



MODERN SOCIAL WORK THEORY:

a critical introduction

CEUM

MALCOLM PAYNE

Foreword by Stephen C. Anderson

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A critical introduction

Malcolm Payne

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To Susan

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Modern Social Work Theory

A Critical Introduction

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Foreword

This compendium of contemporary social work theories is a timely addition to the profession's understanding of the role and acquisition of theory in the practice of social work. The forces of social change taking place around the world today more than ever serve to underscore the need for us to develop an international perspective in examining both what we do and what we base our practice upon. Although much of the leadership in the development of the profession of social work has emanated from the United States and Britain, we risk stagnation as professionals if we do not broaden our intellectual thinking to include perspectives not only from other Western countries, but also from non-Western countries, non-Christian cultures, and Third World countries. Increasingly, we live in a world in which the social needs of one country are related to those of other countries. For example, we must understand the inextricable linkages between the professional endeavors of a social worker whose clients inhabit a drug-ridden ghetto of an American metropolitan area and his or her counterpart who works among the peasant peoples of any number of countries where the growing of coca and opiates thrive.

Throughout the profession, increasing attention is being given to the development of social work theory. This focus is particularly emphasized in social work education through curriculum standards (CSWE Accreditation Curriculum Policy Statement, 1982) that require research content to "... impart scientific methods of building knowledge for practice..." (p. 8) *Modern Social Work Theory* begins by offering the reader a framework from which to critically examine and assess theories for social work practice. Chapter 1 on the social construction of social work theory is particularly elucidating in considering the three elements of social work: the social worker, the client, and the setting in which they meet. By looking at how each is socially constructed by expectations, cultural norms, and patterns of behavior, the reader is challenged to look broadly at the many social forces that influence social work practice and theory. As the author points out, these are influences that have "... nothing to do with the academic and practice development of the occupation." (p. 14) This challenging perspective requires that the development of social work theory take into account the current social pressures of the day along with the political and public perceptions of human needs. Thus, theory

development is viewed as being an interactive process that is dynamic in nature, culturally relevant, and based on a recognition of client need. Although this view seemingly would result in a competing array of theories for social work practice, Dr. Payne argues that the common features of each theory should be identified and examined in the context of its fit within a basic paradigm of social work.

The ideas advanced by the author offer a thoughtful and refreshing discussion of differing means for both looking at and developing theory for social work practice. I find the discussion particularly challenging in its emphasis on finding the theory that fits the client. From my own experiences, I have often felt that at times social work either underserves or poorly serves certain populations. All too often, I have observed practitioners redefining and reshaping the needs of their clients to fit their theoretical perspective. The result is simply bad practice that does little to meet the needs of the client system. Whether or not the reader ends up agreeing with the author's views, he or she will benefit from the author's ideas.

Chapter 2 provides a rich discussion and critique of the pragmatic, positivist, and eclectic approaches to the use of theory in practice. In addition, the chapter examines the relationship between theory and practice and presents a comparative analysis of social work theories. Readers at the undergraduate, graduate, or practitioner level will find the material in this chapter well referenced and helpful in identifying the major literature in the field on comparative frameworks for analyzing contemporary social work theories covering individuals and families, group work, and community organization.

The main content of this text is contained in chapters 3 through 11, which review social work theory as grouped into differing theoretical perspectives. The basis used by the author for either the inclusion or exclusion of social work theories is historical importance or contemporary debate. The theoretical perspectives that are covered include: psychodynamic models; crisis intervention and task-centered models; behavioral models; systems and ecological models; social psychological and communication models; humanist and existential models; cognitive models; radical and Marxist approaches; and empowerment and advocacy. The authors referenced are well recognized and include: Hollis and Woods; Golan; Reid and Epstein; Pincus and Minahan; Krill; Goldstein; Gorrigan and Leonard; and Barbara Soloman. Rather than just present the views of the preceding individuals, the author focuses on how the differing theories are applied to social work

practice and connects each of the theoretical perspectives to other related ideas and writers. The richness and uniqueness of *Modern Social Work Theory* is contained in this presentation, discussion, and critique of the differing social work theories. The strength of the book rests in how the preceding is directly connected with social work practice both in the United States and in Europe. The international scope provided is most stimulating, and challenges readers to broaden their thinking about the “whats” and “whys” of their practice.

The text ends (Chapter 12) with a challenging discussion of how to assess and integrate social work theory into practice. It is evident that much of the theory developed to date is individualistic in nature and focuses primarily on therapeutic functioning. Although these theories are useful in dealing with some client systems needs, social work theory does not adequately address social work functioning in dealing with issues brought about by organizational breakdown, social change, or economic pressures at the macro level. The challenge to all of us, whether students or seasoned professionals, is to work towards the development and strengthening of social work theories that will better guide our practice in effectively meeting the needs of our clients in an ever-changing world.

This text represents one of the most readable and intellectually stimulating treatments of contemporary social work theory. It is a book that should be required reading for all social work students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Particularly useful for students is the extensive bibliography reflecting current literature published both in the United States and abroad. If, as human beings and as social work professionals, we are to advance into the future and effectively address the human conditions of *all* peoples, it is imperative that we look and begin communicating beyond the confines of our own narrow and parochial borders. More than ever before, our present and future are linked together as members of a worldwide community. I thank Dr. Payne for this important contribution to our profession and encourage all who read this timely book to work toward making this world a better place for us all.

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Clearly, any writer of a review of social work theory relies on the ideas of other writers, and I commend any reader to progress from this introduction to the comprehensive accounts to be found in the books and articles referred to. I have found them stimulating and full of ideas for practice and understanding. I am sure you will do so, too.

Didsbury, Manchester

MALCOLM PAYNE

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1

The Social Construction of Social Work Theory

Introduction: the starting point

This is the starting point: at this moment, somewhere in the world, 'clients' are struggling into an office to meet with a 'social worker'. Or perhaps the social worker is visiting the client's home, or is working with clients in groups, in residential or day-care settings, or in some form of community work. In some, but not all societies, this something called 'social work' goes on. It is widely enough spread for international associations of social workers and a shared language and literature of social work to exist.

This apparent shared understanding across many societies raises questions. Is social work a single entity? If so, presumably we should be able to say what it is and what it is not. But there is no agreed definition. It is hard to decide what might be included in social work, what its objectives might be, who its clients are, what its methods are, what a social worker is.

Perhaps these are insoluble problems, and no final decisions about them may be made. The answers may vary according to the time, social conditions and cultures within which the questions are raised. Nonetheless, to take part in social work you need a view about what you are doing – an interim view perhaps, but something which guides the actions you take. It will include values which are appropriate to doing social work, and theories about the nature of social work, for example sociological theories about its role in society, or its relationships with other occupational groups.

This book is concerned with *theories of social work* which try to explain, describe or justify what social workers do. Such theories

seem to be in a turmoil. There are a wide variety of them that may be used; their proponents and other theoreticians compete and have disputes about their value. Hartman (1971) argues that we must each make our own definition of theory in order to practice, and research by O'Connor and Dalglish (1986) on beginning social workers in Australia shows that they did create and retain their personal models of social work during their early experience of practice, but had difficulty in adjusting it to the agency setting. Hugman (1987) in a similar British study did not find so many difficulties, and argues that helping beginning workers to construct personal models may avoid making therapeutic theories appropriate for their social and service context.

My personal reason for writing this book comes from a wish to resolve theoretical turmoil for myself, and in doing so perhaps to help others think about their own resolution. My career has spanned the period of uncertainty, and I have learned, embraced and used many apparently different and conflicting theories. Although I have been involved in arguments with colleagues holding different views, I have always seen these views as part of social work. Throughout my theoretical travels, I have never seen myself as moving away from social work as my fundamental base. So, somehow I have managed to integrate different approaches to social work into something that feels and is to me a whole. In doing so, I must be saying something about social work: that it is, or may contain, all these elements. Jordan (1989) contends that social workers use 'a process of violent bodging' to adapt and mix theories to 'render ideas more serviceable for their purposes.' Accounts of social work theory often express their ideas in a coherent form, using evidence and ideas drawn from the social sciences. Yet social workers often take into their practice lives only a hazy set of concepts which, while they may be recognised (Curnock and Hardiker, 1979), do not form a co-ordinated theory. Loewenberg (1984) argues that this is because less wide-ranging 'middle-range' theories, fitted into an overall professional ideology, are needed. I am interested in how ideas come to be made practical within social work and form a coherent (if theoretically messy) basis for practice.

Another reason for writing this book is that I am concerned by students and practitioners who either reject or simply parrot the different kinds of theory that they have been taught about, or

repudiate the rich heritage of ideas which is theirs. They do not see the need to understand where their theory comes from, how one theory differs from another, how they connect. Clarity about theoretical ideas is, to me, necessary to being part of the occupation of social work since these ideas are an important pillar of mutual understanding and identity among social workers. It also helps in practice, because being able to specify what we should do, and why, is an important purpose of theory and a vital necessity to anyone working with and trying to help human beings. It is particularly crucial if, as I have suggested, we tend to use practical amalgamations of ideas from different sources, instead of one set theory for all our practice. Doing this without understanding is likely to risk confusion, and possibly damage, to our clients. Understanding connections and disparities among the ideas we use can help avoid such problems.

The *aim* of this book, then, is to review a range of theories about social work practice, to offer an assessment of those theories, and to arrive at an understanding of them and their value in modern social work practice. I contend that social work theories may be understood in relationship to each other as a whole body of knowledge.

This first Chapter sets out how social work theory may be understood as part of the social construction of the activity of social work and how this activity itself helps to construct theory. I say that, contrary to some views, the body of theoretical knowledge is useful in practice. Chapter 2 considers and rejects the pragmatic argument that social work theory is no use in practice, discusses the positivist and eclectic approaches to using social work theory, and examines some ways of analysing social work theories and their relationships with one another.

I find it useful to think about these theories in relation to one another and compare and assess them against each other. Chapters 3–11 look at nine groupings of social work theories, their history, relationships with other theories and their prescriptions for practice. Reasons why these theories have been selected and why certain material has been included or excluded are given towards the end of this Chapter and in Chapter 2. Chapter 12 seeks to assess the value of these theories in relation to one another and arrive at a view of their value in modern social work practice. I say modern, because understanding a social phenomenon

such as social work can only be for this time. Also, it is only possible to consider social work theory within a limited cultural frame. Rein and White make this point in an important paper on the development of new understandings of how we seek and use knowledge:

...the basic movement of knowledge gathering is to provide for contexts in transition. The knowledge that is gathered – the perceived utility or relevance of the knowledge – is bounded in time, place, and person. (Rein and White, 1981, p.37)

Cultural differences in social work theories

Differences in cultural frame are important. Much writing about social work and its histories derives from Western cultures, and may not apply to non-Western cultures. Moreover, the significance of American (and to a lesser extent European) social work theory, and of colonial influences from Europe on Third World countries has led to an impression that techniques appropriate in these countries can be transferred to completely different cultures. This is increasingly disputed, and some points should be made about the applicability of Western social work theory in non-Western countries.

First, not all such influences are identical. Heisler (1970) makes the point, for instance, that the British colonial tradition tended to lead to a reliance on local, decentralised and informal initiatives for social welfare, while French colonies reflected a more centralising and co-ordinated tendency. In turn, the reaction to these trends by governments and people after decolonisation also varied.

Second, while English language theories tend to be pervasive, the different forms of service organisation and professional education in different countries lead to different sets of ideas which are not widely available in the USA and Britain. For example, in France, a range of welfare workers exists, all of whom have roles which are related to but different from social work as it is known in Britain and the USA (Birks, 1987). Similarly, Western European ideas about social pedagogy (e.g. Hamalainen, 1989), in which education rather than therapeutic approaches are taken to social assistance, are not widely used in Britain and the USA.