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1 | Theory for practice

Introduction

For social work there is a continuing tension between practice and theory. This tension exists both *within* social work and *about* social work. At times students and practitioners have protested that it was necessary to forget theory once in practice. The argument has been that theory is abstract, inaccessible, and that it reduces spontaneity in helping people. Using theory implied distance and objectivity which contrasted with feelings and the living reality of social work encounters. As such it was seen to be a stumbling-block to developing individual style, and the most that could be hoped for was that students would admit that they might subconsciously be using theory that they had absorbed during their education and training.

Other discussions that have taken place, mainly among academics, are that social work has suffered because it has been seen to be theory-less or atheoretical. The suggestion is that because social work is about practice then it is neither a profession nor an academic discipline, it is merely the appliance of other social sciences (Orme, 2000a). While this might be seen, in more ways than one, to be an academic debate it is important because social work's uneasy relationship with theory has made it vulnerable in many ways. Policy-makers could argue that anyone can do social work, or that social work was not necessary. Or they could introduce policies and practices, such as care management, that sought to displace social work to the extent that they rename it social care. In universities the fact that social work did not develop, or was not seen to be developing, theory meant that its legitimacy was being challenged. Social work did not have a place in universities. For those who deny the need for theory, education and/or training for social work practice this is not a problem. For social work as a

whole and those for whom social work exists, client/service users, it constitutes a threat to the quality of services provided.

In a text about social work practice it is vital that we consider the role of theory. This is not because theory should prescribe how social work must be practised, but because the use of theory is the hallmark of a good practitioner. This introductory chapter will explore what is meant by theory, and how social workers apply theory in practice. To do this is not merely a justification for the text; it is a contribution to the defence of social work as an activity.

Why practice needs theory

Over time students have become less antagonistic to theoretical ideas, naming and trying to integrate what can at first glance appear to be a smorgasbord of apparently contradictory explanations of behaviour. Education about theories that might underpin decision-making, or that might inform what action to take, is enjoying resurgence in the form of the social work degree but this has not been without a struggle.

The competence-based approach to education and training introduced in the 1980s (CCETSW, 1989a), reflected assumptions that social work is a set of functions, and that practitioners need to be trained merely to perform these functions. This was reinforced by legislation and policy initiatives that were accompanied by sets of 'guidelines', attempting to set limits on social work activity. The consequence of this prescriptive account of social work intervention was that the emphasis was on tasks, and task performance, not on workers' abilities to analyse and process information drawn from their skilled interactions with individuals, families or groups. Such an approach was unethical, failing to provide users of social work with appropriate interventions, and as such it is incompetent. As Howe (2000) argues, practitioners who develop and offer coherent applications of what is going on in their practice keep their professional bearing and sustain their commitment. Service users deserve professional and committed practitioners.

More importantly if such a mechanistic approach is adopted, there is no understanding that the information gleaned during social work interventions might be interpreted in many different ways, depending on which theoretical approach is used. Nor is there any expectation that students and practitioners will review

their intervention in the light of the growing amount of practice-based research available in social work. The competence-based approach (see Ford and Hayes, 1996, for a discussion of this approach) requires certainties; that if you are dealing with A, you can intervene with B and that will secure an acceptable outcome C. In the history of social work such assumptions were associated with a scientific approach when social workers, in their quest for a professional identity, looked to medicine.

In a climate of increased managerialism, workers are scrutinised on performance indicators that include the number of service users or problems dealt with, the time taken to respond to a referral (or to prepare a report) or other calculations of throughput and output. The 'management' outcome is often that the required form has been completed. The quality of the intervention, what has occurred or might occur between the worker and the service user while the form is being completed, was not covered in national standards for probation practice, competences for care management or definitions of 'best value'.

The dilemma for social workers is that there are tasks to be performed and skills to be utilised, but prescriptions of 'the what' and 'the how' cannot be constructed in a vacuum. Social workers, to be truly effective, need to be constantly asking 'why?' It is in this quest for understandings about, for example, why situations arise, why people react in certain ways and why particular interventions might be utilised, that theory informs practice. However, this might suggest that there is a certainty about what theories should be taught, that theory for social work practice is uncontentious. What follows in this chapter is a discussion of what constitutes theory and the contribution of theory to 'ethical and effective' practice.

The use of that phrase brings us back to the developing relationship between theory, practice, education and training. A change of government in the late 1990s and concerted efforts by academics and practitioners led to a reclaiming of the place and function of social work. The incoming Labour government initially attempted to dismiss the need for social workers. However repeated child abuse tragedies, concerns about mental health users and other social problems led to a re-think and a decision to 'modernise' social work. In the process this offered a chance to increase qualifying levels in social work. In the development of the degree some important tensions emerged. The announcement that an undergraduate degree

was to be the minimum qualification was accompanied by a statement from the Minister for Health, Jacqui Smith, that this was to be a 'practical degree', that services users needed social workers to do practical tasks to resolve their problems, not think about why the problems had arisen. Others felt that undergraduate study of both practice and theory would prepare workers for the complexity of the social work task (Orme, 2001a).

Theory, practice and research

The developments in social work education and training were accompanied by increasing attention to the relationship between research and practice. That a research base for social work is necessary is indisputable. Initiatives such as Making Research Count and Research into Practice focus on ways of encouraging social workers to utilise research findings to inform their practice. These initiatives were supported by the setting up of the Social Care Institute for Excellence (Scie) with a remit to ensure 'knowledge transfer', that is, to gather research findings, evaluate them and disseminate them to the social care workforce.

This infrastructure was to support an evidence-based approach to practice, described in criminal justice as the 'what works' approach (McGuire, 1995). However the terms 'evidence-based' and 'what works' have been contentious. Debates about the nature of the research, appropriate methodologies, ethical issues and the impact of research are central to social work, both in academia and in practice. Parton (2000) suggests that crucial to discussions about an evidence base for social work is an understanding of whether evidence of good practice refers to the way problems can be solved, or the effectiveness of the organisation. For example, the development of the 'what works' agenda has influenced service delivery in the criminal justice field. Chapter 8 describes how research evidence that demonstrated that accredited groupwork programmes based on behavioural approaches were effective ways of working with offenders led to their proliferation in the criminal justice services. However notions of 'effectiveness' were part of a managerialist agenda that required requisite numbers of offenders to be processed, and prescribed methods of intervention (Chapman and Hough, 1998; Home Office, 1999) irrespective of the quality of the intervention or the appropriateness for the individual offenders.

Such developments could be seen to fulfil fears that emphasis on theory curtails the spontaneity and freedom of practitioners. But approaches to research that merely describe findings and assume that these are the answer to practice dilemmas are not good research, and do not constitute theory. This does not mean that practitioners can adopt an ‘anything goes’ approach. In research, as in practice, workers have to be reflexive. That is, they do not accept information uncritically and they must be able to test out ideas in the light of practice experience. This has been crucial in the development of good research-informed practice. It has also contributed to approaches to research that involve practitioners and service users in research, acknowledging that the best way to understand situations is to ascertain the views of those in the situation. While such approaches are desirable they are not straightforward, not least because they challenge the power of both the practitioner and the researcher (Orme, 2000b). More importantly they recognise an important strand of theory building – theory from social work.

What is theory?

Educationalists have debated at length competing positions regarding social reality and the production of knowledge, in other words, theory (for discussion see Rojek, 1986; Howe, 1987). Put more simply theory is a framework for understanding a clustering of ideas that attempt to explain reality in a self-conscious way (Stepney and Ford, 2000, p. viii). This self-conscious explanation involves ‘making sense’ of what is going on by observing, describing, explaining, predicting and intervening (Howe, 2000, p. 81). It is also this imperative to explain that distinguishes a theory, which seeks to explain *why*; from a model, which seeks to describe *how* factors interact; or a method which involves formal written accounts of how to do the job (Stepney and Ford, 2000). Hence in many of the following chapters descriptions are given of how to undertake a particular social work intervention, but these are accompanied by different theoretical perspectives on why this model has been developed and which theoretical perspectives explain why it is effective.

However, as has already been stated, this does not mean that there is only one explanation or perspective. Academics and practitioners with particular theoretical perspectives will observe,

describe, explain, predict and intervene in different ways. This is referred to on a number of occasions throughout this book when critiques of particular approaches are provided to help practitioners reflect both on what is being proposed, and on their own particular position in relation to those proposals. While for some this lack of certainty might seem unhelpful, Howe suggests that it should be embraced positively: 'Rather than bemoan the number and range of theories the practitioner needs to acknowledge that diversity reflects the subtlety and complexity of the human condition' (Howe, 2000, p. 83).

Also there is no need to assume that because there are different perspectives, these are necessarily contradictory rather than complementary. The 'gladiatorial paradigm', that is, the notion that social work theories compete and cannot be integrated since they offer opposing interpretations of social reality, ignores the commonalities and interdependence of explanations of how human beings shape, and are shaped by, their internal and external worlds. Moreover it ignores ambiguity, uncertainty and doubt which are features of the complexity of social work practice (Parton, 2000).

Either/or arguments, such as insisting that counsellors must be either Rogerian or behaviourist, or that social workers are either radical or traditional in their approach, fail to see the underlying continuities that hold together such apparently diverse positions. Most theories have elements in common as well as elements in opposition. The eclectic practitioner, who claims to take the 'best' from different theories, actually holds a consistent view of people and their situations (Howe, 1992; Payne, 1998). Purists might attack this seemingly undisciplined and incoherent way of working; yet this is the way in which practice is generally conducted, not least because it reflects the complexity of situations in which social workers intervene. However such debates do highlight the range of theoretical perspectives upon which social work draws, and demonstrate that social work is certainly not atheoretical.

Theory for practice

Since there are competing explanations for the situations social workers meet, it is not surprising that there is little agreement about the nature of theory that is required to intervene in those situations. Siporin (1975), for example, believed that social workers needed

foundation knowledge (personality theory, social theory and social policy theory) that would contribute to an understanding of the person in society. Jones (1996) on the other hand criticised social work academics' selectivity in identifying and privileging certain theories or, in his words, 'seeing (theory) as a resource to be plundered and pillaged' (Jones, 1996, p. 203).

Another way of framing theory is offered by Pilalis's (1986) six meanings of 'theory' which reflect visions that are carried amongst student groups. Some regarded theory as general rules or laws testable against observable evidence. Others, similarly influenced by the physical sciences, took it to mean a probability, a hypothesis or a speculative explanation subject to research. The third and fourth meanings, specific to the human sciences, involved a system of principles which help us to understand events more clearly or to capture, for practical purposes, underlying ideological and value bases of say psychological, sociological or political ideas. Finally, popular uses of the word 'theory' are encapsulated in the fifth and sixth examples. That is the way in which it is distinguished from practice ('this is theory rather than practice') and the dismissive, 'that is all very well in theory' which sees knowledge as idealistic, and representing unattainable goals.

A more common way to classify theory is to distinguish between 'levels' of theory. So called 'grand theories' included Freudian or Marxist explanations of what motivates human nature, giving seemingly all-inclusive accounts. On the other hand, 'mid-range theories' are not so comprehensive, they address particular phenomena such as loss, attachment, delinquency and so on and try to explain their causes and consequences. Such explanations can be offered within Marxian or Freudian understandings of the world (see Howe, 1987 for examples). Finally, micro theories describe and explain particular practices.

These classifications, also known as the deductive approach (Howe, 2000), can be described as theories *for* social work. That is, the relevant social sciences are applied to practice. However practice is more than a 'rational-technical' activity (Parton, 2000) of applying knowledge from other disciplines to help decide what to do. An inductive or constructive approach, that is, building theory from practice and observation is just as, if not more, important.

In developing a particular approach to practice, a constructive approach, Parton and O'Byrne argue that there has been a failure

to articulate and develop concepts and theories for practice. By this they mean ‘a range of insights and concepts which had previously been derived from detailed analysis of what goes on between social worker and service user’ (2000, p. 7). However, these are, in fact, theories *from* practice. Before considering what that means, we need to recognise that there has also been a development of theories *of* practice.

Theories of practice

Theories of social work include understandings of, for example, what it is and who is it for, but also contribute to models of how to do social work. Often this theory is developed inductively when workers build up theory from observations of their practice and observation. An example of this is task-centred practice, where a whole new approach to practice was developed after existing practices were observed and new ones introduced and assessed (see Chapter 7).

However other developments are not so overt. Theory that is implicit (Evans, 1976), alternatively called practice theory or practice wisdom, makes assumptions about what social workers do and how they make sense of their experiences. This explains in an organised way how social workers may usefully act, using their knowledge of the social world. England (1986) argues that a social worker’s ‘practice knowledge’ involves a unique understanding of the people who constitute the clients, ‘the general processes of perception and the creation of meanings which determine the individual’s capacity to cope’ (England, 1986, p. 34). However, in espousing a commonsense approach, England is being neither atheoretical nor anti-theoretical, but argues that ‘defined’ knowledge is not enough on its own. Professional learning has to be accompanied by, or mediated through, ‘personal’ knowledge that will inform intuitive knowledge and intuitive behaviour (England, 1986, p. 35). This position is reinforced by Parton (2000). His definition of social work as a practical moral activity involves social workers drawing upon tacit knowledge to inform and make sense of their interventions.

Significant in the development of an evidence base for social work is the work of Scie in trying to elucidate this tacit knowledge. By producing practice overviews and practice guides, resource

guides, knowledge reviews, reports and positions papers (all available on the Scie website: www.scie.org.uk), Scie promotes good practice by reviewing knowledge to find out what works best and sharing this knowledge with all kinds of people involved in social work.

Theories from practice

Knowledge gained from theory exists to inform social workers' understanding, not to dominate it. As England argues, theory is not an end in itself, 'Abstract knowledge in social work, whilst it remains abstract knowledge, is utterly useless' (England, 1986, p. 35). If effective strategies and techniques are recorded and developed, then knowledge is created and can be used to direct others to what is common and regularly occurring in human experience. Some codification of activity enables social workers to evaluate their practice. When social workers evaluate their efforts, be they services to individuals or whole programmes of care, they begin to engage in theory building. Much social work theory derives from someone's experience that has been written down and shared with others. This can be described as theory from practice. However this does not mean that it is unassailable. What it does mean is that everyone's perspective is valuable, and importantly this recognises the perspectives of users and carers in the development of theory.

Postmodernism

As social work searches for a theory base, the notion of theoretical coherence is being challenged by postmodernism (Howe, 1994; Fook, 2002). Postmodernism focuses on how and why we seek for explanations or underlying causes, rather than what those causes might be. Hence postmodern notions of practice theories for social work would be 'a kaleidoscope of ideas, research findings, argument, practice wisdom, values and critical speculation, whose coherence would lie in relationships between the different parts, and between them and the reader's experience' (Tuson, 1996, p. 70).

But as Stepney and Ford point out, while academics might usefully debate theoretical dilemmas such as whether truth exists, practitioners can only afford such luxuries if they bring about

tangible benefits and lead to positive outcomes (Stepney and Ford, 2000, p. 21). But accepting that there are many influences on the construction of social work theory, and ultimately practice, can be enormously helpful to practitioners. That there is no one timeless, all-embracing theory for social work, and that social work evolves and reforms according to local and cultural conditions of all social life (Howe, 1994) creates the potential to build theory from practice. More importantly, doing so calls into question who defines relevant theory, or which theories are privileged at any one time.

Social work theory should never become an end in itself, it can be generative offering new insights and perspectives (Parton, 2000). It therefore has to be both interactive and reflexive, and will change in response to practice constructions (Payne, 1991).

Reflexive practice

The notion of reflexive practice has contributed to the synthesis of postmodern critiques and theory building in social work. This synthesis has contributed to the development of emancipatory or transformational theory (Payne, 1998). As Fook (2002) explains, part of the resistance to theory is that there has been an inextricable link between knowledge and power. Postmodernism questions the supremacy of professional knowledge and thus significantly undermines the professions' claim to dominance (Fook, 2002, p. 37).

This might seem ironic in that so far this chapter has argued for developing a theory base as part of the recognition of something called 'social work'. But this depends on a particular use of knowledge by professionals. Schon (1987) argues that technical knowledge helps professionals only to a limited extent. Reflecting on the different contributions to any social work interaction involves identifying the limits of existing theories and developing new ones. Hence a reflexive stance requires practitioners to 'reflect in action' and demonstrate or construct accounts of what they have done, in what order and the outcomes; the values, strategies and assumptions that make up 'theories' in action (Schon, 1987). It is this that holds the potential for change (Fook, 2002), not only in professionals' perceptions of the situation that they are dealing with, but also in theories that inform the situation, the theories *for* and *of* practice.

However a truly reflexive stance, a one that develops theory from practice, has to recognise that explanations of what is happening in social work interactions are not the sole prerogative of practitioners. Any understanding has to incorporate the contribution to knowledge from users and carers. Postmodernism questions assumptions about 'legitimate' knowledge. Often legitimacy is granted because of the way things are known, who knows them and how knowledge is conveyed to others (Fook, 2002). Writers such as Foucault (1980) have highlighted that some knowledges (that is what people know about their experiences) are classed as inauthentic, not valid and not taken into account. In the past the knowledge, experience and views of service users have been treated as inauthentic or subsidiary. This contributed to the oppression of service users by the processes and practices of social work. Practice informed by user and carer perspectives is emancipatory and reflects the anti-oppressive value base of social work.

The potential of critical reflection is not that it overthrows or throws out all other understandings of theory, but that it challenges assumptions that only certain theories are valid. It does not mean that only one form of knowledge, that is, either professional knowledge or service user knowledge, is valid; it accepts that both have a contribution to make to understanding situations, and therefore constructing theory about them. This is crucial in the process of undertaking social work assessments, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Praxis

Critical reflection also helps to bring together theory and practice in a way that is meaningful to practitioners. The educationalist/community worker Freire (1972) calls the ability to think and do 'praxis', a Marxist term that has been explored further by feminist scholarship (Stanley and Wise, 1990). The notion of praxis encourages people to perceive, interpret, criticise and transform the world around them. In social work a lot of time is spent in giving tangible, immediate, practical help, but this does not invalidate attempts to look beyond the obvious to ensure that experiences of inequality and oppression are revealed and challenged. Underpinning praxis is the notion that it is not enough to study

the world; the aim is to change it. Hence we have come full circle in exploring the relationship between theory and practice.

Conclusion

Professional social work practice requires that workers deploy a wide-ranging repertoire of skills, underpinned by a value base that respects others. This will enable them to respond to the diversity of experiences and reactions that are encountered when working with fellow human beings. Skills and values are only meaningful if they are informed by theories. However as we have seen in this chapter theory building and theory application require a complex interaction between knowledge and process, challenging notions of who produces knowledge, how it is used and what are the implications for practice.

In this context the aim of this text is to provide not a recipe book, a manual of how to do social work, but an array of approaches which themselves arise out of, and are constructed by, the attempts of others to describe practice. It is important for practitioners to be able to utilise the knowledge generated and to understand that each intervention in which they are involved will add to their knowledge and understanding, and help to contribute to their own theoretical approach. In this way, and in many others, this text should be considered as a beginning, and not an end in itself.

putting it into practice

1. Identify a piece of your own practice. This might be a case or just one interview. While you are thinking about it list all the 'assumptions' that you made when dealing with the situation: about the people involved; what was going on; what might happen; what you might do to help those in the situation and so on.
2. When you have made the list try to organise it into themes around the kind of theory that has informed your thinking. This might be theory about human development, theory about oppression and discrimination or it might be theory associated with a particular way of intervening.

3. You might not always be able to identify specific theories – so ask yourself: ‘Where did that idea come from?’ and see if that helps you link with any of the ideas in this chapter about the relationship between theory and practice.
4. Finally, think about what you have learned from the situation that you have been reflecting on – Do your particular experiences help you understand more? Do they change the way you think about things? Do they challenge what you have read or learned?

This is the beginning of developing theory from your own practice – so now try to write down the one most important thing you have learned about intervening in this situation. You might then want to go to the Scie website to see if you can find out if anyone else has written about or researched this aspect of practice.

Further reading

- Stepney, Paul (2000) ‘The theory to practice debate revisited.’ In P. Stepney and D. Ford (eds) *Social Work Models, Methods and Theories*. Lyme Regis: Russell House. A brief chapter that uses diagrams to help clarify the relationship of theory to practice.
- Parton, Nigel and O’Byrne, Patrick (2000) *Constructive Social Work: towards a new practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. An important book that develops new approaches to social work practice based on social theory.
- Trevithick, P. (2005) ‘The knowledge base of social work.’ In *Social Work Skills: a practice handbook*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. Explores different ways to think about practice.
- Social Care Institute for Excellence website: <http://www.scie.org.uk/>
This is a rich source of information. It includes knowledge reviews, practice guidance and the electronic library for social care – a gateway to even more resources such as research findings.

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