

Theory and Social Work Treatment

Francis J. Turner

"Everybody has won and all must have prizes." I am certain that Lewis B. Carroll was not thinking of social work and social work theories when he penned these words from "Alice in Wonderland" in Oxford many years ago. However, their theme reflects accurately my viewpoint as I continue to wrestle with the ever-expanding reality of our profession's rich theory base. For me each of our several theories stands as an important contribution to the field if it gives us a better way of helping even one client. And whether or not one or another of these theories fits our individual view of the world and how we believe our practice is to be conducted each deserves a prize and each needs to be a part of our practice treasury.

The above paragraph is the same one that began Chapter 1 in the previous edition of this

book. Instead of casting it differently, I decided to use it just as it was written some 12 years ago. This is because it reflects for me where we are as a profession and where I find myself after some 50 years of watching and pondering the highly diversified development of theories for social work practice.

In the previous edition I had presumed that the process of our highly diversified theory base development would be slowing down and moving to a greater integration, perhaps even to the prospect of a general theory of social work. Rather, the reverse is happening. Instead of fewer, better integrated theories, we have more with less integration. Whether this is an aid to our practice or not is a moot question and undoubtedly will be the basis of many academic debates.

The Goals

As in earlier editions, the aim of this book is to provide colleagues with a readily available overview of the principal theories currently extant in social work practice around the world. It seeks to serve a broad spectrum of audiences, including at least the inquiring student, the conscientious practitioner, the searching professor, and the harried administrator.

It aspires to achieve this goal based on the assumption that to fully appreciate and make effective and ethical use of these theories, they must be understood both as individual conceptual constructs and also as bodies of thought that are inter-influencing, interconnecting, and interlocking.

Underlying these objectives is a strongly held assumption that theory and practice, to be effective, must be inexorably interconnected. Even though we argue strongly that theory is critical to practice, it is often difficult to demonstrate that these two factors are closely intertwined in our practice. The challenge now is how to gather and evaluate evidence to demonstrate that we are doing so.

In addressing this challenge we can certainly no longer decry a paucity of theory. We know we have a well-established richness of old and new theories, as well as theories in the making and theories in development. Accompanying this reality is a growing acceptance of interest in, and indeed excitement about, the implications and challenges of this diversity for practice.

This diversity has been and is an exciting step forward. It is a position that strengthens our understanding of the importance of tested ethical theory. Further, it helps us add precision to the growing complexities of our practice by providing us with tools to better understand its scope, dimensions, and effects.

However, to tap the potential of the differential use of specific theories, each of us must be familiar with all of them, whether we subscribe to them or not. This is a strong statement but an important one. Many theories exist in contemporary social work. Others continue to emerge. All have an impact on some components of practice.

We begin from the assumption that what we do in practice is closely connected to what we know. As yet, though, we still have difficulty in

demonstrating the validity of this concept. This does not mean that practitioners function irresponsibly or ineffectively. Our challenge is to build a rigorous conceptual base to make practice even more effective and accountable (Howard, Perron, & Vaughan, 2009).

To take a further step in this direction, an overview of each of the major theories currently affecting practice will be presented by a colleague knowledgeable about it.

What is Theory?

One of the difficulties in clarifying the meaning of the word *theory* in a social-work-practitioner-oriented text stems from the various ways in which this term is used in our day-to-day exchanges. Most of us can recall from our research courses that the more precise meaning of this term describes a model of reality appropriate to a particular discipline and includes terms such as *concepts*, *facts*, *hypotheses*, and *principles*. Such a model helps to understand what is, what is possible, and how to achieve the possible for the discipline (Hearn, 1958; Siporin, 1989; Unrau, Gabor, & Grinnell, 2006).

Clearly this is a highly summarized and stylized description of the involved and ongoing efforts of all disciplines, including our own, to develop bodies of tested facts in a manner that helps us understand and predict some aspect of the reality with which we deal and so provide us with guidelines for effective action. Hence, the development of any theory, especially in all of the helping professions, is an ongoing process. We can never say that a theory is fully developed.

What Constitutes a New Theory?

This, then, raises the complex and oft-debated question of when an evolving body of concepts can be designated as a theory, and who should say that this has occurred. When are we talking about some interesting new ideas from which a theory may or may not develop? When are we talking about a developing theory? When are we talking about a body of thought that is sufficiently well developed to be called a theory? Debates about these questions go on in all professions.

However, since in this volume decisions have been made about which theories to include or to

exclude, it is important to set out the criteria that were used for the selection of topics; indeed, it is a question that has been frequently put to me (Goldstein, 1990). More often I have been queried as to why some particular body of thought was omitted or included.

Overall I have leaned to inclusivity rather than exclusivity, aware that some would not view a particular body or bodies of thought to have achieved the rank of theory. But even discussions as to when a particular thought system has achieved the status of theory is a way of advancing the theory. The answer as to when a thought system becomes a theory has been and will continue to be a highly pragmatic practitioner-based one, where there will be and needs to be ongoing differences of viewpoint.

It is my position that we have a new or continuing theory in practice when the following 10 criteria are met:

1. The ideas are new and are not restatements of earlier knowledge using only new terminology.
2. The ideas generated by the system give us new insights into an important aspect of the human condition or a significant group of clients or into some aspect of relevant and environmental or societal systems.
3. There is a beginning body of tested knowledge that supports the new ideas.
4. The system has been found to be demonstrably useful by a significant component of the profession.
5. The interventions emerging from the theory are ethical.
6. The interventions and concepts can be learned, understood, and utilized by a significant component of the profession.
7. The system addresses a broad spectrum of practice and methodologies.
8. The system has some beginning acceptance by the profession.
9. The system is generally within the value system of the profession.
10. The system has not been formally rejected by the profession.

Obviously there is a range of judgments involved in this paradigm. Since theory is an evolving dynamic process, there will probably

never be (nor should there be) full consensus on the point of a system's development at which it can be said that it is now a theory. For example, a chapter on meditation included in the second edition of this book raised criticism by some segments of the profession. Now there is a much broader acceptance and understanding of its relevance to social work, and meditation is viewed by many as an important therapeutic resource. Also in the previous edition we included a chapter on hypnotism, which also raised some colleagues' eyebrows but is also now accepted on a much wider base—although some would not consider it a theory.

Theory in Social Work History

As befits any responsible profession, the search for a strong theoretical base has been a continuing theme throughout the history of social work. At least 13 such approaches can be identified in the literature. Their presentation in the list that follows is not to imply that they arose sequentially; rather, many of them continue to be employed simultaneously and independently.

1. The first approach describes what is best described at the pre-theory period in our theoretical development, when our early colleagues were attempting to conceptualize practice, to formulate definitions, and to classify interventive procedures and methods. Examples of these efforts are found in Mary Richmond's *Social Diagnosis* and Gordon Hamilton's classic *Theory and Practice of Social Casework*, a book that for a long time was the basic text for clinicians (Hamilton, 1951; Richmond, 1917). Despite the word *theory* in the title, Hamilton rarely uses the word and makes little reference to the process of theory building and the place of research in the process. Rather than discussing concepts and tested hypotheses she refers to "basic assumptions which cannot be proved" and uses such terms as *axioms*, *values*, *attitudes*, and *exhortations*. She speaks authoritatively and comfortably from her knowledge of and competence in practice. Her writing is more prescriptive than theory-based. These early writings are not to be disparaged; they were the essential first steps in bringing together

- the practice wisdom of the profession, from which theory evolved.
2. A second approach to theory building can be found reflected in an important but largely unknown book by Frank J. Bruno, *The Theory of Social Work* (Bruno, 1936). In spite of its title, it is not about social work theory. Rather, it is about various theoretical bodies of thought from which social work practice of the time drew upon. The author argues strongly against a search for an uni-theory for the profession, stating that any answer that pretends to explain social events in a single formula must be viewed with strong suspicion (p. 85). In criticizing the search for a single theory, he gives particular attention to the strong influence of Freudian thinking on the practice of the day. He is challenged by the complexity of social work's mandate and reviews the bodies of knowledge from which, in his view, social work needs to draw. Interestingly, in addition to emphasizing the need to understand the physical bases of some of the problems we encounter, he discusses the importance of psychoanalysis, functionalism, gestalt, Adlerian thinking, and Jungian thought, as well as the work of Marx. He quotes Tennyson: "Our little systems have their day: They have their day and cease to be." By this quote he warns of the dangers of faddism but anticipates the reality of a multi-theory base for the profession.
 3. A third approach to theory building is seen in the rich cluster of writings by social workers, based on a particular body of theory on which some elements of the profession were drawing. These authors build their works on a strong adherence to one or another school of thought and then postulate the implications of the relevant concepts for social work practice. Two influential examples of this are Howard Parad's two books, *Ego Psychology and Dynamic Casework*, and *Ego-Oriented Casework*, co-authored with Roger Miller (Parad, 1958b; Parad & Miller, 1963). These writings do not attempt to develop a new or different theory for social work but rather apply existing theory to practice.
 4. A fourth approach to theory building is found in the work of authors who begin to formulate a distinct theory base for social work practice

again drawing on their own experience and that of others with whom they have practiced. In most instances, the theory that evolves in these situations is not totally unique but builds on other thought systems, to which is added a conceptual framework that represents a new understanding of practice. Florence Hollis's "Psychosocial System" and Helen Harris Perlman's "Problem Solving Process" are well-known examples (Hollis, 1964; Perlman, 1957; Woods & Hollis, 1990), and Konopka's work represents this approach (Konopka, 1963).

Both Hollis and Konopka state the conceptual base of their approach, while Perlman presents a set of axioms or principles that underlie each of their approaches to a theory of practice. These systems are based on well-thought-out conceptual systems unique to social work and each contains the foundation for the further development of a theory. These were and remain major contributions to our profession, albeit often underestimated in our current commitment to modernity. One consequence of the emergence of different theories for social work was the tendency to take an either/or position: if you were drawn to one system, you were expected to reject the other. This of course was the situation during the diagnostic/functional schism of an earlier day, and the division was similar, although not as intense, between the positions of Hollis and Perlman.

5. A fifth approach to theory building is seen in the early custom of dividing practice and the emerging theories of practice along method lines. This was done initially with casework and group work, but later family therapy was also separated out. The historical reasons for this separation are complex and related to the way in which these different methodologies emerged. The tendency to these method-oriented theories helped foster the perception that our practice needed a pluralistic theoretical base, one for each method. It has only been in the past four or five decades that attention has been drawn to theoretical commonalities across methods and hence the possibility and indeed the necessity of multi-method and multi-theory practitioners.

6. Prior to the 1950s the majority of clinical theoretical writing was based on some form of psychodynamic thinking or small group theory. In the early 1960s we began to see a growing acceptance of theoretical plurality, which led to a series of important social work writings based on a range of other theoretical systems. Hence we find Perlman writing a book from a role theory perspective, Parad editing a work on crisis theory, Harold Werner publishing a book on cognitive theory, and Derek Jehu and Edwin Thomas each producing major writings from a learning theory and behavioral approach (Jehu, 1967; Parad, 1958a; Perlman, 1968; Thomas, 1967; Werner, 1965). Similarly, there were writings related to systems theory by Werner Lutz and Gordon Hearn, among others (Hearn, 1958; Lutz, 1956). Later, we saw a number of important writings from both feminist and constructive perspectives. The exciting aspect of the pluralistic development is the awareness and acceptance that there are many sources from which theory develops.
 7. The next identifiable approach to theory building is seen in the search for interconnectedness between systems, both old and new. As practice began to develop a diverse theoretical base, the question arose as to how these various approaches did or did not fit together. The concept of separate methodologies remained the general model of practice, so these comparisons of theories for the most part were made along methodological lines. In this way Joan Stein and her associates compared the various emerging theories related to family therapy (Stein, 1969). Roberts and Nee and later Strean wrote about diverse theories of casework (Roberts & Nee, 1970; Strean, 1971). Hollis and later Hollis and Woods showed how some of these theories could be incorporated into the psychosocial approach (Hollis & Woods, 1981; Strean, 1971; Woods & Hollis, 1990). In the group treatment field we find Schwartz and Zalba doing a similar study of the differential theoretical bases of group practice (Schwartz & Zalba, 1971). Although there was a strong hope being expressed that by comparing the various systems a unified theory of social would emerge, this did not take place.
 8. The next observable component of theory development flowed from the growing acceptance of, and enthusiasm for, the potential of plurality. Once some segments of the profession had broken away from the tradition of staying too close to one or two theories, there was a growing interest in searching widely for new ideas and less concern about their interconnections. In this way we moved rapidly from the 6 systems described in the Roberts and Nee book to the 14 addressed in the first edition of this work, to 19 in the second edition, 22 in the third, 27 in the fourth, and 36 in this, the fifth edition (Roberts & Nee, 1970; Turner, 1976; Turner, 1979; Turner, 1986b;).
- Under this umbrella colleagues began to look at such things as Transactional Analysis and gestalt, to wonder about the potential utility of other systems such as meditation and existentialism, and to develop systems of our own, such as Task-Centered and the Life Model. This trend was declared by some to be a confounding outcome of faddism, while others saw it as a mature and commendable way of better responding to the diversity of client needs.
9. With the rapid growth in the number of theories and the return to a close identification with the interests and disciplines of the social sciences, more attention was being given to the process of formal theory building and the nature and characteristics of theory (Merton, 1957). Examples include the work of Lutz, Hearn, and Paley (Hearn, 1958; Lutz, 1956; Paley, 1987). Much of this early work was influenced by systems theory and the wish to understand how theoretical systems and practice systems interfaced (Nugent, 1987) Although this process did not demonstrably lead to the enrichment of practice, it did lead us to re-examine the concept of theory and to be more precise in the use of theoretical terminology.
 10. A further theory-building activity is related to the very essence of theory—that is, the testing of concepts through research. As theory almost became equivalent to dogma for many colleagues, who then followed

a particular theory unquestioningly, and as the risks of this trend were recognized, there developed increasing interest in, and commitment to, empirical testing of various components of the theories being practiced. That is a growing demand for tested theory.

This is an area that is never finished and must continue on an ongoing basis. In this mode various concepts from different theories are operationally defined and tested through the formulation of hypotheses and the publication of the resultant data. The amount of practice-based research has expanded greatly. This is exemplified in the richness of material published in our many excellent refereed journals.

11. A contemporary approach to the plurality of practice theories that is frequently employed and that has much potential to strengthen practice theory is eclecticism (Koglevzon & Maykrznz, 1982). In this approach, concepts are adopted from various theories and an amalgam is formed, which is used as the basis of practice.

There appear to be two forms of eclecticism. In the first, choices are made based on the preferences of the particular practitioner or the nature of the practice setting. This strategy appears to be strongly influenced by the person's own value base and his or her perception of practice, rather than on an analysis of all theories from which a conceptual framework might be developed (Latting, 1990).

A second form of eclecticism is best explained by Dr. Joel Fischer, who postulates that only those elements of a theory that have been demonstrated to be effective should be used (Fischer, 1978). Our knowledge base thus should be built on the findings of research, not on preference—that is, on evidence. This approach fosters a process in which theory is developed in an ongoing selective and incremental manner.

12. A more recent approach to theory building is reflected in the increasing number of articles in the professional literature that address highly discrete components of selected theories. Rather than attempting to address a

system in its entirety and its application in practice, these authors are more targeted. In some instances, they are looking at a specific application of a theory, such as the use of crisis theory in a particular practice situation such as physical assault. In other instances, they are concerned with practice applications of a discrete concept, such as the concept of homeostasis in work with couples (Turner, 1986a). Both of these strategies reflect the growing appreciation that progress in the more precise use of theoretical concepts will take place in a step-by-step manner rather than efforts to test an entire theory or a major component of it.

13. A more contemporary approach to theory building is reflected in the strong interest in evidence-based practice. It is an approach that stresses that we need to build practice on known outcomes of practice, which when positive gives us the basis for theory development. In many ways this approach reflects the admonishment of Leonardo da Vinci to his colleagues: "When it is impossible to make a good theory it is better to get along without one" (Santilanna, 1956). What this growing emphasis does not always demand is that some aspect of theory is being tested; it does demand that what we do in particular practice situations results in positive outcomes that can be replicated in similar situations. It is these kinds of studies, of course, which lead us to seek explanations of outcomes, and this is the way in which theory is advanced.

There are undoubtedly other approaches to theory building that can be identified in our history. This range has been presented not to be exhaustive or definitive but to help us understand that our commitment to theory has always been viewed as an essential commitment of our profession, a commitment that has been multifaceted in its fulfillment.

These various approaches demonstrate that we have always been committed to the search for a strong theoretical base. Just as our theoretical base is diverse, so too are the various strategies we have used to foster our commitment. But always these seekers emanate from the work of concerned colleagues. Hence, all theories and all

responsible approaches to theory building should be seen as being important in themselves and as having differential value only in their proper or improper use. Sigmund Freud underscored this position in speaking of the validity of a pluralistic theory base: "There are many ways and means of practicing psychotherapy. All are good that lead to health" (Freud, 1905).

As we continue our search for strong and selectively effective theories to cope with the demands of our complex practice, the long-standing academic/clinical and theoretical/practical dichotomies will, we hope, continue to blur. We are beginning to better understand the close connection between practice and theory building. We understand that the process of assessment and diagnosis is very much akin to the process of hypothesis formulation and testing, which is the heart of theory building. Harold Lewis (1982) described this well some 30 years ago:

Every practitioner should know that her observations are not simply casual scannings; they involve a conceptually ordered search for evidence. Her eyes and ears are trained to help her select evidence related to some framework that will permit inferences to be drawn, order revealed, meanings surmised, and an exploratory guide for action planned. Their organizing frameworks are theories. (p. 6).

Theory in Social Work Practice

The principal thesis of this work is that responsible, ethical practice needs to be built on strong theory, based on relevant evidence. But what are the functions of theory for the practitioner? Why is it so important?

Clearly the most important function of theory is its ability to explain and hence predict phenomena. The answers to two questions are sought in practice: What will happen if I do nothing in this situation? And what will happen if I respond in a particular way or ways? Theory helps us to recognize patterns, relationships, and significant variables that assist in bringing order to the complexities of contemporary practice.

In consciously formulating a treatment plan based on assessment and diagnosis, a practitioner is involved in either a theory-building or a theory-testing activity. A treatment plan presumes sufficient understanding of a situation

that actions can be taken with predictable outcomes. Without such an understanding, practice remains in the realm of guesswork and impressionistic response and artful use of techniques.

Theory aids in anticipating outcomes and speculating about unanticipated relationships between variables—that is, theory helps us to recognize, understand, and explain new situations. If we understand sufficiently well the phenomena with which we are dealing and their interrelationships, we should have the conceptual tools for dealing with unexpected or unanticipated behaviors. To the extent that our theory is sound, we should meet with fewer surprises in our practice and be better able to solve problems.

Theory also helps us carry knowledge from one situation to the next by helping us recognize what is similar or different in our ongoing practice experiences. Rather than distracting us from our commitment to individuality or self-determination, theory can enhance these by helping us see not only how the client or situation resembles other clients and situations, but how each is unique.

Theory helps us to expand our horizons as we follow the implications of some observation that does not appear to fit what we know or have experienced before. In these situations we are led to speculate about other ways of viewing reality. This, in turn, can lead to an enriched perspective on clients and situations.

A sound and logically consistent theoretical structure and mindset permit us to explain our activity to others. This allows us to transfer our knowledge and skills in a testable and demonstrable way and to have our activities scrutinized and evaluated by others. If we have sound theories, others can profit by our experience by applying those theories on the basis of how action was being taken in particular situations.

Further, theory helps us to recognize when we encounter new situations that indicate gaps in our knowledge. For example, when the application of a theoretical concept does not have the expected outcome, we have either misunderstood or our knowledge is not sufficient to deal with the situation at hand. After meeting with a difficult or new practice situation, practitioners frequently blame themselves, assuming that if they had been more aware they would have coped

more effectively. In fact, there may have been no available theoretical construct to explain the presenting phenomenon. It is just as important to know what is not known as it is to know what is.

Theory also provides the practitioner with assurance. We have all experienced the awesome responsibility of practice and endured the loneliness that it can bring. Theory will never completely dispel these feelings. However, a firm theoretical orientation gives us a base to organize what we do not know. A set of anchoring concepts can help us avoid the aimless wandering with the client that can occur when we do not know what we are doing (Pilalls, 1986).

Theory brings order to our practice by helping to put into perspective the mass of facts, impressions, and suppositions developed in the process of our therapeutic contact with an individual, dyad, family, group, or community. A cynic might even suggest that theory, whether sound or not, gives a sense of security to the therapist, thus increasing effectiveness, even when the theory has little to do with the treatment employed.

In addition, knowledge of one theory permits us to assess other theories. If we are clear about which of our concepts are empirically verifiable and connected, we are in a much better position to evaluate emerging ideas in light of what we know. There can often be several theoretical explanations for a single phenomenon. Determining which of these is most useful requires constant testing and seeking for evidence. Theoretical explanations different from our own help us to better understand and modify our own theoretical stance.

Finally, a strong and inquiring theoretical mindset helps us look at new ideas and emerging developments and to find a middle way between the dismissiveness of the cynic who has "heard it all before" and the overeagerness of those who leap on every bandwagon that passes by.

Other Roles of Theory

It is also important to understand the role that theory plays in the dynamics, sociology, and politics of our profession and its interaction with other professions.

The increased interest in theory has strengthened our commitment to research, which in turn

has raised our profile with scholars in other disciplines. Implied in the very nature of theory is an essential commitment to testing, experimentation, and conceptual and empirical development. Following the era in which theory was treated by many almost as dogma, the essential role of research came to be accepted. Thus, in addition to the great expansion of research activities, we have seen the establishment of research centers; the rapid expansion of quantity and quality of professional journals, whose primary interest is the dissemination of research; the strengthening of the research component of the curricula; and an enriched perspective of the essential interface between research, practice and theory. These have greatly enhanced the status of and respect for the profession on many fronts.

Thus, there is now within the profession a very strong commitment to the essential place of theory. However, this commitment is far from total: there is still a strong perception among many that the development of theory is something to be carried out by academics and graduate students, and by professional researchers at research centers. We still do not seem to have built a sufficiently strong practice-theory link, and hence there is still an unfortunate chasm between these two essential components of any professional endeavor.

Another interesting phenomenon related to our plurality of theories is that each is recognized and prized to different degrees at different times in different parts of the profession and at different stages in the lives of colleagues. Since theories are strongly value-driven, they are respected, rejected, or ignored, depending on the values of the practitioner.

As the status of a theory increases it acquires a corresponding power base, which influences position and recognition. Political correctness influences the popularity of theories to ebb and flow, and can in turn have an impact on what knowledge is available to clients. This is a serious problem with serious ethical implications.

Changing preferences or viewed importance for particular theories also create challenges in the design and implementation of curricula at schools and faculties of social work at all levels. In the face of an expanded diversity of theories, the challenges of what to teach and how to teach theory are numerous. The pedagogical challenge

becomes even more complex given the changing status of different theories. It is not being suggested that every theory needs to be taught in the same manner and afforded the same emphasis, but students do need to be taught to respect each theory and to be given the tools with which to learn and incorporate each into their theoretical base of available therapeutic resources.

But Can Theory also be Harmful?

There are several ways in which theory can be a detriment to practice and harmful to clients. This can happen when we define clients' help based only on the dictates of a particular theory rather than responding on a personalized, ad hoc basis. When theory becomes overly cerebral and mechanistic, stressing labeling and classifying rather than the individuality of each client and situation, it can become an end in itself. Then the ability to predict, explain, and even control can become the goal, rather than the optimizing of human potential and the facilitating of growth. Here the client can become an interesting subject for study rather than a fellow human coexisting with us on life's journey.

Theory can also become self-fulfilling, especially if we become overly attached to a particular system and begin to see the world only from our chosen theoretical perspective. Here we tend to interpret all phenomena in a way that fits that conceptual framework. This can be very limiting, preventing us from taking into account alternative and perhaps more accurate explanations of situations.

Similarly, theory that takes the form of dogma ceases to be living, self-examining, and dynamic. This often happens when a particular system is identified with a charismatic founder, group, movement, or ideology. When this occurs, the theory tends to be used to close out other explanations and to dismiss those who offer them as quasi-heretics.

At times theory can acquire a form of political power. When a particular theory gains power or ascendancy within professional circles, agencies or practitioners can be granted or deprived of status depending on their adherence to the "official truth." This can have a powerful influence on what kinds of client goals are served,

what services are offered, what problems are addressed, and who is considered competent to act in the prescribed therapeutic role.

Finally, some suggest that the search for a theory for social work is a futile one and should be eschewed. They argue that the subjects of our professional practice are so complex, individualized, and mobile that they cannot be understood or influenced in terms of any theory, and efforts to do so only diminish the uniqueness of the individual client. Clearly we will never fully understand everything about our profession's areas of interest, but the history of humankind has made it abundantly clear that the quest to do so can only help us to become more effective. Dr. Bruce Thyer discusses this question of the potential negative effects of theory in a thorough manner in a recent paper (Thyer, 2008). Because theories can be harmful, it doesn't follow that we should ignore them, only that we need to be very cautious in our use of them. We cannot live without them as a responsible profession.

The Classification of Theory

One of the challenges presented by each edition of this book is how to order the spectrum of theories addressed. Since a major premise of the work is that these theories need to both stand alone as well as interlock and inter-influence each other, it is important to consider different organizational methods of classification and their implications.

For example, theories could be ranged along various continua, from the most abstract to the most concrete; from the most particular to the most general; or from the most individualistic to the most socially oriented. It is important to note that no one of these is better or more correct than any of the others. Each is useful and could lead to a better understanding of the various theories, how they interface, or what they add to each other and to our pool of knowledge. In this era of evidence-based practice, another approach would be to order the theories on the basis of their research strength.

Theories could also be organized into clusters, such as foundation theories that provide a general orientation and practice theories that are more action-specific. Or they could be clustered into three groups: highly general,

midrange-specific, and highly focused. Siporin's suggestion is that theories could be clustered according to those that are assessment-oriented by nature and those that are intervention-oriented. In his view, there are theories that help us understand phenomena but do not provide much help in knowing what to do, while others are more action-oriented than conceptual (Siporin, 1975).

Golan calls some theories "transitional" and suggests that this is a basis for clustering theories into those that can be connected with other theories and those that can stand alone (Turner, 1986b). Another way of clustering is according to value base. For example, some theories are more individualistically oriented, some more group-oriented, some more family-oriented, and some more community-focused.

Many other approaches to clustering could be considered as well (Fischer, 1971). Each in its own way will and does help us to understand theories in themselves as well as how theories are interconnected and interlocking, and like the theories, contributes to the ongoing development of our body of knowledge.

One thing we noticed in preparing this volume was that authors devoted more time than in earlier editions to commenting on other theories with which the one about which they were writing connected. This could lead to a further way of classifying chapters, by focusing in on clusters of theories that have some similarity with each other.

Undoubtedly there are many other ways of classifying theory. Each comes from a different perspective. But to make this book generally useful, any effort at classifying has been avoided. We choose to let each person use it as he or she will. Thus, as in earlier editions, an alphabetical format has been chosen. (This too probably has a bias that holds they are all equal.)

Summary

Certainly from our earliest days we have been cognizant of the nature and critical importance of tested theory as the hallmark of all professions. As our understanding of the requisite of theory has expanded, so too has our awareness that the term *theory* is a complex one, dynamic and changing in nature, that not only gives us a

basis for ethical and evidence-based practice but also plays a spectrum of roles in the politics and sociology of all professions. In particular we have learned that our profession has no unitary theory but a plurality of theories, each of which changes and activates and inter-influences each other. To best understand this interlocking factor it is important that we seek to understand the specificity of each, aware that the concept of a "theory for social work" is a naïve one and a sign of our maturity is our growing comfort with the discomfort of plurality.

In the final chapter, we will discuss some of the interlocking perspectives of the range of approaches, discuss some of our research challenges, and speculate on possible further developments for their building in the decade ahead.

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