In this issue, Judith K. Englehart, a practicing administrator, argues that theory and practice are two halves of a whole. She rejects the idea that theory need be considered irrelevant to day-to-day practice. Englehart suggests that in fact administrators do theorize, whether they are aware of doing so or not; often “hidden theories” in policies “shape practitioner actions without their conscious awareness.” It may be the scientific model of theory that is putting administrators off, because this type of theory seems to hold itself above the field of practice. But, by broadening our definitions of theory, the field may be able to rejoin theory with practice, and by doing so contribute both to advancing knowledge and to producing knowledgeable public sector leaders.

The editors welcome submissions for possible publication in “The Reflective Practitioner.” We are particularly interested in articles that explore ways in which theory and/or research did or did not inform practical situations in public agencies. Please send articles for consideration to Camilla Stivers, associate editor (camilla@wolf.csuohio.edu).

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The Marriage between Theory and Practice

The idea of a dichotomy between theory and the professional practice of public administration is a confusing enigma to this well-seasoned social work management practitioner, currently administering a public human service agency. Over 20 years, my practice has been both as a social worker and as an administrator in public agencies. Both my education in the management of social work organizations and the actual practice of my profession have led me to the belief that theory and practice are two halves of a whole.

The assumption that practice does not need theory is tantamount to setting sail in a ship without first possessing knowledge of navigation. How would one know that she or he had arrived when there is no course established? How would one know the pitfalls of the journey or even learn from others’ journeys when little thought or consideration is given to what has gone before?

Practitioners who assume public administration can be effective without parameters set by theory find themselves simply reacting to whatever the day brings. Whatever happens today often seems to have no correlation with similar occurrences nor connection to other parts of the field. The practitioner who does not recognize the impact of theory on finding meaning in situations is a technician—following procedures but failing to understand the deeper “whys,” and lacking the ability to apply the “whys” in other situations. Without an understanding of theory, the public administration practitioner becomes merely the user of a “cookbook,” a step-by-step guide any person of reasonable intelligence could apply. Practice without theory is a hollow exercise and public management without theory is mere tinkering with systems (Timney 1999). The absence of theory within practice greatly diminishes the perception of public administration as a profession.

In a similar way, assuming that theory does not need practice is comparable to setting a course without the ship, confident that the course is right for any ship regardless of its cargo, crew, or ownership. Without practice, where is the ability to field-test? What is there to examine or measure without practice? Do theorists see practice as a “lesser calling?” If there were no administrators, what would theory talk about? Because the brain thinks, is it a more important organ than the heart, which gives it life? The more practitioners recognize the need and role of theory in public administration, the more theorists need to “...devise a mode of theorizing that enhances, rather than destroys, meaning in practice” (Harding 2000, 5).

Clearly, with the ever-increasing complexity of public administration practice and the desperate need to apply practice in a meaningful, innovative, progressive manner, it is time for theorists and practitioners to “kiss and make...
up.” Practitioners and theorists must realize that they are married to each other and have been for quite some time. Even if this marriage is not comfortable for all involved, neither divorce nor separation is possible. Perhaps, while we in public administration are arguing over the virtues of theory versus practice, other professions are finding our domestic dispute rather amusing. The reconciliation between practice and theory for professions like social work and nursing came long ago. Until our reconciliation comes, our status as a profession will remain doubtful.

If theory and practice are not a dichotomy, what is the problem of joining them? Could it be as simple as perception and/or a lack of communication? Do traditional practitioners of public administration believe theorists have nothing of value for those “in the trenches”? Do theorists fear sullying their work with the dirt of those trenches? Are theoretical pearls simply thrown before the swine of practice?

Mary Timney states, “Theory gives practitioners that context and enables them to take a broader view of their functional work” (1999, 3). Theory gives the practitioner’s ship a plethora of navigational courses, frameworks in which new methodology can be applied and tested. Practice is theory-in-place. Theory is practice-to-be, waiting to be enacted. Theory, then, is one’s understanding of the world. Practice is the enactment of that understanding.

Although they seem to reject the idea of theory, in everyday practice public administrators use theory, whether they consciously recognize it or not. Short-term usage of theory when combined with the presenting problem is often dismissed as mere “problem resolution.” Practitioners theorize in this short-term way in order to improve the success of practice (Miller 1999). But they need the long-term view as well.

Theory and Policy

Here is one example of a practitioner theorizing in a short-term manner, while rejecting research that would have given a much-needed bigger picture. In 1998, as a response to the increasing demands of welfare reform, a colleague of mine cooperated with a local business organization to develop what seemed an innovative approach to training public assistance recipients. The program, which gained a great deal of attention for its novel approach to training unskilled laborers for employment, had vehemently rejected an in-depth research review on the subject. Feasibility of the project could have been determined by utilizing the extensive research conducted on economic predictors, as well as specific research into post-depression era governmental leasing of idle factories to “make work” for idled workers. Ironically, a similar program, dubbed the “Ohio Plan” because it was most extensively utilized in that state during the mid 1930s, provided for the lease of factories in which goods were produced by people on relief (Rose 1993). Had the inventor of this welfare reform program studied the research available regarding the Ohio Plan, he might have been able to avoid the pitfalls that beset the first program. Because he did not, the colleague was left with a very expensive building to maintain and no consumer or contractor for products.

Often without acknowledging it, practitioners do review and ponder situations in an attempt to make sense of occurrences. But too often they reject the notion of a more systematic type of theory because, “in the messy swamps of practice, problems are not often amenable to solutions using law like formulae” (Miller and King 1998, 46). The practitioner in the example above may have rejected a research review because he felt it might be too abstract and therefore inapplicable. Clearly though, in the above example of the purchased abandoned factory, the practitioner’s “swampland” got even more messy without the research.

Another example of the need for better understanding of past policies is the current welfare reform effort. Thanks in part to a booming economy, great strides have been made in reducing welfare rolls since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. But perhaps a deeper understanding may be necessary. Experience since the earliest phases of social welfare policy may hold lessons applicable to current efforts. For example, what are the implications of our historic and continued reliance on distinctions between “worthy” and “unworthy” clients? In the year 2001, welfare recipients have an extensive face-to-face interview culminating in a self-sufficiency contract outlining required behavior. In contrast, non-working individuals applying for unemployment insurance may make application and continue benefits via telephone or email from the comfort of their homes. In this context of past history, does welfare reform look a bit less new?

Yet another example from social policy has to do with what gets counted as part of the American welfare state and what gets left out. Although America’s welfare state is often described as limited, this may be because it is usually defined as including only direct expenditures such as social security and welfare, while indirect tools like loans, loan guarantees, and tax expenditures do not count. While direct expenditure programs remain in the hands of traditional social welfare agencies, subject to patterns of inter-
pretation such as “worthy” and “unworthy” that have persisted in this bailiwick for generations, other programs like tax exemptions are not subject to such judgments. If these policies were counted as part of the “welfare state,” average citizens would see themselves as receiving benefits and therefore be less likely to judge other “recipients” harshly. The point in both these examples is that such patterns of interpretation reflect hidden theories in our social policies, ones that shape practitioner actions without their conscious awareness. Would it not be better to draw consciously on theories, to understand that we have choices about which frameworks to subscribe to?

A Variety of Frameworks

Addressing the issue from a practitioner’s perspective, it is difficult to say what creates the perceived rift between theory and practice. Perhaps it is the scientific model of theory that puts off practitioners the most. When faced with the very word “research,” practitioners envision the “slice ‘em, dice ‘em” microscope model used in positivist research. Others see a white robed person floating on a cloud pontificating polysyllables, interspersed with some recognizable words such as “the, and, therefore” but little else familiar. The temptation is to tug on the bottom of the white robe with one’s dirty hands and say, “Excuse me. I’m down here—please look at me. Would you tell me, in plain English, what you are saying so I can use it? Humanity is dying down here.”

These typical practitioner reactions stem from a too-narrow idea of research. There are a multiplicity of research methods and theories to enable a “fit” between theory and practice for any practitioner. Determination of which approach to apply depends upon the needs of the entity initiating the research, the nature of the situation, and the preference, preference, and comfort level of the practitioner. Because of education as a “professional social change agent,” a social worker managing a public agency may prefer critical theory. On the other hand, an accountant in public administration may prefer a by-the-numbers model such as positivism, while a jail administrator may need an interpretive approach. Depending on the situation, the public administrator should find that each theoretical approach has its place.

The positivist approach is one upon which most of us cut our research teeth. Using this approach, a policy scientist, like an engineer or a physician, can tell the most efficient means to achieve an end because “questions of means are resolved into questions of fact” (Fay 1975, 23). The positivist framework is built on the premise that the researcher must be strictly an observer, one who lets the facts speak for themselves. In the interpretive framework, in contrast, interaction between the researcher and the subject matter becomes crucial in order to understand the situation from the point of view of those in it. Finally, from the point of view of the human services professional, critical research is often necessary, especially when legislative action threatens to eradicate a lifetime of professional learning. Like critical theorists, social workers often realize the impact of social conditions over which clients have no control. They seek to interconnect social theory with social practice. These three research approaches have differing implications for practice. But even more important, their existence broadens the menu for practitioners. Therefore to throw aside “theory” as such because it feels uncomfortable is to function solely as a technician. It is not as if practitioners have only one kind of theory on which to draw. They must be well versed in the use of a range of theoretical approaches.

Just as theory challenges the practitioner to a higher pinnacle of skill, practitioners’ increased comfort level with theory permits theories even from outside the realm of public administration to be tested and tried in practice. For example, although social work initially ignored the works of one of its own, Mary Parker Follett, other fields such as public administration recognized her genius and applied it. On the other hand, boundary theory, an important concept in many disciplines, well developed in the physical sciences and in the social and behavioral sciences, is less known and used in public administration or human service administration (Halley 1997).

Conclusion

Only until the practitioner can comfortably approach and utilize theory in practice and the theorist can realize that there is a wealth of knowledge to be gained from the practitioner will the union between the two be blessed. The progeny of this union will be what the field needs most: organizational leaders who are both competent and committed to furthering knowledge in the field, performing at the highest, most effective level of public administration through the understanding and operationalization of theory. Only our own limitations constrain our achievements.

For those who vehemently care about public administration, it is best to heed Michel Foucault: “For us the danger is not that we might fail to become what we are meant to be, but that we might only be what we can see ourselves to be” (quoted in Kajaenman 1991, 93).
References
