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Social workers' conceptions of the relationship between theory

and practice in an organizational context

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Abstract

The research studies the relationship between theory and practice in the context of an agency. Eight social workers from an agency were recruited for in-depth interviews. Results showed that the conception of theory and practice was influenced by the self, the client, and the agency.

Social workers' conceptions of the relationship between theory

and practice in an organizational context

The social work profession in Hong Kong is facing increasing demand from society for accountability and quality of service delivery to the public. In recent years, the pressure on the government to bear more responsibility by providing social services is increasing. There is an urgent need to provide social services such as social security, elderly services, family services, and rehabilitative services to solve social problems such as those associated with the elderly, family violence, single parent families, and mental illness, to name a few. The awareness of the government and non-governmental organizations in demanding accountability and quality of service has been raised. In the review of the social welfare subvention system launched in 1995, it was proposed to set service standards for all social services so as to ensure the cost-effectiveness of service provision and the proper use of resources. The social work profession has to make an effort to respond to demand so that a high level of service quality can be offered to the public.

In response to society's demands, social work is in the process of seeking professionalization. The formation of the Social Workers Registration Board in 1997 was a concerted effort aimed at promoting professional practice and enhancing the improvement of standards of service. However, social workers commonly believe that the setting up of this Board is not enough if social work is to be truly professionalized. A theory-based form of practice needs to be developed which would be regarded as more professional than merely relying on the wisdom that develops through practice. Social work theories are perceived as the main and legitimate sources of knowledge in

problem definition, setting policy goals, and planning social services and social work practice (Law, 1994). The belief in the application of theory to practice as an effective way of building practical knowledge can be traced back to the work of Greenwood who regarded the "systematic body of knowledge" as a significant attribute of a profession (Greenwood, 1957). In the review of the literature concerning the knowledge and theory development of social work, it was found that there is much debate on the topic, especially on the relation between theory and practice. Almost all discussions of theory and practice are centered around the development of the social work profession in Western societies. It is rare that the development of social work in Hong Kong has been studied.

Current debate on the relationship between theory and practice

The theories used in social work are diverse and have different foci of analysis and intervention. In order to develop a systematic body of theory, some social work studies (Pincus and Minahan, 1973; Goldstein, 1973; Siporin, 1975) have sought to unify social work theories and develop an integrated model for social work practice. Their attempt is based on the assumption that there is a common base for social work practice. Such an assumption implies that practice is constant, concrete, observable, and objective, and can be reduced to a common framework. If the framework can be developed, social workers would not get lost among the scattered theories. However, the assumption is not necessarily valid as there are many variables and uncertainties in social work practice. The development of the integrated model, therefore, was challenged for its oversimplification of practice situations (Evans, 1976), and was eventually abandoned (Howe, 1994). There is no one single objective "reality" in social

work practice. Practice, therefore, cannot be fully understood by just one model. As Shulman (1991) argues, "the social work profession has not yet developed an integrated, method-focused, empirically based theory of practice" (p. 9). Although several scholars (Leonard, 1975; Blyth and Hugman, 1982; Barbour, 1984; Loewenberg, 1984) have tried to differentiate the theories and classify them, their unification remains difficult. Nevertheless, from their efforts two major conclusions can be drawn:

a)   There is no consensus on the meaning of theory and thus no unified theory, but rival paradigms exist in social sciences (Leonard, 1975; Evans, 1976; Pilalis, 1986). This results in different meanings of "integrating theory and practice" being held by different scholars.

b)   The integration of theory and practice depends on the types of and the meanings of the theories. The meanings should first be identified in any study of the relationship between theory and practice. As Pilalis (1986) points out: "... it is overly simplistic to talk about the relationship between theory and practice in social work without identifying which type of theory and of practice one is referring to at that particular time" (p. 89).

As there is no unified understanding of social work theories, there is confusion when it comes to applying theory to practice. The relation between the two is beset with problems (Sheldon, 1978; Schon, 1983; Hindmarsh, 1993). There are two major causal factors of the problems identified:

a)   Knowledge for practice acquired from theory only

Influenced by technical rationality, which is dominant in the epistemology of practice, the separation of theory and practice is presumed. Theory exists in the abstract

form of concepts and principles that have been conceptualized from experience. Such concepts and principles have generalizability so that they can be applied to guide practice. Practice is viewed solely as a set of techniques that is subordinate to theory and lacks the status of true knowledge (Whan, 1986). However, problems arise when the theory cannot be applied to practice, the latter having much variation that theory cannot take account of. The inadequacy of theory to meet these variations in practice highlights the inadequacy of treating theory as the only legitimate knowledge for practice. There should be other sources of knowledge to inform practice.

b)   Neglect of contextual factors

In discussions of the relationship between theory and practice, the effect of context on that relationship is seldom considered. There is a tendency to assume that the application of theory to practice is context-free (Rein and White, 1981). However, there are contextual factors that would influence the applicability of theory. Such factors are clients, the social work agency, and the individual worker's competence. The constructs of theory concerning clients' behavior, problem definition, and the definition of social function are socially and culturally defined (Payne, 1997). Because the factors differ from context to context, if they are neglected, there will be problems in the application of theory.

Technical knowledge is not the only legitimized knowledge in the realm of professional knowledge. There is also implicit or tacit knowledge (Zeira and Rosen, 2000), called practical knowledge, that is constructed during practice through a practitioner's reflection (Kondrat, 1992). Practice embodies knowledge and solutions to problems. Such knowledge can be obtained through reflection-in-action (Schon, 1987).

Each action is viewed as unique and therefore each practice develops a unique theory (Schon, 1983). The relationship between theory and practice is conceived in the way that knowledge is internally connected to practice.

Theory and practice influence each other. Changes in practice precipitate a need to re-conceptualize theory. Practice is influenced by contextual factors such as agency policy and clientele. However, it is hard to tell how practice is influenced in a particular context. Most of the discussions of theory and practice are centered on the development of the social work profession in Western societies. It is worthwhile to research into the relationship between theory and practice in the context of Hong Kong to see how the contextual factors interact to influence the practice of social work.

Method

The present research studied how social workers conceptualize the relationship between theory and practice, and sought to understand how their agency influences their practice and their use of theory. The meanings attached to theory and practice vary among different social workers. The process of construction, therefore, would be quite complicated and unique in each case. For this reason, the qualitative method was employed to view the research topic from the perspective of the interviewees and to understand how and why this particular perspective evolved.

Sample

A service unit of a non-governmental organization was chosen as the context for the study. The service unit had five centers providing developmental services for children and youths. There were 29 social workers at the time of the study who had

experience applying social work theories such as social skills training, assertiveness training, and cognitive behavioral approaches. Eight social workers from the five centers of the same service unit were recruited as the subjects of the study. The subjects needed to have a qualification in social work training, at least three years' social work experience, and experience applying social work theories in practice, and they needed to give their consent to being interviewed.

<u>Data collection and analysis</u>

In-depth interviews were employed to collect data. Each interview lasted about one and a half hours. An interview guide approach was adopted to provide a structured and standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 1990). Documentary review and direct observation were employed to set guidelines for the interviews and to ensure the use of a common language understandable to the interviewees. Information about agency policy and procedures was collected for data analysis. The interviews were recorded using a tape recorder. The interview content was transcribed and coded for content analysis. The coding framework included two major dimensions: (i) factors affecting practice, such as theory, client, agency, and personal orientation including personal values, beliefs, human assumptions, worldviews, character, and interests; (ii) the relation between theory and practice including respondents' views on the relation between theory and practice, gaps between theory and practice, and respondents' experience of putting theories into practice. Based on the coding framework, a case analysis and a cross-case analysis were conducted. The purpose of the case analysis was to describe, in summarized terms, how the social workers conceptualized the relationship between theory and practice, and how the contextual factors influenced their practice. The second

stage of analysis was the cross-case analysis in which all the summarized data were compared. Different views on the same theme contributed to the expansion of the meaning of the theme. Further classification of the data was attempted so as to enrich our understanding of the meaning of the theme.

Results and discussion

The eight respondents came from four children and youth centers of an agency. Four of them were the supervisors of the centers and the other four were frontline social workers. The supervisors were at the rank of Assistant Social Work Officer (ASWO), while two of the social workers were ASWOs and the other two were Social Work Assistants. Social worker working experience ranged from at least 3 years to 13 years with the mean at 5.5 years (See Table 1). The respondents, thus, were experienced social workers. They were not only familiar with social work theories but also had experience applying theories in practice.

[Table 1 about here]

According to the findings, all respondents perceived that the relationship between theory and practice is interactive in the way that theory guides practice which in turn validates and modifies theory. As one respondent put it:

"Theory is experience. The formation of theory is a process in which

experience is accumulated and conceptualized into abstract

statements and general principles. Such concepts and principles will

in turn inform the methods of practice. If experience accumulates,

theory will be modified and then practice will also be improved."

The relationship between theory and practice is depicted in Figure 1. The process of theory application is interactive and dynamic. Such a dynamic process can be integrated and internalized at a personal level. This means that everyone may have a different method of integration. During actual practice, more attention and concern is paid to the context of the practice. Theory is only one of several ways of acquiring knowledge for practice. There are other contextual factors that influence the relationship between theory and practice. The framework shown in Figure 2 facilitates a systematic understanding of the respondents' conceptions of theory and practice. It brings into consideration the effect of contextual factors on the relationship between theory and practice.

[Figure 1 about here]

In Figure 2, "*a*" shows the relationship between theory and practice, which is influenced by three factors: the self, the clients, and the agency. "*b*" shows the influence of a social worker's self on the application of theory to practice. The "self" includes personal character, experience, values, and beliefs. "*c*" represents the clients' influence on practice and includes clients' problems, needs, and feedback. When using theory, consideration should be given to its applicability to clients. There is also an organizational influence on the respondents' views concerning theory and practice. Such an influence occurs in three different ways shown by "*d*," "*e*," and "*f*." "*d*" represents

the agency's effect on the selection of theory and the guidelines for practice. The agency

tends to select practical knowledge for application in practice. "*e*" represents the

agency's effect on a social worker's professional performance. Through participation,

the social worker can contribute to the agency's policy-making and setting of guidelines

for practice. This is represented by "*f*." The dynamic process is elaborated below.

[Figure 2 about here]

1. The self as an active agent for relating theory and practice

The "self" is regarded by most of the respondents as an active agent for

knowledge building. Each practitioner developed his or her personalized approach to

integrating different types of knowledge. Knowledge and practice can be integrated

through personal learning and reflection. The preference of the respondents regarding

the selection of theories for application would influence the service direction of

professional development. Based on their social work experience, three respondents

identified theoretical knowledge that could be applied in practice while five identified

practical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge refers to those theories that provide a

conceptual framework of analysis for understanding clients' problems and needs. The

main function of this type of knowledge is to describe, analyze, and make sense of those

problems and needs. Systems theory and Erikson's theory were given as examples by

the respondents. Practical knowledge refers to those theories that explain how to

practice social work and describe the skills of intervention. Social skills training and

cognitive behavioral approaches were given as examples. Practical knowledge was

much preferred by all the respondents due to the demands of practice and agency expectations.

In their daily practice, the social workers were involved in much decision-making and value choice. They emphasized their competence in dealing with uncertain and unstable situations. They used theoretical knowledge to support decision-making and professional judgment. But in practice, decision-making and professional judgment relied not only on knowledge and information but also on personal factors: (i) character and experience; (ii) values and beliefs.

Four respondents emphasized that the selection and application of theories should match personal character and experience. One respondent explained it this way:

"The worker will likely use Cognitive Behavioral Approaches if he

is more rational. Sometimes the choice of theories would be limited

by the worker's lack of knowledge of the theories. The selection of

theories also needs to take into consideration the worker's experience

in applying theory. The use of theory should be able to build on the

past experience of the worker. That means, it should be able to

integrate the theory into work experience."

The other four respondents were concerned about personal values and beliefs. One of them claimed that value precedes theory. Practice is value-laden involving much choice and decision-making, such as the choice of which theories to apply, and dealing with the conflicting needs of clients.

"I believe that young people need different experiences. I perform

my work in accordance with this belief. I also believe that the

mission of social work is to help young people grow and develop.

Based on this understanding, I think that young people need someone

else to be with them, to provide resources, and to teach them skills

needed for growth. In this way, my beliefs concerning a social

worker's role and the needs of clients become a guide for my

intervention."

The selection of theory and the ways of obtaining useful knowledge all reflected

the values held by the respondents. This was consistent with Gray (1995) who argues

that personal orientations such as values, interests, and character play an important role

in knowledge building. Values are considered an important component of the research

process and theory development. McFee (1993) sees a practitioner as an

action-researcher who has dual roles in practice: as a worker and as a researcher. The

action-researcher tests knowing-in-action against the circumstances of new cases, and

acts as an active learner through reflective learning (Gould, 1989; Gould and Harris,

1996).

2. The agency as an active agent for knowledge building

The agency that was studied during the research had the mission of promoting

the professionalization of social work. It is actively cultivating an agency culture of

providing professional and effective service to the public. It emphasizes accountability

to the public. According to the respondents, the agency requests social workers to

conduct program evaluations and to apply theories in practice so as to improve service quality and effectiveness. Thus, the selection of theory for application should consider the agency requirements, which are as follows: a) a match between the agency philosophy and service development; b) applicability to clients; and c) a readiness to apply theory, because the agency is concerned with the cost-effectiveness of theory application. The agency has the tendency to select those theories which are practical and easy to learn and follow. These theories should have a training manual so that the workers can start to implement theory relatively quickly. The agency encourages knowledge building and professional exchange through publications. The theories selected for application are mainly cognitive behavioral approaches, social skills training, and assertiveness training. Other theories, such as Erikson theory, Gestalt psychology, and psychoanalysis to name a few, are not popular because the practitioners need more time to learn them.

The agency has a significant influence on the professional activities. All respondents defined theory as practical knowledge that responds to practical concerns in the context of the agency. The construction of social work knowledge can be agency-based (Howe, 1986, 1987). The agency has a significant influence, whether positive or negative, on professional development and knowledge building. Through the administrative and supervisory procedures, compliance is expected from the staff to ensure the achievement of organizational goals (Etzioni, 1975; Kadushin, 1992). Policy and procedures are designed to guide practitioners when delivering the services. Whether the direction is general or specific depends on the knowledge accumulated from organizational experience.

Almost all respondents shared the agency's expectations but they felt that professional autonomy was less emphasized in the agency context. The time and space for integrating theory and practice was inadequate, thus rendering their practice very pragmatic. One respondent said:

"There is too much demand which makes it difficult for staff to fulfill the administrative requirement. This results in less time to repeatedly apply theories and accumulate experience and less time to reflect on practice and internalize knowledge gained from experience. Finally, it has an adverse effect on knowledge building."

The need for time and space in order to improve their practice and use of theory was very much emphasized by the respondents. Four respondents who were supervisors of centers held more positive attitudes concerning the agency's policy. They had more understanding of the rationale of the policy and to some extent they could participate in policy-making. They perceived that the agency acted as a catalyst to promote professional and effective practice which was theory-based and was accountable to the public. They recognized that the agency provided resource support and facilitated learning more about theory and other working methods. Overall, they appreciated that the agency was active, progressive, and professional.

3. The clients' effect on theory and practice

The applicability of theory to clients was greatly emphasized by all the respondents. The clients' needs and feedback acted as a guide for the social workers to

make choices and form judgments in practice, and as references for service planning, delivery, and evaluation. The feedback given by the clients also helped in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the service and so affected the service design. For example, one respondent shared that there were difficulties in the integration of theory and practice because some theories did not seem applicable to certain client groups.

"I face difficulties as most children do not accept Rational Emotive

Therapy. They are not rational enough to be receptive to the program

design which emphasizes rational thinking."

All other respondents shared the same feeling. They recognized that the knowledge practitioners grasp during practice is inadequate. Social workers should not succumb to the illusion that as they learn more theories, they come to know more than their clients about the latter's problems and the means of solving them. Rather, the clients may know better what they need and what is good for them. Consideration of their views makes the practice and application of theories unique to different clientele.

Client feedback regarding service delivery plays an important part in the helping process (Mayer and Timms, 1970; Payne, 1988; Howe, 1989). It was suggested that practitioners and their clients work together to discover and construct a mutually agreeable course of action. The relationship should be reciprocal in nature. Recognizing his or her limitations, a practitioner should test his or her understanding against the client and so develop a mutually acceptable framework of understanding. The practitioner may adopt an attitude of "not-knowing" in order to completely open his or her mind so as to understand the client (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992). Knowledge of

the client must be evaluated constantly against empirically-based theory as well as against the practitioner's practice wisdom and tacit knowledge. Since clients differ from one another, practitioners come to develop a unique understanding of each case through dialogue with the specific client. A unique theory is thus developed.

Implications for social work practice

From the above discussion, certain implications for social work can be identified that point to possible areas for future research. It is especially meaningful to the Mainland China which is developing social work profession in a very rapid way.

1. A personalized approach to theory and practice

As we have seen, almost all respondents indicated the importance of the use of self in the integration of theory and practice. Through effective learning, they can develop a personalized theory which integrates different kinds of knowledge with practice, and which matches personal values and beliefs. Awareness of learning style is the first important step towards improving the effectiveness of learning. Moreover, as the respondents revealed, they seldom thought about theory during practice. If they could become more aware of their implicit theory or tacit knowledge, they would be more consistent in practice and thus develop a personalized theory.

To enhance personal awareness, reflection, and learning, adequate time and space is necessary. A professional team made up of colleagues from the same center or study group is helpful for the worker to develop a personalized theory. In such a team or study group, participants who work in a similar context could be more understanding

and supportive of each other. This would facilitate reflection-in-action and thus help to develop unique theory (Schon, 1983).

2. Agency development and knowledge building

a.   Cultivation of a supportive environment and administration

The research findings also revealed that the agency had a significant influence on the relationship between theory and practice. A supportive environment is important for professional sharing and exchange, and for the worker to learn and integrate knowledge with practice. A balance between professional autonomy and agency instruction should be maintained. It is important for an agency to maintain and cultivate the agency culture of pursuing professionalization. It needs to be aware that the meanings of theory and practice could be so diverse that any single, rigid interpretation would hinder creativity and knowledge building from multiple perspectives. Flexibility in selecting theories for application would allow for a variety of different theories. Two strategies may be found helpful for widening and accumulating professional knowledge and experience: opening channels for professional sharing and exchange, such as meetings, agency working groups, and training workshops; and building up a systematic documentation of knowledge and experience through publications as well as the establishment of a staff library and filing system.

b.   Supervision and staff development

Given that the use of self is emphasized, the professional development and the participation of social workers in agency development and knowledge building are very important. A healthy balance should be maintained between the development of self, the agency, and the profession (see Figure 3).

[Figure 3 about here]

The personal development of social workers is important for enhancing professional and agency development. Systematic staff development programs and supervision could cultivate an atmosphere of effective learning and the sharing of knowledge and experience. Through supervision at the individual and group levels, the supervisor can promote personal awareness of learning styles and the sharing of difficulties over learning and applying theories.

3. Social work education in the agency context

Seven respondents felt that what practitioners learn in universities was not adequate to meet the changing demands of practice. There is a gap between knowing and doing as well as a gap between teaching in institutions and practicing in the context of an agency. From the above discussion, it is evident that learning no longer takes place solely in an institution but also in a work setting. Learning in an agency through a staff development program and staff exchange would be more relevant to the context of the agency and the client's needs. The contextual factors having been considered, the knowledge would be more applicable.

This study was exploratory in nature, seeking to understand how the relationship between theory and practice is conceptualized under the influences of the self, the agency, and clients. It is hoped that the study has provided a framework for understanding knowledge building in an organizational context that can facilitate further research and discussion.

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	No.
Sex	
Male	6
Female	2
Rank	
ASWO*	6
SWA**	2
Work post	
Supervisor	4
Social Worker	4

Table 1: Profile of the respondents
*ASWO: Assistant Social Work Officer   **SWA: Social Work Assistant
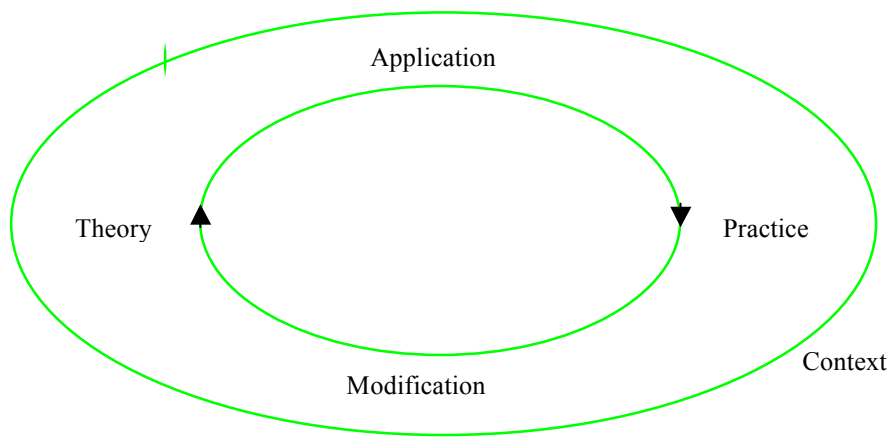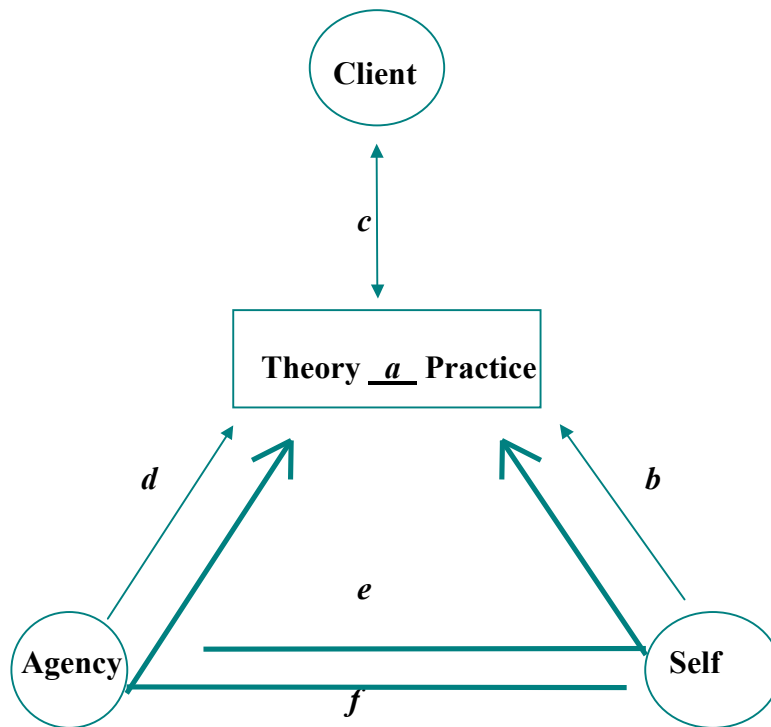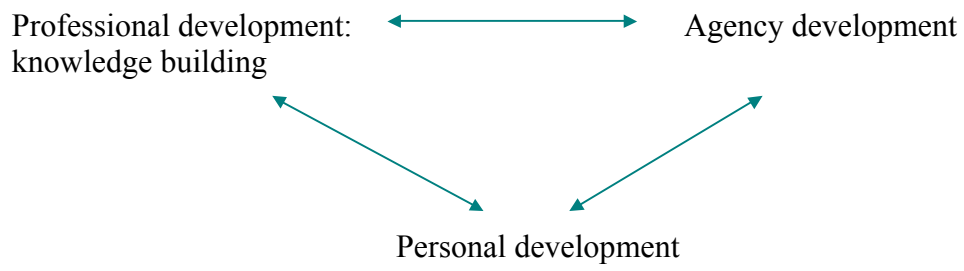
Figure 1: The interactive nature of theory and practice

Figure 2: The interactive nature of theory and practice in context

Professional development: ⟷   Agency development
knowledge building

Personal development

Figure 3: The relationship between professional, agency, and personal development