**Common Social Work Theories of Intervention**

Social work revolves around service, but is inherently interdisciplinary in nature. The social work profession occurs where individuals, communities, and society intersect. Subjects like sociology, psychology, criminology, economics, education, health, and political science are all essential to this field. This means that social work is informed by an array of theoretical models, each designed to reconcile or marry these varying disinclines into a unifying way of understanding and improving social conditions. As a student or practitioner of social work, you need not view these as competing theories. Instead, your goal should be to understand how each of these theories approaches and addresses the service strategies and policy imperatives of social work. As a practitioner, you'll draw on the ideas that best serve your clients and your role.

**1. Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory holds that all societies are inherently unequal, and that power disparities have a direct impact on people's lives. Often attributed to Karl Marx, conflict theories point to an array of socioeconomic, racial, and class differentials that contribute to significant gaps in opportunity, quality of life, and even longevity. Marx argued that conflict is inherent and necessary as a way of resisting or overthrowing structural inequality.

**Application to Social Work**

Conflict theory is considered a major paradigm in the field of sociology, and it serves as an important component of social work. Conflict theory provides an explanation for the ways that power differentials impact the daily lives of individuals and communities. Social workers address these asymmetric power relationships by helping to confront both the sources and symptoms of inequality.

**Key Literature**

* [Karl Marx — A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm) (1859)
* Karl Marx & Frederick Engels — Manifesto of the Communist Party(1848)

**2. Developmental Theory**

Developmental theory generally refers to a collection of ideas about how societies can advance toward positive change. Developmental theory is often incorporated into geopolitical theories and models. Included among these ideas are the concepts of modernization — the idea that economic development through modernization can advance opportunity and equality; structuralism — the idea that certain structural realities may stand in the way of economic growth; and dependency theory — the idea that dedicated support between nations can help underdeveloped states advance according to their own respective stages of development.

**Application to Social Work**

"Developmental social work" is a relatively newer approach to intervention, one that emphasizes the importance of "social investment" in the practice of social work. This refers to the necessity of material support for social work clients, especially high-risk individuals such as the homeless, elderly, disabled, or those struggling with mental illness. Under this approach, social workers help clients capitalize on economic opportunities and integrate into social structures while also ensuring access to real and meaningful public resources and services.

**Key Literature**

* [James Midgely & Amy Conley — Social Work and Social Development: Theories and Skills for Developmental Social Work](https://www.amazon.com/Social-Work-Development-Theories-Developmental/dp/0199732329) (2010)

**3. Family Life Cycle Theory**

The family life cycle theory focuses on the series of changes that commonly occur in individual and family dynamics, and how these changes function as a series of developments over the lifespan. Important stages in the family life cycle include independence, coupling or marriage, parenting, launching adult children, and senior years. Important milestones in the life cycle are often connected with ritual, including birth, marriage, and death. Transitioning through the stages of the family life cycle will often include redefining roles and realigning relationships, such as in the transition from adult child to parent.

**Application to Social Work**

The family life cycle plays an essential role in social work because of the formative and ongoing impact that family dynamics have on individual opportunities, outlook, and mental health for individual clients. For many, personal crises may be rooted in dysfunction or disruption to the family life cycle through events such as divorce, incarceration, or abuse. Social workers often take the role of helping individuals navigate these crises or manage successful transition between life cycle stages.

**Key Literature**

* [Monica McGoldrick & Tazuko Shibusawa — The Family Life Cycle](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-02536-016) (2012)

**4. Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory operates from the presumption that any theoretical model must first be grounded in data and analysis. Introduced into practice in the late 1960s, grounded theory applies formal research methodologies to the social sciences. Where the scientific method typically begins with a theoretical model that might either be reinforced or refuted by the consequent research, grounded theory allows the inquiry to arrive at a theory only after collecting, categorizing, and assessing data.

**Application to Social Work**

In the context of social work, grounded theory is essential as a way of understanding the empirical relationship between broad systemic realities and the experiences of communities, families, and individuals. A major component of social work is determining the best way to allocate resources and the most impactful way to leverage agencies and actions for the benefit of groups or individuals. Grounded theory provides an important framework for drawing clear connections between systemic issues like racial inequality, geographical isolation, and socioeconomic disparity, as well as the way these issues impact lives. This allows for informed and targeted intervention through broad and far-reaching policy initiatives.

**Key Literature**

* [Barney Glaser & Anselm Strauss — The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research](https://www.amazon.com/Discovery-Grounded-Theory-Strategies-Qualitative/dp/0202302601) (1967)
* [Julianne S. Oktay — Grounded Theory](https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof%3Aoso/9780199753697.001.0001/acprof-9780199753697-chapter-006) (2012)

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**5. Humanistic Theory**

Humanistic theory begins from the perspective that all human beings are in a state of constant "becoming," that each of us is always striving toward self-actualization through an emphasis on personal strengths and greater mindfulness. Humanism emerged in psychology during the early 20th century as a reaction to the psychodynamic and behavioralist theories of Sigmund Freud and B.F. Skinner, respectively. Advocates like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers pushed the focus of mental health treatment toward more personal interests like individuality, creativity, and the search for meaning.

**Application to Social Work**

Humanism in social work holds that individuals can benefit from support in their personal development in ways that can enhance relationships, communities, and individual goals. This theoertical model promotes exploration of personal identity, the pursuit of connectedness with others through positive interpersonal relationships, and flexibility in navigating one's self as well as in finding meaning in the larger world. Humanistic approaches to social work often stand in contrast to more technical cognitive-behavioral approaches. These strategies can also provide an alternative to tradtional, bureaucratic, agency-based outreach strategies.

**Key Literature**

* [Malcolm Payne — Humanistic Social Work: Core Principles in Practice](https://www.amazon.com/Humanistic-Social-Work-Principles-Practice/dp/0190616067) (2011)
* [J.F.T. Bugental — The Third Force in Psychology](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/002216786400400102) (1964)

**6. Psychodynamic Theory**

The psychodynamic perspective is typically attributed to the psychoanalytic ideas of Sigmund Freud, and holds that human thoughts and behavior are influenced by a combination of conscious and unconscious psychological processes. Freud believed that many of our unconscious processes — especially those manifesting as dysfunction — can be attributed to childhood experiences and traumas. Psychodynamic theory also emphasizes the importance of relationships and how they can impact our sense of reality, as well as our feeling of belonging.

**Application to Social Work**

In the context of social work, psychodynamic theory focuses on the internal processes and emotions that cause individuals to behave in unique ways. Each of us responds to situations and crises according to these internal processes. Psychodynamic social work seeks the unconscious root causes of these processes and leverages psychoanalytical clinical treatment strategies to confront unique client issues.

**Key Literature**

* [Sigmund Freud — An Outline of Psycho-Analysis (The Standard Edition) (Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud)](https://www.amazon.com/Outline-Psycho-Analysis-Standard-Complete-Psychological/dp/0393001512/ref%3Dasc_df_0393001512/?tag=hyprod-20&linkCode=df0&hvadid=266033622375&hvpos=1o1&hvnetw=g&hvrand=1295180045703100403&hvpone=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=&hvdev=c&hvdvcmdl=&hvlocint=&hvlocphy=9007326&hvtargid=pla-488864667810&psc=1) (1989)
* [Jerrold Brandell & Kate Schechter — Psychoanalysis and Psychodynamic Theory](https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195389678/obo-9780195389678-0170.xml) (2015)

Of course, there's more to this field than just Sigmund Freud. If you're interested in the people and events that shaped the social work profession, check out these [23 Defining Moments That Every Social Worker Should Know](https://thebestschools.org/magazine/23-defining-moments-of-social-work/).

**7. Psychosocial Development Theory**

Psychosocial development theory proceeds from the view that our development is influenced by both internal psychological factors and external factors from the surrounding environment. These factors, it is thought, can have a profound impact on mental health and wellness. In his original theory on psychosocial development, Erik Erikson identified eight stages of development that a healthy individual should pass through between infancy and the late stages of adulthood. With each stage, Erikson identified the emergence of key traits: 1)Infancy/Hope; 2) Toddlerhood/Will; 3) Middle Childhood/Purpose; 4) Late Childhood/Competence; 5) Adolescence/Fidelity; 6) Early Adulthood/Love; 7) Middle Adulthood/Care; and 8) Late Adulthood/Wisdom. Erikson believed that the ability to effectively move through these stages is shaped by both biological and sociocultural forces, and that the transition between these stages is often inspired by social crisis.

**Application to Social Work**

Erikson's theory posits that individuals evolve through their stages of development based on how they adapt to social crisis throughout the lifetime. These social crises inform how individuals respond to the world around them. This provides social workers with a set of cues to determine how effectively clients manage crises and move along a "maturation timetable." Erikson's stages of development provide a roadmap toward healthy development that social workers can use to identify individual challenges and provide the right support and services for addressing these challenges.

**Key Literature**

* [Erik H. Erikson — Childhood and Society](https://www.amazon.com/Childhood-Society-Erik-H-Erikson/dp/039331068X) (1950)
* [Erik H. Erikson — Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History](https://www.amazon.com/Young-Man-Luther-Psychoanalysis-Monograph/dp/0393310361) (1958)

**8. Rational Choice Theory**

Rational choice theory provides a framework for understanding both human behavior and the behavior of economic systems. This theory proposes that social behavior is the consequence of behaviors by individual actors making personal choices. The assumption is that individual choices are, more often than not, informed by rational preferences, and that rational individuals will use information, probability, and cost benefit analysis to determine a preferable course of action. Rational choice theory does not aim to describe the process of determining a preferable course of action, but offers strategies for predicting the likeliest choice patterns and outcomes based on that which is most rational.

**Application to Social Work**

The rational choice cheory provides social workers with a framework for understanding the motives behind individual behaviors, especially in the context of personal relationships. This model recognizes that factors like self-interest, fairness, and goal-orientation can impact personal decision making. Rational choice theory can apply to the way we navigate one-on-one relationships, how we experience family dynamics, and how we participate in the various other forms of social organization that are central in our lives. Social workers may refer to rational choice theory in helping clients evaluate the fairness and value of their personal relationships based on a rational observation of both the rewards and costs connected to these relationships.

**Key Literature**

* [Rafael Wittek — Rational Choice](https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0070.xml) (2013)
* [Mancur Olson — The Logic of Collective Action](https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674537514) (1965)
* [Gary S. Becker — A Treatise on the Family](https://www.amazon.com/Treatise-Family-Enlarged-Gary-Becker/dp/0674906993) (1981)

**9. Social Constructionist Theory**

Social constructionist theory advances, and departs, from grounded theory, which holds that reality is observable only through systematic and methodological gathering of data. By contrast, this theoretical model holds that reality is constructed through both objective and subjective lenses. The theory posits that knowledge is not created organically, but is instead constructed by society according to shared meanings. Social constructionists are most concerned with the process by which these shared meanings are formed, sustained, and modified.

**Application to Social Work**

For social workers, the social constructionist theory is a useful framework for understanding the ways in which individual cognitive development is influenced by surrounding cultural context. In essence, social constructionism gives social workers the tools to embrace inclusivity and multiculturalism by recognizing the ways that shared meanings and constructed knowledge shape individuals, communities, and groups. This is a pathway to producing support and intervention that is harmonious with the cultural needs and perspective of impacted clients and communities.

**Key Literature**

* [Vivien Barr — Social Constructionism (2nd Ed)](https://epdf.pub/social-constructionism-2nd-ed.html) (2003)
* [Michael Bury — Social constructionism and the development of medical sociology](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229445595_Social_Constructionism_and_the_Development_of_Medical_Sociology) (1986)
* [Tom Andrews — What is Social Constructionism?](http://groundedtheoryreview.com/2012/06/01/what-is-social-constructionism/) (2012)

**10. Social Learning Theory**

In the late 1970s, Albert Bandura postulated that we learn and acquire new behaviors by observing others. According to Bandura's social learning theory, we learn in social contexts, and therefore, the actions of others can have a profound impact on what we view as acceptable behavior. This impact is reinforced further by observations of punishment and reward in connection with certain behaviors. Bandura's theory expanded on traditional behaviorist models by recognizing that there are various internal cognitive processes at play when we adopt and imitate observed behaviors, especially during the formative stages of our development.

**Application to Social Work**

For social workers, the social learning theory is a valuable prism through which to understand the relationship between cognitive function and certain behaviors in clients. By determining where dysfunctional behavior has been learned, it may be possible to design targeted intervention. In particular, social learning theory gives social workers a framework through which to confront negative learned associations, particularly between dysfunctional behaviors and perceived rewards. This can inform treatment strategies such as positive modeling and vicarious reinforcement.

**Key Literature**

* [Albert Bandura — Social Learning Theory](https://www.amazon.com/Social-Learning-Theory-Albert-Bandura/dp/0138167443) (1977)
* [Craig W. LeCroy — Case Studies in Social Work Practice](https://books.google.cl/books?id=4EScAgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false) (2014)

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**11. Systems Theory**

Systems theory concerns the interdependency of various systems, both natural and human-made. Systems theory takes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding how an event at one point in a system can have direct and rippling effects on other parts of a system. Tracing its roots to Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory, the systems theory emphasizes the role of systems in the social sciences.

**Application to Social Work**

As an interdisciplinary field, social work makes particular use of systems theory by recognizing that individuals are a part of their environment, and that we are each shaped by an array of interdependent and inextricably linked systems. For instance, each of us may be shaped and influenced by a set of related systems that include family, school, religious structure, and community. These systems are, in turn, closely connected to broader systems such as economy, society, and geography. Recognizing the interconnectedness of these systems can help social workers pinpoint systemic breakdowns — whether they have occurred in the family unit, in the community, in school, or otherwise — and target intervention around resolving these breakdowns.

**Key Literature**

* [Talcott Parsons — The Social System](http://home.ku.edu.tr/~mbaker/CSHS503/TalcottParsonsSocialSystem.pdf) (1951)
* [Robert K. Merton — Writings](http://www.garfield.library.upenn.edu/merton/list.html) (1968-1995)

**12. Transpersonal Theory**

Transpersonal theory merges the field of psychology with the spiritual and transcendent aspects of the human experience, emphasizing the goal of reaching a level of consciousness that goes beyond personal identity and self. Emerging in the 1960s and gaining increased prominence through the 1990s, transpersonal theory draws on themes of understanding, human potential, and the achievement of a transcendent state of consciousness. One of the primary goals of this theoretical model is to promote individual development beyond the self by promoting unity between spirituality and the theoretical underpinnings of modern psychology.

**Application to Social Work**

Transpersonal theory emphasizes consciousness outside the boundaries of personal identity, focusing on the spiritual aspects of the human experience. In the context of social work, transpersonal theory emphasizes the roles that these spiritual dimensions have on our well-being. Transpersonal theory holds that every individual possesses the capacity to heal the self and achieve personal growth by tapping into an inner wisdom. The goal behind transpersonal social work is to teach clients how to harness these abilities. Practitioners help guide individuals to question their core beliefs, detach from their egos, and ultimately remove self-imposed obstacles to their happiness.

**Key Literature**

* [D.H. Lajoie & S.I. Shapiro — Definitions of transpersonal psychology: The first twenty-three years](http://atpweb.org/jtparchive/trps-24-92-01-079.pdf) (1992)
* [Bruce W. Scotton, M.D., Allan B. Chinen, M.D. & John R. Battista, M.D. — Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology](https://www.amazon.com/Textbook-Transpersonal-Psychiatry-Psychology-Scotton/dp/0465095305/?creativeASIN=0465095305&linkCode=w61&imprToken=SVUEC8A78UDkoOXSZzs9hg&slotNum=0&tag=psychcentral) (1996)