

RESEARCH YOU CAN USE

Make Way for a New Theory

I cannot recall exactly where or exactly when, but about 15 years ago I came across a review article on planning theory that made the startling claim that urban planning had no theories of its own. According to the article, the theories that we profess as ours are actually borrowed from other fields such as economics and sociology.

life experiences, as opposed to analysis by a lone individual, as is typical of the rational planning model.

The argument for an alternative model appears in an article called “Strategies for Megaregion Governance,” published in the Winter 2011 issue of the *Journal of the American Planning Association*. The authors are Judith Innes of the University of California, David Booher, and Sarah DiVittorio. Innes and Booher further outline and illustrate their case in a new book, *Planning with Complexity: An Introduction to Collaborative Rationality in Public Policy* (2010, Routledge).

Whereas the traditional rational planning model equates rationality to scientific inquiry, collaborative rationality “relies heavily on interpretive, pragmatic and dialectical ways of knowing,” write Innes et al. in *JAPA*. The authors recognize that at least a semblance of rationality is needed to sway public opinion in a highly political environment. They simply define rationality in a novel way.

It is easy to miss their point in the brief article, but it is made much clearer in the book. After seeing a rave review by Phil Emmi, a colleague at the University of Utah, I read the book myself. In it I learned that collaborative rationality is a stool that rests on three legs—diversity, interdependence, and authentic dialogue. The authors invented an acronym to help us remember the legs, DIAD.

Putting theory into practice

This column is always about research guiding practice, which, it turns out, is the gist of the book’s second chapter. To answer the question, “How can theory improve practice?” Innes and Booher cite three elements of a good theory: truth, beauty, and fertility. The theory of collaborative rationality meets all three criteria. It is truthful because it accounts for evidence. It is beautiful because it is simple and provides novel insights. And it is fertile because it opens new lines of inquiry. Moreover, this theory has emerged from the world of

practice and is informed by in-depth case studies and cross-case comparisons. It is inductive, drawing generalized conclusions from a collection of specific observations. This by itself speaks well of the collaborative rationality model as a basis for action.

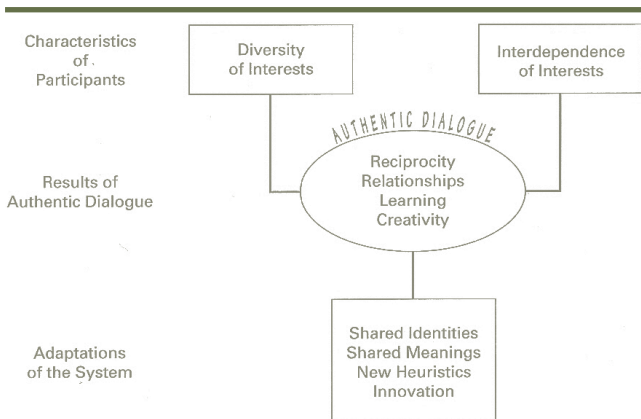
To illustrate the difference between the traditional and new approaches, the authors refer to the theory that sprawling environments contribute to obesity. Researchers using the old, deductive model would begin by testing to see whether obesity rates actually do increase with sprawl, controlling for sociodemographic differences across communities. According to a 2007 literature review by Mia Papas et al., published in *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 17 of 20 such studies showed statistically significant associations between obesity and the built environment.

By contrast, researchers using the new model, the inductive, collaborative approach, would conduct interviews to determine whether sprawl contributes to a culture that encourages driving, fast food, and sedentary activity. “The theory might be in the form of a story about how this culture reinforces itself as such people coexist in a sprawling environment,” write Innes and Booher in their book. In collaborative dialogue, participants listen to each other’s opinions and those of experts to engage in joint learning.

In the *JAPA* article, the new model is applied to one of the thorny issues of our times: the governance of megaregions. Collaborative processes fill gaps where government fails to operate, bridge jurisdictional and functional boundaries, engage public- and private-sector actors in common tasks, and focus on the collective welfare of a region. The usefulness of the collaborative approach is illustrated by case studies of water planning in California and of voluntary civic organizations known as Collaborative Regional Initiatives. Like the book, the article is not an easy read, but it is a worthwhile one.

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Theory of Collaborative Rationality (DIAD Network Dynamics)

From *Planning With Complexity*

The closest we come to an original theory, the article continued, is the rational planning model. Following this model, experts and decision makers begin by identifying problems to be solved and goals to be met, which they then translate into performance measures. Next, they identify planning and policy alternatives to meet the goals and evaluate them with respect to the performance measures. Finally, they select the alternative that performs best with respect to those measures.

I have to admit that theory isn’t my thing, but the basic approach described in that article is evident in everything we do, from environmental impact statements to long-range transportation plans to scenario analyses. Thus it came as a surprise when a compelling case for an alternative was advanced recently. The alternative model is called “collaborative rationality,” and it is based on dialogue among people with diverse opinions and