Synergizing Perspectives in Social Work: Blending Critical Theory and Solution-Focused Model

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Abstract:
One lacuna in social work practice is the temptation to excessively focus on treating the environment without commensurate treatment for the individual and vice-versa. This is further fostered by learning conservative and liberal perspectives in social work as independent of themselves, without efforts to synthesize them. It is for this purpose that this paper hopes to achieve a synthesis of two theories that are respectively typical of explaining societies and individuals at both extremes. Thus, while the critical theory makes for explaining place of societal structures in remedying problems faced by clients, solution focused therapy concentrates on remedies residing within the client’s potentials, resources and strengths. Data will be sourced from secondary sources, while concept mapping will aid in illustrations.

Introduction:
Social workers in fulfilling their training demands are exposed to understanding three major perspectives which are, conservatism, liberalism and radicalism. The first believes that the individual should take responsibility for his or her situation, whereas, the second and third negate such position and collectively put the blame on economic and power relations structure (Idyorough, 2008: Teater, 2010). Based on how these perspectives are taught, the temptation to diagnose, understand and remedy pathologies of client from a one sided lens tends to be imminent. This is because, social work teachings in the light of these perspectives have been observed to be dearth of adequate provisions for synthetizing societal structures and persons as informing pathologies of client. Therefore, to make treatment holistic there ought to be the need for even assessment of societal structures and individual idiosyncrasies. Assessment must be free from victimizing one against the other. This paper tries to buttress the person-in-environment case approach obtainable in social work practice and calls for its application to teaching major perspectives in the profession (Teater, 2010; Coulshed & Orme, 2006). This is because, it believes that the environment is like an orbit having the person at its middle, with some level of interaction. It emphasizes that individuals and their environments are intertwined. Though, even with the person-in-environment approach, the temptation not to consider both factors as even still persists. Especially, social workers who have aligned themselves to a particular perspective, such that they become vanguards of them, are
liable to victimizing one against the other. A conservative practitioner for his bias of conservatism could say that the individual should be blamed for his pathologies, leaving the societal structures out of the equation. This could equally apply to those who fan either of the liberal or radical perspectives. With such thought, it is very obvious that clients are bound to face wrong diagnosis and eventually treatments. Therefore, the hallmark of this paper is centred on the fact that social workers ought to refrain from taking sides as to what perspectives they feel should be best for them. Perspective neutrality is being advocated and should guide social workers in their dealings with the client population. Societal structures and clients must however be evenly treated in case-diagnosis and treatment. The critical theory was propounded at the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research and was first mentioned in 1937 (Kellner, n.d.). The critical theory is a consequence of the enlightenment era that was dominated by Marx’s philosophy and inter alia. Thus, it sought to make a redefinition and reconceptualization of all variables and ideologies utilized during the enlightenment era, so as to enable them conform to the demands of a post-positivist and contemporary society (Holkheimer, 1972). The critical theory owes its formulation majorly to Max Holkheimer and other scholars such as Friedrich Pollock, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno and Jurgen Habermas (Rush, 2006). The theory fundamentally asserts the consequence of a capitalist and feudal structure on the welfare of the masses and how such structure clamps on the development of the masses. It pushes for enlightenment, empowerment and emancipation as an antidote to the exploitation and inhumane tendencies occasioned by the structure (Kellner, 1989). It further aims at making people aware of hidden coercion through emancipation and enlightenment and freeing them from such coercion which satisfies and protects the wellbeing of the people (Little, 2013; Obasi, 2007). The critical theory in Dominelli (2002) was stated to believe that certain people in the society are oppressed and they need to be empowered. The author confirms the interdisciplinary implication of the critical theory when the assertion was made that the responsibility to achieve emancipation includes all fundamental categories of all disciplines. More so, the term ‘critical’ in critical theory is a show of criticizing and not being comfortable with oppression and exploitation. This discomfort becomes very vital to the struggle for a better society that ensures social justice and equity for everyone (Kellner, n.d; Adorno, 1973; Little, 2013) On the other hand, the solution-focused model is first a brief therapy that is psychotherapeutic. It is usually described as a talking therapy because of the oral exercise and dialogue that serves as precedents for treatment. The accentuation of the model is a movement from a problem deficient state to a problem solving state. Hence, it maintains that social workers will record more success in their practice with clients when they concentrate on solutions to problems rather than the problems themselves (De Jong & Berg, 2008). The solution-focused model is a brain child of Steve de Shazer and his colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Hoyt, 2002). The solution-focused model was particularly inspired by De Shazer’s work with a family who reported 27 unclearly defined problems. As reported in De Jong & Berg (2008), Shazer shifted his and the family’s attention from the reported problems to solutions that were endogenous in the family. Shazer told them to x-ray their lives and look at what the experiences they are having that they would love to repeatedly have. Two weeks later, the family reported that they were going so well and having no trace of their problems. Hence, rather than Shazer to push the attention of the family on what was going wrong or spending time to make an analysis of the reported problems, he opened them to examining themselves and discovering that those problems are actually not problems as reported. They became problematic by virtue of the huge attention being paid to them (Macdonald, 2007; Teater, 2010).

The nexus of the duel and how they typify synergizing perspectives in social work is evident in using critical theory to clamp on inequalities and exclusion obtainable in the society that impede one’s functioning. While solution-focused therapy shifts the focus of remedy to the mindset of the client in order to maintain a state of optimism and action oriented approach toward changing worse for better, including structural related issues. With such achieved balance comes a holistic package for clients at default void of perspective oriented bias. Existing literature on
this subject have always promoted perspectives in social work practice differently without thoughts of their implications (Pierson & Thomas, 2010; Coulsheed & Orme, 2006; Thompson, 2006; Walsh, 2010; Fook, 2002; De Shazer, 2007). This is where this paper hopes to come out differently.

**Social work and critical theory:**

In social work, the critical theory has informed what is known today as critical practice. It is referred to as a practice that draws on the fundamental assumptions of critical theory to promote greater social justice through methods that are inherently transformational. It further buttresses emancipatory approach that captures experiences of service users within wider social structures and seeks to challenge oppression, vulnerability and a wide range of inhumane conducts through progressive welfare policies and practice (Pierson & Thomas, 2010). This goes a long way to show how tandem the critical theory is to the democratic and humanitarian ideals of social work practice.

The influence of critical theory on social work practice cannot be overemphasized. This is evident in Reamer (2009) who corroborated that social workers deal with cases of inequalities and its consequences for the most of practice at all levels. Social work becomes one of the disciplines among the interdisciplinary structure for which critical theory is very essential in producing an enabling society. The dialectics championed by the critical theory is not unconnected from the roles in social work that are inherently advocative and mediating for greater good (Idyorough, 2008). Social workers ensure that logic and empiricism are merged to reach decisions that will favour their clients. Through responsible social action, social workers scuttle the consequences of Marxism revolution, so as to ensure a peaceful cohesion of the system. This has led to some perceptions that the care approach of social work is an instrument used by the capitalists and elites in the state to maintain the status-quo while they continue with their exploitation unhindered. Hence, social work to such schools of thought, becomes nothing more but a palliative amidst the exploitative perpetuations of those who control state’s resources (Fook, 2002). While the foregoing in part might be true, it does not negate the inherent emancipatory and empowerment responsibilities of the social work profession given its track record of assisting societies and individuals to achieve an appreciable quality of life.

The critical theory is said to be reflective as it has succeeded in given rise to other theories, perspectives and models, that have been considered as its variants. Hence, social workers in the act of intervention could subscribe to a particular variant of the critical theory. Among such variants include: Feminist perspective, Social constructivism, Radical/Structural social work, Empowerment theory and Anti-Oppressive approach in social work (Heionen & Spears, 2001). For the purpose of this work, the anti-oppressive approach would be the focus in examining the application of critical theory to the demands of social work practice.

**Anti-oppressive practice in social work as a variant of critical theory:**

Social workers do not only facilitate wellbeing for individuals but they strive to ensure that the environments of these individuals are encouraging with necessary conditions that would guarantee positive growth and development while prohibiting any form of oppression or inequality (Payne, Adams & Dominelli, 2009). The focus of anti-oppressive practice is to challenge inequality and ensure moral implications for power usage across systems within the society. Therefore, individuals through this variant of the critical theory are not seen independent of their environment, as the influence of the structure on the development of the individual could be far-reaching in both positive and negative stead (Burke & Harrison, 2009).

The above explanation has offered reasons why cases of racism, classism, sexism, ageism, poverty, unemployment, tribalism and among other discriminatory practices and social problems, have taken structural dimensions, thereby impeding on the functioning of those who become victims (Teater, 2010). It is in lieu of the foregoing that Dominelli (1993) maintained that the practice embodies a person-centered philosophy; a value for egalitarianism and very concerned with the reduction of the deleterious effects of structural inequalities on the lives of people. Therefore, social workers who take to this practice are sure to achieve an end result that will produce an empowered client who grows the ability to combat oppression, access resources and opportunities and climax his/her functioning via having needs met. Summarily, the focus of anti-
oppressive practice is to make the society better for the people via exposing the people to their challenges occasioned by the environment and equipping them with necessary skills, knowledge and motivation to change the status-quo (Saleebey, 2009).

In bringing the anti-oppressive practice home, Thompson’s approach developed in 2006 from the works of Dalrymple and Burke (1995) would be used. Thompson’s approach has been known today as Thompson’s PCS model. This model sees structural inequalities and all forms of discrimination as occurring at three levels of personal, cultural and societal. This model becomes an intervention plan social workers can adopt when critically challenging cases that have been described by the critical theory as having roots in the structure. This will enable social workers to understand the particular point in the life of a client that craves intervention. The PCS model of Thompson as explicated below buttresses further the effects of the structure on the people and the response of the people to the structure.

**Personal Level:**

At the personal level, interpersonal relationships, personal feelings, attitudes, self-conceptions and interactional patterns are explored to ascertain the perceptions and effects of structural defects on the client (Turner, 2009). This becomes the precedent upon which the social worker starts his/her work with the client. The social worker begins by exposing the client to reasons for his actions. The practitioner also adopts cognitive therapy for the purpose of changing perceptions of the client to acknowledging the realities of his functioning which is not unconnected from defects in the structure that determine the oscillation of the social space housing the client.

**Cultural Level:**

The culture of a person exercises far-reaching influences on perceptions of people. The culture being upheld in the biblical synagogue that do not give women the right to speak in synagogues became acceptable to them as fate and was for several decades not challenged. The fact that it is upheld by culture does not make it right in the real sense. Therefore, when social workers must have treated cases of clients at personal level, it becomes very crucial to understand the extent to which the culture of the client has clouded his or her reasoning regarding the acceptance of certain status-quo. This is captured in Payne (2005) who asserted that the culture of people establishes norms and rules that shape cognition and interactions of people regarding themselves and their environments. Thus, the social worker who seeks to empower a client might not be successful if the client is not made aware of the defects of certain cultural constructs and their consequences on overall functioning.

**Structural Level:**

The structural level aggregates the defects of personal and cultural levels or even instigate such defects at those levels, to investigate the extent to which they have been accepted as norms, rules and acceptable orders within the society. At this level, the social worker having exposed clients to the realities of the defects of the structure, usually proceed with social and policy actions to address such structural defects. In Paulo Friere’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he summarily disclosed how the oppressed are taught to see oppression as a norm in the society. This act is usually perpetuated by those who define the structure and it is the responsibility of social workers to strive to ensure that the masses are aware of such schemes and equally make efforts through dialectic principles to reach resolves that are fair and humane.

In conclusion, the critical theory has exposed latent factors behind structurally instigated social problems and inequalities in socioeconomic and cultural terms. It has also made provision for what should be done in countering the effects of such structurally instigated issues of exploitation, alienation and false consciousness, with emphasis on enlightenment, emancipation, empowerment and true consciousness. It finally narrowed its assertions down to an action oriented measure via the Thompson’s PCS model which practically explicates what social workers and clients should do in the event of structural issues that portend harm to the full functioning of the client.

**Social work and Solution-focused model:**

The relationship between the solution-focused model and the strength perspective in social work is very obvious. It represents a radical shift away from problem based interventions towards approaches and interventions that utilize the strengths and resources of clients to move them towards a preferred future and quality of life (De
Shazer, 2007; Saleebey, 2009). Ever since the introduction of solution-focused model into social work, it has been used for a wide range of cases which include: domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, mental health, drug and alcohol related issues, terminal patients and among others (Neilson-Clayton & Brownlee, 2002; De Jong & Berg, 2001; Myers, 2008). The solution-focused model is a diversion from the traditional problem analysis and solving in social work. It builds on the experiences, resources, strengths, interactions and feelings of the client to navigate a change process through short term achievable goals that never takes into consideration the effect and threats of reported problems (Walsh, 2010). This model has proven very effective in counselling. It also opens client to the realities of a positive mindset that attracts its likes and the reverse being the case for a negative mindset. This philosophy is in corroboration with the law of attraction as put forward by Byrne (2006). In consecution to the foregoing, Miller (1997) opined that so much stress laid on troubles faced by client is time killing and initiates avenue for self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus, the client experiences more problems and troubles because of the intervention that has never stopped giving a reminder of them. Therefore, concentrating on the problems of a client or his/her wrong doings poses iatrogenic complications induced by the social worker.

A very crucial part of the solution-focused model is tied to language and words used in case treatment. This can be buttressed in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language that underscores how language exercises grave influence and confounds problems in everyday life (Teater, 2010). It is in this regard that De Shazer (1997) maintained that social workers who attempt to remedy problems should be mindful of words made by clients and those made by the practitioner as they have a great role to play in instigating change. Thus, Shazer made a recommendation of solution-focused language and positive statements. In the event of negative comments made by clients, the social worker must ensure a rephrasing or paraphrasing of such statements to reflect positive insinuations and actual meanings.

Furthermore, Hoyt (1996) alongside Walter and Peller (1992) formulated basic rules that should guide solution-focused model. They include:

- If there are traces of no crack, don’t bother fixing it.
- Once you know what works, ensure you do more of it.
- If something is not working, stop doing it and do something different.
- Focus on solution-oriented talks rather than problem-oriented talks
- People have all they need to solve their problems.

In summary, the above rules can be said to imply that social workers should always look out for what works in the life of client and keep encouraging the client to do more of them, while they stop doing what does not work. These rules by Hoyt also instruct social workers to be very critical, careful and constructive while practicing, so as not to foment problems where there are none. Clients could get so desperate with their issues and out of desperateness conflagrate their issues either through actions or choice of language. Social workers must remain calm and calculative to understand the motivations of the client which will help in assisting the professional to direct the client toward the right motivations (De Jong & Berg, 2008).

The Nexus:

The profession of social work is one that constantly engages structures and people for the sole purpose of dealing with issues that portend danger or challenge to life’s quality at all levels of micro, mezzo and macro implications (Reamer, 2009). Given the sensitive nature of the practice of social work as regards its emphasis on empowering and liberating those who are vulnerable, oppressed, poor and might be facing one challenge or the other, the fact of science becomes germane (Idyorough, 2008). The essence of scientific emphasis in the practice of social work, is geared toward ensuring objective and orderly practice. Thus, social workers are expected to desist from practicing from a knowledge base that has no scientific justification. This has become a measure to ensure best practices and further protect the wellbeing and interest of service users who see social workers as competent professionals in their respect (Coulshed & Orme, 2006). Science as a product of critical observation and empiricism, is for the most codified in theories, models, perspectives and inter alia (Barbie, 2010). These scientific
precedents have become an integral part of the practice of social work as they are being utilized in the description, explanation, exploration, prediction and eventually antidotes to the problematic cases handled by social workers. Hence, the essence of science in the social work discipline, is not farfetched from the systematic procedures social workers take to in problem solving (Payne, 2005).

The critical theory alongside the solution focused model are both problem solving oriented. They lay their emphasis on the empowerment of people at personal, group and societal levels. This has made them to become germane to the practice of social work whose obligatory responsibilities are tied to fostering social development, social cohesion, social change and the empowerment and liberation of people and structures to enhance wellbeing (IFSW, 2014). Therefore, while the critical theory focuses on making structures work well for people, the solution focused model pays more attention to making people and groups be in sync with the wellness of the structures (Teall, 2000). This shows the nexus holding both scientific precedents and the need for juxtaposing their respective jurisdictions for an overall case intervention in social work.

The critical theory is an offshoot of Marxism that tends toward making the tenets of Marx’s philosophy more contemporary and capable of being relevant to all fields of social relationships endeavour (Stepney, 2006). It emphasizes structural defects and their impacts on the people that make the society. It also seeks to unravel an action sought response that should come from both the people and those who make the structures to circumvent the consequences of such structural defects. This is its implication of being named critical (Pransky, 2001). The critical theory was inspired to critique the postulations of Marxism and other fore related theories whose emphasis was more on the producing class as those who determine the structure. Hence, believing in a revolution that would be instigated by the proletariats (Idyorugh, 2008). The critical theory assumes that a revolution must not occur to achieve an empowered people and society but principles of dialectics and empowering activities could bring about such ecstasy of fairness and egalitarianism to the lots of the society (Rush, 2006).

Therefore, the critical theory is a representation of its nomenclature as it seeks to critique, question and offer reasons capable of changing the society and not mere explaining the consecution of variables, constructs and hypothesis that form a theory. Its problem solution orientation has made it a critical part of social work case treatment, especially when engaging structures through policies, programmes, cultural assertions and among others (Okafor, 2004). However, the critical theory because of its fluid nature and vastness have been made to accommodate several variants of perspectives and models/approaches which will be handled in subsequent sections.

In another vein, the solution focused model is a product of the strength perspective in social work. It is key to the empowerment of clients and takes practical measures to return them to a state of equilibrium where quality of life is improved and enjoyed (Eaton & Roberts, 2009). The solution focused model is a short-term approach to the problems of clients that deemphasizes weaknesses and problems with staunch emphasis on strengths and solutions. Thus, practitioners are expected to see this model as a derivative of the positives lying in and within the client, that must be looked out for in case treatment. The model sees problems as pointers toward solutions and not frightening as what they present themselves to be (Teater, 2010). The solution focused approach is seen as a model because of its systematic practical steps taken toward case handling and treatment. It shares commonalities with theories and perspectives which among others include: Barbra’s empowerment theory, Saleebey’s strength perspective, Romer’s new growth theory and Frankl’s logotherapy. In a nut shell, solution focused model emphasizes change, goal setting, solution oriented interaction and remedy, while the problem in itself is relegated to the background. Therefore, while using the critical theory to challenge structural defects, positive mindset and change oriented behaviour ought to be fostered for the client using solution-focused therapy. This way, the social worker gets radical about the structure but does not neglect working on conservative attributes peculiar to the client.

Conclusion:

The critical theory and solution-focused model have been extensively reviewed and shown to be vital in the practice of social work at micro, mezzo and macro levels. While the critical theory

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targets the structure, the solution focused model tends to be more conservative by changing the thoughts processes and imagery of the people to think and act positive. This is in sync with Rhonda Byrne (2006) Law of Attraction. To this end, it can be see that both scientific precedents have achieved a blend of radical, liberal and conservative perspectives used in practicing of social work. Therefore, social workers are encouraged to be bias free by not being aficionados of one perspective against the other. For benefits of not victimizing either the person or his environment in err.

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