

# Social Work

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE  
FOURTH EDITION

*Social Work: From Theory to Practice* provides a critical introduction to core and emerging theories of social work and teaches students in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand how to apply these theories in their practice to facilitate change.

The fourth edition introduces a cultural lens through which to interrogate theory. A new chapter on Aboriginal perspectives explores a range of theories, from emancipatory frameworks and approaches to deep listening, and provides insights for students on how to decolonise their practice and responsibly provide socially just outcomes for communities. New discussions on navigating the service system, feminist and anti-oppressive approaches, sustainability and the impact of COVID-19 on social workers and the communities they serve are included throughout the book.

Each chapter includes reflections from social workers, to demonstrate how theory informs practice in the field, and case examples with accompanying questions, which give students an insight into the changing social work landscape. New end-of-chapter questions help students engage critically with the content.

Written by experienced and respected academics, *Social Work: From Theory to Practice* is essential reading for modern social work students commencing a career in this discipline.

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**Louise Harms** is the Chair and Head of the Department of Social Work in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne.

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**Marie Connolly** is an Honorary Professor and former Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne.

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Louise Harms , Marie Connolly  
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Contributor: Shawana Andrews

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*Dedicated to Jane Sullivan and George Hook*

## FOREWORD

I am delighted to write the foreword for the fourth edition of *Social Work: From Theory to Practice* by Louise Harms and Marie Connolly. The first edition was published in 2012 and in the preface to that book the authors highlighted how theories from other disciplines, used by social workers, actually then become social work practice theories (Connolly & Harms 2012).

The teaching of social work practice theory is a requirement of social work degree programs around the world. For a number of years, I have taught a social work theory class and I have experienced first-hand how students struggle with practice theory. It is as if students hear the word ‘theory’ and all their assumptions about how hard ‘theory’ is to understand and work with jump to the forefront. Additionally, sometimes students recognise theory as belonging to other disciplines but do not associate that theory is relevant to social work. Through using the previous editions of *Social Work: From Theory to Practice* in my teaching, in particular the integrated framework promoted by Harms and Connolly, I have found that students are able to come to understand how theory informs the ‘doing’ of social work.

When students understand how theory connects with social work practice, they are able to think creatively about how to work with people and systems. They learn that theory can explain and predict behaviour and therefore helps social workers recognise patterns and organise complex information. They learn that theory can also help social workers understand new situations and plan their work with service users as well as enhancing their work with other professionals; this is because the theories used by social workers are also used by others. How the same theory used by other professionals becomes theory specifically designed for the practice of social work is, argue Harms and Connolly, related to the various interpretive lenses that social work brings to theory. These interpretive lenses influence how social workers apply theory. As a Tangata Moana (Pacific/Pasifika) educator, I have found that sharing the interpretive lens approach at the beginning of my theory courses with students helps to provide them with the groundwork for more specific content on Tangata Moana social work theory, knowledge and practice.

This new edition of *Social Work: From Theory to Practice* builds on previous editions by bringing together up-to-date content throughout the book to enhance our understanding of how theory informs social work practice. After the introductory chapters about what theory is and the general role of theory in social work, the fourth edition prioritises content on the decolonisation of social work theory with a chapter by Associate Professor Shawana Andrews. By placing this important contribution as an earlier chapter in the book, the authors draw

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attention to the need for decolonising social work practice that acknowledges the impact of colonial power on Aboriginal populations. Andrews makes the point that critical reflection be used to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about Indigenous populations and how social workers should ‘do’ social work with Indigenous peoples. As Harms and Connolly rightly point out, this necessitates a recognition of the role that social workers play in promoting oppressive practices that privilege non-Indigenous frameworks for social work practice.

The content presented in Chapter 3 also has relevance for social educators worldwide because Andrews affirms that Indigenous content must be included in social work curriculum content in line with social work program standards in many countries. Thus, social work educators have the opportunity to use *Social Work: From Theory to Practice* in two key ways: first, to inspire students to identify mechanisms of power and oppression within Indigenous contexts and to provide alternative ways of seeing and thinking about these contexts; and second, to consider how to decolonise the teaching of practice theory within the social work curriculum.

I am delighted that Chapter 8 addresses green social work at a time when the world is in a state of significant climate change that will significantly impact population health and well-being. As noted by Harms and Connolly, the application of social work practice theory is uniquely social work; therefore, social work recognises that the climate crisis is a worldwide issue that impacts individuals and families and that climate change disproportionately impacts populations where social inequities already exist. Social workers can take an environmental view to recognise the connection between people, environmental vulnerability and sustainability efforts. Ultimately, as Harms and Connolly note in Chapter 8, social work can contribute to positive macro- and micro-adaptation approaches to deal with the cascading impacts of climate change.

*Social Work: From Theory to Practice* provides a comprehensive and up-to-date synthesis of key social work practice theories. As with previous editions, care has been taken with the fourth edition to present content in a way that is readable and easy to understand. The use of case examples throughout provides readers with practical application points to enhance learning and understanding. I strongly recommend *Social Work: From Theory to Practice* to social work educators, students and practitioners.

**Yvonne Crichton-Hill**  
*Department of Social Work*  
*University of Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Louise Harms** holds the Chair of Social Work and is the Head of the Department of Social Work in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne. She is also the Deputy Head of the School of Health Sciences. She has taught and researched at the University of Melbourne for many years, after having worked in medical social work and the University's student and staff counselling service. Her research and teaching interests are in trauma and resilience, and health, disability and mental health.

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**Marie Connolly** retired in 2019 from her position as Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne and returned to Aotearoa New Zealand. She remains affiliated to the University as Professor. From 2005–10, she was Chief Social Worker 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.

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**Shawana Andrews** is a Palawa Trawlwoolway woman and a Senior Academic Specialist in the Department of Social Work and Director of the Poche Centre for Indigenous Health at the University of Melbourne. Shawana has a professional background in social work and public health, having worked in Aboriginal paediatric health and mental health prior to becoming a teaching and academic specialist. Her teaching and research areas are Aboriginal women's experiences of family violence; cultural practice and health; and Indigenous health leadership.

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## PREFACE

As social workers, we continually build understandings of practice that are theoretically and experientially informed. The social work profession enjoys a long tradition of theorising. This is despite occasional disciplinary uncertainty and debate about whether we actually have a theoretical knowledge base underpinning our practice. 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 our social work interpretive lenses 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. This fourth edition demonstrates both the continuity over time of many of these practice theories, and the evolution of the discipline through new ideas and developments.

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

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, which 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 (2018) to illustrate the way in which theory translates into practice, where theoretical explanations logically suggest practice approaches, then into a set of techniques (see Figure 1.2). 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 many 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

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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 examples, 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 fourth edition, we are delighted to have our colleague – Associate Professor Yvonne Crichton-Hill from the University of Canterbury – write the Foreword again. This is an important contribution, which speaks about the ways in which social work practice can be more responsive to cultural need in different contexts.

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 and social 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 the 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 lenses helps us to interrogate theory so that it responds to the concerns of the people with whom we work. In fact, we look at five interpretive lenses, each of which reflects important disciplinary concerns. The *relational lens* highlights the importance of relationship-based practice; the *social justice lens* reinforces core disciplinary concerns relating to social reform; the *reflective lens* and the *cultural lens* interrogate the power of cultural thinking and the ways in which culture shapes professional responses. These four lenses shape our particular concern with the fifth lens – the *lens of change* – for people and 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. This is particularly important given how multidisciplinary many of our practice contexts are today. We can demonstrate a strong professional identity through articulating and mobilising these five lenses in all that we do.

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 trauma-informed practice and care, another framework adopted in many human service organisations. Building on the cultural lens introduced in Chapter 1, we 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, they build 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 exploration of Aboriginal theoretical approaches for social work practice. Authored by Associate Professor Shawana Andrews, the chapter explores questions of Aboriginal identity and world-view. Through the social justice lens, Andrews introduces the critical practice of decolonising our social work knowledge and assumptions and highlights the importance of deep listening and emancipatory approaches. This new chapter centres Indigenous knowledge in social work theory and practice, providing an important cultural lens for the chapters ahead.

Chapter 4 provides an examination of systems theory, arguably one of the most influential set 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, and how they help us to understand change and the range of ecosystem interventions. In Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8, we draw upon the work of Connolly and Healy (2018) 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 5 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 6, we use the faulty-engine metaphor to describe behaviourism, cognitive behaviourism and mindfulness. Challenging the perceived limitations

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of insight-focused theories, these theories bring with them ideas and techniques aimed at shifting 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. In Chapter 6, we also look at mindfulness approaches, which are increasingly being used by practitioners in a range of practice settings.

Chapter 7 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 both individually and collectively. Most fully articulated in narrative modes 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 8. This group of perspectives, which includes feminist, decolonising and anti-oppressive 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. So, in Chapter 8, we discuss the development of green social work approaches, which challenge us to address issues of environmental vulnerability and sustainability and are critical issues at this time of such significant climate change.

In Chapter 9, 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 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 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.

**Louise Harms and Marie Connolly**

## 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 on ways of overcoming challenges and barriers to theoretically informed practice. These insights have been particularly important given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic – much has had to change in the delivery of social work services and education. So, it has been a time to reflect critically on what is enduring in our theoretical approaches to practice.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank the practitioners who contributed case examples to the fourth edition: Ms Hanh Nguyen, Dr Jeanette (Jenny) Conrick, Ms Michelle Spinks, Dr Bree Weizenegger, Mrs Tileah Drahm-Butler and Dr David Denborough. Their important contributions bring to life the application of theory in practice in many different settings.

Dr Kath Sellick and Associate Professor Shawana Andrews have joined this edition. Kath has reviewed the reflections and written some new case examples. She has brought both her practice wisdom and her expertise as a teacher of theory and practice in the Master of Social Work to these inclusions. Shawana has contributed her deep cultural and social work knowledge, drawing out Indigenous knowledges in provocative and scholarly ways.

Ms Hanh Nguyen has provided invaluable research assistance to the online guide and resources, bringing her excellent insights as a Master of Social Work student to this task. We thank you all deeply for these contributions to this edition.

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.

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