1 The role played by theory in understanding behaviour

Social work practice is increasingly expected to justify itself according to a basis of supportive evidence, which may make the prospect of approaching practice according to theory seem unnecessary, or even frivolous. A sound theoretical base of understanding human behaviour is anything but frivolous, however. This chapter is devoted to considering the role of theory as it applies to the ways in which social workers interpret (and respond to) human behaviour. The premise is that, without a sound theoretical underpinning, social work practice would be based on guesswork, which is a singularly ill-informed way of working with people.

The theories used by social workers are not necessarily unique to the profession. Historically, social workers have used, ‘borrowed’, and adapted theories that originated in other disciplines, most notably psychology and sociology, along with medicine and biology. The ways in which social workers apply theory, however, are often unique to their practice. That distinction relates to the ways in which social workers apply theories according to how they understand people in the context of their unique circumstances. Thus, social work’s contextual emphasis may alter the way in which some theories are applied. So while social workers’ application of theories may not be in accordance with some ‘purist’ approaches, it nonetheless remains theoretically informed and grounded.

Theories’ relevance for social work

The terms ‘theory’ and ‘theoretical’ have often been used to denote highly abstract, and possibly irrelevant concepts. In some cases, ‘theoretical’ has an almost derogatory connotation. While some theories rely on fairly abstract concepts, for academic and professional purposes, theories are profoundly relevant because they provide a frame of reference within which to interpret people’s behaviour. Theory provides systematic ways of observing, questioning, and interpreting behaviours so that social workers have a conceptual infrastructure of how they conduct assessments and justify their practice. The use of theory reflects a level of rational, systematic thinking that distinguishes social work practice from personal opinion.
Because human behaviour is very complex, the theories used to explain it must be sufficiently complex to be useful. That does not mean that those theories provide absolute, iron-clad explanations that are universally sufficient, but that those theories are reliably applicable. For social workers, the various theories of personality and development provide a means of organizing observations and details of people’s behaviour and circumstances in ways that contribute to forming an assessment, which in turn informs what needs to happen next in order to meet people’s needs. In doing so, theory can save the practitioner considerable time and energy, which might otherwise be spent ‘reinventing the wheel’ every time they are called upon to conduct an assessment. As Kurt Lewin is reported to have said, ‘There is nothing so practical as a good theory’ (Polansky, 1991: 2).

An example of how social workers depend on theory to inform practice can be found in the following scenario:

‘Eve’ (age 21) has a history of learning disabilities, and her first two babies were removed from her care because they were found to be at risk of abuse and neglect. Eve is in a new partnership with a much older man with a history of violence toward women, and who is actively heroin dependent. They have had a baby, who was born prematurely. The baby has respiratory problems, and is on an apnoea monitor. Eve is a heavy drinker. When you arrive at her flat, you find her nearly unconscious from intoxication, with a lit cigarette in her hand. Her partner has taken their baby to the pub, leaving the baby’s formula, apnoea monitor, and blanket behind.

Eve’s situation poses some difficult and potentially painful decisions for a social worker. Theory would inform a social worker’s interpretations of Eve’s circumstances in ways that would influence practice. Examples of theoretic approaches include the following:

- Cognitive theories could be applied to explain Eve’s capacity to understand consequences of past and present behaviour.
  
  \textit{What can we expect Eve to understand?}

- Behavioural theories could be applied to explain how some problematic behaviours come to be repeated.
  
  \textit{What reinforces Eve’s involvement with her partner?}

- Psychodynamic theory could be applied to interpret ways in which Eve’s defence mechanisms may be functioning.
  
  \textit{What role does denial play in her appraisal of her situation?}

- Developmental theories could be applied to understanding both Eve’s and the baby’s life stages and developmental needs.
  
  \textit{Is Eve functioning as a young adult, and is she able to appreciate the developmental needs of her infant?}
Theories regarding substance use/misuse/dependency that address the irrational continuation of usage, despite negative consequences, could be applied.

*Is Eve drinking as a means of self-medication?*
*Is Eve genetically predisposed to misuse alcohol?*

Attachment theory could be applied to understand the baby’s emotional needs and the potential risks if those needs go unmet.

*Is Eve capable of prioritizing her infant’s needs, and of providing a consistent, reliable presence that promotes emotional security?*

Social learning theory that could help explain how Eve’s lack of a positive role model has contributed to her current difficulties.

*Has Eve ever experienced sober, reliable, appropriate parenting?*

Learned helplessness theory could be applied to help explain Eve’s sense of being destined to be in demeaning, dangerous partnerships.

*Does Eve perceive herself as only deserving abusive treatment?*

Feminist theory could be applied to appreciate the implications of Eve’s upbringing and expectations, and her financial dependence on men, regardless of how they exploit her.

*Has Eve ever been empowered to be autonomous, or to feel positive about her role in the world as a woman?*

Systems theory may be applied to understand the role played by Eve’s family of origin and social networks, and how they contribute to her frame of reference.

*Does Eve’s family of origin, in which she was consistently physically and sexually abused, place her at risk of repeating some of those patterns of raising a family?*

*Does living in a neighbourhood in which violence and crime are prevalent make her and her infant more vulnerable?*

While the examples of relevant theories clearly do not provide a solution to any of Eve’s problems in and of themselves, they can provide the social worker with useful frameworks with which to interpret (and assess) Eve’s situation in such a way that the social worker’s response can be focused constructively. The use of theory serves to protect Eve from being subjected to a social worker practising without a theoretical framework, which would potentially require having to reinvent an approach to assessment with every service user they meet.

If her social worker relied on a single model or theory to explain Eve’s circumstances, the resulting assessment could prove woefully inadequate. Eve’s social worker’s theoretical perspective (and the breadth of that perspective) will potentially shape
everything from how he or she refers to Eve (e.g., as a ‘patient’ vs. a ‘service user’, or ‘client’), to how the social worker defines Eve’s difficulties. The social worker’s theoretical perspective will also shape the intervention that occurs in response to their assessment of Eve’s difficulties.

Social work’s theoretical knowledge base is broadened by its adaptation of theories from other disciplines. Some of those adaptations have been the results of practice wisdom; others have evolved over time. All served the purpose of providing specifically applicable frameworks with which to inform social work practice. To quote Coulshed (1991: 8), ‘Theoryless practice does not exist; we cannot avoid looking for explanations to guide our actions, whilst research has shown that those agencies which profess not to use theory offer a non problem solving, wooly and directionless service.’

Since the 1970s, social work has increasingly relied on ‘systems theory’ as a means of viewing people in the context of their environment (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 1994). While systems theory does not preclude concepts from the medical model or psychodynamic theories being simultaneously applied, it provides a theoretical framework that is generally congruent with social work’s values and ethics regarding the role played by people’s context. Systems theory is an example of a theory that explains behaviours and interactions, without entailing an explicit set of guidelines for practice. Explanatory theories are focused more on development and behaviour (e.g. Erikson’s life cycle, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, systems theory, attachment theory), while others are more focused on practice (e.g. Carl Rogers’ client-centred theory, and crisis intervention theory). Some theories apply both to interpreting behaviours and to shaping practice (psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioural theories are but two examples). Social workers must understand the appropriate role of theories, and how and when they apply to practice.

The ongoing effort to match theory and practice is actually a reciprocal arrangement, as theory must apply to good practice, just as good practice must reflect sound theory. That equation is not necessarily easily established.

Theory cannot provide simple answers which tell us ‘how to do’ practice. Theory can only guide and inform. Theory, practice and the relationship between them are all far too complex for there to be a clear, simple and unambiguous path for practitioners to follow. Theory provides us with the cloth from which to tailor our garment, it does not provide ‘off the peg’ solutions to practice problems.

(Thompson, 2005: 69)

**Necessary components of a theory**

A theory comprises a structured set of hypotheses, principles and concepts that serve to explain a given set of phenomena or events. The theory’s concepts are based on ideas or observations that are not necessarily provable. The terms and principles used to explain the theory are called constructs. The person who developed or created the theory is a theorist.
A theory’s constructs must be interrelated; they need to be logically consistent and congruent with one another. In that way, the theory provides a coherent framework to organize observations of the relevant factors, by generalizing across them in ways that contribute to the capacity to use the theory to predict future events or phenomena. By doing so, a theory provides a world-view through which the observer can interpret their observations. A theory provides a means of generalizing observations; theories and observations are typically mutually complementary. In order to explain and predict why various phenomena occur, a theory needs to be based on empirically tested or testable principles.

Theories and observations are linked through the basic processes of *induction* and *deduction*. The inductive process entails reasoning based on developing general principles by moving from specific observations to the more general. The deductive process entails drawing specific conclusions by moving from a set of general principles to the more specific. In the scientific tradition, deductions serve to derive a *hypothesis*. A hypothesis (sometimes called an educated guess) is a statement describing a proposed relationship between variables. If that hypothesis is based on theory, then it can be evaluated through the process of conducting further observations and tests.

Some theories are used solely for purposes of classification. For social workers, theories necessarily involve more concepts than classification. Theories ideally are *dynamic*, comprising sets of predictions. By having a sense of causation, theories contribute to social workers being able to anticipate consequences. A dynamic theory is *predictive*.

A good theory also embodies the principle of *parsimony*, which means that it is able to cover the largest range of observations with the fewest possible principles. Parsimony is the way in which the ‘less is more’ principle is applied to intellectual concepts. In the interests of parsimony, ‘simple’ really is ‘elegant’.

Simultaneously, a good theory is sufficiently *comprehensive* to address a wide array of circumstances. Given the complexity of human behaviour, social workers necessarily rely on theories that have sufficient breadth to address those complexities in an effective manner.

As noted by Polansky (1991: 5), good theories are *concise*; they are sufficiently complex to explain complex concepts, while being sufficiently simple to be remembered and applied correctly. Theories do not have to be adjusted according to which service user a social worker is assessing, but are equally applicable across varied circumstances. Parsimony refers to the reliance on the simplest explanation available, and is sometimes also referred to as *Occam’s razor*, after the English philosopher who initially proposed it as an approach to scientific study. Occam’s razor is briefly summarized by the premise that the fewer assumptions a theory makes, the better (Gross, 2001).

**The functions of theory**

For social workers, the primary function of theory is to inform practice. Theory provides ways of understanding people’s behaviour that describe, explain and predict. Assessments are necessarily informed by a social worker’s theoretical perspectives. For
example, if a social worker were to subscribe to the theory that blames Eve for being a
moral failure of the worst degree, then that assessment will necessarily shape their
assessment and its results. Similarly, if the social worker subscribes to a theory that
incorporate Eve’s cognitive limitations, her having had a traumatic childhood, along
with her living in an oppressive society with a series of exploitative partners, in
which she has found alcohol and tobacco to be useful coping strategies, then the social
worker’s assessment will result in a very different outcome for Eve and her child.

Explanatory theories provide a means of describing why various factors have
occurred or resulted in related consequences. Practice theories relate to how specific
interventions are best suited (or not) to specific problems.

Aside from theories, models describe what occurs in the course of practice in
a general way, and applies to a wide range of situations. Models provide a system
of classification that facilitates a systematic, pragmatic and concise description and
explanation in the interest of consistency in practice (Clark, 1995).

Perspectives tend to reflect professional disciplines’ approaches to such complexities
as human behaviour. For example, social work perspectives on human behaviour are
necessarily reflective of theoretical factors as well as the profession’s values and ethics,
along with the evidence provided through research and practice wisdom.

Approaches provide perspectives that are not as specific as a theory and which
generally embrace two or more distinguishable theories. The components of an
approach share some level of congruence, or compatible assumptions or principles. For
example, the approaches considered in this text all pertain to understanding facets
of people’s behaviour.

Implications for practice

The use of theory informs the ways in which social workers interpret people’s
behaviours and circumstances. Theory also informs the way in which social workers
intervene to help people overcome difficulties. The explanatory theories that social
workers use inform the selection of practice theory, because they must be congruent in
order to provide coherent services. The way a social worker approaches practice will
vary according to their theoretical perspectives. A social worker who employs a psy-
chodynamic theoretical perspective will respond to Eve’s situation in a very different
way from a colleague whose approach is based more on social learning and systems
theories.

Social workers tend to apply microsystems theories to explain and anticipate the
circumstances related to individuals and their immediate environments. Macrosystems
theories apply to explaining the larger society, and entail ways of looking at the ways in
which organizations and governments contribute to the individual’s difficulties. Social
workers are often in a unique position to intervene on both the micro- and macro-
levels. (See Chapter 14 for further discussion of micro- and macro-systems concepts.)

Sometimes social workers are called upon to make use of a medical model when
interacting with medical or mental health settings. Being ‘fluent’ in the medical model
is sometimes crucial for the sake of advocating for service users who are recipients of
medical or psychiatric services. Social workers sometimes struggle with the authoritarian aspects of the medical model, and its emphasis on diagnostics and ‘cures’. Being able to navigate and negotiate with that model does not necessitate social workers’ abandoning the integrity of their own theoretical perspectives. It may, however, necessitate the professional equivalent of being ‘bilingual’ in being able to understand both perspectives simultaneously.

As critical thinkers, social workers must consider an array of factors when evaluating a theory’s suitability for application to their assessments and practice. Those factors include (but are not limited to) the theory’s actual applicability, its empirical validity, and its value base. Most social workers utilize an ‘eclectic’ blend of theories, but doing so is not as easy as just ‘cherry picking’ what suits for the sake of convenience. Being eclectic necessitates considerable finesse in being able to apply components of a number of theories in ways that are consistent and informed.

When evaluating a theory’s applicability, social workers must consider whether the theory’s principles are suited to understanding and/or responding to their service user’s circumstances. Several examples of applicable theories have been mentioned earlier:

- Beginning with systems theory, a social worker could consider whether Eve’s family and social supports are positive, and whether she has anyone to whom she can turn in times of crisis. Does social isolation place Eve at risk of greater exploitation and danger from her partner?
  - If so, then good practice would address her isolation. It would also encourage changed behaviours on her part, to include more positive social interactions, and use of available resources.
- By applying the social learning theory, a social worker could consider whether Eve’s lacking a sober role model has contributed to her current difficulties. Especially if Eve has never experienced sober, reliable, appropriate parenting, then the prospects of being such a parent may be profoundly challenging.
  - If that is the case, then good practice would address her need for healthy relationships to model ‘good enough parenting’. This approach would also look at helping Eve make manageable changes in her parenting skills.
- By applying the self-medication hypothesis to Eve’s drinking, a social worker would consider whether Eve’s drinking helps her cope, and whether without it she might find her circumstances even more unbearable than they already are. Particularly when Eve’s learning disability may compromise her appraisal of her circumstances, her drinking may seem a source of comfort to her.
  - If so, then good practice would address her drinking in a way that would not use ultimatums, but rather help her understand some of the negative consequences of her drinking, especially in relation to her baby. Helping Eve find ways of moderating her drinking, or ‘harm reduction’, would be a viable consideration.
- By applying learned helplessness theory, a social worker would explore whether Eve perceives herself as being destined to be in demeaning, dangerous partnerships.
If so, then good practice would address Eve’s sense of herself, and explore ways in which she deserves to be treated respectfully by all concerned. This approach would utilize Eve’s strengths as a way of reinforcing her self-esteem.

- By applying psychoanalytic theory, a social worker could explore ways in which Eve’s defence mechanisms may be contributing to her difficulties, including such factors as the role of denial in her appraisal of her situation.
- If so, then Eve’s denial of the seriousness of her situation needs to be addressed in ways that are reality-based without being overwhelming. This can be a very delicate balance.

Alternatively, other aspects of psychoanalytic theory could be questioned as to their suitability to Eve. Depending on the particular emphasis and focus of the social worker, some elements of psychodynamic theory could be considered unsuitable when working with Eve.

- By applying psychoanalytic concepts from Freud’s topographic concepts (the conscious, the unconscious and the preconscious), a social worker could emphasize the role of the unconscious in Eve’s replication of her mother’s alcohol dependence. Alternatively, using a psychodynamic approach, a social worker could emphasize Eve’s unconscious conflicts with her mother.
- From a psychoanalytic perspective, Eve could be then referred to a psychoanalytically trained therapist, or for psychoanalysis, which entails a lengthy and often expensive form of insight-orientated therapy. It also typically presumes a cognitive level of understanding that would not necessarily be realistic to expect from Eve.

The complexities of applying a single theory are apparent even from this brief discussion. Especially when applying such a broad and complex (‘grand’) theory as the psychoanalytic theory, social workers are urged to use caution. Even when some psychoanalytic concepts are readily applicable to an informed assessment, they may not prove relevant or suitable for working with individual cases.

When evaluating a theory’s empirical support, social workers are urged to familiarize themselves with both original sources and with current research. Because theories often entail fairly abstract concepts, research is not necessarily going to establish any ‘absolute’ truths per se. Instead, research can provide examples of whether theories are supported through sound research with sufficient numbers to have some validity, and that studies are conducted with the level of rigour to provide confidence in the findings. Such findings will provide empirical or evidence-based support with which to apply the relevant theory.

Finally, when evaluating a theory’s value or ethical basis, social workers must consider whether the theory is congruent with social work values and ethics. Specifically, those values and ethics entail social workers’ ultimate responsibilities to their service users’ best interests, their autonomy, and issues of social justice reflected in anti-oppressive practice. Various socio-economic theories that incorporate advantageous
arrangements for the privileged few at the expense of the poor are incongruent with social work values. Theories that discriminate against various groups of people (immigrants, teenagers, gays and lesbians, travellers, etc.) on the basis of their differences or other superficial characteristics are incongruent with social work values and ethics.

Criticisms of a theoretical framework to inform practice

According to some arguments, basic skills are sufficient for social work practice, and thus a theoretical framework is superfluous. From such a perspective, technical competence and familiarity with the law would suffice, making a theoretical orientation unnecessarily complicated. The argument against theory is sometimes couched in ideas such as the sufficiency of ‘common sense’ (which is a legendarily variable commodity) for effective social work. Sometimes it is absorbed into the will to be helpful being sufficient for social work practice. Such a perspective is more congruent with the approach of a ‘streetwise practitioner’ than of a professionally trained practitioner. As anyone who has read the preceding pages will have noticed, that perspective is incongruent with the content of this book.

Questions

1 What are the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning?
2 What would be some theoretical perspectives that are incongruent with social work?
3 What do you consider the main differences between a theory and a model? Most of us are constructing or employing theories of our own, or borrowing from others, on a regular basis. What are some theories that you have used to explain or predict the following?
   (a) Do you do your best work ahead of time, or under pressure?
   (b) Is it better to read the assigned readings before lectures or after?
   (c) Is it better to ask the lecturer questions when you don’t understand what they’ve said, or check with a classmate later to see if they understood it (hoping that they did)?
   (d) If you do well on an assignment, is it because you worked hard, or because it was easy?
4 What theoretical perspectives do you consider most relevant to social work practice? Why? (Hint: It’s OK to be undecided for now!)