

SOCIAL WORK THEORY & PRACTICE

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MASTERING Social Work Practice





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Introduction

Lesley Deacon

The intention of this book is to introduce students and social work practitioners to key theories in understanding individuals' experiences and behaviour in the course of social work practice today. The theories covered are not meant to be an exhaustive list but to give a flavour of some of the key areas of theory that students and practitioners alike need to consider in order to understand service users and carers that they encounter in practice. Chapter 1 sets out the theoretical paradigm applied to this book, which is also applied to the way in which social work theory is taught at the University of Sunderland, where all the authors and contributors teach and research.

It is important to note that the way in which this book is written is to try and explain the theories in clear language in order to remove some of the barriers students and social work practitioners feel exist between them, their practice – and their understanding of theory. Certain theoretical terminology is necessary but where this is used explanations are given. The intention of this is to equip the reader with the knowledge and understanding of theory in order for them to research further.

Each chapter sets out the key principles of the theory concerned and demonstrates to the reader how they may be applied to practice through debates, activities and case study examples. Throughout this book you are likely to encounter the phrase 'core social work values'. In order to explain exactly what this means would actually require another book(!) – however, what we refer to here is the ethics and values that underpin social work practice. According to BASW (2012) *Social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideals, and its values are based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people* (p5) and it is to these that we refer. What is significant about case study application is the use of a real situation through a Serious Case Review (SCR). The SCR concerned is from Manchester Safeguarding Children's Board, Child Z in September 2013 (www.manchesterscb.org.uk/prof-scr.asp). This is a public document which can be accessed online. Each chapter addresses an aspect of this case and demonstrates how the theoretical perspective

considered can be applied in order to help understanding of the service users and carers concerned – either their behaviour or experiences. It is important to note that these applications are not meant to question or criticise the SCR or anyone involved but to raise questions to facilitate understanding. It is the authors' understanding that this is a unique idea in order to help students and practitioners understand applied theory in social work – by seeing the same case study (which is real) considered throughout the book.

The way in which the chapters are written are based on lectures given by the authors on both the BA and MA Social Work programmes at the University of Sunderland. The intention is, therefore, to explain the key principles of the theories and then illustrate understanding of them with examples and explanation. It is anticipated that this will make the theories (and theory in general) more accessible and understandable to students and social work practitioners.

The book is divided into five main theoretical realms: Psychological, Sociological, Ethics and Moral Philosophies, Political Theories and Ideologies, and Organisational Theories. Each Part consists of a brief introduction to the focus of that Part as well as a brief summary of each chapter within.

Focusing on psychological theories first (Part One) does not determine their theoretical authority in social work practice but simply the theoretical origins of the profession. The Casework principle of the first social work professionals was based in psychological thinking so it is not possible to consider essential social work theoretical perspectives today without considering their foundations. Stephen J Macdonald sets out the key schools of thought: Psychoanalysis, Behaviourist, Cognitive and Humanist – these are all key ways of thinking in order to understand human behaviour in different ways. Attachment theory is often a key theory referred to in social work practice. However, while it is relevant it is by no means the only psychological theory that can help to understand people and their relationships to others. This section is completed by Lesley Deacon who summarises key theories in Human Growth and Development, specifically the work of Erik Erikson which is relevant and helpful to social work practice today.

Part Two focuses in on some sociological theories that have influenced theoretical understanding in social work practice from their origins around the mid-twentieth century onwards. Jane Tunmore sets out Social Constructionism in order to help the reader begin to think sociologically. She then addresses the General Systems and Ecological Theories, which are often the go-to theories used in social work practice as they are evident in the assessment model. This chapter specifically focuses on the underpinning theories as students and practitioners often go to the framework first, i.e. the model *that set(s) out a clear sequence of actions to take when we are faced with a particular situation* (Payne, 2014, p8). In considering and applying

theory into practice it is imperative that the underpinning theory is understood in order to understand how and in what way people and their behaviours and experiences are being viewed. Catherine Donovan introduces students and social work practitioners to the key developments in feminist theories and how these are applied to social work practice. She raises questions regarding the assumptions made concerning gender identity which happen in social work practice and specifically focuses on the issue of domestic violence from the SCR. Finally, in this part, Mark Bradley who is a practising social worker considers the sociological theory of Reflexivity – framing the concept of Reflection in Action into a theoretical basis.

Part Three introduces Ethics and Moral Philosophies – each of the chapters in this section is written by Lesley Deacon. A problem in ethical thinking in social work practice today is that there is too much focus on rule-following (i.e. legislation, policy and organisational procedures) and not enough time spent on the fundamental principles that underpin social work practice (i.e. the concern for other people). Lesley Deacon therefore focuses on the Moral Philosophies of Deontology, Utilitarianism, Virtue Ethics, Ethics of Care and Radical Ethics in order to stimulate a different way of thinking about the relationship between the service user and the social work practitioner.

Part Four concerns some key developments in political theory that are intrinsic to social work practice today. Lesley Deacon sets out the historical development of Radical Social Work and its increasing relevance to social work practice today. Stephen J Macdonald then highlights the key models to understand disability of which, he argues, there are five. Although these identifications may not be acknowledged by others, this can be helpful for student social workers and practitioners in order to understand more fully the key principles of the different perspectives. Finally, Alan Marshall presents an understanding of the theoretical basis of Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive Practice using the concept of racism to present applied understanding. At the time of writing this book the issue of racism has become more prominent again due to the outcome of the Brexit vote (2016) and the demonstrations concerning #blackmatters (2016).

Finally, Part Five covers Organisational Theories, written by Lesley Deacon. Readers may initially wonder at the relevance of this Part to social work practice. While the theories set out do not specifically concern the behaviour and/or experiences of service users and carers, they do concern the experiences of students and social work practitioners in practice environments; and therefore have an indirect impact on the experiences of service users and carers. Lesley Deacon sets out these chapters initially considering management theory and then organisational theory. Management theories are relevant not just to managers but also to those who are

managed and how they work with their manager and colleagues. Charles Handy's work *Organisational Culture* is used as the basis for Chapter 20 as it is still as relevant today as it was at the time of writing.

To conclude, Lesley Deacon and Stephen J Macdonald draw the book together at the end with some concluding remarks about social work theory and practice and its future development.

Chapter 1

Introduction to social work theory

Lesley Deacon

Achieving a Social Work Degree

This chapter will help you meet the following capabilities, to the appropriate level, from the Professional Capabilities Framework:

PCF 5 Knowledge

- Demonstrate an initial understanding of the application of research, theory and knowledge from sociology, social policy, psychology, health and human growth; and demonstrate an initial understanding of the range of theories and models for social work intervention;

PCF 8 Context and Organisations

- Demonstrate awareness of the impact of organisational context on social work practice.

What is social work theory?

While there may be different ways to describe and understand the concept of a theory, according to Payne (2014) *a theory is a generalised set of ideas that describes and explains our knowledge of the world around us in an organized way* (p5). So, taking this to a social work perspective, it can be suggested that social work theory is 'a generalised set of ideas that describes and explains' people and how they can be understood. Rather than considering two separate issues of social work *and* theory, it is important for social workers to have a theoretical perspective that is compatible with both the ethos of the practice itself and of the theoretical understanding of people and their behaviour and

experiences. This chapter will therefore set out how social work theory has developed as an entity in its own right, and how it can be understood in practice. It therefore begins with an overview of the theoretical perspectives of social work practice from the origins of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) and considers other key historical events that influence social work's theoretical paradigms to the present day. Following this, the reader is introduced to the concept of the Theory Circle by Collingwood et al. (2008), which is presented not just as a tool or model but as a theoretical framework for understanding the concept of social work theory.

Overview of social work and thinking about theory

To understand social work theory, first social work as a profession needs to be understood as well as its intentions in terms of working with, and understanding, people and their experiences. Knowledge about social work *is in a constant state of flux and might best be described as a continuing activity that is formed and reformed over time* (Gray and Webb, 2013, p2). There is no doubt that this is influenced by and, it could be argued, beholden to the political climate in which it is practised. When considering the historical context in which the first official social work organisation, the Charity Organisation Society (COS), emerged we must first consider the repercussions of the Industrial Revolution, and the significant historical time period of industrialisation (1700–1850) that led to a need for a society to address issues concerning the *social impact of the factory system* (King and Timmins, 2001, p10).

The ramification of this period of time was the large-scale movement of people from rural communities to urban towns and cities. Where communities had previously been able to support some residents when in need, this became problematic in urban environments. It could be argued that this was in part related to the speed in which these urban areas grew (King and Timmins, 2001), presenting the practical problem of adjusting to these numbers. Therefore, an inability to work became a key factor in terms of views regarding morality. There were strong views in society that idleness was part of a morally deficient character and so philanthropy should not be encouraged for fear that this in itself encouraged idleness. And it was in this context that the COS emerged in 1869 with its initial intention to prevent philanthropy (where the rich willingly shared some of their wealth) as it was perceived that it encouraged the poor to remain so. Charles Stewart Loch was the first secretary of the COS between 1875 and 1913 and the ethos of this organisation was that poverty was caused by the moral failing of the individual and so assessments by the COS concerned the worthiness of individuals. When considering the concept of assessment in social work practice, we must consider its historical conception as a tool for assessing worthiness – whether an individual should be given support or not. These were the origins of the concept of casework – to find

the problem in the individual (Glasby, 2007; Howe, 2009). When considering the theoretical basis of this understanding of people we can see different theoretical perspectives emerge: those of moral reasoning regarding worthiness; and a psychological focus on the inadequate adaptation by the individual. This focus meant that the theoretical paradigm of initial social work practice was on the need for the individual to be changed in order to fit in. Society was not to blame for poverty and instead there was a need to teach people to manage their weaknesses.

These events were closely followed by a very different focus to social problems, i.e. social enquiry. This was the work of Canon Samuel Augustus Barnett (1844–1913) who was the founder of the Settlement movement. Although visits to people's homes had become common, the intention of Barnett and his colleagues was to live among the poor in order to understand them. This was considered, working 'in the field' and they found themselves welcomed for example in workhouses (Beauman, 1996, p xxiii). Through this work they were able to identify that the problems being experienced were caused, not by the people themselves, but by the structures in society. The theoretical basis for this work was therefore a sociological one, which was also, it could be argued, the initial origins of a more radical focus for social work. The emphasis of this movement was that of social change and action, led predominantly by those who had been university educated (Beauman, 1996; Glasby, 2007).

The radical concept of social work developed further following the Second World War (1939–1945), which led to the development of the Welfare State (the National Assistance Act in 1948). The separation of social welfare and social care technically removed the concept of *poverty* from social work provision (Glasby, 2007). However, it was evident that this was still a contributing factor in people's lives and when this was not resolved the influence of university education on social work practice was further developed, from the 1960s onwards. Here we see the significant influence of radical social work theory with an emphasis on social action by Brake and Bailey in their seminal work *Radical Social Work and Practice* (1975). This and further politically driven theoretical perspectives such as the Social Model of Disability and Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive Practice are significant political theories which have influenced the theoretical basis of social work. This was also a significant period of time for the influence of feminist theories in social work practice, the origins of which can be seen in the settlement movement in the 1800s (Beauman, 1996).

Political changes during the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government have had a lasting impact on the way in which today's social work is practised and its theoretical basis. At that time, public services were seen as inefficient and a new political movement attempted to move away from what was viewed as the *paternalism* of the Welfare State (Aldgate et al., 2007). The origins of a management-focused driver for social work can be seen in the application of management theories and concepts such as New Public Management (NPM) from this period onwards, which were further re-enforced by the Third Way Agenda of the Labour Party from

1997 onwards leading to an individualist neo-liberalist-focused society. This is felt more so today than ever due to imposed austerity measures by the Coalition (2010) and then Conservative government (2015). There is no one accepted definition of NPM but it must entail application of private business ideas to public institutions with a focus on outcomes and targets rather than processes; and the power moved from the professionals (social workers) to the managers to drive change (Aldgate et al., 2007). A significant change in terms of service users was the shift to service user involvement in the design and delivery of services rather than as 'passive recipients' (DoH, 2010) and this continued with New Labour in the form of public and patient involvement (DoH, 1999; DoH, 2000a; DoH, 2000b). While significant changes happened during the Coalition government (up to 2015) the management and neo-liberalist theoretical basis for social work remains.

So, what is social work theory?

What should be evident from this brief historical overview of key events in social work as a profession is its eclectic nature with theoretical influences from: psychological; to sociological; to radical; to organisational; to neo-liberalist individualism. What we can see in this section is how these different theoretical perspectives have been applied to social work practice depending on the historical and social context. This goes some way to helping students understand why social work theory does not follow one particular theoretical discipline. Therefore, social work theory is eclectic and cannot be any other way. It reflects the changes in the views of society regarding people in need. Today, that mixture is seen depending on the political party in power and their agenda for sanctions or intervention.

The Theory Circle: theoretical framework

The Theory Circle by Collingwood et al. (2008) sets out a framework for social work students and practitioners to help make sense of social work theory. As the authors themselves note:

Social Workers have grappled for many years now with the tension between theory and practice. The struggle may be to bridge a perceived gap between the academic knowledge base of social work and the complex realities of practice.

(Collingwood et al., 2008, p70)

As Teater (2010, p1) acknowledges, *{t}heory is an essential ingredient in practice that guides the way in which social workers view and approach individuals, groups, communities and society.* While not always commented upon by practitioners themselves, there is no doubt that theory underpins their understanding of, and interaction with, service users in practice. These are sometimes viewed as *assumptions and beliefs* that guide practice rather than recognition of the theories themselves (Teater, 2010, p1). However, this

does not acknowledge the significance of theoretical perspectives which guide social work practitioners to help them understand themselves, others, society and their own practice. There often appears to be an apathy, or sometimes even fear, by social workers to consciously recognise theory as being significant for social work practice. The intention of using the Theory Circle as a theoretical framework is an attempt to contextualise theory into practice in a clearer way for social work students and practitioners (Collingwood et al., 2008).

The Theory Circle was devised by Collingwood et al. (2008) in recognition of the need to identify the *formal knowledge base for (social work) practice* and for theory to be integrated in practice (pp71–2). They refer to this ‘formal knowledge base’ being guided by academic disciplines such as those listed in this chapter (i.e. psychological, sociological, ideological) which, according to the authors, is what ‘equips’ social work students and practitioners with the tools to help understand a service user’s behaviour and (or) their experience/s.

Before an appropriate theoretical perspective can be considered, however, the student or practitioner is required to investigate the service user’s life: their experiences and their behaviour, etc. This forms the Service User Profile (KIT). Each piece of information is then analysed and considered against an understanding of relevant theoretical perspectives (Collingwood et al., 2008). The *theory to inform* concerns identifying appropriate theories to underpin understanding of the key elements concerning the person’s experiences and/or behaviour. The *theory to intervene* involves developing a strategy based on theoretical understanding for intervening in the service user’s life, in order to change behaviour and improve outcomes. In essence, what Collingwood et al. (2008) have identified here is what constitutes social work theory. This is presented to students and practitioners as a simple formula:

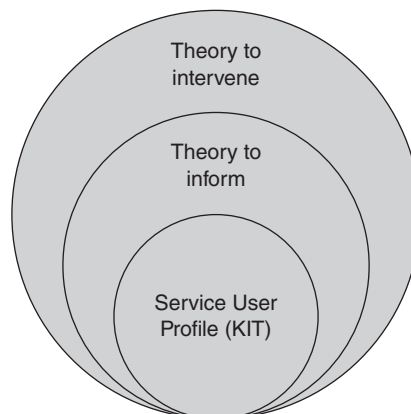


Figure 1.1 Diagram based on Collingwood et al.’s (2008) Theory Circle

Because of their practice-based focus, social work theories are not sufficient if all they do is help the social worker to understand a person’s behaviour or experiences.

As a social worker, they also need to be able to intervene in a person's life and this intervention should also be underpinned by theory. This book therefore addresses the first part of Collingwood et al.'s (2008) Theory Circle: *theories to inform* in order to establish the foundation of understanding a service user's life.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has set out the context and influence of different theoretical paradigms in social work practice. It has suggested that social work theory is underpinned by Collingwood et al.'s (2008) Theory Circle, which provides students and practitioners with a theoretical framework for understanding service users and social work intervention.

Further Reading

Collingwood, P, Emond, R and Woodward, R (2008) The Theory Circle: A tool for learning and practice. *Social Work Education*, 27(1): 70–83.

Gray, M and Webb, SA (eds) (2013) *Social Work Theories and Methods* (2nd edition). London: SAGE Publications.

Healy, K (2005) *Social Work Theories in Context: Creating Frameworks for Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Howe, D (2009) *A Brief Introduction to Social Work Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Payne, M (2014) *Modern Social Work Theory* (4th edition). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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

Introduction to Part One – Psychological Theories

Initial thinking about psychology can occur when our thoughts turn to questions regarding *why people do what they do or how their personalities differ* (Nevid, 2012, p2). This means we are questioning the individual psychology of others and how this compares to ourselves and what we know. Psychologists are primarily focused on the study of behaviour, be that in humans or in animal life, and in doing so to understand the mind. The five chapters in this section of the book initially address the four main schools of psychological thought: Psychoanalysis; Behaviourist; Cognitive and Humanist. Each of these chapters is written by Stephen J Macdonald to assist social work students and practitioners to understand the psychological basis of social work (as set out in Chapter 1).

It is imperative that in order to understand and be able to apply psychological-based theories in practice, that social work students and practitioners must first have knowledge of these key schools of psychological thought. It is also imperative that on reading these, that social work practitioners are concerned ethically with the way psychological experiments were conducted as well as the challenges that applying psychological theories can lead to in social work practice – for example, the focus on individual pathology being in some way *maladaptive*, i.e. the individual's inability to adapt themselves to their environment.

This section finishes with a chapter introducing the idea of Human Growth and Development across the lifespan, which is common to understanding people in social work practice. This chapter, written by Lesley Deacon, primarily focuses on the work of Erik Erikson (psychosocial theorist) in order to begin to see the emergence of an additional sociological focus, blended with the psychological one.