



Theory Scaffolding of Master-Level Social Work Students

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Theory and Social Work

Why do we need theory in the social work classroom?

- Offers rationale for practice (Cheung & Delavega, 2014; Forrester-Jones & Hatzidimitriadou, 2006)
- Strengthens a social worker's skills, identity, and effectiveness (Gentle-Genitty, Haiping, Karikari, & Barnett, 2014)
- CSWE requirement (CSWE, 2015)



Challenges with teaching theory

Definitions, descriptions and terminologies about theory are inconsistent (Bolsen & Syers, 2004; Miller & Skinner, 2013)

Students, like some social workers, question the value of theory in practice (Forte & LaMade, 2011; Lewis and Bolzan, 2007; Lewis, 2003)



In learning to use theory,

students often struggle to:

- ✓ select an appropriate theory
- ✓ remain flexible in applying the theory
- ✓ critique the applied theory

(Gentle-Genitty et al., 2014)



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METHODOLOGY

STUDY DESIGN & DATA ANALYSIS

SECTION --

Methods

Participants & Procedure

- MSW students in online theory course (2013-2016) invited to voluntarily participate in 14-item anonymous survey assessment on theory evaluation & application
- Nonprobability convenience sample of MSW students (N = 122)
- Key sample demographics:
 - Women (87.5%); mean age of 31; majority first-year students (57.5%)
- Administered via Survey Monkey during 1st two weeks of course
- Approved by university IRB



Measure

- Theory Evaluation & Application Assessment (TEAA)
 - Developed to explore students' theoretical understanding
 - Present study used only pre-course responses, though post-course data was also collected
- Items: 11 multiple-choice questions + 3 short essay questions
 - Present study evaluated response to item #6 –essay question in response to brief case scenario



Item 6: "Based on the case using just various theories, how would you respond to the case and create a plan for work? Give a short rationale."

Ginny is in the **10th grade** at North Central High School and has **been referred to a mental health clinic** by her school social worker. The school social worker, Ms. Jones, makes the referral directly to the Northside Clinic. (Assume all appropriate releases are signed.) She shares that **Ginny is a bright fifteen-year-old having difficult focusing in the classroom and had begun to withdraw from her peers and is also failing in two classes when previously she was an above-average student.** The school counselor acknowledges that Ginny's parents are willing to participate in any counseling. The therapist, a social worker by discipline, schedules the **initial session with Ginny, her parents, the school counselor, and also one of Ginny's teachers has agreed to attend.** **Ginny has asked if she could also invite her best friend Jana to the session.** The social worker acknowledges she is in agreement, as long as Ginny's parents agree, but she adds that all helpful individuals would be welcome. Mr. Smith, Ginny's father, wants to know if the **youth minister** might be helpful –so she too is invited. At the initial session, there are eight present. After an initial time with Ginny and her parents (to rule out critical issues), the others are asked to join. The session takes an interesting turn in that **instead of talking about deficits, the social worker asks for a list of strengths** beginning with Ginny and then others are invited to contribute. The social worker then states, "I know we are here to help Ginny with some difficulties she has had lately and I am wondering Ginny, if you see some things on this list that will help you with your current concerns?" As Ginny talks, **the social worker begins to turn the list into an eco-map** which provides a visual cue for the group.



Data Analysis

- Interrater reliability sought through routine comparison & discussion of findings between researchers
- Coding methods (Saldaña, 2016):
 1. 1st round: **descriptive & magnitude** methods
 2. 2nd round: **process & holistic** methods
 3. 3rd round: responses were categorized into revised dimensions (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2000) of **Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives**
 4. Theory application was deemed **implicit** or **explicit**
 5. Theory-based responses **recategorized into SW theory groups** (Payne, 2014)

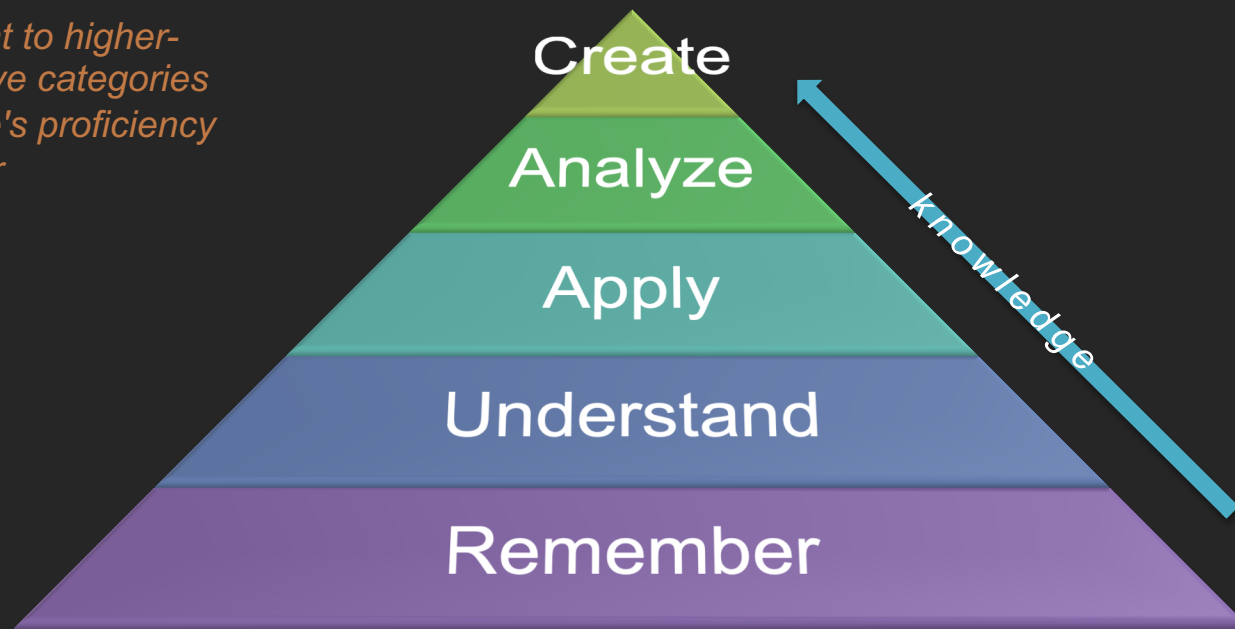


Bloom's Revised: Taxonomy of Educational Objectives

(Anderson & Krathwohl, 2000)

Consists of a “framework for classifying statements of what we expect or intend students to learn as a result of instruction” (Krathwohl, 2002. p. 212)

Development to higher-level cognitive categories involved one's proficiency of the former



Examples of Systems Theory

Remember

I see a couple theories that could work in this case. I see the systems theory, empowerment theory and strengths based-theory.

Naming a theory concept

Understand

I feel that I need more information before I can really begin to choose any specific type of theory to work with or plan any sort of intervention. For now, I would probably focus on systems theory or ecological theory to determine how the environment and her closest relationships are impacting her current difficulties.

Describing a theory concept

Apply

In this case I feel that general systems theory would be the best way to look at Ginny's case. In systems theory Ginny is just a part of a family. She is also part of a school and a youth ministry. By seeing Ginny as a part of all of these systems, we are able to narrow down where strengths and problems may lie.

Connecting a theory concept to the case

Implicit

I would ask Ginny and her support system if there have been any major changes in her life lately or anything that they think may be influencing Ginny's drop in grades. After the initial session with the system, I would use the information provided to identify problem areas and then what areas of strength may be called upon to use as a support when working through this problem.

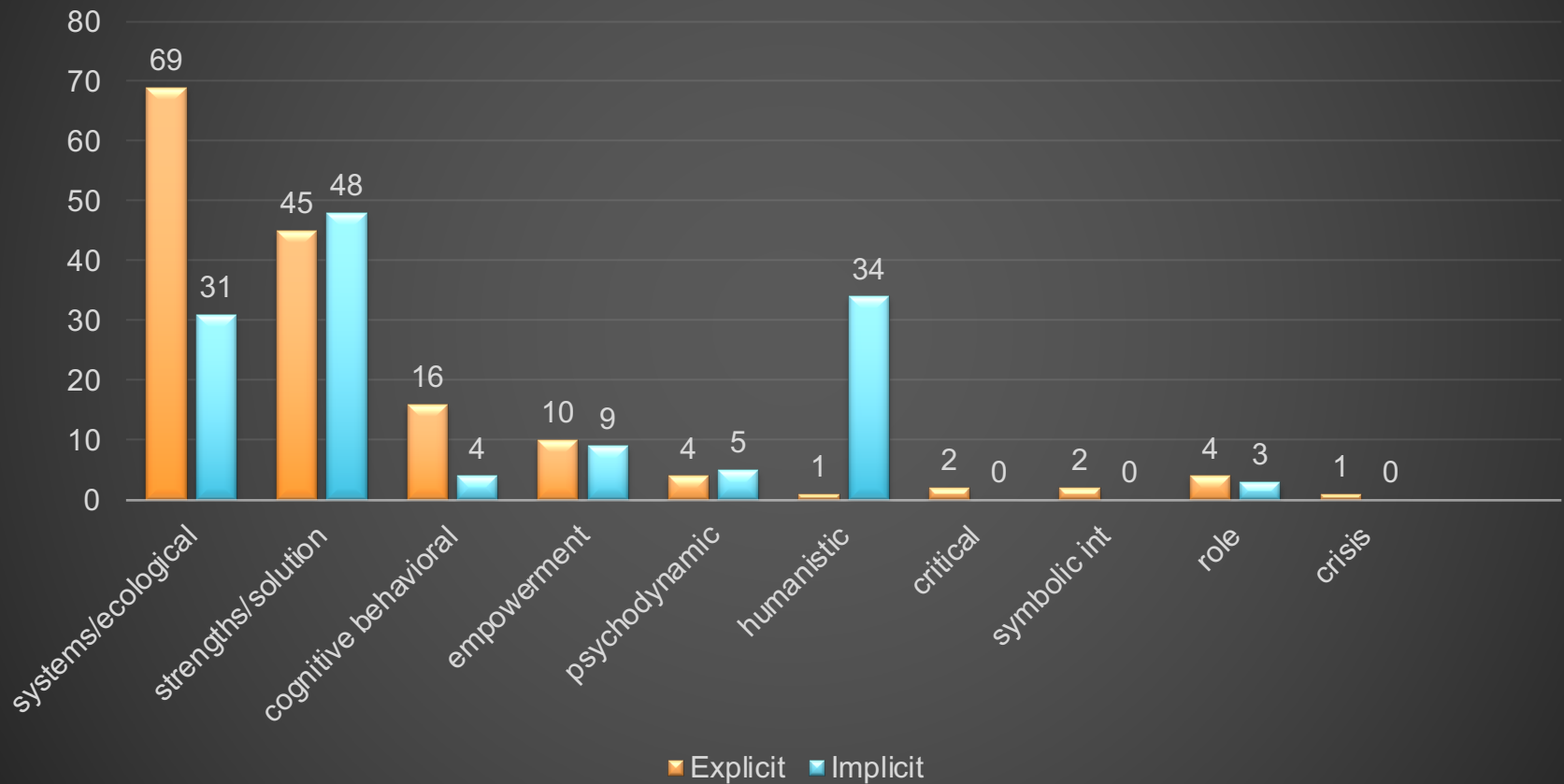


Results

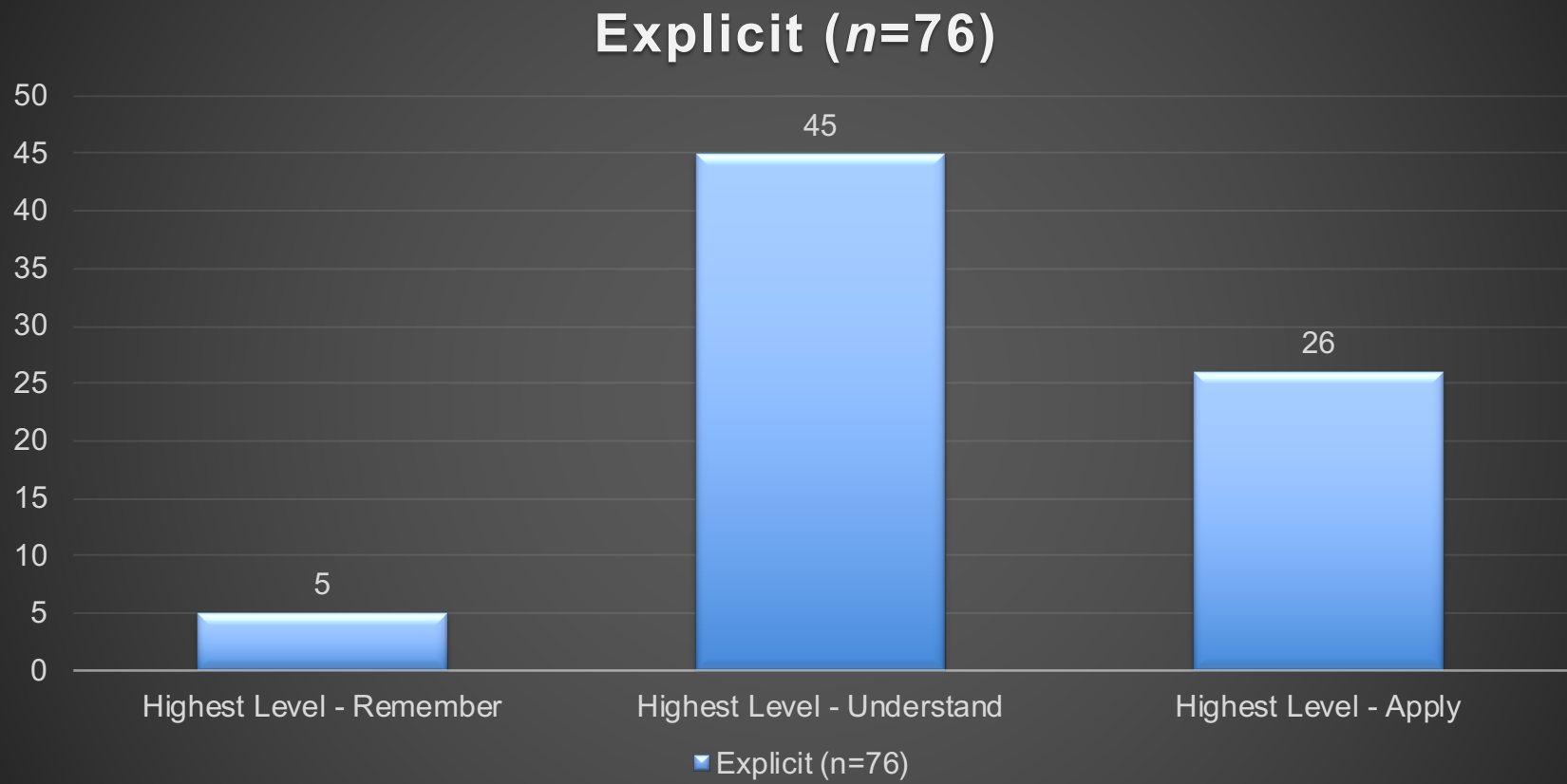
- Students varied in degree of theory knowledge & familiarity
 - $\frac{3}{4}$ had taken another theory course in previous 2 years
- Most students ($n=115$) responded with ≥ 1 theory-informed idea
 - **Explicit** use of theory/perspective (62%, $n=76$)
 - **Implicit** use of theory/perspective (66%, $n=80$)
 - $\sim \frac{1}{3}$ demonstrated implicit knowledge *only*



Theories demonstrated explicitly and implicitly

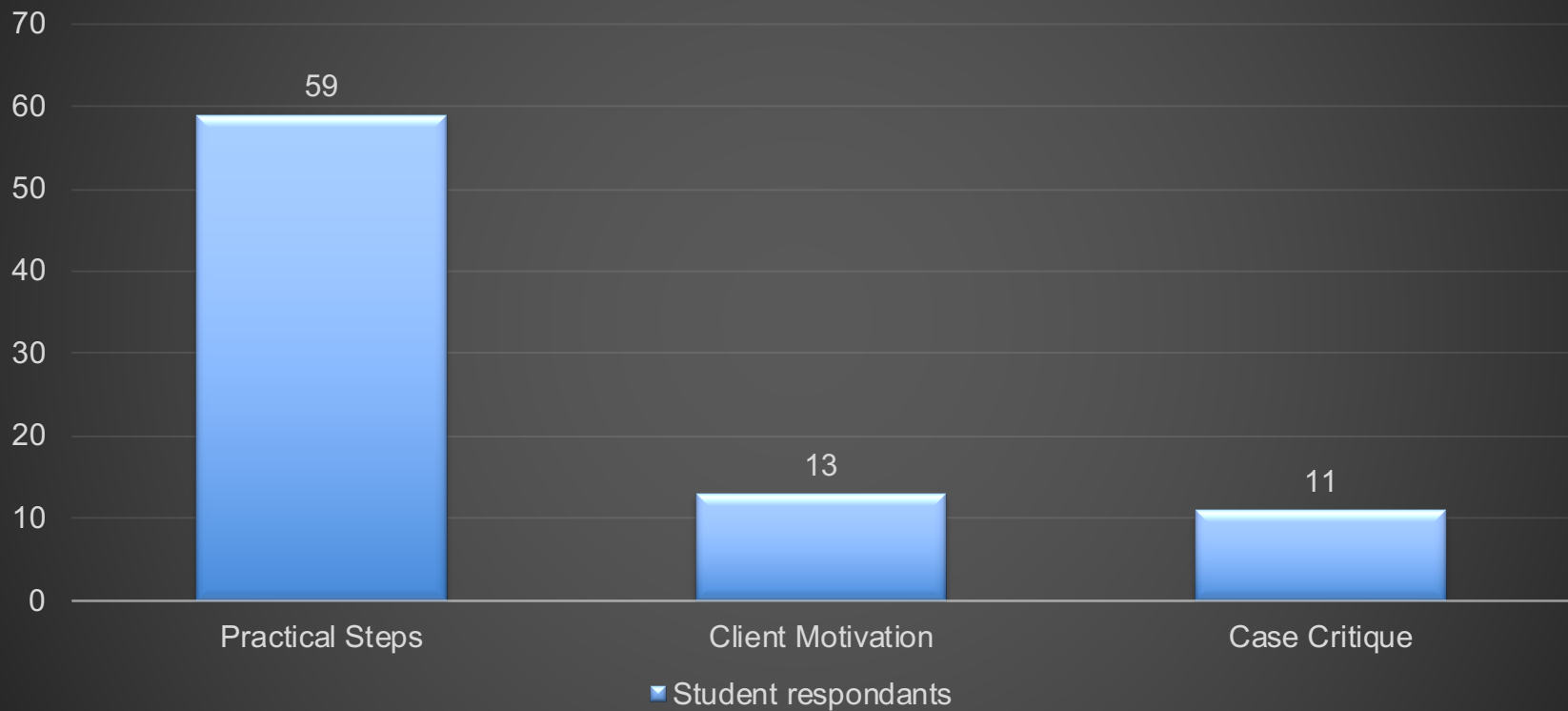


Bloom's Taxonomy Demonstrated



Nontheory-Based Considerations

Student respondents (n = 72)



DISCUSSION

**Assessing student theory
application is complex**

Student Theory Comprehension

1. Students demonstrated a range of familiarity around theory
2. Blooms offered a quick way to assess this snapshot of student capacity to connect theory to a case
3. Clarifies for faculty the need to assess student familiarity and comfort level with theory in order to identify the gaps in comprehension.
4. Shifting students to be intentionally aware of the theories they are applying fosters student's holistic application.



Approaches demonstrated by students

- Systems/ Ecosystems
- Strengths perspective
- Person-centered (humanistic views)



Benefits and risks of implicit theory application

1. Benefit – certain approaches become internalized and infused with the student's own genuine style
2. Risk – students may be limited in critiquing their methods because they don't realize they made a choice.
3. Risk – students might not recognize their own choices when understanding and working with clients



Student tendency towards pragmatism and critique apart from theory

1. A reflection of the action steps they use in the field?
 - Based on what they have observed in the field
 - Based on personal thought processes in assessment or intervention
2. A reflection of uncertainty about theory application?



Recommendations

- Assess student knowledge and comfort with theory early on and regularly
- Use highly structured teaching methods to help students integrate theory ideas (Bolsen & Syers, 2004)
- Teach students different levels of Bloom's taxonomy as a way to foster a framework for critical thinking and theory application

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Recommendations

- Have students recognize theory in complex, dynamic, real life situations
- Reduce anxiety levels through active theory application to cases and practice situations
- Facilitate student dialogue about theory

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Limitations

- Students were not directly asked to name the theory they were applying
- Case offered might have lent itself to one theory over another
- Convenience sample from one online master level social work program in Midwest U.S.
- Analyzed through the lenses of two social workers
- Response rate limitations due to instructor inconsistency over collection years

Future Research

1. Explore social work educators awareness of their own biases and positioning around theory usage, which is likely communicated to students.



References

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Questions or comments

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FULFILLING *the* PROMISE