FROM PRACTICE TO THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interplay between theoretical frameworks and homeland security practice, focusing on the challenges of working within complex adaptive systems. Drawing from various disciplinary frameworks and personal experience, the author argues that theories seldom provide clear guidance for prospective actions within complex social systems. Their primary value lies in post-event analysis to understand what went wrong. The author asserts that generating context-specific theories is crucial for navigating the complexities of homeland security. The paper advocates for practitioners and students to learn how to create theory from their work.

INTRODUCTION

This essay is about the relationship between practice and theory.[1] I believe homeland security as an academic field of study is discipline-agnostic (Bellavita, 2023). I consider it a domain of practice and thought that would welcome any idea that might improve homeland security.

My central claim is that homeland security students and practitioners should be encouraged to create their own theories. Established theories are an essential resource for that endeavor, but practice gives life to the sterility of theory. This essay underscores the need to balance the coherence of theoretical explanations in homeland security with an awareness of the difficulties of working in an environment that does not present itself in conceptual categories.

There is little that is new or innovative about my assertions. I do not know anyone who believes practitioners can directly apply ideas they learned in school to complex problems. Pragmatist philosophers and academics have written extensively about the value of experience over theory (Dewey, 2000; Dewey & Hinchey, 2018; James, 2017; Peirce, 1878; Rorty, 1989; Rorty et al., 2017; Wittgenstein, 1973), and about using practice to construct theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Klein, 2017; Kolb, 2014; Schön, 1984; Weick et al., 2005). In the early days of public administration, the precursor academic discipline of many public safety professions, apprenticeships were a primary way of transferring knowledge (Bellavita, 1990). I make the case in this essay for a renewed appreciation of the role practice can play in developing effective theories.

In this essay, I focus on the intellectual and practical demands created by the complexity of homeland security.[2] Significant parts of practitioners' work environments can be volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Bellavita, 2006; Elkington, 2018; Mann, 2023; Taskan et al., 2022). The facts and theories people learn in school are likely less important than understanding how to learn (Pelfrey & Kelley, 2013, pp. 3–5). In a complex world, knowing how to create useful theories can effectively improve one's impact. I arrived at the beliefs expressed in this essay primarily through experience (Bellavita, 2019; Mills & Gitlin, 2000).[3]

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Many years ago, I naively believed theory was like a blueprint or a formula. If I did X, then I could expect the outcome would be Y.[4] I think I absorbed this belief from high school chemistry and physics classes. There was an order to the physical world. Theory helped describe and explain that order. Those who understood theory had an opportunity to predict and maybe influence what could happen.

In college, I learned that theory was integral to understanding the social sciences and humanities. History, sociology, art, anthropology, and literature all had theories one was supposed to learn.

I do not recall ever questioning my belief in the value of theory. I did question particular theories.[5] However, I unreflectingly assumed that theory held inherent value. My search was for correct theories, theories whose truth could be demonstrated by objective evidence, theories that would help me effectively describe, explain, or predict something I cared about. I enjoyed the intellectual pleasure of theorizing, of searching for and finding the world's order.[6]

After working a few years for the federal government and earning a doctorate, I started teaching public administration at a graduate school in Washington, DC. My students were mid- to senior-level public employees. Since I had recently completed my formal academic training, I had many theories to serve as grist for lectures and course modules.

The students played their role appropriately. They took notes, asked questions, discussed the material, submitted assignments, and did well on the tests. However, there was a disconnect between their lives as practitioners and what they were learning in school. While most were gathering a bucket full of ideas, little of what they were learning was helpful in their professional lives.

I retained faith in the value of theory. I suspected there was something about how I was teaching that did not do justice to the treasure of theories, concepts, metaphors, and paradigms I had access to (Bellavita, 1990, xvi). After several years of discussions with practitioner students, culminating in a book examining the link between theory and practice in the public sector (Bellavita, 1990), I realized I had far too many theories and not nearly enough practice.
I left teaching for a job working with what are now called National Special Security Events.[7] I spent the next two decades exploring the usefulness of theory in "the real world." That experience changed my understanding of what I could expect from theory.

GETTING TO WORK

Working as a practitioner allowed me to conduct a natural experiment (Leatherdale, 2019). I intended to be a participant-observer[8] and test the theories I knew about leadership, collaboration, communication, motivation, structure, and other concepts that the organization theory and behavior literature had to offer. Work gave me the chance to be a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1984) and to act "thinkingly" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 412).

I never expected to make a one-to-one match between theory and practice, particularly within my complex, multi-agency environment. Theories in social science mainly served as guides, pointing roughly in the direction of what I wanted to accomplish. I would need to adapt general ideas to fit local conditions. The thought of doing that energized me. It was about learning, about transforming my experiences into a refined knowledge of how to use theory to improve practice (Kolb, 2014, p. 151).

WHAT I LEARNED

What I learned after 20 years working for federal, state, and local government agencies was how rarely theory consciously informed anything I did. I validated the maxim, "An ounce of practice is generally worth more than a ton of theory" (Schumacher, 1973, p. 44).

I cannot recall ever developing a strategy or planning an operation by starting with theory. Nor do I remember ever using theory to dissect why something important went right. The only time I found theory valuable was in hindsight, when I sought to understand setbacks or adverse incidents (Bellavita, 2006, p.16).

Theories provided a checklist I could use to apply in practice what I thought I knew in principle. When something went wrong, I could ask myself, is this a leadership issue? If so, I could go through the dozen leadership theories I had access to and see if any offered insight into what happened and why. Alternatively, maybe the problem was a communication issue. Or a structural concern. Theories gave me many ways to think about what had happened. My reason—my theory espoused (Argyris & Schön, 1974)[9]—for using theory diagnostically was to identify alternative actions I could take the next time a similar situation came up, hoping for and expecting a different outcome.

The poet Paul Valéry wrote, "History is the science of what never happens twice."[10] Unfortunately, that aphorism was true for my naturalistic research experiment. I still believed in a model of an ordered reality I could influence once I knew which levers to operate. However, the reality I worked in changed continuously, and the levers never appeared in quite the same way.

An adage in the Olympic security community states, "All Olympics are the same, and all Olympics are different." While they may share unimportant similarities, their differences often appear unexpectedly and surprisingly. Consequently, I never experienced situations that were significantly the same. I never got to apply what I had learned from my past mistakes. Instead, each emergent situation presented opportunities for making new errors.

Eventually, I understood that my model of how the social world worked did not accurately describe life within complex adaptive systems (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Johnson, 2002).

I was largely effective at the work I did. At least I kept getting hired to do similar jobs. Initially, I thought I was successful because I was adept at making things up as I went along—*ready, fire, aim*. If there is a theory in there, it must have been about improvisation (Phelps, 2013). Despite whatever theory I espoused, my theory-in-use was to navigate whitewater: keep the overall mission in mind and do whatever came next (Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Vaill, 1989).

Several years later, I synthesized my security operations experiences into an article describing what I had learned on my reflective practitioner journey (Bellavita, 2007). If pressed, I could call what I wrote a theory of special event security, at least in the broad sense that "theory" is used for this journal's special issue.

It was satisfying to distill two decades of experience into a coherent narrative. Did I expect anyone to use that theory to guide future national special security events? No. I have not found that theory *prospectively* informs practitioner action in complex adaptive systems. However, I continue to believe theory can help someone make sense of what they have been through.

"LET EVERYONE BE THEIR OWN THEORIST"

The idea of being your own theorist comes from the essay *On Intellectual Craftsmanship*, by C. Wright Mills (2000). He wrote the essay for readers who are "quickly made impatient and weary by elaborate discussions of method-and-theory-in-general … with the hope that others, especially those beginning independent work, will make [the ideas in Mills' essay] less personal by the facts of their own experience" (p. 278). Mills advised theorists to:

> Be a good craftsman: Avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and to use the *sociological imagination*. Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious intellectual craftsman, and try to become such a craftsman yourself. Let [everyone] … be … [their] own methodologist; let … [everyone] be … [their] own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft. Stand for the primacy of the individual scholar; stand opposed to the ascendancy of research teams of technicians. Be one mind that is on its own confronting the problems of man and society. (p. 319, my emphasis)

Mills defined *sociological imagination* as "the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and of its components" (p. 302).

Here is an example of that capacity in action. A colleague told me about participating in a three-day training seminar with a few dozen other homeland security professionals. Several hours into the first day, the conference center lost power. It was not expected to be restored for 24 to 48 hours. The conference organizers debated sending everyone back to their hotels. After conferring with his boss, my colleague decided to use the now powerless conference to run an unannounced Continuity of Operations (COP) exercise. According to my colleague, the participants considered the exercise successful.

Because I was working on this paper, I asked him to describe the theories he used to help the exercise succeed. I also asked him what came first: his actions or his theories. He told me his actions came first and that he had not thought about a theoretical analysis of what happened until I asked.

After more conversation, I learned that what he did to lead the impromptu exercise was based on integrating theoretical frameworks ingrained in him through decades of experience and education. He told me his actions were

> A synthesis of OODA, Cynefin, a growth mindset, a focus on solving the small problems, and an awareness of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I was a composer who used those ideas as needed to figure out what the next move was. I was not afraid to make mistakes or to fail. What looked like chaos to some of the people just looked complicated but manageable to me.

His explanation illustrates combining existing theories using what could be called a cognitive muscle memory into a situation-specific theory-in-use.[11] His experience mirrored something written by Karl Weick and his colleagues about how medical teams make sense of a unique situation (my emphasis):

> Nurses (and physicians), *like everyone else*, make sense by acting thinkingly, which means that they simultaneously *interpret their knowledge with trusted frameworks, yet mistrust those very same frameworks by testing new frameworks and new interpretations.* The underlying assumption in each case is that ignorance and knowledge coexist, which means that adaptive sensemaking both honors and rejects the past. What this means is that in medical work, *as in all work,* people face evolving disorder. There are truths of the moment that change, develop, and take shape through time. It is these changes through time that progressively reveal that a seemingly correct action "back then" is becoming an incorrect action "now." These changes also may signal a progression from worse to better (Weick et al., 2005, pp. 412–413).[12]

Mills' definition of the sociological imagination, my colleague's spontaneous COP exercise, and Weick's description of simultaneously trusting and mistrusting frameworks echo Fitzgerald's claim that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" (Fitzgerald, 2018, p. 88). Fitzgerald's words capture the dynamic experience of consciously creating one's own working theories.

Being your own theorist requires the ability to transform what you broadly know into what is specifically needed for the situation you are in. One develops this ability by what Weick calls "acting thinkingly," by practicing what Klein calls naturalistic decision-making (Klein, 2017), and through trial and error. With enough experiences, one can become reflexively aware of patterns that can be used to guide behavior and understanding.[13]

Being your own theorist does not have a stopping point. Closed-loop learning in a complex system is neither interesting nor useful. Effective theory creation requires sharing what you believe you know with others, and being open to modifying those beliefs based on new experiences and how people respond to what you assert you know (White & McSwain, 1983).

CAVEATS, CRITIQUES, AND CONCLUSIONS

My claims about being your own theorist apply primarily to activities within the complex domains of homeland security. The approach may also be beneficial in simple, complicated, and chaotic domains (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). However, I think there are better ways to be effective in those environments than what I am suggesting in this paper.

Nothing in this essay intends to discount the worth of established "grand theory, macro-theory, meso-theory… [or] micro-theory" (Ramsay et al., 2020, p. 5). At a minimum, they have value in facilitating conversation among homeland security academics and practitioners. They provide useful material for lectures and examinations. At times, some theories may also lead to significant public policy change (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). If homeland security is as discipline-agnostic as I believe it is, the broader the set of theories students and practitioners can draw from to create their own theories, the better.

I do not believe there is a widespread appreciation for how complex the work demands are on people within the homeland security enterprise. It is easy to see the complexity of such concerns as climate change, border security, catastrophe, artificial intelligence, pandemics, domestic terrorism, and political polarization, among other topics. I find it challenging to identify homeland security issues that are *not* complex.

I am working with someone whose major project is trying to rationalize position descriptions for one of the DHS components. From afar, one would think that would be a straightforward, "simple" issue (in Cynefin framework terms). It is not. Another person is trying to systematize real estate acquisition to enable DHS agencies to collocate. That turns out to be as complex, in its own way, as trying to reform immigration policy. I would find it surprising if most homeland security concerns that matter to readers did not fall into the complexity domain.

One objection to everyone being their own theorist is that we appear to live in a time when that already happens (e.g., Chaffetz, 2023; Gingrich, 2018; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Marche, 2023; Packer, 2014; Walter, 2022). Almost anyone who has an opinion about, say, refugees, desertification, or election security likely has their preferred supporting frameworks. The approach I describe in this paper requires more cognitive effort and intellectual doubt than simply having an opinion (Bellavita, 2019, pp. 5–6).

Another objection might be that while experienced practitioners could benefit from my approach, undergraduates with minimal work experience may not find it helpful. I have never taught undergraduates, so my response to that objection is anecdotal. I know instructors whose teaching is based on andragogical or constructivist principles (Knowles, 2020; O'Connor, 2020). One homeland security professor uses an intelligence simulation exercise with her online undergraduate classes. The exercise aims to help students develop their own frameworks for assessing the quality of information. Another instructor integrates a 20-hour volunteer commitment into a semester-long course on human trafficking. The activity is designed to provide students with experience applying and fine-tuning their academic knowledge in real-world situations. I suspect many public affairs instructors include similar activities in their courses.

I think a lot of students already know how to create their own theories.[14] They likely use different words than I do to describe how they do that. But I doubt they could navigate the years of COVID, counter the continuing threats of school violence, defend themselves against cyber-attacks, grapple with the opportunities and risks of generative AI, or confront the other threats and challenges without already knowing how to act thinkingly within the complex world they are inheriting.

This essay aims to encourage students and practitioners to create more theories, try using them, report the results, and then do it again.

APPENDIX: A NOTE ABOUT METHODOLOGY

I want to make two observations about the method I used to construct this paper. One is about how I used subjectivity. The second is about generative artificial intelligence tools (e.g., chatGPT).

This essay is subjective in the sense described in Bellavita (2019, pp. 5–6). The argument is heavily influenced by my beliefs, shaped by my experiences and the literature I have cited. While I believe my assertions to be true, I recognize that they remain rooted in belief (Markie & Folescu, 2023; Klein, 2017, pp. 527–530).

Kolb (2014) defines learning as transforming experience into knowledge (p. 151). The dominant (but not uncontested) definition of "knowledge" is "justified true belief" (Ichikawa & Steup, 2018). Thinking through what it means to validate a belief as true when writing about complex adaptive social systems pulls one into a cave of multiple understandings about truth, meaning, and justification (Bellavita, 2008, pp. 21–22; Dewey, 1939, pp. 246–248). An extended discussion of this topic (except for the next paragraph) is far beyond the scope of this paper.[15]

The narrative approach I use in this essay is primarily framed (and justified) by Richard Rorty's ideas about inquiry. He believed that "[We] simply do not have a concept of objective reality which can be invoked either to explain the success of some set of norms of warrant, or to justify some set of standards over against others" (Ramberg & Dieleman, 2023). I do not fully accept that claim, but I agree with it regarding interpretations of social reality in a complex adaptive system like the homeland security enterprise. Rorty maintained that in place of objectivity, "All we really know about is how to exchange justifications of our beliefs and desires with other human beings, and as far as we can see, that will be what human life will be like forever" (neopragvideo, 2008). I believe that under the appropriate conditions (Bohm et al., 2004), exchanging "justifications of our beliefs and desires" can be an effective basis for productive inquiry about homeland security.

My second point is about generative AI tools. Anyone who has read this far will likely understand the turmoil tools like ChatGPT have created for schools and universities. Along with Zotero and Grammarly, I used ChatGPT-4 as aids in writing this paper. This was my first attempt at using a large language model in my writing. Initially, I used it to help me format the APA-style citations.

I have not used APA for decades. I read manuals and websites to see if I could get a crash course in the basics of APA 7. I found that much too confusing. So I created a simple prompt for GPT: "Provide an APA 7 citation for the following:" and entered the reference information I wanted to cite.

I received a response in seconds.

I know about the hallucination problems large language models have, so I checked the results against the APA 7 guidance. Not only were the results accurate (an objective claim the JSIRE editors can confirm or refute), but after each request, GPT detailed the rules it followed to create the citation. I do not want to anthropomorphize what it did, but it was tutoring me. I was amazed.

The next part of my experiment involved sentences. Anyone who writes understands there are times when you know what you want to say, but the sentence you just wrote does not quite convey your meaning. Grammarly often picks up my tortured passive voice sentences and suggests how I can improve their readability. I am okay with that help.

I created another simple prompt for chatGPT: “I will post a sentence. I would like at least three suggestions for improving the wording of the sentence.” In a few more seconds, I received three new sentences. I did that maybe a dozen times, and each time, I received at least one sentence that, in my opinion, was better written than the original sentence. Unlike when I use Grammarly, I was uncomfortable replacing my words with GPT’s phrasing. So, I did not.

My university has issued progressive and clear guidance about how to incorporate generative AI effectively and ethically into research and writing. Nevertheless, until I wrote this paper, that guidance was only a theory to me. Having the experience of seeing my thoughts expressed better than I did was unnerving. Transforming that experience into knowledge, I learned I am not yet ready to cross that bridge. However, I leave this part of the experiment knowing I will keep exploring how to use large language models. I believe I can become a better writer with ChatGPT’s help.

Finally, I thought it would be worth asking GPT to write the abstract for the paper. I fed it the text and asked it to create a 100-word abstract. The first abstract was 300 words and inaccurate. The second try was 150 words and still inaccurate. The third and last effort was 112 words, but I did not recognize the essay it was abstracting. So, a human wrote the abstract. Except for formatting citations, a human also wrote everything else in this paper.

I wonder how long I will be able to say that.

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ENDNOTES

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[1] In this essay I use "theory" as defined in this Journal's call for papers: *"For this Special Edition, a theory is systematic and evidence-based approach to processes or phenomena and includes models, frameworks, and similar constructs."* For an extended discussion of theory in homeland security, see J.D. Ramsay, K. Cozine, and J. Comiskey (2020, pp 1–15); and Bellavita (2012).

[2] I will frequently use the word "complexity" in this essay as shorthand for "volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous" and for "complex adaptive systems" (Taskan, et al., 2022. Mitchell, 2009, pp. 23–42).

[3] I explain why I think "beliefs" and "experience" can be useful for theory development in *How to Learn About Homeland Security* (Bellavita, 2019). Arguments in that paper describe applying andragogical and constructivist educational philosophies to higher education (Knowles, 2020; O'Connor, 2020). I found it useful to read Klein's description of how he thought about the methods he used to develop the theory of naturalistic decision-making and about whether his research could be considered "science." Klein concluded that "If [naturalistic decision making] and the study of different sources of power turn out to make little difference, then we will lose confidence in the approach more surely than any debate over what is science" (2017, p. 530).

[4] I still encounter homeland security practitioners and graduate students who hold versions of this view.

[5] Example theories include the great man theory of leadership, social Darwinism, rational choice theory, and behaviorism, among others.

[6] Decades later I learned I was helping to construct any social order I found (Berger & Luckmann,1967). Rorty concluded one could do better than searching for an organic order within social systems: "There isn't any natural order but there is the possibility of a better life for our great-great-great grandchildren. That's enough to give you … all the meaning or inspiration or whatever that you could use" (neopragvideo, 2008).

[7] "The term 'National Special Security Event' means a designated event that, by virtue of its political, economic, social, or religious significance, may be the target of terrorism or other criminal activity" (https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/6/601#9). I provided security support for the 1992, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006 Olympic Games, the 1994 Cup, and other major sporting, political, and international security events. For two detailed examples of the complexity involved in national special security events, see Buntin (1999) and Scott (2005).

[8] "Participant observation is the central research method of ethnography. It requires a researcher to engage with people in as many different situations as possible to look at what people actually do as well as what they say they do … in their everyday lives" (Tacchi et al., 2007).

[9] "Espoused theories are those that an individual claims to follow. Theories-in-use are those than can be inferred from action" (Argyris et al., 1985, p. 82).

[10] The quotation is attributed to Paul Valéry from a 1930 essay titled "The Poetics of Science." I have not been able to confirm authorship.

[11] For a different and more detailed explanation of what I am describing as "cognitive muscle memory," see Klein (1999).

[12] I am avoiding discussing here the conceptual overlap between sensemaking and theorizing. That discussion can be informed by Weick (1995, pp. 121–124) and by Turner et al. (2023).

[13] This is another way to state what Weick et al. described as "simultaneously [interpreting] … knowledge with trusted frameworks, yet [mistrusting] those very same frameworks by testing new frameworks and new interpretations" (2005, pp. 412–413).

[14] One reviewer wrote to me that the argument reminded him "of how I used to study for exams when I was an undergrad—do a lot of practice problems, get most of them wrong, and then theorize about why I got them wrong, and in so doing, build cognitive muscle memory that would help me get the problems on the real exam right."

[15] One entrance to this discussion can be found in Markie and Folescu (2023).