



The University of South Dakota

SCHOOL OF HEALTH SCIENCES

SOCIAL WORK

**SOCIAL WORK**

414 East Clark Street

Vermillion, SD 57069

605-677-5401

605-677-7213 fax

[www.usd.edu/socialwork](http://www.usd.edu/socialwork)

[socialwork@usd.edu](mailto:socialwork@usd.edu)

## Theoretical Framework

### **Applied biopsychosocial science with a strengths-based perspective using evidence based decision making processes.**

While social workers increasingly generate their own new knowledge, we understand our professional identity to be anchored in the application of the empirical findings from the biopsychosocial sciences for the welfare of others (Competency 2.1.1). Accordingly, our theoretical framework looks to the empirical findings from a variety of disciplines for support (Competency 2.1.7), as follows:

- Biology: health, medicine, neurobiology, epigenomics
- Psychology: developmental, social, clinical, experimental, spirituality
- Social: economics, sociology, public policy, religion, cross-culture, law, education

We believe that application of biopsychosocial empirical findings (Competency 2.1.6) to social work engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation (Competency 2.1.10) is facilitated by adopting the evidence based behavioral practice process. The EBBP process is best understood as a five step collaborative, complex, and systematic decision-making process in which the best available research evidence (from qualitative insights through randomized controlled trials), client subjectivities, and practitioner expertise are combined in a comprehensive ecological environment (Competency 2.1.9). These five cyclical decision-making steps can be summarized as:

- Ask important questions (Competency 2.1.2)
- Acquire the best biopsychosocial evidence (Competency 2.1.6)
- Appraise that evidence critically (Competency 2.1.3)
- Apply the evidence in a manner sensitive to client subjectivities and practitioner expertise (Competency 2.1.10)
- Analyze the outcomes and adjust (Competency 2.1.9)

We consider empiricism alone, however, to be an inadequate epistemological perspective from which to define social work engagements, assessments, interventions, and evaluations because of the neglect of professional social work values (Competency 2.1.2). In the absence of a paradigm through which to access, interpret, and apply the findings of the biopsychosocial sciences, social and institutional power disparities will inevitably define population needs, social problems, and the response of social welfare systems in a deficiency framework.

Thus, our theoretical framework intentionally adopts a strengths-based perspective through which we interpret biopsychosocial empirical findings in the development of social work engagement, assessments, interventions, and evaluations (Competency 2.1.10). The strengths-based perspective serves two heuristic functions. First, the strengths-based perspective is the filter through which client decisions and behaviors are understood to be functional adaptations to failures in social and/or institutional structures. From this perspective, population needs are formed in existing social and institutional power inequities, which are root causes of social problems. Adoption of the strengths-based perspective, accordingly, undergirds our

commitment to human and social justice (Competency 2.1.5), diversity (Competency 2.1.4), and policy practice (Competency 2.1.8).

Secondly, the strengths-based perspective is the filter which informs the initial step in the EBBP process: ask important questions. We believe *importance* is a qualitative measure of value that is best reflected in the strengths-based perspective. In our view this perspective is fully compatible with professional social work values (service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence) and, in effect, provides a paradigm in which to operationalize these values in raising meaningful questions (Competency 2.1.2).

We conceive of our theoretical framework as three concentric circles (see Figure 1 below). The empirical findings from the biopsychosocial sciences are at the core of our framework and surrounded by the five cyclical steps of the EBBP process. The outer ring represents the environment containing social and institutional inequities and failures from which population needs (micro, mezzo, macro levels of ecosystems), social problems, and the response of social welfare systems emerge. Between the environment and the empirical findings accessed through the EBBP process is our strengths-based filter which functions, on the one hand, to define and interpret the population needs and social problems presented by the environment, and on the other hand, to initiate the EBBP process through which we access empirical evidence to support social work engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation. As illustrated by the diagram below, the strengths-based perspective opens the EBBP decision making model to client focused interpretations of their position within the environment and the influence of social institutions in their lives.

Figure 1

