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Theory, social work methods and participation

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Abstract

- *Summary:* This paper examines the use of theory in social work methods geared towards promoting participation of vulnerable groups, a subject that has been barely – if at all – researched empirically. The study comprised an analysis of 46 methods documented in the database of the Netherlands Institute for Social Development and interviews with social workers and educators.
- *Findings:* Social work methods for participation are interspersed with theoretical notions. While the study shows that there is no shortage of theories in this field, what is more problematic are their use and integration. Incorporating theories in such a way that they provide an underpinning of the work method poses a challenge. Many theories appear to be presented out of window dressing, deviate from their original source in the literature, or are narrow in their paradigmatic focus, overlooking alternative theories that could promote or offer better nuanced participation perspectives.
- *Applications:* The paper proposes criteria for a 'theoretical underpinning' and provides suggestions for a proper use of theory in social work methods.

Keywords

Social work, social work theory, social theory, participation, reflective practice, critical reflection

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Introduction

In 2014, the Dutch Health Council – the highest advisory board to the Dutch government in the field of public health – issued the report *Social work on a solid basis*. In this report, the Council calls for a 'stronger theoretical and scientific underpinning of the profession of social work', to be utilized for 'the support and activation of citizens through their own network and within their own social environment, rather than direct support from professionals' (Gezondheidsraad, 2014, p. 14). The appeal from the Dutch Health Council reflects an international political trend in the regeneration of active citizenship: promoting self-responsibility, fighting against elements of the welfare state that are believed to be invasive and activating and socially rehabilitating vulnerable groups (Hall, 2004; Lub & Uyterlinde, 2012; Milner & Kelly, 2009). As with the term 'Big Society' in the English-speaking world, the term 'participation society' has gained currency in the Netherlands as a means of describing a whole series of changes needed to realise these aims.

The call also reflects an institutional trend in the advancement of social work itself. In response to society's demands, Dutch social work seems to be in a continuing process of 'professionalization' (Chan & Chan, 2004), whereby 'empowerment' has become the modern social work concept *par excellence* (Parker, Fook, & Pease, 2016). Providing theoretical legitimacy is seen as a natural part of this process. Theories are perceived as the main sources of knowledge in problem definition, setting programme goals and planning services within social work practice (Law, 1994; Payne, 2014; Turner, 2017). The idea is that social workers ought to have a properly thought-out basis for what they do, and that they ought to be able to make explicit what this basis entails (Beckett & Horner, 2016). In the Netherlands, organisations like the Netherlands Institute for Social Development and the Netherlands Youth Institute have encouraged the advancement of the theoretical basis of social work methods since at least the early 2000s. First this occurred in the field of general social work and policy, then later with an explicit link to activation and social participation. Part of the effort by the Dutch national institutes at the time was motivated by the criticism that social work practices lacked a theoretical basis. While since the 2000s much has been done to stimulate the theoretical content of social work, this criticism never completely died down – as is evident from the recent appeal of the Dutch Health Council. In collaboration with Universities of Applied Science in the Social Studies, the aforementioned institutes currently work on creating overviews and inventories of theoretical 'bodies of knowledge' to support social work organizations in this area. However, although a vast literature has now developed on social work theory itself (mostly for educational purposes), there is little – if any – empirical research on how theory *de facto* is used in social work methods and how theory building can contribute to the goals formulated within a Big Society or 'participation state' discourse.

This article presents an examination of the use of theory in social work methods geared towards participation in the Netherlands, based on an analysis of 46 documented methods from the database of the Netherlands Institute for Social Development and interviews with social workers. The methods include programmes aimed at rehabilitating and activating people with psychosocial problems and mental impairments, methods for activating vulnerable groups such as multi-problem families or (ex-) juvenile offenders, or methods for promoting social contacts, often designed for socially excluded groups like young homeless persons or single elderly people. How well-developed are theoretical underpinnings of such methods? How are theories methodically incorporated? What types of theories are mentioned by developers? And how relevant are they, considering what needs to be done to change behaviour or contexts to promote social participation of groups or individuals?

The study shows that there is no shortage of theories in this field. Social work methods for participation are interspersed with theoretical notions, but what is problematic are their use and integration. Incorporating theories within methods poses a challenge. Appeals for a stronger theoretical basis of social work such as those of the Dutch Health Council demand an accurate articulation of the requirements for a theoretical underpinning of social work methods. This article will explore this issue both conceptually and empirically. It is, however, with a theoretical introduction of theory itself that this exploration must begin.

Theory and social work

In a strictly scientific sense, theory can be defined as a coherent description of a process of inference which provides an explanation for observed phenomena or makes predictions about those phenomena (West & Brown, 2013). In the context of behavioural and social change, theories attempt to explain why, when and how certain behaviour may or may not occur and indicate the main sources of influence to change the targeted behaviour (Michie, West, Campbell, Brown, & Gainforth, 2014). A theory used in social work must, in other words, provide an integration of acquired knowledge about the relevant mechanisms of action, and conditions for behavioural and social change. The social learning theory of Miller and Dollard (1945), for example, attempts to explain how people learn through observation and imitation of others. This theory distinguishes different sources that influence learning, such as response and reward. Those sources can then serve as influencing factors to deliberately change particular behaviour through a particular method.

What is the function of theory in the design of social work methods? There are three points to consider. First, theory provides a grip on complexity (Kelly et al., 2010). Whether initiated for families or individuals, youths or the elderly, ultimately, social work methods strive for behavioural or social change. Yet, this change occurs in a complex set of psychological, social, cultural and even economic relationships and processes. Theoretical concepts and models can be seen as a way to define such links and processes and to somewhat untangle the complexities of

their relationships. It thus provides a framework within which the designer of a particular method may consider and determine what needs to be done to change behaviour and contexts, in terms of capabilities, opportunities and motivation processes. Secondly, theory helps with evaluation. Theorizing about the mechanisms of methods promotes the assessment of relevant influencing factors. Researchers can determine whether a hypothetical influence factor actually has an effect on behaviour. Theory building thus promotes our understanding of what works and why. Ideally, this also facilitates the adjustment and refinement of specific interventions for different contexts, groups and behaviours (Michie, Johnston, Francis, Hardeman, & Eccles, 2008). Finally, theory has a critical function. Particularly in social work, theory is not just about rigid behavioural determinants, influencing factors and causal pathways. Such an instrumental, positivistic viewpoint is just one way of looking at theory building; it is but one particular organizing principle (see also Montaño, 2012). Many social theories also contain a critical component. In the critical paradigm, explanations and predictions of human behaviour are driven by issues of social injustice, social inequality and limiting opportunity structures (see e.g. Calhoun, 1995; Pease & Fook, 2016). In such a paradigm, the emancipation of the individual, or empowerment and social activation of vulnerable groups are not just neutral, instrumental goals. They serve to form the complex normative context in which the method is designed and implemented. In the design of a social method aimed at the empowerment of a multi-problem household, for example, it can be made explicit which social structures act as barriers for the family and under what conditions emancipatory objectives can be achieved.

The belief in the application of theory as an effective way of building knowledge in social work can be traced back to the writings of Ernest Greenwood who regarded a 'systematic body of knowledge' a significant attribute of the profession (Greenwood, 1957). Beckett and Horner (2016, p. 238) describe social work theory as 'a practice guided by a set of ideas or principles, which are sufficiently coherent to be made explicit in a form which is open to challenge'. Payne (2014) argues that theory offers a framework for social professionals and helps them to be accountable and self-disciplined. Yet to this day, there is neither a universal definition of 'theoretical underpinning' nor an articulation of criteria for proper theory use in social work methods. Considering this, one can argue that a social work method has a strong theoretical underpinning when it meets the following requirements: (1) the method presents a coherent and explicit vision of what should lead to behavioural and social change; (2) this vision is supported by relevant theoretical notions from the literature; (3) the theories are incorporated into the method in such a way that they logically connect to problem definitions, programme goals and target groups.

Analytical framework and research methods

In light of the shift towards a 'participation state' or Big Society, the present analysis of the use of theory in social work in this article is limited to the theme

of social participation. The Dutch Health Council demarcates social participation as the field 'including methods designed to help citizens offer support and care to others and methods or practices which help ensure that people remain healthy and can meet each other' (Gezondheidsraad, 2014, p. 43). Social workers can make use of methods geared towards collective arrangements, such as community development projects, support for vulnerable groups and methods for promoting general social cohesion. For its analytical framework, the present study adheres to the demarcation of social participation by the Dutch Health Council. This demarcation also corresponds to one of the main social work categories of the database 'Effective interventions' of Movisie, the Netherlands Institute for Social Development (NISD). The NISD database is part of the aforementioned professionalization development of social work in the Netherlands. It is part of a wider effort of the institute to promote methodical approaches and an assessment of social interventions that require an underpinning, both through theory and empirical evidence. As part of its database, the category 'social participation' includes 46 documented methods developed and described by various social work organizations. The NISD methods served as the empirical data source. Via an analysis of the methods for participation documented in the NISD-database, theoretical notions, models and concepts were identified and described. Thereafter, a textual analysis of the properties, their use, integration and reference sources of the theories was conducted. In addition, in-depth interviews with six social work developers of NISD methods were conducted to reflect on the use of theory in this area. The interviewees were most often experienced – sometimes former – social workers and currently established educators in their field. The interviews covered how theoretical underpinning ideally should take shape and where its opportunities and possible obstacles lie in the eyes of the respondents.

Analysis was conducted in three steps. The first step was to construct an overview of all the theories and reference sources of the theories mentioned by the developers of the database methods. This comprised a selection of what the developers of the method themselves identified as a 'theory' or theoretical concept, but also what they generally presented as the underpinning (*onderbouwing* in Dutch) of their method. The method description format of the NISD provided a special section on this topic. Theoretical notions were mostly mentioned here but also in other sections of the method description format, for example in the sections 'problem definition' or 'implementation'. This first step in the analysis yielded an overview of approximately 100 theories and reference sources. As a second step, the results were filtered comprising a more thorough coding of mentioned theories based on the criterion of descriptions of mechanisms and conditions for influencing factors of behavioural and social change, as well as their connections to problem definition, programme goals and target groups (see the previous section 'Theory and social work'). The texts were examined to determine how developers considered theory as a framework for social participation and what needs to be done to change behaviour or contexts to promote social participation of groups or individuals, in terms of capabilities, opportunities, motivation processes and

actions. This second phase also allowed for a check in overlap between certain theoretical notions of different methods (i.e. developers using different nomenclature for similar theoretical concepts). As a third step, an analysis of the reference sources was carried out. This allowed for an examination into what extent theory descriptions of social work methods correspond to the original source(s) referenced from the literature (for the complete documentation of theories, see Lub, 2017).

The use of theory

The theory listings in the method descriptions of the NISD database vary from very general social theories, such as 'Constructivism' or 'Gestalt therapy' to more specific models unique to a particular method, such as the '8-phase model' or the 'cyclical learning model'. An immediate insight emerging is that few methods contain a thorough, well-argued theoretical underpinning. That is to say, few methods contain the ideal criteria: coherently described theories, presentation of an explicit vision of what should lead to success and support by relevant literature which in turn is logically connected to programme goals and target groups. No more than a dozen methods could be selected that met these criteria fully. In other words, within the NISD database methods, a solid theoretical underpinning is the exception rather than the rule. The majority of methods display rather nebulous and chaotic descriptions. Three types of faulty or 'shaky' underpinnings can be distinguished.

First, many methods seem to construct their theoretical underpinning out of name dropping or window dressing. Theories have a famous name to them but are often presented 'out of nowhere'. As a result, theories branch out in very different directions and display elaborate descriptions, but at closer inspection hold little or no logical connection to each other or to programmatic aspects of the method. Often a situation was encountered of theories 'going all over the place'. Some methods list as many as 10 separate theories without much argumentation as to why they were selected or where they fit in the method. The NISD method 'Psychiatry in the Neighbourhood' – aimed at the social inclusion of residents with psychiatric problems – is an example of how various theories are presented disjointed, covering 'outreaching approaches' as well as broad notions about 'empowerment' without much interrelation (see Movisie, 2013). Of course, different theoretical notions do not necessarily have to exclude one another and can even complement each other. But in the case of the name-dropping type, the theoretical description becomes so broad and disjointed that there is a risk of the underpinning itself becoming meaningless. Here one can question whether the theories still represent a thoughtful integration of theory, producing a useful source of knowledge. An aphorism of sociologists Komter, Burgers, and Engbersen (2000, p. 8) comes to mind: 'Whoever shows solidarity with everyone ultimately shows solidarity with no-one'. This also applies to theory: whoever aims to incorporate all theories ultimately incorporates none.

Secondly, the theoretical underpinning of social work methods also often falls prey to tautological reasoning. In this type of underpinning, the developers use circular arguments or self-evident statements with little referencing to the theoretical literature. The method 'Mixed Talent', aimed at promoting community support of people with mild intellectual impairments, is one example of tautological reasoning. It states for instance: 'A social network contributes to social inclusion' (Movisie, 2011, p. 22). Of course, social inclusion can only take place within a network. The statement is therefore self-evident and does not add much to the underpinning of the method. The theoretical underpinning of the method 'Feeling Like Friendship', aimed at promoting friendships between elderly individuals provides a similar example of tautological reasoning. It explains how friendships play an important role in preventing or reducing loneliness. Although this is true, the statement in itself is self-evident and therefore in effect theoretically void. Obviously, one can feel lonely despite the presence of friends. But someone who experiences solitude and makes new friends self-evidently becomes less lonely.

Finally, several methods present a theoretical underpinning which, after closer examination, actually contains no theory to begin with. Rather than presenting an underlying vision of what should lead to success supported by theory from the literature, these methods simply do one of two insufficient things: they either describe the working procedures of their particular programme or intervention, or they refer to effect research that shows that their method 'works'. In the first variant, the method usually presents various 'theories' which are in effect procedures of other methods that have been copied into their particular programme. The FACT method (Flexible Assertive Community Treatment) provides an illustration of this. The method focuses on the participation of people with psychosocial disorders, but mainly describes methodical procedures of the programme itself, leaving the theoretical argumentations nondescript. In the latter type variant, developers refer to secondary research that scientifically proves the efficacy of their method. Although one could argue that the method in question is thereby more firmly underpinned, it is in fact still far removed from a definition of theory in social methods. Such a definition would imply that the developer outlines what must be done to change behaviour and promote participation in terms of capabilities, opportunities and motivation processes of people.

The ambiguity of theory

The theoretical disorder and multitude of theory in the underpinnings of most of the NISD methods may have several underlying causes. Incorporating theories into social work methods is not an exact science. Theories sometimes deviate from their original meaning or even lose their original meaning when they are textually utilized or codified in the design of a concrete method. This is evident from the analysis of the reference sources of the NISD methods. Most of the literature sources referenced by developers are secondary sources, and the description of the theory in the method does not always neatly correspond to the initial

description of the source. One can compare this dynamic with the familiar word play in kindergarten; the teacher invents a word and whispers it in the ear of the first child sitting in the circle. This child then whispers the word in the ear of the classmate sitting next to him, and so on. At the end, however, a different word emerges than what the chain started with. This alternation process is also visible in the use of theory in the NISD methods. It is for instance reflected in the theoretical principle of the 'Recovery Vision' – described in the method 'Recovering? Do It Yourself!' that focuses on the rehabilitation of people with a mental disability or other psychological vulnerabilities. The principle of the Recovery Vision is that even people with serious mental illnesses should still be in charge of their own lives and recovery. People may be influenced by their relationships with others, but guided by their own goals, hopes, dreams and interests they still make their own choices. According to the method's developers, it therefore follows that the key to recovery from mental or psychiatric symptoms lies with the individual itself, and in their theoretical underpinning the developers of the method refer to Anthony (1993), the originator of the Recovery Vision. The developers state that the client must take charge of its own life and take their recovery process into their own hands as much as possible. Yet in spite of this autonomous perspective taken by the developers, Anthony himself seems to view recovery as a collective effort emphasising the importance of a community support system for the client.

> A mental health services system that is guided by the recovery vision incorporates the critical services of a community support system organized around the rehabilitation model's description of the impact of severe mental illness – all under the umbrella of the recovery vision. In a recovery-oriented mental health system, each essential service is analysed with respect to its capacity to ameliorate people's impairment, dysfunction, disability, and disadvantage. (Anthony, 1993, p. 528)

In fact, Anthony presents different views on the concept of 'recovery', in which he highlights different aspects of the concept and implies different optional strategies. Ranging from the notion that recovery can be achieved without any (professional) help whatsoever to the proposition that family support is a prerequisite for successful recovery. The explanation of Anthony's theory by the developers of the method – individuals taking charge of their situation – is thus not necessarily wrong, but it does constitute a particular interpretation and selection. The example illustrates that the translation of social theory from the source to the receiver is not a linear process. Just as the kindergartener in the circle may alter the word whispered in his ear according to what he thought was the correct word or according to what he preferred to hear, so too can developers of social work methods alter social theory according to their own interpretations and predilections. But, as the analysis of the sources show, this is not necessarily due to carelessness or biases on the part of the developer. Many social theories considerably branch out in their configuration and use rather nebulous wording – even in their original description – allowing for multiple interpretations.

The question arising, then, is whether such nebulous theoretical configurations still provide practical meaning to social work. According to Weiss (1995), there is 'nothing as practical as good theory'. But the risk is that when developers are left in the dark because of the multi-interpretable nature and configuration of the theories themselves, the theoretical foundation of the social work method itself can become unstable, risking arbitrary implementation. The interviews with the developers of social work methods indicate that this process is already occurring. The narrative of the interviewed developers provides several indications of how their method was implemented 'incorrectly', or how they noted 'pale imitations' or 'selective shopping' from their method. Some even speak of other practitioners 'giving the programme a bad name'. One of the interviewed developers explained how a method she developed to promote the participation of people with mental problems gained popularity, leading to widespread national implementation. But this widespread use also diluted the theoretical premises of the method due to the differing interpretations of the professionals working with it, as she describes in the quote below.

> Other social professionals select certain theories from the method. Sometimes this can be useful. But you could also argue that this does not comply with the method. And some professionals say that they follow the method, but in my eyes, they have really compromised. For example, some focus strongly on individual clients, but far too little on the social environment. Or they pick one procedure or theoretical element from the method that they are very good at, but neglect the rest.

The demarcation of theory

An issue emerging from the study relating to ambiguity is the demarcation of theory. Although 'theory' often evokes connotations of rigidness and solidity (recall the title of the Dutch Health Council report), it is in fact a highly diffuse concept. 'Social' theories, for instance, are not merely relevant to 'social' interventions and vice versa. Take the Social Norms Theory by Perkins and Berkowitz (1986) mentioned in some NISD methods. This theory predicts individual behaviour based on perceptions of behaviour of others and can thus be regarded as a 'social' theory. It states that behaviour is often influenced by inaccurate or incomplete assessments of the thoughts and behaviours (standards) of other persons within the same social group. A teenager, for instance, may overestimate the level of alcohol consumption within his group of friends, which can lead to excessive alcohol consumption for that particular teenager. In similar ways, the underestimation of attitudes or behaviours of others in relation to specific, individual behaviour may discourage behaviour. In other words, according to the Social Norms Theory, people adapt their behaviour according to their subjective perceptions of the standard within their own reference group. However, a social work method inspired by the Social Norms Theory that aims to limit

negative consequences of particular self-destructive behaviour or even aims to provide a solution for it, does not have to be purely 'social' in its properties or designed as a group intervention. An individual intervention design is equally justifiable. For example, the normative perceptions about alcohol of our hypothetical youngster may well be treated in the form of an individual therapy. Conversely, a social intervention can well be inspired by or based on individual behaviour theories.

Moreover, one particular theoretical notion may spill over into another theoretical notion. A notable example from the NISD database is provided by the sound theoretical underpinning of the method 'PAja!', designed to promote the socialization of young homeless people. The method incorporates theory on peer research which involves young people from a particular group acting as co-researchers of problems occurring within the same group (Hart, 1992; Young, 1992). Peer research is based on the idea that information is more valid if the parties gathering the information can see it as 'a reflection of their own reality' (De Winter & Noom, 2003). But this particular peer concept is cross-linked with theory on constructivism (youths create and perceive their own reality which must be investigated as this gives more insight into their development), action research (target groups are involved as co-researchers at different stages of the research process) and empowerment (participation in action research increases self-worth of the youngsters). In other words, while, conceptually, theories can be distinguished from each other, in effect the boundaries are diffuse and may be cross-linked in their methodical application (which is not to say of course that they should be presented as disjointed listings for window-dressing purposes, see previously).

The analysis thus indicates that the current institutional call in the Netherlands for clearly demarcated overviews of theories for particular sectors – or any 'theory envy' of the social sector in relation to, for example, the health sector – should be put into perspective. There are no ready-made recipes to make overviews of theories that are purely or primarily relevant to a particular sector or professional discipline. From an institutional point of view, it can still be useful to create an inventory of theories, but all too rigid demarcations will in practice yield no added value. For some professionals or policymakers, such inventories or overviews may offer a theoretical framework from which they can select. But many other professionals will see those sectorial overviews as disconnected of their own practice, or feel that they do not reflect what they need. Just as was observed with the ambiguity of theory in the previous section, there is a risk that rigid theoretical overviews lead to arbitrary implementations of social work methods, as one of the interviewed developers suggests in the quote below.

> I support that there is a database of social work methods that civil servants, policy makers or administrators can look into. They can ask themselves: "What methods do we have to combat a social problem? What is the range of theories?" I think it's a good thing that new methods and unknown theories are given a platform this way.

> On the other hand, the danger is that everybody is going to run with it and a situation ensues of 'anything goes' thereby actually undermining certain theoretical insights.

A preference for structuralism

Finally, regarding the content of theories, a particular paradigmatic preference emerges. The dominant theoretical narrative of NISD social work methods in the field of social participation derives from structuralism: the idea that an individual is not personally responsible for his or her behaviour or success, but that this is largely determined by the opportunity structures to which that person belongs (Merton, 1975; Sturrock, 1986). And because these structures can be either limiting or liberating, we should seek methods and underlying theories that can bring about empowerment and liberation. Or, as the developers of an NISD method focusing on multi-problem individuals and households put it: 'The individual is the starting point, but the system is the level of influence.' With most of the methods, to 'allow' individuals to participate, social work methods in the NISD database prioritize the activation of the social environment, not the individual – for example supported by theories such as the Social Action Theory and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986; Weber, 1978). To put in another way: to adequately solve the problems of vulnerable groups, one must look at how the social network functions around them, and in activating that network subsequently lays the solution. The method description of the 'Family Group Conference', offers a notable illustration of this theoretical tendency.

> The vast majority of the effective factors that contribute to positive change lie in the person's contextual characteristics and social support systems. It concerns the situation where the person is positioned in a functioning social network that contributes to help bring about the necessary changes. Is there a stimulating social environment that can be set in motion? If so, the probability of a positive change increases considerably. (Movisie, 2012, p. 26)

This type of reasoning is explicable considering the tenets of the NISD methods. After all, by definition, each NISD method is geared towards the *social* participation of vulnerable groups. So perhaps, it should be no surprise that developers call upon theories that centralize the social environment as the main source of influence to achieve this goal. Moreover, the structural approach stands in a long theoretical tradition of Western social work (Beckett & Horner, 2016). Besthorn (2013, p. 17) notes that for the social work pioneers, 'the environment, not the individual was the locus of change'. It reflects the principles of structuralism and systems theory, in which individual problems are explained from or reduced to opportunity structures and other social environmental factors (see also Beeckman, 2015; Latour, 2004). What resonates through the theoretical underpinnings of most methods for social participation in the NISD database is the idea that the opportunities of

individuals to participate are confined by the structural limitations that they face. Social workers need only to break through those structures and even the toughest target groups may live a socially meaningful existence.

However, the theoretical preference for structuralism causes developers to make very little distinction between specific target groups in the theoretical underpinnings of their methods. With only a few exceptions, NISD methods indicate that they are designed for all 'vulnerable' groups or mention target groups with psychosocial problems in the same sentence with people with mental impairments. Little or no distinction is made between these categories. From a structuralist point of view – a perspective that views behaviour and personal development primarily in terms of opportunity structures, not in terms of individual characteristics – this distinction is not relevant. But one could also argue that people with psychosocial problems versus people with mental impairments are very different categories, requiring different methodical trajectories and approaches to participation.

Limitations of the study

The author recognises some limitations of the research and design used in this study. First, the findings of the study are based on a specific analysis of social work methods in the Netherlands. Second, the presented study is limited to a single area of methods, i.e. social participation for different target groups. Therefore, caution must be taken in generalizing its findings to other countries or particular contexts.

Conclusions and discussion

The insights presented here provide a window on how theory is used in a Western social work context, and its contributions to promoting social participation in terms of a Big Society. One obvious implication from the study is that an institutional emphasis on a theoretical basis of social work alone will not necessarily bring us closer to achieving a participation state. Developing a body of knowledge of theories in the field of social participation is useful, but there is a challenge in promoting and sustaining a robust use of theories. After all, the analysis shows that there is no shortage of theories about social participation. The analysed methods are interspersed with theoretical notions. But developers seem to have difficulty incorporating those theories. Theories in social work methods should offer a choice of strings to pull on, not wires to become entangled in. There are several challenges: resisting the temptation for name dropping or using theory as window dressing, building theory in a coherent and explicit manner as opposed to presenting disjointed or nebulous listings, realising an accurate translation of theories from the source to the method, preventing tautological reasoning, and stimulating better integration of theories within social services. A few suggestions in particular should be considered.

First, it is important to enhance the use of theory in practice so more social work methods realise a theoretical underpinning that matches the criteria outlined

in the introduction of this article: a coherent and explicit vision of what should lead to behavioural or social change, supported by relevant theoretical notions from the literature that are incorporated into the method in such a way that they logically connect to problem definitions, programme goals and target groups. This does not imply that the use of theory in social work should limit itself to rigid instrumental constructions and verifiable mechanisms, or that they should only follow or adhere to positivistic 'accountability' objectives. One can use critical theory and still provide a solid basis. But it does imply that developers and social workers think more closely about how theory can be utilized in a 'systematic' manner, as Ernest Greenwood envisioned decades ago. The present study suggests that teaching theory to students and practitioners of social work is not enough. Educating social professionals in the *use* of theory via reflective practice demands equal attention.

Secondly, to prevent theoretical sprawl, that is, underpinnings 'going all over the place', the fundamentals of theories and methods can be given more emphasis. Theoretical sprawl may be caused by the large number of theories available in social work, which can be overwhelming for social workers as to how these theories can fit their methods (Collingwood, Emond, & Woodward, 2008). Another reason for the observed tendency to support methods with a range of theoretical notions may be a preoccupation with complexity. With the growing realization that social interventions are 'complex' and will not work if they do not consider unique contexts and a wide range of behavioural and social variables, methods of these interventions have also become increasingly complex. The theoretical notions developers apply tend to mirror this propensity, branching out into a multitude of concepts. Of course, social interventions are indeed complex and the environments in which they are implemented all the more so. Yet, each social work method or social policy must meet certain assumptions; 'necessary' or 'contextual' conditions for the programme to be effective (Lub, 2014; Pawson, 2006). For example, if a sports programme in a deprived neighbourhood aims to mitigate criminal tendencies by offering an alternative social environment where young people can learn positive values and norms, then it naturally follows that sport *must* have a significant impact on human social behaviour for it to work in the first place. Or if a meeting is organized between youth groups of different religions to promote mutual understanding, then it naturally follows that intergroup contact *must* have a significant impact on tolerance levels and reduction of stereotypes for it to work. And so on. These basic conditions could be given more emphasis. From which assumptions does the programme start? How plausible are these assumptions given the theoretical body of knowledge? Only then can the use of theory as a 'grip on complexity' and aid to evaluation be realised to its full potential (see Kelly et al., 2010). In other words: proper use of theory in social work methods is also a matter of selection: separating relevant from less relevant theories and choosing what theoretical notion is most suitable given the particular situation and assumptions of the social service provided.

Thirdly, we must avoid an overreliance on ingrained and habitual schools of thought. Most of the NISD social work methods in the field of social participation draw their theoretical underpinnings from structuralism, confining the capabilities of individuals to participate to the structural opportunities and limitations that they face. As said, this type of reasoning has strong historical roots in social work (Beckett & Horner, 2016). Yet, acknowledging that an individual cannot be fully understood without consideration of its environmental context does not mean that the capacity to participate should be solely explained from or reduced to opportunity structures and other social environmental factors (Besthorn, 2013). Capacity to participate and social opportunities both also depend on individual dispositions, socio-biological factors, inherited behavioural traits and innate intellectual capacities (see for example, Fitzgerald, Rose, & Singh, 2016; Pinker, 2002; Spear, 2007; Zuckerman, 2005). Especially people with very limited mental capacities or severe psychological problems tend to fare better in a safe and specially created environment. Social work for these groups is not just a matter of promoting independent living and socialization but also of 'safeguarding' vulnerabilities (Clements & Read, 2003; Oliver, Sapey, & Thomas, 2012). An alternative is to develop a type of 'ecological thinking' which focuses on the reciprocity of individual-environment exchanges in which one shapes and influences the other (Derezotes, 2017; Gitterman & Germain, 2013). Instead of a preoccupation with structural forces shaping the individual, the ecological perspective encompasses more of a dynamic interplay between the person and their external world (Beckett and Horner, 2016). Both the environment and the individual should be taken into account. Broadening the structural framework to an ecological one may help bring the divergent capacities of vulnerable groups within a Big Society discourse more into the picture; 'participation' is not beneficial for everyone and should not become a mandatory condition imposed by social workers.

Finally, the scholarly field of social welfare and government institutes should acknowledge that the use of theory in social work methods is an inexact science. The hermeneutic interpretation and incorporation of theories into social work methods constitute an exercise that can be strictly rational, but also pragmatic (see Dewey, 1938; Rorty, 1992). In an 'ill-structured' domain like social work (Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobsen, & Coulson, 1992), theoretical notions may evoke slightly different meanings for different professionals, depending on their preferences, interests, situational knowledge and choices about the practical implementation of the method. This is not an issue to be solved by social scholars and administrators, since theory not only provides building blocks for methods but also plays a role in the wider professional development and socialization of the reflective practitioner. What scholars and administrators can do is provide more order and focus by setting clear criteria for the use of theory in social work methods themselves. Although this does not have to lead to a rigorous 'golden standard' in the use of social work theory, it may in the future provide silver linings for a more systematic advancement of social work.

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