

Exploring a Model-Driven Approach to Social Work Theory Education

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Accredited social work programs must use practice experience and theory to inform research and practice, policy, engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation with varied constituents. Models to teach theory have been all but non-existent. This manuscript presents the S.A.L.T. model for theory assessment and shares findings when the model is applied to assess students' knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), accredited social work programs must use practice experience and theory to inform research and practice, policy, engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation with varied constituents. However, models to teach theory or about theory have been all but non-existent. This manuscript presents the S.A.L.T. model for theory assessment and shares findings when the model is applied to assess students' knowledge. To assess students' knowledge and skill in applying and evaluating theory, a 14-item course assessment was developed by Dr. Gentle-Genitty called the *Theory Evaluation and Application Assessment*. The assessment was based upon course objectives for a master's level social work theory course in a CSWE-accredited master of social work (MSW) program. Demographic information was also gathered from participants, including age, gender, bachelor degree major, state where bachelor's degree was attained, year in MSW program, and year of last theory course. Context of the work and results are presented herein. Of primary importance is the need to bridge teaching theory with application and evaluation. We propose that the best way to do this is through the introduction of models as a pedagogical strategy in teaching theory. The model presented is the S.A.L.T. model (Gentle-Genitty, 2014).

Defining Theory and Teaching Theory

Theories of human behavior allow social workers, particularly educators and practitioners 1) to explore old situations with new lenses, 2) to understand the complex nature and context of people's lives, 3) to understand different points-of-view, 4) to organize a client's story, 5) to frame the focus of analysis, and 6) to identify the areas for intervention (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006). Human behavior theories provide us with boxes and conceptual labels to assist in organizing the chaotic world we now live in or in developing a plan of work. These theories "help us to conceptualize how and why people behave the way they do and help us understand the contexts (biological, physical, psychological, socio-cultural, spiritual, economic, political, and historical) of the nature of behavior" (Robbins et al., 2006, p.4). Not only do human behavior theories do this, but many other theories espouse to do this as well.

In the context of social work, theory is defined as "a group of related hypotheses, concepts, and constructs, based on facts and observations, which attempts to explain a particular phenomenon" (Barker, 2014, p. 430). Often considered as approaches to practice, social workers depend on empirical and theoretical knowledge from various disciplines—such as sociology, psychology, economics, and medicine— (Bloom, 1969) to drive such interventions as cognitive-behavioral therapy, group work, psychotherapy (Horowitz, 1998), and family practice (Beresford, 2000; Dow & McDonald, 2003).

Payne (2014) distinguishes theory from practice and knowledge, and practice theory from theory in a more universal concept: If theories are comprehensive groups of ideas which describe human understanding in a systematic way, social work practice theories are more specific, interrelated, and are defined by "perspectives, frameworks, models and explanatory theories" (Payne, 2014, p. 3). One such practice framework is the strengths perspective, through which social workers promote collaborative client relationships, emphasize client goals, resources, and psychosocial support systems, and foster a sense of individual empowerment (Oko, 2006). In their analysis of the immersion of theoretical frameworks in care-giving research, Dow and MacDonald (2003) support a theory-practice relationship, suggesting that, "social work research, practice, and theory are inextricably linked" (p. 198).

Though social work practice at all levels is wholly thwarted by societies increasingly influenced by individualistic ideologies (Nichols & Cooper, 2012), social work can and should continue to rely upon theoretical perspectives to assist their practice in the pursuit of social change (Gil, 2013). The application of theoretical concepts is imperative both for micro and mezzo social work practice in areas such as public policy and poverty alleviation (McCarty, 2008) and caregiving (Dow & McDonald, 2003), and theoretical frameworks continue to be the cornerstone for a substantial amount of social work research (Brophy & McDermott, 2013; Dow & MacDonald, 2003) and advancing professional knowledge and thought (Nichols & Cooper, 2012). The products of such research and knowledge-building will inevitably guide the future of social work educational standards and practices.

Theory continues to be paramount to the education of social workers (Peleg-Oren, Aran, Even-Zahav, Macgowan, & Stanger, 2007; Garthwait, 2015). Today, all CSWE-accredited social work programs are mandated to include diversity-centered material into course objectives; theoretical frameworks have assisted this emphasis on culturally-competent practice (Kohli, Huber, & Faul, 2010). Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that social work students lack the opportunity to link theory with practice. In a study by Smith, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil (2015) more than half of 263 social work students engaged in field placement were found to lack a consistent opportunity to connect social work theory with their practicum experience in supervision.

About 10 years ago, Cameron and colleagues (2009) described a model for teaching organizational theory and practice in a school of social work. A focus on developing a teaching approach for organizational theory is especially desirable as it is often neglected in social work education, despite its relevance to practice—as social workers are often employed by organizations and agencies (Cameron et al., 2009). In recent years there have been various studies assessing pedagogical approaches to social work education (Turkich, Greive, & Cozens, 2014). The purpose of the present study was to examine the knowledge base of incoming master's-level social work students on basic social work theory and their application to practice. Furthermore, would a concept model designed to synthesize theory evaluation and application in a master's-level social work theory class assist students in improving their knowledge base?

S.A.L.T. Model

As noted, there is a gap in social work education. Students struggle in transferring theory to practice. With emphasis on competency based education there is an urgent call for better ways to teach and to ensure that students are competent with the knowledge to transfer theory to field. The S.A.L.T. Model, developed by the primary author (Gentle-Genitty, 2014), attempts to respond to this need. The model identifies and examines the Strengths, Areas of focus, Limitations, and other Theories to redress for the shortcoming of any given theory (Gentle-Genitty, 2014). It was developed in 2007 and has been evaluated in various forms over the last ten years. It is a teaching tool, but also a structured evaluation and application of theory tool for students (Gentle-Genitty, 2014).

Using a multi-method design (course evaluation, text analyses, and quantitative data). Data was gathered in a Social Work Program at a Midwestern University. IRB approval was sought and received. Two pools of data were used. 1) The first data pool was course evaluation comparison of a 20 person S.A.L.T. course—compared with six other non-S.A.L.T. courses—offered in the same semester and on the same campus. 2) The second data pool was an online pre- and post-test study with a control and experimental group of graduate social work students enrolled in an advance social work theory course. In 2011 an online module of the S.A.L.T. tenets was implemented as the intervention. Students, from three course sections, were randomly assigned to a control or experimental group. The control group received regular course content presented in their theory courses. All 67 students were invited to complete a 15-item multiple choice survey on social work theory and application to practice and were asked to apply theory to solve a case and reflect on their theory application. 3) Forty-four students completed the pre-test and 27 completed the post-test. Following the intervention improvements were evident in 5 areas: 1) defining theory, 2) identifying whether lack of theory caused harm, 3) having a model to respond, 4) identifying what theory application should do, and 5) naming of combined tasks). There were strong benefits for applying theory to practice with a model although some concerns still lingered such as students reporting not understanding the structure needed to learn and apply theory, struggling in choosing theory definitions, and needing a structure to apply theory. When given an option of choosing how to evaluate theory—in the pre-test and post-test, 100% of students consistently chose the S.A.L.T. model (question 4, choice 4 of survey). Having a systematic way to practice is necessary in teaching students how to practice in an appropriate manner. Because of this finding, in 2013 a larger sample of students were gathered. Each semester the course was taught, students enrolled in the advanced graduate course were asked to complete the pre-and post-test survey. In this manuscript, we report on the findings from this second and longer study with more sections conducted over 5 years.

METHOD

Sample and Participant Selection

Between the years of 2011-2016, students enrolled in a CSWE-accredited online MSW program were asked to participate in a 14-question survey to evaluate their understanding of social work theory and application. Over the study's sequence, a total of 157 students agreed to participate in the pre-test, which was given prior to the commencement of a theory course. Following the conclusion of the courses, 86 students of the 157 followed-through with the post-test, given after the course's conclusion. The purpose of the survey was disclosed to participants. The study was approved through the university Institutional Review Board.

Assessments and Measures

To assess students' knowledge and skill in applying and evaluating theory, a 14-item test was developed by Dr. Gentle-Genitty called the *Theory Evaluation and Application Test*. The test was based upon course objectives for a master's level social work theory course in a CSWE-accredited master of social work (MSW) program. Demographic information was also gathered from participants, including age, gender, bachelor degree major, state where bachelor's degree was attained, year in MSW program, and year of last theory course.

Six of the 14 questions given were designed as stand-alone, multiple-choice items. They consisted of the following: (1) *What is a theory?* (2) *What are the common types of social work theory?* (3) *When someone applies theory to practice they...* (4) *When evaluating theory, social workers should...* (5) *Can lack of theory application and evaluation cause harm in practice?* (6) *From the options provided, which would be a general list of tasks to help you prepare to apply theory to practice?* In the same assessment, a series of five stand-alone, multiple-choice questions were also given. This was done after disclosing to participants their relation to the phases of theory application: (7) *The first phase in theory application should help you...* (8) *The second phase of theory application should help you...* (9) *The third phase of theory application should help you...* (10) *In preparing to close a case, the fourth phase of theory application should help you...* (11) *What is the name given to the combined aspects for which a theory can help a social worker respond to a case?*

RESULTS

Demographics

Over 70% of participants were female ($n=111$). This being a course in an online social work master's program, students had earned bachelor's degrees from across the US, with the majority (63.3%) graduating from a Midwestern ($n=100$) or a Southeastern ($n=14$) school. The western region of the US was represented by six participants, and the northeast, four with approximately one-fifth of participants not disclosing their geographic region. The majority of participants (45.6%) were first-year master's students in social work ($n=72$), followed by second-year master's students ($n=43$); approximately 30% of participants did not identify their position in the program ($n=41$). Mean age for pre-test participants was 31.29 years ($MIN/MAX=22/66$; $SD=8.8$). See Table 1 for list of undergraduate majors.

TABLE 1
UNDERGRADUATE MAJORS, UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTIONS, AND YEAR OF LAST THEORY COURSE AT THE TIME OF THEIR PARTICIPATION (2011-2016)

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>College major(s)</i>		
Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)	27	17.1
Sociology	6	3.8
Sociology with another major	2	1.3
Psychology	29	18.4
Psychology with another major	9	5.7
Criminal Justice	9	5.7
Other social science	11	7.0
Other field outside social science	19	12.0
Unspecified	46	29.1
<i>US geographic region of undergraduate institution</i>		
Midwest	100	63.3
Southeast	14	8.9
West	6	3.8
Northeast	4	2.5
Unspecified	34	21.5
<i>Year last taken theory course</i>		
Within past year	67	42.4
Within past 2 years	21	13.3
Within past 3 years	6	3.8
Within past 5 years	3	1.9
Over 5 years ago	11	7
No prior theory course	10	6.3
Unspecified	40	25.3

Means-Comparison between Pre-and Post-Test Items

As each test item was independent of the other, paired-sample t-tests were conducted between each of the 11 categorical test items to assess significant differences between pre-and post-test answers. Answers were recoded into correct vs. incorrect ($0=incorrect$; $1=correct$). Paired sample t-tests were used to assess significance between pre-and post-test answers on each individual test item. No significant differences were found between tests.

A paired-sample t-test was performed between the sum of correct pre-test answers for items one, six, and 11, and the sum of correct post-test answers for the same items (*What is theory? From the options provided, which would be a general list of tasks to help you prepare to apply theory to practice? What is the name given to the combined aspects for which a theory can help a social worker respond to a case?*). These test items were chosen because they showed an improvement in number of correct answers from pre-to post-test –though these improvements proved statistically insignificant. Results of the analysis showed a statistically significant improvement in cumulative correct answers between the pre- and post-test for items one, six, and 11 ($t(83) = 2.396, p < .05$) (See Table 2 below). These results indicate that the use of a model-driven approach to theory education might holistically assist students in their understanding of social work theoretical concepts.

TABLE 2
PRE- AND POST-TEST CUMULATIVE IMPROVEMENT IN QUESTIONS ONE, SIX AND ELEVEN

Pair 1 (goodpre-goodpost)	M= -.28571, SD=1.09, SE .119, t= -2.396, df=83, p<.05
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DISCUSSION

Results indicate a possible relationship among student knowledge acquisition in a theory course and a model-focused pedagogical strategy for teaching theory in social work education. This is a very important finding in that many schools currently still teach theory in an abstract critical thinking exposure manner with no real pedagogical framework for knowledge acquisition or application and evaluation. With the Council on Social Work Education through their Education Policy and Accreditation Standards emphasizing the need for an integrated use of theory across our curriculums, it behooves social work higher education institutions to adopt a model. A model aids social work students to have a way of learning and organizing knowledge about how to apply and evaluate theory versus rote memorization of definitions. The ability to grasp such knowledge is the difference between students applying it immediately in field and thereafter in their professional practice and simply leaving it at the institution never to be applied again.

Secondly, given that this evaluation and small study was done with graduate students suggests that we have not maximized this training opportunity at the undergraduate level. More so, it says that we have graduated another cohort of students who may have failed to grasp the learning necessary for theory application and evaluation at the master's level. In social work, the master's degree is the terminal degree for the profession though some may choose to acquire a doctoral degree. As such, with graduate students graduating still not knowing how to apply theory in varying situations, we are doing a disservice to our profession and to our clients.

Limitations of the Present Study

The initial study had some limitations in that it only had three course sections with a sample under 100. There is also a need for more generalizable data. We could also benefit from a multiple university and program participation assessment to establish a better set of common knowledge expected to transfer

from the classroom – to field – to profession. Until this transference and common knowledge set is created we recognize there is a gap.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

With given time constraints, the call for effectiveness, and the principle of ‘do the least harm’, social work educators have a responsibility to teach human behavior theory in a way that provides a framework for students to continue the learning and evaluation beyond the classroom into practice. Failing to do so affects our teaching (hooks, 1994) and our learners. Theory has not always been taught in a consistent or effective manner. In some situations when taught, some theories are held as truths – believing there is none better. The truth is that our learners are rarely taught how to think and evaluate for themselves but to regurgitate only what has been taught to them (Gentle-Genitty, 2007).

As the rest of the data set is being examined for other findings and we anticipate publishing more, there is need for more of this type of study and review to be clearer in 1) what the best pedagogy is for teaching theory. Is a model or framework better than no model or framework? Is simply reviewing a list of theories better than teaching how to choose a theory for a case, how to stack theories to better understand a client situation? How to determine when a theory adds value or takes away and is not effective? 2) What outcomes do we expect from students when we teach theory and assess their learning? Do we simply review the definitions of theories, expose them to the content and hope they get it? Do we provide cases and simply tell them what theories to apply to the case without a rationale or process for choosing or applying? Or do we skip the conversation all together and never teach them about choosing, evaluating, or applying?

Successful practice depends on effective use of theory. Theory effectiveness is contingent on students’ knowing ‘how’ to apply, analyze, and assess the applicability of various theories. The S.A.L.T. method encourages students to learn the Strengths, Areas of Focus, and Limitations of theory while also exploring Theories that can redress for the shortcomings of the theory under investigation (Gentle-Genitty, 2014). Yet, because theories are social constructions with their own cultural, class, belief, and application biases (Robbins et al., 2006), without guidance, they can be applied in an ill-fitting fashion and negatively influence our behavioral responses as practitioners. Even though theories are useful in helping us conceptualize and organize human behaviors, they are flawed and are not appropriate as a one-size-fits all solution. Some agree that theory application is important and others do not, regardless, students must be taught how to unpack and use the information our accrediting body asserts as an important part of our curriculum and practice.

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