Theory and social work: A conceptual review of the literature

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Theory and social work: A conceptual review of the literature

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Abstract

This article presents a conceptual review of the literature concerning social work and theory. Based on analysis of 93 research studies, drawn from literature in English published between 1968 and 2016, the review considers the many ways that theory is conceptualised in the literature, and asks meta-theoretical questions about how and why different conceptualisations arise. The article examines definitional questions and ambiguities concerning the use of theory, extant research on the use of theory by social workers in practice, hostility expressed regarding theory in social work, the theory/practice divide, and perspectives that emphasise theory's utility or functionality. The article points at some methodological and ethical limitations concerning current research, and summarises dominant, as well as less prominent, versions of what counts as theory within the social work discipline, before finally suggesting that further meta-theoretical research is needed.

It would appear that social work has a problem with theory. That is, the contexts in which theory is discussed at all are usually those where it is some kind of problem to be resolved. Talk about theory in social work provokes accusations of impracticality, intellectual snobbery, ivory-tower privilege, or even coldness, and there are arguments that social work could do without it. For example, a report on UK social work education states that universities 'have been allowed to provide too much theory, too much sociology and not enough about spotting things in a family which are wrong' (Narey, 2014, p. 30). However, many make a case for theory's relevance and importance to social work, with Sibeon, for example, stating, '…"theoryless practice" is a contradiction in terms' (Sibeon, 1991b, p. 7). Nevertheless, as Pilalis (1986, p. 80) noted, terms 'such as "tension"…, "conflict"…, "lack of fit" or "gap"…and even "gaping hole"' are used to account for what is usually described as the theory/practice divide.

Part of the problem, here, is what counts as theory, not what theory is appropriate or what theory is relevant. Within social work, various competing conceptualisations of theory exist, and so practitioners, academics, researchers, students and policy-makers may be talking about quite different notions, or from different ontological positions, when they talk about theory. Further, what counts as theory in social work is itself cast as a political question, since 'groups of people gain an interest in a particular theory and support it in arguments with groups of people who support other theories' (Payne, 2014, p. 20). The question of what gets counted as theory, then, becomes an important practical, moral and epistemological one, which has important consequences for social work.

Rather than a focus on the more familiar 'Is theory relevant to practice?' question, this article takes a step back in order to investigate how theory is variously conceptualised within social work. This is necessary because there is danger in assuming a shared understanding, and because there is very little meta-theory within the discipline. Here, feminist meta-theory

(Christian, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 2000) is an important inspiration, in that this asks what counts as theory, including questions about its form, how it is counted and whose work is seen to count. In social work, however, this 'theory of theory' (Poulter, 2005, p. 208) is lacking, and it is this meta-theoretical concern that forms the basis for this review: How is theory currently conceptualised and used in existing social work literature and what can be learned from this?

Conceptual review

Conceptual review, unlike the more usual, aggregative type of literature survey, involves examination of how the topic in question is theorised (Harkness, 1989; Palmer, 2011), in order to 'reveal, "at a conceptual level," the frames of reference, theoretical debates, and interpretive arguments that [are] common to the wider body of literature' (Young et al. 2006, p. 325). For this reason, conceptual review includes both qualitative and quantitative studies, as well as non-empirical pieces, is less concerned with summarising, appraising and analysing findings, and instead focuses on methodological and epistemological processes by which a topic – theory – is produced.

In order to carry out this review, the date range 1968–2016 was used, with Timms (1968) taken as the starting point. This decision was taken because conceptual review considers patterns and changes in theorisation of a topic over time and, although a more recent start date would have decreased the volume of studies requiring consideration, this would also, inevitably, have focused only on contemporary ways of thinking. The electronic databases, Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts, PsychINFO, Social Care Online, Social Services Abstracts and the Web of Science, were searched using keywords 'social AND work* AND theory'. However, other keywords, such as 'knowledge', 'science' and 'evidence', were also used in place of 'theory', as these often feature in existing studies

concerned with the nature of social work knowledge or research methodology. Initial results produced about 1,900 relevant hits, based on a reading of abstracts and keywords.

In addition, a hand search was undertaken because computer database searches are not exhaustive (Aguirre & Bolton 2014; Britten et al. 2002). Keyword searches of library catalogues were used to identify relevant books and book chapters, and reference lists or bibliographies were examined, in order to highlight pieces that had not already been picked up in the database or catalogue searches. This produced a further 96 results, mainly books and book chapters, and five reports or knowledge reviews published on the World Wide Web.

After excluding duplicates and those pieces that mentioned one of the search terms but were not substantively concerned with the nature of theory, evidence, knowledge or science within social work, 267 pieces were chosen for inclusion in the conceptual review, consisting of 171 journal articles, 72 books, 19 book chapters, three knowledge reviews and two reports on social work education and policy (see Table 1, Appendices). All 267 were analysed, but this figure was then reduced to 93 key studies for the purposes of the present article due to limitations of space. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on one model of practice or on one theorist, or on aspects of classroom teaching. Where one debate (e.g. on evidence-based practice) or the work of one author on a particular topic was present across a number of studies, then one or two representative articles were chosen. Introductory textbooks on theories for social work were also excluded, as they have been reviewed elsewhere (Payne, 2014). Table 1 summarises these exclusion/inclusion decisions. The studies included are drawn primarily from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Australia, as those countries dominate the literature in English, though there are also single studies from Israel, Sweden, Denmark, Hong Kong and China.

Lastly, a mapping exercise of concepts and approaches to questions of theory in the studies was carried out, and this was used to structure the review into five key areas:

definitional ambiguity, findings from empirical studies, hostility, the theory/practice divide, and questions about function. This was an iterative process, one that involved assessing ways that the studies addressed theory, re-examining them to look for tropes or significant, recurring themes, and then deciding on just five key areas to address in detail, once again, due to limitations of space. Each study was then mapped against the five tropes. Table 2 (Appendices) summarises this mapping exercise, and shows that definitional ambiguity is by far the most common trope, with 93% of the chosen studies addressing this point. Theory utility or function is addressed by 76% and the theory/practice divide by 65% of the studies. Just 38% of the studies discuss hostility towards theory and only 18% are based on empirical investigation of theory and social work.

Definitional questions and ambiguity

Ninety-three per cent of the studies either define theory or raise the question of ambiguity concerning its meaning within social work. That many of the studies attempt to define theory is not surprising but, given that various ontological views concerning the nature of theory are adopted, these are not always made explicit. That is, definitions may be provided without reflexivity, so that the version of theory presented may appear factual rather than based on any kind of explicit epistemological, ethical or ontological stance. Further, any reader considering this range of perspectives will encounter definitional ambiguity, since existing social work literature displays many, sometimes incompatible, conceptualisations. However, it is important to note that this is not peculiar to social work. In the words of Mills (2008, p. 19), theory 'remains an elusive category with fuzzy boundaries that involve often hazy adjudications as to what is "theoretical enough"'.

There are some common themes to the various definitions; for example, theory is often described as a set of ideas, assumptions or a framework used to explain phenomena

(Coady, 2008; Howe, 1987; Oko, 2011; Thompson, 2010; Thyer, 2001). However, this may suggest that theory is merely an explanatory device for already-given behaviours, persons or events, which tends to see interpretation merely as a functional task. That is, the notion that phenomena might be constructed via, or the result of, theory hardly features in such accounts. For others, theory ought to provide methods or justification for social work practice (Beckett & Horner, 2016; Borden, 2010; Greene, 2009; Trevithick, 2012), sometimes combined with the explanatory role to provide a basis for action (Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 1997; Healy, 2014; Shaw & Norton, 2007). Payne's argument that theory is a 'social construction' (Payne, 2014, p. 17) acknowledges that definitions of social work theory are disputed, may change over time and, crucially, that what counts as theory is a meta-theoretical question, since this involves powerful assertion and reproduction of ideas.

Less common is the view of theory as a form of praxis (Evans, 1976; Ferguson, 2009; O'Brien, 2004; Penna, 2004; Pozzuto, 2007; Rojek, Peacock & Collins, 1988), a perspective that has emerged at particular times, usually associated with what is described as radical, structural or critical social work. Here, three key moments emerge as especially significant: first, the rise in the 1970s of the radical social work movement which argued for analysis of ideology within social work and for a practice that challenges oppressive relations (Bailey & Brake, 1975; Brake & Bailey, 1980; Statham, 1977); second, a re-emergence in the 1990s (Langan & Lee, 1989; Mullaly, 1993), alongside, but in part a challenge to, the development of anti-discriminatory practice (Thompson, 1992); and third, recent accounts (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Hick, Fook & Pozzuto, 2005; Lavalette, 2011; Turbett, 2014), which have argued for the need to reinvigorate social work with critical and social structural perspectives.

Perhaps the most striking source of conceptual disagreement in the literature associated with the definition of theory in social work, however, has to do with epistemological and ontological differences, or 'philosophical debates about knowledge, the

nature of reality, and how we know and represent that reality' (Mäntysaari & Weatherley, 2010, p. 180). This takes place between those who take up positivist *versus* interpretivist epistemological positions. In the former, theory is about hypothesising or prediction (Teater, 2014), and has taken a number of forms at various times. First, there have been arguments, especially in the USA that social work ought to be scientifically based, and that theory should be a logical explanation for empirically verified facts (Thyer, 2008; Turner, 1974). Second, authors, such as Sheldon, have argued for an 'injection of positivism' into social work (Sheldon, 1978, p. 18). Third, those who propose evidence-based practice have also suggested that theory ought to be potentially refutable, reliable and valid (Gambrill, 2012; Rubin, 2015; Sheldon & Macdonald, 2009).

This is opposed by authors who argue for interpretivist accounts of social work knowledge, based on social, rather than natural, sciences (Heineman, 1991; Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011; Paley, 1987; Penna, 2004; Peile, 1994; Taylor & White, 2000; Witkin, 2011, 2016). Thus, in response to Thyer's (2001) argument that social work research ought to be based upon experimental, outcome studies that are 'essentially theory-free' (Thyer, 2001, p. 18), Gomory (2001) responds that assumptions about objective data are naïve, since theories about what to look for in research precede any kind of data generation. Here, interpretivist accounts focus on knowledge, not as product applied in an 'instrumental' fashion (Webb, 2001, p. 73), but rather a concern with how it is made via interactional and contingent processes. Social work is seen as a value-based and human practice that does not adhere to many of the requirements of evidence-based approaches. Further, as noted by Smith (1987, p. 412), '[f]acts do not speak for themselves' (Smith,), since the role of theory as a form of interpretation is key. Indeed, England (1986) argues for an arts-based analysis because this allows for the complexity, subjectivity and ephemerality of social work practice. However, insights gained via artistic criticism are no less disputed than those of science, and so no

'more capable than positivist scientific rigour of providing a stable foundation for investigating social work' (Smith, 1987, p. 412).

Existing studies highlight different versions of theory used within social work, with earlier studies referring to theories about social work's purpose, as models for practice, or as being derived from the social sciences (Timms & Timms, 1977). The latter two notions relate to Curnock and Hardiker's 'practice theory' (theory that comes from, or is developed in, practice) and 'theories of practice' (theories from outside social work, applied to practice) (1979, p. 10), a formulation developed as part of a UK-based research project that analysed 90 social inquiry/assessment reports, as well as structured interviews with social workers and probation officers. Their respondents drew on theories of practice in their assessments, but, in none of the cases did they 'strictly adhere to one or more theoretical stance because they had to rely on other knowledge besides their explicit theories' (Curnock & Hardiker, 1979, p. 98).

Curnock and Hardiker's research has thus identified a split between theories outside of practice, or what Oko (2011) refers to as capital-T, textbook-type theories, and theories from within practice, or informal ones. Here, it becomes important to remember that this either/or description refers not to how things are but rather to a conceptualisation that begins, at the same time, to be referred to as the theory/practice divide, a notion given specific attention later in this article. It is also relevant to note the normative nature of this position, with the suggestion that any theory not directly from or for practice may be treated with suspicion.

Findings from empirical studies

Just 18% of the studies reviewed are based on empirical research and, while this might surprise some readers, it also indicates that most of the work on theory and social work is either speculative or applied. The empirical studies demonstrate both that there are different kinds of theorising going on within social work, but also that some are more likely to be

recognised as theory than others. Some studies tend to investigate the use of capital-T-type, propositional theory and the appliance of objective or existing knowledge. Others are concerned with how understandings of theory depend on contextual and temporal changes, and with making sense of practice from within. This alternative view is a 'generative' one (Pozzuto, 2007, p. 69) in which to theorise is to produce rather than apply understanding.

Exemplifying the former approach, Marsh and Triseliotis' British study, based on questionnaires from 714 social workers/probation officers and 69 supervisors, plus interviews with 60 newly-qualified staff and 31 supervisors, suggests that newly qualified staff are far more likely than seniors to see theory as relevant. However, while 81% of respondents said that they applied theory, newly qualified staff said it was rarely discussed in supervision (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996, p. 160). Marsh and Triseliotis quantify the presence of theories within respondents' accounts, noting that counselling and task-centred theory were discussed by 15 and 14%, while feminist and radical perspectives by just 4 and 2%, respectively (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996, p. 51). This propositional theory approach is echoed in the study by Mackey, Burek and Charkoudian (1987, p. 371), based on questionnaire responses from 458 senior clinical social workers across the United States. Fifty-one per cent of the respondents stated that 'psychoanalytic ego psychology' was their primary theoretical orientation, with a further 19% stating family systems theory, 11% behavioural and cognitive therapies, and 8% sociocultural theories.

However, other studies have investigated theorising in practice and, relatedly, how both social work students and practitioners make sense of theory, not coincidentally based on qualitative and ethnographic research methods. Secker's British study, based on 21 interviews and 19 questionnaires with social work students, argues that, in the early stages, students rely on personal knowledge and beliefs, but treat information in a rather unquestioning way. Towards the middle of their studies, students use theory in a 'fragmented' way, treating

theories as rulebooks, and assessing them as either right or wrong. Later, students develop a 'fluent' approach, where they see theories as building blocks that do not have to be applied rigidly (Secker, 1993).

These findings are echoed in the study by Fook, Ryan and Hawkins, based on interviews with 30 Australian social work students, as well as vignette-based discussions with 76 social workers and students. The newer students made sense of social work via personal views or those drawn from 'popular psychology', with little reference to theory (Fook et al., 2000, p. 33). By the end of their studies, although little formal theory was used, the students mentioned perspectives such as systems theory. Fook et al. (2000) found that newly qualified professionals speak of theory more often, but, like experienced practitioners, tend to use particular concepts, such as empowerment, child development or attachment, rather than whole theories. Similarly, in an ethnographic study by Avby, Nilsen and Ellström (2015, p. 8) based on observations, interviews and case record analysis with seven Swedish social workers, the respondents 'preferred practice-based knowledge and rarely consulted knowledge from sources found outside the practice setting'.

Lastly, there are studies that examine how the word theory is used or how practitioners make sense of their own use of theory in practice. Barbour's longitudinal study, based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 20 UK-based social work students, suggests that students use the term to refer to 'grand theory' such as Marxist or Freudian perspectives, to 'mid-range' theory that offers an explanatory framework, and to anything 'covered in class and thus learnt at university' (Barbour, 1984, p. 558). Further, some students view 'theoretical abstractions … with suspicion as they [abstractions] obscured the true nature of the social work task as an essentially practical one' (Barbour, 1984, p. 561). Practice supervisors did not always encourage students to see theory as useful, and 'this anti-

theoretical orientation was extolled by students as evidence of the quality of the social worker in question' (Barbour, 1984, p. 561).

Some studies suggest that theory is used without reflexivity or acknowledgement, in an entirely personal way, and therefore that explicit acknowledgement of theory is not a preferred cultural practice. For example, in Barbour's study, some students described theory as something which '"seeped in" and was used unconsciously,' (Barbour, 1984, p. 566). Carew's study, based on recordings of 20 English social workers' activities, as well as their responses to a questionnaire, also suggests that theory's utilisation is 'unconscious' (Carew, 1979, p. 353). Arnd-Caddigan and Pozzuto's institutional ethnography, based on American child welfare workers' written responses to a simulated client situation, and on unstructured interviews, similarly suggests that, even where a social worker does 'not believe she was using formal theory, she may have in fact done so' (Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2008, p. 61).

Hostility towards theory

The question of whether the social work discipline displays hostility towards theory is discussed in several studies, 38% of all those considered. Hostility arises either via anti-intellectualism or the downplaying of theory's potentially unsettling role by those who take an instrumental, skills or outcome-focused view of knowledge, something which several authors argue has increased under neoliberal, governmental regimes. That is, in some cases, such as that reported by Narey (2014), social work is regarded as an essentially practical, ameliorative activity which does not need theory and in which theory is seen as impractical or inappropriately political. Thus, hostility may be directed towards theory as such or towards its perceived lack of utility, with some arguments taking up an instrumental view of knowledge for social work.

In the quote below, Cohen discusses the relationship between sociological theory and social work, and suggests that practitioners':

… most familiar reaction … is … that, however interesting, amusing, correct and even morally uplifting our message might be, it is ultimately a self-indulgent intellectual exercise, a luxury which cannot be afforded by anyone tied down by the day-to-day demands of a social-work job (Cohen, 1975, p. 76).

Cohen notes that such hostility takes either an extreme form ('it's all right for you to talk, we're the ones doing the dirty work') or a less defensive position, which, while interested in the sociologist's claims, remains baffled about their application. However, he argues that hostility may arise because theories such as radical social work are 'extremely evasive' on questions of application to practice (Cohen, 1975, p. 86), and he suggests that dismissals of social workers' perspectives are not only patronising, but do little to address genuine questions about how to put theory into practice.

Others have argued that anti-intellectualism is present in social work, but that this has been encouraged by the increasing state regulation of social work education, including prioritisation of employer-led syllabi and a general hostility towards the social sciences (Green, 2006). Jones argues that, in the UK, social work education is 'unique in its anti-intellectualism and its hostile stance to the social sciences' (Jones, 1996, p. 190), echoed by England, who goes so far as to say, 'social workers have not developed any adequate tradition of intellectual scrutiny and criticism, and their thinking – in the job and in writing – is often lazy' (England, 1986, p. 6). Singh and Cowden note that the intellectual is not often linked with social work, but state that this is due to an association of the word with 'the "ivory tower" and detachment from the everyday' (Singh & Cowden, 2009, p. 480). Instead, they

argue for a wider notion of the intellectual to include practical activities, which embed theory within everyday practice.

Some authors, such as Howe (1987, 1996) and Houston (2001, 2014), have argued that the dangers in anti-intellectual and instrumental views of theory are that these see knowledge as merely practical or skills-based and that this results in shallow or surface accounts of, or engagement with, the kinds of complex human situations that social workers face. Howe suggests that theory is sometimes seen as pretentious and effete, opposed to 'practical … down-to-earth wisdom' (Howe, 1987, p. 1), but argues that all practice is theoretical and that the 'choice of a theory *for* practice is also a choice about the kind of activity social work is taken to be' (Howe, 1987, p. 166). He cautions that the discipline is becoming 'analytically more shallow and increasingly performance-orientated' (Howe, 1996, p. 77), and suggests that neo-liberal welfare favours a performance culture of targets and outcomes, in which theory is rejected in favour of 'task-focused and contract-orientated practices' (Howe, 1996, p. 90).

Houston has taken up these points, cautioning against 'overly instrumentalised responses governed by procedures, competencies and managerialism' (Houston, 2001, p. 853), and advocates moving from '*surface* appraisal (of facts and feelings) to one of *depth* … attuned to "deep causality",' a project that defends 'philosophy in a run away world that privileges instrumentalism in social life' (Houston, 2014, pp. 59–60). While it is important, here, to note that some perspectives raise questions about the deep causes suggested by critical realism, these arguments suggest that hostility towards theory is part of a wider move in the direction of short-term, surface welfare regimes under neoliberal forms of government.

The theory/practice divide

The theory/practice divide is a prevalent concept in the literature, present in 65% of the studies, indicating that, for some, these are seen as separate, even incompatible, worlds. Here, however, there is a danger of assuming a divide, and that this divide, rather than the assumption, is the problem to be investigated. This assumption limits some of the studies by taking the divide as read, rather than asking how the notion of divide arises, and is perpetuated in various ways. In relation to the conceptualisation of theory, proponents of the divide tend to work with the propositional, theories of practice model, one which tends not to recognise generative or interpretive accounts or practitioners' thinking and grounded practices as theorising. Coulshed and Orme suggest the 'continuing tension between practice and theory' depends on this confusion between theories *for* practice (social science-type), *of* practice (how to do social work-type) and *from* practice (implicit, practice wisdom-type) (Coulshed & Orme, 2012, pp. 1–10).

There are also analyses that attempt to account for the divide. Curnock and Hardiker (1979) argue that much practice wisdom does not get counted as theory because so little of it is written down, a point also made by others, who refer to social work's word-of-mouth culture (England, 1986; Fook, 2012; Oko, 2011; Sibeon, 1991b). Sibeon (1991a) adds that social work practice not only prioritises oral over written expression of methods, but favours individual experience. For example, partnership working, anti-discriminatory theory, or research based on capturing participants' experiences may treat service users' accounts as authentic and unquestionable, to be prioritised over others. This is a crucial point because, where theory is dismissed as irrelevant, there is, at the same time, ignorance of the ways in which practice wisdom operates its own epistemological assumptions, such as those that favour individual experience as a basis for knowledge.

Others suggest that the divide arises because academic and research-based accounts of social work come from different institutional spaces than those of practitioners and service users (Heinsch, Gray & Sharland, 2015; Smid & van Krieken, 1984; Trevithick, 2012). Fook (2002) argues such disparities are increasing, but, given the emphasis on involvement of service and other research users in contemporary studies, including the rise of some practitioner and service user-led research, this may be changing. Fook (2012) also suggests that academic and research-based authority is now no longer taken-for-granted. Instead, she refers to bottom-up, inductive and top-down, deductive theories, both of which are needed for social work, and describes these as different 'ways of knowing', in order to avoid the suggestion that researchers and academics theorise, while practitioners use everyday wisdom. Carew's study argues that the theory/practice divide may be exaggerated:

> Only two of the participants thought that the part played by theory in practice was relatively unimportant. The rest of the participants considered it to be important, maintaining that it acts as a framework from which to practise (Carew, 1979, p. 353).

However, few of the social workers in Carew's study referred to formal theory; they talked instead about practice wisdom. In part, this was because they lacked access to research, and sought wisdom about ways to practice from colleagues. For Carew, however, the propositional knowledge view of theory promotes the theory/practice divide, since it undermines an ability to understand what knowledge social workers already use as a form of theorising.

Theory as functional

For Smeeton, theory is best imagined a 'region of thought' rather than a tool, since when social workers 'adopt theories as tools, they tend to become sledgehammers' (Smeeton, 2015,

p. 6). However, within social work, theory is often disparaged for its lack of function, value to practice or applicability (Sharland, 2012, 2013). That is, it is seen as a mere tool, although those who point out that theory promotes critical thinking, or that it has a legitimate role other than utility, do not accept this. Timms, for example, states that '"practice" is distorted if it is conceived as simply a matter of applying "theory" or even of applying "theories," and "theory" is misread if it is seen as some kind of summary of "practice"' (Timms, 1968, p. 23). Both Garrett and Thompson raise concerns about the one-way view of theory as something merely to be applied (Garrett, 2013; Thompson, 2010), and Kreisberg and Marsh argue that 'much utilisation of research occurs on a conceptual level, as compared with an instrumental, means–ends level' (Kreisberg & Marsh, 2015, p. 15 of 20).

The emphasis on theory's functionality, or 'knowledge as product' (Sheppard, 1998, p. 765), relates to what Kondrat (1995, p. 410) terms a 'technical framework', in which knowledge is something to be applied or used. Ayre and Barrett caution that the relationship between theory and practice is more complicated than theory as 'a solid substrate or a set of well-laid foundations on which the edifice of hands-on intervention can be constructed' (Ayre & Barrett, 2003, p. 125). Indeed, they note that contingent matters, such as practical resources, affect whether theoretical perspectives are taken up, a point echoed by others (Chan & Chan, 2004).

Here, political aspects of theory enter the picture in a number of senses. First, theory is concerned with praxis, linked to social work's role in challenging oppression (Leonard, 1975; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988). Second, the processes by which realms of thought become designated theory or not, and whether they make it into textbooks or a canon, are political or material, not just ideas in the head. Third, that there is, relatedly, a hierarchy of theories. Ayre and Barrett argue that certain theories 'become dominant because they work particularly well for social groups who have the power to make them dominant, and not because they are more

"right" or more "accurate" in any absolute sense' (Ayre & Barrett, 2003, p. 131). In this sense, it is not so much that practice is underpinned by theory, but rather that theory is underpinned by what practices, including the operations of power, allow. It is for this reason that Ferguson resists a 'closed system' of theory, in order to critique neo-liberal versions of what counts as appropriate social work knowledge (Ferguson, 2009, p. 214), also crucial for the opening up of new, rather than designated, ways of thinking.

This relates to the processes by which less privileged perspectives, particularly those associated with race or gender, for example, are either written out of the canon of theory or merely added in to its peripheries. Graham argues that ethnocentric processes result in black perspectives being merely 'articulated as an adaptation or modification of existing theoretical frameworks' (Graham, 1999, p. 254), and, in Wachholz and Mullaly's (2001) content analysis of 14 introductory, American social work textbooks published between 1988–97, there is little coverage of radical, feminist or anti-racist scholarship.

On the question of gender and theory, some suggest that the professionalization of social work has prioritised the technical-rational view, side-lining practice wisdom produced mainly by women. As a result, technical-rational views have gained greater prominence, particularly in the United States, and theory proper has become associated with the men that dominate senior academic posts. However, Weick argues for re-valuing practice wisdom, and holding academic theory to account:

> The profession's first voice is found most fully in what we have come to call
> practice wisdom, the accumulation of knowledge that is flavored with the richness
> and intricacies of years of collective practice experience … That is not to say that
> academic theory should be jettisoned. However, it does mean that we must
> evaluate that theory according to the standards of both values and utility (Weick,
> 2000, pp. 400–401).

However, while Weick asks what values a particular theory is based on, since technical-rational views usually jettison values in favour of objectivity, she also makes a case for theory's 'utility' (Weick, 2000, p. 401). This presents an interesting contradiction, since questioning the dominance of evidence-based, objective views does not necessarily sit well with a utilitarian account. Further, Weick's suggestion that theory has been promoted as part of a masculinist culture contradicts Howe's point that theory may be seen as effete (Howe, 1987). So, while Weick's point about epistemological positions, drawing on feminist critiques of mainstream ways of theorising, is important, it is also necessary to remember that gender does not necessarily map onto forms of knowledge in a straightforward, binary way.

A meta-theory for social work?

Before discussing the main approaches to theory and social work that have arisen from this conceptual review, it is vital to ask some methodological questions concerning extant literature. The studies based on interviews and questionnaires may be limited because they focus on what respondents say about theory, rather than observing how social workers theorise. That is, they may tell us little about interaction and the production of theory within practice settings. While narrative does tell us much about how people engage, too much reliance on extracts from interview data does not allow us to consider indexical production, the kinds of interactions within which theory emerges, or forms other than talk, such as visual data, which involve theory.

In the questionnaire or interview-based studies, reports about whether social workers think theory relevant are, first, a particular conceptualisation of what counts as theory and, second, do not take account of how they construct accounts of practice. The possibility that newly qualified staff might wish to present more competent accounts of theory, or that

experienced practitioners might take up anti-theory perspectives, for example, does not feature in these studies. It is for these reasons, amongst others, that some researchers promote the use of ethnographic, observational methods, in order to ask how social workers theorise in practical contexts (Floersch, 2004; Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang, 2008).

In addition to these methodological concerns, this review has demonstrated that ontological and epistemological assumptions concerning theory are vital. What counts as theory matters, in the sense that various authors conceptualise it in different ways, but also that there are political and material processes by which both abstract and practical thought get labelled as theory or not. That the studies reviewed in this article demonstrate definitional and philosophical ambiguity, or tensions concerning theory's nature, indicates differences between formal, propositional *versus* generative, in practice views of theory. However, this also indicates a more general ambiguity within theory, in the sense that to theorise involves philosophical questions that do not have agreed or straightforward answers. As Shaw and Norton (2007, p. 3) note, 'incommensurable philosophical presuppositions' mean that no 'coherent single framework' for social work knowledge is possible, a point that allows for expansion of the realm of theory and guards against the dominance of a narrowly defined range.

This review demonstrates that a formal, textbook-type view of theory dominates social work, influenced by positivist epistemologies which characterise arguments for evidence-based practice and suggest that theory takes the form of either hypothesis-testing or a methods-application model. Theory, from this view, is to have a use and is to be applied, and, where not derived from empirical studies, is often taken from outside of social work, for example, the social sciences. Two further, associated notions of theory are less dominant. The first is that social work derives theory from practice wisdom, often passed on via word-of-mouth. The second is that social work involves sense making, and theorises in practice. These

are generative models, suggesting that social work formulates theory, rather than borrowing it from elsewhere or merely applying it.

This either/or approach to theory, however, does not take into account epistemological hierarchies or material processes of theory generation and confirmation. For example, because the formal, textbook view of theory dominates, then much of the theorising that goes on in practice is either disregarded or is not considered theory. A rather narrow, utilitarian view of theory also dominates, in which application or value is prioritised, and in which theory is required to specify methods, downplaying theory's role in challenging tacit knowledge or engaging critical thinking. This utilitarian view, however, is unhelpful because it tends to see theory as merely functional, something 'to "make sense" of things in order to help things work, without challenging what making sense might mean, who outcomes work for, etc.' (Grimwood, 2016, p. 6).

I have argued for meta-theory in social work, since recognition that differing conceptualisations of theory exist within social work is important, or, rather, greater reflexivity in writings about theory is needed. That there is relatively little empirical investigation of how theory is conceptualised and used within social work also indicates the need for further research but, as we have seen, this raises methodological as well as ontological and epistemological questions. I have also suggested that the narrow, textbook notion of theory is unhelpful, since this misses the processes of theorising, whether those be within social work practice scenarios, or the processes by which some forms of knowledge and some thinkers get to be called theory and theorists, while others do not. My point here is that the question, 'Do social workers use theory?' rests on a particular view of what counts as theory, and so does not pay attention to how they are already theorising. Social work phenomena are constructed through theorising, or, to put this differently, social work cases do not exist independently of their theorisation. This, of course, is a controversial point, but also

reminds us that the differing ways the social work discipline conceptualises theory need further investigation.

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Appendices:

Table 1. Studies included or excluded from this review (with reasons for exclusions).

Author(s)	Date of article (unless otherwise stated as book etc.)	Included in (I) or excluded from (E) final 93
Aldridge	1996	E focused on neo-liberal management
Applegate	2000	E focused on postmodernism
Arnd-Caddigan, Pozzuto	2006	E used Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto 2008
Arnd-Caddigan, Pozzuto	2008	I
Askeland, Payne	2001	E focused on knowledge and validity
Avby et al.	2015	I
Aymer, Okitikpi	2000	E focused on a teaching module
Ayre, Barrett	2003	I
Bailey	1982 chapter	E overview chapter
Bailey & Brake	1975	I
Barbour	1984	I
Barratt	2003	E evidence-based practice and child welfare
Beckett	2006 book	I
Beresford	2000	E used other representative articles on power, service users and theory
Blom, Moren	2010	E focused on one theory
Borden	2010 chapter	I
Brake & Bailey	1980	I
Brekke	2012	E used other representative pieces on science and social work
Briar-Lawson	2012	E focused on critical realism, used Houston 2001
Brown	1995	E evidence-based practice debate, covered elsewhere
Busch-Armendariz et al.	2014	E specific practice focus
Carew	1979	I
Carey	2008	E focused on care management
Carey, Foster	2011a	E focused on radical social work
Carey, Foster	2011b	E focused on discourse and ideology
Chambon	1999 chapter	E focused on Foucault

Chambon et al.	2015	E focused on history of social reform
Chambon, Irving	1994 book	E focused on postmodern theory
Chan, Chan	2004	I
Clark, Asquith	1985 book	E focused on philosophy
Coady	2008 chapter	I
Coady, Lehmann	2008 book	E used Coady 2008 as representative
Cohen	1975 chapter	I
Corby	1982	E used other representative studies
Coulshed, Orme	2012 book	I
Cox	2013 chapter	E overview chapter
Cox	1982	E focused on student expectations
Cox, Hardwick	2002	E focused on teaching
Cree	2010 book	E overview textbook
Cree	1995 book	E focus on discourse on role of social work profession
Cunningham, Cunningham	2014 book	E sociology textbook
Curnock, Hardiker	1979 book	I
D'Cruz et al.	2007a	E focused on reflexivity
D'Cruz et al.	2007b	E as above
Davies	1991 book	E overview sociology text
Dibicz, Pyles	2011	E focused on dialectic method
Dominelli	2002 book	E focused on feminist social work
Dunk-West, Verity	2013 book	E sociology textbook
England	1986 book	I
Epstein	1995	E evidence-based practice debate
Evans	1976	I
Evans, Hardy	2010 book	E used other representative texts
Fargion	2007	E focused on language use
Ferguson	2009	I
Ferguson	2008 book	E used Ferguson 2009
Ferguson & Woodward	2009	I
Figueira-McDonough et al.	2001	E focused on feminist teaching
Fisher, Somerton	2000	E focused on teaching of reflection
Floersch	2000	E used Floersch 2004
Floersch	2004	I
Fong	2012	E used other representative pieces on science and social work

Fook	2011	E looked at uncertainty, used her empirical studies instead
Fook	2002	I
Fook	2012 book	I
Fook et al.	2000 book	I
Fook et al.	1996	E used Fook et al. 1997, 2000
Fook et al.	1997	I
Forte	2014a book	E overview textbook
Forte	2014b book	E skills textbook
Gambrill	1994	E used Gambrill 2012
Gambrill	1995	E reply to critique piece
Gambrill	2012	I
Garrett	2015	E focused on Wacquant
Garrett	2013 book	I
Garrity	2010	E focused on discourse theory
Gilbert et al.	2009	E focused on evidence based practice
Gilbert, Powell	2010	E focused on Foucault
Gomory	2001a	I
Gomory	2001b	E focused on response to Thyer
Graham	1999	I
Graham	2007 book	E used Graham 1999
Gray	1995	E focused on ethics
Gray et al.	2009 book	E used other responses to evidence-based practice
Gray, Schubert	2013	E focused on knowledge transfer
Gray, Webb	2013 chapter	E overview intro
Gray, Webb	2013 book	E overview textbook
Gray, Webb	2008	E overview of England 1986 and response
Gray, Webb	2009	E focused on critical social work
Green	2006	I
Greene	2009 chapter	I
Grimwood	2016 book	I
Hardiker, Barker	1981 book	E overview textbook
Hardy, Jobling	2015	E focused on governmentality and knowledge flow
Harris et al.	2014	E discussion of international knowledge exchange
Harston	2004	E focused on Buddhism
Healy	2008	E critical commentary
Healy	2014 book	I
Heineman	1981	I

Heinsch et al.	2016	I
Hick et al.	2005	I
Houston	2014a	I
Houston	2014b	E looks at identity
Houston	2001	I
Houston	2004	E overview of Garrett/Ferguson debate
Houston	2002	E focused on systems theory and child welfare
Houston	2005	E used other pieces by Houston 2001 2014
Houston	2012	E used Houston 2001, 2014
Howe	1996 chapter	I
Howe	1987 book	I
Howe	1994	E focused on postmodernity
Howe	2009 book	E used Howe 1987
Jeyasingham	2008	E focused on sexuality theory
Johnsson, Svensson	2005	E overview text
Jones	1996 chapter	I
Jordan	1978	E used other pieces on the evidence-based practice and responses debate
Karger, Hernandez	2004	E used other texts on the intellectual and social work e.g. Singh & Cowden 2009
Kirk, Reid	2002 book	E focused on science and evidence-based practice, used other representative articles e.g. Thyer
Kondrat	2002	E used 1995 piece
Kondrat	1992	E used Kondrat 1995
Kondrat	1999	E focused on self-awareness
Kondrat	1995	I
Kreisberg, Marsh	2015	I
Kunzel	1993 book	E focused on history of work with unmarried mothers
Langan & Lee	1989	I
Lavalette	2011	I
Lee	1982 chapter	E overview of theory/practice
Leonard	1975	I
Leonard	1997 book	E focused on postmodern politics
Lishman	2007 book	E overview textbook
Llewellyn et al.	2008 book	E sociology textbook
Loewenberg	1984	E used other representative studies

Longhofer, Floersch	2012	E used other representative pieces on science and social work
Lorenz	2012	E focused on hermeneutics
Lorenz	1994 book	E focused on European social work politics
Mackey et al.	1987	I
MacKinnon	2009	E used other texts on the intellectual and social work e.g. Singh & Cowden 2009
Maclean, Harrison	2015 book	E overview textbook
Mantysaari, Weatherley	2010 chapter	I
Margolin	1997 book	E focused on history of surveillance and power
Marsh	2012	E used other representative pieces on science and social work
Marsh et al.	2005	E focused on knowledge types
Marsh, Triseliotis	1996 book	I
Mayer, Timms	1970 book	E focused on class and poverty
McBeath, Webb	2005	E focused on critical social work
McBeath, Webb	1991	E as above
McDermott	1975 book	E focused on philosophy of self-determination
McLaughlin	2008 book	E focused on radical social work and mental health
Mikailakis, Schirmer	2014	E focused on systems theory
Moffatt	2001 book	E history of ideas specific to Canada
Mullaly	1993	I
Munro	2002	E overview text
Narey	2014 report	I
Nash et al.	2005 book	E overview textbook
Nevo, Slonim-Nevo	2011	I
Nissen	2013	E focused on sociology
Noble	2004	E focused on postmodernism
O'Brien	2004	I
O'Brien, Penna	1998 chapter	E used other pieces by both authors
O'Brien, Penna	1998 book	E overview textbook
Oak	2009 book	E overview text
Okitikpi, Aymer	2010 book	E focused on anti-discriminatory perspectives
Oko	2011 book	I
Olsson, Ljunghill	1997	E used other representative studies

Orme, Briar-Lawson	2010 chapter	E focus on policy
Osmond, O'Connor	2006	E used other representative studies
Osmond, O'Connor	2004	E used other pieces on tacit knowledge/practice wisdom
Paley	1984	E used other representative pieces
Paley	1987	I
Parton	2003	E focused on specific ethical models
Parton	2000	E used other pieces on technical-rational 'vs' interpretive theory
Pawson et al.	2003 report	E largely focused on knowledge review in social care
Payne	2010	E used 2014 text as representative
Payne	2009	E used Payne 2014
Payne	2002	E focused on systems theory
Payne	2014 book	I
Pease, Fook	1999 book	E focused on postmodern theory
Peile	1988	E as above
Peile	1994	I
Peile, McCouat	1997	E looked at Peile 1994
Penna	2004	I
Philp	1979	E focused on Foucault
Pilalis	1986	I
Platt	2007 report	E social care review, used Narey 2014
Poulter	2005	I
Powell	2001 book	E focused on critical and radical theories
Powell, Carey	2007	E focused on Butler, Foucault
Pozzuto	2007 chapter	I
Price, Simpson	2007 book	E as above
Reid	1997	E focused on outcomes/evidence
Reid	2003	E used other representative articles
Reid	1994	E used other representative articles
Reid	1995a	E as above
Reid	1995b	E as above
Riemann	2005	E focused on ethnographic methodology

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Riley	1996	E focused on postmodern theory
Rojek	1986	E used Rojek et al. 1988
Rojek et al.	1988 book	I
Rosen	1994	E used other representative studies
Rubin	2015	I
Saleebey	2013 book	E focused on strengths perspective
Schiele	1996	E focused on Afrocentricity
Schirmer, Mikailakis	2013	E focused on Luhmann
Scott	1989	E focused on mode of (research) inquiry
Secker	1993 book	I
Sharland	2009 report	E used Sharland 2012, 2013
Sharland	2012	I
Sharland	2013	I
Shaw	2013 chapter	E used Shaw & Norton 2007 and other representative pieces
Shaw	2012 book	E used Shaw & Norton 2007
Shaw, Norton	2007 report	I
Shaw, Norton	2008	E, used 2007 as representative
Sheldon	1978	I
Sheldon	2001	E used Sheldon 1978
Sheldon, Macdonald	2009 book	I
Sheppard	2006	E used another representative article
Sheppard	1995	E used Sheppard 1998 as representative
Sheppard	1998	I
Sheppard et al.	2000	E used other studies on practice theory and Sheppard 1998
Sheppard, Charles	2014	E used another representative article
Sheppard, Ryan	2003	E used Sheppard 1998
Sibeon	1991a chapter	I
Sibeon	1991b book	I
Singh, Cowden	2009	I
Smeeton	2015	I
Smid, van Krieken	1984	I
Smith	2001	E focused on postmodernity
Smith	1987	I
Smith	2008 book	E focused on power theories
Smith, White	1997	E overview of postmodernity debate and reply

Soydan	2012	E used other representative pieces on science and social work
Soydan	1999 book	E historical account of national ideas
Soydan, Palinkas	2014 book	E used other pieces on evidence based practice
Statham	1977	I
Stevenson	2013 book	E autobiographical memoir
Sung-Chan, Yuen-Tsang	2008	I
Swigonski	1996	E focused on Afrocentricity
Taylor	2012	E focused on decision-making models
Taylor	2004	E child development theory
Taylor, White	2000 book	I
Teater	2014 book	I
Thompson	2010 book	I
Thompson	2012 book	I (have referred to original 1992 version)
Thyer	2008	I
Thyer	2001a	I
Thyer	2001b	E used Thyer 2008
Timms	1968 book	I
Timms, Timms	1977 book	I
Trevithick	2008	E used Trevithick 2012
Trevithick	2012 book	I
Tsang	1998	E overview text
Turbett	2014	I
Turner	1990	E focused on health
Turner	1974 chapter	I
Turney, Ruch	2015	E focused on cognitive interviewing
Ungar	2004	E focused on postmodernism
Van de Luitgaarden	2009	E overview of evidence based practice
Wachholz, Mullaly	2001	I
Wakefield, Kirk	1996	E used other articles on evidence based debate
Walsh	2010 book	E overview textbook
Webb	2001	I
Webb	2010	E focused on redistribution/recognition
Webb	2006 book	E used Webb 2001
Webber et al.	2014	E focused on universities
Weick	2000	I
Weick	1991	E used other representative pieces on science and social work

Weick	1987	E response to evidence-based models
Weick, Saleebey	1998	E focused on postmodernism
White	1997	E debate with Sheppard on reflexivity/retroduction
White	2006 book	E focused on feminist theory
White, Stancombe	2003 book	E used Taylor & White 2000
Witkin	2011	I
Witkin	1996	E used Witkin 2011, 2016
Witkin	2016 chapter	I
Witkin	2012 book	E focused on social constructionism
Witkin, Gottschalk	1988	I
Zeira, Rosen	2000	E used other representative pieces on practice wisdom

Table 2. Analysis of whether tropes 1–5 are addressed by the 93 studies in this review.

Author(s)	Date	1. Definitional questions and ambiguity: (87/93) 93%	2. Empirical study of theory and social work: (16/93) 18%	3. Hostility towards theory: (37/93) 38%	4. Theory/ practice divide: (59/93) 65%	5. Theory's utility and/or function: (71/93) 76%
Arnd-Caddigan, Pozzuto	2008	x	x		x	x
Avby et al.	2015		x	x	x	x
Ayre, Barrett	2003	x			x	
Bailey, Brake	1975	x		x	x	x
Barbour	1984	x	x	x	x	x
Beckett	2006	x		x		x
Borden	2010	x		x	x	
Brake, Bailey	1980	x		x	x	x
Carew	1979		x		x	x
Chan, Chan	2004	x	x		x	
Coady	2008	x				
Cohen	1975	x		x	x	x
Coulshed, Orme	2012	x			x	
Curnock, Hardiker	1979	x	x		x	x
England	1986	x		x	x	
Evans	1976	x			x	
Ferguson	2009	x				x
Fergsuon, Woodward	2009	x		x	x	x
Floersch	2004	x			x	
Fook	2002	x			x	
Fook	2012	x			x	x
Fook et al.	2000	x	x		x	
Fook et al.	1997	x	x		x	
Gambrill	2012	x				x
Garrett	2013	x		x	x	x
Gomory	2001	x		x		x
Graham	1999	x				
Green	2006	x		x	x	x
Greene	2009	x				x
Grimwood	2016	x				x
Healy	2014	x			x	
Heineman	1981	x				x
Heinsch et al.	2016	x				x
Hick et al.	2005	x		x	x	x

Houston	2014	x				x
Houston	2001	x				x
Howe	1996	x			x	x
Howe	1987	x		x	x	
Jones	1996	x		x	x	x
Kondrat	1995	x			x	x
Kreisberg, Marsh	2015		x			x
Langan, Lee	1989	x		x	x	x
Lavalette	2011	x		x	x	x
Leonard	1975	x				x
Mackey et al.	1987		x			x
Mantysaari, Weatherley	2010	x				x
Marsh, Triseliotis	1996		x	x	x	x
Mullaly	1993	x		x	x	x
Narey	2014			x	x	
Nevo, Slonim-Nevo	2011	x			x	x
O'Brien	2004	x		x		
Oko	2011	x		x	x	x
Paley	1987	x		x	x	
Payne	2014	x		x	x	x
Peile	1994	x		x	x	x
Penna	2004	x			x	x
Pilalis	1986	x			x	x
Poulter	2005	x			x	x
Pozzuto	2007	x				x
Rojek et al.	1988	x				x
Rubin	2015	x		x		
Secker	1993	x	x	x	x	x
Sharland	2012	x	x			x
Sharland	2013	x	x			x
Shaw, Norton	2007	x	x			x
Sheldon	1978	x			x	x
Sheldon, Macdonald	2009	x			x	x
Sheppard	1998	x			x	x
Sibeon	1991a	x		x	x	x
Sibeon	1991b	x		x	x	x
Singh, Cowden	2009	x		x	x	x
Smeeton	2015	x			x	x
Smid, van Krieken	1984	x			x	
Smith	1987	x				x
Statham	1977	x		x	x	x

Sung-Chan, Yuen-Tsang	2008	x			x	
Taylor, White	2000	x				x
Teater	2014	x				x
Thompson	1992	x		x	x	x
Thompson	2010	x		x	x	x
Thyer	2001	x		x		x
Thyer	2008	x				x
Timms	1968	x		x	x	
Timms Timms	1977	x				x
Trevithick	2012	x		x	x	x
Turbett	2014	x		x	x	x
Turner	1974	x				x
Wachholz, Mullaly	2001	x	x			x
Webb	2001	x			x	x
Weick	2000	x			x	
Witkin	2011	x				x
Witkin	2016	x				x
Witkin, Gottschalk	1988	x				x