



## Social Work as an Integral Profession

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# Social Work as an Integral Profession

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This article introduces the reader to the profession of social work and its evolution over time. By simultaneously attending to both the person and the environment, social work has been a more comprehensive profession. Yet, although social work has been inherently striving for a more integrative approach from the beginning, it has lacked a meta-theory that could address people, their environments, and integrate previously competing theories. Integral Theory is that meta-theory. Social workers are invited to consider this meta-theoretical approach to the service they provide.

## Introduction

The profession of social work emerged through the effort to address the person-environment interaction in the service of improving peoples' lives and facilitating transformation and growth through skillful interventions. Social work is geared toward helping underprivileged members of society, enhancing the well-being of people within their social context, and addressing the welfare of society as a whole.<sup>1</sup> By simultaneously attending to both the person and the environment, social work has actually been more comprehensive in its approach. It is this degree of inclusiveness that has made it challenging to explicate. Although social work inherently strove for a more integrative approach from the beginning, it has lacked a theory that could address *both* people *and* their environments by integrating the various theories drawn upon by social workers.

One result of this lack of theoretical cohesion has been a division in the profession between social workers who emphasize the person and those who focus on environmental interventions. In order to adhere to its comprehensive vision, social workers have made various attempts throughout the history of the profession to integrate theories and create integrative models of practice. The purpose of this article is to 1) introduce the reader to the profession of social work, especially as it has evolved through history to have a dual focus—the person or the environment;



2) to critique previous attempts to conceptualize social work in an integrated manner; and 3) to propose Integral Theory as a more appropriate conceptual framework than previous attempts to integrate these two aspects into a single focus of social work.

## The Profession of Social Work

### What is Social Work?

With its attention to both individual and environmental interventions, the social work profession has tended toward a more integral perspective since its beginning. Social work, at its most comprehensive, has committed itself to addressing the connection between clients or client systems and society, intervening to create change on both personal and environmental levels.<sup>2</sup> The profession emphasizes helping people in poverty, oppressed groups, and other vulnerable populations.<sup>3</sup> Social workers ideally possess a broad spectrum of skills, often making them priceless contributors in efforts to facilitate transformation throughout society.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, the social work profession struggles with its sense of self-identity and continues to search for a clear definition for itself.<sup>5</sup> This may be because the profession's strength lies in its ability to cross professional boundaries, attempting to integrate theories and knowledge from various disciplines in order to address both the person *and* the environment most effectively.<sup>6</sup> Because each of these theories has been exclusive and partial, none has been capable of providing a unifying theoretical base for a profession that attends equally to both the environment and the person.<sup>7</sup> Albers suggested that the competing moral ideals of the promotion of selfhood and the promotion of community well-being define the essence of social work and that the profession's purposes flow from these ideals.<sup>8</sup>

Some recent efforts at self-definition are presented in a special issue of *Research on Social Work Practice*, "Evaluating the Definition of Social Work Practice."<sup>9</sup> These authors carefully considered Bartlett's working definition of social work. It emphasized the uniqueness of the profession by outlining its particular content and organization of value, purpose, sanction, knowledge, and method.<sup>10</sup> There was consensus that its principal elements could be preserved



but re-worked to better reflect social work practice today. Such a re-working would need to address issues of: globalization, practice models, education, credentialing, professional identity, current practices, and a consumer or client focused point of view.<sup>11</sup>

This article presents Integral Theory as inclusive of all commonly used social work theories, able to conceptualize the knowledge base of social work, and uniquely capable of explaining the breadth and depth of the profession. Integral Theory is useful to our profession, as it articulates the scope of its practice in the world today. This article will build upon this discussion by embracing the “all-quadrant, all-level” (AQAL) approach, using Integral Theory to both explain and critique the various historical attempts to professionalize and define social work.<sup>12</sup>

## Integral Theory

### Holons and Holarchies

According to Wilber, the universe is composed of holons, which are simultaneously both a whole and a part of another whole.<sup>13</sup> For example, atoms are parts of molecules, which are parts of cells, which are parts of organs, which are part of organisms, and so on.<sup>14</sup> As holons maintain their own autonomy, they also exist in the context of interlinking relationships. While they function to preserve themselves as a whole, they also accommodate themselves to other holons in their function as a part: “Its agency—its self-asserting, self-preserving, assimilating tendencies—expresses its *wholeness*, its relative autonomy; whereas its communion—its participatory, bonding, joining tendencies—expresses its *partness*, its relationship to something larger.”<sup>15</sup> Holons are also capable of transforming themselves by merging with other wholes in the proper environment, creating a new holon. Therefore, in addition to agency and communion on a horizontal level, vertical growth occurs with the emergence of a new holon that has greater depth, a holon that transcends and includes the holons which comprise it. Holons can also break down, dissolving in the reverse sequence from which they evolved.

The concept of holarchies allows us to view each individual holon as embraced by a deeper and more inclusive holon. Individual holons evolve within the context of social holons, or their



environment. Although each holon is inseparable from its social holon, an individual holon cannot be reduced to its social holon. At each level of development, the individual holon is interdependent with the social holons at that same level, and they evolve in relationship with one another (agency-in-communion). A person continues to interact with social holons at their various levels of biological, psychological, and spiritual development—which is the meaning of agency-in-communion. Each level of holarchical development (the result of co-evolution between individual and social holons—agency-in-communion) is characterized by its own interior consciousness and exterior form.<sup>16</sup>

### Quadrants and Levels

Wilber describes a full-spectrum model of consciousness development that co-evolves in interaction with cultural worldviews, values, and settings and is reflected objectively in the organism and brain.<sup>17</sup> This full-spectrum model is also objectively reflected in the environment, nature, and social systems. Each of these aspects, or perspectives, are known as the four quadrants, which are often labeled “I,” “We,” “It,” and “Its.” The “I” quadrant is the perspective of the individual interior. The “It” quadrant represents the individual exterior (for example, brain, organism, and behavior). The “We” quadrant represents interior cultural values and worldviews. The exterior social system and environment constitute the “Its” quadrant. All holons are characterized by, and concurrently developed within, the dimensions of reality represented by the four quadrants.<sup>18</sup>

People move through waves/levels of development, motivated by both changing environmental conditions and interior forces. Each of these levels offers a different worldview and lays the groundwork for the next. The different levels or waves of self-existence move beyond and embrace the previous wave (transcend and include). At the same time, the self evolves by navigating the levels of self-existence available within the environment.<sup>19</sup> Even though people possess multiple lines and stages of development as they grow and mature, they experience a general center of gravity. Similarly, the members of their environment or society have achieved an average level of development.<sup>20</sup> Each cultural worldview encompasses numerous variables, including: value systems, shared meanings, and manner of adaptation. Each of these can develop.



For example, according to Clare Graves, there might be a move from basic instinctual survival to tribal thinking to egocentric power drives to righteous order to scientific achievement to lateral bonding, and then to the development of integrative perspectives.<sup>21</sup> First-Tier thinking occurs at the first six subsistence levels, which then give rise to Second-Tier thinking or “being levels.” While First-Tier thinkers try to “correct” the worldviews of others, Second-Tier thinkers can value the functions of each level of self-existence, recognizing all levels as essential in the overall spiral of existence.<sup>22</sup>

## The Roots of Social Work in the United States

### The Early Years

Mary Richmond began her career in 1889 through her involvement with the Charity Organization Societies, which sought to efficiently and humanely meet the needs of poor people by coordinating the charitable efforts of communities. “Friendly visitors” examined requests for assistance, both supervising the distribution of charity and offering guidance. Mary Richmond believed that solutions would become evident once all of the information about a person was gathered. She wrote the first social work textbook, *Social Diagnosis* in 1917, providing the basis for the casework tradition in social work.<sup>23</sup>

Jane Addams, who started her work in the profession in 1888 with the settlement house movement, is credited with the social reform emphasis of social work. Jane Addams and other social reformers believed that poverty and related social problems were the result of hostile conditions in society and sought the eradication of poverty by changing society. Staff would settle in poor areas and flexible programs would naturally grow out of mutually beneficial associations, thereby responding to the needs of that neighborhood.<sup>24</sup> Jane Addams recognized that personal growth is interconnected with social development and viewed moral choices as emerging from social processes.<sup>25</sup> In 1910, Jane Addams became the first female president of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.<sup>26</sup>



## Establishing the Profession

In 1915, Dr. Abraham Flexner made his well-known speech addressing whether social work had achieved the status of a profession. After comparing social work with the established (and predominantly male) professions of engineering, law, medicine, and preaching, he deduced that social work was *not* a profession. He concluded that social work lacked its own theoretical and scientific knowledge base, drawing primarily on the knowledge of other professions to carry out its practice and engaging in work to coordinate and link these other professions. He commended social work for offering a new perspective and breathing a new spirit into the existing professions upon which it had drawn, placing social work on a higher level than other professions in the respect that a social worker's rewards are in their conscience and heaven.<sup>27</sup> Freedberg pointed out that while there was a need to clarify social work's definition, this predominantly female profession was being assessed based on male-oriented values that stressed scientific training rather than a deliberate commitment to caring.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, social work is informed by theory and research as well as the internalized values of caring and goodness.<sup>29</sup>

In 1917, Mary Richmond wrote *Social Diagnosis*, attempting to address Flexner's conclusion that social work was not a profession by adopting the scientific method and detailing the techniques to be used by caseworkers for the purpose of professional training. Because of the impact of Flexner's speech on the field, the publication of *Social Diagnosis* elevated the casework method in social work. In this way, social workers were not just caring but could be viewed as meeting the professional standards set forth by Flexner.<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that Mary Richmond did emphasize the person-environment interaction, suggesting that the notion of the "wider self," or the idea that a person's identity actually included all of their relationships, provided the foundation for social casework. Whether a disorder was located within a person or their environment, the route to recovery was through an individual's social relations.<sup>31</sup> Because they were not yet developed, Mary Richmond did not have theories supporting this person-environment interaction.<sup>32</sup> Richmond would have likely resonated with Integral's concept of agency-in-communion, which explains that all four quadrants arise together, or that people grow in the context of their environmental relationships.



## Theoretical Developments in Social Work

The profession of social work sprouted from practical experience, rather than theoretical knowledge, of two roots. The COS practitioners engaged in interventions oriented toward the person through social relationships, and the settlement house workers emphasized environmental interventions as the solution to improving people's lives. As we professionalized and responded to Flexner's critiques, conceptual knowledge grew. Social workers tried to explain their interventions with theories. Because no one theory could explain its varied interventions, the profession chose among theories that explained parts of social work.

### Psychological Theories and an Emphasis on the Individual

By the 1920's, Freud was becoming well-known and psychological theories became more widely available. There were many ways in which these theories were useful to the caseworker in understanding and addressing human behavior, and the profession needed theory to guide its practice. In an effort to be scientific, social work adopted these psychological theories, reducing reality to an understanding of the levels of development that Freud's theory could explain in the "I" (interior-individual) quadrant. This led to an increasing focus on the subjective experience of the individual and neglect of the environment and social reform.<sup>33</sup> While these psychological approaches did not entirely satisfy Mary Richmond, Jane Addams refused to adopt a psychological perspective. Rather, she had been strongly connected with the field of sociology through the University of Chicago. Mary Jarrett and others, however, focused on a psychiatric approach to diagnosis and treatment, aligning the profession with psychiatrists.<sup>34</sup>

### Group Work, Community Organization, and Social Reform

It was challenging to explicate the broad social reform goals of the settlement house movement into an integrated practice method. These reformers sought to expand U.S. society's notion of democracy as well as the cultural and educational opportunities of the poor. Attempts at integrating secular and religious thought in both sociology and education influenced settlement methods. A focus on the responsibility of intellectuals to apply their intelligence to the transformation of society was drawn from the work of Lester Ward in the education field. The



belief that the environment brought about personal behavior was also connected with John Dewey in the field of sociology. Groups were used as vehicles of social action, socialization, and education.<sup>35</sup> Western Reserve University offered a group work course in 1923 and created a group work curriculum in 1927. Educational and recreational components of group work practice were clarified by the 1930's, and group work continued to emphasize the reciprocal relationship between the social good, personal satisfaction, and the beneficial influence of group experiences for both the person and the environment into the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>36</sup> Integral Theory would explain that people grow within their relationships with others at all levels of development, interrelating at all levels (agency-in-communion), the resulting creative forces often leading to new cultural outcomes.<sup>37</sup>

The method of community organization sprung from both the Charity Organization Societies and the settlement houses, drawing on the service coordination and development efforts of both movements and the COS interest in centralizing information for agencies. The social reform emphasis of the settlement houses, however, was excluded from the early development of this method.<sup>38</sup> While Jane Addams and others worked to expand Mary Richmond's person-in-environment conception to include community-in-society, explaining community organization as a method of social reform, it was even more challenging to define as well as to distinguish it from the political arena. This was exacerbated by the increasing demands for a theoretical foundation for social work that lent itself to a scientifically-based method of practice. The more social work integrated social change into its actions, the more difficulty it had in clarifying its unique professional foundation.<sup>39</sup> While some theoretical developments were made between the 1930s and 1950s, they did not emphasize social reform, and the community organization method changed very little.<sup>40</sup> In this context, Integral Theory would have been effective in explaining that community organization is a purposeful way of intervening with the social holon, facilitating the evolution of a higher level of cultural development, or simply addressing pathologies at lower levels. Through community organizing activities, society is confronted with the parts of itself that it may have alienated and repressed, components it must reintegrate in order to grow in a healthier manner.



### Theoretical Integration in the Early Years

It is important to note that while a small group of social work leaders promoted psychodynamic theory in the 1920s, psychoanalytic thinking did not completely dominate social work theory or practice.<sup>41</sup> Because psychological theory focused on methods of practice, it was useful in scientifically explaining social work activities. Sociological theory and research, however, continued to be important to social workers.<sup>42</sup> The relationship between social work and sociological theories and research was, in fact, discussed in a 1929 issue of *The Family*.<sup>43</sup> Toikko points out that one of the most important practice methods in the 1920s was family casework and that there was interest in the sociological understanding of the family unit.<sup>44</sup> In general, social workers found sociology helpful despite the fact that it did not offer methods similar to psychological theories.<sup>45</sup> This demonstrates that social work never completely abandoned its integrative approach; it simply struggled to explain it.

Furthermore, although the casework orientation became predominant in the profession, even early social workers attempted to integrate theories in order to seamlessly guide practice at all levels. For example, during the Great Depression, social workers involved in the Rank and File Movement made an effort to reunite clinical and social reform approaches by integrating the psychoanalytic work of Freud, the functional schools of Rank, and the sociological theory of Marx into a consistent practice framework for social workers. Bertha Capen Reynolds stressed the idea that institutional change and social reform should be included in direct services, highlighting the link between psychosocial problems and socioeconomic circumstances and noting human interdependence.<sup>46</sup>

### Professional Definition

In 1958, Boehm pointed out that the development of social work in segments of casework, group work, community organization, and fields of practice contributed to the fact that there was not yet a definitive statement on the purpose and goals of the profession as a whole.<sup>47</sup> A body of practice was emerging gradually, and the development of a professional social work organization had only recently taken place. Furthermore, he stated, “as yet we have only fragments of practice theory intermingled with incomplete knowledge of the nature of man, the nature of society, and



their relationship.”<sup>48</sup> Boehm defined social work by its focus on social relationships, a focus that distinguished the field from other helping professions.<sup>49</sup>

Bartlett concurred that the lack of a complete theory to organize thinking and analysis of social work activities created a barrier to movement in the area of practice.<sup>50</sup> Social work practice entails a broad scope of activities, making it challenging to identify the essential values, knowledge, and skill necessary for all social workers.<sup>51</sup> Bartlett proceeded to set forth the constellation of value, purpose, sanction, knowledge, and method unique to social work and expressed the hope that a conceptual framework would develop out of this definition.<sup>52</sup> In 1965, Gordon further clarified the distinction between value and knowledge in this constellation.<sup>53</sup>

### **Integrating the Environment and Including Social Change**

While early social work refined its interventions with the person, environmental interventions were recognized as important but not professional, as they were perceived to require less knowledge and skill. The complex structures that lay beneath the “person” were better understood than those underlying the “environment.” In the 1960s, social work was criticized for its lack of attention to the environment. In fact, social workers had not fully developed an understanding of how to intervene in the environment. Other than family therapy and milieu therapy, there were no action principles of intervention available to social workers.<sup>54</sup> Yet, the Vietnam War, the war on poverty, and civil rights were social issues that demanded attention and threatened social work’s emphasis on casework. Group work methods were expanded in the late 1960s and 1970s, and over time, the major group work models were integrated. The method of community organization as it is known today also emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, transitioning from service coordination to intervention with social problems. Social change goals replaced the previous emphasis on processes, and sociological theories offered concepts of power, social change, and conflict.<sup>55</sup>

By 1968, there was still no unified conceptual framework by which social workers could understand the range of their practice. Therefore, Maas emphasized that social work should draw on various social science theories, cutting across divisions among groups and disciplines.<sup>56</sup> Both



personal and social theories should be used to promote change through new practice techniques and policy development in a particular problem area.<sup>57</sup> Fischer suggested that social work's "integrative" nature offered flexibility because there was no attachment to a specific professional theory.<sup>58</sup> He attempted to address the lack of guidance in selecting theories outside of the profession by creating a structure to analyze theories for use in social work.<sup>59</sup> Turner proposed that different practice theories used in social work actually interlocked, with no one system complete in itself and each providing part of the answer.<sup>60</sup>

Because social workers increasingly needed to understand an array of relevant methods, they began to utilize general systems theory in order to create a unitary model of practice. Intervention areas increased by focusing on the influence of numerous interacting systems at varying degrees of complexity.<sup>61</sup> According to the Integral approach, however, systems theory only explains the exterior of social systems and does not address values or other interior cultural forces that impact people. Systems theory typically reduces reality to the "Its" quadrant, the exterior-collective. Thus, although it is a dynamic of unified systems of exteriors, this quadrant alone is part of "the *disqualified universe*."<sup>62</sup> At the same time, social workers deserve recognition for this early attempt to integrate systems theory with their knowledge of interior *personal* processes, thereby combining various parts of the picture to better explain their mission.

As the 1960s brought greater articulation to the practice of community organization, social planning gained recognition as a specialization in the 1970s.<sup>63</sup> Dudley drew upon Bartlett's working definition, and Gordon's expansion of it, in order to demonstrate the congruence between the practice of social planning, which is geared toward correcting social inequities and improving the range of social services people are provided, and social work.<sup>64</sup> Social planners began to draw upon the knowledge of systems theory, organizational theories, sociological theories of power structures, and others. While asserting that social planning is an appropriate practice for social workers, the author recognized that ambivalence about the foundation of social work continued. He proposed refining the definition of social work to clarify the generic base of social work and the specialized areas of practice.<sup>65</sup> This further demonstrates the ongoing



confusion created by the lack of a unifying theory for the profession. Social workers continued to mine concepts and techniques from other fields in order to carry out their mission in various person-environment arenas. They were then faced with figuring out how to integrate their activities into the definition of social work. In support of this integration, Integral Theory explains that social planning is an intervention geared toward the direct development of the social holon (which includes the developmental levels of its members).

### Integrative Practice Models

Meanwhile, during the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s, integrative practice models were developed to guide social workers in simultaneously intervening with people and their environments. Hollis and Woods developed *Casework: A Psychosocial Therapy* that intentionally included both direct and indirect methods.<sup>66</sup> This approach was rooted in the casework method and drew upon ego psychology, family therapy theories, communication and role theories, systems theory, and other relevant social science data and concepts.<sup>67</sup> Forster pointed out, however, that this psychosocial practice had evolved independently from systems theory and could not be characterized as a systems approach.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the psychosocial approach emphasized the person and simply drew in concepts to intervene with social relationships and the coordination of services around the person. It was not a theory that accounted for the broad spectrum of social work activities (and Hollis and Woods discounted the idea that such a “grand theory” would ever exist or be desirable).

The foundation of social work remained uncertain in the 1970s. Theories of personality continued to comprise the knowledge base of clinically-oriented social workers, while personality theories might be completely discounted by a social action practitioner with a more sociological and organizational knowledge base. Family therapists emphasized knowledge that explained transactions in the behavior of family members, and group workers focused on the group-developmental, structural, and functional theories that informed group practice.<sup>69</sup> Meyer believed that in recognizing boundaries as wider than the person, social workers must possess substantive knowledge about the problem at hand *and must also* understand individual, group,



organizational, and community processes as well as relevant social policies.<sup>70</sup> Because there are no real boundaries to the case, it becomes impossible to restrict practice to one method.<sup>71</sup>

Meyer explained that general systems theory addressed the relationships among objects and offered a means to conceptualize personal and environmental actors, both animate and inanimate, into a unit of attention.<sup>72</sup> The ecosystems perspective, drawn from ecology and general systems theory, offered a perspective on the interconnections between people and their environments providing hope for the development of action principles for environmental interventions.<sup>73</sup>

According to Germain, there were both “inner” and “outer” aspects to the environment, which were conceptually challenging to distinguish and demonstrated the complexity of the environment itself.<sup>74</sup> The natural and constructed world made up the physical environment, whereas various levels of organizations of human relations networks made up the social environment. Cultural values, beliefs, norms, and knowledge impacted both the social environment and the physical environment by channeling social interaction and responses to the physical environment. Conceptions of time and space also influenced these natural, constructed, and social worlds.<sup>75</sup>

The eco-systems perspective provided an increased understanding of the “Its” (interobjective) quadrant, and social workers recognized the impact of cultural values, or the “We” (intersubjective) quadrant, on these systems: “Culture is understood to pattern social interaction and to influence the meaning and use of the physical setting, including orientations to space and time.”<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, there is some understanding of the concept of levels of development in terms of cultural worldviews and the systems created by those perspectives. While there was not a theoretical integration with the “I” and “It” quadrants, social workers were able to bring this somewhat deeper understanding of the environment into the picture, creating integrative models of practice. For example, Swenson presented a model of practice utilizing the concepts of social networks and self-help/mutual aid.<sup>77</sup> Hartman translated ecological principles into practice by presenting the extended family as an environmental resource for assistance and transformation.<sup>78</sup> The Life Model of Practice was developed by integrating the ecological perspective with



psychological theories to both increase the responsiveness of the environment and fortify the person's adaptive capacity.<sup>79</sup>

It is important to note, however, that these models continued to emphasize the person and were used by clinicians, although they also acknowledged the environment. While Germain pointed out that the macroenvironment (issues of racism, sexism, ageism, and poverty) must be addressed as well as the microenvironment, this was from the casework perspective.<sup>80</sup> These were not integrative models of practice to be used by community organizers, social planners, administrators, or policy analysts, who continued to emphasize the environment over the person and drew on other social science theories rather than the eco-systems perspective. In fact, social workers intervening with the environment continue to lack an integrative practice model that takes the *person* into consideration.

### Specialization or Unifying Theory?

In 1982, Kolevzon and Maykranz suggested that systems theory only added another theory to the mix of theories social work had already borrowed from other professions. Rather than replacing the guiding framework (which social work still did not have) with a breadth of exposure to numerous theories, these authors suggested that social workers opt for depth by thoroughly understanding one theory.<sup>81</sup> There seems to have been some recognition that domain-specific theories were both "wholes" and "parts". Some emphasized an understanding of these theories in their "wholeness," while others recognized their role as a "part" of the bigger picture of social work.

Thyer suggested that a unified theory was needed rather than simply a conceptual framework (such as the eco-systems perspective) that structured the use of different theories in social work practice.<sup>82</sup> He believed that a theory adopted as a unifying theory for social work would need to have direct practice applications and be scientifically testable. He proposed that operant theory met these criteria and was already being used with individuals, families, and groups, as well as in community settings, and that it could be used to evaluate contingency-based policies.<sup>83</sup> Thyer and Hudson stated that contingencies of reinforcement and punishment took place in the



environment of client systems, contending that this is more relevant to social work than intrapsychic theories.<sup>84</sup> Rather than integrating the variety of theories used by social workers, however, Thyer chose a theory and reduced reality to the “It” quadrant. It could only verify truths that were identified in the material world and explained nothing of the interior processes of people, their culture, or their environments.

### Wakefield's Critique

Wakefield declared that the eco-systems perspective did not explain person-environment connections—possible existing relationships, their qualities, and the likelihood that they would respond to treatment were determined by domain-specific theories.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, the eco-systems perspective did not integrate the practice theories with one another or even integrate any of them with the eco-systems perspective: “Integration refers to the construction of a new theory that incorporates the legitimate insights of various competing theories into one coherent approach.”<sup>86</sup>

Since it did not correct or challenge any theories and allowed for the use of any domain-specific theories, the eco-system perspective actually did not correct the tendency to neglect the environment for the person. Although the eco-systems perspective played a role by highlighting the need to integrate theories and adopt a comprehensive approach that included the environment in the assessment, it did not achieve what it claimed.<sup>87</sup> Also, while social work emphasizes the well-being of people, the mechanistic wording of the eco-systems perspective did not recognize the person as anything more than another system level between its internal systems and the external environment: “...the uniqueness of the person as an entity capable of consciousness and suffering is not found in the perspective’s abstractions.”<sup>88</sup>

Wakefield suggested that the profession focus on domain-specific theories rather than generic theory, work towards integration of the various theories it draws upon, and clarify social work’s organizing value or purpose for which these theories are employed to address person-environment interactions.<sup>89</sup> Wakefield argued that Rawls’ egalitarian theory provided the organizing value for social work as a profession geared toward minimal distributive justice.<sup>90</sup>



Because both environment-oriented and person-oriented interventions become necessary to achieve justice, it did not lead to a bias towards the person.<sup>91</sup>

### Transcending and Including Social Work Theories

Although social justice is a core value central to social work's mission, egalitarian theory offers only one view of justice.<sup>92</sup> Theories of social justice include Communitarian theories, Utilitarian theories, Libertarian theories, Feminist perspectives, Equalitarian perspectives, and others. Beauchamp and Childress recognize that helpful aspects exist in different theories and similar conclusions can be arrived at by employing various theories.<sup>93</sup> Integral Theory attempts to agree that all of these legitimate differences in perspective need to be included. One can be a Communitarian or a Libertarian, for example, and still use the AQAL framework. While social workers value social justice, we can take a more *Integral* perspective.

Rather than foist egalitarian principles on the rest of society (that often do not even completely meet our own social work goals), we should be able to value the various worldviews that make up the overall spiral of development and understand that they are all correct in that they provide a *part* of the answer. Integral Theory transcends and includes all of the theories, explaining how seemingly disparate theories actually do tell their own truths, emanating as they are from a particular perspective or worldview and explaining a particular aspect of reality (e.g., one of the quadrants).<sup>94</sup> Whereas non-Integral thinking tries to correct the other worldviews in the service of its view (such as egalitarian is a better approach to justice), Integral thinking values all of the levels of development and recognizes their contribution to the whole.

## Current Issues in Social Work

### Attending to the Environment

Concerns still exist today that social workers focus more on the person than the environment, suggesting that previous attempts at integration and Wakefield's introduction of minimal distributive justice as an organizing value for social work are inadequate to our needs as a profession. Johnson expresses concern that commonly used psychological theories explain the



interior of the person, but do not tell the clinician what to do in terms of collaboration and advocacy.<sup>95</sup> A number of social workers persist in the call for an increased emphasis on the environment and social reform.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, macro social workers draw on theories from a variety of other professions. Yet, macro social workers must have an understanding of direct interventions since the goal is to intervene with larger systems in ways that serve the individual.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, rather than abandoning clinical for macro, the solution requires an *Integral* perspective.

Some have noted that a dualistic “split” has occurred in the profession, whereby the majority of social workers choose between clinical and macro methods.<sup>98</sup> Abramovitz believes that the environment has been neglected as a result of the greater number of social workers choosing the clinical focus and points out that the clinical/macro split is a false dichotomy since all social workers can choose to promote liberation and transformation at every level of society.<sup>99</sup> Others have suggested that social work has become further fragmented by an increasing number of specializations within these methods, divided by both population and practice settings.<sup>100</sup>

### The Usefulness of Integral Theory

Given the mission of the profession, social workers have a responsibility to both facilitate the growth and development of people in the context of society and to address the well-being of society as a whole (“all-quadrant, all-level”). Attending to the interactions between people and their environments, joining direct and indirect approaches is the unique vision of the social work profession and gives social work the unmatched ability to act as the primary mover in a personal and societal transformation that is needed now more than ever.<sup>101</sup> Until now, however, there has been no theory for social work that would offer an adequate strategy for completely understanding both individuals and the various systems with which they are engaged.<sup>102</sup>

While the profession has already acknowledged the necessity of research, an equal degree of effort must be placed on social work theory development to ground our research and practice.<sup>103</sup> Now that the social work profession has matured and has further established itself, some are



working towards greater integration of the micro and macro perspectives. The clinical and macro orientations need to be brought into balance with one another and integrated, starting with the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the profession. Integral Theory provides the basis for these endeavors.

## **Integral Social Work**

“All quadrants, All levels”

By organizing and integrating various theories and systems of thought, Integral Theory conceptualizes the knowledge base of the profession and explains the nature of social work. It transcends and includes all other social work theories, micro and macro. The four quadrants organize the recognition the social work profession already has about the individual person, the collective environment, the interior, the exterior, and the interactions between the interior and exterior of the individual and the collective. Social work has drawn on theories emanating from each of these quadrants in order to comprehensively address both person and environment. The following four quadrant chart organizes some of the theories commonly utilized by the social work profession:



	INTERIOR	EXTERIOR
INDIVIDUAL	Psychodynamic theory Developmental theories Cognitive theory Attachment theory Transpersonal theories  <b>I</b>	Behavioral theory Referral for medical & pharmacological interventions (biological & genetic theories)  <b>IT</b>
COLLECTIVE	 <b>WE</b> Ethics & Social Justice Family & group theories Social capital theory Sociological theories (Weber, Durkheim)	 <b>ITS</b> Sociological theories (Marx, Parsons) Ecological systems perspective Social Learning Theories Organizational theories Economic theories

Figure 1: The Four Quadrants of Theories used in Social Work

The upper two quadrants are oriented to the person, and the lower two quadrants are oriented to the collective. The left side is subjective/intersubjective, and the right side is objective/interobjective. The aspects of reality represented by these four quadrants mutually interact with one another and evolve together.

Social workers already recognize that people (individual holons) develop within the context of the family, community, and society (social holons) in which they live (agency-in-communion). The quadrants are perspectives that arise at each level of holarchical development, and different theories used by social workers grow out of and explain different levels of personal and social development from the perspective of each quadrant. Since all development takes place through mutual interaction between the person and their environment, there is no need for the “split” between those intervening with the person and those intervening with the environment. Social workers can use their skills across the spectrum in order to facilitate liberation and transformation of people and society. Integral Theory provides the necessary theoretical



underpinning for social work, underlying all methods and specializations within the profession. Theories commonly used by social workers are not abandoned; they are “plugged in” to a larger, Integral perspective that can ground the development of models for practice and research.

## Conclusion

Jane Addams believed that “the modern world is developing an almost mystic consciousness of the continuity and interdependence of mankind” and stated that Hull House sought to demonstrate and define this fleeting consciousness.<sup>104</sup> And, according to Mary Richmond, “The methods and processes here dwelt upon will subordinate themselves to a larger whole. It is only through devotion to that whole—not through any narrow insistence upon technique alone—that we can submit ourselves in the right spirit to the task of analyzing individual situations.”<sup>105</sup> Integral Theory articulates the interior growth and development of both personal and social consciousness in interaction with one another, as well as the exterior form of these developments.<sup>106</sup> Social work’s various methods facilitate growth through the levels as an all-quadrant affair, contributing to the growing global consciousness. Mary Richmond and Jane Addams attempted to reach a more integral view as they aimed to revive dispirited people. Integral Theory now offers the opportunity to explicate this initial vision. Integral Theory provides a comprehensive framework in which social work can ground its own theoretical refinements, development of practice models, techniques, and research.<sup>107</sup>



## Endnotes

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