INTRODUCTION

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WE MUST FIND A THEORY THAT WILL WORK; AND THAT MEANS SOMETHING EXTREMELY DIFFICULT; FOR OUR THEORY MUST MEDIATE BETWEEN ALL PREVIOUS TRUTHS AND CERTAIN NEW EXPERIENCES.

—WILLIAM JAMES, LECTURE 6, PRAGMATISM’S CONCEPTION OF TRUTH (1907, 76–91)

PLURALISM HAS BEEN an irrepresible feature of social work from the start of the profession. A divergent range of thinkers, intellectual traditions, and theoretical perspectives have shaped the course of practice, over the last century, and clinicians continue to make pragmatic use of ideas from a variety of sources. Even so, theoretical concerns receive surprisingly little consideration in the broader literature of the field as practitioners seek to strengthen the empirical foundations of the discipline and negotiate the demands of an applied profession. Theory is often marginalized in social work education as a result of perceived conflicts with the practical concerns of the profession; the emergence of generalist, skills-based courses of study, and the growing emphasis on evidence-based practice.

This volume reaffirms the place of theory in social work practice and shows how emerging perspectives enlarge ways of seeing, understanding, and acting over the course of psychosocial intervention. At root, as William James reminds us, theories are instruments, providing us with tools for critical thinking, methods for carrying out our work, and justifications for our actions. The following chapters, written by distinguished scholars and practitioners especially for this volume, engage a range of essential concerns in contemporary social work, reflecting the vitality, richness, and creativity of theorizing in our time. Social workers have centered on the concrete
particularities of persons and lives in their theory making from the beginnings of the profession, remaining close to the richness of lived experience and the human contexts of vulnerability, need, and possibility. As we will see, the contributors are careful to connect ideas and experience through case reports and clinical illustrations, showing how we bring ideas to bear in the give-and-take of day-to-day practice, reflecting the play and place of theory in our ongoing efforts to provide care, foster personal growth, and work toward social change.

Although most social workers endorse eclecticism as their orientation to practice, there is little consideration of the ways in which clinicians integrate ideas and methods from differing perspectives over the course of intervention. In the opening chapter I introduce critical pluralism and pragmatism as orienting perspectives in comparative approaches to clinical theory, drawing on the philosophical thought of William James, and show how mastery of differing theoretical models, therapeutic languages, and modes of intervention strengthens eclectic and integrative approaches to psychosocial intervention. By way of illustration, I examine a case from four theoretical perspectives, encompassing psychodynamic, behavioral, cognitive, and humanistic lines of understanding, and consider the ways in which a pluralist approach enlarges explanatory systems and facilitates efforts to integrate concepts, empirical findings, and technical procedures from divergent points of view. I emphasize the crucial role of ongoing dialogue across the foundational schools of thought, grounded in the concrete particulars of the clinical situation, in attempts to strengthen critical perspectives and enrich theoretically informed, pragmatic approaches to practice.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore recent developments in cognitive theory and psychoanalytic thought, and identify basic tasks in development of integrative approaches in psychosocial intervention. Although practitioners have employed cognitive approaches in a range of settings over the last quarter century, traditional versions of this mode of intervention have proven problematic in the field of social work because they fail to take sufficient account of actual experience in the outer world. Sharon Berlin, in chapter 2, reviews the basic assumptions and therapeutic methods encompassed in classical models of cognitive psychotherapy, considering their strengths and limits, and outlines the integrative perspective she has developed for social work practice.

As Berlin explains, classical thinkers have tended to locate the origins of dysfunction within the person, emphasizing cognitive distortions and failing to consider the realities of social, cultural, and environmental conditions that perpetuate problems in functioning. Moving beyond the traditional focus on the inner life of the individual, Berlin provides a crucial reorientation of
the cognitive perspective for social work practice, situating the person in the larger social surround of demands and opportunities, helping practitioners take more account of oppressive or depriving conditions in the outer world that shape personal meaning and behavior.

Drawing on recent developments in neuroscience, personality theory, social psychology, relational psychoanalysis, narrative studies, experiential psychotherapy, and framing perspectives in the social work tradition, Berlin has developed an integrative model of practice that enlarges conceptions of person-environment interaction and core elements in psychosocial intervention. While her reformulations emphasize social and environmental domains of concern, she preserves a focus on the person as an individual, strengthening connections among personality theory, social-psychological perspectives, and clinical practice.

In chapter 3, Jerome Wakefield and Judith Baer trace the growing convergence of contemporary cognitive psychology and psychoanalytic thought and identify overlapping domains of concern that they view as fundamental in efforts to fashion an integrative theoretical perspective. By way of introduction, they present scientific and moral arguments for the development of integrative perspectives in social work practice and explore the strengths and limits of differing approaches to integration in the broader field of contemporary psychotherapy. Their conceptions of theoretical integration frame their account of the crucial points of contact between Sigmund Freud’s classical psychoanalytic theory, contemporary cognitive science, and cognitive-behavioral perspectives. They consider notions of motivation, unconscious mental states, and mental representation in their analysis of the conceptual overlap between psychoanalytic understanding and cognitive perspectives.

Wakefield and Baer review models of intervention developed within each tradition, providing representative case illustrations, and describe shared concepts, themes, and facilitating processes in the clinical situation. They outline the ways in which psychodynamic perspectives promise to strengthen development of cognitive theory, showing how modular models of mind, conceptions of defense, and notions of conflict enlarge current understanding. They view Freud as a thinker from whom clinical scholars and practitioners can continue to learn in efforts to establish a hybrid cognitive-psychodynamic theory.

James Clark, in chapter 4, argues that theorizing should centralize the dignity of the human person; he explores the ways in which biography, the study of lives, and historical perspectives deepen our understanding of what it means to be a unique individual and the particular circumstances that shape one’s experience of vulnerability, need, and problems in living. He
examines contemporary issues in the study of persons and lives, exploring a range of philosophical and methodological concerns, and reviews recent work in the field of psychobiography, providing a trenchant analysis of the strengths and limits of work to date.

In the domain of practice, Clark shows how biographical and historical frameworks inform critical thinking and decision making in the clinical situation and facilitate development of protocols for assessment of clients and management of cases. He presents three case studies that document the crucial importance of biographical and historical data in psychosocial intervention. As he demonstrates, biographical and historical perspectives introduce complexity and longitudinal views, carrying critical implications for inclusion and exclusion of data that potentially lead to dramatically different interpretations of experience in case formulations and differing modes of intervention over the course of the helping process. His chapter shows how the promise of theory, as practiced in the pursuit of psychobiography, the study of lives, and the study of history, enriches psychological, social, cultural, and clinical understanding in social work practice.

In spite of claims to a professional jurisdiction framed by a person-environment perspective, models of social work practice continue to emphasize psychological theories and person-oriented approaches in psychosocial intervention. In chapter 5, Susan Kemp centers on conceptions of place in her efforts to rejuvenate environmental theory in direct practice. The centrality of place in human experience is the starting point for converging lines of inquiry in cultural anthropology, cultural geography, and environmental psychology, much of it shaped by phenomenological perspectives. Kemp explores what it means to speak of place in social work practice, emphasizing the ways in which everyday environments enrich or limit conceptions of self and relational life; health, well-being, and spirituality; and access to resources and opportunities. People make places, but places also make people, she explains, reminding workers that the dynamics of power and privilege operate in the concrete particularities of ordinary, everyday surrounds. The burdens of current environmental challenges fall inequitably on communities "for whom social workers are particularly accountable," she observes.

In the realm of direct practice, Kemp emphasizes the need for deeper appreciation of the experiential and material aspects of place in clients' lives and the crucial role of “place making” that transforms people and surrounds. Drawing on empowerment perspectives, she emphasizes the importance of a critically reflective focus on personal agency and structural
factors, on local knowledge, and on participatory and dialogic approaches to place-based knowledge and change. She outlines basic tasks in efforts to facilitate “place-sensitive” practice, encompassing strategies to engage and validate local knowledge; narrative perspectives; a range of visual activities, including photography, video, and other art forms; and geographic information systems that provide ways of mapping person-place relationships. Kemp urges practitioners to follow the example of the early social workers in the settlement house movement and the charity organization societies, who remained close to the everyday worlds of their clients, “observing and absorbing the texture of daily life in place.”

The field of mental health, shaped by the medical model and classical psychoanalytic thought, emphasized conceptions of individual psychopathology and family deficits well into the late twentieth century, failing to recognize sources of strength that sponsor efforts to negotiate adversity and misfortune. Over the course of her work, Froma Walsh has challenged this paradigm, working to enlarge understandings of resilience, coping, and growth in her studies of family functioning and the social surround. In chapter 6, she reviews theoretical and empirical lines of inquiry that have informed conceptions of resilience over the last three decades and introduces a multisystemic perspective that integrates developmental theory and ecological domains of concern.

Walsh describes the core elements of a family resilience model, focusing on belief systems, organization patterns, and communication processes, that provides a pragmatic framework for clinical and community-based intervention and prevention. As she shows in her account of intervention with Bosnian and Kosovar refugee families, the concept of family resilience centers on strengths in the context of adversity and lends itself to a wide range of applications in our efforts to help families and communities negotiate crises and ongoing life challenges.

The last three chapters of this book explore the relationship among theory, practice, core values, and essential concerns in the broader social work tradition.

Janet Finn centers on the meaning and power of love and the search for social justice in social work practice, considering the ways in which the value base of the profession influences theorizing and practice. She wonders whether the forces of professionalization and the postmodern practice of social work have silenced a more intimate discourse of human connection and undermined motives for social action, denigrating a connection to our fundamental humanness as a core value base in the profession. Drawing on Sharon Berlin’s seminal essay on the value of acceptance and the
politics of knowledge that have shaped the profession over the last century, she reviews emerging conceptions of relationship, love, and justice, and examines the implications of the turns toward more reflexive and dialogical approaches in psychosocial intervention. In doing so, she describes the development of her own political and theoretical work over the last decade, integrating the contributions of structuralist and poststructuralist thought, feminist theorists, strengths perspectives, and empowerment-based approaches to practice.

With her colleague, Maxine Jacobson, Finn has introduced a social justice framework that emphasizes themes of personal meaning, context, power, history, and possibility. She reviews the defining features of this orienting perspective, providing clinical illustrations, and shows how core concepts are translated into action through facilitating processes that link theory and practice, including engagement, teaching and learning, activity, accompaniment, evaluation, critical reflection, and celebration. The perspective emphasizes conceptions of relationship, mutuality, and participation, translating the theory, politics, and ethics of social justice into praxis for personal and social transformation.

Theoretical understanding promises to strengthen emerging models of evidence-based practice, informing assessment, case formulation, and treatment planning in psychosocial intervention. In chapter 8, Stanley McCracken and Tina Rzepnicki examine the crucial functions of theory in evidence-based practice. They define theory broadly, encompassing a range of explanatory or predictive propositions set forth in formal knowledge structures subject to evaluation by researchers, as well as personal knowledge structures that help practitioners organize and understand clinical phenomena.

McCracken and Rzepnicki outline basic steps in the implementation of evidence-based practice, offering clinical illustrations, and explore the ways in which theoretical understanding strengthens efforts to carry out empirically supported intervention. In doing so, they show how conceptions of “mindful practice” and “logic modeling” help workers clarify the ways in which they engage differing perspectives in the clinical situation. As they emphasize, theoretically informed conceptions of evidence-based practice show how practitioners can make flexible use of technical procedures and the experiential dimensions of the helping process in light of the nature of specific problems in functioning and the individual, social, and cultural characteristics and contexts of the client.

A growing number of thinkers are exploring the development of practice wisdom in contemporary social work, seeking to better understand the ways in which clinicians generate knowledge through experiential
learning and bring understanding to bear in the course of their day-to-
day activities. In doing so, scholars emphasize the limits of the predomi-
nant theories that currently guide conceptions of intervention and urge
practitioners to reformulate ideas and establish perspectives that better
reflect the pragmatic character and diverse contexts of contemporary
social work. In the closing chapter, Malcolm Payne provides a critique
of clinical theory and describes core elements of practice wisdom that
promise to deepen understanding of basic tasks and facilitating processes
in psychosocial intervention.

In his analysis, formal practice theory is problematic in two respects.
First, it is “universalist,” in the sense that theorists assume that social work-
ers can carry out their practice on the basis of research-based behavioral
prescriptions. Such perspectives fail to take account of the complexities,
ambiguities, and demands of particular situations and settings that shape
actual practice in the real world. Payne argues that we must deepen our
understanding of the ways in which context, contingency, and experien-
tial learning influence intervention in continued development of practice
knowledge. A second limitation of current practice theory lies in its empha-
sis on behavioral and social change. Payne reminds us that a good deal of
clinical social work involves provision of ongoing care and support rather
than efforts to facilitate change as such. He reviews conceptions of caring,
support, resilience, emotional intelligence, and basic elements of the helping
process, providing representative clinical illustrations, and identifies crucial
domains of concern in continued development of theoretical understanding
and models of practice.

Although the writers explore divergent concerns in contemporary theory
and practice, their accounts reaffirm the framing perspectives and core val-
ues that have shaped the profession from the start, including (1) the crucial
focus on person and environment; (2) humanistic conceptions of the self,
emphasizing the inherent worth and dignity of the individual, the influence
of life history on personal meaning, resilience, and inherent capacities for
change and growth; (3) the role of relationship and social life in health and
well-being; and (4) fundamental commitments to caring, notions of social
justice, and the common good.

At the same time, the writers identify challenges and tasks in the continu-
ing development of theory and practice in our time, emphasizing the need
to elaborate integrative models of treatment; to take greater account of place,
social surround, context, and history in conceptions of intervention; to link
theoretical understanding with empirical findings, technical procedures,
and clinical experience in more complex formulations of evidence-based
practice; and to address fundamental tensions and contradictions among the core values, ethical foundations, and moral claims of the profession and the politics of theory and practice. The contributors are hopeful that their accounts and reflections will help establish a basis for greater dialogue across the divergent perspectives that shape the field and foster continued development of theory, research, and practice.
RESHAPING THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL WORK