



# ENHANCING THE USE OF THEORY IN STUDENT ACTIVITIES PROFESSIONALS' PRACTICE

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The student activities professionals we work with and have spoken to for this article are busy people who argue that they hardly have the time to slow down to use theory to guide and direct their work. However, what they do not realize is that they use theory in most situations and in virtually, all aspects of their work. The theories they most often use are personal theories. The purpose of this article is to present the concept of personal theories in student activities work, compare personal theories to formal theories, explain the relationship between them, and suggest a process to ensure these two types of theories work in concert to enhance the effectiveness of professional practice in student activities.

It is clear from our recent conversations with student activities professionals that while performing their duties, they have to make sense of a great deal of complexity to accomplish their goals and desired outcomes. They advise and mentor individual students, student leaders, and student workers helping them accomplish their goals while seeking to enhance their learning, growth, and development. They also work with fellow professionals, vendors, community members, groups, and organizations. They advise student groups and, in some cases manage their larger organization (e.g., the Office of Student Activities). They hire students and staff, conduct staff training, manage the budget, plan programs, oversee facilities, assess their work, supervise and evaluate staff, respond to crises, and lead and inspire.

The actions they take are meant to facilitate particular outcomes. They take a specific action because they believe that that particular action is more likely to bring about the desired outcome, rather than some other action. In its simplest terms, they have a “theory” about how to bring about a desired outcome – a personal theory. They have theories about all sorts of things, including leadership training, student motivation, group dynamics, organizational culture, program planning, and staff supervision. They have theories about how to work with students with diverse identities, such as first-year students, upper-class students, students of color, first-generation students, students from varying socio-economic backgrounds, non-traditional students, international students, students with disabilities, and many more. Furthermore, student activities professionals also have theories on how to work effectively with students whose identities intersect. They bring these theories with them and adapt them to new jobs, new institutions, and new organizational contexts.

Personal or informal theories refer in part to the “theoretical understanding that practitioners have of student learning and development based upon their interpretations of formal theories through the lens of their own ex-

periences” (Parker, 1977; Reason & Kimball, 2012, p. 361). However, personal theories are also the theories professionals develop through experience with or without knowledge of formal theories. Most professionals tend not to identify personal theories as influencing their choices and actions. If they consider them at all, they may talk about experience, gut instinct, common sense, intuition, or “protocols for professional practice” (Personal Communication, 2018). Pejoratively, personal theories might be referred to as trial and error (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) or habits of action (Stage & Dannells, 2000).

In our conversations with professionals about how they determine their actions to bring about specific outcomes, formal theory rarely enters the conversation. When asked specifically about formal theories guiding their work, a few that were mentioned included Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, minority/social identity theories, and Schlossberg’s Transition theory. These theories only cover a small portion of their work and typically, only involve their work with individual students in their role as mentor or advisor. One individual argued that she is also a “business woman” (referring to the larger organizational and administrative aspects of her job) and suggested that she would have benefited from learning Industrial and Organizational Psychology theories in her master’s program. Another talked about using formal theory for the design and planning aspects of her work, such as developing mission and vision statements, organizational and strategic planning, curriculum development, and staff training.

According to Moore and Upcraft (1992) theories are used to explain phenomena, predict outcomes, and influence those outcomes. Jones and Ames (2010) added that theories help us assess practice and generate new knowledge and research. For this article, we divide these constructs into two categories of theories: personal theories - the theories we carry around in our heads that are often subconsciously, influencing our choices and decisions, and formal theories - the public and published theories based on formal research. Both personal theories and formal theories can do all of the things Moore and Upcraft (1992) and Jones and Ames (2010) tell us theories do.

Professionals very rarely write down, specify, and formalize their personal theories (also called informal theories [Love, 2012] or theories-in-use [Argyris & Schon, 1974]). On the other hand, formal theories are written and specified, and are those we usually first learn in graduate school. There are many formal theories presented in student affairs preparation programs, including identity theories, psychosocial development theories, cognitive development theories, spiritual development theories, and ethical and moral development theories. There are also theories that discuss phenomena, outcomes, and influences related to learning, motivation, personality, leadership, and organizational development. Many more formal theories beyond these seek to bear on and improve the practice of student activities professionals.

The question arises – Which of these two types of theories should we use - personal or formal? The answer is both. Personal theories are ever-present and drive one’s practice whether one is aware of them or not. Formal theory and research should be used to challenge, inform, and enhance one’s personal theories, rather than replace them. Unfortunately, as the argument has been made previously (Love, 2012), there are circumstances where many student affairs professionals believe that they must choose between the two. As Evans and Guido (2012) pointed out, some master’s programs work to integrate personal theory development and practice with formal theory and encourage emergent professionals to see themselves as personal theorists. However, the experience of many student activities and other student affairs professionals we have spoken to and worked with indicate that their master’s programs focused solely on formal theory and made no mention of personal theories, informal theories, or theories-in-use. They were left with the strong impression that formal theories were the only legitimate theories and that formal theories should drive their practice.

Moreover, upon graduating from master’s programs in student affairs and having learned a great deal about formal theories, many professionals experience a negative reaction from experienced peers in the workplace when they mention formal theories in conversations about practice: “I was looked down upon because I was using formal theory in my examples and presentations” (Personal Communication, 2018). The reputation of experienced professionals being anti-theory (i.e., anti-formal theory) has been noted in the past (Rogers, 1995;

Strange & King, 1990). From our conversations with current professionals, the message that formal theory is for graduate school, but not for the world of work persists today.

In graduate school, students learn established and prevalent formal theories to describe, explain, and help facilitate their understanding of student development. Following graduate studies, many student affairs professionals find it challenging to incorporate the use of theory in their day-to-day work – as it is a complex and esoteric task, not easily applied to a diverse student population, and requires professionals to create synergy between theory and their practice. Furthermore, most student affairs professionals are often directed to apply existing procedures and protocols of their unit or division to their daily student development practice. So, because of this, many professionals do not recognize, identify, or reflect on their own personal theories that influence the decisions, actions, and sense-making in their work. Additionally, they keep any consideration or use of formal theories to themselves or avoid discussing them in the workplace altogether.

This combination of failing to recognize the relationship of personal theory to practice and being discouraged from discussing formal theory in work settings reduces the effectiveness of professional practice for two important reasons. The first is that relying un-reflexively on personal experience and not recognizing the value of one's own personal theories means that such theories will be less open to review, correction, and improvement in the light of new information and new experiences that either does not fit or contradicts one's current personal experience. The second reason is that avoiding formal theories (and the research they are based on) means that professionals are less informed about emergent issues addressed by such theories and research.

Given that this situation is detracting from the effectiveness of at least some student activities professionals, we offer the following suggestions to improve professional practice by recognizing and using both personal theories and formal theories. Specifically, we recommend that formal theory and research should be used to inform and enhance one's personal theories (Reason & Kimball, 2012).

## RECOGNIZE THE EXISTENCE OF PERSONAL THEORIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The first step in this process is to recognize the existence of personal theories, which many professionals do not. By failing to recognize the existence of personal theories, professionals often ignore or denigrate the role of prior experience in their current practice. Student affairs professionals have been developing a wide array of personal theories about the college student experience since the time they were college students themselves.

It is important to realize and accept that one cannot act without applying a theory, because, as Moore and Upcraft's (1992) definition of theory states, we are trying to explain, predict, or influence something in our work and our plans, choices, and decisions. If we did not have a personal theory, then any action we would attempt would be a random guess with no rationale for it. If there is a reason to take action, there is a personal theory behind that reason. This relationship between theory and action is clearly illustrated in a crisis situation when personal theories rush to the forefront and direct our actions in a clear way (Love, 2012). One's personal theory may be based solely on personal experience or personal observation, but it is a theory nonetheless. As Love (2012) argued:

*Humans are sensemaking machines; we cannot help but try to understand and give meaning to the events that occur around us. We try very hard to figure out what will happen next. That is the core of theory building—making sense and trying to predict to exert some control or influence over the events around us. Removing [personal] theory from the theory-to-practice connection is like removing the cooking step from “the mixing ingredients–cooking–eating” connection. (p. 188)*

Parker (1977) recognized the importance and value of personal theories. He suggested that professionals cannot act without personal theories and that formal theories cannot be applied directly to the practice of individual professionals. He further extrapolated that personal theories help professionals create constructs that make it

possible to practice. In addition, Strange (1983) recommended theory-building as a necessary and natural activity of successful administrative practice.

## BRING PERSONAL THEORIES TO CONSCIOUSNESS IN ORDER TO ELABORATE AND IMPROVE THEM

One problem with the personal theories of many professionals is that they are subconscious. Argyris and Schon (1974) discussed tacit theories-in-use, which are theories that influence behavior, but do so subconsciously. Most often these theories-in-use (i.e., personal theories) act on our decisions and actions outside our conscious awareness. Often, we do not think about from where the choice we made came. As indicated above, we might refer to it as common sense, trial and error, a “gut feeling,” or intuition. We do not realize that these “feelings” come from past experiences, observations, and formal learning that we have incorporated into our personal theories that then dropped from consciousness. Discovering and specifying our personal theories takes work:

*[It] involves critical self-reflection. It can also occur with the assistance of others in supervising, advising, or mentoring processes, where an individual is asked to reflect on and identify the assumptions, expectations, and beliefs that were involved in a particular incident or action in which they were involved. Because informal theories assert themselves in non-programmed, difficult, and threatening situations, these situations present great opportunities for self-reflection in the aftermath of the incident. (Love, 2012, p. 188)*

One recommendation is that in the aftermath of a crisis (e.g., a conflict between two student organizations) or time-sensitive situation (e.g., pressure from a supervisor to accomplish or address something quickly), student affairs professionals take the time to review the choices made and actions taken and reflect on and write answers to the following questions. These stressful and time-sensitive situations often lead us to be less conscious of the rationale behind our decisions. Therefore, during (or immediately after) these times, it is important for student affairs professionals to pause and reflect on the following:

- What choices did I make, or actions did I take to address the situation? What was I trying to accomplish?
- Why did I think they were the right choices and actions?
- What do I think influenced the effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of these choices and actions? What do I think brought about these results?
- What was it in and about the situation, the context, and the students (or other people) who were involved that led me to those choices and actions?
- What does this reflection say about my personal theories that came into play in this situation?
- What changes would I then make to my personal theories on these matters?

McEwen (2003) recognized the role of personal theories and emphasized that student affairs professionals are both users and developers of theory. One cannot take the time following every significant action in one’s job to do such in-depth reflection. Still, making this a more regular practice will help us, over time, to better identify and specify our personal theories and how to improve them.

## ENCOURAGE THE NOTION OF PROFESSIONAL AS PERSONAL THEORIST

Effective professional practice typically includes a process of assessment, reflection, and adjustment of tactics and strategies after some form of action has taken place (e.g., a program, a crisis response, an intervention). Adding to such a process, as indicated above, reflecting on one’s personal theories can encourage individuals to see themselves as theoreticians. Once a practitioner has worked to bring some of their personal theories to a conscious level, they are in an excellent position to examine them in the light of new and recent evidence to ascertain the degree of their efficacy. As practitioners become consciously aware of the theories driving their practice, they can better identify where they can reinforce, challenge, or contradict their personal theories with formal theory and research. Additionally, as practitioners recognize and reflect on their struggles to make sense of the complex world around them, they may have greater empathy and appreciation for those formal researchers who have theory-building as a focus of their work.

## USE FORMAL THEORY AND RESEARCH TO INFORM ONE'S PERSONAL THEORIES

Student activities professionals use many sources of information to enhance their practice. Sources include their own direct experience, observation of others' professional practice, and conversations with peers, faculty, supervisors, mentors, and respected others (Love, 2012). The information from each of these sources is mediated through one's own personal theories in applying it in a work situation. However, it may be the case for many young professionals that formal research and theory are not brought to bear enough on one's work due to an anti-theory culture. This needs to change. One step is to encourage student activities professionals to expand the notion of valid information; to expand it to include formal theory and research. Such expansion will require getting away from the notion that formal theory always directly applies to individual practice. Instead, like advice from a mentor, it is applied to one's personal theories, which, in turn, influences one's professional practice. Ultimately, student activities professionals are encouraged to see themselves as theory-builders, to respect the role of personal theories in their practice in student activities, and to become critical and analytical consumers of formal theories and research (Love, 2012).

Reading formal theory and research is an important and valid source of information. In addition, one should judge the effectiveness of theory and research from the perspective of how it relates to our own personal theories (Love, 2012). Reading formal theory can be a way to facilitate bringing personal theories to our consciousness. This analysis of formal theory from the lens of our personal theories and professional practice provides us with the opportunity to enhance our work with students.

There is a long history in student affairs literature about how to effectively apply theory to practice (e.g., Desler, 2000; Jones & Ames, 2010; Knefelkamp, 1984; Knefelkamp, Widick, Parker, 1978; McEwen, 2003; Moore & Upcraft, 1992; Stage & Dannells, 2000; Strange, 1983; Strange & King, 1993). Some of these authors recognize the existence and influence of personal theory; however, none foreground the role of personal theory as co-equal with formal theory, or recognize its mediating influence on the application of formal theory. More recently, Reason and Kimball (2012) depict the mediating influence of formal theory on personal theories. It is our argument that theory to practice in student activities can be strengthened when the individual professional recognizes the existence of personal theories, works to bring them to conscious level in order to access them for purposes of improvement, sees oneself as a builder of theory (practicing theoretician), and uses formal theory and research to enhance their personal theories.



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