

**Core Theories that Support the Social Work Curriculum**

There are many theories of human behavior as well as theories and models that inform direct and indirect social work practice. The extent of these theories is overwhelming to students as well as many practitioners. The faculty in the Department of Social Work Education has analyzed program outcome data over many years and identified the need to place more focus on the core theories that support the B.A. and M.S.W program curricula. These core theories are a starting point to build a strong foundation for entry-level practice and life-long learning of more advanced theories and/or those most applicable to practice specializations in which graduates are engaged. Additional theories are also covered in the program, including developmental theories, psychodynamic theories, and theories specific to families, groups, organizations and communities. The four core theories that support the social work curriculum are systems theory, empowerment theory, learning theory, and conflict theory. They are summarized below. All faculty and field instructors are encouraged to discuss these theories with students and facilitate student understanding of their application to practice.

1. **Systems Theory**

Systems theory is a core component of generalist and multi systems social work practice. It focuses on recognition of the significant environments and systems in which humans interact (micro, mezzo and macro) and the relevance of those transactions to development and behavior. Analysis of these transactions between people and their social environments is the basis for planning and implementing social work interventions.

2. **Empowerment Theory**

Empowerment theory, as defined by Gutierrez (1995), is “the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families and communities can take action to improve their situations” (p.229). It proposes that an empowerment process improves physical, spiritual and behavioral health and wellness as well as social justice. The core social work practice of advocacy is based on empowerment theory.

3. **Learning Theory**

Learning theory is a broad category that includes four major theories: operant conditioning; classical conditioning; cognitive-behavioral; and, social learning theory. All learning theories view behavior as a product of conditioning. Given that most behaviors are learned, most can be unlearned and replaced with new learning. Intervention involves re-education or re-learning that is based on the particular learning theory used. For example, social learning theory is based on learning through observation and modeling that is further shaped by internal thoughts. Social skills training is based on social learning theory.

4. **Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory proposes that conflict is a fact of social life, that change, rather than stability is the norm, and that conflict generates change through societal responses to coercion, constraint, domination and oppression (Robbins, Chatterjee and Canda, 2006). Conflict theory informs social work interventions in that it questions who benefits and who is disadvantaged by existing societal arrangements. Identification of sources of social, health, and income inequalities oppression, discrimination and marginalization becomes the basis of client assessment, intervention and evaluation at micro and macro system levels.

**References:**

- Gutierrez, L. (1995). Understanding the empowerment process: Does consciousness make a difference? *Social Work Research*, (19), 229-237.
- Robbins, S.P., Chatterjee, P. & Canda, E. R. (2006). Contemporary human behavior theory: A critical perspective for social work.