Context, Yes - And Theory, Yes

Morton Deutsch

Context, Yes! And Theory, Yes!*

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I admire Carrie Menkel-Meadow's article very much.[1] It reveals her deep and broad knowledge of the field of conflict resolution. It also represents an important and valid emphasis on the necessity of a rich knowledge of specific contexts for applied work in those contexts. However, the article implicitly constructs a false opposition between contextual knowledge and theoretical knowledge; in reality, both are needed. I understand that "practitioners" and "theorists" commonly misunderstand one another because of their different orientations and social roles. In this article, I will discuss these differences and then briefly consider the integration of theory and practice.

I. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE ORIENTATIONS OF THE PRACTITIONER AND THE THEORIST

There are many careers within the conflict resolution field, both academic and applied. These jobs range from theory-oriented and problem-centered researchers, to social scientists and practitioners. These varied careers require many of the same skills and similar basic knowledge, but certain clear-cut differences in the skills and knowledge base are evident in the people who undertake these careers. For the purposes of this article, I have grouped this wide variety of people into two groups, forming a dichotomy between the "theorists" and the "practitioners."

Before turning to a consideration of the differences between these two groups, a brief comment on their similarities is in order. There must be sufficient similarity in knowledge and skills for meaningful two-sided communication to occur between the theorists and practitioners. Each must know the basic theoretical ideas and the basic research methodologies of their discipline, and each must have a grasp of the socio-psychological realities of life in the socio-cultural contexts with which they are concerned. Although practitioners are generally more concerned with particular realities than theorists, practitioners too must use or develop conceptual models which transcend ephemeral particulars if their work is to have anything more than a temporary usefulness. Likewise, while maintaining their focus on developing new theories, theorists too must occasionally reflect on how their ideas transfer into practice in a variety of "real world" contexts.

Nevertheless, there appears to be some characteristic differences in emphasis between specific problem-solving work and theoretical or scientific work. The differences center around several clusters of characteristics: 1) the analytic versus synthetic approach; 2) the skeptical versus pragmatic orientation; 3) the emphasis

1. *See* Carrie Menkel-Meadow, *Correspondences and Contradictions in International and Domestic Conflict Resolution: Lessons from General Theory and Varied Contexts*, 2003 J. DISP. RESOL. 319.

on the "surprising" versus the practical or economic; 4) the relative importance of social skills; 5) the relative importance of self-insight; 6) the relative salience of ethical concerns; and 7) the social status of the scientist and the practitioner.

A. The Analytic versus Synthetic Approach

The practitioner's work involves synthesis, whereas theorists focus on analysis. The former combines variables, while the latter isolates and analyzes them. Practitioners make a collage of theories rather than relying upon any single one, using theories within their particular field while also borrowing freely from other disciplines. For the practitioner, breadth of theoretical knowledge may be more important than precision, consistency, or elegance, even though the opposite is true for the theorist. Moreover, because there are no established procedures for combining theories to fit them to a given problem, practitioners must often work intuitively, without being able to specify precisely how different theoretical ideas are woven together in practice. The practitioner requires flexibility to draw upon a multiplicity of methodological strategies as well as a variety of theoretical paradigms.

The practitioner's approach is more likely to be inductive, starting with the concrete and moving to the general. Practitioners are likely to start their analysis with a focus on the symptoms of difficulties, which become dependent variables to identify and control. On the other hand, theorists are more likely to start with a concept and move toward a concrete exemplification of it, focusing instead on the independent variables and their effects.

B. The Skeptical versus The Pragmatic

Theorists are commonly more critical of their own work than are the practitioners who implement the practical lessons extracted from the theorists' research. Practitioners are rewarded if their methods "work," even if they are not grounded in flawless, peer-reviewed theory. Moreover, practitioners often report that their work has better results when they exhibit a positive, confident attitude; tentativeness undermines the influence of the practitioners' recommendations to their clients. Theorists, on the other hand, know well that the path of scientific progress is littered with discarded ideas and that academic honor often goes to those who help dethrone well-established theories. Thus, it is not surprising that theorists tend to be hesitant, self-critical, and skeptical toward the theory and research that practitioners use with a confident attitude.

C. The Interesting versus The Economic

Theorists' research often gravitates toward the "surprising" or interesting consequences of a theory because a theory's validity seems enhanced by its ability to predict the unexpected. On the other hand, practitioners are necessarily concerned with the mundane and practical – namely, with the aspects of a situation which can be altered with minimum cost to produce the desired consequence. It is remarkable how little attention theorists have paid to this basic need of practitioners. Rarely does theoretical research identify whether different causal variables

are alterable, and it almost never provides information about the relative cost/benefit ratios of various social interventions. In practical work, for example, it is more important to know whether a child's ability to learn may be improved more easily and economically by changing her motivation than by modifying her genes, even though the child's genes might be more influential than her motivation in determining her ability to learn.

D. The Relative Importance of Social Skills

Although the social skills involved in conducting social science research are not trivial, they are minor compared to those necessary for effective applied work. The array of skills required of the practitioner include such basic skills as tact, social poise, and persuasiveness – all of which are necessary to initiate and establish working relations with people whose status, intellectual background, social and cultural values, and interests may be quite different from those of the practitioner. Practitioners also need to be well-versed in higher-level skills, such as creating a sense of trust, respect, and maintaining clarity of the roles established in the relationship between the practitioner and participants.

E. The Relative Importance of Self-Insight

Unlike theorists, conflict resolution practitioners need to have a clear understanding of how they cope with personal problems involving authority, conflict, dependency, and trust. It is evident that practitioners, like psychotherapists, often rely heavily on their subjective impressions in understanding a situation and are more apt to use their impressions effectively if they are attuned to the operation of their own psyches in the conflict resolution process. A well-trained therapist, for example, can use her awareness that she is angry, anxious, bored, or feeling trapped as a clue to understanding what is happening between a patient and herself. Similarly, an insightful practitioner may only become sensitive to the implicit demands being made upon him as he becomes aware of his anxiety about fulfilling his own omnipotent fantasies. Such self-awareness may be useful in formulating problems for theorists, but it is not crucial for the conduct of their research.

F. The Relative Salience of Ethical Concerns

The continuing concern over ethical standards in relation to conducting research on human subjects[2] indicates that conflict resolution theorists must always be attentive to the welfare of the people who participate in their research. However, the theorist is rarely attempting to produce anything more than temporary effects in the persons being studied. Hence, many of the ethical problems in the conflict resolution field center around avoiding even transient negative effects and insuring that the participation of the subjects is based upon their informed consent or the consent of appropriate guardians of the subjects' interests. The power over

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2. *See* ROBERT SOMMER & BARBARA SOMMER, A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO BEHAVIOR RESEARCH: TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES 13-29 (5th ed. 2002).

one's own experiences is best left in the hands of the research subject rather than in those of the theorist-researcher.

It is apparent that the ethical issues become more profound for practitioners who are attempting to bring about individual, organizational, or societal change of a more profound and enduring character. On its face, the ethical value of "informed consent" seems at least as appropriate to the work of the practitioner as to that of the theorist. However, that is not necessarily reflected in practice. For example, if company management wishes to increase worker productivity and a consultant (practitioner) suggests reducing intergroup conflict by reorganizing work patterns, who is to give the informed consent – the workers who will be affected or the management who desires the change? There is no *a priori* reason to assume that there will always be a confluence of interests about such matters between labor and management. Without the informed consent of those workers, a consultant advising a client to introduce a change is in a dubious ethical position. However, it is apparent that implementing the use of informed consent in conflict resolution practice which is directed toward producing individual or social change would entail a radical restructuring and redistribution of power. The critical existing difference in power between labor and management, for example, would disappear if the strong could only influence the weak with the informed consent of the weak.

Even if practitioners are willing to accept the radical implications that accompany the introduction of informed consent to their work, they may still question its feasibility. How can one adequately describe the complex, technical process of "conflict resolution social engineering" to untrained persons so that they can make a truly informed judgment about it? Moreover, much like a medical practitioner, one of a conflict resolution practitioner's most influential devices is the "social placebo" – the positive effect related to the "conflict resolution patient's" acceptance of the practitioner's unquestioning and confident belief that a given practice will have a given result.

These and other questions relating to such ethical concerns as coercion, manipulation, use of power, misuse of information, standards of competence, and professional responsibility are vital to conflict resolution practitioners. It is evident that sensitivity to ethical issues must be cultivated through systematic discussion if the techniques of social science are not to be in Paulo Freire's words, "only another way of domestication and alienating men even further in the service of greater productivity."[3]

G. *The Social Roles of the Scientist and the Practitioner*

John Rawls once stated, "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought."[4] In paraphrasing this lofty quote, one might say that the prime virtue of the theorist is to seek the truth about social institutions and that of the practitioner is to use scientific knowledge to help to improve social practices and institutions. These are, of course, idealized characterizations and one can further suggest as ideal types that the theorist searches for enduring truths,

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3. PAULO FREIRE, PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED (Myra Bergman Ramos trans., 1970).
4. JOHN A. RAWLS, A THEORY OF JUSTICE 3 (1971).

while the practitioner is concerned with useful truths. The archetype practitioner is part of the secular order, while the pure scientist participates in the sacred.

These social roles are rarely, if ever, found in their ideal forms. Nevertheless, the crucial differences between the two roles are highlighted by these exaggerated characterizations. There is a difference in value emphasis—the theorist places greater emphasis upon standards relating to verification; the practitioner focuses on standards of effectiveness. There is also a difference in time perspective—the theorist is concerned with what remains true over the long run; the practitioner is concerned with what is true now. Finally, there is a difference in location—the theorist is situated in the abstract, not tied to a specific time and place; the practitioner is located in the concrete reality of a unique time and setting.

These contrasting orientations, given ample time and resources, are not inherently in conflict—over the long run, they are each necessary to sustain one another. Yet it is apparent that in specific instances, the conflict between the two orientations may be severe. It may be impossible to maximize both efficacy and knowledge in the same endeavor. In such situations, a choice must be made among the conflicting objectives of the two roles. Society's usual choice is to value effectiveness over truth, to be concerned with the specific rather than the general, and to focus on the "here and now" rather than the long term. An effective social engineer is more amply rewarded than the innovative scientist; she is, after all, more immediately rewarding to society. Yet, if the social engineer does not promote the support of scientific work, then the productive intellectual base for her own work will dwindle. Similarly, if social science is unable to aid the development of an effective social engineering, its social support is likely to disappear.

The two roles need one another, but they are often in conflict and are sometimes disdainful of one another—the practitioner is stereotyped as "soft-headed" and the scientist as "impractical." How can they relate to one another productively? Must both roles be embodied in every person involved in the conflict resolution field, so that each is a "theorist-practitioner"? This is the model that clinical psychology tried to follow for many years but has now largely abandoned. However, if the two roles are not internalized within each person, how are the different orientations of the practitioner and scientist to be fruitfully combined? This question needs to be addressed; it has no clear answers now.

II. THE INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

In a recent book that Peter T. Coleman and I co-edited, we sought to integrate theories and practice, particularly as they are relevant to interpersonal and intergroup conflict.[5] I emphasize that they are plural *theories* – not a single theory. There is no single theory that can embrace the variety of processes and phenomena that are relevant to conflict resolution. This is not surprising, since even in the long-established physical sciences, there is no single theory to explain all physical phenomena. To do any applied work, whether it is building a boat or diagnosing

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5. THE HANDBOOK OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION: THEORY AND PRACTICE. (Morton Deutsch and Peter T. Coleman eds., 2000) [hereinafter HANDBOOK].

an illness, one must draw upon a mosaic of theories as well as specific knowledge of the specific environments in which the physical objects function.

Similarly, for the practice of conflict resolution, many different social science theories[6] are relevant, but none can be usefully applied without specific knowledge of the context in which they are to be employed. Thus, in our *Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, there is discussion of theoretical ideals relating to such topics as cooperation-competition,[7] social justice,[8] trust,[9] communication,[10] power,[11] persuasion,[12] judgmental biases,[13] emotions,[14] self-regulation,[15] problem-solving and decision-making,[16] aggression,[17] personality,[18] change processes,[19] learning,[20] and creativity.[21] All of these theoretical topics are relevant to a practitioner who wishes to understand and intervene in a conflict. Again, I emphasize to apply these theories in a specific context one must have knowledge of the characteristics of that context.

Let me illustrate with some theoretical ideas that I developed related to conflict resolution. The first set of ideas was developed in my 1948 Ph.D. dissertation, in which I created a theory of the effects of cooperation and competition upon the productivity and interaction processes within groups.[22] For the dissertation, I also conducted an experimental study which supported the empirical implications of the theory.

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6. Most theories in the social sciences use the concepts and syntax of everyday language and, as a result, do not have the precision and logical coherence of physical science theories. Even so, they can provide useful frameworks for organizing thinking and generating new insights.

7. Morton Deutsch, *Cooperation and Competition, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 21-40.

8. Morton Deutsch, *Justice and Conflict, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 41-64.

9. Roy J. Lewicki & Carolyn Wiethoff, *Trust, Trust Development, and Trust Repair, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 86-107.

10. Robert M. Krauss & Ezequiel Morsella, *Communication and Conflict, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 131-43.

11. Peter T. Coleman, *Power and Conflict, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 108-30.

12. Shelly L. Chaiken et al., *Persuasion in Negotiations and Conflict Situations, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 144-65.

13. Leigh Thompson & Janice Nadler, *Judgmental Biases in Conflict Resolution and How to Overcome Them, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 213-35.

14. Keith G. Allred, *Anger and Retaliation in Conflict: The Role of Attribution, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 236-55.

15. Walter Mischel & Aaron L. DeSmet, *Self-Regulation in the Service of Conflict Resolution, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 256-76.

16. Eben A. Weitzman & Patricia Flynn Weitzman, *Problem Solving and Decision Making in Conflict Resolution, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 185-210.

17. Susan Opotow, *Aggression and Violence, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 403-27.

18. Sandra V. Sandy et al., *Personality and Conflict, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 289-315.

19. Eric E. Marcus, *Change Processes and Conflict, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 366-81.

20. Victoria J. Marsick & Alfonso Sanquet, *Learning Through Reflection, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 382-400.

21. Howard E. Gruber, *Creativity and Conflict Resolution: The Role of Point of View, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 345-54; Peter T. Coleman & Morton Deutsch, *Some Guidelines for Developing a Creative Approach to Conflict, in* HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, at 355-65.

22. The dissertation was written shortly after World War II in which I served as a lead navigator in B-24 bombers flying over occupied Europe and Germany, shortly after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and shortly after the formation of the United Nations. It was stimulated by these events and by an image of the permanent members of the UN Security Council cooperating or competing with one another. *See* DAVID W. JOHNSON & ROGER JOHNSON, COOPERATION AND COMPETITION: THEORY AND RESEARCH (1989) (summarizing much of the research related to this theory).

My theory stated that if a conflict is perceived by the parties in a conflict to be a mutual problem, to be worked on together cooperatively, they would have better results than if the parties dealt with their conflict competitively, as a win-lose struggle. In other words, the theory implies that a *cooperative* process could be equated with a *constructive* process of conflict resolution while a *competitive* process would be equated with a *destructive* process of conflict resolution. This formulation suggests many additional questions, both practical and theoretical, including, "How can conflicting parties be helped to reframe their conflict into a mutual problem to be resolved cooperatively?" "How can the skills involved in cooperative work be developed so that cooperation is effective?" "What are the conditions under which parties involved in a conflict will develop a cooperative or competitive orientation to their conflict in a situation which permits either?" This last question can be rephrased as, "What are the conditions which give rise to a constructive or destructive process of conflict resolution?"

After much experimental work, I came up with a general, theoretical answer to this question, which I immodestly labeled "Deutsch's Crude Law of Social Relations." The Law states that the characteristic processes and effect elicited by a given type of social relationship also tend to elicit that type of relationship. Thus, cooperation induces and is induced by a perceived similarity in beliefs and attitudes; a readiness to be helpful, openness in communication; trusting and friendly attitudes; sensitivity to common interests and deemphasis of opposed interests; orientation toward enhancing mutual power rather than power differences; and so on. Similarly, competition induces and is induced by the use of tactics of coercion, threat, or deception; attempts to enhance the power differences between oneself and the other; poor communication; minimization of the awareness of similarities in values and increased sensitivity to opposed interests; suspicious and hostile attitudes; the importance, rigidity, and size of the issues in conflict; and so on.

This law is certainly crude. It expresses surface similarities between effects and causes; the basic relationships are genotypical rather than phenotypical. The surface effects of cooperation and competition are due to the underlying type of interdependence (positive or negative) and type of action (effective or bungling), the basic social psychological processes involved in the theory (substitutability, attitudes, and inducibility), and the social medium and social context in which these processes are expressed. Thus, how a positive attitude is expressed in an effective, positively interdependent relationship depends upon what is appropriate to the social medium and social context; that is, presumably one would not seek to express it in a way that is humiliating or embarrassing or likely to be experienced negatively by one's partner. Similarly, the effectiveness of any typical effect of cooperation or competition as an initiating or inducing condition of a cooperative or competitive process is not due to its phenotype but rather to the inferred genotype of type of interdependence and type of action. Thus, in most social media and social contexts, "perceived similarity in basic values" is highly suggestive of the possibility of a positive linkage between oneself and the other. However, we are likely to see ourselves as negatively linked in a context that leads each of us to recognize that similarities in values impel seeking something that is in scarce supply and available for only one of us. Also, it is evident that although threats are mostly perceived in a way that suggests a negative linkage, any threat perceived as

intended to compel you to do something that is good for you, or that you feel you should do, is apt to be suggestive of positive linkage.

Although the law is crude, it is my impression that it is reasonably accurate; phenotypes are often indicative of the underlying genotypes. Moreover, it is a synthesizing principle, which integrates and summarizes a wide range of social psychological phenomena. The typical effects of a given relationship tend to induce that relationship, similarly, it seems that any of the typical effects of a given relationship tends to induce the other typical effects. For example, among the typical effects of a cooperative relationship are positive attitudes, perception of similarities, open communication, and an orientation towards mutual enhancement. One can integrate much of the literature on the determinants of positive and negative attitudes in terms of the other associated effects of cooperation and competition. Thus, positive attitudes result from perceptions of similarity, open communication, and so on.

In brief, my theory of conflict resolution equates a constructive process of conflict resolution with an effective cooperative problem-solving process in which the conflict is the mutual problem to be resolved cooperatively. It also equates a destructive process of conflict resolution with a competitive process in which the conflicting parties are involved in a competition or struggle to determine who wins and who loses. The theory further indicates that a cooperative-constructive process of conflict resolution is fostered by the typical effects of cooperation.

Cooperation-competition, although of central importance, is only one factor influencing the course of conflict. A practitioner must develop a mosaic of theories that are relevant to the specific situation of interest, rather than relying upon any single one. As I have indicated earlier, breadth of theoretical knowledge may be more important than precision since the practitioner must often work intuitively weaving together a different mosaic foe each situation. The symptoms of difficulties in one situation may require an emphasis on the theoretical theme related to power; in another, they may require a focus on problem-solving deficiencies.

Theories cannot serve as "cookbooks" for a practitioner in the field of conflict resolution, even though the theories do have practical implications.[23] Theories provide general intellectual frameworks for understanding what goes on in conflicts and how to intervene in them. Understanding and intervention in a specific conflict requires specific knowledge about the conflicting parties, their cultural and social contexts, their aspirations, their conflict orientations, their social norms, and so on.

It is evident that conflict resolution practitioners do not enter into a conflict situation empty-minded; of course, they must be open-minded to the specific cultural and social contexts in which they are working. Often, they have a set of implicit, unverbalized theoretical assumptions which help them acquire knowledge of the situation's characteristics, as well as how to use this knowledge effectively in that situation. Typically, in a young field such as conflict resolution, the inherent knowledge is that the implicit "real world" theories of experienced practitioners are richer than the explicit knowledge of the research-tested theories. However, both kinds of knowledge are important. Research-tested theoretical

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23. See HANDBOOK, *supra* note 5, for discussions of the implications for practice of the different theories presented in the book.

knowledge, being more explicit, is more easily testable through further research than is implicit field-tested knowledge. Refining and testing implicit knowledge generates more refined and reliable knowledge for practice. However, it is the interaction between these two types of knowledge that is most important for furthering the progress of the field of conflict resolution. The richness of implicit knowledge provides valuable material for developing more explicit research-tested theoretical knowledge.