

SECTION

4

# Critical thinking about theoretical knowledge using scientific, practical, and professional standards

Section 4 provides lessons related to the Council on Social Work Education critical thinking competency and to the theory application competency's practice behavior "*critique knowledge used to understand person and environment.*" Lessons focus on topics such as critical thinking about theory; the appraisal of theory by scientific standards such as explanatory power, parsimony, and usefulness; and the appraisal of theory by social work standards such as ethics, diversity, and justice. In these lessons, we shift our attention from the deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction of explanatory and practice theories. Instead, the reader will learn how to engage in normative theorizing. A *normative theory* specifies a set of resources such as ethical standards and value convictions, useful when appraising the "goodness" of a theory and justifying the use of theories and their components. The social work profession has work to do in developing formal normative theories. However, there are a set of scientific norms, pragmatic standards, and social work conceptions of ideal theory and responsible practice that guide our normative thinking and theorizing about theory application issues such as the desirability of theory-specified goals, the proper implementation of theory-informed directives, the possible intended and unintended consequences of a theory's use, and the quality of evidence for theory-guided assessment and intervention alternatives. This section will focus on the critical appraisal of theoretical knowledge using these norms, standards, and conceptions.



LESSON

22

# Think critically about theory

(EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge)

Theories vary in quality, and theories vary in their usefulness for particular social work tasks. Therefore, critical thinking is a necessary part of practical theorizing. Theorizing and critical thinking are like twins. Effective, scientific theorizing is a major part of the critical thinking expected of informed and engaged citizens (Schneider, 2006), and critical thinking makes possible judgments about the quality of a theory and its best applications followed by remedial actions (Oko, 2008). Gambrill (2006) makes the case for critical thinking about theories eloquently: “If we do not critically evaluate our theories (assumptions), they may function as prisons that limit our vision rather than as tools to discover what is false” .... “a theory believed too soon stifles further inquiry” (p. 154). Gitterman and Knight (2013) commenting on evidence-informed practice, assert, “While both theory and research findings about a broad range of variables are essential to social work practice, they are not sufficient. The application of theory and research to practice requires critical thinking” (p. 73).

## **Theorizing and critical thinking: definition and habits**

*Critical thinking* is the “art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it” (Paul & Elder, 2009, p. 2). Critical thinkers use established standards and ask sharp questions when appraising the quality of theoretical claims, especially claims that are taken for granted by others (Gambrill, 2006). If we fail to think critically about theories and our theorizing activities, we are likely to apply knowledge that harms rather than helps our clients.

In relation to theory appraisal, critical thinkers need to develop certain habits. Social workers who are critical thinkers work hard to monitor and improve their awareness of the theories and theoretical ideas that influence their practice. They engage in self-reflection: appraising and questioning

continuously their theoretical assumptions, guiding conceptions, and biases. They develop the predisposition to think in an open-minded way about specific case challenges with an awareness of their own preferred theoretical assumptions and the assumptions of the client. Critical social work thinkers refine inclinations to gather and weigh relevant theory-derived information, raise vital assessment questions, and formulate these questions and their answers precisely. Critical thinkers make a habit of seeking well-reasoned theory-guided conclusions about the client's problems and needs and checking these conclusions against relevant standards. Critical-thinking social workers use evidence to judge possible theory-guided intervention strategies and to select with client input the best and most suitable intervention.

Critical thinking, like theorizing, has social aspects and requires the cultivation of certain habits of interaction. The critical thinker cooperates and communicates with others in finding or generating sound theory-guided strategies of inquiry to understand complex bio-psycho-social challenges and empirically supported theory-based interventions to deal with these challenges. Thinking critically includes looking for evidence with colleagues and clients to support sound theories and to challenge dubious theories. Moreover, the social worker applies critical thinking standards during conversations and arguments about theory deconstruction, reconstruction, construction, and application.

## **Theorizing and critical thinking: core elements**

Experts in critical thinking identify eight elements in the critical thinking process (Elder & Paul, 2007; Paul & Elder, 2009). These elements will be described in relationship to theory selection, use, and critique. First, the critical thinker generates a clear purpose for the particular use of knowledge. For example, the social worker might state, I intend to use theory A (Kohlberg's moral developmental theory) for a particular end (to understand and categorize the adolescent members of a rehabilitation group by moral decision making level) in particular circumstances (the community corrections agency and its combined group and individual counseling rehabilitation program). Lawrence Kohlberg created a very influential theory of moral development. Here is a brief summary of this knowledge. Moral reasoning capacities, the basis for ethical behavior, develop through six identifiable developmental stages, each more adequate for responding to moral dilemmas than the previous stage. Kohlberg argued that the process of moral development was principally concerned with justice and that people can continue to develop morally throughout their lifetime. The stages of moral development are obedience and punishment orientation (How can I avoid punishment?), self-interest orientation (What's in it for me?), interpersonal accord and conformity (How can I meet community expectations?), authority and social-order maintaining orientation (What are the relevant and compelling laws and

rules?), social contract orientation (How can I reconcile different rights and values to do good for the general welfare?), and universal ethical principles (How can I use principles that transcend particular times and places as a guide for my conscience?). In this theory, progress in moral reasoning emerges sequentially and by the stages. Each stage-based achievement provides a new understanding, one more comprehensive than its predecessors but integrated with them, and the new understanding is necessary for moral growth. Under certain circumstances, the person may regress from a higher to an earlier stage. Kohlberg's ideas have stimulated many other theorists, researchers, developers of assessment instruments, and practitioners.

Second, the critical thinker begins to raise relevant questions. These are based on a careful review of the information needed in the focal helping circumstances. Related to theory selection and consideration, the worker might formulate the following questions. Does Kohlberg's theory, for instance, appear suitable for use with these particular clients as they face the difficult cognitive, emotional, and behavioral challenges addressed in this agency context? Can the theory be used in a responsible, ethical way? What evidence supports such an application of the theory? What are the specific strengths and limitations of the theory when used for the chosen purposes? Are there competing theories that could be more useful?

Third, the critical thinker checks assumptions. He thinks critically about core theoretical assumptions. For example, in the case of Kohlberg's moral development theory, the social worker might investigate the following topics. What does Kohlberg assume about the nature of morality? What are his assumptions about the processes and dynamics of moral development? What "person, interaction, or environment" events are likely to stimulate or retard moral development? What does Kohlberg assume about moral deliberation, decision making, and action? After identifying such assumptions, the critical thinker considers whether they are reasonable and justifiable. Finally, the critical thinker might check his or her personal assumptions, for example about adolescent moral development, and reflect on how these interface with the theoretical assumptions.

Fourth, the critical thinker considers various viewpoints on the relevant knowledge about the "person interacting in the environment" configuration and reflects on these viewpoints. The social worker considers carefully and critically, diverse theoretical and practical perspectives related to the knowledge for use. In reference to Kohlberg's theory (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983), the worker might do a literature search and consider the viewpoints of human development theorists, researchers, and practitioners who have become expert on Kohlberg's theory. The worker might give special attention to those social workers who have used, tested, or adapted Kohlberg's ideas for practical use. The critical thinker also considers the viewpoints of colleagues and organizational leaders. Most important, the worker confers with the client and solicits his or her views about the suitability of Kohlberg's

theory. Finally, the worker attempts to synthesize these multiple perspectives into a personalized theoretical orientation, one that can be incorporated into thinking (mind) as well as feeling (heart) and acting (body).

Fifth, critical thinkers make use of available and relevant information. What information is needed to use the selected knowledge effectively and responsibly? Sources might include Kohlberg's own books and articles on the theory, evidence from research and practice evaluation studies, information from case studies and other reports on practice in the realm of moral development, and practice wisdom accumulated by the profession or the agency about the theory and its use. Critical thinkers attempt to form firm opinions on a topic without bias about the relevant information. Information both supporting and opposing the selection of Kohlberg's theory, for instance, should be considered objectively and with an open mind.

Sixth, critical thinkers identify and use concepts that can help them appraise knowledge and its potential usefulness. For example, the social worker considering Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development might review the meanings of "theory." Concepts related to scientific standards for theory appraisal such as parsimony, explanatory power, empirical support, and so on can be used to judge the knowledge. Social work standards and related concepts associated with affirmation of diversity, promotion of justice, and adherence to ethical principles also merit consideration.

Seventh, critical thinkers make inferences. They think systematically about the logic of their theoretical analysis and the potential usefulness of the analysis. Questions from the study of logical reasoning can be used. For deductive theories, do the theoretical conclusions follow logically from the premises? For inductive theories, do the empirical observations lead logically to the theoretical conclusions? Has the analysis of the selected knowledge avoided logical fallacies or errors? Is the practitioner's theoretical thinking consistent?

Eighth, critical thinkers generate and consider implications. The social worker, for example, thinks critically about the likely consequences of the use of knowledge. What are some of the possible positive consequences for the client and his significant others of using Kohlberg's theory? Are there any likely negative consequences of the use of this theoretical knowledge? What are some of the possible positive or negative consequences for your development as a professional social worker? For the agency? For the profession?

## Practical theorizing and logical fallacies

Theory users and theorizers learn from mistakes. In the area of critical thinking, social workers might watch from and correct thinking based on logical fallacies. A *logical fallacy* is a case of unsound or non-scientific reasoning during an argument (Gambrell, & Gibbs, 2009). For instance, a practitioner arrives at a conclusion that doesn't follow from the premise. In Table 22.1, I provide a list of ten of the major fallacies (Ben-Ari, 2005, Richardson, 2012), and I describe and illustrate each in relation to theorizing and theory use.

**Table 22.1 Practical theorizing and major logical fallacies***Fallacy – Definition and Example*

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1. **The Ad Hominem** – critics challenge the theory by attacking the theorist or theory advocate rather than the theoretical concepts and propositions. Freudian theory is useless because Sigmund Freud used cocaine.

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  2. **The Appeal to Authority** – the debater uses the opinion of an authority figure or an institution of authority instead of evidence or a sound argument to defend a theory. My wise and experienced supervisor has told me that the past life regression approach to practice theory works terrifically. That’s all that I need to know.

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  3. **The Appeal to the Bandwagon** – advocates of a theoretical position assert its validity by arguing that many people believe and act according to the theory. Educational theorists claim that the rapid shift to online classes by a large number of colleges and universities prove that this modality effectively teaches students curriculum content.

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  4. **The Appeal to Ignorance** – a theory is true according to its advocates because it hasn’t yet been proven false. Astrological theory is sound because scientists have never proven that the stars can’t affect human behavior.

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  5. **The Appeal to Tradition** – a theory is justified by appeal to the wisdom of earlier proponents. Astrology is useful because it was founded and valued by the ancient and wise Greeks. I still should cherish and affirm my grandmother’s theory of the use of dried red peppers to ward off evil.

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  6. **The Argument by Anecdote** – the theorizing practitioner uses personal experience or an isolated example to dismiss evidence supporting a theoretical claim. Sure, there is much empirical evidence linking sexist attitudes, power, and control needs to violence against women but I doubt the Duluth Theoretical Model of Partner Violence because my dad was a dominating patriarch in our Italian-American family and he never hit my mom.

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  7. **The Argument to Logic** – the thinker assumes that if an argument for some conclusion is fallacious, then the conclusion itself is false. John Dalton, the father of modern chemistry, theorized in the 18th century, that atomic elements combine in integral proportions to form molecules. Critics claimed that his theoretical premises were false, but experts in the field have shown that his theoretical conclusions are still basically sound.

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  8. **Correlation Not Causation** – the person using this argument asserts that X happened then Y happened; therefore X caused Y. Two events occur together or one occurs after the other, so there is evidence of a causal relationship. For example, an agency director has an affair with a worker and then the agency’s sexual harassment policy is made more lenient. Feminist critics of the director formulate a causal theory and assert with full confidence: the affair caused the policy revision.

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  9. **The False Dilemma** – the debater claims that there are only two theoretical possibilities for understanding any situation. Human change over time can be understood by either using the Darwinian evolutionary theory or by using the creationist model. The idea behind the false dilemma is to set up a system in which a disproof of the opponent’s argument is automatic proof and support for the attacker’s argument.

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  10. **The Straw Man Argument** – the critic misrepresents a theory or the theory’s elements and structure to make it easier to attack. Critics of intelligent design theory, a theory asserting that the initiation of life was caused by an intelligent planner, who make false claims that the approach refutes evolution and supports creationism are setting up a straw man argument.

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Optimally, social work professionals work in agencies or businesses where a culture supporting critical thinking has been created and maintained. The organization expects, for example, that its members think critically about theory selection and theory use (Gibbs & Gambrill, 1999). The organization provides frequent opportunities for employees to increase their knowledge about theory and about critical thinking processes and common logical fallacies. As participants in such cultures, practitioners fortify their habits of critical theorizing.

## Critical thinking about theory: questions to ask

Wallis (2011) proposes a set of critical thinking questions tailored specifically to the appraisal of theory and theorizing activity. These could be fruitfully incorporated into a social worker's critical thinking processes. How clearly and precisely are the concepts of the theory defined? In what ways has the historical or cultural context influenced the theory creation or theory use processes? To what degree does the theory provide explanations ranging across system levels: micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level? In what writing style (academic, literary, mathematical, formal-propositional, or logical) is the theory presented, and how well does the theorist use the style? To what degree does the theory achieve its purpose: description, explanation, prediction, critique, or design of intervention? How well does the theory fit with empirical observations? How well does the theory fit with existing theories? Is the theory useful in many common practice situations or only a few helping situations? How well does the theory assist the social worker-client system as they work together to achieve desired results, and how useful is it compared to a rival theory? Does the theory offer a novel or innovative perspective on human behavior and the environment? In what positive or negative ways has the theory changed over time? Does the theory and its use affirm value preferences important to the social work profession related to diversity, justice, strengths, and so on? How economically does the theory use concepts, propositions, and explicit linkages between propositions? From how many sources does the theory draw supporting evidence? I will comment more on some of these questions in the upcoming lessons on theory critique.

## Learning activities and reflections

- 1 Use the critical thinking framework and pick a familiar theory that you might use to help a client or significant other. Think about the theory and whether you should use it critically and report the highlights of how you will follow each of the eight steps in the appraisal process.
- 2 Develop a critical thinking approach to the claims of a conspiracy theorist. For example, how might you prepare a critical and evidence-informed counterargument to 9/11 conspiracy theorists. These theorists make an

odd claim. They claim that United States government agents destroyed the World Trade Center buildings in New York City on September 11, 2001. Terrorists were not responsible for this crime.

- 3 Do a scan of the website or media publications for recent controversies about human behavior theory (Creationism is a viable scientific alternative to Darwinian evolutionary theory, for example), policy issues (President Obama should direct police officers to find and deport every undocumented alien), medical or psychosocial interventions (homeopathic remedies work as healing agents for many physical ailments), or ethical conduct (the news corporation of Fox News has not acted improperly in influencing British officials and detectives and in hacking into phones). Expand on my examples or pick a contemporary controversy that interests you; a controversy where there is much coverage of pro and con arguments. Follow the details of the arguments carefully, and identify several illustrations of logical fallacies. Specify the nature of the fallacy and how the critical thinker might have challenged reasoning based on the fallacy.

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LESSON

# 23

## Critique theory using scientific and practical standards

(EPAS 2.1.1 Identify as a Professional Social Worker;  
EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge)

Critical thinking involves a judgment about the quality of our thinking activity by reference to standards. In the case of theorizing, scientists turn to an established set of scientific standards for determining the worth of theorizing and theories. These are norms agreed to by members of the scientific community. They are useful when deciding whether to use a particular theory, when validating a theory and its claims, and when attempting to theorize well.

### **Scientific standards for theory appraisal**

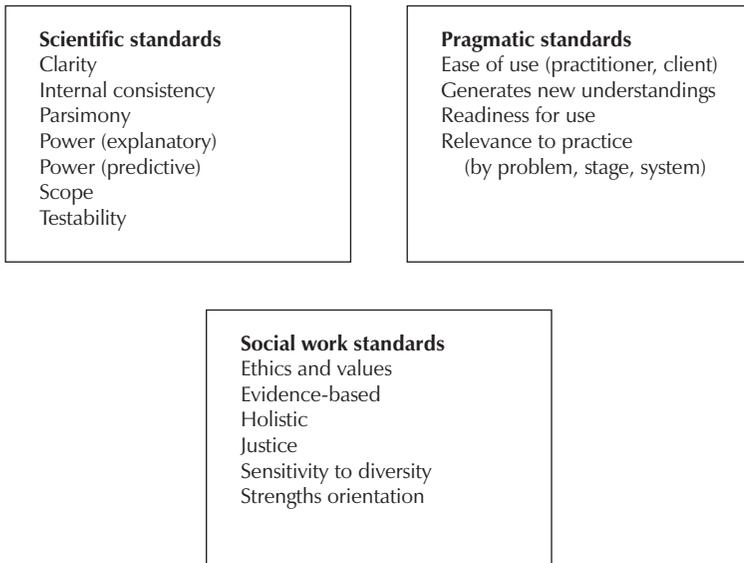
Scientists and other theory users provide various general standards, criteria for evaluating theories. In Figure 23.1, I identify three types of standards that the theorizing practitioner might use when thinking critically about theory and theorizing activities.

### **Scientific standards**

Let's describe first some of the most important scientific standards for theory evaluation.

#### ***Clarity***

A theory sacrifices usefulness if it is incomprehensible and can't be communicated to those other than the theory's biggest fans. Good theories define concepts clearly and explicitly. There is general agreement among the scientific community about the nominal definitions (Weis, 1998). Good theories develop valid, reliable, and culturally sensitive operational definitions of central concepts. The assumptions, concepts, propositions, and ordering of propositions of good theories are clearly articulated and can be understood



**Figure 23.1** Standards for judging theory: scientific, pragmatic, and social work

by the theory users. The theory and its elements can be discussed orally, and they can be written about in ways adequate to the reading capabilities of the common theory user (Hudson, 2010). The overall structure of a good theory can be laid out clearly and with enough detail for the user to understand the logical order of its theoretical argument (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

### ***Internal consistency***

A good theory is characterized by internal and logical consistency (Jaccard, & Jacoby, 2010). Concepts are defined clearly and consistently. The use of each concept is consistent with its definition, and each concept is used consistently in various presentations of the theory. Critics have challenged Kuhn's theory of scientific progress, for example, because he used the concept "paradigm" in too many different ways, including as scientific exemplar (noteworthy solution to a problem of science) and as disciplinary matrix (a framework or perspective shared by theorists in a particular theory community; Reynolds, 1971). Each variable in a good theory meets two criteria for consistency: mutual exclusiveness (no different thing can be placed in more than one category) and inclusiveness (all things can be placed in at least one category).

In a good theory, theoretical statements are consistent with underlying assumptions, and the concepts and propositions are linked together logically (Chafetz, 1978). Additionally, the scientific reasoning inherent in the theory—deductive or inductive—follows the rules for proper and logically

consistent reasoning. The theory and its elements are arranged coherently as compared to similar theoretical knowledge (Kaplan, 1964). A theory with a great deal of internal harmony is preferable to one with little internal consistency or harmony.

### ***Parsimony***

Optimally, the theory's presentation is parsimonious, too. Advocates of parsimony argue that a theory adequately stated with a few assumptions, concepts, and propositions is better than a comparable theory presented more complexly and using a greater number of elements. An ideal theory explains much about the "person interacting in the environment" but without excessive verbiage or mathematical symbolization (Hage, 1972). The standard of parsimony ensures that there is appropriate brevity and conciseness in the statements describing the theoretical elements and overall formulation (Chafetz, 1978). There are no unnecessary elements. For example, if there are two theories of racist behavior in public encounters between strangers, the theory that needs a one-page summarization is preferred to the theory detailed in 42 pages—other things being equal. However, be aware that person-in-environment configurations are often very complex, and simpler theories may not best help social workers understand these configurations.

### ***Power***

A good theory has explanatory and predictive power. The theory's explanations fit well with the set of facts known about the relevant phenomenon or processes and provide a comprehensive explanation (explanatory power). Such achievements have been established in the theory's record of explaining past instances (Yearley, 1984). Competing theoretical explanations have been ruled out as inadequate or spurious (Hage, 1972). For social work, good theories, for instance, explain much about the person, transactions, and environment, especially when compared to their competitors.

Preferred theories also have predictive power. They have been specified in ways that relate theory elements to their anticipated effects (in a series of tests, if x occurs, then y is likely to follow 75 percent of the time, for example). This feature of a theory makes precise prediction possible. The good theories have a public record also of predicting future events successfully.

### ***Scope***

Theoretical scope is related to explanatory power. A good theory provides a clear statement of the scope of its applicability (Cohen, 1980). The theory

creator has answered the question “under what other conditions and in what other situations has the theory been used successfully for explanation or to guide action” (Swedberg, 2012)?

Good theories have wide scope and can be generalized to and used in a wide variety of situations—different circumstances, settings, or populations. Theories with impressive scope have uses that aren’t restricted to a particular kind of client, a specific helping setting, a definite historical period, or an ecological setting. Additionally, theories with greater scope than competitors have shown the ability to handle many of the basic theoretical problems and practice challenges of concern to the profession of social work (Hage, 1972). Ideally, the limits of the theory’s scope are also identified.

### ***Testability***

A good theory has been translated into measurable variables and can be validated (Nugent, 1987; Shoemaker, Tankard, & Lasorsa, 2004). This allows for the derivation of hypotheses that can be tested in the empirical world by researchers and facilitates the appraisal of the fit between theory-based expectations and empirical observations (Aneshensel, 2002; Kaplan, 1964). Popper (1934/1959, 1963) called this the “falsification principle.” He questioned the value of any theoretical claim that couldn’t be refuted. *Falsification* means that a proposition, theory, or hypothesis derived from a theory is “scientific” only if it can be refuted by data. “God is good” is a statement with spiritual meaning but not a scientific statement; it can’t be challenged by scientific inquiry. A theory gains support in the scientific community when it passes multiple attempts by researchers in the scientific community to falsify or refute its major assertions. Ideally, evidence of theory application effectiveness in the same area as the practice puzzle or a closely related area has also been accumulated.

### **Questions guiding critical thinking about the scientific value of a theory**

The standards or norms discussed heretofore and some others have been transformed into a set of questions that might assist us as we think critically about theory and theorizing processes. Shoemaker, Tankard, and Lasorsa (2004), for example, propose that you ask the following questions about a theory. Is the theory testable? Is the theory parsimonious, stated as simply as possible? Does the theory have explanatory power and explain a great deal about the topic or challenge considered by the social work theory user? Does the theory help us make accurate predictions? Does the theory have a large scope and help us understand many important public problems and social work topics? Have the theorists associated with the theory’s development taken a cumulative approach and revised the theory whenever new evidence

is discovered? Has the theory been constructed formally and precisely; that is, have assumptions, concepts, nominal definitions, operational definitions, propositions, and the linkages between propositions been explicitly articulated? Does the theory have heuristic value and generate ideas for social work practice and research?

Chafetz (1978) adds criteria focused on the communicability of the theory. Are the assumptions explicitly stated? Are the concepts carefully defined and used in a consistent manner? Is the nature of the explanation(s) and the theoretical linkages spelled out clearly and without ambiguity?

Fawcett and Downs (1986) recommend a set of questions related to the theory's suitability for and support by scientific testing. Was the theory developed with reference to a sample representative of the theory user's population of interest? Are the concepts of the theory defined with empirically observable indicators? Are valid and reliable measurements of the indicators available? Are the hypotheses falsifiable? Are the theoretical statements backed up by empirical evidence?

## **Practical standards for theory appraisal**

Pragmatists contend that theorizers, researchers, and practitioners should judge theory by its practical consequences (Doane & Varcoe, 2005). Let's expand on the many ways that a theorizing practitioner might appraise the usefulness of a particular theory and its consequences.

### ***Specific practical standards***

A good theory is useful to the practitioner in direct and indirect planned change efforts and supports actions in varied professional roles: advocate, broker, educator, evaluator, leader, therapist, and so on. It contributes to the understanding of puzzling "person interacting in the environment" configurations, and it facilitates the achievement of desired outcomes in many different cases (Webster, & Whitmeyer, 2001). Good theory has several other and specific characteristics.

#### *Generates new understandings and interventions*

Gergen (1978) argues that we should judge theories on the capacity to generate something new. Ideal theories provoke debate about conventional human behavior and human development understandings, contribute to the transformation of selves and societies, change the way that people and collectives act, and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions of culture while suggesting alternative and innovative lines of social action. Stevenson (2005) expands on the generative feature of usefulness. Good theories provide the practitioners new ways of describing and conceptualizing their professional

selves. They contribute to the effectiveness of helping processes by helping workers understand problematic situations in new ways, by suggesting future scenarios and possibilities for action that enhance the goal setting process, and by identifying innovative helping actions that will lead to desired outcomes. In summary, a good theory is generative. It contributes to the professional work of accumulating sound knowledge. It suggests new lines of inquiry, new understandings, new research, and new applications for varied members of the profession (Hudson, 2010).

### *Readiness for use*

Other practical considerations about theory are important. For example, a good theory is ready for use. The application of good theories is feasible, legal, and possible with a manageable degree of training (Fawcett & Downs, 1986). Worren, Moore, and Elliott (2002) recommend that we judge how friendly a theory is to clients and practitioners. Ideal theories aren't too complicated for practice settings and don't need extensive modification before they can be applied. Ideal theories include operational definitions of central concepts that specify the procedures for use of the concepts in practice, and they include propositions stated in if-then form: If the worker/client takes this action, this outcome will follow. Ideal theories include presentations as narratives such as case studies that are interesting, easy to recall, and involving. Finally, ideally theoretical products make effective use of display conventions and supplement narratives with effective visual representations of the theory and its elements Weick (1987) suggests that the theories most relevant to worker goals and desired outcomes for clients and theories have operationalized variables carefully. Theories with operationalizations that suggest how the worker and client can use the theory's independent variables to effect change are better than theories that have not specified the indicators and operational measurement procedures for its variables. We can add that a good theory can be adapted for use by the practitioner.

### *Relevance to practice*

Contemporary practice-minded theorists have suggested the addition of other criteria regarding usefulness to the core of scientific standards. Many revolve around the theme of relevance to practice. Weick (1987) argues that relevance is a critical factor. Relevant theories describe person-in-environment challenges, life-stage issues, and system-level problems encountered often by practitioners. Relevant theories are timely and will help practitioners deal with contemporary personal and public problems. Relevant theories go beyond the obvious and add understandings that exceed practitioners' common sense and practice wisdom. Ninic (2000) adds that theorists enhance theoretical relevance when they construct

practical theories that describe the expected impact of a theory-based intervention or program on desired outcomes in specific contexts. Additionally, the theorists specify the likely direct costs and consequences of using the theory-guided intervention and the possible indirect or secondary consequences and costs. With this information, the theorizing practitioner can judge the usefulness and affordability of a theory application at the practice site. Relevant new theories, we should add, are similar to theories used previously and successfully by the practitioner to guide inquiry and plan interventions—or at least understandable with reference to familiar theories.

### **Questions to guide critical thinking about the practical usefulness of theory**

The theorizing practitioner can transform these practical standards into questions useful during critical thinking about theory and theorizing activities. Several theory experts (Doane & Varcoe, 2005; Stevenson, 2005) formulated questions specific to the issue of usefulness for social work practice. What will a particular theory or theoretical concept lead us to focus on, to attend to, and to do during the helping process? What difference will it practically make to the worker, client, and collaterals if this particular theory is selected and used? In what ways does the theory enhance the practitioner's and client system's efforts to describe, predict, explain, categorize, or intervene in regard to the challenging situation? To what degree does the theory help identify instrumental descriptions of the situation that imply specific actions or means likely to produce a desired change in the situation? What specific improvements in the person-interacting-environment configuration will follow the use of the theory? Does the theory use result in more perceptive understanding of life challenges and more responsive action? How practical is the theory compared to other theories?

### **Professional criteria for appraising theories**

Social workers also use the profession's value commitments to appraise theories critically and determine their validity, usefulness, and suitability for the profession (Vandsburger, 2004). A theory that meets scientific and pragmatic standards may be rejected if the worker judges it as poor in relation to our professional standards, such as ethical soundness, strengths orientation, justice promotion, or affirmation of difference. For example, a bad theory is one that undermines the appreciation of diversity by presenting stereotypical and demeaning ways of understanding culture, members of a culture, and human differences. Standards derived from social work values will be reviewed in the following lessons.

## Concluding remarks: using scientific, practical, and professional standards

There is a communal aspect to theory use and theory appraisal. Our scientific standards are very abstract and must be tailored to particular theory use situations. Giroux (1983) follows the pragmatic tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce when he suggests that theory appraisal occurs ideally in open, collaborative, democratic, and critical forums where all relevant stakeholders engage in dialogue and deliberate respectfully about the focal theory, its strengths, and its limitations. The negotiation of differences during theory appraisal sessions will be most successful when organized according to the same democratic and reflective principles and norms that guide scientific inquiry. Specifically, stakeholders should embrace ideals such as unimpeded communication, mutual understanding, the decentralization of power, and freedom from unconscious constraints or force. Stakeholders should also reflect continuously on the ideals, norms, and interactional patterns that characterize their cooperative theory appraisal and use these reflections to improve collective critique and decision-making processes.

## Learning activities and reflections

- 1 It is important for social workers to be alert for articles, books, and debates on the degree to which your favorite theories earn favorable answers to the evaluative questions used by scientists. Review and become familiar with the standards listed in the commentary. Find an article, an excerpt from a book, a research study, or some other document that includes a critical discussion of an explanatory theory, practice theory, or middle-range theory. Briefly identify the standard (s) used in the document and summarize in your own words the details of the critique (s) of the focal theoretical product.
- 2 Take each of the scientific standards listed in the commentary above. For each, summarize the meaning of this standard in your own words. Additionally, provide for each standard an illustration of how it might be violated by some explanatory theory or practice theory about “person interacting in the environment” configurations.
- 3 Take each of the practical standards listed in the commentary above. For each, summarize the meaning of this standard in your own words. Additionally, provide for each standard an illustration of how it might be violated by some explanatory theory or practice theory about “person interacting in the environment” configurations.
- 4 Observe a set of social workers and colleagues, clients, or other stakeholders during a discussion about the merits of a particular theory. Refer to the principles for democratic and dialogical collaboration summarized above. In what ways did the stakeholders conform to

these principles? What are some illustrations of variance from these principles such as intellectual bullying, monopolizing the conversation, poor listening, appealing to one's greater power or status, subtle or overt threats, or the intrusion of impulses and emotions with minimal awareness. Overall, what was the impact of interaction on the quality of the theory appraisal process?

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LESSON

# 24

## Critique theory using professional standard of ethics and values

(EPAS 2.1.2 Apply Ethical Principles;  
EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge)

Social workers share preferences regarding theory and theorizing activity. These preferences are expressed through our professional language including our declarations of core values and ethical guidelines (Bloom, Wood, & Chambon, 1991). All social workers must confront value and ethical issues during knowledge application, research, and practice processes. Professional values and ethics are very relevant to theorizing and theory use. Theorists create theoretical products with explicit or implicit attention to value issues, and theories include explicit or implicit directives for practical use; these directives have ethical implications (Meleis, 1985). Social workers can learn to take a critical approach to theory and inquire about the consistency of a theory with social work values and ethics (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1998).

We are a profession that borrows and reconstructs much knowledge from other professions and disciplines, but we also discriminate about what we borrow. Our values and ethical standards serve as a filtering screen ensuring that we borrow theoretical knowledge consistent with our profession's core convictions. When theorizing practitioners enter universities and research centers and search their knowledge archives to acquire theory for practical use, they should check the material against social work values and ethical principles before making selections. In this way, theorizing practitioners avoid careless or hazardous borrowing and use theoretical frameworks, models, and other elements that will contribute to sensitive, responsible, and successful practice.

## Value preferences and theory appraisal

Social work's mission is rooted in a set of core values. These values lead to the profession's central ethical principles. These core values also contribute to our unique perspective and guide knowledge selection and application. A chosen theory, its assumptions, implications, and uses, for example, should be congruent with the core values of the profession (Hudson, 2010). Major values are service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, integrity, and competence. Equality and self-determination are also important values (Barsky, 2010).

DePoy and Gilson (2007) call the value judgments, by social workers and others about the acceptability of any theoretical account, *explanatory legitimacy*. An appreciation for explanatory legitimacy directs the theory user to judge "person interacting in an environment" knowledge by consideration of value preferences in addition to the conventional standards of scientific validity and practical usefulness. A competent practitioner, they add, can identify and articulate the values used to appraise the merit of any theoretical account and can select a moral theoretical explanation for a theoretical puzzle.

A value is a standard or quality considered preferable or worthwhile. Each theoretical tradition and its theories include a set of value positions; these may be explicitly stated or implicit to the theory. For example, Barsky (2010) considers Marxist theory in relation to its conception of the preferred person and environment. In this theory, the person is a "cooperative" being, one who works with others for the common good rather than against others in competition for personal gain. The society is one committed to "equality." Each person receives an equal share of the society's resources. This theoretical orientation differs from intellectual systems that endorse the distribution of wealth and resources based on job, status, and entrepreneurial aggressiveness. Critics of Marxist theory associate it with less desirable values such as its endorsement of violent rather than peaceful means to redress injustices and its prioritization of collective over individual good. Because of these value issues and other perceived limitations of the tradition, Marxist theory and its derivatives have been mostly rejected by American social workers.

A theory's values must also be considered in relationship to the society's dominant values. Sociologist Robin Williams (1951) identified values prevalent in the United States. These include individualism (success follows individual effort and initiative); achievement especially as demonstrated by the accumulation of wealth, power, and prestige; hard and challenging work; efficiency (completion of tasks quickly and with minimal wasted effort); technology, especially technological solutions to environmental challenges; progress (continual movement toward "more and better"); material comfort (food and housing and identity-comforting possessions); mutual aid, at least in response to natural disasters; personal freedom; representative and

democratic government; equality of opportunity; and group superiority (the conviction that certain groups are more worthy than others). Perhaps many social workers reject Marxist theory because it threatens Americans who embrace social values such as individualism, competitive achievement, freedom, and group superiority. Theorizing practitioners need to consider the consonance of any theoretical candidate for application with the core values of the larger society and the communal site of use.

## Ethical standards for theory appraisal

The social work profession is committed to practice in accord with ethical standards related to the client's rights to dignity, respect, privacy, and self-determination. Theoretical traditions that suggest any assessment or intervention practices that humiliate or coerce clients are suspect. Theory-guided practice models that conceive of the worker as controlling rather than cooperating with those who need help deserve a negative evaluation.

Let's quickly review some major ethical guidelines derived from our values and endorsed by the social work profession (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2010). These are part of the code that was approved by the 1996 NASW Delegate Assembly and revised by the 2008 Assembly. The relevance to theoretical knowledge is also indicated.

Regarding the value of *service*, social workers' primary goal and ethical obligation are to help people in need and to address social problems. This includes using theoretical knowledge suitable for need meeting and problem amelioration assessment and intervention.

Regarding the value of *social justice*, social workers are ethically obligated to challenge social injustice. This includes efforts to build and spread theoretical knowledge about oppression, inequality, and justice-enhancing strategies.

Regarding the value of *dignity and worth of the person*, social workers are expected to respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person. This refers to a mindfulness of human importance, individual differences, and cultural-ethnic diversity. Mindfulness is enhanced potentially by theoretical knowledge.

Regarding the value given to the *importance of human relationships*, our ethical guidelines expect us to recognize the central importance of human relationships in life and to engage people as partners in the helping process. Effective and ethical engagement requires theoretical understanding about how relationships can foster change.

Regarding the value of *integrity*, ethical social workers behave in a trustworthy manner. This guideline doesn't include a directive regarding professional knowledge. However, we could suggest that social workers are honest about the theoretical orientation that guides their work, disclose information about the evidence supporting this orientation, and openly

confer with clients about their adaptations of proven theory-informed helping procedures.

Regarding the value of *competence*, social workers are expected to practice within their areas of expertise and develop and enhance their professional knowledge, skill, and attitudes. Don't use a theory if you don't understand it and know how to reconstruct it for inquiry or action planning. This guideline includes an explicit mandate for knowledge expansion. Social workers should strive continually to increase their professional knowledge, to apply knowledge in practice, and to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

Besides judging and critiquing theoretical knowledge for its support of these six ethical principles, competent social workers should become aware of some related ethical issues in the use of theoretical knowledge (Duncan, 1986). These include the requirement to adopt knowledge with proven value for client systems when possible; to refrain from the inappropriate or inept application of knowledge; to decline to make use of knowledge for the exclusive benefit of a special interest group in a way harmful to other groups; and to work hard to avoid any intentional misrepresentations of knowledge.

### **Illustration of theory appraisal by values**

In a chapter on applied symbolic interactionism (Forte, 2008), I examined the interactionist rejection of classic behaviorism and its derivatives. The argument was grounded in perceived value differences. Interactionists focus on the distinctive worth and capabilities of humans: communication by reciprocal perspective-taking activity, and the use of significant symbols. Issues of human purpose, intentionality, and creativity and the complex uses of language such as satire, irony, and humor fall within the interactionist practitioner's purview. In contrast, classic behaviorists are inclined to assume that humans have the same qualities that have been found in rats, pigeons, monkeys, and other nonhumans and treat clients accordingly. This lessens human dignity.

According to interactionists, humans are self-determining creatures; helping work should maximize capacities for choice. The behaviorist recommendation of reinforcement schedules, positive and negative behavioral control, conditioned stimuli, and operant learning may be ideas useful for working with understanding with lower animals. Humans, unlike animals, interpret and choose. Practice theory organized around interventions imposed on a person by an "expert" undermines self-determination.

Interactionists refer to the value of social justice to argue that classical behavioral practice is built on the foundations of an oppressive political philosophy. Clients are treated as captives of their learning history who can

gain behavioral flexibility only with the aid of authoritarian behaviorists. Scientific practitioners become oligarchs with a monopoly on the knowledge of psychosocial change. Behaviorist assessment and intervention support the bureaucratic and elitist impulses of social control agents and become an extension of the state's apparatus for defining truth and allocating power. Such behaviorist approaches have been most frequently institutionalized in agencies of control such as correctional boot camps, prisons, mental hospitals, income maintenance programs, and substance abuse programs. In these settings, human lives are often crushed in the name of objective and scientific theory application. Behaviorist practice contrasts significantly to progressive-interactionist practice.

When participating in practice endeavors, interactionists claim to affirm “dignity,” “social justice” and the “importance of relationship” values. In contrast to classical behaviorists as profiled by interactionist critics, interactionists relate to people as autonomous actors making meaning of their situations and lives. Information gathering and assessment is a partnership between the worker and the client; both bound by a common humanity. An egalitarian helping dyad or group is created, and members become innovative co-constructors of their own destinies. Social order is accomplished by cooperative and mutually respectful joint action, not by behavioral engineering.

Many behavioral social workers will reject this critique of the behavioral theoretical framework as inaccurate or outdated. However, the lesson here is that social workers should become active in appraising theoretical content using professional values and ethical standards.

## **Questions to guide critical thinking about theory using ethics and values**

There are a variety of questions that a theorizing practitioner might ask when using value preferences and ethical guidelines to think critically about theory and its use. He or she might start with a general question: What are the ethical and value issues, limitations, and strengths, related to a focal theory and its use? A variety of specific questions might also inform critical and reflective theorizing and theory use. In what ways do the theory's core assumptions, root metaphors, and explicit and implicit values (its value base) align (or fail to align) with values of the profession? How well does the value base of the theory align with social work values as compared to other theories? How well do the uses of the theory allow adherence to social work's ethical guidelines compared to other theories? How does the theory compare to other theories in its alignment with ethical guidelines and the degree that likely uses will be ethical? Would theory use increase the likelihood that the practitioner violates an ethical guideline included in the professional code of ethics?

## Learning activities and reflections

- 1 Reflect on some piece of theoretical knowledge that you have acquired in a class or in your career. How would you appraise the quality of the theoretical knowledge? How well does this knowledge meet the evaluation criterion shared by most social workers for good theory? These include a strengths orientation, appreciation for social justice, sensitivity to diversity, a bio-psycho-social or holistic orientation toward its theoretical explanations, an affirmation of social work ethics and values, and empirical support for its effective application. What are some of your personal reactions to the theoretical knowledge? Did it fit or not fit with your own values, theoretical style, and preferences? How might the theory be improved if it were deficient as judged by any of the social work standards or by your personal standards?
- 2 Imagine that you are considering various possible referrals for a troubled adolescent on your caseload. One is a correctional boot camp. You decide to investigate further and learn that the boot camp's administrators assert that the program makes effective use of a behavior modification theoretical base. The boot camp claims to remove male adolescents from environments filled with negative behavioral models and from stimuli that trigger self-defeating, reckless, or self-destructive behavior. The heads of boot camp residents are shaved, their belongings stored, and their clothing replaced with uniforms. These procedures are viewed as a consequence for past misdeeds and a means to eliminate any rewards for deviant identities. Defiant or disobedient teenagers are punished harshly; punishments are often derived from military training programs. For example, rule breakers are forced to complete lengthy and grueling physical exercise routines. Fear is often induced in the youthful offenders as a way to scare them straight. The boot camp is organized as a status hierarchy, and new arrivals are treated as worthless and are humiliated often and in public gatherings. Privilege and status can be earned only by meeting standards for appropriate and responsible social behavior as determined by superior camp members. Elevation from the lowest rank to the next rank takes at least six months. After further study, you learn also that teenagers have died at several correctional boot camps in the United States.

For this learning activity, ignore the question of whether the boot camp is actually applying a behavioral theoretical framework. Many grossly distort the perspective. For example, Skinner strongly argued against punishment as an intervention and for the frequent use of reinforcement to change behavior patterns. Instead, identify possible ethical issues as identified by the social work code that might merit consideration. Review your position on the boot camp program, procedures, and interventions

using the social work code of ethics. Conclude with a summary of your decision regarding the referral and your rationale for the decision.

- 3 Review in your mind the core social work values and the value positions supported commonly by other groups in the United States. Consider the controversy associated with the teaching of evolutionary theory in public schools and the advocates for a curriculum that includes creationism. Darwin theorized that all organisms on Earth, including human beings, are descended from a common ancestor or ancestral gene pool. This theory asserts also that the line of descent for humans can be traced back to great apes. Creationism, in contrast, is the religious conviction that God is the creator of the Earth, human beings, and all other life.

What values might opponents and proponents consider when appraising the Darwinian theory of evolution? In terms of values, what would opponents to evolutionary theory find objectionable? What do proponents mean when they claim that evolutionary theory has been validated by scientific evidence? In what settings providing social work services might agency values concur with the values implicit in evolutionary theory? In what settings would the theory's values and the agency values conflict? What would be a value-based social work stance toward evolutionary theory? Can you imagine a way of reconciling theological beliefs in a higher being or God with scientific confidence in the facts of evolution?

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# Critique theory using professional standard of evidence

(EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.6 Engage in Research-Informed Practice;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge)

“Show me the money” was a popular phrase in the 1990s; the phrase indicates a skeptical reaction to promises of big salaries and bonuses. Social workers should be skeptics, too, and respond to claims about the quality of a theory or the effectiveness of a theory-derived intervention with the demand: Show me the evidence.

## Evidence and its sources

Evidence and theory are not antagonists: “The accumulation of empirical evidence *per se* and the development of theory need not be seen as alternative and competing approaches” (Green, 2000 p. 6, italics in original). Evidence is everything that an impartial judge might consider to determine the truth or accuracy of a theoretical claim. Evidence is also called *empirical support*. Evidence ranges widely and refers to all that can be brought to bear when thinking critically about theory or theory-guided practice (Layder, 1998). Evidence can be found in client reports, notes on practitioner observations, transcripts of sessions and, most important, empirical research studies.

As part of competent theorizing, social workers should be able to find and judge evidence about theories (Anderson, 1976; van Ryn & Heaney, 1992; Whitmeyer, 2002). This includes evidence documenting that the theory guides accurately the assessment of PIE challenges; for instance, the theory-derived assessment tools are valid, reliable, and culturally sensitive. For a good theory, there is evidence that worker and client partners have achieved the desired results adapting and using the theory and its elements in natural helping situations as predicted by the theory. Additionally, the evidence shows that the theory has been applied effectively to deal with similar puzzling situations faced by the worker and the theory has been applied effectively to aid people such as those participating in the current

relationship or program. For a good theory, there is also a body of evidence allowing the practitioner to make judgments about its overall explanatory and predictive power.

Evidence is often recorded formally in written documents such as professional notes, single-system practice evaluation reports, reports on program evaluation, randomized controlled experiments, quasi-experimental studies, case reports, systematic reviews of intervention studies, and expert opinion statements. The theorizing practitioner might look for relevant evidence in journals such as *The Journal of Evidence Based Social Work* or *Research on Social Work Practice*. The practitioner might carefully generate a list of theory-specific challenge terms and search Web sites devoted to collecting empirical findings on effectiveness such as the Campbell Collaboration ([www.campbellcollaboration.org](http://www.campbellcollaboration.org)), a site presenting systematic reviews of research results. The practitioner might also cull evidence from books summarizing accounts related to effective interventions directed to particular size client systems, particular fields of practice, or particular client problems. For example, see the book by Feit, Egan, and Wodarski (2009) called *Evidence-Based Interventions for Social Work in Health Care*.

## Evidence and theory appraisal

In relation to the social work standard of evidence, social workers are like courtroom judges attempting to make use of all the information presented by both prosecuting and defense attorneys regarding the guilt or innocence of the defendant. In the case of theory use, the defendant is a middle-range theory, a practice theory, a theoretical concept or proposition, a theory-derived assessment strategy, or a theory-guided intervention.

Theoretical traditions vary in their commitment to developing interventions and testing their effectiveness. Practice approaches derived from theoretical traditions also vary in the quality of their evidentiary base. Some include a set of interventions that are well established and possess clear evidence of efficacy. Behavioral practitioners, for example, have distinguished their approach by accumulating hundreds of studies supporting behavioral interventions. Some use interventions with limited or no evidence of efficacy. The past-life regression approach used for journeys into one's lives before birth has a questionable theoretical base and makes unsupported claims about healing effects. Social workers prefer to use interventions that will work.

Scientific reasoning processes of deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning can help when weighing evidence. Earlier commentaries reviewed, respectively, deductive theorizing, deriving a specific hypothesis from a general statement, and inductive theorizing, deriving a general pattern from a set of observations. *Abductive reasoning* or logic (DePoy

& Gilson, 2007) is a third form of reasoning. It involves an intellectual and creative process of judging which explanation or interpretation of some aspect of “the person interacting in the environment” is the most plausible one. Abductive reasoning is also useful for thinking critically about theory. When appraising the relative merits of each hypothesized theoretical explanation, the social worker gives attention to the degree of credible evidence supporting the alternatives but also uses her educated intuition.

Social work values and the judgments of colleagues and clients are other important forms of input for validating a preferred explanation. As suggested above, scientific practitioners make certain to consider systematic empirical validations of explanatory theoretical frameworks, practice theories, and theory-informed assessment and intervention procedures (Jaccard, & Jacoby, 2010).

## Best practices, best theories, and theory appraisal

How should the practitioner engage in critical thinking about a specific theory element by judging the available evidence? Regarding theory-derived interventions, Chambless and Hollon (1998) recommend that the worker look for evidence that the intervention has been clearly specified and also shown to be effective in carefully controlled research with a specific population. Questions to guide such a search include Does it work? How do we know it works, and under what circumstances does it work best?

The practitioner might also look for evidence that a theory-derived intervention has achieved the status of a “best practice.” Such interventions have been judged as preferred ways for providing competent services to a particular client group with specific problems. These conclusions are based often on empirical studies and the informed judgments of experts. For example, The Child Welfare League of America reported on a youth development theoretical orientation for service to lesbian, gay, and gender-non-conforming youth in out-of-home care settings (Wilber, Ryan, & Markstone, 2006). They identified best practices related to supporting the expression of sexual orientation, providing a safe place for youths to come out, offering nondiscriminatory health care, creating positive recreational outlets, and responding to client-specific concerns.

The achievement of “best practice” status doesn’t ensure that the intervention will lead to desired outcomes in a specific case (Thyer, & Pignotti, 2011). The worker and client using an evidence-informed approach should not shortcut the processes involved in searching for and selecting interventions suitable to their circumstances. Supporting this point, Marsh (2004) notes “empirical practice advocates argue for both the utility of multiple theoretical frameworks and the enhancement of practice through the use of evidence *plus* theory *plus* practice experience” (p. 20, italics in original).

Regarding “best” theory-guided approaches, Bledsoe and her colleagues (2007) suggested the consideration of various factors in judging different theory-guided approaches to helping. These included well-established usage, evidence of general efficacy, and research indications of effectiveness as a treatment in specific cases. Here’s an illustration of their findings. In a review of three large studies on 23 different approaches, they reported that behavior therapy received three positive checks: well established, clear evidence of efficacy, and solid evidence validating the treatment approach. In contrast, existential psychotherapy received no checks. Of note, there are many practice theories and theory-derived interventions that are not yet supported by a substantial body of supporting empirical evidence. In these cases, decisions about theory suitability may involve weighing client preferences, situational characteristics, and varied types of evidence. Reviews of evidential support, however, can be starting points for appraising the quality of different theories and interventions.

## **Questions that guide critical thinking about theory using evidence**

When thinking critically about theories and theorizing activities, the social work practitioner can ask the following questions. What is the overall evidence supporting the theoretical approach? What evidence confirms the effectiveness of particular elements of the applied theoretical approach such as its assessment tools and intervention strategies? What evidence supports the effectiveness of the approach in specific circumstances—for a specific client system with its values and identifying characteristics, with a particular problem or challenge, by a worker with specific qualities and training, in a particular environmental context, and toward the achievement of definite outcomes? What is the evidence indicating the overall comparative effectiveness of the theory, theory-informed assessment tool, or intervention strategy and also the comparative effectiveness in particular circumstances? How will the working involve the client in weighing evidence and making informed decisions?

## **Learning activities and reflections**

- 1 Identify several theory-derived interventions that you have added or would like to add to your professional toolbox. Name the interventions that you considered as candidates for inclusion and their theoretical base. Discuss how you have considered this issue of “effectiveness” when selecting interventions from a range of possible interventions. What evidence did you use or might you use to help in the decision-making process? In what other ways, have you attempted to check on the effectiveness of the possible interventions?

- 2 Develop a detailed plan for seeking evidence about the quality of a possible theory-informed intervention. Where will you search? How might you conduct the search? How much evidence will you attempt to locate? By what standards and in what ways will you consider critically the provided evidence? How will the client participate in this process?
- 3 Reflect on the assertion by a practitioner: I know that I have made a major difference in the life of this client system. What are some possible arguments that the practitioner might make to support such a claim? Which arguments would you find credible and why? Which arguments would you doubt and why? Which arguments would show that the practitioner based her or his statements about effectiveness on evidence?

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# Critique theory using professional standard of holism

(EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge)

Holism is the idea that the properties of a system can't be determined or explained by its component parts alone. Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1969) championed *holistic theorizing*, thinking systematically about wholes instead of parts. General systems theory, the framework that he founded, was a science of wholeness, and he asserted that the systems expression, "The whole is more than the sum of its parts" means that "constitutive characteristics are not explainable from the behavior of the isolated parts. The characteristics of the complex, therefore, appear as 'new' or 'emergent'" (p. 55). Phillips (1976) discusses holism as involving three related assumptions: parts can't be understood apart from the whole, parts and the whole are in constant and dynamic relations, and the whole can't be understood fully by reference only to its parts. Hanson (1995) uses the mathematical imagery of non-summativity. The contention that the whole is greater than the sum of parts means that we can't understand a whole by adding the qualities of each of its parts. For example, one John Lennon, one Ringo Starr, one Paul McCartney, and one George Harrison didn't add up to one super rock group, the Beatles. The Beatles incorporated the four distinct members and their personalities, but something unique emerged also when they created music: a group chemistry and creativity. These properties of the band as a holistic system differed significantly from the qualities of each member as a musician (and as a leader of his own rock group).

## Holism and theory appraisal

Social workers often judge theoretical knowledge and practical theorizing activity using the holistic standard. Let's elaborate on the meaning of this normative standard.

### ***The holistic standard***

In its standards for social work with clients dealing with genetic disorders, the National Association of Social Workers (2003) asserts “the complexity of genetic conditions requires a holistic approach to intervention” (p. 13). The Association encourages practitioners to attune themselves to the blend of emotional needs, social needs, and biological conditions, and they recommend multidisciplinary teamwork and theorizing to ensure a holistic assessment and intervention plan. The International Federation of Social Workers in its position paper argues that “social work utilizes a variety of skills, techniques, and activities consistent with its holistic focus on persons and their environments” (spelling in original, 2010, p. 1).

Social workers have called the holistic approach a bio-psycho-social model, or more recently, a bio-psycho-social-spiritual model. Theoretical knowledge that meets the holistic standard focuses on the physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual dimensions of the person as these are connected to environmental contexts. This whole configuration is theorized as relevant to life success. Parts of the person and parts of the environment may have weight in particular challenging circumstances, but the holistic theoretical lens looks at and clarifies the entire picture. For example, Lee, Chan, Ng, and Leung (2009) developed a holistic framework integrating empirically supported knowledge about body, mind, spirit, and context. They created this theoretical framework for guiding social work practice and illustrated its use with female patients with depressive disorders, female patients with breast cancer, women who have survived traumatic events, and patients with colorectal cancer. The holistic framework directs both the assessment and intervention processes with these client groups. For another example, addiction to substances has a powerful biological base, but holistic theories consider also psychological dimensions, social systems, and other factors (Forte, 2006).

### ***Alternatives to holism: reductionism***

The holistic stance can be contrasted to its opposite: reductionism. Holists prefer the imagery of the living organism and assert that a human being or social system such as a living organism can't be fruitfully explained by reduction to selected parts. Reductionists prefer the imagery of machines. Analysis of a part is critical to understanding a machine's functioning or malfunctioning. *Reductionism* in theoretical work assumes that an entire person or social system can be explained by reduction to its parts and that a unit at a higher level of complexity and organization (a society) can be explained adequately by theorizing about the qualities of the lower level and constituent units (individual citizens). Reductionists argue, for example, that societal racism can be grasped theoretically by focusing on the prejudice

of the individuals in the society. A gang can be understood if we know the values, aspirations, behavioral tendencies, personality traits, and other characteristics of the individual members. A family and its qualities of cohesion and adaptability can be assessed if we ask each member to complete a survey documenting his or her individual perceptions of family dynamics. Holists reject this approach. Take the last example: Family cohesion, they would contend, is a dynamic property of the family group, not of the individual members. A survey of members tells us only about individual perceptions, not about entire family connectedness.

We can think of reduction going in two directions (Forte, 2006; Wiley, 1994). Downward reductionism occurs when theorists start with a high-level system and then theorize using lower-level factors and processes. Spikes in societal hate crime and minority group scapegoating are explained by changes in individual beliefs and fears. Economic trends and shifting cultural norms are omitted from consideration. Here's a second example. A homosexual sexual orientation is fully explained according to downward reducers by a genetically structured part of the brain. The environment and socialization experiences are left out of the equation.

Upward reductionism reduces complex explanations of the person-in-environment configuration to the pervasive influence of large-scale social systems. The personal dimensions are left out of these equations. For instance, all human behavior is determined, Marxists sometimes assert, by one's place in the larger political and economic structure. Personal choice is irrelevant. Material arrangements—access assigned at birth to wealth, housing, good jobs, and other life necessities—preordain us for prosperity and health or poverty and early death. Human choice and creativity have minimal relevance.

## **Holism and parts/whole theorizing**

Bohm (1980), a scientist and philosopher, reported about his distinguished career “my main concern has been with understanding the nature of reality in general and of consciousness in particular as a coherent whole” (p. ix). The holistic standard urges social workers to judge theories by their appreciation for the irreducible qualities of wholes and by their interest in looking for continuous exchanges between parts and the whole. At times, the social worker may use theoretical analyses or research processes that examine the whole in terms of its components and study a part in isolation from the whole: theories about the woman with qualities independent of her role as wife or the thought processes of the irrational person separate from his or her thought communities (Phillips, 1976). This is similar to everyday theorizing when we single out a family member's face from the family portrait and think about their expressive facial patterns. The social worker committed to the holistic standard, however, uses analyses of a

part cautiously with continuous reminders to her- or himself of the part's embeddedness in the whole and a quick return to use of theoretical literature and tools that explicate the indivisibility of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of the human experience.

## Questions that guide critical thinking about a theory considering holism

Holists suggest a number of questions to guide theorizing practitioners as they think critically about a theory or theorizing activities. Is the theory a conceptual system permeated by downward reductionism, claims that all aspects of a higher level system can be explained by one lower level factor or process? Is the theory a conceptual system permeated by upward reductionism, claims that all aspects of a lower level system are determined by the one operation of a higher level system? Is the theory a holistic conceptual system assuming the whole is greater than the sum of the parts and including a continual emphasis on the complex and dynamic relation of parts to the whole, and the reciprocal influences of the whole and its parts? To what degree does the theory incorporate holistic philosophical tenets as compared to other theories, and to what degree does the theory support holistic approaches to information gathering, assessment formulation, intervention planning, intervention, and evaluation?

## Learning activities and reflections

- 1 Reflect on social work with a family and their school-age child. The parents have received several reports from the sixth grade teacher that the child is misbehaving in the classroom and earning grades lower than his apparent potential. Start by attempting to identify “the whole” in this case? What theoretical knowledge might you need to gather information in a holistic manner and to formulate a holistic assessment? Where would you search for such knowledge, and how would you judge the knowledge to determine whether it met the standard of holism?
- 2 Social workers attempt to enhance clients' performance of important life roles. The bio-psycho-social perspective adopted by social work is a holistic stance. It assumes the interrelationship of basic life and role processes. Reflect on your performance as a student or as worker. How may health problems affect your psychology, your social interaction, and your spirituality and, thus, your performance of the school or work role? How can thinking or feeling difficulties complicate your efforts to stay healthy, to maintain supportive relationships, to affirm your faith beliefs and, thus, your performance of the role? How might troubles or setbacks in your social context (your relationships, networks, or memberships in larger societal groups) contribute to physical troubles,

psychological malfunctions, or doubts related to faith and, thus, your performance of the role? You might do the same kind of analysis of the influence of spiritual challenges (moments of doubt, for example) on the other dimensions of your whole being and on your role performance?

- 3 Review the following reductionist statements about the “person interacting in the environment.” Some psychodynamic theorists have asserted that all human behavior can be understood as manifestations of aggressive and sexual drives and that all environmental patterns can be understood as the collective efforts to channel these instinctual drives. Some theorists aligned with sociobiology make a reductionist claim that all individual and collective action can be understood from an evolutionary perspective as those patterns that were selected over time because they gave the focal human population a survival advantage.

Pick one of these theoretical assertions, or identify a similar reductionist generalization. What are your reactions to this claim about human behavior and the social environment? Can you identify counter-examples that might undermine the assertion’s validity? What illustrations of topics of concern to social workers at the family, community, organizational, societal, or international levels might not be well explained by the assertion? Pick one human behavior or human development area or topic at a system level higher than genetic inheritance or human drives. Then, offer an alternative, holistic, and non-reductionistic theoretical explanation of this aspect of human behavior and the environment.

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LESSON

27

# Critique theory using professional standard of justice

(EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.5 Advance Human Rights;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge;  
EPAS 2.1.8 Engage in Policy Practice)

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) defines justice as “the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities,” and NASW declares that “social workers aim to open the doors of access and opportunity for everyone, particularly those in greatest need” (2010, p. 1).

## The justice standard and theory appraisal

According to Witkin and Gottschalk (1988), theorizing has an important function in the global project to liberate oppressed people and to achieve just social arrangements. They argue:

a distinctive feature of social work has been its commitment to a value base aimed at promoting a particular vision of social justice. These values help set social work apart from allied disciplines and professions. The evaluation of theories must consider their relationship to these values. (p. 216)

The social worker should use those theories that challenge destructive and unjust conditions and suggest better alternatives. Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) add a specific directive. Social workers should identify and reject the theoretical frameworks that advance the interests of the ruling groups while furthering the exploitation and domination of many other social groups. Politically engaged theory critique can raise the consciousness of social workers and other citizens susceptible to becoming passive victims of the ruling groups. The justice standard for theorizing and for theory evaluation is a necessary tool in the work of justice advocates rebelling against oppressors and promoting human emancipation from circumstances of arbitrary control and domination.

Swenson (1998) recommends the use of the justice standard, too. She rejects the position that a theoretical framework should be considered “value-free” and judged only by references to explanatory power and evidence of positive outcomes after application. Theories are not neutral. Knowledge is socially created, filtered through cultural perspectives, and can be used to protect the interests of groups with disproportionate privilege, power, and status. Social workers, Swenson (1998) adds, should give preference to theories congruent with justice. For instance, she endorses the strengths perspective because it emphasizes human capacities and rejects any “blame the victim” assumptions about humans and their struggles. She also appreciates the feminist theoretical perspective for its critique of power based on domination and subordination, for its assumption that the personal is political (personal experiences are always linked to social, economic, and political structures), and for its development of a methodology for raising the consciousness of vulnerable group members and fostering their liberation.

Lewis and Bolzan (2007) reinforce Swenson’s pointed endorsement of critical thinking about theory in terms of justice. They write that

social work theorists draw on the value base of social work, in particular social justice, as a boundary marking strategy to define itself as a discrete professional group informed by knowledge, practice, and research from other fields of professional endeavor. (p. 139)

## **Gil’s profile of the just society**

David Gil (1994, 1998, 2002, 2004), a distinguished social work theorist, has drawn on empowerment theories (critical and feminist approaches, for instances) to develop a vivid conception of the ideal and just person-in-environment configuration. His profile is a useful way to spell out the justice standard. In brief, he imagines the person as an active citizen with a critical consciousness and a capacity for dialogue with others. Transactions between people are I-Thou exchanges with each person treated as an equal, autonomous, authentic subject holding the same rights and responsibilities as any other person. The ideal social environment for Gil is a just society, one free from coercion, exploitation, and oppression and one characterized by wise stewardship of resources, member participation in workplace decision making, and the fair and balanced distribution of goods and service. In this just society, all can meet their basic needs, governance is democratic and nonhierarchical, and there are opportunities for all to develop their human potentials. The practitioner might take this justice-oriented depiction of the ideal “person interacting in the environment” state and use it to think critically about a focal theory and its contribution to the realization of Gil’s characterization of the just society.

## Justice and theory appraisal: an illustration

Let's take the case of attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder—a diagnosis asserting that a person has difficulty in staying focused and paying attention, difficulty in controlling behavior, and a tendency to impulsivity and over-activity. The underlying biomedical theoretical model for this diagnostic approach suggests that this is a biological disorder and the primary causes are genetic and neurological. Blame is centered on failed bodily processes. We could accept the narrow argument explaining this phenomenon. Or we could theorize about other relevant factors such as crowded schools and classrooms, outdated and poorly written textbooks, inexperienced teachers, family problems, boredom, hunger, preoccupation with text messaging and Web scanning, and inadequate opportunities for physical movement and exercise during the typical class day. We might wonder whether children from poor families are more often diagnosed with this “biomedical” condition as a way to ignore the ways that these families and their schools receive very few resources compared to those in wealthy communities. We might also wonder about collusion between pharmaceutical companies, some doctors, some psychologists, and even some social workers to profit from the recommendation that medications must be bought and used as the primary intervention once the biomedical theoretical explanation of restlessness is accepted. In justice-oriented theorizing, large political, economic, and cultural patterns are allocated responsibility for the unjust and sloppy use of a medical label.

## Questions that guide critical thinking about theory considering justice

In order to act on the following conviction—theorizing activities, theoretical frameworks, their underlying assumptions, and their elements should be appraised by the justice standard—the practitioner can ask a series of questions (Anderson, 1976; Swensen, 1998; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988). What particular interest groups are served by theory and use of the theory, and are those interests aligned or not aligned with the needs of client populations, especially the most vulnerable groups? Do the theory and its uses affirm the self-determination of members of oppressed groups? Do the theory and its uses contribute to the fair allocation of societal resources and to the extension of opportunities to more social groups? Do the theory and its uses contribute to the expression of marginalized voices in public forums and policymaking arenas? Do the theory and its uses expose unquestioned assertions that obscure the structures and processes causing inequality? Do the theory's assumptions, concepts, and propositions affirm human rights, enhance solidarity, and increase economic, political, and social equality and opportunity for all? Or do the theory and its applications support actions and

policies that threaten human rights, undermine solidarity, and lessen equality and opportunity for select groups in the society? How well do the theory and its uses promote all forms of justice as compared to other theories?

## Learning activities and reflections

- 1 The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) reported that in 2003, 4 percent of children in the four- to eight-year-old category, 10 percent of children in the nine- to twelve-year-old category, and 10 percent of children in the thirteen- to eighteen-year-old category had been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Many children were required to take medications prescribed by their doctors. The center noted also that the diagnosis of ADHD had increased an average of 3 percent per year from 1997 to 2006.

How can we explain theoretically this growing epidemic? Debate the statement “Personal problems and relationship difficulties such as classroom restlessness are too often defined using a biomedical theoretical framework that emphasizes medical diseases.” What evidence for and against this statement can you present? What are some positive and negative implications of the “medicalization of problems” in relation to the promotion of economic, political, and social justice? What factors besides theoretical convictions and research support might lead a practitioner to use the biomedical model for problem definition and explanation? Do you suspect that children with certain group membership characteristics are more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD than other children? Which groups and why?

- 2 Take the role of critical thinker and engaged citizen committed to promoting social justice. Examine the proposition promoted by many classical “laissez faire” economic theorists and policy leaders in the United States. They propose that the best financial market is an unregulated market (the concept “market” refers to spheres of activity characterized by exchanges designed to achieve profit, and the concept “regulation” refers to the rules and governance of exchange processes by agents of the government or organizations imposed on the market).

Think critically using the justice standard. What are possible criticisms of this free-market theoretical assumption? How has this assumption advanced the interests of the ruling groups at the expense of most other citizens? Provide three or four examples. In the last 30 years, this economic approach has become increasingly influential in the United States and concurrently, the rich have become richer and the poor poorer: The top 20 percent of our society, for example, control 80 percent of the wealth, and the wealthiest 1 percent control almost 40 percent of the nation’s wealth (Norton & Ariely, 2010). What might be a “justice” response to this trend toward inequality? What alternative

theories, policies, and arrangements (economic, political, social) would achieve fairer economic consequences for the vulnerable populations served by social workers?

- 3 A just society provides equal social opportunity and treatment, political opportunity and treatment, and economic opportunity and treatment. Such societies are rare; inequality, differential opportunity, and discriminatory treatment are common. Characterize your salient social and cultural memberships related to age, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, region, and sexual orientation. Using these memberships, place yourself and your family in the societal hierarchy of status (low status to high status).

Describe in detail how, at some point in your family's development, two or three of these membership factors influenced your family's interaction, access to resources, communication patterns, division of labor, rituals, traditions or other family experiences. For example, when my father abandoned our Italian-American family and started to renege on his family support agreement, we changed from a middle-class to a lower-class single mother-headed unit. The effects of this downward mobility were great. We moved to a poor, somewhat dangerous, and mostly African American neighborhood. Each rent day brought fears that we would be evicted. My mother assumed traditionally male and female roles. I began to work part-time to supplement the family's income. For a short time, my three younger siblings had to live in a residential institution. Our relatives blamed my mother for our difficulties; minimal pressure was put on my father to meet his obligations.

Depending on your family's relative status, provide either an example of your experience of positive differential treatment (privilege) or an example of negative differential treatment (discrimination) related to your social and cultural background. What impact did the experience have on your bio-psycho-social development? Organize these reflections as a small-scale theory relating membership, position in a status hierarchy, and family development. How might these reflections help you understand and work with clients placed in a low status by their community and some of the injustices that they confront?

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LESSON

28

# Critique theory using professional standard of sensitivity to diversity

(EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.4 Engage Diversity;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge)

Social workers prefer theoretical frameworks that affirm human differences rather than elevating certain membership groups to a conceptual place of privilege and casting other membership characteristics to the depths of the condemned. From such theories, it is more feasible to develop culturally sensitive interventions. Culturally sensitive interventions are defined as interventions with the following feature: the “target group’s culture (i.e., values, norms, beliefs, practices) are incorporated into the design, delivery, and evaluation of an intervention.” Such intervention development is done for the purpose of making the intervention “more accessible, congruent, and effective” (Jackson & Hodge, 2010, p. 260).

## **Diversity and theory appraisal**

Professional socialization mandates screening for and training in cultural sensitivity and competence. Gatekeepers monitor, then, the social worker’s capacity for taking the perspective of colleagues and clients from various cultural and membership backgrounds. The Council on Social Work Education (2013), for example, expects social workers to understand how diversity shapes the human identity and experience, to be competent in engaging human differences in practice, and to affirm our clients as persons whatever their membership characteristics. Human differences are understood in terms of the intersection of many different factors including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, geographic location, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. Human differences are key to

understanding variations in life chances and life constraints for persons, social groups, and communities.

## **Perspective taking, theoretical pluralism, and diversity**

Generally, the development of theorizing competencies contributes to the perspectivist thinking about theoretical knowledge (Guzzini, 2001). Perspective taking refers to the perceptual, cognitive, affective, and imaginative processes used to anticipate, understand, interpret, or infer the covert and private feelings, cognitions, and intentions of another person or group of persons in order to coordinate one's overt conduct, behavior, or actions with that other person or group (Forte, 1998). Perspective taking is conceptualized as multidimensional (Schwalbe, 1988). Perspective-taking competence includes situational accuracy (correct decoding of external communicative signals and predictions of other's likely actions); range (the capacity to take and understand many different types of people and a diversity of perspectives); and depth (the capacity to infer fully the cognitive and emotional patterns and dynamics of an other's perspective). Perspective-taking performance depends on motivational factors and competence factors.

As a profession, social work affirms the proposition that contemporary pluralistic societies operate best when members of diverse cultural and other membership groups work to understand and respect one another, learn to accept and value human differences, and make commitments to cooperate together on community projects. This proposition is relevant to boundary work in multi-theory settings. Practice communities characterized by professionals with different theoretical allegiances are like pluralistic societies. Adept practical theorizers learn that there are multiple theoretical frameworks that are useful for making sense of a particular practice puzzle. Problem solving is enhanced by reciprocal perspective taking cooperation across theoretical, disciplinary, and professional boundaries. So theory users must learn to present their own positions to those with contrary theoretical preferences and explore areas of convergence and possibilities for joint action despite disagreements.

There is a close relationship between theoretical pluralism and social pluralism. When practitioners endorse theoretical pluralism, they grow professionally because of their openness to learning and using multiple theoretical perspectives. Additionally, acting on this endorsement, practitioners can select and use a wide range of theories. Each theory is a new lens. A practitioner with many different theoretical lenses has assorted ways to perceive, understand, appreciate, and respond to the experiences of diverse clients and colleagues (Doane & Varcoe, 2005). Anderson and Wiggins-Carter (2004) agree and contend that "competence in working with

and on behalf of diverse populations requires more than just the adaptation of existing frameworks for practice. Clinical social workers must be prepared to expand their theory base and learn new models of practice” (p. 20).

## **Diversity and strategies for judging a particular theory**

Like skilled diplomats in international social work, theorizing practitioners can take a range of theoretical perspectives and interact with the clients, colleagues, and mentors who see “person interacting in the environment” configurations from many different points of view. When judging any theoretical frameworks, the practitioner needs to take first the perspective of the framework and its advocates, understand its foundational assumptions, and grasp its arguments or explanations about the puzzle.

In a pluralistic society, some communities, however, affirm common perspectives, shared understandings, and behavioral norms damaging to members who are different. Social workers learn to challenge the stereotypical thinking and prejudicial actions emerging from these communities. Likewise, in our multi-theoretical practice universe, some theoretical frameworks include assumptions, concepts, propositions, or middle-range theories that distort the lived experiences of minority group members. Social work theory users can identify and reject these frameworks or call for significant revisions. Using such theories without rectifying their flaws will damage vulnerable or at-risk clients.

### ***Appraising theoretical origins and assumptions***

The theorizing practitioner should think critically about the assumptions of any theoretical candidate for practical use (McCrea, 2006). Do the assumptions suggest that the theory is sensitive to clients’ diverse values and cultural contexts in a way transcending prejudice? Do the assumptions suggest that theory application ensures respectful partnership between workers and diverse clients, partnerships that are nonhierarchical, that promote client autonomy and connectedness, that call for the investigation of stigma and discrimination and their harmful effects, and that focus on protecting client dignity and self-determination. Or, in contrast, McCrea asks, do the theory’s assumptions indicate that the theory should be rejected or that the theory needs modification for sensitive use with a particular membership group. For instance, would the theoretical assumptions of a focal theory indicate the theory’s suitability for or negation of healing work with a Native American tribe in ways responsive to the tribal members’ preferences regarding engagement, goal setting, session scheduling, the location of helping sessions, termination processes, and so on.

Anderson and Wiggins-Carter (2004) propose a strategy similar to the appraisal of theory using the diversity standard. They recommend a critical approach to existing theoretical frameworks, their assumptions, and their core images (root metaphors) of the person and society.

For example, they argue that some theories are built on assumptions common to a deficit model, and these theories “represent people of color, women, gays and lesbians, older people, and those with disabilities as having substantial and continuous difficulties” (p. 20). These social workers also recommend special attention to theories with origins and assumptions tied to Eurocentric cultural principles. These theories may assume that European-rooted values and traditions are superior to all others (to the detriment of African, Asian, and other clients), that patriarchy is desirable and male dominance should be reinforced (to the detriment of men and women), and that capitalism is the best economic approach and its emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility is preferable (to the detriment of those who don’t hold this mainstream view and those who are marginalized in the capitalist system). If members of a particular group don’t fit these assumptions and related images, Anderson and Wiggins-Carter argue, they are likely to be pathologized, labeled deviant, and ejected from the inside of valued communities by the theory users. Let me offer a few cautions about their line of argument. Anderson and his colleague don’t name names and identify the “bad” theories. Nor do they provide evidence backing up this critical profile of “Eurocentric” theories.

### ***Appraising theory-derived interventions***

A theory and its theory-derived interventions should be judged for suitability for use with members of a particular membership group (Resnicow, Braithwaite, Ahluwalia, & Baranowski, 1999; Resnicow, Braithwaite, Dilorio, & Glanz, 2002). Optimally, the theory and theory-derived interventions are culturally sensitive. The conceptualization and design of a focal theory-based intervention, for example, affirms the cultural values of the membership group; incorporates concepts and if-then change propositions that reflect the subjective culture (attitudes, expectancies, norms) of the membership group; recognizes the historical, social, and environmental forces relevant to the group; and includes directives for the planned change process congruent with the behavioral preferences and expectations of the members of the group. Ideally, focus group interviews, literature reviews, ethnic mapping strategies, and other methods were used during the intervention design phase to determine preferences. Practitioners need the ability, then, to search, sort through, and select from theoretical knowledge relevant to diverse groups by judging the specific ways that the knowledge suggests interventions that apply sensitively or fail to apply to a given client system and its situation.

### ***Diversity and theory appraisal: illustrations***

There are some clear examples of theory problems when judged by the standard of sensitivity to diversity. Antiquated psychodynamic theories characterized homosexuality as a psychopathology, a disorder (Forte, 2006). Heterosexuality was considered the norm and the natural sexual orientation. Such theories included arguments that faulty parenting caused sex role identification with the same-sex parent and a consequent homosexual orientation. This resulted in the psychic pain, emotional and mental disorders, and interpersonal difficulties common to all homosexual persons. From this kind of theoretical base, sexual reversion therapy became the logical form of intervention. Conversion therapy is an approach to practice that attempts to change the sexual orientation of a person from the “abnormal,” homosexual or bisexual orientation, to the “normal,” heterosexual orientation. Techniques used to convert lesbians, gay men, and others to heterosexuality have included the application of electric shock to the genitals, nausea-inducing drugs administered at the same time that homoerotic stimuli is presented, visualization, prayer, and intensive group pressure. Research evidence doesn’t support the claims of effectiveness (National Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues, NASW, 2000). By the social work standard of diversity, psychodynamic theories rejecting the possibility of homosexuality as a mature and healthy orientation and failing to appraise sexual reversion therapy as an immoral approach fall short.

Erik Erikson’s life stage theory has also been appraised by use of the diversity standard. In brief, Cornett and Hudson (1987) took issue with Erikson’s original conceptualization of the stage of generativity versus stagnation. In middle life, Erikson theorized, the developing person faces the danger of stagnation but can realize the joys of generativity. The person who can act on his or her capacities for generativity in the form of creative contributions to the next generations by raising their children and who can resist tendencies toward self-absorption will incorporate the ego strength of care. Such adults also develop a sense of responsibility to others. Ego interests expand, and the person devotes him- or herself to other people and wider causes. All social institutions should reinforce the values necessary to the development of familial generativity and the success of generations. Adults who fail to become generative develop instead a sense of stagnation and a basic ego problem: the preoccupation with one’s own needs at the expense of the needs of others. Cornett and Hudson (1987) argued that this theory and its early use by practitioners revealed a preference for the conventional family with heterosexual parents fulfilling themselves through contributions to their children. Social workers must adjust Erikson’s model of human development and ideas about middle adulthood to expand the meaning of generativity to

persons with alternative sexual orientations. These adults may not have biological children, but they still pass on their gifts to the next generation by productive career activities, by creative involvement in volunteer service and hobbies, by artistic endeavors, by political advocacy, and by teaching younger gay and non-gay persons about identity issues and their resolution.

Dowling (2006) provides another example of how the theorizing practitioner might select the theory that best fits the needs of clients by using the diversity standard. The social worker serving disabled children and their families might use the prevalent biomedical model. According to this theoretical approach, disability is a problem that resides in the individual. The disability problem is the result of a mental or physical impairment. The impairment is the cause of the child's and family's stress and coping challenges. Medical interventions such as surgery and medication are preferred. However, Dowling asserts that the biomedical theory doesn't meet the standard of affirmation of differences. She recommends instead the choice of a social model. Difficulties related to the inability to walk are not characterized as indicators of an individual impairment. Instead, the difficulties are caused by the society and its failures to provide accommodations such as transportation accessible to wheelchair users. The child and his or her family experience hardships primarily because of ecological barriers, prejudicial treatment, and poorly conceived and/or supported policies and social programs. From this theoretical base, social workers don't focus on changing the child but on reorganizing the society. The practitioners advocate for policies, programs, and practices that take account of physical differences.

## **Theoretical contributions to the appreciation of diversity**

We have been examining how some frameworks have fallen short of the diversity standard. However, many theoretical frameworks have particular strengths and contribute to our understanding of differences in a variety of ways: the influence of differences on human behavior, human development and life chances; the ecological, social, and psychological factors contributing to differences; and the construction of culturally-sensitive interventions (Dana, Gamst, & Der-Karabetian, 2008).

Let's use the "person interacting in the environment" framework to identify some specific theoretical contributions (Forte, 2006). Several theories illustrate diversity and related patterns. The behavioral theoretical framework informs us about the relationship between variations in learning opportunities, models, and favored rewards and punishments and a person's action patterns. The bio-evolutionary framework has documented the influence of genetic predispositions and physical characteristics (height,

weight, skin shade, hair texture, facial features, and so on) on bio-psychosocial functioning. The cognitive theoretical framework theorizes about linkages between the particular characteristics of a “thought community” and notions of rationality, tendencies toward stereotypical thinking, and prejudicial conceptions of other persons.

Symbolic interactionism and pragmatism focus on diversity and interaction between the person and the environment. These approaches have theorized extensively about variations in symbol sets (words, gestures, objects, actions, and so on) and symbol using preferences as related to different cultural and sub cultural groups.

We can use the diversity standard to identify contributions to knowledge about environmental influences on the construction of diversity. Ecological theory specializes in the formulation of ways to characterize variations in the ecosystem, niches, and built spaces as influences on human adaptation in such contexts. Critical and feminist theoretical frameworks focus on the influence of differences in power, privilege, and status on life chances, interaction patterns, and social awareness. The strengths perspective provides insights into community-based differences in the quantity and quality of collective assets and personal strengths as affecting the actualization of member potentials. We might, additionally, identify the practice theories associated with various explanatory theoretical frameworks and list illustrations of guidelines, techniques, and skills for diversity-affirming helping work.

## **Questions that guide critical thinking about a theory considering diversity**

When thinking critically about theories and theorizing activity with reference to the standard, “sensitivity to diversity,” the social work practitioner can make use of the questions suggested by McCrea (2006) earlier in this lesson. The following questions also guide critical reflection. Does the theory portray the client, family, or other social system accurately and with appreciation for its membership characteristics, background, and social context? Does the theory limit the worker’s ability to know and respond in culturally sensitive and competent ways to diverse clients by including stereotypes or shallow assumptions about human differences? Is the theory built on a narrow set of cultural principles assuming that a particular cultural tradition is superior to the traditions of groups in other continents and countries? Does the theory boldly or subtly make the case that if members of a particular group don’t act in accord with the theory’s assumptions, root metaphors, and conceptualizations, they should be pathologized, labeled deviant, cast as victims, or ejected from valued communities? How well does the theory affirm human diversity and suggest culturally sensitive interventions as compared to other theoretical approaches?

## Learning activities and reflections

- 1 React critically to the following generalizations made by classical psychodynamic theorists (many decades ago) about diverse members. Religion is a neurosis, an infantile way to deal with family relations and to attempt to control the environment. Homosexuality is the result of pathogenic developmental processes, and homosexuals are characterized by arrested, immature, narcissistic, and undifferentiated capacities for relationships with people and things. Women's biological differences from men condition their psychology and ensure that they are subordinate beings: inferior, incomplete, envious of the male's penis, and preferring submissive interaction patterns.

How do such characterizations fit with the social work approach to human diversity? What problems might practitioners using such theoretical ideas have in customizing their helping work interventions to fit client membership characteristics? What evidence might you use to support or reject these generalizations? What alternative theoretical explanations might you offer for spiritual practices, alternative sexual orientations, and gender-based identity and interaction patterns?

- 2 Take a feminist theoretical approach toward childhood and gender development (For example, this approach argues that boys have greater opportunities and louder voices in sexist societies. Girls are cast generally as inferior and restricted in subtle and blatant ways from achieving their full potential. Such gender inequalities have identifiable influences on male and female development). Analyze how children were socialized in your family. What different meanings were attached to boys and to girls? How did significant others (your mother, your father, and your siblings) interact differently with boys and girls? What were different behavioral expectations for male and female children? How were the family environments designed differently to accommodate boys and girls? What impacts of these gender-based socialization practices have you experienced or observed later in life on yourself or your siblings (behavior patterns, career aspirations, relationship style, life obstacles and opportunities, etc.)? Appraise this feminist theoretical standpoint on development using the diversity standard.
- 3 Create a theory about an important human behavior and the social environment topic from a mainstream perspective; for example, the perspective of a white, middle-class, physically able, heterosexual and Protestant male of European descent. Now create a theory on the same topic from the perspective of a member of a minority group (or of multiple minority groups). How do the two theories differ? How are the theories similar? What implications for the application of theory to practice can you derive from this activity?

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LESSON

29

# Critique theory using professional standard of strengths

(EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge)

Do you see a glass of juice as half empty or half full, a social or natural disaster as a crisis or a challenge, a family as a mess of dysfunction or a collection of possibilities? Is the theory that you endorse infused with assumptions, concepts, explanations, and imagery emphasizing deficits or potentials? If given the opportunity, advocates of strengths-oriented social work argue, you should pick a positive theoretical framework, one that conceives of the person, environment, and transactions in terms of resources, opportunities, and strengths rather than absences, pathologies, and disorders.

## **Illustration of a deficit theoretical orientation**

In thinking critically about a theory or theorizing activity using the strengths standard, a counter-example helps. Some social workers using family systems theory, for example, have conceptualized the “family in the environment” phenomenon in a way that emphasizes family system dysfunction, surrounding systems characterized by negative norms and role models, and family dynamics prone to chaos and disorganization. Weakness and failure are assumed, and expectations for success are few. Kaslow’s handbook (1996) prioritized diagnosis of family dysfunction. The influential Bowen Center (2013) characterized basic nuclear family patterns as marital conflict, spouse dysfunction, child impairment, and emotional distance. Arpin, Fitch, Browne, and Corey (1990) identified 30 percent of families seeking health services as dysfunctional. The following is my creative profile of a deficit-oriented family systems theoretical orientation, a kind of approach to assessment and intervention that I learned during my graduate studies. I present it with once-common and negative characterizations of “multi-problem families.”

In such families, the personalities of each member are disordered. An incapacity for empathy, understanding, and sensitivity toward certain family

members is the norm. A tendency to deny the severity of family failings is strong, and each member has boundary issues and thus is unable to maintain barriers against physical, emotional, or sexual abuse from the others and outsiders. This approach assumes that criminality, mental breakdown, addiction, suicide, unwanted teenage pregnancy, incarceration, and other tragic outcomes are inevitable for a disproportionately high number of these families compared to those in healthy family systems.

In such families, interaction is problematic. Fighting, arguing, misbehavior, and abuse occur continually and regularly, and members learn to accommodate themselves to such patterns as normal. Unfair and biased exchanges characterize family processes; some members are indulged because of age, gender or personality traits while others are cast as scapegoats and treated with unearned harshness. Trust is rare; deception and manipulation frequent. Negative emotions such as anger, fear, envy, and hopelessness are more often expressed than positive emotions such as love, confidence, pride, and hope. Attachments are few, and promiscuity is favored.

In such families, there is one parent or no biological parents. Fathers have abandoned their children. Mothers can't meet their multiple role demands. If the family system is not broken, the subsystems are. The parents are dysfunctional. Family difficulties result from co-dependent parents or from parental struggling with substance abuse, untreated mental illness, the lingering effects of their own subjugation by their dysfunctional parents, or stalled psychosocial and moral development. Parents have minimal authority over their children and few parenting skills. Sibling dyads are equally dysfunctional, and siblings join together to evade parental surveillance and influence.

In such families, system dynamics are also dysfunctional. Members never spend recreational or social time together. Role assignments are unclear and unstable. Leadership is minimal or tyrannical. Family communication and decision-making processes are primitive. Secrets are common, and threat rather than persuasion is the preferred method for achieving agreements. These destructive family system patterns are transmitted across generations, and the pattern of disorganized, disconnected, and maladaptive system dynamics will be continued in the children's and grandchildren's lifetimes.

Communities with multi-problem families are rife with problems but not with resources. There is little employment in legitimate jobs. Crime, disease, addiction, and violence are rampant. Housing is deteriorating, and the physical environment is harsh, smelly, and noisy. Police are brutal and racist while businesses and professionals have fled to the suburbs. Schools are overcrowded, uncaring, and chaotic bureaucracies. Media images and sounds glorify gangsters, greed, and cruelty. Gunfights find innocent bystanders in harm's way.

Although a caricature, some practitioners see families, their members, and their environments in terms of weaknesses. Adopting a deficit orientation,

social workers are likely to lose hope and doubt their ability to stimulate positive change. Committed to a deficit approach, there is no theoretical directive to look for strengths and resilience (despite exposure to numerous hazards), to capture moments of mutual aid and caring interaction, to identify episodes of group cohesion and adaptability, to learn about survival strategies passed across generations, and to search for assets and resources hidden but present in the community and culture. The deficit orientation becomes part of a self-fulfilling prophecy: the expectation of weakness. Helping actions influenced by this bias accelerate the trajectory toward rampant failure.

## Strengths and theory appraisal

It is unlikely that you will find a theory as bleak and negative as the family systems theory caricature presented above. Recently, many social work leaders, educators, and practitioners have developed the conviction that the best theoretical knowledge recognizes and promotes human strengths. A strength is “a capacity for feeling, thinking, and behaving in a way that allows optimal functioning in the pursuit of valued outcomes” (Rettew & Lopez, 2008, p. 2). The strengths perspective asserts that social workers can make significant difference in the lives of clients by helping them search for and identify strengths, capacities, and resiliencies (Saleebey, 1992). Social workers also assist in the search for small-group, family, community, organizational, and other environmental strengths and assets that can be mobilized on behalf of clients.

There are several premises central to strengths-oriented theories (Saleebey, 2006). First, every person, group, community, and society has strengths, and these can be identified, respected, and mobilized as transformative resources. Second, adverse life experiences such as illness, abuse, and poverty may be injurious, but they can also be sources of opportunity; people are resilient and find strategies to cope with life’s difficulties. Third, theorists and practitioners should not set limits to the capacity to grow. If practitioners and others hold high expectations of clients and affirm client hopes, values, aspirations, and visions, the clients will realize some of their potentials. Fourth, every environment is full of resources. These resources include individuals, families, informal and formal groups, associations, and institutions willing to help others. These people and systems can contribute knowledge, support, special talents, time, energy, concrete aid, and so on to ameliorate or eliminate personal and collective problems. Fifth, human well-being is essentially related to mutual aid and caring relations. Practical theories should facilitate community members’ efforts to help and care for each other.

Let me add two more premises. Sixth, the strengths perspective and the theory of risk and resilience are closely related (Greene, 2006). Communities vary by the prevalent risks and hazards, by the protective factors that lessen

exposure to the risk, by the degree of resilience of community members, and by the ability of members to recover from participation in risky or hazardous behaviors. Seventh, the strengths standard for diversity directs us to consider the particular meanings community members assign to common events, experiences, and traits (Ungar, 2004). An individual strength in one community may be perceived as a weakness in another community.

Committed to such theoretical premises, Saleebey (2001) even argued that social workers need to create a diagnostic strengths manual as an alternative to disorder-based classification. The *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) is an assessment tool used by many practitioners to categorize youths and adults by disorder and associated signs and symptoms. The manual—we will consider its fourth version (DSM-IV)—is rooted in an illness or psychopathological model. Diagnoses based on the manual increase in the likelihood of reimbursement from medical insurance companies and the probability that medication will be included as a preferred intervention. Clients may be categorized by diagnoses such as dementia, male erectile disorder, mood disorder, gender identity disorder, schizophrenia, stuttering, mathematics disorder, and sibling relationship problems and by subtypes of many of the major diagnoses. More than 900 pages summarize the multitude of mental disorders and their major features. Saleebey calls for the construction of a parallel tool cataloguing individual strengths and system resources.

The strengths orientation is a significant departure from the past preferences of many other professionals and some social workers for theoretical and practice orientations emphasizing disease, deficit, deviancy, disorder, disorganization, disturbance, or dysfunction (Saleebey & Longres, 1997). Contemporary practitioners should appraise any theory, theory element, or theorizing activity by examining its foundations and weighing its relative emphasis on the positive aspects of “person interacting in an environment” configurations.

## Questions that guide critical thinking about theory considering strengths

Strengths-oriented social workers propose questions to ask when selecting an ideal theoretical framework (Gergen, 1990; Rapp, 1998; Saleebey & Longres, 1997). Does the theory include assumptions that the past conditions but doesn't determine human behavior, that each person has a degree of agency, and that every person can choose and achieve a better future? Does the theory recommend practitioners begin with dysfunction and prescribe remedies, or does the theory begin with aspirations and urge practitioners to invite clients to engage in projects of actualizing desired scenarios? What is the theoretical language like? Is it mostly a vocabulary of pathology and problem, or is it a

vocabulary of strengths and accomplishment? Does the theory suggest that certain people and groups are doomed to failure or that all human beings have unrealized potentials and with the right circumstances can learn and grow despite past adversity? Does the theory contend that certain environments are empty terrains with none of the emotional, social, and material nourishment necessary for sustaining life or that all environments include goods, services, relationships, and opportunities that can be used by members to progress toward positive and fulfilling lives? How well does the theory compare to other theories in emphasizing possibilities, potentials, and prospects?

## Learning activities and reflections

- 1 Identify an example of a theory or concept that focuses primarily on negative aspects of human behavior. Identify an example of a theory or concept that focuses primarily on positive aspects of human behavior: strengths, capabilities, competencies, and possibilities. Compare and contrast each approach in terms of explanation and intervention. What are the pros and cons of adopting a strengths perspective compared to a deficit perspective?
- 2 Think about the diagnostic strengths manual as an alternative to disorder-based classification. What might Saleebey's objections be to the heavy reliance on the DSM-IV? What are negative consequences experienced by a client labeled with a disorder? For the client? For significant others? For the community? What are possible positive consequences associated with a diagnostic label? What might a manual designed to help social workers identify environmental assets and strengths look like? What would be good and bad consequences after practitioners shift to a strengths category system?
- 3 Watch one of the film portrayals of urban life—*Boyz in the Hood*, *Menace to Society*, or *Colors*—or watch a few episodes of the television series, *The Wire*, or a similar sociologically oriented and realistic depiction of the experiences of African-American teenagers (or groups of other people of color) in a large city. Focus on several major characters. Use a version of a theoretical framework (behavioral, psychodynamic, or family systems theories, for instances) that is not oriented to strengths and formulate your assessment of the deficits of each of these characters and of their neighborhoods.

Next, use a strengths orientation for your assessment. Identify protective factors and risk factors prevalent in the characters' community. Discuss perceived strengths and illustrations of resilience in the face of chronic and severe adversity. Summarize your assessment of the characters, their resilient responses to challenges, and the assets and other resources available in their neighborhoods.

Imagine that you could discuss these two different theory-based assessment formulations with the characters of the film or television show or with wise and alert members of their communities. How might they judge the two theoretical interpretations of the same “person interacting in environment” dynamics? What might be the differential impact of social work with such at-risk populations guided by the deficit perspective compared to the strengths perspective?

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LESSON

30

# Critique theory by reference to moral and technical uses

(EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge)

In this book, I have commented repeatedly on the responsible and effective uses of theoretical knowledge. I have linked such use to professional core competencies. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) expects practitioners “to apply *theories* and knowledge from the liberal arts to understand biological, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development” (CSWE, 2013, p. 6; emphasis added). Several other uses are identified in the CSWE standards. These include applying knowledge of human behavior and the social environment to understand person and environment, critiquing knowledge about person and environment, and using conceptual frameworks to guide the helping processes, especially assessment, intervention, and evaluation.

## **Immoral uses and theory appraisal**

Theorizing responsibly and effectively includes the recognition that theoretical knowledge may be used for immoral purposes or improperly used. In a previous lesson on judging theory by social work ethical and value standards, we explored how social workers can use theory in accord with our code of ethics and core professional values. In this lesson, we will examine other misuses of theoretical knowledge.

### ***Theory use for destructive ends***

A theoretical framework often includes premises, concepts, and propositions that can guide the formulation and implementation of social policies. Political leaders, policy entrepreneurs, agents of social control and others who don't accept the bonds of professional ethics have used theories and their elements for evil ends. For example, eugenics theory, a distorted version of the genetic and evolutionary biology traditions, represented the product of theorizing about

social actions that would improve the gene pool of human populations. This theory was harmfully influential during the early twentieth century (Penna, 2004). Adolph Hitler and his Nazi followers used eugenics to justify human experimentation, the prohibition of sexual contact across racial-ethnic groups, and the extermination of “undesired” population groups. In the United States, eugenics became a theoretical rationale for administrators of state hospitals deciding what to do with persons diagnosed with mental illnesses or learning disabilities. Theory-justified policies included the forced institutionalization of persons deemed unfit for community life, the use of lobotomies to treat persons diagnosed with mental illnesses, and the compulsory sterilization of many vulnerable adults. Following breeding rationales, those with traits allegedly caused by damaged genes were made incapable of passing on their illness, disability, racial characteristics, or adaptive strengths to the general population. More recently, variations of eugenics theory assuming the superiority of the dominant social groups and the inferiority of rival ethnic or tribal groups have been used to justify policies and programs of “ethnic cleansing” or genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia.

Here’s a second example. Marxist theory and Marx’s ideas about ideal community were transformed by political leaders such as Lenin and Stalin to serve a theoretical rationale for the creation of a totalitarian state in the Soviet Union. Mass murder, extreme abuses of power, and the complete repression of citizens advocating for rights were excused as necessary steps on the society’s path toward a fully developed and communist society (Penna, 2004).

### ***Theory use and knowledge control or distortion***

There are other illustrations of the immoral misuse of theories. Dorothy Smith (1990), a feminist theorist, has written of the control of knowledge and knowledge use by male scientists, sociologists, doctors, lawyers, judges, and community leaders. The privileged theoretical and research knowledge ignored women’s experience and was used to justify unfair policies and actions. Smith and her feminist associates have documented such misuse of scientific knowledge. Biomedical doctors, for example, used male-biased theories to ignore or devalue the experiences and stated preferences of women giving birth. Psychiatric theories made possible the judgment by male authorities that women expressing strong emotions in response to overwhelming and inequitable family roles should be institutionalized. If a woman challenged the judgment of these powerful men, this challenge was interpreted as additional proof of her hysteria and poor contact with reality. See Clint Eastwood’s film, *The Changeling* (2008), a tale of a mother institutionalized for rejecting the police’s false claim to have found her lost son for a vivid dramatization of a real-life abuse of psychiatric theories.

Drug policy experts (Choo, Roh, & Robinson, 2008; Golub & Johnson, 2002) argue that the gateway theory of drug abuse—people start with

marijuana use and this leads to the use of hard drugs such as crack cocaine and heroin—has been intentionally misused. First, the research suggests that the theory's central tenets are incorrect for most drug users. Second, the theory has been used to justify the harsh and life-damaging incarceration of many young marijuana users. Third, the theory allows political leaders and policy makers to ignore the risk factors that are much more predictive of hard drug use such as neighborhood crime and drug sales, anti-social peers, and schools that don't evoke student commitment.

## Technical misuses and theory appraisal

Theory users may use theory to justify immoral means or to support actions to achieve immoral ends. However, some theory users are inept. There are many improper ways to use theory.

### *Bias*

Bias refers to a process of thinking that gives systematic favoritism to certain theory-based interpretations and interventions over alternatives. Such biased theorizing activities are a hindrance to effective practice; Goldfried (1999) argues to watch for biases because “they lead us to distort information provided, inaccurately fill in the gaps, or selectively recall that which fits with our theoretical construction” (p. 544). For a biased practitioner, the theory directs what one sees, even if these perceptions are not supported by data collected. Additionally, such a practitioner may reject interventions, even those supported by evidence if they go counter to unsupported interventions derived from the favored theory.

Whitaker (1976), a family therapist, is also concerned about theoretical bias. He believes that those who adopt a biomedical theory often emphasize symptoms and focus helping efforts on diagnosing and relieving symptoms even when this stance isn't congruent with a client's needs. Psychodynamic theories of psychopathology bias workers toward attaching abstractions about blocked personality development and infantile character structures to family members. Helping is an art as well as a science, Whitaker believes, and theoretical bias (and any closed-minded theory-guided practice) undermines practitioner intuition and creativity, creates a distance between the worker and the family group, creates therapeutic rigidity, reduces practitioner trust in the helping process, and lessens the use of accumulated practice experience.

### *Ecological fallacy*

The ecological fallacy occurs when the theorist draws conclusions about individuals on the basis of data on groups or other larger-size social systems. Chafetz (1978) provides an example of shoddy theorizing on the

relationship between race and voting behavior. In her example, voting records indicated that a majority White precinct voted 75 percent of the time for the conservative candidate whereas the adjacent majority Black precinct voted 75 percent of the time for the liberal candidate. To theorize that White voters prefer and vote for conservatives and Black voters prefer and vote for liberals is an ecological fallacy. All Blacks in the first precinct may have voted, in fact, for the conservative candidate.

### ***Reductionism***

Reductionism is a theorizing problem that we have examined in the lesson on the holistic standard. Reductionism occurs when a theorist explains aspects of a complex larger system, a country frequently engaged in war, for instance, by variables associated with lower-level systems, belligerent, and aggressive personality dispositions of citizens and leaders. Though lower-level phenomena may be part of the explanatory framework, the reductionist claims inaccurately that the individual or group variables fully and adequately explain the societal pattern.

### ***Reification***

The theorizing mistake of reification refers to the process of attributing the status of reality to a theoretical concept or proposition (Thyer, 2008a). Theories are conceptual creations, not tangible things. Sometimes, theorists forget this fact. The theorist, for example, may become so enamored of his or her creation that he or she treats the abstraction as if it were a real part of the environment with the abilities and qualities of living beings. The theoretical object has scientific meaning, but it doesn't breathe, move, eat, or die in the way living organisms do.

### ***Tautology***

A tautology is a circular form of theorizing. The theorist asserts that something (the subject term) is true by definition (the explanation). The form of a theoretical assertion is such that it can't be falsified (Chafetz, 1978). The inept theorizer claims, for example, that Pedro is smart. High intelligent quotient (IQ) scores on an intelligence test explain his smartness. If smart is defined as high intelligence, a circular argument, IQ scores don't add anything to the theoretical explanation of Pedro's cognitive functioning.

### ***Teleology***

Teleology means that the theorist provides a theoretical explanation that offers the result of something as its cause (Chafetz, 1978). For example,

a community organizer might theorize about why communities develop a division of labor after reaching a certain size of population. The theorist suggests that the division of labor is created to reduce competition between community members over scarce resources. Chafetz points out that the anticipated result of a community process couldn't have been the cause of the process. In actual cases, it is very unlikely that community members ever convene to discuss how to specialize, to divide labor by specialties, and to do so with the rationale of avoiding within-community competition. The division of labor is more likely an unforeseen result of community growth.

### ***Theoretical overgeneralization***

Theoretical overgeneralization occurs when a theorist develops an explanation, prediction, or description based on research on a population with specific characteristics. Then, the theorist extends his or her claims about the relevance of the theory to a different or larger population. For example, critics of Alfred Kinsey's theorizing about patterns of human sexuality complain about sampling issues (Jones, 1997). Kinsey asserted that he was discovering common patterns of sexual activity in the general United States adult population. However, his samples, critics report, included an over-representation of prostitutes, homosexuals, prisoners, and child molesters. Thus, patterns and types suggested by the data might not occur in the larger population. Incidentally, Kinsey and his supporters contested this charge of improper theoretical generalization.

### **Professionally damaging misuses of theory**

There are a variety of ways that inept or irresponsible theory users might damage the profession and their own professional growth and reputation. Theorizing practitioners should use their critical thinking skills to avoid such negative outcomes.

### ***Pseudoscientific theory***

Thyer (2008b) warns social workers, for example, against investigating and learning about a bad theory, one without empirical support or positive qualities as judged by our scientific and social work standards. Past-life regression theory and therapy fit this description of bad theory. Such efforts waste the practitioner's precious time and resources. Ben-Ari (2005) refers to such bad theory as pseudoscience, a theory that makes use of the style and conventions of science without any legitimate claim to status as science (Ben-Ari, 2005). Pseudoscience has a variety of identifiable deficiencies: the lack of explanatory mechanisms, the lack of a coherent system of concepts and propositions, and a shortage of empirical support. Ben-Ari identifies

alchemy and astrology as examples of pseudoscience and would join Thyer in claiming that their use weakens professionals and their profession.

Using pseudoscientific theory can also result in ineffective and even harmful helping activities (Thyer, 2008b). For instance, the use of a rebirthing theoretical orientation (the approach emphasizes resolving current problems by re-experiencing birth traumas and simulating a trauma-free birth) caused the death of one social work client.

### ***Theoretical monism***

Thyer (2008b) advises also against adopting one theory as the only lens for understanding practice challenges and then forcing all observations into a form consistent with the vision provided by this theoretical lens. Such theoretical monism blinds the social worker or professional team to other useful theoretical perspectives and lessens the likelihood of finding a good match between theories and the problems identified during assessment. Plionis (2004) shares this conviction and argues that no single theory can accommodate all the person-in-environment processes and structures addressed by social workers. Moreover, social workers need to discriminate intelligently from a variety of useful theories. Thus, in particular cases, they can pick the theory that is most applicable to the helping circumstances and best supported by the evidence.

### ***Theory cults***

Finally, Thyer (2008b) worries about professionals and professional groups that give theory leaders, theory creators, and theory advocates the status of authority figures and, then, create personality cults adulating these theorists. Such adoration reduces critical thinking, increases destructive antagonism toward all who challenge theoretical ideas, and deepens reluctance to subject the theory to scientific and logical tests. Lindblom and Cohen (1979) note also that a cultish embrace of a particular theory undermines the interactive and improvisational problem solving necessary to effective theory application and becomes a noisy distraction during the helping process.

## **Learning activities and reflections**

- 1 Review your grasp of history, politics, current events, and world affairs. If necessary, spend a week scanning a major newspaper or a Web-based news organization. Identify an example of the immoral use of theory in relation to policy, public programs, or social problem solving. Specify the person misusing the theory. Describe the use of the theoretical knowledge for harmful and destructive means and/or ends. How might a critical thinker challenge the distorted use of theory?

- 2 Familiarize yourself with each of the inept uses of theory identified in the attached commentary. Summarize the meaning of each in your own words. Pick one and give an illustration of how you might make the mistake in your own application of theory to practice.
- 3 Talk with social work friends, colleagues, supervisors, or teachers about their observations of theory use in the profession. With their help, attempt to identify an example of a time when a professional has used an explanatory theory or practice theory in a way damaging to the professional's growth or reputation. With their input, attempt to identify an illustration from a profession's long history of a time when the social work profession or an association or subgroup within the profession has used theory in a way that weakened our allegiance to a scientific and accountable knowledge base. Describe each example in detail, and identify some ways that the damage might have been avoided or repaired.

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LESSON

31

# Critique theory in historical and cultural context

(EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge;  
EPAS 2.19 Respond to Contexts)

Genealogy is the study of families and the tracing of their lineages and history. Genealogists use oral traditions, historical records, genetic analyses, and other methods to obtain information about a family and to demonstrate the kinship and pedigrees of its members. Results are often displayed in charts or written as narratives. Social workers conduct genealogies when they work with family systems to construct and interpret a genogram, a tool for deepening insights into past influences on current patterns. Genealogies can enrich our understanding and appraisal of a theory and its parent theoretical tradition.

Contextual analysis places a client system in a particular ecological, social, and cultural context. Such analysis identifies relevant systems, connections between systems, and the reciprocal influence of the focal client and the salient social systems. Social workers conduct ecological analysis to learn more about the context for client system patterns when they construct and interpret an ecomap. Likewise, contextual analysis can deepen our understanding and appraisal of a theory and its parent theoretical tradition as developed in a particular place.

## **Historical and contextual factors and theory appraisal**

Theorists often construct theories by assembling metaphors, images, and concepts that best characterize the selected aspect of the “person interacting in the environment” configuration. Theory construction is a rational and scientific process insulated from the biasing effects of personal preferences and political influences—at least, in theory.

## **Influences on theory construction**

However, theorists are human beings who live in particular historical times and specific contexts. and they acquire ways of seeing, thinking, feeling,

and valuing shaped, at least to some extent, by their experiences in the stream of history and an ecological setting. Theory creation doesn't occur solely in the conscious mind. Theorists, for example, may respond with or without awareness to societal and political conditions when theorizing (Stehr, 1992). Tyrannical governments are likely to flavor the theorist's work in ways different than beneficent and democratic governments. Changes in social norms such as those related to shrinking numbers of two-parent, two-children families or increased rates of premarital sex might influence a theorist. Unexpected and non-normative historical events such as the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001 or the British Petroleum oil spill in 2010; ecological shifts such as climate change and increases in unusual weather events; and technological changes such as the creation of the World Wide Web might challenge theorists to think in new ways about human behavior and the environment.

The tenor of the times and larger context may also directly influence the personal decision making of the theorist deciding on a theory project. The availability of funding related to social work with older persons, for example, might attract some theorists. The perceived popularity and prestige attained by certain theorists may evoke an urge to emulation. Theorists are influenced also by charismatic theory developers, by their scientific peers, and by their perceptions of the possibility of sharing a theory and its ideas with others via books, journals, websites, and other vehicles (Germain, 1983).

## **Influences on theory reception**

Dimaggio (1995) noted that “the reception of a theory is shaped by the extent to which a theory resonates with the cultural presuppositions of the time and of the scientific audience that consumes it” (p. 394). In some contexts and historical periods, for example, cultural trends, theoretical enthusiasms, and the characteristics and interests of theory users result in a warm reception for a particular social work theory while another theory fades from the public realm quickly. In the United States, theories affirming individualism and self-interest have had popularity in the recent past whereas theories emphasizing our involvement in and dependence on membership organizations gained less support. Theory reception may also be affected by the cultural membership groups and social movements (civil rights, female liberation, gay pride) that advance justice and cherished social causes and promote certain theories as social change tools.

## **History and theory appraisal: illustrations**

Any theory has a genealogical lineage, and it is important to know its history, especially its record of success and failure in solving theoretical problems. I am fond of interactionism partially because of its creation by social workers

and sociologists working together at Hull-House in the early twentieth century and the expansive range of human experiences it addresses.

### ***Policy theories***

Social work educators may include a historical review in their theory survey courses to enhance appreciation of changes in theoretical thinking. For example, policy instructors often cover theories of policy influential in different historical periods (Nagel, 1990). These include the political theories of the ancient Greeks, especially around the fifth century BC, Machiavelli's theory of political power in the sixteenth century, utilitarian theories of Bentham and Mill developed in the eighteenth century, Pareto's theory of wealth distribution at end of the nineteenth century, the pragmatist theory of John Dewey formulated at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the theory of justice created by John Rawls in the 1970s. Classroom lectures and activities might help students appraise the contemporary relevance, if any, of each of the important historical theories.

### ***Social theories of aging***

Theory users and theorizers should learn about how theory appraisals change over time. Bengtson, Burgess, and Parrott (1997) propose that many disciplines and professions experience growth across generations in theorizing preferences. They examined the field of social gerontology. The first generation of theorists in social gerontology built a theory of disengagement, for instance. This emphasized age-related decreases in social interaction, psychological involvement, and physiological functioning. These decreases were explained in terms of the individual's withdrawal from social engagements because of lessened ego energy and the anticipation of death. Second-generation theorists discovered that research findings didn't support many of the claims of disengagement theory. New theoretical frameworks were constructed such as social exchange theory, social breakdown/competency theory, and age stratification theory. These borrowed selectively from and improved on first-generation theories. In the third and current generation, theorists interested in aging have shifted to theorizing that is supported by multidisciplinary partners and that limits its scope to one level of analysis such as the micro level rather than spanning multiple levels.

### ***Family development theories***

We have seen changes in theoretical notions about family development. When I was completing my dissertation in the late 1980s, the family life cycle theory was popular (Forte, 1990). This focused on the cycles of birth, growth, maintenance, shrinkage, and death experienced by all families.

Family changes were commonly grouped by seven family life cycle stages: the newly married couple stage, the young couple with a newborn stage, the family with school-age stage, the family with adolescent children stage, the launching stage when children begin to leave home, the empty nest stage, and the post-retirement stage. The family was conceptualized as a system of roles and relationships that changed in predictable ways with each stage. Three criteria for demarcating the boundaries between family life cycle stages were shared by many theorists. The first criterion gave central importance to the life course of the first child as a “catalyst” or pathfinder stimulating change for the entire family. It was believed that family interaction and needs are strongly influenced by the age of the oldest child and the oldest child’s evolving social involvements, especially the school. The second criterion, changes in composition, recognized that a central emphasis in family development is the effort of the family group to manage changes in family group composition. The entry and exit of children influence entire family relations and the experience of each family member. As family size increases, family interaction becomes more complex. Membership changes necessitate family reorganization to accommodate the requirements on the family related to changes in number of members and organization. The third criterion focused on the work career of the man in the family. Reflecting an increasing life expectancy, this criterion permitted consideration of later stages of family life including the period after the departure of children from the home, when the major wage earner retired. The role transition has effects on family life for all family members including the retiring person.

Since the 1980s, theorists, researchers, and practitioners have identified many limitations to the family life cycle theory (Forte, 1990). The framework was biased toward the intact nuclear family, a type of family structure increasingly rare in the United States. The framework didn’t fit the experiences of different family forms such as multigenerational and one-parent family households. Gender, ethnic, cultural, and sexual orientation differences were not accommodated well by the theory. Contemporary theorists have shifted to notions of the multiple and intersecting careers of family members. Theoretical models of family change over time have become more complex and now recognize the great diversity of family forms and the many variations in the scheduling of family events such as childbearing, marriage, and retirement.

### ***Theories of cultural competence***

Kohli, Huber, and Faul (2010) provide a social work example of historical developments in theorizing about human differences and cultural competence. They contrasted the changing theoretical emphases of the 1950s (melting pot imagery and ideas), the 1980s (cultural pluralism and variations on identity development), and the early 2000s (the social

construction of ethno-cultural distinctions). Distinctive notions of cultural competence are associated with each theoretical emphasis. Unfortunately, the authors don't identify possible historical or contextual factors contributing to these advances in theorizing or comment on the current perceived value of these different theories.

## **Context and theory appraisal: illustrations**

Malcolm Payne (2002) investigated how the cultural context for the use of knowledge in a profession affects theoretical development. He focused on trends and changing theoretical preferences in Great Britain.

### ***Systems theory***

Systems theory became very popular among social workers in Great Britain in the 1970s especially for understanding and guiding services to families. Payne argued that this was not because of the strength of systems ideas. The theory had been available for several decades. Specifically, the theory's growth in popularity wasn't because it added something new and needed to the social work knowledge base. The theory became popular because of changes in the cultural, political, and historical context for practice. Systems theory made it possible for social workers to work in the large organizational structures emerging in England at the time. Increases in the complexity of social service departments, in the demand for social services, and in the power, prominence and public visibility of social workers stimulated the theoretical shift from psychodynamic approaches to system approaches. Systems theory also helped reduce the fragmentation of services by providing ways of unifying specializations such as child care and mental health (the shared systems orientation), unifying workers trained in different methods such as casework, group work, and community organizing (the common systems methodology), and unifying diverse roles in common action (shared systems interventions including social networking, the provision of informal support, and community care). Systems theory fitted with the cultural preference of British social workers to maintain some continuity with traditional helping approaches such as ego psychology. Systems theory offered an integrated approach to guide rationing resources, setting priorities, and dealing with problems in this cultural context. Social workers shifted to systems theory, Payne concluded, not primarily for scientific reasons but for historical and contextual reasons related to advancement of the profession, of their organizations, and of their careers.

### ***Individualistic theories***

Cultural context also influences the theorist's likelihood of creating individualistic or communally oriented theories (Falck, 1988). North

American theorists tend toward theories that conceive of society's individuals as free agents pursuing self-selected goals and unique preference sets often in resistance to societal pressures. Other theorists (Asians and European theorists, for example) more often conceive of society's members as bound by responsibilities to the collective and as able to realize potentials through shared activity and commonly endorsed values (Askeland & Payne, 2013).

## Concluding remarks

Practitioners must consider ecological and temporal contexts when thinking critically about theories and selecting a theory for use. For example, they might ask whether there is there an identifiable similarity in the context for the theory's development and the context for the theory's application? Or are the contexts very different: the academic setting versus the community center, for example? As a general rule of thumb, social workers might assume that the more similar the contexts of theory development and use, the more likely the theory will be appropriate for helping work. Additionally, theories created by social workers in common practice contexts and created with an appreciation of the specific features and complexity of such contexts are more likely to be useful than theories created at great distances from the field by academicians or researchers unacquainted with social work concerns and issues.

## Learning activities and reflections

- 1 Reflect on your current place and time. What are the features of your environment that shape knowledge creation and adoption? Think about political, economic, cultural, social, and technological features? What are some of the contemporary events, trends, fads, and patterns that might possibly influence your theorizing or a theorist's construction of a theoretical system? If you were creating a theory, how might these features and events influence your theorizing work?
- 2 Select a theoretical proposition from a theory developed more than 50 years ago such as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality development, Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy, or Adam Smith's invisible hand theory of economic processes. Summarize your views of how the proposition makes sense or fails to make sense of contemporary manifestations of the focal topic. How would the theory have to be modified to serve current social work practitioners well?
- 3 Conduct some interviews. Find a social worker from a very different region in your country or a different country. Engage that person in a discussion. You might use a Web-based tool to find and converse with this partner. What are the two or three most important theoretical frameworks or theories in that place? According to your partner, in

what ways does this theoretical knowledge reflect the influence of the region or country? Is any preferred theoretical knowledge universal and transcendent of place? How so?

- 4 Find and interview a social worker from a generation earlier than yours: your parents' or your grandparents' generation, for examples. Ask him or her about the theory or theories that were most popular early in their career? What were some of the perceived influences on the theory creator, the characteristics of the theory, and its popularity? How were these influences associated with the time period? How has your respondent seen the profession's preferred and valued knowledge change over his or her lifetime?
- 5 In the past, male theorists typically developed human behavior theories and practice theories. How might shifts in theory preferences and evaluations relate to changes in gender roles and the greater involvement of women in research and scholarship? Identify a specific theoretical tradition, theoretical proposition, or concept associated with a "founding father" and critique it with reference to gender biases.

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LESSON

32

# Critique theory considering long-term impact

(EPAS 2.1.3 Apply Critical Thinking;  
EPAS 2.1.7 Apply Knowledge)

How do we judge the impact of scientific theoretical tradition? How do theoretical ideas make a difference? These aren't questions solely about the effectiveness of an application of theory in specific helping circumstances only but about the long-term impact of theoretical ideas and intellectual systems.

## **Likely impact and theory appraisal**

Several criteria have been suggested for judging theoretical impact. These are based on the notion that theories with impact add something new to the professional and social knowledge base.

### ***New understandings***

First, we may judge theoretical knowledge in terms of its contribution to a new understanding of the “person interacting in the environment” (Feyerabend, 1978). Such theoretical breakthroughs offer an innovative way of seeing and thinking. Many philosophers of science relate this criterion to the value of knowledge accumulation: the “new work somehow meaningfully incorporate and build upon earlier work” (Rule, 1997, p. 27). The innovation occurs sometimes in an unanticipated yet important way. Sigmund Freud, for example, offered a theoretical lens that opened the eyes of social workers to the influence of childhood experiences and sexuality on human development.

### ***New languages***

Second, theoretical knowledge may be impactful because it provides a new language, a way of scientific talking (Alexander, 1988). Queer theorists, for instance, argued that the theoretical language of heterosexuality and homosexuality and the public derogatory language of “faggots,” “queens,”

and “dykes” inadequately captured the life experiences of persons with diverse sexual identities and orientations. Queer theorists took control of language about sexual orientation back, for example, by embracing and promoting an affirming meaning for the concept queer. This linguistic advocacy contributed to the ability of theorists and laypersons to articulate in new ways aspects of human behavior in the environment related to sexual orientation and discrimination. Specifically, this new theoretical discourse lessened communication distortion among theory users, gave meaning to complex experiences, enriched the interpretation of previously misunderstood social worlds and cultural groups, provided for persuasive theoretical arguments, and enhanced the society’s conversations about the subject matter.

### ***New ways of coping***

Third, theoretical knowledge may have a lasting impact because it increases the coping ability of community members as they adjust to changing environmental conditions (Feyerabend, 1978). A theory might provide useful insights into the possibilities of “better social relations” and of “a social world which all concerned could acknowledge as superior” (Rule, 1978, p. 173) while also providing demonstrations of the effective means for realizing these possibilities. The application of an impactful theory reduces human miseries, increases enlightened patterns of personal and social action, lessens the degree of disagreement and debate about social policies and practices, and helps social workers solve urgent problems in line with our values and visions of social justice (Rule, 1997; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988).

James Rule (1997) suggests that social work theory users should judge theoretical knowledge by this standard of coping. Has the theory become a base of action for helping practitioners cope with professional challenges faced in the world? Does the theory identify the contingencies (events, states, meanings, or arrangements that are connected to one another) that hold across a variety of contexts relevant to community interests? Has the identification of such contingencies reduced our vulnerability to destructive biological, psychological, social, political, and ecological processes? Has the theoretical knowledge better equipped practitioners with intellectual strategies and intervention tools for ameliorating destructive processes and enhancing positive processes?

### ***Knowledge accumulation***

Finally, we can consider the likely impact of theoretical knowledge by the criterion of cumulative progress. Ideally, new knowledge refines existing knowledge and stimulates theory-building work. The theorist is like a brick mason adding a brick to a major construction project: the building of the library of social work knowledge. The artful theorist inspires other brick masons, too.

Laudan (1977), for instance, discusses the usefulness of *theoretical research programs* for knowledge accumulation. Such a program is a theory-driven enterprise involving multiple theorists and researchers working together to accumulate knowledge in a given “person interacting in the environment” area. In social psychology, for example, there are theoretical research programs related to role-based emotional experience (affect control theory), power and bargaining processes, social exchange networks, rational action, and social comparison (Berger, & Zelditch, 1993a). Much effort has been expended testing and refining the theories of interest to these theorist/researchers. Such work has increased the impact of these theories. The interplay between theorizing and research promoted by theoretical research programs resulted in substantial knowledge accumulation (Berger, & Zelditch, 1993b; Shelly, 2002)

Advances in theoretical knowledge help theorizers transform anomalous, unsolved, and significant theoretical puzzles into solved ones. Additionally, impactful theoretical programs refine theories so they mature as tools for solving the tough theoretical puzzles. Eventually, such theoretical knowledge becomes part of the canon. The *canon* is considered the fundamental theories in the discipline or profession: the basic knowledge, for example, considered a prerequisite to a genuine and comprehensive understanding of “person interacting in environment.” The professions’ accrediting and licensing associations mandate that every legitimate social worker master this profession’s canon. The canon changes slowly. So theories accepted into the theory “hall of fame” may have influence on generations of social workers.

Cumulative and systematic theoretical work to increase theory impact can take several paths (Berger, & Zelditch, 1993b). *Theory elaboration* occurs when a theory becomes more comprehensive in its scope and ability to explain aspects of human behavior and the social environment. Symbolic interactionism, for example, has expanded its explanatory power to cover social structures and biological processes. *Theory proliferation* refers to the expansion of the practical use of theoretical knowledge. For example, behavioral theory has extended its range of application to many different social work helping situations.

## Long-term impact and theory appraisal

Practitioners may find it difficult to make judgments about the long-term impact of theoretical knowledge. Has a given theory contributed to the thinking, communicating, and coping abilities of social workers and the profession in a lasting way? The answer often depends on the values, standpoints, and interests that the judge brings to the evaluation process. Reflect on the impact of the feminist theoretical tradition. Many social workers have viewed this theory in a positive way.

However, those with deeply held and fundamental Christian beliefs have arrived at different judgments. The Jeremiah Project (2010), for instance,

argues that feminism has had long-lasting and damaging effects on many spheres of society, especially the family. The feminist theory and its advocates have undermined favorable societal beliefs about God, capitalism, birth, heterosexuality, males, and family structure. Feminists have irreversibly alienated many women from men. Because of feminist theorizing, the home and traditional family values are no longer a source of identity and moral guidance for most Americans. Adultery, lesbianism, divorce, and selfishness have increased as a direct result of the dissemination of feminist thought. The pillars of American society—private property, the state, and the family—are under attack by feminists, and feminist theorizers and their organizations have championed unrestrained sex, rights for deviants such as homosexuals and transgendered persons, and abortion on demand. Since the 1960s wave of feminist theorizing and theory application, women have also been stripped of many economic and legal protections. Displaced and abandoned housewives and their children have become a new and large underclass. This extremely negative appraisal of the feminist theoretical tradition illustrates the value-based nature of judging long-term theoretical impact.

## Learning activities and reflections

- 1 Galileo's sun-centered theory of the relationship of the planets to the sun, his ideas about observation methodology, and his other theory-based discoveries such as the telescope revolutionized science, changed astronomy, physics, and mathematics, and provoked a transformation in the dominant paradigm in Europe. The impact of his theorizing work has been great.

Let's consider more deeply an important and controversial theoretical tradition discussed in the commentary. In the early 1960s, several feminist theorist-activists reignited the flame of feminism lit earlier by the Suffragists fighting for women's property, sexual rights, and the right to vote in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Betty Friedan (1963), for example, wrote a book titled *The Feminine Mystique*. She theorized that lives organized only around child rearing and domestic activities and the internalization of the beliefs about femininity that identity was inextricably linked to the mother and wife roles unfairly closed off other roads to fulfillment and caused unhappiness. The Women's Liberation Movement began the next year. Feminist theorists have added significantly to the theoretical tradition in the last 45 years.

Has this line of theorizing make a positive difference? Reflect on your own life experiences and developmental history as a man or woman. Confer with your mother, your grandmother, your aunts, and other women. Confer with some of your teachers. Do some research on the impact of feminism on American society, families, norms, patterns of interaction, and self-conceptions. What evidence might you assemble to argue that early and contemporary feminist theories have been

influential? If you believe that the tradition has made a significant difference, what values might you use to argue that the influences have been either positive or negative? What evidence might you use to argue that feminist theory made no difference or had a destructive influence? How might social workers in 2050 look back and judge the impact of the feminist framework?

Add some specificity to your reflections. Select and address several of the following questions. How has our knowledge of human behavior and the environment changed because of feminist theorizing? How have public policy and problem solving changed because of feminist theorizing? How has social work practice changed because of feminist theorizing? How have research methods and procedures changed because of feminist theorizing?

- 2 Take this activity a step further. How might you use what you have learned about the impact of a theoretical tradition to appraise the scholarship of a school of thought: behaviorism, symbolic interactionism, cognitive psychology, Marxism, or queer theory, for examples. To what degree has the focal tradition had a positive impact? What is your evidence for this appraisal? In what ways has the focal tradition negatively impacted human beings, society, the environment, or the profession of social work? What is your evidence for this appraisal?

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