Integrating theory and practice: The Three-Stage Theory Framework

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Summary: This paper explores the theme of theory for practice in social work education, taking as its focus the application of a theoretical model called the Three-Stage Theory Framework for relating theory to practice during practice-based learning for social work. The article is derived from a research study carried out over a period of six months and presented for academic award in March 2005.

   The study demonstrates that the Three-Stage Theory Framework does indeed provide a useful resource for student learning which is currently lacking in social work training; that the process of using the Framework has benefits for student learning, for the development of practice teaching and for social work education in university and in practice. The study also shows that the Framework is flexible, developmental and can be used in different ways for a range of learning styles, stages of training and contexts for learning.

Key words: theory and practice, practice learning, framework

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Introduction

Social work training has placed a strong emphasis on the need for students to provide evidence of the way in which knowledge underpins practice (CCETSW, 1991; 1995; SSSC, 2004).

Social work theory and the large body of literature used by social work practitioners is drawn from the academic disciplines of sociology, psychology and social theory. This theoretical base equips the social worker with an understanding of a client's situation. In addition, a practice literature provides a range of methods to enable the social worker to intervene in the client's situation. What is less developed, is a literature which offers frameworks or tools that provide the practitioner with the means to access and integrate these numerous strands of theory for practice.

The researcher holds a qualification in social work and a post-qualifying award in practice teaching. Experience as a student social worker, practitioner, practice teacher and tutor in social work education has raised awareness of this gap in the literature. The integration of theory and practice has created an anxiety for students and practice teachers as they work to meet the requirements for social work qualification and practice teaching awards. Over the last five years, work with a colleague at the University of Stirling led to the development of a model which facilitates this process of learning. The Framework has been used with students of social work and introduced to practice teachers during training for the Post Qualifying Award in Practice Teaching.

The research study provided the opportunity to investigate the use and effectiveness of the model, the Three-Stage Theory Framework, in enabling students to access theory for practice. The focus for the research was to investigate the application and effectiveness of the Framework with a sample of students and their practice teachers during the practice placement component of social work training.

Figure 1. 'Kit': The Service User Profile (SUP)
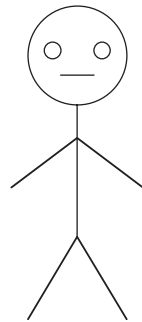
Referral:
Agency Setting:

(Emond & Collingwood, 1999)

## The Three-Stage Theory Framework

As its title suggests, The Framework (Figures 1-3) comprises three progressive stages in the construction of a model for accessing theory required for social work practice.

A service user profile (SUP) is constructed building an 'identi*kit*' picture (see Figure 1). The service user becomes 'Kit' (non gender/race/age/ability specific). Prior to the work with 'Kit' it is essential that we clarify the nature of the referral and the context for the work. For example the referral could be from a health visitor for respite care assessment or a request from a GP for family support. The context could be the voluntary, statutory, residential, day-care or social work centre.

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 'Kit' emerges - age, gender, race, culture, history, family, friends, likes, dislikes, life events, 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 SUP ('Kit') becomes an assessment tool for initial, interim and ongoing storage of information. How much information is shared and with whom will influence its use with the service user. Two profiles may

Figure 2: The Theory Circle

Theory to inform   Theory to intervene

'Kit'

(Emond & Collingwood, 1999)
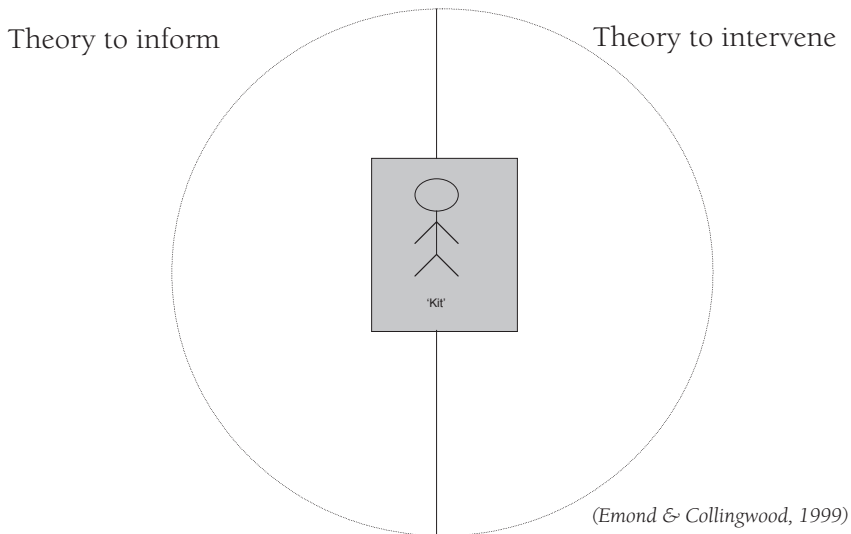
be required, the first shared and built up with 'Kit', the second held by the worker until an appropriate time for sharing sensitive material. The SUP enables consideration of the next stage for social work practice.

The Theory Circle is introduced as a 'whole' with two distinct halves, a circle divided vertically into two (see Figure 2). The two halves signify the importance and interdependence of different theories to explain what may be going on in 'Kit's' world (left half) and to consider appropriate social work intervention with 'Kit' (right half). The left half of the circle encourages the student to consider the range of social work theory drawn from psychological, sociological and other theoretical perspectives, which will help understand 'Kit' and the environment he or she inhabits (for example Attachment, Development, Systems). Having drawn from theory to begin to understand 'Kit's' current situation brings recognition that this body of theory will not necessarily enable social work intervention. The right half of the theory circle identifies the need to consider a range of theoretical methods of intervention. These methods (for example Task- centred, Life story, Crisis, Person-centred, Psychodynamic, Behaviourist) assist the process of intervention and the linking of assessment with identified goals or desirable changes for 'Kit'. Completion of this stage enables the student to consider the wider

Stage Three: The Knowledge, Skills and Values Framework

(Collingwood, 1999)
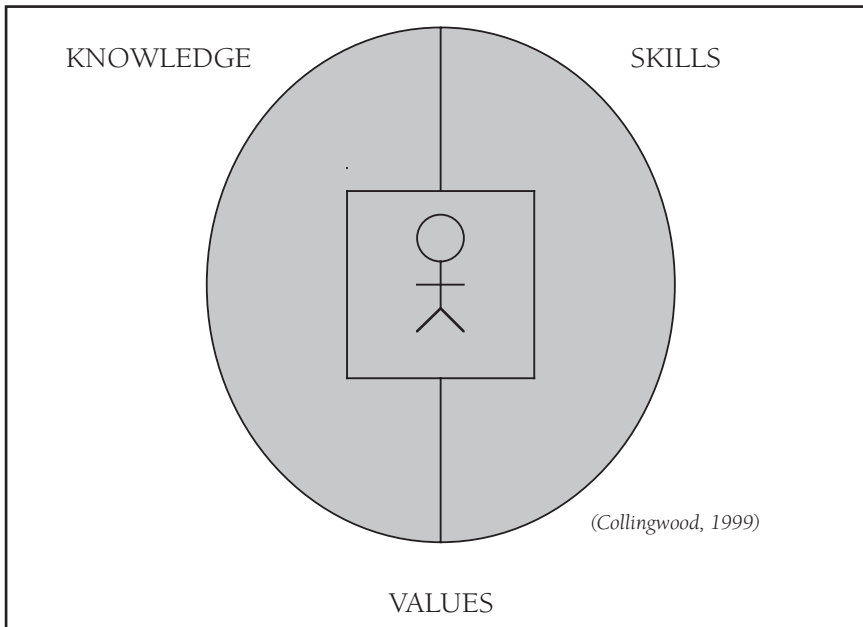
knowledge, skills and values component of social work practice.

The Knowledge, Skills and Values stage introduces the student to what underpins the specific social work service offered within the placement agency (see Figure 3). To the left side of the Theory Circle the knowledge required for practice is indicated, namely what a practitioner needs to know to be able to appropriately engage with 'Kit'. This includes: organisational issues; the legal framework; policy and procedural information; and the availability of resources. To the right side of the Theory Circle the skills required for effective intervention are identified, that is how a practitioner uses social work method to intervene with 'Kit' to effect necessary change and offers opportunity to demonstrate competences required. The consideration of values is represented at the foot of the Theory Circle and therefore underpins the practitioner's understanding of choice and potential areas for discrimination, that is that theory, organisational context and the practitioner's professional identity are not value-free. The consideration of values enables the student to ask: why the organization operates in a particular way; why

a particular theory and theorist is chosen to explain 'Kit's' experience; and why a particular method is considered an appropriate choice to intervene with 'Kit'. The student brings his or her own personal and professional value base of experience to the work with 'Kit'. Practice choices are therefore informed and underpinned by values.

The literature

Social work theory is drawn from a range of literature which has influenced social work practice during the past fifteen years (Howe, 1987; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005; Payne, 2001; Maisch, 1997). The practice learning literature has focused on a number of writers (Lishman, 1991; Davies, 2001; Noble, 2001; Fook, 2002; Doel and Shardlow, 2005; Ixer, 1999; Leiba and Leonard, 2003; Thompson, 2000) and journals including *British Journal of Social Work, Social Work Education* and *Journal of Practice Teaching in Health and Social Work*. These were reviewed to determine the extent to which they provided a helpful framework, method, model or tool for accessing the range of theory for practice. The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, (CCETSW, 1991; 1995; 1998.) *The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2003) and the professional policies and guidelines were also reviewed

Methodology

The research followed an heuristic form of enquiry, intended to build on past experience to inform and influence future social work practice. The research method was qualitative, using interviews with a small number of practice teachers and students on placement. There was a sample of six case studies, each comprising a student, practice teacher and tutor. The sample was random although influenced by the timing of the study and the availability of participants. The main criteria for inclusion in the study was that at least one of the participants in the pairing had previously been introduced to the Three-Stage Theory Framework. Students were following a postgraduate or undergraduate route and were

at the final placement stage of training with 100 days to be spent in a practice setting. The interviews took place at the beginning, mid-way and toward the end of the placement. The inclusion of the views of the programme tutor was intended to provide an overall view of the student's progress in providing evidence of their ability to articulate and integrate theory and practice.

The 'pairings' of student and practice teacher and the perspective of the tutor provided six discrete 'triangulations', which formed the basis of the six case studies.

The research study focused on six case studies of a placement training team. Three interviews were held during the practice placement: the first at the start of the practice placement, the second at the mid-way point following the session of observed practice using the Framework and the third toward the end of the practice placement. The questionnaire was sent to the university tutor towards the end of the placement when they were in a position to make an assessment on the student's learning on placement.

Consideration was given to the position of the ethics committee for ensuring that the research proposal conformed to approved principles and conditions. Drawing up the consent form gave opportunity to consider and agree the appropriate boundaries of the research study. The relevant stakeholders were identified as: the university; the placement agency; the practice teacher; the student and the tutor. Each member of the stakeholder group received formal written invitation to participate in the study, a consent form and a brief outline of the research study. It was noted that where the researcher observed any direct use of service user material, the confidentiality policy of the practice agency would be respected. The level of requested participation was outlined and possible impact of outcome noted. Bell (1999) suggests that participants within the study require to know exactly what they will be asked to do, how much time they will be expected to give and what use will be made of the information they provide.

Preceding the initial interview it was important to restate the boundaries of the research study, restate the issues of confidentiality, purpose of the research and possible outcomes.

The data

In order to test the value of the Framework it was necessary to consider three related questions.

Does the three-stage theory framework provide a resource for student learning which is currently lacking in social work education?

To begin to answer this question it was important to seek information at the start of the student placement and elicit views of both the practice teacher and the student. The interviews took place in the practice setting within the first two weeks of the placement, at the point of identifying learning needs and how this would be met by the placement.

The majority of the students expressed unease with theory in a number of different respects. For example, the overwhelming variety of available social work theory and how then to choose the relevant theory and apply it to the client's situation seemed vague; similarly the available range of choices of social work approaches to intervention made it difficult to select an appropriate method. Added to these was the difficulty some students had with the difference between theory to inform practice and theory to intervene with clients:

> There are so many different theories and there doesn't seem to be any coherent way of identifying conflicts between them, why you choose one theory as opposed to another, or do you just randomly pick a theory. (S)

Theory was also identified as an afterthought to practice rather than something that initially influenced choice of practice:

> I can see it once it has been demonstrated, the link's there, but I can't see it in process. In reflection I can see it. (S)

The practice teachers placed a high priority on the importance of theory and practice and stated that it influenced their own practice:

> It's really essential in terms of your profession in order to justify intervening in people's lives to a degree where it can have quite an impact on them. It gives you a basis of where you are going with that person. (PT)

The students' experience of relating theory to practice during the first placement was more of a reflective process than a proactive use of theory to inform practice:

Getting to the end result was basically a fluke, because I never used the theory to get there, commonsense was more what I used than theory to get to the place I wanted to be. It was then a surprise that it was theory. (S)
I would only really integrate it when it came to formalising things for reports. (S)

All of the students emphasised the role of the practice teacher and supervision in influencing their relationship with theory:

Purely through supervision …. it was pretty much my practice teacher that drummed it into me. (S)

There was no evidence of a systematic approach to relating theory to practice during the first placement. For those students who had achieved some degree of application they were unable to say how this had happened. There was a similar absence of use of a framework for assisting the integration of theory and practice. Even when students could describe a piece of theory and an area of practice, they were unable to express how the particular theory informed that particular practice. This lack of cohesion seemed to be responsible for their lack of confidence with theory and practice.

The students and the practice teachers expressed a readiness to use the Framework and had a confidence in its usefulness. This confidence appeared to derive from the availability of a learning tool, which offered clarity and practical application:

The model you have shown us will help to bring things together and that's the difficult bit, finding the theory and finding the practice. I will use the Framework starting with the person in the middle, that's where you do start and use theory to find out what's going on. (PT)

Emerging themes at the start of the placement were: firstly, theory and practice continued to cause anxiety for students at this stage in their learning. Secondly, practice teachers had confidence in both theory and practice but were unable to articulate their integration. Thirdly, students placed a great deal of confidence in their practice teachers' expertise.

Finally, the use of the Framework was seen to have the potential to offer a formula to reduce anxiety for the student and facilitate learning during the placement.

To what extent does the experience of using the Three-stage Theory Framework assist the social work student to access theory for practice?

To gather data to answer this question involved an observed session with each student and their practice teacher using the Framework, followed by an interview with both participants to gain their views on this process. The observation and interviews took place in the practice setting and formed part of the usual weekly supervision session. Observation provided opportunity to evaluate the use of the Framework and the interview enabled the process to be evaluated by the participants. The students were within the first six weeks of the placement and at the stage of identifying learning needs in relation to direct practice with identified clients.

The information generated using stage one, 'Kit', was comprehensive and this visual representation facilitated much discussion about background information and the impact of this information for practice. Most of the pairings commented on the complexity of the situations represented by 'Kit' and how the visual representation of the relevant information and networks assisted with planning the work.

Stage two of the Framework was used by all of the pairings in the intended format of a Theory Circle with two halves representing the different aspects of social work theory to inform practice and social work theory to intervene and work with 'Kit'. In all six pairings the Theory Circle was used directly with 'Kit'. Both of these stages were added to as a result of comparing the information generated by 'Kit' and the Theory Circle. All six pairings directly related all of the theory to the situation of 'Kit'. This process enabled further exploration of the situation, reflection on possible causes of difficulties and hypothesis about the potential for change as a result of social work practice.

Using discussion, prompting and open-ended questions particularly starting with a 'what', 'why', 'who' and 'how', practice teachers encouraged the student to consider the available range of theory to help to make sense of 'Kit's' situation. The students were encouraged to reflect on theory already learned at university or their previous placement and to transfer this knowledge to the new situation. Some of the students had been given reading material and were asked to consider its application, while others were encouraged to identify what theory they might now

need to read. All of the practice teachers offered possible sources of theory to inform practice; some of this was drawn from research while other sources were specific to the agency setting and client group. Most of the pairings evidenced a developmental and dialogical approach to learning about theory; however, two of the students resisted the practice teachers' attempts to establish dialogue. One of these students appeared anxious about discussing the application of theory although had brought clear evidence of their ability to write about it. The other dismissed the requirement to use theory as purely an academic requirement with little relevance for practice. All six discussions to identify theory to inform 'Kit's' situation produced an extensive range of theory.

Students were encouraged to consider if a particular theory had assisted the understanding of a situation; for example, how this theory could be translated and used in practice. Various methods of intervention were named and explored in their application to 'Kit'. This process facilitated the elimination of less appropriate methods in favour of those that would suit the remit of the agency, the role of the worker and the timescale for the work. Some of the students commented during the process that it was much easier just to name the theory rather than to apply it directly to a piece of practice and that they had initially thought the Framework could make easy this theory-naming. Two of the students acknowledged that they had previously considered 'naming' to be simplistic until they realised that the practice teacher in the placement required them to apply it, using reflection, analysis and hypothesis within the Framework.

In all six pairings the relevant theory to inform and theory to intervene was directly applied and integrated with practice. This appeared to be achieved using the information drawn from 'Kit' to inform the Theory Circle and vice-versa, and directly applying theory to 'Kit' generated more information about 'Kit's' situation. The practice teachers' use of open-ended questions greatly facilitated this process, as did the creation of open dialogue. Most of the students responded favourably to this approach. They were able to take risks, were given positive feedback and encouraged to voice their own reflection and analysis.

Stage three, the Knowledge, Skills and Values Framework, produced the greatest variation of usage. One of the pairings began with this stage and focused on the process of the student's initial meeting with 'Kit'. Two of the students found this third stage to be less interesting and informative than the others and the completion was more perfunctory

and quickly executed.

When used by three students, the identified legislation, policy and procedure were accurate and underpinned social work role and intervention. Two of the students compared the identified skills with the list of social work competences. All six students referred to the values component of stage three and identified appropriate social work values to underpin professional practice.

All of the practice teachers appeared to be confident and comfortable using the Framework. All of the practice teachers gave positive encouragement and feedback to the students. The practice teacher's ability to engage with the student and create an open dialogue was crucial to student learning. The practice teachers of two students who demonstrated a level of anxiety during the session expressed confidence that the continued use of the Framework would assist with the students' learning needs and the integration of theory and practice.

The observed session was followed by an interview with the twelve participants to gain their views on the process of applying the Framework.

It's a generation of ideas like brainstorming, it's quite refreshing. (S)

The Framework was also found to be helpful for gathering information about the client and information to inform practice:

I have to go back and get more details from her (the client) whereas I probably wouldn't have thought about, but when you do think about it and you are writing it down you think 'aha' I better check that … It kinda makes obvious things that I have maybe assumed or not thought about. (S)
Using 'Kit' helped to identify areas where I didn't have enough knowledge, where I needed to do more reading and I have already done that. (S)

One student noted the usefulness of the Framework in planning for the work:

It brought clarity for planning the next sessions, we had a vague plan … it helped me see how essential it is to acknowledge there is still a lot of work to be done … I felt we had done the planning for the next session. It was good. (S)

Practice teachers were unanimous in their support of the Framework

to facilitate the integration of theory and practice. Five practice teachers found that using the Framework enabled access of specific theories:

I think being able to see what theories the student needs to understand and needs to know ... and this Framework brings it out perfectly. (PT)

The visual representation of the three stages facilitated the creation of a dynamic process. The compilation of 'Kit' enabled the pairings to identify the complexity of competing background information and the various systems involved in the world of this client. The diagram represented the picture at the point of the request for social work intervention. Further meetings with 'Kit' would provide information to be added to the diagram.

All of the practice teachers asked the student the question 'what do you need to know more about?' This question began the exploration of the need to identify theory, which would help the student to understand and become informed. This theory was required to help make sense of what might be going on in 'Kit's' world. The practice teachers' facilitation to access the students' knowledge enabled relevant theory to emerge and be directly applied to 'Kit'. The students were able to transfer learning from both the previous placement and the academic setting and apply it to the given situation. Gaps in knowledge were highlighted and all of the practice teachers offered direct input on relevant theory.

Does the Three-stage Theory Framework provide a resource for student learning which is currently lacking in social work education?

To collect further data for the concluding stage of this question it was important to seek information as near to the end of the student placement as the research timescale allowed. All participants were at the stage of collecting evidence to demonstrate competent social work practice and this included their ability to integrate theory and practice

The Framework enabled the client to be presented in a clear visual way right from the start of the work. The process of building 'Kit' was found to be particularly helpful to focus the practitioner on the specific theories needed to inform and explain the client's particular situation. All but one of the participants evaluated highly the usefulness of the Framework:

It's purely a visual thing for me. When it's in my head it's spaghetti but when it's on the paper it's like lining the spaghetti up in rows. (S)

The Framework also was seen to put theory on the agenda from the start of the work with a client:

It's a way of working the case. (PT)

Although students identified that they could use the Framework for themselves it was brought alive in supervision with their practice teacher:

I can use the Framework on my own and I do think about it a lot, but theory has been more useful talking together with the practice teacher, it's good to use in discussion. (S)

Use of the Framework enabled some of the participants to move from a position of using it as a particular, identifiable tool to one of being an implicit application of the Framework for practice learning:

What it has helped the student to do is incorporate theory almost naturally in her reflections about practice. (PT)

All but one of the participants found using the Framework had increased their confidence by making theory more real and more applied. In particular the students found that using the Framework had assisted with the provision of evidence for academic requirements, which in turn confirmed their ability to integrate theory and practice:

In the beginning I used to just throw everything I had ever heard of into the Theory Circle ... it's made me more confident in my ability to use those theories. I have just been writing up my plan for my practice study for the university and I have basically written it as the Framework. It's been brilliant for doing that. (S)

For the practice teachers the Framework increased their confidence and ability to directly assist the students' learning:

As a learning tool I found it really useful because it gave me a focus and aim for each supervision session. I felt I knew the client by the end of it. I felt I could have gone in and worked with that client. (PT)

All six practice teachers were clear that they would use the Framework in any future student placement:

The more I feel a student is struggling with theory and practice the more I would be inclined to use it – to help both of us. (PT)

The Framework was also acknowledged to be a useful tool to assist with agency practice:

'Kit' will be placed in the front of files being worked by the student. The following stages will be placed in the folder also. This will assist others who access the file to see what the intervention is informed by. (PT)

The students considered that the Framework would be a useful tool for a newly qualified worker. It was felt that it could be used either explicitly or implicitly in their future practice as a social worker:

The beauty of this Framework is that you don't need to do it formally on paper, you can hold it in your mind and it works quite well. (S)
Yes I do think it would be really helpful for qualified workers to use it, I think it would be more useful for those who have been qualified for a long time where theory is not uppermost in their mind but maybe it should be. (S)

There was acknowledgement that using the Framework in its most basic format could easily produce comprehensive lists of theories and information. However, to actually apply the relevant theory in a meaningful and formative way required much more work but the results were also much more worthwhile:

In the early stages of using the Framework I just listed the theory. That really doesn't help, you need to say how the theory is going to help you ... you go into depth and that is what produces the result. (S)
This model shunts you right into practice ... if I hadn't been part of the research study I probably wouldn't have used it. (PT)

Emerging themes

Firstly, theory and practice caused less anxiety for students at this stage in their learning. Secondly, practice teachers had further increased in confidence in their articulation of integration of theory and practice and their ability to assist the students' learning in this area. Thirdly, students and practice teachers placed a great deal of confidence in the process of the learning partnership.

The findings

The findings raise a number of significant issues for social work education and the use of the Framework to assist with the task of assisting students and practice teachers to integrate theory and practice. There was one hundred per cent response rate for all stages of the research from the practice teachers and students.

The initial finding from the beginning of the placement was that the Framework had the potential to be used as a tool to facilitate learning and competence for the integration of theory and practice during the placement. This finding was confirmed at the end of the placement in a number of different ways. It was clear that the use of the Framework for students had greatly increased confidence and reduced anxiety in knowledge-based practice. For practice teachers, confidence had increased in how to achieve the students' learning in this area. This was a marked development from the initial finding that practice teachers gave high importance to theory and practice. By the end of the placement they were clear how the Framework had enabled them to achieve this outcome. At the core of this process were supervision and the learning partnership between student and practice teacher. The response to the Framework was indeed overwhelmingly positive although this did not restrict the participants in finding ways to be creative in how they used and applied the Framework. It was interesting to note that the Framework could appear to be a relatively easy exercise to complete but required rigorous application to utilise and realise its full potential for learning. The participant who remained sceptical of their own use of the Framework still commented on its usefulness for practitioners.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the findings of this research into the use of the Three-stage Theory Framework will facilitate the development of other frameworks for accessing theory-based practice and will contribute to the ongoing debate on the professional role of social work and the articulation of a sound knowledge base for practice.

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