

SOCIAL WORK



THIRD EDITION

Social workers draw on a variety of theoretical perspectives to inform their practice and understand the diverse settings in which they work. *Social Work: From Theory to Practice* explores practice theories through the discipline's unique interpretive lens and demonstrates how these can be understood and enacted by practitioners in human services settings.

The third edition includes new material on trauma-informed practice and Indigenous practice, as well as enhanced content on narrative approaches, and child protection and family violence. New practitioner reflections and case studies illustrate how theory influences practice and facilitates change. Thought-provoking case study discussion questions prompt students to identify and reflect on key concepts and develop strategies for practice.

Social Work: From Theory to Practice builds a strong foundation for theoretically informed practice, and enables practitioners to develop the skills required to confidently and critically evaluate their work as they respond in complex practice contexts.

Louise Harms is Professor and Deputy Head of Social Work and Associate Dean (Equity, Diversity and Staff Development) in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne.

Marie Connolly was formerly Professor and Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, and Chief Social Worker, a senior executive within the New Zealand government.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-46084-2 — Social Work
3rd Edition
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*from
theory to
practice*

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Louise Harms Marie Connolly

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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978-1-108-46084-2 — Social Work
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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

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/9781108460842

First edition © Marie Connolly, Louise Harms 2012
Second and Third editions © Cambridge University Press 2015, 2019

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First published 2012
Second edition 2015
Third edition 2019

Cover designed by Leigh Ashforth, watershed art + design
Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd
Printed in China by C & C Offset Printing Co. Ltd, February 2019

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

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978-1-108-46084-2 Paperback

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Dedicated to Jane Sullivan and George Hook

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Foreword

I am delighted to write the foreword for the third 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 theory is a requirement of social work degree programs around the world. For a number of years I have taught a theory into practice class and I have experienced first-hand how students struggle with 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 as being relevant to social work. I have found, through using the first and then second edition of *Social Work: From Theory to Practice* in my teaching and in particular the theory into practice framework promoted by Connolly and Harms, that students are able to understand how theory informs the ‘doing’ of social work. I have found that when students understand how theory connects with social work practice they are more able to think creatively about how to work with people and systems. They learn that theory can explain and predict and thus help social workers to recognise patterns in behaviour and organise complex information. They learn that theory can also help social workers to understand new situations and plan the work we do with service users but also enhance the work social workers do 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.

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. Chapters 2 and 7 have been significantly revised. The inclusion of trauma-informed practice to the social work frameworks and models discussion in Chapter 2 pays recognition to the development of late about the impact of trauma and adversity on well-being. Trauma-informed practice has particularly been debated and implemented in mental health, health and child protection fields. A superb addition to Chapter 2 is the discussion on how research and practice knowledge can be combined to

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About the authors

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Marie Connolly was formerly Professor and Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, and 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.

Shawana Andrews is a contributor to Chapter 7. She is a Palawa woman with a clinical background in social work, working in Aboriginal paediatric health and mental health prior to becoming an academic. Shawana is currently Senior Lecturer, Indigenous Health in the School of Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne and leads the Indigenous curriculum development for the School. Shawana has recently been awarded a University Excellence Award for Innovation in Indigenous Education and a national citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning.

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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 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 (2018), 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). 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

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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. 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 third edition: Michelle Spinks, Judy Wookey, Samantha Clavant, Tileah Drahm-Butler and David Denborough. 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 Vilija Stephens and Tanya Bastrakova, our Cambridge University Press publishers, for their support throughout the writing process and to Carol Goudie throughout the editing phase. We are also grateful to the University of Melbourne for its ongoing support of our scholarship, and to our colleagues at the School of Health Sciences for their encouragement.

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

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