

New book first to link theory, practice for future social workers

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Credit: Terry Koenig

Social workers apply a diverse range of theories that examine social, cultural, political, ecological and psychological aspects of human behavior to their everyday work in helping people. Yet, when receiving their professional education, there are virtually no classes or books that bring the two together. University of Kansas social welfare professors have authored "Human Behavior Theory for Social Work Practice," one

of the first to directly link human behavior theories to a range of practice-based case examples spanning individual, family, community and global social work practice.

The textbook, from Sage Publishing, is among the first to link theory and [practice](#) through case examples and classroom exercises, but also covers existing scholarship in the field to help guide students and social [work](#) faculty in how they can link all three in their professional careers.

"You can say it's almost a hybrid because it encourages this integration of theory, practice and research," said Terry Koenig, professor of social welfare and co-author of the book. "I'd like to holistically link all of those ideas together and not see them as cut off from each other or as elements that need to be separated."

Koenig co-authored "Human Behavior Theory" with Richard Spano, professor emeritus of social welfare, and John Thompson, associate professor at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa, and former doctoral student in KU's School of Social Welfare.

The book includes three introductory chapters that emphasize social work practice and how it can be informed by theory, regardless of the setting where a professional works, be it a foster care or mental health setting, school, hospital, correctional facility or private practice setting; encourage students to engage in a critique of each theory using questions rooted in the profession's purpose and values; and support a historical analysis of each theory, examining its roots and current trends.

Ten chapters then provide an overview of the theory, an in-depth look at a key theorist, a critique and the theory's application to social work case examples.

"We ask questions like, 'Does this theory focus on growth and change?'"

Koenig said. "If a theory is pessimistic about growth and change, is it something we want to use in practice? If so, how can we best do that?"

Koenig provided the book's overviews and critiques, while Spano wrote the application sections, informed by his extensive experience in private practice. Thompson provided the in-depth reviews of theorists and their work.

"Human Behavior Theory" also focuses on diverse theories from a broad range of scholars, and the case studies cover a wide spectrum to help future social workers understand how varying life experiences can shape human growth and development. Critical self-reflection and its value to [social workers](#) is a central theme throughout.

"There wasn't a textbook that we knew of that linked theory to how things are practiced in the field, and we thought, 'Why isn't there a book that does that?'" Koenig said. "I think students need to be exposed to ideas. They're going to work with people from all walks of life in their careers and just need to be exposed to a range of ideas, especially those that might differ from their own experiences."

Social work curriculum has traditionally provided theory in human behavior in the social environment classes and social work practice in separate courses. Koenig, who teaches human behavior [theory](#) at undergraduate and graduate levels, and co-authors say the book can be beneficial to faculty and students teaching in any of those areas or levels by providing background and real-life cases of theories at work.

Each chapter also features photography from Koenig's international travels as a social work educator. A chapter on empowerment and the strengths perspective, for example, contains a photo of a dragon in a Buddhist temple in South Korea. Photos from locations such as Croatia, Italy, Spain and Kazakhstan are featured throughout.

The profession of social work is an "interesting blend of art and science," Koenig said. Just as no two people have identical life experiences, no two social work practitioners or clients will be exactly the same. Therefore, knowledge of a wide range of theories, practices and research are beneficial and fit together between the covers of one book.

Provided by University of Kansas

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