Chapter 1 An Introduction to Theory and Practical Theorizing

Chapter Outline

I. Introduction
   A. Multiple theoretical perspectives on “Little Red Riding Hood” story

II. Theorizing and generalist social work
   A. Definition of generalist social work – social workers help in many roles, many system sizes, many settings, and many membership groups
      1. generalists also use many theories
   B. Common base and advanced practice
      1. all social workers are unified by common base
      2. generalist foundation may lead to specializations by some social workers

III. A Dialogical Approach to Theoretical Knowledge
   A. Introduction – metatheory is a theory about theories
   B. Science is a language
      1. similar to language systems in use of shared symbols
      2. different than spoken languages in complexity and use of multiple communication devices
   C. Scientific problem solving is a conversation
      1. Scientific community characterized by theoretical pluralism
      2. Scientific communities like place communities inhabited by different language groups
      3. Each theoretical tradition in the scientific community is like a language group with own metaphors, vocabulary, grammar, rules of pronunciation and dialects
   D. A dialogical approach to science
      1. Much scientific discourse characterized by debate and contention
      2. Science applicers might engage in dialogue (mutual perspective taking and careful listening)
   E. Components of the dialogical approach to science
      1. Universe of discourse – a shared and standardized language for communicating across specific languages
      2. Participants develop communication capacities including
         a. perspective taking propensity
         b. perspective taking depth
         c. perspective taking accuracy
         d. perspective taking range
      3. Participants develop larger selves: the incorporation of the perspectives of multiple others into one’s own sense of professional self; contrasted with a narrow self or set of perspectives.- Figure 1.1: Multiple Perspectives and Social Work Practice
      4. Participants take a pragmatic stance to knowledge: the best ideas and theories are those that solve public and personal problems
      5. Participants commit to an experimentalist stance; theories are transformed into working hypotheses about problem solutions and tested continually

IV. Theory translator: A new social work role
A. Settlement house workers translated for both immigrant groups and for native residents who could not understand immigrants
   1. communication by current event
   2. communication by art
   3. communication by public gathering
B. Theory users and researchers must also translate their languages
C. There is a need for theory translation
   1. theorists use unusual and specialized terms
   2. social workers use many different theories and many constantly changing theories
   3. different theoretical communities are isolated from each other and do not learn to communicate across boundaries
D. The role of theory translator
   1. translation is the act of rendering meanings intelligible across languages
   2. translators are specialists with competence in providing equivalent and comprehensible terms for a target language
   3. scientific translators take on various tasks
      a. translation within one language system (translation of one theoretical language like psychoanalysis into an everyday language)
      b. translation across language systems (translation from one theoretical language, psychoanalysis, into another theoretical language, behaviorism)
V. Levels of theoretical language – social work theorizing varies in abstraction from the most abstract to the most concrete
   A. Paradigm – a coherent collection of beliefs and theories, a worldview, stated at the most abstract level. Like the culture of a language community, a paradigm is shared by members of the scientific community.
      1. pre-scientific paradigm: belief in magic and myth
      2. positivistic scientific paradigm
      3. post-positivistic paradigm
   B. Theoretical language or tradition
      1. School of thought – theory statements organized in relationship to a founding figure and a site for theoretical development (a university or research center, for example).
      2. theoretical traditions are also called traditions, perspectives, orientations, and frameworks.
      3. Theoretical schools of thought include sub schools. These are like the dialects of a language.
   C. Theories – a systematized set of ideas explaining some aspect of reality.
      1. Grand or general theories – ambitious theories of great scope explaining all or most aspects of social life
      2. Theories in a topic area – theoretical explanations of a particular topic like socialization or crime
      3. Middle-range theories – theories of modest scope that organize concepts and propositions to explain a particular aspect of physical or social reality like the tendency of delinquents to associate and learn from other delinquents
      4. Practice theories – knowledge organized to guide the process of helping, tested more
5. Theories by system size – theoretical explanations organized in relation to varied size social systems
   a. micro theories focus on the smallest social systems
   b. mezzo theories focus on middle size systems like social networks
   c. macro theories focus on larger systems including communities and societies
6. Informal or everyday theories – casual and untested theories used in daily life
7. Empirical generalization – statement of a pattern that occurs widely across places or time periods
8. Observations – sensory impressions of elements of the empirical world

VI. What Theoretical Languages Do Social Workers Speak?
   A. Social work practice settings are characterized by diversity of disciplines, professions, and theoretical traditions
      1. Discipline – established field of social work knowledge recognized as such within academic institutions
      2. Profession – an association bound by discipline and practice with established entrance requirements, shared standards for performance, and an ethical code of conduct
      3. Theoretical tradition or orientation – a preferred structure of explicit theories, concepts, principles, and procedures that guides one’s practice
         a. Table 1.1 Theoretical Orientations Taught by Social Work Educators
         b. Table 1.2 Theoretical Orientations Preferred by Social Workers
         c. Table 1.3 Theoretical Orientations Preferred by Allied Professions

VII. The Value of multi theory practice to practitioner
   A. More tools to help clients
   B. Increases intellectual flexibility
   C. Can better communicate with diverse others
   D. Can better contribute to helping teams
   E. Can help build profession’s knowledge base

VIII. Theorizing
   A. Definition – the process of creating a theoretical product
      1. Everyday theorizing – creating an idea or set of ideas to make sense of daily experiences
      2. Scientific theorizing – the mental process of systematically generating explanatory statements of variations and processes characterizing particular situations.
   B. Metatheorizing
      1. Definition – theorizing about theories and about theorizing
         a. metatheorizing for understanding
         b. metatheorizing for application
      2. Metatheory – the product of metatheorizing, a statement about what counts as knowledge or about the processes necessary to knowledge creation and use

IX. Theorizing: Specific uses of theoretical languages, vary by practice setting and focal problems
   A. Referencing – the use of a theorizing to communicate precisely with members of a reference community
B. Classifying – the use of theorizing to categorize information about clients, client groups, or social conditions
C. Explaining and interpreting – the use of theorizing to help theory users make sense of and understand some aspect of reality; can take a deductive or inductive form
D. Predicting – the use of theorizing to make statements about the likely occurrence of some action or event
   1. hypothesis – testable statement about a predicted relationship between 2 or more variables

X. Theorizing competencies
A. Theory knowledge – mastery of the core concepts, history, and leading theorists of a theoretical tradition
B. Theory comprehension – understanding of the foundational assumptions and root metaphors of a theoretical tradition, and the way the components of a theoretical tradition are organized or structured
C. Theory application – the ability to use theory to solve real life problems
D. Theory analysis – the ability to identify the building blocks (assumptions, concepts, propositions, and so on) of a theoretical explanation
E. Theory synthesis – the ability to combine concepts and propositions from different theoretical traditions
F. Theory evaluation – the ability to appraise the quality of a theory including its suitability for different practice problems and its degree of empirical support
G. Theory communication – the ability to use language to collaborate with other theory users includes skills necessary for theory-based discussions, theoretical explanations, and theory translation

XI. The professional career and theorizing mastery – similar to the process of gaining proficiency in a new language or in the use of multiple languages
   A. Novice theory users – basic familiarity with the ecosystems paradigm and beginning familiarity with the range of theoretical languages, theorizing competencies include knowledge and beginning comprehension
   B. Intermediate level theory users – mastery of the ecosystems paradigm and basic competence in two other theoretical languages; theorizing competencies expand to analysis, application, synthesis, and evaluation
   C. Advanced level theory users – mastery of the major theoretical languages used by social workers, beginning familiarity with new and emerging orientations, theory-based use of each phase of the planned change process, advanced comprehension and capability in all theorizing competencies including expertise as theory communicators

XII. Stances toward theoretical discourse – influenced by many factors (teachers, agency, economics, culture, and personal convictions
   A. Philosophical positions toward practice in a theoretically pluralistic world
      1. Assume different theories are incompatible but reconciliation is possible
      2. Assume different theories are incomparable and translation is fruitless
      3. Assume different theories are incommensurable but a new language will make possible conversation across languages
B. Professional theoretical commitments – similar to orientation to religion and to language

1. A theoretical practitioners – dislike theory and speaking theoretically and prefer the use of practice wisdom and of intuition
2. One-theory monists – value only one theory and do not speak to those from different theoretical language communities
3. Theoretical proselytizers – prefer one theory like fanatics and work aggressively to convert others to the use of the preferred theoretical language
4. Theoretical cultists include eclectics who like parts of many different theories and use words from various theoretical languages and dilettantes who change theoretical allegiances frequently
5. Theoretical internationalists – value multiple theoretical languages, attempt to converse with those from various theoretical communities, and believe that professional practice is enhanced by dialogue with those from other theoretical traditions