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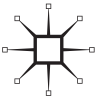

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1
Social Work Theory

The view from above

If, on the 21 November 1783, you were standing on a small hill just above the river Seine in Paris, not far from where the Eiffel Tower now stands, you would be looking up into the sky. Rising slowly above you is the world's first manned flight and it's in a hot air balloon.

Suspended beneath the open neck at the base of the bright blue and gold balloon, known as a Montgolfier after its maker, is a circular deck. On one side is Pilâtre de Rozier, and on the other, to balance his weight, is the Marquis d'Arlandes. Between them is a brazier that burns straw. The balloon reaches a height of 900 feet and drifts over Paris for 27 minutes. The watching crowds are rapturous. The world is astonished.

In his exquisite book on the science of this age, Richard Holmes (2008) goes on to describe the growing number of balloon flights that took place over the next two decades, both in France and Britain. Some continued to rely on hot air. Others were filled with the recently discovered, very buoyant gas hydrogen. The balloon launches attracted excited crowds of tens of thousands. Within 20 years, the most intrepid balloonists were reaching unbelievable heights of 10,000 feet or more, drifting for miles, and even crossing the English Channel.

But amazing as these feats of flying were, they also delivered an unexpected prize. Rising above the busy cities and countryside, these 'aerial travellers' saw the world in a new, completely different way. As they ascended, the seemingly random bustle and tangle of towns, fields and forest began to take on shape. Patterns and order started to appear. In the silent air above the land, reason and logic could be discerned in the doings of men and women – in the design of streets, the direction of roads, the layout of meadows, the siting of towns and villages. There were also rhythms to be seen between land and sea, rivers and mountains, valleys and hills.

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This was the beginning of the Age of Wonder (Holmes 2008). Between 1770 and 1830 science began to get into its full stride. Rising above the world, both literally and metaphorically, men and women began to make sense of the buzz and confusion of everyday life and events. And in the broadest possible way, making sense is what theories help us to do. They rise above the detail and help us to find regularities, patterns and order in what we see and do. They look for relationships between one thing and another.

Ways of knowing

The idea of looking for order and making sense is of great help to all those who have to grapple with the everyday world, not just of nature but also of people. The world of people, of course, is social work's domain.

The more the world makes sense or feels meaningful, the easier it is to negotiate our way around it. If the world in which we work happens to be complicated and turbulent, the need to make sense and know our way around it is even more urgent. Social workers practice in such a world. They deal with people in need and under stress. They operate in environments where there is inequality and injustice. Power, money and opportunities are not fairly distributed.

All of these are tricky matters with which to deal. If social workers are to be sharp and responsive, they simply have to try and make sense and find meaning. Otherwise, the people and situations they work with remain a puzzle. Not being able to understand what's going on is stressful, both for the worker and the client.

Very loosely then, theories are particular ways of making sense. They help social workers see regularities and familiar patterns in the muddle of practice. By stepping back and rising above the hubbub, they help us see what's going on.

Beckett (2006: 33) defines theory in social work as 'a set of ideas or principles to guide practice'. If you can make sense of what is going on, then you're half way towards knowing what to do. There is a good case for having an even more relaxed view of theories by simply calling them 'ways of knowing' (Fook 2002: 68).

This makes theories and ways of knowing very practical things to have under your belt and in your head. The theoretically informed social worker remains steady in the midst of confusion, curious about

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the unexplained, caring in the face of distress, and compassionate in the presence of need. Social work theories are therefore good things to have if you want your practice to be sensitive, intelligent and organized. Susser puts all of this much more poetically:

> . . . to practice without theory is to sail an uncharted sea; theory without practice is not to set sail at all. (Susser 1968, quoted in Hardiker and Barker 1991: 87)

There is no doubt that service users appreciate and respond well to social workers who want to understand, make sense and find meaning. Service users, says Payne (2002: 136), 'are entitled to know that *we have an organized view of what we are doing and why* and gain understanding and explanation of what we are doing, so that they can agree or disagree with it' (emphasis added). 'Organized views' are what theories give us.

Why are there so many social work theories?

You will see from the contents page of this book that there are rather a lot of theories in social work. If theories are attempts to find order and make sense of reality, why do the psychosocial sciences in general and social work in particular have so many? More worryingly perhaps, why do so many of psychosocial sciences' theories clash, disagree, argue and dismiss one another? The answer seems to lie in the fundamental differences to be found in the character of the natural world of things on the one hand, and the social world of people on the other.

As we have seen, theory generation represents the attempt by men and women to explain reality, including physical, psychological and social reality. Some theories are more abstract and high level than others. Newton's theory of gravity and laws of motion are supported by mathematical formulae that allow an extraordinary level of accuracy to be achieved in predicting the motion of stars, planets and satellites. They are essential when it comes to landing men and women on the moon and guiding spacecraft to exactly the right spot on the planet Mars.

Social and psychological theories do not have this degree of exactness. If people are not like objects, then it is unlikely that social and

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psychological theories can ever be quite like the natural sciences. Rocks, atoms and light beams in themselves are meaningless. In contrast human beings are full of meaning. We have ideas about ourselves, who we are and what we are about. We are self-defining as well as socially defined.

Our psychological development takes place as we relate and interact with others, as we negotiate and create meaning for ourselves and others. The social and psychological sciences therefore have to deal with subjective experience as well as objective reality – what people think, feel, and believe as well as what they say and do. This is why language and the quality of the relationship are so important in the conduct of social work.

Language mediates so much of our experience. We try to make sense of ourselves, other people, culture and the world in general using language. We try to understand and be understood using words. The meaning that we give to our own and other people's experience is therefore language dependent.

But language is slippery. It's open to interpretation, misunderstanding and misuse. It changes over time. It is never fixed. It differs between countries and cultures.

So if meaning is carried by language and language is never still, never stable, never exact, it is not possible to capture personal meaning and social experience in the way that the natural sciences fix physical reality. This is why the social sciences and the humanities can never be quite like the natural sciences. They explore personal experience as well as external behaviour.

Personal experience and social reality are therefore socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1971). This means that there are many social theories each seeking to make sense of human behaviour and social life. Society being socially constructed means that it is 'a fluid, precarious, negotiated field of loosely connected activities. It is held together, ultimately, by the thin threads of shared understandings and a common language' (Seidman 2004: 82).

It is therefore inevitable that social work, which is an applied psychosocial science, will also be rich, varied and contested. The psychosocial sciences have developed a dizzying array of ideas to fathom the individual, the relationship, the family, the group, and the community as well as the cultures and societies in which they all live. Social work and its theories reflect this richness, which, after all, reflects the richness of the human experience. We also see this

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extraordinary diversity of interest reflected in the ways in which social work has been defined.

For example, social workers, according to Beckett (2006: 4), work with people 'who are in some way vulnerable, excluded or disadvantaged in society'. He continues that it is the job of social workers to help people meet their needs, improve their circumstances and reach their potential. The business of social work is therefore something to do with enhancing personal wellbeing. The International Association of Schools of Social Work and Federation of Social Workers (2001) add that wellbeing is also achieved by promoting freedom, personal power, social change, and problem-solving in personal relationships.

Back on the ground, all of this social work concern and action take place at the point where individuals, families, groups and society brush up against each other.

Three quick examples make the point. Family and neighbours begin to worry whether 86-year-old Mary can continue looking after herself at home, although she feels quite happy where she is. The hospital has a concern that the injuries suffered by a 2-year-old boy may not be accidental. The police are called to the local shopping mall to attend to a young man with mental health problems who is shouting abuse at passers-by.

These relatively straightforward, everyday concerns are packed with political issues and moral dilemmas. There are issues of freedom and equality, order and conflict. And although these examples may be unexceptional, they demand some working knowledge of an extraordinary range of academic disciplines.

Add to these examples the interest that many social workers have in matters of human rights and social justice, and it soon becomes apparent that if good practice is driven by sound knowledge, then social workers need to know an awful lot of very different things. Even in the simplest of cases, there's usually much to think about. To practise well, social workers have to think well, and to think well, they have to know a good deal.

Putting it rather grandly, social workers engage with the human condition. If they are to work competently with people in need and distress it is inevitable that social workers will need to know something of the many disciplines that have tried to make sense of human experience. This is likely to include psychology and sociology, political theory and philosophy, social policy and cultural studies,

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communications theory and organizational behaviour, the law and criminology. Little wonder that social work's key introductory textbooks are long and weighty. They have to be.

So, in contrast, what can be made of a book that claims to be brief, introductory and about social work theory?

The aim here is not to be comprehensive. Nor can this book attempt to be definitive. Instead, the hope is that the reader will gain a sense of why social work finds itself so involved and interested in so many types of knowledge.

Reasons for choosing a particular social work theory

It will also be apparent that in order to survive and develop some professional expertise, not everything can be known. Indeed, only some things can be known well. Quite what these things will be is likely to depend on the individual social worker's moral sympathies, intellectual inclinations and emotional character.

Matters are made even more challenging when the social worker is faced with not only a vast range of books on this theory or that practice, but also with the authors of these books who are nearly always passionate and persuasive about the critical importance of their approach and their understanding of social work.

I'm not the most critical of readers. I am easily won over by an enthusiastic writer or a committed advocate of one approach or another. Although this might seem weak minded, I prefer to see it as a recognition that people and society are rather complex matters, particularly when they interact. Each theory, each approach is saying something interesting about human nature and social life. Further reflection might make you more cautious and less convinced of this idea or that model, but there might be an element of truth in most, if not all theories.

So how to choose? Well, closer examination of one's own beliefs and convictions might rule out some approaches while ruling in others. The perceived merits and conceptual rigour of one particular theory might appeal to the intellect. Or the idea that social work should be like medicine and base its practice on methodologically sound research about what works might sound eminently sensible. Or the way another theory celebrates our shared humanity might convince us morally and so win the day.

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Being brief, this introduction to social work theory aims to give you a feel for the subject. Inevitably there will be bias in what I say and choose to emphasize. Often the bias will be implicit, but sometimes I'll come clean.

The idea is not to get you to agree or become an expert. Rather, the hope is that you will become intrigued by the way different thinkers have tried to make sense of people and society. You are then free to pursue their thoughts in more detail. To the extent that social work applies sociology, psychology and political theory, our subject matter should excite the intellect. After all, people and what they think, feel, and do is our business.

Certainly, many would-be practitioners are motivated to consider a career in social work because of a strong interest in people. Many also feel great concern about the inequalities and injustices suffered by society's more vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. There is a wish to make their lot better. But whatever the drive, many of these feelings boil down to a simple wish to help people.

Easily dismissed as naïve, the idea of wanting to help people in need has an honourable pedigree. Bill Jordan, in a compelling personal account, wrote a classic text with the title *Helping in Social Work*. In his book, Jordan (1979: 26) values social workers who are truthful, who ring true, who help people feel better by listening, who 'recognize' their fellow men and women and treat them as valued and 'real'. Behind the ability to be sincere and authentic lies a genuine interest in people driven by an unquenched curiosity about what makes each and every one of us tick, and what helps us live together in the good society.

Wondering why

The best way to get into a theoretical way of thinking about what you do and how you do it is to ask the question 'why?' People who are curious and want to know what's going on tend to be interested in ideas, theories and explanations. It is my hope that this book will excite your curiosity.

So, why do people do the things they do? Why is there social inequality and injustice? Why does a father get so angry and violent? Why does a depressed woman feel so anxious and sad? How does stress affect people?

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Asking 'why?' questions is generally a good thing to do if you want your practice to be considered, thoughtful and justified. Intellectual curiosity is likely to keep us professionally alive and alert. As we have seen, theories are particularly good things to have if we want answers to these practice questions. They help us to understand what might be going on. Coulshed and Orme agree:

> Social workers, to be truly effective, need to be constantly asking 'why?' It is in this quest for understandings about, for example, why situations arise, why people react in certain ways and why particular interventions might be utilized, that theory informs practice. (2006: 9)

Moreover, the more we are aware of the many different ways we can think about a person, a need or a problem, the more humble and less dogmatic we are likely to be, and that, say Hardiker and Barker (1991: 97), is no bad thing for a social worker.

The plan of this book is to keep the flame of curiosity burning by wandering, indeed wondering across social work's bumpy, complicated but never dull terrain. We shall not stay too long with each theory but move briskly on to gain a sense of how different social work ideas view people and their social situations. The aim is to gain a feel for the kinds of practice that each theoretical approach inspires.

It will also become apparent as we explore social work's practices that theoretical fashions change. This alerts us to the idea that what we know and think as social workers is embedded in the bigger political picture. Social work finds itself being swept along by the grand themes of history. Particular theories and practices bob up at certain times and in particular places.

Occasionally, a particular theory will dominate a decade only to fade into the professional background. We shall try and appreciate the theories and their practices and the broad social movements that toss them to prominence before the tide of history drops them and moves on. However, few of social work's theories and practices ever entirely disappear. They wash through social work, leaving behind traces of their ideas and thoughts. It is as if each theory discovers a particular insight into our shared fate and so we are reluctant to let it go.

But before we get too involved with the fates of different theories, let's go back to the beginning and explore social work's origins.

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