The Integration of Theory into Practice: Suggestions for Supervisors

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Introduction

Eric is a supervisor who is responsible for educating master's level social work students. Christine is a supervisor, but in a social work agency, who educates degreed practitioners. Both Eric and Christine are asked to respond to the following questions: What theoretical framework guides your practice? Can you articulate three central concepts of the theories you have cited? How does a particular theory influence your practice?

If Eric and Christine are like many social work practitioners, they will have some difficulty answering these questions. While social workers "ought" to have a relatively coherent, integrated theoretical base from which they work, often they are not clear or are unable to specify what constitutes this base (Mattaini, 1998). This difficulty may be explained by the fact that the further one gets from the discipline of the academic structure, the further theory recedes from awareness. It could also be explained by the fast-paced exigencies of agency-based practice, where there is limited time to focus on theory-based intervention. More likely, however, it is because the supervisors themselves have not thought about what theoretical orientation drives their practice.

While some supervisors may have lost sight of the theoretical underpinnings of their practice approach, the newer workers under their supervision are being taught to rely on theory to guide practice and have been, or are being exposed to, theory in their graduate level classes. It behooves the supervisor to help the social worker understand and integrate theory into the practice experience. The value of theory introduction through supervision, grounds the student and/or worker in their approach to their work, orients goal setting and practice interventions, and helps the worker anticipate practice outcomes.

This article will explore the challenge of integrating theory into practice and the importance of utilizing theory as a guide to practice. It will look at various definitions of theory and why it is essential as a supervisory tool. It will also articulate the core theories used in master's level social work education and offer suggestions to supervisors to steer them in this aspect of their work with agency-based social workers or students. Throughout the article, the word "supervisor" will be used to indicate one who supervises either social workers who have graduated and earned their masters degree or students who are placed in an agency for their internship experience.

What is Theory and Why Do We Need it?

What is Theory?

Theory is a logical system of concepts that provides a framework for organizing and understanding observations. Theories frequently offer comprehensive and dependable principles for the explication and prediction of observable phenomenon. A given theory can help organize observations and deal meaningfully with information that otherwise would be chaotic and useless. The interrelated concepts within a theory are empirically verifiable (Gitterman, 1988). Often, theories emerge as a result of systematic observation, analytical thinking, and intuition; the true value of a theory is its ability to identify those critical components within complex realities that point toward specific outcomes (Siegrist, 1998).

Why Do We Need Theory in Social Work Practice?

Theory in social work practice helps explain why people do what they do. Theory provides an explanation for what is happening in a given practice situation between client and social worker. In addition, a theory is a statement of a specific aspect of social work and prescribes what social workers should do in specific situations (Payne, 1997). In practice, social workers struggle with interventions and interventive styles to best serve client needs. Supervisors frequently ask workers to

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anticipate what may happen in a given situation when the client or worker responds in a particular way. Theories can be used to identify, describe, explain, predict, control, and cope with some portion of the worker-client relationship. Theories help in the effort to recognize, select, and collect stimuli and observations, and also help to find a sequence which forms a pattern to interpret data. As guides to behavior, theories serve in the monitoring, feedback, and correction of people's actions (Siporin, 1975).

If practice emerges from a strong theoretical base, social workers are able to explain intervention activity to others; it brings order into practice by helping organize the mass of facts, impressions, and suppositions developed in relationships with clients (Mattaini, Meyer, & Lowery, 1998). Sibeon (1990) distinguished between two types of theory—formal and informal. Formal theory is written down and debated within professional and academic circles. Informal theory consists of broader theories and values which exist in society and constructions from practical experience. Both formal and informal theoretical bases unite to form the knowledge base of social work from which practice is derived.

As a vehicle for anticipating outcomes, theory can be useful. Theory can also help explain unanticipated relationships between variables and guide the worker in new situations (Turner, 1996). To summarize, theories are useful to the extent that they provide a conceptual framework that shapes the direction of professional activities and gives context to specific actions. In this way, a social worker's actions are not random, but tend to reflect the theories, implicit or explicit, that he or she accepts and uses (Greene, 1999).

Theory in Supervision

Bertha Capen Reynolds (1970) commented that "The art of social work is learned by experience illumined by theory..." (p. 51). Reynolds, in making the connection between practice and theory, offers a strong rationale for the inclusion of theory in social work supervision. While there is undeniable

skill in social work practice, it is in the art of the helping where theory is most useful.

Theory in supervision is a tool used in making knowledge apparent and understandable. Kadushin (1992) comments that other than administrative supervision, educational supervision is the principal responsibility of the social work supervisor. Educational supervision is concerned with teaching the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to social workers so they can do their job. Though it is a difficult task, part of educational supervision is for the supervisor to help the worker in the explication and refinement of a theoretical base.

How would many supervisors answer the questions posed at the beginning of this article and how would they explain the theoretical base from which they practice? Many would answer that they work from an eclectic base, a euphemism for a collection of theories which form the basis of their interventive approach. As practitioners who have graduated from schools of social work, whether recently or some time ago, each has been exposed to and knows at least some theory. They are also likely to have developed a practice orientation that more or less takes the form of a variety of concepts. If pushed, each could probably describe a facet of a theory which has been incorporated into his or her work, but most would be hard pressed to explain the more subtle aspects of their orientation.

Some supervisors might be good at what Munson (1993) calls practice theory. Practice theory concerns the actual interactions with clients, detailing the intervention, and how the clients respond, rather than on the more structured, formal aspects of a given theory. Practice theories are often based upon a range of assumptions about the client and the change process; sometimes these theories have been borrowed from related professions (Shulman, 1991). Practice theory provides the tools with which social workers help people accomplish the tasks of assessment, planning, intervention, and evaluation (Siporin, 1975). It is a blending of method and theory.

Formal theory and practice theory differ in that

formal theory is highly organized and offers textbook explanations which practitioners can detail, while practice theory is descriptive. In clinical discussions, most practitioners will begin citing formal theory and then quickly move into practice theory, which details how the client acts in response to an intervention. The shift from formal to practice theory does not suggest that the practitioner is a poor clinician or a poor supervisor. It does however explain some of what gets lost after graduation within the outcome-focused world of agency work. Supervisors should nonetheless be able to differentiate practice theory and formal theory as they work with their supervisees. Most social workers will easily gravitate to practice theory, seeing it as a form of practice wisdom, leaving the teaching of formal theory to the university professors.

What Theories?

The Council on Social Work Education has mandated that all beginning master's-level schools of social work teach from a generalist base known as the foundation year. During this year, the content includes basic skills across method lines and exposure to general theories of work with client systems. In the second year, when all students are expected to take methods courses, many of these basic theories are expanded and intensified. This section will describe several of the more prominent first and second year practice theories that form the academic core of the social work curriculum. These are the theoretical bases from which students and workers can be taught during supervision. This brief overview is to serve as a reminder of several theories and should not be seen as exhaustive.

Theories for Use with Individual Clients
Systems Theory

Bertalanffy is considered the founding father of systems theory (Greene, 1999). Social work adopted a system theory orientation beginning in the late 1960s. "A system is a holistic, organized unit of interdependent, transacting, and mutually influencing parts (individuals or collectives and their subunits) within an identifiable (social-ecological) environment" (Siporin, 1975, p. 106). Systems are those elements in lives that relate and interrelate, which have contact and impact on our ability to function. Systems theory's utility for social work practice is that it draws attention to the need for the social worker to examine the multiple systems in which an individual functions. Systems theory can be applied to systems of varying sizes and complexity and helps social workers intervene at multiple stages in an individual's life. The focus of systems theory is on the interrelatedness of social conditions and phenomena (Greene, 1999).

A frequent social work question is whether the environment causes a person to behave in a certain way or does the person affect the environment in ways which creates behavior. Systems theory steps back from that question and provides social work practitioners with a conceptual framework that shifts attention from the cause-and-effect relationship between paired variables to a person/situation as an interrelated whole (Andreae, 1996). Systems theory has also been instrumental in broadening social work's understanding of human behavior in the social environment. The theory's broad, universal principles that begin with the person-in-environment focus expands understanding of the human condition and promotes inclusion of cross-cultural content (Greene, 1991).

Ecological-Life Model

As was articulated by Germain and Gitterman (1980), drawing from various theoretical foundations, the Life Model uses ecology as a practice metaphor. Ecology seeks to explain the reciprocal relationship between organisms and their environment. As a guiding theoretical perspective for social work practice, the Life Model assumes that human needs and problems are generated by the transactions between people and their environments. Problems of living occur from life transitions, environmental forces, and interpersonal pressures. Therefore, the social work role is to maximize the

relationship between people and their environments. Practice in the ecological perspective generally is concerned with problems in living that block or interfere with a client's ability to function (Greene, 1991). This is accomplished through adaptation and adaptive exchanges of information, energy, and matter between the individual and the environment, and between the environment and the individual.

Differences Between the Ecological-Life Model Approach and Systems Theory

While closely allied, systems theory and the ecological model differ in significant ways. The ecological approach refers to living, a dynamic interaction with an emphasis on active participation with the environment. Systems theory assumes a broader perspective. Although some terms are similar in the description of the two approaches, they are emphasized differently in each theory. The ecological approach focuses on transactions between the individual and their environment at the interface or point where the environment and individual meet. Systems theory, while concerned with environment and individual interchange, is more focused on the equilibrium within the larger system and seeks explanations for behavior within the subsystems and homeostasis of those involved (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, Jr.,1993).

Strengths Perspective

Central to the strengths perspective is the idea of building on the strengths of a client or client system, rather than looking at the areas of weakness. According to Saleebey (1997), a major proponent of this theory, practicing from a strengths orientation means that everything done by the social worker will be predicated on helping clients to discover and embellish their strengths and resources in an effort to assist them to achieve their goals. "It is an approach honoring the innate wisdom of the human spirit, the inherent capacity for transformation of even the most humbled and abused" (p.3).

This theoretical orientation is a departure from traditional social work in that the social worker uses herself to enhance and strengthen the client based on the client's strengths. It varies from the more traditional medical model in which the client is seen as a repository of pathology. As such, it assumes that every individual, group, family, and community has strengths which are yet to be realized and utilized in overcoming problems. Problems themselves, in fact, can be a source of strength as they present challenge and opportunity (Saleebey, 1997).

Psychosocial Approach

This theory is based on a person-in-situation perspective which focuses on the study, diagnosis, assessment, and treatment of individuals in transaction with their social environments. The major goal of this approach is the enhancement of social functioning. The strengths of the client are mobilized, dysfunctional patterns are acknowledged and addressed, and coping capacities are supported and restored. Intrapsychic factors are examined with some emphasis on psychodynamic technique fused with environmental awareness. Interventions are aimed at ego enhancement. "The key to understanding human behavior in this approach is the developmental process over the life course, much of which is seen as not in the client's conscious awareness....There is a place for the social and physical environment in this approach, but this place may be primarily historical" (Mattaini, 1998, p. 140).

As a theoretical orientation to social casework practice, the psychosocial approach posits that human beings are more than the products of their environment, they can participate in the creation of their environment (Woods & Hollis, 1990). The approach is grounded in the belief that people's behaviors develop within the context of many open systems interacting in mutually causative ways. Human adaptation is based on a dynamic interplay between the person and the situation, with new and

changing equilibriums being established to help the individual adapt (Woods & Robinson, 1996).

Psychology

Decidedly influenced by Freudian psychoanalytic thinking, ego psychology is grounded in the belief that all aspects of behavior are expressions of unconscious conflicts battling against societal sanctions and improper sexual or aggressive impulses. Ego psychology focuses on the executive arm of the personality as defined by Freud, the ego, and its relationship to other aspects of the personality and to the external environment (Goldstein, 1996). The evolving ego, from infancy to young adulthood, goes through stages of development marked by conflict between conscious and unconscious desires, while providing opportunities for maturation and growth (Bloom, 1990). The ego is seen to be the part of the personality that takes action in life situations; it develops protective-defensive structures that help the individual to function. Personality development is seen as the result of interaction with the environment (Compton & Galaway, 1994).

As a social work practice theory, ego psychology looks at the relationship between the client and the worker as the essential key to altering behavior. It is believed that the potential to undo the unconscious traumas of the past resides in the relationship between worker and client. Efforts are focused on helping the individual attain more effective interpersonal relationships, a more realistic assessment of potentials, and an acceptance of what can and cannot be changed (Greene & Ephross, 1991). This is achieved through 1) nurturing, maintaining, enhancing, or modifying inner capacities; 2) mobilizing, improving, or changing environmental conditions; or 3) improving the fit between inner capacities and external circumstances (Goldstein, 1996).

Role Theory

The term role refers to the behavior of people in positions, as prescribed by society. Role theory posits that individuals and groups surrounding the child from birth onward hold certain behavioral expectations. Many roles are commonly accepted as appropriate and necessary for individuals in certain areas of functioning; the individual is often assessed both externally and internally by what is deemed appropriate within a role (Woods & Hollis, 1990). Individuals are confronted by a number of problems that cause discomfort and prevent them from achieving their objectives; these problems can be analyzed in role terms and interventions can be designed within this framework (Garvin, 1991). Many seek help from social workers because they are having difficulty fulfilling the various roles that they are expected to fill. Sometimes, this is due to lack of knowledge of expectation and lack of skills in the performance of role behavior. Role theory offers an orientation which helps "free social workers from excessive concern with the 'inner space' of the client and directs their attention to the myriad ways in which behavior of clients is influenced by their contemporary interpersonal relationships, as well as by the society that both defines and enforces conformity to appropriate role behavior" (Davis, 1996, p. 597).

Cognitive Theory

Cognitive theory is an approach to social work practice based upon the assumption that a person's thinking is the principal determinant of emotions and behavior. Often, thinking can be distorted, self-deprecating, and uninformed. While some of these distortions are part of awareness, many of the misconceptions upon which people base their behavior are outside of the individual's awareness. As such, the focus of social work intervention is to help the client identify, challenge, and change thought patterns that have fostered dysfunctional forms of behavior, emotions, and outcomes. Frequently, the process of helping is educational (Lantz, 1996; Vourlekis, 1991).

Theories for use in Group Work Stage Theory

An overarching theory for group work is that of developmental stages within the group process. Various theorists label the stages with different

terms but the basic stages are beginning, middle, and end. A group's entire social structure, communication and interaction patterns, internal controls, and culture, evolves through these stages. The needs of each stage provide the rationale for the stance, function, and intervention(s) of the worker (Anderson, 1997).

Field Theory

This theoretical orientation, most closely associated with the work of Lewin, sees the group as a gestalt, "an entity of opposing forces that acts to hold its members in the group and to move the group along in its quest for goal achievement" (Toseland & Rivas, 1995, p. 62). The group is a milieu in which members are constantly changing to cope with the social situation within the group. Inherent in the theoretical structure is the belief that individuals will not change their own behavior unless they see their behavior and attitudes as others see them (Toseland & Rivas, 1995).

Those who work within this framework will strive to have members confront each other with the effects of their behavior on other members of the group and on the facilitator. Forces both within and outside of the group affect the direction of the movement within the group (Garvin, 1991).

Social Exchange Theory

Drawing heavily from animal psychology and the work of Homans, this theory states that behavior in groups is based on the seeking of rewards by members within the social interaction of the group. As a member of the group, behavior is based on a comparison of the rewards and punishments that are expected to be derived from a given behavior. Expectations are that group members act to increase positive consequences and decrease negative consequences (Toseland & Rivas, 1995). This dynamic is seen as a form of social exchange which provides the individual in the group with something of value. The understanding and subsequent growth is in the return. This exchange reinforces the new behavior for the group member.

Psychoanalytic Theory

According to psychoanalytic theory, group members act out their unresolved conflicts from early life experiences in the group. The group can thus be seen as a re-enactment of the original family situation. A particular focus of this theoretical orientation is the emotional responses of group members to each other and to the group leaders (Garvin & Ephross, 1991). The group leader uses transference reactions to help group members work through their own unresolved conflicts, by exploring past behavior patterns and linking these to current behaviors (Toseland & Rivas, 1995).

Mutual Aid

As developed by Shulman, (1999), modeled after the work of Schwartz (1961), "group work starts with the assumption that a group has the potential to serve as a mutual aid system for its members" (Shulman, 1999, 302). The underlying assumption within this theory is that members can be enormously helpful to each other through the process of mutual aid. The task of the group leader is to facilitate both personal and group growth with requisite interaction skills to enhance the capacity for mutual aid. Each member, including the group leader, comes to the group with a unique set of experiences based on previous group interactions, and these past experiences contribute to the strength of the group as a whole. The group leader is seen as responsible for mediating between two clients: the individual and the group as an entity (Shulman, 1999).

Theories for Use in Community Organization Social Planning

The Social Planning approach to community organization emphasizes a technical process of problem-solving with regard to substantive social problems. Rational, deliberate planning, and controlled change are all aspects of this theoretical approach. The approach presupposes that the change requires the thinking and input of expert advisors and planners who, through their technical

abilities, are able to guide complex change and work with bureaucratic systems (Rothman & Tropman, 1987).

Community (Locality) Development

Through the perspective of community/locality development, the focus is on enhancing community participation and competence through the use of community service programs, self-help efforts, and efforts to enhance social networks (Kemp, 1998). The underlying assumption within this framework is that community change can be pursued through broad participation of a wide spectrum of people at the local level. The involvement of the local citizenry is essential in problem definition and problem solving (Bloom, 1990).

Social Action

The underlying assumption in this orientation to community work is that the task of community organization is to empower those who are disadvantaged, through alliance with others, in order to enlarge the community for increased resource power. It is a model grounded in the belief that social action requires the redistribution of power, resources, and decision making to the broader community on behalf of the disadvantaged (Rothman & Tropman, 1987). The strategies which are employed by the disadvantaged group are varied. Often these efforts are undertaken in a short period of time, are highly visible, and yield benefits quickly. As an empowerment approach, social action helps people to be diverted from the view that the source of social problems lies in institutional systems (Brager, Specht & Troczyner, 1987).

Teaching and Integrating Theory

The integration of theory into the supervisory experience poses particular challenges. Agency supervisors and field instruction are central to education for social work. It is within the agency and the supervisory relationship that workers become professionalized, skills are mastered, social work values are instilled, and a work ethic nurtured (Fortune, 1994). The agency is a site for learning and integration of knowledge. These two components form the mandate of the supervisory relationship.

Educational supervision has as one of its goals the "technology of helping." " The supervisor has to teach what the worker is to do, how he is to act if he is to help individuals, groups, or communities deal effectively with social problems. And he has to teach something of the theory that explains why the particular teaching technology... is likely to effect change" (Kadushin, 1992, p. 143). Inherent in any discussion of how a supervisor can help a social worker examine, integrate, and use theory in practice, is the assumption that the supervisor is conversant in the nuances, application, and concepts within a given theory or several theories. This requires the supervisor to be knowledgeable and current regarding theory, and that the supervisor assumes the role of teacher in this facet of interaction with the worker. Greene (1999) argues that beyond knowing the basic assumptions of the theory, the supervisor must decide whether the theory has utility, is consistent with social work's value base, and whether it is appropriate in the agency setting. Then, the teaching begins.

The timing of this teaching by the supervisor could be an important factor in the ability of the worker to absorb and be able to integrate theory into her/his practice. Workers new to an agency experience are often anxious because they are uncertain about who they are in relation to the work and their clients. They may feel inadequate as they are thrust into positions of influence, with little experience or learning to guide them. Clearly, it would be unwise to attempt to infuse theory into the initial work assignment if a worker is so unsure. Additionally, early in their agency experience, workers are usually engaged with experiential material and are unable to look at a theoretical structure with any seriousness. As workers become more accustomed to their professional roles, more acculturated to the agency, and more comfortable with their supervisory positions, the technology side of helping can begin.

The art of teaching theory in supervision is in understanding how a theory is used and how it can be applied. Theory taken alone, without connection to behavior or case example(s), is of little value. The supervisor's failure to make this connection accounts for the workers' shortcomings in being able to apply theory to practice (Munson, 1993). It is not enough to talk theory, it has to be actualized.

As with many things in social work, a process is involved. In supervision, the process of helping the worker to become more theory based involves a progression from information to theory-based knowledge, from knowledge and integration of theory into understanding, and from understanding into changed behavior in interaction with clients. With the addition of feedback from the client, the supervisor and student are able to complete the learning loop. This process involves a level of inter-action between worker and supervisor which positions the supervisor to act as a director of learning, helping the worker toward a clarification of general theoretical principles that can be applied from case to case (Kadushin, 1992). Munson (1993) offers three suggestion to facilitate this process:

1) connecting the conceptual material with experiential material;
2) translating the conceptual material into experiential material before presenting it and while presenting it to the supervisee;
3) abandoning the conceptual material, presenting exclusively experiential material, and checking that the supervisee has made the association (p. 182).

What is being asked of the supervisor is that she/he look for opportunities to integrate theory into the content of supervision. As a worker flounders with case material, the supervisor could suggest to the supervisee that a perusal of certain theories may be helpful. It behooves the supervisor to supply both the literature and understanding of the theory to be able to facilitate the learning. Follow-up by the supervisor is warranted and the opportunity to utilize the theory in another case situation will help solidify the value of relying on theory to guide intervention.

Conclusion

After this brief overview of a variety of theories, the questions posed at the beginning of the article may be more readily answered. Supervisors have an obligation to be able to augment and expand student learning. Several key points will help this process: theory must be related to practice; supervisors must be conversant with their own theoretical approaches; and social workers must be asked what they did, and then why they did it. The why relates to theory. It is important for the supervisor and student to work together with the goal of integrating practice and theory to facilitate learning, and to offer the client(s) the support and guidance they need.

The knowledge base of social work is strongly rooted in a diverse collection of the writings of many scholars with distinct points of view. From this rich history, theory-based practice has emerged. The interweaving of the theoretical side of the profession's knowledge and the practice wisdom marks social work as a dynamic profession. Supervisors are urged to reinforce the theoretical as it is blended into practice to strengthen the work of the practitioner.

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