On The Perils of Applying Theory To Practice

Sue Penna
University of Lancaster

Introductory Remarks

Social work education in Britain has undergone repeated and fundamental restructuring in the past decade. In the early 1990s the professional qualification, the Certificate in Qualifying Social Work (CQSW), was replaced by the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW), a shift which required significant curriculum changes. Now social work education is undergoing another major change, with the DipSW being replaced by an undergraduate degree. However, despite changes to practice and academic training requirements, there are some constants, some requirements which do not alter. One of these is the demand for social work students to demonstrate that they can ‘apply theory to practice’ as part of qualifying requirements. This requirement, presented casually alongside a long list of further requirements, characteristically fails to grasp that understanding the relationship between theory and practice has long been a source of debate within social science. In many respects, the recent debate in Britain (see Trevillion, 2000) continues, and draws upon, consistent themes in social theory over the relative merits or otherwise of positivist paradigms, with their underlying assumptions of a social world that can be revealed through the application of correct techniques. The early debates in social theory were structured by a widespread belief in the power of scientific and secular-philosophical knowledge to provide for the direction and improvement of natural and social life. The ‘age of reason’ provided a context of optimism in the possibilities for a collective life
informed by justice and representing the march of progress. Though the optimism generally attributed to the Enlightenment was tempered by ambivalence on the part of some theorists, or rejected by others, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were dominated by philosophical and theoretical interventions which, in general, supposed that knowledge could provide a foundation for political and social progress. This supposition could only be held by assuming that the world could be conceived as an object, containing an underlying unity, progressing in a logical way, and peopled by subjects whose access to rational thought would liberate them collectively from the superstitions of pre-modern life. The underlying mechanisms of historical progress, the necessary regularities in social life, were held to be available to discovery by the sciences and philosophies, so that such knowledge attained a key role in the achievement of social progress (Penna, et al, 1999).

Although the 'age of reason' was also characterised by profound ambivalence concerning the possibilities for rational progress, the social sciences displayed a deep belief in the possibilities of knowledge to understand the social world and therefore guide the development of rationally organised structures, institutions and interventions. Thus the objective of knowledge-generation has been the establishment of a foundational knowledge, derived from the exclusive truth-producing capacity of science, that can inform social action. Foundational principles have been based upon two important assumptions: that theory involved a distinction between mind and world, between the subject and object of knowledge, and that language functioned as a neutral medium for the mind to mirror or represent the world (Seidman 1994: 3).

This historical intellectual legacy, together with a need for professional status dependent on a proper ‘knowledge-base’, drives demands that professional practice demonstrate the application of theory to practice. I want to suggest here that this
demand betrays a lack of understanding of what theory is and what it can do and, at best, leaves students confused, whilst at worst it leads to cruel or ineffective practices in agencies. Here I outline the historical context that has led to a particular understanding of theory as a guide to action, point to some perils of its application in practice, and suggest a different method of dealing with theory on social work degree schemes.

What is Theory?
What we call 'theory' can be understood as a form of social action that gives direction and meaning to what we do. To be human is to search for meaning, and all of us hold theories about how and why particular things happen or do not happen. Some of these theories are little more than vague hypotheses about what will happen if we act in a certain way in a certain situation and what we might expect from others. But many of the theories we hold are more complex and express our understandings of, for example, how organisations work, of how people become offenders, or why the distribution of resources is as it is. In this sense theories are generalisations about what exists in the world and how the components of that world fit together into patterns. In this sense also theories are 'abstractions' in as much as they generalise across actual situations our expectations and suppositions about the reasons why certain patterns exist (O'Brien and Penna, 1998).

In the same way that we use theory in our everyday lives, we also draw upon various theories as part of the ways we act in the world, so understandings of the 'social' dimension of social work are also built upon different theoretical foundations. As O'Brien and Penna (1998) point out, theories about the validity of data and research procedures, theories about what motivates individual behaviour, theories about what will happen if we intervene in particular situations in x way rather than y
way, become embedded in social, economic and criminal justice policies developed, implemented and managed by different social groups. Theories about the proper relationship between the individual and the state, men and women, homosexual and hererosexual, inform policy and practice frameworks so that both the frameworks that legally bound social work, as well as practice priorities and interventions, differ substantially from country to country. Theory about social life is either used or promoted in particular policy and welfare frameworks in order to make them more ‘effective’ or 'appropriate', and is invariably embedded in the social programmes that ensue from them. In this way theories make up the premises and assumptions that guide the formulation of particular policies and practices in the first place, as well as their later implementation. Such premises are essentially theoretical: they are 'imaginary' in the sense that the conditions they describe, the logics of action and the structures of provision on which they focus are not proven, definite realities.

This use of theory in the ways described above developed from the intellectual sea-change of the eighteenth century European Enlightenment. Prior to the Enlightenment, social organisation was understood through theological worldviews, and government of the population justified largely according to divine right and religious edict: the Sovereign ruled over a subject population because he or she was divinely ordained to so. However, from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards a shift in intellectual thinking occurred which was to have major implications for the development of European societies. This historical period - The Enlightenment – marks a time when people start to be understood as self-creating, rather than as products of divine creation. A philosophical shift, questioning theological understandings of the human world and establishing the legitimacy of scientific explanations of the natural world, results eventually in a humanist understanding of
social organisation. The Enlightenment sees the establishment of new philosophical systems for understanding both the natural and human worlds and the development of rational responses to social problems. The Enlightenment promises progress and represents a faith in science as a progressive force which can understand, and hence solve, problems in the natural and social worlds.

In this intellectual movement, new ways of thinking overlay those they were in the process of replacing, so that the cosmic transcendence of religious thought was replaced by the universalism of philosophy, and the methods and principles of the natural sciences. It was assumed that a theory could be developed that would substitute for the truth of religion. Eighteenth and nineteenth century social thought was focused, in the social sciences, on the search for one theory that could explain the social world and hence provide a guide to action - a theory that could be used in practice – famously captured by the term *praxis*. However, as the twentieth century developed, this conception of theory came under increasing attack, and this attack is one which has many implications for the use of theory in social work education and practice.

*Some Problems With Theory*

Several events in Europe contributed to a questioning of the application of theory to practice. The establishment of a communist society based upon the premises of Marxist theory was one such event. As the mass exterminations, abuses of power and repressions of the communist state came to widespread notice, so did the rationales underlying them. The communist leadership, following particular strands of Marxist theory, imposed upon populations conditions which, in theory, were necessary for the development of a communist society. Those individuals who did not fit the predictions of theory, or questioned the premises upon which action was based, were
considered ‘deviant’ and sent for ‘retraining’ in labour camps when they were not killed. The endless compulsory ‘self-criticism’ that members of various Marxist groups carried out was aimed at making individual behaviour conform to the tenets of theory. Yet when many thousands of individuals failed to conform, it was their behaviour that came under scrutiny, rather than the premises and assumptions of the theory, resulting in tragedy for thousands. The second tragedy was the application of theory to practice by Germany’s Nazi leadership. These two examples provide perhaps the most extreme illustrations of the application of theory to practice, but the history of social welfare is littered with more mundane examples that nevertheless cause great misery to those subject to theory application. We have seen the eugenics movement in the early twentieth century whose influence contributed to the institutionalisation (and worse) of people with learning difficulties, the widespread use in the mid-twentieth century of lobotomies in treating people with mental health problems and, to take two examples from this author’s practice career, the use of psychodynamic and behaviour modification theory in practice.

I observed the use of psychodynamic theory in practice in the social work department of an acute unit in a psychiatric hospital. A senior social worker specialised in dealing with depressed female lone-parents. Reading through dozens of case-notes (meant to aid my practice) I was struck by the way that these women’s depression was attributed to various failures in their early psycho-sexual development, whilst their practical circumstances – victims of domestic violence, poor housing, lack of money – were completely ignored. Needless to say, these women failed to improve, but the point to note here is that this failure was not attributed to the faulty premises of the theory and the way in which it was being applied, but to the women’s innate psychopathology. My second example is taken
from two years in a residential home for children with learning disabilities. Here a
behaviour modification regime was implemented by management with no critical
appreciation of debates in psychology about what it means to be human, what
motivates behaviour and how behaviour should be understood. Those children who
did not respond to ‘positive reinforcement’ (the majority) were labelled and punished,
whilst the underlying problems of the theory itself left unexamined. In short, in both
these cases, where service-users failed to fulfil predicted outcomes derived from
particular theoretical paradigms, the response displayed a notably similar
characteristic as in the examples from totalitarian societies – the users were
pathologised, rather than theoretical premises examined.

An objection could be made here that these examples merely demonstrate a-
typical historical circumstances or incompetent practitioners. However, whether at
the level of whole societies, whole social groups, or numerous disparate individuals, a
backlash against the conjoining of knowledge and power has been manifest in many
locations, including: the overthrow of communism in the Soviet Union, the critical
interrogation of ‘totalising’ discourses, the decline in membership of organised,
hierarchical political movements, the widespread development of ‘rights-based’ and
user movements, and a suspicion of ‘expert’ practice and bureaucracies. In social
theory, the last three decades or so has seen a particularly sustained interrogation of
the status of Enlightenment theory. Under the impact of post-structuralism,
particularly that associated with Foucault and Derrida, an unpackaging of the
assumptions and premises of theory construction has severely undermined the ‘theory
as truth and guide to practice’ position. This is not to say such challenges to
Enlightenment theory did not exist before, for a long tradition of hermeneutic and
phenomenological thought had posed alternative understands of human and social
action. Post-structuralism, however, has mounted a comprehensive and thorough critique of the epistemological basis of structuralism and realism. In the current examination of Enlightenment thought, Derrida 'deconstructed' major traditions in western social thought, showing how accounts of human knowledge depended on the use of key textual devices for obscuring problematic philosophical categories, or for revealing and endorsing particular interpretations and meanings of social and political progress. The construction of any text lends itself to several meanings and interpretations, such that it is impossible to arrive at any one fixed, 'true' account.

Foucault, on the other hand, examined the epistemology underpinning the Enlightenment belief in the replacement of an institutionalised theological belief system with one which emphasised Reason and the limitless capacity of human knowledge. Enlightenment philosophy suggests that what occurs in the world is subject to entirely knowable and explainable laws that can be discovered and used in the progress of human society and human mastery over the natural and social world. Foucault’s contribution to the unpicking of this position was to show, through examinations of historical understandings of punishment and sexuality, that there are other ways of understanding this history which suggest a very different interpretation of the Enlightenment and its effects on social life, and demonstrate that many truths and experiences of social life co-exist that make it impossible to provide an overarching account that explains everything. At the same time, science constantly shifts its parameters, so that what may be ‘true’ at one historical moment is rendered false later.

This brief outline cannot do justice to the sophistication and breadth of the critique of Enlightenment theory, critiques which have resulted in major debates over how we can know our world and what valid knowledge claims can be made (c.f.,
Lemert, 1999). Even where the foundations of poststructuralist epistemology are rejected there is a much greater appreciation of the problems associated with universalism and linear structures, two of the major props of Enlightenment theory. The permeation of these critiques is perhaps most evident in mainstream emphases on ‘difference’ and social constructivism, ‘difference’ and postmodernism, (c.f., Briskman, 2001), and a general rejection in many disciplines of overarching, grand theory (Leonard, 1997).

Here attention shifts to the assumptions embedded in theory and the way in which these assumptions become embedded in projects of nation-building, in legal and organisational structures, and in policy initiatives. Goldberg’s (1993, 2002) work on ‘race’ and racialization traces this process of embedding through an examination of the ways in which Enlightenment thought depended upon a racialized subject of social action and object of social theory. The pervasiveness of this discourse entrenches and normalizes symbolic representations and values both culturally and materially within the institutions of modern life (c.f., Goldberg, 1993: 8). The social sciences are ‘deeply implicated’ in the building of a racist culture and in the ‘hegemony of symbolic violence’ underpinning social systems (Goldberg, 1993: 12, 9). Roediger (1994) examines a similar process in American history and nation-building, pointing to a normalization of ‘Whiteness’ in the construction of conceptual and political subjects. This legacy enters social work in various ways (see Taylor, 1993), but appreciating the role of theory as cultural artefact, as a cultural product, produced in, and reproducing, social assumptions of normativity and relations of domination and subordination, can be similarly achieved in relation to gendered and sexualised categories, for example.
This leads us to a situation in which theory itself can be understood as a key resource in forging a ‘modern’ consciousness, and socio-political spheres shot through with asymmetries of power (Penna and O’Brien, 1996/7), where exploitation and oppression operate through complex and unstable socio-economic mechanisms (O’Brien and Penna, 1996). Not only can the ‘social’ upon which we work not be known in its entirety, not be predicted, not be subject to fool-proof risk assessment, evaluation and so on, but theory production has arguably been a contributory mechanism in the creation of precisely many those socially problematic circumstances that social work sets out to address. In short, Parton (2000:452) hits the nail on the head in claiming that we need to learn to live with ‘uncertainty, confusion and doubt’. Where then, does that leave theory in social work, if we accept this position? I want to turn briefly, and finally, to some suggestions of the use of theory in social work education.

**Using Theory**

At the beginning of this piece I suggested that we all use theory in our everyday lives. Given that this is so, and that theory permeates every aspect of academic work, policy implementation and practice initiatives, even when it is tacit and unacknowledged, I would propose that social work students and, ultimately, service-users, would be better served if students were taught how theory-construction takes place and how to unpack and critically examine theoretical edifices, accounts and the components through which they are constructed. The task for social work students would be not the mechanistic injunction to ‘apply theory to practice’ but rather to consider how adequate the application of theory to practice might be in X or Y case. To do this, they would have to be taught not so much along ‘who-says-what’ lines, but rather in terms of how theorising as an activity works and how different theories are
constructed. Theory building is an exercise in logic, moving from initial assumptions and premises to conclusions, through an argument linked by one or more claims. Taking these components apart can be taught as a skill (see, for example, Phelan and Reynolds, 1996; Thompson, 1996) rather than through the more philosophically based, social theory courses provided in many other disciplines. Tackling theory in a skills-based way has several advantages: it demystifies theory and enables students to see that, with practice, they can take a theory apart and reconstruct it in much the same way as a plumber or mechanic might tackle a job; it leads to a critical scrutiny of practice proposals derived from (often unstated) theoretical premises and to confidence in rejecting the inappropriate; and, when the theory fails to deliver, it leads to critical scrutiny of the theory rather than the person on the receiving end of it. This is not a plea for eclecticism, but for much more modest expectations of the theory-practice relationship than are currently formally embedded in many social work training programmes. I say ‘formally’ because many people have a suspicion of theory but, in my view, for the wrong reasons. Most theories offer insights into the ‘social’ sphere that is the ‘work’ of social workers but, ultimately, a theory is only as good as its critics.

References


