Human Behavior and the Social Environment: 
Engaging Diversity and Difference in Practice

This chapter describes the use of human behavior and the social environment theory to support social workers in engaging diversity and difference in practice. The theory and models presented are guided by the ecological systems perspective and symbolic interaction theory. These are contrasted with Africentric concepts intended to inform micro- and macropractice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Major concepts include power, oppression, and identity formation. Strategies to try and eliminate personal bias and to promote human rights are discussed.

Chapter 2 described the reciprocal influence of the person and environment—“the nested context of social competence” (Walsh 1998, 12). This chapter expands the discussion by turning attention to how culture and diversity “characterize and shape the human experience” (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] 2015, 4).

The chapter is divided into two sections. It first explores how larger-scale systems—political, economic, educational, and legal—may either be supportive influences in people’s lives or oppress and marginalize people by limiting access to services and human rights. It then discusses how exclusionary policies and hostile environments affect identity formation, sometimes contributing to feelings of alienation. At the same time, it contrasts ways in which people’s cultural heritage can positively influence well-being.

Models that help social workers conduct cross-cultural practice and combat bigotry and prejudice are also provided. These models stem from a theoretical base that incorporates the values of people of color (Schiele 1996). The purpose is to provide human behavior and the social environment theory for social work practice with diverse constituencies, “recognizing, supporting, and building on the strengths and resiliency of all human beings” (CSWE 2015, 10).
Cultural diversity in social work practice has gradually come to embrace the multiple dimensions of human identity, biculturalism, and culturally defined social behaviors. This has not always been the case. The primary shift to a more inclusive social work practice came about because the civil rights and women’s liberation movements, with the accompanied acceleration in social change, required that the social work profession reassess its direction and priorities. These social and political forces gave impetus to an advocacy approach to social work and its curriculum. (Greene and Kropf 2009, 33)

Students, faculty, and CSWE promoted the idea that groups less visible in the curriculum be given more attention (Tully 1994).

Organizational Support

The efforts of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and CSWE have contributed to “ever-expanding parameters related to cultural diversity” and client and constituency well-being (Tully 1994, 235). In 2001, the NASW National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity developed the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (Table 3.1). The committee was concerned with furthering cultural competence, or the ability to “provide services, conduct assessments, and implement interventions that are reflective of the clients’ cultural values and norms, congruent with their natural help-seeking behaviors, and inclusive of existing indigenous solutions” (Fong and Furuto 2001, 1).

Table 3.1. NASW standards for cultural competence in social work practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard 1. Ethics and values</th>
<th>Social workers shall function in accordance with the values, ethics, and standards of the profession, recognizing how personal and professional values may conflict with or accommodate the needs of diverse clients.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard 2. Self-awareness</td>
<td>Social workers shall seek to develop an understanding of their own personal and cultural values and beliefs as one way of appreciating the importance of multicultural identities in the lives of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard 3. Cross-cultural knowledge</td>
<td>Social workers shall have and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions of major client groups they serve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard 4. Cross-cultural skills</td>
<td>Social workers shall use appropriate methodological approaches, skills, and techniques that reflect the workers’ understanding of the role of culture in the helping process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Standard 5. Service delivery
Social workers shall be knowledgeable about and skillful in the use of services available in the community and broader society and be able to make appropriate referrals for their diverse clients.

Standard 6. Empowerment and advocacy
Social workers shall be aware of the effect of social policies and programs on diverse client populations, advocating for and with clients whenever appropriate.

Standard 7. Diverse workforce
Social workers shall support and advocate for recruitment, admissions and hiring, and retention efforts in social work programs and agencies that ensure diversity within the profession.

Standard 8. Professional education
Social workers shall advocate for and participate in educational and training programs that help advance cultural competence within the profession.

Standard 9. Language diversity
Social workers shall seek to provide or advocate for the provision of information, referrals, and services in the language appropriate to the client, which may include use of interpreters.

Standard 10. Cross-cultural leadership
Social workers shall be able to communicate information about diverse client groups to other professionals.

Note. The standards proposed by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity were approved by the NASW Board of Directors on June 23, 2001. From NASW (2001).

In 2008 and 2015, the CSWE Commission on Educational Policy mandated a more inclusive educational competency to ensure that students could engage diversity and difference in practice. They proposed that

the dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including, but not limited to, age, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status. (CSWE 2015, 4; Table 3.2)

The concept of intersectionality has resulted in an overarching approach to curriculum that casts the social worker in the role of learner and the client as cultural guide (CSWE 2008, 2015). In the broadest sense, intersectionality encompasses a host of disenfranchised groups (Fong and Furuto 2001) as well as an array of diversity principles (Greene and Watkins 1998; Table 3.3).

▶ Universality is realized at the intersection of our multiple identities.

Section I.
Power Relationships

Diversity Theory: Applying Terms and Macroassumptions in Social Work Practice

The human behavior and the social environment theory base has been criticized for its Eurocentric perspective. For this reason, these theories are critiqued throughout the Handbook. However, the diversity in literature has produced a number of
### Table 3.2. The intersectionality of diversity and difference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Description and legal protection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>People may be devalued and discriminated against because of their age. Such <em>ageism</em> is an attitude that can result in actions that subordinate a person or the group because of age, bringing about unequal treatment. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 protects individuals who are 40 years of age or older.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class</strong></td>
<td>People who are seen as being in a certain class are affected by economic and educational (dis)advantage, especially those living in poverty. Class encompasses a misdistribution of wealth and variation in educational attainment, occupations, and patterns of deference accorded certain groups (Devore and Schlesinger 1998). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sets poverty guidelines for benefits and services every year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Color</strong></td>
<td><em>People of color</em> is a term sometimes preferred instead of <em>minority</em>. It generally refers to people who are not White and who face prejudice and discrimination. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culture</strong></td>
<td>Culture is a people’s way of life. Characteristics may include arts, music, cuisine, language, religion, and social habits. Culture is more broadly seen as a worldview or belief system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disability</strong></td>
<td>People with disabilities are perceived as being limited in lifestyle and activities. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, a law that protects people with disabilities from discrimination, an individual with a disability (a) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, or (b) has a record of such an impairment, or (c) is regarded as having such an impairment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td>Members of an ethnic group think of themselves as being a people or as having a common culture, history, and origin. An ethnic group may maintain a distinction between its members and perceived outsiders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Gender is the sex, male or female, to which one is born. Gender can be distinguished by roles and power issues. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 protects men and women who perform substantially equal work in the same establishment from sex-based wage discrimination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender identity and expression</strong></td>
<td>Gender identity is an individual’s personal sense of being male or female. Gender expression refers to manifested behaviors and mannerisms. These expressions exist on a continuum and may differ from culture to culture. Employers may apply the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) law—29 Code of Federal regulations (C.F. R.) Part 1614—to gender identity and expression if they so choose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Immigration status</strong></td>
<td>Immigrants seeking economic opportunity in the United States must meet several conditions before they can immigrate. They must apply for an immigration visa and be sponsored by either a relative or employer who requires their work skills. They must also acquire a green card, which allows them to live legally in the United States as long as they retain their work status. Refugees are people who have been displaced and are given special permission to come to the United States. Their lives may be disrupted by famine, war, civil conflict, and/or persecution. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political ideology</strong></td>
<td>A person’s or group’s beliefs about the social order and what constitutes well-being and fairness. Most employees in America working for private employers do not have any legal protection against discrimination on the basis of political affiliation or activity. <em>(A public employer can, under certain circumstances, be prevented from firing someone based on political speech because that would constitute the government itself suppressing free speech.)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td>Race is a social category usually based on color. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion/spirituality</strong></td>
<td>Religion is the outward organized expression of one’s faith system. Faith is an inner system of beliefs about the meaning of life and one’s relationship with the transcendent. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Continued)*
Sex: Sex is synonymous with gender. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Sexual orientation: There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons why an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation (American Psychological Association 2008, 2). Several decades of research and clinical experience have led mainstream medical and mental health organizations to conclude that differences in sexual orientation represent normal forms of human expression (American Psychological Association 2009). The Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states on June 25, 2015 (Obergefell v Hodges). Other rights for the LGBT community vary and are in a state of flux.

Tribal sovereign status: There are 562 federally recognized Indian Nations. Tribal status recognizes the right of tribes to govern themselves and act as government entities. Actions are related to treaties or contracts between the U.S. government and indigenous tribes.

### Table 3.2. (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your agreement with the following diversity principles discussed in the Handbook? Rate yourself from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) on the following diversity principles.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-awareness and Self-reflection</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity practice requires an appreciation for attitudinal differences between clients and social workers regarding autonomy or self-determination. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social workers who are culturally sensitive appreciate differences. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity practice requires that social workers understand that their decisions may be culture bound or ethnocentric. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity practice requires social workers to be self-aware, open to cultural differences, and aware of their own preconceived assumptions of diverse groups’ values and biases. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity practice requires social workers to understand their own and the client’s belief systems, customs, norms, ideologies, rituals, traditions, and so forth. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diversity and curriculum</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity practice requires a model. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity practice requires the ability to think critically. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity practice requires that social workers be learners. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity content encompasses practice methods, field education, ethics, research, social policy, and human behavior in the social environment. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity content encompasses the selective and differential use of knowledge, skills, and attitudes pertaining to all areas of social work practice. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The most effective social workers in diversity practice differentially use assessment and intervention strategies. 1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)


The most effective social workers in diversity practice use a blend of formal and informal resources.

1 2 3 4 5

Diversity practice requires an understanding of multiple theories, such as symbolic interaction and systems theory.

1 2 3 4 5

Social and economic justice

Diversity practice requires social workers to uphold the profession's commitment to social justice.

1 2 3 4 5

Diversity practice requires that social workers understand the processes of inclusion and exclusion.

1 2 3 4 5

Diversity practice requires social workers to understand that individuals and groups may have limited access to resources, live in unsafe environments damaging to self-esteem, and experience their environments as hostile.

1 2 3 4 5

The scope of diversity practice encompasses all populations at risk affected by social, economic, and legal biases; the distribution of rights and resources; and oppression.

1 2 3 4 5

Diversity practice requires an understanding of the effects of institutional racism, ageism, homophobia, and sexism.

1 2 3 4 5

Development

Theory building for social work practice with diverse constituencies should reevaluate concepts such as normalcy and deviance.

1 2 3 4 5

Diversity practice involves the use of knowledge or research conducted in a manner culturally congruent to the people involved in the study.

1 2 3 4 5

Diversity practice involves the integration of skills and theory grounded in the client's reality.

1 2 3 4 5

Diversity practice promotes a client's sense of self-efficacy and mastery of his or her environment.

1 2 3 4 5

Diversity practice recognizes differences in help-seeking patterns, the definition of the problem, the selection of solutions, and interventions.

1 2 3 4 5

Cultural adaptation

Using a diversity framework, one views culture as a source of cohesion, identity, and strength as well as strain and discordance.

1 2 3 4 5

A diversity framework needs to provide an understanding of a culture's adaptive strategies.

1 2 3 4 5

Diversity practice requires an understanding of bicultural status.

1 2 3 4 5

Diversity practice requires an understanding of a person's behavior as a member of his or her family, various groups and organizations, and community.

1 2 3 4 5

Note. Adapted from Greene et al. (2003).
models that further elaborate the knowledge base on difference (Asante 1988; Devore and Schlesinger 1980; Lum 1992). For example, Molefi Asante (1988), a professor of Black studies, has written principles for an Afrocentric curriculum; Doman Lum (1992), a professor of social work, constructed a five-stage process model for clients of color; and Wynette Devore and Elfriede Schlesinger (2012), professors of social work, authored an ethnic sensitive practice model. Such researchers have enhanced understanding of culture, ethnosystems, and power.

Culture

Cross-cultural social work practice is based on an understanding of client culture. Culture is the way of life of a group of people, encompassing values, attitudes, mores, religion, and even food and music. Culture binds the group together through its worldview or belief system.

Anthropologist James Green (1978/1998) suggested that practitioners take a broader view of culture, thinking of it as a community of interest. He contended that communities of interest are not necessarily explicitly racial or ethnic but may encompass a school for deaf people, a drug house, or street people. He went on to offer an expansive definition: “Culture is not a specific value, physical appearance, or something that people have; rather, it is people’s shared cognitive map, their discourse, and how they go about their lives—their life perspective” (p. 3).

Ethnosystems

Just as the United States can be pictured as being made up of social systems of various sizes, it may also be thought of as comprising ethnosystems of varying cultural makeup. Bush et al. (1983) defined an ethnosystem as “a collective of interdependent ethnic groups sharing unique historical and or ties and bound together by a single political system” (p. 99).

Language sometimes differs among ethnosystems, interfering with client access to social and health services (Gonzalez 2006). The literature historically treated language as a problem rather than seeing it as an expression of the client’s culture (O’Hagan 2001). Practitioners tended to place the problem on the client (blame the victim) for not communicating in a language that the provider could understand. It is now increasingly accepted that understanding the client’s language is a necessary factor in the helping process (Carrillo 2001).

Power Defined

Ethnosystems may differ not only in historical, cultural, and organizational patterns and language and communication but in the degree of power over material resources and in political decisions (Pinderhughes 1989). Therefore, cross-cultural practice necessitates an understanding of power differentials.
Table 3.4.
Power issues in social work practice: theoretical positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General systems theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• All social systems have an organizational structure and therefore have a status or power hierarchy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal and positional resource differentials are associated with differences in power. Resources are an interpersonal factor influenced by diversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• As a social system, the client–social worker relationship has inherent power issues that may mirror those found in the general society. Societal beliefs and practices tend to view professionals as authorities or experts over the lay public.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecological theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Power is related to the reciprocal process of goodness of fit between the person and the environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A goodness-of-fit metaphor construct suggests that nutritive environments offer the necessary resources, security, and support at the appropriate times and in the appropriate ways. Such environments enhance the cognitive, social, and emotional development of communities and their members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When environments are not nutritive, the match tends to be poor. Hostile environments, in which there is a lack or a distortion of environmental supports, inhibit development and the ability to cope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The goal of the client–social worker relationship is empowerment, or a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power to improve the client’s life situation, knowledge, skills, or material resources.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminist theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Power is unlimited and can be widely distributed through empowerment strategies. Empowerment is a political act in which people take control over their own lives and make their own decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Power is a process in which people personally and collectively transform themselves. Power is derived from a person’s internal energy and strength and requires openness and a connection with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Whenever possible, the personal power between the therapist and the client approaches equality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Summarized from Greene (2006).

Power definitions vary from theory to theory. Ecological theory proposes that power is related to the person and environment fit, systems theory suggests that power is related to people’s status and hierarchy within various systems, and feminist theory espouses the idea that power is unlimited and can be shared (Table 3.4). In addition, social constructionists believe that societal power issues should be infused in treatment (Gergen and Gergen 1983; McNamee and Gergen 1992; see Chapter 5). For example, a client who is a battered woman could directly discuss her experience with power abuse with the social worker. The social worker should also be cautious about how his or her power is perceived by the client.

Power Levels

According to Foucault (1980), “Power is everywhere . . . because it comes from everywhere” (p. 86). Power may be expressed at the personal level, referring to a person’s sense of personal control; the interpersonal level, relating to one’s influence
over others; and the institutional/structural level, encompassing the extent to which discrimination is embedded in organizations and societal institutions (Cohen and Greene 2005). Social workers need to keep these levels of power in mind during the assessment and intervention process.

▶ Social workers’ change strategies can be intended to increase client power.

Engage With Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Macrolevel Power Factors

Before they engage with health and social services, far too many people will have had to overcome structural barriers involving power and privilege. Power and privilege can first be understood as a macrolevel phenomenon that requires that “social workers recognize the extent to which [U.S.] culture’s structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power” (CSWE 2015, 4).

This idea has been called institutional racism, or a system of White supremacy that permeates the U.S. social fabric, including its history, culture, politics, and economics (McIntosh, 1988). Institutional racism may also be understood as a normalized and legitimized hierarchy of power that negatively affects multiple institutions and people’s normative values (NASW 2007).

White privilege. The idea that prejudice is embedded in institutions and social norms is known as White privilege. The concept has been applied in the circumstances of ageism, ableism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of discrimination based on stereotypes. Privilege can be invisible unless social workers make a particular effort to ask, “What are some of the advantages of being white, male, middle-class, and so forth?” (Swigonski 1996, 154). Table 3.5 illustrates how White privilege may influence daily behaviors.

▶ Change strategies selected should address structural barriers to service that often are shaped by policy decisions.

Structural barriers. Most important is that structural barriers at the societal level may keep potential clients from using services. For example, older Latinos have limited access to health care because of economic, administrative, cultural, and linguistic barriers (Angel, Angel, and Markides 2002), which negatively influences their decisions to seek help, particularly mental health treatment (Choi and Gonzalez 2005). Another structural barrier that was overcome on July 25, 2015 was the Supreme Court ruling on Obergefell v Hodges, making same-sex marriage legal in all fifty states (www.cnn.com/2015.06/25.../Supreme-court-ruling-same-sex-marriage...).
Table 3.5.  
Types of privilege reflected in statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of privilege</th>
<th>Sample statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The freedom to associate exclusively or primarily with members of your own group</td>
<td>“I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time” (p. 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The level of social acceptance you can presume across varying contexts</td>
<td>“If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area in which I want to live” (p. 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability” (p. 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily protection” (p. 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability to see members of your group in a positive light in history records, in texts, in media, and as role models</td>
<td>“When I am told about our national heritage or about civilization, I am shown that people of my color made it what it is” (p. 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I can be pretty sure that if I ask to speak to the person in charge, I will be facing a person of my own race” (p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom from stereotyping</td>
<td>“I can swear, dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morale, poverty, or illiteracy of my race” (p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race” (p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race” (p. 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability to be oblivious to other groups in your culture</td>
<td>“I can remain oblivious to the language and customs of people of color who constitute the world’s majority without feeling any penalty for such obliviousness” (p. 7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from McIntosh (1995).

Maria is a seventy-five-year-old woman originally from Mexico. She came to the United States forty-five years ago and became a U.S. citizen. She is married and has four children and ten grandchildren. She has recently become forgetful and confused and no longer is capable of babysitting the younger grandchildren. She told her curandera, or herbalist, that she misses her grandkids and feels very sad.

Assessing Power Characteristics

Power is a marked feature in all complex societies that can create inequalities in social position (Anderson, Carter, and Lowe 1999). Such inequalities have seven common characteristics. Each power characteristic is accompanied here by a question or statement that may help social workers explore what inequality clients may be facing.
1. Inequality in social resources, social position, and political and cultural influences
   The social worker can ask questions related to the clients’ (system) sense that they have the ability to control their environment (e.g., “Do you sometimes feel that life is out of your control?”).

2. Inequality in opportunities to make use of existing resources
   The social worker can make inquiries about the availability of “fundamental human rights such as freedom, safety, privacy, [and] an adequate standard of living, health care, and education” (CSWE 2015, 5) for clients and constituencies (e.g., “Do you sense that you are living from paycheck to paycheck?” “How would you say you manage with your budget?” “Does your community have resources for your children—nice parks and libraries?”).

3. Inequality in the division of rights and duties
   The social worker could ask questions related to reciprocal obligations and hierarchy within the various social systems in which clients interact (e.g., “How are the major decisions made in your household?” “Are raises and promotions handled fairly at your workplace?”).

4. Inequality in implicit or explicit standards of judgment, often leading to differential treatment (in laws, the labor market, educational practices, etc.)
   The practitioner wants to know whether clients believe they have adequate access to jobs and education, especially those protected by law (e.g., “What are the schools like in your neighborhood?” “How did your job interview go?” “Do you think you will get that promotion?”).

5. Inequality in cultural representations—devaluation of the powerless group, stereotyping, references to the “nature” or (biological) “essence” of the less powerful
   The social worker wants to know how clients’ self-identity is influenced by their group’s portrayal in the media, music, and arts, especially for developing teenagers (e.g., “I wonder, what is the route to success in your peer group—sports, education?”).

6. Inequality in psychological consequences—a “psychology of inferiority” (insecurity, “double-bind” experiences, and sometimes identification with the dominant group) versus a “psychology of superiority” (arrogance, inability to abandon the dominant perspective)
   The social worker can explore whether clients express seemingly negative psychological outcomes due to prejudice (e.g., “Do you sometimes think you will never be treated as an equal?” “What success have you had in overcoming poor treatment?”).

7. A social and cultural tendency to minimize or deny power inequality—(potential) conflict often represented as consensus, power inequality as “normal”
   The social worker can ask questions related to the client’s acceptance of powerlessness (e.g., “Do you think we will ever see progress in getting a safer neighborhood?” “Are there organizations to advocate for you?” “What do you think we can do to get organized?” based on Davis, Leijenaar, and Oldersma 1991, 52).
Marginalized Groups

Oppression by the mainstream society at the structural level of society shapes discrimination against people of color and all disenfranchised groups throughout their daily lives. Those who are marginalized have less control or influence over goods and services or have less access to social, economic, and political resources (Garcia and Van Soest 2006; Pinderhughes 1978; Wilson 1973, 1985). People and communities, especially those living in poverty, may feel “expendable, hopeless, and helpless” (Goldenberg 1978, 2).

The process of discrimination can be seen as a cycle of powerlessness in which the failure of the larger social system to provide needed resources operates in a circular manner. . . . The more powerless a community is, the more the families within it are hindered from meeting the needs of their members and from organizing the community so that it can provide them with more support. (Pinderhughes 1983, 332)

Economist, sociologists, and a handful of social workers at the World Bank are tackling this problem, attempting to build human capital and addressing the quantity and quality of societal interactions that lead to well-being (econ.worldbank.org/indicators]. These community development projects focus first on building trust in communities and their respective relationship networks. Civic involvement is encouraged through collaboration and coalitions. The goal is to improve physical and social environments and to increase collective capacity.

Social Stratification

In a similar vein, the cycle of powerlessness, among other factors, has created a social stratification system in the United States based on social and economic status (Parsons 1951, 1964). A well-known six-part hierarchy categorizes members as follows:

1. Upper-upper class: the most wealthy (often old wealth)
2. Lower-upper class: the newly wealthy
3. Upper-middle class: successful professionals and business people
4. Lower-middle class: white-collar workers
5. Upper-lower class: blue-collar workers
6. Lower-lower class: unemployed persons and recipients of public assistance (Hollingshead and Redlich 1958a, 1958b)

Movement up the status ladder can be difficult and is often limited by systemic constraints, inequities in education and power, the presence of job ceilings, and the extent to which an individual develops a strong cultural frame of reference that allows him or her to feel accepted (rather than rejected) by society (Ogbu 1985).
Section II.
Theories of Identity

Diversity Theory: Applying Terms and Microassumptions in Social Work Practice

As described previously, assessment, particularly of minority clients, involves an evaluation of clients’ power position within U.S. society. This can explain the disproportional use of services and why some people have lost hope in the system. Theories of identity are used in assessment to better comprehend people’s relative ability to overcome the effects of discrimination and become resilient (Greene et al. 2009). This area of inquiry is critical because “the consequences of negative valuations directed toward members of stigmatized groups . . . and the relationship between power, powerlessness, [negatively affect] the processes of human growth and development” (Solomon 1976, 13–17). This section outlines selected theories of personal identity and their application in social work practice (Table 3.6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time adopted</th>
<th>Major theorist(s)</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Concept for Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>G. H. Mead:</td>
<td>People take on social roles as they interact in everyday life</td>
<td>Role conflict and strain</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Generalized other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social interactionism</td>
<td>The self is socially constructed</td>
<td>The “I” and the “me”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Mead: Cultural environments</td>
<td>Personality development is understood by understanding ethnographic information and the cultural environment</td>
<td>Cross-cultural social work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983–1989</td>
<td>Pinderhughes:</td>
<td>Empowerment occurs when people can affect their own space beneficially</td>
<td>Cycle of powerlessness; power sharing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Solomon: Power differentials</td>
<td>There is a hierarchy of power in society</td>
<td>Social and economic justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Chestang: Hostile environments</td>
<td>Oppressive societies are characterized by social injustice, societal inconsistency, and personal impotence</td>
<td>Negative quality of oppressive environments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Critique theories for whether they are culturally sound.
Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development

One of the most well-known theorists to address identity formation within a cultural milieu was Erik Erikson (1959). Erikson’s fifth stage of psychosocial development, *Identity vs. Identity Confusion*, occurs between ages twelve and twenty-two. The task of this stage requires a youth to “formulate successive and tentative identifications, culminating in an overt identity crisis in adolescence” (Greene 2008, 97). Although Erikson took social forces into consideration, he saw identity primarily as a psychosocial process that takes place in the context of one’s peer group (see Chapter 4).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is another theory that explains how the self emerges through social interaction. The school’s two basic assumptions are that (a) people develop their personalities through reflection and social engagement, and (b) societal institutions derive their meaning through the social interaction of their members (Ephross and Greene 1991). In this way, both individual and community development is accounted for.

Social psychologist George Herbert Mead, one of the founding members of the school of symbolic interactionism, studied how people understand themselves as well as others. He proposed that once children master the use of symbols, expectations for behavior solidify into what is known as the *generalized other*: “the internalized organized community or social group which gives the individual his unity of self” (Mead 1934, 154; Table 3.6).

Mead suggested that the self consists of two parts: (a) the “I,” which are the impulsive, spontaneous aspects of the self unique to the individual; and (b) the “me,” which refers to the organized expectations of others, social norms, and values. Therefore, the concept of the “me” suggests that the social worker must examine the collective nature of behavior and its social context.

Relational Worldviews

Erikson and Mead have been criticized for their limited, perhaps Eurocentric, view of self-development. According to Sue (2006), because “social work theories, concepts, and practices are often rooted in and reflect the dominant values of the larger society . . . forms of treatment may represent cultural oppression and may reflect primarily a Eurocentric worldview” (p. xvii).

In contrast, relational worldview models present an alternative approach to the development of the self and well-being. For example, Cross’s (1998) schema was originated to explain how members of a tribal nation (or other diverse clients) may view “disease” and health (p. 144; Figure 3.1). The model depicts culture as a circle resembling a medicine wheel consisting of four factors: (a) *context*, involving family, culture, and history; (b) *mind*, including intellect, emotion, and memory; (c) *spirit*, referring to dreams, symbols, and stories; and (d) *body*, encompassing genetics, condition, and age. (Cross saw the items listed in the circle as examples only.) When a tribal member keeps all four parts in balance, he or she experiences...
harmony or health. But when a person has a sense of imbalance, then he or she feels disharmony or disease.

From this point of view, healing may come from any or all of the four parts of the circle. Nothing in the circle changes without every other thing in the circle changing as well. The circle is constantly evolving because of the passage of days, weeks, and seasons and because of development and different experiences.

Similarly, Schiele’s (1996) Africentric theory explores the ethos and values of Africans and African Americans. He felt that African cultural forms are transmitted from one generation to another in the United States, and people also engage with the mainstream culture. Whereas the Euro-American perspective is more individually oriented, the African perspective focuses on cooperation and harmony. The theory recognizes African history, culture, and worldview as a holistic context for understanding the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit and the development of collective identity (Swigonski 1996). Learning about such cultural meanings related to self-identity is central to the helping process. These theories build on an empowerment philosophy in which people define their own worldviews and pathways, hoping to move from feelings of powerlessness to empowerment (Goldenberg 1978).
Jean Baker Miller and colleagues developed another example of the relational self in their relational–cultural theory. Collaborating as theorists at the Stone Center at Wellesley College, they first studied empathy among women (Jordan 1997; Miller and Stiver 1991). They contended that although women tend to hope for connections with others, they generally keep a large part of themselves private. Therefore, for trust and growth to take place in the helping relationship, empathy and mutuality in goal setting must occur (CSWE 2015). This viewpoint has since been extended to clinical work with men as well as other population groups (Brown and Ballou 2002).

The Social Construction of Race and other Social Groups

The idea of the social creation of the self has been applied to the social construction of race (Ore 2014). Race is considered by most social scientists to be a social concept with no standing as a scientific or analytic category (Green 1978/1998). The disuse of the term race as a scientific category relates to the understanding that there are only superficial physical differences between people, such as skin color, and that people differ more within a race than between races.

Nonetheless, race may be thought of as a social construct that can result in discrimination, leading to social injustice or the denial of legal rights. According to Leon Chestang (1972), the double standard for Blacks and Whites and the disparity between societal ideals and actions can lead to a feeling of personal impotence. Children who are not protected from hostile environments may develop a diminished sense of self characterized by suspicion and mistrust.

Nigerian American anthropologist John Ogbu’s (1985) international research culminated in a cultural-ecological framework explaining why minority immigrant youth may develop an oppositional culture toward educational achievement. He contended that when youth face systemic barriers to job opportunities, they can come to believe that education is not for them. That is, they feel that they are precluded from meaningful roles in society. However, children who are proactively socialized to ward off such discrimination can become more resilient (Greene 2012).

Similarly, people with disabilities have historically been thought of as deficient and expected to fill roles forced on them by the larger society. For example, persons with mental health disabilities have routinely been institutionalized. When their behavior has exhibited signs of institutionalization, it has reinforced stereotypes and falsely vindicated the idea that they need to be institutionalized (Mackelsprang and Salsgiver 2014).

During the deinstitutionalization movement beginning in the 1960s, patients with intellectual or developmental disabilities needed to learn about living in a new world. Social workers often assisted them in entering life in the community.

Change strategies selected can foster positive societal roles played by clients and constituencies.
For example, consider James, a fifteen-year old released from a New England institution in 1962 when he was fifteen: What new cultural forms would such a teenager have to master? How would you teach him about dress and hair styles? Music? Rules of dating?

Imagine the “remaking identities” of immigrant children and what it takes for them to adapt. According to Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001), they must find suitable behaviors for different settings such as home, schools, the world of peers, and the world of work. They may have their breakfast conversation in Farsi, listen to African American rap with their peers on the way to school, and learn about the New Deal from their social studies teacher in mainstream English. (p. 92)

Questioning youth, or those who question their sexual orientation, is another group that can face stigma due to their personal identity. Stigma is a negative social construct or meaning placed on a given group based on stereotypes (Goffman 1963). Recent research underscores the fact that teens who self-identify as gay or lesbian have relatively insufficient support resources specifically designed to meet their needs. A study conducted by CSWE and Lambda Legal (Lambda, n.d.) found that the problem of the invisibility of this population is intensified when social workers have insufficient knowledge to practice effectively with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) population (Martin et al. 2009). Helping professionals can benefit from using online resources to enhance their own knowledge as well as that of their clients.

Engage With Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation

Before beginning the assessment and intervention process, social workers should become more self-aware about what inequalities are affecting their clients. For example, people with developmental disabilities may be prevented from realizing their potential unless an empowering approach is taken. As Mackelsprang and Salsgiver (2014) have suggested,

One of the most important tools for effective human service practitioners is an understanding of our personal values. This particularly holds true for those who work with persons with disabilities. Our internalized values and beliefs come from a variety of sources, including the aggregate culture, various subcultures, family teaching, life journeys, and educational experiences. Values and beliefs concerning disability affect the work that you will be doing with one of the largest minority groups in the world—persons with disabilities. (p. 20)

- Client–social worker relationships are based on trust and cultural sensitivity.

Social workers need to come to terms with the incongruities between values, norms, and worldviews they do not share with clients. Unless overcome, these incongruities can serve as barriers to forming a helping relationship and expressing appropriate empathy. Moreover, the social worker can turn to theories that
use intervention strategies to reframe identity based on negative self-perceptions (see Chapter 5).

**Trust Building**

Diverse clients may be on guard when seeking social work services. They may wish for empathy but believe that their meaning of events may not be understood (Kadushin and Kadushin 1997). Obtaining feedback from clients and constituencies builds trust and a positive helping relationship.

**Helping Pathways**

Lewis (1980) recommended that social workers recognize that there may be an extended path to seeking professional help. He depicted a help-seeking path in which a tribal member goes first to family and extended family (cousins, aunts, uncles, etc.); then to his or her social network, religious leader, or tribal council; and finally to the formalized healthcare delivery system (Figure 3.2). Social workers should ask specific questions to understand a client’s path to treatment, such as what other help or solutions he or she has already sought. This can help social workers foster access and retention in care.

**Figure 3.2.**

*Help-seeking pathways.* (From Lewis 1980).

1. Individual
2. Goes to family first
3. Then to extended family (cousins, aunts, uncles, etc.)—social network
4. Religious leader
5. Tribal council
6. Finally formalized healthcare delivery system
Structural Domains of Care

In a similar vein, the social context of the healthcare culture may be thought of as consisting of three structural domains: (a) The professional domain refers to doctors and nurses or other licensed practitioners; (b) the popular domain comprises family, the social network, and the community; and (c) the folk domain consists of nonprofessional healers, such as herbalists. Each domain has its own explanatory systems, social roles, interaction settings, and institutions. Therefore, social work practice that engages difference is a cross-cultural process.

Crossing Cultural Boundaries

With the concepts of helping pathways and structural domains in mind, the assumption can be made that cross-cultural practice occurs in many helping situations. Therefore, social workers need to first recognize that their culture is different from that of their clients. They will have to gain culturally specific information to infuse throughout the helping process (Greene and Kropf 2009). This is best accomplished when “social workers view themselves as learners and engage clients and constituencies as experts on their own experiences” (CSWE 2015, 4). You may want to think of the social worker and client having “two stocks of knowledge”: (a) what the client knows from daily experiences and (b) what the practitioner knows from formal education and training (Green 1978/1998, 57).

Help-seeking model. Another way of visualizing the client–social worker relationship as a cross-cultural experience can be seen in Figure 3.3. This help-seeking explanatory model is composed of the client culture and the professional subculture. Each of these systems has its own belief system(s), means of recognizing problems, and ways of making healthcare decisions (Green 1978/1998; Kleinman 1980). For example, clients from minority cultures may prefer feedback from their social network, such as their families, friends, and community members.

Indigenous help providers, such as natural healers, may also be sought. Although the professional subculture may see referral to a specialist as a way to resolve a (health) concern, Bhui and Bhugra (2002) suggested that, in addition to their usual assessment questions, practitioners use a mini-ethnographic approach to explore client concerns. These everyday questions may include “Why me? Why now? What is wrong? How long will it last? How serious is it? Who can intervene or treat the condition?” (p. 6).

People who experience two environments live in a dual perspective.

Dual Perspective

DuBois (1903), a freed slave, first described the dual perspective. He said, “One ever feels his twoness—an American; a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged
strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 17). The dual perspective provides another way of thinking about people’s participation in a multicultural society and can be used as a framework for engaging and assessing difference. It is also a way of examining the socialization of children who are not members of the mainstream.

The dual perspective is a process of consciously and systematically understanding the values, attitudes, and behaviors of both the minority and mainstream cultures (Chestang 1972; Miller 1980; Norton 1978). The perspective suggests that people first learn from their nurturing, immediate culture in the family system. They later encounter the majority, sustaining culture when they interact with the institutions that control the provision of goods and services, such as schools and health and human services agencies (Figure 3.4).

- Assessment content addressed from a dual perspective examines the extent to which a particular culture is nourishing or hostile. Is there congruence between social systems, or is there stress/conflict?
When people grow up being socialized within a dual perspective, they are relatively bicultural; that is, their two cultures exist side by side. According to Greene (2012),

Biculturalism allows a child to learn about and take advantage of mainstream culture without compromising ethnic pride. For the child to develop knowledge of and a positive attitude toward both cultures, the family needs to validate that it is acceptable to live in two communities. A child who is bicultural can communicate effectively across cultures, and feels effective and well-grounded in both ethnic and mainstream cultures. (p. 262)

This suggests that over time, people may become more familiar with the mainstream culture. This process is known as acculturation, or a change in one’s culture resulting from contact between cultures. Some people, however, become assimilated, or take on most of the beliefs and behaviors of the mainstream culture. Still others experience a disconnect or incongruence between cultures.

A client’s relative capacity to function in two cultures falls along a continuum, from most (ethnically) traditional to taking on many aspects of the mainstream culture (Pedersen 1997). Bicultural competence is a person’s ability to alternate between and integrate cultural forms. The social worker’s assessment from the dual perspective involves an evaluation of the incongruence “of these disparate systems and determines where the major stress lies” (Norton 1978, 7). If desired, intervention strategies can then be mutually agreed on.
Empowerment and Resilience

Social workers who embrace an empowerment philosophy of practice seek ways to tap into clients’ strengths and natural healing processes, moving them from the margins to the center of society (Simon 1994). This entails learning which social networks contribute to client well-being. For example, research has documented that religion and religious institutions, including the provision of social integration and support, have had an empowering impact on African American individuals and communities (Taylor, Chatters, and Levin 2004). Taylor, Chatters, and Levin (2004) research indicated that religion could serve as a protective or preventive factor against the recurrence of mental illness and as a moderating factor to ease the influence of life stress.

Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

The following assessment questions summarize the diversity issues discussed throughout the chapter and should be adjusted and applied differentially depending on the client system size and culture:

1. What are your professional self-expectations for working with difference?
2. What solutions has the client or constituency already tried?
3. What does the client expect of you?
4. What is the effect of cultural structures and values on your client system? (see additional questions on power dynamics in Assessing Power Characteristics)
5. Is the client(s) a member of an identifiable ethnosystem or marginalized group? What have you learned about the client’s cultural patterns or belief systems?
6. Does the client or constituency think it has been marginalized, stereotyped, or denied access to resources?
7. In what general economic circumstances is your client? Are opportunities limited?
8. How does the client think about his or her dual perspective? What is the level of person and environment fit? Is he or she relatively bicultural, or is there acculturation stress?
9. Does your client live in a competitive or collaborative culture?
10. What is your client’s self-construct? What does he or she hope for in the future?

Change strategies selected for marginalized or disempowered clients should involve person and environment solutions.

Intervene With Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities: Policy Practice

Intervention with individuals, groups, organizations, and communities varies depending on the client system size and culture and the client assessment. Most interventions fall in the realm of advancing social, economic, and environmental
justice (CSWE 2015). Intervention approaches may be thought of as a strategic use of power (Cummins, Byers, and Pedrick 2011). Examples can include eliminating health disparities and raising the minimum wage. Consequently, questions to guide interventions primarily come under the umbrella of policy practice (Cummins Byers, and Pedrick 2011). They include the following:

1. Are your agency’s institutional history and policy directives congruent with the needs of diverse client groups? If not, what action needs to be taken?
2. Can you change social systems or institutions oppressing the client through your intervention? Will there be change in laws, budgets, and/or policy?
3. Who are the stakeholders? With whom will you collaborate or build coalitions?
4. Are coalitions addressing inequities in your area?
5. How can the social capital of the community be enhanced?
6. Do your strategies build physical and social environments?

**Critique of Diversity Issues in Social Work Practice**

The NASW *Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* have been revised and now encompass *cultural humility* in which diversity practice is seen as never realized, achieved, or completed, but rather a lifelong process of learning and introspection.

Finally, as you continue through the *Handbook*, this chapter should help you critique each theory to see how difference is addressed.

**Glossary**

**Belief systems.** Sets of precepts from which one lives one’s daily life; those that govern one’s thoughts, words, and action.

**Biculturalism.** Living in one’s [ethnic] immediate environment and the larger distal environment.

**Cultural competence.** The ability to provide services, conduct assessments, and implement interventions that are reflective of clients’ cultural values and norms, congruent with their natural help-seeking behaviors, and inclusive of existing indigenous solutions.

**Culture.** The way of life of a group.

**Dual perspective.** A process of consciously and systematically understanding the values, attitudes, and behaviors of both the minority and mainstream cultures.

**Empowerment.** A process whereby an individual gains power and increased interpersonal influence, often achieved by building support systems and reducing societal discrimination.

**Ethnic group.** Members of an ethnic group think of themselves as being a people or as having a common culture, history, and origin. An ethnic group may maintain a distinction between its members and perceived outsiders.
Ethnosystem. A collective of interdependent ethnic groups sharing unique historical ties and bound together by a single political system.

Helping pathways. Pathways and solutions clients use for help seeking.

Hostile environments. Environments in which there is social injustice, social inconsistency, and personal impotence.

Institutional racism. Reinforcing discrimination within institutions.

Marginalization. The process whereby someone is placed in a position of marginal importance, influence, or power.

Minority. A group of people who differ from the larger group of which it is a part. As U.S. society becomes increasingly diverse, the minority will become the majority, posing different power differentials.

Oppression. The withholding of power by the dominant group(s) in society.

Personal impotence. A diminished sense of self that is characterized by suspicion and mistrust.

Power differential. Differences generated because of the hierarchy of power in society.

Powerlessness. The perception of lack of control over a current situation or immediate happening.

Race. A socially constructed concept of classifying people based on skin color.

Racism. A form of prejudice that espouses that one group of people is superior to another and is therefore denied access to resources.

Relational self. The view that identity is formed through human interaction; a collective sense of self.

Self. The union of elements of body, emotions, and thoughts that constitute the individuality and identity of a person.

Social injustice. Unfairness or injustice in a society in which people do not realize their potential equally and do not have the same access to opportunities.

Socialization. A process of consciously and systematically understanding the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the society necessary for participating within the society.

Societal inconsistencies. Having a double standard for mainstream versus minority populations.

References


