

• P A R T O N E •

OVERVIEW

Part 1 introduces the historical context for the life model. The current conceptual framework of the ecological perspective for social work practice follows the historical perspective. A brief overview of life-modeled practice is also presented: its defining features, modalities, methods, and skills. Part 1 concludes with a discussion of assessment, practice monitoring, and practice evaluation.

Chapter 1 traces themes and trends in the United States' historical development of social work's practice purposes and methods. Particular attention is paid to the historical dialectics such as cause-function (social action-clinical treatment), generalist-specialist, and the science and art of practice. The current societal context (economic, political, legislative, and cultural) and its impact on current professional developments are explored.

Chapter 2 reviews the major ecological concepts that underlie life-modeled practice:

1. Ecological thinking focuses on the reciprocity of person:environment exchanges, in which each shapes and influences the other over time. (The colon is used to repair the conceptually fractured relationship suggested by the hyphen in *person-environment*.)
2. Varied levels of fit between people's needs, goals, and rights, and their environment's qualities and processes, within a historical and cultural context; adaptedness and adaptation, achieved by making changes in the self, the environment, or both in order to improve or sustain the level of fit;

- maladaptiveness leading to dysfunctional perceptions, emotions, thinking, and action; and positive and negative feedback processes.
3. Salutary and nonsalutary human habitats and niches.
 4. Vulnerability, oppression, abuse or misuse of power, and social and technological pollution.
 5. The “life course” conception of nonuniform pathways to human development and functioning, replacing traditional formulations that consider development a journey through fixed, sequential, universal stages. The life course conception incorporates human, environmental, and cultural diversity, and it is applicable to individuals and groups. It also makes use of temporal concepts—historic, social, and individual time—in considering psychosocial functioning.
 6. Life stressors that threaten the level of fit and lead to associated emotional or physiological stress, and the coping tasks that require personal skills and environmental resources for managing the life stressors and reducing the associated stress.
 7. Resilience reflects moment-to-moment consequences and outcomes of complex person:environment transactions and not simply attributes of a person. Protective factors that help people to negotiate high-risk situations include (1) temperament, (2) family patterns, (3) external supports, and (4) environmental resources.
 8. Deep ecology deepens our understanding that all phenomena are interconnected and interdependent as well as dependent on the cyclical processes of nature. The interdependence of networks, the self-correcting feedback loops, and the cyclical nature of ecological processes are three basic principles of deep ecology.
 9. Ecological feminism or ecofeminism challenges the culture/nature dichotomy. To ecofeminists, the oppression of women and ecological degradation are intertwined: both evolve from hierarchical, male domination. Hierarchical structures and oppression are always together.

Chapter 3 provides a brief overview of the origins and characteristics of life-modeled practice. Ten features, in unique combination, define life-modeled practice: (1) professional purpose and function, which includes practice with individuals, families, groups, and communities, and organizational and political advocacy; (2) ethical practice; (3) diversity-sensitive and skillful practice; (4) empowering and social justice practice; (5) integrated modalities, methods, and skills; (6) the client:worker relationship regarded as a partnership; (7) agreements, assessments, and life stories; (8) a focus on personal and collective strengths and on client action and decision making; (9) the pervasive significance of social and physical environments and culture; (10) the evaluation of practice and contribution to knowledge building.

The preparatory, initial, ongoing, and ending phases of work structure life-modeled practice, even in one-session and episodic services, where the phases are temporally collapsed. Life-modeled practice focuses on (1) painful

life transitions and traumatic life events; (2) poverty, oppression, and unresponsiveness or harshness of social and physical environments; and (3) dysfunctional interpersonal processes in families or groups and sometimes between the practitioner and the people served. These and many other aspects are considered in greater detail and depth in parts 2 and 3.

Chapter 4 examines assessment tasks common to all practice approaches as well as a few underlying beliefs that are distinct to life-modeled practice. Life-modeled practice strongly values and encourages *client participation* in the assessment tasks, and emphasizes assessment of the *level of fit* between human needs and environmental resources. Graphic representations—ecomap, genogram, and social network map—and force-field analysis provide a visual “snapshot” of individuals’, families’, groups’, communities’, social networks’, and organizations’ capacities to deal with stressors and change.

The chapter also examines the tasks and skills of practice monitoring. To truly monitor practice interventions, they must be evaluated by how the client experiences and evaluates their connectedness to the underlying messages being conveyed rather than by what the professional intended to accomplish. Various practice-monitoring instruments are discussed and illustrated. The chapter concludes with an examination of the strengths and limitations of different research designs used to evaluate practice outcomes.

We hope that the examination of historical context and contemporary societal and professional themes, the ecological concepts, and the overview of the totality of life-modeled practice and issues related to assessment, practice monitoring, and practice evaluation in part 1 will help the reader move confidently and eagerly into parts 2 and 3 and their detailed study of a complex professional practice. It is complex because it is designed to prepare students and seasoned practitioners to move knowledgeably and skillfully among varied modalities (individual, family, group, neighborhood and community, organizational, and political) as needed.

