simpler, less explanatory theories and practice models as well as to some of the broader perspectives. For example, social workers would not necessarily assume that the best political approach is always their personal favorite political party line. They may decide that policy changes that would increase justice for prisoners would be best served using ideas from a different theory. Diversity of ideas is highly valued, and the complexities of the issues that social workers address usually demand flexibility. Keep in mind that the tool/kit analogy, while useful, also quickly breaks down when we consider that the ideas (tools) and the source of the ideas (kit) do not reside with the practitioner alone; not only do clients bring their own tools and kit, but also new ideas and sources are hopefully generated by way of the creative, collaborative relationship between practitioner and client in context of multiple environments.

Pragmatism also includes humility with regard to the ideas themselves; this is called **fallibilism** (Hickman & Alexander, 1998; Thompson, 2012). This means that the ideas are not considered finished or perfect as they stand but are always in process and able to be revised and improved. This allows social workers great opportunities for analyzing and synthesizing extant ideas, as well as the possibility of inventing new ideas. This is all part of the great critical thinking process that is necessary for effective social work practice, whether at the individual or societal level. In our opinion, this is also psychologically healthy because it seems to reduce anxiety when we don't assume we have the one, right answer to everything from the outset, but instead approach problems with an array of ideas at our disposal. These "instruments" can then be utilized to achieve the ethical ends such as freedom and justice that define social work.

Overall, pragmatism provides a nice overarching perspective or meta-theoretical orientation because of its unpresumptuous flexibility, and also because it has (arguably) already been the broad theory informing and shaping social work since Jane Addams and John Dewey developed it over 100 years ago. Pragmatism permits social work practitioners to select the ideas they believe will best serve their clients (alongside the clients' own ideas). It also permits researchers to utilize not only quantitative and qualitative scientific methods but also wisdom and expertise from both practitioners and clients. In sum, by putting ethics first (e.g., justice and equality) pragmatism keeps these goals at the forefront, making all knowledge-making and practice-related concerns serve these ends.

Critical Theory as an Overarching Theory for Social Work Practice

Critical theory, beginning with Marx through authors like Paulo Freire, provided a conceptual foundation for early empowerment writings rooted in social work's core mission to serve those who are poor, dejected, oppressed, and who live on the margins of our society. In fact, social work writers have long been referring to the works of Marx, Freire (a key contributor to critical and empowerment-based theories and featured in our text), and others to describe how to assist clients in developing a critical consciousness or awareness of their oppression, and the means to take their power back. These early writers describe assisting clients to engage in a process of reflection (on their oppressive situation), dialogue with others in similar circumstances, and take action to bring about changes in their situation.

It is no accident that this book has been created to provide a framework for helping social work students think about and critique any theory or set of ideas. Our critique framework (presented in Chapter 2) asks us to take into account the nature of each theory, whether or not the theory attends to holistic thinking and supports growth as well as social work values (e.g., the dignity and worth of each person), and if the theory acknowledges multiple types of knowledge (i.e., empirical studies, professional expertise) and also the working knowledge and wisdom that clients bring to their own experiences. In essence, broad critical theory insists that we engage in this kind of thinking or critique of any theory or ideas, making certain that we consistently connect what are often intimate, personal experiences with larger, unjust social structures and behaviors. For example, take the woman who was sexually abused by a priest when she was child, who now "wakes up" through news media and conversations with her friends to the unjust religious structures that refuse to acknowledge the cancer in their institution—relegating the abuse to a handful of individual priests whom they mislabel as psychologically deviant. In this example, having access to research studies is helpful because we know that heterosexual men are more likely than gay men to sexually abuse a child. And, knowing this, we can analyze the institutional behavior of the Catholic Church as an attempt to deflect blame and avoid being held accountable for their abusive behavior and for the ensuing cover-up by Church leadership. For this individual woman, her experience is not simply a "personal problem," but it is all bound up in the harm and willful blindness of leaders at the helm of a powerful and corrupt religious institution.

Critical theory requires much from those of us who live in a democratic society. It insists that large social structures, such as a diocese or government, can only be held accountable (having their corruption curtailed or stamped out) in a democracy when citizens—from all walks of life based on class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender expression, (dis)ability, age, religion, and other forms of diversity—have an equal place at the decision-making table (e.g., in the voter's booth, at city council meetings, in state government, as members of the church institution or the foster care agency). Critical theorists hold to a creed that mirrors social work values having long been concerned about power within democratic societies and across a broad set of relationships and oppressive situations (see race, queer, and feminist criticism in Chapter 4). They put forth the idea that the transformation of society is only possible when people move from

a culture of silence (where they passively accept what happens to them) to genuine participation in democracy through an analysis of the assumptions and actual practices of their society as played out within an historical and political context. Without any challenges to "progress" in which efficiency and outcomes or results are placed above individual well-being and freedom, our society faces negative social and moral consequences. Critical theorists emphasize the important role of social work and other social disciplines (in contrast to the humanities or natural sciences) to challenging all forms of oppression and to continuing to engage in a critique of our current social reality. In our age of shrinking resources for a range of needs and services (e.g., quality public education, mental health, disability, aging, and child welfare services), social workers who espouse a critical theoretical perspective are called on to provide a critique of our society's abandonment of the welfare and needs of the majority of our citizens, including the "least among us." And social workers can point to our core professional principles (e.g., social, economic, and ecological justice, and the dignity and worth of each person) that reflect the best of our American society and the human spirit. As Hubert H. Humphrey (1977) once remarked:

> The moral test of government [and hence, a society] is how it treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped. (p. 37287)

Key Terms (in order of appearance)

Meta-theory
Perspective
Theory
Practice model
Shared decision-making model
Positivism
Ontology
Epistemology
Social constructionism
Pragmatism
Fallibilism

Chapter 2

Critique of Theory for Use in Social Work Practice

Taking into account multiple viewpoints: Walled city, Dubrovnik, Croatia

©Terry Koenig

Learning Objectives

2.1 Describe the process of analyzing and critiquing human behavior theory for use in social work practice

2.2 Examine theories for what they say about human behavior

2.3 Explain how theories address growth and change

2.4 Explain how theories address a holistic, person-in-environment perspective

2.5 Explain the consistency of theories to social work values and ethics

2.6 Explain the sources of knowledge that support theories

Introduction to Analysis and Critique of Theory

This chapter introduces you to a process for analyzing and critiquing theory. This process involves two key steps. First, you will summarize the theory, define its key concepts, and create a working thesis with examples or evidence of the main point or claim of the theory. For example, systems theories, in general, support the key idea of holism or that everything is connected to everything else. For example, when working with a teenager who wants to stop abusing alcohol, from a systems' viewpoint, we will want to assess the client's internal world, the client's social (and natural) environment, and how the two interact with each other. The client may need to develop new friends at school in their environment to maintain sobriety. A key thesis of systems theories is that when we ignore the interactions between the environment and the client's internal world such as the impact of friendships that may help the client sustain sobriety, then we will not be as effective in helping the client reach life goals. Our thesis about systems theories may also change over time as we "dive in," analyze, and critique the theory in more depth.

Second, you will use a framework (or a set of questions) for critiquing theory. In this chapter, we present a set of questions that are consistent with our historical context chapter (see Chapter 3) and reflect major themes in social work's development. We not only introduce theory critique questions as a way of exploring a theory's overall usefulness and limitations but also give you ways to think about a theory's usefulness and limitations in relationship to social work practice. For example, a theory such as behaviorism or social learning theory has ample knowledge or evidence to support its effectiveness in addressing behavior change with diverse populations (Akers & Jensen, 2003; Miller, 2011). However, this theory can support the use of coercive and even abusive practice strategies to bring about client behavior change (e.g., yelling at a client who is disabled to get them to fold towels in a residential facility) that are not consistent with social work values such as the dignity and worth of clients or in seeking social justice for marginalized groups of people. Consequently, even if a theory has "evidence" to support its effectiveness, the application of a theory may be ethically questionable, and therefore social workers must exercise caution and perhaps even refrain from using it in practice.

Social work has drawn on and uses multiple sources of knowledge (such as diverse human behavior theories, practice wisdom, or client expertise) as a way to work with people in solving a variety of problems they face within their social and natural environments. However, social

work scholars have not often discussed distinct elements of theory critique (Robbins et al., 2011; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988). Some of this may be due to practitioners' lack of awareness of social work's rich history and intellectual rigor, which can indeed be used to help critique theories and their conceptual ideas. Current social work educational curriculum devotes minimal attention to social work history that addresses our profession's key purposes, our values, and the development of our knowledge or intellectual ideas (e.g., our belief and emphasis on clients' growth and change in contrast to pathology and illness; Koenig & Spano, 2007; Saleebey, 2005; Simon, 1994). Some of this may also be due to our discomfort with philosophy and our lack of experience in analyzing ideas and in developing a stance or argument to support our positions. Social work educators have strongly supported a liberal arts education in which social work students can develop these critical thinking skills through their coursework in philosophy, world history, human biology, religious studies, languages, and other subjects. It is our belief that the capacity to engage in theory critique is an essential skill that social workers can learn how to do.

What follows is an examination of our questions for theory critique. Each question is described in more depth, more detailed follow-up questions are suggested, and examples are given for how critique questions can be applied to a range of theories.

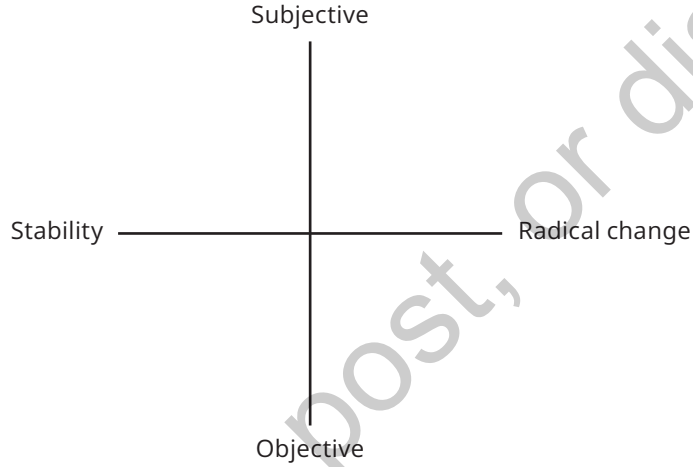
- What does this theory say about human behavior?
- How does this theory address growth and change (e.g., for the individual and community)?
- How holistic is this theory?
- How consistent is this theory with social work values and ethics?
- What sources of knowledge does this theory support (e.g., client's voice, social worker's practice wisdom, or qualitative and quantitative research studies that reflect the profession's worldview)?

What Does This Theory Say About Human Behavior?

To examine the possibilities for using a theory in social work practice, it becomes important for practitioners to be able to summarize the theory and its key ideas and articulate a thesis that explains (with examples and evidence) the main point or claim of the theory. To engage in this process, we will want to become familiar with some philosophical terms (e.g., ontology and epistemology) so that we can use these terms in our theory analyses. Our capacity to analyze theories can help us understand if a particular theory is a "good fit" or applicable to our particular practice as a social worker. These theoretical assumptions are discussed by many different social work scholars and philosophers (see Burrell & Morgan, 2003) and can be categorized along two broad dimensions: the **subjective–objective dimension** and the **stability–radical change dimension** (refer to Figure 2.1). The subjective–objective dimension involves

the debate over whether or not theorists can treat the social world just like the natural world as being real and external to the individual (objective) or whether the world ought to be viewed as having a more personal and subjective quality to it, one in which individuals create their own meanings. The stability–radical change dimension involves an emphasis by some theorists on stability, integration, the nature of social order, and equilibrium (Comte, 1853; Durkheim, 1938; Homans & Curtis, 1934) in contrast to those theorists who are concerned with conflict, coercion, and change as a way of understanding human affairs (Marx, 1867/1976; Marx & Engels, 1932).

Figure 2.1 ▪ Two Assumptive Dimensions of Human Behavior Theories



The Subjective–Objective Dimension

For our purposes, the subjective–objective dimension encompasses two central philosophical concepts: ontology and epistemology. What follows is a description of each key concept with questions that you might ask when you are considering the use or application of a theory to social work practice.

Ontology

Ontology is concerned with the very essence of reality; scholars have long debated what we mean by reality (Keat & Urry, 1975; Kolakowski, 1972). Does our social reality exist outside of our awareness of it? If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

Some assume that the social world or "reality" is external to an individual and that it consists of concrete, tangible, and objective structures. For them, the social world is just as real as the natural world. And so we are born into an external world that has a reality of its own; it is not something we create. It is prior to the existence or consciousness of any human being. No one

needs to be in the forest to hear the tree make a sound as it falls; indeed trees fall independently of human sensation and awareness all the time.

However, others view reality as made up of names and concepts that create our social world. Human beings create their own meaning and sense of purpose in the world and this meaning-making or our understandings of how the world operates can and do change all the time. To illustrate how humans' perceptions of reality are constantly changing and defined by the person who is observing the reality, the following well-known story is told by a respected Buddhist monk who one day passed by two other monks engaged in lively exchange:

> Two monks were watching a flag flapping in the wind. One said to the other, "The flag is moving." The other replied, "The wind is moving." Huineng (the respected Buddhist monk) overheard this. He said, "Not the flag, not the wind, mind is moving." (Aitken, 1995)

Like the Buddhist monks, the meanings that we make of our social (and physical world) can change dramatically and are based on how our mind perceives that reality at that moment in time. Certainly in this way, reality is constantly in the process of change, and how we understand or make meaning of our social world changes based on our perceptions. An ancient philosopher, Heraclitus, once remarked that we cannot step into the same river twice (T. M. Robinson, 1987). Our subjective perceptions define our reality. In its extreme form, nothing exists outside of human awareness or consciousness of it. If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it fall, then, it has no meaning for humans and in effect, it did not happen. As we examine theories in this textbook, here are some ontological questions we might ask:

- Does this theory view reality as tangible, concrete, and external to the individual, or is reality based on the meanings that human beings give to it?
- Does this theory honor the ways in which our clients perceive their reality?
- When reality is viewed differently by the client, the social work professional, or others (e.g., physician, judge, family member), how do we manage differences between ourselves, our clients, and others?

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with how we know what we know and privileges certain kinds of knowledge. It also involves distinguishing justified belief from mere opinion (Giddens, 1974). Key epistemological approaches (or meta-theories) that are addressed in our text (and that undergird many human behavior theories) include positivism, social constructionism, and pragmatism. *Positivism*, which developed out of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, began in England during the 17th century (Crotty, 1998). Positivism emphasized unambiguous knowledge of the world grounded in direct experience through careful scientific observation, not speculation (Comte, 1853). Positivism has ascribed great status to scientific findings, which are viewed with absolute objectivity. However, more recent scholars (Heisenberg, 1930; Murdoch,

1987) have shifted this position and refer to postpositivism, which strives for probabilities (not certainties) and still touts a level of objectivity (but not absolute objectivity).

Social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) is rooted in broader notions of postmodernism and deeply challenges positivist claims to objectivity. Social constructionists view all knowledge and meanings as constructed in our interactions between human beings and their world. Our social reality is a function of shared meanings; societies and cultures develop these shared meanings in interactions with others and through language. Social constructionism ascribes great status to multiple, ignored, and at times competing understandings of human beings' narratives to uncover the meanings that these participants ascribe to their contextual experiences.

Pragmatism assumes that humans are biological organisms linked to the earth and multiple nonhuman species in various interdependent relationships (Addams, 1902/2002; Dewey, 1916). Pragmatists believe that we move forward to create the best society we can by humbly acknowledging our fallibility. Pragmatists start with an ethics-based quest for democracy, equality, justice, and freedom for all people and are interested in developing societal conditions to support these ideals. Pragmatists ascribe status to the systematic analyses of societal conditions that can best support democracy for all people.

As social workers, we may strive but struggle to obtain some kind of certainty, objective knowledge, scientific explanations of human behavior, or even ways to predict human behavior. The following case example is provided to explore the difficulties social workers face in drawing on theories to reach a level of certainty in practice. An older male client shared with the social worker that he was being financially exploited by a family member. In practicing from a critical theoretical perspective, the social worker worked with the older adult to encourage him to participate in a support group with other elders who had experienced financial exploitation. Critical theories indicate that it is often through dialogue with similar others that this older adult can develop a critical consciousness or awareness of his experience of exploitation as part of a larger social problem that many elders experience. This broader knowledge and awareness can in turn impact the older adult to take action to address the financial exploitation (e.g., advocating with policy makers to develop harsher penalties for financial exploitation). However, there is no way for the social worker to predict whether or not the older adult will participate in a support group. And minimal evidence suggests exactly what the social worker should do to help raise the older adult's critical consciousness of the exploitation. Even though practitioners may be able to make effective use of theories, therapeutic models, or skills, we caution readers in that any theory or "evidence" is a guide at best, and often oversimplified. Practice is filled with messy and important situations in which there are no technical solutions. Practitioners' personal beliefs and assumptions can also unduly impose their reality on clients. In general, human behavior theories and perspectives are at best inadequate, partial, often contradictory, or even wrong.

We encourage readers to search for an epistemology of practice that includes artistic and intuitive processes (as well as scientific research) to bring to our situations of instability, uncertainty, value conflicts, and uniqueness. Human behavior is often unpredictable: People surprise us and are resilient in ways we think not possible. As social workers, our practice with human beings is not like conducting a chemical experiment, where the results are predictable and

most often turn out the same way. Social work authors, such as Jane Addams and others, have discussed how social workers' growth involves learning to develop a trial-and-error method of working with clients that includes managing our discomfort, our not-knowing and uncertainty, and which, as discussed in Chapter 1, involves a pragmatic approach in which we take into account our clients' unique characteristics and environmental context to adjust our thinking and actions (Addams, 1902/2002; Chappell Deckert & Koenig, 2017).

Our growth as professionals often occurs as we reflect on our practice and are able to adjust what we are doing to best serve our clients. Schön (1983) describes this as reflecting-in-action and indicates that professionals become skilled in learning to "think on their feet." They can think, reflect, and change their responses toward a client in the very moments that they are working with that client. This takes practice to be able to do and involves working in the swampy lowlands and with messy problems that do not have easy solutions. Many social workers, seeing the limits of using scientific evidence to solve these messy practice problems, are not interested in searching for laws or underlying regularities in the social world. Instead, social work professionals often view their understanding of the world as relativistic and contextual. Social workers operate in a relativistic world of "grays," where not much is quickly or easily solvable.

Further, social workers believe that it is only possible to understand human behavior from the point of view of the individuals who are directly involved in the behavior. This has been referred to as contextual knowing, and there are many ways of knowing that include the use of our practice wisdom, our capacity to reflect-in-action, our awareness of clients' stories, and the patterns we might see in those stories that help us with current and future clients. Also, this contextual knowing occurs for clients themselves through dialogue in which they discover new meanings to their narratives (Mehrotra, 2010; Netting & O'Connor, 2005; Weick, 2000; Woodcock, 2012). For example, a social work practitioner worked with a veteran who had experienced childhood sexual abuse by his now-deceased father. After several sessions with the social worker, the veteran was still unable to tap into his emotions and experiences of the abuse and expressed that he felt stuck in his work with the social worker. Unexpectedly, the veteran was called to return home to attend the funeral of a family friend. This spontaneous trip brought back many memories of the sexual abuse that the veteran was able to share in subsequent sessions with the social worker. Returning home provided a social context for the veteran that helped him remember details about the sexual abuse and begin to come to terms with how helpless he was as an 8-year-old boy. The social worker encouraged the veteran to tell his stories of abuse and also suggested that the veteran might make another visit home to not only remember the abuse but also how he had coped with the abuse (e.g., the client had built a make-shift tent near a creek so that he could periodically escape from the abuse). Through this storytelling, the veteran was able to more fully remember the abuse and also honor his capacities for resilience. This example of contextual knowing reflects a social constructionist epistemology, honors the client's knowledge or expertise about his own situation, as well as the practitioner's intuition and capacity to use spontaneous client experiences.

As we examine theories in our textbook, here are some questions that we might ask about the epistemological assumptions of each theory:

- What kind of knowledge does this theory support (e.g., intuition, research-based evidence, practice wisdom, or a particular epistemological approach such as social constructionism)?
- Does this theory seek to explain or predict human behavior?
- Does this theory value knowledge that is subjective, based on personal experience, or even spiritual?
- Does this theory view clients as having expert knowledge about their own experiences?

The Stability–Radical Change Dimension

The stability–radical change dimension involves examining the degree to which a theory emphasizes stability, unity, and cohesiveness in human affairs. This is in contrast with theories that provide explanations for radical or transformative change at an individual, family, group, community, and/or societal level (Burrell & Morgan, 2003). As social workers, we will want to examine if a theory ignores the centrality of growth or change and instead views stability, unity, and cohesiveness as more important than pursuing this change and growth. For example, a social worker who uses family systems theory (which often values helping couples work through conflict and stay together) may experience major difficulties in using this theory if the couple is engaged in intimate partner violence because systems theory does not provide guidance about which direction the social worker should take (i.e., stability or radical change). For example, in instances of violence, ethical considerations are essential (e.g., a woman's safety) in determining the direction the social worker may need to take in working with the couple. These ethical concerns are not addressed by systems theory.

Social work is very interested in how individuals, families, and communities grow, change, and strive toward health and well-being, and so it also becomes pivotal for us to analyze the assumptions that a theory makes about whether or not change, health, and growth are even possible. Because these ideas are much more fully addressed in the next section, we do not present questions about growth and change here.

As we examine theories in our textbook, here are some questions that we might ask about stability as part of the stability–radical change dimension:

- Is this theory concerned with stability, unity, or cohesiveness within individuals, families, communities, or societies? How do you know?
- What importance does this theory place on stability, unity, or cohesiveness in contrast to growth and change for individuals, families, communities, or societies?

How Does This Theory Address Growth and Change?

Social work has used many theories and perspectives for understanding human behavior. Two important historical streams that have impacted our view of how growth and change happens in practice have been expressed through the diagnostic and functional schools. The **diagnostic school** emphasized an approach to practice that involved the expertise of the social work professional in assessing, diagnosing, and treating clients (Hamilton, 1940; Hollis, 1935; Towle, 1945). This school of thought has been prominent in social work's history and still impacts the profession today (e.g., psychodynamic theory, ego psychology; Fleischer & Lee, 2013). However, the **functional school** has provided a meaningful historical alternative rooted in the belief that everyone, no matter how difficult their life circumstances, has a place within them that propels them toward growth and change (see our chapter on psychodynamic theory for a discussion of Otto Rank; Hofstein, 1964; Rank, 1945; V. P. Robinson, 1930; Taft, 1937, 1962). This view of growth and development has been supported by empowerment theory and the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2005; Simon, 1994) as well as robust empirical findings on a trans-theoretical model of practice, which points to the centrality of the practitioner's hope and belief in the client's capacity to grow and change (Duncan et al., 2010; Koenig & Spano, 2007).

Along with social work's emphasis on individual and/or family growth and change, social work has long been concerned with how to help communities participate in social change. This has especially been evident in its community practices that involve helping communities organize, develop, plan, and engage in progressive social change for a wide range of challenges that emerge at global and local levels. These challenges include human rights for women and girls, the needs of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, injustices due to class and economic need, and the emerging needs of the natural environment. For example, social workers have been involved in helping South American women organize to combat extreme violence and its impacts on their families (Chappell Deckert, 2013); in supporting grassroots food movements (e.g., local farmers in the development of well-functioning farmer's markets; Cobb, 2011); in organizing community-based youth HIV prevention programs (Chowdhury et al., 2013); and in combatting the erosion of voter rights in the United States (Congressional Social Work Caucus, 2013).

As we examine theories, we will want to ask questions about a theory's assumptions regarding growth and change:

- Does this theory support the belief that individuals and communities can grow and change no matter how difficult the circumstances?
- How does this theory say that growth, development, and/or change occur?
- What is the social worker's role in helping client systems grow and change?

How Holistic Is This Theory?

Holistic thinking involves an awareness that reality needs to be understood in terms of whole patterns; a pattern loses its meaning and imbalance occurs if it is broken down or reduced into parts (Koenig & Spano, 1998; Spano et al., 2010). Holistic thinking is highly valued by social work practitioners as evidenced by our emphasis on understanding people within their environments (Gordon, 1969; see our discussion of pragmatism in Chapter 1); our expansive perspective of micro-mezzo-macro and now global social work practice (Grise-Owens et al., 2014); in regard to our view of human nature and reasoning in human activities; and in social work's holistic awareness of growth as including both difficulties and strengths. Social workers place importance on a person-in-environment perspective, which acknowledges the holistic and dynamic interaction between people and their social/natural environments (Bartlett, 1958; Germain, 1973; Gitterman & Germain, 2008; O'Brien & Young, 2006). Our mission has always involved a dual purpose of supporting human capacities and at the same time engaging in social and political efforts to bring about greater societal responsiveness to individual needs. This is reflected in our conception of micro-mezzo-macro practice, which involves working across all levels: with individuals and families, in small groups, at community and social policy levels, in regard to the natural world (Besthorn et al., 2016; Hudson, 2014), and within a global context. This also means that our assessment and treatment practices are holistic, taking into account bio-psycho-social-spiritual elements of our client systems (Bergeron, 2013; Canda & Furman, 2010).

Human nature addresses the question of what it means to be human and encompasses key ideas, such as the impact of free will and the environment on human behavior and humans' use of reason in problem solving. Social workers have long grappled with and embraced holistic views of the role of the environment on human nature and the contrasting role of a person's free will to act autonomously without environmental constraints (Bartlett, 1970; Gordon, 1969). Although some thinkers have described human nature as having fixed, innate qualities that a person is born with, social workers and others have increasingly called this view into question, noting the related and even simultaneous influence of environment and experience on human nature. Scholars and practitioners alike point to the artificial dichotomy between nature and nurture and instead refer to the constant, holistic influences of both nature and nurture on phenomena such as major depression and fetal development (Esposito et al., 2011; Griffiths, 2009). This holistic awareness of the multiple sources or causes of behavior impacts social work at many levels; for example, social work practitioners engage in holistic assessment and treatment with clients and conduct research that acknowledges the complex contexts of clients' lives.

Reason is viewed as a defining feature of human nature and involves the capacity for humans to consciously make sense of their world by establishing and verifying information; changing and adapting beliefs, practices, and institutions based on new and existing information; and by drawing on multiple and integrated sources of knowledge to engage in creative activities and address problems (Freeman, 2008). Reason is closely associated with human activities such as

art, science, language, and philosophy and helps us in developing our capacities to make holistic connections and integrate these multiple sources of knowledge.

A holistic mindset helps us expand our view of human behavior, which emphasizes health and positive growth along with an awareness of illness and pathology. Through our empowerment, critical feminist, and strengths perspectives, the profession of social work recognizes the potential of people for growth and the capacity to maintain integrity in body, mind, and spirit in spite of crises and difficulties (Collins, 1986; Lee, 2001; Saleebey, 2005). We put forth the idea that holistic thinking includes the view that human qualities can be both a strength and a weakness, that healing is often found right next to the wound (not outside of the person who is wounded), and that growth includes both difficulties and also strengths or triumphs in human functioning.

As we examine theories in our textbook, here are some questions about holistic thinking that we might ask:

- How does this theory view the role of the social and/or physical environment on determining human behavior?
- What does this theory say about the role of biology or genetics on human behavior?
- What does this theory say about the transactions (interactions) between people and their environments?
- Does this theory support the idea that human beings, in spite of difficulties, can reason, act on, and creatively change their environments?
- How does this theory view the importance of a broad range of bio-psycho-social-spiritual characteristics in shaping the client or community's worldview?

How Consistent Is This Theory With Social Work Values and Ethics?

Many social work writers have insisted that social work is primarily a value-driven profession and as such view any perspective, theory, practice model, or strategy as needing to be scrutinized for its consistency with our profession's unique core values (Bartlett, 1970; Gordon, 1965). In this section, we define and discuss these core values as delineated in the Preamble of our *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2008). These values include (1) service, (2) social justice, (3) dignity and worth of the person, (4) importance of human relationships, (5) integrity, and (6) competence. Two more social work values are discussed within the context of these six core values. Client self-determination is examined in relationship to the value of social justice. Cultural competence is also discussed because it adds depth to our understanding of the dignity and worth of the person.

People are often drawn to social work because of the profession's distinct emphasis on serving others. Social work scholars have referred to the profession as having a mission to serve others: to help individuals in need and also address broader social problems (Bartlett, 1970; Gordon, 1965). Social work practitioners value their *service* to others above self-interest. For example, many social

workers volunteer some portion of their skills and expertise without any expectation of financial compensation (e.g., working for Habitat for Humanity to help build houses, volunteering to provide counseling one evening per week).

Social workers also highly value *social justice* in which they strive to ensure that all members of a society have the same human rights, protections, social benefits, and opportunities. Social workers acknowledge historical and current inequalities, which contribute to vulnerability that many experience within our society. Consequently, social workers engage in practice and policy-based advocacy to confront discrimination, oppression, and institutional inequities across many levels within our society. For example, social workers are engaged in efforts to address issues of unemployment, access to health care, education and housing, child and adult violence (e.g., child abuse, intimate partner violence), poverty, and other forms of social injustice. Social workers strive to support clients' self-determination and freedom as they access services, other information, and resources and as they meaningfully participate in their own decisions and broader life goals. Self-determination and social justice go hand-in-hand. Social justice supports the idea that individuals and society have both rights and responsibilities that they owe each other and further recognizes both individual self-determination and the common social good. Social workers also promote the responsiveness of communities and other social institutions to meet individual needs. Recent authors have also insisted that we expand our view of social justice to include ecological justice (Besthorn et al., 2016). Increasingly, social work educators and practitioners alike are encouraging us to include the natural environment in our clinical and social justice work (e.g., supporting clients in meditating in the beauty of the natural environment; initiating sustainability efforts for clean air and water).

Social workers also value the *dignity and worth of each person*. They treat each client with care and respect, mindful of individual differences (e.g., race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability). To be vigilant about their own prejudices and biases, social workers engage in ongoing education, supervision, and other activities to increase their self-awareness, knowledge, cultural sensitivity, humility, and competence in working with diverse groups of clients. For example, social work educators and practitioners can visit cultural centers (e.g., Native American) in their region and learn from Indigenous people about their oppression and resiliency.

Social workers recognize the *importance of human relationships* and understand that relationships are vital for client change and growth. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process and seek to strengthen clients' relationships with others as a means of enhancing the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organization, and communities. For example, if we are working with a client who has experienced life events that we are unfamiliar with (e.g., military combat; racial, gender, or age discrimination; intimate partner violence), we can let the client know that we are unaware and even ignorant of the client's experiences. We can encourage clients to tell about their experience and support their expertise and knowledge of these experiences.

Social workers value *integrity*, which can be defined as behaving in a trustworthy manner, while also monitoring their own practice so that it remains consistent with the profession's

mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards. Social workers' integrity extends to their ethical practice within the organizations with which they are affiliated. For example, if you are a rural social worker, it can be very difficult to maintain boundaries because you are likely to see your clients in the community grocery store or at the movie theater. One way to manage these likely boundary crossings is to have conversations with the client early in your professional relationship. You can let the client know that you will never initiate conversation with the client in a public place. If the client wants to talk with you, then the client can choose to do so.

Social workers practice within their areas of *competence* and strive to develop and enhance their professional expertise. Social workers are charged with increasing their professional knowledge and skills and are further encouraged to pursue supervision and ongoing training to ensure competence. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession. For example, many social work practitioners pursue training and intensive supervision in specific clinical areas such as motivational interviewing or trauma-informed care. In these ways, social workers can become more knowledgeable about an area of practice.

As we examine theories in our textbook, here are some questions about social work's core values that we might ask:

Service

1. How can this theory support the client's unique needs and interests?
2. What emphasis does the theory place on your involvement in addressing broader social or community-based needs?
3. According to this theory, what is the role of the social worker in advocating for clients to have access to needed resources?

Social Justice

1. How does this theory address clients' experiences of oppression and discrimination?
2. What, if any, aspects of service delivery in our agency supports or hinders social justice for this client system?

Self-Determination

1. How does this theory support (or not support) clients' self-determination and participation in their own growth and change?

Dignity and Worth of Each Person; and Cultural Competence

1. How does this theory take into account culture, race, age, sexual orientation, gender expression, and other forms of diversity?

Importance of Relationships

1. Based on this theory, what is your role in supporting or nurturing clients' key relationships with family members, friends, and other support networks?

Integrity

1. Does your use of this theory require that you persuade, coerce, or deceive clients?

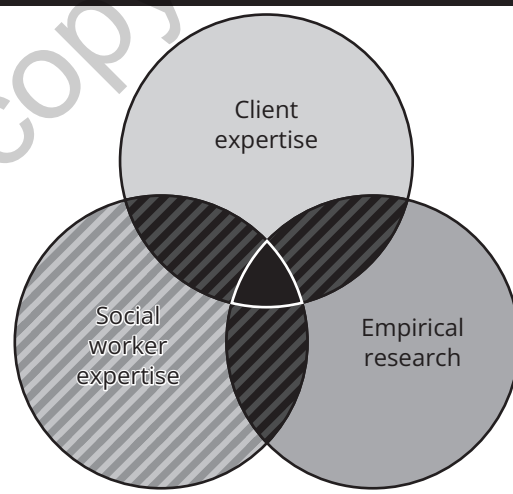
Competence

1. What kinds of skills and expertise do you need to use this theory in social work practice?
2. What does this theory say about how you monitor and adjust your work to ensure you are meeting agreed-upon client goals?
3. What education, training, and ongoing supervision will you need?

What Are the Sources of Knowledge That Support This Theory?

In this section, we examine "evidence" that supports theories presented in this textbook. The evidence we focus on includes not only empirical research studies but also the client's expertise and your growing practice wisdom and use of critical thinking as a social work professional (note Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 ▪ Social Work Knowledge as Tripartite



Using Empirical Research

Social work scholars have advocated for an evidence-based approach to practice. They call on practitioners to be ethically competent by identifying and evaluating evidence for intervention strategies that can be used to meet the specific needs of clients (Cournoyer, 2004). Although this is perhaps a laudable goal, there continues to be great concern among social work scholars and practitioners about the use of this kind of "evidence" in social work practice; a growing number of scholars describe limitations of this narrow approach to evidence (Gitterman & Knight, 2013; Witkin & Harrison, 2001). In contrast and for our purposes, the term **evidence-guided practice** (EGP) is used to encourage you to explore the theories presented in this text (e.g., theories about human growth and development, psychological and societal processes) and the range of evidence for these theories that comes from multiple sources such as the narratives of clients, the critical thinking and creativity of practitioners, and empirically based research studies.

EGP is an approach in which interventions are suggested, not prescribed by research. EGP acknowledges the especially broad nature of the social work profession and the multiple types of knowledge and skills that social workers need in working with clients and communities (e.g., critical thinking, legislative advocacy skills, and respecting and drawing on clients' expertise about their life experiences). The purpose of social work is much broader than individual client work, and social workers are charged with improving clients' social and psychological functioning, enhancing transactions between people and their environments, and influencing communities, organizations, and political processes (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). Consequently, it is difficult for the social work practitioner to only draw on narrow intervention research that is unable to acknowledge the broader social context in which social workers practice (e.g., poverty-stricken neighborhoods; communities with high rates of violence, crime, and oppressive or limited police presence; substandard housing; and a lack of social services). These complex social problems do not lend themselves to narrow evidence-based, clinical interventions.

Practitioner Expertise

Instead, EGP acknowledges the use of research studies but places the practitioner and client in the driver's seat in determining if these studies have any relevance for their work together given the broader social context in which the client lives and the responsibilities of the social worker (Betts-Adams et al., 2009; Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011). Authors argue that this is more ethically consistent with social work values of respecting the dignity and worth of our diverse clientele and their self-determination in making decisions that fit best with their life experiences. EGP, unlike evidence-based practice, also values the importance of theory (e.g., theories on multiracial identity development, gender expression, and women's moral development) and views theories in combination with empirical research as providing meaningful information for practice (Gitterman & Knight, 2013; Walker et al., 2007). However, theories and research are not enough to guide practice. Social workers must use their critical thinking, creativity, hunches, self-reflection, and other skills to monitor their practice as well as actively listen to and engage clients in a collaborative process that acknowledges their real-world experiences and expertise.

Evidence indicates that practitioners who adhere strictly to interventions are much less able to be authentically present or listen to their clients (Henry et al., 1993).

Client Expertise

Taking into account the client's voice and expertise and letting the client take the lead or direct the work has also been a longstanding approach within social work practice. Increasingly, others are acknowledging the importance of client feedback and in letting clients teach us what we need to know about working with them (Duncan, 2012; Koenig & Spano, 2007; Lambert & Shimokawa, 2011; Saleebey, 2005; Shimokawa et al., 2010; Slone et al., 2015). Robust studies indicate that client feedback can be obtained across all types of theoretical orientations or diagnoses of individual clients and can be tailored to the individual worker/client relationship (Duncan, 2012). We know much less about how to involve groups and communities in obtaining their feedback on our work.

One Final Note: Common Factors Research

Although common factors researchers limit definitions of practice to psychotherapeutic approaches such as cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic, or person-centered therapies, what they have found is relevant for our work with individual clients. The general success rate in treated persons using these therapies (which have their roots in many of the theories we discuss in this book) is 67% compared with that of 33% for untreated persons over the same period of time (Lambert, 2013). And the benefits of these therapies can be found in diverse settings (e.g., public mental health clinics, managed care settings, university counseling settings). However, what is truly fascinating is that none of these proclaimed therapies or models are superior to any other systematically applied psychotherapy approach (Duncan et al., 2010; Stiles et al., 2008). And although we know that treatment works, Duncan (2014) describes elements that are troubling. First, clients who seek mental health or substance abuse services drop out or quit therapy at significant rates averaging at least 47%. Second, not everyone benefits from treatment; many clients go home without obtaining help. Third, practitioners vary significantly in their clinical effectiveness, and they struggle to identify clients who are not doing well. It is important to learn about models, theories, and techniques, but becoming enamored with or believing that salvation can be brought about with any approach is not a good idea. These treatment models account for so little of the clients' growth and change, whereas the client and practitioner—and their relationship—account for so much more.

Five common factors, as highlighted by Duncan (2014), comprise a **transtheoretical perspective**, are interdependent and interactive, and include client, practitioner, the client–practitioner relationship, model/technique, and client feedback. (Because of the overlap and interacting nature of these factors, the percentages for each factor do not add up to 100%.)

First, the client's contribution, which is unique and idiosyncratic (e.g., a supportive partner, spiritual beliefs, a difficult divorce) is the largest contributor, or 40%, of the change that occurs in the therapeutic process. Clients are indeed what drive any change, and our capacity

to draw on their unique characteristics and to help engage them in the work is the most important determinant of client change. Second, the practitioner's effects (e.g., successful therapists attended more to identifying client resources and channeling them toward achieving client goals; successful therapists also have specified skills such as with couple's therapy; Gassman & Grawe, 2006; Owen et al., 2014) account for approximately 36% to 57% of client change. Third, those practitioners who are able to develop strong, positive relationships with clients (and from the client's point of view) represent 36% to 50% of client change. The relationship, or alliance, is one of the best predictors of client outcomes. The alliance refers to the worker–client relationship that focuses on achieving the client's goals. Fourth, the model or technique (and theory) are the beliefs and strategies unique to any given approach. Only 7% of client change is due to the model or technique. However, it is really broader, general effects of treatment including (a) client's expectancy for improvement; (b) the worker's hope and belief in the client's natural growth, development, and change; along with (c) the worker's allegiance to the approach being used that matter much more than any specific model or technique. At least 28% of client change is attributed to these general effects. Fifth, the practitioner's process of obtaining formal, ongoing client feedback and using this feedback to tailor services also impacts client growth and change (Reese et al., 2014). (Although no percentage is attributed to client feedback because this is a newer area of study, indications are that client feedback has an impact on the work.) This client feedback interacts with and integrates all the other common factors.

As we examine theories in this textbook, here are some questions about evidence that we might ask:

- What evidence guides or supports this theory?
- What importance does this theory place on the social worker's expertise?
- What importance does theory place on the client's expertise (e.g., life experiences)?
- Given that a meaningful relationship (or alliance) between the client and worker greatly impacts client growth and change, what importance does this theory place on the development of that professional relationship?
- What does the theory say about how the professional relationship is used to obtain goals for the work? (For example, who defines the goals in the professional relationship? Is it appropriate for practitioners to coerce clients to achieve socially acceptable goals?)

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we have used a conceptual framework (or set of questions that represent key themes) for critiquing theory. This conceptual framework is based on assumptions that have their roots in the history and philosophy of knowledge and values as understood in the profession of

social work. Each question in this conceptual framework attempts to get you to look at theories through different lenses just as you would facets of a gemstone. For example:

- If you are exploring the epistemological assumptions behind a theory, you will be examining what kinds of knowledge (e.g., clients' life experience, empirically guided studies, or the practitioner's practice wisdom) are valued by the theory.
- If you want to examine the question of ontology (or what is real), you will want to know how the theory acknowledges the client's views and intimate knowledge of their real-world life experiences and challenges.
- If you are exploring a theory to see how holistic it is, this will draw your attention to whether or not the theory can be applied only to individuals, or if it is applicable to community or advocacy-based work.
- If you are examining the theory's emphasis on growth and change, you will want to know how your theory views the possibilities and capabilities of change for the client. Is the theory hopeful or guarded about the prospects for growth in the clients and communities that you work in?
- If you want to know how consistent a theory's major ideas are with social work values and ethics, you will want to explore how the theory addresses oppression and discrimination or how it supports and enhances social justice for diverse groups of people whom we are called to work with as social workers.
- Finally, if you are interested in exploring the evidence for a given theory, you will want to examine, among other things, how the theory views the importance of the client's contribution to the work (e.g., a supportive partner, a recent death in the family), the practitioner's capacity to identify client resources that support client goals, and the relationship (or alliance) between the worker and client.

We also provided specific, more detailed questions (that have been included as bullet points) throughout this chapter that flow from the five key questions in our conceptual framework. As we move forward in the text, our goal is to present each theory, taking an in-depth look at a central theorist with relevance for social work practice, and then engage in a critique of the theory using these key questions. Because each theory has different emphases of attention (e.g., some theori focus primarily on internal, psychic processes of individuals while others examine the role of socialization and societal oppression on human behavior), our questions may be responded to in a variety of ways and some may be addressed in much greater detail than others. Theory critique involves not only examining the shortcomings of a theory but also its strengths in being useful for social work practitioners and scholars alike. Your growing practice wisdom will play a major role in determining whether or not a theory is useful to you in your practice.

Key Terms (in order of appearance)

Subjective–objective dimension
Stability–radical change dimension
Diagnostic school
Functional school
Reason
Evidence-guided practice
Transtheoretical perspective