

Basic Concepts to Understand Individuals

The basic concepts necessary to understand individuals might begin with their stage of development to determine how best to proceed. You can then take a look at the role(s) being filled by the individual to get an idea of what they feel their expectations and those of others are. Communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is also important during your interactions. Most of these concepts stem from specific paradigms built throughout the history of trying to understand human behavior. Two separate paradigms, traditional / dominant, and alternative / possible are currently in use with each created from very different criteria.

Traditional / Dominant

The traditional / dominant paradigm relies heavily on more concrete, measurable and observable processes for understanding human behavior. The methods used to gather information for this worldview also determine what is worth knowing. A great value is placed on masculinity and the power of men in society, specifically in relation to decision-making. In addition, the paradigm bases its viewpoint in terms of “whiteness” or with the idea that all knowledge being gathered may not be consistent with individuals outside of those of white European descent. The traditional paradigm also tends to want to separate people and view them in competition with one another instead of working together.

The traditional paradigm can be useful when trying to help with issues of expectations and adverse behaviors. We can explore stages of development in an attempt to understand behavior or we can seek to identify the reinforcement that encourages the behavior to continue. Since these theories have been based on observable standards many of them rely on individuals passing through specific stages before developing further. This can be very helpful as a guideline, but it seems to leave out the human element. Working with a foundation built on ideas that correspond to one gender and one race leaves out the potential to understand the remainder of civilization.

Examples of the traditional viewpoint

- a. Freud’s psychodynamic model
- b. Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages of Development – Eight stages of man
- c. Levinson’s Adult Development – life cycle consist of 4 eras
- d. Piaget’s model – 4 major developmental periods

Alternative / Possible

The alternative / possible paradigm is a much more inclusive viewpoint. It does not try to exclude all values of the traditional paradigm but recognize that they are not the only possible way of understanding human behavior. The alternative paradigm does not require that all methods produce information that can be accurately measured and observed. There is more room for being subjective and intuitive. Interpretation has great value and individuals must face personal levels of awareness. In addition, this alternative view allows for ideas to be collaborative and shaped by experiences and culture. It acknowledges that diversity exists and also shapes the behaviors of individuals. The alternative paradigm allows us to use an individual's strengths to try and bring about positive changes and helps empower the client. It requires the social worker to be responsible for integrating skills and values of diverse cultures. This view also looks at issues of wellness and spirituality, which can be incorporated into finding strength for a client.

Examples of the alternative viewpoint

- a. Ecological model – implications of a person in their environment
- b. Gardner's multiple intelligences – develop skills important to your way of life
- c. Gibbs and Huang's interactive model of identity formation – child development through interacting perspectives
- d. White identity – pattern of whites forming identity in relation to people of color
- e. Cross—stages of African American identify development

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