

Reflecting on Theoretical Foundations of Student Affairs

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John Weng

San Diego State University

Author Note

John Weng is a first year Master's student in the Post Secondary Educational Leadership Program with a specialization in Student Affairs.

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### **Introduction**

When I first decided to continue my education in student affairs, one of the classes that I most looked forward to was the Student Development Theory course. As I had completed my undergraduate degree at a theory-based institution, theory had informed a large part of my education. I was also fortunate to have a mentor from the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program who supported my theoretical thinking and practice. She shared common theories such as Challenge and Support, Mattering vs. Marginality, Self-Authorship (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010) as well as Astin's (1984) Involvement Theory to help me understand how practitioners at UC San Diego were informed. I, however, did not realize that the various concepts she described were the theories that I would later learn. Instead, I had an unrealistic expectation that there would be a single student development theory that I would have to master. I expected to learn about different stages that every student would progress through, and how college students had to develop.

Throughout the past semester, I have not only learned how misinformed I was previously, but I have also had a chance to witness the power of student development theories both in the classroom and in practice. Through ARP 621, I was able to gain a stronger theoretical foothold and continue my graduate education development (PLO 1, 2, and 7). Specifically, the most impactful assignment was the process of Adopting a student and applying a Student Development Theory to them. Within this process, my theoretical thinking was challenged when I had to recognize signs of my student's growth and development. In it, I was also able to fulfill my personal goals of dealing with ambiguity as well as my professional goals of understanding what it means to be a good professional.

### **Links to Program Learning Outcomes**

With the help of my Theory Application paper, I was forced to critically evaluate a student's interactions and the words that she espoused in order to understand how I might be able to apply a student development theory to them in practice (PLO 1). In the process of applying Helm's (1993) White Identity Development Model to my adopted student, I realized what it meant when practitioners often said to "dig deeper". Instead of simply looking for matching actions between the student and what the theory claimed, it was also important to consider if there was congruence between what the student espoused and how the student acted. I also found it necessary to look at what they said, consider how they communicated, and understand if they had truly internalized what they were saying, instead of simply regurgitating facts that they memorized. This process helped me understand how I might need to be able to apply other theories to students.

Further, throughout my interview and interview process, I realized the power of the stereotypes that I might have of other people; something that became a powerful learning moment for me. I caught myself surprised, internally, when my student mentioned that she came from a divorced family, a small town, and was a first-generation college student. Because of her Greek chapter affiliation, I had automatically assumed that she would be a privileged individual, given that she was at a "top house" at the institution. This was when I found myself shocked at the inclinations to think of her as an individual with multiple privileges and advantages. When considering their gender, the interviews helped me realize my own expectation that women would enjoy presents and having things paid for. While I claimed to be open minded, I found this shocking and realized a need to be more critical in my reflective thought processes. This launched a realization that I need to challenge my original perspective and be more self-aware in my practice and interactions with others (PLO 2).

### **Links to Personal and Professional Goals**

A personal goal I had when starting the program revolved around the topic of addressing ambiguity. While I am an outcomes-based individual, I have found that in the midst of ambiguity, I become nervous. This, in large, might be caused by my dynamic upbringing, where I was never sure of where I would be raised or where I would live the following year. I was originally nervous about establishing rapport with a student that I did not know very well. My intention to have a conversation on relatively personal topics the first time I met someone was counterintuitive considering how I usually interacted with others. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that our “interview” really became an extended conversation after the first few minutes. Further, I realized that even simple concepts like establishing a strong rapport—akin to providing support—is necessary to have difficult conversations and to challenge someone’s thinking. This course and paper allowed me to become comfortable with ambiguity because I could address situations that I may not have previously experienced by being informed by theory.

This course also supported my professional goal of understanding what it might mean to be a good professional through understanding formal theory and developing ways that I might be able to bridge the gap between theory and practice. When I originally started thinking about the assignment, I was interested in considering my student’s gender identity. My student, however, seemed to have an affinity towards discussing her culture and background. This process eventually led me to her race. In these discussions with her, I realized the importance of letting the students drive the conversation. Further, when applying theories, it was important to let the conversations lead me to a theory rather than forcing the student to fit a mold. This has since influenced my conversations with other students that I advise, as I find myself asking more probing questions; ones that lead me to better understand them and how I may provide support to aid in their development.

### **Conclusion**

In my graduate course work, I am frequently provided with facts and statistics that revolve around the topics of racial injustice and how it may affect different populations at an institution. As a student of a historically underrepresented community that was a majority at the institution that I attended, I never felt this injustice or the need to prove myself. It was not until this process that I was able to see how this was a privilege and how white privilege can affect others, even those that are white. Watching my student develop and grow has become an inspiring element of my practice in addressing inequalities that exist in student affairs. I look forward to the opportunity to continue my theoretical understandings of the field through my coursework in the upcoming year, journal publications, and conference attendance.

## References

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