Dear Students of Social Work,

Social Work Theories – The Beginnings[1]

Social work practice is very much about context and addressing social concerns and issues which are often at the nexus of the environment and the individual. What made social work a social science was its professional approach to the work of helping people. Social work adopts the empirical method used in the natural sciences and has therefore come to be defined as a disciplined science and not just a philanthropic effort. Mary Richmond was one of the earliest proponents of using a logical, evidence based method for helping which marked the start of social work theories. Attention was paid to defining the problems in people's lives so that a rational, rather than a purely moralistic approach was used. It is useful to understand that the development of this form of professional practice was intersected in the 1930s by increasing interest in psychoanalytic theory as the theoretical structure for defining individuals' problems (Smalley, 1967, pp.ix-x)[2]. This approach tended to draw on psychological insights and viewed human weakness as the critical variable in understanding human problems. It went in search of a cause and often looked for individual behaviours that fitted into a diagnostic category. Each diagnosis focused on a human lack or weakness, ranging from the relatively benign to the severe.

But social workers soon realised the importance of recognising individual strengths in their work. So in 1958, the Commission of Social Work Practice included as a main objective of the field to "seek out, identify, and strengthen the maximum potential in individuals, groups and communities" (Bartlett, 1958, p6)[3]. This was the start of the strength-based approach to social work practice as there was a recognition that confining social work to individual pathology while ignoring strengths was not only remedial in its approach but also failed to capitalise on the strengths and resilience in people. Germain and Gitterman (1980)[4] then built on the social work tradition of focusing on the interface between the individual and the environment, introduced the ecological concepts such as adaptation and called for attention to be given to the transactions that occured between people and their environment.

Over time, more theories which help us to understand, explain and formulate intervention were translated or applied in social work practice. These practice models provide social workers with a framework of how to help others based on the underlying social work theories. While a theory explains why something happens, a practice model shows how to use a theory to create change.

Social Work Theories[5]

There are many social work theories that guide social work practice. Here are some of the major theories that are generally accepted in the field of social work.

Systems theory describes human behaviour in terms of complex systems. It is premised on the idea that an effective system is based on individual needs, rewards, expectations, and attributes of the people living in the system. The theory explains how individuals, families, couples, groups and communities can be directly involved in identifying and framing their problem and how they can be supported to resolve it or to improve the conditions for social functioning.

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[1] Adapted from Chapter 1 (History, Critique, and Useful Conceptions: Towards a Strengths Paradigm) of *"The Strengths Model: A Recovery-Oriented Approach to Mental Health Services (3rd Edition)"* by Charles A. Rapp & Richard J. Goscha. (2012). Oxford University Press.

[2] Smalley, R. E. (1967). Theory for social work practice. New York: Columbia University Press.

[3] Bartlett, H. M. (1958). Toward clarification and improvement of social work practice. Social Work, 3, 3-9.

[4] Germain, C., & Gitterman, A. (1980). The life model of social work practice. New York: Columbia University Press.

[5] Adapted from "Theories Used in Social Work Practice & Practice Models" by Simmons Staff. (2014). Retrieved from https://socialwork.simmons.edu/theories-used-social-work-practice/

Social learning theory is based on Albert Bandura's idea that learning occurs through observation and imitation. New behaviour will continue if it is reinforced. According to the theory, rather than simply hearing a new concept and applying it, learning takes place when new behaviour is practised and sustained. Much of the work done in the guidance and rehabilitation of youths at risk and addiction apply social learning theory.

Psychosocial development theory is an eight-stage theory of identity and psychosocial development by Erik Erikson. Erikson believed everyone must pass through eight stages of development over the life cycle: hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom. Each stage is divided into age ranges from infancy to older adults.

Psychodynamic theory was developed by Freud, and it explains personality in terms of conscious and unconscious forces. The theory describes the personality as consisting of the id (responsible for following basic instincts), the superego (attempts to follow rules and behave morally), and the ego (mediates between the id and the ego).

Rational choice theory is based on the idea that all action is fundamentally rational in character, and people calculate the risks and benefits of any action before making decisions.

Social Work Practice Models[6]

There are various practice models that influence the way social workers help people meet their goals. A practice model shows how to use a theory to create change. It draws on a theory which helps to explain why something happens and it is important that practice is grounded on theories and evidence based ones. Theories are also being refined and updated by research and discoveries so it is necessary to stay current while not chasing new theories without critical thinking.

Here are some of the major social work practice models used in various roles, such as caseworker, medical social worker, group worker and community worker.

Problem solving helps people with the problem solving process. Rather than to tell clients what to do, social workers teach clients how to apply a problem solving method so they can develop their own solutions. A good book on this approach is "*Counselling: A Problem-Solving Approach*" by Anthony Yeo[7].

Task-centred practice is a short-term treatment where clients establish specific, measurable goals. Social workers and clients collaborate together and create specific strategies and steps to begin reaching those goals. To a large extent, much of the work in Family Service Centres apply this practice which is based on a good assessment of what needs to be addressed more immediately.

Cognitive behavioural theories focus on the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Social workers assist clients in identifying patterns of irrational and self-destructive thoughts and behaviours that influence emotions.

Crisis intervention model is used when someone is dealing with an acute crisis such as struggling with suicidal thoughts. The model includes seven stages: assessing safety and risk of harm or hurt, rapport building, problem identification, addressing feelings, generating alternatives, developing an action plan, and following up.

[6] Adapted from "Theories Used in Social Work Practice & Practice Models" by Simmons Staff. (2014). Retrieved from
https://socialwork.simmons.edu/theories-used-social-work-practice/
[7] Yeo, A. (1993). *Counselling: A Problem-Solving Approach.* Singapore: Armour Publishing.

Narrative therapy externalizes a person's problem by examining the story of the person's life. In the story, the client is not defined by the problem, and the problem exists as a separate entity. Instead of focusing on a client's depression, a client would be encouraged to fight against the depression by looking at the skills and abilities that he or she may have previously taken for granted.

Social Workers in Different Settings
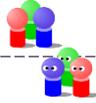
Generally, direct practice involves working with clients (individuals, groups and communities) to resolve social problems and strengthen the functioning and quality of their lives. They work in areas of early intervention, rehabilitation and protection work and end of life programs. Good social work practitioners integrate advocacy into their work and seek to influence systems and policies that impact the lives of the clients they work with.

Indirect social work practice brings about change by influencing the larger systems, services and policies that impact individuals, groups and communities. Some work in policy positions such as analysts and legislative advocates; others work as community organisers, program designers, reviewers and resources mobilisers. They aim to address gaps in resources, inequalities and limitations on access to services because of systemic or structural issues.

Competencies required of a social worker

The competencies required of a social worker for practice in Singapore can be found in the National Social Work Competency Framework. Social work education and post education professional development now have a competency reference. The framework enables social workers to progress beyond foundational competence to proficiency and expert mastery level. It is important however to understand that competency is necessary and key to good service delivery and outcomes but not sufficient for a profession. The key to quality and efficiency is professionalism and accountability for practice.

A profession is characterised by a job that requires a specific education, as well as training and skills that are guided by a Code of Ethics. As social workers we conform to the technical or ethical standards of the Singapore Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics. A high level of professionalism is a mark of a mature profession. It is marked by the ability to take charge and be in control and accountable for what is a professional judgement and opinion. It involves a systems approach at viewing issues that goes beyond the individual cases. It is professional wisdom that is drawn from among other things the collective experience of intervening in many social work practice cases and community development work.

Skills required of a social worker

Social work requires a range of professional, emotional and cognitive skills. A life-long learner contributes to good practice. There are several qualities and skills that are at the core. These are: active listening, emotional intelligence, empathy, case management skills, critical thinking skills, working with cultural sensitivity and tolerance, setting boundaries, facilitation and communication skills.

Good social work practice is always based on evidence based theories. It has to be so in order for it to make the most appropriate assessment. There is only one form of good practice regardless of where it is practised be it in the Family Service Centres or in specialised centres or programs. It is a myth to think that there different forms of social work such as traditional and non-traditional practice. Good practice is directed by the goal of helping individuals, groups and communities to move on in their lives. Good practice enables those we work with to discover and draw on their strengths to live lives as independently and with as much support as possible. This is why the strengths based approach that undergirds most of our practice applies regardless of the setting and context of our practice.

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