Development on Purpose

Faith and Human Behavior in the Social Environment

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Preface

One of the things I learned quickly in my roles as a student, social worker, parent, and eventually social work professor, is that while human nature and development is fascinating, it's also incredibly complex and multifaceted. You don't have to work very long in the social work field to encounter head-scratching examples such as siblings raised in the same home environment who turn out as entirely different adults. Or children taught in identical educational environments who wind up learning completely different things. Or the way in which some adults who have experienced trauma recover and grow from suffering while others get trapped in resentment, hopelessness, and despair.

Social workers have long believed that individuals cannot be understood without a careful examination of the person *and* their environment—their families, schools, neighborhoods, ethnic groups, workplaces, and so on. Most social workers are also familiar with the need to do a micro and macro examination of a case in order to understand the immediate context of the individuals as well as the broader forces that impact their lives. That means that studying the health of a depressed client's marriage is no more important than studying the nature of the neighborhood in which the couple rents an apartment. Those forces work together, along with many other important variables, to impact the daily realities experienced by those we serve.

What social workers know (or perhaps intuitively sense) is that there is a complex interplay of nature, nurture, and environmental influences that intertwine to inform and shape individuals. In fact, we could safely say that development takes a uniquely different form in each person on the planet. Indeed, while there are indeed quantifiable aspects of the ways in which humans grow and develop, the particulars of each person and the context in which they live come together uniquely, creating an infinite number of variables and outcomes. And that infinite number of variables, while frustrating for those who wish to accurately describe and predict human behavior, meld in altogether unique and individual-

ized ways. This is the wonder and mystery of human development. No two stories are the same.

Taking into account both the person and the environment is also important because social workers want to help clients to actually change and accomplish their goals and, therefore, need to know where obstacles to progress actually lie. To do this, social workers naturally want to locate the heart of the problem. But a problem may have multiple different underlying causes. Take a depressed male client, for example. He may be depressed because his marriage and family are functioning poorly. In this case, his sense of hopelessness about relationships in his *micro* environment surfaces as the primary factor behind his depression. Another plausible option is that his depression is rooted in pessimism about the future, an obstacle linked to his *macro* environment. The client may have marketable job skills but live in an economically depressed community with bleak vocational prospects. We might also conclude that the man's depression is the result of unresolved psychological issues from his past. He could be depressed because current stresses have overwhelmed his ability to cope or because past emotional wounds have been triggered by his current circumstances. Alternatively, the source of the client's struggle may be neither his interpersonal relationships, setting, nor psychological history, but an illness within his physical body. Finally, we might suggest that, like dominoes, these areas have *each* been activated, one after another, in rapid succession. Indeed in many cases, there isn't a singular cause to a problem such as depression, but a combination of factors working together.

Whenever social workers attempt to help, they face the challenge of holding elements of the unique person in one hand along with elements of the unique environment in the other hand. Social workers are trained to value an understanding of both the person and their environment, a concept often referred to as *person-in-environment*. Historically, social workers have looked to theories for help in explaining this tension. As we will see in later chapters, theories typically emphasize the things held in one hand or the other. *Psychodynamic theory*, for example, locates the problem within the "person" hand. In our depressed male case, it encourages us to look to unresolved past psychological issues as primary sources of his depression. *Cognitive-behavioral theory* also locates the problem within the person hand and suggests that the client has unproductive thought patterns that make and keep him depressed. This theory may connect, for example, his inability to find work with a view of himself as inherently flawed. Other approaches, such as *social learning theory,* look to the "environment" hand, explaining our client's problem on the basis of what he has learned from various social groups, especially those modeling harmful behaviors.

Persons and environments are both divine priorities. Consider, for example, how God interacts with us as separate and unique persons, demonstrating the importance of our individuality. Our unique emotions, concerns, and circumstances are never outside of God's concern. The Psalm writers speak often of God's tender and watchful care for their needs as individuals. On the other hand, God desires just environments where people can flourish as persons, families, and communities. The Old Testament prophets write about our responsibility to work toward policies and practices that are characterized by mercy and justice. We are called to fight injustice and its consequences in our local and global communities. Indeed, Scripture speaks of the ways in which God attends to both the "person" and "environment" hands by attending to us individually while simultaneously shepherding all of humanity, not to mention the entirety of the natural world. Imagine God holding you and the entire universe in His hands. Colossians 1:17 indicates that indeed God is holding all things together through the work of Jesus Christ.

Adding to the complexity of our person and environment challenge is the reality that development is constantly in flux. This is true because nature, nurture, and environmental influences themselves are constantly changing. Human development is not only unique in the way it plays out within each individual; it's an ever-moving target. Children get older and grow up, poverty increases or decreases, physical bodies decline, and religious beliefs strengthen and weaken.

What does this mean for social workers seeking to understand their clients well in order to help them well? Among other things, it means that while most of us like simple answers to problems, categories do not sufficiently capture or explain human development. Grouping individuals by things such as age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status gives us helpful parameters, but never the complete picture. Theories are also useful, but also fall short. Instead, what is consistently required from each of us is a posture of humility and curiosity toward the persons we serve. The complexity of these persons and their environments necessitates carefully listening to their stories and the particular ways they have been shaped by their places and experiences. Ultimately, this is what makes social work so fascinating — no story is the same.

This book reaches farther than most by incorporating faith-based themes with our understanding of persons and environments. This is an important gap in social work literature as the Christian faith offers insights about persons and environments that add remarkable depth and wisdom. As persons of faith in social work, we draw upon rich theological themes related to God, our roles in relationship to God, and the world we

inhabit. For example, biblical themes related to our individuality, relationality, and embodiment provide the appropriate context for accurately understanding human behavior and development.

Our faith has much to say about human nature. For example, the Bible highlights the fallen, sinful nature of humans, a stark reality for each of us. Christian theology also highlights the ways that sin extends to all of creation and, therefore, leaves its indelible mark on every social institution—families, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and even churches. Every conceivable environment has been tainted by sin. We see its destructive consequences in our own actions, the actions of others toward us, and the large-scale actions of nations. As social workers, we see the marks of sin all over the cases in which we work.

But the Christian story is ultimately one of redemption and hope. Though sin is destructive and the world deeply broken, God has hardly abandoned His creation. Jesus Himself comes to us like a physician to the sick, offering grace, mercy, and healing. As Christians in social work, we act as God's hands and feet, his tangible, earthly representatives. But we must never imagine ourselves as those who are first on the scene. God is always there before us, calling forth light from darkness.

The Bible also reveals the deeply relational nature of humans, that is, the way in which we are created and hardwired for connection with God and other people. Healthy and life-giving relationships form the rich context—the environment—by which we experience divine and human love. Relationships enable us to grow into the persons we were originally created to be and to fulfill the purposes for which we were created.

We will explore each of these points later, but for now we can conclude that Christianity provides particular insights that should not be minimized or ignored. Yes, the study of persons and their environments is complex, but we're also given foundational parameters by which to ground our exploration. Anchoring our study of Human Behavior in the Social Environment [HBSE] in these theological truths enhances our ability to understand persons and their environments.

I want to note at the start that a Christian perspective does not negate the importance of the many theories of human behavior or development offered by social work or sister disciplines. A Christian understanding can, however, prompt us to question, enthusiastically adopt, or soundly reject some of the presuppositions underlying commonly-held theories. By examining theories in light of biblical themes, we are better equipped to understand and serve. Additionally, I am not suggesting that there is necessarily a qualitative difference between the work done by Christians in social work and social workers from other backgrounds. That is not my argument here.

Instead, I outline a perspective I believe to be helpful and important to Christians in social work. We cannot fully understand ourselves and one another without grasping, for example, the ways we were created. Or appreciate the power of sin to deceive and tempt, drawing us toward activities that ultimately bring harm. How often do we as social workers become exasperated when we coach our clients about the right thing to do, yet they still choose the wrong direction. An understanding of biblical themes can lead us to more accurately understand the dynamics surrounding our clients and their struggles. By this I do not imply just an *intellectual* grasp of the situation, but an understanding that translates into empathy, grace, and accountability. I believe that a more accurate assessment of persons and their situations, one that accounts for biblical themes of human nature, also facilitates responses that more closely reflect those to which we are called.

Accounting for biblical themes is also important because it can sustain us during times of discouragement. Working with people is less predictable than working with, say, computers. Both entail flexibility and trouble-shooting, but our clients cannot be programmed to act in the ways we wish they would. At times they make destructive and harmful decisions. When you care about people and their environments, setbacks are disheartening. Grounding ourselves in realities such as human agency, fallenness, and promise of redemption can sustain us when we feel ineffective or even angry. Understanding the nature of persons can, for example, allow us to be faithful in our work while remembering that ultimately persons make their own choices. In complex situations where we play only a small role, an understanding of God's redemptive heart allows us to trust that He is always present and working.

At this point, I want to briefly explain the organization of the text. The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 explores the frameworks and theories of HBSE from a faith-based perspective. Part 2 covers six stages of the lifespan, using case studies to apply some of the theories and frameworks from Part 1. In this sense, Part 1 is designed to be more theoretical and Part 2 to be more applied.

The book is further divided into twelve chapters. Five key biblical themes are briefly identified in the beginning of the book and further discussed in Chapter 1. These themes are not intended to be inclusive, but were chosen because of their application to HBSE. Chapter 2 discusses a theological perspective for HBSE. The biological, psychological, and social realms—the biopsychosocial perspective—was used to organize Chapters 3–6. Chapters 7–12 examine cases across the lifespan using some of the principles described in Part 1. In sum, this book pulls together three

streams by examining: (1) biblical themes and a theological model in Chapters 1–2, (2) the intersection of biblical themes and biological, social, and psychological theories in Chapters 3–6, and (3) the practical application of biblical themes to various stages of the lifespan in Chapters 7–12.

Like every author who comes from a particular vantage point, I want to be transparent about the theological and denominational perspective from which I am writing. My point in doing so is not to suggest my denominational tradition as the preferable one, but simply to identify my roots for the sake of reader understanding. During the majority of my adult years, I have been discipled within the Reformed tradition, and careful readers may hear this denominational "accent" throughout. But each of us speaks with our own accent and must listen carefully to one another's core message. That type of listening is cultivated and intentional, a gift to the speaker.

I have written this text for Christians in social work, while acknowledging this as a wonderfully diverse group. While we likely will not agree on every matter, I write with hopes that this text may be helpful to a group with many common core beliefs. Related to this point, please note that I have chosen to refer to God with male pronouns throughout this book, more for ease in reading than as a specific theological statement.

Readers should also note that this book takes an intentionally micro HBSE focus. Due to space limitations, many critically important macro issues, including groups, communities, social welfare politics and policies, and economic forces will not be significantly addressed. Understand that in no way does this lessen their importance, however, to fully grasping the complexity of human behavior and development.

I wish to acknowledge two excellent texts which greatly influenced this work. *The Reciprocal Self* by Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstyne King, and Kevin S. Reimer informed my thinking around relational reciprocity and Trinitarian anthropology. *Exploring Psychology and Christian Faith* by Donald J. Tellinghuisen and Paul Moes was equally influential. Their delineation of biblical themes and their general tone influenced my approach in this text. To each of these authors, my sincere gratitude.

This text is designed to accompany standard HBSE textbooks. It has self-contained chapters that may be read and used interchangeably. It is for students and social workers on the frontlines who wish to better understand the remarkable persons you serve. Those on the frontlines also include those working to improve the world by setting and impacting public policy and filling critical leadership roles within the field. This book is also for you, because ultimately persons and environments form the basis of all social work practice.

My hope is that God may guide us in better understanding how and why He has made us. May we all grow and develop in the right direction.

Balswick, J.O., King, P.E., & Reimer, K.S. (2016). *The reciprocating self*: *Human development in theological perspective* (2nd edition). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Tellinguisen, D.J. & Moes, P. (2014). *Exploring psychology and Christian faith*: *An introductory guide*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.