

# Social work theories analysis



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**Introduction**

Social work brings about social change. It addresses complex relationships between humans and the environment. Social work involves analyzing human problems and addresses issues to resolve injustice, discrimination, and dysfunction. Thus, according to International Federation of Social Workers (2000 qt. Ramsay 2003), the social work profession can be defined as a profession that “ promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Using theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.” Social work profession is based on the fundamental interrelation of a system of values, theory and practice. Although over the years, the definition of social work has undergone tremendous transformation. Nevertheless, the essence of its humanitarian and democratic ideals of social work through the centuries has remained the same. Today, social work has a global context and professionals follow national and international code of ethics that make the scope of their work more complex and challenging. Moreover, social work professionals also draw their experiences from accepted methods developed through systematic evidence-based knowledge from extensive research designed for both specific and general practices (Ramsay 2003). Theoretical frameworks form the basis of their evaluation of human behaviors, development and social systems and enable them to resolve the problems inherent therein.

## **Social Work Theories**

Social work theories have their roots from the need to develop a disciplined approach to social work. By adopting common principles, social professionals were able to focus on the social goals. Charles Loch developed this conceptual framework during the early 20th century. Later social work scholars took up his seminal work. During the 21st century, renowned Harriet Bartlett (Bartlett 1970) had taken up and continued to develop professional frameworks for social work to “articulate words, terms, concepts to represent the important facets and components of the profession’s practices as a whole.” As more and more formalized ideas, theories and disciplines formed, social work has come to be acknowledged as an independent discipline with subset knowledge and systems for dealing with problems of the society. Bartlett (1970) also further reiterated the three key concepts – person, interaction and environment – as the basis for social work practices. Any theory developed with the view to examine, evaluate and resolve social issues must be based on these three key concepts.

Given the above background on the development of social work theories, the researcher now shall discuss theories of particular interests, which are the theories of problem solving and psychoanalytic. In the following discussion, the researcher shall trace the theories in its historical context, values, concepts and fitness with the strengths approach. The strengths approach basically involves challenging the traditional problems-oriented way of working through training, expectations and work experience of professionals. The problems are then resolved through developing a collaborative framework based on examination of the professional’s strengths and

resources for positive growth and development (Morgan 2006; Wormer and Boes 1998).

### **Problem-Solving Theory & Social Work Treatment**

#### **According to Duncker (1945):**

“ A problem arises when a living creature has a goal but does not know how this goal is to be reached. Whenever one cannot go from the given situation to the desired situation simply by action, then there is recourse to thinking... Such thinking has the task of devising some action which may mediate between the existing and the desired situations.”

According to this definition, a problem arises when it is not clear to the individual what action(s) are to be taken to achieve some desired goals. The action to rectify this problem is known as problem-solving. Problem solving starts from a given situation where the problem or state of the situation requires additional knowledge to work towards its solution (Anderson 1980).

Problem-solving theory has its developmental origin to Herbert Simon, Alan Newell and colleagues at Carnegie Mellon University during the 1980s (Patel 1991; Newell and Simon 1972). The general theoretical approach is that problem-solving theory is based on a given problem-solving situation. The second premise is that knowledge is a set of rules that specify actions to be performed in specific situations. The third premise is the distinction between weak and strong methods for resolving problems. Thus, an expert is expected to utilize the set of rules to find the solution for the given problem situation by using forward reasoning or observations. Alternatively, problem solving can involve using exhaustive knowledge base for deductive reasoning and assessing the validity of the hypothesis or goals against the

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facts given. This is a backward reasoning approach (Patel 1991). Newell-Simon theory of problem solving describes processes for developing expert systems in cognitive psychology, which forms the basis for other experiments in specific fields.

### **Social work field**

In social work field, problem solving has its origin in the concept of social change developed by Helen Harris Perlman of the University Chicago (1957). In her work ' Social Casework: A problem-solving process', the author views casework and problem solving synonymous which are based on constant elements, forces and processes. The constants form the reasoning framework for analyzing problems just as humans solve their daily problems. Learning is developed when individuals are involved in organizing, synthesizing and imagining the solutions of the problems (Perlman 1957). Perlman's theoretical framework is limited to the casework components such as the individual, problem, place, process, expert relationship and the resolution to the problem. The emphasis is more on the components rather than on the problem solutions itself and the scope of the solution is limited by the casework situation.

Alternatively, Compton and Galaway (1979) also developed a problem-solving model for social work practice, which emphasizes on intervention and beyond processes. According to their theoretical framework, problem solving is connected with human relationships in a dynamic manner, which may involve partners, family members, friends or co-workers or group relationships such as race, ethnicity, gender or religion. Social works can resolve problems depending on the micro, mezzo or macro level practice

they are involved in. Compton and Galaway's (1979) problem-solving theory is based on two phases – first the definition of the problem must be established for identification of intervention methods. The second phase involves intervention methods based on the problem context defined by human, societal and physical environment. Thus, Compton and Galaway's (1979) problem-solving theory is based on human relationships with the environment and other individuals. The focus is on intervention rather than on the problem itself.

These investigations and conceptualization leads to the unified theory of problem-solving, which holds that experts process new information and integrate it into their existing knowledge base which helps them to recall and deal with situations rapidly through forward reasoning within limited time span and scope. There is little account for differences in complexities in domains and situations. For this reason, the problem-solving theory is only valid for responding to domains that are apparent through explicit patterns of results.

From the social work practice, context problem-solving theory presents social worker as the expert and the source for intervention, and the individual with the problem as the client of the environment. The worker encounters problem situations within the work environment. To resolve, he/she refers to activities that co-workers or peers have undertaken on behalf of clients. Working with the client, the social worker analyzes, and identifies problem commonality to resolve it through group relations. Hence, problem solving in the social work practice means participation and direct involvement of the client with the worker (Sheppard 1991).

**Intervention method**

Another underlying element of the problem-solving theory is the intervention method. Unlike early perception of social workers, the value of work is not gauged by the duration of its intervention. Instead, it is gauged by the significance of the knowledge base used to analyze the problems to develop solutions. Therefore, intervention is further defined by the relationships of interaction among individuals involved in the problem. The social worker is the support element who is responsible for mediating between the environment and the person (Sheppard 1991).

As an intervention method, problem-solving method is dynamic in the sense that it mediates problems by resolving on a case-by-case basis. Each individual problem in this theory is unique and is defined by the individual, relationship and context of the environment which makes it versatile in addressing numerous problem solutions. Furthermore, the option of forward and backward reasoning helps social workers to analyze and determine problem solutions from different perspectives depending on the nature of the problem. In the social work context, this is a valuable tool as it allows individuals to work on a case from the grassroots level, without having to eliminate vital facts and situations to achieve desired social goals.

Furthermore, the researcher is of the view that problem-solving theory, though limited by the expertise and knowledge base developed by peers and colleagues, is flexible in allowing new avenues to be included in the problem-solving process. As workers work their way through resolving the problem, they discover new facts, and perhaps new solutions, which might be different from the initial premise that they have set for its solution. From a strengths

perspective this implies that problem-solving methods add new resources; they enrich the experiences of the social workers by allowing them to explore new perspectives; and add value in developing new approaches for solving similar albeit unique problems.

### **Psychoanalytic Theory**

The study of the unconscious was relatively schematic and meager before the advent of Sigmund Freud. For this reason, it could be said that Freud was the pioneer in psychoanalytic theory. Freud held that the human mind takes into account of transactions within the limits of the body. Unlike traditional belief that the human mind is shaped by culture, Freud believed that the depth and endurance of human personality is dependent on the social context in which an individual is born. A psychosomatic process is the traditional method by which physicians analyze symptoms of mental disorders within the pathological discourse. However, Freud holds that psychosomatic processes are limited, as he believes that individuals are influenced by elements that are outside the body – that is the environment. To exemplify that, he writes of the influences of human association and its impact on the unconsciousness. It is only through observational procedures that the expert would extricate subtle and multiple ties of the personality with the other individuals and environmental elements. Observations of body language, as well as human acts in relation to sequences of interaction form the study of individuals within the context of the society (Ruitenbeek 1962). Freud's conceptual framework was based on the observation of the human consciousness and unconsciousness, and its relation with the basic nature of man. It lacked the social work context. His theory implies that man is



exceedingly indulgent or deprived by his/her surroundings which give rise to a certain psychiatric state of mind.

### **The Theory of Psychoanalytic Technique**

Menninger (1958), in his work 'The Theory of Psychoanalytic Technique' counteracts the practice of external influence by suggesting that individual behavior is a reflection of behaviors that occur during and after the events they are involved in. Menninger and Holzman (1973) differed from Freud's theory for psychoanalysis in the sense that they were of the view many individuals may demonstrate similar behavior without having any psychiatric problems. Therefore, psychoanalysis is not essentially about the physiological influence but rather associated with stimulus from interactions. The authors emphasize on new methods for observing and interpreting behavior in the context of culture and personality through structured research instruments. They believe that the psychoanalytic approach has particular associations with socialization sequences that lead to individual relationships with the environment, culture and personality. This implies that psychoanalysis approaches emphasize on the role of the professional engaged in the observation of individual behaviors and interpretation of the same. The skills used to deduce valuable information about the personality is derived from daily life processes. Likewise, an intervention is inherent in the behaviors and actions of the individual under study.

Alternatively, works by Roy Schafer (1976) and Irwin Hoffman (1983) have entirely altered the conceptual framework of psychoanalysis theory and practice. They emphasize on the reality of social construct and its impact on both the individual and the professional. They present the view that solutions

for problems in psychoanalytic are dependent on the cultural life at large. It is based on objective knowledge derived from social agreements and human actions are the narrative of the acts. Therefore, psychoanalysis is the study of the language of the human acts and interpretation of the same to represent possible accounts of the past or present life of the individual.

Transactions between the analyst and the patient are constructed by subject experience, human agency, and fragments of individuation/separation etc.

Thus, “ For Schafer, (1) psychoanalysis is concerned in a primary fashion with language and its equivalents; (2) subjective experience, objective reality, and selves are all constructions brought to life in language; (3) these present-day tellings could be told in other terms and do not represent real world events; (4) unitary selves are displaced by the notion that we tell useful stories about “ multiple selves” in order to conduct our affairs; and (5) cure accompanies changes in discourse.” qt. Leary 1994). Similarly, Hoffman believes that human beings, whether professional or individuals, requiring intervention live worlds within worlds to make social interaction highly ambiguous. Observation of individual behaviors cannot construct individual social environment alone. Individual experiences must be taken into account to understand the influences of elements surrounding them. Intervention follows the paradigm of change and analysis of the participants because he believes individuals are incapable of understanding their own dilemma.

These later conceptual frameworks of the psychoanalytic theory not only pose challenges for social work practices but also offer new dimensions for analyzing complex individual social problems. The role of the social worker in the psychoanalytic context is separate from the individual and the

environment, as he/she has to observe objectively to interpret individual behaviors in the psychiatric context as well as in the context of the environment in which the individual inhabit. Thus, the professional is segregated and does not really participate in the problems faced by the individuals. This tends to dissociate the analyst from the individual, which at times hinders problem resolution. However, objective observations in psychoanalysis enable the social work professional to emphasize on interventions methods. Since interventions are not set in paradigms or experiments or processes from knowledge base, the social worker has more leeway in developing creative interventions that meet desired social goals at the individual and from the broader societal contexts.

At the same time, there are certain limitations to the theory of psychoanalytic. There is too much emphasis of the individual and less focus of intervention for the broad social context. As individuals live in the society – interact, transact and have relationships with other entities within the environment – it is natural to assume that any problems or issues that they face should be resolved in the context of the community they live in. It is not natural to assume that the problem is inherent within the environment and the intervention method should be for the individual only. From this perspective, the psychoanalytic theory is limited.

Therefore, the psychoanalytic approach does not really fit the strengths approach, which basically emphasizes on resource development. Although psychoanalysis emphasizes on problem resolutions, this is limited to the issues faced by individuals – not from a communal or global context. There is little scope for adding value to interventions in the social work practice as it

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represents the realities of the individuals. Therefore, world events, social change and communal issues become secondary to the analyst who adopts this approach.

### **Compare and Contrast**

At the beginning of the discussion, the researcher emphasizes on the importance of the key components in social work i. e. person, interaction and the environment. These key components, as one observes over the course of the evaluation of the theories of problem-solving and psychoanalytic, play integral roles in synergizing the conceptual framework for social work and professional practices. In this context, if any one component were missing from the theoretical framework, it would destabilize its validity and usefulness to the profession.

### **Theoretical fit with the social work professional focus**

From the discussion, the researcher observes that the problem-solving theory, as compared to the psychoanalytic theory, has more dimensions to the mission of social work. The nature of forward and backward reasoning enables social work professionals to trace the problem from multiple layers of contexts such as culture, race, gender, ethnicity and religion, to extricate the inherent issues prevalent within the individual, a community or a society. In doing so, it encompasses broader social perspectives and addresses problems such as poverty, cultural diversity, discrimination, gender bias or social injustice. Thus, the problem-solving theory serves the purpose of problem identification and eventually leads to its intervention as well, even though the problem-solving theorists have not emphasized as such. Interventions, according to the theory, stem from set rules and the

knowledge base that professionals can acquire through experience and expertise.

On the other hand, the psychoanalytic approach adopts similar processes for problem identification within the individual and in the social context but does not really view the problem as a social problem. The components of person, interaction and environment are not synergistic but rather segregated from each other. This makes finding interventions difficult as the social work professional would have to differentiate the person, relationship and the environment, before individual resolutions can be devised. This is because the psychoanalytic approach mandates objective observations and following set processes, which does not allow social workers to view the problem from different dimensions which are inherent in the social work mission.

Therefore, psychoanalytic theory mostly identifies problems within the society from micro perspectives, thereby, limiting the scope of intervention. Unlike the problem-solving theory, the psychoanalytic theory integrates social problems like poverty, cultural diversity, discrimination, gender biases and social injustice into the social environment and explains its influence on the individual. Sometimes, these factors may or may not be the culprit for individual problems but, in fact, the problem stems from within the unconscious. Thus, the abstract nature of the psychoanalytic theory makes it difficult to devise interventions realistically that are practical in the social work field.

### **Progress on the part of the client and ethical concerns**

As a social work professional, one is responsible for the progress of the client. The problems or issues my client faces may be from the micro, mezzo

and macro environment and therefore require different approaches towards interventions. Therefore, I would reserve the psychoanalytic approach for micro interventions so that I would be able to analyze the psychological as well as physiological dilemmas, and ultimately devise interventions that address the root problem. On the other hand, if the nature of the problem that my client is experiencing stems from the outset and requires a broad perspective in evaluation, then I would adopt the problem-solving approach to address the problem, first from the macro level then narrow it down to the micro level and resolve it accordingly. The approaches differ because, as a social work practitioner, I need to have flexible tools to evaluate the progress of my client. This can only be possible if I use a combination of theories and approaches to offer me flexibility as well as dynamism in my work.

The only ethical concern I have regarding the application of these theories would perhaps be the scope and limitations each poses for social work practice. The problem-solving theory, as discussed earlier, emphasizes too much on the processes, which at times may result in compromised interventions. On the other hand, the psychoanalytic approach is too narrow and limited in its scope in addressing individual perspectives and tends to neglect the broader scenario. In resolving individual problems, perhaps I would neglect to incorporate the bigger picture and, thereby, inadvertently harm the society instead of benefiting it as a whole through my social work practice.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the above reservations, the researcher is of the view that each of the theories has its own merit and application in intended practice. It is

difficult to choose one over the other, as social work professionals realize no social issues or problem congruent with the other. Each problem is unique and requires unique resolutions. Since human beings are dynamic, their problems are dynamic too, requiring diversity in resolutions and intervention methods. Yet, from a broader perspective, the researcher would prefer the problem-solving approach over the psychoanalytic as it would more commonly be used in every day practice for the interventions of common problems. Such problems require a knowledge base to be developed from set rules and experiments, and require less time for interventions. On the other hand, for complex problems the researcher would prefer to use the psychoanalytic approach for individual objective observation and interventions.

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