Theories in social work are nothing more than an attempt to explain situations and social relationships. Theories were developed because it became clear that there were similar patterns or repeating cycles of behaviour, both in an individual’s life and in the lives of different people. Since theories are expressed by academics and social scientists, they often use academic language. Do not let that deter you from learning. Theories are life dressed up! Many theories actually have a straightforward, accessible message even if you have to look beyond the jargon.

If theory is to be useful it needs to have a clear link to experience. There have been debates about what actually constitutes a theory. Generally, a theory helps you to explain a situation. In science, a theory helps to:

- describe (e.g., what is happening?)
- explain (e.g., why is it happening?)
- predict (e.g., what is likely to happen next?)

Sometimes theories help us to understand situations and bring about changes.

If you think about it, you often act or make decisions in your daily life, knowingly or unknowingly, based on your personal theories. We define embedded theories as explanations of why you chose to behave in a particular manner. Because we are often unaware of why we act in a particular way, or the rationale behind our decisions, it becomes important to reflect and deconstruct situations, thereby making it clearer to interpret and use the theories that we discuss in this book.

During supervision in your field placement, you discuss placement responsibilities, roles, assignments, and scenarios. You will also be required to describe and discuss the situations you are working with, explain why you think this came about, and what you can do to bring about change. In doing so, you
will be drawing on some form of theory. You may, however, not always be aware of the theories that you actually use.

In social work, there are ranges of different types of theory. An understanding of these various types or forms of theory can assist you in recognizing that you can comfortably use them in any given situation.

Types of Theory

Beckett (2006) separates theory into formal and informal theory. Some people use these terms inappropriately – formal theory is interpreted as theory that is academically presented more academically, while informal theory is more accessible and understandable. Embedded theories fit into the informal category.

In this guide we will cover formal theory that can be named and traced to a writer or an academic. Informal theory, on the other hand, relates to a worker’s personal values and ideas about a situation. You will develop competency through experience – both practice experience, and personal experiences, as well as embedded theories. Informal theory has been referred to as practice wisdom (Healy, 2005). Beckett (2006) also refers to informal theory as ‘common knowledge’. Many social workers and students use ‘practice wisdom’ or ‘common knowledge’, which usually contains a range of formal theory. People often use their personal language to explain this, rather than the original language of the theory. This guide aims to support you to recognise the formal theory within your existing knowledge.

While Beckett categorizes theory into formal and informal, other writers draw other distinctions. One common idea is that there are theories of social work and theories for social work. In straightforward terms, this means that there are theories about the way social work is delivered which constitute theories of social work, for example, taskcentred practice and crisis intervention. Theories for social work, such as behavioural approaches and systems theories, explain situations and behaviours.

Sibeon (1989) took this idea further and proposed a three-part distinction between theories:

- Theories of what social work does
- Theories of how to do social work
- Theories of the clients’ world
We have used Sibeon’s ideas of the distinction between theories in the different sections in this guide.

Perillo and Cedeno-Martinez suggest that Sibeon’s (1989) ideas can be further clarified with the following four theory distinctions that impact on professional practice with clients:

- Theories of what social work does
- Theories of how to do social work
- Personal theories of the social worker
- Personal theories of the clients

With so many different types of theory, you can call on them to help you in your various professional roles. For example, you can use formal theories when you explain the role of social workers and how these theories assist in understanding the clients’ situation. You need to draw on informal theory as it relates to how clients explain and describe issues and problems. However, remember that you influence process. By highlighting all the important formal and informal theories, it will not only help to assess and do social work practice, it will facilitate a collaborative process. By including awareness of your personal theories and validating your client’s worldview, it will help to facilitate the creation of space for your client’s voice. When presenting a client’s needs for resources to a manager, you may draw on all of these, and some formal theories about social work. Therefore, in dealing with a client’s situation, you are likely to draw on a whole range of theories. Whether or not you can necessarily name the theory is another matter. As a student, you need to be able to explain this process verbally and on paper.

**Why Do We Need to Apply Theory to Practice?**

While individual social work theories have different purposes, using all kinds of theory in our work offers us, as social workers, some important things.

- Theories help us to make sense of a situation and generate ideas about what is going on and why things are as they are.
- Theory can help us to justify actions and explain practice to clients, caregivers, managers, and society in general. The aim is to make social work more widely accountable and ultimately more respected.
• When working with individuals, use theories to relate to specific situations. This will help you to develop a clear direction.
• Theory explains why an action results in a particular consequence. This helps us review and possibly change our practice in an attempt to make the consequences more effective.

It is clear that theory is important to one’s practice – both when working with clients and in making social work more valued by society.

How will Guide to Help Me with Theory?

Don’t be put off by jargon. It has a purpose. But learn to use it appropriately.

While this guide is useful throughout your course, it is predominantly designed to assist you in your practice learning experiences (i.e., when you are on placement). In practice learning, students often struggle to apply their knowledge. Our aim is for you to feel more confident about what you already know and how to apply it.

This book is not a detailed guide to social work theory from an academic perspective, but an exploration of how theory links to actual social work practice and learning situations.

It aims at increasing your confidence by broadening your vision of the different types of theories, as well as understanding HOW and WHY you use theories, as this is a critical part of your academic and practicum experience. The next chapter will discuss the need to link theory to your practice placement in more detail and the importance of critical reflective skills.

You will also be required to show the same skills when analyzing theory in future employment and in post-qualifying training. That is why it is helpful to start here to learn how to enjoy what theory offers.
A Note about Surface and Deep Approaches to Learning

Martin & Saljo (1976) identified the concept of deep learning and surface learning.

- **Surface approach**
  This approach focuses on acquiring and memorizing information. An uncritical and superficial approach is taken to acquiring new knowledge with little reflection. Learning is motivated by external factors such as demands from employers or assessment requirements.

- **Deep approach**
  This approach involves critically analyzing new ideas and linking them with existing wider knowledge. This approach means the learner will understand and apply the learning to new and different contexts. Deep learning assists with problem solving and making wider analytical connections.

Houghton (2004:2) explains that “deep is good and surface is bad”.

The original title of this book was ‘Everything you ever wanted to know about social work theory (but nobody bothered to tell you!)’, however, as the guide developed we reflected on the name and realized it could be interpreted as a superficial approach to learning about theory. It is vital that you take a deep approach to learning about theory – question and critically analyze the theories and models covered in the guide, and read widely to develop a deeper understanding of the theories, models, concepts and ideas presented in this resource to make links with your wider knowledge. What is presented in this guide certainly is not everything you ever wanted to know, but it is a starting point to help develop and refresh your knowledge and direct you to other ideas.

Don’t be a surface learner

Be a deep learner
FURTHER READING

Part of taking a deeper approach to learning about social work theory will be through further reading. At the start of each section of this guide we recommend further reading. However, it is important to note that this refers to secondary sources. You will be familiar with the concept of primary and secondary sources from your course assignments. Essentially, secondary sources are textbooks (like this one!) and primary sources are journal articles and research reports. To obtain the best marks in academic work, you must read current (up-to-date) primary source material. You will find articles on social work theory in the wide variety of journals available to you in your studies. Make use of these to further develop your understanding of the theories and concepts. Once you have a grasp of the theories covered in this guide, you will have the foundation to understand the journal articles.