THE RELATIONSHIP OF THEORY TO CLINICAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: This paper, based on the results of a national study of experienced clinical social workers, focuses on the nature of theoretical perspectives, practice models, and modes of clinical intervention. The majority of respondents identified ego psychology as being most instrumental to their approach with socio-cultural, cognitive/behavioral and family systems theories having an important secondary influence. Most identified with the psychosocial model of practice with problem-solving and family therapy being instrumental secondary models. Specific modes of clinical work were examined in relation to these theories and models.

The practice of clinical social work has become increasingly complex in the last several decades. Newer approaches to practice along with their accompanying theoretical frameworks have led to a proliferation of modalities in individual, family and group modes of treatment. While the relationship of theory to practice has always been an important issue for the profession, it has become more critical in recent times because of the proliferation of theories and approaches. While we assume that theory plays a highly instrumental role in shaping practice approaches, relatively little empirical work has been done to test that proposition. The objective of this study was to explore in a more empirical way the relationship between theory and practice.

We accepted as a starting point that one's approach to practice is influenced by two perspectives: theory about human behavior and models of practice. Theory about human behavior tends to ground one's approach in...
a general framework for understanding the psychological functioning of people as they interact with their social environments. That perspective may include a variety of theoretical interpretations of human behavior such as ego psychology, behaviorism and family systems theory. The other perspective is, in a sense, closer to the everyday realities of practice and tends to have a more pragmatic effect on shaping professional interventions. We refer here to models of practice which have an orienting effect on the behavior of practitioners as they interact with clients in a professional relationship. These may include the psychosocial, the problem-solving, and the family systems models of practice.

This distinction between theory and models is a convenient way of examining two important influences on the use of self in a therapeutic relationship. Conceptually, the differentiation makes sense. However, in the real world of clinical practice, one's conceptual framework for understanding behavior and the way in which one operationalizes that framework is a dynamically interrelated process. The two dimensions operate in tandem although the linkage may remain implicit rather than explicit. As Lazare (1973) observes, psychotherapeutic interventions including treatment modalities are shaped by implicit models and theories. Our intent was to clarify these potential connections in a more explicit way.

Although there may appear to be a simple one-to-one relationship between the two perspectives, such as behavioral theory shaping the behavioral approach to practice, one's theoretical perspective may be affected by a range of ideas which have a manifest or latent effect on one's approach to clinical work. Some theories will, no doubt, be more or less influential on how practitioners use themselves in professional role relations with clients. For example, the psychosocial model of clinical social work practice may be shaped by several ideas for understanding the psychological and social functioning of clients. Thus, one may be grounded primarily in psychoanalytical ego psychology as a psychosocial practitioner yet integrate into that primary perspective a considerable amount of theory from other perspectives. In other words, theories will be valued differently and, as a consequence, having a varying influence on what is then referred to as the use of self in clinical work.

Method and Study Population

The instrument of data collection was an adaptation of a questionnaire in an earlier study of graduates from the School of Social Work at Boston College (Mackey, 1984). In addition to information about employment, personal and social characteristics, the questionnaire asked respondents to identify theories of human behavior which were most influential in organizing their approaches to practice as well as models of