

# Contrasting philosophies and theories of society in social work: paradigms revisited

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## Introduction

Social work students are presented with an ever-widening range of theories for practice (Healy, 2005; Turner, 2011) and injunctions from various sources to approach this and other knowledge analytically and critically (TCSW, 2012). How should this be done? This working paper revisits and updates discussion of two key dimensions necessary for the critical analysis and appraisal of theories: respectively, their underlying *philosophical* and *theoretical* assumptions. I shall compare the philosophical assumptions of subjectivism and objectivism. I shall also contrast theories of society that emphasise its order and social regulation with those that observe overt or underlying social conflict and pressure for radical change. Some implications of the different positions will be considered. These positions will be represented and combined in two summarising frameworks (Figures 1 and 2). A short postscript will raise the question of the potential for reconciliation between, respectively, the contrasting philosophies and theories.

## 1. A LITTLE HISTORY

### Theories of society

After many decades of sociological theory influenced by early founders like Durkheim, Marx and Weber and later, by Parsons, noted sociologists in the 1950s (particularly Dahrendorf, 1959; Lockwood, 1956) argued that approaches to sociology could be grouped into two broad preoccupations:

- Theories that concentrated on understanding and explaining **the order and general stability/integration that was observed in society** (theories of order/consensus/regulation/equilibrium).
- Theories that focused on understanding and explaining **observed and underlying conflict between different interests and the associated pressures for dis-integration and change** (theories of conflict/coercion/radical change).

Dahrendorf (1959) acknowledged that the two perspectives (order vs. conflict) represented two faces of society but he argued for much greater attention to the conflict model to counter the dominance in Western sociology of an order/equilibrium model represented by Parson's theories of the social system and structural functionalism. However, there was a rival growth of other strands of sociology that focused on the meanings and social interaction of individuals and groups (e.g. symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology and, later, social constructionism and postmodernism). The continued development of these approaches led many theorists in the 1970s and since to argue that the debate of order/consensus/ regulation/equilibrium vs. conflict/coercion/radical change, was out-dated. In some quarters, the main debate in sociology shifted from arguing over **theories of society**, to a **philosophical contest** over the best way to study and understand social life.

### Different 'philosophies of science': subjectivism-objectivism

The philosophical debate centred on the claim that sociology should be a 'true' social *science*. Sociologists should study society, social groups and social problems in the same way as the natural sciences (like biology, physics and astronomy) study the natural world, seeking universal laws, explanations and predictions of human behaviour and doing so in an objective and value-free way that allows the 'facts' to speak for themselves. This view, is known broadly as 'positivism' and represents an 'objectivist' philosophy.

Ranged against it are a variety of 'subjectivist' arguments, which may be summarised as follows: society is not a biological organism and humans as social beings are not the same as a blood circulatory system, cells, particles or the other subjects that are studied by the natural sciences. The circulation, cells and particles do

not attach meaning to their world, unlike humans, who *interpret the world they live in and act according to the meanings they give to their experiences*. In short, there are fundamental differences between the *natural* world studied by natural scientists and the *social* world of humans and we need fundamentally different ways of studying and understanding them; our approach must involve, indispensably, seeking and learning directly from people their views, experiences and perceptions of their world.

## Social work

Despite these important shifts into debates over subjectivism and objectivism in sociology, the debate did not take off straightaway in social work where the regulation/order vs. radical change/conflict debate remained heated into the early 1980s, centring particularly on the alleged conservatism of psycho-social, behavioural and systems theories that were prominent in social work. In the 1980s, Whittington and Holland (1985) recognised the potential for using these two dimensions, theories of society and philosophical positions to analyse the theoretical landscape of social work, drawing on the paradigm analysis of sociologists, Burrell and Morgan (1979/1985). Their lead was followed by Howe (1987) and later by other professions like health education (Caplan and Holland, 1990). The contribution of the resulting analysis continues to be recognised in contemporary work (Howe, 2008; Lundy, 2011).

The following section is concerned, particularly, with the *philosophical* subjectivist-objectivist debate. However, it will be seen later that the dimension concerned with *theories of society* is an inescapable part of any adequate analysis.

## 2. SUBJECTIVISM-OBJECTIVISM IN SOCIAL WORK THEORY

The social work writers above argued that the two perspectives, subjectivism and objectivism, could be used to understand and contrast the philosophical positions taken by different theories and practices, not only in sociology but also in social work. The reason for analysing the philosophical position of a social work theory, or practices that follow from it, is to learn more about the kind of explanation a theory is seeking to make. That is: it helps us to learn in what terms the 'theory' seeks to understand the service user. For example,

- does it view the service user as shaped or governed in their behaviour by psychological or social patterns discovered by the social scientist from studying individuals or groups of other people?
- or does it maintain that we can only know about the nature of the service user's 'problems' and the possible 'solutions' by asking and trying to understand *their view*?

Let us break this down a little and start with the root words: subjective and objective. We describe a person's judgement as **objective** if we believe they are not influenced by personal feelings and tastes; and as **subjective** if we think they are influenced by these factors ([www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)). If the person is acting as our advisor in a medical or purchasing decision, we tend to regard the objective stance as superior and more desirable. If we suspect that the person's feelings or personal tastes (which we may not share) have affected their advice, we may think their judgement is less valuable to us – complaining that they 'are just being subjective'.

This hierarchy of 'objective'= superior and 'subjective'= inferior is sometimes played out in debates within social work, with the objectivists taking the high ground. Yet the subjectivists counter that objectivists miss the key point<sup>1</sup>, which is this:

While a social worker's approach requires professional objectivity in the particular sense of not imposing their personal feelings and tastes on the service user, *the service user's personal feelings and opinions themselves* are the only sound basis on which the social worker may gain an understanding of their situation. The committed subjectivist would go further, saying that the social worker should not then reinterpret what the service user says with reference to a theory the social worker has brought with them (from say, psycho-social

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<sup>1</sup> To supplement this discussion, there is a short appendix on Objectivism at the end of this paper.

theory, behaviourism or systems theory). The social worker's expertise should be expressed not in these objectivist theories but in their facilitation skills, knowledge of services, understanding of the law and professional values.

### Critical questions

In seeking the philosophical position of a particular method of intervention or 'social work theory for practice' (to borrow Healy's (2005) term), we can ask the following 'critical questions'. Does the social work theory for practice state explicitly, or imply, that the social worker should adopt the following orientation?:

#### subjectivist

- a scepticism about labels and fixed problem-categories, including official ones, as socially-constructed
- separate the person and socially-constructed 'problem'
- focusing on the person's 'story' with them and the subjective meanings they attach to problems and issues
- seeking theories, assessment and research evidence able to focus on subjective, person-centred accounts
- seeing the person, not the practitioner, as the expert in 'the problem' and potential solution
- being expert in exploring stories/solutions, facilitation and providing information, for example on services
- basing their intervention on collaboration with the service user in goals the service user has chosen.<sup>2</sup>

Or does the social work theory for practice state explicitly, or imply, that the social worker should adopt the following orientation?:

#### objectivist

- treating formal labels and problem categories as generally objective and real
- seeing problems as *caused by* forces 'internal' or 'external' to the person
- seeking understanding by systematic observation and predetermined questions based on theoretical knowledge of causes
- favouring research evidence gained from 'scientific' methods (data/numbers)
- developing an 'expert' view of problem causes, diagnosis and treatment solutions which shape assessment and intervention
- listening carefully to the service user as key source of information and seeking to collaborate with them but acting, as social worker, as the expert in the service user's problem and potential solution
- making sense (sometimes called 'diagnosis') of what the service users says and does with reference to a separate framework of ideas (theory/theories) the worker has brought into the situation and of which the service user may know little or nothing

### Does it matter?

It can be argued that whether you take a subjectivist or objectivist stance in your work matters on at least three counts, which I will consider in turn:

- it shapes the *explanations* you choose for people's problems or behaviour
- it can affect your practical *choice of social work theory/intervention*
- (some) service users (and others) may have a *preference* for the theory/intervention you choose

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<sup>2</sup> There are clearly limits, particularly in statutory work, to the goals to which the social worker can become committed.

### It matters in the kind of explanation you get

Take two kinds of account of the summer riots in London and elsewhere in 2011. The press and political debate were soon alive with 'objectivist' accounts of socio-psychological cause: viewed from this 'outsider' perspective, rioters were from an underclass, had grown up amid family instability, often without fathers, and lacked the moral and practical learning and discipline needed to escape a culture of dependency (Daily Mail and Daily Telegraph: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14483149> ; 11/08/11, accessed 191112).

By contrast, a study by the Guardian and LSE based its first phase findings on the views of a sample of the rioters themselves (<http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/274239/reading-the-riots.pdf>; 2012; accessed 191112). This subjectivist, 'insider' account of views, motives and intentions (the 'meaning' of the riots to those involved) found, most strongly, a mistrust and "long-burning anger and frustration with the police" (p.19), particularly in relation to stop and search of black people. The study also found in rioters a sense of alienation and denial of opportunity in a British society fuelled by greed and consumerism which excluded them. At heart, what the rioters spoke of was a sense of social, economic and cultural injustice<sup>3</sup> (p.24).

### It matters in shaping the choice of intervention

How we read and apply these two sets of explanatory accounts will tend to point us in different directions. For some, the response will be that the rioters should face the force of the law and that punitive sentencing is demanded, either because it will instil discipline and correct behaviour or because retribution is necessary. However, these measures are not directly open to social workers, although a social work response may have to be made in the context of a court sentence of some kind. If we focus our attention on the kinds of intervention available to social workers (that is, 'social work theories for practice'), different types of intervention seem to follow from the two accounts. The objectivist accounts, based on 'outsider' views that explain behaviour in terms of socio-psychological causes constructed independently of the accounts of participants, invite and justify interventions of a similar kind. For example, they invite forms of individual or family 'therapy' using psycho-social or behaviourist approaches in which the social worker is the expert in both problem cause and treatment solution

The second account points in other directions. The rioters did not refer to poor parenting or family instability as the reason for their conduct. They sought opportunity, respect and social justice. This suggests that instead of seeking to repair deficiencies in the individual or family, we should recognise the person's experience of injustice; explore with them their wishes and preferred solutions; and identify with them their strengths, on which they can build, in order to pursue their chosen solutions, where they are legal (person-centred, solutions-focused and strengths-based approaches).

We could take this analysis further, but would need to draw on our second dimension mentioned above: 'theories of society', so I will come back to it. For the present, I will continue with our discussion of whether it matters that I take a subjectivist or objectivist stance.

### It may matter because of service user preference

Leaving the particular illustration from the riots for the present, we should note in principle that (some) service users may have a clear preference for the *kind* of social work approach chosen, without necessarily knowing the kinds of theoretical terminology. Some may want you to be an expert facilitator of their views and wishes and to help them in representing and pursuing those wishes (subjectivist social work approach). Others may expect your expertise to come in the form of skills and knowledge of the causes and solution of problems, for

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<sup>3</sup> The two accounts also point to different theories of society which would be part of a more complete critical analysis but here the focus is primarily of the philosophical analysis of objectivist and subjectivist perspectives.

example, in CBT or psycho-social 'therapy', that equip you for an expert therapeutic role (objectivist). Whether and in what ways you respond as a social worker to the service user's preferences will be affected by a number of factors: your professional values and your own preferred social work theory for practice and its philosophical base but also by your role, the service or duties (function) of your employing organisation and the time and other resources available to you.

A close reading of the discussion so far will have revealed that although, ostensibly, we left the debate over theories of society after the introduction, to concentrate on philosophical questions, theory will not remain on the side-lines. The discussion above of subjectivist and objectivist explanations of the riots could not avoid smuggling in 'theoretical' explanations. I shall now bring the theoretical dimension back to the centre of the discussion.

### **3. THEORIES OF SOCIETY AND SOCIAL WORK THEORY**

As described earlier, sociological analysis by Burrell and Morgan in the field of organisation studies reignited attention to the regulation/order vs. radical change/conflict debate (1979/1985). Although the debate was still live in social work (it was, after all, the era of Thatcherite conservatism, public sector cuts and the miners' strike), Burrell and Morgan's analysis added an important *philosophical* dimension to the analysis. Its potential for analysing social work theory was identified by Whittington and Holland (1985) who argued that the two dimensions, namely theories of society (regulation/order; radical change/conflict) and philosophies of science (subjectivist; objectivist) could be used to understand and contrast the positions taken by theories not only in sociology but also in social work.

The main ideas of each theory of society as found in sociology are summarised below.

#### **Regulation/order theories about society and its members:**

A tendency to state, assume or leave unquestioned that:

- we live a predominantly stable, integrated, cohesive society which has an inherent tendency to regulate itself and maintain order
- there's a broad consensus or rules and objectives
- integration and re-integration are prime goals
- social institutions exist (family, education, social services) to satisfy the needs of individuals and society
- the social work task is support, reintegration or control of people whose problems or behaviour prevent normal and socially-acceptable participation

#### **Radical change/conflict theories about society and its members:**

A tendency to state or assume that:

- society is inherently unstable and inclined towards change provoked by fundamental contradictions (e.g. the interests of financial capitalism vs. the majority on whom capitalism depends for its profitability but whom capitalism exploits and rewards unequally)
- the ideas, rules and aims of some groups dominate others (e.g. based on class, gender, ethnicity)
- deprivation, injustice and alienation are common
- social institutions (e.g. family, education, social services) serve the interest of the dominant groups in society by maintaining order and compliance
- emancipation/empowerment are prime objectives; radical change of prevailing rules and structures is needed
- social workers either reinforce domination or must work to create/support change

Whittington and Holland noticed that the ideas embedded in many social work theories for practice (methods of intervention) had most in common with the regulation/order perspective. However, this was not always easy to see because social work theorists did not routinely make explicit their ideas about society. The stance of these theorists tended to be implied by committing the social worker to 'reintegrate' the client into society, to correct or contain deviant behaviour and by locating the causes of problems primarily in the individual or family or both.

Typically, the structure of society, its many inequalities and the perceived oppressions and powerlessness of some groups were not examined for their relevance as possible sources of social problems. Problems were seen as caused by personal misfortune, psycho-pathology, poor adaptation, failed learning of appropriate behaviour and role, or lack of competent problem-solving or solutions-finding skills and were located in the individual, the family, a sub-culture (youth gangs) or local community. These tendencies were identified for example in assessments undertaken by psychoanalytic, psycho-social and problem-solving approaches, in behavioural perspectives and more recently in some solutions-focused approaches.

The underlying ideas of a society based on regulation/order that have been said to characterise the *mainstream social work theories* above have been subjected in social work to a radical critique based in the ideas drawn from the sociologies of radical change/conflict. Hence, the critique draws on theories that challenge the economic order represented by capitalism or that analyse social injustice, divisions and inequality embedded in the experience of ethnic minorities, older people, women, disabled people, sexual minorities and 'the poor'.

The critique (or more correctly, mix of critiques) made of regulation/order approaches has waxed and waned over time. It is represented by a set of approaches (variously, anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice, radical/critical social work, critical postmodernism, structural social work, feminist social work). The critique has challenged the acceptance of the social order implicit in 'mainstream' social work theories for practice. Over time, some of the ideas of these radical perspectives have become incorporated into mainstream social work – for example the acceptance of ideas of individual and institutional racism – although without necessarily altering the underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions about an ordered society and social work's role in promoting that order.

We can begin to illustrate these two theoretical positions and their implications for policy and practice by returning to the example of perspectives on the 2011 summer riots, which were used earlier to illustrate the implications of objectivist and subjectivist philosophies. In considering them, it is possible to see that philosophical and theoretical dimensions combine.

### **Regulation/order combined with a) objectivist and b) subjectivist philosophy**

On the one side we saw the underlying objectivist *philosophy* of 'outsider' accounts based on the views of the observers not of the riot participants. But there are clues here also to the outsiders' *theory of society* in their view of rioters as the product of an underclass, who had grown up amid family instability, often without fathers, and lacked the learning and discipline needed to escape a culture of dependency. Perceptions of individuals as damaged and maladjusted by their upbringing and membership of a 'troubled' underclass of families, employ forms of social theorising that distinguish a general, well-integrated and consensual social order from a minority experience that is aberrant and in need of correction and change. These perspective suggest the need for social work interventions and social policies to alter patterns of parenting and child-rearing among particular social groups and cultures, reducing truancy, youth crime, anti-social behaviour and worklessness (Gov.UK, 2012). The need for wider and more fundamental social or economic change does not enter the agenda. In short, we see an implicit or explicit theory of regulation/order in both social work intervention and the social policy response.

If we turn to the second, insider account of the rioters, it does not automatically point us towards a different theory of society. If the approach of the researchers and the social worker go no further than allowing the participants to speak and to pursue their chosen solutions, supported say by narrower versions of solutions-focused techniques, there may be no challenge to the status quo, no analysis of the social and economic conditions which may explain the lack of opportunity, respect and social justice of which the interviewed rioters complain. In other words, unless there is an attempt to theorise the rioter's experience in ways that seek to explain their collective as well as individual experience, the broader status quo remains unquestioned.

### **Radical change/conflict combined with a) objectivist and b) subjectivist philosophy**

The two positions outlined above show how both subjectivist and objectivist approaches can be socially conservative, endorsing or assenting to the social *status quo*. However, the riots are open to other theoretical interpretations that draw upon the radical change/conflict perspective. One has a strong objectivist component; the other includes a subjectivist dimension.

The more objectivist radical change/conflict perspective has its roots in Marxist, or neo-Marxist, analysis, explaining the persistent injustices and growing inequalities observed in society as rooted in neo-liberal, market-oriented policies driven by the national and global demands of capitalism and the class relations that result. The objectivism in this theoretical account is contained in its economic determinism (seeing social relations and experiences as ultimately determined by the economic base of capitalism) and in its assumption that the theoretical explanation it offers applies irrespective of the views that may be held by the individuals involved. The more subjectivist radical change/conflict perspectives recognise the subjective experience of injustice and oppression and seeks to understand them using a spectrum of perspectives, including feminist sociology, the analysis of power and discourse and critiques of racism, colonialism and euro-centrism.

If these radical/change perspectives sounds like a political agenda for social work, they are, although it is important to recognise that all interventions – both those that question the social order and those that do not - are arguably political. If a political agenda also sounds like a tall order for social work, that is again true, except that some theorists argue that it is both essential and feasible. Accordingly, they build a methodology on the following: defending the service user and their material position; acting as ally and advocate; pointing out to them the structural roots of oppression; encouraging collective support and action; and engaging in political campaigning through social movements, a trades union, professional association or other representative groups (Lundy, 2011).

## **4. PARADIGMS REVISITED**

It is possible to take the analysis further, as hinted earlier, by connecting the discussion of philosophical positions taken by theorists (subjectivism; objectivism) with the theories of society expressed or implied in those theorists' ideas (radical change/conflict; regulation/consensus). We can update and use the idea of paradigms in social work explored by Whittington and Holland (1985), which built on the sociological paradigm analysis by Burrell and Morgan (1979/85). Two figure are given below showing how philosophical positions and theories of society may be combined to characterise paradigms (meaning here 'world-view' or 'overarching perspective') in social work and to locate particular 'social work theories for practice'. Fig. 1 outlines four paradigms (radical humanism; radical structuralism, behavioural and systems functionalism and social constructionism) and their corresponding combinations of philosophical and theoretical position. Fig. 2 suggests approximate locations of some social work theories in the paradigm framework. Their location will be elaborated in a subsequent version of this working paper.

The purpose in doing this is *not* to pigeon-hole theories, that is to force them to fit in a particular box. The purpose is exploratory, namely to learn more about social work theories for practice and their philosophical and theoretical assumptions by providing a basis for:

- exploring and debating their location in the framework
- discussing relative positions of theories
- finding anomalies and inconsistencies between theories with similar labels
- becoming aware of philosophical and theoretical alternatives to the theories we currently use
- discovering shifts of ideas among social work theorists and within theories over time
- considering whether the philosophies or theoretical positions polarised in the discussion can be reconciled.

The frameworks also add the labels 'postmodernism' and 'neo-liberalism' to the originals to register their significance in contemporary debates. They will be discussed in a subsequent paper.

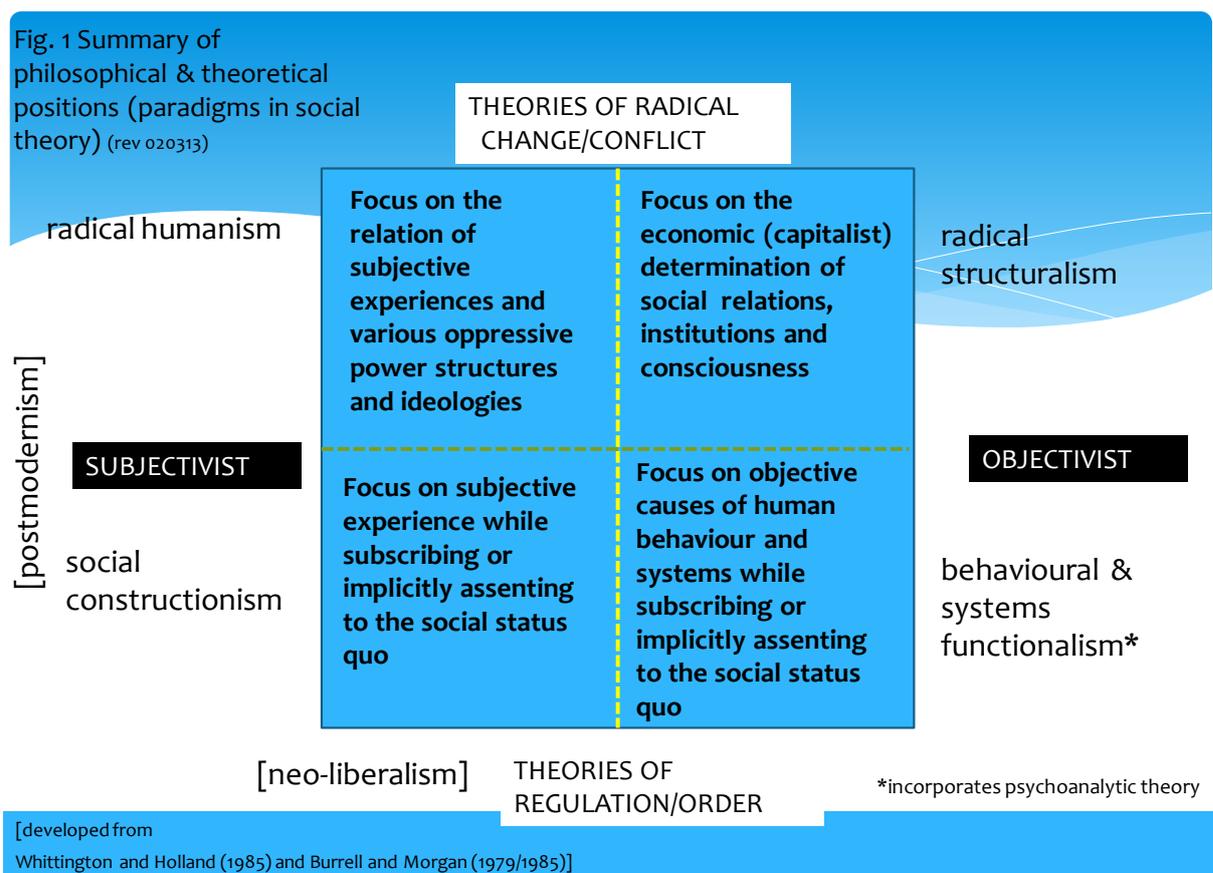
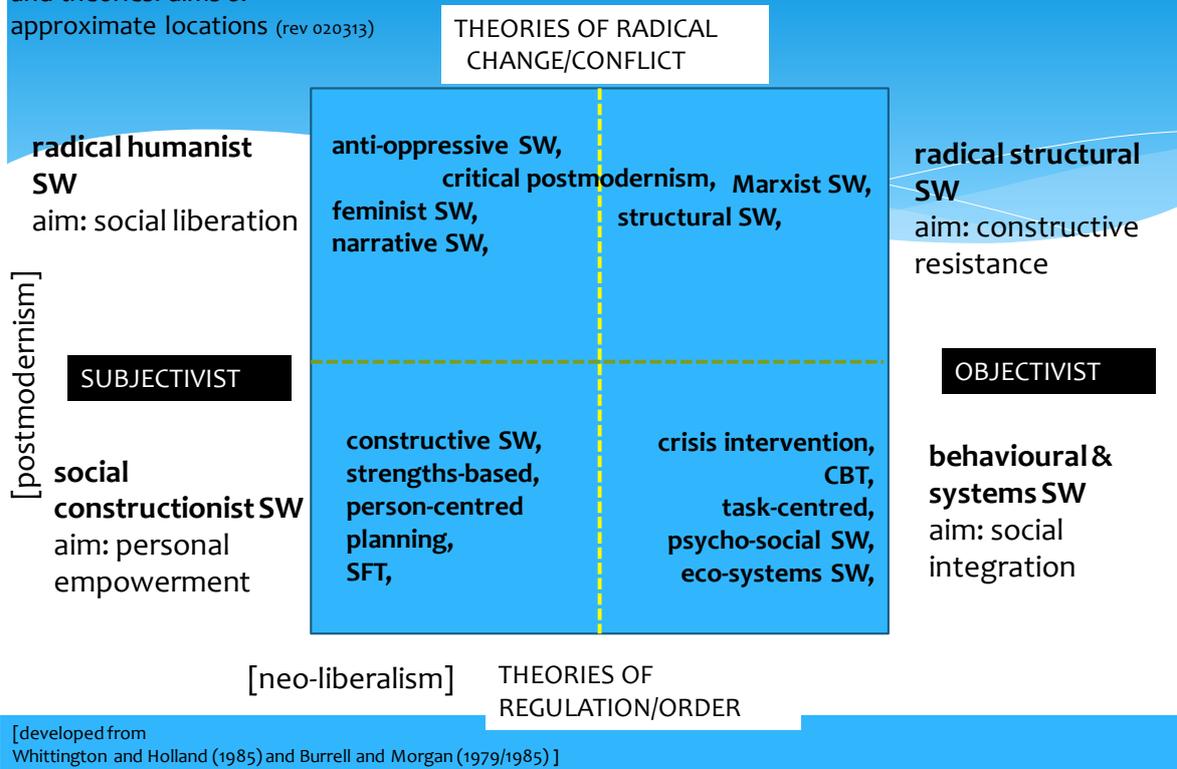


Fig. 2 Social work paradigms and theories: aims & approximate locations (rev 020313)



**POSTSCRIPT: ARE THE POSITIONS INCOMPATIBLE?**

As indicated in the final bullet point above, there is a further area of ongoing debate, which cannot be resolved here but which deserves mention. It concerns whether the theoretical and philosophical polarities identified (respectively, regulation/order vs. radical change/conflict and subjectivism vs. objectivism) represent incompatible positions. That is, to take philosophies first, can we blend subjectivist and objectivist philosophies and the social work approaches that employ them?

Some authors argue emphatically that the two positions, as represented for example by narrative social work approaches (subjectivist) and traditional behavioural, psycho-social and systems approaches (objectivist) represent entirely different ways of understanding the nature of people and cannot be combined (Milner, 2001). In contrast, Leonard advancing a more complex argument, seeks to combine the subjectivist ideas in postmodernism contained (after Foucault) in the concept of a capacity for *resistance*, with the objectivist acceptance that individuals are shaped by domination of capitalist markets and mass culture (Leonard, 1997). Leonard’s ‘dialectical’ solution is to argue that capitalism and mass culture may dominate the individual and their consciousness (objectivism), shaping their way of life and desires, but that the many contradictions within capitalism (between, for example, the work ethic and high unemployment or mass consumption and environmental damage) disturb the dominant capitalist discourse and create space for “contradictory consciousness” among individuals (subjectivism) (p.48). Lundy, however, is sceptical of the attempt to reconcile the relativism of postmodern ideas and the objectivism of Marxist analysis. She sees it as a venture that brings together incompatible ideas and distracts social workers from the priorities of critical analysis of capitalism and action to over-turn its injustices (2011). The debate will continue.

Meanwhile, there seem even more impediments to attempts to blend a social work approach informed by a radical change/conflict view of society with an approach associated with assumptions about society as a consensually regulated and ordered system. Yet Dahrendorf, as we have seen, spoke of these as two faces of society and argued for greater attention to the conflict view to counter the dominance of systems functionalism –that is, the order perspective – rather than the abandonment of notions of order. Fifty years later, a radical change/conflict perspective still struggles for sustained attention, this time not because of Parsonsian functionalism but in the face of a pervasive and dominant neo-liberal ideology. In social work, contemporary advocates of radical practice are in no mood to embrace the therapeutic tradition of social work, with its roots in behavioural and systems functionalism and now potentially servicing neo-liberal goals in a continued preoccupation with “case-ism”<sup>4</sup> (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009, p.133). Instead they seek a radical agenda of “good practice”, small-scale resistance, alliances with service users and political campaigning, together with the rediscovery of group and community work methods (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009, pp.153-5). However, within the idea of “good practice” there is recognition of the merits of modern “relationship-based” and “value-based “ social work practice which are seen to offer an “antidote to bureaucracy and managerialism”, provided they take a holistic and humanistic approach rooted in social justice (*ibid*). Is there room here for combining radical/Marxist social work ideas with the relationship-focused methods found in the more traditional and order-based social work approaches?

Perhaps more problematic is not whether radical social work theorists can envisage rapprochement with previously rejected traditional social work approaches, but whether social workers committed to behavioural, psycho-social or solutions-focused approaches are able to transcend the pressures to case-ism perceived in these approaches? There is some evidence that the answer to this is, yes, in the growing adoption of anti-oppressive principles (a radical humanist set of ideas) into mainstream practice via the professional codes of ethics of social workers (BASW, 2012; NASW, 2008) and in the assumptions declared by some ‘constructive social work’ theorists (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000, p.46). Radical theorists seem bound to welcome this while pointing to the obstacles that persist to the inclusion of more radical methods and goals in the way social workers’ employing organisations define their roles and the services they provide.

Again, the debates will continue and will be taken up in a subsequent paper.

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[An appendix and references follow below]

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<sup>4</sup> Case-ism is “the tendency to see people using services in isolation from the communities in which they live and from the structural factors that shape their live...” (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009, p.133).

## APPENDIX

It was suggested earlier that objectivist positions may be represented as superior for their scientific and dispassionate stance. This is a characteristic position of advocates of evidence-based practice (EBP) (Sheldon and Macdonald, 2009). However, some social workers may see this 'evidence-centred' position as incompatible with the essentially humanist values of a 'person-centred' social work with the result that *all* dimensions of objectivism may be prematurely dismissed without considering their claim to attention. The intention in this appendix is not to privilege objectivist approaches but to pay attention to some of the claims that objectivist approaches may have on our attention.

### **Are objectivists just the bad guys?: some arguments for objectivist approaches in social work**

To begin, objectivist approaches in social work and sociology open the way for a wider *theoretical* understanding of society. Objectivist approaches are sometimes assumed to exhibit underlying conservatism, and are therefore seen, by some, to be suspect. This view refers, first, to systems and functionalist ideas that seek to understand and explain the observed order and general stability of society (theories of order/consensus/regulation) with reference to a 'naturally' regulated social system that is based largely on consensus among members and oriented towards integration. These ideas are found in social work in approaches based on systems theory including, for example, ecological systems perspectives. The view that objectivist approaches are conservative also refers to ideas drawn from psychoanalytic and behavioural strands of psychology, both of which focus on the adaptation or 'treatment' of the 'client' and tend to leave the wider social order unquestioned. However, objectivist approaches are not, by any means, all politically conservative. For example:

- left radical, Marxist ideas that explain social problems and inequalities as rooted in the consequences of capitalism, which concentrates wealth and power in the hands of those who own and control the system and shapes mass culture, beliefs and ways of life available to us, are objectivist in asserting structural forces that operate outside individual consciousness
- similarly, theories that analyse gender divisions and ethnic conflict in terms, respectively of patriarchy and colonial history are invoking objectivist categories of explanation.

Turning to *social research*, objectivist approaches can claim to *enhance the service to service users* by improving our understanding and the evidence on which we base our actions. For example, they:

- allow for the collection of data from large samples, striving to give *reliable information* on, say poverty among older people or hardship among working families on low incomes
- enable collection of information about the *effectiveness of services* in health and social care and, in the case of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, have played a major part in the adoption CBT in government funding of the treatment of certain kinds of mental distress
- have provided information on the disproportionately high incidence of diagnosis of mental illness in some black and ethnic minority populations, leading to efforts towards greater cultural sensitivity and awareness among professionals and service providers (see: <http://www.nmhd.org.uk/our-work/mhpd/delivering-race-equality/delivering-race-equality-in-mental-health-a-review/> )

In addition, objectivist approaches can arguably *assist social workers* by providing them with confident, evidence-based arguments for:

- decisions in practice, for example, as advocated by Munro, following the Baby P case (Secretary of State for Education, 2011)
- contesting agency cuts in particular services that have been shown to be effective
- representing a social work perspective in dealing with other professionals.

Some of the arguments above are themselves individually contested within social work and the social sciences and must be debated in a separate paper.

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