

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13362-3 - Social Work: From Theory to Practice
Marie Connolly and Louise Harms
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Social Work

From theory to practice

Social workers practise across a wide range of settings with many different people. Some work primarily with individuals, some work with families or groups of people in therapeutic or community contexts, while others focus on community advocacy, community action and social change. In such diverse disciplinary contexts, the notion of theoretically informed practice can seem complicated.

In practice, social workers rely on a variety of theories and cultural resources to explain, predict and understand the diverse environments in which they work; however, issues of theory formation and appraisal have been somewhat neglected within the social work profession overall. *Social Work: From theory to practice* builds a strong foundation for theoretically informed practice, and provides an accessible and scholarly work that presents fundamental knowledge for social work students.

Written as a core text, the book captures the critical information students need to feel confident in the application of theory to practice. Integrated case studies from both Australasian and international perspectives illustrate how theory works in practice and how theory facilitates change. *Social Work: From theory to practice* provides a comprehensive exploration of knowledge in practice, the use of evidence as a basis for practice, and the ways in which theory helps practitioners to understand, make sense of, and respond to complex human needs.

Marie Connolly is Professor and Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne. She was formerly Chief Social Worker, a senior executive within the New Zealand government. Prior to this she was Associate Professor at the University of Canterbury, and founding Director of the Te Awatea Violence Research Centre. She has a social work background in child protection.

Louise Harms is Associate Professor and Deputy Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne. She has taught and researched there for many years, after having worked in medical social work and the University's student and staff counselling service.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13362-3 - Social Work: From Theory to Practice

Marie Connolly and Louise Harms

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13362-3 - Social Work: From Theory to Practice

Marie Connolly and Louise Harms

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Social Work

From theory to practice

Marie Connolly and Louise Harms



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-13362-3 - Social Work: From Theory to Practice
 Marie Connolly and Louise Harms
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
 Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City
 Cambridge University Press
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521133623

© Marie Connolly, Louise Harms 2012

This publication is copyright. Subject to statutory exception
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
 no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
 permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2012

Cover design by Tanya De Silva-McKay
 Typeset by Aptara Corp.
 Printed in Australia by Ligare Pty Ltd.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication data
 Connolly, Marie.

Social work: from theory to practice / Marie Connolly, Louise Harms.
 9780521133623 (pbk.)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Social service – Textbooks.

Harms, Louise.

361.3

ISBN 978-0-521-13362-3 Paperback

Reproduction and communication for educational purposes

The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (the Act) allows a maximum of
 one chapter or 10% of the pages of this work, whichever is the greater,
 to be reproduced and/or communicated by any educational institution
 for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution
 (or the body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to
 Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.

For details of the CAL licence for educational institutions contact:

Copyright Agency Limited
 Level 15, 233 Castlereagh Street
 Sydney NSW 2000
 Telephone: (02) 9394 7600
 Facsimile: (02) 9394 7601
 E-mail: info@copyright.com.au

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
 accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in
 this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such
 websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

The book has been printed on paper certified by the Programme for the
 Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). PEFC is committed to
 sustainable forest management through third party forest certification
 of responsibly managed forests.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13362-3 - Social Work: From Theory to Practice

Marie Connolly and Louise Harms

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Dedicated to
George Hook and Jane Sullivan*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13362-3 - Social Work: From Theory to Practice

Marie Connolly and Louise Harms

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

List of figures	<i>page</i> ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgements	xv
Chapter 1 Social work knowledge, theory and practice	1
Chapter 2 Frameworks, models and practice	24
Chapter 3 Ecosystems theories	47
Chapter 4 Onion-peeling theories	73
Chapter 5 Faulty-engine theories	101
Chapter 6 Story-telling theories	124
Chapter 7 Mountain-moving theories	145
Chapter 8 Reflective practice and theory	163
Concluding thoughts	177
References	179
Index	193

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13362-3 - Social Work: From Theory to Practice

Marie Connolly and Louise Harms

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Figures

Figure 1.1	The intersecting interpretive lenses of social work	<i>page</i> 11
Figure 1.2	The unfolding of theory into practice	15
Figure 2.1	Task-centred intervention steps	27
Figure 2.2	The Care and Protection Practice Framework	32
Figure 2.3	The <i>engagement</i> and <i>assessment</i> practice triggers	33
Figure 2.4	The <i>seeking solutions</i> practice triggers	35
Figure 2.5	The <i>securing safety</i> and <i>belonging</i> practice triggers	36
Figure 2.6	Interrelated factors influencing behaviour and human potential	38
Figure 2.7	The assessment triangle	42
Figure 2.8	The Fonofale Framework	44
Figure 3.1	Richmond’s areas of person: environment assessment	49
Figure 3.2	Mapping Bronfenbrenner’s layers of the social environment	55
Figure 3.3	Comparing the language of systemic approaches	63
Figure 3.4	Unfolding systems theory into practice	64
Figure 3.5	Mrs Andreou’s ecomap	66
Figure 4.1	Common defence mechanisms	82
Figure 4.2	Unfolding psychodynamic theory into practice	86
Figure 4.3	Unfolding person-centred theory into practice	95
Figure 5.1	Unfolding behavioural theory into practice	104
Figure 5.2	Unfolding cognitive-behavioural theory into practice	108
Figure 6.1	Unfolding narrative theory into practice	133

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13362-3 - Social Work: From Theory to Practice
Marie Connolly and Louise Harms
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

x	FIGURES	
	Figure 7.1	Unfolding anti-oppressive theory into practice 155
	Figure 7.2	Eight rungs on the ladder of citizen participation 160
	Figure 8.1	The circular process of reflexive practice 165
	Figure 8.2	Areas of reflective interrogation 167
	Figure 8.3	A systems model of reflective practice in supervision 173

Preface

AS SOCIAL WORKERS, we continually build understandings of practice that are theoretically and experientially informed. Despite occasional disciplinary uncertainty about whether we actually have a theoretical knowledge base underpinning our practice, the social work profession has a long tradition of theorising. Writers have drawn upon a range of important perspectives, and social workers across a range of settings have used them to inform work with clients. Even though many of these theories that are used by social workers have not originated from within the discipline, in applying a social work interpretative lens, we will argue that they have become distinctly social work practice theories. How they become social work practice theories is an important focus of this book.

Social work is fundamentally concerned with both people and the interactions with their environments, so it involves bringing together theories of the inner worlds and outer worlds in which we live. Some social workers will be drawn to inner world theories, such as psychodynamic approaches, that focus on individual and familial systems. Others will prefer outer world theories that influence structural inequalities and disadvantage. Whether social workers are drawn to inner or outer world theories, the influence our unique disciplinary lens creates theoretical responses that reinforce key disciplinary concerns so that theories are responsive to the needs of the people we work with and address broader social justice issues.

While social workers draw upon a range of theoretical perspectives, in this book our focus will be on practice theories – theories that have both explanatory power that helps us to gain insight into the causes of distress and practical direction and technique. We will use an integrated framework, adapted from Connolly and Healy (2009), to illustrate the way in which theory translates into practice, where theoretical explanations logically

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13362-3 - Social Work: From Theory to Practice
Marie Connolly and Louise Harms
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

suggest practice approaches, then a set of techniques (see figure 1.2, p. 15). This process of unfolding from theory to practice is important as it illustrates internal logic and theoretical consistency, and highlights in a relatively straightforward way how theories differ from one another. For this reason we will use the framework consistently as we explore each of the theoretical perspectives.

In talking to social work students and practitioners over a number of years we appreciate some of the challenges in translating theory into practice. We nevertheless see theories as important conceptual tools that can help us navigate our way through complex human troubles. So, in addition to providing the theory/practice integrated framework explaining the unfolding of theory into practice, we have also invited experienced practitioners to reflect upon how they have used theory in their work. These case studies that have been filtered through the following chapters provide rich examples of ways in which theory is translated into practice across a range of contemporary practice settings.

In bringing the following chapters together we wanted to capture key international perspectives in the development of social work theory and the unique cultural practices of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Social work can be seen as a global endeavour in that there is coherence in terms of disciplinary vision, values and concerns. Yet it is also intensely local in its application, responding necessarily to unique cultural contexts. Attention to culture and diversity is of critical importance when thinking about the application of theory in practice. In the chapters that follow we invite the challenging of theoretical constructs in ways that respond to cultural context. Theories can be used positively to increase understanding and to help people work through difficulties in their lives. They can also be used to impose professional ideas in ways that are prejudicial to the interests of clients or lack synchronicity with their concerns.

In chapter 1 we look specifically at the ways in which social work's interpretative lens helps us to interrogate theory so that it responds to the concerns of the people we work with. We do, in fact, look at four interpretative lenses, each reflecting important disciplinary concerns: the relational lens, which highlights the importance of relationship-based practice; the social justice lens, which reinforces core disciplinary concerns relating to social reform; the reflective lens, which interrogates the power of cultural thinking and the ways in which culture shapes professional responses; and the lens of change, which informs the ways in which we understand the nature of change in human systems. As we explore the different theoretical perspectives we come back to these lenses as important disciplinary

influences that shape the application of theoretical ideas in practice. In chapter 1, we also scaffold ideas that support the understanding of theory: what a theory is and what has influenced theory development over time. Then in chapter 2 we look at the ways in which models of practice have emerged from theoretical ideas. Social work has pioneered the development of models and frameworks that help to bridge theoretical ideas and intervention strategies within daily practice. One of the most enduringly influential frameworks developed by social work theorists has been Reid and Epstein's (1972) landmark task-centred casework model. We also look at models that explore dimensions of culture providing important knowledge that can be incorporated into assessment processes and intervention practices. We argue that when theory, knowledge and practice come together in this way it builds the fabric of a rich and continually evolving intellectual tradition within social work.

We then begin an exploration of key theoretical perspectives that have informed social work thinking and practice over time. Chapter 3 begins with an examination of systems theory, arguably one of the most influential sets of ideas to shape social work practice. Drawing upon the work of key writers, we explore the ways in which systems theories help us to think about interactions between people and their social and physical environments, how they help us to understand change and the range of ecosystem interventions. In chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 we draw upon the work of Connolly and Healy (2009) and group theories metaphorically in ways that we hope will be memorable. Our metaphorical distinctions are intended to capture the essential character of each group; hence onion-peeling theories in chapter 4 describe theories that seek to peel back the layers of experience so that people can gain insight into what prevents them from moving forward in their lives. These inner world theories include psychodynamic approaches and person-centred practices. In chapter 5 we use the faulty-engine metaphor to describe behaviourism and cognitive-behaviourism. Challenging the perceived limitations of insight-focused theories, these new theories brought with them ideas and techniques that would shift practice attention to the present and more concrete evidence of change. The most evaluated and empirically supported of social work theories, the faulty-engine group actively focus on changing thoughts and behaviours in the here and now. Despite their history of success, they have struggled to gain traction in mainstream practice.

Chapter 6 describes our story-telling theories, a group of theoretical approaches that explore narratives of strength and resilience in ways that can influence how we think, feel and act. Most fully articulated in narrative

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13362-3 - Social Work: From Theory to Practice
Marie Connolly and Louise Harms
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

ways of working, story-telling theories are critically interested in the ways that stories can be reinterpreted to enable more positive and rewarding life outcomes. Building on notions of strengths-based practice, they focus on externalising problems and finding narrative solutions that lead to a greater sense of well-being and freedom. Originating from post-structural and social constructionist traditions, these story-telling approaches also resonate with the last of our metaphorical distinctions: mountain-moving theories in chapter 7. This group of perspectives, which includes progressive and human rights-based approaches, seek to eliminate disadvantage and empower people to realize their hopes for themselves, their families and their communities. These theories provide social work with an important critical edge, connecting the personal with the political and shifting focus from individual blame to collective solutions across social, economic and political domains.

Finally, in our last chapter we look at how the integration of theory and practice is an ongoing professional process for social workers. Integrating theory and practice in ways that respond to the unique needs of social work clients is a complex process, both intellectually and practically. In chapter 8 we return to our earlier discussion of the disciplinary lenses that social work brings to practice and the ways in which they can help us to critically reflect on how we perceive our professional role and how we give effect to it in practice. Considering the circular process of reflection and reflexive practice we look at both the dynamics of power and critical thought. We look at supervision as an important means of supporting good practice, providing a supportive professional space where we can critically reflect on practice thinking and action, and better understand the various domains of practice and how we can be most effective in our professional responses.

In presenting these theoretical perspectives we seek to capture the essence of what makes the application of practice theory a uniquely social work intervention. In doing so, we hope we have demonstrated at least some of the vibrancy of social work thinking and the rich disciplinary tapestry that represents contemporary social work theorizing.

Marie Connolly and Louise Harms
May 2011

Acknowledgements

AS WE HAVE WRITTEN THIS BOOK we have drawn upon our experiences of working with social workers in practice and social work students undertaking their studies with us. Their insights have been invaluable as we have worked together on how theory can be translated into practice, and ways of overcoming challenges and barriers to theoretically informed practice. We would like to acknowledge this contribution and make clear that this book on theory and practice would not have been possible without them. We would also like to thank the Master of Social Work students at the University of Melbourne for helping us test our ideas and in particular the framework for understanding the unfolding of theory into practice.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the practitioners who contributed case studies to this book. Their important contributions bring to life to the application of theory in practice: Sarah Batty, Samantha Clavant, Jim van Rensburg, Michelle Spinks and Judy Wookey. Thanks also to the staff of the Chief Social Worker's Office of the New Zealand Government who proposed the title of 'mountain-moving' theories. We had spent ages trying to think of a suitable metaphor, and their creative suggestion put an end to our agonizing search.

Special thanks are due to Nina Sharpe, our Cambridge University Press publisher, for her patience and support throughout the writing process. We are grateful also to the University of Melbourne for its ongoing support of scholarship, and to our colleagues at the School of Health Sciences for their encouragement.

Finally our most grateful thanks go to George Hook and Jane Sullivan, to whom we dedicate this book.

The publisher and authors would like to thank the following sources for permission to reproduce material:

Figure 2.7: From *Social Work Now*, April 2011, p. 24. Reproduced with permission of Ministry of Social Work, New Zealand; **2.8, 4.3, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1:** Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press Australia, from *Social Work: Contexts and Practice Second Edition*, edited by M. Connolly and L. Harms, 2008. © Oxford University Press, www.oup.com.au; **7.2:** From Sherry R. Arnstein, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', *Journal of American Planning Association* 35(4): 216–24. Reproduced with permission of Taylor & Francis.

Every effort has been made to trace and acknowledge copyright. The publisher apologises for any accidental infringement and welcomes information that would rectify this situation.