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Theory-Directed Social Work Practice

LEARNING OUTCOMES
 Articulate the relationship between the five categories of theory and social work practice, providing examples of applications.
 Distinguish between a practice theory and a meta-framework as applied to selected client scenarios.

- KEY OUTLINE**
- Categories of Practice Theory
 - Practice Theories
 - Behavioral Theories
 - Ecological Theories
 - Systemic Theories
 - Networks for Social Work Theory
 - Perspective of Social Work Practice
 - Practice-Based Practice Model



Social workers are prepared through their BSW education and in their first year of MSW education to practice as generalist social workers. As generalist social workers, social workers draw on a broad knowledge base in practice with diverse clients, situated in a wide range of contexts, and involved in many interlocking systems, such as family, work, community, and institutional, political, and judicial systems. To be an effective generalist, a social worker must be grounded in a broad range of practice theory. To be a generalist social worker means one is able to draw on many theories, perspectives, and models and weave them together to create a reasoned and comprehensive approach to practice for specific clients in specific contexts. Client problems, values, culture, and belief systems influence the practitioner's selection of theoretical frameworks when constructing practice interventions.

From its beginning, social work has been concerned with providing care that is grounded in tested knowledge. Early in the profession's development, pioneers such as Jane Addams and Mary Richmond worked to provide theoretical bases for social

work practice. The publication of Mary Richmond's *Social Diagnosis* in 1917 was one of the first efforts to link theory to practice. Likewise at the family, agency/community (mezzo), and national (macro) levels of practice, Jane Addams's knowledge of work within and across these multiple system levels made her an effective advocate for bringing needed resources and social justice to those in need (Addams, 1893; Dierman, 1984; Trattner, 1999). While the profession of social work has been active in developing theories of social work practice since its inception, it has always borrowed relevant theories from other disciplines such as psychology, medicine, nursing, anthropology, biology, and sociology. While many of these theories continue to inform social work practice, with maturity, the profession developed empirically tested theories of its own. Today, there are more than 400 practice theories, perspectives, frameworks, and models that direct and inform social work practice (Boyle, Hall, Mather, Smith, & Farley, 2009; Wedding & Corcini, 2014). See Box 3.1 for a list of commonly used theories, frameworks, perspectives, and models across four broad categories of practice theories: psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, humanistic, and postmodern theories.

Fundamentally, practice theory is a body of knowledge that has been empirically tested and shown to be effective. Theory then guides the action of practice, and its evidence of effectiveness becomes the standard of accountability for practitioners (Turner, 2011). Without the application of tested knowledge, social workers cannot claim to be practicing professionals. If we did not use theory to guide us in our practice decisions, social workers would not be distinguishable from kind, warmhearted people wanting to be of help and doing what they felt was the "right thing to do." Theory becomes the basis of our assessments and interventions with clients. We use it to give meaning to situations, to assess the strengths and challenges (or barriers) in presenting situations, and to understand our clients' lives and the environments in which they live and function. Usually, practice requires that we employ multiple theories when working with a client (which may be an individual, family, group, organization, or community) (Turner, 2011). For example, we may use the person-in-environment perspective to understand the complexity of our client's life, psychodynamic theory to understand her low self-esteem, crisis theory to counsel her after a rape, and grief theory to help her through the recovery process.

CATEGORIES OF PRACTICE THEORY

Direct practice theories and models have been categorized into four broad groups. These include psychodynamic theories, cognitive-behavioral theories, humanistic theories and postmodern theories. In this section, you will be introduced to each of these categories of theory and provided some examples of some of those theories and an explanation of their application in direct social work practice.

Psychodynamic Theories

Psychodynamic theories can be traced to Sigmund Freud and attempt to link current problems clients may be having to past traumas, usually occurring during childhood. Treatment is focused on gaining insights that then can be translated into personality changes within the client. Common psychodynamic theories include psychoanalysis