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ARTICLE

Theorizing from Practice

Towards an Inclusive Approach for Social Work Research

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ABSTRACT

Practitioner researchers often experience difficulties in understanding and using the plethora of approaches to the ways in which practice can be theorized, and mistakenly feel they must be committed to one main approach. In this article I argue that an inclusive approach to the many different methods is crucial to social work. I develop this approach by describing, in broad terms, the major different approaches to theorizing and the methods associated with this. I begin by relating an inclusive approach to the changes in knowledge-making becoming recognized with postmodernism. I then develop an inclusive approach by examining three major areas: what theory is; how it is generated; and who it should be generated by. I end by arguing that an inclusive approach best fits the range of practice which social workers wish to research, but that it must include research of the 'tacit' knowledge of practitioners.

KEY WORDS:

knowledge
building
practice research
theorizing

How do we theorize from practice, and what are the best methods to use? These are central questions for all practicing professionals, but their answers are not straightforward. Complex processes and arguments are involved. There is a plethora of methods that, as social work researchers, we might use to effectively theorize our practice. Many of these are associated with different paradigms, which are seen as competing. Often the debates have polarized between the more positivist camp, and those who take a more 'interpretivist' or constructivist line (Atherton, 1993; Haworth, 1994; Rodwell, 1998: 12-13). Sometimes the debate is couched in 'quantitative vs. qualitative' terms, pointing up the differences between approaches which emphasize measurement and analysis of relatively static variables in a value free framework, and those of the latter which are more concerned with processes and generating meanings in a recognized political context (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 4-5).

As social workers, interested in researching the theory of our practice, how do we make sense of these debates? How do we best approach the theorizing of our complex practice, when the choices seem framed in relatively rigid paradigmatic terms? What kinds of ways of understanding theory, practice and research will cultivate best practice in uncertain contexts? What approaches to theorizing from practice can we develop which will enable the practitioner researcher and the researcher practitioner to make sense of diverse perspectives, to act confidently and responsively in changing and unpredictable situations?

A rigid, or even loose, commitment to one type of perspective, be it positivist, qualitative or deconstructive, does not seem to provide the flexibility of thinking needed to work in changing circumstances. In this article I start from the premise that entering and resolving the debate between paradigms will not necessarily yield better practice and research. In any case, much of our research is already practiced within an embedded culture of positivism (Fook, 2001) – the way we speak about and conceptualize research often assumes scientific ways of thinking about knowledge building; implicit beliefs that hypothesis testing, strict sampling techniques and validated instruments are the only pathways to legitimate understanding. For example, even the accepted format (of relatively short articles) for reporting on research (Fraser, 1995) assumes a scientific framework, which does not then allow for a more discursive description of in-depth experience. It is therefore necessary to critically examine *all* perspectives and methods (whether avowedly positivist or not) to ensure that they are enacted in ways relevant to the context at hand.

At the same time, an 'anything goes' mentality, often associated with post-modern thinking, in which any type of method or approach is acceptable, also seems lacking in providing clear value-based ideals for action. It does not seem appropriate for many situations in which the moral and political dimensions might in fact be clear, and in which some methods do suggest themselves as superior to others and for good reason. Is it possible for us to have our cake

and eat it too? Can we develop an approach that allows us openness, but also builds upon and uses established methods of working? Can we devise a more inclusive approach, in which different perspectives on theory and its development from practice are used in a meaningful yet flexible way to suit the situation at hand?

In this article I want to begin the task of mapping an inclusive approach to theorizing from practice, an approach which seeks to recognize different approaches to 'theory-building', and to enable a more critically aware and meaningful engagement with different theories and the different ways they may be developed from practice.

First, it is important for us to understand the broader context of thinking that influences our approaches to theory-building. I will therefore begin by taking a step back, and by reviewing broadly current postmodern thinking about theory, practice and knowledge generation. In the bulk of the article I will then look at the different elements of an inclusive approach to theorizing from practice: what is theory, how it is generated, and who generates it.

CURRENT THINKING ABOUT THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE NEED FOR AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH

While controversial, postmodern analysis nevertheless influences some of the current changes in thinking about theory and practice. It challenges some of the taken for granted assumptions in social work, and some of these challenges can have positive ramifications. Let us examine briefly the nature of these broad challenges.

In its broadest sense, postmodernism can be understood as a phase of global history, a 'moving on' from a period of modernist thinking in which the 'guiding principle was to establish reliable foundations for generalisable knowledge, policy and practice' (Parton, 1994: 28). In a modernist frame of thinking, the goal of research was thus to develop universal and incontrovertible knowledge which would allow explanation and control of phenomena towards an ultimately progressive end. Structures, such as the nation-state and the welfare state, were believed to provide an organizing framework. Scientific rationality was seen as a major means to achieve such control. Postmodernism thus represents a challenge to these totalizing structures and ways of thinking.

When we apply postmodern thinking on a more specific professional level, professions, and the way they are organized, can be seen as features of a modernist state. They represent organized ways of practicing and thinking based on the assumption that universal and scientific knowledge will lead to better, more progressive, ends. Postmodern thinking thus represents a questioning of our assumptions about two features which are said to define a profession: how professional knowledge and control is created and how it is maintained

(Friedson, 1970). Professions maintain their status by controlling their knowledge base and how it is disseminated. Professions are socially legitimated by their knowledge claims (Leonard, 1997: 97). In a postmodern world, however, specialist knowledge is challenged as the exclusive domain of a particular professional group. These challenges also arise from a broader postmodern movement to question traditional hierarchical arrangements. In this sense the traditional authority of professional knowledge is questioned, as against the legitimacy of the experience of the service-user. Similarly the privileging of the scientific knowledge of the researcher, as against the lived experience of the practitioner, is also debated. Smart (1992: 100) sees professional expertise as 'the citadel . . . which has disqualified the understanding and knowledge of "ordinary" people'.

Postmodern analysis thus highlights a widening gap between theory and practice. This is old news – we have long been aware that practitioners use little formal theory in everyday practice (Sheppard, 1995). What postmodern analysis does is point out that the gap arises because of the different social positioning, and ways of knowing, of the different players. The disparities between knowledge and theory generated by professional researchers, and the 'on-the-ground' knowledge embodied in the daily experience of both practitioners and service users are widening. And perhaps it is not so much that the disparities are widening, as that it is also now more acceptable to question the taken-for-granted authority of academic, non-practitioner, researchers. A major set of questions which postmodern thinking poses for social work is what constitutes legitimate social work knowledge or theory, how is it best generated, and by whom?

As a follow on from this, there is also a question about what types of knowledge and theories should be the goal of professional research. Should we be striving to create generalized theories that have been validated through scientific testing? Or can practitioners grounded in specific contexts generate universally applicable theories? At the same time can knowledge that is developed to operate regardless of context be meaningful to specific service users and practitioners? Does the attempt to generate universal knowledge assist the social work endeavour in postmodern and changing contexts? What is evidence-based practice, and what counts as legitimate evidence, are not easily answered questions (Trinder, 2000; Taylor and White, 2000: 184–9).

Postmodern thinking highlights that there are many differing answers to these questions. And it is the answers to these questions that lie at the heart of the differing perspectives on social research and its methodology that have arisen in the last few decades. For instance, 'qualitative', 'ethnographic' and 'naturalistic' approaches draw attention to the need for methods to research phenomena, in a *sympathetic* way, from the perspective of the 'experiencer' in context (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). 'Grounded theory' (Strauss and Corbin, 1994)

methods enable the researcher to develop theory from the experience of respondents, rather than imposing preconceived theory. 'Reflective' methods (Schon, 1983; Fook, 1996) also upend the traditional theory–practice hierarchy and encourage the identification of theory implicit in practice, by practitioners themselves. 'Deconstructive', 'semiotic' and 'narrative' research methods also encourage the development of theories implicit in practice, through the *interpretation* of texts representative of experience. 'Action' research recognizes that theories are generated in context, influencing, and being influenced by a context of interactions as they are in the process of being developed. 'Participative' and 'collaborative' forms of inquiry (Heron, 1996; Baldwin, 2000) recognize that theories are often most effectively generated from practice through an alliance and dialogue between researchers and practitioners.

How does the practitioner researcher make sense of these many differing perspectives in order to use and develop a variety of methodologies for researching the complexities of practice? One way forward is to begin by focusing on the broad themes they share, namely:

- What theory is
- How it is generated
- Who it should be generated by

WHAT IS THEORY?

A traditional view of 'theory' is that it must consist of a systematic set of ideas which provides explanation, and which must also be generalizable (Thompson, 2000: 24). In some ways, this might be seen as a modernist view, which dominates our traditional ways of understanding theory. However, if we examine these ideas closely, I would argue that there are many different forms of thinking which can perform these functions, albeit in ostensibly different ways. I have now come to think that 'theory' can vary from a single descriptive idea, concept or label, to more complex sets of related ideas. Often just 'naming' or labelling a piece of behaviour can function to provide some explanation, or connect the behaviour with related ideas. Different theories might spell out these connections or explanations to different extents.

The literature on qualitative theory building supports this thinking. According to Strauss and Corbin (1994) theory 'consists of plausible relationships proposed among concepts and sets of concepts' (p. 278) and that 'grounded theory' is conceptually dense (p. 279) and grounded in the multiplicity of perspectives of the actors in a situation (p. 280). Theories also vary in terms of their degree of formality, generalizability and relevance (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 281) and the degree to which they should provide explanation, or can indicate causality (Huberman and Miles, 1994: 432). There are also different

levels of theories – Strauss and Corbin (1994: 281) distinguish between theories based on data gleaned from one context (substantive theory) and 'higher order' theories developed from numerous contexts (formal).

Questions of generalizability and relevance relate to the varying degrees to which theories can apply more broadly, yet can also provide understanding. These are complex concepts, since a theory that is generalizable may not necessarily apply to a specific instance. In relation to this point, Gilgun (1994: 122) distinguishes between two types of generalizability. The first type, 'ideographic', refers to theory that is developed from specific situations and can be tested for its relevance for, and its ability to provide understanding of, other situations. The second type of generalizability, called 'nomothetic', is associated with the search for more 'general laws, abstracted from time, place and specific person' (Gilgun (1994: 122). According to Gilgun (1994) these different types of theory are developed differently. The advantage of idiographic theories is their openness, their ability to take into account the individual 'exception to the rule', to illuminate specific experiences in different situations and contexts. The beauty of nomothetic theories is their predictive function, their ability to impose order and clear guidelines for practice. I like to think of the differences between them as the differences between 'bottom up' (inductively developed) and 'top down' (deductively applied) theories. Both are needed in any type of effective practice. 'Bottom up' theories allow us to constantly apply our thinking in ways relevant to the situation at hand. 'Top down' theories give us a starting point for engaging with a new situation, a framework that may ultimately prove inadequate but at the very least provides a beginning framework that makes new experiences initially manageable.

I think one of the difficulties for both practitioners and researchers is that an artificial distinction between idiographic and nomothetic theories has been created – it is often assumed that idiographic theories emerge from practice, and nomothetic theories from research. This has led to a devaluing of the forms of theorizing associated with practice. Idiographic theorizing is often thus not even viewed as research. But in fact both forms of theorizing are used in, and are integral to, practice and research, indeed, to the business of living.

In order to get around the devaluing of theories that are not seen as generalizable, I like to use the term 'transferability' (Fook, 2001) in place of generalizability, to refer to the ability of the theory to transfer meanings between different contexts. However it is important to remember that these ways of differentiating between the generalizability of theories are not mutually exclusive categories. Idiographic theories may become more nomothetic through further testing. Nomothetic theories may be constantly revised through accounting for exceptions. Transferable theories can become more generalizable. Theories can go through a succession of different types of research processes to develop, as Strauss and Corbin (1994: 281) term it, from 'substantive' (developed in one

context) to 'formal' (developed from many contexts) levels; from a description of a single concept, through the development of relationships between many concepts. At their most complex, grounded theories 'connect a multiplicity of perspectives and patterns and processes of action and interaction that in turn are linked with carefully specified conditions and consequences' (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 280).

Understanding the differences and relationships between generalizability and relevance or transferability, between nomothetic and idiographic theories, points up the variations between theories in terms of their 'content', 'purpose' and 'application'. For example, in social work we are familiar with the differences between practice theories, and the broader social or behavioural theories on which they are based (Fook, 1993: 40; Payne, 1997: 38–41). In some literature, these differences might be categorized as 'substantive' (knowledge about a situation or phenomenon) or 'procedural' (knowledge about how to use that knowledge) (Fook et al., 1997). Erant (1994) makes the very pertinent point that practicing professionals are engaged in the constant process of using theories and that this in itself creates a theory (about how to use theory). We can therefore say that there may be as many different types of theories as there are the processes to create them (Payne, 1997: 49).

Huberman and Miles (1994: 434) note some of the many types of theory:

- 'Grand theory', consisting of major well articulated constructs.
- 'Maps', aiming to generalize the story from a case or cases.
- A predicted pattern of events, for comparison with what can be observed.
- A model, consisting of hierarchical relations between components.
- A network of non-hierarchical relations between linked concepts.

Given the diversity of theories, their uses and applicability, and given the diversity of social work practice experience, it makes sense to take an inclusive approach to our understanding of theory. To help us understand this more inclusive approach it is useful to use the idea of continua in picturing how these different conceptions of theory relate to each other. Picturing a set of continua, on which different features are graduated, rather than a set of more rigidly defined categories, can lead to a more inclusive way of understanding the ways in which theories might vary. For example, at one end of one continuum might be the idea that 'theory' is a term we use to denote a label that gives some meaning to a phenomenon. At another end of this continuum, 'theory' may be a set of labels and complex relationships between them. On another continuum theories that illuminate understanding might be at one end, and on the other end, those that allow prediction. These theories may be generated through a multitude of different methods, from different contexts and for different purposes.

Theorizing, then, in simplest terms, is the act of developing these labels, the different processes of creating an idea or sets of ideas, from and through, different types of experiences. Thinking about theorizing in this way is enabling because it allows the practitioner/researcher to locate their specific knowledge generation activities within a research context and discourse. It allows the practitioner/researcher to identify the specific contribution of their particular form of theorizing, and how it fits within a broader context of professional knowledge.

HOW THEORY IS GENERATED FROM PRACTICE

The problem of course, as we all know, is that practice can be unpredictable and uncontrollable, changing and contextually based. It is often 'one-off'. It is hard to access (by researchers) and often practitioners themselves are not keen to undertake the research. There are also ethical considerations, of intruding on the experiences of those who often have least to gain directly from the research, namely service users. Practice does not lend itself easily to the requirements of traditional research as we see them – the need to measure and control variables, to make predictions, to be able to generalize our findings.

However an inclusive view of theory provides for an inclusive approach to practice as data, and for the analysis (theorization) of that data. In this section I want to provide a brief overview of the many possibilities for obtaining of data from practice, and then to review the many different types of analytical processes available for theorizing from this data.

The Data for Theory Generation – Accessing Frontline Practice Experiences

For the purposes of our discussion here, an *inclusive* approach to collecting data from practice involves understanding practice as involving many different experiences in which the practitioner is involved in delivering services directly to service users. The experiences can be many and varied, ranging from personal interactions with service users, to writing reports, making judgements in implementing policies, attending case meetings, lobbying managers, and so on. I find it most useful to talk about 'accessing experiences' rather than 'obtaining data', since the information we seek is the experiences themselves. Since these experiences already occur, it is more accurate to speak of accessing them in the most appropriate ways, rather than trying to collect something ('data') which does not already exist in the form we want it. We should be asking, 'How do we access frontline practice in ways which will best enable us to theorize from it?' rather than 'What instruments allow us to collect best data on frontline practice for research purposes?' I also think this is a more inclusive way of thinking about data and its collection, because it forces us to think about practice experience at how it happens 'naturalistically', so that we can approximate our

methods to it, rather than necessarily creating or imposing more 'artificial' methods for data collection.

However it is also important to bear in mind that, because frontline practice experience is holistic and multi-perspectival, we will only ever have a partial and selective access to the whole experience. Experiences also take place in contexts, which partially influence the experience, and no one player has access to all aspects of the context at any one time. Even if it is our own practice experience from which we wish to theorize, our view of it will be framed by what we have access to, and must therefore still be limited. One of the important principles therefore in researching holistic experience is to try to maximize the number of perspectives, or to access the experiences in different ways, and from different angles.

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) make some useful points about experience and our study of it. Experience at the very least is both personal and social, but it is the holistic experience we wish to study. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) suggest that methods need to be focused in at least four directions – on the inwards (internal thinking, etc.) and outwards (the context), the backwards (past) and forwards (present and future). They then suggest a number of different ways of accessing personal experience for study. These include: oral histories; constructed annals of particular periods; stories; historical artefacts; interviews; journals; autobiographical writing; letters; conversations; and field notes. I include the whole list because it may easily suggest similar ways of accessing frontline practice.

It is useful to divide possible ways of accessing experience into a number of main categories:

- Ethnographic and observational methods can be conducted in a variety of ways depending on the slice of experience under study. The 'slice' may be a defined period of a practitioner's work time (e.g. one week), a series of defined activities (all assessment interviews for a period of a month), staff meetings, and so on. Participant observation may be a method most accessible for practitioners. An issue will be how observations are recorded, and there are more or less unobtrusive ways to do this (Kellehear, 1993).
- Existing documents, which may include diaries, case notes, files, policy documents, minutes of meetings, position statements, reports and statistics on practice.
- Accounts of practice, which could include interviews, staff room conversations, debriefing sessions, supervisory sessions, or simply constructed accounts. Process or taped recordings of interviews with service users are useful.

One of my favourite tools for accessing practice is the description of critical incidents selected by practitioners (Fook et al., 1999), because, if I am aiming to theorize from practice as it is *experienced* by practitioners, I find it best to elicit their own descriptions of their practice, rather than to study accounts

