
Column

Connecting Theory and Practice

Noah Susskind and Lawrence Susskind

Introduction

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin famously said, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.” Too often, unfortunately, negotiation scholars and practitioners cannot agree on the meaning of *good*. Some academics look down their noses at what they regard as the limited and anecdotal knowledge of practitioners, while some practitioners think ivory-tower intellectuals quibble about abstractions or conduct toy experiments instead of grappling with the complex challenges of the real world. Many theoreticians and practitioners hold less extreme stances, of course, and a theory–practice gap might be the product not just of disrespect but methodological disputes, specialized and inaccessible professional languages, institutional distance, simple ignorance, or lack of opportunities for cross-pollination.

In the spirit of bridging the apparent divide between theorists and practitioners, the organizers of the 2006 Environmental and Public Policy section meeting of the Association of Conflict Resolution (ACR) in Boston sponsored some novel theory–practice dialogues. In all, eleven well-known theorists of negotiation and deliberative democracy hosted simultaneous and separate dinner meetings, each with a dozen practitioners, including some of the best-known public dispute resolution practitioners in the United States.¹ Each meeting offered a brief exposure to the theoretical interests of the presenter while highlighting the concerns and reactions of practitioners.

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The meetings were open-ended: theorists were invited to describe an aspect of their current work, offer a hypothesis, or pose a question. The participants' interests and contributions shaped the conversations that followed. But, although each meeting was different, some trends emerged. The theorists typically did one or more of the following things:

- challenge conventional wisdom and suggest relevant ways to improve practice;
- label a phenomenon or trend that practitioners might themselves recognize in their practices;
- address systematic weaknesses in the field and offer possible remedies; and
- provide historical context, tracing the parallel development of theory and practice and how they might be better aligned.

As expected, the sessions were lively and covered considerable ground. In many instances, the theorists and the practitioners found themselves in substantial agreement. In others, they engaged in spirited debate. We have summarized some of these exchanges not to prove somehow that the theory–practice gap is narrow but to offer a sense of the texture and value of this kind of conversation.

Challenging Conventional Wisdom and Improving Practice

Some of the theorists sought to redefine best practices by identifying current inequalities and inadequacies, and by highlighting ways that conventional wisdom and assumptions may have led us astray.

For example, Deborah Kolb described findings from her research on organizations that showed how, contrary to expectations, carrying out assignments successfully can sometimes hamper an employee's opportunity to negotiate their advancement. In essence, she challenged the familiar "Peter Principle," which posits that someone will inevitably ascend the corporate ladder until they reach a level where they are incompetent to handle the tasks at hand. Kolb said that performing certain tasks competently can get people stuck in what she calls "Velcro projects," such as organizing a meeting agenda or making dinner reservations. Once someone does the task well, it may never be assigned to anyone else. The person is stuck with it even though it might not be significant or merit advancement, leaving the employee in a weaker position when time comes to negotiate for a promotion. Although Kolb's research indicated that Velcro projects were a problem especially for women, her observations sparked a lively discussion about whether they are a problem for

men, too. Participants also considered whether the dynamics that she illuminated apply in other contexts.

Environmental mediator John Folk-Williams challenged the notion that the most important part of negotiation is what happens at the bargaining table. He invited practitioners to reconsider away-from-the-table power dynamics, especially when the negotiators represent organizations that can take steps behind the scenes (without necessarily consulting their principals). By enhancing their own best alternative to negotiated agreement (BATNA) or diminishing someone else's, they can tilt the balance of power. Such moves are often beyond a mediator's control and sometimes not even apparent. As a result, a mediator who seeks to empower underempowered stakeholder groups may be stymied. Folk-Williams's observation struck a chord with most participants, some of whom reported that it matched their own experiences, although they said they saw no easy way for mediators to offset away-from-the-table moves.

Psychologist Daniel Shapiro discussed his work on the role of emotion in negotiation, challenging the myth that emotions "interfere" with successful negotiation and mediation. He argued that focusing exclusively on "rational" thought ignores the fact that emotions affect human behavior and institutional viability. Recognizing the feelings that underlie what others do and say can actually help elucidate their interests, and thereby direct the search for mutual gains. Shapiro offered a five-part model for understanding the concerns that can trigger powerful emotional responses: appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status, and role (or participation). One party's acknowledgment of the other's core concerns, he stated, facilitates (but does not guarantee) resolution of a dispute.

Shapiro's ideas stirred some passionate responses. One practitioner cautioned against letting emotions overwhelm constructive conversation, pointing out that the more vocal and emotional party often gets the most attention. Especially in multiparty negotiations, where frustrations multiply easily, mediators and facilitators may have to keep the display of emotions from escalating. Another participant mentioned how various cultures perceive emotional expression differently. On the whole, practitioners agreed about the need to address emotions but also noted that the complexity of fully understanding other people's feelings makes the task of managing them difficult.

Identifying Phenomena and Trends

Negotiation scholar-practitioner Bruce Patton focused on the decline in the quality of public policy discussions, especially congressional debate. He argued that the adversarial nature of congressional debate often leads to centrist-crafted compromises, which are not the best method for public policymaking. Partisan framing of problems and options for action, he argued, insulates the public from the complexities and nuances of the

real choices involved. Moreover, it can quickly foreclose or ignore the most creative and unconventional thinking on difficult issues. Perhaps worse, it can lead to compromises that do not satisfy those most capable of obstructing a bill's progress. He advocated a mutual gains approach instead.

This dinner group explored the prospect of framing public policy disputes in more constructive ways. In the course of brainstorming, some ideas emerged. One was the notion of a "shadow Congress," not unlike the backbenchers in the United Kingdom that help make their Parliament's debates so fruitful. It would comprise people with process and substance expertise who could take on the most pressing policy issues while using more constructive and collaborative problem-solving procedures. Another suggestion was to organize national issue forums that would tap "trusted people" to help reframe divisive issues in more productive nonpartisan ways, which might help the public understand more about the overwhelming importance of issue framing.

The group also noted that fostering effective discourse over contentious policy issues could require selecting political candidates (from all parties) for the effectiveness of their problem-solving dialogical skills. The end-goal should be a restructuring of debates between candidates and among elected officials so that there is a distinction between behind-the-scenes exploratory dialogue and more public partisan debate.

In another dinner, ADR scholar Robert Bordone discussed the design of dispute resolution systems, which are processes for resolving disputes within organizations. Bordone discussed the seven key features of such systems (as identified by his former student Khalil Shariff): their conclusiveness, or the finality with which they resolve disputes; their coverage, or the breadth of disputes they are capable of addressing; their jurisdiction, or the breadth of disputes the system is allowed to address; their capacity for gathering and sharing information relevant to the dispute; the decentralized discussions they encourage among the disputants (both before and after resolution); and finally, their capacity to render a definitive judgment that yields settlement.

The participants thought an eighth factor should be included: the degree to which the system may influence disputants' relations and relationships. As participants noted, some sets of rules and procedures can attenuate adversarial behavior. Doing so is good if it reduces the cost of conflict, yet on the other hand, it may also lessen the pressure for constructive reform. This part of the discussion echoed one of the themes explored in the Patton dinner and paralleled some of the conversation about "conflict transformation" with Baruch Bush, noted in the succeeding discussions. That such issues arose spontaneously in different venues only further suggests that theorists and practitioners share some common concerns.

Addressing Weaknesses and Offering Remedies

Public policy scholar Archon Fung framed his conversation with practitioners by stating that negotiations and mediations ought to be guided by such overarching principles as justice and fairness. He also stressed the need to do more to include and address the concerns of the larger public, instead of just focusing on the consensus of those who have come to the table.

Fung encouraged guests to think about the differences between theories of deliberative democracy, on the one hand, and the theory and practice of mediation, on the other. Deliberative democracy theorists, he said, are primarily concerned with the public — especially its ignorance of (or exclusion from) the workings of representative government. By contrast, public dispute mediation focuses more on those who have a direct stake in a particular dispute. Thus, for deliberative democracy theorists, the issue of fairness may center on disenfranchisement from the political system, while for mediation practitioners and theorists, it centers on resolving an acute dispute in a way that seems fair to involved stakeholders.

Fung noted that deliberative democrats are concerned that mediation's efforts are primarily palliative, rather than systemic and systematic. From his perspective, mediation's efforts to engender participation focus too narrowly on identifiable stakeholder groups. Indeed, it might be that deliberative democrats view the public as one giant stakeholder group whose welfare must be accounted for, whereas mediators believe that the legitimacy of negotiations hinges mostly on the merits of each person's or group's stake in the dialogue.

Fung said that while the current political system necessarily considers the public as a whole, it does not consider each member of the public as a whole person with a range of interests. Instead, it sorts them into polarized interest groups, which Fung describes as "partial versions of a full citizen." Each person holds a range of interests and views that are often filtered dramatically by the parochial interest group believed to be representing them. Moreover, political debates over contentious issues such as immigration, abortion, and health care are often framed and dominated by diametrically opposed interest groups, so public dialogue is shortchanged because it is limited to the juxtaposition of only the most extreme views. Unknowingly echoing Patton, Fung said that this causes people to fail to appreciate the trade-offs and nuances of the common ground, sometimes producing incoherent compromises that are not in anyone's best interest.

Mediation theorist Robert A. Baruch Bush argued that traditional Western methods of mediation are so focused on treating disputes that they fail to treat the disputants and the nature of the dispute. Baruch discussed transformative mediation, an influential method that he developed with Joseph Folger to remedy this problem. The primary goal of transformative mediation, Bush explained, is not resolution or settlement but transformation of the disputants'

experience of the conflict, both by restoring their sense of “self and agency,” which “conflict tends to weaken, leaving people with a sense of powerlessness,” and by restoring their sense of understanding and connection with each other, which conflict tends to undermine, leaving people feeling isolated. Letting the conversation between disputants run its course without any interference on the part of the mediator actually accomplishes the goal, said Bush. Under his model, the mediator only “supports, but does not guide,” intervening, for example, by listening carefully and offering “reflections and summaries” of what the disputants say.

Despite its adoption by the U.S. Postal Service, this method runs counter to much of mainstream theory and practice. Several participants asked how an unguided and time-consuming process could be implemented in conflicts that need to be settled quickly, sometimes in an hour or less. Bush said that if he, like one attendee who practiced court-ordered mediation, were trying to work something out in just forty-five minutes, he would “wonder if he should really be doing that,” and he would prefer to “try to change the whole system.” He emphasized that his method “was not for everyone” and that when disputants come to him wanting a process focused on resolving their dispute and producing an agreement, he points them elsewhere.

Negotiation scholar Michael Wheeler described his interest in how negotiators and mediators learn from experience, both within and across cases. Can lessons from experienced negotiators be used to shore up novices’ weaknesses? He asked practitioners what they had learned from experience and in what ways those lessons could be efficiently assimilated. To sharpen discussion, he asked what they do as seasoned mediators and facilitators that is different from what they did when they were newly minted.

One guest mentioned celebrating interim successes during negotiations. Long negotiations often leave everyone too drained to acknowledge accomplishments. Explicit celebrations encourage participants to value and reward the hard work that is often invisible when done well. This, said the guest, fostered respect for the mediation process and for one another. Others agreed, and noted that its importance could be taught in introductory classes and trainings. The same could be said for setting up pre-mediation meetings (or “caucuses”) to gain a sense of context and see what disputants reveal when they are not in the same room.

Other practices, such as employing humor to reveal complexity and create common ground, or using insider information strategically, may require deftness that comes only with years of practice. Practitioners noted also that with experience, they appreciate that people do not make decisions on information alone, and that everyone at the table has something to offer. While students and trainees can be alerted to such insights, knowing how to put them to good use probably requires experience.

Chronicling History and Suggesting Reforms

At his dinner meeting, Robert McKersie, a pioneer in the study of labor negotiations, lamented how public dispute negotiations have often mimicked the adversarial nature of traditional labor negotiations. At their worst, he observed, they can have the flavor of some police interrogations because they use sleep deprivation and round-the-clock sessions to coerce “agreement” or “resolution” rather than promoting real consensus building. (In this way they can foster bad agreements, just as similar aspects of some police interrogations can cause false confessions.) He also described ritual negotiations where parties go through the motions just to make it seem as if they have done everything possible to avert deadlock and fight for their constituents. Viewing negotiations as a zero-sum game, where one party’s “loss” is another’s “gain,” leads to agreements that are subpar at best, said McKersie. He has long contended that understanding is far better than mutual coercion, as the latter often produces incorrect information and destroys everyone’s credibility.

McKersie’s emphasis on fostering rapport prompted the participants to contribute a variety of methods for building rapport, including humor, listening, suspending judgment, showing care, reframing participants’ statements, and intentional mirroring. Given all these possibilities, however, McKersie then asked why so many negotiating groups still subscribe to the mutual coercion model. If the negotiators do it because they feel that their constituents expect it, he said, then the challenge lies in educating people about what constitutes effective negotiation behavior.

One of the advantages of the broad perspective gained from scholarship is that it affords views of historical trends and developments. This point is not meant to devalue the perspective of those in the trenches, or to imply that no practitioners can enjoy this broad perspective. We just mean to suggest that the practice of responsible theory building lends itself to the macroscopic perspective from which one can survey the field, notice trends, and offer solutions for reform.

Some Conclusions

The work of the theorists who participated in these meetings has a direct bearing on practice, and the work of these practitioners has much to say back. These theorists challenge conventional wisdom to improve praxis. They coin and popularize labels for patterns and phenomena to make them easier to recognize and work with or around. They draw attention to the field’s weaknesses and suggest remedies. They trace techniques’ historical lineages to illuminate how praxis’ methods have deviated from its goals. (Many of the featured theorists did more than one of these, but to save space we leave it to readers to make these connections.)

We encourage the pursuit of any reasonable methods that help theorists and practitioners learn from each other. But we take this opportunity to offer lessons learned about this particular kind of dinner meeting model:

1. A small event at a conference forces people to engage with those whom they might not normally share a lengthy dialogue.
2. It would be worthwhile to swap roles: have practitioners host theorists for dinner, or have one theorist and one practitioner cohost each discussion with similarly mixed audiences. Changes like these would affect the substance and dynamic of the meetings. For example, suppose a dozen practitioners each hosted meetings with ten theorists. Their conversations would probably be more about interpreting and understanding the practitioners' experiences within theoretical frameworks. Conversational pressures might still be on the host, but if that person is a practitioner and the guests are theorists, then it might be the practice camp that is more likely to find itself on the defensive.
3. Make a record of the conversations. If audio recordings are not possible, employ rapporteurs as we did.² But make sure that they are already conversant with the language of negotiation and mediation.
4. Use rapporteurs or confidential surveys to gather additional responses from the guests away from the table. This would help uncover what participants thought but did not share.
5. Include some discussion of the theory-practice gap itself.
6. Produce some kind of report of all the meetings, distribute it, and encourage meaningful follow-up discussions. (For the 2006 ACR conference, rapporteurs' summaries of each discussion were posted on the conference's webpage overnight.)

Our last conclusion is more general, although we have only implied it here. We believe that in most fields, any theorists ignorant of practice, and any practitioners ignorant of theory, are guilty of negligence. As such ignorance can result in missed opportunities and avoidable mistakes, the negative consequences accrue to the people that practitioners and theorists alike seek to help: the disputants. A division of labor can be efficient, and methodological battles are necessary and fruitful, but turf wars, purposeful ignorance, and needlessly incompatible language are unproductive and even damaging, especially when the stakes are high, and experts are not the only ones who stand to suffer the consequences.

As noted by Donald Schön, an influential scholar in the field of professional learning, periodic reflection can both open practitioners' eyes to their theory in use and remind theory builders of the complexity of practice. We believe that the "good theory" Kurt Lewin mentioned draws from

practice and that good practice draws from good theory. In this field as in others, some straddle the theory–practice divide. (They include some of the theorists and practitioners at this conference.) In general, however, we feel that the existence and value of both camps needs to be more widely recognized and carefully explored. To pursue these ends, we hope that more dialogues like the ones we have described will continue.

NOTES

1. We regret that we cannot discuss two of the meetings — with Barbara Gray and Daniel Kemmis — because adequate accounts were not available.

2. We want to thank the rapporteurs who prepared summaries of the dinner meetings: Elizabeth Cunha, Beth Doherty, Cathy Huyghe, Gracia McGovern, Emily Menn, Spencer Montague, Andrew Rabens, Tina Rosan, and Adam Sigelman. Some of their reports are available at <http://launch.vermontlaw.edu/epp/thurs.html>.