ResearchGate

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304075811

Social Work Theories

Chapter · January 2015

CITATIONS
2

READS
91,075

1 author:



Barbra Teater
City University of New York - College of Staten Island
94 PUBLICATIONS **745** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Project Integrative Family and Systems Treatment (I-FAST) Project View project

Project Restorative Peer Mentoring with Returned Citizens and Justice-Involved Youth View project

All content following this page was uploaded by Barbra Teater on 18 June 2016.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.

28092. Social Work Theories

Barbra Teater, Ph.D.

University of Bristol

School for Policy Studies

8 Priory Road

Bristol, BS8 1TZ, UK

b.teater@bristol.ac.uk

+ 44 (0) 01179 546 787

Keywords
behavioral theory
cognitive theory
critical theory
developmental theory
humanistic theory
psychodynamic theory
social constructionism
social constructivism
social learning theory
social work
social work practice
social work theory
systems theory

Abstract

Social work theories serve as the foundation for social work practice by providing an understanding, explanation, and prediction of human behavior and social structures. Seven general categories of theories used in social work practice are reviewed and their relevance to the stages of social work practice of assessment, intervention, evaluation and endings, are discussed.

Introduction

Social work theories serve as the foundation for social work practice by providing an understanding, explanation and prediction of human behavior, social structures and social interactions. Theory informs each stage of the social work process from the initial stages of assessment, to selection and evaluation of interventions, to deciding when it is best to end services with clients. The profession of social work aims to promote social change and social justice by working with people and the environment in which they interact. Intervening within several different layers of society, including individuals, families, communities and societal and political structures, is necessary to achieve this aim. Therefore, social workers must have a firm

understanding of the operations of human behavior, relationships, social interactions and social and political organizations and structures. Theories provide the necessary knowledge to begin to achieve this aim.

Social Work Theory

A theory is an organized set of assumptions, beliefs or ideas about particular phenomena in the world. Theory is synonymous with hypothesis, presumption, speculation, belief, idea and philosophy and is used to help explain or predict situations, actions and consequences. The social work profession aims to intervene at the point where people meet their environment, which requires social workers to have an understanding of the operations and complexities of working with and within these different systems. Established theories serve as a basis on which to explain human behavior, growth and development, psychological and social functioning, the construction of social order, and the ideas of social justice.

Working within the different layers and multiple systems within society make social work a unique profession. Social work is a relatively new profession. It originated in the 19th century to address the economic inequalities that became more prominent after the end of feudalism and the emergence of the industrial revolution. Social workers aimed to combat the effects of poverty and promote social justice. In doing so, social workers needed to work with and understand human behavior, but also understand societal and political structures and the interactions between society and individuals. This need to focus on individuals, and the environment in which they live and interact, required the profession to look to other academic disciplines where established theories of humans, society and the interaction between the two were already established. Therefore, theories within social work are predominately drawn

from other longer-standing academic disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

The Importance and Use of Theory within Social Work

The social work process involves stages of assessment, intervention, evaluation and endings with an overall goal of promoting human growth and development and social justice (Teater, 2010; Turner, 2011). To initiate each of these stages, social workers must first have an understanding about how best to proceed with each stage given the particular situation, circumstances and setting in which the practice is taking place. Social workers are working with vulnerable people in situations that are variable. A single approach to social work practice will not fit all. Social workers must tailor their practice to fit the specific needs of the client given her/his circumstances and given a consideration of the environment in which the client is interacting. Theory is the critical factor in assisting social workers' understanding of a situation, hypothesizing about how to intervene and speculating and predicting what might happen in the future (Teater, 2010; Turner, 2011).

Theory guides social work practice at every stage. During the assessment stage, theories help to explain what is happening with a client, what could have contributed to the presenting problem, and what is needed or required to alleviate the problem. A consideration of biological, psychological and sociological theories during the assessment process assists in explaining the presenting problem and helps structure and organize the social worker's thinking toward the next step of intervention. The intervention stage is based on theories of why the intervention will work given the particular situation and setting. Finally, theories will guide a social worker in the evaluation stage of the social work process by re-assessing a client's biological, psychological and sociological functioning and explaining the best time to end services.

Social workers assess for risk and needs and then recommend the best course of action for the client. The outcome is anticipated to be positive by alleviating or diminishing a presenting problem, however, it could equally lead to negative outcomes due to negligent practice. Therefore, social workers should be held accountable for their work. One way to ensure accountability is to work within established theoretical frameworks, justifying the choice of theories and methods used based on evidence, and continually reflecting upon and evaluating the theories and methods used with the client.

The Relationship between Perspective, Theory, Method, and Model

Perspective, theory, method and model are all important in understanding the role and significance of social work theory. A perspective is a particular value base or point-of-view that informs how one sees the world. A theory serves to explain or predict situations and provides a rationale as to the course of action that is needed to alleviate presenting problems. A method is the course of action taken to alleviate or diminish the presenting problem (method is often used interchangeably with intervention, practice, or approach). The choice of method is based on the particular theories that have been used to explain the current situation. A model is a structured and organized description of what generally happens in a particular type of situation.

Perspective, theory, method and model are all equally important in social work practice as one concept depends, influences or relates to another (Payne, 2005). Theories are generally developed based on a particular perspective. A perspective will influence the type of theories that are used in practice. Theories influence the methods that are selected, and models help to put theories into practice using specific methods. Therefore, social work theories can only be fully understood when considered alongside perspectives, methods and models.

Types of Social Work Theory

Table 1 presents seven general types of theories that underpin social work practice, which are predominately developed within the professions of psychology and psychiatry and the academic disciplines of psychology, sociology and philosophy. The following theories were selected as they serve as the basis for understanding human behavior, social interactions and social constructions that is required to conduct efficient and effective social work practice. The theories range from explanations of individual biological, psychological, and social development, to theories that explain psychological functioning, relationships and social interactions, to theories that explain the societal influences on social order, construction of rules and norms, and explanations for inequalities and disadvantage. Table 1 includes the underlying perspectives and a selection of practice methods often employed when utilizing a particular theory.

<Table 1 near here>

Developmental Theories

Developmental theories explain the biological, psychological, social and emotional development as stages over a portion (childhood; adolescence, adulthood, old age) or the whole of the life span. Many developmental theories focus on the development during childhood, such as Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which describes how a child (from birth to over 11 years) moves through discrete stages of cognitive development and intellectual growth to where she/he learns how to think and reason (Crain, 2011). Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory provides an explanation of how a child develops socially and emotionally based on her/his attachment to a primary caregiver, and subsequently the types of relationships and attachments that the child will possess as an adult.

Other developmental theories focus on individuals across the whole of the life span. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development consists of eight continuous stages of life that spans from birth to death and details how a person develops based on biological, psychological and environmental factors (Crain, 2011). The eight stages consist of a type of tension or crisis that an individual needs to work through to move to the next stage. Completing each stage successfully will result in more positive and healthy psychosocial development. Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs is a lifespan developmental theory that explains how individuals must have certain needs met before they can move to achieve a higher level of need. Maslow's theorized needs starts with the basic physiological needs for survival and expands until the individual reaches the final need of self-actualization (a term often associated with humanistic theories). Additional theories focusing on the whole of the lifespan have examined faith, or spiritual, development (Fowler, 1981), and moral and ethical understanding and reasoning (Kohlberg, 1973). Although such theories influence social work practice, particularly through assessment, they have been criticized as being ethnocentric as they were developed based on Western (individualistic) societies, primarily with White men or middle-class individuals/families (Cianci and Gambrel, 2003).

Developmental theories influence social work practice by providing a basis for assessing and understanding a client's physiological, psychological, and emotional development. Such theories are primarily used in the assessment stage of social work practice where a social worker assesses the current level of development and functioning and uses this information to assist in explaining the client's situation, determine the most appropriate form of intervention, and hypothesize about future outcomes. Developmental theories are also useful during the evaluation and endings stages to determine any shifts or changes in levels of development.

Psychodynamic Theories

Psychodynamic theories focus on the psychological drives and forces within individuals that explain human behavior and personality. The theories originate from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, which focused on the unconscious mind as the source of psychological distress and dysfunction. Psychoanalytic theory proposed the need for psychoanalytic therapy where the aim is to bring the unresolved issues, developed during childhood, or repressed trauma buried within the unconscious to the conscious mind in order for the client to begin to address these unresolved and underlying problems (Sharf, 2012).

Psychodynamic theories primarily deal with the unconscious motives that underpin an individual's personality and behavior. Childhood experiences are seen as critical in the development of the personality, behavior and psychological thinking of an individual in later life, particularly psychological distress and dysfunction. Freud's Drive Theory, involving the three states of being (id, ego, and superego), are seen as important in understanding the role of the unconscious. The id is the unconscious that seeks self-gratification and fuels instincts, the superego is the conscious moral reasoning based on one's moral values and society's values, and the ego is the mediator between the id and the superego and seeks to make decisions based on the id's instincts and need for self-gratification and the superego's call for decisions based on moral values (Sharf, 2012).

Defense mechanisms, transference and counter-transference are terms often used when considering psychodynamic theories. Defense mechanisms are the tools used by the unconscious mind to prevent anxiety caused by unresolved issues and trauma. The mechanisms distort reality and are used to protect oneself by distancing from reality. Common defense mechanisms include denial, disassociation, regression,

acting out, projection, or displacement (Sharf, 2012). Transference explains the act of a client unconsciously projecting thoughts, feeling and experiences of relationships or interactions with previous significant figures onto a social worker. Counter-transference is where the social worker's unconscious responds to signals received from the client and the social worker acts out a particular role (e.g., taking a parenting role) (Ruch, 2010).

Additional theorists have expanded on the ideas of the role of the unconscious and have shifted the attention in psychodynamic thought from one that focused on conflict, to one that focuses more on relationships. Jungian analysis and therapy explores the conscious and unconscious, but is equally interested in extroverted and introverted personality, archetypes, symbols and dreams (Sharf, 2012). Adler's individual psychology, more commonly referred to as differential psychology, explores the ideas of inferiority, superiority, birth order, and individual differences (Sharf, 2012). Klein's object relations theory explores how relationships developed in infancy and childhood are embedded in the unconscious mind and form the focus of individuals'' drives, views of themselves and others, influences their personality in adulthood, and dictates how they interact in interpersonal relationships (Sharf, 2012). Kohut's self-psychology expanded on object relations theory and aims to focus more on the self and the deficits within the self (Sharf, 2012).

Crisis theory is also classified as a psychodynamic theory as it explains how people cope with stressful situations and how they have the capability to grow, develop and change based on the crisis. The theory holds that individuals reach a state of crisis when their existing coping skills are unable to deal with stressful or traumatic situations resulting in psychological and physiological distress (Caplan, 1964).

Psychodynamic theories are useful in social work assessments to explore a client's past experiences, hypothesize about how such experiences are contributing to the presenting problem and how to address the problem (or crisis). In this sense, psychodynamic theories influence social work assessments as well as the interventions employed, such as psychotherapy, crisis intervention, or transactional analysis. Acknowledgements and understandings of defense mechanisms can assist a social worker in explaining a client's behavior, interpersonal relationships or reactions to information. Considering the role of transference and countertransference can assist the social worker in building the social work-client relationship (Ruch, 2010).

Behavioral, Cognitive and Social Learning Theories

Behavioral, cognitive and social learning theories explain how individuals come to learn how to think, feel and behave. Behavioral and social learning theories were developed by theorists who disagreed with the psychodynamic theorists. Instead, they hypothesized that individuals learn how to behave by cognitively and behaviorally responding to cues received from the interactions with their social environment.

The development of behavioral and social learning theories originated through experiments conducted by psychologists during the early 1900s that explored how animals can be conditioned to respond in a particular way. The studies from Ivan Pavlov and John Watson lead to the ideas of classical and respondent conditioning, which proposed that behaviors are the result of prior learning and can be learned and unlearned. The studies from Edward Lee Thorndike and B. F. Skinner lead to the ideas of operant or instrumental conditioning, which proposed that providing positive or negative consequences to behaviors lead to learning. Thorndike and Skinner found that positive consequences for behavior, or positive reinforcers, will lead to an increase in the occurrence of the behavior and negative consequences, or negative reinforcers, will

result in a decrease in the occurrence of the behavior (Teater, 2010). Therefore, the behavioral theories postulate that behaviors can be learned, unlearned and modified based on the reinforcers received from the social environment.

Bandura's social learning theory (1977) extends on the behavioral theory by stating that not only do individuals learn to think, feel and behave through the receipt of reinforcers, but they also learn through observing and then modeling the actions of others. Individuals must observe a model (e.g., parents; teachers; media characters), pay attention to the behaviors or actions of the model, imitate the behaviors or actions, and receive a reinforcement (positive or negative) for modeling the behavior or action, which will influence whether the behavior or action is imitated in the future.

Cognitive theory is also a learning theory, but rather than addressing the learning of behaviors that occur merely through reinforcers from the social environment, cognitive theory aims to explain how humans are thinking creatures who will make choices about their behavior based on what makes the most sense to them. Cognitive theory, as expressed through Ellis' A-B-C model, states that individuals experience an activating event (A), they process this event through their cognition and belief system (B), which mediates the behavioral consequence (C) (Sharf, 2012).

Behavioral, cognitive and social learning theories are useful to social work practice as they provide a basis for exploring how behaviors are learned and unlearned, how a client's social environment can be positively or negatively reinforcing particular thoughts, feelings and behaviors, or how a client's cognition and belief system can be contributing to problematic behaviors. Such theories are primarily used in the intervention stage of social work practice where a social worker attempts to modify or eliminate a particular thought, feeling or behavior. Such interventions often used in

social work practice are: task-centered social work, cognitive therapy; behavioral therapy; cognitive behavioral therapy; or group work.

Humanistic Theories

Humanistic theories used within social work practice originated from humanistic psychology, which developed in response to the psychodynamic and behavioral theories that focused on human behavior and personality being determined by the unconscious or through reinforcers from the social environment. Humanistic psychology saw that these two prominent theories viewed individuals in response to events that they were not able to fully control and failed to view the individual as meaning-making and purposeful. Humanist theories stress the ultimate good of humans and their potential, creativity, health, hope, meaning, connection, purpose and ability to reach self-actualization, or for individuals to achieve their full potential (Crain, 2011).

Phenomenology and existentialism are two theoretical schools of thought that underpin Humanistic theory. Phenomenology is the exploration of conscious perspectives and experiences of phenomena and the meanings one attributes to such phenomena. Existentialism focuses on individual existence and the meaning one gives to her/his life. The central aspect to both phenomenology and existentialism is the lived subjective and conscious experiences of individuals, how individuals experience and attribute meaning to the phenomena to which they encounter, how they make sense of life, and how they make sense of their place and meaning within the world (Sharf, 2012).

The five core values of humanistic theory include the following: (1) human beings supersede the sum of their parts; (2) human beings have their existence in a uniquely human context, as well as in a cosmic ecology; (3) human beings are conscious. They are aware and aware of being aware both of oneself and in the context of other

people; (4) human beings have some choice and, thus, responsibility; and (5) human beings are intentional, aim at goals, are aware that they cause future events, and seek meaning, value and creativity (Greening, 2006, p. 239).

Humanistic theory can be found to underpin aspects of developmental theories, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where an individual aims to achieve self-actualization, and Erikson's later stage of old age, ego integrity versus despair, as well as many therapeutic approaches that aim to explore and respect the experiences of individuals as humans and the meanings they attribute to such phenomena. Humanistic theory underpins Rogers' person-centered approach, which highlights the importance of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness in developing a therapeutic relationship that will lead to personality and behavioral change within the client (Sharf, 2012).

Humanistic theories are useful to social work practice as they provide a theoretical basis for viewing individuals, their experiences in the world and the meanings they attribute to such experiences. Such theories are primarily used in assessment and intervention stages of social work practice. Using humanistic theories in the assessment stage would involve a social worker being empathic, having unconditional positive regard and being genuine when interacting with a client in order to establish a relationship and fully see the client as an individual when assessing her/his situation. The intervention stage might involve a social worker employing interventions that would explore the client's experiences, meanings, hopes, and aspirations. Such interventions often used in social work practice are: person-centered approach; existential therapy; counseling; gestalt therapy; hypnosis; meditation; motivational interviewing and advocacy.

Social Constructivist Theories

Social constructivist theories focus on the creation of reality and how individuals view the world. The theories are related to the humanistic theories, discussed above, in that they were influenced by phenomenology as well as philosophical ideas of what is real and what is socially constructed. The basis of the modern social constructivist theories stems from Berger and Luckman (1966) who explored reality creation and the influence of individual meaning based on life experiences, societal and cultural expectations, rules and norms, which they termed social constructionism. Since then, several theorists have refined social constructionism into three more specific theories, which emphasis either individual or social forces in reality construction (Teater, 2010). Social constructionism holds that reality is constructed through the use of language in interactions with others and is primarily influenced by history, society and culture. Constructivism holds that reality is constructed more through one's biological forces through developmental processes, cognitive structures and the human mind. Social constructivism combines both social constructionism and constructivism by placing the emphasis of reality construction on both societal and biological factors. There is a joint focus on reality construction being influenced by both nature and nurture.

Social constructivist theories have underpinned several theories often used within social work practice. Symbolic interactionism focuses on three core principles of meaning, language and thought. The theory proposed that people use symbols (words, rules, roles) to give meaning and to make sense of the world. The meanings are transmitted to others through language. People are believed to interact with others and society and assign meaning and symbols to these types of interactions and relationships (DeLamater and Myers, 2011). Future interactions are, therefore, dependent on the types of meanings and symbols one has attributed to that relationship or situation, thus, individuals act on what they believe versus what is objectively true. Communication

theory holds that people cannot NOT communicate and that all behavior is communication and all communication affects behavior (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Role theory examines how people play out socially defined roles (e.g. mother, sister, wife, manager, teacher) and their ability to adhere to society's expectations of acceptable and unacceptable forms of behavior for the particular role (DeLamater and Myers, 2011).

Social constructivist theories are useful to social work practice as they provide a theoretical basis for understanding how realities and views of the world are individual-specific and created through a combination of interactions with society, the societal structures of history, culture, rules and norms, and the meanings that individuals attribute to such interactions. Such theories are primarily used in the assessment and intervention stages of social work practice. Using social constructivist theories in assessment involves a social worker taking a position of curiosity with the client, using language to attempt to understand the client's reality and view of the world, and acknowledging that no two clients have the same reality of view of the world despite living through similar experiences. The intervention stage involves a social worker employing interventions that would explore the client's experiences and meanings and attempt to reframe thoughts or views that are contributing to the presenting problem into ones that are more acceptable. Interventions also include the social worker challenging societal assumptions or social constructs that are preventing the client from growing and developing. Such interventions often used in social work practice are: narrative therapy; social constructivist approach; solution-focused brief therapy; anti-oppressive, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices; cultural competency and advocacy.

Systems Theories

Systems theories are based on the belief that individuals do not operate in isolation, but rather grow and develop in interaction with their physical and social environment. Systems theories derive from general systems theory, which explores the parts of a system that interconnect and interact to make a complete whole (Teater, 2010). Within social work, systems can constitute individuals, couples, families, communities, organizations, society, and the world. Systems theories hold that each system should be viewed as consisting of several elements that make the system a functional whole, and each system should be viewed in relation to the other systems that can cause a change or reaction within the main system. For example, when working with clients, social workers should consider the bio-psycho-social aspects of the client by looking at physical and psychological functioning, social relationships, and community or societal structures that impact on the client.

The life model (Gitterman and Germain, 2008) of social work practice was greatly influenced by system theories as well as the person-in-environment perspective (Karls and Wandrei, 1994), both of which examine how social work is a unique discipline in that it focuses on the point where individuals interact with their environment. Such systems theories aim to move social work practice away from focusing solely on the individual, such as with development theories, psychodynamic theories and behavioral theories, and instead focus holistically on the individual within her/his environment (often referred to as human behavior in the social environment). Consideration of the environment includes the physical space, the social context, and the individual's culture and history. The aim of systems theories is to create homeostasis, or a favorable person-environment fit, in that the individual interacts and responds to her/his environment where interactions and change are contributing to positive growth and development and social functioning.

Family systems theory adapted the main concepts of general systems theory in understanding and working with families. The family is viewed as a system with each family member playing a critical part. Family systems theory holds that a change in one part of the family system will create a change in other parts of the family system, yet this is often variable depending on the boundaries of the family, the patterns, messages and rules of the family, and the family's responsiveness to change (Sharf, 2012).

Systems theories are useful to social work practice as they provide a theoretical basis for assessing a client holistically by examining all the systems within her/his environment. Such theories are primarily used in assessment and intervention stages of social work practice where the social worker assesses the client holistically by considering psychological, biological and social functioning, as well as assessing the interaction of other systems within the client's environment, particularly those that could be contributing to the presenting problem. Based on the assessment, underpinned by systems theory, the social worker determines which system needs the intervention. Although the client may be an individual, the social worker may deem the family system, community system, or even political systems as the focus for intervention. Interventions most commonly used in social work practice include: couple and family therapy; family systems therapy; community development; and community practice.

Critical Theories

Critical theories in social work aim to examine and critique social and political structures and functioning and their effects on individuals, families and communities (Payne, 2005). Such critiques and understanding of social and political structures will assist in social work's aims of tackling inequalities and disadvantage; and promoting social justice. Conflict theory is a form of critical theory, based on the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber, which focus on inequalities within society, such as wealth, power,

class, and how such inequalities impact on individual life experiences and chances creating conflict between and within social groups (see Hier, 2005 for a review of critical theories). Numerous critical theories have been applied to social work practice in an attempt to acknowledge the inequalities and disadvantage that clients can and do experience within the current social and political structures and to encourage courses of action and interventions that will challenge such inequalities.

Empowerment theory acknowledges that oppression is present within society and affects individuals and communities, yet individuals and communities do have strengths and resources and can combat such societal oppression (Adams, 2008). Individuals need to have power and control over their lives in order to obtain and use the resources necessary for positive growth and development, which can be achieved through individual and collective strategies. Feminist theory explains the inequalities between women and men, the oppression of women, the development and consequences of socially defined gender roles and seeks to explain how development and life experiences differ for women and men (Enns, 2004; Hyde and Else-Quest, 2003). Anti-oppressive, anti-discriminatory and anti-racist theories acknowledge the structural oppression and discrimination that impacts on clients and seeks to promote social work practice that challenges such structures by working individually with clients and participating and joining in social movements that challenge oppression and discrimination within larger structures (see Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Dominelli, 2008; Robbins, 2011; Thompson, 2006). Environmental and green social work applies a social work perspective to the ways in which environmental issues and crises can lead to disadvantage and limit resources, and focuses on targeting the social-political forces that impact on individual, community and global well-being in order to promote environmental and social justice (Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2013).

Critical theories are useful to social work practice as they provide a theoretical basis for assessing a client within her/his environment by acknowledging how societal and political structures and processes can be oppressive or discriminatory. Such theories take the focus away from blaming the client and examining other factors much larger than the client that could be contributing to the presenting problem. Such theories are primarily used in assessment and intervention stages of social work. Assessment strategies involve the social worker examining societal and political structures and how these are impacting on the client (e.g. individual, family, community). Intervention strategies involve the social worker providing direct work with the client or participating in social movements and advocacy to eliminate structural oppression and discrimination. Such interventions commonly used in social work practice include: advocacy, the empowerment approach, anti-oppressive, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice, consciousness-raising, crisis intervention; community practice and community development.

Conclusion: The Application of Social Work Theory

The seven broad categories of theories range from a focus on individual psychological development to the influence of societal and political structures on human and communal growth and development. The profession of social work seeks to promote human growth and development as well as social justice; therefore, knowledge of the complete range of theories is necessary for effective social work practice although the choice and application will vary.

The use of theoretical approaches within social work practice will vary depending on social, political and cultural structures, agency and organizational structures, and individual social worker preference. Social workers practice under legal mandates, which prescribe when and how a social worker can intervene. Such legal

mandates are influenced by social and cultural values and norms, which dictate what is socially acceptable behavior. For example, a social worker will utilize different theories when working with mental illness based on the social and legal structures which define mental illness, theorize its cause, and hypothesize about ways in which it is to be treated or not. Agency and organizational structures also dictate the types of theories social workers use in practice. Agencies may specialize on a specific aspect of social work practice, such as mental health or community development, and will, therefore, utilize theories that help to achieve the agency's aim. For example, one mental health agency may work from humanistic theories and focus on person-centered counseling or solution focused brief therapy to alleviate a presenting problem, whereas another agency may work from psychodynamic theories and concentrate on psychoanalysis or psychotherapy that aims to bring the unconscious to the conscious. Finally, the application of social work theories is dependent on the social worker's values and preferences. For example, one social worker may believe that behavioral change is initiated through conditioning (behavioral theory) whereas another may believe behavioral change is initiated through individual motivation (humanistic theory). The theoretical stance of the social worker will influence the choice of intervention (cognitive behavioral therapy versus motivational interviewing). It is important to note that the influences of societal/political, agency/organization, and social worker preferences may not be congruent.

Social work practice does not necessarily adhere to one category of theories, but often social workers must choose from a range of theories to create an intervention package that is suitable for the client. For example, a child welfare social worker may use developmental theories to explain the current developmental stage of a child, systems theories to conduct a holistic assessment of the biological family, social

constructivist theories to understand the child and family's perspective, behavioral, cognitive and social learning theories to hypothesize about how thoughts, feelings and behaviors are contributing to the presenting problem, and critical theories to understand the context in which the child and family operate and in which the social worker practices. In selecting theories for practice, social workers must acknowledge that not all theories will be applicable to all clients and that theories that appear to fit in one situation will not always fit in similar situations. Social workers must combine theoretical knowledge with research evidence and reflections on practice to promote most accurately human growth and development and social justice.

References

Adams, R., 2008. Empowerment, Participation and Social Work, fourth ed. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Bandura, A., 1977. Social Learning Theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall.

Berger, P. L., Luckman, T., 1966. The Social Construction of Reality. Garden City, NY, Doubleday.

Bowlby, J., 1988. A Secure Base: Clinical Application of Attachment Theory. London, Routledge.

Caplan, G., 1964. Principles of Preventative Psychiatry. New York, Basic Books.

Cianci, R., Gambrel, P.A., 2003. Maslow's hierarchy of needs: does it apply in a collectivist culture. Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship. 8, 143-161.

Crain, W., 2011. Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications, sixth ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ, Pearson.

Dalrymple, J., Burke, B., 2006. Anti-Oppressive Practice: Social Care and the Law.

Maidenhead, Open University Press.

DeLamater, J. D., Myers, D. J., 2011. Social Psychology, seventh ed. Belmont, CA, Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Dominelli, L., 2008. Anti-Racist Social Work, third ed. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Dominelli, L., 2012. Green Social Work: From Environmental Crisis to Environmental Justice. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Enns, C. Z., 2004. Feminist Theories and Feminist Psychotherapies: Origins, Themes, and Diversity, second ed. New York: Haworth.

Fowler, J. W., 1981. Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning. New York, Harper & Row.

Gitterman, A., Germain, C. B., 2008. The Life Model of Social Work Practice: Advances in Theory and Practice, third ed. New York, Columbia University Press.

Gray, M., Coates, J., Hetherington, T., 2013. Environmental Social Work. Abingdon, Routledge.

Greening, T., 2006. Five basic postulates of humanistic psychology. Journal of Humanistic Psychology. 46, 239.

Hier, S. P., 2005. Contemporary Sociological Thought: Themes and Theories. Toronto, Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

Hyde, J.S., Else-Quest, N., 2013. Half the Human Experience: The Psychology of Women, eighth ed. Belmont, CA, Wadsworth.

Karls, J. M., Wandrei, K.E., 1994. Person-in-Environment System: The PIE Classification System for Social Functioning Problems. Washington, DC, NASW Press.

Kohlberg, L., 1973. The claim to moral adequacy of a highest stage of moral judgment. Journal of Philosophy. 70, 630-646.

Maslow, A., 1954. Motivation and Personality. New York, Harper.

Payne, M., 2005. Modern Social Work Theory, third ed. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Robbins, S. P., 2011. Oppression Theory and Social Work Treatment, in: F. Turner (Ed.), Social Work Treatment: Interlocking Theoretical Approaches. Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 343-353.

Ruch, G., Turney, D., Ward, A., 2010. Relationship-Based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Sharf, R. S., 2012. Theories of Psychotherapy and Counseling: Concepts and Cases, fifth ed. Belmont, CA, Brooks/Cole.

Teater, B., 2010. An Introduction to Applying Social Work Theories and Methods. Maidenhead, Open University Press.

Thompson, N., 2006. Anti-Discriminatory Practice, fourth ed. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Turner, F., 2011. Theory and social work treatment, in: F. Turner (Ed.), Social Work Treatment: Interlocking Theoretical Approaches. Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 3-14.

Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H., Jackson, D. D., 1967. Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes. New York, WW Norton.

Cross References

21044
21047
21048
21049
21051
21052
21053

21054
21059
21062
21063
21064
21065
21066
21067
21068
21069
21072
21073
23033
23093
23094
23095
23097
23098
23166
23198
23200
23201
24049
26037
26076
28018
28022
28027
28033
28055
28072
28074
28093

View publication stats