

## Commonly Encountered Theories in Social Work Practice

<b>Theories of Human Behaviour</b>	<b>Focus of theory</b>	<b>Main concepts of this type of theory</b>
<b>Systems Theories</b> E.g. Ecological Systems & Family Systems perspectives	How people interact with their environment. How the family system affects the individual and family functioning across the life span	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People are continual interaction with their environment</li> <li>• Systems are interrelated parts or subsystems constituting an ordered whole</li> <li>• Each subsystem impact all the other parts and whole system</li> <li>• Systems can have either closed or open boundaries</li> <li>• Systems tend toward equilibrium</li> <li>• Individual functioning shapes family function and family systems can create pathology within the individual</li> <li>• Boundaries, roles, communication family structure influence family functioning</li> </ul>
<b>Behaviourism and Social Learning Theories</b> E.g. Cognitive, behavioural, social learning (social behavioural perspective)	How individual's develop cognitive functioning and learn through acting on their environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imitation and reaction to stimulation shape behavioural learning</li> <li>• Knowledge is constructed through children physically and mentally acting on objects</li> <li>• Intelligence is an evolutionary, biological adaptation to environment</li> <li>• Cognitive structures enable adaptation and organisation</li> </ul>
<b>Psychodynamic Theories</b> E.g. classical psychodynamic, ego-psychology, object	How inner energies and external forces interact to impact on emotional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unconscious and conscious mental activity motivate human behaviour</li> <li>• Ego functions mediate between individual and environment</li> <li>• Ego defense mechanisms protect individuals from becoming overwhelmed by unacceptable impulses and threats</li> <li>• Internalized experiences shape personality development and function</li> </ul>

<p>relations and self-psychology (psychodynamic perspective)</p> <p><b>Psychosocial Theory</b> (Developmental perspective)</p>	<p>How internal and external forces shape life development, generally by life stages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Healing occurs through attention to transferences and the treatment relationship.</li> <li>• Human development occurs in defined and qualitatively different stages that are sequential and may be universal</li> <li>• Individual stages of development include specific tasks to be completed and crises to be managed</li> <li>• Times and social context shape and individualise the meaning of life stages</li> </ul>
<p><b>Transpersonal Theory</b> (Developmental perspectives; built upon humanistic perspective)</p>	<p>How the spiritual and religious aspects of human existence can be understood.</p> <p>How spiritual development builds upon and goes beyond bio-psychosocial development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on meaning, connection and purpose</li> <li>• Some people achieve developmental levels beyond the personal (ego-based) level into transpersonal (beyond self or ego) levels of consciousness and functioning (links to concept of emotional intelligence)</li> <li>• There is an inherent tendency to express innate potentials for love, creativity and spirituality</li> <li>• There is a difference between psychopathological phenomena and spiritual growth experiences</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social Constructionism</b> (Social constructionist perspective)</p>	<p>How socio cultural and historical contexts shape individuals and the creation of knowledge</p> <p>How individual's create themselves</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All experience is subjective and people recreate themselves through an on-going, never static process</li> <li>• Knowledge is created through an interplay of multiple social and historical forces</li> <li>• Social interaction is grounded in language, customs, cultural and historical contexts</li> <li>• All phenomenon, including the sciences, must be approached with doubt in order to understand how people construct reality</li> <li>• People are self-interpreting beings</li> </ul>

<b>Symbolic Interactionism</b> (Social constructionist perspective)	How the “Self” is influenced and shaped by social processes and the capacity to symbolise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human action is caused by complex interaction between and within individuals</li> <li>• Dynamic social activities take place among people and we act according to how we define our situation</li> <li>• We act in the present, not the past</li> <li>• People are actors on the stage and take on roles, interacting with the environment</li> </ul>
<b>Conflict Theory</b> (conflict perspective)	How power structures and power disparities impact on people's lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All societies perpetuate some forms of oppression and injustice and structural inequity</li> <li>• Power is unequally divided and some groups dominate others</li> <li>• Social order is based on manipulation and control by dominant groups</li> <li>• Social change is driven by conflict with periods of change interrupting periods of stability</li> <li>• Life is characterised by conflict not consensus</li> </ul>
<b>Contingency Theory</b> (Systems perspective)	How people and groups gain power, access to resources and control over their lives, often through the use of collective action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groups are open, dynamic systems with both change and conflict present</li> <li>• Groups are stratified with different and unequal levels of power and control</li> <li>• High discrimination and low privilege equals low opportunity</li> <li>• Oppression occurs when upward mobility is systematically denied</li> </ul> <p>This theory sits well with organisational functioning</p>

## **Why do we need to apply social work theory to practice?**

Whilst individual social work theories have different purposes, using all kinds of theory in our work can offer us opportunities to:

- Make sense of situations
- Generate ideas about what is going on and why things are as they are
- Make sense of information gathered through assessment processes
- Help us to justify our actions and explain what we do to service users, carers and society in general
- Give explanations about why an action resulted in a particular consequence. This can help us review and possibly change our practice
- By using theoretical models and perspective in work with individuals it may enable us to gain more direction in our interventions, so optimising potential for success.