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The Professional Lens, Part II

Social Ecology of Human Development and Behavior

Individuals are born and live embedded in social environments made up of caregiving and threatening forces nested in the family, social network, neighborhood, broader community, and society (Bronfenbrenner, 2005a, 2005b; Germain, 1991). A person's social history evolves in this ecological context. A review of basic social systems theory will lay a foundation for subsequent discussion of how various ecological factors influence social development and behavior.

Environmental Context and Social Systems Theory

The constellation of social factors that surround an individual can be conceptualized as a social system (see Figure 3.1). Intricately complex, social systems can be described using concepts from general systems theory, which originated in biology in 1936 (Bertalanffy, 1968). Systems essentially are dynamic entities that maintain some degree of order and boundaries while perpetually changing. Elements within the system exchange resources, such as energy and information, among themselves and with the external environment. "Static" systems are resistant to change and do so slowly. "Dynamic" systems change rapidly. "Closed" systems have tight boundaries and exchange only internally, not with the external environment.

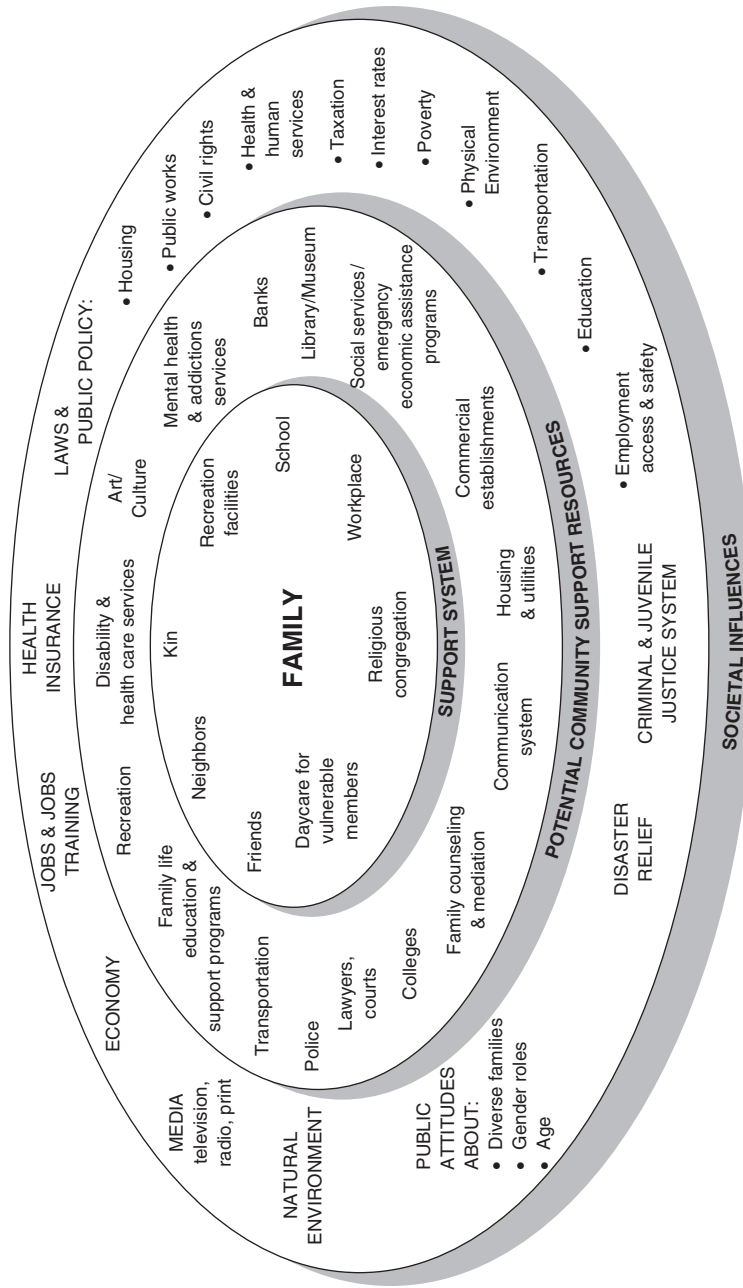


Figure 3.1 The Family in Community: An Ecological Perspective

“Open” systems exchange freely or through self-regulation with the external environment. Systems that develop rigid order and energy over time are “entropic” and those that lose energy and dissolve into chaos are “negentropic.” To survive, a system must aim for a stable balance between internal control and regulation of relations with the broader environment; the system does this through adaptation. Systems have characteristics that are greater than and different from the sum of their parts. Every part of a system affects every other part of the system; they are interdependent. Within a system, some elements are organized into subsystems. Outside the system, environments are composed of multiple, overlapping systems.

Social systems can be understood in terms of their structures and their processes (Luhmann, 1995). Describing a social system involves identifying the parts, attributing qualities to the parts and the whole system, describing how the relationships work among the parts and with the broader environment, and describing key characteristics of the broader environment.

Structurally, the parts are people, including individuals and subsystems of people as small as a couple to as large as a community or organization. Systems and their parts may possess a vast array of qualities, illustrated by such terms as *cohesive, unstable, well differentiated, enmeshed, flexible, chaotic, fragmented, or weakly bonded*. Systems theory provides a framework for describing, understanding, and acting to change the dynamic processes and structure of human relationships. The language of systems theory permeates most helping professions.

The system that exerts the most substantial influence on an individual's social history is the family, which can be defined as “an organized, interdependent system, regulated by a set of norms and rules” (Gerson, 1995, p. 91). Members of a family include those who share a household and others who live beyond it. McGoldrick, Gerson, and Shellenberger (1999) offer an encompassing definition: “Family is, by our definition, those who are tied together through their common biological, legal, cultural, and emotional history and their implied future together” (p. 7). The norms and rules guide interactions among the family members; thus the relationships tend to follow particular patterns. As the family evolves through time and its members go through life transitions and respond to interactions with the external environment, the rules change. How the family handles these transitions affects the well-being of its members.

Similarly, the influence of other social systems, such as the school, peer network, or faith community, on individual or group development can be described through systems theory. How these factors typically influence

human development and behavior will be addressed in more detail after another core concept, development, is discussed.

Family and Social Networks as Mediators of Individual Behavior

Humans' earliest and most consistent social contexts are their families, which change throughout their life course. What is learned in the family is transferred to other social contexts. Likewise, as the child develops and spends more time away from the family, what is learned in external contexts affects the family. Various family members bring to the family beliefs and behaviors they have learned in other contexts. This constant interaction of the family with external social environments places demands on the family that require family members to adapt. Given that each family member is also progressing through her or his own development, collectively the family has its own unique developmental life cycle.

Families can be understood in terms of their structures, processes, and resources. Variations in individual behavior are affected by differences in these family capacities. In addition, an individual's behavior may be influenced by the genetic inheritance from within the biological family.

Family Structure

Discussions of family conditions often center on family structure, which has always changed according to adaptations necessary for particular cultural and historical contexts. Structurally, families may include grandparents (increasingly, more than one generation of grands as people live 80 or 90 years or more), mother, father, children, step-relatives, half-siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and people related by blood or marriage (current or former). Some families, like foster and adoptive families or gay or lesbian-headed households, are connected by chosen commitments. Sometimes family members live together, sometimes in separate households. A particular family's composition changes periodically, but its basic functions are constant, as noted here:

Far from being static, families are dynamic units engaged in an intertwined process of individual and group development. They can be viewed from three different perspectives. First, a family can be seen as a biological unit whose members are linked together by blood ties; this

relationship is often institutionalized through marriage or sanctioned by an equivalent relationship and describes the kinship between mothers, fathers, and their children. Secondly, a family can be seen as a social unit consisting of a number of people, who usually live together in the same household and share different developmental tasks and social functions. Thirdly, a family can be seen as a psychological unit defined around the personal feelings and emotional bonds of its members. (United Nations, 1994, p. 1)

Families come in all shapes and sizes, but they are influenced by the social norms inherent in their immediate culture and the larger society around them. Some of the norms pertain to the authority or leadership structure of the family. For example, in “traditional” families with rigid gender roles, men relate to the outside world and women to the home. Females are subordinate to males, and men are only marginally involved in rearing young children. In authoritarian families, the patriarch takes control if women or children defy their expected roles and “step out of line.” Historically, this involved the sanctioned use of physical force, even death, to maintain order. In such societies, father absence does not mean that men are not regarded as authority figures in the family. Men who pass through a household or assume fathering roles are often accorded deference under the traditional model. Even where females assume most economic as well as social responsibilities for the family, male privilege may still prevail.

Alternatively, an egalitarian family strives for consensus among members or cooperatively delegates authority over certain matters to various members. For example, a mechanically inclined member may have control over the garage, while the one with culinary skills rules the kitchen. The less predictable circumstances in an egalitarian family require clear and open communication to prevent confusion or conflict. These families engage in routine collaborative problem solving, or carry unresolved tension.

How families organize their structure varies widely. As each family is formed, it blends the practices of the members’ families of origin; as people develop, or circumstances change, the family structure and organization also evolve. For example, when a spouse dies, someone assumes that person’s roles. When a parent leaves a household due to divorce, the other parent must adapt.

Within the family system, a healthy family has clear boundaries between its members and respect for the integrity of each person (Bowen, 1985; Minuchin, Colapinto, & Minuchin, 1998). Each person understands his or her role in the family. This is known as differentiation; in a well differentiated family, there is high tolerance for difference and

members respect one another. Children whose boundaries are violated, for example, when adults in the household abuse them sexually, often develop no clear sense of how they are distinct from others. As adults, they may easily disclose private matters to strangers and fail to see the social norms that govern privacy and integrity of individuals. Families with rigid internal boundaries, such as strict patriarchies where the father makes all decisions, can produce children who are poorly prepared to handle flexibility or to make autonomous decisions when such are expected. Thus, if a dominant peer tells them to perform an illegal act, they may feel confused about what to do and comply because it is all they know how to do. Healthy young adults differentiate themselves from their families of origin, resolve negative emotions about letting go, and maintain open and respectful relationships with their families of origin.

The family also has boundaries with regard to the external environment, including identification of who is in the family and who is not. Open families welcome people to come in as family members and are tolerant when they leave. For example, a child may have several unrelated people to call "uncle" or "stepmother" as the child's primary parent engages in serial live-in relationships. In such cases, if the needs of the child are overlooked, the child may develop no clear sense of who is in the family and how to identify him- or herself. Other families may be disengaged, with rigid boundaries for each person and limited communication among them so that each family member has an autonomous life while sharing a household or identity. At a different extreme, tightly closed families cut themselves off from the world and deprive members of normal interactions with others, thus equipping children poorly to deal with experiences outside the home if and when they do become independent. Families may be enmeshed, with strong pressure for togetherness, diffuse boundaries among individuals, and no room for privacy or independence. The variations in family functioning are infinite.

Individuals learn from their family systems and carry ways of relating into other social relationships. For example, Murray Bowen (1985) observes that adults with poor differentiation of self tend to engage in relationships outside the family that are marked by (1) conflict and high emotional reactivity (to maintain distance from others), (2) dominance (i.e., they seek to relate to people they can control) or child-like dependence (i.e., they find a parental figure who will provide the care and support they crave), and (3) projection of anxiety onto their own children (i.e., they may overindulge or treat their children harshly based on projected beliefs that the child is fragile or is oppositional). Generally, each of these relational patterns leads

to personal dysfunction and harm to others in the relationship. People from dysfunctional families have uncanny ways of finding partners to perpetuate these patterns.

Healthy families have a clear sense of who is in and who is not, and have open communication with outsiders. They balance the unity of the family with the separateness of each individual. Each person has individual identity with commitment to the family group.

Family members may form coalitions within the nuclear or the extended family system. Some are beneficial to family well-being, as when parents are together in their approach to childrearing. Others can breed harm, such as when a parent coalesces with a favored child and grants that child privileges while the rest of the family is excluded. Coalitions within the family system may develop conflicts among members.

Using a life course perspective, social norms about family structure can be seen to change over time within any particular society. For example, in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century, while family structures are extraordinarily diverse, the general trends are that young adults cohabit before marriage, birth to unmarried mothers is increasing, mothers with children (whether married, cohabiting, or without a partner) work outside the home, nearly half of all children will live with a single parent for part of their lives, the majority of adults will marry more than once, acceptance of same-sex marriage is increasing, and 42% of people over age 65 will require long-term care in their own homes or alternate placements (LTC Info, 2003). These patterns differ significantly from patterns at the turn of the 20th century, when “traditional” families—those with a biological father and mother—were the norm.

Family Processes

How a family manages life’s gifts and threats depends on the dynamics of the family system. The exchange of information, ideas, and feelings within a family is governed by rules and expectations that are unique to each family.

Froma Walsh (1998) emphasizes that a family’s fundamental beliefs about itself guide the ways members interact with one another and the outside world. She identifies several core beliefs that characterize families that manage to be resilient in the face of adversity. These include *trust*—faith in the dependability of and loyalty to one another; *coherence*—the belief that life has meaning and is manageable despite continual shifts; *respect* for individual differences and autonomy; a sense of *shared history and identity*;

positive outlook—commitment to persevere and to hope for the future; *acceptance* of things that cannot be changed; belief in *transcendence*, a greater whole beyond oneself; and *spirituality* that is dynamic and provides support.

Family processes essentially involve communication: Who communicates with whom about what, with what tone? Communication takes many forms, including those that are verbal and nonverbal, and those that are spoken, written, sung, illustrated, enacted, or otherwise transmitted. Functional families have clear communication; the sender of a message is clear, and the receiver can send feedback that the message is clearly received. Messages include rational thoughts as well as a wide range of emotions. Family members know how to share joy, sorrow, affection, anger, and a host of other feelings. Expression of negativity is tolerated. These families solve problems by collaboratively identifying the problem, exploring alternative solutions, sharing decisions about what to do, evaluating the effect of decisions, and trying again if necessary. They negotiate, compromise, reciprocate, and constructively manage conflict. They adapt constructively.

By contrast, families may have a variety of dysfunctional communication patterns. For example, children who engage in crime tend to come from homes with high turmoil, inconsistent consequences for behavior, and excessive coercion by parents (Reid, Patterson, & Snyder, 2002). These children learn to try to coerce others to get their way, the parents respond with increasing coercion, and the cycle escalates as the child becomes increasingly resistant. The family adapts in destructive ways, and stress mounts. Without help from outside resources, the family is at risk of serious problems.

What works to promote harmony in one family may not work in another. By tradition, some families are more comfortable with hierarchical decision making. Others prefer egalitarian communication. As families form, the members bring their experiences and habits from their families of origin. Together, they form a new family system with its own processes and communications norms. The extent to which these processes promote healthy and socially adaptable behavior in each family member will vary from one family to another and over time within a family.

Family Resources

To survive, families must exchange resources with the external environment. They gather resources to meet physical needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, hygiene, health care, and transportation. Healthy families distribute these resources among their members along with emotional support and

a sense of belonging over time. They take particular care of vulnerable family members, that is, those who are young, very old, or have special needs.

The key medium for resource exchange is work. During the early years, a person's work is typically in educational settings; later it is in paid or voluntary employment in exchange for money, goods, or status. School and work environments exert significant influences on family systems, and vice versa. A person's various occupations and the quality of the work environments can promote or hinder life satisfaction.

Families also exchange resources through their social networks. Social *network* refers to the structure of a person's social system, that is, the number and type of people with whom the person interacts. Social *support* pertains to functions of the system, including emotional and instrumental positive interactions such as providing a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on or giving concrete aid such as food or transportation (Haines, Beggs, & Hurlbert, 2002). The person may regard the social interaction positively, negatively, ambivalently (both positively and negatively), or benignly. Generally, positive networks of adequate size help families cope with life's demands (Coyne & Downey, 1991). Some people have large networks, but if their networks provide little positive support, these people may still struggle as if they were alone.

Families with adequate internal resources manage, with relative ease, to garner not only what they need but also what they desire from their communities. Their lives are not without problems, but they generally can overcome access barriers and benefit from high quality health care and education, fair access to justice, and other such privileges. Families who have been historically denied adequate resources or have become marginalized fare less well. They suffer the burden of disparities. Many feel politically impotent, economically oppressed, and psychologically helpless in community arenas outside the comforting circle of their own family and friends. They struggle with unemployment or poor job conditions, racial and ethnic discrimination, inferior schools, deprived child and elder care, and insufficient health and mental health care. Even when marginal groups gather strength, their more endowed neighbors tend to gather even greater strength, and the relative disparities persist. This dynamic makes for fragile and fragmented communities rather than strong, sustainable communities.

Behavioral Genetics

People inherit their genes from their biological ancestors. The ways in which people interact within their environments, including how they relate

to those with whom they share a gene pool, are complex. The next decade will bring forth major discoveries with regard to specific genetic influences on behavior, thanks to the rapid advances in the field of genetic research. On April 14, 2003, the International Human Genome Sequencing Consortium announced it had completed the sequence of the human genome (Collins, Green, Guttmacher, & Guyer, 2003). The discovery confirmed that all humans share most of their genetic composition (99.9%) and that individuals vary considerably within their unique 0.01% genetic constitution. Some of this genetic variation is shared with their biological families of origin. Research has enabled the identification of genes associated with diseases such as diabetes and schizophrenia and certain behavioral and physical traits, though the initial studies have emphasized the complexity of the etiology of various conditions and the need for much more substantial research (Bonham, Warshauer-Baker, & Collins, 2005).

Scientists agree that genetic factors are some of the many factors that help to explain human behavior but they never are the exclusive explanation (Plomin & Daniels, 1987). For example, research has demonstrated that the propensity for aggression in childhood may be heritable but its manifestation depends on environmental influences (DiLalla, 2002; Plomin, DeFries, & McClearn, 1990). Behavior patterns tend to run in families, but the extent to which they are genetically determined (i.e., based in biological functions determined by genes) or environmentally determined (i.e., based in social learning) varies from one situation to another. Genetic and environmental factors are correlated and interactive. Genetics do not determine behavior, but they can make it possible, so that under certain environmental conditions, the behavior occurs.

Thus far, research has found a genetic predisposition for behavior associated with such capacities as: cognitive reasoning (though no genetic link has been shown for memory or cognitive creativity); achievement in particular academic areas; reading disability; mental retardation; certain dementias; schizophrenia; depression; anxiety disorders; alcoholism; extraversion; and adult criminal behavior (Plomin et al., 1990). Researchers consistently state that a genetic propensity does not mean that the behavior is destined by heredity.

Parents and children tend to share their biological heredity and their environments. Therefore, in family studies, it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. Behavioral geneticists typically study twins reared apart or adopted children to differentiate effects of family environment from genetic factors.

Genograms, discussed later in this book, are an important tool for describing a person's genetic history and are an essential part of most social histories (Bernhardt & Rauch, 1993; McGoldrick et al., 1999).

Social Networks

Humans start life with their family systems as their primary social networks, except in those cases where infants or children have no family environment, as when they are raised in group or institutional care. As humans mature, they typically come into contact with an increasingly diverse network of social relationships. Even in infancy and early childhood, they are influenced by the social networks of which their caregivers are a part. Social networks include people who share proximate space and interact socially with the person on a regular basis, such as friends, neighbors, classmates, coworkers, teammates, professionals who provide services to the person, and members of faith or civic organizations with which the person is affiliated.

The mastery of social skills, that is, the capacity to relate positively to others, occurs through interaction with family and social networks. Social skills are affected by the way a person thinks and feels about other people. To the extent that social environments nurture and support the child, the child will learn self-worth, competence, and trust. If the environments are hostile or confusing, children learn behaviors that may be harmful to themselves or others, such as withdrawal or aggression. Of course, few environments are uniformly positive or negative at all times, but a general social climate tends to be consistent. Children have to learn to manage themselves across a variety of environments of increasingly complexity as they mature. In the United States, the age at which children enter more complex environments has dropped significantly. Child Trends reports increasing rates of children in out-of-home care at young ages (Child Trends DataBank, 2005). In 2001, 61% of children ages 0 to 6 (and not yet in kindergarten) spent time in nonparental care. Twenty-three percent were cared for by a relative, 16% by a nonrelative but in a home, and 34% in center-based programs. A focus on 2-year-olds reveals that 17% were in center-based care (up from 12% in 1995). Peer relations are thus assuming greater prominence in more children's lives at earlier ages.

Social networks are a key source of what is known as social capital, which is knowledge and resources available through relationships (Coleman, 1988). Happiness, well-being, and access to economic capital are related to personal human capital (typically measured as education and income) and social capital (typically assessed at a minimum as structure and amount of contact; Easterlin, 2000). People begin to accrue social capital early in life through their caregivers' social networks and the social environments of which they are a part. Kellam and associates (Kellam, Ling, Merisca, Brown, & Ialongo, 1998) emphasize that the social

networks a person has at each stage of life set the foundation for social relations at the next stage of life.

Children are often “marginalized,” that is, kept on the margins of social networks, when they are regarded as different from others. Children with disabilities, those for whom English is a second language, children of minority status, or those who have atypical behavior may face such exclusion. For example, a child who must sit in the office due to the family’s religious beliefs that proscribe against parties while a class has a party may be seen as “weird” and treated differently at other times. Adults who are responsible for intentional environments, such as classrooms or structured recreational settings, must exercise skilled care to ensure that social interactions are inclusive.

Schools, neighborhoods, and the work environments of parents and other family members affect how a person develops and copes in life. The sheer amount of time children spend in child care and school environments makes these powerful social forces in human development. The quality of early care can remediate the harmful effects of a home life challenged by poverty, though the effects may not last if support outside the home diminishes as the child ages (Barnett, 1995). School quality, including quality of out-of-school programs (i.e., before-, after-, and summer school programs) exert significant effects on child outcomes (Little & Harris, 2003). Children learn academic as well as social skills through interactions with one another. Even families who homeschool their children often arrange for their children to participate in peer networks with other homeschooled children, to enable their social skills development.

As children age, they seek companionship away from home. They cluster with groups of friends and peers who share common interests. Youth who have opportunities for learning positive social interaction and civic responsibility are more likely to show competence in such areas as social communication, emotional expression, problem solving, moral judgment, and resilience in the face of adversity (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004).

If youth are cut off from opportunities for positive youth development, they are at risk of joining gangs. Teens who spend their time in gangs may find comfort in the affinity of the group and a sense of belonging (Branch, 1997; Weiner, 1999). Unfortunately, even when the gang does not engage in negative behavior such as violence, which is often the media’s focus on gangs, teens in gangs inhibit their opportunities for development by restricting their social interactions. They may find that later in life, when they are living more independently, they are unprepared to live with typical social challenges.

In adulthood, people tend to participate in many chosen and given social networks. Most people are employed and regard certain coworkers as members of their social networks. They may belong to faith communities, friendship circles, groups of shared interest (such as hiking clubs or quilting circles), or they may just gather together informally at regular places such as pubs or parks.

People increasingly participate in social networks through electronic media rather than face-to-face contact. They communicate through cell phones and other handheld communications devices and online networks such as "MySpace.com," which facilitates personalized communications or "eharmony.com," which is a matchmaking service. For people who have resources (i.e., the capacity to purchase equipment and services for electronic communications), electronic media create opportunities for individuals to have large and diverse networks, although caution must be exercised to practice appropriate security measures and minimize risk of exposure to exploitive relationships in such relatively open arenas.

In addition to media that facilitate two-way or multiple participant communication, the mass media transmit one-way messages about social norms to viewers and listeners. The ubiquitous messenger of mass culture is, of course, television. People of all ages watch a huge number of hours of television programming each week. Children who watch limited hours of educational programs appropriate for their age level acquire certain school readiness skills while those who watch cartoons or entertaining shows do more poorly on indicators of academic success (MacBeth, 1996). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2006) recommends that total television time be limited to no more than 1 to 2 hours per day and that parents restrict programming to nonviolent, educational shows suitable for the child's age. The huge popularity of electronic media and their effectiveness in helping people of all ages feel connected to one another is without dispute. What is unknown is what effect electronic media will have on the general well-being of humankind, because human history has never seen such a phenomenon and thus far it has existed for only a few decades.

The Individual, Families, and Social Networks

As a person's social history emerges, the story about who is in the history and how the person related to and continues to relate to other people typically forms the heart of the story. Human service professionals listen to histories with awareness that strong families protect members from harm, teach values and healthy behaviors, and provide support

through hard times. Families teach social skills like communication, problem solving, cooperation, moral decision making, and spiritual awareness. They can provide a foundation for each member's self-esteem, happiness, creativity, and cultural and ethnic identity. Fragile or conflicted families can teach members to distrust others and feel vulnerable. They may relate to others in ways that are hostile, exploitive, or detached. The extent to which this foundation is realized in other social relations depends on the nature of the person's informal and formal social networks, which can reinforce or hinder the person's inclinations.

Communities and Organizations

Social relationships and networks are the media through which individuals relate to their communities and the organizations of which they are a part. People tend to be affiliated with multiple communities and organizations.

Communities

Communities may be those based on location (e.g., where they now live or formerly lived or where they work or study), experience (such as communities of war veterans, survivors of cancer, school alumni, or ex-offenders), or interest (such as people who are affiliated as artists, rap musicians, genealogy buffs, or followers of a certain religion). Communities, which may be formally or informally organized, can be described structurally by such indicators as boundaries (what indicates who is in and who is not) and number and characteristics of members. They may also be described functionally, which typically would include indicators of shared activities, resources, cohesion among members, and quality of relations with people outside the community.

This discussion will focus on the influence of geographic communities because the next section on the broader environment will essentially address dynamics of how communities of experience and interest might influence human social development.

Any thorough life history review will include a good description and interpretation of the communities in which the person has lived. Geographic communities vary according to several factors in the physical, social, and economic environments. People who live in substandard housing with no toilet facilities, go to bed each night anticipating that they may hear gunfire, attend poor quality schools, drink polluted water, face recurring natural

disasters, or grow accustomed to political corruption have significantly different histories than those who live in gated communities with manicured lawns, fiddle with excessive electronic gadgetry in every room, access emergency medical assistance in less than 4 minutes, and feel so safe they leave their doors unlocked at all hours.

Researchers are just beginning to understand how and to what degree geographic communities influence individual development. The relationship is complex, mediated by family factors as well as historical, cultural, economic, and other characteristics of the community (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997). Individuals tend to relate to a relatively small geographic area. In urban communities, that would be a block or neighborhood; in rural areas, it might be an area along a particular highway or around a cluster of homes or a convenience store. These small areas are embedded in somewhat larger communities, which are in towns or districts of cities, and so on. Within these areas, individuals find resources and opportunities for engaging in or refraining from certain social behaviors. A community's assets and processes affect how a person behaves socially.

The relational processes among residents in a community convey the social norms of the community (Garner & Raudenbush, 1991). People tend to act in accordance with social norms. For example, where youth are expected to finish high school, as communicated by multiple messages from peers, parents, neighbors, faith and business leaders, and mass media, graduation rates are higher. Where educational norms are ambivalent or lacking, as when adults are relatively silent about expectations or harshly critical of schools, youth seem less motivated to finish.

Chapter 6 contains guides for profiling communities according to indicators of population, geography, housing, economy, education, health and safety, and an array of other factors. Such profiles, including asset mapping (assets may be people, natural resources, physical structures, businesses, educational settings, or informal organizations; see Community Tool Box, 2006; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Regions of the United States, such as New England, the Deep South, and the Northwest, have characteristics that differentiate them from one another, although increased relocations among them and common media and markets are reducing their distinctiveness, just as globalization has tended to blend international cultures. Yet differences persist, and within regions, subregions, even neighborhoods, variations persist. For example, where textile mills once flourished in the South, mill owners often constructed rental housing, which eventually was sold to employees. These "mill villages" had a common culture since every family had at least one,

often several, wage earning employees at the mill. When the mills died, the villages remained and transformed into various new communities with vestiges of the old culture still present. In the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, Felton Earls and his associates have tracked the evolution of neighborhoods that were predominantly Anglo American, then African American, then Hispanic (Earls, 1999). The characteristics of the area changed as each group became dominant.

Poverty tends to be linked to geography. Material deprivation may vary among children living within a neighborhood, but in many areas, the entire neighborhood is deprived. The notion of an “underclass” that lives in such areas refers to people affected by (1) persistent and intergenerational transmission of poverty; (2) geographic concentration; (3) social isolation from mainstream society; (4) unemployment and underemployment; (5) low skills and education; and, often (6) membership in a minority group (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, & Liaw, 1995; Gephart & Brooks-Gunn, 1997, p. xiv). Research has found that children in neighborhoods without these deprived characteristics are more likely to have better developmental outcomes (e.g., in terms of health, behavior, contentment; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). This holds true for children whose parents came from deprived areas and moved to more endowed neighborhoods—somehow, the children benefit from the surrounding resources (Gephart, 1997). Still, while neighborhoods do exert an effect, it is mild. What most predicts the differences between children who do well and those who do poorly is related to family processes (such as more than one stable parent and parental employment) and their own individual characteristics (such as intelligence, capacity to handle stress).

When an individual makes an inadequate adjustment to a culture different from the one of his or her origin, the results can be tragic. In one situation, a young Euro American gay man, survivor of extreme physical and sexual abuse in a fundamentalist religious household, raised in a small southern mill town that condemned his sexual orientation, moved to Los Angeles. There he was regarded as a “hillbilly,” a term he resented because, in southern mill towns, it is a derogatory term reserved for people who live in Appalachia, not the mill territories. Without the external restrictions inherent in his social environment of origin, he felt lost and confused, and experimented with a variety of drugs and behavior. He found himself a protector. When threatened with rejection by his protector, he went on a drinking and drug binge and assaulted the woman next door, who reminded him of his mother. Such cultural factors as regional religious fundamentalism, attitudes toward homosexuality, southern white mill town culture

in transition, and difficulty in adjusting to a new community are critical to understanding his behavior.

Social environments vary geographically. Thus an individual's or family's social history must be assessed with attention to the various locations in which the history occurred.

Organizations

Humans live in interaction with multiple formal and informal organizations. Organizations include such groups as schools, hospitals, sports leagues, synagogues, banks, restaurants, listservs, libraries, city councils, corporations, political parties, waste management companies, and hundreds of other groups that make up communities and society. Organizations range from small, informal groups such as book clubs to large international conglomerates such as the International Red Cross or the Sony Corporation. The influence is reciprocal; humans influence organizations and are influenced by them.

Humans relate to organizations in multiple ways. They may be part of the internal processes of the organization as leaders or workers. They may be consumers such as students, patients, or customers. They may be sponsors, such as older taxpayers who support schools or donors to nonprofit organizations. On a typical day, any one person is directly and indirectly influenced by multiple organizations.

A rather massive knowledge base has revealed considerable information about how organizations function to influence human social development and well-being (see, e.g., Anderson, Ones, Sinangil, & Viswesvaran, 2002; Poelmans, 2005; Schneider & Smith, 2004). In general, studies have differentiated governmental, business, and nonprofit organizations. Structurally, organizations can be described in terms of their governance, leadership, facilities, strategic planning and management, resources, marketing, teamwork, external alliances, and results. Functionally, they are often described in terms of relationships among people within the organization and relationships among those within and outside the organizations. Studies of organizational climate and culture have identified those organizational factors that affect the people associated with the organization (Lindahl, 2006; Orpinas & Horne, 2006). Within the organization, such factors as trust, morale, communication, decision-making processes, leader credibility, inclusion, equity, benefits, and conflict management are related to participant well-being, whether they are employees, volunteers, stakeholders, or consumers. External relations are affected by such factors as

consumer satisfaction, adaptability, accountability, image, and ethical decision making.

How organizations influence individuals and vice versa can be assessed in multiple ways. For example, with regard to school environments, students, teachers, administrators, and parents are more engaged if schools have smaller student enrollments, small classes, integrative curricula, and organizational decision-making processes that enable students and teachers to influence how they “live and learn” (Seidman, Aber, & French, 2004). While school is the work of the young, eventually most people enter employment to garner the financial resources necessary to sustain their lives and pursue happiness. How people feel about their work will affect their home lives, and vice versa. Workers are more effective if they are supported by organizations that empower them through an organizational climate that enables mutual trust, common goals, and continuous learning (Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998). Groups like the Families and Work Institute (n.d.) have promoted supportive policies such as family leave, health care benefits, vacation time, release time for school meetings, flex time, and other alternatives to help people manage stress and balance their work and family lives effectively (Vannoy & Dubeck, 1998; Williams, 2000).

The social history will include themes about the person’s organizational affiliations, how closely affiliated the person was with the organization, the person’s regard for the organization’s values and mission, and the dynamics that affected the person’s association with the organization. For example, a person may have been raised in a children’s home. The professional who is assessing the social history will be able to do so more thoroughly with knowledge of such factors as whether the children’s home met quality standards, suffered any turmoil such as sexual abuse allegations, received any accreditation or awards, had low staff turnover and stable strong leadership, and other relevant factors. Information about each organization in the history, such as quality school indicators, how termination decisions were made when an employer downsized, morale in a National Guard unit, and a host of other indicators, can reveal insight into the facts and meaning of the person’s life.

Formal organizational assessments may be an important part of an individual or family social history. The assessment may be qualitative, such as gathering interview information about a focused topic, or quantitative, based on a rating system. Tools to facilitate the assessment are generally tailored to particular purposes, such as assessing psychosocial factors related to school climate, health and safety, or readiness for change. For

example, the Centers for Disease Control, National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety (2006) maintains an inventory of source information about organizational assessment tools. Many other tools can be accessed by searching for specific topics such as school climate assessment or workplace safety assessment.

A thorough social history will use various means to examine key factors associated with the most salient organizations and communities in the life of the person or family that is the subject of the history.

Social Ecology: The Broader Environment

Everyone's life history is affected by their position in society, which is related to such culturally ascribed characteristics as gender, ethnicity, social class, age, sexual identity, religion, globalization, and governmental policies that affect family life. Society is socially constructed through the medium of culture. Starting at an early age, humans learn to think about the world through language that is shared with other members of the culture. Throughout life, social interactions influence a person's constantly changing perceptions. How people regard their own and others' characteristics is shaped by attributions learned from other people. Collectively, the shared perceptions form what is known as culture.

Culture, Class, Race-Ethnicity, and National Origin

Culture, traditionally the domain of anthropologists, is now recognized as a powerful force by all social and behavioral scientists. Culture, the systematic organization of social behavior through customs, beliefs, and values, pervades all life and significantly affects human development (See, 1998; Super & Harkness, 1999). D'Andrade and Strauss (1992) observe that what a person does on a typical day is influenced by a shared system of understandings about the appropriate things to do. Each individual affiliates with several cultures (e.g., by racial-ethnic identity, religion, national identity, socioeconomic class, gender identity, and occupation). Culture is transmitted from generation to generation through familial roles, communication patterns, emotional expression, personal control, individualism, collectivism, spirituality, and religiosity (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Santisteban, 2002). At times an individual or family faces conflicting loyalties between cultures, as when they migrate to a different country, marry across racial-ethnic groups, or move upward or downward in

socioeconomic class. If managed poorly, this tension can breed conflict and dysfunction.

Historically, race was regarded as a biological characteristic, but that notion has been discounted. Based on a review of scientific evidence, Smedley and Smedley (2005, p. 16) declared, "Race as biology is fiction, racism as a social problem is real," though the myth persists that race is biologically determined. People do have a wide range of physical attributes that are biologically determined, but whether the attributes are ascribed to a particular "race" is a social construct. Thus, people who identify as "black" may have a wide range of skin colors and hair types. Smedley and Smedley reiterate, as many social scientists have done, that race is a social construction, nested in ethnicity, that is based on perceived differences among cultures. Members of an ethnic group share a common culture and common ancestry, country/region of origin, and/or group history (Santisteban, 2002). Ethnic identity is generally a source of pride, but historic differences in power among ethnic groups have generated feelings of shame in some members of oppressed groups and elitism in privileged groups. How a person identifies ethnically and the regard he or she has for the ethnic group significantly affects his or her well-being. Similarly, the disdain or hatred members of one group may feel for another breeds conflict and war.

The complex process of acculturation occurs when immigrant groups change their attitudes and behaviors toward a dominant group with a different culture (Booth & Crouter, 1997; Burnett & Thompson, 2005). These transitions create tension for the individual and the family. The meeting of cultural groups occurs under varying circumstances; in many cases, immigrants come from war-torn, oppressed areas, and the migration process itself is traumatic. When children migrate separately from their parents, they are particularly at risk for problems (Bemak & Greenberg, 1994). Even people who migrate under positive conditions, for example, in response to a business opportunity, must adapt. The dominant culture often looks down on the immigrant's culture. Studies of immigrants have demonstrated varying styles of adaptation, some of which can induce harmful negative effects on children. They may be marginalized (feel identity with no group), withdrawn (try to maintain separate identity), assimilated (reject culture of origin), or integrated (able to balance bicultural identities). These are not states but processes that elicit stress as they occur.

Privileges and disadvantages are not evenly distributed across the human population. The power to affect one's own life and the lives of others is generally linked to socioeconomic class—those with wealth and privilege related

to favored social positions, such as a particular ethnicity or gender, have relatively more power than those in less favored positions. Margaret Wetherell (1996) observed that

power is intimately connected with social identity in the sense that people's place in a system of social organization has a large bearing on the resources they can command, and on whether attempts to secure power are seen as reasonable and appropriate or as disruptive and illegitimate. (p. 315)

Historically, the use of physical force has assured those in power that they will be secure in their positions. They control such resources as law enforcement, the judiciary, the military, banks, and other institutions of power. Force need not be imminently present or used. Over time, social norms, backed by the potential for force, help keep people in their social positions.

Income and social class are not the same. Income fluctuates and generally rises in a family over a typical child's life, except in cases of persistent poverty. Generally, a family's social and economic positions are determined not simply by income but also by parents' educational level, occupational status, and assets (e.g., property ownership). In some cultures, class mobility occurs. People can gain access to power and resources and shift their social positions, or lose their privileged positions.

A British study of 30,000 children over the course of their development from birth to adulthood found that persistent and accumulating experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage throughout childhood and adolescence had a significant negative effect on adult competencies (Schoon et al., 2002). Similar studies in the United States have shown that regardless of social class, a family's low income during a child's earliest years predicts lower academic achievement by the child in later years (Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). Public policies that help children compensate for socioeconomic disadvantage promote children's gaining a fairer chance for getting out of poverty as they mature.

A history of oppression, that is, exposure to aggression by dominant groups, tends to generate protective practices in oppressed groups. Individuals become keenly attuned to subtle cues in interactions. They adapt in ways that reduce the perceived threat, such as compliance, avoidance, or subversion. For example, the subculture of poverty that exists when low-income families are crowded together in poor neighborhoods supports suspicion and opposition to the dominant culture (Brooks-Gunn

et al., 1997). In these areas, law enforcement officers are likely to be feared rather than trusted and respected. People may prepare to defend themselves with force if threatened. Gangs provide a source of security. Sometimes, behaviors that helped individuals adjust to difficult cultural transitions become dysfunctional in other contexts. For example, carrying a concealed weapon may be important for protecting oneself and one's loved ones when a gang war is under way in a community. Carrying that weapon into a predominantly middle-class neighborhood of people from the dominant culture may provoke harsh penalties.

Culture, race-ethnicity, and socioeconomic status powerfully affect the social environments of humans as they develop. Individuals, singly and collectively, also affect the social environment. In a society committed to equality, acknowledging a legacy of oppression and offering supports to individuals and groups from historically oppressed populations will help to even the unfair odds.

Gender Identity and Gender Roles

Aside from a few obvious differences between males and females (reproductive organs, body hair, average body size), much of what is regarded as "male" or "female" is socially constructed and culturally influenced by prevailing ideologies of gender role stereotypes and norms (Bem, 1993). In many ways, people learn to be male or female and develop an identity that they are male or female. Yet their practice of behaviors that are culturally regarded as masculine or feminine varies widely, whether they identify as male or female. Each culture has its own regard for gender roles. In the United States, tradition regarded men as breadwinners, protectors, builders and repairers, and decision makers. Women were nurturers, resource managers, peacemakers, and organizers. These normative gender roles influence individual life decisions about such critical matters as education, mate selection, family formation, and the aging process (Adler, 2001; Satow, 2001). These notions persist, although they have been broadly challenged, to be replaced by current contradictions about what roles are generally expected based on gender.

At the turn of the 21st century, people in developed countries such as the United States are generally experiencing ambivalence about what it means to be a man. Maleness is not simply biological; it is social. Men learn how to be men (i.e., what to wear, how to look, how to act) from men and women in their lives, but their essential identity tends to come from their relations to one another (Connell, 1995; Zilbergeld, 1992).

Thus, a son's relationship to his father (present or absent) or father-figure exerts a powerful effect on his identity, development, and adult behavior. Even men who hated their fathers tend to be like them. Increasingly, boys are being raised without consistent access to a male father figure, which can create identity confusion (Tamis-LaMonda & Cabrera, 2002).

The process is similar for women. Conventionally, female meant being nurturing, compassionate, sexy, self-sacrificing, and submissive. These characteristics have been valued less than traditional male characteristics, as evidenced by failure to compensate for jobs requiring these traits. Historically, women were punished for being independent, aggressive, or dominant, though now the "new woman" ideology expects her to be assertive, self-sufficient, rational, and competitive (Philpot, Brooks, Lusterman, & Nutt, 1997). Women struggle with perceived pressure to "do it all" (Kite, 2001).

These changing roles started after World War II and escalated throughout the latter part of the 20th century, so most young people today have been exposed to these gender role conflicts. Put confused males and confused females together in marital and co-parenting roles, and the result is an epidemic of family discord. Men and women argue, physically fight, get depressed, separate, divorce, and try again with someone else but remain at risk of dissatisfaction with their relationships with the opposite sex. Children exposed to this discord can suffer developmentally. Marriage rates have dropped precipitously in recent years. For example, in 1970, the median age at first marriage was 20.8 years for women and 23.2 years for men (Fields & Casper, 2001). By 2000, these ages had risen to 25.1 years and 26.8 years, respectively. People's inclination to marry or make other forms of lasting social commitment is declining.

Each person's social history will include stories about how men and women relate within the person's family and social networks. In contemporary relationships women and men may share expectations of one another, such as agreeing that "he will rock the baby at night because he is a nurturing father." Or they may disagree, such as when she expects him to rock the baby but he believes "men don't do that—I need my sleep so I can provide for the family." Or they may be confused, struggling to find ways to develop reliable expectations. They may agree to be traditional, with the mother taking full responsibility except in rare circumstances when she needs help. The key to a successful relationship is communication about gender roles and all expectations. A thorough social history will examine such gender-related factors as the person's beliefs about what it means to be a man or woman, how activities inside and outside the home

are organized according to gender, and how various people express emotions and power.

Sexuality and Reproduction

Cultural norms about gender also influence the expression of sexuality and sexual orientation. Typically, people will develop a gender identity as male or female and a general sexual orientation that is heterosexual (i.e., they feel sexual attraction to the opposite sex), homosexual (they feel sexual attraction to the same sex), or bisexual (their sexual attraction is to either sex). Some individuals have a complex gender identity and regard themselves as transsexual—that is, they live in a gendered body but adopt the typical gender roles and mannerisms of the opposite sex. Yet none of these categories seem to be fixed because sexuality is multidimensional and changes with context (Rothblum, 2000). Sexual behavior (the type of sexual activity practiced by the individual), sexual identity (self-identified masculine or feminine gender identity and sexual orientation identity), and sexual desire (feelings of attraction and arousal) can vary over time and from one context to another (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). In general, women are more likely than men to expect an emotional relationship and partner-centered orientation in their sexual relations (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Sexuality may be a means to intimacy, but it may also be an expression of objectifying or exploiting another person. Clear communication and mutual choice are the keys to healthy sexual interaction.

Each culture practices norms that influence how sexuality is expressed. Prevailing discriminatory norms in the United States recognize heterosexuality as the preferred sexual orientation and support a rigid social hierarchy that treats people with other sexual orientations as subordinate. Tolerance for homosexuality has increased considerably in the past two decades, but homophobia is still rampant, as the recent state-by-state effort to outlaw same-sex marriage has indicated (Garnets & Peplau, 2000). Sexuality can be a critical means to pleasure and life satisfaction, but when people face criticism from their families, neighbors, and the broader society, their right to happiness can be impaired. Their sexual identity is also affected by pervasive media messages that portray stylized images of thin, muscular young people engaged in certain types of presumably pleasurable sexual interactions. These images are impossible for most people to follow as models, so they are disappointed in themselves. Dangerously, many of the images are blended with violence, creating an impression of tolerance for forced sexual relations.

Hyde and Jaffee (2000) observe that studies indicate children first experience sexual fantasies and attractions at about age 10, boys begin masturbating at about age 12, and girls are most likely to first experience sex in relations with boys, starting masturbation later. As many as 25% of girls report their first sexual intercourse was unwanted and 4% say it was forced (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). People thus may learn to associate fear, anger, shame, or disappointment with sexuality, rather than joy or contentment. They may develop sexual dysfunction, which can induce emotional effects that spill into other areas of their lives (Leiblum & Rosen, 1988).

The sexual history overlaps with the history of intimate relationships (addressed in the attachment domain) and reproduction. While some cultures still support “love, marriage, baby carriage” as the preferred sequence of events, reality involves many diverse steps to reproduction (Pallone, 2003). Some people start with careful selection of a committed mate while others cognitively separate sexual intercourse from its consequences and deal with the effects as they occur (Feingold, 1992). Childbearing may result from careful planning and spacing of each pregnancy, or serendipitous pregnancy following unprotected sex. Individuals or couples can rely on technology such as sperm banks, fertility drugs, surrogate parenting, and in vitro fertilization to facilitate their reproduction when they choose (Rosen, 2005). People now recognize the grief of a miscarried pregnancy. Elective abortion can prevent the medical or psychological crises of unwanted pregnancy. Adoption can ease the despair of infertile couples or single individuals who yearn to be parents. Even though people have multiple reproductive choices in the postmodern world, the process of starting a new life is laden with emotion. How a person’s biological parents conceived the person has significant meaning for most people. Likewise, how the person and his or her partner make reproductive decisions reveals much about the person.

Taking a sexual history is an important part of any social history, though it can be difficult because people typically desire privacy about their sexuality and, in a culture that can be harshly judgmental, they may be sensitive about whether they will be criticized or deemed inadequate in some way. The very language of sexuality can be challenging, given that people tend to use slang or euphemistic words and to misunderstand anatomical terms. Families often have sexual secrets that are well protected, so asking questions may be threatening. History takers must be specifically trained and prepared to ask questions sensitively about potentially embarrassing or painful topics and to use various language tools that

are culturally and situationally appropriate (see, e.g., Donahey, 2004; Skelton & Matthews, 2001; Watson, 2002).

Spirituality and Religion

A person's beliefs about transcendent forces constitute the essence of his or her spirituality. Spiritual faith influences how people form values and construct meaning from life events, particularly those events that have to do with profound transitions, such as death or tragic misfortune (Canda, 1998; Coles, 1990). Belief in forces that transcend human experience helps people to find hope when life challenges them with agony or fear (Martin & Martin, 2003).

Such beliefs can also inspire motivation to pursue fulfillment and optimal use of talents. People use the term "have faith" in encouraging one another to pursue their dreams.

Religion is an organized system that addresses beliefs about morality and powers beyond humanity. Religious communities promote spirituality, although people experience spirituality without religion, too. Furthermore, people can practice religious traditions without experiencing spirituality.

For some people, religion and/or spirituality exert vital, even dominant, influences in their lives. They organize their daily lives according to religious expectations, including how they eat, dress, behave, consume, work, socialize, serve others, and participate in religious activities. Some people regard their faith as a more subtle constant presence in their lives. For others, their religious orientation affects life rituals, such as recognitions of birth, marriage, or death, and otherwise has no major influence on their ways of life.

While most people find that their spirituality and religion strengthen their capacity to manage life, some develop serious problems related to religious abuse or maladaptive uses of religious practices (Artuerburn & Felton, 2001). People may also develop an addiction to religion, using religious practices to control interaction with others (Booth, 1991). *Religious abuse* refers to psychological or other injuries that occur when religious leaders with authority, including parents, manipulate followers to increase their own power and control. They may use physical coercion, sexual abuse, or psychological intimidation, such as condemnation. The pairing of such abusive behavior with their religious authority induces severe spiritual and mental trauma in the victim. *Ritualistic abuse* is a severe form of religious abuse that occurs as part of a religious rite, such as beating

someone during a religious service as punishment for sin or raping or killing someone as part of a supposed rite.

A person's social history will reflect the religious and spiritual practices and traditions of the family's social network (Miller, 2005). When assessing a person's religious or spiritual history, studies have typically examined four dimensions: public participation (e.g., attending services), affiliation (e.g., belonging to a religious group), private religious practices (e.g., prayer, meditation), and religious coping (turning to religion when faced with a problem; George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002).

Government and Public Policy

In the United States, formal resources to support healthy human development are embedded in an intricate system of public and private institutions that operate at local, state, and federal levels. The overarching principles behind the system are embedded in the legal framework of the nation, with its focus on individual rights in relation to the government, and a free market economy. Still, the states and local governments have considerable flexibility in determining how local societies will operate. The focus here is on public action that targets the promotion of healthy, prosocial human development.

Each state can develop its own resources, although the federal government provides incentives and requirements that strongly influence what states and localities do. For example, each local economy is different but depends on regulatory actions by the federal government. Each locality develops its own voting procedures, within state and federal regulations. Generally, policies related to human development are enacted in response to identified problems that are identified through participative political processes. Recent major issues, for example, include access to affordable health care, availability of affordable quality child care, disparities in school funding, racial-ethnic profiling, and voting exclusion. How each of these is resolved from one area to another will affect the quality of life for residents.

Communities typically offer an array of health, education, and human services. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- Public assistance programs (e.g., Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Food Stamps)
- Emergency assistance (e.g., from private agencies for food, shelter, clothing, payment of utility bills, house repair)
- Housing assistance
- Child welfare systems (protective services, foster care, adoption)

- Family services (e.g., counseling, family life education, budget advice)
- Out-of-home care resources for children
- Education system (preschool, primary and secondary, higher education)
- Mental health care system
- Drug or alcohol treatment system
- Health care system
- Elder care system
- Disabilities or special needs services system
- Cultural resources (e.g., art, music, drama)
- Recreational resources
- Victim services system
- Family court (e.g., child support, divorce) system
- Law enforcement system
- Juvenile justice system
- Criminal justice system

Sooner or later, most people's lives are significantly influenced by several of these systems. The quantity and quality of a person's "system involvement" is an important part of the social history.

Amazingly, even with a vast network of formal resources, individual and family needs often go unmet. People may encounter barriers for reasons related to access (e.g., no transportation, conflict with work hours), affordability, eligibility restrictions, or cultural relevance. Or the system may have gaps, with no resources to address the unique needs of a particular situation. The number of people who need the resource may exceed the response capacity of the provider. The quality of the resources, particularly the skill of providers, may be deficient. Assuring that formal systems do adequately support human development is a continual governance and management process.

People's social histories reveal the ways in which they have related to their governments. This includes not only access to and use of resources provided by the government and involvement in various systems, but also participation in government, such as voting, participating in campaigns, expressing opinions, or serving on decision-making bodies.

Globalization

Anyone living in the 21st century experiences the opportunities and risks that have emerged as globalization sweeps across the planet. Historically,

people have identified with their cultural groups and the nation-states of which they are a part. Increasingly, their identities are changing as communications and economic markets penetrate the political boundaries of nations, creating transnational social relationships and exchanges. Whereas citizens of the United States claim the identity “American,” people of other North American and South American countries now say, “We are all Americans—you are people of the USA.” National identity is less salient, as people often relate to the multinational corporations that employ them or to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Doctors Without Borders, Greenpeace, or faith-based missions.

Globalization has produced a large, rapid transnational flow of people, ideas, products, and cultural norms. The interactions have yielded increased empowerment and positive well-being, but they have also induced exploitation. People move across political borders for reasons of economic opportunity as temporary or resident workers or immigrants planning to relocate. They also move as refugees from war and civil conflict, slaves, and occupation forces. Globalization has enabled the development of productive networks of artists, health care providers, and people of shared faith but it has also spawned networks of terrorists, drug dealers, and human traffickers. The market and communication factors in globalization have evolved so rapidly that international governmental, business, and nonprofit organizations are scrambling to develop means to protect human rights and regulate practices for the good of the world’s people and environment (Brysk, 2002).

The impact of globalization on human development and everyday social life has yet to be adequately studied. Demographic studies show that people in the United States are more likely now than in the past to live near people whose culture and national origin is different from their own. People have more diverse choices with regard to food, consumer goods, music, and other cultural experiences (Hannerz, 2000). Educational systems have adapted to accommodate more languages and more advanced curricula to promote competitiveness with people from other countries in the global marketplace. Local job opportunities are linked to decisions of multinational corporations. People have variously celebrated the increasing diversity or resisted it through nationalistic and ethno-centric organizations such as the American Border Patrol (an anti-immigration group).

People’s social histories are affected by how they perceive their identities—including their understanding of how they came to be who and where they are—and social relationships within this rapidly emerging transnational context. Even if their global awareness is limited, the type and extent of

resources in their social environments will be affected by various global forces that may be distinct for each community.

The social ecology that surrounds an individual's life over time affects whether the person thrives, survives, or declines. Understanding a person's social history requires knowledge about the unique characteristics of his or her various social environments over time.

Individuals in the Social Environment

In the eternal debate about free will versus determinism, most contemporary social scientists come to the opinion that both matter—the individual and environment are inextricably linked (Biddell, 1997). A person's social environment may determine many factors that influence the person's life. Yet the person still has some degree of choice about how to respond to the environment and regulate emotions and behaviors in various contexts. By exercising human agency, individuals actively pursue goals within the environments of which they are a part. They adapt to environments and they also influence the environments, causing changes in the environment that affect themselves and others. Thus all lives are interlinked.

People can actively create their own social lives and influence their own outcomes and social positions, within limits. Social structures and processes constrain individual choice by affecting opportunities, threats, privileges, and deprivations. Individuals can chart their own courses within certain prescribed boundaries. The boundaries vary from one individual and group to another. Some boundaries are real while others are believed to be real by the affected individuals. For example, women who seek to advance to management or corporate leadership positions may encounter real barriers to advancement in organizations where the leadership structure is intolerant of a significant female presence. Women in such organizations seek advancement and are rejected for unfair reasons. Other organizations may be more open to women's advancement, and yet women hesitate to try to advance based on the assumption that they will be rebuffed. Those who try move forward fairly. Women in the former organization face real barriers; those in the latter perceive barriers that may not be present.

Whether people perceive that they have freedom to choose or a degree of control over their own lives significantly affects social behavior (Bandura, 1977, 1997). People construct their own identities, or sense of self, based on their social experiences. Part of this sense of self is a generalized sense of

personal efficacy, the belief that they can achieve the change they desire. This belief, variously called willpower, motivation, agency, self-determination, and other terms, is the spark that stimulates individual action within social settings. Perceived efficacy varies from one situational context to another. Essentially, a person feels more confident of being efficacious in some settings than in others. Some people are more comfortable on a sports field than in a boardroom or in a church sanctuary than in a deep forest, or vice versa, depending on where they feel a greater sense of efficacy.

People bring their beliefs about their personal efficacy and abilities to different social situations. They have a propensity to act in a certain way based on these beliefs and abilities. Whether they behave according to their propensity depends on situational factors (Rotter, 1982) that elicit certain behaviors from individuals and inhibit others. For example, a person who has the capacity for empathy with the suffering of others may not actively show compassion until confronted with a situation where someone is in need of help, such as seeing someone gasp for breath in a public setting and providing first aid or calling for emergency medical assistance. The national call for community service is based on awareness that creating opportunities for people to show care leads them to find even more situations where they can help others, thus building a stronger, more interactive society. From a different perspective, social control strategies such as mandatory arrest of domestic violence perpetrators seek to inhibit negative behaviors by assuring negative consequences for harmful behavior (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996; Gelles, 1993). Whether the laws actually do change the situation and deter the behavior depends on many factors associated with the individuals, situation, and context. Presumably, when people know with a degree of certainty that they will be arrested if they commit an act of violence, it will deter their behavior. The situational context is different from areas where arrest almost never follows the assault, and thus the rates of the behavior are lower, at least for people who care about getting arrested.

Self-efficacy affects how people perceive themselves and act in social settings (Bandura, 1997, 2002). Greater self-efficacy is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction. People try to explain their own success or failure. People who cope well seem to attribute their success and failures to their own efforts. People who cope maladaptively tend to see their success or failure as matters of luck or forces beyond their control.

Collective efficacy occurs when groups of people unite to seek a change in their environment (Duncan, Duncan, & Okut, 2003; Watson, Chemers, & Preiser, 2001). They recognize the limitations of individual

efficacy and join forces to pursue their goals. Even when people appraise their situations realistically and realize the limits of their capacity to change the environment, their well-being can be affected by the hope that somehow the situation and the environment will change positively (McGeer, 2004). People with little or no hope are at risk of depression and despair that drains their will to influence the environment.

Through personal efficacy, collective efficacy, and hope, people try to make sense of the world around them and integrate that into their future anticipations and behaviors (Wetherell, 1996). In some cases, life has given them such contradictory messages that they feel fragmented, lost, and confused. For example, research on maltreated children indicates they tend to misattribute other people's intentions, believing, for example, that someone can be trusted when in fact that person is exploitive (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990; also see various chapters in Meyers et al., 2002). Therapeutic programs for at-risk youth often train them to assess and respond to situations more realistically.

As people exert influences on their immediate environments, they do so as parts of a greater context. Actions that look personal are often part of a greater social movement, though the process may not be immediately obvious. Giele (1998) studied the 1950s phenomenon of women entering the paid workforce in the United States. She found four main motivations that affected the choices of women who were among the first to seek careers outside the home: new moral belief in the egalitarian roles of men and women, economic necessity, pursuit of improved well-being and life satisfaction, and desire to cope with perceived uncertainty about the future. In each case, the individuals assessed factors in their environment and made personal choices regarding their own life situations. Each woman's action changed her own immediate environment whether she achieved her personal goal or not. What resulted from these multiple individual decisions was a mass movement that stimulated yet more reform, including such phenomena as the invention of more labor-saving household devices, expansion of the child care industry, reduced commitment to marriage by men and women, increased legal support for women's freedom, changing social norms regarding expectations of men and women in family life, and a host of other societal changes.

While unique individual actions may combine to form a collective change in the environment, the environment does not always produce uniform change across individuals. Many people live in the same or similar social environments, yet they behave quite differently. For example, why does one child raised in a home with a brutal father grow up to commit

murder while a sibling raised in the same home never breaks the law? Why are some students in a school altruistic while others focus on self-gratification? No two social lives are exactly alike. Twins come close, but even they are different. Generally, when lives are examined closely, social environments that appear identical actually have subtle differences, and each individual brings particular perspectives and characteristics to the social situation, which makes his response unique.

The interaction of the individual with the environment is complex, affected by personal beliefs and abilities, individual differences, situational factors, and the incredible diversity of the social environment. Democratic societies support an individual's right to self-determination with due respect for others. Social history assessment enables the discovery of key patterns in how individuals have learned to exercise their own agency within and across environments.

Summary

The social life at any point in time is anything but simple. Cumulatively, over time, the person's social history reflects the dynamic interaction of various elements of the social system at all levels—family, social network, organizational affiliation, community, and society. As people develop along the predictable trajectory of human life, their social systems shift. Positive and negative life events and threatening and supportive social forces evolve around them, shaping who they become. They respond, learning and adapting as they interact, exerting influence over the social environment as their lives proceed. Capturing the essence of any particular life in a social history assessment requires an understanding of human social development within this complex, dynamic social ecological context.

