# Social Work Theory and Application to Practice: The Students' Perspectives

**Carolyn Gentle-Genitty**
**Indiana University**

**Haiping Chen**
**Indiana University**

**Issac Karikari**
**Indiana University**

**Crystal Barnett**
**Indiana University**

*We believe the success of applying theory in practice is largely contingent on how students define social work theory, identify the role of theory in practice, and categorize benefits and challenges in applying theory to practice. It is on this premise that this article is presented. Two datasets were used to form the students' perspectives. The first dataset is a seven year compilation of 109 undergraduate student theory papers and the second is a pre-test/post-test online survey of graduate students in an advanced social work theory course. The work offers a context for educators in teaching and helping students to apply theory in their own practices.*

## SOCIAL WORK THEORY AND APPLICATION TO PRACTICE: THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

As a helping profession, the primary mission of social work is to help clients meet their needs and enhance their well-being. In order to effectively respond to clients' needs and demands, professional social workers are equipped with a wide range of knowledge. However, what constitute social work knowledge base remain a major concern and a controversial issue (Trevithick, 2008). A classic debate in social work is whether theories are necessary for practice. Thyer (1994) argues that it is a waste of time for social work educators to teach theory for practice because they do not do a good job of teaching theory. He espouses that most theories in social work are taught incorrectly, and are invalid, which may lead to ineffective methods (Thyer, 1994). In contrast, Simon (1994) insists that it is crucial for social work practitioners to learn theoretical knowledge because theory can serve as an anchoring frame and a conceptual screen for case assessment, causal explanation, intervention planning, and outcome evaluation. Although this kind of expert debate provides a vehicle for scholars or educators to thoroughly discuss the role of social work theory in practice, it does not offer an opportunity for the general consumers of the outcome to express their views, especially students who are required to learn and apply theory in practice.

Because students are receivers and users of social work theory, it is important for them to have a say and learn about their views about social work theory and application to practice. Views on how do they define social work theory, how do they identify the role of theory in practice from their perspectives, and what they see as benefits and challenges when applying theory to practice. Instead of a top-down approach such as the expert debate, this article aims to explore the role of theory in practice from a bottom-up approach; that is, from the students' perspectives. Grounded in this empirical review outlined below, this article is followed by a literature review, methodology, data analysis/findings, discussion and limitations, and a conclusion organized largely around four parts: defining social work theory, identifying the role of social work theory in practice, benefits of applying social work theory to practice, and challenges of applying social work theory to practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Defining Social Work Theory

When formulating theories there are at least four basic components: formulating concepts, facts, hypotheses, and principles (Turner, 1996). Concepts are agreed upon terms often used within a discipline; facts are information gathered, tested, or researched in relation to phenomena, and evaluated for influence and correctness; hypotheses are the structural way of using the information to link observations for testing and evaluation; and principles are the stated research outcomes and findings (Turner, 1996). However, there is not such a clear and consistent path when defining theory. Tripodi, Fellin, and Meyer (1969) define theory as an interlocking set of logically related hypotheses, which "seeks to explain the inter-relations among empirical generalizations" (p. 13). Barker (1999) consider theory a set of correlated concepts, hypotheses, and constructs grounded in observations, as well as facts, which aims to explain a particular phenomenon. Theory is a framework of interrelated concepts (Lipsey, 1993). They provide meanings and explanations to particular events and helps to solve pertinent problems. Obviously, the definitions of theory become complicated and pluralistic when components, functions, and nature of theory are combined. The following are seven definitions of theory giving an idea of the varied scope in defining theory (See Table 1).

## TABLE 1
## DEFINITIONS OF THEORY

| Authors | Definitions |
| --- | --- |
| Tripodi, Fellin, & Meyer (1969) | Theory consists of an interlocking set of hypotheses that are logically related, and it seeks to explain the inter-relations among empirical generalizations. |
| Lipsey (1993) | Theory is a framework of interconnected concepts that gives meaning and explanation to relevant event and supports new insights and problem-solving efforts. |
| Tolson, Reid, & Garvin (1994) | Theories are set of concepts and constructs that describe and explain natural phenomena. |
| Turner (1996) | Theory is a model of reality appropriate to a particular discipline. Such a model helps us to understand what is, what is possible, and how to achieve the possible. |
| Barker (1999) | Theory is a group of related hypotheses, concepts, and constructs, based on facts and observations that attempts to explain a particular phenomenon. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Thyer (2001) | Theories are attempts to retrospectively explain and to prospectively predict. |
| Kendall, Adler, Adler, Cargan, & Ballantine (2008) | Theory is a set of logically, interrelated statements that attempts to describe, explain, and (occasionally) predict social events. |

Social work uses a broad range of theories from other disciplines and professions, such as: sociology, gerontology, psychology, economics, and so on. In general, there are two major terms used to describe theories in social work profession: *human behavior in the social environment (HBSE) theories* and *practice theories*. Thyer (2001) states that HBSE theories are general theories and can be utilize to explain and predict a variety of human behaviors. They can help social workers to have a comprehensive understanding of their clients and environments. Thyer's definition of HBSE theory is often founded and adopted in social work literature (Munro, 2002). Connolly and Harms (2012) further clarified that HBSE theories should include theories of inner worlds (e.g., psychodynamic approaches), as well as, theories of outer worlds (e.g., structural inequalities). Practice theories on the other hand, mainly focus on how conceptual theories can inform empirical practices. Practice theories link knowledge about clients' problems and its contexts to knowledge about professional intervention (Simon, 1994). After reviewing the literature it was clear that the line separating HBSE theories and practice theories is blurred in use and in teaching. These two types of theories are interlocking and overlap. Many definitions of theory in social work often include some functions of social work, which makes the main difference between definitions of theory in general and definitions of theory in social work. The following are eight definitions of theory in social work from the literature demonstrating this point (See Table 2). Together they help identify the role of theory in social work.

**TABLE 2**
**DEFINITIONS OF THEORY IN SOCIAL WORK**

| Authors | Definitions |
|---|---|
| Simon (1994) | Practice theory links knowledge about an identified problem and its context with knowledge about an intervention with a conceptual format that is oriented towards action and rooted in previous research. |
| Thyer (2001) | Theories pertain to explaining and predicting various aspects of human behaviors. |
| Greene (2008) | Theories helped social workers explain why people behave as they do, to better understand how the environment affects behavior, to guild their interventions, and to predict what is likely to be the result of a particular social work intervention. |
| Towland (2009) | A theory helps to explain a situation and perhaps, how it came about. |
| Howe (2009) | Theories are particular ways of making sense. They help social workers see regularities and familiar patterns in the muddle of practice. |
| Babbie & Rubin (2010) | A theory is a systematic set of interrelated statements intended to explain some aspect of social life or enrich our sense of how people conduct and find meaning in their daily lives. |

| Teater (2010) | Theory is an essential ingredient in practice that guides the way in which social workers view and approach individuals, groups, communities, and societies. Theory helps to predict, explain, and assess situations and behaviors, and provide a rationale for how the social worker should react and intervene. |
|---|---|
| Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois (2011) | A theory represents a plausible explanation about the relationship between a set of facts and a framework for change. |

**Identifying the Role of Social Work Theory in Practice**

The role of theory in practice continues to be an on-going discussion in the profession. There are two major camps in the dialogue of theory application in practice. One camp insists theory-free in practice, and the other emphasizes theory-driven in practice. The theory-free camp eliminates the role of social work theory in practice. Thyer (2001) states most etiological theories and intervention theories are wrong, so it is neither essential nor necessarily desirable for practice to be theoretically driven. Rosen and colleagues (1995) found that there were rarely any clear theoretical reasons in practitioners' rationales for practice decisions. In contrast, the theory-driven camp emphasizes the indispensable role of social work theory for practice. Boisen and Syers (2004) think "social work education rests on the assumption that competent social work practice is grounded in the intentional use of theory. Practice informed by theory distinguishes professional social work from informal forms of helping" (p. 205).

Again, irrespective of the fierce the dialogue, an agreement has been made that there is no dichotomous answer to end the debate claiming social work practice must be either theory-free or theory-driven. In recent years, however, there has been a trend that theory and practice should be integrated, which implies that social work theory should play certain roles in practice. Lam (2004) states that "not only are social workers expected to be informed about relevant theories, but they must apply these theories to practice so that unfavorable conditions in our society can be ameliorated" (p. 317). As a matter of fact, Puolter (2005) thinks learning and applying social work theory in practice is an on-going reflective evaluation of practice guided by current and emerging theoretical knowledge and research to learn when and how to add or replace theory and practice strategies for practice effectiveness. This bridge emphases that practitioners are engaged in a quest of self and practice-correction and improvement done most effectively through the use and replacement of tested and researched strategies and approaches found in theory application (Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang, 2008).

**Benefits of Applying Social Work Theory to Practice**

Due to the positive roles of theory in practice mentioned above, there is no doubt that applying theory to practice is beneficial to social workers. The value of theory application in practice is that it: (1) explains clients' situations and predicts their behaviors; (2) provides a starting point for social workers; (3) helps social workers have an organized plan to their work and reduces the wandering that can happen in practice; (4) offers social workers a clear framework in a chaotic situation and provides accountability to their work; (5) gives social workers a perspective to conceptualize and address clients' problems with appropriate interventions; and (6) identifies knowledge gaps about practice (Walsh, 2010; Turner, 1996; Gilson & DePoy, 2002; Kendall, et al., 2008, Royse, 2011). Without the integration of theory and practice, social workers are easily and overly affected by their own attitudes, moods, and reactions, which may result in infectiveness, inefficiency, even harm clients (Walsh, 2010).

For example, the theory of *ego psychology*, which assumes clients better achieve their goals if they reflect on their ways to address life challenges, can guide social workers to utilize the intervention strategy called person-situation reflection to help clients understand their situations and solve their problems (Walsh, 2010). Or using *critical race theory,* social workers can have an individual-context perspective to rethink power differentials, understand cultural diversity, empower marginalized

populations, and promote social justice, all of which are emphasized by the 2008 CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). Or with the aid of *ecological theory*, social workers are able to have a whole picture of systems and member functioning and find out effective ways to develop reciprocal transactions and relations between clients and their environments (Ashford & LeCroy, 2010). As such, it is obvious that social work theory can serve as anchoring frame and theoretical underpinnings in directing social work practice.

**Challenges of Applying Social Work Theory to Practice**

When theory is applied to practice, one of the biggest challenges facing social work students is integrating theory with practice in an effective way. Although many social work programs espouse the importance of integrating theory with practice in their field courses, there are still difficulties in realizing such integration. Vayda and Bogo (1991) state that social work students often experience the disconnection between classroom and practicum, and frequently experience difficulty in applying concepts learnt in the classroom to practice. Munro (2002) points out social work students cannot explicitly and systematically apply any relevant theory when they work with clients unless practice supervisors provide a clear theoretical framework. What is worse, because of disconnection between classroom and practicum, social work students are more likely to "see theories as irrelevant to their practice and as merely some kind of game played by academics" (Munro, 2002, p. 462).

In addition, when applying theory to practice, social work students often lack the ability to identify, understand, and use relevant theories to their work with clients (Boisen & Syers, 2004). Because one theory alone may not understand clients' situations, social work students are likely to draw on multiple theories. Although the use of various theories allows for flexibility and comprehensiveness, it presents a big challenge for social work students to achieve real mastery of theory application in practice especially when different theories are incompatible with each other (Walsh, 2010; Boisen & Syers, 2004). Actually, social work students are often overwhelmed with theoretical knowledge learnt in limited time and have difficulty in selecting most useful information for their practice (Lam, 2004; Boisen & Syers, 2004; Caspi & Reid, 1998).

**Methodology**

Two datasets were used to form the students' perspectives – one qualitative and the latter quantitative – both of which were collected in a social work program at a Midwestern University. The first dataset is a seven year compilation of 109 student theoretical papers from an undergraduate social work theory and practice course. All students who took this course from 2007 to 2013 and who completed the assignments were included in the analysis. There were incentives for participation. The second dataset is a pre-test/post-test online survey with a control and an intervention group of graduate level students enrolled in an advanced social work theory course. Using an online randomization tool, students from three courses were automatically chosen to be in the intervention or control group. Only the experimental group received an online module on theory application. The control group received regular course content presented in the context of the course in which they were enrolled. Students completed the 15 item survey on social work theory and application to practice and were asked to apply theory to solve a case and reflect on their theoretical application. A total 67 students were invited of which 44 students completed the pre-test and 27 completed the post-test. These students completed the survey on social work theory and application to practice. The key questions they answered included: (1) what is theory? (2) what are the common types of social work theory? (3) how do social workers apply theory to practice? (4) how should social workers evaluate theory? and, (5) can lack of theoretical application and evaluation cause harm in practice?

## DATA ANALYSIS & RESULTS

**Defining Social Work Theory**
It was evident from the literature on the definitions of theory in general and social work in particular that many were written by varied scholars or educators but did not adequately reflect the views of social work students who are required to learn theory for practice. In the empirical study, 44 social work students were questioned on what they thought the common types of social work theories were and what they thought theory was. Approximately 77.3% of students (n = 34) thought social work theory should include both practice and HBSE theories. 20.5% students (n = 9) thought social work theory only meant HBSE theories. None of them thought practice theories equaled to social work theory. Most social work students placed high value on the integration of theory and practice, which meant social work theory should not only include theoretical knowledge but also practical knowledge. In addition, almost all students (n = 43) felt that HBSE theories were the indispensable component of social work theory.

In defining theory, 56.0% of the students surveyed (n = 25) thought social work theory was a complicated concept. They thought that theory was a roadmap of sorts for understanding human behaviors and that it included a set of concepts and constructs that described and explained situations. They also felt it was a model of reality used to help describe human behaviors, and worked as a framework to explain past behaviors and predict future behaviors. Yet almost 25.0% of the students surveyed (n = 11) thought social work theory was only a set of concepts and constructs that described and explained situations. From these students' perspectives, human behaviors and the social environment seemed to be the two key words in social work theory, while social work theory seemed to be a tool to described, explained, explore, and predict human behaviors and situations (or environment). This view carried through in how they defined the role of social work theory in practice.

**Identifying the Role of Social Work Theory in Practice**
As the receivers and users of social work theory, social work students have their own understandings of the role of theory in practice. In the online survey, almost 75.0% of students (n = 33) agreed that lack of theory application and evaluation could cause harm in practice. From the dataset of student theory papers, students further described their thoughts about the role of social work theory in practice as follows (See Table 3).

### TABLE 3
### STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK THEORY IN PRACTICE

| Students | Comments |
|---|---|
| Shelly3 (2013) | Human behavior is way too complex for any of us to understand in its entirety so a theory is just a perspective or a "lens" that we assume so that we can narrow down what we're looking at and do the best we can at understanding people and their experiences. |
| Kaitlin6 (2013) | Theory allows a social worker to understand and explore meanings behind a client unique situation. Theory can provide much more than just categorized information and is a vital key to success in this career. |
| Nicole11 (2013) | Without incorporating theory in practice, social workers would be found incompetent and much less effective at working with clients and groups. |
| Leila17 (2013) | Each theory consists of different facts and concepts, and serves as a model that practitioners can use to guide their practice. |
| Erin18 (2013) | Theories provide a holistic approach to analyzing the client and using theories to better serve clients. |

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| April12 (2013) | The utilization of theory allows for the practitioners to be able to reference a guild to explain a client's behavior, the effects of the client's environment, and how to determine what is likely to be the result of the intervention. |

From the students' perspectives, social work theory does play an important role in practice: (1) it is a theoretical tool to understand complicated human behaviors and social environment, both of which are the core factors influencing clients' lives and problems; (2) it is a critical kind of knowledge with which competent social workers should be equipped to effectively work with clients; (3) it is a practical guideline to help social workers analyze cases, understand clients, develop interventions, and increase effectiveness; and (4) it is a conceptual screen to identify the most useful information, which can be used to understand clients' situations and solve their problems. In essence, the role of social work theory in practice is just as a student described in his paper: "*Theory in social work is like the rudder that guides the boat to its destination. It gives the captain (social worker) and its passenger (client) a sense of direction, purpose, and a form of control*". So what are the benefits of applying such important concepts to our work?

**Benefits of Applying Social Work Theory to Practice**

The students' views are somewhat similar in their understanding of the benefits of applying theory to practice (See Table 4).

**TABLE 4**
**STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE BENEFITS OF APPLYING SOCIAL WORK**
**THEORY TO PRACTICE**

| Students | Comments |
|---|---|
| Jonathan2 (2013) | Another benefit of using theory is that it gives a sense of security and increase effectiveness. It also shows clients that a social worker is competent. |
| Shelly3 (2013) | Theory can also provide a confidence to practitioners that they are grounded in their approach. |
| Shanteal4 (2013) | Another benefit of using theory is that it allows us to explain our activities to others, transfer our knowledge and skills, and have others evaluate our activities. By using theories that have been supported by empirical observations, social workers are able to feel confident with their ability to work with clients. |
| Rachel1 (2013) | Using theory in practice can help social workers create a treatment plan, increase sense of security, and explain and predict occurrences in the client's life. |
| Jess8 (2013) | Having knowledge of various theories and how they apply to different clients and situations can help social workers determine a course of action with clients. |
| Kaylin13 (2013) | It provides explanation and reasoning as to why a client behaves in the way they do. Utilizing a particular theory in practice can also help when deciding what treatment to use for a client. |

From the students' perspectives, there are four major benefits of applying social work theory to practice. First, applying theory to practice can increase effectiveness of social work intervention. One student in her paper cited Green (2008) believing that social work theory explains why clients behave as they do, describes how social environment influence clients' behaviors, implies how social workers can make intervention plans, and predicts what is likely to be the results of intervention. As a result, by applying theory to practice, social workers can have a clear and systematic framework to help them effectively analyze cases, develop interventions, and evaluate outcomes.

Second, applying theory to practice can promote confidence among social workers. Social work theory is a systematic body of knowledge which is grounded in professional experiences, empirical research, and logical analysis, so it can be used as an important indicator showing that social workers are competent and professional. Being equipped with theory, social workers can feel more confident about their professional knowledge and skills when working with clients.

Third, applying theory to practice provides a good opportunity for social workers to transfer theoretical knowledge to solve practical problems. Social workers can use theory to conceptualize and address clients' concerns, which makes theoretical knowledge applicable and useful. In particular, theory application in practice helps social work students connect classroom to real world.

Fourth, applying theory to practice helps social workers make an in-depth reflection and evaluation on theory learning and application, which can enhance the effectiveness of theory application in practice. Social work theories are not written in stone, so they need to adjust to the changes in real life. By applying theory in practice, social workers are able to know which parts of theory can help them effectively respond to clients' problems, and which parts of theory are out of date. In this way, social workers also have an opportunity to contribute to theory progression.  As there are benefits, there are also challenges to theory application.

**Challenges of Applying Social Work Theory to Practice**
Besides the integration of theory with practice, social work students also face other challenges. In order to better understand the challenges of applying social work theory to practice, a case example was designed in the empirical study. Forty-four social work students were asked to solve this case by applying relevant theory. They were also asked to answer questions about their reflections on theory application to practice. One of these questions was: "Having read the case above, do you think you have a model or method to respond to using theory?" Some 45.5% of students (n = 20) thought they had a theoretical model in their minds when they had read this case. Another, 11.4% of students (n = 5) thought they might have or might not have had a theoretical model in their minds. Also, 43.2% of students (n = 19) had no idea and just skipped this question. Thus, it seemed as if many social work students were unable to locate relevant theories when encountering a practical case. They seemed to lack a plan, process, or model of how to respond to cases in order to apply theory. At the end of the empirical survey with MSW students, an open question was asked about students' general thoughts and feedbacks on theory application to practice. A text analysis of the 11 comments shared found five common themes: Believe theory, social work, clients, knowledge, and practice). Respectively the students reported **(See Table 5).**

**TABLE 5**
**MSW STUDENTS' GENERAL THOUGHTS AND FEEDBACKS ON THEORY APPLICATION**

| Students | Comments |
| --- | --- |
| Susan11 (2013) | I believe theory classes should involve some practice to demonstrate how a particular theory is applicable. |
| April32 (2013) | I believe theory is very important for understanding clients and practicing in an appropriate manner. |

| | |
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| John15 (2013) | I feel as though I am still learning a lot of this as it applies to social work. My S503 course was a good overview of theories, now in S513 I am hoping to learn more about application and evaluation of theories. |
| Jim04 (2013) | I thought HBSE was helpful, clarified different theories, and approaches to use with clients. It also provided information to assess client progress, and the option to shift to a different theory if one was ineffective. |
| Bob93 (2013) | I need more practice. |

In addition to this feedback, the paper dataset of 109 BSW students also mentioned challenges in theory application. Some of the students' answers are below (See Table 6).

### TABLE 6
### STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE CHALLENGES OF APPLYING SOCIAL WORK
### THEORY TO PRACTICE

| Students | Comments |
|---|---|
| Elizabeth18 (2007) | It is a hard area for me to wrap my head around because theory application process is fluid. There are many theories to be considered, and there are rarely 100% correct answers. |
| Manda17 (2007) | I am still a little unaware of which theory to use in which situation. |
| Kaylin13 (2013) | There are some risks when theory is relied on too much in practice. If a practitioner relies too heavily on theory to define a client, then they are limited by that theory. |
| Nicole 11 (2007) | Dogmatic theory causes harm by closing other explanations and dismissing the use of other ideas. |
| LaQuisha9 (2013) | It can limit and not take into account alternative explanations of the situation. Theory closes out other explanations and dismisses those which offer them as heretics. |
| Jess8 (2013) | As a practitioner, you could become too focused on implementing the theory and use it as too strict of a guide for treatment. This can also cause you to begin to see the clients not as people, but as projects. |

**Discussion**

Despite the challenges noted by the BSW students in their assessment there seemed to be no more improvement in the MSW level theory courses. In fact when comparing the pre- and post-test from the online survey it was evident that the students lacked confidence and consistency in their answers. For instance when examining the experimental group, to which 22 students were assigned, only four of the thirteen who responded to both the pre and post-test scored higher on the post-test. More specifically nine of thirteen students did better guessing on the pre-test, choosing random answers, than they did on the post-test after having watched an online module on theory application. Coincidentally one female score a perfect score on the pre-test and failed the post-test. However it was evident that it was not because they were not exposed to the content. Because on average, the pre-test and post-test both showed students scoring 100% on item four of the online survey. This question asked "when evaluating theory social

workers should …." The correct answer was "consider the theory strengths, area of focus, limitations, and other theories to fix the limitations to determine best use and effectiveness with client groups".

From the students' perspectives, there are three major challenges of applying social work theory to practice. First concern is that of choosing relevant and applicable theories to solve a practical case. Social work students are taught a broad range of theories in a limited time and they cannot have an in-depth understanding of all theories especially given that each theory contains a lot of information. Additionally, the complexity of the case itself makes it much more difficult for social work students to locate a relevant, applicable theory to solve the case. At this point, this is where teaching a model of theory application is better than teaching a multitude of theories for implementation (Gentle-Genitty, 2013).

Secondly, students struggle with the flexibility to adjust to the changes in the process of theory application. Yes, theory application is a fluid process to apply theory to practice. A theory may be applicable at a certain stage of an intervention process, but it may be inappropriate when the clients' situations change or if they are at different levels of the stages of change. When this occurs students should be taught how to use and apply alternative theories to adjust for new or emerging situations. This may alleviate the confusion that comes with determining which theory can be used and in what kind of situations. It will also allow flexibility to adjust or switch between theories as they will have more options.

Thirdly, trying to avoid dogmatism and mechanism in theory application to practice is hard for many social workers and continues to be a concern for students. As the receivers of social work theory, those students with little critical thinking are more likely to consider theory as incontrovertibly true and neglect other possible explanations. The dogmatism can also lead to mechanism, which means social work students may have very strong beliefs in one theory and strictly follow the theoretical guideline of that theory alone. If so, they may easily forget here and now, which leads to the ignorance of clients' unique personalities and special situations. Thus, it is a great challenge for social work students to effectively apply theory to practice if they cannot critically evaluate theory case by case.

In order to help social work students overcome these challenges in theory application, social worker educators should devote their time to teaching theory application in practice using a model for application and learning. Teaching and learning theory application in a non-standardized way is constrained in the academy (Buchan, Rodenhiser, Hull, Smith, Rogers, Pike, & Ray, 2004). Herein lays the main difficulty in theory to practice knowledge transference. Educators tend to teach theory using what we call a basic encoding-retention-retrieval hierarchical model with tightly prescribed guidelines. They call for formality but if one can teach steps for theory application students may take more away from the classroom to use in application to practice (Gentle-Genitty, 2013).

Therefore, social work educators should become more interested in learning and application outcomes and less concerned with amount of knowledge acquisition and regurgitation. They should also push similar curricula to make it easier to measure, develop, and share approaches on theory application across curriculum. This will give multiple points of learning, exposure, and also help field instructors to appropriately assess and enforce theory application in field. Competency based education on theory and field for practice will then become more of a reality rather than continue just as an aged-old debate.

**Limitations**

The databases used for this analysis and presentation shared the perspective of students and offered a start in the conversation of teaching theory for effective transference to practice. In fact the paper dataset of 109 students, over seven years of which one of the authors was the instructor, added constructive context to the discussion in the students' own words. There are some limitations however. First, though this dataset of papers presented an honest view of theory from the students' perspectives – in their own words – the papers were written for a grade and may have only included what students thought the instructor needed to hear. This is a flaw in any student reporting, or self-reporting – especially while still in the course. A second limitation is the small number of students (44) who completed the pre-test from the advanced theory course. A normal class at the advance MSW level enrolls 16. The forty-four students represented students from three courses, with three different instructors – none of whom are authors of

this article. Therefore 44 is a high response rate. However, having a larger dataset to generalize the results would have been more effective. Recommendation for future research include: (1) bringing together both quantitative and qualitative datasets to inform the discussion; (2) ensure the voice of students in the results; and (3) increasing the dataset sample size, and ensuring that the data represented more than a snapshot in time, giving a truer picture of the situation.

**Conclusion**

As the receivers and users of social work theory, social work students considered theory as a complicated and pluralistic concept, which should include both HBSE theories and practice theories. They think of social work theory as a roadmap for understanding human behaviors, a set of concepts and constructs that describe and explain situations, a model of reality used to help describe human behaviors, and a framework to explain past behaviors and predict future behaviors. Social work theory plays an important role in practice, including a theoretical tool to understand human behaviors and social environment, a necessary knowledge to be competent social workers, a practical guideline to direct interventions, and a conceptual screen to identify relevant information.

Competent practice in social work mandates that social workers act from an informed and research-based knowledge base. Theory provides social workers with the tools to offer their clients effective services. Foregoing theory may easily result in negligent, harmful, and unreliable practice. More so, not teaching from a model to provide consistency across curriculum and for measurement of competency is also a negligible practice from those teaching in academia. As social workers gain experience and knowledge in their field they will begin to recognize their own patterns that may enhance previous theories or create new ones. Interventions based on theory are tried and tested and produce somewhat of a track-record that allows social workers to anticipate, with some confidence, the results of any action they take. However, for social worker students they still face various challenges when applying theory to practice. They have difficulty in choosing relevant and applicable theories to solve practical cases, learning to be flexible to adjust to the changes in the process of theory application, and avoiding dogmatism and mechanism when using theory to practice. As a result, efforts should be made by educators in social work programs to help students overcome these challenges. All in all, theory is essential for the social work profession. Many social workers cringe at the idea of theory, when in reality it could be used as a tool to gain confidence in working with clients or particular situations.

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