

March 1993

Theory and the Generation and Subversion of Knowledge

Dennis Saleebey
University of Kansas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons, and the Theory, Knowledge and Science Commons

Recommended Citation

Saleebey, Dennis (1993) "Theory and the Generation and Subversion of Knowledge," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2053>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol20/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Theory and the Generation and Subversion of Knowledge

DENNIS SALEEBEY

The University of Kansas
School of Social Welfare

This essay is an argument for the refurbishing of theoretical thinking in social work. In particular, the author calls for the infusion of generative as opposed to normative theory in the profession. Only generative theory has been proven to invigorate the thinking and doing of professional social workers.

The current debate in the social work academy about positivist versus more heuristic approaches to knowledge development is clearly an epistemological struggle that, more often than not, hinges on concerns about method and methodology (Fischer, 1981; Gordon, 1983; Heineman [Pieper], 1981). Certainly in epistemological inquiry method must be of interest but it should not be, as it has turned out here, a singular obsession. Method, and the data that it may help us accumulate, is not synonymous with meaning, does not add up to understanding or even, except in the merest sense of the word, learning. Jeffrey Alexander (1983b) in his massive four-volume critique and exposition of the current state of sociological theory and governing theoretical logic puts it this way in decrying the sway of methodology over theory:

The crucial proposition of the positivist persuasion . . . is the belief that factual statements can be ontologically separated from non-factual statements or generalizations. From this central tenet other components of the positivist persuasion inevitably follow: the notions that philosophical or metaphysical issues play no essential part in a true empirical science, that theoretical disputes must be decided by reference to crucial empirical experiments alone, that methodological techniques of verification or falsification are of critical and ultimate importance. In opposition to these positivist tendencies, I suggested that general as well as specific thinking

is crucial to science, and I defined this "theoretical" . . . logic as the *concern with the effects of more general assumptions on the more specific formulations* (p. xiv).

Theory is not only a critical element in the advance of thinking in a particular discipline or profession, but it is absolutely essential, as Alexander argues, to method; without theory method makes little sense, and has little relevance in addressing compelling questions about the human condition.

This essay is an argument for reinstating theory into the epistemological debates in which social work is embroiled, as well as a plea for the particular poignance of generative theory over normative theory. Once a discipline or profession has decided that philosophical and theoretical issues are too far removed from the exigencies of life, and once empirical observation has become reasonably problem-free, then most practice issues and questions will inevitably be decided by method. At that point, theory becomes relatively useless to a profession, and what theory might conceivably arise out of this positivist, inductive scenario is, in the end driven by method, not conception, not value, not urgency, and certainly not philosophy. This "normative" view of theory, it will be contended, is inadequate for illuminating the concerns of the social work profession.

Alberto Guerreiro Ramos (1984), in his attempt to revive organization theory, makes the distinction between normative theory and science, and what he calls the substantive view. The former, regnant over social science, is "scientistic. . . it assumes that the correct model of reality can only be articulated according to the . . . technical language of natural science" (p. 40). He goes on to maintain that a "sound argument against (normative) science. . . simply asserts that method and technique are not standards of truth and proper scientific knowledge. . . . To consider this mode of knowing as the paradigm of knowledge in all realms of reality is precisely what Whitehead called the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'" (p. 40).

The Necessity of Theory

If method is insufficient as a means for revealing, shaping, or informing the world of language and action and if the accumulation of methodically derived fact will not add up to

knowledge, truth, reality, or understanding, maybe even not interest, then it behooves us to carefully examine the nature and role of theory. The other side of this coin is that probably *no* methodological entree into the world of experience is without presumption or “theory,” anyway, although usually implicit.

Theory can be formally defined. The prototypical definition in social science is probably Robert Merton’s:

It is only when concepts are *interrelated* (my emphasis) in the form of a scheme that a theory begins to emerge. Concepts, then, constitute the definitions (or prescriptions) of what is to be observed; they are the variables between which empirical generalizations are to be sought. When propositions are logically interrelated, a theory has been instituted (1957, p. 89).

The task of the theorist is to explain and account for relationships between empirical generalizations, usually at a higher level of abstraction. An empirical generalization, which may or may not have theoretical pertinence, is a proposition which asserts, thanks to replicated observation, a consistent relationship between at least two variables. Frequently mistaken for model, concept or even empirical generalization, it is theory’s work to explain the relationships between seemingly isolated empirical generalizations at a more abstract level of conceptualization.

The classical example often referred to in the sociological literature is Emile Durkheim’s theory of suicide (Greenwood, 1960; Merton, 1957). Durkheim’s initial observations revealed a number of puzzling uniformities (empirical generalizations): Protestants have more suicides than Catholics; unmarried individuals more than the married; urban dwellers more than rural. The quest for explanatory devices for these empirical generalizations led Durkheim (1951) to the concepts of social integration (cohesion, richness of social relationships) and individualism. He eventually constructed a theory of suicide out of this and other conceptual material, posing the central formulation of the theory as: “suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of social groups” (p. 209). This ultimately yielded three kinds of suicide—altruistic, egoistic, and anomic, all variants of the differing relationships between degrees of solidarity and individualism.

Once having established the theoretic pertinence of a uniformity (e.g. the suicide rate differential) by deriving it from a set of interrelated propositions provide for the *cumulation* both of theory and research findings. The differentials-in-suicide rate uniformities add confirmation to the set of propositions from which they, and other uniformities, have been derived. This is a major function of *systematic theory* (Merton, 1957, p. 97).

Although Merton seems of two minds about the function of more general and sweeping theories (at one time suggesting they yield theoretical insights and help clarify the relationship between concepts; at another arguing that they are too remote from the reality of behavior), he has consistently promoted the value of "theories of the middle-range" which focus on "*verifiable statements of relationships between specified variables*" (Alexander, 1983a). Perhaps the best examples of theories of this scope exist in social psychology: attribution, cognitive dissonance, reactance, and reference group theories.

Thomas Kuhn (1970) has argued that if you want to get at the gist of "normal science" (i.e., the prevailing views of method and instrumentation, of theory and theory-building in a given discipline or area of investigation) look to the textbooks that "scientist-to-be" (or practitioners-to-be, we might add) read. Let us, then, turn to one representative text used to teach research to social science and social work students, Nachmias and Nachmias' *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (1987) to see what they have to say about theory in normal social science.

A theoretical system is one that provides a structure for the complete explanation of empirical phenomena. . . . A theoretical system . . . consists of a set of *propositions*, that is, statements of relationships between two or more empirical properties that can be verified or refuted: such a set of propositions forms a *deductive system* . . . (and) some propositions are deduced from others . . . (and) they are said to be explained as well as to provide predictions . . . (p. 43).

Thus, the normative approach to theory is that it explains relationships in a systematic way, between discrete groups of uniformities that, without theory, would seem to stand in no relationship to each other. Theory yields propositions which

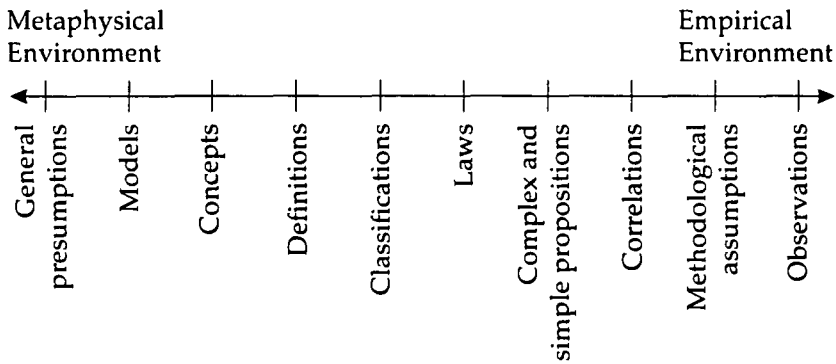
can be tested in the real world for their correspondence with observable data.

The problems with theory as ordinarily understood are many. First, many schemes identified as such are not theory, even by the normative definition. They are instead empirical generalizations ("Morale among older new residents in public housing is initially lower than among younger new residents"), conceptual frameworks ("We can look at a football game as an interactive tension between the catharses of instrumental, playful aggression and the stimulation of malignant aggression"); models (the "systems" approach), or post hoc inferences about sets of facts ("The rise of admissions into schools of social work during the Reagan Administration is more an effect of joblessness in other sectors rather than optimism about the future of social service").

A second problem with theory, as Alexander (1983a) contends, is that after the Grand Theorists—Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Pareto, et al.—theory development, in sociology, has flagged, the central reason being the reduction of the concerns of theory to exclusively empirical preoccupations (method, design, statistical and logical analysis, instrumentation). This fuels the delusion that methodological rigor ultimately adds up to theoretical relevance. Alexander (1983a) constructs a continuum of kinds of scientific thought—all of them requisite parts of the scientific enterprise—ranging from the most general, the *metaphysical environment*, to the most particular, the *empirical environment*. At the metaphysical end we find modes of thought from general presuppositions to models, and then concepts stretching to the empirical end, where we find correlations, methodological assumptions and, last, observation. Those elements at the general end might be lumped together as "theory" and those at the narrower end as method (and data). A common mistake is to assume the qualitative discreteness of elements of thinking along the continuum, or that the elements of the empirical environment alone constitute legitimate science.

Every piece of actual scientific analysis contains implicit references to, and is at least influenced by, each of the other analytic levels of scientific thought. What appears concretely to be a difference in

Figure 1

The scientific continuum and its components

Note. From *Theoretical Logic in Sociology, Vol. I* (p. 3) by J. C. Alexander, 1983a, Berkeley: University of California Press. Copyright 1983 by University of California Press. Reprinted by permission.

types of scientific statements—models, definitions, propositions—simply reflects the different emphasis within a given statement on generality of specificity (Alexander, 1983a, p. 4).

Given this, social science has failed in the development of a logic and a methodology of generalization that compels it to move from the empirical all the way to the metaphysical and back again, to develop understanding of phenomena at all levels of thinking. Without such a discipline we are fated to experience a foofaraw of isolated data, and methodological nitpicking. With no means of evaluating the struggle between theoretical propositions that goes beyond appeals to data ("Let the facts speak for themselves"!) we can only develop a Babel of ultimately meaningless data.

Another problem with theory—there isn't much. Consider social work. Historically, we have claimed to: (a) translate social science theories for employment in social work practice, and less frequently, (b) develop practice theories out of the observations and evaluations of practice. In actual fact, little translation is in evidence. Even in the case of theories of psychotherapy and

human behavior, most are imported wholesale and with little modification to the unique social purposes and ethical infrastructure of social work. Instructive in this case are two current "theories" that have their roots in other disciplines but are widely used in social work texts: systems theory and ecological theory. The first question to be asked is: Are they in fact theories? Or are they models, conceptual schemes, or metaphors? Second: how do they orient the practitioner to her world?

Of course, it is unfair to characterize a corpus of enormous size in a few sentences and then critique it. What is intended here is merely suggestive. A widely used textbook in social work education, reputed to have already sold, in its three editions, more than 100,000 copies is based on the systems approach (Anderson and Carter, 1984). The authors open their discussion of systems with sociologist Marvin Olsen's observation that the systems approach is not a theory but a model and as a model it provides housing for any number of theories. Fair enough, *if* theories can analytically be transformed into either the language or metaphor of systems. A review of the chapters—on culture, communities, organizations, groups, families, and the person—reveals that, in this book, there is little integration of systems thinking with the theories and empirical generalizations that are presented. The point? Unless one is willing to cast every dimension of natural and social living in the language of systems as James Miller (1978) has done in *Living Systems*, this model (perhaps, any model) offers very little of resonance to the practitioner or learner. How has, for example, systems thinking infused and extended Carter and Anderson's discussion of Piaget and Erikson? Very little it seems. What might have been a vehicle for the integration and recasting of some theoretical notions has had only superficial impact on them. Models are pale imitations of life, and the systems model is especially so. In the absence of vigorous theorizing, models rush in to fill the gap but, except in remarkable cases, they cannot do the job. Compare, for example, the challenge to, and elaboration of developmental theory authored by Carol Gilligan (1982), its richness and generativity, with Anderson and Carter's systemic treatment (I recognize that it is unfair to compare a small section of one book with an entire book devoted to the

same subject but I merely want to contrast the potency of one with the other).

Finally, a long-standing critique of normative social theory ("normal science") is that it supports and rationalizes the existing moral, social, and political order, and thus, orients the user to the world of conventional wisdom. Sociology, for example, via the manifold versions of its reigning theory, structural/functionalism, and its supporting methods and morality, reflects the limited aims of a welfare state run by and for the middle class and driven by an implicit ethic of utilitarianism (Gouldner, 1970, pp. 61–87). Recently, Russell Jacoby (1987) reported that a sociologist, Patricia Wilner, had surveyed the official organ of academic sociology, *American Sociological Review*, expecting over a 45-year period (1936–1982) to find articles and studies grappling with, clarifying, and informing the knotty issues of the day, from the cold war and McCarthyism to the civil rights movement and social protest. Less than 5.1% of the articles addressed such topics. The favorite subject of the sociologists? Mate selection (p. 158). Perhaps that reflects Gouldner's acerbic and sexist observation, "In loyalty tinged with bitterness, most [sociologists] stick it out to the end with wives who saw them through graduate school . . ." (1970, p. 57).

Ecological theory, a variant of systems, has arisen as a new "hope" in developing a broadly based theory to undergird social work practice by defining its spheres of interest, foci of intervention, and the range of permissible and possible outcomes.

People, like all living organisms, together with their environment form an ecosystem in which each shapes the other. . . . In these complex transactions between people and environments, upsets in the usual adaptive balance or goodness-of-fit often emerge. These upsets create stress. In our conception of the life model, we treat stress as a psycho-social condition generated by discrepancies between needs and capacities, on the one hand, and environmental qualities on the other. It arises in three interrelated areas of living: *life transitions, environmental pressures, and interpersonal processes*" (Germain and Gitterman, 1980, pp. 6–7).

More prescriptive and focused than systems models, ecological approaches, too, are translations in which the normative

views of the world, the conventional idiom are recast in a more neutral, less indicative language. Translation is suspect when dressed in the new lexicon, it simply appropriates traditional and normative understandings of the world. Normative here may refer to either the larger society's conventions or those traditions of the given profession or discipline. Of course, the conventions of profession and society frequently intersect. But the essential focus of ecological thinking is on *how individuals adapt to environmental demands*. While there is talk of changing environments, the message of the ecological approach in general is that, in many cases, it is the client(s) who will have adapt: "the *transactional* emphasis of the ecological perspective fosters individually oriented interventions directed towards promoting personal competencies for dealing with environmental blocks to achieving personal objectives" (Holahan, Wilcox, Spearly, and Campbell, 1979, p. 8). In her feminist critique of the ecological model, Gould (1987) argues: "One of the most important limitations of the life model. . . is its overestimation of the role of purpose and its underestimation of the role of power in human change" (p. 348). The realities of power, conflict, oppression, and violence, so central to the survival of many groups, are given a curious and unreal patina by the adaptation perspective.

While it would be difficult to draw any hard and fast conclusions from such a cursory review of the problems of normative theory, two come immediately to mind: Disciplines, whether practice-oriented like social work or research-dominated like psychology, seem to have a declining interest in theorizing, or in the metaphysical issues and symbolic foundations of the discipline (language, imagery, values, and ethics). The decline of theorizing may end in a dangerous thwarting of critical thinking, a fateful reduction in the pursuit of answers to fundamental questions by which a profession is energized, chastened, emboldened, and revised.

Joel Fischer (1981) heralds, inadvertently, the danger:

The necessity for basing practice on empirical knowledge and for utilizing a range of effective techniques that may be adopted from several different approaches bespeaks the need to re-evaluate the conceptual basis of practice. The major alternative to traditional

practice grounded in particular theories of practice (my emphasis) is the development of an eclectic approach to practice made up of a variety of empirically derived and validated principles and procedures (p. 203).

Second, much of what passes for theory not only lacks interest by *denudes* the complexity, richness, volubility, and conflicts of modern societies (as well as the elegance of modern professional practice.) Gouldner (1970) observes, as an example, that is Talcott Parson's massive tome, *The Structure of Social Action*, a total of five pages are devoted to the problem of violence and aggression. It is, then, little wonder that few academicians, and practitioner-academicians have substantial investments sunk in theory.

Generative Theory.

The term "generative theory" is Kenneth Gergen's (1983). Gergen is a social psychologist with impeccable and seemingly appropriate "normative" credentials. That is, he has conducted empirical research, contributed to a body of theory (developmental-personality), and has even written a popular introductory text in psychology. But, over time, he has voiced some of the concerns reviewed above and recently has expressed some dismay over the way that theory is typically conceived, as well as some wonder at the gap between the elements of social life as we experience them and as psychological, behavioral science theory describes and elucidates them.

Most everybody these days seems to agree that theories are cognitive products that we impose upon nature; stories that we tell about reality. The rift seems to be over the nature of the reality these conceptions bespeak. Sir Karl Popper (1982), examining the influence of quantum theory in physics, expresses the *realistic* view of the relationship between theory and reality:

Thus theories are our own inventions, our own ideas: this has been clearly seen by the epistemological idealists. But some of these theories are so bold that they can clash with reality: they are the testable theories of science. *And when they clash, then we know there is a reality: something that can inform us that our ideas are mistaken. And this is why the realist is right* (p. 3).

Gergen departs from the realist view. He contends that what human beings are doing all the time, whether conversing, building a theory, conducting an experiment, making a business decision, or wooing a lover, in both sacred and profane contexts, is engaging in discourse, establishing linguistic conventions, both *constructing* as well as *construing* a reality that satisfies, protects, interests, and is palpable and plausible. In other words, much of daily life is spent proposing and testing theories to figure out what is happening, what we will do, and what, in fact, did happen. Over time, some of our stories become collectivized, become conventions that are institutionalized and create the basis for individual motives, desires, and orientations to the world. We, scientists and lay person alike, are in the business of developing languages of understanding, themes and patterns of discourse, and that is how we construct our world, making it resonant and reducing chaos and surprise (Gergen, 1983, pp. 93–106).

From a generative point of view, normative theory and its empirical research program are not themselves really divorced from this subjunctivity of human life. The desire to explain, predict, and control in a methodical and rational way, in its fashion, is similar to what we all do in creating meaning, however tentative. Those who conduct research are also deeply ensconced in particular sociohistorical contexts, and the concerns, values, presumptions, and linguistic conventions of the era imbue their work. The obverse is true, as well. The scientist is an active agent whose opinions, statements, and theories influence patterns of conduct, values, even the discourse and colloquies of everyday life. It is quite common now for experts of every sort to appear on media talk shows to tell us what to make of wife-battering or saturated fat or Mikhail Gorbachev or punk rock. For example, Stanley Milgram's (1974) 10 years of research on obedience to authority, by all accounts elegant and scientifically respectable even if ethically controversial, was widely disseminated (a TV movie was made about it, for example), and changed for those who were familiar with it the way they considered obedience, how they valued it, and, not insignificantly, what it meant. In many social circles, obedience was once regarded as a civil virtue. Thanks to Milgram, the evaluation of obedient behavior

is more difficult and in some corners the obedient may even be regarded with suspicion.

However, in the virtual absence of vigorous and generous theorizing, much but not all (e.g. Milgram) of the program and discipline of the social sciences has narrowed, become methodologically precious, of interest only to cognoscenti, having little lasting or broad impact on society, politics, and culture, or, in the case of social practice, the disciplines of assessing and intervening. Of course, the prevailing attitude in the scientific enterprise would appreciate that: What we should be doing is fine tuning and focusing our knowledge of discrete phenomena. But what we are also doing is turning our backs on the great urgencies and aspirations of the early social theorist—the search for an “anthropodicy”; the explanation of evil and alienation in human life, and a basis for the development of plans and visions for the resurrection of the human spirit. Ernest Becker (1968) put it this way:

The science of man [*sic*] in society must be a superordinate value science; on which has opted for human progress, and which has a clear and comprehensive, compelling idea of what constitutes such progress. The task of such a science would be the incessant implementation of human well-being (p. xiii).

Such an ideal would be a product of the achievement of a thoroughgoing theory of human alienation (which Becker believed we already had in immanence and which he devoted his life to vivifying).

The great theories of our immediate past, those that dwarf our efforts today—Marx, Freud, Weber, Mumford, etc.—were not simply theories to be tested but were explicit and implicit critiques of convention and social order, and had within them proposals for reform, revision, or revolution (Becker, 1968, pp. 33–67; Gergen, 1983, pp. 107–108; Gouldner, 1970, pp. 87–102; Jacoby, 1987, pp. 3–26). In the end, however, it is not the scope of these theories that should bedazzle us, it is instead that these theorists were literate, they generated discourse, controversy, and contravening notions about the nature of society, the relationship of the individual to society, and the meaning of history. Today, academia-bound intellectuals “share

and idiom and a discipline. Gathering in annual conferences to compare notes, they constitute their own universe" (Jacoby, 1987, p. 7). Generative theory creates doubt and sheds light; normative theory promises certainty, and narrows its beam.

In his thoughtful article on theoretical (and methodological) pluralism, John Brekke (1986) advocates for the ideas of Imre Lakatos as the basis for developing criteria for selecting one theory over another. These criteria involve a kind of generation: That is, how much *more* knowledge can a new theory generate compared to a more established one? How much more of the real world will be revealed? How much of contending theories can be accounted for in the terms of this theory? The problem with Lakatos' criteria is that they depend on the assertion of a real world that exists and can be known apart from human subjectivity and subjunctivity, and they seem strangely aloof from the concerns and conditions of everyday life. In Lakatos' view, theory is progressive if it leads to new predictions. It is empirically progressive if these conditions are verified experimentally. In essence, what Lakatos suggests is that, in spite of hard-core commitments of a scientific program, that because the world awaits discovery, scientific knowledge is cumulative, and as it accumulates, brings us closer to the truth (Baker and Gholson, 1984).

Generative theory, by contrast, joins with concerns about the human condition within contemporary society and unabashedly asserts its social interest.

Theoretical accounts (must) be compared in terms of *generative capacity*, that is the capacity to challenge guiding assumptions of culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is "taken for granted," and thereby to generate fresh alternatives for social action; (Gergen, 1983, p. 109).

Any theory "may truncate one's capacities for problem solving" (Gergen, 1983, p. 109) or put blinders on prophets, but the value of generative theory is that it continually urges that need to think anew, take a different perspective, develop a new discourse, a different structure of meaning. Two examples leap to mind, though neither may have achieved the fullness of theory yet. Carol Gilligan's (1982) challenge to the usual psychosocial,

cognitive accounts of human development reveals two things. Existing theories of the lifespan are pretty much synonymous with acceptable and reputable social wisdom. Furthermore, the emendations of Gilligan make it clear that not only do the theories implicitly support current sexist notions but that they have prevented us from seeing, over the past seven decades of such theorizing, development in a different light. Is Gilligan right? Who knows for sure? But she has initiated a new conversation, new possibilities for meaning, revised exchanges between developmental thinkers, and she has upset the interaction between developmental theory and social institutions and their keepers. Out of such discourse "validity" will come: That is, we will discuss how such thinking affects the way we raise children, the morality of parenthood, and our notions of male and female identities, and the possibilities for revising action and policy that may follow. Not the least of the effects of such thinking, for example, would be to raise the status of connectedness and caring to debatable moral and social issues (Davis, 1985; Rhodes, 1985).

Weick's (1983; 1986; 1987) efforts to challenge the basic presumptions of the social work academy, and profession in their search for a knowledge base has generative qualities. Her work focuses upon the waning power and frail human relevance of an empiricist/positivist epistemology for the profession and its supporting "sciences." By searching other fields in turmoil (physics, health, biological structuralism, for example) she seeks to develop means of inquiry, frames of presumption that turn us toward the novel, the whole ("web of relationships"), and the transformational to which we, as a profession, claim to be committed.

I will begin by looking at the social work belief in the transformational capacity of individuals. The use of the word "transformation" signals an interesting shift in language. The term is commonly used in holistic health and the new psychologies to express a belief in the inherent capacity of human beings to engage in fundamental personal and social change. It connotes an interior ability that stands in sharp contrast to the more traditional notion of an externally stimulated or socially created ability (1987, p. 224).

The idea of generative theory and implicit in both Gilligan's and Weick's work is that we do not need to brush another theoretical patina on the surface of official "reality." What we require are telling perspectives that open our eyes, draw attention, direct us to new pathways and novel possibilities.

The Two Qualities of Generative Theory: Critique and Narrative

Critique. The essence of generative theory, for Gergen, is the power it has to render part of the social world intelligible in a way that exceeds the conventional wisdom, and extends the reach and possibility of the relevant social groups. A generative theory must create doubt about the current constructions of the world, especially narrow, univocal, and stultifying ones (pp. 167–169). In this sense, insight or intelligibility is a function of systematic, mutually authored social critique (Saleebey, 1987; Walzer, 1987). Such generative re-interpretations should not only give us reason to examine existing social institutions, cultural forms, political ideologies, and moral imperatives (as well as existing social and practice theory) but they should also at least imply or, better yet, fully enunciate alternative plans and programs for individual and collective life (Gergen, 1983, pp. 169–170). Since social change (in the sense of human betterment) is at stake here, the relationship of value to theory becomes critical and obvious; theories exist, unwittingly or deliberately, to sustain and promulgate values or to challenge them. Attachment theories of early human development implicitly uphold, for example, the value of the continual presence and emotional involvement of the mother in the early months and years of the child's development and raise doubt, in some instances, about the capacity of other caretakers to encourage attachment behaviors and provide bonding-promoting responses (Bowlby, 1969). To carry this a step further, they may also raise doubt about some child care ventures outside the home.

If, then, the function of theories is to provide the basis for alternative views and practices what is to prevent a cacophony of theoretical voices from drowning our sensibilities? The fact that knowledge and rationality are products of interpersonal negotiation, debate, dialectic, and dialogue is one protection. We decide what theories prevail because we have concluded

together that they provide more interest, open up other ways of interpreting phenomena that generate new alternatives of inquiry and action, clarify difficult moral and ethical choices, and create new meanings. Theories *do not discover* new knowledge. They give us an amended or fresh lexicon and grammar with which to discourse about ordinary and extraordinary events, structures and relationships. They also pose new alternatives for social and individual action. Their rationality, their value, their humanity, in the end, is judged in dialogue and praxis.

Narrative. Jerome Bruner (1986), perhaps the real inspiration for the reviving of cognitive theory in this country and Europe, describes two modes of knowing—argument and story, or the *paradigmatic* (the current, scientific/positivist world-view), and the *poetic* or *narrative* (p. 11). The two manners of knowing are, in his view, complementary but irreducibly different. Arguments *convince* us of the truth; stories *imbue* life with meaning. What either can tell us about human nature and the human condition is problematic. Science, the paradigmatic, attempts to “make a world that is invariant across human intentions and plights. . . on the other had the humanist deals principally with the world as it changes with the position and stance of the viewer” (p. 50).

Narrative succeeds or has interest because it deals with “subjunctivities,”—the worlds of human possibility—and because of its sensitivity to shifting and varied contexts of human consciousness and interaction. Argument, or science, succeeds as it demonstrates context independence and persistence (p. 50). Precisely what this implies is not clear. But one might make the case the “science” can tell us about the non-subjunctive world, a world bereft of cognitive intent, that it can inform us about parameters of the social world that we shape with our consciousness. For example, we can be enlightened about:

How many people are suffering from A.I.D.S. and what socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural groups are “over-represented” (although designation of these groups can be a figurative problem)? How many children are sexually abused by a same-sexed parent? What people say about the coming presidential election in terms of who they will likely vote for and why, and so forth?

This sounds like pretty routine stuff—banal, even. W.V.O. Quine said in his review of Nelson Goodman's *Way of World Making*, that physical theory is preponderantly conceptualization, even poetry, and very limitedly, observation (Brunner, 1986, p. 100). Science as method brings us the mundane and that is a small part of the epistemological enterprise. Generative theory weaves a literate fabric of understanding and interpretation.

So we have come full circle. The data do not tell us the story; the method does not bring us closer, in most cases, to human "reality." Normative theory abhors the novel, supports the conventional, and sustains an epistemology of adjustment and adaptation that is increasingly hard to rationalize. What we seek is theory, a story, a narrative that makes our world resonant and intelligible. Not just our professional world, but our personal world as well because the two unite as we construct an interesting interpretation of our circumstances. Bruner (1986) provides words to close our case with:

If I have, then, made much of the contingent and subjunctive not so much in story-telling as in story apprehending, it is because that narrative mode leads to conclusions not about certainties in an aboriginal world but about varying perspectives that can be constructed to *make experience comprehensible* (p. 37).

Conclusion: Generative Theory in Social Work

Generative theory is both requisite and possible in the profession of social work. there are at least three reasons for this.

First, the nature of practice, as we have construed it in the "normative" sense: That is, the professional as an applied scientist, or technologist wielding principles and techniques deduced and derived from scientific theory—probably has very little to do with what professionals actually do. If this is the case, then normative definitions of theory (and practice) tend to draw the professional (and the educator for the professions) off the mark. That may explain in part why there is often such a gap of relevance between academicians and practitioners. Donald Schon (1983), along with Chris Argyris (1978), has studied the nature of professional knowing and doing for many years. In his words:

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is the high hard ground where practitioners can make use of research-based theory and technique, and there is the swampy lowland where situations are confusing "messes" incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problem of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or the larger society, while in the swamp are problems of greatest human concern (p. 12).

If the bulk of what practitioners do is in reality's bog, then normative theories may be of relatively little value to them, and generative theory, formed of the shared experiences and dialogues between practitioners and clients, and between practitioners and academicians might, in fact, have more value, be more democratic, more provisional, and take many more shapes and forms depending on the shifting contexts of practice.

Second, the ethical and historical traditions of social work profession would seem to make the impulses and orientation of generative theory ideal. Social work, in the pursuit of social justice, fired by an ethic of indignation, and absorbed with the plight of the vulnerable, the disadvantaged and disenfranchised, would seem to be a particularly hospitable environment for the development of interpretations designed to restore a critical and productive alternative perspectives on social "reality." It is still true, protestations to the contrary, that normative theory supports a conservative professional regimen: adaptation and adjustment to the environment, and restrained social change and challenge. Whether or not social work's current disengagement from vulnerable populations is an effect of the infusion of the *weltanschauung* of normal science or whether the disengagement is the cause of such infusion is uncertain; the more generative view (in the sense that it will cause us to reconsider seriously the place of "science" in social work education, research, and practice) supports the latter hypothesis. In any case, there is ample historical and ontological reason to embrace a generative approach. As Habermas (1970), Marcuse (1966), Mumford (1970), Barrett (1976), Freire (1973), and others (Foucault, 1980) have shown us, knowledge and method can either oppress or liberate. It is in the nature of the normative view of science and technology, through the methodological

requisites of distantiation and manipulation, the mandate of expertise and exclusivism, to subjugate. It is in the nature of generative theory to offer a means, a venue, of liberation. What would be more hospitable to the ethical impulses of the profession of social work?

Finally, what profession is more comfortable with narrative, story, the meaning of the moment for the client, than social work? Our history is rich with respect for the narrative accounts of others, although fears of not being scientifically respectable may have made us more tentative in this regard. As Howard Goldstein (1986) suggests:

The task of both the worker and the client is to develop . . . a theory in collegial fashion, as they join together in pursuit of *understanding and meaning that is relevant to the client's life* (my emphasis, p. 46).

In describing the oral, preliterate culture of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), a former alcoholic (Elpenor, a pseudonym) talked of the absolute importance of narrative and story-telling as a kind of generative theory for the needy alcoholic wanting to sober up.

In the rooms, then, where AA people tell their stories, there are really two dramas going on, the events recounted in the narrative and the narrator's struggle to recover his experience to build a new ladder of word on firmer footing. The story emerges rung by rung, sometimes as farce, sometimes as melodrama: a situation comedy or horror show. Often it is both (1986, p. 46).

Without narrative, the "bottomless neediness" and "wondrous hopes" of the newly sober individual remain just that, and the bottle becomes the only means of sating both. Narrative and story-telling are important to all clients; we, as social workers should know. Perhaps, as Schon implies, the central activity of the professional is framing, "setting" problems in phenomenal terms that generate movement, interest, and possibility. In other words, what we offer the client are grounds and language for a more plausible, action-freeing narrative. For the drinker, the narrative of possibility is the one that bathes the past in unique meaning and frames the future with palpable hope; we should wish no less for those we presume to help.

- Alexander, J. C. (1983a). *Theoretical logic in sociology, Vol. I., positivism, presuppositions, and current controversies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Alexander, J. C. (1983b). *Theoretical logic in sociology, Vol. III., the classical attempt at synthesis: Max Weber*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Anderson, R. E. & Carter, I. (1984). *Human behavior in the social environment: A social systems approach* (3rd edition). NY: Aldine.
- Argyris, C. & Schon, D. A. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Barker, P. & Gholson, B. (1984). The history of the psychology of learning as a rational process: Lakatos versus Kuhn. In *Advances in child development and behavior*, Vol. 18 (pp. 227-284). NY: Academic Press.
- Barrett, W. (1976). *The illusion of technique*. NY: Anchor/Doubleday.
- Becker, E. (1968). *The structure of evil*. NY: George Braziller.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment*. NY: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Separation*. NY: Basic Books.
- Brekke, J. S. (1986). Scientific imperatives in social work practice: Pluralism is not skepticism. *Social Service Review*, 60, 538-554.
- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Davis, L. C. (1985). Male and female voices in social work. *Social Work*, 30, 106-113.
- Durkheim, E. (1951). *Suicide* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press)
- Elpenor. (1986). A drunkard's progress: AA and the sobering strength of myth. *Harper's*, October, 42-48.
- Fischer, J. (1981). The social work revolution. *Social Work*, 26, 199-207.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge*. NY: Pantheon.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. NY: Seabury.
- Gergen, K. J. (1983). *Toward transformation in social knowledge*. NY: Springer-Verlag.
- Germain, C. B. & Gitterman, A. (1980). *The life model of social work practice*. NY: Columbia University Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychosocial theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goldstein, H. (1986). Toward the integration of theory and practice. *Social Work*, 31, 352-357.
- Gordon, W. E. (1983). Social work: Revolution or evolution? *Social Work*, 28, 181-185.
- Gould, K. H. (1987). Life model vs. conflict model: A feminist perspective. *Social Work*, 32, 346-352.
- Gouldner, A. W. (1970). *The coming crisis of western sociology*. NY: Basic Books.
- Greenwood, E. (1960). *Lectures in research methodology for social welfare students*. Unpublished manuscript. Berkeley: University of California, School of Social Welfare.

- Habermas, J. (1970). *Towards a rational society: Student pretest, science, and politics*. Boston: Beacon.
- Heineman (Pieper), M. B. (1981). The obsolete scientific imperative in social work research. *Social Service Review*, 55, 371–395.
- Holahan, C. J., Wilcox, B. L., Spearly, J. L., & Campbell, M. D. (1979). The ecological perspective in community mental health. *Community Mental Health*, 4, 1–9.
- Jacoby, R. (1987). *The last intellectuals: American culture in the age of academe*. NY: Basic Books.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1966). *Eros and civilization: A philosophical inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon.
- Merton, R. K. (1957). *Social theory and social structure*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority: An experimental view*. NY: Harper/Colophon.
- Miller, J. (1987). *Living systems*. NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Mumford, L. (1970). *The pentagon of power: The myth of the machine*. NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
- Nachmias, D. & Nachmias, C. (1987). *Research methods in the social sciences* (3rd ed.). NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Popper, K. K. Quantum theory and the schism in physics. In W. W. Bartley (Ed.), *Postscript to the logic of scientific discovery*. Totawa, NJ: Rowan and Littlefield.
- Ramos, A. G. (1984). *The new science of organizations: A reconceptualization of the wealth of nations*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Rhodes, M. L. (1985). Gilligan's theory of moral development as applied to social work. *Social Work*, 30, 101–105.
- Saleebey, D. (1987). Insight as social critique: Prospects for a radical perspective in social work practice. *California Sociologist*, 10, 11–26.
- Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. NY: Basic Books.
- Weick, A. (1983). Issues in overturning a medical model of social work practice. *Social Work*, 28, 467–471.
- Weick, A. (1986). The philosophical context of a health model of social work. *Social Casework*, 67, 551–559.
- Weick, A. (1987). Reconceptualizing the philosophical perspective of social work. *Social Service Review*, 61, 218–230.
- Walzer, M. (1987). *Interpretation and social criticism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

