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Roland G. Tharp

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DELTA THEORY AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SYSTEMS

Delta Theory establishes the foundation for a true scientific applied psychology, a theory of how human influence induces change in others. Delta Theory is unified and universal, applying to all cultures, historical periods, and goals for change. It integrates concepts and research from psychology, sociology, anthropology, evolution theory, philosophy, psychoneurology, cognitive science, and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. Yet Delta Theory is clear, economical, and elegant, with a full exposition of tactics for its practices. Rich examples are drawn from professional practices, but also from the creation and operations of criminals, healing ceremonies of indigenous peoples, and cross-species comparisons. This book ultimately seeks to describe how influence works, how it could be improved, and how it can be resisted.

Roland G. Tharp is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the Universities of Hawaii, Manoa, and California, Santa Cruz. He has also taught at University of Arizona, Stanford University, and the University of Greenland. Tharp is the director of the national Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence. He has done extensive fieldwork with indigenous people, including Mayan, Polynesian, Navajo, Zuni, and Inuit. Tharp is the author or coauthor of the books *Behavior Modification in the Natural Environment*, *Rousing Minds to Life*, *Teaching Transformed*, and *Self-Directed Behavior*. His articles have appeared in such journals as *American Psychologist*, *American Anthropologist*, and *Psychological Bulletin*, among others. He is the laureate of the Grawemeyer Prize in Education and the Hopwood Award (Major, in Poetry) from the University of Michigan and has held the Frost Fellowship of the Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury College.

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THE PRACTICE OF INFLUENCE AND CHANGE

Δαβ

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Emeritus Professor

Universities of California and Hawaii



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*To my first and primary psychosocial system:
Ila and George, Berma and Oswald, Carol and Gail*

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PREFACE

THE AUTODIDACT AND THE COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS

This book's work was not conducted in isolation but was intensely psychosocial. It could not have been otherwise, as its domain of inquiry is the acquisition of behavioral and attitudinal patterns, the building of the mind, and the building of consciousness itself – which results from intensely social processes, processes that do not cease during life.

However, as a young man, I had a period of exclusively self-directed learning. Like most autodidacts, I no doubt developed some idiosyncrasies. A decade of formal education thereafter would seem sufficient to correct them, nevertheless the author of a theory purporting to unify across such a large domain can hardly deny some measure of peculiarity. The autodidact is subject to a society of authors who do not engage him in dialogue. In formal education, some dialogue is provided, and although never enough, interpretation of facts received and activities endorsed is subject to negotiation, explanation, and socialization. Not so for the autodidact.

Some years ago, two young students in an audience with the revered Buddhist spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, asked him the following:

STUDENTS: I wonder if you have in your past any people who were important ... teachers ... or a kind of master that you think about now?

THE DALAI LAMA: Those Indian pundits! Many centuries back ...

STUDENTS: No, I mean someone who influenced you when you were a child or a younger man, who was a master to you, and you his disciple.

THE DALAI LAMA: Yes ... the great Indian pundits of the past many centuries.

STUDENTS: But no one living? I mean, not an actual person?

THE DALAI LAMA: No. You see, those living persons, they are just carrying the messages of the great Indian pundits ... (Hilgers & Molloy, 1981, p. 195, quoted in Tharp & Gallimore, 1998)

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I do not liken myself to the Dalai Lama – quite the reverse. In his formal monastic education between the ages of six and twenty-three, he would have been immersed in the school's intensely social patterns of interaction, in which interpretation of text and application to life are dramatically disputed in a pattern very close to “debate” in the Western tradition, or to the “drum-dance” contest of ideas among traditional Inuit. In all likelihood, he reached his private dialogue with books and authors in his later life.

As a young autodidact, I made what I could of readings alone under a night-light: broad, sweeping surveys – Fraser's *Golden Bough*, Toynbee's *Study of History*, the many volumes of *The Story of Civilization* and *The Story of Philosophy* by Will and Ariel Durant, Freud, Einstein, a set of books about the biological-medical researchers who pioneered disease theory. I suppose attempting a simulacrum of survey courses was an economical way of understanding how knowledge is organized and of what categories it consisted. However, as I will emphasize further in this work, *more is learned than is taught*. Mentors teach disciplines and craft; but learners absorb them as models. Not that those “pundits” seemed infallible, any more than a reader will find this author so. Yet it still seems to me that building toward a unified theory is what scholars are supposed to do.

Only recently have I attempted such a thing myself. An accumulation of concepts has developed along with a kind of sorting and stacking, so after a long career there seem enough blocks in my shed to attempt some kind of edifice.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

As an undergraduate at the University of Houston, I had a rat and a Skinner Box. In graduate school at the University of Michigan, I studied field theory, systems theory, social psychology, and anthropology; I used sociological theory in my dissertation. At the Palo Alto Veterans' Administration Hospital, I was further trained in applied behaviorism, community psychiatry, and the social therapies for families and institutions. As a young faculty member of the University of Arizona, in 1961, I designed the first graduate degree program in Community Psychology. Many of the building blocks of my personal intellectual structure came from these fields. I continue to find value in them, and all reverberate in Delta Theory.

Delta Theory's central concepts also include three of Lev Vygotsky's (1978) concepts, which I have expanded and published previously: the zone of proximal development (Tharp & Gallimore, 1969); the developmental domains, particularly his cultural-historical domains (Tharp, 1994);

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and, by asserting the strong case, an extension of the age range of applicability of ZPD-assisted performance principles (e.g., Watson & Tharp, 2006). These expansions are made possible by decades of data accumulated since Vygotsky's death. The Cycle of Social Sorting (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton & Yamauchi, 2000) is an amalgam of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory concepts and some from sociology. Other Delta material has other sources, from cognitive behaviorism to cognitive science to brain studies. A concept vital to Delta is drawn from the philosopher John Searle (see Chapter 6). My method is to accrete domain-specific data and explanations to the structure of Delta concepts and dynamics, and thereby articulate a unified scientific theory explaining influence and change.

A "UNIFIED" THEORY

In Delta Theory, what is being unified? My purpose is to bring together a number of theoretical and research domains *insofar as they treat influence and change*. Thus I draw 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. I do not purport or aspire to unify these entire disciplines, but rather to propose a theory of influence and change that unites and interweaves contributions from each. A secondary aspiration is that Delta Theory serve as a demonstration or proof of concept of the feasibility of unifying many small domain theories – not to refute or remove them, but to offer a system of more basic processes to enrich their own theorizing and research.

“Modern physics began with a sweeping unification: In 1687 Isaac Newton showed that the existing jumble of disparate theories describing everything from planetary motion to tides to pendulums were all aspects of a universal law of gravitation. Unification has played a central role in physics ever since.... In addition to predicting new physical effects, a unified theory provides a more aesthetically satisfying picture of how our universe operates” (Lisi & Weatherall, 2010, p. 55–56). I quote these two ambitious theorists in physical science to emphasize that unification is necessary to progress. Likewise in the human sciences: We will unify or stultify. There will be unifiers. There will be unification.

In speaking to colleagues about this aspiration, I meet some sardonic smiles and perhaps will now receive a great deal more. Yet also encouragement: It is not unique to suppose that the task of scientists is to contribute discoveries pertinent to theory or challenging to current theory, thereby

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participating in theory building itself. Pecking away at it and sometimes attempting a reach: This is the calling of science and indeed of the intellectual life.

I feel far from my autodidactic youth, having had a professional life of intense collegiality. Virtually all of the concepts used here are the result of work and dialogue with a set of extraordinary collaborators, through whose influence this work has developed. Delta Theory is *synthesis* in another sense, being an integration of concepts that emerged during my long study of various forms of influence and change in the settings of many cultures. Readers of my previous writings, many of them decades prior to my exposure to Vygotskian concepts, will meet again some familiar terms and threads of thought but will perhaps see them anew in this whole-cloth attempt.

A last personal note: In critiquing the professional practice of influence and change, every shortcoming I strive to influence and change I too have committed.¹ Of practitioner errors, I write with the bona fides of frustrated experience, not disdainfully but with empathy.

IS DELTA COMPLETE?

The question may arise: Is Delta a finished theory or a draft of a work in progress? My hope is that Delta will never be “finished,” unless or until it is refuted. Absent that, any theory with power will accrete, expand, modify, and gradually incorporate into accepted science, especially a universalist theory for which there is a built-in process of modification. As this book will emphasize, the basic discipline of any universal theory is the Method of Universals, characterized most frequently as William James’s “one white crow” test, in which any universal proposition (such as “all crows are black”) is upset by a single exception. Thus instances of exceptionality are followed by a modification of the specific proposition. The discipline of the universalist requires vigilance in searching for white crows.

¹ My career has been in many specific domains of influence and change: research and practice in marriage and family counseling; group and individual psychotherapy (office based and home based); formal education from preschool to graduate school; community psychology; and coaching (athletic, personal, and professional development). This has brought regular collaboration with nursing, psychiatry, occupational therapy, public health, rehabilitation, group homes both open and closed, mental hospitals, and community mental health centers. I have also had the common human experiences of influencing children, in my case as the parent of five. Working for a unified therapy for these domains was less a choice than being driven to solve the problems of Babel.

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Thus any universal theory is only provisionally complete; it is ever open to necessities for greater precision until the community of scientists is satisfied that some propositions require no further searching and are declared accepted science.

DELTA?

I have appropriated the word *delta* from calculus, Δ denoting a change, as the result of a specifiable relationship between one variable and others it affects. The name's obvious appeal is as the metaphor for change, but its mathematical association also invokes standards of disconfirmability and the potential for quantification of relationships among concepts as variables. I choose to fly the flag of Δ not as a claim of territory occupied, but as an idealistic symbol. Throughout the work assembled here into Delta Theory, I have taken care only to use concepts potentially quantifiable and their relationships disconfirmable. If any should prove not to be so, they must be refined or replaced.

Efforts through quantitative research to test theoretical propositions are expensive in resources and effort. The warrants for such work lie in the plausibility of the theoretical ideas, plausibility sufficient to justify prudent investment. I have attempted to test the Delta assertions against plausibility at every stage of the theory's construction. Using the one white crow test, I have not found exceptions. A further test is to continually ask at each stage of theory development: Among the interdependencies of the central concepts, is the weave tight enough to hold complex phenomena without spillage? When it is not, the strands must be further tightened.

Of course, plausibility is a criterion requiring judgment, and that judgment will now be the reader's to make.

A NOTE ON "NATURAL" AND "NATURE"

Forty years ago, in *Behavior Modification in the Natural Environment* (Tharp & Wetzel, 1969) our use of the word *natural* was much remarked, in the tone of "What's more natural about school and home than the laboratory?" Nevertheless, I retain the idea of natural, because the strongest evidence for the validity of Delta Theory is its correspondence with successful human practices of influence as they occur naturally (as opposed to professionally), but also in a more foundational sense. The theoretical processes of Delta Theory are natural because they occur *by and through the nature* of *Homo*

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sapiens. Thus grounding in science – physical, biological, and social – is essential to my criteria for a valid theory of human behavior. Successful influence processes are successful *because* they operate through natural processes – those that are phylogenetically laid down, historically conditioned, and socially influenced toward development.

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