

DEAL Reflection Paper: Human Behavior in the Social Environment Theory
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Introduction

This DEAL (describe, examine, and articulate learning) reflection paper is to demonstrate my understanding of theoretical frameworks and their application in the context of agency in which I am placed. In addition to strengths-based approach, I selected ecological theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs to explain the client system as well as practice in the agency. In this agency, I am involved in Family Strengthening program, and the main service is to address financial challenges and basic needs of clients.

Description

In preparation for this reflection, I identified two theories including strengths-based approach and ecological theory. Based on the discussions I had with my Field Instructor, several theories can be helpful in the case of my practicum setting. For example, we talked about empowerment theory and its benefits. That is, focusing on individuals' capacities, this theory puts emphasis on empowering individuals economically, socially and culturally (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment theory goes beyond merely addressing basic needs and highlights the importance of long-term capacity building (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

The Field Instructor and I also talked about Maslow's hierarchy of needs and ecological theory. Although I will talk a little about Maslow's theory, I chose ecological theory as my second theory, since I thought it is more helpful to explain the agency's clients and their conditions. When the clients visit us in the agency and explain their financial problems, I see that the issue is beyond merely financial challenges. Sometimes clients mention health or family issues such as domestic violence as a main cause of their financial needs (Bishop & Makki Alamdari, 2018). Therefore, I thought I need ecological theory that can help me explain all complexities in several levels of analysis.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

The theory of Maslow's hierarchy of needs is somewhat helpful to explain practice in this agency. This theory was developed in the field of psychology by Maslow. According to this theory, there is a hierarchy of needs in several levels including physiological needs, safety needs, social belonging, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). In this hierarchy, the most basic and fundamental levels of need must be met before a person focuses on higher level needs (Maslow & Lewis, 1987).

Since the main focus of my practice in Family Strengthening program is to provide referrals to address basic needs in terms of housing, food, clothing, and utilities, the Maslow's theory fits well with this kind of intervention. That is, without addressing basic needs, we cannot expect individuals to reach to their full capacity. Based on National Association of Social Work (NASW) *Code of Ethics*, one of primary goals of social work profession is to help individuals strengthen their abilities and contribute in the community (NASW, 2008). Therefore, based on Maslow's theory, addressing basic needs is a

prerequisite to reach the higher levels of need such as social belonging, self-esteem and full potential (Maslow & Lewis, 1987).

Strengths-Based Approach

Instead of focusing on problems, strengths-based approach highlights the importance of strengths and builds upon them (Forte, 2014; Payne, 2005). This approach has six principles (Saleebey, 1996): Every person, family and group has considerable strengths; every hardship can be a source of opportunity; we do not know maximum level of the human capacity; serving clients should be collaborative; context is a critical component for human well-being; and many resources are embedded in environment (Saleebey, 1996). Instead of focusing on pathology, this theory puts emphasis on individual capacities, identifies the strengths embedded in several domains of one's life and builds interventions upon those strengths (Forte, 2014).

Ecological Theory

Ecological theory emphasizes that merely focusing on individuals is not enough to understand the one's problems and conditions. Individuals should be studied in their environment (Forte, 2014). Main concept of this theory is that there are ongoing and dynamic transactions between an individual and her/his/their environment that influence every single aspect of one's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Turner, 2011). Ecological theory also highlights the importance of inter-related multilevel factors such as intrapersonal, interpersonal and community levels in explaining one's behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Other Research or Literature

In addition to our textbooks, I reviewed Maslow's theory. This theory is not discussed in social work theory courses. I also directly used original resources such as Bronfenbrenner's original text on ecological model (1979) as well as Saleebey's original text on strengths-based approach (1996). These original resources are cited in social work theory textbooks, but we have not studied them as part of coursework.

Examination

Practicum Site and Client System

My placement agency is in the west side of the city. The agency has several departments and programs. I am placed in their Family Strengthening program. In this program, we are serving diverse population. The population is diverse in terms of race, gender, and age. We serve African-American, Hispanic and Caucasian clients with the age ranged from 3 to 100. Most clients have low socioeconomic status, are from African-American background, and residents of the west side of the city. The primary service provided in the program is referral to address financial needs of families and individuals in order to strengthen families and improve healthy communities.

How theory informs your practice

Strengths-based approach. This theory is very informative in working with clients in this agency. Many clients who walk-in or call us are really full of capacities. For example, sometimes clients call to get assistance with utility bills or rent, and when I provide referral to resources, they mention that they have already tried those resources. Even sometimes they have tried other resources which I am not aware of them. That means sometimes clients have more knowledge than me and I learn from them. When they name new resources which I am not familiar, I add those into my list of resources and provide them for next clients. This is consistent with strengths-based approach which discusses that individuals are full of capacities, and thus, they are expert in solving their problems (Saleebey, 1996).

As an approach in strengths-based perspective, risk and resiliency perspective developed by Fraser (1997) is helpful to explain the abovementioned example more. In the face of adversities such as the lack of shelter and food, some individuals try to find solutions to bounce back to their life and overcome difficulties (Diehl & Hay, 2010). There are different kinds of protective factors to overcome difficulties and stay resilient (Diehl & Hay, 2010). For example, as mentioned before, toughness and seeking support are some of those protective factors (Diehl & Hay, 2010) that some agency clients apply very well to handle difficult conditions. Thus, in everyday practice, I understand the importance of strengths-based approach more.

Ecological theory. When I provide only referral to address basic needs of clients in the agency, I think there is something missing. Only providing referral to address basic needs is not enough. Based on what I hear from the clients, I think there are more other issues going on in the system of a client. For example, I had a client who could not pay her rent, because she had lost her job. When I talked with her about the reason for job lost, she mentioned that because her daughter is in hospital and she is a single mother. This case was helpful for me to understand that the reason for having unaddressed basic needs is more complicated than what one may think. Considering systems approach and examining an individual in her environment will help a social worker understand a client with more empathy and provide better resources. In the case of this client, this ecological understanding of her family conditions was helpful for me to provide a better referral.

Ecological theory's metaphors are pertinent in this case. The metaphors mention that a person is an organism who needs resources, and a social worker as a gardener works to improve resource availability for a given client (Forte, 2014). That is, a social worker works to increase level of fit between the needs and the availability of resources. In the abovementioned example, I as a social worker tried to provide the best possible resources for our client. Referring her to a case management department in the Hospital was a better resource for her based on her specific conditions.

Unique Challenges and the Importance of Chosen Theories

The clients struggle with many different kinds of challenges more than only basic needs. For example, sometimes clients are victims of domestic violence, and this is why sometimes clients cannot address their basic needs. When such a client calls us and asks for

help with low-income housing or shelter, as a social worker, I should be aware that a person needs safety and protection as well. I think in such a case, ecological theory is very helpful to make me aware of other interrelated factors and challenges in the client's environment such as family violence.

Some challenges of clients is at the individual level. For example, there was a client that she could not pay her rent despite having a good payment. When I conducted a financial analysis, I figured out that she spends too much money for mortgage of an expensive car. When I started talking with her around this, she was defensive and not open to revise the way she spends money. That is, sometimes the lack of financial literacy is a big challenge for our clients. In similar cases, I think strengths-based approach is useful because of its focus on individual capacities. Providing financial literacy training is an effective strategy to improve individuals' capacities to help them manage their money in a more effective way.

Systems of Oppression

Poverty is a system of oppression that significantly affects African-Americans. African-Americans with low socioeconomic status constitute most of our clients in the agency. Thus, it is critical to apply theories to counter the effects of poverty among our target population. Highlighting the importance of individual capacities, strengths-based approach can be helpful to address the outcomes of oppression. That is, empowering individuals who are in poverty and helping them reach their full potential are helpful strategies to strengthen individual capacities, and consequently to address the outcomes of poverty (Mohaqqi Kamal, Ghaedamini Harouni, Basakha, & Makki Alamdari, 2019). Ecological theory can also be helpful to counter the effects of oppression. Emphasizing on environmental factors such as policies is critical to reduce poverty in a society. In this case, social workers can be involved in advocacy efforts to address social injustice and prejudice through changing policies (Mohaqqi Kamal et al., 2019).

Articulating Learning

What did I learn?

I learned many things about myself as a social worker. For example, to be a good social worker, I really need to practice different kinds of theories in different client systems. Theories provide a lens that a social worker can use to examine the client's condition to get a better understanding of the client and the problem. I also learned about theories and their application in a real world. Each theory provides a specific insight, which can be helpful in explaining a specific condition. For example, ecological theory looks at a person in environment, which provides a broad understanding of multiple interrelated factors in a client's system. While strengths-based approach is mainly focused on individual capacities.

This assignment was also helpful to increase my mindfulness about clients. I really enjoyed seeing how theories can deepen my empathy in practice. For example, reviewing two abovementioned theories, learning that every individual is full of capacities and learning about environmental factors beyond the control of a client help any social worker have more empathy and be non-judgmental in working with clients. That is, these two theories help a social worker reflect on her/his/their personal biases more carefully without blaming a client.

How did I learn?

Field observation was helpful in my learning process. Observing every single client and her/his/their specific condition was a great experience to learn about kinds of theories that might be helpful in explaining the client system in the agency. Further, my coursework was very helpful to get a broad understanding of multiple theories in the field of social work. Field Instructor's supervision sessions were also useful in my learning process. My Field Instructor is very knowledgeable and has many years of experience in similar agencies.

Why is it important?

It is fundamental to apply theories in practice. As I talked with my Field Instructor, there is always a gap between theory and practice, which is critical to address this gap. Theories can inform our practice and as mentioned before, they can flourish our understanding and empathy in working with clients. As a developing social worker, I believe learning about the importance of theories and application of them in practice is fundamental to become an excellent social worker.

What will I do as a result of this learning?

This learning was very important for me to get more in-depth understanding of how I can apply theories in practice. In our coursework, we have learned many theories, but I did not know how we can use them in a real world. Before this homework, I was not completely familiar with application of theories, but now I understand more how to incorporate theories in my future practice. I will remember this homework and its benefits in my future professional employment. That is, in my future career, whether working with the same population or different ones, I will be aware of the importance of theories in explaining unique conditions of clients, and will apply theories to increase my understanding of the client, and consequently to conduct more effective interventions.

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