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978-1-107-01491-6 - Delta Theory and Psychosocial Systems: The Practice of
Influence and Change: Δαβ
Roland G. Tharp
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SECTION ONE

THE THEORY OF INFLUENCE AND CHANGE

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Introduction and Overview

INFLUENCE AND CHANGE: INTENDED, ADVENTITIOUS, INADVERTENT, AND INCOMPETENT

Most attempts to influence others do not succeed. In general, it is a good thing that subjects reject and resist, and that successful influence requires sustained, thoughtful, and purposeful effort. Even among sustained, thoughtful, and purposeful attempts, many are simply incompetent, and the effects, if any, are inadvertent. A classic example is the reinforcing power of negative attention, by which a scolding teacher increases the mischief of children who could better be ignored (Gallimore, Tharp, & Kemp, 1969). The “law of unintended consequences,” which has historically plagued public policy, is of this nature – that is, unintended consequences resulting from ignorance, incomplete analysis, or inadequate theory. Adventitious effects are unplanned and unexpected, perhaps disappointing, and often truly unpredictable. Although not a result of inadvertence in planning, adventitious effects in complex systems are common. Overlapping and interacting psychosocial systems are no exception.

Beyond the intellectual satisfaction of a unified theory of influence and change, there is wide potential utility. Better professional practice should flow from richer theoretical understanding. Personal lives may be more satisfied if we are able to influence others for their own good, just as our own lives will improve if we understand how to be better parents, lovers, pastors, or accountants. Further, there is another use of the knowledge of how influence changes us. I hope the ideas of Delta Theory will come to the attention of general readers as well as social scientists, because there is no human who is not under social influence, much of which is not benign. The world is awash with attempts to influence: blandishments of advertisers; twists of politicians; systematic campaigns of conversion, seduction, or trickery.

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Knowledge of how influence works will allow us better to resist it. A fuller understanding of how influence leads to change can help us defend against unwanted influence while providing effective influence for those we foster and protect.

The domain of discussion here is *influence and change*. Influence and change is practiced in many settings and professions and, indeed, by us all. Who does not attempt to exert influence and hope for change? Educators, psychotherapists, coaches, and parents do; but so do seducers, political spinmeisters, and gang bosses. Members of the latter groups will have little interest in this intellectual construction, but I am suggesting that professional practitioners might attend, if warily, to a theory purporting to unite our separate and too-often competitive disciplines.

Influence and change is professionally practiced as a set of discipline-specific techniques and is not guided by a general theory. Convincing evidence for the efficacy of those techniques is scarce. Most human service professionals work in multidisciplinary case conferences, a theoretical Tower of Babel. It is a difficult matter, this practice of influence and change, and it is perhaps even more difficult to achieve *sustainable* change. Yet there is no resource to most practitioners beyond disciplinary techniques, no general theory based on *Homo sapiens'* nature, societies, and cultures.

Further, a fundamental misunderstanding handicaps many professional practitioners of influence. We objected to it forty years ago:

[T]he *treater* is rarely a psychiatrist or psychologist or social worker, but is rather the individual's parent or teacher or spouse or ward attendant or sibling or friend or employer.... If the environment [setting of the intervention] is the hospital, these people are the nurses, doctors, or other patients; if ... the school, they are the principal, teachers, or other pupils; if ... the family, they are siblings, the spouse, or the parents.

The traditional alternative is to build a new and artificial relationship between the *treater* and the individual.... *This procedure is patently wasteful, if there is indeed an alternative form of intervention, which mobilizes the potential power of [an individual's existing social relationships].* (Tharp & Wetzel, 1969, pp. 3–4, emphasis added)

Forty years later it has become obvious that any professional Agent's first task is to analyze Subject's psychosocial field and then devise an influence plan using existing psychosocial systems, disrupting or extracting Subject from the destructive ones and creating new ones when necessary. This is what the masters of influence do, from good mothers to organized criminals. The default choice should not be Agent directly and individually

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relating to Subject; that should be a temporary and, indeed, the last choice, taken only in the absence of anything more effective.

A unified theory *will* some day soon be accepted. Physical science's galloping pursuit of a unifying theory has glamorized the search for a "theory of everything," so in social science unification may take on a reflected legitimacy. Delta is not an attempt at a theory of everything. My aspirations are only for a theory of everything in one field – a large field, but one with clear boundaries: intentional influence and change in behavior, thoughts, emotions, and values. Only by going toward a goal can we hope to get beyond the present, and then only by the orderly interpretation of accumulating evidence – the activity we call science, in which there is a permanent vector of *toward*.

I write from the general orientation of developmental psychology, which has been vigorous in recent decades. If there is a synonym available for *influence and change*, it may be *intentional development*. Yet no single discipline or domain of knowledge can satisfy universalistic criteria. If a unified theory is possible, it will be construed from and in the languages of many disciplines. Thus Delta Theory draws together explanatory concepts and research findings from (as examples) cognitive science, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, cultural-historical activity theory, behaviorism, observational learning, evolution theory, criminology, and history, *insofar as they treat influence and change*.

DELTA: AN OVERVIEW OF THE DOMAIN

Delta Theory reveals the principles and dynamics by which change is effected, yet it simultaneously shows why change occurs so infrequently. *The foundational proposition of Delta Theory is that influence and change operate primarily, indeed almost exclusively, within and through psychosocial systems – that is, affiliated persons organized into systems that share values, purpose, and activity.* The theory and practice require a valid description of how social systems are formed and the internal processes that account for their continuation, particularly those involving the challenges of change. The practice of Delta *mobilizes the potential power of an individual Subject's social relationships, either preexisting or created by the Agent.* Professional Agents understand this at the first level: They attempt to create a new psychosocial system consisting of him- or herself and the Subject. The core of Delta Theory is that every Subject of influence is embedded in complex psychosocial systems whose tendency toward inertia is directly analogous

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to Isaac Newton's First Law of Motion. Any Agent of influence must perforce change those psychosocial systems – a far more complex task than presumed by the one-to-one counselor.

The burden of Delta Theory is to explain how *change* (both learning and development) is brought about by *influence*. Influence is social. To begin with the end of the argument, each *Agent* of influence and *Subject* of change interact under known phylogenetically provided restrictions, conditioned by historically provided cultural values and expectations, which are re-created and sustained by small psychosocial systems loosely articulated into social networks. *Every successful action of intended influence takes place in species, cultural, life-historical, and technical human-science validities.*

That prescription sounds daunting, but the doing need not be. Many of those validities flow naturally from the nature of *Homo sapiens*. Humanity's existence depends on influencing one another, by fostering the young and defending against the depraved. Successful influence can be seen all around us, sometimes benign, sometimes malign. The most effective change Agents are the crafty – the good mother, the gang boss, the leader – who *feel* the intricacies of influencing. Less often successful are we professional practitioners, who are restricted by incomplete theory and must, in the vacuum, take guidance from our guilds.

My task now is to guide a walk through the processes by which we have become ourselves and through which our becoming continues. This complex field of forces is intellectually comprehensible through a small number of concepts.¹ Perhaps some readers will say as I did: *Aha*. Accepting the strictures of settled science, we will consider what we know from relevant developmental and social science and then contextualize that knowledge within levels of phylogenesis, historical-ethnogenesis, and the ontogenesis

¹ In common sense, we over-attribute effects to "persuasion." For example, the recruitment of underage girls into prostitution (see Chapter 8) is not by persuasion, except perhaps for the acceptance of a first date with the young man who is actually the crime syndicate's pimp, working to protocol. Thereafter, even during that very date, Delta theory explains. Thus I exclude persuasion from this theoretical analysis. As we will see, influence makes for change only after Subject has been persuaded to engage in Agent's prescribed activities. Persuasion's objective is to induce Subjects to agree to actions or beliefs. I have been persuaded by Aristotle to adopt his expository structure: Delta Theory's *Means of Influence* will be defined, then their dynamics clarified through illustrations, just as Aristotle does in his *Rhetoric*, which identifies his Means of Persuasion and, through examples, clarifies their dynamics. We scientists and thinkers attempt to persuade and engage one another. But for Delta processes to produce change, persuasion is either prior or irrelevant. *Influence*, a more complex psychosocial process, begins after persuasion is achieved. Author influences reader only if and when reader begins to act in a different way.

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of life histories. I will attempt to sever the knot that has prevented a unification of psychological and cultural studies, that last hindrance to a universal theory. That exposition is replete with examples.

We will then turn from the science and theory of influence and change to its practice, design, and engineering principles, with special attention to cross-cultural contexts. We conclude with some considerations of the future prospects of Delta Theory's own further development.

THE SCOPE

The scope of a *unified* theory of influence and change includes, at least, the following: primary socialization of the young; formal schooling; psychological and social therapies; counseling; public health; civic public education; restricted residential environments; family intervention; home-based social-service treatments; correctional programs; criminology; social casework; community development; organizational development; professional development; on-the-job training; mentoring; rehabilitation; occupational therapy; all coaching – personal, cognitive, and athletic; self-help groups and programs; self-directed behavior change; all twelve-step programs; and all training of all practitioners, from philosophers to soldiers.

The scope of a *universal* theory of influence and change includes and applies equally to all cultures and historical periods.

The theory must fit not only the “engineered” operations of formal institutional and professional services, but also the processes by which humans have successfully socialized and developed one another informally, currently and historically, and across cultures, including the primary socialization of child rearing.

A unified theory of change and influence must account for unsuccessful and successful instances – both institutional and informal, and both benign and malign in purpose or outcome. That is to say that the theory must be equally effective in accounting for socialization into convents as into criminal gangs. And it will reveal why change is so often very hard to do.

DELTA THEORY (Δαß): A SUMMARY

The foundational proposition of Delta Theory is thus: Influence and change operate primarily, indeed almost exclusively, within and through *psychosocial systems*, that is, groups of persons that tend toward stability of affiliation. I call this theory *Delta*, but it might be better labeled Δαß, or *Delta/*

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Alpha/Beta, in respect of the three *phases* of psychosocial systems. In the simplest terms, for psychosocial systems:

- β The *Beta* phase is one of behavioral and social equilibrium and stability.
- α The *Alpha* phase is characterized by disequilibrium and instability.
- Δ The *Delta* phase is organized for enhancing influence and change.

The phases are not explanatory concepts. They constitute a descriptive typology only. Most psychosocial systems, even those with stable membership, move from phase to phase in predictable response to processes and forces that operate uniformly in all three phases. Just as ice, water, and vapor are three phases of H₂O, each responsive to variable temperature and pressure, Delta, Beta, and Alpha psychosocial systems may be seen as phases, their transitions resulting from the variables discussed in the next chapter. The phases are also in a predictable dynamic with one another: Everything trends toward Beta's homeostasis; change is resisted; a Delta condition of purposeful change is infrequent and usually temporary; and the discomforts of Alpha provoke maneuvers for return to Beta.

Consideration of the phases is vital for understanding and planning influence and change. By analogy, consider the design (and the experience) of a roller coaster. At any point on the roller coaster's track, its efficiency or safety or thrill can be understood through the same set of forces and particles – friction, gravity, inertia, and so forth. These scientific forces and elements function lawfully at all points of the course and in all forms of cars: rail, cogwheel, automobile, or spacecraft. However, different design challenges inhere in, let us say, three roller-coasting conditions: whether the cars are rising, falling, or coasting flat. These three conditions organize the physical forces and particles quite differently, and the human experiences of the three are breathlessly disparate.

Likewise, there are three phases of psychosocial organization: Recognizing the differences among Delta, Beta, and Alpha is necessary for successful design and planning, as well as for appreciation of the experience of the changer and the changed.

We will consider the processes of formation and maintenance of psychosocial systems and how they continue as if in response to Newton's First Law of Motion (something in motion tends to stay in motion with the same speed and direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force). We will also consider the launching of "unbalanced forces," an analogy for weakening, creating, or otherwise influencing psychosocial systems in which change goals are implicated.

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Most pages in this book will be devoted to discussing the processes and forces that influence psychosocial systems from without and within, with particular attention to the processes by which Subjects are influenced, changed, and developed. The processes are themselves psychosocial and occur within psychosocial systems. The *means* by which influence is exercised will be seen as a short but open list, operating universally in all influence and change.

At this point in the argument (Chapter 6), we pause to confront the most serious intellectual challenge to any possibility of a universal theory. Cultural differences are pervasive and powerful and on the surface would appear to require quite different procedures for influence and change. The resolution of this challenge will reveal a deeper level of unity of concepts and suggest further guidance for designing influence interventions.

The chapters of Section Two, devoted to the practice of Delta, are analyses of designs for intentional behavior change. In the service of testing the capacity of the Delta Theory proposal to explain, predict, and guide, illustrations of a variety of influence and change operations are included, some benign, some reprehensible, some successful, [and]some failed. The last chapter looks toward the current horizon, anticipating arenas of research that offer promise for the continued development of Delta.

Finally, the Appendix provides an outline of the standards and guidelines used by the author in the developmental work of the propositions and cited evidence for Delta Theory. In brief, these standards and guidelines require that theoretical propositions be valid within the boundaries of settled science; that inquiry be conducted, and data evaluated, within the strictures of mathematical and symbolic logic; and that the theory must be held to the standards of science, including generativity, testability, disconfirmability, simplicity, and elegance.

Psychosocial Systems and the Exercise of Influence

The source nexus of influence has long been attributed to social groups. Cooley (1962, 1909) defined the *primary* group by *intimate face-to-face association and cooperation*, which he considered as foundational for the creation of an individual's ideals and social nature. A century ago he argued that the very self is constituted by the shared life and purposes of the primary group. More recently, Athens (1992) has elaborated and clarified the definition of the primary group as the following:

a group characterized by regular face-to-face interaction and intimate familiarity between its members, such as a family, gang, or clique, whereas a secondary group can be characterized by the absence of the quality of intimacy, such as a large school's graduating class (p. 28).

These and other sociologists have long observed that the primary group – far more than the secondary – has great impact on the development of values, repertoires, and identity of the individual. That there may be more than one highly influential group renders the primary label less useful; in these and other ways the dynamics of influential social groups (both in their creation and functioning) can now be more elaborately described. Thus I will refer to these influential groups as *psychosocial systems*.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SYSTEMS

Two great challenges face the viability of a unified theory of influence and change. The most obvious is to preserve the goal of universal explanatory concepts while assuring that manifest and powerful cultural differences are acknowledged and incorporated. Before facing that issue in Chapter 6, there is a prior challenge. There can be no unified theory until the divide is bridged between approaches that primarily employ psychological constructs