Social Work: using theories

Theories are used in Social Work to:
- guide the way in which social workers view and approach individuals, groups, society and the community
- help to predict, explain and assess situations and behaviours
- provide a rationale on how a social worker should react and intervene with clients who have particular histories, problems and goals
- inform social workers of the type of method that is likely to be effective in a situation

Look at the examples below of how theories can be used.

Example 1

The stages of Change Theory (often depicted as a five stage model) specifies that individuals proceed through distinct stages when making a behavioural change and they often cycle through the stages several times before the change is maintained. Therefore, when working with clients to make a behavioural change, social workers should use the stages of change theory to assess the current stage of the client as this will determine the type of method, or technique that is used with the client. If the client is in a contemplation stage, where she or he is undecided about making a change, the social worker would know to utilize techniques, such as the decisional-balance or scaling in an attempt to resolve the uncertainty in favour of change. In this situation, the social worker utilizes the stages of Change Theory to assess where the client currently sits in regard to behavioural change and then, based on this assessment, implements specific techniques and interventions (method) to reach the goal of behavioural change. Therefore, as interrelated concepts, theories inform practice.


Example 2

A social worker working with a child who was placed in foster care as a baby and subsequently moved to numerous foster homes, might explain the child’s ‘disruptive’ behaviour in foster homes as a result of an inability to create a secure connection to a parent or caretaker as an infant, which is based on Bowlby’s (1979; 1988) Attachment Theory.

### Example 3

Another example includes the use of Social Systems Theory or the Ecological perspective, which holds that individuals and their environments are separate systems that are interconnected and interdependent, and a change or movement in one of these systems results in a change or movement in the others. Therefore, when social workers utilize the Social Systems Theory or Ecological perspective, they conduct an assessment of the individual and their environment in order to determine which system requires an intervention.


### Some major theories and their key principles

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<th>Theory</th>
<th>Key Principles</th>
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| **Systems**  | • Reciprocal relationships between elements that constitute a whole  
• Relationships between individuals, groups, organisations or communities and mutually influencing factors in the environment  
• Interrelationships of elements in nature, encompassing physics, chemistry, biology, and social relationships (general systems theory, ecological perspective, life model, and ecosystems perspective) |
| **Psychodynamic** | • How internal processes such as needs, drives and emotions motivate human behaviour  
• Emotions have a central place in human behaviour  
• Unconscious, as well as conscious mental activity serves as the motivating force in human behaviour  
• Early childhood experiences are central in the patterning of an individual’s emotions, and therefore, central to problems of living throughout life  
• Individuals may become overwhelmed by internal and/or external demands  
• Individuals frequently use ego defence mechanisms to avoid becoming overwhelmed by internal and/or external demands |
| **Social Learning** | • Human behaviour is learned as individuals interact with their environment  
• Problem behaviour is maintained by positive or negative reinforcement  
• Cognitive-behavioural therapy looks at what role thoughts play in maintaining the problem  
• Emphasis is on changing dysfunctional thoughts which influence behaviour  
• Methods which stem from this theory are the gradual shaping of new behaviour through positive and negative reinforcement, modelling, and stress management: biofeedback, relaxation techniques, cognitive restructuring, imagery and systematic desensitization |
| **Conflict**  | • Focuses on conflict, dominance and oppression in social life  
• Groups and individuals try to advance their own interests over the interests of others.  
• Power is unequally divided, and some social groups dominate others  
• Social order is based on the manipulation and control of non-dominant groups by dominant groups  
• Lack of open conflict is a sign of exploitation  
• Social change is driven by conflict, with periods of change interrupting long periods of stability |