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THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN BEHAVIOR

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Recognize one's own cognitive and emotional reactions to a case study.
- 2.2 Identify the major themes of seven perspectives on human behavior: systems, critical, social constructionist, psychodynamic, developmental, learning, and humanistic-existential.
- 2.3 Analyze the merits of each theoretical perspective as well as a multitheoretical approach to human behavior and practice.
- 2.4 Apply knowledge of seven theoretical perspectives on human behavior to recommend guidelines for social work engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation.

A CASE STUDY ABOUT HUMAN BEHAVIOR THEORY

Case Study 2.1: COVID-19 in the Family

Mariana Rodriguez took a job in the laundry at the nursing home in her small California town in October 2019 soon after her 52nd birthday. She had been working part-time at an assisted-living facility, but her husband Daniel, age 57, was unable to work after a recent heart attack and the family needed the health insurance provided to staff at the nursing home. She and Daniel lived in a 1,300-square-foot house with three bedrooms and one bathroom, along with two of their children, Sofia and Mateo. Sofia was in the second year at community college and Mateo was in the 10th grade. Another daughter, Camila, lives with her husband, Juan, in an apartment a few blocks away. Mariana's pay at the nursing home was much less than what Daniel had received in his landscaping job and money was tight. They were trying not to dip into the small savings account that they had carefully built.

When the first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in California in late January 2020, Mariana was not sure what to think of it. She heard so many stories, and some of her friends and relatives were convinced the media and some politicians were exaggerating the situation. When a statewide stay-at-home order was issued, Camila and Juan, both hair stylists, were not able to work. Sofia and Mateo had to quickly find a way to stay involved with their educational programs from home, and Sofia was no longer able to work part-time at the salon where Camila

and Juan worked. Daniel and the children begged Mariana to quit her job, where she was considered an essential worker. Mariana said, “I must work; the family depends on my \$13.50/hour paycheck. Don’t worry. I won’t get sick.”

There was confusion at the nursing home about what precautions the staff needed to take. Masks and other protective equipment were scarce, and some administrators and a number of the staff were not convinced of the necessity for them. In early May 2020, Mariana became so fatigued at work one day that she couldn’t deliver laundry to the resident rooms. She tested positive for COVID-19 and was sent home. Over a few hours, she developed a high fever and a harsh cough and stayed in bed. She tried to stay separate from the rest of the family, but social distancing was hard to do in a small house with one bathroom. Over the next week, Daniel, Sofia, and Mateo also tested positive. Daniel was transported to the hospital with a severe breathing problem and needed to be on a ventilator. Mariana was hospitalized two days later but she responded well to treatment. Sofia and Mateo had milder symptoms and were able to stay at home, with Camila, neighbors, relatives, and friends delivering food to the front door.

Mariana was filled with guilt that she had brought COVID-19 into the house and was despondent that she could not visit Daniel or take care of Sofia and Mateo. The medical team kept her informed about Daniel’s condition, and the news was not good. From discussions she had with Daniel after his heart attack, she knew that he did not fear death but was concerned about what would happen to her and their children if he died. Mariana was able to leave the hospital after 10 days of treatment and before she left the medical team brought her a hospital iPad so that she could say goodbye to Daniel before she left. When she returned home, she asked Sofia, Mateo, and Camila to make FaceTime calls to their father. Daniel died 5 days after Mariana was discharged from the hospital. The family turned to the parish priest to see what type of funeral rituals could be planned during the pandemic and were advised that the traditional gathered community ritual was not possible.

They were all overcome with grief and yet had some concrete problems to solve. Because Mariana had not been at her job for a full year before becoming ill, she was not eligible for sick leave. The last of the savings went to pay the mortgage and utilities. Mariana’s sisters volunteered to feed the family until the small life insurance policy on Daniel paid out. The landscaping company where Daniel was employed for many years loaned the family money for Daniel’s burial, which they were able to repay in 2022 after the federal government began a program that reimbursed eligible families for COVID funerals. Camila, Juan, and Sofia were able to contribute a little to the expenses of Mariana’s household.

Mariana, still fatigued and grieving, returned to work 10 days after Daniel died. When she pulled into the parking lot at the nursing home, she felt her heart racing and was lightheaded when she got out of the car. She felt fearful at work for the next month and tried to stay away from other people as much as possible. At first she thought her physical symptoms were caused by COVID-19, but upon reflection, she realized they did not occur anywhere but at work. When she told her supervisor that she got dizzy, had trouble breathing, and trembled every time she had to go near the resident room where she thought she had contracted COVID, the supervisor agreed not to send her to that section of the nursing home for a while. As the nursing home administration became more careful about worker safety, Mariana began to feel less fear at work and the symptoms gradually disappeared.

On August 21, 2020, California hair salons were able to reopen with some health precautions. Camila and Juan were able to return to work, and Sofia was able to resume her part-time work at the salon. Mateo struggled with remote learning, but with the help of Sofia and a cousin he was able to get back on track. He was happy when outdoor sports were once again allowed and he could resume playing with the high school soccer team. He was sad, however, because his dad had always been his soccer mentor and had never missed one of his games. Juan made an effort to fill in for Daniel in that role.

The financial situation stabilized a bit when Sofia increased her hours working at the salon and Mateo was able to work full-time in the summer and part-time during the school year at the landscaping company where Daniel had worked. The family was learning to get by without Daniel, but Mariana continued to feel guilty about bringing COVID-19 home and became worried that her deep sadness was lasting so long. She didn't want to burden the children with her sadness, so in early September 2021, after talking with the nursing home social worker, she began to meet with a grief support group at the hospital. In those conversations, Mariana talked about her guilt and sadness and recalled that when she was a child her grandmother had contracted influenza from her and died. This was something that she had never given conscious thought to, but she realized that she had always carried some guilt about that. After a few sessions with the support group, Mariana decided to talk with the parish priest about planning a Día de los Muertos celebration for all the people who had died from COVID-19 in their largely Mexican American parish. She knew that she had never had the chance to fully grieve the loss of Daniel or to celebrate his life with a loving community.

MULTIPLE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH

As you think about the details of the unfolding story of Mariana Rodriguez and her family, you may discover that you have some informal theory or theories of your own about what they have been through and how they are coping now. If we asked you what caught your attention as you read the story, we would begin to learn something about your theory or theories of human behavior as you have developed it or them so far. There is much information in the case material as presented, but the case may have raised questions for you as well and left you wanting more information. What you see as gaps in the information might also tell us something about your theory or theories. Theories help us organize vast and multifaceted information. The purposes of this chapter are twofold: first, to help you identify and refine your own theory or theories of human behavior and, second, to help you think critically about commonly used formal theories of human behavior that have been developed by behavioral science scholars and used to guide social work practice.

As noted in Chapter 1, social work has a long tradition of being guided by a person and environment construct for understanding human behavior. Different theories have been considered essential to understanding person and environment in different time periods, but theory has always been an important resource for social work practice in all settings. In its 2022 Educational Policy Statement, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) reiterated the

important role that theory plays in social work practice, noting the way that theory supports the development of four social work competencies. It states that “social workers understand theories of human behavior and person-in-environment and critically evaluate and apply this knowledge” to facilitate

- engagement with (Competency 6),
- assessment of (Competency 7),
- intervention with (Competency 8), and
- evaluation of practice with (Competency 9)

“individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities” (CSWE, 2022, pp. 11–13).

Although different theories have been considered essential knowledge for social workers in different periods of time, there is general agreement that contemporary social workers must use a range of theories that draw on a number of disciplines to help us understand the practice situations we encounter and to see the possibilities for change. As we have come more and more to recognize that human behavior is multidimensional, we have also recognized the need for multiple disciplines and a multitheoretical framework to understand it (Berzoff et al., 2022; Sapolsky, 2017). There are many theories from which to draw: general theories of human behavior, as well as theories designed to understand specific dimensions of person and environment covered in this book. There are also a number of ways of grouping existing theories into categories or perspectives. We have organized them into seven broad perspectives: systems perspective, critical perspective, social constructionist perspective, psychodynamic perspective, developmental perspective, learning perspective, and humanistic-existential perspective. An overview of the big ideas, major concepts, and related theories of each perspective is presented in Table 2.1. This table can be helpful to review as you continue to learn more about human behavior.

We have selected these seven perspectives for a number of reasons. Each has a wide range of applications across dimensions of human behavior and is used in empirical research. Each has been reconceptualized and extended over time to keep current with rapid knowledge development. Each paid little attention to diversity, and most paid little attention to issues of oppression, equity, and inclusion in early versions, but all have evolved over time to address diversity, human rights, injustice, and the pursuit of justice. Since the last edition of this book, each of the perspectives has taken a much more critical approach to understanding societal arrangements and become much more intentional in addressing issues of racism and other forms of oppression. This is a much more rapid theoretical revision than we have seen at any time since we first began to work on these books in the mid-1990s. Each of the perspectives was developed by European or American theorists, but in recent years have begun to be influenced by thinking in other regions of the world. Some of the perspectives had multidisciplinary roots in their early versions, and each has benefited by collaboration across disciplines in more recent refinement and elaboration. Some blurring of the lines between perspectives has been occurring for some time. Theorists are increasingly being influenced by each other as well as by societal changes and

TABLE 2.1 ■ Important Principles, Major Concepts, and Related Theories of Seven Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical Perspectives	Important Principles	Major Concepts	Related Theories
Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Human behavior is the outcome of interactions within and among systems of interrelated parts. Each person is involved in multiple interacting systems. Social systems can provide both support and challenge for human behavior and development. Humans are embedded in systems that include other humans as well as nonhuman actors such as animals, nature, planetary systems, and technology. Systems have boundaries that may be relatively open or closed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interactions Interrelated parts Feedback mechanisms Closed system Open system Interdependence Mutual influence Holistic Risk factors Protective factors Social networks Social capital Complexity Actants Cyborg Anthropocene Autopoietic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General systems theory Ecological theory Bioecological perspective Risk and resilience theory Social network theory Actor–network theory Theories of the Anthropocene Autopoietic systems theory

(Continued)

TABLE 2.1 ■ Important Principles, Major Concepts, and Related Theories of Seven Theoretical Perspectives (Continued)

Theoretical Perspectives	Important Principles	Major Concepts	Related Theories
Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploitation and domination are central features of the capitalist economic system. • Contemporary patterns of exploitation and domination are a continuation of 18th- and 19th-century colonialism. • Members of nondominant groups, such as those based on gender, class, and race, live their lives at the intersection of multiple identities. • Race and racism are central organizing features of social life in the United States. • Racism and other forms of oppression must be challenged. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Injustice • Pursuit of justice • Exploitation • Dominance • Alienation • Colonialization • Neoliberalism • Global South • Global North • Race and racism • Intersectionality • Privilege • Whiteness • Microaggressions • Western imperialism • Indigenous knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marxist economic theory • Neo-Marxist critical theories • Feminist theories • Postcolonial theories • Southern theory • Critical race theory • Intersectionality theories • Racial formation theory • White privilege theory • Microaggression theory • Indigenous theory of Western imperialism

Theoretical Perspectives	Important Principles	Major Concepts	Related Theories
Social constructionist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social reality is constructed and constantly reconstructed as humans interact. • People construct meaning, a sense of self, and a social world through interactions with each other. • As they interact, humans develop symbols to which they attach meaning. • There is no singular objective reality but rather multiple realities that are created in different contexts. • Social interaction is grounded in language customs as well as cultural and historical contexts. • Binary language customs produce social hierarchy and power structure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social reality • Social construction • Social interactions • Meaning • Sense of self • Shared meanings • Symbols • Impression management • Social construction of race • Language • Binary opposition language • Social construction of sexuality and gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Queer • Standpoint • Multiple realities • Entrainment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolic interaction theory • Structuralism • Poststructuralism • Queer theory • Postmodern theories • Standpoint theory • Affect theory

(Continued)

TABLE 2.1 ■ Important Principles, Major Concepts, and Related Theories of Seven Theoretical Perspectives (Continued)

Theoretical Perspectives	Important Principles	Major Concepts	Related Theories
Psychodynamic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal processes motivate human behavior. • Unconscious as well as conscious mental activity serve as motivating forces in human behavior. • Early childhood experiences are central in the development of the self. • Attachment relationships with others are absolute human needs. • Individuals frequently use defense mechanisms to cope with internal and external threats. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs • Drives • Emotions • Mental states • Eros/Thanatos • Conscious • Preconscious • Unconscious • Id • Ego • Superego • Psychosexual stages • Unfolding human capacities • Ego defense mechanisms • Mastery • Adaptation • Survival • Object relations • Tripolar self • Emotional connectedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drive theory • Topographical theory • Structural model of the mind • Psychosexual stage theory • Ego psychology • Object relations theory • Attachment theory • Self-psychology • Relational and intersubjective theories

Theoretical Perspectives	Important Principles	Major Concepts	Related Theories
Developmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Human development occurs in defined, age-graded stages. Each stage of life is based on a complex interaction of biological, psychological, and social processes. Individual development must be understood in the context of culture and historical trends. There is much diversity in life course trajectories. Advantage and disadvantage are accumulated over the life course. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developmental stages Developmental tasks Roles and statuses Epigenetic principle Psychosocial crisis Basic strength Core pathology Historical trends and events Timing of lives Linked lives Human capacity for choice making Diversity Developmental risk and protection Cumulative advantage/disadvantage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freud's theory of psychosexual stages Jung's theory of stages of life Piaget's theory of cognitive stages Kohlberg's and Gilligan's theories of moral development Erikson's psychosocial theory Life span or life cycle theory Life cycle models for specific groups Theory of transgender identity development Life course perspective

(Continued)

TABLE 2.1 ■ Important Principles, Major Concepts, and Related Theories of Seven Theoretical Perspectives (Continued)

Theoretical Perspectives	Important Principles	Major Concepts	Related Theories
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human behavior is learned when individuals interact with the environment. • Human behavior is learned through different mechanisms of learning, including association of environmental stimuli, reinforcement, observation and modeling, and personal beliefs and expectations. • Human behavior is learned through a combination of conditioning and cognitive methods of learning. • There is a limit to rationality in cognitive learning. • Humans engage in both implicit and explicit cognition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondent conditioning • Association of stimuli • Unconditioned stimulus/conditioned stimulus • Unconditioned response/conditioned response • Exposure-based psychotherapy • Instrumental conditioning • Reinforcement • Positive reinforcers • Negative reinforcers • Behavioral extinguishment • Beliefs • Expectations • Self-efficacy • Efficacy expectation • Agency • Costs and benefits • Cognitive load • Fast and slow thinking • Implicit and explicit cognition • Implicit bias 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classical conditioning • Operant conditioning • Bandura's social cognitive theory • Social exchange and rational choice theories • Cognitive load theory • Dual process theory • Learned helplessness • Cognitive behavioral therapy • Dialectical behavioral therapy • Cognitive processing therapy

Theoretical Perspectives	Important Principles	Major Concepts	Related Theories
Humanistic-existential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humans have the capacity to make choices, search for meaning, and constantly strive for personal growth. • Human behavior is best understood from the internal frame of reference of the person and not from external evaluation. • Each person is unique, has worth, and should be treated with dignity. • Each person is responsible for the choices they make within the limits of freedom. • Human suffering and power imbalances must be acknowledged and addressed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human conscious experiences • Internal frame of reference of the person • Human agency • Search for meaning • Unique • Motivation • Hierarchy of needs • Physiological needs • Safety needs • Love and belongingness needs • Esteem needs • Self-actualization needs • Self-understanding • Self-directed behavior • Formative tendency • Actualizing tendency • Authenticity • Unconditional positive regard • Empathic listening • Freedom • Responsibility • Alienation • Fear of death • Learned optimism • Suffering • Power imbalances • Critical consciousness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maslow's theory of human motivation • Transpersonal psychology • Roger's person-centered theory • Fromm's humanistic psychoanalysis theory • May's existential psychology theory • Positive psychology • Critical humanism • Ubuntuism

have begun to borrow ideas from each other and to build new theory by combining aspects of existing theory. As you can see, theory, like other aspects of human behavior, is ever-changing.

Each of the perspectives presented in this chapter comprises a number of diverse theories. We present the important principles of each perspective and not a detailed discussion of the various theories within the perspective. Although we trace the development of each perspective over time, we pay particular attention to some of the recent extensions of the perspectives that seem most useful in contemporary times. We draw special attention to instances where new research is supporting premises of the early root theories as well as recent theoretical revisions. If you are interested in a more in-depth look at these theoretical perspectives, there are many resources to help you do this. We introduce the perspectives in this chapter, and you will see variations of them throughout subsequent chapters, where theory and research about specific dimensions of person and environment are explored.

In this chapter, in addition to presenting an overview of ideas, we analyze the scientific merit of the perspectives and their usefulness for social work practice. The five criteria for critical understanding of theory identified in Chapter 1 provide the framework for our critical analyses of the perspectives: coherence and conceptual clarity; testability and empirical support; comprehensiveness; consistency with social work's emphasis on anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion; and usefulness for social work practice.

Systems Perspective

When you read the case study at the beginning of this chapter, you may have thought of it as a story about a family system—a story about Mariana Rodriguez, her husband Daniel, and their three children, Camila, Sofia, and Mateo—even though Mariana appears as a central figure in the story telling. You may have noted how intertwined the lives of Mariana, Daniel, Camila, Juan, Sofia, and Mateo are and the impact each had and is having on the overall well-being of the family. They are also connected to people far beyond their immediate family, connected in a global pandemic. Prominent in the story is how COVID-19 spread rapidly in their small house, crossing the boundary from Mariana's work system into the family system. We see the way the family interacted with a number of other institutions and social systems as they coped with the challenges COVID-19 brought to their family: a hospital system, school systems, employing organizations, government assistance programs, and a network of neighbors, relatives, and friends. The Catholic parish of which they are members has served as a spiritual resource to the family and also provided some concrete services such as meal delivery and funeral planning. We also are aware of the important role that nonhumans play in the story of Mariana Rodriguez and her family: the SARS-CoV-2 virus, masks and other protective equipment, diagnostic tests, medical treatments, and electronic communication devices. These are some of the ideas that the systems perspective suggests for understanding what has happened and is happening with Mariana Rodriguez and her family.

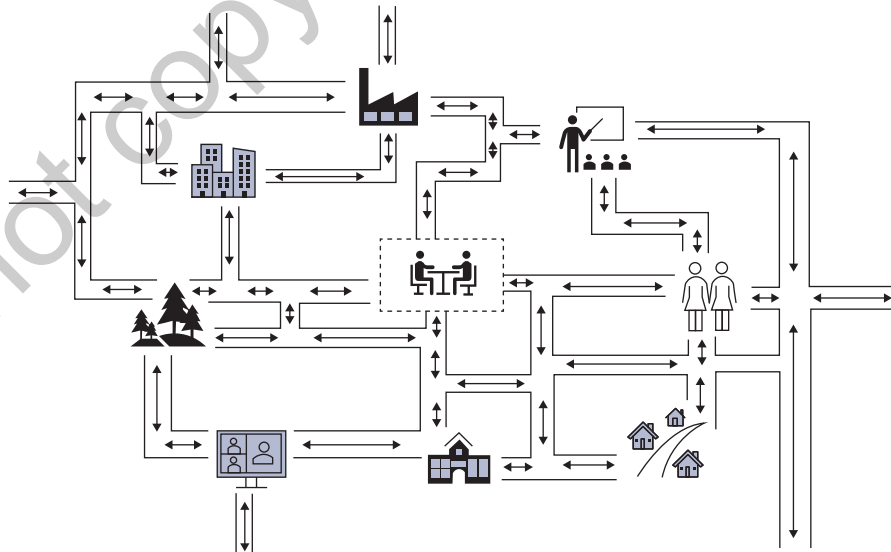
The **systems perspective** sees human behavior as the outcome of interactions within and among systems of interrelated parts. It focuses on the interconnectedness of elements of the social and physical worlds. The roots of the systems perspective are very interdisciplinary, and there are many theoretical variations. The perspective has been influenced by contributions

from biology, cultural anthropology, economics, engineering, mathematics, physics, political science, psychology, and sociology. Figure 2.1 provides a visual representation of the systems perspective, and Table 2.1 lists the important principles, major concepts, and related theories of the perspective.

Social workers were attracted to the systems perspective in the 1960s, and *general systems theory* was the dominant theoretical perspective in the social work literature during the 1960s and 1970s. This theory was based primarily on the work of biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who defined systems as “sets of elements standing in interrelation” (von Bertalanffy, 1969, p. 38). von Bertalanffy proposed that any element is best understood by considering its interactions with its constituent parts as well as its interactions with larger systems of which it is a part. For example, Mariana Rodriguez and members of her family are best understood by considering the interactions among the family members as well as the interactions the family has with other systems. von Bertalanffy identified two types of systems: closed systems and open systems. A *closed system* is isolated from other systems in its environment. An *open system* is in constant interaction with other systems. He emphasized that *feedback mechanisms*—processes by which elements of the system affect each other in a reciprocal way—produce both stability (homeostasis) and change within and across systems. Socially and geographically isolated families and communities could be considered examples of relatively closed systems. Some Internet-based social networks are examples of comparatively open systems. The family of Mariana Rodriguez seems to be a comparatively open system that was able to receive the resources needed to manage their COVID-19 crisis.

In the 1980s, *ecological theory*, also known as *ecosystems theory*, became popular across several disciplines, including social work. This theory comes from the field of ecology, which

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Systems Perspective



focuses on the relationships and interactions between living organisms and their environments. Interdependence and mutual influence are emphasized. The environment exerts influence on an individual, family, or social group, but individuals, families, and groups can also have an impact on external systems. Social workers who promoted the ecological perspective called for a *holistic* view of practice situations that considers the multiple environmental influences involved (Germain & Gitterman, 1996). The ecological perspective extended general systems theory by considering the important role of physical environments in human behavior and recent systems theorizing has expanded upon this idea.

More recently, social workers have drawn on an extension of Urie Bronfenbrenner's *bioecological perspective*, which was revised to pay more attention to biomedical factors, to understand individual behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). As it evolves, the bioecological approach includes many and varied attempts to incorporate ongoing neuroscience research into theorizing about the ways that biological factors are intertwined with psychological and sociocultural factors in the creation of human behavior. This approach considers gene–environment interactions, the impact of the environment on brain development, and the intertwined nature of biology, cognition, and emotion. One theoretical approach often used in social work is *risk, protection, and resilience theory*, which is an extension of the ecological perspective. It uses concepts from epidemiology and public health to explain the complexity of influences on human behavior. This theory proposes risk factors and protective factors in both the person and the environment. **Risk factors** are conditions and circumstances that increase the likelihood of a harmful outcome of person and environment interactions, and **protective factors** are conditions and circumstances that support a positive outcome (see Jenson & Fraser, 2016). In the past decade or so, biomedical researchers have expanded on the ecological risk, protection, and resilience model to propose a theory that views human behavior as developing from the biological embedding of conditions in the social and physical environments (Nist et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2022). While most of the research on risk, protection, and resilience has focused on individual well-being, the approach has also been used at the community level to examine health equity (Plough, 2021).

Social network theory is a systems theory that focuses on the ties between actors in social networks connected either directly or indirectly by interpersonal relationships, social interactions, and an exchange of resources (Borgatti et al., 2018; Cook, 1987). Yang and Horak (2019) note that the Korean word for network is *innaek*, which “literally means people entangled like vines” (p. 397). The actors in networks may be individuals but they may also be groups, communities, or organizations. Social networks are typically presented visually, with members of the network—individuals, groups, or organizations—represented as points. Lines are drawn between pairs of points to demonstrate a relationship between them. Arrows are often used to show the flow of exchanges in a relationship. These graphic displays illuminate such issues as network size, density of relationships, strength of relationships, reciprocity of relationships, and access to power and influence. *Social capital theory* is an outgrowth of social network theory. Social networks provide **social capital**, both direct and indirect connections to others who are potential sources of a number of types of resources (Horak et al., 2019). Social network theory has stimulated considerable empirical research.

Social network theory focuses on relationships between and among human actors. In contrast, influenced by scientific inquiry in a number of disciplines, recent systems theorizing

emphasizes the nonhuman elements involved in human behavior and broadens understanding of the complexity of interactions from which human behavior emerges. Taken as a whole, these new theories are attempting to explain the *complexity* of contemporary life, acknowledging the roles that nonhuman animals, technology, and the natural world play in human behavior. The following discussion highlights two of these recent system theories, actor–network theory and theories of the Anthropocene as well as another recent systems theory that takes a different approach to understanding systems boundaries, Luhmann’s systems theory.

Actor–network theory (ANT; Haraway, 2008, 2016; Latour, 2007, 2017) extends social network theory to look beyond human relationships. The basic premise of this theory is that societies are not made up of humans alone. Societies are networks made up of both human and nonhuman actors, including such things as animals, viruses, plants, electrons, gravity, climate, and computers. Social life includes collaborations between humans and nonhuman entities. ANT refers to all of these entities as *actants*, who exert force on other actants and have the capacity to modify, even transform, one another. ANT theorists suggest that our study of networks should decenter humans and recognize the important roles that other entities play in network exchanges. They decry the humanistic assumption that humans have more value than other actants. They call attention to the important role that material entities—such as keyboards, computer screens, websites, and medical technologies—play in human relationships, suggesting that these entities are more than resources for humans; they are also important actants in network interactions. Ritzer and Stepnisky (2022) note that ANT can be used to understand the influence that the virus SARS-COV-2 and the related disease COVID-19 exerted on societies around the world. It was an actant that changed everyday face-to-face relationships, prompting such innovations in human behavior as the wearing of masks and staying 6 feet apart. Government, medical and scientific professions, and the pharmaceutical industry were important actants in the global response to COVID-19.

Social network theorist Donna Haraway (1991, 2016) challenges the idea that there are clear boundaries between humans, technology, and the natural world and introduces the term *cyborg* to refer to a cybernetic organism that is a hybrid of human and machine. Technology of many types is so pervasively used to extend human abilities—to travel, communicate, fight wars, learn, do business, and live in comfort—that we are all effectively cyborgs. Actants such as Siri, Alexa, self-driving cars, assistive robots, and computer algorithms act with an autonomy once thought possible only of humans. Haraway (1991, 2008, 2016) suggests that humans are put together in bits and pieces over time through relationships with technology and other nonhuman elements such as companion animals and aspects of the natural world such as sunlight. This idea is taken up again in Chapter 3 of this book.

In recent years, interdisciplinary *theories of the Anthropocene* have received considerable attention (see Chernilo, 2017; Ellis, 2018). The **Anthropocene** is described as the current geological era in which collective human activity has become the dominant influence on climate and the natural environment. Like ANT, theories of the Anthropocene decenter humans and argue that humans must abandon the self-important idea that human societies can be separated from nature. These theories take a more global perspective than ANT. They emphasize the way that human societies are embedded in and dependent on the natural environment and focus on the global problem of human-caused changes to the planetary ecosystem.

They call attention to the great acceleration of population growth and the capitalistic economic system that depends upon endless growth in consumerism and take a critical view of how these circumstances are damaging the natural world and benefitting wealthy members of European and North American societies while passing the risks on to economically marginalized groups, communities, and countries. They argue that we need new theories that help us understand nature on its own terms and where humans fit in the ecosystem. They recommend a *world ecological perspective* that examines how societies shape and are shaped by the natural environment. Theories of the Anthropocene call for social workers to consider whether it is possible to promote human and community well-being without working to protect the well-being of the planetary system in which human lives are embedded (M. D. Allen, 2020).

Actor–network theory and theories of the Anthropocene challenge the idea that there are clear boundaries between humans, nonhuman animals, technology, and the natural world. In this way, they can be seen as proposing very open systems with highly permeable boundaries.



The pieces of this globe come together to form a unified whole—each part interacts with and influences the other parts—but the pieces are interdependent, as suggested by the systems perspective.

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In contrast, German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (2011) proposes a systems theory that suggests that in highly complex societies, systems must find a way to reduce complexity to make life more manageable. They do this by developing cultures and structures that clearly differentiate one system from other systems. Systems are open to interaction with other systems, but they are operatively closed, meaning that system behavior is influenced only by the system's operations—its language, culture, and processes—and not by the language, culture, and processes of other systems. The environment can affect the system only by causing it irritations or disruptions, but the system will have its own conditions for responding to these irritations. Luhmann argues that systems are *autopoietic*, meaning they are self-created and reproduced. For example, think about social workers who work in child welfare services. They assess child safety issues in the context of their social work knowledge of child development and family dynamics, and in the process, they often interact with medical professionals and the court system. When interacting with those two systems, they must recognize that those systems use their own often different language, culture, and processes to think about child safety. Luhmann has made some good observations about how human social systems try to manage complexity and, when working across social system boundaries, social workers will need to understand the language, cultures, and processes of these other professional systems. At the same time, it is important for social workers to recognize the nonhuman elements involved in human behavior and consider the permeable boundaries of human, nonhuman animals, technology, and the natural environment.

Critical Analysis of the Systems Perspective

In terms of *coherence and conceptual clarity*, some concepts associated with the systems perspective have been criticized as vague and somewhat ambiguous. While the concepts in some versions of the perspective continue to be highly abstract, overall recent systems theorizing has coherence and conceptual clarity. Considering *testability and empirical support*, a long tradition of research supporting a systems perspective can be found in anthropology and sociology. The systems perspective has been greatly strengthened in recent years with research in neuroscience, epidemiology, and environmental science. Social network analysis is used to analyze many types of networks and has research evidence supporting its validity (see Ahmed et al., 2020; Falcone et al., 2020).

The systems perspective is clearly devoted to the ideal of *comprehensiveness*. Different versions of the perspective address different system elements, and some versions are more comprehensive than others. Bioecological theories and research are shedding light on the complex interactions of various biological systems with each other and with psychosocial processes. Both the bioecological theories and theories of the Anthropocene include time dimensions. Actor–network theory makes an important contribution by calling attention to the nonhuman elements—technology and the natural world—involved in human behavior, and theories of the Anthropocene focus on the planetary ecosystem. *Anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion* are not the explicit focus of systems theorizing. However, bioecological research contributes to understanding of human diversity, and the risk, protection, and resilience research has begun to explore racism and other forms of oppression as a risk factor for racialized and other oppressed groups (see Z. Bailey et al., 2017; Goosby et al., 2018). Social network analysis has great potential for exploring patterns of social inclusion and exclusion (Young et al., 2020). Theories of

the Anthropocene give some attention to social, economic, and environmental justice (see Langemeyer & Connolly, 2020).

As noted in Chapter 1 in this book, social work has been guided by an ecological person-in-environment framework for over 6 decades. This attests to the perspective's *usefulness for social work practice*. Systems thinking is consistent with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2021) ethical principle "Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships." That said, the systems perspective is perhaps more useful for assessment and practice evaluation than for directing social work engagement and interventions. The greatest value of the systems perspective is that it can be used at any level of practice, including individual, family, group, organization, community, or society. It also has merit because it surpasses other perspectives in suggesting that we should widen the scope of assessment and intervention and expect better outcomes from multidimensional interventions. Bioecological theory and research cue social workers to the neurological and other biological mechanisms involved in human behavior. Social network theory provides tools for analyzing the social networks of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Actor-network theory breaks ground for social workers by recommending attention to nonhuman actants—such as technology, companion animals, and the natural environment—in the situations they encounter in practice. Luhmann's autopoietic systems theory is helpful when social workers are engaged in advocacy; it reminds us that to be effective advocates, we must make the effort to understand the language, culture, and processes of the social systems we target with our advocacy efforts.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS 2.1

As you read the story of the COVID-19 crisis faced by Mariana Rodriguez and her family, what aspects of their situation caught your attention? What would the systems perspective draw your attention to? What more would you like to know? How would you explain their story to someone else? What types of social capital were available to Mariana Rodriguez and her family from the social networks of which they were a part? The systems perspective focuses on the interconnectedness of nonhuman and human intertwined elements of the physical and social world. How did the COVID-19 pandemic help you to think about that interconnectedness?

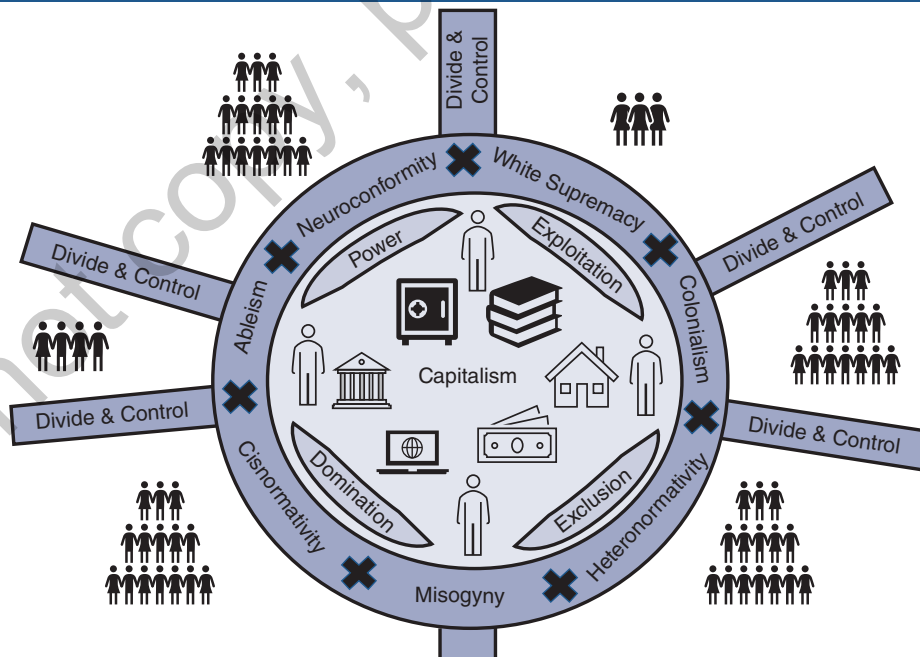
Critical Perspective

When we think about Mariana Rodriguez and her family, we note the precarious financial and health situations they faced during the worst of the COVID-19 epidemic. A pandemic like COVID-19 is a universal problem across geography, race, gender, and class, but not all are affected equally. The pandemic story of Mariana Rodriguez and her family is a story of the intersection of race, gender, and economic inequality. During the first wave of the pandemic, people of color suffered more job loss than white workers and were more likely to be among "essential" workers whose work could not be carried out remotely. Like Mariana Rodriguez,

nearly half of Black or Hispanic health care workers earn less than \$15/hour. One in five Black and 1 in 6 Hispanic workers could work remotely from home, compared to 1 in 3 white workers (Tiako et al., 2021; Powell, 2021). People of color were more likely to work in jobs that required interacting with the public, which presented more exposure to the virus, especially if they were working in health care settings. They were hospitalized at a rate of about 4 times the rate of white workers. One in every 3 jobs held by women was deemed “essential,” and women like Mariana Rodriguez were overrepresented among low-wage “essential” workers, many of whom did not have sick leave or health insurance. While wealthy families could escape highly contagious areas or, when infected, quarantine in separate spaces of large homes, families like Mariana’s live in smaller spaces with no such luxury. In the early days of the pandemic, the federal government was weak in enforcing worker safety and slow to promote availability of personal protective equipment (Tiako et al., 2021; Powell, 2021). These are some of the observations suggested by the critical perspective about the experiences of Mariana Rodriguez and her family with COVID-19.

The **critical perspective** focuses on injustice and the pursuit of justice. There are many versions of the critical perspective; in this section we introduce Marxian and neo-Marxian theories, feminist theories, postcolonial theories, and theories of race and racism. Figure 2.2 provides a visual representation of the critical perspective, and Table 2.1 lists the important principles, major concepts, and related theories of the perspective. The roots of contemporary critical theories are usually traced to the works of Karl Marx (1887/1967; 1932/1964), which focused on

FIGURE 2.2 ■ Critical Perspective





Karl Marx

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exploitation and domination of workers as central ingredients in the capitalist economic system. For Marx, exploitation and domination lead to a perversion of human relationships and to workers becoming alienated from their own work and from their true nature. Marx proposed, however, that workers are capable of recognizing the exploitation and achieving *class consciousness*—awareness of one's place in a system of social classes—but capitalists are incapable of recognizing the exploitation inherent in the system.

Marxist theory evolved over time, and newer versions are often referred to as *neo-Marxist theory*. Neo-Marxist theorizing includes some theorists who criticize the economic determinism proposed by Marx. Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987) and other *critical theorists* argued that as capitalism underwent change, people were more likely to be controlled by culture and their consumer role than by their work position. They argue that human lives have become dominated

by the culture industry, which is controlled by mass media. Critical theorists suggest that the culture industry plays a major role in turning workers into consumers, calling attention to the role of the advertising industry in exploiting consumers. Other neo-Marxists continue to focus on the economic system, calling attention to the exploitation and domination in the globalized capitalist economy. Wallerstein (2004) argues that the *core* geographical area (North America and Western Europe) dominates the capitalist world economy and exploits the rest of the global capitalist system. Sassen (2014) contends that global capitalism is now based on “predatory formations” that are producing a brutal form of inequality based on expulsion and exclusion. Some communities stand in the way of extraction of natural resources and the production of profit, and these communities are expelled and excluded from contemporary social and economic systems. Economists Banerjee and Duflo (2019) call these “left behind” communities. Left behind communities exist in Africa, Latin America, and central Asia but also in increasingly isolated rural and urban communities in North America and Europe. Sassen (2014) names six forms of contemporary expulsion: poverty, outmigration, foreclosures, unemployment, displacement, and imprisonment.

Feminist theories originated during an era of binary gender conceptualization; such theories focus on male domination of the major social institutions and present a vision of a just world based on gender equity. As feminist theories have evolved over time, they have raised several basic questions about the organization of social life and the answers to these questions have produced different varieties of feminist theory. Lengermann and Niebrugge (2022) trace the development of feminist theory, suggesting that it has moved through the following sequence of questions being raised:

1. And what about the women? Where are the women in any situation being reported? What are their contributions to the situation? If they are not present in the situation, why not? This is a question about inclusion.
2. Why is women’s situation the way it is? What social forces are involved in the marginalized way women are situated in the world?
3. What about the differences among women? Feminist and critical race theorists have developed *intersectionality theory*, which recognizes numerous vectors of oppression and privilege, including not only gender but also class, race, physical disabilities, global location, sexual orientation, and age (see Crenshaw, 2021).
4. How can we change and improve the social world so as to make it a more just place for all people?
5. How and why does gender inequality persist in the modern world?
6. What is really being understood by the category “gender”? This question has arisen as the concept of gender as binary has been problematized.

Postcolonial theories focus on the ongoing impact of 18th- and 19th-century colonialism on the social, cultural, political, and economic development of both the colonizing and colonized

nations. *Colonialism* was a process by which European nations and the United States created empires and occupied and dominated overseas nations, sometimes by administrative rule from a distance and sometimes by establishing permanent settlements in colonies. The colonizers stripped the colonized territories of political and economic sovereignty and constructed a hierarchy in which colonized people were treated as inferior in legal, social, and cultural terms (Steinmetz, 2014). To maintain dominance, the colonizers racialized people they were colonizing as nonwhite and therefore inferior people who, in their minds, rightfully belonged at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This perspective observes that Western societies have created an image of themselves grounded in their encounter with colonized people, an image that nourishes and sustains Western privilege and power. The end of the colonial era did not destroy the power structures established by colonialism. Many postcolonial theorists argue that we now live in a neocolonial world in which a philosophy of *neoliberalism* puts great faith in the rationality of a free market and opposes any form of collectivism, state planning, or safety net for those who are economically disadvantaged, using the argument that any governmental involvement would hurt economic growth. Neoliberalism became prominent at the end of the colonial era, ensuring that those who held power during the colonial era were well situated to continue to hold power (see Go, 2013).

Southern theory, one version of postcolonial theory, has been developed in the Global South to critique existing social and behavioral theory and research, arguing that Southern societies have been studied using Global North concepts and research methods and this has led to a colonizing of knowledge (Connell, 2007; Connell et al., 2017). These theorists argue that Indigenous knowledge has been discounted as primitive and irrational. Southern theory has called for alternative theoretical concepts and a respect for Indigenous knowledge. Some Southern theorists are synthesizing Northern theories and Indigenous philosophy to form new theory. An example of that will be presented in the discussion of the humanistic-existential perspective.

Because of the historical relationship between colonialism and the social construction of race, *theories of race and racism* call attention to the postcolonial perpetuation of racial domination as well as to ongoing resistance to that domination. **Critical race theory (CRT)** is the best-known theory of race and racism, largely because it has been targeted in recent years by the political right in the United States as a theory that should be eliminated from public school curricula (even though it was seldom, if ever, taught in public school curricula). CRT was developed in the 1980s by a group of legal scholars who concluded that racism is a permanent part of U.S. society, and law is not a neutral tool that can end it (Bell, 2021). CRT has been summarized as having six basic tenets (Bell, 2021; Delgado, 2017):

- Race is a social construction, not a biological phenomenon. It “represents a perceived set of shared phenotypical characteristics that are assigned meaning and value by society” (Bell, 2021, p. 109).
- Racism is a regular part of U.S. society and racial hierarchy was codified in the founding documents of the country.

- The racial hierarchy places whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom, with other people of color falling between whites and Blacks. Whites receive both psychological and material benefit from their whiteness.
- There is not one “Black experience.” Black individuals live their lives at the intersection of multiple identities (intersectionality), such as those related to class and gender.
- People of color have a unique and valuable perspective on their lives, but most of the science about race has been written from a white, Eurocentric perspective.
- Scholarship on race and racism should use “personal stories, allegories, metaphors, analogies, and other related methods of storytelling” (Bell, 2021, p. 111).

Scholars from racialized groups other than Black and African American have proposed variations of CRT to consider the distinct ways that these groups are racialized. These variations include AsianCrit (Qin et al., 2022), LatCrit (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), and TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005). Proponents of AsianCrit, LatCrit, and TribalCrit agree that race is a social construction and see their theories as supplementary and complementary to CRT. AsianCrit, also known as Asianization, emphasizes the way Asian Americans are cast as a monolithic group of “overachieving model minorities, perpetual foreigners, and threatening yellow perils” (Museus, 2014, p. 23). LatCrit theory calls attention to language, immigration, and ethnicity in the racialization of Latinx people and also to the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). TribalCrit highlights the way that colonization processes continue to privilege European American knowledge and power structures, and it argues that material gain for white people and assimilation of Indigenous people are driving goals.

Omi and Winant (2015, 2021) present a *theory of racial formation* that proposes that race and racism are central organizing features of social life in the United States. Race is a dominant category that shapes history, culture, and social structure. Like CRT, Omi and Winant note that race is a social construction, not a biological reality. Race is connected to racial identity at the micro level and is embedded in the economic, cultural, and political institutions at the macro level. People do not have race but rather are racialized. *Racialization* is the process of assigning meaning and value to perceived phenotypical characteristics. The process of racialization that began with colonialism gives superior value to whiteness and inferior value to people of color. Race is both stable and unstable. It is a constant dominant category and yet different groups have been cast as Black at some historical times and white at other times. Omi and Winant propose that *racist racial projects* create and reproduce structures of racial domination. *Antiracist racial projects* challenge and resist structures of racial domination. They argue that racial conflict is persistent at the macro and micro levels but passes through periods of both rapid change and inertia. Racism can be challenged through social movements and racial identity can be a foundation for demands for equity and inclusion.

Amico et al. (2021) propose a *theory of white privilege* (discussed in Chapter 1 in this book), which examines what whites are experiencing as people of color are experiencing racism. They argue that racism cannot be understood without understanding whiteness, the power bestowed

on those considered white. Being white means to be advantaged in relation to those not considered white. Lipsitz (2006) argues that white people are possessive of their white status and manipulate people of color to compete for white approval. Amico et al. (2021) suggest that an important aspect of whiteness is a lack of awareness of the role that race plays in societal power arrangements. They suggest that the important elements of white privilege are the invisible opportunities received, presumption of white innocence, white ethnocentric educational curricula, residential and social isolation of whites from people of color, and enforcement of privilege through social structure and social institutions.

Sue (2010) presents a theory that calls attention to how **microaggressions**—brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages and insults to people of color or members of any other marginalized identity group—create alienation for members of the marginalized group. Microaggressions are a form of covert racism and oppression that is often difficult to detect. Sue and colleagues (2021) also identify microintervention strategies for disarming and dismantling individual and systemic racism. Recent critical theories of race and racism have incorporated the work of cognitive psychologists who examine implicit bias, a concept examined in the section on the learning perspective in this chapter and also in Chapter 8, Cultures.

North American Indigenous scholars are ambivalent about existing theories of human behavior, considering them inherently connected to Western imperialism (Simpson & Smith, 2014). They are modifying Western concepts to better reflect Indigenous perspectives. The work of Glen Coulthard (2014) is one example of such scholarship. The basic premise of Coulthard's theory is that settler colonialism subjected and continues to subject Indigenous North Americans to enormous physical and cultural violence: plagues, stolen lands, forced relocation, cultural and language destruction, and removal of children from communities. Coulthard insists that concepts such as cultural recognition, reconciliation, and multiculturalism do not liberate Indigenous people from colonialism but instead serve to obscure Western government efforts to maintain settler-colonial systems of domination. Like the Southern theorists, Coulthard calls for a resurgence of theorizing based on Indigenous knowledge not only of cultural symbols but also of land and nature. One example of work that weaves together Indigenous knowledge and Western scientific knowledge is Kimmerer's 2013 book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*.

Critical Analysis of the Critical Perspective

In terms of *coherence and conceptual clarity*, most concepts of the critical perspective are straightforward—injustice, exploitation, alienation, domination, inequality, exclusion—at least at the abstract level. Like all theoretical concepts, however, they become less straightforward when we begin to define them for the purpose of measurement. In general, theories in the critical tradition are expressed in language that is relatively accessible and clear, but like any theoretical perspective they introduce new concepts that must be learned. Considering *testability and empirical support*, critical theories have developed, in the main, through attempts to codify persistent themes in history. A preferred research method is empirical research that looks at large-scale patterns of history. As with other methods of research, critics have attacked some interpretations of historical data from the critical perspective, but historical analyses are some of the most

influential works in contemporary sociology. All versions of the critical perspective encourage storytelling and other qualitative forms of empirical investigation and are providing new understanding of the lives of members of oppressed and marginalized groups.

In terms of *comprehensiveness*, the greatest contribution of the critical perspective is that it addresses dimensions of human behavior not found in other perspectives. Many versions of the critical perspective focus on large-scale social institutions and social structures, such as economic and political institutions, even global ones. In the contemporary era, critical theorists integrate processes at the societal level with those at the community, small-group, and family levels. They suggest that we should recognize exploitation, domination, and conflict as a central process in social life at all levels. In terms of individual psychology, critical theories propose that oppression of nondominant groups leads to a sense of alienation rather than belonging. Most critical theories do consider dimensions of time involved in ongoing systems of oppression. They are particularly noteworthy for recommending that the current behavior of members of marginalized groups should be put in historical context.

With the critical perspective's focus on injustice and the pursuit of justice, it more than any other perspective presented in this chapter helps us think about *anti-racism*, *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion*. Intersectionality theory, which recognizes that individuals have overlapping memberships in a variety of status groups, is particularly useful for considering human diversity. The critical perspective is strong in *usefulness for social work practice*. It is essential to the social justice mission of social work and has been instrumental in recommending practice strategies for confronting microaggressions, elevating the voices of marginalized members of society, and challenging interpersonal and systemic racism. It shines a spotlight on how domination and oppression affect human behavior; it illuminates processes by which people become estranged and discouraged. A major strength of the critical perspective is that it discourages taking a deficit approach to members of racialized and other marginalized groups, recognizing the historical, cultural, economic, and political context of behavior. It encourages social workers to consider the meaning of their power relationships with clients, particularly nonvoluntary clients. Empowerment approaches to practice at the individual and group level are recommended to connect "social and economic injustice and individual pain and suffering" (J. Lee & Hudson, 2017, p. 146). Social movement theories (see Chapter 14), which are based in the critical perspective, have implications for the mobilization of historically marginalized groups.

Social Constructionist Perspective

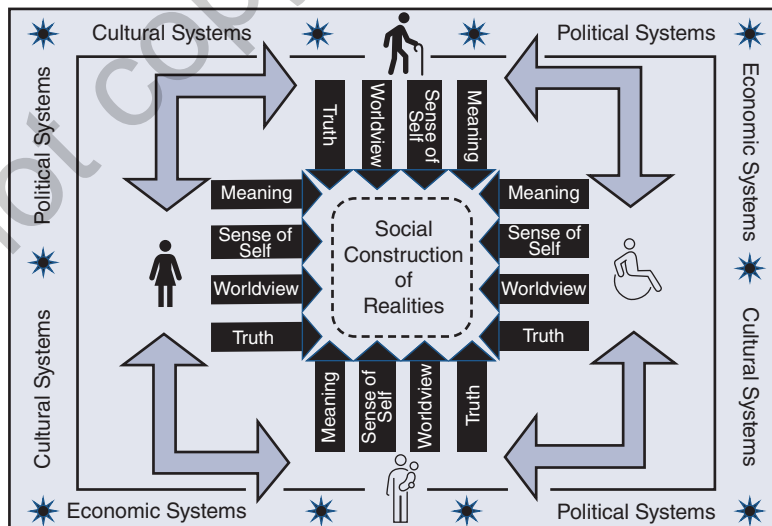
When a *novel* virus hits the world population, it is expected that people will be confused about what it will mean for them. In the early days of the pandemic, Mariana Rodriguez recognized that not all the people she knew shared the same meaning about the newly identified virus. Her husband and children were concerned about her health and safety and encouraged her to leave the job where she was vulnerable to exposure to the disease. On the other hand, some of her relatives, neighbors, friends, and coworkers thought the media and some politicians were exaggerating the dangers of the novel virus. As the pandemic hit her own community, Mariana was surprised at the deep divide that had developed about its meaning for social life. Masks became symbols of that divide. Mariana knew that she had been classified as an "essential" worker, a

classification that was socially constructed, and like many essential workers she struggled to understand what it means to be essential and yet undervalued, even disposable. As she struggled to reconstruct a life without Daniel, Mariana realized that her grief process had been short-circuited by the inability to participate in shared traditional death rituals. These are some ideas observed by the social constructionist perspective about the COVID-19 experience of Mariana Rodriguez and her family.

To understand human behavior, the **social constructionist perspective** proposes that social reality is constructed and constantly reconstructed as humans interact with each other. People construct meaning, a sense of self, and a social world through their interactions with each other. They learn, through their interactions with each other, to think about the world and their place in it. People interact with each other and the physical world based on *shared meanings* or shared understandings about the world. This perspective asserts that people develop their understandings of the world and themselves from social interaction, and these understandings shape their subsequent social interactions. A visual representation of this way of thinking about human behavior is presented in Figure 2.3, and Table 2.1 lists the big ideas, major concepts, and related theories of the perspective.

The early roots of the social constructionist perspective come from **symbolic interaction theory**, which proposes that as humans interact, they develop symbols to which they attach meaning. Words are symbols, but so are actions, tattoos, masks, national flags, confederate monuments, crosses, rosaries, clothing and fashion styles, and the types of homes we build. Symbols can carry very different meanings for different people, and conflicts can arise about the meaning they carry. In the United States, conflicts have arisen about the meaning of confederate monuments and the act of standing during the national anthem. A mask came to symbolize safety and respect to some people and unnecessary loss of freedom to other people. The symbolic interactionist would be interested in how ideological differences developed about the

FIGURE 2.3 ■ Social Constructionist Perspective



meaning of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the symbolic interactionist, society is constructed by human beings engaging in (symbolic) interaction, and the self is constructed through interactions situated in historical and social contexts (Mead, 1934/1962). Individuals have multiple and dynamic selves created by their interactions with multiple groups in multiple settings (McVeigh, 2016).

Social constructionists disagree about how constraining the environment is. Some see individual actors in social interactions as essentially free, active, and creative (Gergen, 1985). Others suggest that individual actors are always performing for their social audiences, based on their understanding of community standards for human behavior (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Goffman, 1959). Although this idea of human behavior as performance has been around for a while, it is taking on new meaning in the current world of proliferating communication technology, which provides us with many modalities for performing for our audiences, for engaging in what Goffman refers to as *impression management*. The dominant social constructionist position is probably the one represented by Schutz's (1967) phenomenological sociology. While arguing that people shape social reality, Schutz also suggests that individuals and groups are constrained by the preexisting social and cultural arrangements constructed by their predecessors.

The social constructionist perspective and its central concept "social construction" gained prominence with sociologists Berger and Luckmann's 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality*. The concept of social construction was quickly diffused through a number of academic disciplines, but it also gained popular usage outside of academic settings. In the section on the critical perspective, we saw that both critical race theory and racial formation theory focus on the social construction of race. Racial formation theory proposes that although race is a stable social construction in U.S. society, assignment to racial groups has been flexible over time with some groups, such as Jews and immigrants from Finland, Italy, and Ireland, being categorized as not-white at some points and white at others, depending on the needs of people in power. This is consistent with the symbolic interactionist proposal that reality is constantly being constructed and reconstructed. As evidence of popular usage of the social construction concept, Knoblauch and Wilke (2016, p. 56) report that a December 17, 2015, Google search of the term "social construction of reality" yielded almost 10,000,000 hits.

Some social constructionists focus on the important role of *language*, one type of symbol, in the social construction of reality. Language is used to label our experiences and to develop classification systems of behaviors and categories of social identities. Social constructionists differ in their analysis of how constraining language is on human behavior. *Structuralism theory* argues that meanings, the mind, and the social world are shaped by the structure of language. They call attention to the influence of the use of **binary oppositions** in language structures, where one thing is understood by comparing it to its binary opposite: bad-good, female-male, life-death, us-them (Layton, 2006). The structuralists believe that human cognition favors the simplicity of binary conceptualizations. In contrast, *poststructuralist theorists* believe that language cannot constrain people. Derrida (1998) proposes that language is disorderly and unstable, taking on different meaning in different contexts. Consistent with poststructuralist theory, scholars in the Global South argue that language has been colonized and represents the interests of cultural elites in the Global North. They contend that

language is embedded in economic, political, and cultural systems; is never neutral; is often alienating and oppressive; and is resisted (Deumert, 2021; Rudwick & Makoni, 2021; Useem, 2020). Deumert (2021) argues that language can be used to imagine alternative futures, that “language is key to political freedom and liberation” (p. 109).

Poststructuralist theorists also challenge the structuralist contention that binary opposition is an essential characteristic of social reality. They propose that in the West reality has been constructed through linguistic binaries, with one element in the binary structure always viewed as inferior to the other. Binary opposition is an example of how language produces social hierarchy. Binary oppositions are used by people with power to reinforce the existing power structure and preserve their own status. In this way, poststructuralism is consistent with the critical perspective. Poststructuralists also argue that binary opposition is an oversimplification of social reality and masks the complexity of social life and human behavior.

In the poststructuralist tradition, *queer theory*, one of the most influential social theories of the past two decades, proposes that sexuality and gender are linguistic creations rather than natural realities (Piontek, 2006). They are constructed, experienced, and performed in language. Queer theory pushes for a move away from the binary male/female, homosexual/heterosexual binaries, arguing that sexuality and gender are not fixed and stable and do not determine who we are. They are social constructions that create power and inequality, but they are fluid and always open to transformation. Butler (2004) argues that linguistic binaries of sexuality and gender overlook the many identities that are constructed through mixing and remixing linguistic binary categories. Although queer theory focuses on the social construction of sexuality and gender, theorists in this tradition challenge all categories of socially constructed identities and the hierarchies built on them. Queer theory proposes that no area of social life is immune from the influence of sexuality and gender; therefore, queer theory is not just a theory of sexuality and gender but a theory of social life.

Both neuroscience research and cognitive psychology research (see Kahneman, 2011; Sapolsky, 2017) indicate that categorizing and identity building are an inherent part of human cognition, but the importance of queer theory is that it reminds us of the critical role that culture and power relations play in shaping these cognitions.

Postmodern theories, like closely related poststructuralism, are skeptical of theoretical explanations that claim to be valid for all groups and all cultures and call attention to the multiple social realities created by culture and other social systems. Two adaptations of postmodern theory are discussed here: standpoint theory and affect theory. *Standpoint theory* argues that what people know and believe is shaped by where they “stand” in society, their geographies, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, races, genders, and so on. No two people have exactly the same standpoint and we must recognize our own standpoints, be reflective about them, and be curious and open to learn about the unique standpoints of others. At the core of standpoint theory is the belief that not all standpoints are equally valued and that marginalized people must live with a *bifurcation of consciousness* (from one’s own perspective as well as the perspective of dominant standpoints) while dominant group members often enjoy the privilege of remaining oblivious to nondominant standpoints. Like poststructuralism, standpoint theory is a blend of the social constructionist and critical perspectives. It was first developed as feminist standpoint theory, but Dorothy Smith (2005) began to focus not only on gender but also on the exclusion

and oppression of other standpoints, such as those based on class, race, sexual orientation, and able-bodiedness.

Affect theory is a significant departure from other postmodern theory because it calls attention to the independent role that biology and matter play in the construction of reality (see Blackman & Venn, 2010). It calls for breaking down the artificial boundaries between the natural and social sciences, noting that both biology and social processes play important roles in creating human reality. In affect theory, *affect* refers to a nonconscious, automatic form of emotion. Emotion is what happens to affect once it undergoes the social processes that make it conscious. Affect theorists are interested in the way that human bodies affect each other as they interact, calling attention to a process of *entrainment* identified by neurologists—a process in which the nervous and hormonal systems of interacting people are brought into alignment (Brennan, 2004). Some psychodynamically oriented social workers have written about how the disembodiment involved in remote communications during COVID-19 interfered with the process of entrainment (Hershberg & Sandmeyer, 2021). Like the ANT discussed earlier as a systems theory, affect theory takes seriously the important role of nature and other nonhuman elements in human behavior.

Critical Analysis of the Social Constructionist Perspective

In terms of *coherence and conceptual clarity*, social constructionism, both the original phenomenological and symbolic interactional concepts as well as the contemporary poststructuralist and postmodern conceptualizations, is often criticized as vague and unclear. And, yet, the rapid diffusion of the concept of social construction across academic disciplines and its popular use outside of academic settings suggest that it is intelligible to both scholars and the general public. Over the past few decades, a great diversity of theorizing has been done within this broad theoretical perspective, and there is much fragmentation of ideas. In recent theorizing, social theorists in the critical and social constructionist perspectives have borrowed ideas from each other and blurred the boundaries between these two perspectives. There is inconsistency among the various streams of the constructionist perspective about how constraining history and social structures are on human interaction and how free humans are to reconstruct their social interactions.

Considering *testability and empirical support*, the social constructionist perspective has made a great contribution to scientific inquiry by calling attention to the limitations of positivist research methods to explain all of human behavior and for pointing out the possibilities for bias in those research methods. Social constructionists propose alternative research methodology that focuses more on narrative and storytelling. Social constructionism has stimulated a trend in the behavioral sciences to use a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to accommodate both objective and subjective reality. This is providing a richer picture of human behavior. Affect theory, the newest theory discussed here, has incorporated findings from the natural sciences, and many ideas of the theory are well supported by empirical research.

Looking at the range of theories in the social constructionist perspective, it gets relatively high marks in *comprehensiveness*. Until the development of affect theory, social constructionism had paid little attention to the role of biology in human behavior. In some versions of social constructionism, cognitive processes are central, and the social construction of emotions is considered in others. With the emphasis on meaning making, social constructionism is open to the

role of religion and spirituality in human behavior. With its emphasis on social interaction, the social constructionist perspective is strong in attention to the social environment. Unlike earlier social constructionist theories, poststructural theories, queer theory, and standpoint theory call attention to the macro world of social institutions and social structure. Time, and the role of history, is respected in the social constructionist perspective, with many authors drawing attention to the historical era in which behavior is constructed.

Recent versions of the constructionist perspective have much to offer for understanding *anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion*. The emphasis on multiple social realities is useful for considering the diverse variations in human behavior. Critical race theories consider the history of the social construction of race and its relationship to contemporary racism. Poststructuralism, queer theory, and standpoint theory are strong in their understanding of the processes of social exclusion and inclusion, particularly in the use of language to build hierarchies and social exclusion.

Although the social constructionist perspective does not provide direct guidelines for intervention, the perspective does have *usefulness for social work practice*. In the social constructionist perspective, the social work relationship begins with developing an understanding of the meaning the client—individual, family, small group, community, or organization—makes of the situation and how that meaning has been developed in social interactions over time. It is highly relevant for engagement and assessment, but it is also useful for social work intervention. The social construction of meaning and identity can be interrogated to inform such interventions as cognitive behavioral therapy, narrative therapy, and solution-focused therapy. The perspective suggests that a goal of practice is to help clients see more realities in their story lines, with other possible interpretations of events. The social constructionist thesis that self, meaning, and reality are constantly reconstructed and even transformed through social interaction makes it a particularly useful approach for work with families, small groups, communities, and organizations. Poststructuralism and queer theory are useful for encouraging both social worker and client to think critically about prominent social categories, particularly linguistic binary categories. At the level of families, groups, communities, and organizations, the social constructionist perspective recommends engaging discordant groups in sincere discussion of their disparate constructions of reality and to negotiate lines of action. This is the goal of restorative justice projects.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS 2.2

What do theories in the critical perspective add to your understanding of the story of Mariana Rodriguez and her family? Do you think it helps to think about the family in this way? Why or why not? Do you think it helps to think about events like COVID-19 in this way? Why or why not? How does the social constructionist perspective help you to think about the great division that occurred in meaning making about COVID-19 safety guidelines and vaccinations—a divide that occurred in local communities, the nation, and around the world? What influenced the meaning you made of safety guidelines and vaccinations?

Psychodynamic Perspective

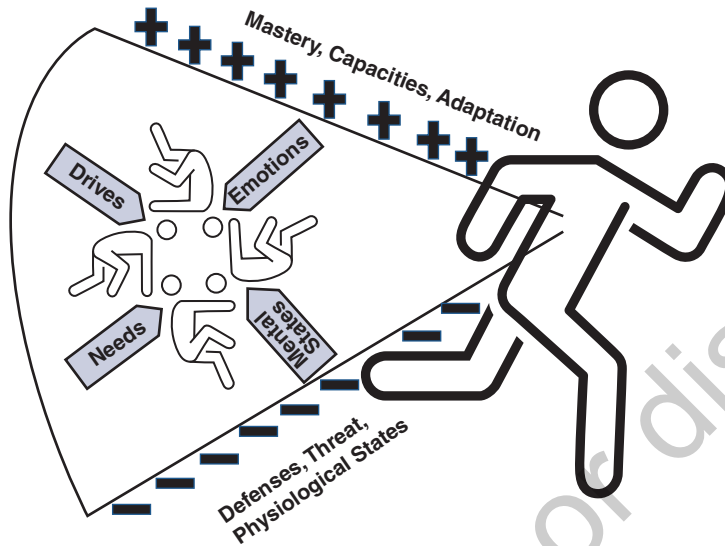
Mariana Rodriguez and her family faced a highly stressful situation involving a novel viral pandemic. Like most families during the pandemic, they needed to quickly make many adaptations to their daily routines, and they faced changes in their physical and social environments. They faced financial hardship and the loss of husband and father roles in their family system while also worrying about their personal safety. Their lives were impacted by environmental forces as well as by biological and psychological forces. It appears Mariana and her children were motivated by survival and adaptation instincts as well as a strong drive to maintain their attachment relationships with each other. Each member of the family developed new capacities as they adjusted to life without Daniel. We take note of Mariana's physiological symptoms of anxiety when she returns to work and consider how she feels unsafe in that setting. We might wonder about the defense mechanisms used by each family member to cope with Daniel's death and the anxieties stirred by the loss of such an important attachment figure. In the grief support group, Mariana became aware of guilt she had carried about her grandmother's death, something she had never given conscious thought to before. These are some of the observations that come to mind when we think of Mariana Rodriguez and her family from a psychodynamic perspective.

The **psychodynamic perspective** focuses on how internal processes such as needs, drives, emotions, and mental states motivate human behavior. The perspective has evolved over the years, moving from the classical psychodynamic emphasis on innate drives and unconscious processes toward greater emphasis on the adaptive capacities of individuals and their interactions with the environment. The origins of all psychodynamic theories are in the work of Sigmund Freud. More recent formulations of the perspective include ego psychology, object relations theories, self psychology, and relational and intersubjective theories. Figure 2.4 presents a visual representation of the psychodynamic perspective, and Table 2.1 lists the important principles, major concepts, and related theories of the perspective.

To trace the evolution of the psychodynamic perspective, it is essential to begin with its Freudian roots. Sigmund Freud proposed that human behavior is driven by strong biological instinctual forces that operate largely outside of awareness. Freud looked at the human personality from a number of interrelated points of view; the most notable are his drive or instinct theory, topographical theory, structural theory, and psychosexual stage theory. Freud revised each of these approaches to understanding human personality over time, and different followers of Freud have attended to different aspects of his theoretical works, further revising each of them over time.

- *Drive or instinct theory.* This theory proposes that human behavior is motivated by two basic instincts: *thanatos*, the drive for aggression or destruction, and *eros*, the drive for life (through sexual gratification).
- *Topographical theory of the mind.* Topographical theory proposes three states of mind: *conscious* mental activities of which we are fully aware; *preconscious* thoughts and feelings that can be easily brought to mind; and *unconscious* thoughts, feelings, and desires of which we are not aware but which have a powerful influence on our behavior.

FIGURE 2.4 ■ Psychodynamic Perspective



- *Structural model of the mind.* This model proposes that personality is structured around three parts: the *id*, which is unconscious and strives for satisfaction of basic instincts; the *superego*, which is made up of conscience and ideals and is the censor of the *id*; and the *ego*, which is the rational part of personality that mediates between the *id* and the *superego*.
- *Psychosexual stage theory.* This theory proposes a five-stage model of child development, based on sexual instincts. Freud emphasized the importance of childhood experiences on personality development.

Let's turn now to some of the roads the psychodynamic perspective has taken from its Freudian roots. *Ego psychology* focuses on unfolding human capacities as individuals interact with social and physical environments (Schamess & Shilkret, 2022). Ego psychologists see a bigger influence of external forces on human behavior than proposed by Freud. Although they see a large contribution of conscious activity to human behavior, they emphasize the ego's use of unconscious defense mechanisms to keep intolerable threats from conscious awareness. White (1959) proposes that humans are driven as much by an instinct for mastery as by sexual and aggression instincts. *Control-mastery theory* suggests that adaptation and survival instincts are the primary motivations for human behavior (Silberschatz, 2005). Erik Erikson, who will be discussed in the section on the developmental perspective, is considered an ego psychologist.

Object relations theories study the relationships and interactions individuals have with other people (objects) and are particularly concerned with the mental representations of *the self* and *the other* that are developed from these relationships and interactions (Flanagan, 2022a). More specifically, they are interested in how others become a part of the self. In object relations theories, attachment relationships with others are absolute human needs (Bowlby, 1969).

Some object relations theorists stress the need for humans to balance attachment to others with the ability to be separate (Winnicott, 1958, 1960). Object relations theorists are interested in the defenses used to cope with anxieties that arise in relationships.

Self psychology focuses on the kinds of life experiences that contribute to a mature self (Flanagan, 2022b). Heinz Kohut (1978) proposed a *tripolar self* who must have three needs met to develop a healthy, cohesive self. First, the grandiose self needs to be validated and made to feel special. Second, the developing self needs to have a strong admirable person whom they can idealize and with whom they can merge and feel safe. Third, the developing self needs to feel that there are others who are similar to oneself, a need that Kohut called twinship. Kohut (1978) was interested in disorders of the self that develop when these needs are not met, disorders such as the understimulated self, the overstimulated self, the fragmented self, and the overburdened self.

Relational and intersubjective theories propose that the basic human drive is for relationships with others. The self is understood to develop and mature through emotional connectedness in mutually empathic relationships. Human connectedness is emphasized, human diversity acknowledged, and human difference is normalized rather than pathologized (Berzoff, 2022). Influenced by postmodern and queer theories, relational and intersubjective theories see the self as fluid, multiple, discontinuous, and influenced by language—rather than as fixed and singular as in self psychology. Multiple selves are sometimes harmonious but often are not.

Recently, social workers who practice from a psychodynamic perspective have taken a critical eye to issues of diversity, race, and racism. Berzoff et al. (2022) recommend that an intersectionality lens should be used to recognize the great diversity represented in social work practice situations. Malamed (2021, p. 149) argues that “racism is a pathology that resides in White people . . . borne of Whites’ narcissistic fragility.” This analysis is usually put in the context of Melanie Klein’s theory of “splitting” as an object relations defense mechanism (see Rasmussen & Garran, 2022; Woods, 2020). Splitting is “the process by which the good and bad or positive and negative aspects of the self and others are experienced as separate or kept apart” (Flanagan, 2022b, p. 111). Hershberg and Sandmeyer (2021, p. 439) suggest that in the United States African Americans are stamped as “the devalued others.” Woods (2020) suggests that white people often engage in a radical splitting of the idealized self from degraded others and that issues of race can prompt such severe anxiety in white people as to block the capacity to think. Malamed (2021) proposes that white people project their fears and forbidden desires on to people of color and argues that psychotherapy with white people must interrogate the meaning of whiteness and challenge the ethic of white supremacy. Malamed further argues that awareness of social justice issues is necessary for emotional maturation in white people. Self psychologist Walls (2006) proposes that the constant othering and exclusion of people of color and other marginalized groups denies their need to be validated, and such ongoing invalidation requires a double consciousness that views “oneself through the eyes of one’s oppressor” (p. 131).

From the early Freudian roots, the psychodynamic perspective was embodied (Hershberg & Sandmeyer, 2021). Freud was a neurologist who saw biological instinctual forces as the primary motivators of human behavior. Freud recognized the reciprocal relationship between body and mind, but he did not have the tools to study the biological mechanisms involved with cognition and emotion, tools later developed by neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists. Recent

research in these fields is giving credence to some of the inclinations of both Freudian and neo-Freudian theory while filling in the gaps related to biological mechanisms. Here are some examples of that research. (Cognition and emotion are covered in more detail in Chapter 4.)

First, both neuroscience and cognitive psychology research suggest that Freud was correct to propose that much of human behavior is based on unconscious emotional and cognitive processes. The limbic systems are central to the emotions that fuel behavior (Rolls, 2019). The limbic systems indirectly regulate autonomic bodily functioning and hormone release, and autonomic and hormonal conditions feed back to the brain to influence behavior, mostly unconsciously. Much research of the limbic systems has focused on the amygdala, two almond-shaped clusters of neurons that serve to rapidly appraise stimuli and mobilize responses to stress. It is the brain region involved in feeling afraid and anxious, and the region most involved in generating aggression (Hoban et al., 2018). As any warning system should, the amygdala works so fast that it responds in advance of a conscious awareness of danger. Research by cognitive psychologists indicates that much of human behavior is based on activity that is outside of awareness; although they do not use this language, it appears that they are suggesting both pre-conscious and unconscious activity (Bursell & Olsson, 2021; Kahneman, 2011).

Second, ego psychologists were correct to recognize the role of both unconscious and conscious processes and both emotion and cognition in human behavior. Neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky (2017) argues that the distinction between thought and feeling is a false dichotomy. The cortex is the “gleaming, logical, analytical crown jewel” of the brain (p. 28). Most sensory information flows into there to be decoded, but some sensory information takes a shortcut, bypassing the cortex and going straight to the amygdala. Lots of axonal projections connect the cortex with the amygdala, and the limbic systems and cortex stimulate as well as inhibit each other. They collaborate and coordinate, and they also bicker and undermine each other. This sounds very much like what Freud meant by ego. Emotions filter what gets remembered. When the amygdala wants to mobilize behavior, it seeks approval from the frontal cortex, which is the site of working memory, executive functioning (which includes organizing thoughts and actions, prioritizing tasks, and making decisions), emotion regulation, and impulse control. However, if the amygdala is sufficiently aroused by fear, it produces a faster but less accurate response by bypassing the frontal cortex. It is situations like this, when the amygdala is hijacked by fear, that a cell phone may be seen as a gun. Sapolsky (2017) calls the frontal part of the cortex the superego of the brain.

Third, neuroscientists identify the neurotransmitter dopamine as central to understanding reward, pleasure, and particularly the pursuit of pleasure (Speranza et al., 2021). It may be implicated in behaviors that some psychodynamic theorists have thought of as id activity.

Fourth, the psychodynamic approach is correct in asserting that early childhood experiences play an important role in behavior across the life course. There is strong evidence from several disciplines that early life experiences shape the structure and functions of the brain in ways that influence behavior throughout the life course. One example is the intersection of research on neurobiology, attachment, and trauma (see Shapiro, 2022).

Fifth, proponents of the emerging polyvagal theory are investigating how physiological states are associated with stress reactions (see R. Bailey et al., 2020; Kolacz et al., 2019; Porges & Porges, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2018). Polyvagal theory proposes that for survival, humans

need to feel safe and safely connected to others. The theory identifies three distinct neural platforms in the autonomic nervous system (ANS) that are involved in the perception of threat and safety: the sympathetic system and two branches of the vagus nerve in the parasympathetic system. When faced with perceived threat, the sympathetic system responds with fight or flight, the dorsal vagal responds by freezing and conserving resources, and the ventral vagal responds by self-soothing and seeking connection with others. Polyvagal theory proposes that neuroception, a neurophysiological response that does not involve cognitive processing, plays a central role in the ANS's ability to assess danger in the environment. Research on polyvagal theory is in the early stages, and recent research focuses on the biological mechanisms that connect traumatic stress to both gastrointestinal and psychiatric disorders (Kolacz et al., 2019).

Critical Analysis of the Psychodynamic Perspective

In terms of *coherence and conceptual clarity*, Freud's original concepts and propositions were not entirely consistent; they evolved over time. Ego psychology, object relations, self psychology, and relational and intersubjective theorists strengthened the logical consistency of the psychodynamic perspective by expanding and clarifying definitions of major concepts. The different strains of the perspective put different emphases on conscious and unconscious activity and internal versus external influences on motivation. Theories in the psychodynamic perspective are sometimes criticized for the vague and abstract nature of their concepts but perhaps no more than most other theoretical perspectives.

Considering *testability and empirical support*, much empirical work has been based on the psychodynamic perspective, and research in other disciplines provides support for some of the propositions of the perspective. Recent long-term longitudinal studies support the importance of childhood experiences but also indicate that personality continues to develop throughout life. There is growing evidence of the supremely important role that attachment plays in shaping development over the life course. Neuroscience research is indicating the important role of emotion in human behavior, explicating the brain mechanisms involved in emotion and suggesting that both genetics and life experiences shape the emotional brain (Davidson & Begley, 2012). Early life experiences are important in this process, but the brain is "plastic" and can be changed by ongoing life experiences and mental activity.

In terms of *comprehensiveness*, early psychodynamic theories were primarily concerned with internal psychological processes. Freud assumed that biology determines behavior, and recent psychodynamic theorists have incorporated new developments in neurological sciences into their formulations (see, e.g., Berzoff et al., 2022). With the exception of Carl Jung, early psychodynamic theorists were not interested in the spiritual aspects of human behavior, but some psychodynamically oriented clinicians have made attempts to include an examination of spirituality and religion in psychodynamic clinical practice (see Nagai, 2007; Shafranske, 2009). As for environments, close personal relationships play an important role in most post-Freudian theorizing, but the economic, political, and historical environments of human behavior receive little attention. As for time, the early focus of the psychodynamic perspective was on how people change across childhood. Theories in the psychodynamic perspective continue to pay little attention to time in human behavior.

Until recently, psychodynamic theorists and clinicians paid little attention to issues of *anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion*. Human diversity is a major theme in relational and intersubjectivity theories, and as noted, psychodynamically oriented social workers have recently been drawing on concepts from object relations theories and self psychology to write about anti-racist social work practice. This is an important contribution to psychodynamic theorizing.

For the most part, theories in the psychodynamic perspective developed as clinical theory and the perspective is strong in *usefulness for social work practice* in clinical practice with individuals, families, and groups. In general, however, the psychodynamic perspective does not suggest practice principles at the level of communities, organizations, and social institutions. In clinical practice, theoretical concepts can be used for engagement, assessment, intervention, and practice evaluation. Practice principles common to all versions of the psychodynamic perspective include the centrality of the professional–client relationship, the curative value of expressing emotional conflicts and understanding past events, and the goals of self-awareness and self-control. Several research projects have found psychodynamic psychotherapy to be effective and the benefits of such therapy to increase with time (see Shedler, 2010). Supported by recent neuroscience research, the psychodynamic perspective reminds social workers that many emotions and cognitions happen at the unconscious, automatic level and are not easily accessed for conscious exploration. This is especially true of traumatic memories. As psychodynamic theorists embrace neuroscience research, the perspective continues to be useful for understanding how trauma is stored and processed (Basham, 2022). Given our commitment to evidence-based practice, social workers should be aware of empirical evidence of the potential benefits of a number of adjunct non-talking, somatic interventions for trauma-related mental health disorders, including eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR; Fereidouni et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2018), neurofeedback (Reiss et al., 2019; van der Kolk et al., 2016), and yoga (Reinhardt et al., 2018). One systematic review of the efficacy of creative arts therapies for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) found that art therapy and music therapy may have potential for reducing the symptoms of PTSD (Baker et al., 2018). Polyvagal theory is being used to develop both biological and interpersonal interventions to stimulate and improve functioning in the vagus nerve (see R. Bailey et al., 2020). Such interventions include electrical stimulation of the vagus nerve (Yagi et al., 2020), yoga (Sullivan et al., 2018), and group therapy (Flores & Porges, 2017). Mindfulness meditation has been found to build better connections between the amygdala and prefrontal cortex (see Davidson & Begley, 2012) and to improve stress reactivity and anxiety symptoms associated with anxiety disorders (Blum et al., 2021). Not all of these intervention methods are used by social workers, but social workers can work collaboratively with practitioners who are trained in them.

Developmental Perspective

Another way to think about Mariana Rodriguez and her family is to view their situation in terms of life stages, the developmental tasks they face, and their roles and statuses. In middle age, Mariana suddenly became the primary wage earner for her family. Her husband, Daniel, developed a compromising health problem when he was just at the peak of his earning power and hoping to consolidate the family finances for a comfortable old age. He became very ill and

died before he could do that. Sofia and Mateo faced disruptions in their educational and social lives at a time when identity, relationship building, and developing skills for future careers were important parts of their developmental process. Camila and Juan had their careers temporarily disrupted as they were taking on adult roles. Daniel was lost to the family at a time when they had expected he would still be there to support and guide them. These are some aspects of the story of Mariana Rodriguez and her family suggested by the developmental perspective.

The focus of the **developmental perspective** is on how human behavior unfolds across the life course, how people change and stay the same over time. Human development is seen to occur in defined stages based on a complex interaction of biological, psychological, and social processes. Each new stage involves new tasks and brings changes in social roles and statuses. A visual representation of these ideas is presented in Figure 2.5, and Table 2.1 lists the important principles, major concepts, and related theories of the perspective.

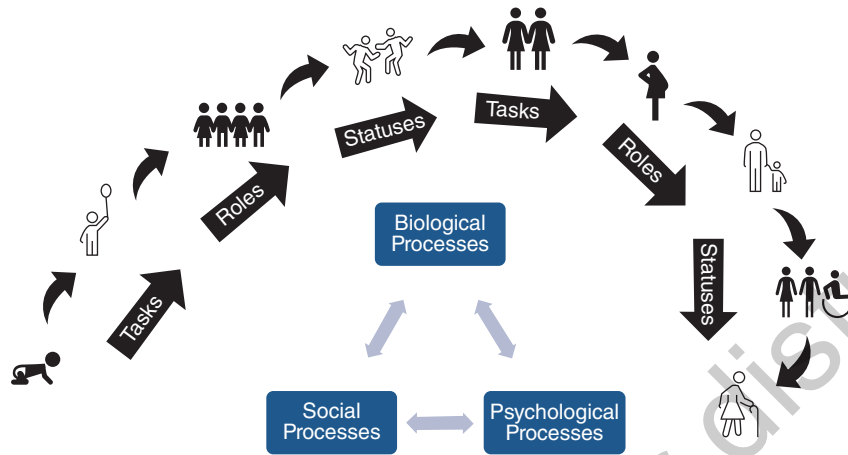
The developmental perspective is perhaps the oldest perspective discussed in this chapter. Early ideas of life stages are found in Eastern and Western religious philosophies, proposed in the Talmud and by Sanskrit scholars. A great number of developmental theories have been developed since the beginning of the 20th century, many of which focus on a specific aspect of human behavior. Freud proposed a theory of psychosexual stages, Jung a stages of life theory, Piaget a theory of cognitive stages, Erikson a theory of psychosocial stages, Kohlberg and Gilligan theories of stages of moral development, and Fowler a theory of faith stages. In addition, there are a vast number of related theories that use a developmental framework to focus on one particular developmental phase. Examples include theories of perspective taking in middle



The developmental perspective focuses on how human behavior unfolds across the life course.

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FIGURE 2.5 ■ Developmental Perspective



childhood, theories of sexual identity development in adolescence, theories of emerging adulthood, and other adult stages.

Early psychology-based developmental theories focused on the inner life at age-graded stages, but recent multidisciplinary theories have expanded the focus to put greater emphasis on the social forces involved in life stage development. Early theories looked for universal patterns in life stages, and more recent theorizing has paid more attention to diversity in life stage development.

Erikson (1963) has been the most influential developmental theorist to date because his model of life span development includes adult as well as child stages of development. Erikson (1963) proposed an **epigenetic model of human development**, in which the psychological unfolding of personality takes place in sequences influenced by biological, psychological, and social forces. Healthy development depends on the mastery of life tasks at the appropriate time in the sequence. Erikson divided the life cycle into eight stages, each with a special psychosocial crisis, basic strength, and core pathology. *Life span or life cycle theory*, based in psychology, has continued to build on the work of Erikson's psychosocial theory of development (see Newman & Newman, 2018). Although life span theorists tend to agree with the epigenetic principle, there is also growing agreement that the stages are experienced in a more flexible way than Erikson proposed, with cultural, economic, and personal circumstances leading to some differences in timing and sequencing. More stages have been added to life span theories as longevity increases in wealthy nations.

Early life span theorists, including Erikson, saw their models of development as universal, applying equally well to all groups of people. This idea has been the target of much criticism, with suggestions that the traditional models are based on the experiences of European American, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class men and do not apply as well to members of other groups. This criticism has led to a number of life cycle models for specific groups, such as women (Borysenko, 1996); gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons (e.g., Cass, 1996; Troiden, 1989;

Weinberg et al., 1994); and African Americans (Cross et al., 1991). For example, Lev (2004) proposes a six-stage model of transgender identity development:

- Stage 1: Awareness
- Stage 2: Seeking information/reaching out
- Stage 3: Disclosure to significant others
- Stage 4: Exploring identity and transition
- Stage 5: Exploration—transition issues/possible body modification
- Stage 6: Integration and pride

It is important to remember that the models noted in the previous paragraph should be placed in the historical time in which they were developed. Life span theories have been criticized for failing to deal with historical time and the cohort effects on human behavior that arise when groups of persons born in the same historical time share cultural influences and historical events at the same period in their lives.

The criticisms of life span theories for their failure to recognize diversity in life course journeys and their failure to appreciate the important role of changing historical times in human behavior have helped to stimulate the development of the multidisciplinary *life course perspective* (LCP). This relatively new perspective conceptualizes the life course as a social, rather than psychological, phenomenon that is nonetheless unique for each individual, with some common life course markers or transitions related to shared social and historical contexts. In its current state, there are six major themes in this perspective:

- Interplay of human lives and historical time. Individual and social group development must be understood in historical context.
- Timing of lives. Particular roles and behaviors are associated with particular age groups, based on biological age, psychological age, and social age.
- Linked lives. Human lives are interdependent, and the family is the primary arena for experiencing and interpreting wider historical, cultural, and social phenomena.
- Human capacity for choice making. The individual life course is constructed by the individual choices made and actions taken within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances.
- Diversity in life course trajectories. There is much diversity in life course pathways as a result of cohort variations, individual agency, social class, race, ethnicity, gender, ability and disability, and so on.
- Developmental risk and protection. Experiences with one life transition or life event have an impact on subsequent transitions and events and may either protect the life course trajectory or put it at risk.

LCP research has explored many dimensions of human diversity and their impact on life course trajectories. Although early LCP researchers focused on large-scale longitudinal research projects, recent LCP researchers have used narrative and other qualitative research methods to develop deeper understanding of diverse groups by recording their experiences in their own voices. LCP theorists have begun to modify the perspective to extend its capacity to reflect the experiences of members of marginalized groups. Two examples are critical race life course perspective (DiAquo, 2018) and feminist life course theory (Calderone et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018).

With its focus on developmental risk and protection, the LCP emphasizes how advantage and disadvantage accumulate over time. **Cumulative advantage** involves the accumulation of increasing advantage as early advantage positions an individual for later advantage. **Cumulative disadvantage** is the accumulation of increasing disadvantage as early disadvantage positions an individual for later disadvantage. The LCP proposes that social institutions and societal structures develop mechanisms that ensure increasing advantage for those with early life advantage and increasing disadvantage for those who struggle (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009). Researchers have applied the concepts of cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage to study health disparities related to class and race (Pais, 2014), financial assistance from midlife parents to adult children (Padgett & Remle, 2016), the earnings trajectories of individuals (Gabay-Egozi & Yaish, 2019), criminal career trajectories (Mowen & Brent, 2016), the victimization trajectory of transgender women (Hereth, 2021), and evolving patterns of inequality among late-life adults (Crystal et al., 2016). The life course perspective is the conceptual framework for the companion volume to this book, *Dimensions of Human Behavior: The Changing Life Course* (Hutchison & Wood Charlesworth, 2025).

Critical Analysis of the Developmental Perspective

In terms of *coherence and conceptual clarity*, classical developmental theory's notion of life stages is internally consistent and conceptually clear. Theorists have been able to build on each other's work in a coherent manner. The life course perspective has developed considerable coherence and clarity about the major concepts. Considering *testability and empirical support*, many of Erikson's ideas have been employed and verified in empirical research. Social work aspires to engage in evidence-informed practice, and the LCP was developed from empirical research and continues to be refined by ongoing research. Most of the early LCP research used large-scale longitudinal research methods, following the same people over an extended period of time. The benefit of longitudinal research is that it clarifies whether differences between age groups are based on developmental differences or whether they reflect cohort effects from living in particular cultures at particular historical times. There is a growing body of longitudinal research in the life course tradition that suggests that age-graded differences in behavior reflect both developmental factors and historical trends (see Elder & Giele, 2009). The LCP is a leading perspective driving longitudinal study of physical and mental health behaviors and outcomes. Life course researchers have recently begun to use qualitative methods of research to understand the meanings people attach to events in their lives.

The developmental perspective gets relatively high marks for *comprehensiveness*. Both the life span and the life course streams recognize human behavior as an outcome of complex interactions of biological, psychological, and social factors, although most theorists in both streams pay little attention to the spiritual dimension. The traditional life span approach pays limited attention to the political, economic, and cultural environments of human behavior, and the life course perspective pays less attention to psychological factors than the psychologically based life span approach. Both approaches attend to the dimension of time, in terms of linear time, but the life course perspective attends to time in a more comprehensive manner by emphasizing the role of historical time in human behavior. Indeed, the developmental perspective is the only one of the seven perspectives discussed here that makes time a primary focus.

As the developmental perspective evolved over time, it paid more attention to *racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion*. The early life span models were looking for universal stages of human development and did not attend to issues of diversity. More recent life span models have paid more attention to diversity, and diversity of pathways through life is a major theme in the LCP. The LCP recognizes patterns of advantage and disadvantage in life course trajectories, and life course researchers have done considerable work on the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage over the life course. LCP research on cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage shows that not all people start from the same place and reinforces the idea that anti-racist, anti-oppressive social work must focus on equity and inclusion. Critical race life course theory and feminist life course theory move the LCP to more clearly articulate issues of racism and other forms of oppression.

The developmental perspective gets relatively high marks for *usefulness for social work practice*. It is often used for assessment purposes in social work practice to evaluate biological, psychological, and social development of individuals. The LCP suggests that individuals must always be assessed within familial, cultural, social, economic, and historical contexts. The developmental perspective can also aid indirectly in the identification of potential personal and social developmental resources. Developmental research provides robust evidence that what happens throughout the life course is strongly influenced by what happens in the early years. Societal health is associated with public policies that support early development, and social workers can play an important role in promoting supportive public health and child and family policies. With its emphasis on life stories that unfold over time, the LCP is a particularly good fit with narrative approaches to practice. Narrative approaches can be used with families, small groups, communities, and organizations as well as with individuals. Overall, the developmental perspective can be viewed as optimistic. Most people face difficult transitions, life crises, and developmental or other challenges at some point, and many people have been reassured to hear that their struggle is “typical.” The developmental perspective is particularly useful for suggesting how to engage people of specific life phases, particularly children and adolescents and for indicating stage-appropriate interventions. Because the developmental perspective sees individuals as having the possibility to rework their inner experiences as well as their relationships, clients may be assisted in finding new strategies for getting their lives back on course. Life course research also has abundant implications for social policy and for practice evaluation.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS 2.3

Both the psychodynamic and developmental perspectives provide stage theories of human behavior, but they put different emphases on the importance of childhood experiences. How important do you think Mariana Rodriguez's childhood experiences are to her current situation? The psychodynamic perspective sees emotion as holding a central place in human behavior. What emotions do you experience as you read the story of Mariana Rodriguez and her family? Do you think these emotions have any relationship to your own life course experiences? Psychodynamically oriented social workers have recently used concepts from object relations theories and self psychology to think about anti-racist social work practice. What are your reactions to their analyses as discussed in this chapter?

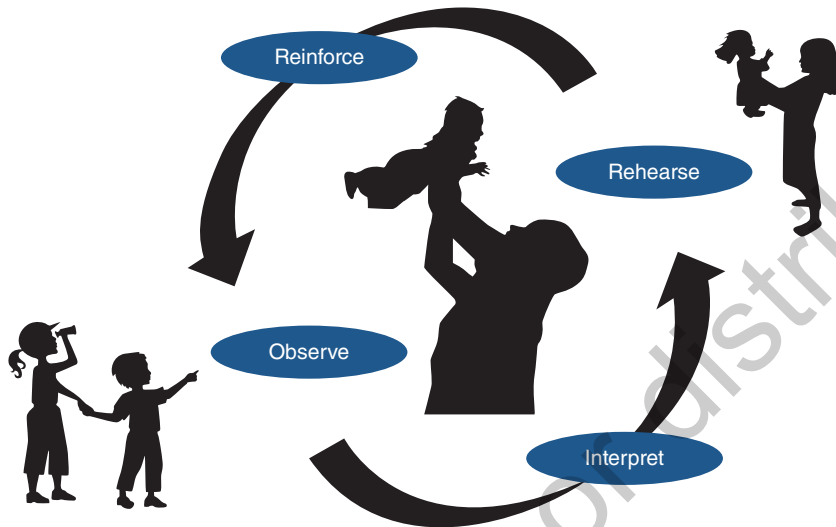
Learning Perspective

When Mariana Rodriguez returned to work after recovering from COVID-19 and burying her husband, she had physical symptoms that are associated with anxiety and panic. For the first few days back at work, she thought that these symptoms meant that she was not fully recovered from COVID-19 but upon reflection she realized that they only occurred at work and became much more severe when she was in the vicinity of a particular room. We can speculate that the symptoms were learned responses, based on an association of certain physical spaces and sensory stimuli with the COVID-19 crisis her family had recently experienced. Another way to think about what happened to Mariana when she returned to work is that her fast-thinking system of cognitive learning led to automatic responses to certain environmental cues, which she was able to override over time with awareness, introspection, and analysis. It appears that Mariana had a belief in her own personal competence to have her supervisor understand the fears she was having at work, to find support in her grief process, and to seek parish assistance to provide a collective day of mourning and celebration of community members who died with COVID-19. These are some ideas about Mariana Rodriguez's situation suggested by the learning perspective.

Theories in the **learning perspective** focus on how human behavior is learned when individuals interact with their environments. There are disagreements among the different streams of learning theory, however, about the processes by which behavior is learned. Over time, three major versions of learning theory—classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and theories of cognitive learning—have been presented, proposing different mechanisms by which learning occurs. Recent research finds that learning often involves an integration of conditioning and cognitive strategies (I.-S. Lee et al., 2021). The general themes of the learning perspective are represented visually in Figure 2.6, and Table 2.1 lists the important principles, major concepts, and related theories of the perspective.

Classical conditioning theory, also known as *respondent conditioning*, sees behavior as learned through association, when a naturally occurring stimulus (unconditioned stimulus) is paired with a neutral stimulus (conditioned stimulus). This approach is usually traced to a classic experiment by Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov, who showed, first, that dogs naturally salivate

FIGURE 2.6 ■ Learning Perspective



Classical conditioning is traced to an experiment Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov performed with dogs.

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(unconditioned response) to meat powder on the tongue (unconditioned stimulus). Then, a ringing bell (conditioned stimulus) was paired with the meat powder a number of times. Eventually, the dogs salivated (conditioned response) to the ringing of the bell (conditioned stimulus) even when it was not paired with the meat powder. In other words, an initially neutral stimulus comes to produce a particular behavioral response after it is repeatedly paired with another stimulus of significance. Biomedical research indicates that many bodily functions and bodily responses such as pain and placebo effects are affected by classical conditioning (see Babel, 2019; I.-S. Lee et al., 2021). Neuroscience research has found that fear responses in the amygdala and other parts of the brain are trained through classical conditioning (Hwang et al., 2022; Morriss et al., 2021; Sapolsky, 2017).

Research indicates that classical conditioning plays a role in understanding many problems that social work clients experience. For example, among people with substance abuse disorders, the environmental contexts routinely associated with the alcohol or other substance intake that preceded the pharmacological effects of the substance can become cues for craving and relapse (Valyear et al., 2017). These environmental contexts can include people, locations, and sensory information such as smells. Although fear is central to human survival, persistent pervasive fear interferes with human functioning. Conditioned fear responses are involved in panic disorder, phobias, social anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Lebois et al., 2019). After a traumatic experience, the body and the brain are conditioned to reexperience the traumatic situation when exposed to sights, sounds, smells, and other sensory stimuli associated with the original traumatic experience (van der Kolk, 2014). The classical conditioning approach looks for antecedents of behavior—stimuli that precede behavior—as the mechanism for learning. Classical conditioning ideas form the basis for exposure-based psychotherapy and other attempts to inhibit and extinguish pervasive fear responses. Because of research that indicates that most people experience trauma in their lifetime but only a small percentage (8–9%) experience PTSD, some researchers are studying the factors involved in individual differences in responses to classical conditioning (see M. T. Allen et al., 2019; Morriss et al., 2021).

Operant conditioning theory, also known as *instrumental conditioning*, sees behavior as learned through reinforcement. It is built on the work of two American psychologists, John B. Watson and B. F. Skinner. In operant conditioning, a behavior occurs and is reinforced by the environment; the reinforcement increases the probability that the behavior will occur again. A classic experiment demonstrated that if a pigeon is given a food pellet each time it touches a lever, over time, the pigeon learns to touch the lever to receive a food pellet. This process is known as *shaping*, a process through which gross approximations of a desired behavior are rewarded, followed by rewards for successive approximations to shape the final behavior. The operant conditioning approach looks for consequences—what comes after the behavior—as the mechanism for learning behavior. *Positive reinforcers* are positive consequences of the behavior, such as food, water, sex, or social approval. We use positive reinforcers, such as smiles or praise, to reward behaviors we find pleasing in hopes of strengthening those behaviors. *Negative reinforcers* involve the removal of an aversive consequence. For example, an adolescent cleans their room to avoid parental complaints. Avoiding the complaints reinforces the room-cleaning behavior. Operant conditioning principles are applied in therapeutic attempts to extinguish

problematic behaviors such as smoking. It is not always easy to determine which consequences are reinforcing for a particular person, and research indicates that people vary in their sensitivity to reinforcement (Cui et al., 2015).

A number of theories of cognitive learning have been proposed. We have chosen four for this discussion: Bandura's social cognitive theory, social exchange and rational choice theories, cognitive load theory, and dual process theory. Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory of learning suggests that humans have the flexibility to learn by observation, modeling, rehearsing, beliefs, and expectations. In this view, the learner is not passively manipulated by elements of the environment but can use cognitive processes to learn behaviors. Humans can observe behaviors of others and model their own behavior on what they have observed, taking into account the characteristics of the model and the consequences of the modeled behavior. Observational learning has been found to play a central role in the development of social skills and cultural knowledge. Social work skills are often developed by observing a model, and social work clients often use the social work practitioner as a model for learning new skills. Neuroscience research indicates an important role for the lateral prefrontal cortex in observational learning (Kang et al., 2021).

Bandura (1977, 1986) proposes that beliefs and expectations are driving forces for learning. He suggests that **self-efficacy** (a sense of personal competence) and **efficacy expectation** (the expectation that one can personally accomplish a goal) play an important role in motivation to learn. Bandura (2001, 2002) has extended the theory of self-efficacy to propose three models of **agency** (the capacity to intentionally make things happen): *personal agency* of the individual actor; *proxy agency*, in which people reach goals by influencing others to act on their behalf; and *collective agency*, in which people act cooperatively to reach a goal. Improvement in self-efficacy is sometimes a goal of individual and group psychotherapy (Cusack et al., 2019). Some practice situations call for social workers to act as proxy agents (advocates), and collective action is the most effective way to bring about change on a large scale.

Social exchange and *rational choice theories* integrate ideas from operant conditioning and social cognitive theory. Exchange and choice theories see human behavior as based on rational analysis of the costs and benefits (rewards and punishments) of particular actions and different relationships (Coleman, 1990; Homans, 1958). Viewed through this theoretical lens, humans are rational actors who make strategic decisions based on values, goals, expectations, and the history of reinforcements.

Two theories developed by cognitive psychologists, cognitive load theory and dual process theory, present a challenge to social exchange and rational choice theories by proposing limits to the rationality of human decision-making and learning. *Cognitive load theory* proposes three parts of memory that are used in learning and decision-making: sensory memory, long-term memory, and working memory. Sensory memory and long-term memory hold information for long periods of time for later recall. Working memory is where processing of information happens, but only a limited amount of information can be held in working memory at one time. People experience cognitive overload when the demands for decision-making exceed the capacity of working memory. Cognitive overload interferes with problem solving and learning. It has been implicated in medical errors and impasses in social policy negotiations (Harris & Santhosh, 2022; Stone, 2012).

Dual process theory proposes that there are two systems of human cognition, one system that is fast, automatic, unintentional, and operates outside awareness and another system that is slow, deliberate, analytical, and operates within awareness (Evans, 2008; Kahneman, 2011). This theory receives support from neuroscience research that finds different neural pathways for fast and slow thinking (Bursell & Olsson, 2021). In dual process theory, the fast-thinking system is known as implicit cognition. Implicit cognition is influenced by language structures and based on memories of past social experiences that are not remembered but have created automatic associations, attitudes, and stereotypes. Explicit cognition occurs in working memory and is accessible to awareness, introspection, analysis, and control (Kahneman, 2011). Implicit bias is an example of fast thinking and is an automatic, favorable, or unfavorable mental representation of people belonging to a social category. It is a social cognition operating outside of awareness, based on attitudes and stereotypes learned over time that often involve a preference for the in-group over an out-group (Banji et al., 2021). Implicit biases persist even when they are discordant with explicit biases. Implicit bias receives further attention in Chapter 8, Cultures.

Critical Analysis of the Learning Perspective

In terms of *coherence and conceptual clarity*, the learning perspective gets high marks for conceptual clarity; concepts are very clearly defined in each of the streams. Although there are disagreements about the mechanisms of learning among the various streams of the behavioral perspective, within each stream, ideas are logically developed in a consistent manner. Considering *testability and empirical support*, learning concepts are easily measured for empirical investigation because theorizing has been based, in very large part, on laboratory research. This characteristic is also a drawback of the learning perspective, however, because laboratory experiments, by design, eliminate much of the complexity of person–environment interactions. In general, however, all streams of the learning perspective have attained a high degree of empirical support.

Overall, the learning perspective sacrifices multidimensional *comprehensiveness* to gain logical consistency and testability. Little attention was paid to biology in early theorizing, but in his later work, Bandura (2001, 2002) recognized the role of biology in human behavior. Even so, biological research provides some of the best evidence for the learning perspective. Cognition and emotion are not included in theories of classical and operant conditioning, but they do receive attention in social cognitive theory. Spiritual factors are considered unmeasurable and irrelevant in classical and operant conditioning theories. Although environment plays a large role in the learning perspective, the view of the environment is quite limited in classical and operant conditioning. Operant conditioning theories search for the one environmental factor, or *contingency*, that has reinforced or has the possibility of reinforcing one specific behavior. The identified contingency is usually in the micro system (such as the family) or sometimes in the meso system (e.g., a school classroom), but these systems are not typically put in social, economic, political, or historical contexts. Bandura's cognitive social learning theory acknowledges broad systemic influences on the development of gender roles, and dual processing theory recognizes both micro and macro influences on implicit cognition. In conditioning theories, time

is important only in terms of the juxtaposition of stimuli and reinforcement. Social exchange and rational choice theories recognize the history of reinforcements, and dual process theory emphasizes the way implicit cognition is created over time.

Early theorizing in the learning perspective receives low marks for addressing *anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion*. Recent theorizing about and empirical measures for implicit bias have made an important contribution to the understanding of the persistence of racist attitudes and stereotypes as well as unfavorable implicit biases about other marginalized groups. It is important for social workers to recognize that we all have implicit biases that are created over time and operate outside of awareness, even when they conflict with newly learned explicit cognition. The best antidote to harmful implicit biases is to slow down and allow time for explicit cognition to kick in. In terms of diversity, Sapolsky (2017) suggests that conditioning theorists were often right about human behavior but were wrong in one big way: They failed to acknowledge that we are not all born the same and the same training will not produce the same results in all humans. Researchers have begun to tackle this issue with empirical investigation of individual differences in responses to classical conditioning and sensitivity to reinforcement (M. T. Allen et al., 2019; Cui et al., 2015; Morriss et al., 2021). Bandura's (2002) conceptualization of proxy agency and collective agency has implications for social reform, equity, and inclusion. Operant conditioning theory recommends rewards over punishment, but it does not account for the coercion and oppression inherent in power relationships at every system level. It is quite possible, therefore, for the professional behavior modifier to be in service to oppressive forces. On the other hand, Bandura (1986) notes that persons in nondominant positions are particularly vulnerable to **learned helplessness**, in which a person's prior experience with environmental forces has led to low self-efficacy and expectations of efficacy. Maier and Seligman (2016) analyzed the neural circuitry of learned helplessness.

A major strength of the learning perspective is the ease with which learning principles can be extrapolated for intervention, giving it high marks for *usefulness for social work practice*. Classical and operant conditioning interventions are used to extinguish or modify problematic behaviors. Parent training programs often teach parents how to make more effective use of reinforcements to strengthen positive behaviors and weaken negative behaviors in their children. Cognitive theories of learning, with their attention to beliefs, expectations, and fast and slow thinking, are useful for social work engagement and assessment. Social workers often model how to enact new behaviors for their clients. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) has been found to produce lasting favorable results for many human problems (Thomlison & Thomlison, 2017). Dual processing theory can be used to assess the implicit and explicit cognitions involved in depression and substance use disorders and to guide cognitive behavioral interventions for these situations (see Haefel et al., 2007; Keough et al., 2016; Li & Dobson, 2021). Dialectical behavior therapy involves the learning of adaptive coping related to dysregulation in emotional, interpersonal, self, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions (Cooper et al., 2022). Cognitive processing therapy, which helps clients learn skills to challenge their trauma-related beliefs and cognitive distortions, has been found to have long-term benefits for reducing symptoms of PTSD (Cooper et al., 2022; Iverson et al., 2015). Bandura's (2002) conceptualization of proxy agency and collective agency has implications for advocacy and

collective anti-racist, anti-oppressive action. The empowerment approach to practice can be used for increasing client self-efficacy (J. Lee & Hudson, 2017).

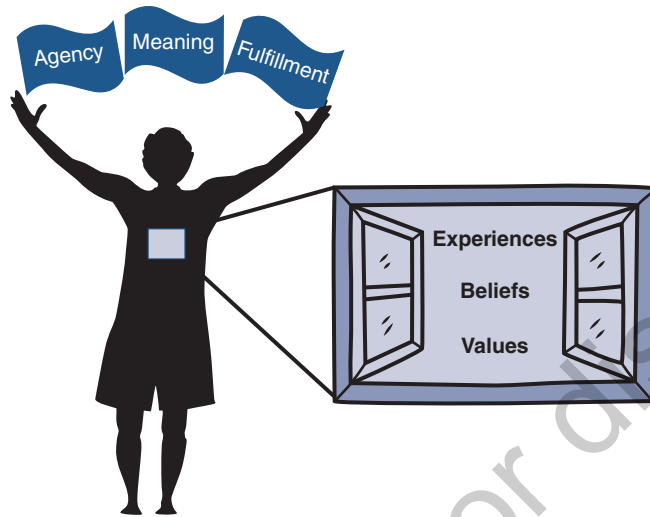
Humanistic-Existential Perspective

Like many families, Mariana Rodriguez and her family were motivated by many needs during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their basic physiological and safety needs were compromised when they tested positive for the disease. During Mariana's and Daniel's hospitalizations, the close-knit family was unable to provide each other the kind of daily love and belongingness to which they had been accustomed. However, they appreciated the compassion and support from the medical community and from their Catholic parish. The changes that needed to be made after Daniel's death were painful and frightening, but Mariana and her children found the courage, will, and perseverance to make the necessary adjustments. When Mariana experienced anxiety and panic at work, she had confidence that her supervisor would respect her version of what was happening and that they could work together to minimize the challenge. Mariana was motivated to be a strength for her family and to take the steps needed to take responsibility and accountability for her grief process. She was fortified by the positive regard and empathic listening she experienced in the grief support group and felt empowered to help create a culture of collective grief and celebration of life for her community. As she reflected on Daniel's death, she revisited conversations in which he had told her he was not afraid of death and questioned her own death fears. These are some of the ideas the humanistic-existential perspective suggests for understanding what has happened and is happening with Mariana Rodriguez and her family.

The humanistic-existential psychological perspective is often called the “third force” of psychology, because it was developed in reaction to the determinism found in early versions of both the psychodynamic (behavior as intrapsychically determined) and learning (behavior as externally determined) perspectives. It is a phenomenological approach that focuses on human conscious experiences, how the person experiences the world internally. It proposes that human behavior is best understood from the internal frame of reference of the person rather than from external evaluation. The **humanistic-existential perspective** proposes that humans have the capacity to make choices (human agency), search for meaning, and constantly strive to become the best version of themselves that they can be. This perspective asserts that each individual is unique, has worth, and should be treated with dignity. The main ideas of the humanistic-existential perspective are presented visually in Figure 2.7, and Table 2.1 lists the important principles, major concepts, and related theories of the perspective.

The most influential early contributors to humanistic psychology are Abraham Maslow (1950, 1970, 1971) and Carl Rogers (1973, 1978, 1986). Maslow proposed a *theory of motivation*. He considered motivation to be complex, both conscious and unconscious or unknown to the person. He acknowledged that some behavior is not motivated but driven by such influences as conditioned reflexes, maturation, and drugs. Maslow proposed that people are constantly motivated by one need or another and presented a **hierarchy of needs** in which higher level needs cannot emerge in full motivational force until lower needs have been at least partially

FIGURE 2.7 ■ Humanistic-Existential Perspective



satisfied. Physiological needs are at the bottom of the hierarchy, and the need for self-actualization is at the top:

- *Physiological needs:* food, water, oxygen, maintenance of bodily functions
- *Safety needs:* physical security, stability, dependency, protection
- *Love and belongingness needs:* affection, intimacy
- *Esteem needs:* self-respect, confidence, competence, reputation
- *Self-actualization:* self-fulfillment, realization of potential

Maslow (1950) was particularly interested in self-actualizing people and was critical of the emphasis on psychopathology in psychoanalytic theory. After engaging in a number of case studies, Maslow identified some characteristics that self-actualizing people possess. They can detect lack of authenticity in others; are less afraid of the unknown than other people; accept themselves, others, and nature; are spontaneous, simple, and natural; are interested in problems outside of themselves; have a purpose for living; and can find joy in solitude and privacy. Maslow is considered one of the founders of *transpersonal psychology* (discussed in Chapter 6, The Spiritual Person), which he labeled as the “fourth force” of psychology.

Rogers (1973, 1978, 1986) proposed a *person-centered theory*. Rogers believed that humans have vast internal resources for self-understanding and self-directed behavior. The person-centered theory has two basic assumptions: the formative tendency and the actualizing tendency. The *formative tendency* assumes that all matter has a tendency to evolve from simpler to more complex forms. Human consciousness evolves from a primitive unconsciousness to a highly

developed awareness, including self-awareness. The *actualizing tendency* assumes that organisms have a tendency to move toward fulfillment of their potential. Rogers thought that the actualizing tendency is not limited to humans; animals and plants also have an inherent tendency to grow toward genetic potential. Rogers also suggested that humans have a tendency to resist change, to fight against new ideas, and find change painful and frightening. However, humans are willing to learn and change when certain interpersonal conditions are met to support the actualizing tendency. The conditions that must be met are involvement with a partner who is authentic and exhibits empathy and unconditional positive regard. These are the ideal interpersonal conditions under which people come to use their internal resources to become more fully functioning. Rogers was particularly interested in the capacity of humans to change in therapeutic relationships and presented a detailed theory of client-centered psychotherapy that focused on the necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic growth (authenticity, unconditional positive regard, and empathic listening), stages of therapeutic change, and the desired outcome of a higher level of positive regard. Rogers emphasized the dignity and worth of each individual.

Existential psychological theory considers the balance between freedom and responsibility in human lives, the human search for meaning, and the uniqueness and value of each person. It posits that the human essence is the power to continually redefine oneself through the choices that are made. Personal growth results from staying in the immediate moment, and each person is responsible for who they are and become. An issue that sets existentialism apart from other versions of humanistic theory is the suggestion that suffering is a necessary part of human growth. Echoing Erich Fromm's (1947) humanistic psychoanalysis theory, Rollo May's (1967, 1981) existential psychology theory provides an example of this focus on suffering. May emphasizes the human suffering that comes from *alienation* and describes three types of alienation: losing touch with the natural world (*unwelt*), lack of meaningful interpersonal relations (*mitwelt*), and alienation from one's authentic self (*eigenwelt*). Healthy people adapt to the natural world, relate to others as fellow humans, and have self-awareness about what their experiences mean to them. May proposed that self-awareness must include an awareness of one's own mortality. Life becomes more meaningful when we confront the eventuality of our death, and fear of death often leads people to live defensively (May, 1958). The idea of fear of death is the focus of contemporary *terror management theory* (TMT) and related research. TMT proposes that human awareness of death makes humans vulnerable to terrifying death anxiety (Harvell & Nisbett, 2016).

Maslow is said to have coined the term *positive psychology* when he used it as a chapter title in his 1954 book, *Motivation and Personality*. As we know it today, *positive psychology* undertakes the scientific study of people's strengths and virtues and promotes optimal functioning of individuals and communities (Lopez et al., 2019). Martin Seligman (1998, 2002), one of the authors of the concept of learned helplessness, has been at the forefront of positive psychology, contributing the important concept of **learned optimism**, the idea that optimism, hope, and joy can be learned and cultivated. Positive psychologists focus on prevention of mental illness and other problems of living and suggest this is best accomplished by enhancing human strength and competence. They have identified a set of human strengths that promote well-being and

buffer against mental illness, including optimism, courage, hope, perseverance, honesty, a work ethic, and interpersonal skills (Lopez et al., 2019). The positive psychology approach is drawing on both Western and Eastern worldviews. A large focus on hope is rooted in Western thinking about individualism, whereas emphasis on balance, compassion, and harmony comes more from Eastern collectivist thinking. The strengths perspective and solution-focused approach to social work are rooted in positive psychology, and Kam (2021) proposes an empowerment-participation-strengths (EPS) model for social work practice.

In recent decades, the humanistic-existential perspective has received criticism on several fronts. Sociological posthumanists criticize the perspective for putting humans at the center of the world and elevating the importance of humans over nature and other nonhuman elements. The perspective has also been criticized for its individualistic nature, suggesting that it is not a good fit for non-Western communal cultures. Another criticism is that the perspective ignores the role of oppressive social structures in human consciousness and behavior and has been used to make decisions about who is worthy of being called human.

Currently, we are seeing a resurgence of the humanistic-existential perspective in a more radical, critical form known as *critical humanism* (Plummer, 2021). Critical humanism focuses attention on the suffering and power imbalances in the world and calls for acknowledgment of the suffering and active work to develop solutions to alleviate it. It emphasizes the need to work toward reducing and repairing suffering and alienation caused by all types of dehumanization, exploitation, domination, and oppression embedded in contemporary social life. It is interested in building connections to the earth and all of the human and nonhuman beings that occupy it. The approach to consciousness in critical humanism draws on Freire's (1970) theory of *critical consciousness*, which is the ability to recognize and analyze economic, political, and social systems of inequality and to commit to taking actions against these systems (see Bañales et al., 2019; Conlin et al., 2021; Zaidi et al., 2017). Critical humanists disapprove of diagnostic psychological labels and categories that create a "medicalization of injustice" (Saleem et al., 2021).

In the discussion of the critical perspective, we noted that some theorists in the Global South are creating new theories out of the synthesis of Indigenous knowledge and theories from the Global North. Here is an example of that synthesis. Robert Chigangaidze (2021a, 2021b) proposes a synthesis of African Ubuntu philosophy and the humanistic-existential theoretical perspective and recommends the ubuntuification of social work. *Ubuntuism* is

an African philosophical framework that is characterized by interconnectedness of all things and beings; the spiritual nature of people; their collective/individual identity and the collective/inclusive nature of family structure; oneness of mind, body, and spirit; and the value of interpersonal relationships. (Chigangaidze et al., 2022, p. 320)

Ubuntu originated with the Bantu people of South Africa and is known by different names across the continent of Africa. It is rooted in the sayings, "I am a person because you are, I am because I share and participate" and "I am because of others" (Chigangaidze, 2021a, p. 148; Chigangaidze et al., 2022, p. 320). Chigangaidze (2021a) identifies the following concepts as crucial to the synthesis of ubuntuism and the humanistic-existential perspective: self-awareness, self-determination, human dignity, connectedness and wholeness of life, pursuit of social justice

and human rights, motivation, social inclusion and social cohesion, spirituality, and death as an inevitable reality.

Critical Analysis of the Humanistic-Existential Perspective

In terms of *coherence and conceptual clarity*, theories in the humanistic perspective are often criticized for being vague and highly abstract, with concepts such as uniqueness, personal freedom, self-actualization, and phenomenological experiences. The same evaluation can be made of many concepts from the emerging critical humanism with the exception of critical consciousness, which is clearly and consistently stated. However, Rogers's person-centered theory and recent positive psychology approaches are clear and coherent. Theorists in the humanistic-existential perspective, in general, have not been afraid to sacrifice coherence to gain what they see as a more complete understanding of human behavior. Over time, theorists have worked to refine and clarify the major concepts.

In terms of *testability and empirical support*, concepts from the humanistic-existential perspective can be rated average for generating research. Self-actualization continues to be a popular concept to research (see Kaufman, 2020; Krems et al., 2017; Ortiz, 2020). Rogers began a rigorous program of empirical investigation of the therapeutic process, and such research has provided strong empirical support for his conceptualization of the necessary conditions for the therapeutic relationship: unconditional positive regard, empathic listening, and authenticity (see Lynch et al., 2019; Ryan & Ryan, 2019; Smith et al., 2021). A scale has been developed for measuring critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2020). The positive psychology movement is focusing on producing empirical support for the role of human strengths and virtues in human well-being (see Chaves et al., 2017; Singh, 2016). Some researchers have suggested that neuroscience research is calling the notion of free will (human agency) into question, arguing that it provides clear evidence that human behavior is determined by the gene–environment interactions that shape the brain (Kurzweil, 2012). Other neuroscientists provide evidence that humans have the power to “live our lives and train our brains” in ways that shift emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (Davidson & Begley, 2012, p. 225). That is a high endorsement for some of the tenets of the humanistic-existential perspective.

The humanistic-existential perspective is low to moderate in *comprehensiveness*. The internal life of the individual is the focus of the classical humanistic-existential perspective, and it is strong in consideration of both psychological and spiritual dimensions of the person. It makes important contributions by its approach to motivation and by introducing the meaning of death to the understanding of human behavior. With its emphasis on a search for meaning, the humanistic perspective is the only perspective presented in this chapter to explicitly recognize the role of spirituality in human behavior. In addition, Maslow recognizes the importance of satisfaction of basic biological needs. Early humanistic-existential theorists noted the importance of relationships with other people and relationships with nature, and these ideas have become more prominent in critical humanism. Critical humanism is concerned with large-scale systems of dehumanization and oppression. The positive psychology movement has begun to examine positive environments that can promote human strengths and virtues, including school, work, and community environments (Lopez et al., 2019).

Although the classical humanistic-existential perspective was concerned about dehumanization, it receives low marks for direct attention to *anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion*. However, the client-centered approach to intervention promotes the dignity and worth of all and gives value to the lived experiences of all, including members of oppressed and marginalized groups. The focus on alienation provides tools for considering the impact of racism and other forms of oppression on individuals, communities, and societies. In recent years, the humanistic-existential perspective has been used to understand diversity. Here are two examples. Positive psychology has been promoted as a helpful way to understand Islamic psychology and Muslim well-being (Pasha-Zaidi, 2021). Ortiz (2020) analyzes how self-actualization should be understood in collectivistic cultures, achieved through relationships and the honoring of collective values.

The humanistic-existential perspective gets high marks for *usefulness for social work practice*. It was developed by psychotherapy practitioners and is being revised by critical humanists devoted to the advancement of human rights and promotion of justice. The *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* of the Council on Social Work Education (2022) includes language that is consistent with the humanistic-existential perspective: “Social workers value the importance of human relationships . . . use empathy, reflection, and interpersonal skills . . . demonstrate respect for client self-determination” (p. 11) and “engage in practices that advance human rights to promote social, racial, economic, and environmental justice” (p. 9). The perspective provides guidelines for engaging with client groups at every level of practice—with authenticity, unconditional positive regard, and empathic listening. The perspective is strong in recommendations for engaging with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities but also useful for assessment and intervention. With its emphasis on the individual drive for growth and competence, it recommends a “strengths” rather than deficit approach to practice (see Corcoran, 2022; Saleebey, 2012). The emphasis on motivation has served as the impetus for the development of the motivational interviewing approach to practice (Corcoran, 2016; Iarussi, 2020). Appreciative inquiry is an organizational model that focuses on identifying the positives and dreams of what might be in organizations (Lewis et al., 2016). Positive psychology is popular in clinical work and proposes guidelines for developing positive environments in schools, workplaces, and communities.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS 2.4

Both theories of cognitive learning and theories in the humanistic-existential perspective emphasize the important role of *human agency*, the capacity to intentionally make things happen, in human behavior. Other theories in the learning perspective and most of the other perspectives discussed here put less emphasis on human agency. Now that you have examined seven theoretical perspectives, how much agency do you think humans have over their behavior, in general? Explain. How much agency do you think Mariana Rodriguez and her family have? Explain.

THE MERITS OF MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

You can see that each of these perspectives puts a different lens on the unfolding story of Mariana Rodriguez and her family. Although they all are seeking to understand human behavior, different aspects of behavior are emphasized. No one theory will ever tell the whole story of human behavior, but each of these perspectives tells an important partial story—a partial story that will be particularly helpful in some situations. You can also see that each of the seven perspectives has been used to guide social work practice over time. Some of the perspectives are particularly useful for suggesting how to engage with client systems, some are especially useful for assessment, some are particularly strong for suggesting social work interventions, and some can be used to guide practice evaluation. It was suggested in Chapter 1 that each situation can be examined from several perspectives and that using a variety of perspectives brings more dimensions of the situation into view. Cognitive psychologists have provided convincing evidence that all of us, whether new or experienced social workers, have biases that predispose us to do too little thinking, rather than too much, about the practice situations we confront. We are particularly prone to ignore information that is contrary to our hypotheses about situations. Consequently, we tend to end our search for understanding prematurely. One step we can take to prevent this premature closure is to think about practice situations from multiple theoretical perspectives.

We have provided an overview of seven theoretical perspectives in this chapter and discussed some of the theories related to them. In Chapters 4 through 8 and 10 through 14, you will encounter other theories related to these perspectives, theories used to understand specific dimensions of person and environment. To help you see the connections between the perspectives discussed here and theories discussed in subsequent chapters, Table 2.2 cues you to where you will find these related theories in subsequent chapters.

To be competent professionals, we must view the quest for adequate breadth and depth in our knowledge base as an ongoing, lifelong challenge and responsibility. As we worked to revise this chapter, we were challenged to rethink some of our own understanding of human behavior and we were excited and sometimes awed to see the extent to which recent events have spurred theorists, researchers, and clinicians to reevaluate the ways they have been approaching the study of human behavior. You can become an important part of this ongoing reflection and revision. With the current state of knowledge about human behavior, recognizing the ever-evolving state of such knowledge, we recommend these seven theoretical perspectives for social work engagement, assessment, intervention, and practice evaluation. Different perspectives will be more or less useful in different types of practice situations. We believe that many practice situations would benefit from using these multiple theoretical perspectives in an integrated fashion in order to see the many dimensions—the contradictions as well as consistencies—in stories like the one of Mariana Rodriguez and her family. We encourage you to be flexible and reflective in both your thinking and your doing throughout your career. We remind you, again, to use general knowledge such as that provided by theoretical perspectives only to generate hypotheses to be tested in specific situations, not as facts inherent in every situation.

TABLE 2.2 ■ Where Related Theories of Seven Theoretical Perspectives Are Found in Chapters 4–8 and 10–14

Perspective	Found in Later Chapters
Systems	<p>Chapter 4 Information processing theory, James and Lange theories of emotion; Cannon-Bard theory of emotion, personality neuroscience, the oneness hypothesis</p> <p>Chapter 5 Social network theory</p> <p>Chapter 7 Behavior settings theories, syndemic theory, theory of healing environments</p> <p>Chapter 8 Materialist perspective on culture, cultural ecology, practice orientation to culture, cultural tightness-looseness theory, gene-culture coevolutionary theory</p> <p>Chapter 10 Family systems perspective, Bowen's natural system theory, family stress perspective, contextual approach to family stress theory</p> <p>Chapter 12 Organizational ecology theory, relational perspective on organizations, resource dependence theory, social capital theory of organizations, social network theory of organizations</p> <p>Chapter 13 Ecological approach to communities, relational approach to communities, social capital and social network theories of communities</p> <p>Chapter 14 Mobilizing structures perspective on social movements</p>
Critical	<p>Chapter 5 Feminist relational theory</p> <p>Chapter 7 Critical placemaking theory, theory of just transition, tripartite theory of environmental justice</p> <p>Chapter 8 Marxist approach to culture, neo-Marxist critical theory of culture industry, colonialism theories of culture</p> <p>Chapter 10 Intersectionality perspective on families</p> <p>Chapter 11 Status characteristics and expectation states theories and groups</p> <p>Chapter 12 Demographic perspective on organizations, theory of gendered organizations, theory of racialized organizations, status characteristics and expectation states theories</p> <p>Chapter 13 Critical approach to communities, decolonizing theory, theory of urban dependency, community cultural wealth theory</p> <p>Chapter 14 Political process perspective on social movements, the intersectionality approach to social movements</p>
Social constructionist	<p>Chapter 5 Relational regulation theory</p> <p>Chapter 7 Placemaking theory</p> <p>Chapter 8 Mentalist perspective on culture, poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches to culture</p> <p>Chapter 10 Symbolic interaction perspective on families</p> <p>Chapter 11 Symbolic interaction theory and groups</p> <p>Chapter 12 Cultural perspective on organizations, national culture approach, institutional approach, organizational diversity and inclusion approach, organizational culture approach, organizational learning approach</p> <p>Chapter 13 Cultural approach to communities, theory of gemeinschaft and gesellschaft communities, great change theory, community logics approach</p> <p>Chapter 14 Cultural framing perspective on social movements</p>

(Continued)

TABLE 2.2 ■ Where Related Theories of Seven Theoretical Perspectives Are Found in Chapters 4–8 and 10–14 (Continued)

Perspective	Found in Later Chapters
Psychodynamic	Chapter 4 Emotional intelligence theory, differential emotions theory, Davidson's theory of six emotional dimensions, two-factor theory of emotion, cognitive appraisal theory of emotion, attribution framework of the emotional process, trait theories of personality, cognitive-affective theories of personality Chapter 5 Relational and intersubjective theories, attachment theory, triangular theory of love, psychoanalytic feminism, defense mechanisms Chapter 7 Theories of spatial behavior, psychophysiological stress recovery theory Chapter 11 Psychodynamic theory and groups Chapter 10 Family stress perspective, ABC-X model of family stress and coping Chapter 13 Sense of community theory, sense of community responsibility theory, sense of virtual community theory Chapter 14 The role of emotions in social movement mobilization
Developmental	Chapter 4 Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Kohlberg's and Gilligan's theories of moral development Chapter 5 Social identity theory, Erikson's psychosocial development theory Chapter 6 Fowler's stages of faith development Chapter 10 Life course perspective on families Chapter 11 Self-categorization theory and groups, stage models of group development Chapter 12 Social identity and categorization theories
Learning	Chapter 4 Piaget's theory of cognitive development, information processing framework, Bandura's social learning/social cognitive theory, multiple intelligences theory, emotional intelligence theory, Schachter-Singer two-factor theory of emotion, cognitive appraisal theory of emotion, attribution framework of the emotional process, higher-order theory of emotional consciousness, cognitive-affective theories of personality Chapter 7 Attention restoration theory Chapter 8 Mentalist perspective on culture Chapter 10 Exchange and choice perspective on families, investment model of social exchange Chapter 11 Exchange theory and groups Chapter 12 Organizational learning approach Chapter 13 Theory of popular and liberation education
Humanistic-existential	Chapter 4 Pancha Kosha theory of personality, theories of self Chapter 6 Fowler's stages of faith development, transpersonal theories Chapter 10 Family resilience perspective Chapter 13 Theory of popular and liberation education

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS 2.5

At the beginning of the chapter, we wondered what got your attention when you read the story of Mariana Rodriguez and her family. As you read about the seven theoretical perspectives, did you see any ideas that addressed the story elements that caught your attention? If so, what were they? Were there issues or ideas that caught your attention that did not seem to be addressed by any of the perspectives? If so, what were they? Which perspectives seemed more closely aligned with what caught your attention upon first reading the story? Which perspectives provided you with useful new ways to think about the story?

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The seven perspectives on human behavior discussed in this chapter suggest a variety of principles for social work assessment and intervention.

- In assessment, consider any recent system changes that may be affecting the client system. Assist families and groups in renegotiating unsatisfactory system boundaries. Develop networks of support for persons experiencing challenging life transitions.
- In assessment, consider power arrangements and forces of oppression and the alienation that emanate from them. Assist in the development of advocacy efforts to challenge patterns of dominance, when possible. Be aware of the power dynamics in your relationships with clients; when working with nonvoluntary clients, speak directly about the nature of the relationship including the limits and uses of your power.
- In assessment, consider the patterns of exchange in the social support networks of individual clients, families, and organizations, using network maps where useful. Assist individuals, families, and organizations in renegotiating unsatisfactory patterns of exchange, when possible. Recognize the role of both reason and emotion in the policymaking process.
- Begin your work by understanding how clients view their situations. Engage clients in thinking about the environments in which these constructions of self and situations have developed. When working in situations characterized by differences in belief systems, assist members in engaging in sincere discussions and in negotiating lines of action.
- Assist clients in expressing emotional conflicts and in understanding how these are related to past events, when appropriate. Help them develop self-awareness and self-control, where needed. Assist clients in locating and using needed environmental resources.

- In assessment, consider the familial, cultural, and historical contexts in the timing and experience of developmental transitions. Recognize human development as unique and lifelong.
- In assessment, consider the variety of processes by which behavior is learned. Be sensitive to the possibility of learned helplessness when clients lack motivation for change. Be aware of your own fast and slow thinking and implicit and explicit cognitions. Consider issues of social justice and fairness before engaging in behavior modification.
- Engage clients by listening to how they see their situations, what kinds of changes they would like to see, and what methods they would like to use to accomplish those changes. Be aware of the potential for significant differences between your assessment of the situation and the client's own assessment. Focus on strengths rather than pathology; recognize the possibility of learned helpfulness as well as learned helplessness.

KEY TERMS

Agency	Learned helplessness
Anthropocene	Learned optimism
Binary oppositions	Learning perspective
Critical perspective	Microaggressions
Critical race theory (CRT)	Protective factors
Cumulative advantage	Psychodynamic perspective
Cumulative disadvantage	Risk factors
Developmental perspective	Self-efficacy
Efficacy expectation	Social capital
Epigenetic model of human development	Social constructionist perspective
Feminist theories	Symbolic interaction theory
Hierarchy of needs	Systems perspective
Humanistic-existential perspective	

ACTIVE LEARNING

1. Reread the COVID-19 in the family case study (Case Study 2.1) at the beginning of the chapter and review the important principles of the seven theoretical perspectives as presented in Table 2.1. Choose three specific important principles that you think are most helpful in thinking about Mariana Rodriguez and her family. For example, you might choose this principle from the systems perspective: Each person is involved in multiple interacting systems. You might also choose this principle from the

humanistic-existential perspective: Humans have the capacity to make choices, search for meaning, and constantly strive for personal growth. Likewise, you might choose another specific principle from any of the perspectives. The point is to choose the three principles that you find most useful. Now, in a small group, compare notes with three or four classmates about which principles were chosen. Discuss why these particular choices, and not others, were made by each of your classmates.

2. Choose one of the theoretical perspectives described in this chapter. Spend 5–8 minutes thinking about how you would describe that perspective to a class of sixth graders. Prepare an outline of the presentation you would make to the sixth graders. Post your outline for your classmates to review and provide feedback.
3. Choose a current event or recent news story. Read the story carefully and then think about which of the seven theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter is most reflected in the story.

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