

Practice Reflections

The Theory Tree: An Extensive Representation of Social Work Theory for Use in Practice

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ABSTRACT

The social work profession sources theory from a range of disciplines whilst training students in everyday practice. As a result of this diversity, students and new practitioners alike can face a challenge in the complexity of recalling large amounts of unstructured information while simultaneously performing social work interventions. Current theory-practice models cater to the application of theory, but leave the practitioner unclear as to how to recall, organise and retain the multitude of theories at their disposal. The Theory Tree has been developed as a visual model to support social work students and new practitioners in their everyday theory–practice identification and application. This model has unique features in its capacity to respond to the relational interaction of theory and sub-theories, as well as crossing both professional and knowledge domains. The Theory Tree can be used effectively in the classroom setting and in field placement supervision.

Keywords: *Theory and Practice Integration; Theory Tree; Field Placement; Social Work Theories*

INTRODUCTION

Social work theory draws from a range of disciplines including science, philosophy, sociology and psychology. In doing so, social work theory has benefited from a historical foundation and a continued relevance for practice (Bell, 2012). This breadth of relevant theory has made the integration of theory to practice dynamic, but potentially difficult in application. Recalling and applying theory while simultaneously practising social work is a complex task, and yet integral to everyday work. Textbooks used in social work education are prolific in their attempts to list and describe theory needed to practise in any given area. These texts are often limited in what they include, the authors inevitably compromise between providing a comprehensive list of relevant theory, and having enough space to describe them in detail. When theory is explored in depth, it is rarely also examined in breadth. Theories originating outside social work, as well as various sub-theories, are often excluded. Feminism, for example, can receive a dedicated chapter in a commonly used textbook as a broad theoretical approach, but subsequent branches, such as ecofeminism and transgender feminism, are not covered (Payne, 2014). By purporting to adequately represent social work theory, such texts risk minimising the significance and potential benefits of companion theories.

The development of a model for social work theory

Several models or frameworks have been devised for use in conjunction with texts that present theory. Vayda and Bogo's integration of theory and practice loop model (1991) theorises that, after an initial "retrieval" phase, where information about a practice situation is collected, a period of reflection occurs, followed by a "linkage" phase where theories are searched for and applied. A professional response is then undertaken and the process "loops" back to the retrieval phase. Similarly, the reflection on action model (Fisher & Somerton, 2000) starts with a process of "clarification," relying heavily on the practice teacher to determine which theories resonate most with practice events, and whether other theory is available for the ensuing "reflection" stage. Most recently, *The Theory Circle* (Collingwood, Emond, & Woodward, 2008) presents an illustrative model whereby two columns separating theory to inform, and theory to intervene, are provided either side of a circle displaying a service user profile. As in the previous models, a practitioner recalls and records theory relevant to the practice situation during a period of critical reflection.

In all of these models, the emphasis is on the timing and application of relevant theory, not on methods for theory recollection and retrieval. Although they aid social workers in the complex task of selecting between competing theories they rely on the inclusion of reflective questioning in the supervision process in order to generate the theoretical content. Ultimately they fail to adequately address the question of where these theories come from in the first place, suggesting only that a social worker "search" for theories (Vayda & Bogo, 1991), assemble their own "bank" of written material, or rely on a practice teacher for ideas (Fisher & Somerton, 2000). Theory drawn from a hand-picked bank of assembled material presents a limitation to the quality and diversity of theory selection. Applicable theory not included in a personal bank will remain underutilised, and a bias towards existing, known theory will prevail. This advice presents a challenge for students and new social workers who are unfamiliar to the practice setting and lack confidence in the practical use of theory. A gap exists for a model

that accounts for a full appreciation of the breadth of applicable theory to social work practice. In addition, the model must support the development of new theory in order to be responsive to the ever-changing nature of social work practice.

The Theory Tree: a concept map

Concept maps provide a way of efficiently organising complex information. By building on pre-existing schematic ideas we already use in our memory and cognitive processes, concept maps allow new information to be more easily assimilated than other methods of data encoding, such as lists (O'Donnell, Dansereau, & Hall, 2002). Symbols such as arrowed lines, concentric circles, simple objects and colour coding, are used in concept maps, allowing information to be condensed into a format that can be faster to access and easier to recall (O'Donnell, 1994). This makes concept mapping highly adaptable for personal learning, and has a history of being used in disciplines where a complexity of theoretical approaches is required (Ghojzadeh et al., 2014).

Theory that is applicable to social work practice is often construed as a multifarious and evolving collection of inter-related paradigms (Borden, 2010) evolving through multiple disciplines and iterations (Vågerö, 2006). This represents a particular challenge for accurate pictorialisation since some theory is difficult to categorise accurately. For example, is feminism a theory belonging to political philosophy or sociology? To accommodate this, a concept map representing social work theory requires a system of symbols capable of fluidity. In this way it is possible to stratify social work theory between five professional domains, while simultaneously depicting other connections using the symbolic characteristics of a tree.

The Theory Tree therefore begins with a trunk labeled "Social Work Theory" and four main branches that are subsequently labeled science, philosophy, sociology, social work and psychology. It is then possible to continue with this theme of subdivision in order to delineate specialisations within each profession, sub-specialisations or knowledge domains, foundational theories, revisions, and then reactive or post-theories, as is often done in educational texts (Forte, 2014). Point A highlights a visual representation of this.

Three other schematic properties commonly understood about trees are also employed. Trees embody the concept of growth: older parts of a tree generally sitting closest to the trunk, and newer parts are further away. This idea is useful for conveying the chronology of theories in a flexible way that allows new parts of a tree to grow, even if from an old branch. This is necessary since there always remain new possibilities in the revision of old theories (Point B).

Secondly, trees entail the themes of death and renewal by way of seasonal changes, analogous with the abandonment or revision of old theory. Theory portrayed this way can resonate with a practitioner's recognition of similar fluctuations in their preference, or generational preferences, for particular theories. It raises questions for critical discussion about why some theories are relied upon to the exclusion of others, why disused theories have fallen out of favour, and whether the same fate awaits those currently being used.

Lastly, an ameliorating strategy for accommodating a large amount of theory information is to situate larger knowledge domains as a single entry on the tree in reference to a separate

(smaller) tree where that domain can be covered more comprehensively. Point C indicates an example of this “theory forest” technique applied to developmental psychology. Different trees may also be used to separate theory informing practice and theory to intervene, enhancing the models’ connectivity with the Theory Circle (Collingwood et al., 2008).

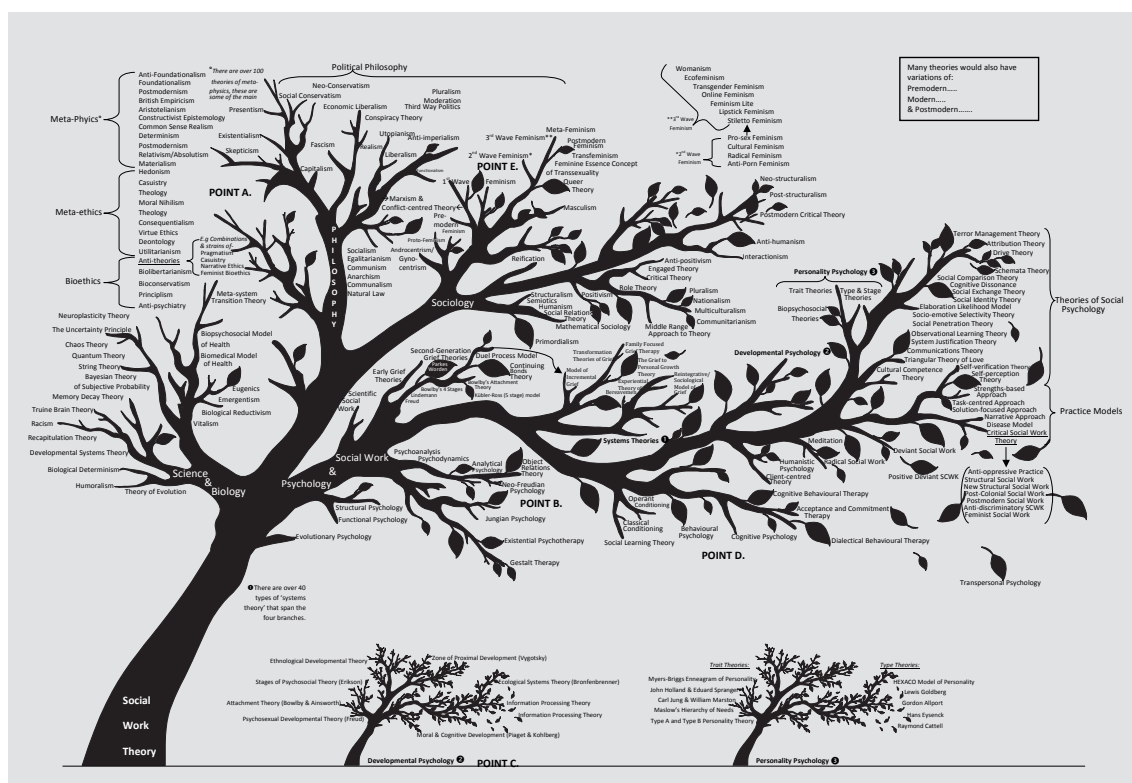


Figure 1.

Application of the Theory Tree model

The Theory Tree allows for complicated relationships between theories to be taught in an accessible manner, whether in the classroom setting or in field placement supervision. An example is the following segment from a lecture or discussion on social work theory:

Cognitive-Behavioural interventions emerged from the tension of two preceding theories; Behavioural Psychology and Cognitive Psychology, and was itself the predecessor to the more recent theories of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Dialectical Behavioural Therapy. All of these theories are predated by Psychoanalysis around the turn of the century and Structural Psychology before that.

This can also be explained by drawing on the Theory Tree as a visual aid and highlighting Point D. Another example is:

When Marxism was first developed the dominant theory of psychology was Structural Psychology. Somewhat after the advent of positivism Psychoanalysis, Anti-Positivism and Critical Theory challenge the preceding theories in their respective domains, while at the same time Liberalism and the first wave of Feminism took hold in Political Philosophy. The next developments in Psychology occur at a similar time to the second wave of Feminism, which peaked in the 1960s and 1970s.

This can be visually explained by discussing Point E on the Theory Tree model. In either example, the Theory Tree acts as a visual aid to critical discussion and analysis.

Future research

The Theory Tree has yet to be empirically evaluated. Preliminary feedback from field placement students indicate the model is useful for illuminating theories they had not yet encountered, considering theories they were aware of but had not previously considered relevant to social work, and providing context to their understanding of familiar theory. Unfortunately, The Theory Tree is limited in its capacity to be a comprehensive representation. Its potential is to include many hundreds of theories from an ever-expanding and developing theory base. The model would benefit from further evaluative research into its usefulness for enhancing theory understanding within theory modules in the classroom setting, the use of theory in the placement setting, critical reflection practices and the supervision process.

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