

Where is the “social” in social work? An analysis of social workers’ use of theory in practice

¿Dónde está lo “social” en trabajo social? Un análisis del uso de la teoría en la intervención de trabajadoras/es sociales

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Abstract

Theory serves as a source of guiding knowledge in informing assessment and interventions in social work practice. Thus, social workers should be cognisant and analytical in applying theory to practice, particularly as their work moves forward the social work aims of social change and social justice under the current social and political climate. This exploratory, qualitative study sought to explore

Keywords:
theory; social change; social justice; anti-oppressive practice; United States

the use of theories by social workers in the United States, the underlying purposes of the social workers' choice of theory, and whether the social workers' practice had a focus on social change and social justice. Data from interviews with twenty social workers were analysed using a summative content analysis and revealed social workers to predominately apply theories to practice that have a purpose to problem solve on an individual level. Only one social worker applied theory with a purpose of empowerment and social change, and two social workers applied theory with a purpose of social change. The findings were considered against the global definition of social work, which promotes social change and social justice as key aims of social work. Social work practice in this study is found to reflect individualism, neoliberalism, and capitalism and recommendations are considered to redefine social work practice to be more widely committed to social change and social justice.

Resumen

La teoría sirve como fuente de conocimientos que orienta las intervenciones del trabajo social. Si lo que se busca es aportar a la transformación y a la justicia social en el momento social y político actual, las/os trabajadoras sociales deben ser conscientes y analíticos al momento de fundamentar teóricamente sus intervenciones. Este estudio exploratorio y cualitativo buscó examinar la manera en que las teorías son asimiladas por parte de trabajadoras/es sociales en los Estados Unidos, los propósitos que justifican la elección de teorías y la orientación hacia la transformación y la justicia social que tenían sus intervenciones profesionales. Se realizaron veinte entrevistas semi-estructuradas con trabajadoras/es sociales, las que fueron analizadas mediante un análisis de contenido sumativo. Los hallazgos revelan que las/os trabajadoras sociales utilizan teorías que tienen el propósito de resolver problemas a nivel individual principalmente. Solo un trabajador social dio cuenta de teorías orientadas al empoderamiento y dos trabajadoras sociales relataron el uso de la teoría con propósitos de transformación social más estructural. Estos resultados sugieren una discordancia respecto de la definición global de trabajo social, que promueve el cambio social y la justicia social como objetivos clave de la profesión y disciplina. Las intervenciones de las/os trabajadoras/es sociales participantes en este estudio reflejan el individualismo que está a la base del capitalismo neoliberal. Finalmente, se discuten algunas consideraciones para una redefinición de la intervención de trabajo social comprometido con el cambio social y la justicia social.

Palabras clave:
teoría; cambio social; justicia social; práctica anti-opresiva; Estados Unidos



Introduction

Social work is an academic discipline and a practice profession that incorporates scientific research and theory into the continual development of best practices to enhance the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, groups, communities and society at large. The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW, 2014, np) provides the global definition of social work:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. bienestar.

A central aspect of the definition is the focus on the role of theories in underpinning the work of social workers to achieve the overall aim of addressing life challenges, enhancing wellbeing, and promoting social change and development to achieve social justice. A theory in social work practice can be defined as “a hypothesis, an idea, or prediction about what can or might happen in certain situations given certain circumstances” (Teater, 2020, p. 1), where the theory “attempt[s] to explain the why, when, and how certain behaviours may or may not occur and indicate[s] the main sources of influence to change the targeted behaviour” (Lub, 2019, p. 5).

Theories, along with the use of empirical research findings, serve as the guiding knowledge in informing assessments and the choice of practice interventions in social work practice. Theories used in social work practice have evolved from knowledge developed within social work as well as theories from other human sciences. Thus, theory plays a critical role in social work practice and social workers should be cognisant and analytical in their meticulous application of theory to practice, particularly as their work moves forward the social work aims of social change and social justice. This study sought to explore the use of theories by social workers in New York City, in the United States (US), the underlying purposes of the social workers' choice of theory, and whether the social workers' practice had a focus on social change and social justice. For the purposes of this study, theory is examined specifically within the context of how individual social workers report using theory in practice situations, which involves direct work with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organisations. The use and application of theory within research, education, or policy development were outside of the scope of this study.



Theory in Social Work Practice

Social workers are first exposed to theory as a form of knowledge to be used to assess and intervene in practice situations through their formal social work education and training. Social work students are provided with key theoretical concepts through coursework and are then given the opportunity to practice applying the theories to social work encounters in their field education placements. The application of theory to practice is one aspect of social work that assists in establishing social work as a “legitimate” profession (Lub, 2019) whereas without the systematic application of theory to practice, social workers would “develop an intuitive voluntaristic mode of work, based on common sense” (Montano, 2012, p. 310). Thus, social workers should be able to explicitly identify what they do, why they make specific practice decisions, and what theory(ies) and other knowledge has influenced and helped them make practice decisions (Howe, 2016; Lub, 2019; Teater, 2020). Such judicious practice will strengthen social workers’ accountability and effectiveness and ensure practice decisions are purposeful and conscious versus taken for granted and/or hidden from conscious awareness (Cox et al., 2020).

Social workers’ choice of theory should be linked to the overall purpose of the work with the client system, thus, the purpose of the practice theory selected should also match the purpose of the work with the client system. Of equal consideration is the extent to which practice theories are informed and shaped by political philosophy, dominant social welfare discourses, and knowledge and understanding of the client world (Cox et al., 2020; Payne, 2014). Cox and colleagues (2020), building on the work of Payne (2014), Mullaly (2007) and McGregor (2019), have identified and defined five purposes of social work theory.

- Problem solving theories, such as psychodynamic or cognitive and behavioural, have the purpose to address individual deficit and personal responsibility by focusing on immediate personal problems.
- The focus of the social work interaction is with the individual and his/her/their immediate surroundings (e.g., family; support systems) in order to alleviate personal problems.
- Problem solving empowerment theories, such as groupwork and macro practices focused on social development, and/or social pedagogy, aims to alleviate personal and group problems through mutual support or understanding through education and identification of shared resources and strengths.
- Individual empowerment (therapeutic) theories, such as strengths-based and



person-centred, aims to work with individuals to realize strengths and resources in order to promote and facilitate growth and self-fulfilment.

- Empowerment social change theories, such as advocacy and empowerment, as well as social change theories, such as anti-racism, anti-oppressive, and ecological justice, take a specific social justice lens to the purpose of the work whereby there is an explicit understanding that suffering, oppression, and discrimination arise from the structural order of society, through systemic racism, classism, and oppression, and social institutions and political ideologies perpetuate and support the continual oppression (Mullaly, 2007).

The latter two theory purposes have recently reemerged as critical elements of social work in an attempt to “return to a more structural, activist social work view in which the state and its relationship to capitalism is brought back into focus” (Cox et al., 2020, p. 4). The extent to which these aims have infiltrated social workers’ practice in the US is unknown and, thus, the focus of this study. Therefore, this study aimed to examine social workers’ use of theory in practice in order to: (a) determine the overall purpose of the practice theories used by social workers; (b) detail the ways in which social workers apply the theories to achieve such purposes; and (c) critique the ways in which social workers’ use of theory had a focus on social change and social justice.

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Current Political and Social Climate: United States Context

In the year 2020, the US was presented with two public health crises: (1) the pandemic of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, which has resulted in nearly 200,000 deaths (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2020a); and (2) the prevailing and longstanding systemic racism that has persistently led to the murders of Black and Brown individuals, for example, the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Both crises have stirred social and political unrest, particularly as COVID-19 and systemic racism have resulted in more health disparities and deaths to Black and Brown communities. For example, African American and Black individuals make up 13.4% of the US population, but account for 21% of the COVID-19 deaths (CDC, 2020b). Additionally, research has consistently shown the link between systemic racism and health disparities among Black and Brown communities, such as infant mortality, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer (Bailey et al., 2017; William et al., 2019). The murders of Black individuals during 2020 resurged the Black Lives Matter movement and resulted in nation-wide protests and calls to action. The two public health crises and the blatant disparities to Black and Brown individuals led to organizations, communities, groups, and individuals to stand in solidarity to address the crises through critiques and changes in policies, practices, education, and health and social care support systems. Thus, the current social and political climate calls for social change and social justice.



Geographical Context of this Study

The regulation of social work in the US is multi-faceted. Social work education across the 50 individual states and the District of Columbia (DC) is regulated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) which sets Educational and Policy Accreditation Standards and regularly evaluates and then accredits social work programs against these standards. The practice of social work, after educational qualification, in the US is regulated by 50 individual states and the District of Columbia (DC) through individual state licensing (registration) boards; in many states, social workers cannot legally practice social work without being licensed (or registered) with the State's regulatory boards. Finally, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is a national organization that provides guidance to the profession of social work, such as the Code of Ethics, and lobbies on behalf of social work to individual state regulatory boards, CSWE, and the federal government. Although NASW has a significant presence, particularly through establishing the Code of Ethics, they do not have regulatory oversight of the education or practice of social workers.

This multi-faceted regulatory structure is further fractioned by each of the 50 state (and DC) licensing boards, CSWE, and NASW having their own definitions of social work (Hill et al., 2017), which ranges from a focus on micro social work (e.g., work with individuals, families, and groups often referred to as "clinical" social work) to macro social work (e.g., work involving leadership, management, community organising, and policy development) (Gitterman, 2014). Therefore, not only is there a lack of a unified definition of social work practice in the US, there is also a lack of one national regulatory body to provide consistent governance of the profession, which is argued to have implications for identification as a social worker, public perceptions of social work, and, thus, solidarity within the profession (Lightfoot et al., 2016; Worsley et al., 2020).

In New York State (NYS), the title of "social worker" is not a protected title but, rather, the titles associated with social work licensure are protected and regulated by the NYS Education Department, Office of the Professions (NYSEDOP). In order to qualify to have one of the protected licensed social work titles in NYS, individuals must have received a Master's degree in social work (e.g., MSW). These titles include a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) or a Licensed Clinical Social Work (LCSW). Therefore, individuals who do not hold social work degrees and/or individuals who have not been licensed and registered with NYSEDOP can call themselves "social workers" without legal ramifications and without oversight from NYSEDOP, but cannot refer to themselves as a LMSW or LCSW and cannot apply for social work positions that require the licensure. Only individuals who hold either a LMSW or LCSW may use these relevant titles with LCSWs being able to provide clinical social



work, or psychotherapy, whereas LMSWs can only provide clinical social work under supervision. Individuals who obtain a social work undergraduate (Baccalaureate) degree are not eligible for a social work license in NYS. Therefore, they can practice as “social workers,” but they are not licensed or regulated, thus, often leading to contentions in the field as to what is a social worker and who has oversight of social workers in NYS, in terms of establishing standards and codes of practice, requirements for continuing professional development, and sanctions for failing to adhere to such guidelines. This study focuses on social workers licenced in NYS who practise social work in New York City (NYC). Focusing specifically on those social workers who are licensed ensured the study was capturing social workers regulated within NYS, and specifically, NYC. As of July 1, 2020 there were 12,202 LMSWs and 10,853 LCSWs registered in NYC (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2020).

Methods

This exploratory, qualitative study consisted of a series of individual interviews with social workers in NYC to achieve the above stated research aims. Prior to the data collection, ethical approval was obtained by the authors’ University Internal Review Board (IRB) with ethical considerations including informing the participants of the purpose of the study, the confidential and voluntary nature of the study, and compensation of a US\$25.00 Amazon gift card in exchange for participation in the interview. Participants provided verbal consent prior to the beginning of the interviews. All data were stored on a password-protected computer and on a secure website only accessible by the authors.

Participants were recruited from a larger quantitative study of 105 social workers who completed an online survey of their use of theories and methods in practice. Social workers were invited to participate in the larger quantitative study through a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling. In the Spring of 2020, the link to the online survey, via Survey Monkey, was distributed to known social workers, social worker listed on the NYS Society for Clinical Social Work website, and social workers listed on the websites of numerous social work organisation in NYC. Participants were asked to share the study invitation with other known licensed social workers. At the conclusion of the online, quantitative survey, participants were asked to volunteer to be interviewed to provide further information on their use of theories in practice. A total of 45 participants volunteered to participate. An initial purposive sample of 10 participants were selected based on their primary field of practice, practice function, licensure type, and demographics. Ten additional participants were selected incrementally and interviewed based on identified gaps in the data, and sampling ceased once saturation was reached and no new information was obtained.

The individual interviews took place via telephone or Zoom between July – September,

2020 with the interviews lasting an average of 41 minutes (range: 32 – 65 minutes). Both authors conducted the interviews with the first author conducting 12 interviews and the second author conducting eight interviews. The interviews were audio recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the individual interviews. The interview schedule consisted of three main questions: (a) Tell me about a recent case in your practice; (b) Is there any perspective or theory that you feel was guiding you, generally, when you worked with this case?; and (c) What interventions or methods did you implement with this case? Follow-up questions included, What factors influenced your choice in this particular perspective or theory?; How did the client's involvement in working with you influence your perspective or theory?; and What were the barriers and facilitators to using this perspective or theory? Demographic and work characteristic variables were collected on each participant from their responses to the online survey.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed by both authors using a summative content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and consisted of the following steps as suggested by Lune and Berg (2017): (a) The data were transcribed verbatim and presented in an online document where the transcribed words were followed along with the audio recording to check for accuracy and to become familiar with the data; (b) The participants' responses to the questions were re-read and excerpts of data were transferred into an excel sheet under the appropriate heading (e.g., overview of case; specific theory identified; example of how applied and used; factors influencing choice in theory; clients' involvement in influencing choice in use of specific theory); (c) The participants' identified theories were listed, collated, and placed under one of the five theory purposes as proposed by Cox et al. (2020); (d) The participants' description of their application of the theory to a practice example were reviewed under each of the five theory purpose categories to explore common themes in the ways in which each purpose is achieved; and (e) The findings are presented by describing the five theory purposes as illustrated by the participants through their identified application of theory to practice. Data extracts are included to provide support for each theory purpose followed by a discussion that examines the extent to which the participants' use of theory challenges or perpetuates social injustice.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness aspects of dependability, credibility, and transferability of the

qualitative data analysis and findings were strengthened by: (a) creating an audit trail of the data analysis and using direct quotes to support the five theory purposes; (b) holding regular peer debriefing between the authors where data were analysed independently and then compared; and (c) providing details of the context in which the practice takes place, and providing details of the geographical context relevant to this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

A total of 20 licensed social workers practising in NYC participated in the study. The participants were, on average, nearly 42 years old, and identified as a woman (n = 16; 80%), White (n = 15; 75%), and as straight/heterosexual (n = 15; 75%). Table 1 provides the full details of the demographics of the sample

Table 1: Sample Demographics (N = 20)

Variable (n)	M(SD)	% (f)
Age(19)	41,95 (10,61)	
Gender		
Woman		80,0% (16)
Man		20,0% (4)
Race/Ethnicity		
White/European-American		75,0% (15)
Asian/Pacific Islander		0,05% (1)
Black/African-American/West-Indian		0,05% (1)
Black/African-American/West-Indian +		
Latinx/Hispanic + White/European-American		0,05% (1)
Indigenous Peoples		0,05% (1)
Latinx/Hispanic		0,05% (1)
Sexuality		
Heterosexual/Straight		75,0% (15)
Bisexual		0,10% (2)
Gay		0,05% (1)
Queer		0,05% (1)
Questioning or unsure		0,05% (1)

Source: own elaboration

Table 2 provides the details of the participants' licensure and work characteristics with an accompanying code for each participant that will be used to identify their direct quotes. It was intentional to separate this table from Table 1 to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. As Table 2 illustrates, the majority of the participants held a LMSW ($n = 12$; 60%) and had an average of just over 10 years practising social work ($SD = 8.20$ years). The primary field of practice and practice functions ranged across a variety of settings, with the largest percentage in adult mental health ($n = 5$; 25%), and in frontline/direct practice ($n = 8$; 40%).

Table 2: Sample Work Characteristics (N = 20)

Code	License Type	Years in Practice	Field of Practice	Practice Function
1	LCSW	20	Medical Social Work	Frontline/Direct Practice
2	LCSW	12	Adult Mental Health	Private Practice
3	LMSW	16	School Social Work	Frontline/Direct Practice
4	LMSW	3	Gerontological Social Work	Case Manager
5	LCSW	9	Youth Justice	Supervisor/Administrator
6	LMSW	6	Children with Disabilities	Frontline/Direct Practice
7	LMSW	3	Adults with Disabilities	Frontline/Direct Practice
8	LCSW	6	Adult Mental Health	Private Practice
9	LCSW-R ^a	28	Adult Mental Health	Private Practice
10	LMSW	8	Advocacy & Com Organize ^b	Trainer/Educator
11	LCSW-R ^a	25	Adult Mental Health	Private Practice
12	LCSW	21	Medical Social Work	Frontline/Direct Practice
13	LMSW	2	Advocacy & Com Organize ^b	Supervisor/Administrator
14	LMSW	2	Children with Disabilities	Advocate
15	LMSW	6	Medical Social Work	Frontline/Direct Practice
16	LMSW	7	Children with Disabilities	Frontline/Direct Practice
17	LMSW	10	Gerontological Social Work	Supervisor/Administrator
18	LCSW	16	Adult Mental Health	Private Practice
19	LMSW	3	Mental Health (all ages)	Frontline/Direct Practice
20	LMSW	2	Homelessness & Sub Abuse ^c	Supervisor/Administrator

^a Individuals granted the "R" are licensed to be financially "reimbursed" (paid) from health insurance companies for services. ^b = Advocacy & Community Organizing; ^c = Homelessness & Substance Abuse.

Source: own elaboration



Theory Purpose

The participants' identified theories were mapped against Cox et al.'s five theory purposes. Table 3 presents the number of times a specific practice theory was mentioned and indicates which participant made mention of the practice theory. Each of the theory purposes are described in more detail below with supporting quotes from the social workers; identification codes are provided for each quote to refer to the specific work characteristics of the social worker as listed in Table 2.

Table 3: Social Workers' Theory Purpose

Purpose	Practice Theories	N	Participant
Problem Solving	Crisis and Task Centred	2	12; 15
	Cognitive and Behavioural	12	2 - 7; 11; 16 - 20
	Family Systems/Therapy	4	1; 12; 16; 18
	Psychodynamic/Psychoanalysis	3	8; 9; 11
	Systems and Ecological	3	6; 9; 14
Problem Solving Empowerment	Advocacy	1	14
	Groupwork	1	17
	Macro Practice/Social Development/Social Pedagogy (e.g. Assets Based Community Development)	1	10
	Individual Empowerment/ (Therapeutic)	Humanist/Existential/Spiritual	1
	Strengths-Based/Solution- Focused/Narrative	6	4; 5; 6; 13; 14; 20
Empowerment Social Change Social Change	Advocacy/Empowerment	1	5
	Anti-Oppressive/Discriminatory	1	4
	Anti-Race	1	5
	Constructivist	0	-
	Critical Post Modern	0	-
	Ecological Justice/Eco-SW	0	-
	Feminist	0	-
	First Nations/Decolonize	0	-
	Radical	0	-
Total		37	

Source: Adapted from Payne (2014) and Cox et al., (2020)

Problem Solving

The majority of the social workers (n = 18) identified practice theories with a purpose of problem solving with 12 of these social workers drawing from cognitive and behavioural theories. In particular, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) was the most commonly mentioned (n = 10) practice method, followed by dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT) (n = 3), and then the following, which were each mentioned by one social worker: acceptance & commitment therapy (ACT); applied behavioural analysis (ABA); trauma affect regulation: guide for education and therapy (TARGET); distress tolerance; harm reduction; and psychoeducation. An example of a social worker utilizing CBT was from a school setting where the social worker was working with a young child struggling with negative self-image. The social worker explains, *“Before class, we would go in a mirror, we would say three things that were positive. [...] ‘I’m gonna have a good day,’ ‘I can make good choices,’ ‘I am smart.’ [...] Positive self-talk to replace that negative self-talk that was really the underlying thoughts that were then causing them to make poor choices”* (3).

Family systems/therapy was mentioned four times by social workers. The ways in which the social workers used this theory ranged from informing assessments to including family members in the therapeutic work. For one social worker, although he was not providing family therapy, he used his background knowledge from training in family therapy to guide his assessment of families within a medical setting. He explains: *“In trying to find out some family history, you know, just trying to gather some background information and find out where the family is at and assess for any significant needs that they might have”* (1). Another social worker with a private practice relied on aspects of family therapy to enable her to work with a client in crisis, *“We started off with doing couples with her and her husband, and then her mom came in. [...] I just really liked the consistency or the continuity of the extended family’s involvement and their commitment to support her”* (18).

The use of family systems/therapy seemed to have some overlap with the use of systems theory identified by three social workers where systems theory was used in conducting an assessment of the problem and need. For example, a social worker who works with children with disabilities explains:

In meeting with people, I usually initially try to figure out all the moving parts of what may be necessary and what we might need to triage before we even start talking about

education. I think that is something I will do on pretty much every case. Just kind of a general, like how are you, and those issues [housing concerns, benefit concerns, family court concerns] inevitably they come out as we're speaking (6).

Psychodynamic/Psychoanalysis was mentioned by three social workers who were working in Private Practice (i.e. the social worker is not providing services within a social service organisation, but serve as their own organisation and clients pay a fee for the social worker's service). These social workers specified the theory that underpinned the service they provided, which included: object relations; attachment theory; somatic experiencing; and Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy. One social worker described psychoanalysis as the theory that underpins her choice of interventions, which often include, "*asking a lot of reflective questions. I'm asking him to think about himself... I'm trying to stimulate his curiosity in himself [...] anything to stimulate awareness.*" (9). Another social worker, who is also in training to become a psychoanalyst described the structure of his sessions with his clients (that he referred to as "patients"):

[T]he structure is, he comes in, he lies down on the couch, he starts talking, and 45 minutes after the scheduled start time I say, 'we're gonna stop'...and in between, he says whatever comes to his mind, and to the extent that I have things that I think might be helpful to say, I say them (8).

Finally, two social workers mentioned crisis and/or task-centred theories, both of whom worked in a medical setting where the work was described as quick and focused, for example, "*go in, you assess, you evaluate [...] we do the social work process within minutes*" (15). The other social worker describes her work with people who are in crisis:

[W]e've walked people to the emergency room to evaluate them for suicidality. I mean, from one extreme to the other. It could just be calming a situation down, pulling them out of an area, getting them to sit down, to talk things through. Or it could be pretty significant, like, yeah, this guy needs a psych evaluation to determine if he's really suicidal (12).

Problem Solving Empowerment

Three social workers mentioned practice theories with a purpose of problem solving to empower with each of the following mentioned once: advocacy; groupwork; and community needs assessment. One social worker works with parents of children with special needs to assist in matching the child to the best learning environment, which often requires navigating the bureaucratic educational system and being persistent in demanding needs be met versus ignored. The social worker states this advocacy work involves, *“helping parents connect to outlets where they will be heard. That their voice is not my voice because I think too often advocates themselves are heard. You know, we get paid to do this work”* (14). The social worker later stressed the need to integrate role modelling into this work to ensure that advocacy is something that is learnt and modelled in the future by the parents when the advocate is not around.

Another social worker mentioned the use of groupwork where she supervises a self-help group for family members of someone with Alzheimer’s or Dementia, which she stated, *“I think it's helpful to know that the groups are not therapeutic, they're support groups”* (17). This type of focus and environment allows for the group to challenge, learn from, and support one another. The social worker describes that as a support group there is not always a specific focus for the group, but more around what the group presents and needs, *“there's a topic that's discussed, but usually, ‘How was your week?’ And everyone, kind of, shares what's happening and then themes will come out and then they, kind of, discuss the themes and flesh it out”* (17).

Finally, one social worker is conducting more macro social work by engaging in the community and is primarily responsible for conducting a community needs assessment each year around problem gambling. This assessment involves engaging key informants through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, but also gathering data, such as prevalence statistics and information from the media. The social worker describes:

Based on all the data, what we want to look at is what are [the] general risk and protective factors in the community. [...] ‘Okay, problem gambling aside, here's kind of a review out of the community as a whole.’ And then we kind of drill down into problem gambling specific information. What does the community need around problem gambling? And where are the gaps in services or other things in the community? (10)

Individual Empowerment/(Therapeutic)

Six social workers mentioned practice theories with a purpose of individual empowerment, which consisted of person-centred care (n = 1); strengths-based perspective (n = 6); and solution-focused practice (n = 1). One social worker, who works with adults with disabilities, described the ethos of the organisation as “person-centred,” which meant, “*specifically while working with this population, um, the feeling of putting empowerment in the hands of the person receiving the support always tends to work in our favour and just continuing to go by the person-centred approach at all times*” (13). Another social worker working in substance use and homelessness described the importance of the strengths-perspective with this population, and described how he used it with a client: “*I have been focusing a lot with her on strengths perspective and reminding her of her resilience and what she's gone through. Also reminding the direct care staff that I supervise of how resilient she is and what she's accomplished over a relatively short time*” (20).

Empowerment Social Change

One social worker mentioned practice theories with a purpose of empowerment social change. This social worker utilized elements of cognitive and behavioural theories, and strength-based practice alongside advocacy/empowerment and anti-racist practice, thus, targeting individual, family, and larger systems for change. She explains the advocacy/empowerment work with justice-involved youth as follows:

[T]he biggest tool that we look at using with youth is self-advocacy. I think that a lot of our youth aren't able to advocate for themselves or their families aren't people that advocate for themselves. So being able to provide not just the information, but ways in which the family can continue to be able to be self-sufficient and can continue to be able to support themselves in terms of finding the knowledge and tools they need is part of what we try to do when the youth are with us” (5).

Social Change

Two social workers mentioned theories with a purpose of social change, which included anti-oppressive/discriminatory and anti-racism. One social worker who works with an older adult population described an element of her practice as challenging stereotypes of older adults and the often oppressive and discriminatory treatment they may receive because of their age. She described this anti-oppressive/discriminatory practice as follows:

[W]e do live in a culture and a society that is ageist. And clients themselves can have these beliefs and also their family members. [...] Oftentimes, people will talk to just the family members and not the client. And that is absolutely heart-breaking and disrespectful. [...] I, as a social worker, am completely passionate and dedicated to changing that belief. When people make a joke like, 'Oh, it's a senior moment,' or anything like that. I am the one to try to be like, 'You know what? You maybe shouldn't say that because this adds to that stereotype about when you're older, you're not useful anymore'" (4).

Another social worker mentioned "social justice" as a focus of her practice working with justice involved youth and illustrated how the programs implemented had an element of anti-racism in order to acknowledge and foster the culture of the youth. She described:

"As an integrated milieu, we do various things to recognize the culture and the background of the youth that we serve. For instance, we do Freedom School in the summer [which] is designed after cultural perspectives from African American culture where learning is more integrative. They do Harambee [...] it's a call and response initiative that takes place in the morning to check in as a community and how that looks when we're checking in on each other, how do we support each other? [...] And what that would look like for us when we, you leave detention. [H]ow can you carry these principles, beyond these walls?" (5).

Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrate how the social workers were predominately concerned with individual functioning of their clients and the choice of theory supported a central focus on individual problem solving. When 16 of the social workers spoke of this individual work, they failed to mention how the individual was situated within her/his/their environment or how larger systems and societal structures could be helping or hindering the individual in alleviating the presenting problem. This type of social work appears to support an individualistic view of presenting problems, without a focus on larger social change and social justice. In this sense, the individualistic work aims to help the client problem solve in order to survive and thrive within a potentially broken system versus tackling the system and seeing if that will alleviate the presenting problems; whether solo or in combination with individual work. Future research should explore the extent to which this individualised focus is evident in other Westernized and non-Westernized countries, and describe other non-individualised ways of working.

As evident in the description of the five theory purposes presented by Cox et al. (2020), not all social work theories used in practice settings have an explicit purpose of

achieving social justice. Yet, the global definition of social work and the accompanying core mandates and principles stress the importance of “promoting social change, social development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people” (IFSW, 2014, np). Likewise, social workers are called to “recognize that the interconnected historical, socio-economic, cultural, spatial, political and personal factors serve as opportunities and/or barriers to human wellbeing and development” where “advocating and upholding human rights and social justice is the motivation and justification for social work” (IFSW, 2014, np). Thus, even if social workers within the US and other geographical contexts are utilizing theories that have a purpose of problem solving and/or individual empowerment, there should also be an acknowledgement of considerations of larger systemic factors that are helping or hindering the individual, family, and/or group system when social workers discuss their work with the client system. Despite the direct work being on a micro-level, there should be macro-level discussions that indicate the social worker has considered larger structural issues and potential actions that need to take place to alleviate structural oppression and/or discrimination ultimately influencing the client system on a micro level; thus, promoting social justice. This seems to be lacking in the recounts of social work practice presented in this study and should be explored within other geographical contexts and countries.

Cox and colleagues (2020) acknowledged the changing social and political landscapes that are moving social services to be more reactive than proactive, with a focus on individual responsibility and solutions versus social and collective need and firmly state, “business as usual is not an option” (p. 1). There is a need for social justice orientated social work practice. By predominately focusing on the individual, the social workers often seemed inoculated to seeing the ways in which the larger social context was shaping the client experience. This type of work supports neoliberalism in placing the responsibility for change on the individual versus seeing the role that societal structures play in the health and well-being of citizens or the need for a communal and societal responsibility to individual, community, and social problems. As the US does not have a universal health care system, access to health and social services is often dependent on one’s health insurance plan (with “better” plans often correlated with higher income). Thus, there are variations in the type and quality of care one can receive. This type of capitalist system can perpetuate the commodification of particular social work services, such as private practice services where individuals who are able to afford services are able to receive them and shop (or move between) social services. This is in contrast to individuals with limited health insurance plans or who are receiving national healthcare plans, due to low income, who are limited to service providers. The profession of social work both within the US and across other



geographical contexts should fully examine the extent to which the current structure of social services is operating within a neoliberal, capitalist system and the extent to which this system includes and excludes members of society and perpetuates a focus on theories that have a purpose on individual problem solving.

The findings further support a need for a social justice to be more explicitly present within social work education in the US in order to influence the types of theories that underpin social work practice. The current social and political climate in the US calls for social change and social justice with a particular focus on anti-racist practice and anti-racist pedagogy. Social workers are exposed to theory in their social work education where they are presented with textbook knowledge, but then provided opportunities to practice applying theories and knowledge to practice through field education placements. Social work education in the US and across other geographical areas should provide a foundation on theories of social change and social justice, such as anti-racism, constructivism, critical post-modern, and First nations/decolonialist in order to introduce such theories and link the ways in which they explain and understand racism, classism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, and other “isms” in working to promote human growth and development and an equitable and safe society for all. In the US, the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is timely and appropriate under the current social and political climate. CRT originated with a focus on race, yet the theory has expanded to be inclusive of other marginalized identities and stresses the importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017) in examining power, privilege, discrimination, and oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT argues that racism and other “isms” are difficult to address because they are often not acknowledged within society and societal structures because it is not to the advantage of White elites or White working-class to do so; racism supports their status, power, and privilege, and material and physical gains. CRT places focus on the analysis of legislation and structural policies and practices that create and sustain racism, colonialism, White supremacy, classism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism and any other form of “othering”. In order to eradicate racism and other “isms,” and promote social justice, change must occur not only through individuals’ hearts and minds, but through dismantling and rebuilding the deeply entrenched systemic policies, practices, and legislation that blind individuals in being able to see how discrimination and oppression are the bones that make up the US. Social work education can play a crucial role in shifting the ways in which social workers think systemically and use theory in practice.

Finally, the profession of social work in the US should strengthen the definition and purpose of social work practice to highlight the aspects of social change and social justice as the fundamental aims of social work. The current definition of social work



practice put forth by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2020, np) is as follows:

Social work practice consists of the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to one or more of the following ends: helping people obtain tangible services; counselling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups; helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in legislation processes.

The purpose lacks a specific focus on social justice or larger systemic structures, practices, policies, and ideologies that can perpetuate and support individual, family, group, and community suffering. Until there is solidarity around the meaning and purpose of social work in the US, the dominant ideologies, infused with individualism, neoliberalism, and capitalism, will continue to directly and indirectly drive social work practice.

Conclusions

The findings of this study should be considered against several limitations. First, the sample of 20 social workers in NYC, selected through purposive sampling, limits the transferability of the findings from this study to all social workers in NYC and beyond. Second, the social workers were selected from a range of fields of practice and practice functions in order to gain a breadth of social work settings; thus, future research may seek to replicate this study by examining in more depth social workers' use and purpose of theory in more concentrated practice areas, for example, those working in community organising and policy development. Despite the limitations, this exploratory study highlighted some key findings that should be further explored in future research to more fully capture social workers' use and purpose of theory in social work practice and point to some recommendations to explore in the current social and political climate.

This study has explored the theories used by social workers in the US, the purposes of the theories selected, and whether the social workers' practice had a focus on social change and social justice. The focus of practice among the social workers was predominately on individual work with only two social workers describing practice to support social change and social justice. The findings of this study leave one to question - Where is the "social" in social work? Given the current social and political climate in the US, it is timely to showcase the ways in which social work in the US is aiming for social change and social justice and to promote ways in which to strengthen



this purpose of practice. Change can begin by the profession of social work establishing a clear definition and purpose of social work that mirrors the definition and purpose provided by IFSW (2014), and social work education can integrate critical macro theories into the curriculum and field education to embed such work into future social work practice. The profession of social work in the US needs to step up and see the deep-seeded ways in which the practice is sustaining social injustices, particularly through individualism, neoliberalism, and capitalism.

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