From Student Development to Social Psychology:
A Supplemental Lens for Student Affairs

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A new Associate Vice President for Student Affairs schedules a meeting with the Residential Life staff. Within the meeting she questions the use of community standards and the lack of more strict policies to be enforced. What research would you use to support the use of community standards?

The Dean of Students approaches you to help her revamp the judicial policies. Within your revisions, you have the option of suggesting either more or less severe sanctions. What are your considerations with the hopes of promoting a student's long-term attitude and behavior change?

The economy booms and an anonymous donor writes a large check to your orientation department. You consider beginning to pay your volunteer staff. Should you do this? If so, how much?

As adviser to Student Government Association, you realize that your executive president has leadership roles in numerous other organizations. While contemplating how to provide effective feedback, you wonder what causes some "leaders" to spread themselves so thin. Is it because she is a Millennial and feels pressure to fill numerous roles, or are there other forces in play?

Student development theory is but one lens through which researchers and practitioners can view the complexities of student affairs. This paper explores select intersections between studies in social psychology and student affairs. Moreover, it both explains how the interdisciplinary approach informs student affairs theory and best practices and serves to galvanize new research. The practicality and direct impact that social psychological theories have on human actions and interactions can and should be utilized for the college student demographic.

In order to promote holistic learning and development for students, and to further understand the processes taking place within and surrounding these students, we must consider both the individual and the social environment. According to Lewin, regarded by some as the father of social psychology, these are the key components of behavior (Porter, 2008). Each day student affairs practitioners must respond to, or attempt to predict, students' behavior. While student development theories are critical

to inform cognition, many do little to explain the key social factors that influence student behavior. The following paper will explore these components, emphasizing the influence of the social environment. First a brief background of both fields is presented, followed by examples of their interplay, revisiting the introductory scenarios accordingly.

History

Psychology

For centuries, psychological thought slowly emerged from a philosophical backdrop, evoking questions of how body and mind relate and function together. Such questions led to experimental philosophy and an increasingly empirical approach resulting in the late nineteenth-century beginnings of an independent scientific field of psychology.

As the field evolved, various schools of thought dominated the respective psychological zeitgeists, from the early inquiries of introspective psychology (understanding the mind via introspective analysis and reports) to conditioning (focusing on stimulus and response) and behaviorism (studying behaviors using a vernacular that omitted internal processes), which emerged in the early twentieth century. Also around this time, coinciding with the seemingly interminable nature-nurture debate, psychologists including Jean Piaget and Eric Erikson were researching human development.

Preceding and during WWII, many German Gestalt psychologists who viewed some elements of human experience as inextricably whole were migrating to America (Hayes, 2000). Among these psychologists was Lewin, who formulated the equation B=f{P,E} to assert an "individual's behavior is a function of both their personality and their environment" (Porter, 2008, p. 8). Unlike the nature vs. nurture debate, Porter asserted that Lewin's equation did not require one to take sides; instead, "it invitingly allows for both the person and their environment to affect what happens in a complex, yet profound, way" (p. 8).

By the 1950s and 1960s the cognitive psychology movement revisited its earlier notion of mental processes whereby psychology became the study of both behavior and mental processes. As psychological perspectives have progressed to the current interest in understanding social environments, behavior, and mental processes, they have a direct alignment with perspectives and interests within student affairs and thus create a strong supplemental base to inform student affairs practice.

Student Affairs Administration

Whereas administrative positions (i.e., college deans) began in the colonial colleges as a relief of judicial obligations from the president and faculty, the disciplinarian role soon expanded to include counseling. By 1925 student personnel functions had developed into a distinct profession (Nuss, n.d., p. 69). Like contemporary psychology, student affairs is a young field; therein, students are considered through a perspective similar to Lewin's, embracing both nature and nurture. Despite the fact that college administrators cannot change the cognitive and developmental transcripts a student brings to college, it is the hope of the profession to provide an environment that promotes maximum holistic growth (which Gestalt psychology would support) while a student is enrolled. Such an approach, again, takes behavior, mental processes, and social environments into consideration.

Furthermore, student affairs professionals strive to engage students and galvanize their self-empowerment and self-sufficiency whereby they discover how to learn, think critically, and attain the ability to efficiently apply previously attained knowledge to new challenges. A core component of student affairs is the creation and maintenance of environments that allow for the aforementioned development. A supplemental social psychological perspective would assist practitioners as they create and maintain these learning environments, which have had their own evolution over the decades.

Crossroads of Social Psychology and Student Affairs

Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito explain that student development theory surfaced from the fields of psychology and sociology (as cited in Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002). Providing further explication, Knefelkamp, Widick, and Parker state that "student development theories focus on the interpersonal and intrapersonal changes that occur while a student is in college and the factors that contribute to these changes" (p. 31). These localities of change, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, and their contributing factors are areas that social psychology has capabilities of informing through the use of theories and through its methods of experimental research.

Although there have been applications of social psychology to education, seldom has it been intentionally focused on student affairs and college student development. Understanding additional forces that influence the collegiate cohort via a social psychological perspective is critical for faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education because the information attained can serve as a necessary supplement to extant theories of student development, knowledge of student behavior, and student affairs practice. Thus, providing supplemental theories for framing behaviors and events will ipso facto provide additional knowledge and understanding to the student affairs domain, which has the potential to spark creativity and innovation.

Authority and Conformity

To understand the importance of the social environment from the supplemental perspective, let us consider the classic study by Milgram (1963). Told they were participating in a study of memory and learning, the subject, or "teacher," was asked to give increasing shocks to a "learner," a confederate of Milgram's, upon incorrect word matches. The power of authority was demonstrated as 26 of the 40 subjects continued to ostensibly shock the learner to the maximum capability (i.e., 450 volts labeled "XXX") of a faux shock generator. Zero of the 40 stopped before 300 volts (labeled "Intense Shock"), at which point the learner was no longer responsive, following earlier shouts of anguish.

In Asch's (1951) classic study, subjects were instructed to match the length of a given line with one of three unequal lines and to publicly announce their judgments. Seven members of the group were confederates of the experimenter instructed to make incorrect answers at specific points. The data concluded that when faced with such opposition, within a series of 12 responses: 1) approximately three-quarters of the true participants conformed at least once by responding incorrectly, and 2) considering the entire spectrum of judgments, an average of 35 percent of the overall responses conformed to the incorrect judgments rendered by Asch's accomplices (Aronson & Aronson, 2008).

Although neither study indicates mindless obedience, they each demonstrate the power of social influence and environment in determining behavior. Upon reflection, student development theories could help us debate students' levels of cognitive development (i.e., reflective judgment or moral reasoning) (Guthrie, 1997; Kohlberg, 1976). However, with the supplemental social psychological perspective, we see a more complete picture of the external forces in the situation and are able to measure behavioral outcomes. As practitioners attempt to create and mold every college setting into a potential learning space, the importance of environment is evident and the supplemental perspective is beneficial.

The previous studies also support current practices and provide information to consider when responding to one of the introductory scenarios. Recall the new Associate Vice President of Student Affairs questioning the use of community standards in residential life. As demonstrated in the Asch study, students will at times abandon their trusted judgment in order to fit in and gain acceptance from their peers. Similarly, the theory of social proof suggests that people look to others to determine what is correct and how to subsequently determine their own plan of action (Cialdini, 2001). Within residential life, we make positive use of this behavior by encouraging the creation of community standards. In addition, because they are created by fellow residents and, in theory, should be a framework for norms[4] we often rely on them more than college

policy to guide student behavior. Studies of commitment and consistency, stating that humans desire to be and/or appear consistent with actions taken or commitments made (Cialdini, 2001), provide additional support for community standards as well as support for roommate contracts.

Group Behavior

When we provide spaces where students feel they belong – via orientation, residential life, student programs, Greek life, etc. – norms are often established, sometimes with assistance, at other times independent of office support. As we continue to work with these students, it is imperative to understand the influence of their group affiliations and, in psychological terms, *ingroup/outgroup effects*.

For example, the self-descriptive terms of *ingroup favoritism* and *ingroup bias* suggest that members of a group tend to see their group as better than others. The group requirements for this phenomenon to occur are minimal. Henri Tajfel (1982) divided complete strangers into groups based trivially on a coin flip, yet group members rated those with similar labels as having more positive personalities and stronger work aptitude than those assigned another label. Given the choice, subjects even allocated more money and awards to those with a common label (Aronson & Aronson, 2008; Tajfel, 1982). If a mere coin flip can create the aforementioned attitude and behavioral changes, how might this inform college professionals who work with students in Greek social organizations or students that affiliate according to the social construct of race? Here again, it is clear that social psychological theories add depth to our behavioral understanding.

Cognitive Dissonance

It could be said that every college student is part of a group, whether by choice, self-identification, or by default. However, there is not always a factor as salient as group affiliation to attribute attitude and behavior changes; sometimes these changes happen internally as a result of the social environment. Presented by Leon Festinger, the theory of cognitive dissonance is described as "a state of tension that occurs whenever an individual simultaneously holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent" (Aronson & Aronson, 2008, p. 184). Thus, in order to reduce the instances of cognitive dissonance, the mind must change one or both cognitions. The following section revisits the introductory scenarios and further explores the theory of cognitive dissonance within student affairs practice.

Justification, Judicials, and Staff Compensation

Two types of cognitive dissonance are internal and external justification. Aronson & Aronson (2008) explain that external justification comes into play when we make a decision that might go against our normal behavior. If, for example, we received money, praise, or some other prize in association with abnormal or dissonant behavior, then this behavior could be justified by external factors. However, if an action causes cognitive dissonance and we are unable to find adequate external justification, our minds will adjust the opposing cognition via internal justification. In other words, we might think, "I must have wanted to do that after all, because I surely would not have done something I disagree with for such little incentive."

Indeed, Festinger & Carlsmith (1959) found that when they paid subjects either one or twenty dollars to perform a dull task, those paid the lesser amount actually rated the task as enjoyable, which could be attributed to inadequate external justification. Taking the theory further, Zimbardo, Weisenberg, Firestone & Levy (1965) conducted a study in which 50 NYU students and 72 Army Reservists were asked to eat fried grasshoppers by either a friendly communicator or an unfriendly communicator. Of those who ate the grasshoppers, the ones asked by the unfriendly communicator (i.e., with no external justification) changed their attitudes toward an increased liking of their insect meal.

Now let us examine where this can be applied to student affairs practice. In one of the introductory scenarios, the Dean of Students requested help revamping judicial policies. Through the lens of external justification, one might consider whether immediate behavioral change or enduring attitude change, which might also include the former, is desired most. If attitude change is priority, the policy should provide just enough incentive or sanction to deter a repeat offense, but not enough incentive to provide adequate external justification. Research by Jonathan Freedman found that a mild threat, compared with severe threat, not only had a more significant effect on inhibiting undesired behavior, but also had a more lasting effect (Aronson & Aronson, 2008).

Conversely, by providing unnecessary external justification for a task someone already enjoys doing, one tends to enjoy the activity less, as actions are then attributed to external justification. Studies with both college students and preschool children working on puzzles demonstrated that paying them money for each piece assembled actually diminished interest (Aronson & Aronson, 2008); this could be considered *overjustification*. Now recall the vignette about the generous donor eyeing the orientation department in light of this theory: a sudden influx of stipend could potentially mean an increased applicant pool but a decrease in genuine internal morale.

Dissonance Reduction and Reflective Judgment

Within student affairs, we desire for students to be confronted with and think critically about problems that are not dualistic in nature. Using as references King and Kitchener's Reflective Judgment Model (as cited in Love & Guthrie, 1999), or Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Judgment (Reasoning) (Kohlberg, 1976), each proposing models of cognitive development, it could be argued that encounters with such dissonance-inducing problems are necessary for students' development and advancement along the stages of Reflective Thinking or Moral Judgment. Put simply, Kroll describes the development of reflective thinkers as moving from 'ignorant certainty' toward 'intelligent confusion' (as cited in Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 42), which is a tacit goal within student affairs.

While attempting to achieve this goal, it would be interesting to see the interplay between dissonance reduction and students' cognitive development when confronted with these problems. Lord, Ross & Lepper (as cited in Aronson & Aronson, 2008) provided a glimpse of this: Stanford University students were given two research articles, one refuting and the other confirming their beliefs on capital punishment. Many student affairs professionals might assume seeing a double-sided argument could slightly depolarize the students' beliefs as additional understanding of a complex issue is gained; this would make sense in light of some student development theory. Instead, however, the students were more fervent with their disagreements than beforehand. Thus, there are times at which dissonance-reducing behavior may work against students' cognitive development.

Self-Esteem

After reading about conformity, group behavior, and dissonance reduction, we can see a common tie to the preservation of self-esteem, a topic especially important for the prevalent college-attending generation, the "Millennials." Atkinson (2004) explains that the Millennials have been pressed to achieve in every area, directly or indirectly related to school, and if at any time there arose a problem they could not overcome, their parents would come through with the solutions for their shortcomings. This results in self-confidence and ambition with few challenges, which likely leads to *ego-defensive* behavior, or behavior intended to protect one's ego or self-esteem.

Ego-defensive Behavior and The "Spread-Too-Thin" Leader

Self-serving bias, for example, refers to "a tendency for individuals to make dispositional attributions for their successes and situational attributions for their failures" (Aronson & Aronson, 2008, p. 176). For example, if I ace a test it is because I am smart, but if I fail it was because I was rushed. The same concept is visible when the sports fan states that "we" won but "they" lost. Another method of ego-defensive behavior is *self-handicapping*. The notion was introduced by Jones & Berglas (1978)

who argued that "people actively select those settings for action that render performance feedback ambiguous" (p. 201). Some examples of self-handicapping include the student who gets two hours of sleep before an exam, the athlete that avoids being seen practicing, or the staff member that avoids setting measurable goals; each allows for potential "success," but with an accessible excuse for failure. Now recall the Student Government Association executive president scenario from the introduction. She may be filling roles due to the common Millennial heartbeat; however the scenario viewed through the lens of ego-defensive behavior suggests that she could be filling numerous roles to provide a positive excuse for underachievement. The idea that she is ostensibly such a great leader might overshadow the fact that she has yet to meet any of her beginning-of-year initiatives. How else might these social psychological perspectives influence a supervisory approach of challenge and support? Fein & Spencer (as cited in Aronson & Aronson, 2008) found a negative correlation between self-esteem and prejudicial behavior, so the protection of self-esteem clearly has multifarious implications; however, at times we should still question: At what expense? In what ways might these protective measures inhibit development?

A small selection of social psychological theories was presented herein; each was addressed vis-à-vis the student affairs profession, although a thorough attempt of explicating either field was not intended. Instead, this essay serves as a thumbnail introduction to the possibilities of a deliberate interdisciplinary relationship between theories and practice within social psychology and student affairs. Through a selection of studies, it was suggested how each supplemented current perspectives, informed theory and best practices, and necessitated future associated research within the student affairs profession.

The added theoretical perspective adds depth to our imperfect understanding of students and their social environments. As student affairs practitioners, analogous to amateur Gestalt psychologists, we see students as more than the sum of their identities and behaviors, but rather as complex, ever-developing, whole individuals. McEwen (2003) explains:

> A student affairs professional needs theory because it is difficult for one person to hold simultaneously in his or her understanding all the aspects of a particular phenomenon he or she is interested in—for instance, all the characteristics of a student's identity or all the components of a particular environment. (p. 154)

Although social psychological theories provide strong supplemental perspectives to student affairs practice, we must remember that theories are merely a way we attempt to explain complex phenomena and not a complete picture nor an absolute method of predicting behavior or outcomes. The SGA president may be balancing her various roles

with no shadow of ego-defensive behavior in sight. Similarly, an added stipend to the orientation staff may not decrease genuine, internal staff morale. However such possibilities should be considered and understood to create a more informed and comprehensive decision making process.

Finally, it should also be noted that there are numerous internal and external forces acting upon nearly every behavior, and a measured behavior change does not necessarily indicate cognitive development. These facts, among others, serve dually as not only a limitation of this paper, but also as reason for future experimental, social psychological research focused within higher education and student affairs. Social psychological studies provide supplemental perspectives and understanding to student affairs, and although still not perfect, together they provide a more complete picture than student development theories and practice alone.

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