Collaborating Across Disciplines, Professions, and Theoretical Orientations: A Communication Approach

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Introduction

- **Collaboration** – an interpersonal communication process through which members of different disciplines, professions, and theoretical traditions contribute to the accomplishment of a common goal.
Figure 00.1 Conventional Model of Knowledge Creation and Translation for Use - “From Bench to Bedside”

**Knowledge Creators**
- Theorists
- Laboratory Scientists
- Researchers

**Knowledge Users**
- Clients/Consumers
- Direct Service Practitioners
- Policy Advocates and Makers

**Trading Zones (Translation for Use)**

**Knowledge Creation Sites**
- Academies (Universities)
- Laboratories (“the Bench”)
- Research Centers

**Knowledge Use Sites**
- Bedsides (Hospital/Clinic Room)
- Offices (Chair, Couch)
- Service Providers (MH Clinic, Etc.)
- Life Spaces (Homes, Neighborhood, Etc.)

**BARRIERS**
1 Barriers to Collaboration

Obstacles Related to Differing Conceptions of Ideal Knowledge (Language and assumptions of basic science versus language and assumptions of applied science)

Obstacles Related to Scientific Languages (Translation difficulties, jargon, scientific communication conventions)

Obstacles Related to Communication and Status Differences (Status and power battles across disciplines, professions, theoretical traditions)

Obstacles Related to Organizational Context for Learning Theoretical Languages (Work demands, lack of support & incentives, disagreements about preferred knowledge)

Obstacles Related to Education and Professional Training in Multiple Theoretical Languages (Gaps in education, new knowledge issues, lack of continuing education)
General Barriers to Effective Collaboration: Activity

Think about your experiences in your internship, in the classroom, or as a professional. Reflect specifically on collaborative experiences related to the application of theories to practice. Attempt to identify three obstacles to understanding and using theoretical knowledge as a guide to the planned change process.
Barriers: Scientific Language - Examples

- Our conception is that of a theory about the system in an inertial state... if the organism is a system in an inertial state, as our law expresses it, the metabolic processes generally have to follow the established system; the ever progressing findings must replace the general expression of 'a system in an inertial state' by a more and more detailed knowing about the nature of this system and its chemical, osmotic, fermentive system conditions. Bertalanffy (1929, p.95-97) as cited in: Felix Müller, M. Leupelt (1998) Eco targets, goal functions, and orientors . p. 308

Over time, the processes of cathexes and anticathexes result in greater differentiations within the psyche. This development results in greater mastery over the instinctual processes (Summary of Freudian Theory)
Language Barriers: Activity

1. Identify two to three complex, technical terms that you have heard in cooperating with partners from different professions, disciplines, or theoretical traditions.

2. Members of the group will attempt to define each term or develop a plan for locating sound definitions.
A conceptual model - a model simply represents a portion of reality, either an object or a process in such a way as to highlight what are considered to be key elements or parts of the object or process and the connections among them.
A Communication Model for Collaboration Across Disciplines, Professions, and Theoretical Traditions*

**Interdependence**
- Clear understanding self and other identity and roles

**Collective action & structure**
- Division of labor using each partner’s expertise

**Flexible interaction**
- Negotiation of differences & creative adjustment of roles

**Commitment to Cooperation**
- Shared effort in project design, definition, development, delivery

**Reflection on Team Process**
- Thinking and talking about interaction, using feedback

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*Adapted from Bronstein, 2003*
Understand Own Identity and Roles (Interdependence)

- A profession - an association covering both discipline and practice that fosters status and respect by establishing entrance examinations, practice standards, and codes of ethics to assure quality and protect the public.

- A discipline - an established field of social science knowledge recognized as such within academic institutions and in society.

- A theoretical tradition - a group of theorists and theory users who identify themselves as members a school of thought and who are united by their recognition of the special leader or founder and the distinctive intellectual stance and theorizing inspired by this leader.
Professional Identity: Elements

- Professional Definition
- Profession’s Mission
- Profession’s Values
- Profession’s Domain of Knowledge
- Profession’s Approach to Inquiry
1. Briefly summarize your understanding of your profession (or discipline).

2. How would you define the profession and its mission to a family member? How would you contrast the profession’s definition, mission, values, theory base, and core competencies with other professions: teaching, medicine, the law, clinical psychology, or applied sociology, for examples.

3. What is your understanding of the knowledge base of your profession? What theoretical knowledge, research knowledge, and practice wisdom is essential?

4. Synthesize your understanding of your profession-based identity.
A theoretical orientation is an organized set of assumptions, concepts, and propositions used by a practitioner to understand children and families, to explain client system problems, and guide all phases of the planned change process.

- Influenced by personal preferences and values
- Influenced by professional education and socialization
- Influenced by agency factors
- Influenced by typical clients and their characteristics
Theoretical Traditions

- Sources for Theoretical Orientation
- See handout (14 major theoretical traditions)
Theoretical Orientation: Activity

- Reflect on the various possible factors that have influenced and may influence your choice of an orientation. Then summarize your orientation.
  - 1. Identify possible personal influences - family of origin, reference groups, role models, philosophy of life, values, and personality style
  - 2. Identify professional socialization experiences relevant to your development of an orientation.
  - 3. Identify agency influences (and organizations where you have volunteered).
  - 4. Identify possible client characteristics that are influences on your choice and refinement of a theoretical orientation.
3 Guidelines for Collaborative Dialogue

1. Team members make a commitment to achieving shared purposes and goals, and dedicating their expertise to the collective effort. This reduces interdisciplinary and cross-theoretical allegiance tensions (Interdependence, Commitment to Cooperation)
2. Collaborative practitioners best participate in teams if they resist institutional and personal inclinations toward parading in-group and out-group distinctions. Contests and controversies about the best theory or profession distract from practical and unified public activity toward goals. Exploration of similarities and differences is guided by the search for an integrative framework for conceptualizing and solving the problem at hand (Flexible Interaction).
Guidelines for Collaborative Dialogue

3. Each participant in the reflecting team works hard to translate their specialty language for understanding by others. This translation work includes identifying the metaphors and core assumptions of their theory, identifying the key terms of their language and transforming these into plain English, explaining the theory-informed foci and questions guiding assessment efforts, discussing preferred theories of change, and converting any jargon associated with theory-based intervention strategies and implementation theory into clearer words (Communication).
Guidelines for Collaborative Dialogue

4. Team members create a group structure to seek consensus about group procedures and case formulation decisions. Members seek working agreements about which goals and objectives, guiding conceptions of focal problems, and plans of action will best ameliorate the child or family difficulties. The plurality of orientations helps rather than hinders democratically structured group processes if status hierarchies are avoided (Collective Action and Structure).
5. Teams work best when all participants are considered equal in potential contributions. Practitioners discuss, deliberate, and negotiate as peers not superiors / inferiors while reviewing their alternative perspectives on the problem and problem solving strategies. Every member has the right to push the group to think about issues in richer and more penetrating ways. Ideally, participants bring diverse but complimentary orientations, skills, and background knowledge (Flexible Interaction, Commitment to Cooperation).
6. Group dynamics that value and use differences will enhance team reflection and action. The team exploits the different perspectives of scholars from diverse disciplines and practitioners with varied practice experiences to address complex problems in ways beneficial to all stakeholders. Understanding and synthesis of a common problem evolve from the confrontation of divergent theses and antitheses (Collective Action and Structure, Flexible Interaction).
7. The negotiation of differences during case formulation is organized according to the democratic and reflective principles and norms that guide scientific inquiry: unimpeded communication, mutual understanding, the decentralization of power, and deliberations free from constraints or force. Team reflect continuously on the democratic ideals, norms, and interactional patterns that characterize their cooperative inquiry and problem solving and use these reflections to improve the functioning of their reflecting teams (Commitment to Cooperation, Reflection).
8. Teams aim to become a collaborative learning community, a community of practice, where members agree to document their collaborative work and share the lessons obtained from multi-theoretical reflection with colleagues and the relevant professions. Such documentation can become a demonstration of translation leadership and an archive for other practitioners interested in collaborative service to family and youth (Reflection on Team Process).
Guidelines for Collaborative Dialogue: Activity

1. Report on an experience with an interdisciplinary team meeting.
   - What were the different professional, disciplinary, and theoretical frameworks represented by the team members?
   - How did members communicate that they were using a particular approach to understand the case?
   - How well did team members take each others perspectives and learn each others languages?
   - What was the quality of reflection on the case details?
   - In what ways, did group norms and dynamics help or hinder the reflection and action?
   - What were some missed opportunities for cross-theory communication and collaboration?
Clinical Exchange - A clinical exchange is a forum attended by practitioners with diverse knowledge allegiances where partners with different areas of expertise unite in the process of case examination and formulation for an identified youth or family.
The Clinical Exchange was designed to foster open inquiry and transtheoretical dialogue in terms of actual psychotherapy cases. Specifically, the purpose is for eminent clinicians of diverse persuasions to share, in ordinary language, their clinical formulations and treatment plans of the same psychotherapy patient – who was not selected or nominated by those therapists – and then to discuss points of convergence and contention in their recommendations” (Allen, 2005, p. 67).
Figure 16.1: Reflecting Teams - Translating Multiple Theoretical Languages for Social Work Practice

Human Service Case:
Elderly Person in Nursing Home with Support of Family Members
1. Imagine that you are participating in an interdisciplinary exchange at a nursing home. A meeting with a family about care for their 84-year old mother with severe memory problems includes the social work director, a nurse speaking a biomedical language, a nun talking in the language of the Catholic religious tradition, a psychologist committed to the cognitive-behavioral jargon, a representation of the agency administration using economic and business ideas and terms, and a lawyer versed in relevant law and procedures. Briefly, summarize the likely perspective and language of each member of the team relevant to the case. Comment on how knowledge exchange could work.
5 Skills for Collaborative Interaction

• A. Identify and understand partners’ assumptions,

• B. Identify and grasp partners’ preferred root and conveyance metaphors,

• C. Identify and understand partner’s preferred theoretical concepts and variables.
5a Identifying Others
Assumptions, Values, Methods

- Theoretical assumptions - general scientific assumptions about reality, statements that can’t be adjudicated by empirical proof or disproof.
  - Assumptions about the child or family
  - Assumptions about the environment
  - Assumptions about interaction between child and environment
  - Assumptions about child development
  - Assumptions about the change process
Identifying Others Assumptions and Implications

- Theoretical assumptions have implications.
- A theoretical implication, the events that will follow logically if a theoretical assumption is put into action and the costs that the theory user is obligated to accept after affirming one assumption in contrast to an alternative assumption. Alternative choices and courses of action is not an option.
- The basic formula is “According to Theory A in relation to issue Z, it is assumed that ______, and this assumption has the following implications for the person, environment, transactions, or helping process ________________________, and these implications obligate the worker to try to help by ______________.”
1. Report on some of your core theoretical assumptions about the person, the environment, and the relationship of person and environment. Identify also your assumptions about how people and families change. Trace these assumptions to their origin in particular theoretical frameworks that you have learned and in your life history.
Identifying Others' Assumptions and Implications: Activity 2 & 3

1. Consider how your assumptions might direct your helping work. What are three or four specific ways that your theoretical assumptions have influenced (or will influence) your approach and shape your helping activities?

Imagine that you are collaborating with one or more practitioners with different assumptions about human behavior, perhaps because they have specialized in different fields of practice like medicine, corrections, or policy advocacy. Provide some illustrations of possible assumption-based conflicts in regards to assessment, problem formulation, or intervention recommendations. Reflect also on how assumptive differences between a client and worker might contribute to impasses in the helping work. Brainstorm ways to deal with differences in assumptions.
• **Root metaphors** are basic comparisons between abstract theoretical assumptions and ideas and concrete objects. Through such metaphors, theorists attempt to make an overall theoretical framework or disciplinary stance toward human behavior and development easier to comprehend. The theory and all its branches grow toward the sky, like a tree, thanks to the support and nourishment made possible by the strong root system.

• **Conveyance metaphors** are comparisons of more limited scope than root metaphors that theorists use to make sense of a selective aspect of human behavior or development,
• Behaviorists emphasize the commonality between humans and other animals. Behaviorists conceive of the environment as a laboratory where the major variables associated with learning can be controlled. Practitioners are like the laboratory who manipulate various contingencies to obtain desired results. Clients are like the animals conditioned by Pavlov.

• Social systems theorists use the metaphor of a machine with parts. The family is one part in a larger machine. The environment is the whole machine. If the parts of the environment work well together, the societal machine will do its jobs well. However, if any part breaks down, then the environment or organization will do its job poorly or cease to run. The practitioner is like a mechanic trying to find the broken parts and fix them so that the machine returns to a state of efficient operation. Change relates to improving the functioning of a part, removing a dysfunctional part that can’t be repaired, or adding a new part that can contribute to the smooth, effective operation of the machine.
Some family systems theorists, for example, use metaphor-based imagery characterizing the child as an element subject to multiple forces of energy and comparing the parent to an electrician optimizing the flow of electric forces to the child.

Family changes over time are compared to a “cycle.”

Family members make use of ego “defenses” like fortifications in war against a perceived enemy.
1. Behaviorists make frequent comparisons of the developing person to animals – rats, dogs, cats, pigeons. Appraise the behaviorists’ root metaphor and its usefulness for understanding a developing child. Using positive comparison, identify some similarities between the developing person and a growing puppy. Using negative comparison, identify some differences between the developing person and the growing puppy. Using practical comparison, discuss some ways that the root metaphor might help practitioners conducting a group for parent-child dyads focusing on developmental problems.

2. Try to learn first the specific way each team partner thinks and acts according to a root metaphor. Attempt to discover how each partner would fill in the following sentences. The child is like __________. The environment is like __________. The helper is like __________. Change is like __________.
When studying a culture, linguists attempt to identify its major terms or key words. These are the words that are particularly important and revealing in a given culture. Major terms are used frequently and serve often as the center of many clusters of phrases.

Each theoretical language includes key concepts or words, and those who speak the theoretical language must understand and be able to use these key concepts. Theory understanding and use requires mastery of a theory’s vocabulary.
Learning Major Terms (Variables) from 14 Theories

- See handout for major terms associated with 14 theories.
Learning Major Terms (Variables): Activity

- Begin with the interdisciplinary life course / family developmental perspective. Use “family quality of life” as your dependent variable. Identify a manageable set of relevant independent variables that might be contributed by team members from various disciplines, professions, and theoretical traditions.

- You might select from individual factors such as those related to mental health, cognitive beliefs, and perceived stress; family system factors such as degree of family adaptability, collective satisfaction with family relations, and family communication dynamics; ecological factors such as resource availability in family’s neighborhood, job market opportunities, and access to family support programs; and family developmental factors such as family stage in family life cycle, family and family member abilities to meet stage-specific tasks, and the division of family roles to perform stage tasks.

- Attempt to identify the source of each major term. Define each concept and specify how you could transform it into a variable influencing family quality of life. Consider how you might identify other relevant concepts with the help of team members from different backgrounds.
In examining collaborative interaction between adherents to different paradigms, Kuhn argued “briefly put, what the participants in a communication breakdown can do is recognize each other as members of different language communities and become translators” (p. 202).
Conclusions

- Mastery of three skills –
  - identify assumptions,
  - identify core metaphors,
  - identify theoretical concepts
- can help practitioners begin to translate their partners’ “foreign languages” and deal with the communication barriers to effective collaboration across professions, disciplines, and theoretical orientations.
Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Models, Metaphors, and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice, 1st Edition
James A. Forte - Salisbury University
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The Book in a Nutshell
This first edition theories-based book provides students with key tools for theory-by-theory comprehension: models, metaphors and maps. These tools help students to easily compare and contrast theories as well as understand their relevance to social work practice. The book also helps students to develop theorizing competencies: analysis, synthesis, evaluation, application, and communication. This book is the ideal textbook for your “Human Behavior and the Social Environment” course, or the perfect supplement for your “Social Work Practice” course.

Table of Contents
PART I: THEORIES AND TOOLS FOR TRANSLATION.
1. An Introduction to Theory and Practical Theorizing.

PART II: MODELS, METAPHORS, AND MAPS APPLIED.
10. Applied Symbolic Interactionism.

PART III: THEORETICAL INTEGRATION.

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An Introduction to Using Theory in Social Work Practice

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