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## Types of Knowledge, Forms of Practice

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## Types of Knowledge, Forms of Practice

### Abstract

This study was designed to explore the way that use of theory influenced a social worker's conceptualization of a simulated case. The participant in this case study was a woman employed in child welfare, who holds an MSW. She was chosen because her response in a larger study represented a deviant case. Data analysis included both thematic analysis and an analysis of a written report based on ideas taken from institutional ethnography. The authors use this case example to illustrate the ways that one's understanding of theory may impact social work practice.

### Keywords

Technical-Rational Practice, Reflective Practice, Social Work Practice, and Institutional Ethnography

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## **Types of Knowledge, Forms of Practice**

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### **Introduction**

How do social workers reach conclusions and choose actions in practice, and does theory have anything to do with those processes? An increased understanding of the theory-practice relationship may help social work educators better prepare students for practice. In order to begin to uncover some possibilities for the relationship between theory and practice, the writers engaged in a case study in which they examined a social worker's assessment of a simulated client situation, and then interviewed the social worker about her report and impressions of the case. Using thematic analysis, and influenced by institutional ethnography, the writers found that in spite of the fact that the social worker did not believe she was using formal theory, she may have in fact done so. The manner in which she used the theory became more important to this study than the specific theory she used. The authors suggest that approaches to teaching theory may significantly influence interactions between social workers and clients, the social worker's conceptualization of practice, and the formal document produced by the social worker.

### **Introduction to the Study**

#### **Problem Statement**

This case study is part of a larger research project. The larger project was designed to look at ways that social workers (specifically child welfare workers) use knowledge and theory to inform their practice. One of the participants stated that she did not use formal theory in her conceptualization of cases. The researchers believed that this response, which deviated from the norm, offered an opportunity to look at the particular social worker's use of knowledge and theory in greater depth than those participants who identified a theoretical orientation. The research problem for the case study became how

one social worker used different types of knowledge and different views of theory to arrive at conceptualizations of cases. The phenomena being studied are types of knowledge and understanding of the meaning of theory. This includes investigation of how types of knowledge and an understanding of the nature of theory are acquired and used in social work practice.

### **Assumptions and Role of the Researchers**

Researchers' standpoints influence their vision, and thus it is important that these are explicitly identified. The authors are interested in social work practices, and more specifically in how some practices contribute to clients being treated like objects, versus clients being treated like subjects.<sup>1</sup> They believe that the way clients are treated not only impacts the client, but contributes to the culture in general. Thus, they believe that there is an ethical dimension to ensuring that social work practice contributes to a world in which all people, including those who are in some kind of need, are treated like subjects. The authors believe that the over-application of one type of knowledge and one understanding of theory, combined with common approaches to report-writing in the practice of social work, leads to context-stripping. This contributes to treating clients as objects, one who is acted upon, or in many cases "fixed" by social workers, rather than working with clients as subjects, or individuals who are capable of volitional action (for further explication of this perspective, see Pozzuto, Dezendorf, & Arnd-Caddigan, (2006).

## **Review of the Literature**

### **The Nature of Theory**

The way that theory is defined, explicitly or implicitly, impacts social work practice (Pozzuto, 2007). There are currently two alternate forms of social work theory, which are informed by different ways of looking at the world. The forms of theory can be referred to as "positivist" and "postmodern". Turner's (1996) definition of theory represents a positivist position. He has suggested that theory is "as a model of reality appropriate to a particular discipline" (p. 2). The model is empirically tested against reality. If it passes the test, the model is believed to describe a mind-independent reality accurately.

Payne (1997) recognized that there are alternate forms of theory. He defined one form, which he termed "positivist," in very similar terms as Turner's singular definition of theory. He noted that from a positivist perspective knowledge is believed to be the reflection of "objective reality." He then suggested a postmodernist understanding of theory as an active component in constructing our knowledge for understanding reality. We can only know reality via our physical and intellectual capabilities. We neither perceive nor think in a pristine manner (Simons & Chabris, 1999). Further, thinking is expressed linguistically, which is limited by the form of language. From this perspective,

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<sup>1</sup> Treating clients as subjects refers to recognizing clients as active, cognizing individual or social group, with the capability of self initiated purposeful actions. Objects lack the capability of self initiated purposeful actions.

theory is about how humans use ideas and perspectives to negotiate the world, not about the world itself.

Theory can be understood from two very different perspectives, as Payne (1997) and Turner (1996) illustrate. Several implications flow from these distinctions in understanding theory. One area impacted by the definition of theory is the practice that might follow from it.

Schön (1983), drawing upon Habermas (1971), approached the relationship between theory and practice by distinguishing between technical-rational and reflective practice. From a technical-rational perspective professional activity “consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique” (Schön, p. 21). Floersch (2004), citing the work of Fook (2002), described the technical-rational approach as a “top down” approach. The theory is the starting point from which to derive practice. Technical-rational practice is the application of “necessary skills to fix or transform objects” (Floersch, p. 163).

The post-modern interpretation is that theory is part of both the understanding and creation of the social world. Given this perspective, social work theory optimally assists in establishing a social context that promotes human well-being both individually and collectively. Kondrat (1992, 1995) distinguished between technical-rational theory and a theory intended for understanding. Understanding refers to grasping how people give meaning to their actions and the social world around them. This understanding then becomes the foundation for purposeful actions. Practice, from this perspective, is situationally dependent.

According to Floersch (2004), technical-rational theory has a conservative effect on social work practice. It is often used dogmatically, leaving little room for innovation. Practice built upon technical-rational theory is based on extrapolation. That is, projecting the present forward. This only allows for endless recapitulation, an upholding of the *status quo*, and undermines the creation of a better future. Levitas (2001) argued the same point using different terminology. Alternatively, understanding that theory contributes to the creation of a social order opens the practice of social work to the possibility of creating a better world order (Gergen, 2003).

## **Types of Knowledge**

Just as there is disagreement among social workers concerning the definition of theory, the relationship of theory and practice is equally contested (Patton, 2002; Penna, 2004). Some authors contend that social work knowledge must be founded upon a scientific base, science understood here as a form of logical positivism, and that practice is derivative of that base (Rosen, 1994). That is, practice interventions must be derived directly from a formal theory. The evidence-based practice movement has furthered this perspective and intensified the debate. This perspective has been subject to numerous critiques (Moxley & Manela, 2001; Webb, 2000; Witkin & Harrison, 2001).

Kondrat (1992), drawing heavily from the works of Habermas (1971), Polanyi (1962) and Schön (1983), presented an argument for the construction of professional knowledge that was independent of the technical-rational approach embodied in a logical positivist perspective. She suggested that the truth claims for professional knowledge resulted from methods of authentication not found in the technical-rational approach (p.

237). Kondrat summarized her approach to authentication of professional knowledge as follows, “The starting point for inquiry about practice knowledge should be the empirical question: How does the competent practitioner go about knowing ‘in’ practice?” (p. 237).

While Kondrat has been highly criticized, her call struck a responsive chord with at least two social workers; Fook (2002) and more recently Floersch (2004). Floersch adopted the terms technical-rational knowledge (TRK) and knowledge-in-action (KIA). He suggested that while the written narratives of practice follow the logic of TRK, the practice, when reported orally, illustrates the use of KIA. Thus it appears that practitioners use two forms of knowledge; TRK refers to knowledge associated with an empirical-analytic perspective and KIA refers to knowledge associated with the substantive rationality of practice (Kondrat 1992). In other words, technical-rational knowledge is associated with logical positivism, and knowledge in action is perhaps more easily understood from a constructivist perspective. In using both forms of knowledge, social workers may exhibit some disconnection between theory and practice. He concluded that at the very least one should not determine the relationship between theory and practice solely on the basis of written records of practice.

Schön (1983) used the term “reflective practice” to describe one’s actions that result from KIA. Reflective practice is the practitioner’s ability to make moment by moment decisions on what to do next, based on the specific context rather than abstract theory (see, for example, Kinsella, 2007). As a practitioner reflects upon what is transpiring at the moment s/he “reformulates the way such an experience might be managed or interpreted” (Burton, 2006, p. 298). “The outcomes of reflection may include a new way of doing something, the clarification of an issue, the development of a skill, or the resolution of a problem” (Boud, Keogh, & Walker as cited in Burton, p. 299).

More recently social workers have been focusing on reflexive practice. In reflexive practice the practitioner is aware of the constitutive power of his or her actions (Davies et al., 2004). That is, the practitioner is aware of the way that his or her actions/interventions contribute to (or create) the situation in which s/he is engaged; “they see simultaneously the objects/subjects of their gaze *and* the means by which those objects/subjects . . . are being constituted” (Davies et al., p. 361, emphasis in original). Thus, reflexive practice goes beyond the ability to observe one’s experiences during an interaction in order to see how those experiences are affecting the interaction.

The literature reviewed suggests that theory can be understood from two very different perspectives: Theory is a description of reality or theory is part of the process of creating the social order. From a positivist perspective, social work interventions are derived from theory. For example, if the theory is that thought causes feelings, the intervention would be to change a thought in order to change feelings. The intervention is applied because the theory from which it is derived is “true” irrespective of context. This describes technical-rational practice. Alternatively, if theory is seen to produce the social order, the context of the interaction plays a constitutive role in how a social worker may intervene to help clients change their circumstance. The choice of intervention will be based on what is likely to lead to a social order that is more in keeping with values or ideals, like treating clients as subjects rather than objects. From this perspective reflexive practice derived from knowledge in action is more appropriate.

The question becomes which of these theories, and which form of practice, do social workers use in conceptualizing a case? Do they use both, and if so, when, why, and how? As a beginning step in developing answers to questions we asked social workers how they conceptualized cases.

### **Institutional Ethnography**

Institutional ethnography is both a social theory and an orientation toward research that was developed by Dorothy Smith (2005). The aim of institutional ethnography is to look at the concrete actions of individuals as they function in relation to an institution. In order to better understand what people do and why they do those things, institutional ethnography often includes analysis of texts that guide the behaviors of people involved with a particular institution. Smith has observed that institutional texts are written in a fashion that replaces individuals with classes of persons (such as “supervisors,” etc.) as a method of erasing agency, that is, intentional acts by concrete actors. By expunging the specific writer of the text, the reader is forced to engage in a type of conversation in which s/he takes both parts. That is, the reader becomes the text’s agent. By avoiding first person references, replacing them with categories of persons, as well as by using the passive voice the writer leaves the reader with the impression that it is in fact the reader who is experiencing first hand what has been written.<sup>2</sup>

Smith (2005) also offered insight into another manner in which texts establish an “objective” frame. This is accomplished by means of the text providing instructions for how it should be read. As an example Smith cited a text that opened with an indication that the subject matter of the work would be about the writer discovering that someone was becoming mentally ill. This opening led the reader to look for and find “descriptions of the individual’s behavior as indications of mental illness or the process of becoming mentally ill” (p. 109). That is, the text instructed the reader to look for and find “evidence” of mental illness, which the reader dutifully accomplishes.

The investigators used the work of Smith in order to look at the texts generated by the social workers in this research. Specifically, by using the principles of institutional ethnography the researchers hoped to gain insight into the degree to which the participants were understanding theory as a description of objective reality.

## **Methods**

### **Design Description**

The question of qualitative designs is currently another topic of hot debate among qualitative researchers. As Arnd-Caddigan and Pozzuto (2006) have observed, the views of constructivist qualitative researchers, and those of critical realists, differ markedly on this subject. The latter group tends to follow a form of procedural validity that requires a qualitative protocol to be followed. The former group tends to construct designs in a more *ad hoc* manner, fitting the design elements to the specific problem and aims of the

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<sup>2</sup> Both of these practices are also common to academic writing. The authors, as you see, do not refer to themselves in the first person, though at various points in the article the authors have attempted to make explicit their intellectual perspective.

individual research project. The authors place themselves in the category of constructivist qualitative researchers. Thus, this project did not adopt a design previously developed; instead the researchers designed methods for this specific project.

### **Sampling Plan**

A key element of sampling logic in qualitative research is refinement of the phenomena for which the researchers are sampling. While people provide the data, the individual is not always the unit of investigation. In this research, the phenomena for which the researchers were sampling were TRK and KIA, along with the understanding of the meaning of theory. An individual can use either or both types of knowledge, and can hold one understanding or another about the nature of theory, but because it is the knowledge and understanding that are the units of analysis, the researchers can look to areas of information that include how and where the participants came to hold the contents of the forms of knowledge and understanding of theory.

The sampling plan for the larger project was purposive; individuals known to the researchers who worked in the public child welfare agency were asked if they wished to participate in the study. The case study being reported here was selected because the response of the participant was unexpected. Thus, it constitutes an example of an extreme or deviant case (Glesne, 1999). The purpose of the study was described to all participants, and informed consent was obtained.

### **Data Collection**

Participants in the study were shown a video recording of an interview with a simulated client. The video may be accessed at [http://www.rockspringinstitute.org/KFPV\\_ideo.html](http://www.rockspringinstitute.org/KFPV_ideo.html). The video depicts an interview conducted by a middle aged white woman who is unidentified, but based on her questions and responses to the interviewee may represent the state or child welfare agency in some formal capacity. The interviewee (Mr. Davis) is a white middle aged man who is being investigated for possible child abuse. Based on the information in the video there is no evidence that abuse as legally defined occurred, however Mr. Davis admitted to engaging in physical contact with his daughter during an argument (grabbing her arm).

The participants in the study were given the URL to access the video. The website included the following instructions:

View the video as many times as you wish, and please provide the following:

1. A brief (less than 5 pages) psycho-social history of Mr. Davis.
2. Your assessment of how likely Mr. Davis is to hurt Mary again.
3. Your professional opinion regarding which, if any, interventions should be mandated or recommended. If any, please list them.
4. Should, in your professional opinion, Mary be allowed to remain in Mr. Davis's custody?



After submitting the written materials the participants scheduled a two-part interview. Each part of the interview was conducted by a different researcher. Each part was an unstructured open-ended interview. The first part of the interview was designed to learn about the participants' knowledge in action. The interviewer opened with the question, "What do you think is really going on with Mr. Davis?" The interview proceeded based on each participant's written material and unfolded further based on the responses the participant gave to the questions.

The second half of the interview was again designed based on the report of each participant. This portion of the interview was conducted by a different interviewer in order to encourage a break in the way the participant discussed the case. The second interview was designed to elicit the social worker's use of TRK, and included the orienting question, "Is there any perspective that you feel was guiding you, generally, when you wrote this [the assessment based on the simulated client]?"

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The researchers expected in the interviews that the participants would identify some formal theory that informed their understanding of the case. This aspect of data is what made Ms. Marks's stand out from the rest of the participants. She responded that she did not use any formal theory, but relied on what she called a "professional perspective" to arrive at her understanding of the case. This led the researchers to analyze her written material and transcripts of her oral narrative, to determine if her conceptualization of the case was consistent with a formal theory of individual or family functioning. Thus, a form of thematic analysis using formal theories of individual or family functioning was employed as an orienting category.

The researchers also used concepts from institutional ethnography in the data analysis. This was part of the original research design, used to help gain insight into the degree to which the data represented examples of positivist use of theory and technical-rational practice, versus the degree to which theory was used more as a heuristic and the degree of reflexive practice.

Dorothy Smith (2005), the originator of institutional ethnography, is heavily influenced by constructivist metatheory applied to research. As such, she eschews the notion that institutional ethnography should be reduced to a set of procedures. Instead, it is an orientation to research. The written text that Ms. Marks submitted was thus read with the principles of institutional ethnography (discussed in the literature review, above) in mind. Were classes of persons used instead of references to specific individuals, and if so, how was this done, and to what affect? Was personal agency expunged, and if so, in what way? Does the text provide instructions for how it should be read? If so, how, and what are those instructions? Perhaps more importantly, if these writing conventions were used, what is the affect? What, if anything, does this reveal about the respondent's conceptualization of the case? This is relevant both to the respondent's understanding of the relationship between theory and reality as well as type of knowledge the respondent may employ in determining the case disposition.

## Ethical Considerations

The research plan was submitted and approved by the IRB of the academic institution at which the researchers are employed. The researchers obtained informed consent for participation, and altered identifying data in the reporting of the research.

## Results

### Thematic Analysis

While the social worker does not hold a conscious formal theory, thematic analysis revealed that she may have in fact employed Structural Family Therapy theory (SFT) outside of her awareness. Structural Family Therapy is based on the application of systems theory to a family unit. Structural Family Therapy (and the related label “family systems theory”) is a theory based on the premise that a family has the properties of, and functions like, all other systems. As a description of systems theory is beyond the scope of this article, the reader is referred to texts on generalist social work practice, including Miley, O’Melia, and Dubois (2001) or Kirst-Ashman and Hull (1993).

The categories employed by SFT, of course, are not unique to SFT. These ways of looking at family functioning may be found within other perspectives as well as common understandings of families. The authors aver, however, that the configurations of categories as a whole are unique to SFT. This particular amalgam of elements is what gives the perspective its identity. We will show that the categories used by the social worker correspond to the configuration of SFT.

Perhaps on the most basic level, the worker seems to hold that the family is a unit composed of individuals (a whole made up of elements or a system). This is a basic construct of systems theory, upon which SFT is based (Vetere, 2001). The notion that the family is a unit comprised of parts is suggested when Ms. Marks indicated that the family should remain “intact.” The worker made her understanding of the family as a system made up of elements more explicit in the second interview.

Interviewer: . . . you saw the interview, and then from the interview you chose different pieces [to include in the report]. I’m asking why choose that piece [about the son’s history with alcohol]?

Ms. Marks: I just thought it was reflective of how he sees his adult son and his family, and how he minimizes some of his wife’s involvement in the family. It’s one of the few times he mentions her in any role in the household.

Interviewer: OK, so you’re saying, in part, that you included sections where you felt he was giving you information more about other family members or a family constellation?

Ms. Marks: Yes, more like in describing his family as a unit or as a whole that might contribute or lend itself to be useful when trying to surmise what transpired and how did he get to the point that he did, of hurting his child.

While the indication that the family is viewed as a single system made up of elements is not particularly well developed, the notion of the family as a system is strengthened by looking at Ms. Marks's suggestion that the system's boundary is an important element of the case. In SFT the system's boundary is a key construct (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). The boundary around the unit distinguishes which elements are part of the system, and which are not, or, put differently, inside from outside. This notion of boundary is manifest throughout the report and interviews by the social worker. Indeed, she made at least 19 references to being "in," "within," or "outside" the family. Specifically, she discussed things that occurred "within the family," and Mr. Davis eschewing "outside" assistance or help repeatedly. For example, in the first interview Ms. Marks described Mr. Davis's family of origin in these terms: "everything was handled within the family ... he didn't go outside of the family for help."

The concept of boundaries is a key element of SFT. According to this theory, boundaries can be clear (permeable), diffuse (too open), or rigid (too closed). The social worker in this particular case appeared to understand Mr. Davis to maintain a somewhat rigid boundary around his family. She observed,

[Mr. Davis] . . . made very clear to me that there was some bias . . . against any outside therapeutic treatment or any type of discussion about problems within your family with anybody else other than the family members.

The social worker reported that in his current situation Mr. Davis did not have much external interaction. She described that he had few acquaintances or friends, which led to stress accumulating or "stewing within the family" with "no outlet." From these examples one gets the sense that Ms. Marks considered the family's boundary to be an important concept, as well as appearing to believe that that boundary may have been more rigid.

There are three other aspects of SFT theory that arise, as intertwined in the case study. These are: (a) a significant component in every family system is the parental sub-system, or more specifically that the parents should work together as a unit to accomplish the tasks of parenting; (b) there are rules that guide how sub-systems (specifically, the parental sub-system) interact within a system; and (c) that these rules often come from the parents' families of origin (Minuchin, 1974). The social worker appears to have used these elements as she analyzed the case.

The notion that the parents should be operating together as a sub-system was evinced in the interview process with the social worker when she described her sense of the mother. The worker pointed out that Mr. Davis "doesn't really talk about her as an equal partner or as an equal disciplinarian or anything like that." Indeed, the SFT notion of disengagement as opposed to the mother being an active participant in the parental sub-system may have informed the social worker's assessment of the case; "[the mother] just seems kind of absent . . . she does not seem to be the disciplinarian or the strongest parent." What is significant here is the worker's normative assumption that the mother should be working as an element in a parental sub-system.

The ideas that there is a set of rules for how one should parent, as well as where these rules come from are also apparent in Ms. Marks's analysis of the case. While one might argue that such rules are the basis for the report in the first place, the notion that

parents recapitulate the parenting practices and styles of their own parents is, again, an important aspect of SFT. In the formal report Ms. Marks detailed in one paragraph Mr. Davis's understanding of rules that guide parental sub-system responsibility/authority.

A parent has to be firm, set boundaries and limits and if the children will not obey, they have to be shown authority by the parent . . . an occasional open-handed slap is an okay form of discipline in order to get a child's attention.

She followed this description of Mr. Davis's understanding of rules for parenting by a paragraph that outlined the way he was disciplined as a child: "He reported receiving a slap or two growing up . . ." It may be that the proximity of these two pieces of information suggests that there is some relationship between them. Such a belief, on the part of Ms. Marks, became clear in her explanation of her report. She directly stated that she believed that rules for parental functioning came from Mr. Davis's family of origin.

Bill [Ms. Marks mistakenly referred to Mr. Davis as Bill.] has shown specific pieces of content . . . that would give you the insight into potentially how he grew up or how he might expect things to be, based on his own past experiences. Because potentially some of the things that happened for him in this current situation that he's being interviewed about . . . might have been contributed (sic) to his family of origin. Without including that, you wouldn't really think about the connection between the two.

She reiterated the position in the second interview.

I just felt like it was a good way to think about how the family of origin might have been structured and what impact that could have had for him [Mr. Davis] now as a father, what that might have meant.

Another important concept in SFT that appeared in this case study is the idea that family problems arise in response to system stressors, and transition points are especially vulnerable times in regard to stress (Minuchin, 1974). Indeed, Ms. Marks appeared to have seen stress associated with transition as the major causal factor in the alleged abuse that was the basis of the case. One way this was manifest was by her many references to the stress and strain that the family was experiencing, which appeared throughout the interviews. She was more explicit about her assessment of the importance of stress when the interviewer asked her why she included specific material in her report. She responded, "It seemed like this could have been a possible stressor for him and his family, and it felt like a significant piece of information to include." At a later point in the same interview the social worker discussed a perceived stressor, lack of support, and suggested that in the absence of the stressor "this incident may not have transpired." She also gave the following explanation of the case.

I think his current family situation is somewhat strained. Again, moving to North Carolina from Indiana, there is a great distance. It sounded like any supports that he would have had . . . it seemed like he didn't really have a

big support network here . . . maybe they were somewhat strained or tension (sic) . . . And possibly this particular event was kind of like the straw that broke the camel's back . . .

One final aspect of Ms. Marks's explanation of the Davis case that is consistent with SFT is the notion the entire family system shares responsibility for problems (Minuchin, 1974). The social worker in this case example appears to accept this view in her analysis of the daughter's role in the alleged abuse. She stated at the end of the first interview,

Probably the part that I see [the daughter] playing is more that—by her resistance to listening to her parents' directions, with a father who is already at a breaking point—it might have contributed to what happened, just by her being resistant and not following the directions of a person who appears to need to be in control and in charge . . .

This thematic analysis suggests that in spite of the fact that Ms. Marks does not believe she used formal theory in her assessment of the Davis family, there is evidence that she may have based her observations on Structural Family Therapy theory. This supposition is supported by the congruence between the theory and the categories Ms. Marks used in discussing her beliefs about the family, as well as the *post hoc* revelation of the content of Ms. Marks's formal education.

Once the researchers determined that Ms. Marks appeared to have been using some variation of SFT as an orienting theory, they undertook an analysis of the written report using institutional ethnography in order to explore the possible understanding of theory and practice within the report.

### **Data Analysis Based on Institutional Ethnography**

Smith's (2005) observations cast light on the nature of the report written by the participant in this research. The report appears to be an objective description of fact; that is, statements are made in terms that do not reflect an understanding of perspectivalism or interpretation. Indeed, Ms. Marks's avowal that she was not using theory seems to support the assertion that she believed that her report was an objective description of reality. Thus, not only does her choice of theory become an important consideration, but the *way* in which the social worker used the theory arises as a crucial element in understanding her conceptualization of this case. Formal theory can be used reflectively, with awareness that one is choosing to focus on some elements of the case (while blinkering others and applying certain interpretations to those observations), or reflexively (with awareness that use of theory contributes to the construction of the situation), or in this case, non-reflectively and non-reflexively. That is, one can be aware that a theory is a heuristic, or one may believe that a theory is a description of reality. Ms. Marks appears to have adopted the positivist use of theory in that she suggested that rather than being based on theory, her report is based on objective facts. From the definition of theory to which Ms. Marks appears to embrace, applying theory (a description of the way the world works, irrespective of human agency) yields "the truth," and leaves the role of the observer completely out of consideration.

The purported objectivity of Ms. Marks's report is suggested in the opening sentences. She began the report as follows,

Mr. Frank Davis is a 51-year old white male who wore eyeglasses and appeared casually dressed (sweatshirt) for the interview. Throughout most of the interview he was cooperative, however, there were a few times when he was defensive in his responses and his voice became escalated, as if he were angered, by some of the questions being asked.

She ended her report with this statement,

Because Mr. Davis does not see anything wrong with his behavior, grabbing Mary during a time of high emotions that ultimately resulted in bruising, he is likely to hurt her again without realizing it.

At first glance there is little remarkable about either the opening or closing of the report. Many of us are familiar with the descriptive sentence that begins with, "The client is a [fill in portrayal]." However, if we strip away some of the familiarity, what becomes striking is the absence of both the writer and the writer's social location. Ms. Marks did not report that "Mr. Davis appears to me, a thirty something year old female social worker with an MSW and several years of experience ..." or even "Mr. Davis presented to me as ..." Her description presented as objective "facts," not interpretations or impressions. The report continued in the same fashion, inserting quotes from Mr. Davis as evidence of the "truth" of her assertion when her account appeared to become more subjective.

Likewise, the conclusion is stated factually, objectively, and assuredly: "Because Mr. Davis does not see anything wrong with his behavior ... he is likely to hurt her again..." All this is accomplished from a "professional perspective." The report was written as if it were to be used in the criminal justice system; a likely occurrence given the scenario. There is a pull to write factually and with authority, the speech genre of that system, but this pull seems within the bounds of the social worker's range of practice. How does Ms. Marks's report communicate objectivity or factuality?

In keeping with Smith's (2005) understanding of institutional texts, the author appears to have established her objectivity by two means. The first was by erasing herself (the author) as agent of the text; that is, a person with a subjective stance *vis a vis* the material within the report. She accomplished this by using passive voice and eradicating first person references. For example, she wrote,

When asked about mental health problems (depression, anxiety, if anyone saw a therapist for any reason) within his current family unit as well as his family of origin, he became defensive, asking the interviewer what that question had to do with why he was being interviewed. Eventually he answered the question, asked of both his current family and his family of origin by saying "No. No." or "No one laid on couches in my family."

We see here use of passive voice ("when asked about mental health problems . . ." asked by whom?) coupled with a reference to the writer not as an individual, but as a class of person ("the interviewer").

At the agency employing Ms. Marks, documents used in legal proceedings, originally written by social workers, are “edited” by the agency attorney. Ms. Marks stated that the editing made the documents more “forceful,” while some of the “social work perspective was lost.” It is possible that the anticipated editing of Ms. Marks’s actual workplace influenced her writing of this report.

Through the lens of institutional ethnography, the second means Ms. Marks employed to establish the objectivity of her report is by opening with instructions to the reader to engage with the text as if the reader were witnessing the interview first-hand, unmediated by biases of any kind. As noted above, the text began with a description of Mr. Davis. The description is concrete and begins quite factually (age, race, and gender). It moves to a slightly more interpretive statement (casually dressed), with “evidence” for the interpretation (sweatshirt). The first paragraph ends with an interpretation (he was defensive), backed by supporting evidence that included a concrete description of his vocal inflection and a direct quote. The implicit instruction in this opening is that the reader is getting an objective description of what happened. It is as if the reader were present for the interview and witnessing it him- or herself. The instructions lead the reader to understand the account as factual.

### Discussion

How did Ms. Marks come to see her account of the Davis case as objective versus theoretically informed? It appears to the authors that this social worker has developed a “professional practical consciousness”<sup>3</sup> formed by her practice experience, general life experience, and oddments of formal education. Elements of structural family therapy, at least in this situation, appear to be features of this professional practical consciousness, which is augmented by a personal belief system about how people “tick” (Bruner, 1990). The authors have no argument with the content of the professional practice consciousness. We are more concerned with what it is lacking.

There are many possible professional practical consciousnesses to mediate the client’s story, to bracket the important from the unimportant, and to fit the relevant pieces into a coherent account. Many will do adequately. What is missing is an awareness of the relation between the events that provide the basis for the client’s statements and the report produced by the social worker. While the social worker is not aware that she is theoretically guided, the authors, as explicated above, believe she is not only guided by the content of a particular theory, but also by a form of theory.

What lead Ms. Marks in this case example to use a writing style that obscures the subjectivity of the writer in order to appear as objective? The institutionalized demands may be seen as the “pull” to present the information in the report as factual. Using this analogy, the “push” might be viewed as the way the social worker used theory. As argued above, from a positivist perspective theory this is the reflection of reality. The theory *is* the objective account of how families function. There is no need to consider the family from different perspectives since the “truth” of the theory transcends perspective. The

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<sup>3</sup> The authors base the term “professional practice consciousness” upon Giddens’s (1991) term “practical consciousness.” Giddens suggested that as we carry on in the everyday world there is a “practical consciousness, incorporated within the continuity of everyday activities” (1991, p. 36.). This practical consciousness assists in monitoring actions but is itself “non-conscious,” in that it is not “held in mind,” but available to reflection.

“objectivity” of the account is consistent with the assumptions of the theory, but this is only one epistemological perspective.

Post positivist practice assumes that the social worker in question has the opportunity to choose between competing theories and apply some decision process in determining which may contribute to a just social order in a given context. This is not a possibility if students are presented with a single theory, particularly if that theory purports to be an accurate reflection of the world.

Of particular interest to the researchers was this social worker’s decision regarding intervention. If theory is “truth,” then, as suggested above, the application of that theory in the form of intervention is independent of contextual factors. Based on the theoretical foundations of Structural Family Therapy, dysfunction is the result of specific structural aspects of the family, and the interventions in SFT are aimed at changing those structural elements. In keeping with the positivist use of theory, the social worker in this case suggested that the Davis family be mandated into family therapy. Thus, we see the application of an intervention, even though the social worker is acutely aware that the specific context of this case points the probability that the intervention will not work. Ms. Marks understood that Mr. Davis would likely be non-compliant, and yet suggested that he be mandated to receive this intervention. This is the response one would expect based on the precepts of technical-rational practice. Mr. Davis is reduced to an object to be acted upon, against his wishes if necessary.

The researchers wish to make clear that they do not see the deficit here to inhere in Ms. Marks. The problem is in a system, be it the education system or the child welfare system, or any other system that informed her understanding of theory and the relationship between theory and practice. If theory is “truth,” and practice is the application of that theory, Ms. Marks had no options. If, on the other hand, theory is seen as one factor that contributes to the social order, the ethical implications of setting Mr. Davis up for failure become problematic. In such a case, the social worker can rely on contextual factors that become apparent in the course of working with people, and make professional decisions that reflect each client’s unique needs.

### **Legitimacy of Results**

Many qualitative researchers hold that a corollary to the idea of validity in positivist research is the legitimacy, credibility, or usability of the results (Maxwell, 1992). The researchers in this case did not have previous knowledge of what, if any, formal theories to which the social worker had been exposed. After performing the thematic analysis we suspected that SFT may have had a greater impact on the social worker’s thinking than she was aware. We contacted her and asked her directly what she learned in her practice with families class. She confirmed our hypothesis: she was presented with SFT almost exclusively in the course, and more to the point, she was presented with SFT as the way one normatively engages in practice. Since conducting the data analysis they have also learned that SFT is presented at in-service trainings at the state child welfare agency in which Ms. Marks was employed. Thus, both Ms. Marks and external sources have confirmed the legitimacy and credibility of the thematic analysis.

From a purely constructivist perspective the legitimacy of a piece of research is dependent upon the manner in which the research is used (Gergen, 2003). If theory



contributes to the social fabric, legitimate research advances theory that creates a more just world order. The authors would like to suggest that any project that deconstructs the ways that humans are treated as objects and/or advocates for professionals interacting with service users as subjects contributes to a more just society.

### Limitations of the Study

Of course every study has limitations. This single case represents a deviant case in a larger study. The researchers do not know the degree to which this case is deviant on a larger scale. Is this use of theory and type of practice widespread? Perhaps not, although the researcher suspect it may be. Future studies may settle this empirical question. The study was not conducted to be generalized in any broad way. Rather, the study may serve as a stimulus to open dialogue regarding the role of theory and types of practice that contribute to a social order that is just and respectful.

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