

Social Work

From theory to practice

Second edition

Social Work: From theory to practice uses an integrated approach to explore a variety of social theories through social work's unique interpretive lens. Systems, psychodynamic and person-centred theories, and cognitive-behavioural, narrative and strengths-based practices, are addressed specifically, and students are shown how to apply these in human service settings. These theories are supported by case studies written by experienced practitioners, providing an in-depth exploration of the use of theory in practice.

This second edition includes new material on mindfulness, and mind, body and spirit social work, as well as enhanced content relating to Indigenous social work.

Social Work: From theory to practice is an accessible and engaging text, which clearly explains the theories that underpin social work in practice.

Marie Connolly is Professor and Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne.

Louise Harms is Associate Professor and Deputy Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-45863-5 – Social Work
2nd Edition
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-45863-5 – Social Work
2nd Edition
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Social Work
*From theory to
practice*
Second edition

Marie Connolly Louise Harms



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-45863-5 – Social Work
2nd Edition
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107458635

© Cambridge University Press 2015

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 2011

Reprinted 2012 (twice), 2013

Second edition 2015

Cover designed by Tanya De Silva-McKay

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt Ltd

Printed in Singapore by C.O.S. Printers Pte Ltd

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

A Cataloguing-in-Publication entry is available from the catalogue of the National Library of Australia at www.nla.gov.au

ISBN 978-1-107-45863-5 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

Email: 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.

Please be aware that this publication may contain several variations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander terms and spellings; no disrespect is intended. Please note that the terms 'Indigenous Australians', 'Aboriginal people' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' may be used interchangeably in this publication.

.....
Dedicated to

George Hook and Jane Sullivan
.....

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-45863-5 – Social Work
2nd Edition
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Foreword

We read a lot about social work and theorising, and we are taught that theory is crucial to social work. Yet applying *theory* in practice is not always as easy as it sounds, particularly for new practitioners. In this expanded examination of social work theory and practice, every chapter is replete with descriptions of theory, supported by rich case examples that show how theories connect to the life challenges faced by real people. The conceptual *theory into practice framework* is the bridge used by Connolly and Harms to connect the explanations about how and why life challenges happen with the practice actions of social workers as they work with individuals, families, groups and communities.

A number of years ago, as a student in a social work theory course, I remember thinking, ‘I don’t get this’. It was also clear from the discussions that followed that my classmates felt the same way. We struggled to understand how one applied theory to practice. I can remember wondering, from a Pasifika point of view, what relevance the theories had to my world. As we progressed through our social work degree and experienced the fieldwork practicum, our ability to connect theory with practice remained tenuous. Students of social work will be relieved to hear that, after a number of years of practice, the connections became clearer. Fast-forward a few years and I found myself teaching social work theory to students at the University of Canterbury in Aotearoa New Zealand’s South Island. I recognised the same hesitating attempts to understand the theory/practice interface and the confusion that I knew very well from my own student experience. Thankfully, however, I had the first edition of *Social Work: From Theory to Practice* to help me. I finally had a textbook that enabled us to meaningfully engage with theory and clarified its relationship with the practice of social work. It helped me to purposefully engage students and bring theory to life, which is why I am so pleased to be writing the foreword to this second edition.

Both clients and social workers come to social work with diverse cultural backgrounds and world-views. Perceptions about the relevance or irrelevance of theory to lived realities can impede understanding and knowledge-building. The inclusion of a Prelude by Shawana Andrews focusing on Indigenous and decolonised social work practice is an exciting addition to the text. It brings important contexts to social work and highlights the commitment that Connolly and Harms have to presenting content about different ways of knowing. The Prelude illustrates how non-dominant explanations of the world, and the issues faced by families and communities are better understood in the knowledge that

viii FOREWORD

social work has traditionally been dominated by non-Indigenous views of the world. Insights from the Prelude are important to the chapters that follow – each of which is critically illuminated by a cultural lens, interpreting theories and exploring cultural fit.

The book provides a systematic way of developing an understanding of theory and social work practice. But perhaps even more importantly, it clarifies the social work contribution to theory development and application. Students sometimes find it difficult to articulate the role and contribution brought to practice by the social work profession – the particular disciplinary character that we might say is uniquely social work. As Connolly and Harms note, the practice theories discussed in this book are not the sole purview of social work. Other disciplines use client-centred practices, cognitive behavioural theories and narrative ways of working. So what makes these theories *social work* theories? It is the infusion of the social work interpretive lenses articulated in *Social Work: From Theory to Practice*, that make them social work practice theories. The lenses provide the disciplinary character that distinguishes social work practice from other disciplinary applications. This places the social work disciplinary stamp on practice – the recognisable commitment to relationship-based practice, critical reflection, social justice and client-led change. Students using this book will come away with a robust understanding of this and the systemic disciplinary foundation they bring to practice.

Being able to articulate the connection between theory and practice is fundamental to social work. On a daily basis, social workers have to make sound professional judgements based on thoughtful consideration of the information they have before them and of the theoretical knowledge that informs the work. As a social work educator, I am pleased to be able to use a book that helps me to engage students in ways that support them to be confident, reflective and responsive practitioners.

Yvonne Crichton-Hill
Department of Human Services and Social Work
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Contents

<i>Foreword by Yvonne Crichton-Hill</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Figures and tables</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Preface to the second edition</i>	<i>xviii</i>
<i>About the authors</i>	<i>xvii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xviii</i>

Prelude: Reimagining social work from an Aboriginal theoretical perspective Shawana Andrews	1
--	----------

1	Social work knowledge, theory and practice	14
2	Frameworks, models and practice	37
3	Systems theories	60
4	Onion-peeling theories	85
5	Faulty-engine theories	112
6	Story-telling theories	135
7	Mountain-moving theories	156
8	Reflective practice and theory	173
	Concluding thoughts	188
<i>References</i>	<i>190</i>	
<i>Index</i>	<i>204</i>	

Figures and tables

Figures

1.1	The intersecting interpretive lenses of social work	24
1.2	The unfolding of theory into practice	27
2.1	Task-centred intervention steps	40
2.2	The engagement and assessment practice triggers	46
2.3	The seeking solutions practice triggers	48
2.4	The securing safety and belonging practice triggers	49
2.5	Interrelated factors influencing behaviour and human potential	51
2.6	The assessment triangle framework	55
2.7	The Fonofale Framework	57
3.1	Richmond's areas of person: environment assessment	62
3.2	Mapping Bronfenbrenner's layers of the social environment	68
3.3	Unfolding systems theory into practice	77
3.4	Mrs Andreou's ecomap	78
4.1	Unfolding psychodynamic theory into practice	98
4.2	Unfolding person-centred theory into practice	106
5.1	Unfolding behavioural theory into practice	115
5.2	Unfolding cognitive-behavioural theory into practice	119
6.1	Unfolding narrative theory into practice	144
7.1	Unfolding anti-oppressive theory into practice	166
7.2	Eight rungs on the ladder of citizen participation	170
8.1	The circular process of reflexive practice	175
8.2	Areas of reflective interrogation	177
8.3	A systems model of reflective practice in supervision	182

Tables

2.1	The Care and Protection Practice Framework	45
3.1	Comparing the language of systemic approaches	70

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-45863-5 – Social Work
2nd Edition
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Preface to the second edition

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 enjoys 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 the theories used by social workers did not originate within the discipline, in applying a social work interpretive 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 their interactions with their environments, so it involves bringing together theories of the inner 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, 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 is 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 (2013), to illustrate the way in which theory translates into practice, where theoretical explanations logically suggest practice approaches, then a set of techniques (see Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1). This process of unfolding from theory to practice is important, because 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 presented in this book.

In talking to social work students and practitioners over a number of years, we have come to appreciate many of the challenges faced in translating theory into practice. We nevertheless see theories as important conceptual tools that can

help us to 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 own work. These case studies, which are scattered through the chapters that follow, provide rich examples of ways in which theory is translated into practice across a range of contemporary practice settings.

In bringing together this second edition, we are delighted to have our colleagues Yvonne Crichton-Hill from the University of Canterbury write the Foreword and Shawana Andrews from the University of Melbourne write a Prelude to this edition. These are important contributions, which speak from different cultural perspectives about the ways in which social work practice can be more responsive to cultural need. Māori and Pasifika people in Aotearoa New Zealand and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia continue to confront disadvantage and inequity, often finding themselves at the front-end of service delivery. Yvonne and Shawana share their ideas with us, providing important insights into how we might use social work theory – and how we might strive to be more culturally responsive in practice.

In this book, we capture key international perspectives in the development of social work theory and some of 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 critically important 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 interpretive lens helps us to interrogate theory so that it responds to the concerns of the people with whom we work. In fact, we look at four interpretive lenses, each of which reflects 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 (2013) 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 theories bring with them ideas and techniques that they thought would shift practice attention to the present and to more concrete evidence of change. The most evaluated and empirically supported of social work theories, the faulty-engine group, actively focuses on changing thoughts and behaviours in the here and now. Despite their history of success, they have struggled to gain traction in mainstream practice. In Chapter 5, we also look at mindfulness approaches, which are increasingly being used by practitioners in a range of practice settings.

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 ways of working, story-telling theories are critically interested in the ways in which 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, presented in Chapter 7. This group of perspectives, which includes human rights-based approaches, seeks to eliminate disadvantage and empower people to realise 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. Social work theories evolve to respond to contemporary issues. Also in Chapter 7, we discuss the development of green social work approaches, which challenge us to address issues of environmental vulnerability and sustainability.

In our concluding 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 examine models of 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 theorising.

Marie Connolly and Louise Harms

About the authors

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 Harns 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.

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. In particular, we would like to thank social workers at Western Health in Melbourne upon whom we tested the relevance to contemporary practice of the theoretical frameworks explored in this book.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank the practitioners who contributed case studies to the second edition: Sarah Batty, Samantha Clavant, Jim van Rensburg, Michelle Spinks and Judy Wookey. Their important contributions bring to life the application of theory in practice. 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 agonising search.

Special thanks are due to Nina Sharpe, our Cambridge University Press publisher, for her patience and support throughout the writing process. We are also grateful 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 second edition.

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, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1:** reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press Australia, from *Social Work: Contexts and Practice* (3rd edn), edited by M. Connolly and L. Harms, 2013. © 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.