

Applicability of Psychological Theories in Social Work Practice

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Introduction

A society cannot be sustainable unless it has incorporated social justice, economic welfare, as well as environmental protection, into its guiding principles. Social Work being a multidisciplinary subject plays a vital role in tackling current social problems and issues with the main assumption of empowering people to solve their problems by themselves where they will be able to experience social justice, receive welfare services and also ensure the environment support. Social Work uses a broad range of theories from other disciplines and professions, such as: sociology, gerontology, psychology, economics, and so on. In general, there are two major terms used to describe theories in social work profession: human behavior in the social environment (HBSE) theories and practice theories. Thyer (2001) states that HBSE theories are general theories and can be utilized to explain and predict a variety of human behaviors. They can help social workers to have a comprehensive understanding of their clients and environments. Thyer's definition of HBSE theory is often founded and adopted in social work literature (Munro, 2002). Thus, Social Work profession allows the practitioners to exercise social justice, economic welfare and environmental protection on human beings by incorporating the various theories and models from other disciplines.

Research Problem

In the multidisciplinary context of Social Work, Psychology takes its prominent way to understand the human behaviour in a more scientific way by using the main theories and concepts it consists with. The ability to apply psychological theories in practice makes Social Workers more skillful and competent in tackling with psycho-social problems encountered by people and also in tapping resources to them. Training the Social Work undergraduates in a level that they could be able to practice the knowledge they gained in the classroom will provide them the platform of growing as competent Social Work professionals in future. Simon (1994) insists that it is crucial for social work practitioners to learn theoretical knowledge because theory can serve as an anchoring frame and a conceptual screen for case assessment, causal explanation, intervention planning, and outcome evaluation. Vayda and Bogo (1991) state that social work students often experience the disconnection between classroom and practicum, and frequently experience difficulty in applying concepts learnt in the classroom to practice. Munro (2002) points out social work students cannot explicitly and systematically apply any relevant theory when they work with clients unless practice supervisors provide a clear theoretical

framework. What is worse, because of disconnection between classroom and practicum, social work students are more likely to “see theories as irrelevant to their practice and as merely some kind of game played by academics” (Munro, 2002, p. 462). In addition, when applying theory to practice, social work students often lack the ability to identify, understand, and use relevant theories to their work with clients (Boisen & Syers, 2004). Because one theory alone may not understand clients’ situations, social work students are likely to draw on multiple theories. Although the use of various theories allows for flexibility and comprehensiveness, it presents a big challenge for social work students to achieve real mastery of theory application in practice especially when different theories are incompatible with each other (Walsh, 2010; Boisen & Syers, 2004). Actually, social work students are often overwhelmed with theoretical knowledge learnt in limited time and have difficulty in selecting most useful information for their practice (Lam, 2004; Boisen & Syers, 2004; Caspi & Reid, 1998).

Although there is a significant contribution of Psychological theories in the practice of Social Work, the professionals as well as student Social Workers find difficulty in the practical implications of those theories in order to gain awareness about them and also to make pragmatic changes in the society.

Objectives

This study mainly focuses on limitations encountered by Student Social Workers in applying the Psychological theories into practice and the focus is further extended to the area of minimizing those gaps between Psychological theories and its practice.

Methodology

This Research study has adopted the qualitative research methodology using purposive sampling method. 10 In-depth interviews have been conducted with the faculty members of the School of Social Work, National Institute of Social Development. The data was collected by focusing on the field work practicum of the students as Concurrent field placement and Block field placement and the supervisors’ perspective of their respective student’s ability to apply psychological theories they learnt in the classroom in the field practicum is considered. The data was analysed and interpreted by using thematic analysis. The identified themes were Social Work methods and Psychological theories, most commonly used Psychological Theories and limitations encountered in theory into practice. Students’ ability to conceptualize the theory in to practice in their weekly journal reports, the students’ ability to present practice based of theory in field presentations, the students’ ability to express about practical implementation of theory based in group and individual conferences are considered as indicators in this study.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The limitations of practicing Psychology in the field of Social Work have been identified throughout the research study. The primary method of Social Work practice, which is Social Case Work, has been identified as one of the most important methods where the students are able to practice Psychological theories since it mainly focuses on the individuals and families. Lack of use of the theoretical concepts by students in Group Work and Community Work also is identified. The reason behind this phenomenon is the

complexity of processes of Working with Social Groups and Community work since it involves more human relationships and students find theory application is more fluid and they consider it is a must to apply theories from other multidisciplinary subjects as well. This perspective makes them to be in dilemma in choosing the relevant theory in the practical situation.

The student weekly journal reports evidence the limitation of choosing relevant and applicable psychological theories in the practice. Social work students are taught a broad range of theories in a limited time and they cannot have an in-depth understanding of all theories especially given that each theory contains a lot of information. Additionally, the complexity of the case itself makes it much more difficult for social work students to locate a relevant, applicable psychological theory to solve the case. Lack of understanding among students to grasp the different components of a particular theory such as the basic concepts, hypothesis, and conceptual framework blocks the student's ability to apply the psychological theories in practice. Students always perceive the theory as set of words rather extracting the different components of a theory which can be easily understood and put into practice. Mainly the insight of the theory is absent among the students which block them from practicing. At this point, this is where teaching a model of theory application is better than teaching a multitude of theories for implementation (Gentle-Genitty, 2013).

Humanism theory mainly the Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Learning theories, Erik Erikson's theory of Social Development, Gestalt theory have been identified as most prevalent psychological theories used by students in their fieldwork practice. From the supervisor's point of view these theories are mostly mentioned by students in their field practicum presentations and when they questioned about the practical implication of such theories the students find difficult to interpret their answers more technically and coherently.

During the group and individual conferences the most common question asked by students is the relevant theory to the incidents they have identified in the field. This situation evidences that the students' lack of insight in the practice of theories they have been learnt in the classroom.

The students have been facilitated mostly by the supervisors to apply the Psychology theoretical knowledge into practice by using methodologies such as identifying few main applicable theories and motivating students to practice them by themselves, providing students with extra materials on different Psychological theories in order to maximize their cognitive authenticity, by identifying two main category of students such as students who apply the knowledge with knowing and the students who apply the knowledge without knowing.

The focus on how students define Psychological theories, identify the role of theory in practice, and categorize benefits and challenges in applying theory to practice should be given by the supervisors. More focus on the human behavior in the social environment (HBSE) theories during the classroom teaching should be given to make students aware about themselves and the service users. Connolly and Harms (2012) further clarified that

HBSE theories should include theories of inner worlds (e.g., psychodynamic approaches), as well as, theories of outer worlds (e.g., structural inequalities).

Social Work as a multidisciplinary subject gets the light of other Social Sciences to practice its methods and techniques effectively. Psychology as a Social Science contributes fullest for the effective Social Work Practice. Application of Psychology theories in practice allow the practitioners to understand the human behaviour, personality characteristics, motivation factors of people, development stages and their characteristics and identify the behaviour patterns of people with Psychological disorders. The limitations encounters by Social Work undergraduates in practicing the psychological theories block them in rendering effective services for the needy people. The increased gap between the theory and practice of Psychological theories was identified and the possible suggestions to minimize the gap are suggested.

Keywords: Psychological Theories; Practice-Based; Social Work;

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