

AINO KÄÄRIÄINEN & HEIDI MUURINEN

Combining
Practice and
Theory in
Professional
Fieldwork

A GUIDEBOOK TO FACILITATE
PRACTICE AND THEORY GROUPS

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IN PROFESSIONAL FIELDWORK

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A GUIDEBOOK TO FACILITATE
PRACTICE AND THEORY GROUPS

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI  MMXX

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To Begin

THIS GUIDEBOOK has been created to support the direction of Practice and Theory groups. It describes how such groups were created, their philosophical foundations and the operating model. This guide helps to experiment with this operating model, which combines theory and practice in work communities. The guidebook is based on our experiences of Practice and Theory groups and our research conducted on such groups.¹

John Dewey² has written that theories are tools and, “as in the case of all tools, their value resides not in themselves but in their capacity to work shown in the consequences of their use.” In our view, this applies to demanding professional work in different fields. In the field of social work, there are often discussions about how social work practitioners feel that their practical work is separate from the academic world. As social work researchers, we began to think about how theories could support social workers in their work and whether, as Dewey described, theories could be practical tools.

In 2015, we came up with the idea of theory-driven supervision, where the basis of the dialogues would be theoretical or research-based frameworks instead of traditional client cases. The planning of the new group model was shaped by ideas of experimental learning and theories as tools for analysing practice. We decided to test this idea of theory-driven group supervision. We named the group the Practice and Theory group (KäyTe in Finnish). The descriptions and instruction in this guidebook are based on the groups we have directed in social work. Though the idea for this model has come from social work, it can be adapted to other fields where there is a need to combine theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

In Chapter 2 of this guide, we present the theoretical grounds of the group work. This helps the group's director to understand what the Practice and Theory model is about, and to discuss the significance of knowledge and theories as well as shared learning with the group. Chapter 3 describes the principles of supervision and group practices. We hope this chapter encourages especially those readers who are not already familiar with directing groups. In Chapter 4 we describe the operational model of the group. The chapter instructs the director with concrete methods to prepare the group and to direct each group session. In Chapter 5 we summarise some of the key insights from our research concerning the participants' experiences of the group.

The Basis for the Group

IN THIS CHAPTER WE PRESENT the theoretical and researched foundations that have affected the development of the Practice and Theory group. These create the framework for the choices and principles which have been observed in the group. You can also find out more about these by reading the literature used as references in this guide.

Practice and Theory

Practice is often defined as the opposite of theory or of thoughts seeking knowledge.³ Often practice means everyday actions, established methods, praxis and practising skills.⁴ The word *theory* has its origins in ancient Greek. The etymology is connected to *spectator* (Gk. *θεωρός*, *theōros*), but the early philosophers adapted the word *theōriā* (Gk. *θεωρία*, being a *ἑκτετατός*) to mean contemplation or intellectual activity in general.

Today theory means a coherent scientific explanation formed with many elements.⁵ Theories are generalisations made based on multiple occurrences that involve theoretical terms and notions. Theoretical terms and notions help in describing such parts of experiential reality that we cannot directly sense.⁶

This guide uses the term theory widely to describe coherent, vast theories but also to refer to theoretical terms, conceptualisations and knowledge that are based on empirical research. In other words, this guide uses the term theory

to refer also to single conceptualisations based on research, even though they may be a part of a broader and perhaps even unfinished theory.

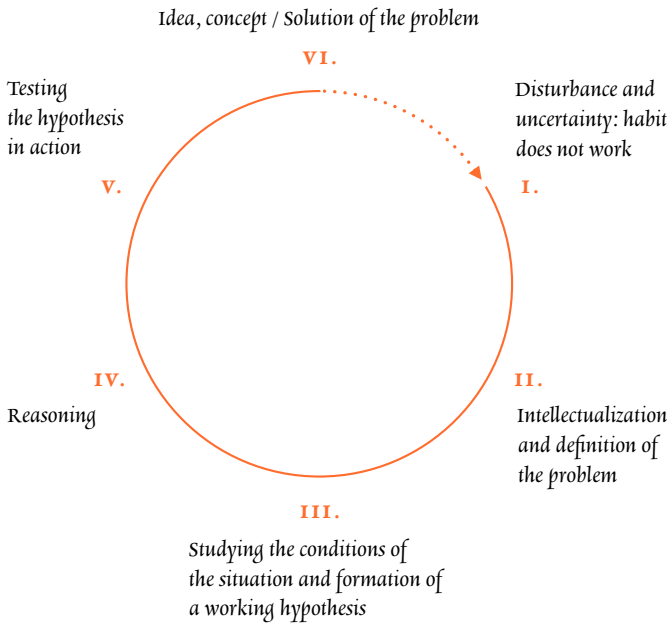
In addition to this definition of theory, theory also sometimes means an assumption or hypothesis.⁷ In the Practice and Theory group, however, theory does not refer to hypotheses relating to isolated cases, rather theory is used to refer to broad conceptualisations based on academic research. Conceptualisations and theories are not, however, locked and final truths. Theories should also be regarded critically, and like hypotheses, they should be evaluated by how they can be of assistance in analysing a situation.⁸

Pragmatism and Experimental Action

The idea for the Practice and Theory group is based on pragmatist philosophy. Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that began at the end of the 19th century in the United States. Pragmatism considers knowledge to be a consequence of interaction with one's environment, and knowledge is seen as a notion or theory which has been tested in practice and which has proven to be appropriate for guiding action.⁹ The central founders of pragmatism are considered to be Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910) and John Dewey (1859–1952). Especially Dewey's philosophy of experience¹⁰ has inspired the conception of the Practice and Theory group model.

Dewey's philosophy of experience describes the experimental thoughts and actions of people and the resulting conscious learning and studying of one's own actions that is connected to these initial thoughts and actions.¹¹ When a person acts, their environment responds to their action.¹² Though a person may have acted in a routine manner, a surprising or unexpected consequence of the action directs the person to become conscious of the action.¹³ Peirce considered that surprising observations are important in the knowledge production process, because they grasp the spectator's attention and initiate deduction that aims to

explain the observation.¹⁴ According to Dewey, when a person begins to reflect on what has happened, this leads to forming a working hypothesis and to clarifying it through thought experiments and experimental action, and ultimately to solving the issue or gaining understanding. The following figure depicts the reflective process Dewey has described.¹⁵



Forming a hypothesis is crucial, because that is what separates the action from an aimless trial and error method, and it enables learning and directing the next experimental action reflected upon.¹⁶ Using hypotheses can be seen as an appropriate method for social workers, for instance, because according to research, social workers form and evaluate hypotheses connected to client situations¹⁷ and they use rules in their thinking. These rules explain the client situation and how these explanations should be adapted, and how they should act in different situations.¹⁸

When a person acts and encounters the consequences of their actions, they gain an experience. This experience enables the person to study, develop and evolve their actions. If a person does not have the opportunity to observe the consequences of their actions, their experience becomes fragmented and they do not gain information based on their experience. Therefore observing the consequences of one's actions is important for knowledge production and this is made possible when the experiments are small enough, are reflected on and form a continuum.¹⁹

Changes caused by experiments reveal relations between different matters. It is not, however, always possible to change the objects of observation in one's own actions. A person gazing at stars cannot change the location of planets. In such situations, the experimental action can involve changing one's point of view. From a new perspective, one can observe something, which cannot be seen otherwise.²⁰

The experiment does not need to be successful or adhere to expectations. According to Dewey, more important than the success of the experiment is that the experiment happens under such circumstances that enable observing its consequences and learning from these observations.²¹ In both science and everyday experimental action, it is important to remember that knowledge is by nature fallible and can be fixed and clarified. In philosophy, this notion is called fallibilism.²² A fallibilistic approach can be considered characteristic especially in pragmatism, which means that knowledge is evaluated critically through study and reflection.²³ Pragmatism considers that the question of ultimate truth cannot be solved and thus it is irrelevant. Instead, the practical implications of knowledge or theory as well their ability to solve practical issues are considered more important.²⁴

Experimental action and developing one's own actions requires reasoning, which enables reflecting on the situation, forming and testing a hypothesis and analysing the consequences of the experiment. The more the experiment

is reflected on, the more precise the knowledge is which can be gained through the experiment. Especially important is the ability to question and become surprised by everyday observations, because surprise can lead to new realisations. Surprise and thoughts leading to realisations can be prompted by different types of strategies and methods for thoughts, such as internal thought experiments or discussions with others.²⁵

Because observations are surprising only in relation to the spectator's expectations or previous knowledge, knowledge of theories can help in recognising contradictory or surprising matters and thus promote deduction.²⁶ Theories and research should not, however, be seen as unchanging truths, but rather as hypotheses which are examined and tested in practice.²⁷ This means it is important that knowledge is not predetermined, but formed through experiments.²⁸

Professionals must always reflect on the relevance of their actions and their ethical principles according to professional ethics rules – and this is also true within the Practice and Theory group. Experimental action can be seen to promote ethically sound action through deliberation and reflection. In addition to this, an experimental approach that is based on pragmatism promotes collaboration and the participation of clients. Because knowledge is seen to be formed in interaction between people and the environment, knowledge and thus also power is not only in the hands of researchers or experts. Recognising the significance of experiential knowledge directs attention towards knowledge and points of view of practitioners and clients as well.²⁹ In addition to this, Dewey³⁰ considered that sharing experiences as well as experimental action could work as a means to develop public action and promote a democratic way of life. Because experiments allow people to use and develop their own potential, Dewey also argued that experimental action is a tool for developing society.

Triological Learning

The foundation of the Practice and Theory group's operating model and work is in triological learning.³¹ The triological approach to professional expertise contains three central areas of learning:³²

- I. Learning as an individual process of gaining knowledge.
- II. Learning as participating and growing as a member of community action.
- III. Learning as conscious knowledge production.

Developing and learning as a professional is not only an individual and cognitive process. The social nature of investigative learning and expertise is central to developing skills. The triological approach to learning focuses on communal learning, where people work together with topics that have been chosen together. Developing skills and learning are not merely a transfer of knowledge. Topics chosen together and shaped in the process are emphasised in addition to individual learning or social interaction.³³ The triological approach to learning has six principles:³⁴

- I. The activities are organised around shared objects.
- II. The action supports individual and collective agency in the shared objects.
- III. Emphasis is placed on combining different forms of knowledge and reflection in analysing objects.
- IV. Long-term working processes are promoted.
- V. Transfer of knowledge between different types of knowledge practices, communities and institutions is supported.
- VI. Different tools that support shared working are utilised.

The model of triological learning has been proven to work best when the participants have sufficient knowledge and practical skills. Then the existing knowledge can be utilised in shared work and in developing actions.³⁵ The objective of the Practice and Theory group is to utilise the skills and experiences of the participants in shared group work.

Epistemic Agency

The notion of epistemic agency has been used in planning the Practice and Theory group model. By epistemic agency we mean communal knowledge building, where the participants do not merely rely on external criteria, but guide their own learning.³⁶ We believe that the shared theory-driven dialogue in the Practice and Theory group can open up opportunities for epistemic agency to develop.

Discussions of agency have often been connected to working life contexts, where there have been efforts to describe professional power, autonomy, freedom of action and capabilities for multi-professional cooperation.³⁷ When professionals can use their knowledge and can affect decisions, their professional agency is trained and developed. Professional agency combines the professional's personal work identity, ethical commitments, motivation, interests and goals. The development of professional agency is affected by personal experiences, knowledge and capabilities to use one's skills and resources. Professionals have specific, practical and natural relationships to their work that have been built contextually, individually and communally.³⁸

Combining different knowledge processes and integrating knowledge into practice increases epistemic agency, which mere reflection does not do.³⁹ In other words, general discussion about work phenomena based on research does not yet necessarily increase the epistemic agency of the participants. Doing so requires personal experiences and adapting or integrating knowledge to practice.

In the Practice and Theory group, shared epistemic agency means⁴⁰ that the group has jointly agreed on:

- I. Operating principles.
- II. Objectives.
- III. Knowledge of the working process and its motives.
- IV. Collective work.
- V. Shared conclusions.

To develop epistemic agency, it is important that topics are found which are interesting to all, are a part of the work community's actions, support the important perspectives raised by the community, and offer the work community compelling topics for their actions. This allows individual epistemic agency to be built as a part of collective action.⁴¹ In the Practice and Theory group, the development of epistemic agency comes from the interaction between individual and communal work, where it is essential that the individuals have the courage to participate in matters that are valuable to themselves and their community.

The Principles of the Group

IN THIS CHAPTER WE DISCUSS general instructions for directing a Practice and Theory group and describe the group work. A supervision approach, striving for dialogical interaction and agreeing on shared rules creates a safe yet enriching atmosphere for the group.

The Supervision Approach

The Practice and Theory group adheres to the principles of supervision. *Firstly*, this means that the participants are encouraged to discuss their own experiences and thoughts about their work. The discussions are usually directed at the participants' own work experiences and reflecting on them together.⁴² The basis of this is that personal development happens best when one's own actions are examined and evaluated.

A *second* principle of supervision is that actions, discussions and events in the group are confidential. This means that anything that the participants hear about others' work communities, clients or personal opinions may not be relayed outside the group. This principle is important for confidentiality.

Directing the Group

In directing the Practice and Theory group, dialogical orientation is applied. Dialogical interaction increases shared understanding and enriches the thoughts of the partici-

pants. Having discussions that allow everyone the time, space and opportunity to present their thoughts and give others the opportunity to do the same is a significant factor in creating confidential interaction.⁴³

Essential in dialogical orientation are *respect*, *hearing* and *waiting*, which are expected both of oneself and of others. The participants in the group respect the thoughts of others, but also respect their own. It is important to focus on listening to others, but it is also essential to listen to one's own internal dialogue and thoughts that arise in the discussion. Waiting in dialogical interaction means that one has the patience to wait for the dialogue to build up without forcing it into a specific, predetermined direction and also that one waits patiently for thoughts to form rather than quickly expressing opinions. People are very different in interactions: some are quick and others deliberate more. What is important is that everyone can participate in the shared discussion.

A dialogical approach also means that the group's facilitators can present their own views and experiences. Directing the group is not merely giving others turns to speak, rather the facilitators may also present their own experiences and ideas about the topic at hand.

We recommend directing the group in pairs, because this allows the directors to reflect together. If however you are directing a group alone, you can tell the group about what you have heard and ask them to reflect on this. This alternation between speech and hearing familiar in narrative therapy⁴⁴ can be realised in the following ways:

- I. The participants in the group discuss the topic at hand together and the facilitators listen closely.
- II. The facilitators discuss together what they have heard and bring forth topics raised by the group in an encouraging and respectful way.
- III. The participants in the group discuss how it felt to listen to the facilitators' speech and what new things should be discussed together.

This method should be mentioned in the group's first meeting, so that the participants are aware of it. It may at first be confusing to hear thoughts awakened by one's own speech and experiences. When the directors discuss what they have heard in a positive light, the participants gain a clearer understanding of new perspectives and this enriches their thoughts.

Agreeing on Ground Rules

In the first meeting with the group, the principles of participating in the group should be agreed upon. The following factors are important for building strong interaction in the group:

- I.** The participants commit to the group's meetings. Because the group progresses in a cyclical manner and the sessions connect to each other, absences affect both the participant's own experience of the group as well as the motivation of others.
- II.** Information discussed in the group cannot be relayed outside the group.
- III.** The participants respect each other's opinions and points of view.
- IV.** Personal experiences are respected, encouraged and considered important sources of information.
- V.** There are no phones, computers or calendars in the meetings.

Getting Started and Implementing the Group

IN THIS CHAPTER WE PRESENT the progression of the Practice and Theory group from preparing theories to the contents of the group sessions. With these practical instructions, you can direct the group well and appropriately.

Preparing Theories

Directing a Practice and Theory group requires choosing and preparing theory materials. In choosing suitable theories, the most important criterion is that they are adaptable to each group's working and operational environment. When you have decided to direct a Practice and Theory group, think about what matters would be central questions in the participants' work and what types of theories would connect to these questions. In our experience, a versatile array of conceptualisations based on theoretical or qualitative research activate the discussion well.

When thinking about theories that might interest the participants, it is likely that you will choose theories that

you are already familiar with. Choosing familiar theories helps with the preparations and may also help with bringing forth different views when directing the discussion. Being familiar with a particular theory does not however need to be a requirement. Instead, you can if you wish choose theories that are new to you. When preparing materials for the group, you will certainly become acquainted with the theories. It is not however necessary to know a theory thoroughly beforehand, because thinking about the topic together is more important.

Suitable theories can be found in academic journals by using key words or by looking through an academic journal that may be of interest to your group. In the first session with the group it is good to ask the participants if they have any theories in mind that they would like to discuss in the group or if they have issues that you could find a suitable theory for. Previous Practice and Theory groups have discussed for instance the following topics:

- I. Face work⁴⁵
- II. Sense of coherence⁴⁶
- III. Client–worker relations in social work⁴⁷
- IV. Ethical decision making⁴⁸
See *Example 1*, pp. 22–23.
- V. Culturally defined having-to in social work⁴⁹
See *Example 2*, pp. 24–25.

For each Practice and Theory group we have chosen around seven to ten different theories and we have written 14 summaries of them. It is essential that the summary can be viewed on one page. In other words, when preparing the materials, you should think about how to condense the presentation of the theory. If the theory is a broad system of explanation, it may be more practical to choose one to two central concepts and briefly present their connection to the broader theory. In this guide, we have included two theory summaries which have been used in previous Practice and Theory groups.

Example I. Ethical Decision Making

LONNE, BOB & HARRIES, MARIA & FEATHERSTONE, BRID & GRAY, MEL (2016) *Working Ethically in Child Protection*. Routledge, pp. 46–48.

The six-stage model of ethical decision making pays attention to the complexity of decision making and particularly the situational context, both internal (understanding and intuition) and external (matters such as race, poverty and illness). Though the stages are presented here in a specific order, decision making is not linear in practice because, at every stage, practitioners are invited to make their own interpretations and reflect on internal and external factors, as well as on facts, principles and anticipated outcomes.

- I. **DEFINE THE PROBLEM:** Before expressly defining the ethical problem to be solved, the facts of the situation need to be ascertained and the questions to be asked outlined. What are the facts that have a particular bearing on the situation and what ethical issue(s) demand a decision? Name the stakeholders. Defining the problem is almost always the most difficult part of this process and often a number of problems can be named before the priority is established. It is useful to compare notes with colleagues at this stage to be alert to the different ways the problem may be perceived.
- II. **ETHICAL REVIEW:** Identify which ethical principles are relevant to this problem or decision, and reflect on which of the principles have priority for particular stakeholders. In all child protection matters, the dominant stakeholder is the child or children, and to them the dominant duty of care is owed. The matter of context and in particular, power relationships, is critical here. Identifying the structural factors influencing the problem assists in understanding the relevant social justice matters and in the twin duties of justice and care.
- III. **CONSIDER OPTIONS:** With ethical questions at the forefront, and as practitioners name the principles and duties

owed to various stakeholders, it is possible to identify fairly quickly the options available and the practicality of the choices therein. Brainstorming the choices from the various stakeholders' perspectives, and determining how they accommodate important principles and duties, will lead to options that are easily excluded or otherwise listed as real options. The chosen option must recognise legal and procedural constraints, while not using these as the sole determinants of action.

INVESTIGATE OUTCOMES: In listing options – perhaps around three – consider the likely outcomes for each. Some considerations might include: will anyone be harmed and if so, how can that harm be minimised? What are the highly charged concerns framing this decision and how might they influence my choice? Identify the likely ethical outcomes, costs and benefits of each option. Check each of the options against the three principles of beneficence, justice and respect for persons and review that outcome to see which is most ethically acceptable or, at worst, the least harmful.

IV.

DECIDE ON ACTIONS: It is important to decide on a clear plan of action – one that has a clear objective and plainly articulates the reason for the decision, and the balancing of principles and priorities required in the process. It is important to remember that there are no absolutely “right” answers, only answers and plans that are well-reasoned, and somehow recognise and accommodate the emotional tensions in decision making.

V.

EVALUATE THE RESULTS: In the busy world of frontline practice, evaluating results is often left out or addressed at a late stage when the best or the worst outcomes are sometimes incidentally raised. Evaluating actions and solutions – what has worked well and what has not – is an essential part of reflective practices. The effects of solutions in child welfare often arise slowly. However, it is important to recognise short-term and long-term effects and evaluate them.

VI.

Example 2. Culturally Defined Having-to

JUVONEN, TARJA (2014) *Culturally Defined Having-to as a Part of Young adults' Agency* (Kulttuurisesti määrittynyt täytyminen osana nuorten aikuisten toimijuutta). *Nuorisotutkimus*. 32 (3), pp. 3–16.

Tarja Juvonen (2014) has studied how culturally defined having-to is constructed in outreach work negotiations as a part of young people's agency. This is a qualitative study, which consists of recorded conversations between youth and outreach workers as well as conversations in other agencies (unemployment offices, adult social services, housing offices) when the youth visited outreach workers. Having-to is a term used in research to describe an explicit or implicit necessity, limit or responsibility.

INTERACTION WITH AUTHORITIES AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE YOUTHS' HAVING-TO: In governmental agencies, individual workers have many societally defined tasks connected to youths' having-to. It is important to understand how externally defined cultural limitations and musts build an individual's agency. Having-to inevitably causes limitations to agency, and at its extreme produces feelings of otherness and thus causes bonds to weaken between the individual and society, causing social exclusion.

AGENCY AND CULTURALLY DEFINED HAVING-TO: Cultural, agency-related expectations can firstly be internalised interpretations that direct action. Secondly, cultural expectations can be subtle hints, instructions or behavioural expectations that are expressed directly or indirectly in professional practices and interaction. Thirdly, cultural expectations can be direct limits or responsibilities that are based on legislation. Cultural expectations are produced and shaped in people's actions and they largely define and uphold our understandings of a good and right, so-called normal way to act and live in society.

THE LIMITS OF AGENCY AND HAVING-TO: There are three main ways to discuss the agency of youth in professional interactions:

- I. Setting limits to agency.
- II. Imploring a sense of moral responsibility.
- III. Bringing new perspectives to having-to.

The cultural expectations and different types of having-to connected to young people's agency are often brought up in the service context by the professionals. This normally focuses on the terms and responsibilities by which welfare services operate. The expectation of active agency may be challenging in many ways to a young person who is socially excluded or in danger of being so. The young person must make decisions even if they are not ready or even if the options are dissatisfying for them. Culturally defined having-to brought forth in social interaction is an essential part of agency, which expresses the boundaries for agency formed by freedom and choices.

Remember that theories and the summaries made of them are not absolute truths, but are instead conceptualisations which can be tested as well as questioned. Thus, the group does not need to find “the correct” answers to questions they have, and the participants do not need to reach a consensus. More important than truths or others agreeing with one’s own opinion is discussing according to the principles of dialogical interaction and broadening one’s points of view.

Compiling the Group

When you have decided to direct a Practice and Theory group, it is good to consider how to compile it and how many participants there will be. We recommend five to six participants, but no more than eight.

The participants in the group can come from the same work team or from different offices. According to previous participants, both options have benefits. Participating in a group with familiar colleagues may feel easier, because there is less need to get to know each other or build mutual trust. When an entire work team participates in the group, this can also support the team’s other shared actions. On the other hand, participating in a group with members from other workplaces may be refreshing, bring new points of view and help to create new co-operational relationships.

You can decide yourself how to share information about the group, depending on the operating environment. Previous Practice and Theory groups have been contacted through email and we have asked participants to sign up via email. You can also decide whether it is a good idea to present the idea of the Practice and Theory group for instance in a shared meeting.

As an appendix to this guide we have attached a brochure (*Appendix 2, p. 46*) describing the Practice and Theory group, which you can send via email or print a foldable version of it to be handed out.

The Group Process

THE FIRST SESSION

- 👉 Presenting the group and introductions
- 👉 Choosing the first theory

Testing the theory in practice (2 weeks)

GROUP MEETING

- 👉 Discussing observations and the experimentation
- 👉 Choosing a new theory

Testing the theory in practice (2 weeks)

GROUP MEETING

- 👉 Discussing observations and the experimentation
- 👉 Choosing a new theory

Testing the theory in practice (2 weeks)

GROUP MEETING

- 👉 Discussing observations and the experimentation
- 👉 Choosing a new theory

Testing the theory in practice (2 weeks)

THE FINAL SESSION

- 👉 Discussing observations and the experimentation
- 👉 Reflecting on the work

Ending the group and agreeing on further actions

The Group Process and Schedule

The Practice and Theory group convenes five to six times and the meetings are usually around two weeks apart. The complete duration of the process is thus eight to ten weeks. The structure and regularity of the group creates a sense of security, giving the participants clarity as to how the process moves along. The group process is also supported by the fact that in the first sessions the participants say what their motives are for participating in the group so that the participants get to know both each other and the group facilitator.

In each session – apart from the last one – the group chooses a theory that each participant tries in practice between the group meetings. In the next group meeting, the participants discuss their observations and their experiments, and a new theory is chosen to be experimented on. This is then repeated. In the last session, no new theory is chosen, but the participants discuss their experiences and the significance of the group work for their own expertise.

At the end of each session, each participant receives a printed copy of the theory summary made by the facilitator about the chosen theory. Giving the summary as a printed copy is important, because it is a concrete tool and reminder in everyday work and it helps one to pause when in a hurry to ponder the perspectives presented in the theory. In addition to this, the participants can be given an observation form (*Appendix I*, pp. 44–45) on which they can write notes between meetings. The form works as a reminder in the next meeting where the observations and experiments are discussed together.

NEXT (pp. 29–31) we will present the programme for the group sessions. The sessions are two hours long.

The First Session

PRESENTING THE GROUP'S FRAMEWORK AND OPERATING MODEL – WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

50 mins

- ☞ The significance of theories in social work
- ☞ The experimental approach
- ☞ How does the group progress?
- ☞ Introducing the participants – why did you want to participate in this group?
- ☞ Agreeing on group rules together
- ☞ Presenting the group and its principles and discussing them together
- ☞ What is confusing or causes questions in everyday work?
- ☞ The possibility to refine the theory material based on the participants' wishes

BREAK

10 mins

PRESENTING THE PREPARED THEORIES WITH THE LIST

30 mins

- ☞ Going through the theories and asking the participants to choose two to three of the most interesting ones
- ☞ Choosing the theory together

HOW CAN THIS THEORY BE USED IN WORK AND HOW CAN INFORMATION BE COLLECTED ABOUT IT?

20 mins

- ☞ Giving out the observation forms (see *Appendix I*, pp. 44–45)
- ☞ Orientation for the next session: What will be done next?

FINAL ROUND: How do you feel? What are you leaving with?

5–10 mins

= 2 hrs

The Next Sessions (3–4 Sessions)

10 mins

ROUND: How do you feel coming into the session?
How has your day begun?

40 mins

DISCUSSION ABOUT OBSERVATIONS ON THE THEORY
AND THE EXPERIMENTATION

Instructing the participants to discuss freely or in groups of two or three in turns while the others listen. Emphasise that even small observations and events are significant

- ◀ How have you used the chosen theory/research?
- ◀ What do you want to say?

10 mins

THE GROUP FACILITATOR/S REACTION OF
WHAT THEY HAVE HEARD

General discussion about what has been discussed already

10 mins

BREAK

40 mins

CHOOSING A NEW THEORY TOGETHER AND VOTING
ON IT, IF NECESSARY

- ◀ How can I use this theory in my work?
- ◀ Everyone can discuss their thoughts about the theory and how they will use it in the coming weeks

5–10 mins

FINAL ROUND: How do you feel?
What are you leaving with?

= 2 hrs

The Final Session

ROUND: How do you feel coming into the session?
How has your day begun? 10 mins

DISCUSSION ABOUT OBSERVATIONS ON THE THEORY
AND THE EXPERIMENTATION 45 mins

Instructing the participants to discuss freely or in groups of two or three in turns while the others listen. Emphasise that even small observations and events are significant

- ◀ How have you used the chosen theory/research?
- ◀ What do you want to say?

BREAK 10 mins

REFLECTIVE FINAL DISCUSSION 30 mins

Discussion themes:

- ◀ The model as a structure and idea:
Did you know enough about what you were starting?
How did the groups' confidentiality work?
- ◀ Choosing the theories:
How did the selected theories work? Were they usable?
Would you have wished for a specific theory? Why?
- ◀ Working in the group:
What happened in the group?
How did operating in the group work?
- ◀ Results – what was the outcome?
What was most important?
What was most frustrating?
How does this affect your own work or thoughts?

WHAT NEXT? 15 mins

Agree on a follow-up meeting if the group wishes to meet after three to six months to discuss the consequences that the group had in their work practices

FINAL ROUND: How do you feel?
What are you leaving with? 10 mins

= 2 hrs

To Conclude

WE HAVE COLLECTED research data from three Practice and Theory groups held in 2015 to 2018: from one group of social work practitioners working in adult social services and two groups working in child welfare. We have reported the results in more detail in two articles: one on the challenges and consequences of adopting theory into practice⁵⁰ and developing epistemic agency and supporting managing work.⁵¹ We have also studied the Practice and Theory group as a part of professional practice teaching during two academic years in 2018 to 2019.⁵² Next we summarise some of the results and conclusions, as they can help in planning the groups and facilitating them as well as increasing motivation in the workplace.

The Group Helped to Recognise the Theoretical Basis for Actions

The participants explained that they use research and theories, but only as a result of the group could they name these instances. The inability to recognise or manage conceptualisations is not necessarily rare, though practitioners often unconsciously or only partially consciously utilise researched knowledge. Participating in the Practice and Theory group encouraged the participants to engage with research and narrowed the divide between practice and theory.

Theories can be Utilised in Many Different Ways

The participants in the group came from different work situations and had different orientations towards the ex-

periments. This does not however prevent group discussions or constructive work. How well and meticulously the theories are tried in practice is not essential. It is more important that the group members actively participate in the discussion by telling about their own experiences and analysing them together with others. Even small observations are important in experimental action.

The Group Supported Managing Work and Increased Interest in Challenging Client Situations

The group supported the participants by offering an opportunity for shared peer discussions. This was felt to help ease the load of work and improve stress management. The participants were excited and had the courage to grapple challenging client situations with curiosity.

Combining Theories with Practice Creates New Operating Options

According to the participants, the conceptualisations based on researched knowledge and theoretical frameworks worked as tools for distancing and helped to examine actions and professional development. The participants felt they benefited from the shared examination and received tools from the research for their daily work practice. Though everyday work is done in a hurry, the group's model enabled developments in work. In the discussions, the practitioners learnt to recognise their skills and could appreciate them more. In addition, the participants noticed that their argumentative skills as social workers had improved.

The Threshold of Applying Theories was Lowered

Perhaps the most significant consequence of participating in the Practice and Theory group was that it lowered the threshold to apply theories and research as well as to

inquire about and reflect on one's own practice. Combining theory and practice does not necessarily require extensive operational changes or a research project, but can be small and continuous knowledge acquisition in everyday work.

The Practice and Theory group's execution is shaped in each group by the participants' and facilitators' work. The principles and instructions in this guide have been deemed useful in compiling and facilitating the Practice and Theory group. If you notice while directing the group that you would have wished for clearer instructions or information about something, please let us know. We appreciate all observations, comments and questions on the guide. We are also grateful for all suggestions for improvement and reviews.

Helsinki 15.12.2019

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Notes

1. Kääriäinen & Muurinen 2020; Muurinen & Kääriäinen 2020
2. Dewey 1920/2012, 168
3. Niiniluoto 2002, 8
4. Helkama 2002, 75
5. Kielitoimiston sanakirja 2019; Haaparanta & Niiniluoto 2016, 56–57
6. Tieteen termipankki 2019
7. Kielitoimiston sanakirja 2019
8. Dewey 1920/2012, 167–168
9. Dewey 1920/2012, 176; Alhanen 2013, 137; Muurinen 2019, 8–9
10. Alhanen 2013
11. Alhanen 2013
12. Dewey 1920/2012, 121
13. Dewey 1910, 41
14. Peirce 1903/1997, 145
15. Dewey 1910, 41; also Miettinen 2000
16. Dewey 1920/2012, 121, 128–129
17. Sheppard & al. 2000; Sheppard & al. 2001
18. Sheppard & Ryan 2003
19. Alhanen 2013, 61, 69, 127, 136
20. Dewey 1929/1999, 78
21. Dewey 1920/2012, 219
22. Peirce 1897
23. Martela 2019
24. Martela 2015
25. Muurinen 2019
26. Muurinen 2019; Tavory & Timmermans 2014, 41
27. Dewey 1920/2012, 167
28. Dewey 1920/2012, 168

29. Hothersall 2019
30. Dewey 1920/2012, 218–219
31. Paavola, Engeström & Hakkarainen 2012
32. Hakkarainen & al. 2008; Paavola & al. 2011
33. Hakkarainen & al. 2008; Scardamalia & Bereiter 2003
34. Paavola & al. 2011, 239
35. Tammeorg & al., 2017; Kääriäinen, 2012
36. Fairweather & Montemayor 2017, 158; Hakkarainen & al. 2008, 363
37. Karvinen-Niinikoski 2009; Karvinen-Niinikoski & al. 2017
38. Eteläpelto & al. 2013, 62
39. Fairweather & Montemayor 2017, 107, 364
40. Fairweather & Montemayor 2017, 158
41. Fairweather & Montemayor 2017, 160; myös Hakkarainen & al, 2008, 364
42. Gubrium & Holstein 1997, method of narrative collaboration
43. See Buber 1995, the I–Thou relationship
44. Morgan 2008
45. Goffmann 2012
46. Antonovsky 1987
47. Juhila 2006
48. Lonne & al. 2016
49. Juvonen 2014
50. Muurinen & Kääriäinen 2020
51. Kääriäinen & Muurinen 2020
52. Jäppinen, Muurinen & Kääriäinen 2020

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Observation Form

Fill in the form with your own observations connected to the chosen theoretical framework.

Write down your observations in a way that allows you to discuss them in the group.



Experimental act



Consequence for yourself



Consequence for client

Brochure for the Practice and Theory Group

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT HOW YOU COULD USE THEORIES AND RESEARCH IN YOUR WORK?

DO YOU WANT AN OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP YOURSELF AND YOUR WORK?

WELCOME TO THE PRACTICE AND THEORY GROUP FOR SOCIAL WORKERS!

The word *theory* comes from ancient Greek, in which it meant a *speculator* or *contemplation*. Often theories are considered separate from practice and work, and there is no time in the hustle and bustle of everyday work to stop and ponder. One way to narrow the divide between practice and theory is to participate in a Practice and Theory group.

In the Practice and Theory group, you have the opportunity to get to know theories connected to (social work) client work through discussions with others and test one theory at a time in your own client work. After a short experiment with the theory, the group will gather to discuss their observations. The objective is to share and deepen understanding connected to your own client work. This is a supervision group, which will be facilitated by:

The group will have meetings once every two weeks, five times altogether. One session lasts around 2 hours. The schedule for the upcoming group is the following:

1 st meeting :	4 th meeting :
2 nd meeting :	5 th meeting :
3 rd meeting :	

The Practice and Theory group will be held at:

The group will have 4 to 8 participants, and they will be asked to commit to the group for the whole duration of the process.

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