

## CHAPTER TWO SYSTEMS THEORY

This chapter discusses five interrelated theories:

- A. Structural functionalism
- B. The ecological perspective
- C. General systems theory (also called dynamic systems theory)
- D. Deep Ecology
- E. Ecofeminism

### IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

**Adaptation:** the process by which a system copes with external demands by securing the necessary resources from the environment; theoretically, systems and their environments mutually adapt to one another.

**Boundary:** distinguishes a system from its environment.

**Deep ecology:** an extension of systems theory that emphasizes the inseparability of humans and the planetary ecology, the importance of diversity within human societies and natural ecosystems, and responsibility for humans to promote the welfare of all beings and the earth as a whole.

**Dynamic systems theory:** proposes that human systems are characterized by development, creativity and transformation and that humans also have the capacity for symbolic activity.

**Ecofeminism:** an extension of systems theory that critiques the patriarchal oppressions of women and nature while promoting justice for all people and all beings in the planetary ecology.

**Ecological self:** a deep ecological awareness that the human individual self is fully interrelated and identified with the total planetary and cosmic ecosystem, giving rise to a sense of compassion for all beings and the earth itself as a living being.

**Ecosystems theory:** (also known as *the life model*) an early formulation by social work educators that proposed an evolutionary, adaptive view of people and focused on *transactions* between people and their environments.

**Entropy:** the tendency of a closed social system to become increasingly disorganized and stagnant.

**Equifinality:** the idea that systems can achieve similar end states or outcomes by using different paths or by beginning from different points.

**Feedback:** information that a suprasystem gives to the system about the system's output.

**Focal System:** the system that you are focusing on at any given point in time; it is your primary system of attention or focus.

**Functionalism:** relates the parts of society to the whole and relates one part to another.

**Homeokinesis:** a process of constant flow and change, including interaction of morphostasis for continuity and morphogenesis for transformation, that results in ongoing dynamic system development.

**Interdependence:** because systems are interrelated, systems are dependent upon one another and, thus, a change in one system will lead to a change in other systems.

**Interrelatedness:** the idea that systems are related to one another because each system is a system unto itself contains smaller systems within it, and at the same time is part of a larger system.

**Morphogenesis:** the self-transforming (form changing) property of dynamic systems.

**Morphostasis:** the self-maintaining property of dynamic systems.

**Negative entropy:** (also called neg-entropy) the exchanges of energy and resources between systems that promote growth and transformation.

**Organicism:** an analogy that compares social systems to biological organisms.

**Self preservation:** the tendency of systems to maintain and sustain themselves.

**Social system:** a system that is composed of persons or groups who interact and influence each other's behavior.

**Structural functionalism:** an elaboration of functionalism that examines both the structure and function of social systems.

**Subsystem:** a system that is part of the focal system and is smaller than and internal to the focal.

**Suprasystem:** a system that is external to the focal system; this is often referred to as the environment.

**Synergy:** transactions within or between human systems that lead to enhanced creativity and fulfillment.

**System:** a set of interrelated and interdependent objects.

**Systems Functions:** Dynamic systems must perform the four functions of goal direction, input, throughput and output.

**The ecological perspective:** a broader ecological systems perspective derived from anthropology and sociology that now includes the concepts of coercive and exploitative power.

**Transperspectival approach:** an approach to understanding that engenders creative dialogue and interaction among people of all vantage points.

## Test Questions

### Objective Questions:

1. The term holon refers to:
  - a. the interrelatedness and interdependence of systems components
  - b. the relationship between and among the focal, sub and supra systems
  - c. the necessity of having clearly defined boundaries between systems
  - d. all of the above
  - e. only a and b
  
2. Germain and Gitterman's Ecosystems theory is derived from:
  - a. ecological theory in the social sciences
  - b. the feminist response to deep ecology
  - c. developmental psychology
  - d. general systems theory
  - e. a and d.
  - f. a, c, and d
  
3. Dynamic systems theory stresses:
  - a. the importance of stability for systems maintenance
  - b. the importance of change for systemic growth
  - c. the importance of both stability and change
  - d. none of the above
  
4. Dynamic systems theory supports:
  - a. a behavioral approach to helping
  - b. a transprofessional approach to helping
  - c. a psychodynamic approach to helping
  - d. a cognitive approach to helping
  
5. Structural functionalism:
  - a. is primarily applicable to individuals and families
  - b. has been widely used in social work
  - c. is a major paradigm in sociological thought
  - d. is best known for its promotion of social justice
  
6. A value commitment most strongly associated with Deep Ecology Theory is:
  - a. conflict is usually necessary and desirable
  - b. deviance and conflict should be eliminated whenever possible
  - c. compassion should be extended to all beings
  - d. human beings should exploit nature for their own benefit
  
7. Ecofeminism shares the following values and beliefs with deep ecology:
  - a. patriarchal oppression of women is the basis of oppression of nature
  - b. justice should be applied to all people and all beings
  - c. human-centered thinking contributes to imbalance in human-nature relations
  - d. all of the above
  - e. only b and c
  
8. The concept of synergy means that every system is both a whole and a part.  
True      False
  
9. The functionalist concept of homeostasis implies that a society has a tendency to

experience creative development through revolutionary conflict.

True      False

10. In dynamic systems theory, morphogenesis and morphostasis interact in the process of homeokinesis.

True      False

11. According to dynamic systems theory, in order to grow, living systems must have semipermeable boundaries.

True      False

12. Change that is gradual is termed synergistic.

True      False

13. According to structural functionalism, survival of a system depends on functions that promote fundamental social change.

True      False

14. Deep ecology developed, in part, as an effort to address spiritual and moral aspects of relations between humans and nature.

True      False

15. Deep ecology and ecofeminism both promote social activism against environmental racism.

True      False

### **Essay Questions:**

1. Compare and contrast the basic assumptions of structural functionalism, the ecological perspective, dynamic systems theory and deep ecology.
2. Some systems based theories have been criticized for their conservative nature and acceptance of the status quo. Discuss fully, giving examples.
3. Some authors have proposed that systems theory be used as an overarching, unifying theory for social work practice, while others have contested this view. Discuss the basic tenets underlying both of these positions.
4. Discuss the philosophical assumptions that underlie systemically based theories and analyze their consistency with the social work values of client self-determination, acceptance of human diversity, and the commitment to social justice.
5. Discuss the strengths and limitations of systemically based theories as they apply to the broad range of social work populations, practice settings and potential interventions with clients. Use specific examples to illustrate your answer.
6. Discuss how social work practice guided by deep ecology and ecofeminism would be different from the more conventional social work based on the life model or structural functionalism. Give examples of types of social problems that might be addressed.

### **Class Activities and Exercises**

1. Examine the flow charts for possible applications of systems based theories. Construct a case scenario that would illustrate one such application.
2. Review the table on possible settings for application of a systems based theory to practice. Choose one setting from the table and develop a case discussion illustrating application of the chosen theory.

## Chapter 2

### *Objective Questions:*

1. e
2. f
3. c
4. b
5. c
6. c
7. e
8. False
9. False
10. True
11. True
12. False
13. False
14. True
15. True