

Master Social Work Students' Explicit and Implicit Articulation of Theory

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We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Master's level social work students enter their studies with a variety of educational and career experiences. Some students pursue an MSW after years in the social work field inspired and influenced by numerous social workers as role models. Other students will begin their MSW education informed only by lived experiences and personal notions of how or why people change. This variation in perspective may influence how readily MSW students learn to rely upon theory. Upon graduation, all MSW students are expected to have developed the capacity to recognize, choose, explain, and utilize theories in ways that will benefit their clients and communities. Instructors with clear pedagogical ideas about helping students to structure their mastery of theory may make theory seem more useful and accessible to students. By exploring how students develop their capacity to utilize theory during their training, social work educators can identify how best to prepare these students for theory application in their careers.

The purpose of this study is to identify and categorize MSW student patterns of thinking and learning about theory. This snapshot can clarify the range of student capacities to access and employ theory. By understanding the range of theory knowledge, educators can facilitate deeper comprehension. In this article, we present the need for theory in social work, as well as the challenges of both teaching and using theory, followed by the investigation and analysis.

Literature Review

Theory in Social Work

Theoretical education is central in the social work classroom. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body for the U.S., emphasizes the importance of theory education in social work school curricula. According to the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), students demonstrate required theory learning when they can

effectively engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate clients using theories of human behavior and the social environment (CSWE, 2015).

Little recent literature exists which articulates how MSW students develop their capacity to apply theory. A search conducted on March 31, 2021, using Academic Search Complete, Education Source, APA PsycArticles, Social Sciences Full Text, and Social Work Abstracts databases since 2010 identified 270 peer reviewed articles in academic journals with the term “social work theory.” One recent article offered a large review of the literature on theory in social work education (Cox et al., 2021) and a few discussed models to teach specific theories. Two articles were located with the search term “teaching social work theory”, one of which applied to teaching theory to social work students (Kokaliari et al., 2016). A search of “social work theory” and “pedagogy” identified 20 articles. In addition to the aforementioned articles, only five articles discussed what theories to teach in class or how to apply them. These resources address teaching critical social work theory in Sweden (Lynch et al., 2019), student perspectives on learning theory in the United States (Author, year), British social work educators’ reflections on teaching theory (Sieminski & Seden, 2011), employing critical reflection as a valuable learning method that could help students learn to apply theory in a HBSE class (Wiener, 2012), and educating about neuroscience (Egan et al., 2011). No articles were identified in these databases that utilized the term “learning social work theory.” A search for the term “social work theory education” identified one new article that discussed an embodied approach to teaching empathy in Australia (van Rhyn et al., 2021). Recent articles about teaching theory to social work students were limited.

Application of Theory

The theory and practice integration challenge has long been present in social work education (Bolsen & Syers, 2004). Students can easily become confused when learning theory, particularly due to the inconsistent definitions, descriptions, and terminology in the literature (Bolsen & Syers, 2004; Miller & Skinner, 2013). An investigation by Author (year) identified that MSW students continue to struggle with applying theory, even when they recognize the benefit of doing so. Students face three challenges in theory application: selecting an appropriate theory to use, remaining flexible in how this theory is applied, and being able to critique the theory once applied (Author, year) This requires not only mastery of content but also the confidence to engage critically with theory application. The difficulty students have integrating theory manifests most prominently when they are expected to make theoretical connections with real cases.

The theory and practice disconnect is not limited to students but is also present in the supervisors and the social work professionals they may be working alongside. In an exploratory study, Forte and LaMade (2011) described social work field instructors' perception of theory use in practice. Social work field instructors were frequently inconsistent in their own professional application of theory. They were more likely to identify workshops, courses, or discussions with colleagues as more beneficial to their work than theory (Forte & LaMade, 2011). These field instructors also ranked knowledge about ethics, assessment, practice effectiveness, and social problems as more valuable than knowledge about theory (Forte & LaMade, 2011).

Alternatively, some social workers valued theory as beneficial in day-to-day practice, but experienced barriers to its real-world application (Forrester-Jones & Hatzidimitriadou, 2006). Such barriers include a lack of time to reflect, insufficient resources, heavy workloads, and lack of support from supervisors (Forrester-Jones & Hatzidimitriadou, 2006). With so many obstacles

to applying theory, exploring how MSW students think about using theory can help educators train MSW students to develop their theory mastery.

Online Social Work Education

A dearth of current literature exists specific to educating students about social work-related theories in both in-person and online courses; however, the body of literature surrounding the broader topic of online and distance education in the social work academy continues to grow. Social work courses are increasingly taught online as this option offers advantages such as flexibility, accessibility, and economic cost (Cummings et al., 2013, Cummings et al., 2015; Davis et al., 2019; McAllister, 2013). In an exploratory pilot study of multi-method design, McAllister (2013) compared variations in student perspectives between BSW students enrolled in online versus face-to-face variations of the same course. Results did not reveal differences in curricular performance outcomes between online and face-to-face students, nor were there discrepancies between students' engagement in study time (McAllister, 2013). Similarly, Cummings et al. (2013) distinguished no significant deviations between course outcomes or students' assessment of "course content and effectiveness" (p. 76) of graduate social work students enrolled in an online, distance education group clinical course and students enrolled in a traditional, face-to-face section of the same course. A follow-up study by the same authors showed similar results, supporting the position that online courses are as effective as traditional courses in graduate social work education in terms of educational outcomes, such as knowledge and skill development (Cummings et al., 2015). The literature also suggests that online education modalities have supported more favorable student satisfaction compared with traditional, in-person courses (Cummings et al., 2015; Forte & Root, 2011). There is undoubtedly an ongoing need for further investigation into best practices in online and in-person social work education.

Social work pedagogy is strengthened by exploring how students develop theory mastery during online coursework.

Study Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this project was to develop a more informed pedagogical understanding of how MSW students think about theory as they are learning about theory. The study's objective is to explore how MSW students, in an entirely online Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) course, conceptualize their practice efforts in relation to theory application. Social work educators can use these insights to tailor teaching strategies to the needs MSW students. By assessing student effort to apply theory at the beginning of a second theory course, researchers get a snapshot perspective of how students think about theory in a case.

Method

This study consisted of analyzing an open-ended question about theory application from an anonymized survey data gathered over several years from MSW students taking a second level HBSE course on theory. The study was approved through the university's Institutional Review Board. Discussion of researchers, recruitment procedures, participants, data collection and analysis process are presented below.

Researchers

The researchers were social work educators who had taught social work theory courses. Two of them taught the HBSE II course while data was being collected. Because the surveys were anonymous, the researchers did not know which students participated. All three researchers are professionally affiliated with the university where the courses were delivered.

Recruitment Procedures

Students who had enrolled in a three-credit hour, second level MSW theory course between the years 2013 and 2015 were invited by email or web-based learning management system (LMS) message to complete a 14-question online assessment. These students would have taken at least one social work theory course prior to this class either within the online MSW program or in an earlier BSW program. The purpose of the assessment was described to students as a means to learn how MSW students apply their theoretical knowledge and skills to improve future teaching practices in MSW curriculums. Students were assured that assessments were anonymous and that their course grade would not be affected by their choice to complete it.

Those students choosing to participate accessed the assessment via a weblink embedded within the opening module of an online HBSE course through the school's online LMS. This survey was offered to students in the first two weeks of the HBSE course. The assessment was administered via SurveyMonkey, an online software.

Participants

The target population was MSW students enrolled in a fully online CSWE-accredited program and beginning a second-level theory course. One-hundred twenty students ($N = 120$) provided a response to an open-ended question where they applied theory to a case scenario; thirty-eight students provided no response or indicated they did not know how to answer. The majority of respondents were female ($n = 105$; 87.5%) with a mean age of 31 ($SD = 8.9$; $MIN/MAX = 22/66$). Respondents most commonly reported holding undergraduate degrees in the social sciences: psychology (24.2%), social work (21.7%), criminal justice (6.7%), sociology (4.2%), and other social science related disciplines (9.2%). Roughly 15% of student respondents ($n = 19$) earned undergraduate degrees outside of the social sciences. Most students (75%) had taken the earlier theory course within the previous two years. These earlier theory course may

have occurred in the same program or years prior at other schools in face-to-face or online formats. Common theories taught in the first MSW theory course of this university include systems theory, empowerment theory, as well as an ecosystems perspective and strengths perspective all within a humanistic approach. However, since some students took earlier theory classes elsewhere, a wide variety of former theory education was represented.

Data Collection

One of the authors developed a survey to explore MSW students' knowledge of practice-based theoretical understanding. This study investigates student responses to a single question on the survey, which measures their knowledge and capacity to use theory at this stage in their educational career. Students were provided the following instruction: “Based on the case using just various theories, how would you respond to the case and create a plan for work? Give a short rationale.” The case vignette described a social worker beginning to work with a female client struggling in school. During the two-year timeframe, 158 students responded to the survey with 120 students responding to the case.

Completed assessments were downloaded from Survey Monkey into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 24.0). Responses to the case example were transferred to a word processing file for organization and coding. Each response was marked separately with a reference identifier.

Data Analysis

A series of first and second-round coding processes were employed to identify patterns between student responses (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptive coding was used in first-round data analysis as a means of establishing familiarity with student responses. Coders considered “What was being explained in the response?” “How did the response unfold?” “What were prominent

ideas or keywords within the response?” Magnitude coding was also applied in first-round analysis to both highlight the prominence given to particular theories within a response, and to indicate whether the response directly mentioned the word "theory," or otherwise alluded to it. Magnitude coding prompts included “If a student discussed two theories within their response as potential frameworks for practice intervention in the case scenario, which of the two were discussed first?,” and “Did the student’s response indicate their understanding of their own theory application by specifying the term ‘theory’ or ‘perspective’?”

Process and holistic coding methods were used in second-round coding for their effectiveness in elucidating the underlying intention of the responses. A prompt used was “in what manner did a detailed intervention plan apply or sidestep the explicit use of theoretical influence?” Both second-round coding methods were useful in revealing and categorizing more unanticipated response-types, such as those more focused on ethical considerations or criticisms of the case vignette.

Following first and second-round coding procedures, the researchers then categorized responses into Anderson and Krathwohl's (2000) revised dimensions of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives. Bloom’s taxonomy served as an effective way to identify differences in student theory utilization. Other studies in social work education have also found this updated version of Bloom’s taxonomy useful (Secret et al., 2017). As Krathwohl (2002) notes of Bloom's original taxonomy, it is "a framework for classifying statements of what we expect or intend students to learn as a result of instruction" (p. 212). Comprised of six key categories ranging from basic to advanced cognitive degrees, Bloom's original taxonomy required that advancement to higher-level cognitive categories involved developing proficiency in the prior levels: *Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation*

(Bloom, 1956). Krathwohl (2002) describes a new Taxonomy of Educational Objectives revised from Bloom's original (1956), which emphasizes educational goals, objectives, and standards and adds *knowledge* as a parallel process to *cognition*. The revised taxonomy consists of the following hierarchy: *Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, and Create* (Anderson & Krathwohl 2000; Krathwohl, 2002).

In the researchers' third-round of coding, students' responses were classified within the most appropriate category in the revised taxonomy for each theory explicitly named. Thus, a student might demonstrate an *Apply* level of comprehension for one theory and a *Remember* level of comprehension for another theory.

While Bloom's taxonomy was used to categorize the explicitly identified theories, the researchers noticed students often responded with an implicit application of theory. Implicit theory application was identified when students' responses demonstrated a latent social work thought or action which the researchers could readily connect to common social work theories even though the students had not named that theory in the response. Table 1 provides examples of how theories were coded using Blooms first three levels and noting implicit application.

[Insert Table 1]

In order to ensure consistency, the researchers used the following "theory groups" (Payne, 2014) as a classification system for sorting students' theory-based responses: psychodynamic, crisis and task-centered, cognitive behavioral, systems/ecological, macro practice/social development/social pedagogy, strengths/solution/narrative, humanistic/existential/spiritual, empowerment/advocacy, critical; feminist, and anti-discriminatory/multicultural sensitivity. The Payne (2014) text was not used in this course; however, his categorization of social work practice theories was selected because of its

popularity in social work education. Due to the frequency of non-theory-based responses to this theory-based question, these student answers were also differentiated by common themes.

Two of the three researchers were involved in the coding process, achieving interrater reliability by means of routinely comparing and discussing their findings. The routine source of coding variance between researchers was ambiguous responses. The researchers analyzed responses-in-question and mutually determined the most appropriate code.

Results

The students beginning a second level Human Behavior in the Social Environment Theory course in an online MSW program naturally varied in terms of social work experience and familiarity with theory. Each student response reflected one or more of three themes: explicit theory use, implicit theory use, and non-theory-based considerations. One hundred fifteen students included at least one theory-informed idea in their response, either explicitly or implicitly. Five students limited their responses to practical steps or additional considerations that appeared to be disconnected from social work theory; many other students also included non-theory-based commentary alongside their theory usage.

Explicit Theory Articulation

Sixty-three percent of respondents ($n = 76$) explicitly identified at least one theory or perspective they would use in consideration of the case. While the question specifically asked students to use theory, their use of perspective was also tracked. Sometimes they simply named the theory; at other times, they extensively discussed how the theory informed assessment and intervention.

Theories Identified by Students

These students named twenty-two different theories and perspectives in their responses. This lack of distinction between theory and perspective suggests students' understanding of the differences might be undifferentiated or minimized. Because both theories and perspectives are models that influence social worker thinking, both are included in this analysis. The majority of students' explicit and implicit use of theory were categorized into eight of eleven of Payne's (2014) theory groups (no responses used macro practice, feminist, or anti-discriminatory theories). Four additional theory classifications not included in Payne's (2014) theory groupings were also identified: role, symbolic interactionism, conflict, and trauma. Figure 1 shows these results, as well as the frequency with which students used the theories either explicitly, by naming the theory/perspective, or implicitly, by describing thinking or behavior that the researchers assessed to indicate a theory or perspective.

[Insert Figure 1]

An indisputable theme across most responses was students' reliance on systems-type theories and strength perspectives to frame their practice approaches to the case example. Sometimes students named the strengths perspective and sometimes they simply alluded to the need to explore strengths, which would be an example of researcher coding for an implicit use of theory. Person-centered concepts were captured under the 'Humanistic/experiential/spiritual category' and students demonstrated an implicit commitment to this practice, even though they hardly ever named it. It was not uncommon for students who explicitly identified one or more theories also to communicate a clear application of a different theory implicitly.

Bloom's Taxonomy Demonstrated

Explicit theory responses ranged from naming a social work theory to both naming and describing a theory within a complex discussion of case application. Theories explicitly stated by

respondents were assessed for placement within Bloom's revised taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) to make sense of these differences. Of the five categories presented by Bloom to demonstrate different levels of comprehension, the first three were recognized in students' explicit use of theory: Remember, Understand, and Apply. Students demonstrated an Understand comprehension of theories most often.

Remember. The Remember response named a theory that could be relevant to case practice. Five students demonstrated a Remember level of comprehension, where they named theories they would use, without any description or application. Often students who recognized or applied theories at more advanced levels might also include another theory at a less advanced level.

Understand. The Understand response named the theory and discussed a general concept within the theory. Forty-five students reflected a level of theory comprehension no greater than the Understand level, where they identified a theory and acknowledged a few theory concepts. This was done with about 13 theories, most often Systems/ Ecological and Strengths theory groups.

Apply. The Apply response not only named the theory but applied it with specifics to the case at hand. The Apply level of comprehension was demonstrated by twenty-six students who explicitly named a theory, described the concepts of the theory, and appropriately applied the theory. The Apply level was demonstrated most often using the systems theory group but also in the strengths perspective, cognitive behavioral, humanistic and role theory groups. Some students showed a more advanced capacity for connecting the underlying principles to social work practice than others.

Implicit Theory Articulation

Responses demonstrating implicit theory usage were identified as those providing case assessment or intervention ideas that experienced social workers could recognize as connected to social work theory. Thirty-nine students engaged in implicit discussion of social work theories without naming one. Moreover, additional students demonstrated implicit application of social work theories distinct from their explicit identification of other social work theories. While students frequently appeared to apply theory implicitly, to what extent the student was trying to apply a theory, or whether they were simply identifying steps guided by their familiarity with common social work practices, remained unclear.

Among the 80 students who implicitly applied theory, 15 theories were evident, representing six of Payne's (2014) theory groups and two additional theories. Fifty-nine percent (48/80) of these students implicitly demonstrated the strengths-focused theory group; 43% (34/80) demonstrated a person-centered perspective associated with the Humanistic theory group; and 43% (31/80) demonstrated a version of the systems theory group.

Non-Theory-Based Considerations

Despite the question directly asking students to use theory, more than half of student respondents (72 /120) shared thoughts or intervention ideas unattached to explicit theory usage. While these comments were sometimes associated with implicit theory, other foci embedded in students' responses were sorted into one of the following categories of non-theory-based considerations: 1) taking practical steps; 2) demonstrating awareness of the client's internal motivation; or, 3) critiquing the given circumstances of the case scenario. Student responses describing a non-theory-based consideration within the context of explicit theory usage were not included in this separate category. See Table 2 for examples of responses demonstrating non-theory-based considerations.

[Insert Table 2]

Practical Steps

Approximately half of student responses (59/120) were not explicitly linked to a theory but identified practical steps that would be taken with the client. Often these students identified practical steps focusing on using the planned change process (such as conducting an assessment, setting goals, or evaluating work). Several times the students described connecting the client to resources or involving external supports.

Case Critique

Eleven students (11/120) critiqued the performance of the case vignette's social worker. Occasionally, such comments were supportive and affirming, but often they were critical of the social worker, such as by questioning the social worker's choice of whom to include in the client's initial meeting. Such criticisms were mostly grounded in the student's subjective opinions and at times grounded in social work ethics.

Client Motivation

Thirteen students highlighted the importance of client motivation who discussed the client's perspective or suggested increasing the client's readiness to engage in change. This influenced the students' suggested interventions. While underscoring client motivation might have reflected a person-centered approach or the stages-of-change model, this response type was coded distinctly rather than treated as implicit theory usage.

Discussion

The value of HBSE theories is limited if we are not effectively educating students to integrate them into their understanding and toolkit. Through an investigation of student responses to a simple case analysis, this study explored MSW students' patterns of thinking about theory early in their graduate careers. By considering the theory concepts relied on by

students, educators can reflect upon their goals for students and decide how to support them to future theory utilization. Student variation in explicit theory use, reliance on implicit theory knowledge, and efforts to comment on cases without theory can inform educators' efforts to prepare students to use theory as practitioners.

This study suggests that some students are internalizing social work theoretical concepts early in their development but need more focused guidance in recognizing how these ideas connect to practice. Students appeared to favor systems theory and the strengths perspective heavily even though they presented a range of explicit and implicit theory usage. This indicates that foundational social work concepts, such as the importance of environmental influences and respect for clients, strongly influence student thinking and practice as they are developing their professional identity. Similarly, students' positive regard and appreciation for clients demonstrated humanistic tendencies, even though students rarely named this as such.

Across theories, students appeared to need support taking what they know and developing more in-depth capacity to transfer this to specific case situations. Some students struggled to name and use theory, either because they had forgotten the theories or because naming the theory seemed to be of secondary importance to the action or commentary they shared. Educators can periodically assess students' current understanding and keep guiding students step by step to develop greater familiarity with theory. This might be starting with the name of the theories they 'Remember' and having them identify associated concepts to show they 'Understand.' The next step is helping them move from the concepts they are associating with a theory to show how this 'Applies' to a specific case. Repeated practice can help the students recognize and further their own reflexive growth at this ability to make use of theory to help others. Providing students guidance along what is often a nonlinear and reflexive path in

developing theory comprehension and mastery is essential. Such guidance is attuned to learner-centered teaching, stimulating motivation and critical thought amongst social work students in the classroom (Karolich & Ford, 2013).

Implicit use of theory was common with students using theoretical concepts in potentially helpful ways. In these instances, it is unclear whether students intentionally considered a theory or acted intuitively. These students may have formally learned these theories in classrooms or may have assimilated the concepts through exposure to social work ideas or values. Students may also be influenced by some instructors' efforts to implicitly incorporate theories or perspectives into their classrooms, such as the strengths perspective (Probst, 2010). Social work has prioritized a strengths-based, humanistic approach for the past 30 years (Dybicz, 2015). A natural consequence is that students will demonstrate some core social work concepts even without recognizing the connection to theory. Without conscious awareness in selecting theories to use, however, students are at risk of not recognizing that they are free to make different theory-related decisions. Intentional theory application allows students to critique their own efforts and think through different approaches if they become stuck with a client or protocol.

Student emphasis on non-theoretical responses to a question asking them to apply theory highlights issues that can complicate teaching theory to MSW students. The practical steps, attentiveness to client's internal motivations, and case critiques may reflect student inability or uncertainty around using a theory. By identifying practical steps students may be trusting in tasks they have learned in the classroom or in the field even without clear theory connection. Another possibility is that students' non-theoretical responses demonstrate students' use of self in the helping process, with an emphasis on the practitioner-client relationship. Liechty (2018) describes use of self as an under-researched yet highly relevant concept in social work practice

and education, “an umbrella term encompassing [...] elements of self-awareness, empathy, and critical thinking, with facets of the personal self functioning as significant antecedents” (p. 148).

Limitations of this Study

While this study offers a perspective on the learning process of student comprehension, several limitations are worth noting. As this was an exploratory study using convenience sampling of students from one master-level social work program in the midwestern U.S., generalizability cannot be assumed. In addition, the phrasing in the case scenario connotes an application of the strengths’ perspective and systems theory, which may have swayed student thought towards these two approaches at the outset. Students were also asked to “use” theories as opposed to “naming” them, which might have affected responses in terms of implicit versus explicit theory articulation in responses. Completing these analyses at the end of the term would undoubtedly have garnered different theory-based responses from students but would not have offered the mid-learning snapshot afforded by the greater variety of student comprehension at the beginning of the second theory course. Additionally, knowing exactly how long it had been since students had taken a previous HBSE course or course that discussed theory would have contributed to an ability to see if recency altered student capacity to use the theory in a case.

It is unknown if these results would be different if students if MSW students in an in-person class were asked to respond to the case scenario and this might further limit the usefulness of these results. In comparison to in-person coursework, social work faculty in the U.S. have doubted the effectiveness of online social work education for preparing students to become practitioners (Levin et al., 2018). Studies have not found, however, significant disparities in academic outcomes between online and in-person social work education (Cummings et al., 2013; Cummings et al., 2015; Davis et al., 2019; Forte & Root, 2011;

McAllister, 2013). This analysis focused upon how students used theory in a case, which this literature around teaching efficacy does not suggest would differ based on in-person or online course delivery. These ideas of strengthening student comfort and deliberate engagement with theory concepts are relevant to theory taught in any setting and integrated with other social work content. While the participating students may have taken the first level theory course online, others may have taken it in-person and the source of their earlier training was not a variable considered in this qualitative inquiry.

Recommendations

Highly structured teaching methods are advised to help students effectively integrate theory ideas with client situations (Bolsen & Syers, 2004). If a course objective requires applying theory to practice scenarios, then early and regular assessment of students' theory comprehension is needed. This can clarify where faculty should focus their efforts to help individual students gain mastery. By teaching with different levels of comprehension in mind, students can better recognize their own skill development (Bloom, 1956). To assist in this process, social work educators might consider facilitating students' critical reflection (Lay & McGuire, 2010).

Theory should be strategically implemented into practice (Payne, 2014). Educators can help students develop their theory mastery through feedback and reflection on students' efforts to intervene with complex true-to-life case scenarios. Faculty can structure dialogue expectations between students about theory, whether in a physical or web-based classroom where this practice has less pressure but more opportunity for collaboration. The more practice at applying theory students have, then the more anxiety associated with theory might be assuaged.

Conclusions and Future Prospects

Dialectical tensions abound in social work: the back and forth pull of micro and macro foci, the ivory towers of academia and the trenches of *real* social work, and the efforts to balance, evidence, theory, and practice wisdom. The long-held theory-practice divide continues to be a challenge for educators, students, and practitioners. Social work students' academic exposure to theory can feel removed from daily client interactions and agency practice; removing barriers to student learning may increase students' willingness to engage with theory. Masters social work education should be actively informed by student experiences (Lewis & Bolzan, 2007) and this study uses student experience to clarify how students are transferring conceptual understandings of theory to applied case scenarios. It is clear from this study that students need time and guidance to develop their theory knowledge. Routine efforts to measure student theory expertise can guide educators' pedagogical efforts around strengthening their students' theory application.

Future research in the scholarship of teaching and learning in social work education should continue to align theoretical models taught in classrooms and outlined in textbooks with realistic practice circumstances. Exploring the inconsistencies in field educators' familiarity with theory and how to strengthen experienced and licensed social workers' theory utilization is a worthwhile future endeavor. Helpful next steps would explore both how social work educators' approach to teaching theory in foundational master courses affects students' developing theory mastery and how MSW students continue to integrate theory knowledge through the rest of their education and into their early career. Social work education can ultimately only be strengthened through acknowledging students' different cognitive methods of learning and comprehending. This is especially relevant when considering the teaching and learning of such complex subjects as theoretical models in relation to ethical and values-based social work practice.

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Table 1*Bloom's Taxonomy and Implicit example: Student theory responses*

Bloom's Revised Categories (Krathwohl & Anderson, 2000)	Defining Characteristics of Response	Examples of Student Responses
<i>Remember</i>	Naming a theory concept	"Learning theory, strengths perspective using solution-focused therapy."
<i>Understand</i>	Describing a theory concept	"After Ginny and the group list Ginny's strengths, I would try to look for ways to build on those strengths and incorporate them. In viewing Ginny through the lens of systems theory, an ecomap can be created to see the resources available to her. Additionally, I would ask when the difficulty with focusing started and what has worked well in the past."
<i>Apply</i>	Connecting a theory concept to the case	"Given the level of social support and commitment from her parents and friends, I think using systems theory is the best choice to figure out what is behind her sudden decline in scholastic interest. If she is not having problems with her friends, or at home, then something else might be causing her decline. The systems perspective can help determine if there is a personal (dyslexia or depression), or environmental problem (bullying)."
<i>Implicit</i>	Evidence to connect theory to a case without naming the theory (Systems theory in this example)	"I would ask Ginny and her support system if there have been any major changes in her life lately or anything that they think may be influencing Ginny's drop in grades. After the initial session with the system, I would use the information provided to identify problem areas and then what areas of strength may be called upon to use as a support when working through this problem."

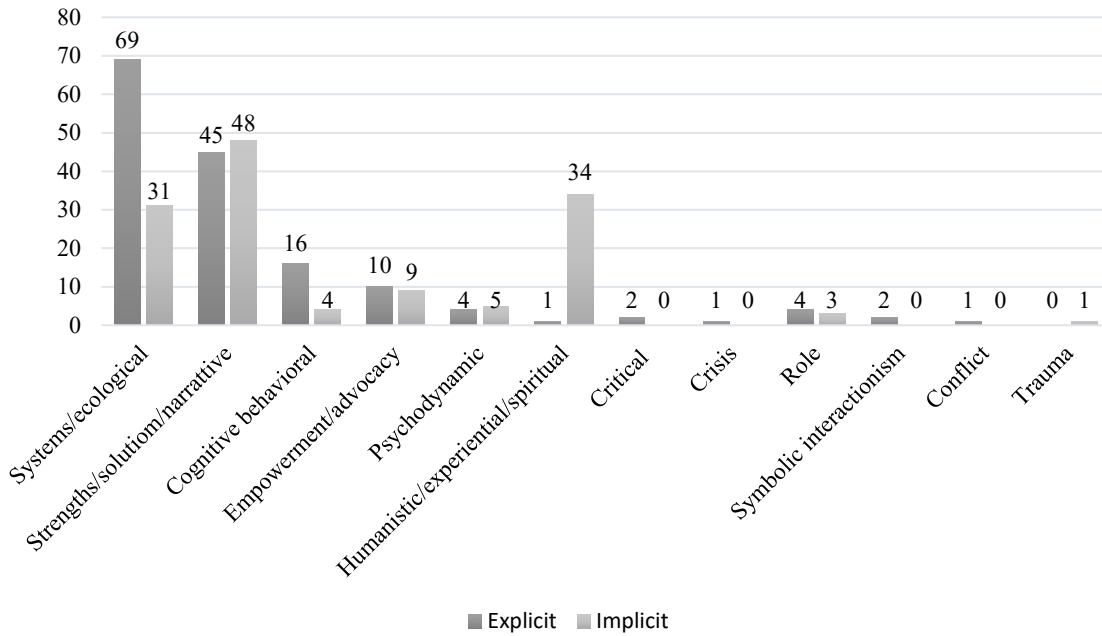


Figure 1. Explicit and implicit student demonstration of theory. This figure illustrates comparative numbers of explicit and implicit usages of theory in student responses (n = 120).

Table 2*Non-Theory Based Student Responses*

<p>Practical Steps</p> <p>(This example includes implicit usage of strengths perspective)</p>	<p>“After engagement and assessment with the client, I will establish rapport that would help me to look for challenges as well as strengths. After client having recognized her strengths, we collaboratively create intervention planning using all the resources and social support available (and recognized). Then create attainable goals to reach.”</p>
<p>Case Critique</p> <p>(This example focuses on ethics and assessment)</p>	<p>“I am surprised that eight folks were included in the initial session. Even if Ginny gave permission I would be concerned if her ""permission"" was coerced. I'm assuming that there were some preliminary questions about the use of drugs or alcohol since she has become withdrawn. IF all is above board I'd begin by using the strengths that are identified and selected by Ginny and assist Ginny in creating goals to help get her back on track.”</p>
<p>Client motivation</p>	<p>“I would see which systems in Ginny's life are supportive and helpful, both in Ginny's opinion and in the others' opinions. I am curious if Ginny actually feels uncomfortable with any of the systems that want to help her. Is there someone that she is more comfortable speaking to? I would encourage her to reach out to them when she needs help. I would also try to address her problems at school and see what assistance she needs with her studies.”</p>

Case Description of Ginny

Instructions	Case - "Ginny"
<p>Based on the case using just various theories, how would you respond to the case and create a plan for work? Give a short rationale.</p>	<p>Ginny is in the 10th grade at North Central High School and has been referred to a mental health clinic by her school social worker. The school social worker, Ms. Jones, makes the referral directly to the Northside Clinic. (Assume all appropriate releases are signed.) She shares that Ginny is a bright fifteen-year-old having difficult focusing in the classroom and had begun to withdraw from her peers and is also failing in two classes when previously she was an above-average student. The school counselor acknowledges that Ginny's parents are willing to participate in any counseling. The therapist, a social worker by discipline, schedules the initial session with Ginny, her parents, the school counselor, and also one of Ginny's teachers has agreed to attend. Ginny has asked if she could also invite her best friend Jana to the session. The social worker acknowledges she is in agreement, as long as Ginny's parents agree, but she adds that all helpful individuals would be welcome. Mr. Smith, Ginny's father, wants to know if the youth minister might be helpful –so she too is invited. At the initial session, there are eight present. After an initial time with Ginny and her parents (to rule out critical issues), the others are asked to join. The session takes an interesting turn in that instead of talking about deficits, the social worker asks for a list of strengths beginning with Ginny and then others are invited to contribute. The social worker then states, "I know we are here to help Ginny with some difficulties she has had lately and I am wondering Ginny, if you see some things on this list that will help you with your current concerns?" As Ginny talks, the social worker begins to turn the list into an eco-map which provides a visual cue for the group.</p>
