1

Introduction ❖

And There Was Theory

Drawing 1.1   Theory Residence: A Good Place to Begin

Although common sense tells us that the study of theory about humans is central to professional human service practice, each year, our students come to class with trepidation about the nature of theory, about the difficulty in understanding theory, and with skepticism about the relationship between theory and practice.

This book aims to debunk the myth that theory is hard to master and instill enthusiasm about the wealth of theoretical ideas and their power in informing social work knowledge, research, and practice. This chapter introduces theory, explores its definitions, historical and current contexts, nonexamples, and applications. We hope not only to convince you that theory is the foundation of all professional activity, but also to excite you about the subject, and educate you in the breadth and depth of thinking about humans that is integral to informed practice.

Consider these exemplars just to whet your theoretical appetite. First, think about the notion of reputation. What is it and how is one's reputation established? Since Aristotle, theories of social propriety and social norms have told us what is desirable in diverse contexts and guided us to behave in a manner congruent with the nature of the reputation, or public persona and esteem, that we seek to establish (Friedman, 2007). These concepts, intertwined with theories of professionalism, frame social work ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2010), which constrain and guide professional social work behavior and define who is a "good" social worker.

Now, think of appearance and beauty. Theories of what is beautiful not only influence how we adorn ourselves, but are foundational to views of health, nutrition, and appearance-based bias—topics of great concern to social work (Rhode, 2010). This important point is discussed later in the book, alongside an examination of visual culture and its contemporary hegemony in developed countries.

These examples highlight the complex issues and questions that social work encounters as we proceed into the 21st century. Yet, as Stoesz, Karger, and Carillo (2010) note, much of our theory is borrowed from other disciplines; we sit in the audience rather than on the stage of social work education and advancment of the scholarship necessary to keep social work alive, viable, and relevant to its mission. Thus, a second and major aim of this work is to meet the challenge Stoesz, Karger, and Carillo pose, and advance the intellectual work of social work, synthesizing and purposively using interdisciplinary thinking within theoretical frameworks that are custom fit to creative and productive social work thinking and action. Before introducing our theoretical framework, we first dissect theory in general and theories about humans in particular. Because of the vast theoretical landscape, much of the theory that we address in this book, at least until we reach the chapters on new and emerging theories, have been developed and engraved with Western world values and standards. We will travel to other parts of the intellectual globe, but highlight this bias as we inaugurate our first term with theory.

Theory Over Time

Theory of human nature and behavior has shifted and diversified over the centuries, from early views of humans and human phenomena as determined by gods, to contemporary advances that have allowed us to peer into the recesses of the human corpus and identify the human genome and its multiple miniscule—yet powerful—influences on human behavior. However, many ancient beliefs and theories remain at the roots, and even inhere in the substance, of contemporary ideas.

So, let us look back in Western history to identify the context in which theory of human behavior emerges, gains support, and becomes part of our intellectual tradition. Note that we emphasize Western theory, as it is the basis of social work thinking and action within the developed world. The text, however, also addresses non-Western theory, particularly in the global context of the 21st century, and then suggests resources and future inquiry that can round out this expansive picture.

Numerous references to the life span are found throughout the history of Western civilization. As far back as Aristotle, who advanced the notion of propriety (Yu, 2007), thinkers have examined and characterized how life unfolded and what individuals had to do or be to live successful lives. Aristotle conceptualized propriety as a hierarchy of virtue, function, and activity, setting the stage for the desirability of role and context specific functional expectations as the basis for theory development. However, because scientific method as we know it today was not established in ancient Greece, philosophy and religion—rather than contemporary disciplines supported by social science research—were central to inquiry about the nature of humans (Zima, 2007). Regardless of the way in which the ancients came to theorize about humans, many of the ideas currently rooted in scientific methodology can be recorded as far back as ancient civilization. For example, the Mayas, whose civilization flourished in Central America from 2600 BCE until 900 CE, characterized individuals with both human and animal characteristics. And today, although we do not identify humans as representing specific animals, we often use animal terms to describe personality types and behaviors (Cloninger, 2007). Or, consider the animal metaphors used to describe and fight cancer. Even the word *cancer* is derived from the word *crab* (Camus, n.d.).

Of particular importance to our focus on human behavior in context is the notion of psychophysical dualism, the existence of two entities: the physical and the psyche. The Mayas believed that the body was a vessel and that when it died, one's soul emerged, journeyed, and then retuned to earth in a new body (McKillop, 2006). Until the 17th century, the church addressed dualism as a distinction between the divine and the organismic. In the 17th century, dualism became an important debate in philosophy. However, Kant, in the 18th century, was the philosopher who gained acknowledgement for his treatment of and influence on thinking about dualism. He argued that humans cannot know the physical world, but rather can only ascertain mental images as their reality (Scruton, 2007). Interestingly, the neuroscience groundswell of the late 20th century found biologists reinterpreting Kant's work through neural networks, arguing that specialized nerves were actually responsible for what Kant referred to as phenomena of the mind of apperception (Smith, 2005).

It was not until the 18th century that science developed its methods of inquiry sufficiently to provide the foundation for contemporary systematic study of human behavior in context (Agamben, 2009). At this point in history, the contextual trends, such as increasing urbanization and industrial modes of production, were important in shaping emergent views of humans. Jansz and van Drunen (2004) noted that two major conceptual shifts, individualization and social management, were critical to the emergence of the field of psychology and related academic and professional arenas. Jansz and van Drunen define *individualization* as the intellectual, political, and social

movements in which the focus on community and group was shifted to individuals, feelings, and internal life. The ideas of the French philosopher, Rousseau, among others (Jansz & van Drunen, 2004) exemplify this trend.

Individualization brought with it ideology in which the study of humanity turned its attention to the self and individual difference. For example, the fields of phrenology and physiognomy examined external features as indicators of skull size and internal characteristics, respectively, as representative of intelligence and character.

Social management refers to systematic efforts to control human behavior. As Jansz and van Drunen (2004) note, control previously exerted by military force moved inward and became the domain of professionals through theory and practice in fields such as social work, compulsory education, psychology, health, pharmacology, and medicine, among others that emerged over the centuries to follow.

In the 19th century, Quetelet (1835, 1969), who studied statistics among several other fields, conceptualized the "normal man." Through techniques of measurement, Quetelet characterized how typical humans changed over the life span. Quetelet's concept of average man was the foundation for determining the boundaries of "normal" and thus the realm of the abnormal (DePoy & Gilson, 2007; Quetelet, 1835, 1969). Quetelet therefore ensconced nomothetic thinking (characterizing humans as group members) over considering individuals (DePoy & Gilson, 2011). By the latter part of the 19th century, the cultural, social, political, economic, and intellectual contexts were ripe for a field of study to emerge that described and explained humans as internally driven. And thus, Wilhelm Wundt, who established the first psychological laboratory in Leipzig in 1879 (Jansz & van Drunen, 2004), formalized the field of psychology. However, the underlying theme of dualism remained, promoting questions and varied responses to describe and explain the role of diverse environments in influencing behavior, and in providing explanations for behavioral observations (Smith, 2005).

Although not the only thinkers to discuss the importance of human-context interaction, Dewey and Bentley (1976) in the early 20th century, were known for their seminal work in transactionalism, in which organism and environment were seen as interactive and interdependent (Dewey & Bentley; Smith, 2005).

The very brief discussion of history ends here as we move into the 20th century. The book proceeds to examine, analyze, and illustrate theories of human experience that have been advanced and built upon in the 20th and 21st centuries.

What Is Theory?

> **THINKING POINT**
>
> Before you begin to read this section, define *theory*. Then, after reading our definitions, compare and contrast your before-and-after thinking.

Much of the discussion of theory that follows is informed by DePoy and Gitlin (2011), who have thought and written much about theory and its relationship to research and professional practice. We therefore have not reinvented the wheel, so to speak, but have applied their discussion of theory to our focus on historical and contemporary theory of human phenomena.

Theory Dissected

Numerous discussions can be found in books and other resources on the nature of theory, theory construction, and use of theory. Not surprisingly, there are many different "theories of theory" or maps that categorize theories according to their commonalities, differences, and levels of development. As an example, Seidman (2004) who focuses his work on social theory, has classified theory into three categories: (1) moral, (2) philosophical, and more contemporarily, (3) scientific. According to Seidman's theory of theories, moral theories are those that posit the nature of goodness and what is necessary to achieve it, while philosophical theories engage in conceptual thinking to unearth principles of knowledge. Although scientific theories have an aim similar to philosophical theories, only empirical evidence, or that generated by scientific methods, can be used to verify scientific idea systems as the basis for organizing, describing, and predicting observations. While the categories may differ according to the type of evidence that is acceptable to support theory (see subsequent discussion), Seidman then suggests that all theories aim to further the improvement of the human condition, whether through identifying what "should be" or predicting "what needs to be changed." As we discuss throughout the chapter, while we do not fully agree with Seidman's taxonomy, we do concur that *improvement,* an axiological construct that lays bare "what is desirable," is inherent in all theory. For example, some theories, such as those that address distributive justice (Rawls, 1971) and distribution of rights and privileges (Hohfeld, 1923) guide thinking and action with regard to whose behavior is worthy or unworthy for resources, group membership, and even citizenship. While these are not typically categorized as moral theories, we suggest that they are and thus we do not address a separate axiological theory category, because for us, all theories guide us to a differential "correct" set of thinking and action, depending on the theory, its view of humans, and its purpose. Rather, *explanatory legitimacy,* our social work conceptual framework presented next, looks explicitly at all theories as value based with moral principles inherent in each.

Our Theory of Theories

Given the ethical foundation of social work, we suggest that the most useful lens through which to view theory for social work analysis and use is multidimensional, synthesizing the four types of theory listed in Table 1.1 within an axiological scaffold, our theory of theories.

Table 1.1 Theory of Theories

Theory as function: descriptions, explanations, predictions

Theory as structure: parts of theories that comprise its elements

Theory as content: topical focus

Theory as evidence: credible support for a claim

Theory as Function

Theory as function refers to the purpose of a theory or the type of intellectual "work" it does. Looking through a purposive lens, theory can be parsed into three types: theories that describe, explain, and predict. Theories can achieve one, two, or all three purposes depending on their degree of development and structure.

The following scenario illustrates descriptive theory.

When you enter a new class on the first day of the semester, you most likely bring a pen or electronic device to record notes. This behavior does not occur spontaneously, but rather is informed by what has happened in previous classes. You have developed a descriptive theory of the commonalities of classroom objects.

Based on this description, you have expectations for courses in which one of the constants is your capacity to record what you and others have said, observed, or thought about. In this case, the descriptive ideas are organized as

Course = Information to be recorded = Device to record

Your evidence is your own and observed previous experience in school. Building on the descriptive theory example, to illustrate explanatory theory, consider the following idea.

Students bring recording devices to class because multiple forms of input (in this case hearing, seeing, and recording) aid learning.

Not only does this theory describe what students typically bring to class, but it also provides a reason for what is observed. Now consider another explanation.

Students bring recording devices to class because their memories are not good enough to remember what they hear.

Both explanations are equally as feasible. Both are interpretations of description. In examining theories of human behavior, many explanatory theories can be advanced for one descriptive phenomenon. How we theoretically describe, explain, and evaluate human experience in large part determines to whom and how we legitimately respond.

THINKING POINT

Provide an example, in your own experience of how multiple explanations have influenced responses.

THINKING POINT

Identify and distinguish a descriptive theory from an explanatory one.

Now, consider this exemplar of predictive theory.

If students do not come prepared to class with devices or methods to record what they have learned, they are likely to perform poorly throughout the semester.

This statement illustrates prediction, or the future view of what may happen based on what is known.

Attending to purpose is a critical element of analysis and comparison of theories. A discussion of structure thus helps illustrate how purpose is linked to level of development and abstraction.

Parts of Theory

According to DePoy and Gitlin (2011), there are four interrelated structural components subsumed under theory, which range in degree—or level of abstraction—and are linked to purpose. These are concepts, constructs, relationships, and propositions or principles.

Levels of Abstraction

First, it is important to examine the meaning of *abstraction*. Abstraction often conjures up a vision of the ethereal, the "not real." However, we borrow from DePoy and Gitlin (2011) and use the term as it relates to theory, to depict symbolic representation of shared experience.
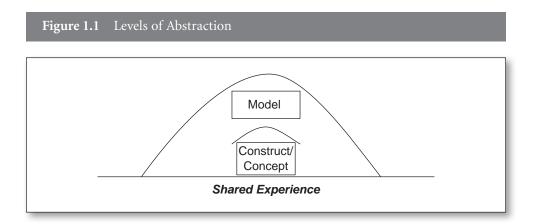
Consider a group of people who all see a small handheld device with numbered buttons and a screen that reflects different images as the buttons are pushed.

The term *cell phone* is a concept, or first order abstraction, to describe the shared image. Intrinsically, the term does not have a meaning without its referent, the handheld

device. Rather, words are abstractions because, by themselves, they have no meaning. But of course, not all words have referents that are directly observable or ascertainable through our senses. Some words are symbols for what cannot be sensed. Thus, different words represent different levels of abstraction, and a single word can represent multiple levels of abstraction.

> *The term* love *can denote an observable such as "making love" or a more abstract construct such as "love thy neighbor."*

In Figure 1.1, levels of abstraction refer to the distance between a symbol and shared experience. Four levels of abstraction within theory, and the relationship of each to the other, illustrate how shared experience is the foundation on which abstraction is built.

Figure 1.1 Levels of Abstraction

Again, we do not use the term *reality* as the foundation, because reality implies that there is only one viewpoint from which to build the basic elements of a theory. In contrast, we espouse *pluralism,* whereby human beings experience, and thus should acknowledge, the value of multiple realities and multiple perspectives about the nature of reality, cultures, and ethics (Dallmayr, 2010). As such, levels of abstraction must be built on *shared experience,* defined as the consensus of what we obtain through our senses.

> *Consider again the handheld device. Shared experience tells each of us that this is a cell phone, but the term* cell phone *may also carry with it other meanings.*

Each type of experience, and thus the different descriptive meanings attributed to a single word or term, are equally as important to acknowledge.

As depicted in Figure 1.1, a *concept* is the first level of abstraction. A concept is merely a symbolic representation of an observable or experienced referent. Concepts are the basic building blocks of communication in that they provide the means to

share our experiences and ideas with others. Without them, we would not have language and thus theory in any form.

> *In the case of the handheld device, the term* cell phone *can function as a concept. At this basic level of abstraction, cell phone describes an observation many share. The words and terms such as* device, buttons, *and* screen *are also concepts because they are directly sensed.*

A *construct,* the next level of abstraction, does not have an observable or a directly experienced referent in shared experience. We refer to this rendering as *reportable* in that meaning has to be extracted from story or inference. It is thus at this level of abstraction that meanings become important to consider because two individuals who articulate the same construct may attribute disparate meanings to it.

> *As a construct, the term* cell phone *may mean a communication mechanism to some and a bother to others.*

Although cell phone was identified as a concept previously, in this case, it functions as a construct because the observable is not the communicated meaning. Rather, the meaning of the term takes on the representation that cell phone evokes

> *Communication mechanism and bother are also constructs. What may be observed are the behaviors associated with these two phrases, such as talking and listening, or showing a facial expression of annoyance.*
>
> *Categories are also examples of constructs. Each category is not directly observable; however, it is composed of a set of concepts or constructs that may or may not be observed. The category of ICT (information and communication technology) is a construct. Computers, MP3 players, and Internet devices all fit in this category. Further, categories can be broken into subcategories. The devices that connect to the Internet may be considered* smart *while those that do not (cell phones with no data capabilities) are simply* telephones.

Abstraction, then, is complex and can be ordered in many ways. Consider now how else we might categorize ICT.

> *Rather than looking at ICT as divided by equipment, it may be split into the nature of information that is produced: voice, Internet data, video and so forth.*

As these examples illustrate, no one category system is the correct one. Rather, these systems are abstractions that can be thought about in many ways.

So, what does ICT have to do with the study of theory about humans? Consider the following examples of constructs relevant to health and human service inquiry:

> *health, wellness, personality, religion, spirituality, culture, life roles, rehabilitation, poverty, illness, disability, functional status, and psychological well-being*

Each construct may not be directly observable, but is made up of parts or components that can be observed or submitted to scrutiny in multiple configurations.

The complexity of this low level of abstraction shows why theories of human behavior are rich, diverse, and complicated.

Single-word symbols, or units of abstraction, discussed so far, are descriptive both in structure and purpose. At the next level of abstraction, single units are connected to form a relationship. A *relationship* may serve a descriptive or explanatory purpose and is defined as an association of two or more constructs or concepts.

> *Age may be associated with preference for a particular type of ICT.*

This relationship has two constructs, age, and preference for ICT.

A *proposition* is the next level of abstraction. A proposition—or principle, which can also be descriptive or explanatory in purpose—is a statement that governs a set of relationships and gives them a structure.

> *More than their elders, younger generations prefer ICT for texting.*

This explanatory proposition describes the structure of a relationship between age and preference for functionality of ICT. It also suggests the direction of the relationship and the influence of each construct on the other.

THINKING POINT

Apply these levels of abstractions to another theory of your choice.

Now that we have examined levels of abstraction and suggested their link to purpose, two theories illustrate the distinction between descriptive and explanatory "work" of theories. A descriptive theory related to ICT may look like this:

> *Younger generations are more facile with texting that their elders and thus prefer it and use it more than elders do.*

This theory merely works to depict what has been observed. It orders observation and can be verified or falsified within the context in which the theory emerged.

An explanatory theory might look like this:

> *Because younger generations have grown up with this technology, they are more facile with texting than their elders and thus prefer it and use it more than elders do.*

This theory identifies the "why" by explaining the phenomena of ease of use and preference; both are verifiable and can lead to prediction.

A predictive statement would look like this:

Younger generations, who have grown up with this technology, will be more facile with texting than their elders and thus will prefer it and use it more than elders do.

Theory as Evidence

As noted previously, the role and nature of evidence in generating and verifying theory equivocal. The trend in professional disciplines is to accept empirical evidence, or that which is generated through systematic research thinking and action (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011). So, we next look briefly at the logical foundations and related methods linked to the diverse levels of abstraction necessary to develop and test theory through systematic inquiry.
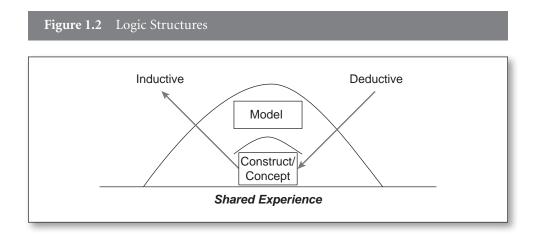
Figure 1.2   Logic Structures

Figure 1.2 depicts the two primary logical reasoning approaches and directionality of thinking that are used in systematic inquiry. Each arrow represents a different way of reasoning and the specific logic of actions that distinguish naturalistic and experimental-type investigators in the conduct of their research. Experimental-type research, which is primarily used to verify or falsify existing theory, uses a deductive form of human reasoning. Deductive reasoning (also referred to as *logico-deductive* or *reductionist*) proceeds from a selected abstract to its reduction to parts, definition of the parts, and then measurement of magnitude of each part and relationship among parts.

A social worker proceeding from the theory that clinical depression is a mood state that manifests in flat affect, sleep disturbance, change in appetite, and dysphoria (APA, 2000) would measure the degree to which a client had these symptoms. If there were sufficient presence of each, the social worker would deduce, based on the general theory, that the client was clinically depressed. If the social worker started with a psychoanalytic theory of depression, which suggests that depression is anger turned toward the self, the social worker would measure internalized anger and verify depression on the basis of the assessment score.

Deduction seeks to uncover and document nomothetic understandings or those that examine commonalities within groups and differences between them. For this reason, the individual is not the focus of inquiry.

Consider depression again. We have all seen many clinical psychotherapeutic studies that seek to look at levels of anger in diverse groups with the intention of revealing group specific differences of magnitude as the basis for informing need and intervention.

Naturalistic inquiry, which is more typically used to develop and generate theory, proceeds inductively. Shared experience including but not limited to narrative, observations, interactions, and image is aggregated and scrutinized for the purpose of mining emergent themes. Thus, unlike experimental approaches that begin with the acceptance of a theory, naturalistic inquiry seeks to extract theoretical gems from observations.

Consider depression once more. Suppose the social worker did not agree with either of the theoretical approaches to explaining depression in the preceding example. To generate theory characterizing depression, the social worker might observe and interview individuals who report depression without preconceived ideas of the nature of depression.

Illustrating this approach is the work of DePoy and Butler (1996). In an effort to identify the unique nature of health and wellness of rural elder women, they conducted a series of open-ended, face-to-face interviews with elder women in a rural New England location. Their analytic strategy followed an inductive process in which they aggregated interview narratives and examined them for emergent themes and patterns. While DePoy and Butler were not looking for theory on depression, they were able to induce by nonexample, or what was not said about wellness and contentment, that the loss of nurturing roles was causative of great despondency in this group of women. Their findings did not support either of the previous theories of depression, but did reveal a clear theoretical abstract pathway to be further traversed.

Different from deductive inquiry, inductive strategies, called *idiographic,* aim to characterize uniqueness of individual phenomena. Those who suggest that group or nomothetic approaches result in essentialism and stereotype espouse inductive strategies.

As we proceed into the thicket of theories about human phenomena, knowing about these two logic structures may comfort us in understanding the absence of definitive monistic truth. Deductive inquiry begins with theory selection, an axiological and teleological process in itself. The social worker has an array of theories from which to select, as illuminated by the example of depression provided. Why one selects a particular theory over another as accurate is based on resonance of the theory with personal belief and value, as well as purpose. If you were working in a brief therapy context, for instance, you would not be well-advised to proceed with psychoanalytic theory as it begets elongated engagement with the client. Even at this early stage of your readings on theory, then, you now can understand why

the nature of theory and inquiry is axiological and pluralistic. Inductive thinking and action are equally as equivocal. One can provide multiple interpretations, and thus explanations for observations as exemplified by the classic Mead-Freeman debate about what could best theorize observations of sexual behavior in Samoa (Cote, 1994). See Box 1.1.

BOX 1.1

In this debate, Margaret Mead proposed free sex as the descriptor for sexual activity in youth in Samoan culture. Rereading her work years later, Derek Freeman challenged her interpretation suggesting that the activity was nothing short of date rape.

A third reasoning strategy in systematic inquiry is abductive reasoning. Because this reasoning implies uncertainty, abduction was not fashionable in research thinking until recently. Abductive thinking involves selecting what is most plausible as explanatory. Rather than developing new theory in the absence of relevant frameworks, or testing existing theory, abduction requires some elements of "guessing," which is then followed by verification. What is valuable about abduction is that it allows selection from a wide array of knowledge rather than a single theory and, through its logical sequence, encourages and celebrates pluralism (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011).

But, remember the assertion that systematic inquiry was not the only support for theory, particularly in the 21st century when challenges to enlightenment thinking have resulted in the acceptance of diverse ways of knowing. Lyotard (1984) perhaps advanced one of the most vocal indictments of science, suggesting that it is a grand narrative, or a large set of symbols that concentrates power by obfuscating the absence of unbiased truth. Consider the work of Zima (2007) as an example. Foregrounding symbolism as the basis for understanding theory of humans and their interactions, Zima suggests that theory is purely discourse. That is to say, he defines theory as a set of linguistic symbols embedded within and influencing a cultural context. Note that there is no claim that theory emerges from, or is verified by, systematic inquiry. Building on Lyotard's thinking, the definition of theory as linguistic symbol topples the towering position of research thinking and action as the highest credible support for theory, and leaves a void to be filled by multiple ways of knowing.

Definitions of Theory

<AU: This needs rewording>

Definitions of theory span a large range—from concepts about the nature of goodness to propositions that can only scientific methods can verify or even as abstract as linguistic statements (Zima, 2007). From the multiple definitions of theory, four examples, presented in Table 1.2, represent the full range from structured to broadly conceptualized.

Table 1.2   Definitions of *Theory*

1. A well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world
2. An organized system of accepted knowledge that applies in a variety of circumstances to explain a specific set of phenomena
3. A concept that is not yet verified but that, if true, would explain certain facts or phenomena
4. A set of statements or principles devised to explain a group of observations or phenomena, especially one that has been repeatedly tested or is widely accepted and can be used to make predictions about natural phenomena

Source: Farlex, 2011

Among the multitude of definitions of theory, Kerlinger and Lee (2000) provide a simple but comprehensive definition, expanded here, and intended to be most useful to students of theory. Note that the term *useful* depicts purposive utility rather than monistic dogma. Kerlinger and Lee define *theory* as "a set of interrelated constructs, definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining or predicting phenomena" (p. 93). We add three dimensions to Kerlinger and Lee's definition. The first is description. As defined earlier, by *description,* we mean characterizing "what is" (DePoy & Gilson, 2004, 2011). Second, we concur with Zima (2007) and thus add the term *articulated ideas* to emphasize that theory is communicated through symbol, or if not, simply remains a set of personal ideas not considered to be theory. Third, we add *value-based* to highlight the axiological messages that are specified or embedded within theory. Thus, in this expanded definition, theory is a set of articulated, value-based, related ideas that has the potential to describe, explain, or predict human experience in an orderly fashion. The theorist develops and communicates a structural map of commonalities that the theorist expects to observe, has observed, or can predict.

What Theory Is *Not*

You might have already realized that none of the definitions of theory assert that theory is fact or truth. Thus, theory is not "reality." To the contrary, theory resides in the realm of the abstract and allows us to organize our thoughts, ideas, and observations into relationships. Theory can structure our thinking, can provide guidance for description, explanation, and action, and can provide a rationale for all aspects of our daily lives. Missing the important distinction between theory and shared experience can mislead us in interpreting descriptions and explanations for and responses to human behavior. Explanatory legitimacy, the conceptual framework used throughout the book to organize thinking about theory, provides the guidelines for distinguishing between description and explanation, and for determining which theories are relevant

and useful, referred to as *legitimate* in our framework, for your professional decision making and action.

Explanatory Legitimacy: Application of Theory in Social Work Practice

Building upon the argument that theory is value based, explanatory legitimacy as a conceptual scaffold thus not only acknowledges value, but also suggests that value is the major reason for the purposive selection and use of theory to guide social work practice.

Explanatory legitimacy is embedded within and builds on the genre of legitimacy theories, which have a long, interdisciplinary history that is highly relevant and useful for social workers. According to Zeldich (2001), legitimacy theories can be traced as far back as the writings of Thucydides in 423 BCE, in which questions were posed and answered about the moral correctness of power and the way in which it was captured and retained. Although legitimacy theory was birthed by political theory, questions of legitimation have reared in numerous domains, including but not limited to social norms and rules, to distributive justice, and now, in our conceptualization, to who is a legitimate client or client group to capture social work attention and what social work responses should be legimated as sound professional practice. Thus, consistent with legitimacy approaches, explanatory legitimacy theory helps clarify the basis on which a phenomenon is seen as genuine, authentic, and worthy of social work response. As proposed earlier, explanatory legitimacy suggests that all theories are axiological regardless of their content. Each describes or explains desired human experience and how social work can help facilitate it.

Moreover, drawing on the work of Shilling (2008), explanatory legitimacy synthesizes pragmatism within its foundation in legitimacy, providing the analytic framework for clarifying theoretical purpose. Capitalizing on the clarity of seminal legitimacy thinkers such as Habermas (Finlayson, 2005) and Parsons (1951), the explanatory legitimacy framework clarifies theory types so that each can be compared to those similar in structure and subject. As discussed throughout the book, explanatory legitimacy lays bare the axiological context for each theory, critically and abductively evaluting each for use on its own or in concert with others.

Through explanatory legitimacy, three purposive elements of theory are therefore proposed: description, explanation, and legitimacy determination. *Legitimacy determination* is the value-based driver of social work action in that it identifies legitimate clients and guides credible social work response. The following example illustrates legitimacy determination.

> *Theory that describes typical and atypical cognitive development in children discusses commonalities in thinking and problem solving that are observed in most children and deviations from those commonalities. On the basis of descriptive cognitive development theory, then, infants are expected to first "think" through oral exploration. If they deviate by performing these skills too early or too late, they are considered to be atypical.*

But, descriptive theory does not tell us why children do what they do.

> **THINKING POINT**
>
> How many explanations can you think of for why an infant might not follow a typical developmental pathway?

This question is left to be answered by explanatory theory. Explanatory theories tell why, and thus have the capacity to predict as well.

If theory explains developmental delays in cognitive activity caused by neurological impairment, we can explain and even predict the nature and length of the delay by knowing the nature and location of the neurological deficit.

> **THINKING POINT**
>
> Did you explain atypical development because of neurology or some other set of factors? What evidence supported your explanations?

Now, consider the legitimacy element.

If you work in a school in which advancement from one grade to the next is based on age-expected thinking skills, a child who has not acquired the "desired skills" captures social work attention. If the explanation is cognitive impairment, the student may become a legitimate client of social work within a rehabilitation framework. However, if the explanation is truancy, the legitimate response would be different.

Although this thinking may seem complex at this early point, as you read through the book and do your intellectual work, explanatory legitimacy will assist your reflection and understanding.

Generating and Validating Theory for Social Work Practice

In the field of social work, there are varying perspectives about what theories should guide social work activity and the "appropriate evidence" to support theory for use. Recently, many professions, including social work, have espoused evidence-based

practice as most desirable. Relevant to discussion, analysis, and use of theory in social work practice, DePoy and Gitlin (2011) detail evidence-based practice as follows:

> It is a model of professional practice that draws heavily on research that uses particular methodologies to draw conclusions from research literature. Major aspects of evidence-based practice include which research methods and conclusions should underpin practice. (p. 317)

In disagreement with contemporary theorists such as Zima (2007) and DePoy and Gilson (2007), the "evidence" in evidence-based practice must emerge from research activity and most desirably from true experimental design, an experimental-type deductive strategy capable of supporting predictive relationships between intervention and outcome. However, within the explanatory legitimacy conceptual framework, the "legitimate" support for theory and its application are value-based and within the scope of individual professional judgment. Thus, throughout the book, the evidentiary basis of theory is discussed so that each reader can weigh the credibility of evidence supporting theory as one important analytic tool for purposive selection and use.

How to Use This Book

This book does not intend to, once again, reiterate a summary of the multiple theories of human behavior in the social environment. There are already many excellent books and sources that do so. Rather, the book's purposes are to

1. Provide the essential intellectual tools for organizing and critically thinking about the breadth, depth, and diversity of theories that inform our notions of humanity.

2. Ground theory in exemplar.

3. Advance a conceptual framework that provides the lens for readers to learn, discuss, analyze, and use theory to inform professional thinking and action.

This book aims not only to introduce theory, but does so in hopes that you will understand and celebrate the importance of theory in your professional thinking and action. We hope that you are as enamored as we are with theory, its generation, and its use for informing professional decision making and activity.

Section I of the book introduces theory and the conceptual framework through which to analyze theory, its derivation, strengths and limitations. Section II explores the breadth and depth of the theoretical genres introduced in Chapter 2. Section II is also devoted to putting the theories to intellectual and professional work. Section III illustrates how theories apply to identifying who is legitimate for social work attention and response, the fit of each genre with social work values, and how each guides legitimate social work professional action.

Each chapter concludes with a chapter summary. Throughout each chapter, illustrations provide opportunities for application, and thinking points allow contemplation. We encourage you to use these points for reflection and analysis, and gauge your learning as you proceed.

Summary

This chapter introduced theory, identifying two types, descriptive and explanatory, and then distinguished them from one another. Levels of abstraction and the four components of theory were next discussed and illustrated. A brief gaze backwards then set the contemporary context for an examination of theory of human behavior. Explanatory legitimacy, the conceptual framework that will guide analyzing and applying diverse theories to social work practice, was introduced. The discussion of theory concluded with a brief look at evidence and its contested nature.

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