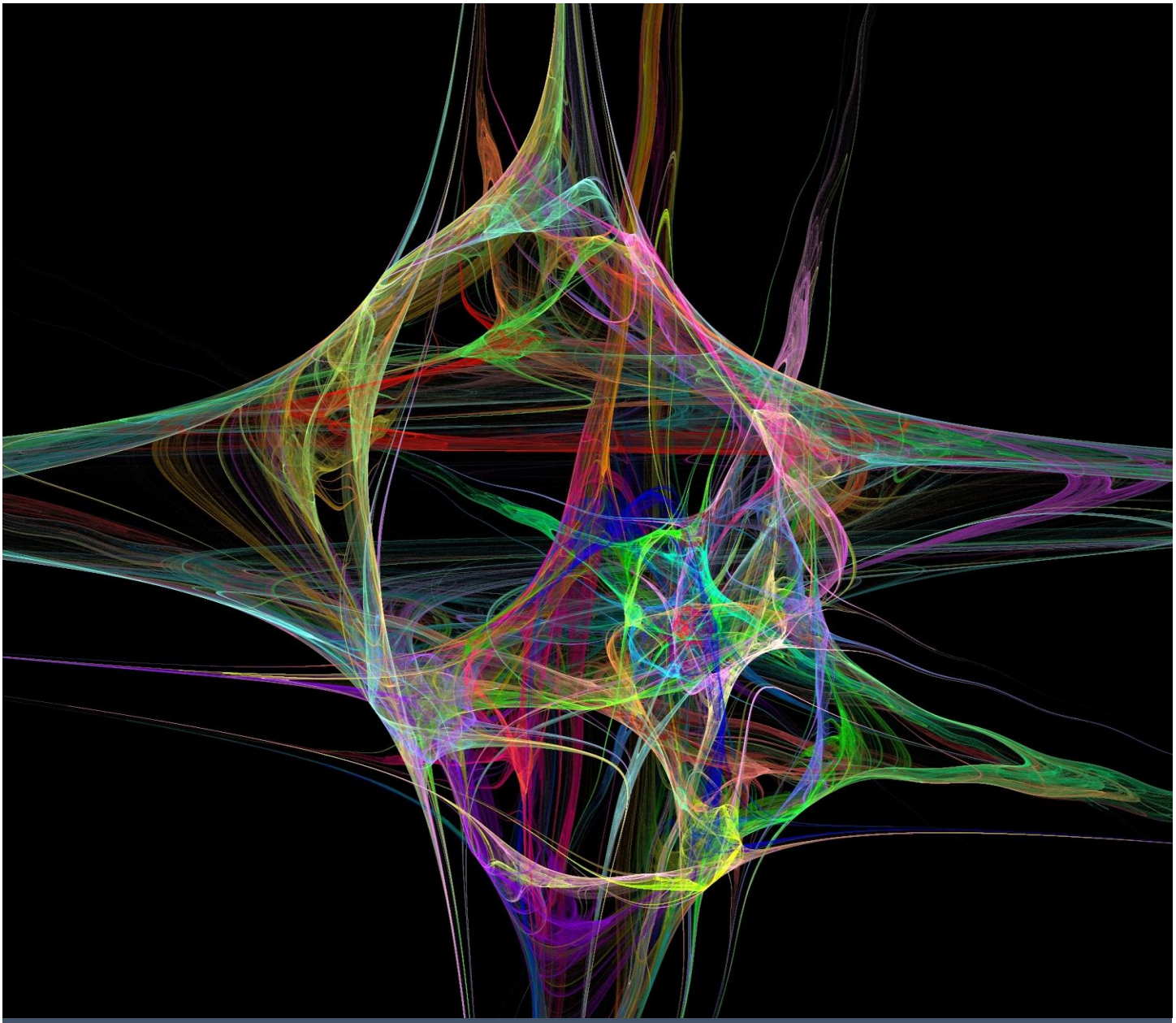

What Use is Theory? Just Get on with the Job!

Dr Neil Thompson

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What Use is Theory?

Just get on with the Job!

By

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Important legal information

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About the author

Dr Neil Thompson is an independent writer and online tutor. He has held full or honorary professorships at four UK universities. He has over 40 years' experience in the people professions as a practitioner, manager, educator and consultant. He has 44 books to his name. These include:

The People Solutions Sourcebook (Palgrave Macmillan, 2nd edn, 2012)

People Management (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
People Skills (Palgrave, 4th edn, 2015)
The Authentic Leader (Palgrave, 2016)
Anti-discriminatory Practice: Equality, Diversity and Social Justice (Palgrave, 6th edn, 2016)
Social Problems and Social Justice (Palgrave, 2017)
Theorizing Practice (Palgrave, 2nd edn, 2017)
The Social Worker's Practice Manual (Avenue Media Solutions, 2018)
Applied Sociology (Routledge, 2018)
Social Work Theory and Methods: The Essentials (co-edited with Paul Stepney, Routledge, 2018)
Promoting Equality: Working with Diversity and Difference (Palgrave, 4th edn, 2018)
Mental Health and Well-being: Alternatives to the Medical Model (Routledge, 2019)
The Learning from Practice Manual (Avenue Media Solutions, 2019)

In addition, he has produced a growing number of e-books, including *Stress Matters; Effective Teamwork*; *Effective Writing*; *A Career in Social Work*; and *How to Do Social Work*. He has been involved in developing a range of other learning resources, training manuals, DVDs, e-learning courses and the innovative online learning community, the Avenue Professional Development Programme, geared towards promoting continuous professional development, based on

supported self-directed learning principles (www.apdp.org.uk).

He has qualifications in: social work; management (MBA); training and development; mediation and dispute resolution; as well as a first-class honours degree in social sciences, a doctorate (PhD) and a higher doctorate (DLitt). His PhD and DLitt focused on existentialism. Neil is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Higher Education Academy and a Life Fellow of the Institute of Welsh Affairs and the Royal Society of Arts. He was the founding editor of the *British Journal of Occupational Learning* and was also previously the editor of the US-based international journal, *Illness, Crisis & Loss*. He currently edits the free e-zine, **THE** *humansolutions* **BULLETIN**. His personal website and blog are at www.NeilThompson.info.

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Introduction

The relationship between theory and practice has been a topic of interest for me throughout my career. In the early stages of my career I was constantly urged to 'just get on with the job' (see my e-book, *A Career in Social Work* for further information about this – Thompson, 2016a). I was given no framework of understanding, no knowledge base to draw upon other than my own life experience to date. When I subsequently went to university I was introduced to theoretical ideas that were directly related to the work I had been doing. But, there was little guidance given on how to use that new knowledge in practice. I was simply encouraged to 'apply theory to practice', but with little or no discussion of what that actually meant. I therefore found myself with conflicting messages. The message from my practice experience up to that point had been: 'Get on with the job', but offering little guidance on what that entailed, while my professional education was telling me to 'Apply theory to practice', while also offering little guidance on what that entailed.

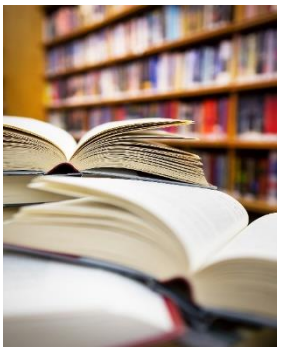
So, from then on, the relationship between theory and practice both puzzled and fascinated me. It led me to write my *Theory and Practice in the Human Services* book (Thompson, 2000) and, some years later, to develop the notion of 'theorizing practice' and to co-edit a book on theory and methods (Thompson and Stepney, 2018). It has also prompted me to write this e-book which has been developed to provide an overview of the complexities involved in understanding how theory and practice relate to one another.

As a short text it will not tell you everything you need to know, but it should give you a foundation of understanding and, I hope, a thirst for finding out more, for taking your understanding further.

I hope that you will find this overview of theory and practice a useful tool and contribution to your personal and professional development.

What is theory?

The term 'theory' is used in different ways in different contexts. It can be used to refer to speculation: 'I have a theory that the company is heading for bankruptcy'. It can also be used as a counterpoint to reality: 'In theory, these plants should grow in any soil, but in reality they won't grow in my garden'. Theory can also be used in a scientific sense – for example, to mean a hypothesis that is put forward to be tested empirically through research. But, in the sense that it is generally used in the context of 'theory and practice', it refers to the professional knowledge base underpinning practice – generally a mix of psychology, sociology, social policy, law and other disciplines, as well as the consolidated understanding from actual practice developed over decades. It is in this sense that I am using the term here – it is what makes our practice *informed* practice (or at least has the potential to make our practice informed if we choose to draw on it).



In a sense, there is always some sort of theory underpinning our practice, in so far as our actions will always be based on some sort of understanding, and that understanding will, in turn, be based on ideas of some sort. Our practice does not take place in a vacuum – there will always be something that is informing the steps we take (or choose not to take).

However, a key question here is: How valid is that knowledge? And that question depends on the answers to a set of further questions:

- Is that knowledge from a reliable source, one that does justice to the complexities involved? It would be naïve not to recognize that some understandings are rooted in very dubious premises.

- Is the knowledge free of stereotypes and discriminatory assumptions or does it rely on 'common sense' understandings that reflect the marginalized position of some groups in society? It would also be naïve not to recognize that much of what passes for 'common sense' is actually quite

discriminatory – for example, the idea that caring for children and dependent older or disabled people is 'naturally' a woman's role.

- Is it open to question and challenge or is it rigid and dogmatic? Working with people and their problems is complex and challenging work, and there will be different people with different perspectives. We therefore need to be flexible and open to learning, as relying on fixed ideas and dogma will give us a very restricted view of the situations we are dealing with and thereby limit our understanding. This would make us far less well informed and therefore far less effective.

- Is it open to development over time? Times change, circumstances change and sometimes our ideas need to change too. For example, our understanding of the effects of trauma is now much more sophisticated than it was ten years ago. Consequently, someone whose practice relies on ideas that are not open to revision and development is likely to have a lesser level of understanding of trauma than could otherwise be the case.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Imagine being in a situation where you and/or your family needed help from a professional. How comfortable would you feel if that person were to say that they have no interest in their professional knowledge base, that they just rely on (their version of) common sense?

So, when people say things like: 'I am not interested in theory, I am only interested in practice', what this amounts to, in effect, is saying: 'I am happy to base my practice on a potentially very dubious knowledge base and I see no point in drawing on the wealth of understanding available to me from my professional knowledge base'.

The idea that we can 'just get on with the job' without considering the ideas and assumptions we are basing our practice on is what I referred to in an earlier text as 'the fallacy of theoryless practice' (Thompson, 2000). All practice is based on understanding, and all understanding is based on ideas. As we have seen, the key question is: How valid are those ideas? This leads on to another important question: How safe and effective will your practice be if you do not know what ideas you are basing it on and you have not satisfied yourself that these are appropriate ideas in the circumstances?

Given the significance of these issues, it is both unfortunate and dangerous that so many people seem to adopt the attitude of 'Forget that college nonsense, you're in the real world now'. Sadly, I have come across many newly qualified workers who have encountered this anti-intellectual attitude, whether directly and explicitly or indirectly and implicitly. It is a worrying indication of a low level of commitment to professionalism (Thompson, 2016b).

I attended a conference many years ago where one of the speakers similarly expressed concern and dismay at the way in which the professional knowledge base is so readily dismissed by so many practitioners. She drew an interesting and powerful parallel with an airline pilot. How many people would be prepared to take a flight if they felt that the pilot was operating on the basis of just their own life experience and paying no heed to what was taught on their pilot training because they preferred to 'stick to practice'?

What it boils down to is that people are complex – common sense is not enough. The idea that, in dealing with complex human problems, with all their different dimensions and all the complex processes that are going on, our everyday knowledge will be enough to equip us to act safely and effectively is clearly a highly questionable one.

Part of the problem, in my view, is that traditionally the relationship between theory and practice has been presented in an unhelpful way. It has fuelled a tendency to separate out theory and practice as two different domains, rather than see them as two sides of the same coin. It is therefore important to reconsider the relationship between theory and practice, and it is to this topic that we now turn.

Applying theory to practice?

The idea that practitioners should 'apply theory to practice' is one that has been a principle of professional education for a very long time. However, in my own work (Thompson, 2017; Thompson and Stepney, 2018) I have challenged this notion. This is because, in my view, it is an artificial expectation. It implies that we begin with theory and then try to fit that into practice, which often amounts to trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

Time and again I have spoken to students, newly qualified workers and experienced practitioners about theory and practice and encountered the same situation: a lack of confidence in being able to 'apply theory to practice', a feeling of being blocked, not knowing where to go next. They were clearly struggling with the idea of putting theory into practice, wondering what it means in a concrete sense.

As an alternative to applying theory I have proposed the idea of 'theorizing practice'. What I mean by this is a process of beginning with practice, a concrete, real-life situation that demands our attention. We then need to look carefully at what our professional knowledge base can tell us about that situation. What insights are available to us from that theory base?

Consider the following scenarios:

- You are dealing with a situation in which alcohol problems are significant? What do you know about the effects of alcohol on individuals, families and groups? How can alcohol-related problems exacerbate (and be exacerbated by) other problems? What pitfalls are we aware of in relation to addressing alcohol-related problems?

- You become suspicious that one of the people you are working with is being abused. What indicators of abuse are you aware of? What are you required to do in line with the relevant safeguarding procedures? What do you know

about supporting people through abusive situations? Might the abuse lead to trauma? What implications might that have for how you respond to the situation?

- You are working with someone whose ethnicity and cultural background are different from your own. What do you need to be aware of in order to ensure that your practice is suitably 'ethnically sensitive'? Might racism be a feature of this situation? How might you know? What would your responsibilities be in order to promote anti-racism?

In all these situation and others, there will also be questions around effective communication; keeping a clear focus on your role; operating within legal, ethical and policy parameters; and various other aspects of professional competence.

In each of these circumstances our practice can be strengthened by drawing on the knowledge base available to us. And this is precisely what I mean by *theorizing* practice, drawing on the relevant aspects of the professional knowledge base in order to cast light on the particular challenges we face.

Instead of taking theory as our starting point and trying to make it fit into practice (as reflected in the traditional notion of applying theory to practice), theorizing practice is premised on making practice our starting point and drawing on the relevant aspects of the knowledge base as required. But how do we know what is relevant? How do we know what is required? That is where critically reflective practice comes in. There are no simple solutions, no formulas to be followed. We need to be able to work things out for ourselves, as professionals. That is why we are now going to focus on critically reflective practice before moving on to look at how that underpins the important notion of professionalism.

Critically reflective practice

Unfortunately, reflective practice is a much-misunderstood concept, and critically reflective practice even more so. Many years ago, Donald Schőn made an important distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schőn, 1983). The former refers to the thinking we need to do while actually engaged in practice – for example, while in discussion with a client or engaged in a meeting. The latter, by contrast, refers to the thinking that is done after the event – reviewing what has happened and trying to learn from it. Unfortunately, what seems to have developed is a major emphasis on the latter at the expense of the former. I suspect that this has happened due to the common tendency for academic institutions and other educational programmes to require learners to produce 'reflective logs' or 'reflective diaries' as evidence of their learning, thereby biasing attention towards reflection-on-action.

This tends to produce a narrow and distorted understanding of reflective practice. A fuller understanding of reflective practice would see it as intelligent, informed practice rooted in professional knowledge, skills and values. Let us look at each of these elements in a little more detail:

- *Intelligent practice* Working in the human services means working with people which means having to manage complexity. And that, in turn, means having to use our intelligence to the full.

- *Informed practice* Not relying on habit, guesswork or just copying others. Uninformed practice is generally dangerous practice.

- *Professional knowledge* We have a significant knowledge base to draw on. It will not provide magic answers, but it will put us in a much stronger position when it comes to making sense of the situations we are called upon to deal with.

- *Professional skills* Effectiveness in our work relies on a wide range of skills. There is no point having them if we do not use them. Being aware of them and developing them over time can make a huge difference to the quality of our practice.

- *Professional values* Values can be the difference between safe and dangerous practice and between good practice and optimal practice. As with skills, being aware of our values and developing them over time can make a huge difference to the quality of our practice.

A well-established concept in nurse education that captures well the idea of reflective practice is that of 'knowledgeable doers', a phrase that also captures well the notion of theorizing practice.

Reflective practice is important because the problems we encounter in the human services are often not simple or straightforward – they are what are sometimes referred to as 'wicked' problems (Clarke and Stewart, 1997). Wicked problems cannot be solved by straightforward processes – they need a well-thought-through, well-informed approach. That is, they require reflective practice. As I have put it many times while running courses on reflective practice: it is not painting by numbers. Indeed, this is what makes it a *professional* undertaking, a point I shall return to below.

But what of *critically* reflective practice? Being critical means being prepared to question and not take things at face value. This applies to our thinking in general, but also specifically to issues relating to discrimination and oppression. Critically reflective practice is therefore the foundation for emancipatory forms of practice, for tackling discrimination and oppression, promoting equality and social justice and valuing diversity. It involves questioning dominant ideologies that reinforce existing power relations of dominance and subordination. In this regard, it is an

extension of the idea of intelligent, informed practice rooted in knowledge, skills and values.

When it comes to theorizing practice, critically reflective practice is clearly a firm basis for such an undertaking.

Professionalism

At one time the term ‘professional’ was largely assumed to refer to the ‘traditional’ professions, such as law, medicine and architecture, even though the term was also used to refer to a wide range of activities that were on a paid basis, as opposed to ‘amateur’: professional footballer, professional photographer, and so on. So, there has always been a degree of flexibility about how the term is used. It is therefore important to be clear about how we are using the term ‘professional’.

In particular, I want to focus on two aspects, first the contrast between bureaucracy and professionalism and, second, the key characteristics of what I shall refer to as *authentic* professionalism.

Bureaucracy refers to systems of work that involve staff following set procedures. The scope for variation, flexibility or tailoring responses to specific needs and circumstances is minimal. Order and efficiency are important, of course, especially in circumstances of scarce resources and high demand. However, an over-extension of bureaucracy is dangerous, as it leaves little or no room for human complexity. A bureaucratic approach is one that focuses on standardization, resource minimization and predictable processes and outcomes. It has its value, but also limitations.

Professionalism, by contrast, involved drawing on knowledge, skills and values to equip us to handle the variable, unpredictable *human* elements of our work. It fits with the idea of critically reflective practice and the recognition that what we do has to be more than ‘painting by numbers’.

Anyone who attempts to practise in the human services by simply relying on bureaucratic processes, without any attempt to draw on professional knowledge, skills and values is likely to be not only far less effective, but also positively dangerous.

Another important aspect of the contrast between bureaucracy and professionalism is the key role of professional development. Bureaucracy is geared towards stability and is therefore inherently conservative and thus a block to innovation and development. Professionalism, by contrast, is premised on continuous development (CPD), constantly seeking to do better and achieve more. Indeed, one of the expectations of a professional is that we improve over time. Someone with, say, two years' experience should be better at their job than they were after only one year's experience. The longer we have been around, the more we should be able to offer. Professionalism is therefore dynamic, while bureaucracy, by its very nature, is static.

Traditional forms of professionalism were characterized by a degree of elitism and a 'we know best' attitude. However, as I have argued previously (Thompson, 2016b), this is not an inherent part of professionalism. We can, instead, promote forms of professionalism that are participatory, egalitarian and empowering. This is precisely what I mean by *authentic* professionalism, an approach to our work that goes beyond the limitations of bureaucracy, but without falling into the trap of elitism and the potential abuse and misuse of power associated with traditional understandings of the professional role. It is a professionalism that is consistent with social work values.

The organizational context

The relationship between theory and practice does not exist in a vacuum. The organizational context in which we work can have a significant bearing. This is because different organizations have different approaches to learning, reflective practice and the use of the professional knowledge base.

A key concept here is that of organizational culture. A culture is a set of habits, unwritten rules and taken-for-granted assumptions. They are very powerful in their ability to influence not just individuals, but teams, sections and indeed whole organizations. That influence can be positive or negative and is generally a mixture of the two.

Organizational cultures can vary in a number of ways across a number of dimensions. But, for present purposes, we should limit ourselves to considering just the following:

- *Learning* Workplace cultures can range from very supportive of learning and development at one extreme to strongly discouraging of it at the other. Sadly, it is a feature of some cultures that learning appears to be seen as a threat, as something undesirable. Such cultures are generally characterized by a high degree of cynicism and negativity,

- *Reflective practice* The impetus to 'get on with the job' can be a very strong message in some workplace cultures. Thinking, planning and learning in such cultures are likely to be frowned upon, seen as a waste of time, rather than an invaluable and positive use of time. Thankfully, there are also cultures that encourage and support reflective practice, recognizing the dangers of 'pressing on' without thinking carefully and wisely about the situations we are dealing with.

- *Use of theory* Similarly, there are cultures that see theory and professional knowledge as having no place in the 'real world', oblivious to the important role of theoretical knowledge in casting light on the human complexities that are characteristic of our work. More positive cultures, by contrast, recognize that an ill-informed approach to practice is a dangerous one.

- *Professionalism* Some degree of bureaucracy is inevitable in any organization, but some cultures are dominated by bureaucracy, leaving little or no room for professionalism, despite the high price that is to be paid for such a limited approach. Other cultures manage to keep bureaucracy within safe limits and encourage a professional approach that allows staff to grow and develop, to become more confident and more effective.

So, in order to develop a fuller understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, we need to 'tune in' to the organizational context and consider to what extent it is helping or hindering opportunities for theorizing practice.

Advanced practice

'Advanced practice' is a deceptive term, in the sense that it seems at first glance to be simple and straightforward, when in reality it is quite complex. This is because what counts as advanced practice will depend on a number of factors: the type of work involved, the setting and so on.

If we are constantly learning, then this week's practice should be better than last week's, even if only marginally so at times. So, one characteristic of advanced practice is continuous learning and development. This week's practice is an advance on last week's practice.

Advanced practice also implies an advanced level of knowledge, skills and values:

- *Knowledge* Where people are concerned, there is always more we can learn, always opportunities to broaden or deepen our understanding. In this regard, advanced practice means having a knowledge that goes beyond 'the basics', well beyond the bare minimum we need to get by.

- *Skills* Working in the human services involves a wide range of skills. Some of these are 'people skills', the basics of which we tend to learn as part of our upbringing. For example, the vast majority of people learn basic nonverbal communication skills at an early age. However, there is much to be gained from taking our nonverbal communication skills to a much more advanced level – in terms of both (i) being able to 'read' body language; and (ii) use it to good effect (for example, putting people at ease when they are distressed or agitated).

- *Values* These are at the heart of professional practice, but they are also very complex. The fuller our understanding of values is, the better equipped we are to deal with the subtleties that we might otherwise miss.

When we combine all three of these, what we are also likely to get is an increased level of confidence. This can apply in two senses, the confidence we have in ourselves and the confidence others have in us (that is, our credibility). Both these forms of confidence can help us to achieve much higher standards of practice and therefore much better results. They can also be a source of pride and job satisfaction.

In a sense, being an advanced practitioner is a logical extension of professionalism. As professionals we should not be settling for doing a 'good enough job'; we should be aiming to do the best we can. We owe it to ourselves, our profession and, of course, the people we serve, to aim for the best results and not just acceptable ones. Being an advanced practitioner is therefore, it could be said, a matter of achieving our full potential as professionals.

Conclusion

In a short e-book like this it is not possible, of course, to provide a comprehensive picture of the relationship between theory and practice. However, I hope you will feel that it has succeeded in providing an overview of some of the key factors we need to take into consideration if we are to develop a fuller, more adequate understanding of not only the relationship between theory and practice, but also why it is important not to lose sight of theory, not to allow ourselves to become disconnected from our professional knowledge base.

'Getting on with the job' is, of course, important. The work we do in the human services is important and worthwhile, so we have to make sure that it gets done. However, what is often not appreciated is that time spent on learning, critically reflective practice and developing professionalism is an *investment* of time, not a cost. We should get that time back – with interest – if we are able to ensure that it makes us more effective, more confident, more creative, more open to learning and less prone to stress.

The problem comes when we 'just' get on with the job, when we bypass our professional knowledge base (and, in the process, bypass our professional values, with all the dangers that entails). 'Just' getting on with the job means 'just' reacting to the demands made on us, 'just' following habits, 'just' doing what others around us do, 'just' trying to guess what the best way forward is, 'just', in effect being culture victims. By culture victims what I mean is allowing the culture in which we work to be a stronger influence than our professional knowledge, skills and values.

It is to be hoped that this short guide will motivate you to find out more, to look at these issues more closely and more thoroughly. That is why you will find a guide to further reading below. It is also to be hoped that the combination of what you have learned here and what you can go on to learn through further study will play a part in enabling you to fulfil your potential and achieve the best results possible – that is, to be an advanced practitioner.

Recommended reading

My own work that is relevant to the issues discussed here includes:

Thompson, N. (2016) *The Professional Social Worker*, 2nd edn, Palgrave.
Thompson, N. (2017) *Theorizing Practice*, 2nd edn, London, Palgrave.
Thompson, N. and Stepney, P. (eds) (2018) *Social Work Theory and Methods: The Essentials*, New York: Routledge.
Thompson, S. and Thompson, N. (2018) *The Critically Reflective Practitioner*, 2nd edn, London, Palgrave.

Other relevant texts include:

Cribb, A. and Gewirtz, S. (2015) *Professionalism,* Cambridge, Polity.
Duyvendak, J. W., Knijn, T. and Kremer, M. (eds) (2006) *Policy, People, and the New Professional: De-Professionalisation and Re-Professionalisation in Care and Welfare*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.
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Learn with Neil Thompson!

Neil has over thirty years' experience of helping people learn. This includes supervising students on placement, supervising staff, university teaching, running training courses, speaking at conferences, writing articles, books and training manuals, developing DVDs and e-learning courses and developing and running an innovative online learning community based on principles of self-directed learning. He is committed to learning because it empowers us and makes us better equipped to play a part in helping others to empower themselves. In short, learning enriches our lives and helps us to enrich the lives of others.

Neil has produced a range of **e-learning courses**, including:

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NB There is a free course available on *Making a Difference* www.avenuemediasolutions.com/shop

He also runs the **Avenue Professional Development Programme**, a subscription-based online learning community geared towards promoting reflective practice. Its facilities include:

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*** There is more information available at www.apdp.org.uk ***

Connect with Neil online!

Neil has a strong online presence. Feel free to connect with him in any or all of the following ways:

- Website and blog: www.NeilThompson.info
- E-newsletter www.humansolutions.org.uk
- Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/drneilthompson/
- Facebook Social Work Focus Group
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- LinkedIn https://www.linkedin.com/in/drneilthompson/
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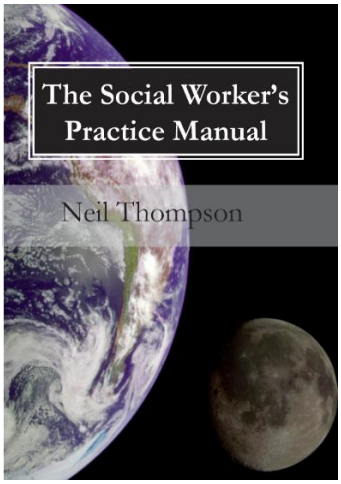

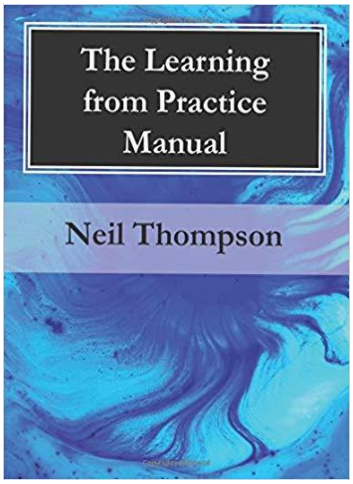

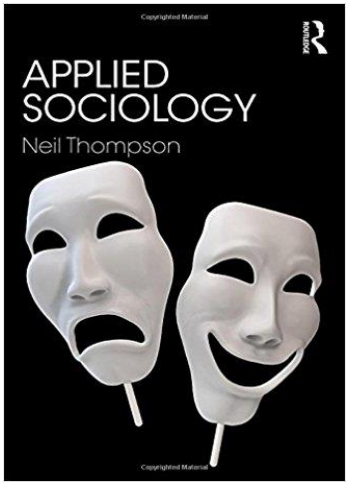

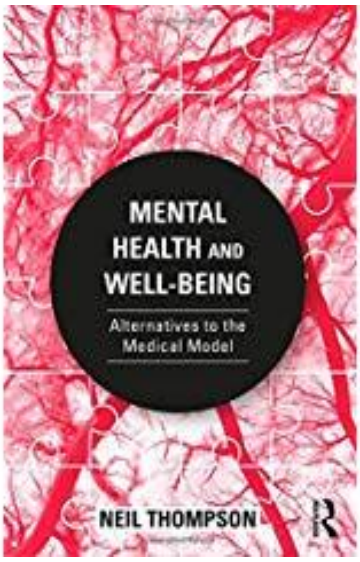

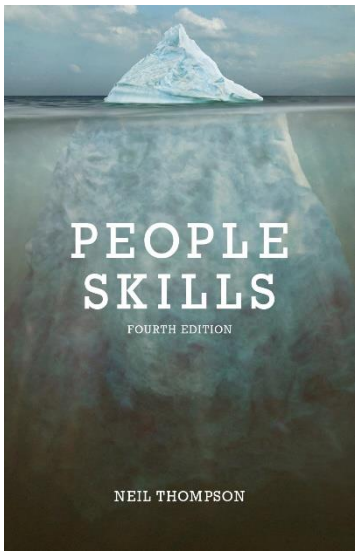

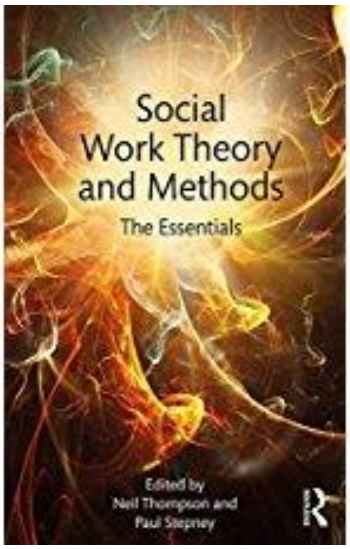

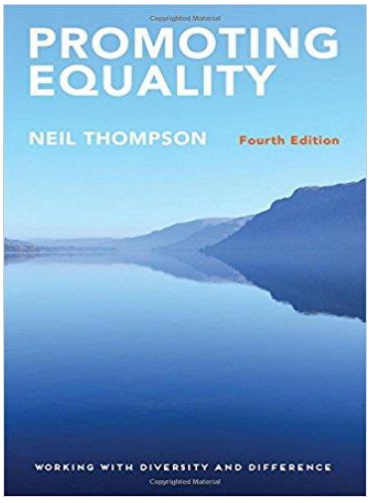

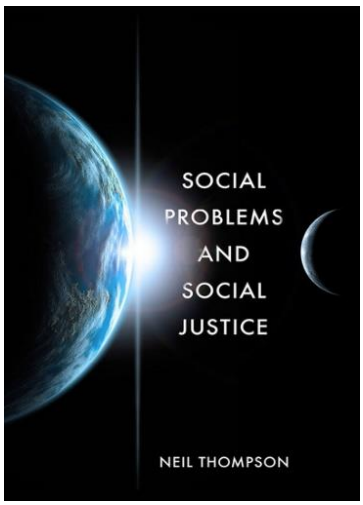

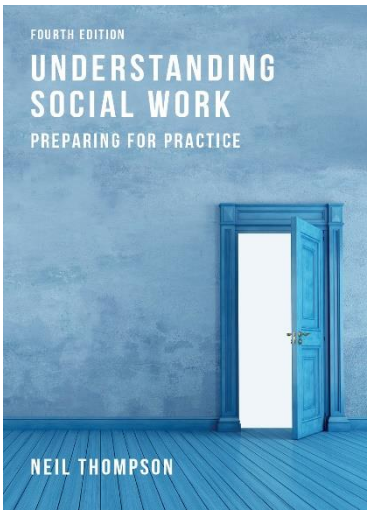

Other Avenue Media Solutions learning resources

Practice manuals

Thompson, N. (2018) *The Social Worker's Practice Manual.*
Thompson, N. (2019) *The Learning from Practice Manual.*
Thompson, S. (2019) *The Care of Older People Practice Manual.*

Other titles are in preparation.

E-books

Mann, H. (2013) *Sleep and Sleep Disorders: A Brief Introduction.*
Mann, H. (2016) *The Cancer Challenge: Coping with Cancer When Someone You Love is Diagnosed.*
Thompson, N. (2012) *Effective Teamwork: How to Develop a Successful Team.*
Thompson, N. (2013) *Effective Writing.*
Thompson, N. (2015) *How to do Social Work.*
Thompson, N. (2015) *Stress Matters: Keeping Stress at Bay.*
Thompson, N. (2016) *Tackling Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace.*
Thompson, N. (2016) *A Career in Social Work.*

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