

Structural Approach to Social Work

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SOWK 641 – Fall 2013

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As noted by Thompson (2000), social work faculties as a whole strive to teach students how to integrate theory into practice, in order to promote informed practice. This process is both strongly encouraged and highly valued, albeit daunting for students. This paper serves as a first step towards achieving theory integration. In the paper, I briefly describe structural theory and explain how the concept of consciousness-raising can be applied to everyday practice.

Structural Theory

Structural theory focuses on linking individual problems to broader social structures. Problems, from a structuralist perspective, are understood as the result of discriminatory and oppressive practices, which are facilitated by social institutions. A foundational belief of the structural theory is that institutions are created to serve those who are in power, by allowing them to maintain their privilege at the expense of others (Weinberg, 2008). This perspective understands power as finite; in order to achieve power others must be rendered powerless. A social worker in Peter's (2012) study on structural theory summarizes the main assumptions of the theory in the following metaphor:

I remember having this conversation with someone... talking about the metaphor of life and being in a ball game or a hockey game, or something. That we all have tickets [and] we all come through the same door, but we don't all have the same seats... That in some ways it's a metaphor for structural theory... some of us have the nosebleed seats... and I think it's our job [as structural social workers] to figure out how to rebuild the arena so that everyone has good seats (p. 230).

Based on this example, it is clear that structural theorists strive to define the underlying cause of problems, namely the structural environment, and then work towards changing these environments, often through the process of collective action.

Collective action is loosely defined as the pursuit of a goal or a set of goals by more than one individual. In terms of the structural theory, the long-term goal of collective action is to change oppressive social structures (Weinberg, 2000). Prior to accomplishing this task, there are a number of steps that prelude collective action. These steps include - but are not limited to - facilitating client access to resources, raising consciousness, and collectivization.

Bowen (2012) remarks that it is difficult if not impossible for an individual to work towards creating social change when their basic needs are not being met. An important aspect of social work then, is to connect individuals with resources that support growth, such as income supports, food, housing, education, and health care (Bowen, 2012). Carinol (2008) acknowledges that through the process of resource allocation, it is important to address the client's internalized self-depreciating thoughts and reframe them using a structuralist approach. For example: a client may blame himself and feel unworthy of aid after being treated poorly by service provider, who implied that he was lazy and unwilling to work (Bowen, 2012). A structural social worker would highlight how this is an oppressive practice and reinforce the client's entitlement to services. This emphasizes that the discourses in the institution are the problem, not the individual himself.

This leads into the topic of consciousness-raising. Bowen (2012) defines critical consciousness as a reflective process, whereby clients reflect on their past experiences and notice connections between their situations and the dominant social structures or

ideologies that contribute to them. According to Bowen (2012) consciousness-raising is achieved through the use of critical questions, which force clients to critically examine their assumptions and beliefs, paying special attention to what shaped them. For example, a social worker might ask a woman, who put aside career aspirations in order to comply with family obligations, if it were her choice or if she choose based on what was expected of her (Bowen, 2012). This question brings to light some of the patriarchal beliefs that are dominant in society today.

Once consciousness-raising is achieved, the social worker will attempt to link the client with others who share similar life circumstances. This process is referred to as collectivization, a necessary precursor to collective action. In the collectivization phase, the client can find solidarity and support in knowing that they are not alone in their struggles. Moreover, by allying with others, the group increases its strength and bargaining power (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010).

As a collective, the group can mobilize and put pressure on established institutions in order to change current practices or policies (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010). Heinonen and Spearman (2012) view mobilization as the embodiment of collective action. According to Weinberger (2008) collective action, and its subsequent policy change, are long-term goals of the structural theory. However it is important to recognize that it is not the only goal. Although I focused on the macro-level applications of the theory, this theory can be applied on a micro-level.

Briefly stated, the micro-level application includes focusing on the worker-client relationship. In particular, it aims to neutralize the innate power difference between the client and worker. Thus, rather than engaging in a top-down approach, where the worker

is viewed as an expert, a structural social worker strives for a more egalitarian relationship where they are both equal partners working towards a common goal (Gray & Webb, 2009). As mentioned by Carniol (2008), some of the techniques used to achieve this goal include, demystifying practices or jargon, providing the client with choices, sharing assessments, and inviting client feedback. In this specific context, the worker is utilizing a structural approach by minimizing oppressive social relations, while still working within the bounds of the social framework (Gray & Webb, 2009). Hence, structural theory can be applied at the micro or macro-level, within or outside of the bounds of the social structure.

Applying Theory to Practice: Consciousness-Raising

As mentioned above, raising awareness of oppressive social structures is a key element to structural social work. Peters breaks this process down into two steps, “the first is naming the issue, and the second is educating individuals about the structural context” (2012, p. 283). The first step is particularly important to Peters (2012), as she acknowledges that although individuals often understand the effects of oppression, they rarely identify the oppression as a structural issue. Without naming social issues as structural oppression, it is difficult to challenge or change social structures (Peters, 2012). Furthermore, by not identifying the structural context, there is a risk that a person’s experience could be interpreted at the individual level: meaning that his or her experience could be understood as a one-off event as opposed to recognizing it within the larger structural context (Peters, 2012). According to Peters “the act of openly naming oppression, at individual, community, and structural levels is an overtly structural [and necessary] activity in itself” (2012, p. 283).

The question is: how does one apply this in practice? Quite simply, by sharing information and knowledge about oppression, specifically focusing on issues that relate to the client's lived experience. To illustrate this point, I refer to Heinonen and Spearman's (2010) ban-the-boarding-homes movement. To set the context, a number of mental health patients were residing in boarder homes set up on marginal farms located in a small rural community. These homes benefited the patients as well as the farmers, who appreciated the supported income. Unfortunately, the community as a whole was displeased with the arrangement. They viewed the boarders as "deviant" or "undesirable" and lobbied for a municipal bylaw, which restricted the boarder residents to one per household (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010).

Faced with this knowledge, Danielle – a structural social worker – decided to educate clients about the problem using consciousness-raising tactics. In particular, she wanted the clients to understand the problem from the anti-boarding-home supporters perspective (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010). She also sought to inform clients about coalitions and how they operate, since she felt that the by forming a coalition the group would be more successful in their appeal of the bylaw.

An important aspect of the appeal also included educating the public about mental illness. In particular, the coalition sought to bring attention to the fact that the residents were harmless and that they were financially contributing members of society. This decision to educate the public was made solely by the coalition, without influence from the social workers. Moreover, it was the public education that largely contributed to the group's success. In the end, the bylaw failed in a four-to-nothing vote and the community as a whole was more accepting of the residents (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010).

This example speaks to the concept of consciousness-raising on an individual and community level: the social worker informed the clients about the problem and how the communities fear contributed to the oppressive practices, and in turn the clients educated the community about mental illness, which largely contributed to their changing attitudes towards the bylaw. More importantly, this example also highlighted the importance of consciousness-raising, specifically demonstrating that it is a precursor to social change.

Peters (2012) supports this by stating,

Before change occurs, social issues need to be identified and understood in the context of social structures, other people need to be on board with the analysis, and a vision of what change looks like and what it could achieve needs to become shared goals (p.288)

In order to accomplish this task of raising consciousness, social workers are both strategic and creative in their approach.

Some of the creative approaches to consciousness-raising include: using Facebook as a medium to identify and name oppressive structures or utilizing humor to bring attention to oppressive comments spoken to clients in the workforce. For example, one of Peters' participants spoke about how a nurse made a comment about not liking a client's family. The participant responded casually, "Oh, are they not middle-class enough for you?" (2012, p. 284). Peters (2012) explains that this was said to bring attention to class-bias without alienating the participant from her colleagues. Additional tactics of consciousness-raising, include utilizing role-plays and case studies in educational workshops in order to bring attention to social and structural issues.

In my former role as a workshop facilitator, I educated youth about the issue of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. A primary goal of the workshop was to raise awareness about the issue as well as identify students who were at risk. In total we received sixty-five disclosures from students, predominantly females, with at least one disclosure from each community visited. From this data, we learned that youth as a whole are vulnerable to exploitation. By informal discussions, we also discovered that a number of youth have experienced sexual exploitation at some level, but they did not realize it because their peers and/or the media had normalized the behavior. This is particularly true of young girls who trade a sexual act for something intangible like popularity or self-esteem.

Throughout the workshop, a number of the females in the class began to recognize past or present relationships of theirs that were unhealthy. With this recognition they were able to work towards changing their relationships or they sought help when needed. A number of the youth even shared and discussed the material with their teachers and peers long after presentation. They also educated their friends about the topic and would speak up if they noticed a friend who was exhibiting the warning signs of being sexual exploited. Due to the education, they were better able to recognize how oppressive practices - like sexism - made young women particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The role-play and case scenarios also allowed them to better understand the scenarios and how they could apply to them. By bringing attention to the issue, and the structural issues like sexism, the students were able to comprehend the problem and with this knowledge start to combat it at a peer-to-peer level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper discussed in brief the structural theory and then utilized practical examples of how the concept of consciousness-raising could be applied to everyday practice. It sought to demonstrate a sometimes-challenging concept of translating theory into practice and it did so in a simple manner. By completing some of the readings, it was clear to me that this process of theory integration although well sought after is not always readily achieved (Thompson, 2000). However, Thompson (2000) states that theory integration has improved steadily over time and it will continue to do so.

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