Learning Guide: Module 1, Theory in Community Practice

Questions based on the reading by Reed

I commonly hear students say that they are not interested in theory because they want to work in the “real world” or they are more interested in “practical work.” To me, this makes no sense. No one needs a good understanding of theory more than the professional practitioner. Any effort to address a social problem, issue or need must be informed by theory. Otherwise, to be quite honest, the practitioner is just guessing about what will work. Guesses have a very low chance of being right. Even if there were only four known ways to address a problem, anyone who just guesses has a 75% probability of being wrong. In the “real world,” there are many more than four possible approaches to addressing any complex social problem, issue or need. Your chances of guessing right dwindle to almost nothing. Worse, bad guesses by practitioners really hurt real people. It is not the practitioner who suffers the consequences of bad guesses, but rather the people that s/he meant to “help.” Take the “bad guess” at solving the housing needs of poor people in the 1960s. We spent millions of public dollars building giant apartment complexes for poor people in major cities. These turned into ghettos filled with poor families living in a state of siege, surrounded by violence, crime and drugs. Investments in maintenance were never made and the physical conditions became horrible – 15 story “walk-ups” because the elevators were never repaired, no lights in the stairwells and hallways, garbage piled in hallways. We finally tore them down, but not until long after many people suffered the consequences of this bad guess. Many social theories clearly explain why this approach was a poor one. In fact, social scientists argued against building these complexes – based on theory. I hope that this course convinces you that you shouldn’t guess at solutions to complex social problems, issues and needs and, therefore, that you really do need to learn to understand and use theory. Theory is not just for “academics” or “dreamers.” It is a critical tool that any professional needs.

1. Reed (pp. 88-97) discusses several ways that theory and “theorizing” can improve practice. State your professional goals – what you want to achieve as a professional – briefly. Two or three sentences are sufficient. Which two or three of these benefits of theory and theorizing seem most important to you for achieving your professional goals? Why?

2. Reed provides an excellent summary of several major theoretical frameworks and gives some examples of how each can be used to inform practice. Table 4.1 on p. 89 gives a nice summary of some theoretical approaches and their potential application. Select a need, problem or issue of interest to you and explore how at least three of these approaches would help guide practice to address the need, problem or issue. Compare and contrast how the three different perspectives would influence how a practitioner would approach understanding and addressing the problem, issue or need.

3. The article by Reed provides definitions of theory. In this course, we will define theory as a logically consistent explanation of the relationships between two or more constructs, supported by a body of empirical evidence. How is this definition similar to Reed's definition at the beginning of p. 85?

4. State the basic ideas of “theory as more” in your own words.

5. Reed argues for theoretical plurality. What does this mean?
Questions based on our activities that you should be able to answer after this module.

1. What are the major differences between the logical empiricist, realist, and relativist epistemological stances with regard to the role of theory in research?

2. How do the stances differ with regard to the role of theory in practice?

3. Which of the three epistemological stances we have discussed would strongly favor a pluralist approach to theory in research and practice?

4. Why are realists not considered “methodological purists?”

Extension Questions

1. Think back on courses that you have taken as a college student. How many professors gave you an explanation of their epistemological stance? Think about a specific course you have taken recently. What epistemological stance do you think that professor had?

2. A very famous physicist (Lieberman), a Nobel Laureate who ran a huge research program in particle physics, became quite irritated when asked about the differences between the “soft” and “hard” sciences – usually by someone arguing that we should fund “hard,” not “soft” science. He once replied (paraphrase): “Physics is easy science. Subatomic particles always behave the same way and they have no choice about it. Biology is a harder science. Plants and animals are quite complex and behave in many ways. Sociology is the hardest of the sciences. People can think about anything and do pretty much whatever they want. Now understanding that is HARD science.” How do these statements by Lieberman relate to what we have read and discussed this week? In particular, how do his statements relate to Reed’s comments about the multiplicity of theories in the social sciences?