Although we know that service users appreciate social workers who have positive human qualities like helpfulness, reliability and patience, we also know that high quality practice requires a depth of knowledge that can only come from learning about and absorbing a wide range of theoretical ideas and research-based evidence such as that contained in the chapters of this book.

To the beginning student the task of linking theory to practice can be challenging and feelings of apprehension may be fuelled by the fact that social work training courses are designed to cover material drawn, not just from one source, but from complex disciplines like psychology and sociology, social administration and politics, philosophy and law.

The process of becoming a social worker is exciting – but it involves a great deal of hard work. A detailed and reflective reading of the theories, facts and ideas that are outlined in the *Blackwell Companion to Social Work* will enable you to lay firm foundations for what lies ahead. But the most crucial step in the course of becoming a qualified social worker depends on you being able successfully to bridge the gap between the theory and knowledge that you learn during training and the way that you practise when you are working in the field with service users. Theory and knowledge, for example, are crucial components in ensuring high quality in the work that you do as you:

- prepare for each encounter with a service user;
- assess people and situations;
- decide how, when and whether to intervene;
- react appropriately at all times and to many different people;
- review what you have done and consider how the service user has responded;
- decide what to do next.

When you are qualified, your work will be judged neither by the marks awarded for essays nor by the quality of your contributions to seminar discussions but by the way in which you carry out your professional duties. Social work practitioners
traditionally hold that social problems are solved or ameliorated by the application of ideas from a tried-and-tested body of professional knowledge. But as one student has commented, ‘there are so many different theories and there doesn’t seem to be any coherent way of identifying conflicts between them: why you pick one theory as opposed to another – or do you just randomly pick a theory?’ (Collingwood, 2005).

In Chapter 2.1 of this book, Howe identifies five key points in his exploration of the importance of theory for social work practice:

- Social work theories help practitioners to make sense of complex and difficult human situations.
- Different social work theories generate different understandings of human behaviour and social situations.
- The social work process... describes a sequence and a structure which helps social workers to practise in a systematic way.
- Social workers who use theory to inform their use of the social work process are more likely to practise in a thoughtful and professional manner.
- The purposes of social work and the theories which support them vary depending on the cultural context in which social work finds itself.

A good theoretical base should equip the social worker with a high level of sensitivity to the needs and circumstances of service users and the skill to assess the relevance and impact of any situational context. It should suggest appropriate ways of intervening compatible with an agency framework. The methods which the social worker is likely to employ are usually drawn from sources that had their origins in humanist thinking, Freudian or post-Freudian ideas, developmental and social psychology or behaviourism. At times and in varying degrees in different fields of social work, significant ideas may come from Marxist theory, feminism, clinical psychiatry, evolutionary theory, educational psychology, law, criminology, the philosophy of ethics and pastoral or radical theology.

As Howe reminds us, ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’, but, with such a wide range of material to draw on, students will always need help as they develop their skill in deciding how best to make links between aspects of theory or knowledge and any particular piece of practice in respect of an identifiable service user. Student learning in this area has traditionally come through group discussion, role play, the viewing of video clips, analysis of transcripted case material and, above all, experience of real world practice in placements under the observation and guidance of skilled field professionals.

But recent research (Collingwood, 2005) has demonstrated that a pen-and-paper or on-screen tool can help students to focus their minds, think clearly, identify priorities, make choices and improve the level of their practice-related understanding. The model that achieves these objectives is the three-stage theory framework. It has been road-tested and has received positive feedback from students who have used it.

---

The Three-stage Theory Framework

The framework identifies three distinct stages that students need to go through when they are learning to access and apply the knowledge and theory that they require for social work practice. It is designed to have generic applicability.
Stage 1: The service user profile

The first step is for the student to construct a service user profile, resulting in the creation of an identikit picture. For generic learning purposes, the service user becomes known as Kit. At this point the service user is gender, race, age and ability neutral. Students in groups may discuss together their respective Kits and the issues that are raised by them as the profile emerges.
The student learns that the referral gives a first indication of the specifics of the person requiring the service and is therefore crucial for focusing the worker’s attention. Of equal importance is for the student to acknowledge explicitly the role and nature of the agency from which the service will be delivered – whether, for example, from the statutory or voluntary sector, from a day care, residential or community-based practice team.

The student is introduced to Kit as a stick person in the centre of a prepared sheet of paper and is invited to build up a profile of Kit. In doing this, significant information about the service user will emerge: age, gender, race, culture, history, family, friends, likes, dislikes, life events and significant other agency connections. The student is encouraged to consider the use of this information as a means of becoming acquainted with Kit’s world. The service user profile (SUP) becomes an initial assessment tool for identification and storage of information. How much of the information is shared (and with whom) will be an important issue to discuss with Kit. The SUP is the first crucial step in preparing for the next stage in social work practice.

Here is a case example to illustrate the process of using the three-stage theory framework. We will call the anonymous service user Kirsty.

![Diagram of Kirsty's profile](image)

**STAGE ONE ‘KIT’**

**KIRSTY LIKES**
- Drawing and reading
- Her baby brother
- Her teacher from P3-4
- Her Grandma
- Seeing her Grandma
- Karaoke and dancing when nobody can see her
- Robbie Williams
- Her old social worker
- Anything pink

**KIRSTY DISLIKES**
- 10 year old girl
- White, Scottish, travelling family
- Mother has alcohol dependency
- Mother has new male partner from ‘travelling’ family
- Father left home when Kirsty was 5 years old
- Three brothers aged 12, 14, 8 months
- Paternal Grandmother lives close by
- Not attending school
- Stays away from school to ‘care for’ her mother and baby brother
- Has self-harmed
- Appears to be thin and withdrawn
- Attended school until a year ago
- No friends
- Wants to find her Dad

Referral: From the reporter to the Children’s Panel requesting a ‘Social Background Agency Setting: Report’ following concerns from school regarding Kirsty’s attendance.
Social Work Department Children and Families Assessment Team

**Figure 3 Kirsty**
Kirsty is a 10-year-old white Scottish girl from a travelling family. She is referred to social work with a request for a social background report to be compiled following non-attendance at school.

Kirsty’s home situation is difficult. Her parents have separated and her mother, who has an alcohol problem, has a new partner. Kirsty has two older siblings and a younger brother. She has a close relationship with her paternal grandmother who lives nearby.

She appears thin and withdrawn and there is some evidence of self-harm. She attended school regularly until a year ago.

Based on the information derived from the referral and having met with Kirsty the student is now in a position to move from the theoretical generality of Kit to the real-world specifics of Kirsty – as outlined in figure 3.

This information forms the basis for the initial assessment of Kirsty’s situation and it enables the student worker to pinpoint what may be required before the process of drawing on theory can begin. One student who used the Kit approach commented at this stage, ‘I have to go back and get more details from the client, I probably wouldn’t have thought about, but when you do think about it and writing
it down, you think “aha” I better check that... it makes obvious things I have maybe assumed or not thought about.’

Stage 2: The theory circle

The theory circle is divided vertically in two as shown in figure 4. The two halves signify the importance and interdependence of distinct strands of theory that can be drawn on to explain what may be going on in Kirsty’s world (left half) and to think about what social work interventions might be appropriate (right half).

The left half of the circle encourages the student to be specific and to identify all the theoretical ideas and relevant writing that might help achieve an understanding of Kirsty and the environment she inhabits. In our example, relevant ideas can be drawn from attachment theory, human development, risk and resilience, mental health, self-harm and the sociological and social policy understandings of travelling people.

The theory entered into the left half of the circle will, of course, not directly enable social work intervention to take place. Only when the student moves into the right half of the circle can theories of intervention be considered for Kirsty. These might be underpinned by person-centred ideas about working alongside Kirsty with empathy, acceptance and congruence, doing play work, life story work or constructing a geneogram. Thinking which of these ideas might be used with Kirsty helps to lay the foundations for a tactical approach to social work intervention and helpfully links the assessment stage with the identification of potential goals or desirable changes for Kirsty and her situation.

Stage 3: Knowledge, skills and values

The third stage requires the student to think about what knowledge, skills, values and ethical considerations might enter into the practice situation as work begins with Kirsty.

On the left side of the theory circle (figure 5) the knowledge required for social practice with Kirsty is indicated. This might include specific organizational issues that relate to working with travelling families and schools, the legal framework for working with children, relevant policy and procedural information with regard to assessment and the availability of resources for undertaking the work.

On the right side of the theory circle the skills required for effective intervention with Kirsty are identified. The skills of assessment, communication and report writing, would be crucial for work with Kirsty. The student social worker can also be helped to identify the special practice skills required when working with a 10-year-old girl: play work and other forms of informal interview techniques in order to gather the information required for the completion of a social background report.

The consideration of values and ethics is represented at the foot of the theory circle. There is acknowledgement that theory, organizational context and the practitioner’s professional identity are not value-free. Thinking about values and ethics enables the student to ask why the agency operates in a particular way and how this might impact on work with Kirsty; why a particular theory and theorist is
chosen to explain Kirsty’s experience; why a particular method was considered an appropriate choice. The student also brings his or her own personal and professional value base to working with Kirsty. (What preconceptions, for example, might the student have about the travelling community? How might the worker’s age or gender affect the relationship?)

Practice choices are informed and underpinned by an amalgam of personal, professional and organizational value bases. Stage 3 gives opportunity for the student worker to consider issues of difference and diversity and to acknowledge the potential harming forces of oppression and discrimination for Kirsty. This could be about having an understanding of the issues relevant to Kirsty being a member of a minority ethnic group, her age, the impact of her mother’s mental health and the consequences of the ‘split’ family situation.

Issues of power and powerlessness will require further consideration if Kirsty is to be understood in context and helped with her need for development in order to move on from this difficult period of her life.

### Conclusion

As members of a profession social workers are trusted to practise autonomously. Because of the specialist nature of their expertise and knowledge, they are assumed
to have internalized the skills required for professional practice. But the skills can only be learnt in a disciplined and organized fashion. If used consistently in a number of different cases, the three-stage framework can go a long way towards ensuring that future generations of social workers are skilled – both in theory and in its application to practice. The ‘Kirstys’ of the world deserve nothing less.

Exercise

Using the easy access approach and with reference to a case that you are familiar with, create diagrams in recognition of stages 1, 2 and 3 of the Three-stage Theory Framework.

Don’t feel that you have to follow the Kirsty model slavishly – your outline needs to reflect sympathetically the age, gender and circumstances of the person and situation.