
UNIT 5 SOME THEORETICAL APPROACHES IN CASE WORK

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**Archana Dassi*

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

The present unit deals with some theoretical approaches in casework, which has been the predominant social work method in social work practice. After studying the unit you will be able to know more about Existential Theory, Cognitive Theory, Behavioural Modification theory, Problem solving approach and eclectic approach.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In a society of paradoxes of poverty and affluence, of overpopulation and brilliant technology, of deeply disturbing contradictions that arise from accelerated complexity that produces dehumanization, social casework makes its contribution by its commitment to the individual in society. The commitment to understand, to differentiate, to act for and with the individual gives social casework crucial importance in alleviating the human suffering related to society's problems. The agony of the individual is seen in his search for autonomy, self-realization, and productive and decent living with his fellowmen. Never had our society such profound need for institutionalized concern for, and competence to deal with, individual development, purposes, and problems. Traditionally the role of social casework in a profession has been to promote individually satisfying and socially constructive living. Thus, it has taken a unique place among disciplines dedicated to the development of a humane society that values each of its members.

As part of social work, social casework finds its cause in the promotion of the welfare of the individual in the society and its function in the implementation of this cause. Social casework serves as one aspect of the conscience of society in so far as it is proud, competent, and passionate in its dedication to the individuality of all persons. Competence is necessary to unify the cause and the function, to give reality to pride and direction to passion. Competence requires knowledge, understanding, and a coherent guide for its enactment in the service of cause. What is the basis of competence in social casework? Keeping this in view, the theories of casework assume a pointed significance.

Theories in casework can neither be overemphasized nor can be underemphasized. Theories help an individual to handle the client in the way that is best suited to the client's needs and conditions. Theories form the supportive structure, providing a sense of intellectual and emotional security to the professional practitioners besides giving them directions and ability to predict outcomes. The essence embodied in theories is not just the knowledge for the sake of it, but knowledge that enriches and empowers practice.

5.2 EXISTENTIAL THEORY

The key points of the existential theory are the following:

1. The human being is not just an existing entity, he is also capable of being aware of his existence, and of imparting meaning to his existence.
2. External forces can be vicious and menacing; but the assumption that the human beings inevitably become victims to these inimical forces is not acceptable. There is within every person the potential for transcending external circumstances. From this point of view, men and women are creators of their personalities, though they are partly creatures of their circumstances as well.
3. Every person is a being, in the process of becoming, indicating that there are static and dynamic aspects of his / her acceptance. Understanding the person implies that the one who is in the process of understanding, experiences through his/her observation, imagination and thinking, the static and dynamic aspects of the other person, in his/her here-and now-living. Understanding is both an intellectual and emotional process, whereas explanation is an intellectual process, without any emotional underpinnings.
4. Freedom is not a license to do everything that one want to do, but it is right that has to be used consciously and responsibly. For many people, the idea of responsibility is missing from their concept of freedom as a right, with the result that, they create problems of social functioning.

Existential casework is geared to following goals:

- **Helping the process of disillusionment:** A person who has wrong assumptions about the self and the others have to go through a process of disillusionment about the self in relation to the problem. Even when the objective fact is established that the client's problem is mainly because of his / her doings, the client is most likely to deny this and may blame others or the environment. Disillusionment here means knowing how the problem has been caused through one's deeds of commissions and omissions. Knowing one's true self is an uncomfortable process and therefore, the social worker's involvement through application of the emotional support and other counselling techniques is necessary.
- **Confronting the client with the freedom to act appropriately and responsibly:** The client is encouraged to use his /her will to rise above his / her instinctual forces in situations where s/he has been a slave to the instinctual demands. This could have been a process of repetitive submission that has adversely affected his / her social functioning. To illustrate, an alcoholic has to choose his freedom to refuse alcohol if he wants to get over his problem of alcoholism. It would mean accepting the anxiety and the tension as facts of

existence, and deciding to handle such facts of life through thinking and acting responsibly instead of seeking a temporary escape through alcohol.

- **Helping the client to make a commitment to the task of changing old habit:** With some knowledge of the self as it actually is, unfettered by the distorted images, the next step for the client is to use his / her will to make a decision to change the unhelpful behaviour. Changing one's behaviour, like any other achievement, needs step to step onward movement in the form of new thinking and doing. As a distant goal not achievable in a day or two, it requires patient plodding day by day, for which a commitment – both mental and emotional – is necessary. The social worker provides help by suggesting assignments for the client and constantly motivating him / her to carry out the assignments.

5.3 COGNITIVE THEORY

The major theme of this theory is centred on the concept of thinking. An individual's thinking is shaped by his/her society and the immediate environment and the thinking determines behaviour. Emotions are set to proceed from his / her thinking. If the social functioning of an individual is different than the accepted norms, it would mean that his / her thinking needs to be modified to change behaviour, the mode of thinking has to change. Cognitive theory also lays stress on the idea that human beings have latent creative resources which are available for use in effecting changes in goals and behaviour.

Albert Ellis, a psychotherapist has developed an easily comprehensible system of cognitive theory under the label of '**rational emotive therapy**'. According to Ellis, some ideas are irrational which are held as rational by people who are thus affected unfavourably by these ideas. Some of these irrational ideas are:

- 1) It is necessary for an individual to be loved and approved by all in all situations.
- 2) It is *horrible* or *terrible* when things do not go according to one's plan.
- 3) Feelings are caused by external forces and one has no control over them.
- 4) What affects one's life adversely once is going to do so for the rest of one's life.
- 5) It is a great tragedy if one can not achieve one's goals.

As against these five irrational ideas, there are corresponding rational ideas. They are:

- 1) It is not humanly possible to be loved and approved by all in every situation.
- 2) Nothing is *horrible* or *terrible*; things may rather be inconvenient or bothersome. When things do not happen according to the plan, one can still put up with things as they are.
- 3) Feelings are caused by one's thinking and hence controllable.
- 4) The impact of an event can not be everlasting. The impact of bad events can be transformed by using the situation as a learning experience.

- 5) It hurts if one does not achieve one's goals, but it is not a tragedy. The feeling of hurt can be changed through thinking.

Cognitive / Rational emotive Therapy includes four stages:

- 1) *Presentation of Rationale*
The worker attempts to elicit the problem or significance of self statements in general without mentioning the client's problem.
- 2) *Overview of Irrational Assumption*
The worker presents a number of irrational self-statements before the client and tries to make the client realize that his / her statements are irrational.
- 3) *Analysis of Client's Problem in Rational Emotive Terms*
Client is made aware of his / her problem rationally and is provided with the knowledge of how s/he has labeled the event.
- 4) *Teaching the Client to Modify Internal Statements*
The client is taught to change his /her opinions and attitudes which are anxiety producing.

In the helping process the social caseworker uses modeling to convey to the client, continuously, the message of rationality in thinking and speaking. Worker helps the client to be as rational as possible in his / her behaviour and to see the irrationalities that one sees around and is unable to change. Clients are trained to use words judiciously so that, unfavourable events may not provoke intense feelings. The judicious use of language means that by describing events with the use of words that symbolize a moderate level of feelings, instead of words that indicate vehemence, one can avoid and the damaging effect of strong feelings. Feelings are to be perceived as derivatives of thinking. Thus by viewing unpleasant events and situations in a balanced way, without mentally exaggerating their significance, one is able to control one's feelings instead of being controlled by them.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) What are the key points of existential theory?

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- 2) What are the various stages of cognitive theory?

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5.4 BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION THEORY

The basic theme in this approach is that behavioural problem is mainly the result of previous learning and that some problems are caused by contemporary events and some by physiological factors. Dealing with the physiological factors does not lie within the professional purview of social workers. The behaviouristic theory viewed problem as essentially the result of a failure to learn necessary adaptive behaviours and the competencies and / or the learning of ineffective and maladaptive behaviours. It may happen due to conflicting situations that require the individual to make discriminations or decisions of which he / she feels incapable. The maladjusted person has learned the faulty coping patterns, which are being maintained by some kind of reinforcement, and he / she has failed to learn competencies for coping with the problem of living.

- **Classical conditioning**

Certain conditions elicit specific responses from living organism. To illustrate, when food is placed in front of a dog, the dog salivates. If the food appears every time with the ringing of the bell, then after a considerable number of experiences of the food and the bell occurring together, the dog salivates even if only the bell ring and food is absent. The ringing of the bell is the conditional stimulus associated with the unconditional stimulus, food. Similarly, people react in certain ways as a result of conditional stimuli that are associated originally in some way or the other, with unconditional stimuli.

- **Instrumental conditioning**

The central idea is that, what a person does in a particular situation brings consequences, which subsequently set a pattern of his / her behaviour. The consequence is perceived by the person as a reward for which she / he repeats the behaviour. To illustrate, a man is forced by his peer group to take alcohol for the first time. Alcohol gives him pleasurable sensation – a little relaxation and elation. Subsequently, the man takes alcohol just for the associated pleasure and it is likely that he may get habituated to drinking and later become an alcoholic as more and more alcohol will be required to produce desirable sensations as the time passes.

- **Observational learning**

Here, the learner is the observer for whom there is a model to copy from – a model who has status, power or wealth. Some aspects of the model's behaviour are likely to be imitated by the observer who wishes to be like the model. Children often learn verbal and physical aggression through their observation of significant adults in their life.

- **Contemporary events**

Contemporary events, most of which relate to environmental facts, can cause problematic behaviour. For example, stressful situations can give rise to anxiety, anger, panic or similar feelings. Individuals behave in unacceptable manner when they are driven by such feelings.

The direct way of helping the clients would involve weakening the process of learning problematic behaviour and strengthening the process of learning desirable behaviour. It is important to identify the stimuli that produce or reinforce undesirable

behaviour and then to remove these stimuli. Factors that act as stimuli for reinforcing desirable behaviour should be strengthened. Rewards may be used to motivate clients to develop acceptable forms of behaviour. In the contemporary scenario the need is for the environmental modification to remove or reduce the effects of damaging factors. The technique has been found effective with reference to clients suffering from abnormal fears about routine things.

5.5 PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH

This approach stands on the recognition that life is an ongoing problem encountering – and – problem solving process. At any point of time, every person is involved in coping with his / her problems. Sometimes s/he is capable of coping and sometimes fails to resolve the crisis situation. Through problem solving process, the individual or the family is helped to cope with or resolve some difficulty that he / she is currently finding difficult to solve. Thus the primary goal of problem solving is to help a person to cope as effectively as possible with such problems in carrying social tasks.

In the initial phase attempts are made to engage the client with his / her problems and to do something about it in a working relationship with the agency. The problem solving starts at once, from the first movement with treating the person. The client is not treated for his / her problem but he/she is treated for the purpose of helping him /her to know his/her that is strength and weaknesses and how to remove these weaknesses.

In short, the problem solving approach involves the following steps:

- 1) It tries to release, energize and gives directions to the client's motivation for change.
- 2) It tries to release and exercise the client's mental, emotional and action capacities for coping with the problem.
- 3) It tries to find and make accessible to the client such aids and resources as are necessary to the solution of the problem.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) What are the various steps in problem solving approach?

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- 2) Explain the experiment of classical conditioning in the behaviour modification approach.

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5.6 ECLECTIC APPROACH

It has been observed that no theoretical approach explains human behaviour in a conclusive manner. Therefore it is important to develop an eclectic approach, an approach that is characterized by a solid knowledge of many systems of theories and a skill for selecting useful concepts and techniques with reference to clients.

Eclecticism does not mean that the social worker chooses casually a methodology of explanation. Eclecticism, on the other hand, means choosing a methodology purposefully with explainable reasons and with reference to a particular client, or clients. Every school of thought has its own strengths and limitations. The social worker's skill will be that of taking advantage of the strengths without ignoring the drawbacks in relation to the client.

Cognitive theory has some things in common related to thinking and they are useful to client whose faculty of thinking can be activated. Those clients who hold some form of religious philosophy may be benefited from existential theory. By knowing the theories well and understanding the clients adequately, it is possible to use theories appropriately and effectively.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Explain why Eclectic approach is considered to be the best way of understanding the human behaviour?

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5.7 LET US SUM UP

There is a great diversity in the casework theory. This diversity would encourage intellectual debates, clashes of ideas that would result in rigorous practice and research efforts based on specification of the general aspects and tangible utility of several theories.

5.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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