WHAT’S THE POINT OF LEARNING PRACTICE THEORY?
• In every kind of professional practice—policing social work, teaching, law, you name it—we are confronted by situations in which we must act but lack adequate information to do so with confidence.
• On the front end, practice theory enables us to see what isn’t visible.
• Imagine you’re going to drive from L.A. to New York and you have your choice of directions on how to make the drive:
  1. One set of directions is what you get off your car’s GPS unit—turn-by-turn with mileage markers and signage between turns.
  2. The second set of directions includes the usual GPS information, but additionally provides detailed descriptions of mountains, rivers, deserts, and forests, and all the different kinds of weather you may encounter—and it provides the best ways to drive successfully through these conditions, even though you can’t see them when you start out.
  3. The second set of directions work like practice theory: seeing, preparing for, and even influencing what’s not even visible at the outset.
• On the back end, practice theory defines specific professional roles that powerfully enable us to influence behavior and action.

IN OUR LAST SESSION WE VIEWED A FILM THAT SHOWED HOW “THE DEMOCRATIC PROMISE” IS BROUGHT TO LIFE.
• In effect, we saw what ordinary people have to do and why they do it to build the power required to hold political and economic institutions accountable, so that they serve the interests of the commonweal.
• What the film doesn’t show in any detail is why people did what they did—we did not see the underlying dynamics of the action.
• For example, we saw a leader in the East Brooklyn organization:
  1. He defined himself as an ordinary guy who was stepping up to a leadership role.
  2. We have a sense of what he had to do and even why he was doing it.
3. He had to chair a meeting of maybe a thousand people with the mayor of New York.
4. But what we don’t know is how he was persuaded and prepared to take on such a responsibility.

- How would most of us respond, under those circumstances, if asked to chair such a meeting?
  1. Who me?!
  2. I don’t have any experience of doing anything like that.
  3. I’d make a mess of it.
  4. I wouldn’t know what to say or do.

- To understand how he became a leader, and to understand hundreds of other behind-the-scenes dynamics of the story, is why we bother with practice theory.

- Practice theory enables us not only to understand what happened when we can’t see all the behavioral dynamics, but it enables us to make things happen in the future.

LET’S SAY YOU’RE INTERESTED IN SOCIAL CHANGE

- Your starting place is that you see a social condition.
- In this example, the condition is that in the last 50 years the State of California’s share of higher education costs have gone from roughly about 80 percent and the students’ share about 20 percent to the students paying about 80 percent of the costs and the state paying about 20 percent.
- To the extent that large numbers of people—students, faculty, administrators, parents, and many others—have begun to talk about this condition, they have concluded that it adversely affects their interests in critical ways, thus transforming this social condition into a social problem.
- They have decided to fight against the trend of placing ever-increasing costs of higher education on the students and, possibly, even reversing the trend.
- Of course, there are constituencies—Republican members of the California Legislature, homeowners’ associations, various anti-tax organizations, and many Anglo taxpayers who simply don’t want to pay for what they see as an education system mainly devoted to minorities—who are prepared to fight against spending more tax money on higher education.
So we have an issue in contention: Shall California continue to place the increase costs of education on the students or stop doing so and even reverse that trend?

As we move through the theoretical material, it may be helpful to use the unified theory schematic to keep tract of where we are and where we’re going.

Practice theory begins by defining the “Field of Action”—the arena of social change, the principal players in that arena, and the forces that govern their actions.

• In the example here, the arena is the statewide political stage.
• The primary players are all those already identified:
  1. Students, faculty, and administrators
  2. Members of the California Legislature
  3. Various anti-tax organizations
  4. Conservative political constituencies

The practical value of acquiring theoretical knowledge is gained by internalizing the theory.

• Getting any real value out of theoretical knowledge requires two things:
  1. One has to study it intensively enough to fully understand and mentally incorporate the concepts.
  2. And one has to use the theory and act on the theoretical knowledge.
• In a way, it has to become the lens through which one normally sees and acts the world.
• The idea is summed up in a Buddhist teaching: “To know and not to do, is not really to know.”

The challenge in devising practice theory to explain the field of action is how to make it cover the full spectrum of practice experience, doing our day-to-day professional work.

• On the one hand, the theory has to cover phenomena from the micro to macro—we have to understand the behavior of individuals, groups, organizations, whole institutions, and communities.
• On the other hand, the theory has to explain psychological, sociological, political, and economic phenomena.
• Suppose, for example, that four individuals observe the interactions of a dysfunctional community—first a psychologist, then a sociologist, then an economist, and finally a political scientist.
1. Do all four observers see the same thing and reach the same conclusions about what they observe?
2. Certainly now, but we nonetheless acknowledge that they all possess some insight and understanding regarding what they’re observing.
• Yet we see that theories that explain one of these dimensions ordinarily ignore the others.
• And not uncommonly, the various theories to which we’re exposed conflict with one another.

AS AN UNDERGRADUATE IN SOCIOLOGY, I WAS EXPOSED TO A MIND-BOGGLING NUMBER OF THEORIES—MOST OF WHICH I COULDN’T APPLY IN ANY MEANINGFUL WAY AFTER GRADUATION WHEN I BEGAN PROFESSIONAL WORK.
• Many years later I discovered that virtually all the theory I had learned was not geared for practice—first as a deputy probation officer, and much later as a community organizer.
• I also discovered that much of it was stage or linear theory, and the stages described by these theories didn’t correspond to most of the situations I was encountering in my day-to-day work.
• When I began to work as a community organizer, before getting my MSW, I discovered that the field was almost entirely devoid of systematic practice theory.
  1. People occasionally used theoretical “fragments,” like making references to someone’s ego or to an elitist power structure in a community.
  2. But the only concepts that remotely had broader theoretical applications were self-interests and values—in effect, that people were acting out of their self-interests or because of their values.
  3. I found both concepts useful in practice, but they are hugely overgeneralized.
• In my MSW and doctoral programs I had the good fortune to learn from Warren Haggstrom at UCLA and Eileen Gambrill at UC Berkeley.
  1. Warren exposed me to the world of phenomenology and the social construction of reality, which focuses on what things mean.
  2. Eileen guided me into the world of behaviorism, which focuses on studying the variables associated with observable behavior.
• Once I had been fully immersed in both of those theoretical worlds a number of questions occurred to me:
  1. What did the proponents of each world think of the other world?
  2. How did the literature of each world relate to the other?
  3. What were the practical connections between the applications of the two theoretical worlds?
• For the most part, trying to get answers to those questions was a frustrating and disappointing experience.
  1. Each of my professors would acknowledge the existence of his or her theoretical counterpart.
  2. But the main thing, each would insist, was his or her theoretical world and its explanations.
• It occurred to me that several of these theoretical perspectives were valid—each revealed important dimensions of the phenomena they observed, analyzed, and predicted.
• But the various theoretical perspectives didn’t captivate me, because I didn’t have any partisan academic interest in either world—I was a practitioner, not a theoretician.
  1. I had a practical problem, which was how to provide a comprehensive theoretical explanation for the field of action in which I worked.
  2. The explanation would have to illuminate every dimension of the action field—not only the psychological and sociological dimensions of the field, but the political and economic ones as well.
  3. Moreover, the explanation would have to account not only for behavioral and phenomenological forces, but their dynamic relationship.
  4. In other words, it’s insufficient to say that people in a certain situation may be acting because of rewards they receive or because of their ideologies—which are behavioral and phenomenological explanations—but if both of those forces are operating, we need to understand their relationship to one another.
  5. I learned from experience that when I tried to use a grab-bag of theories to explain the action field of my work, without reconciling their potentially conflicting empirical foundations and applications, I was hard-pressed to pick one theory over another.
  6. One theory often seemed as good as another under the circumstances, but typically they couldn’t be used together.
• So my question was, assuming that all of these theories are valid, how are they related to one another?
THE CHALLENGE WAS HOW TO FORMULATE A *UNIFIED THEORY* THAT INTEGRATES BEHAVIORAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEORIES TO EXPLAIN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF THE ACTION FIELD.

- So the approach we’re going to cover integrates four theoretical models: social learning, social exchange, social construction of reality, and social development—which are shown on the Unified Theory Schematic.
  1. The first three theories—social learning, social exchange, and the social construction of reality—cover the psychological and sociological dimensions of the action field and give rise to a dialectic of social action, which I’ll talk about in a few minutes.
  2. The fourth theory—social development—covers the political and economic dimensions of the action field and gives rise to a prescription for organizing and developing social infrastructure.
  3. So we’ll consider now the essentials of the first three theories and what I call the “dialectic of social action.”

- Think again of the statewide arena of organizations and institutions that are on the two sides of the issue of who will carry the burden of higher education costs—about which we have four particular interests. Here’s what we need explanations for in professional practice:
  1. The behavior of individuals;
  2. The actions of aggregates or collectivities;
  3. The effects of accumulations and flows of power—i.e., resources; and
  4. The effects of phenomenological meanings—i.e., realities.

- The unified theory, as already noted, draws together and unifies four paradigmatic social science theories:
  1. Social learning theory;
  2. Social exchange theory;
  3. Social construction of reality theory; and
  4. Social development theory.

**WE START WITH LEARNING THEORY AND ITS EXPLANATIONS OF INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR.**

- Learning theory draws together the three waves of behaviorism: (a) Pavlov’s stimulus-response, (b) Skinner’s operant behavior, and (c) the work of cognitive theorists such as Bandura and Mahoney.
- The shorthand for these three behavioral explanations is cues, cognitions, and consequences—which together make up the social learning contingencies.
• In other words, we see that behavior is contingent on cues that precede it in time, cognition (i.e., thinking and knowing that mediates environmental variables), and consequences that follow behavior.
• On the Dialectic of Social Action diagram, you can see that Social Learning is a source of behavioral contingencies.
• The theory is particularly powerful because its empirical foundation is studies of laboratory animals and human individuals and small groups—which also limits it usefulness for macro applications, leading us to exchange theory.

EXCHANGE THEORY BECOMES RELEVANT AS AN EXPLANATION WHEN TWO OR MORE PEOPLE ARRANGE THE CONTINGENCIES OF ONE ANOTHER’S BEHAVIOR—WHICH WE DEFINE AS AN EXCHANGE.
• So exchange theory focuses on collective action.
• It identifies a number of contingencies for collective action, but we’ll only take time to examine three of them: conditions of power, declining marginal utilities, and distributive injustices.

1. The first exchange contingency is the conditions of power imbalance and dependence:
   — If we have attractive resources of our own at the start, we may trade what we have for what we want—engage in reciprocal exchange.
   — If without attractive resources to trade, but alternative sources exist, we may obtain the needed resources elsewhere—opt for new exchange partners.
   — In the absence of optional partners, we may try to use coercion to get what we want—initiate conflict (“negative reciprocity”).
   — Unable to manage that, we may resign ourselves to do without.
   — If none of these possibilities are workable, compliant subordination may be the only means to obtain the needed resources.
   — Logic dictates the conditions of power balance and independence:
     (a) possession of strategic resources, (b) presence of alternative exchange partners, (c) ability to coerce, and (d) capacity to forego satisfaction.

2. The second exchange contingency is declining marginal utility:
   — Measuring value by quantity is reflected in the principle that, the more we have of something, the less we value possession of still greater quantities.
   — This “declining marginal utility” in exchange corresponds to deprivation and satiation in social learning.
—From the “benefactor’s” perspective, as the supply of resources decreases, the value placed on each additional expenditure goes up.
—The two effects converge to reduce benefits for all participants, with the relationship ending when rewards diminish below what each partner expects to gain from the next most valued activity available.

3. The third exchange contingency is **distributive injustice**: The opposite, **distributive justice**, refers to fairness in the distribution of rewards and costs for all participants in an exchange.
—The basic rule is that parties to exchanges expect rewards in proportion to costs, and overall, long-term rewards in proportion to their total investments—for everyone.
—The question is whether one party is able to impose a “hard bargain,” forcing the other into an unfair exchange, by monopolizing something of value—think all of us versus the oil companies.
—Within organizations, communities, and institutions, the value of rewards we receive should be in proportion to the value we contribute in all areas.
—In terms of individuals, distributive justice is reinforcing in itself—in effect, when things are distributed justly, social cooperation and productivity are improved.
—When things are monopolized, demands by those in a superior position become excessive, and the result is unjust distribution.
—This failure has an emotional impact on all participants—“winners” are elated; “losers” are angry and resentful.
—Distributive injustice leads not only to emotional reactions, but also to broad social movements aimed at avoiding the same fate in the future.
—Communication among the victims—the face-to-face talk that goes on in communities—generates retaliatory aggression toward established power, a tendency intensified by talking about common injuries.
—The shared discontent leads to opposition movements and their ideologies.

• On the Dialectic of Social Action diagram, you can see that Social Exchange is a second source of behavioral contingences, along with social learning.
• And as you can see, the behavioral contingencies function as incentives to create realities, which we’ll talk about in a moment.
BOTH SOCIAL LEARNING THEORISTS AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORISTS CONCENTRATE ON BEHAVIORAL CONTINGENCIES.

• When pressed, however, they’ll acknowledge that meanings also play a role in explaining individual behavior and social action, but the “main thing,” they tell us, is the behavioral contingency.

• One doesn’t have to be a molecular biologist to figure out that meanings are very important, because there are too many things—*contradictory social phenomena*—that we can’t explain relying exclusively on behavioral contingencies.

• For example, behavioral contingencies—to oversimplify, rewards and punishments—alone can’t explain soldiers who reenlist after already serving four or five tours of duty in Iraq.

• The explanation lies in what things mean to them.

AND THAT BRINGS US TO THEORY FOR THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY.

• The basic idea here is that what we call “reality” is a social construction, that is, it’s created in the course of social history and shared language experience.

1. The simplest way to demonstrate the idea is to describe one of the ways in which I’ve used the theory in practice, when I brought together 35 or 40 leaders after a major action in which they confronted the mayors of two major Orange County cities.

2. The process has three stages: externalization, objectification, and internalization.

3. The realities are essentially ideological—they incorporate valued beliefs about right and wrong, friends and enemies, winning and losing, loving and hating.

4. In other words, they give meaning to every aspect of social life.

5. The ideological realities are *grounded in roles and institutions*, which are internalized and transmitted to successive generations through *socialization*, and become reified in time—e.g., you as “powerless students.”

• On the Dialectic of Social Action diagram, you can see that the Social Construction of Reality functions to lend meaning to contingencies.

• Theorists who concentrate on phenomenology, like behavioral theorists, tend to stay within their own theoretical world.

1. When pressed, they’ll acknowledge that behavioral contingencies, like rewards and punishments, also play a role in individual behavior and social action—but the “main thing,” they tell us, is what things mean.
2. It’s obvious that both behavioral contingencies and phenomenological realities have a piece of the “truth,” and, if that’s true, that somehow their pieces must fit together—which they do.

SO NOW, LOOKING AT THE DIAGRAM, YOU CAN BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THE DIALECTIC OF SOCIAL ACTION.

• When we ask why people engage in the mundane activities required to construct social meanings, we see half of a dialectical relationship.
• That is, without behavior contingencies, people don’t behave in ways that create ideological realities.
• Consider the leaders who meet after an action to pressure a politician and they construct a shared ideological reality: why do they do it? (There are numerous behavioral contingencies—in effect, rewarding outcomes they understand for creating a shared ideological reality.)
• Then if we ask ourselves how people know the meaning of behavioral contingencies, we see the other half of a dialectical relationship.
• That is, contingencies have no effect without attached meanings.
• Consider a rent increase for tenants of an apartment building.
• Is that a rewarding or punishing contingency—and how do we know which it is?
• We only know the effect of that contingency by virtue of knowing its socially constructed meaning—the effect for tenants is negative, while the effect for the owner is positive, because we know the meanings they have ascribed to the rent increase.

WITH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE ACTION FIELD SKETCHED IN, WE MOVE ON TO SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY, WHICH DESCRIBES THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS, IS ALSO SHOWN ON THE UNIFIED THEORY SCHEMATIC.

• The cases, commentaries, and concepts that form the foundation of social development theory incorporate both behavioral and phenomenological perspectives.
• While behavior and phenomenological theories implicitly suggest practice roles and methods, social development theory is explicitly prescriptive in its specifying professional goals and objectives.
• Unlike linear or stage-like economic development theories, social development theory proposes human advancement on many fronts simultaneously.
• The main social development tasks are production in non-industrialized countries and redistribution in industrialized nations.
• Since redistribution in industrialized nations is a condition for their own social development and a precondition for the development of non-industrialized nations, we are primarily interested in the conditions for redistribution.
• Three strategies are typically proposed to achieve redistribution:
  1. Transfer payments, which is a form of distribution that reinforces relations of power;
  2. Revolutionary transfer of political and economic assets, which has a dismal track record for achieving redistribution; and
  3. Building social infrastructure, the local foundation of national political-economic enterprise for producing public goods—the “input” and “output” organizations and their culture, which requires the presence of empowered roles to succeed.
• So development for us requires organizing social infrastructure as the method to institutionalize roles for social self-management, democratizing the society, if you will, and to achieve redistribution, restructuring the society’s resources.
• Neither the democratizing nor the restructuring leads the development, but they reinforce one another in a process of “continual mutual causation.”
• In this conception, not only the terminal benefits are important, but also the method of change is also critical.
• The main political and economic functions of infrastructure are “public space” and “public enterprise.”
• Other manifest functions are planning, service, juridical, and religious.
• The latent functions of social infrastructure are socio-maintenance (reality construction and socialization) and socio-therapy (personality development and social bonding).
• Sponsors’ influence on the ideology of infrastructure organizations dictates bottom-up sponsorship—grassroots legitimization and funding—for redistributive development.

LET’S LOOK AT THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE THEORY-BASED ROLES SUGGESTED BY THESE FOUR MAJOR THEORIES, WHICH YOU CAN SEE ON THE UNIFIED THEORY SCHEMATIC.
• This is where the theoretical rubber meets the road—where some of the most valuable practical use of theory comes into play.
• The roles suggested by these major theories are really the practical guidelines for influencing behavior—whether of citizens, clients, convicts, or whomever—in the course of your professional work.

• *Learning theory suggests modeling*—that is, teaching by serving as a model or presenting models (in contrast, for example, to exhortation), for which extensive techniques are spelled out in the professional literature.
  1. Models may be for organizational *structure, processes,* or *instrumental* objectives.
  2. Models may apply to behavior or action on a *micro level,* say motivating people to pitch in on a project by setting an example; *mezzo level,* for instance using a role-play to illustrate negotiation techniques; and *macro level,* such as proposing a multi-state chapter development plan.
  3. Often we try to influence the behavior of others by arguing with them, exhorting them (“you really oughta wanna”), and threatening them—but research and practice both show that modeling is much more effective, especially when we *personally* model the desired behavior.

• *Exchange theory* informs the macro practitioner’s role in identifying and influencing accumulations and flows of resources with the following aims and tasks:
  1. Analysis, prediction, and intervention; and
  2. Pinpointing of and agitating around conditions of power, declining marginal utilities, and distributive injustices.

• *Reality construction* theory centers on the definition of the practitioner’s role as *demiourgos*—the “creator of worlds”: (a) facilitating understanding of reality as an ideologically biased social construction and (b) orchestrating the development of new ideological realities that serve the broad public interest—suggesting the following tasks:
  1. Keeping track of and retelling *organizational history*;
  2. *Identifying potential causes* of important events and focusing on those that provide the most organizational mileage;
  3. *Mediating the post-action consensual validation* of ideological meanings that are critical to organizational movement and progress; and
  4. *Shattering the consensual validations* of opponents.

• *Social development theory* prescribes that macro practitioners forego revolutionary and electoral strategies (using the latter only tactically) in favor of *organizing social infrastructure*—with the following aims:
1. Bottom-up-sponsored organizing that politically and economically empowers the general citizenry.
2. Displacement of planning and service delivery from domination of top-down public and private bureaucratic institutions and interests.
3. Development of demand-driven planning and service delivery institutions that are responsive to want defined from the bottom up rather than need defined from the top down.
4. Ultimately developing institutions of direct self-governance as the lowest tier in the federal and state system.