



## *Reconciling the Knowledge of Scholars & Practitioners: An Extended Case Analysis of the Role of Theory in Student Affairs*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper utilizes a critical post-pragmatist epistemological lens in tandem with an extended case analysis to explore how student affairs professionals process truth claims related to student experience. Findings from the study, which include the limited usage of formal theory and the iterative reconstruction of informal theory, are used to demonstrate the utility of critical, theory-engaged methodology in educational research. Implications for future research and methodological decision-making are offered.*

**Keywords:** *post-pragmatism, formal theory, informal theory, theory-engaged methodology*

Critical scholars of education hold that knowledge cannot be neutral. Truth claims always have normative implications, and those normative implications are always associated with larger economic, political, and cultural forces. Critical scholars of education have systematically demonstrated far-ranging and deleterious effects on students and teachers at all levels of the educational pipeline; however, no systematic study of how higher education professionals in non-faculty roles experience the politics of knowledge construction has yet been conducted. In an attempt to rectify this issue, this paper reports the results of compressed ethnography focused on the theory usage of student affairs professionals (hereafter: practitioners)—specifically academic advisors and residence life coordinators—within higher education. It then uses these empirical findings as a catalyst to explore the potential for critical, theory-engaged methodologies in educational research.

The student affairs profession is a particularly revealing subject for this sort of undertaking. From the date of its founding, the student affairs profession has consistently been asked to justify the theoretical grounding for its work. This work is typically conducted in a prescriptive, ostensive fashion wherein leading experts designate some forms of knowledge as legitimate and others as illegitimate (e.g., Evans & Guido, 2012). Most often, the answer has been that knowledge produced according to standard social scientific conventions is legitimate while all other knowledge is not. As Reason and Kimball (2012) have noted, however, practitioners frequently encounter situations that go beyond the bounds of their training and require the use of post-formal reasoning, which has led some (e.g., Love, 2012) to conclude that only highly localized knowledge is likely to be useful. As a result, studies of the student affairs profession are enhanced through careful attention to and application of theory-engaged methodologies.

The relative legitimacy or illegitimacy of disparate knowledge bases also invites a critical approach. A critical approach sheds light on the politics of knowledge production by focusing on

what truth claims practitioners actually value in practice and how those truth claims were produced. To that end, I utilize a critical post-pragmatist epistemology (CPPE; Rorty, 1990; 1999) as the interpretive lens with which to understand findings arising from an extended case analysis (ECA; Burawoy, 1991; 1998). Both approaches reframe well-established modes of inquiry—American pragmatism and ethnography respectively—through the lens of critical theory. In this paper, I demonstrate the utility of both CPPE and ECA using empirical results originating from a study that addressed the following research question: What truth claims do practitioners employ in constructing their understanding of student experience?

The empirical results emerging from this work serve to highlight the potential for the application of critical, theory-engaged methodologies in educational research. Specifically, CPPE served as a useful lens for examining the production, use, and revision of truth claims by practitioners while ECA allowed for the testing of specific predictions emerging from existing theoretical knowledge—in this case, four predictions derived from Reason and Kimball's (2012) theory-to-practice model. Given the importance of both CPPE and ECA to the overall aims of this paper, I begin by describing both. During the discussion of ECA, I also provide a brief overview of the design and methods of the study described throughout the remainder of the paper. I then review relevant literature related to theory use in student affairs. This discussion of literature serves to demonstrate how specific, testable theoretical predictions are created and then function within the methodological framework provide by ECA. Following this discussion of theory and literature, I then share limited findings from my study of practitioners. These findings highlight the way that theory is utilized as well as its connection to practice and thereby demonstrate the utility of both CPPE and ECA as part of a critical theory-engaged methodology in educational research.

### **Critical Post-Pragmatist Epistemology**

CPPE begins from the assumption that the experience and understanding of individuals are inseparable (James, 1907/1981; 1909/1978). According to the pragmatic conceptualization of reality, the most fundamental impulse for people is to produce narratives that account for their experiences. Each day, experiences bring new ideas into conflict with existing narratives. These new ideas must then be accepted as truth and assimilated into the way the world is understood, deconstructed into constitutive elements in order to reconstruct present understandings, or rejected in favor of past understanding. Consequently, for pragmatists, knowledge is constantly in flux; as new truth replaces old, change is the only guarantee.

As the anchor for a philosophy of social science, pragmatism's focus on the processual interactions of experience, interpretation, and assimilation account for disciplinary decisions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Kuhn (1962/1996) demonstrates that scientific knowledge is paradigmatic—that is, the result of a set of shared conventions regarding problem selection and techniques—and that often judgments of truth are made based more on consistency with that paradigm than on coherence to empirical observations. However, truth claims do evolve over time, and philosophers of science can impose a retrospective judgment of movement toward some referent. This movement can be accounted for only by treating the truth claims themselves—not the normative conventions of science—as paradigmatic (Fine, 1996).

The rules of science as a form of paradigm recede further when examining the actual behavior of scientists, which is often unscientific (Feyerabend, 1975/2010); instead of being seen as objective, science becomes very human. Given its focus on other human beings, social science encounters this issue even more acutely. Experiencing what Giddens (1984) has called the “double

hermeneutic,” social scientists study processes in which they themselves are participants and produce results that have the potential to alter the processes they study. As a result, social scientific knowledge and methods are produced in a state of praxis in which the researcher, research subjects, methods, and findings interact in myriad ways. Building on this observation, a critical philosophy of social science highlights the extent to which this field of praxis is inseparable from the actual interpretive judgments of social scientists (e.g., Bourdieu, 1971/1977; Habermas, 1963/1973). Post-pragmatists take this understanding of the social sciences to its logical conclusion—suggesting that the social sciences have erroneously followed the example of the natural sciences believing them to be a road to objectivity (Rorty, 1990). For post-pragmatists, however, not only can that objectivity never exist, but its pursuit also leads to negative consequences (Rorty, 1999). All truth is highly contextual, and only problems of practical significance are worth pursuing (Rorty & Engel, 2007). For Rorty (1999), this emphasis on actual human impact is also consistent with a larger, critical agenda for social change.

As an epistemological lens for the study of the theory use of practitioners, CPPE offers several noteworthy advantages. First, by destabilizing the relationship between truth claims and objectivity, CPPE makes space for the multiple forms of theory utilized in the student affairs profession. It further makes no normative judgment regarding the relative values of each—allowing a methodological sensitivity to the utility of that knowledge use. Second, given this focus on utility, CPPE is sensitive to the relationship between individuals, environments, and the research process. It therefore offers several different hermeneutic relationships (individual-environment, individual-research process, and environment-research process) that can help to surface findings. Finally, in rejecting the belief in objective truth, CPPE is suitable for use with a research design intended to produce scholarly knowledge in atypical ways, as is the case with a research design based on ECA.

### **Extended Case Analysis as Research Design**

The study reported in this article employed ECA as proposed by Burawoy (1991; 1998; 2009) and modified by Eliasoph and Lichterman (1999). As conceptualized by Burawoy (1998), ECA is a mechanism for refining formal theories. Beginning with an existing theory base, ECA compares what existing theory would predict to empirical data derived from a detailed study of one or more cases. Observations that are unexplained by existing theories become the basis for proposed modifications to those theories. Importantly, Burawoy (1998) does not claim that these modifications are “valid” or “true” according to the conventions of social science. Instead, they represent a composite form of theory that accounts for both scholarly and practical knowledge that emerges from, but exists in parallel with, social scientific knowledge until such time as future research can resolve the conflict. In short, discrepant observations surfaced by the ECA are intended to structure future research and problematize existing theories rather than to be treated as the empirical truth. As a result, ECA is capable of resituating the epistemological and methodological foundation for social science research. To that end, Burawoy (2009) notes:

...the extended case method [is] defined by its four extensions: the extension of observer into the lives of participants under study, the extension of observations over time and space; the extension from microprocesses to macroforces; and, finally, and most important, the extension of theory. Each extension involves a dialogue: between participant and observer, between successive events in the field, between micro and macro, and between successive

reconstructions of theory. These dialogues orbit around each other, each in the gravitation field of the others. (p. xv)

This fundamentally dialogic understanding of research means that ECA views knowledge as a social production; sees the hermeneutic function of knowledge as its applied function; and treats praxis as inherently implicated in the research itself. Consequently, theories constructed in this way can bridge the gap between informal (Love, 2012) and formal theory (Evans & Guido, 2012). Insights can then be taken into account in future empirical and theoretical work.

As stated by Burawoy (1991), ECA “seeks generalization through reconstructing existing generalizations, that is, the reconstruction of existing theory” (p. 279). Researchers employing ECA begin by surveying existing theoretical descriptions of the phenomena they plan to observe. They then compare the forecast provided by existing theory to data derived from sustained engagement with relevant observations. Described in greater detail below, the study reported in this paper responds to theoretical predictions generated by Reason and Kimball (2012) in a model of theory-to-practice conversions in student affairs.

By convention, ECA relies on ethnography as an overall framework for its research since it is focused on the intersection of individual lives and social structures (Burawoy, 2009). Further, the naturalism and holism incumbent in ethnographic approaches minimizes the potential that theoretical predictions might unduly shape the perceptions of the researcher by allowing discrepancies between the theoretical and the real to emerge. While ECA has most often been used to study theories of the middle range—accounting for social institutions like factories and school—Eliason and Lichterman (1999) argue that ECA can also be employed to focus on cultural processes and individuals. In the study described in this paper, having a specific focus on how practitioners make meaning of disparate truth claims about student experience required a more person-focused set of methods than ECA typically entails. As such, the study is best thought of as an interview study residing within the overall framework of a compressed ethnography (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). These divergences from the normative application of the ECA serve to further highlight the role of researcher’s reflexivity in critical, theory-engaged methodologies.

## **Participants**

This study utilizes a comparative multi-case design, which Burawoy (2009) suggests is appropriate when looking for divergences in theoretical utility across settings. Participants were drawn from the staff of Central University, which enrolls more than 25,000 undergraduate students. Student affairs work at Central University is highly decentralized: departments, colleges, and the central administration share responsibility for the delivery of student services. Consequently, practitioners working in different functional areas under different supervisory structures might have divergent training and experiences. To maximize the potential for comparison, I selected staff from residence life and academic advising—two student affairs units with widely divergent portfolios of work.

At Central University, residence life operations are organized into several “areas” that serve targeted student populations. In the Commons, the area from which I recruited participants, six full-time practitioners worked with a large support staff to provide housing to approximately 4,000 sophomores or juniors. I employed a convenience sampling strategy wherein potential participants contacted me following a neutral announcement from their supervisor. Five practitioners

in residence life responded to this announcement. After follow-up conversations to explain research design, three practitioners (Hughes, Alice, and Barbara) confirmed their willingness to participate.

Academic advising operations at Central University are operated by each academic administrative unit. The School of Management and Information Technology, the site where I conducted my research, has an enrollment of approximately 5,000 students and employs 15 full-time academic advisors. Again, utilizing a convenience sample, I made a presentation to the advising staff and asked interested individuals to contact me to express an interest in participating. Six advisors (Lisa, Jean, Marie, Linda, Brenda, and Tom) chose to participate.

By recruiting participants from a college's office of academic advising and the central student affairs division's residence life office program, I created the potential for controlled comparison (Maxwell, 2005). For the purpose of analysis, I treated each individual practitioner included in this study as a unique case while aggregating cases based in similar contexts (i.e. advising cases and residence life cases) as part of the same analytic units. In this regard, my study differs from a standard application of ECA in terms of its scope—providing findings both about individuals and the larger theory base in question (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 1999).

## **Data & Methods**

As noted above, this study incorporated an interview study into the overall framework of a compressed ethnography. At the residence life office, I conducted approximately 40 hours of participant observation—including time spent shadowing Hughes, Alice, and Barbara; observations of office operations; and general observations of The Commons. Roughly 55 hours of participant observation research were also conducted in the academic advising office. This data collection included shadowing most of the participating advisors; observations of office operations; and general observations of the School of Management and Information Technology. I documented all participant observation utilizing both informal jottings (which included notes intended to provoke my recollection of events and ideas) and more formal fieldnotes (which included reflexive observations, notes on emergent themes, and more fully elaborated narrative descriptions). Document analysis supplemented my direct observation and was utilized to produce a greater understanding of context (Smith, 2006).

Each participant also took part in two interviews. Interviews averaged 75-90 minutes. Initial observations were recorded utilizing hand-written notes and a digital audio recorder. Based on participant observation and document analysis, initial topical codes were produced for the field notes and used to refine a loosely-structured protocol for the first interviews. The first interview included questions related to participant backgrounds; theory use; understanding of student experience; definition of learning and development; and their professional role. The second interview was utilized as a form of member-checking and to test understandings developed from both observation and the initial interview. The second interview included questions related to scenarios that had been observed by or related to the researcher during data collection (e.g. a student who was not adjusting socially; a student who was over-committed; a student who was in the “wrong” major; and a student moving through a conduct or judicial process); preliminary findings; and the social context of their work. In the second interviews, participants were also asked to respond to an emergent model of student learning and development that was based on first interview responses.

## **Analytic Strategy**

All coding and analysis was completed in Atlas.ti. As data were collected, an abductive approach to analysis was employed by—holding cases and theories up against one another to see how theories might be reconstructed to take into account the lessons of practice (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Burawoy, 1991). Data was frequently and continually reexamined and recoded through the lens of new findings. A cut-and-sort coding method was used to associate excerpts of interviews or field notes with an open or *in vivo* code and then to determine the extent to which similar meaning was inscribed elsewhere in the study (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Similar open and *in vivo* codes were grouped once again to produce an emergent code defined by the range of initial codes. Related emergent codes were clustered into code "families" that included similar, divergent, and related meanings. Based upon these code families, the themes described in the "Findings" section were created.

While it is relatively common to suggest that key themes emerge from the data (Murchison, 2010), it is not an accurate description of how the ECA works: by design, the researcher's perspective and the conceptual framework shaped the final analysis as suggested by Burawoy (1998). Throughout the analysis process, I compared emergent codes, code families, and themes to the Reason and Kimball (2012) model and to other relevant literature as appropriate. In doing so, I sought both coherence with and divergence from existing theory. These observations then informed both my future analysis and my re-analysis of previously coded work. While to some extent intrinsic to ECA, this iterative, reflexive process also stems from the use of a CPPE. Its insistence on utility rather than truth as the central concern of knowledge production means that CPPE is capable of holding open tensions between expectation and observation during data collection while also being well-suited for reconciling those contradictions during analysis.

## **Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument. This poses a series of interpretive challenges for both the researcher and the reader. As such, I maintained a practice of writing regular reflexive memos about my own behavior and thinking throughout the data collection and analysis process (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). I also utilized the second interview to share my preliminary findings with participants; asked them to comment on the sections of my analysis that they had most informed; and shared an emergent model with them—again asking for comments. In this way, I attempted to create "common ground" with participants. I also employed triangulation—utilizing multiple data collection techniques—and peer debriefing in order to enhance further the trustworthiness of my research results.

In order to facilitate the creation of "common ground" with readers of this research, I have tried to be as explicit as possible—given the space constraints posed by the medium—about the design choices that I have made. Additionally, through the analysis section, I provide extended descriptions and excerpts of the data upon which various analyses are based (Geertz, 1973). Further, I remind the reader that I not making a traditional claim of validity or generalizability as is now common in case study research (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2008). Instead, as with Burawoy (2009), I believe that the research findings discussed subsequently represent only the beginning of a scholarly and practical conversation wherein meaning will be inscribed, contested, and reinscribed. Theoretical reconstructions produced via ECA are intended to structure future research. Until that time, however, they exist in an epistemological space uncommon in social

science: they are useful but not true. They are useful to the extent that they can serve to structure both scholarly and practical action, but they do not conform to the norms of social scientific knowledge production. Simultaneously, the theories that were subject to reconstruction remain true according to the norms of social science—even while they may already have been falsified in a practical context and thereby limited in utility. Given the temporary incommensurability of the theories refined through ECA and the theoretical reconstruction produced by ECA, a CPPE helps reconcile the multiply signified truth claims inherent in critical, theory-engaged research that itself examines the nature of theory.

### **Truth Claims in Student Affairs Practice**

Both CPPE and ECA serve to highlight that there can be multiple, competing truth claims within a discourse of scholarly or practical significance. As highlighted in the discussion of CPPE, these problems can be particularly pronounced when the scholarly or practical problems under discussion are human-focused (Giddens, 1984). ECA provides a means to identify but not fully reconcile these divergences. In point of fact, these divergences are remarkably difficult to resolve. In the case of student affairs practice, they have heretofore proven to be irreducible: higher education researchers have long-lamented the problematic interface between scholarship and practice, but to date, there has been limited progress in resolving the separation. For example, Keller (1998) notes that scholarship is often of limited scope and utility. In a survey of higher education administrators, Kezar (2000) found that many held a similar view—noting that practitioners were more likely to utilize research that: 1) arose from questions that were proposed by other practitioners, 2) directly addressed issues of practice; and 3) utilized ideas and research techniques that were accessible to them. Kezar (2000) therefore concludes that an engaged, scholarly praxis wherein scholars and practitioners collaborate in the selection and execution of research is needed. To further understand what an engaged, scholarly praxis might look like, I next provide a description of several different types of theories that operate within student affairs, describe the practical significance of the divergences between these theories, and then discuss a synthetic model for reducing the differences between them.

### **Formal, Informal, and Implicit Theory**

An engaged, scholarly praxis is also the crux of Parker's (1977) distinction between "formal" and "informal" theory. Formal theory accords with the scholarly understanding of theory development described above. It is produced and validated primarily through rigorous social science methods. Relevant research questions are seen as arising principally from the logically continuous body of scholarship that preceded a given study (Kuhn, 1962/1996). Such a theory is designed principally to have predictive power; it is held to be true until such time as it might be demonstrated false or another theory is shown to be more predictive (Popper 1959/2002). In contrast, informal theory emerges directly from human experience (James, 1907/1981; 1909/1978). Formal theories often contribute to informal theory development but so too do interactions with students; personal values, beliefs, and assumptions; and an understanding of relevant institutional factors. Thus, informal theories are far more eclectic than formal theories; since they are intended to serve as heuristic devices, they are evaluated primarily on their utility and flexibility.

As Bensimon (2007) notes, however, Parker's (1977) separation of truth claims into formal and informal theory obscures the potentially negative implications of the gap between scholarship

and practice. Proposing the term “implicit theory” to describe uncritical acceptance of assumptions about student experience, Bensimon (2007) suggests practitioners may be unaware of the truth claims that they have internalized. Thus, Bensimon (2007) argues that scholars have an ongoing obligation to attend both to the implications of their work for practice and to practitioners. A lack of this sort of attention leads to the creation of implicit theories, which are based on casual assumptions about student behavior rather than critical consideration of scholarly knowledge. As a result, Bensimon (2007) suggests the need both for a careful examination of implicit theory and for a formal theory that is more practical.

This seeming incommensurability of implicit and informal theory relative to formal theory earlier leads Bloland, Stamatakos, and Rogers (1994) to dismiss most student affairs research as meaningless and argue that such studies did more harm than good. Though never the dominant point of view among scholars, theory-to-practice conversions have been increasingly problematized over time (see Reason & Kimball, 2012). In a recent synthesis of these views, Love (2012) holds that most theories of student development do not conform to standard social science definitions of theory and further suggests that theoretical knowledge of student experience would not prove particularly helpful even if it did exist. The focus of student affairs work, Love (2012) argues, is more appropriately the individual student or small groups of student. At this level of application, student development scholars have long held that formal theory breaks down (Parker, 1977; Bloland et al., 1994). Instead, Love (2012) suggests that practitioners need ways to integrate their understandings of student experience with information provided by a variety of sources—including scholarly literature that suggests important “guiding concepts” (Reason & Kimball, 2012). While these guiding concepts might be based on something called theory, Love (2012) suggests that contextualizing them in practice strips them of any pretension to universality—a key part of the definition of formal theory.

Writing in response to Love (2012), Evans and Guido (2012) suggest that practice is inevitably informed by theory whether so labelled or not: the issue is how formal an approach to theory we ought to adopt. Advocating for a highly formalized approach, Evans and Guido (2012) hold that the use of informal theoretical approach advocated by Love (2012) is likely to introduce untested and potentially problematic assumptions. In this way, they suggest that informal theory is impossible to distinguish from Bensimon’s (2007) implicit theory. They suggest instead that it is only via the aspiration to formal theory, even if executed in imperfect ways, which practitioners can safeguard against this sort of error.

### **The Reason and Kimball (2012) Model**

Though not a part of the exchange between Love (2012) and Evans and Guido (2012), Reason and Kimball (2012) responded to the issues raised by both pieces. Finding a middle ground between the two positions, Reason and Kimball (2012) argue that while theory application may be problematic at present—as suggested by Love (2012)—its utility can be greatly enhanced through the use of a structured process designed to situate formal theory within an institutional context, produce informal theories based on both formal theories and that context, and then create strategies for practice. Their model can thus also be seen as a response to Evans and Guido’s (2012) call for a direct connection between theory and practice. As such, this study thus utilizes an ECA to explore these varied definitions of theory through the synthetic lens offered by Reason and Kimball (2012).

The Reason and Kimball (2012) model holds that there are four elements in a theory-to-practice process: formal theory, institutional context, informal theory, and practice. Building in



two feedback loops, they also suggest that their theory-to-practice model is designed to be self-correcting—thereby promoting greater alignment between theory and practice. Their works builds on many prior attempts to model theory-to-practice conversions in both student affairs (e.g., Rodgers & Widdick, 1980; Stage, 1994; Stage & Dannells, 2000) and the human sciences more generally (e.g., Argyris & Schon, 1974; Morrill, Oetting, & Hurst, 1974).

The Reason and Kimball (2012) model begins from the assumption that practitioners require a foundation in the most important historical and contemporary theories of student development. This broad base of knowledge enables practitioners to select appropriate theoretical approaches based upon a variety of contexts—including the level of desired intervention and the institutional context. The institutional context, though missing from many models of theory-to-practice, provides an important lens through which formal theories are assessed and adapted. Defining the institutional context quite broadly—and thereby including standard institutional characteristics like Carnegie Class and admissions selectivity as well as the overall understanding of student experience held by the campus community—Reason and Kimball (2012) argue that practice is not a values-neutral activity and is consequently foregrounded by an institution-specific understanding of student development goals. They argue that, at the level of institutional context, practitioners ought to consider: the socio-demographic characteristics of students, the educational objectives of the college, the value commitments they hold, and the extent to which the above align.

At the informal theory stage, Reason and Kimball (2012) hold that practitioners construct the understanding of student experience they “use in their everyday practice” (Reason & Kimball, 2012, p. 18). As they define them, informal theories are “produced based upon the confluence of formal theories, institutional context, and the individual student affairs practitioner’s positionality” and are the precursor to practice (Reason & Kimball, 2012, p. 18), which they describe as “the point at which formal and informal theories are translated into specific, concrete behavior with students.” Reason and Kimball (2012) also incorporate two feedback loops designed to account for changes in understanding over time. Kimball and Ryder (2014) and Ryder and Kimball (2015) respectively have described the feedback loops as reflexivity and assessment.

As a conceptual framework, the Reason and Kimball (2012) model offers four theoretical predictions useful to the goal of better understanding how practitioners evaluate truth claims: 1) practitioners will use formal theory; 2) practitioners will create contextualized knowledge claims; 3) those contextualized knowledge claims will vary from person-to-person; and 4) there will be variation in both the use of formal theory and contextualized knowledge claims over time as practitioners seek to refine their understanding

## **Findings**

Findings from this study are presented in three themes: 1) use of formal theory; 2) informal theory and contextual truth claims; and 3) uncertain knowledge. The first theme addresses the prediction that “practitioners will use formal theory,” which was derived from Reason and Kimball (2012). The second theme addresses the remaining three predictions. The final theme represents an emergent finding concerning the discomfort some participants experienced when asked to share their understanding of student experience. As a result, it draws attention to the consequences of the current way knowledge is produced in student affairs.

### Use of Formal Theory

Participants' narratives revealed their complicated relationships with formal theories. At one extreme was a group who either eschewed direct use of theoretical approaches altogether or argued that theoretical bases drawn from other disciplines had greater utility for their work. For example, despite the fact that her graduate training and professional experience had offered her broad exposure to both student learning and development theories, Linda stated when asked about student learning and development theory: "I don't consciously think about those." She did admit, however, that they might function in some background capacity. Alice, who had also received excellent graduate preparation in student learning and development theory, had the strongest negative reaction. In her words:

I don't think this is a field that necessarily requires it. I think a lot of what we teach used to be called common sense and listening to your elders...I come from a really big family, and I think a lot of my perspectives and my values are really rooted in that. When you have [a large] family, there's always somebody not happy with the decision, and somebody's not getting their way. You really have to know how to communicate and so those are all things that I felt like I had before I went to grad school, before I learned student development theory and stuff like that. Some development theory I think is a load of horseshit, and they just need to stop.

Marie found slightly more use for formal theories, but argued for an eclectic approach that incorporated her experience in career counseling. In talking about theory, she also moved seamlessly between different literature and theory bases. Likewise, Jean traced her thinking about how best to manage developmental processes to prior experience managing recovery communities. In effect, both Marie and Jean utilized their academic and professional training to elide the distinction between theory and informal theory and, in so doing, created a more useful theoretical narrative.

Others accomplished this synthesis differently. Brenda attributed her understanding of student experience primarily to her background—noting that her approach stems from her cultural background and more specifically her mother's parenting. In our interviews, Tom frequently referenced his graduate training but did not identify particular concepts with specific theorists. Instead, he noted:

I tend to be one of those people who can take information from anything and kind of apply it in some way...so I found all of it [theoretical approaches] to be fairly useful. I don't try to pigeonhole myself into one particular approach. I think that [all] students are different...so if I can honestly have the same approach with every single student I'm not [going to] be as effective.

Explaining how theory functioned as a background layer, Tom noted that "you get to know pretty quickly some theories are useful in some situations and not so useful in other situations" and that as a result it "definitely helps a lot too just having that background" so that he could fall back on theory as needed. As a result, Hughes stated he tried to focus his work on supporting individual students as they sought to reach their own developmental goals. In this regard, his position echoed that of Alice, a colleague in residence life. Summing up her work with students, for example, Alice

noted that every time she works with a student “it’s a different person in front of you, so you’re never [going to] have the exact same [approach] with each person.”

Of the six advisors and three residence life professionals I interviewed, only two described having made explicit use of formal theory. Suggesting that theory use is at least in part the product of institutional culture, Lisa noted that she had frequently utilized strategies based on student development theory when previously working at a medium-sized urban research university “because our dean at the time...did his dissertation in that [area] and just had us working [in] these small work groups and [going] through all the different theories and approaches.” While she noted that this experience served as a background for her current work and had produced some desirable outcomes at her prior institution, Lisa also suggested that this did not occur in her current academic advising work. Barbara, the other student affairs practitioner who discussed specific theories, stated that she found that most were not useful, but when asked to identify specific theories that she found problematic, she preferred to focus on an approach that she found useful—thinking about balancing between appropriate levels of challenge and support (Sanford, 1968).

### **Informal Theory and Contextual Truth Claims**

The informal theories demonstrated by academic advisors differed considerably from one another. Ranging from the theoretical eclecticism advocated by Tom to the more directive questioning designed to promote self-actualization of Jean, each informal theory was unique to the advisor. Nonetheless, the informal theories that I observed seemed well-adapted to work with a wide range of students. While some advisors described borrowing parts of their informal theories from other advisors, most acknowledged that their advising practices likely departed significantly from their colleagues. Several advisors, for example, described their commitment to proactive engagement while noting that they were unsure that their colleagues approached their work similarly—with one advisor noting that: “we don’t sit on each other’s advising sessions so we don’t know how each other [advisor works]...[but] we hear rumors from students.” Statements such as these seemed to reflect a lack of clarity about how informal theories should be evaluated and validated among the advisors with whom I spoke.

Participants from residence life likewise had highly sophisticated informal theories. Hughes, for example, framed most of his work around the concepts of connectedness and engagement. While Alice also frequently emphasized engagement in our conversations, her informal theory was focused on a respect for the individual student, which led her to emphasize being honest and straightforward. Though she felt strongly that this approach was right for her and worked well, Alice also believed that there was considerable variety in the way that staff at The Commons thought about student experience and admitted that a different informal theory might work better for someone else. Likewise, Barbara indicated that her own informal theory was rooted in the belief that there was a “sort of similarity” between her own experiences in college and those of her students; as a result, she felt that her informal theory was best understood via her own history. Interestingly, however, Barbara was also the residence life professional who most consistently emphasized the importance of viewing students as both individuals and as members of a group. To that end, she spoke frequently about “assessing the needs of the community” in order to provide a background layer of programming and structure that would be good for the majority of students. Barbara also emphasized that in her work she then took pains to follow-up with individuals or smaller groups to ensure that everyone was having positive experiences.

Informal theories were frequently based on elements of existing scholarship but rarely on the wholesale application of formal theory. For example, some advisors referred directly to recent empirical research as they described the guiding concepts employed in their research. Marie, for example, referenced research on “millennials” emerging from demography when describing the typical student in the School of Management and Information Technology. Tom also mentioned having consulted recent higher education scholarship and went on to indicate that his understanding of student experience was structured by some of his own attempts to answer questions about the students with whom he worked via original research. More often than not, however, the role of guiding concepts was made clear not by an abstract discussion of theory itself but in the way that advisors spoke about how they addressed specific student experiences.

Across both sites, Nevitt Sanford’s (1968) description of the role of challenge, support, and readiness in student experience was the most frequently employed guiding concept. It was unclear whether this application was attributable to the research itself, its widespread diffusion, or an understanding derived from experience. Barbara, for example, began every interaction with a student that I observed by asking about classes and “everything else.” When I asked her why she did so, she indicated that she needed to know “where they are, how they’re doing” in order to know how best to respond. A short time later, when responding to my statement of a tentative model of student learning and development, she indicated that being able to accurately gauge a student’s current mental state was essential because “the presence of something challenging [causes] the reflection, it promotes the learning” that is the goal of her practice. Without challenge, she notes, there is no impetus for change.

Regardless of where the concept emerged from, however, these guiding concepts structured their work with students. Linda, for example, described her work as a careful balance of “hand holding,” and “making sure that you’re supporting whatever growth [a student is] engaged in” based in part on the student’s progression through the College of Management and Information Technology. Finally, Tom suggested the important role that readiness plays in structuring a student’s response to offered support—noting that: “Sometimes you have to encourage students more than once. Sometimes it’s like a broken record with students.”

Described in greater detail above, Jean’s use of structured questions to promote reflection is also consistent with the dialectical push-and-pull nature of student affairs work rooted in a conception of challenge and support. Jean’s advising practice was also consistent with Tom’s belief that sometimes a “broken record” approach with students could be beneficial. During the sessions that I observed with Jean, she would frequently present a piece of information, ask a question about it, present the information again in another form, ask the student to respond to it, and then conclude the session by recapping all of the salient information. In follow-up conversations, Jean mentioned that she would occasionally also summarize the information for the student via email. Though she expressed uncertainty as to how well this information was received by students, it is a behavior entirely consistent with Sanford’s (1968) contention that there is an appropriate level of support for each readiness level. Her work provided information in multiple forms, accessible to students of varying levels of developmental readiness.

Others also noted that they adjusted the level of support that they provided depending on the maturity of the students with whom they were working. In our interview, Marie depicted her work as an evolving partnership wherein students are asked to take increasing levels of responsibility for their education and their decisions—going on to state that the goal is to “try to help them with decision-making, not...make decisions for them.” Similarly, Lisa described first-year stu-

dents as having relatively high support needs; an interim step where they learned how to be successful at the School of Management and Information Technology; and finally, a dramatically reduced need for support in the students' final years at Central University.

Most of the guiding concepts employed by the academic advisors focused on the uniqueness of the individual student. Building on the concept of engagement described above, Lisa tried to approach every student as an individual, explaining that each student experienced their developmental trajectory in a different way—saying that “growth and development is different for every individual.” Meanwhile, Brenda described the advising process thusly: “it’s about them figuring out what they should do, and...guiding them [to do] so.” While these are the clearest statements regarding the role of the individual, all the participants suggested at some point that the advising process had to be tailored to the needs of the students with whom they were working.

As part of the second interview protocol, I asked participants to respond to three or four scenarios based on common student experiences encountered by practitioners at Central University. Neither the residence life professionals nor academic advisors responded to these questions using formal theory. However, all the responses confirmed the crucial role played by informal theories. Most of these informal theories were based on guiding concepts derived from, influenced by, or otherwise similar to key elements of student learning and development theory. For instance, Tom noted that when he was struggling to find an approach that would work for a student he often fell back on engagement literature and focused on increasing a student’s sense of connection to Central University. Likewise, Linda stated that her default response for a student struggling to adjust socially would be to “get them engaged in a community.” Marie expanded on that concept— noting that an environment as large as Central University “can be as big or small as you want...it is a big place but...getting involved in clubs and organizations and getting to know your faculty...getting involved in some things that you’re interested” can reduce the environment to a manageable human scale. Alice and Hughes—both residence life professionals—echoed this sentiment.

In thinking about informal theory, the advisors I spoke with articulated two levels of intervention—one at the group level and one at the individual level. At the group level, advisors seek to foster engagement by introducing students to affinity groups. Again, Linda notes that she “just [tries] to get them engaged in a community.” To start, these communities may be based on a student’s social identity—Linda stated, for example, that she might recommend that a Catholic student join the Newman Society—but participants consistently suggested the importance of broad-based engagement strategies. Brenda described her engagement work as “a multi-step process” involving a discussion of the transition to college, student interests, and a shared search for involvement opportunities.

### **Uncertain Knowledge**

As noted in the “Extended Case Analysis as Research Design” section, ECA regards the researcher as the instrument for the production of findings, and to that end, I was intentional in my use of reflexive strategies throughout the process of data collection. Originally trained as a post-positivist social scientist, when I examined my fieldnotes, I found myself surprised by the frequency and extent to which I described a powerful need to validate the thinking of the participants with whom I worked. Throughout my research, I have come to know them as bright, capable, and experienced practitioners. In my fieldnotes, however, I found that I had frequently been asked to

respond to questions from participants about whether their answer was “correct”—a reflexive observation that departed from routine questions from participants about whether an answer sufficiently addressed a topic to meet my needs. This time, however, comments from participants were designed to gauge the accuracy of their responses. Many of these interactions occurred during the participant observation rather than interview component of my study, so I have relatively few verbatim excerpts elaborating these exchanges. However, interview transcript did capture several that demonstrate this pattern.

For example, after thoughtfully describing how a student might gain greater self-confidence, an academic advisor somewhat ironically said: “I am not sure of that answer. It is probably a combination of things, I guess, with most people; right?” Another was self-deprecating—stating that “hopefully I’ve given you...valuable information.” Yet another expressed frustration at my questioning: “I never know if I’m answering your questions. I know there’s no right or wrong answer, but I don’t know if they’re addressing what you want to hear.” More broadly, though, this study offered participants the opportunity to hear their own words back from the mouth of someone that they considered a scholar. The words of one academic advisor capture this best: “You actually made me think about things that I hadn’t...certainly, they’re in my head, but I hadn’t verbalized...when you verbalize something, it’s like holy cow, like a light bulb went off.” Paradoxically, my aspiration—like that of any ethnographer—was simply to do justice to the richness and wisdom that I found in the site of my research. The words in which that participant found wisdom were, in fact, her own.

### Discussion

Through its use of ECA and CPPE, this study offers important insight into the study of knowledge production. That is to say, this study reveals not just the experiences of higher education administrators but also establishes a research strategy for similar future work. ECA uses a critical theoretical lens both to select appropriate problems and predict the scenarios likely to be encountered in fieldwork (Burawoy, 1998). It also relies on the reflexive judgments of the researcher to surface discrepant observations through interaction with local experts and to “extend” the existing theory-base by proposing modifications to it to account for the observed divergences. The newly extended theory can then be further evaluated via additional research more in keeping with normative social science. While ECA has been previously used to study topics such labor organizations and community-based educational programs (Burawoy, 1991), it remains seldom used among educational researchers.

Likewise, CPPE is seldom cited as an epistemological orientation by social scientists despite its focus on providing solutions to human problems based on human solutions (Rorty, 1999). CPPE holds that truth claims are produced without reference to broader essentialist forms and are instead the product of contextual, value-laden judgments about which truth claims are useful in explaining the norm-governed world as individuals encounter it (Rorty, 1991). While its connection to the theory-to-practice problem described in this paper is clear, CPPE has more far-reaching uses. Its focus on context is fundamentally consistent with broader constructivist orientations held by many qualitative researchers but also lays bare any lingering pretension to objectivity. As a result, CPPE provides badly needed critical engagement with theory that could help qualitative researchers to anchor their work to social reality without reverting to post-positivism’s objectivity or slipping into a post-modernism’s uncertainty.

Importantly, this paper not only makes claims regarding the relevance of ECA and CPPE, it also demonstrates their relevance by producing empirical findings. In so doing, it provides an example of how future work might unfold. Literature suggests that there is a problematic connection between theory and practice: we produce formal theories because we presume them to be generally true, but even if they are generally true, they are not universally applicable. In this extended case study, practitioners do not appear to utilize formal theory to guide their practice directly. Instead, they produce informal theories that they use to guide practice. Combining practitioner experience and guiding concepts derived from formal theories, these informal theories can become quite sophisticated and when they take into account institutional context, they seem likely to promote desirable student outcomes. This understanding confirms portions of Reason and Kimball's (2012) theory-to-practice model while complicating others.

Every one of the participants in this study had a clear set of informal theories that they employed to construct their practices, but few found scholarly theories useful. As such, despite the fact that most participants had formal training in higher education or a related field, many did not see the clear connection between formal and informal theory as proposed by Parker (1977) and reaffirmed by Reason and Kimball (2012). In fact, the lack of apparent connection led one participant to label formal theory as "horseshit." At its most useful, scholarly theory was seen as a form of background—akin to ambient noise, pleasant to have but not entirely necessary. Consequently, this study demonstrated limited empirical support for the first theoretical prediction derived from Reason and Kimball (2012), which stated: "practitioners will use formal theory." A more accurate, pragmatically-oriented understanding of formal theory usage would hold that practitioners will utilize formal theory if and when it is more useful to them to do so than the alternative model of student experience—including those offered by informal theory.

This study also suggests that the lack of formal theory usage did not negatively impact the sophistication with which practitioners thought about their work or the experiences that they created for students. Instead, as Love (2012) suggests, they embraced informal theory. However, findings also suggest that the dismissal of formal theory is not inevitable. The majority of participants seemed influenced by what Reason and Kimball (2012) call "guiding concepts." Responding to the call for engaged scholarship set forth by Bensimon (2007) and Kezar (2000), there is no reason that scholarship cannot focus both on the production of formal theory as it always has as well as application via these guiding concepts. Using this approach preserves the very real advantages of rigor and generalizability inherent in our current system of theory production as articulated by both Bensimon (2007) and Evans and Guido (2012). However, it also meets the need for contextualized knowledge claims proposed by the second theoretical prediction derived from Reason and Kimball (2012): "practitioners will create contextualized knowledge claims." And indeed, this study demonstrated that these contextualized knowledge claims were frequently produced. Consistent with the third theoretical prediction derived from Reason and Kimball (2012), it also found that contextualized knowledge claims varied from person-to-person.

Existing literature also treats at least some types of theory (e.g., informal and implicit theory) as a form of knowledge production. Consistent with the fourth theoretical prediction of Reason and Kimball (2012), this study provides limited empirical evidence of this production process and thereby hints at variation over time. However, as noted above, most participants regarded formal theory as having less utility than contextualized knowledge claims. Informal theory did evolve over time as suggested by Love (2012) and Reason and Kimball (2012), and with this evolution, the use to which informal theory was put could be seen to shift as well. As one advisor

noted, each interaction with a student could foster a whole new understanding of student experience. That led to an ever-changing lexicon of strategies for practice whereas the same dynamism was not found for formal theory. Consequently, the fourth theoretical prediction might be revised to read: the nature and use of contextualized knowledge claims will change over time as practitioners seek to refine their understanding. Once again consistent with the tenets of CPPE, the way that practitioners describe this understanding is most typically use-oriented: that is, they seek to refine their understanding in order to alter their practice.

In addition to testing these four theoretical predictions, this paper also offers broader insight into the politics and possibilities of knowledge construction in student affairs. As described above, an incidental finding revealed that many participants were uncomfortable when asked to position themselves as arbiters of what theory was and whether it was true. Not only did they seek to conform to my expectancies as a researcher, they also simply wanted to know whether they were right. This finding suggests that practitioner knowledge may be undervalued by scholars at present. However, research methods that are widely-used at present do not do a particularly good job moving between scholarly knowledge, expert judgment, and empirical data. Consequently, the empirical findings from this study begin to bend back again to the more conceptual ones: there is a pressing need for the methodological tools offered by ECA and for the epistemological insights offered by CPPE.

### **Implications**

This study offers both empirical and conceptual implications pertaining to the use of a critical, theory-engaged methodology in educational research. One of the clearest implications for this study concerns the relationship between formal and informal theory. While many scholarly texts focus on the rigor and generalizability of a formal theory, practitioners draw “guiding concepts” from these texts eclectically. The theory-to-practice conversion would be facilitated by greater attention by scholars to the possible ways that the formal theories they propose will be repurposed by practitioners. Rather than relying on participants or secondary literature to produce them, guiding concepts should become a key part of the way that scholars present formal theory. This implication echoes Kezar’s (2000) suggestion that practitioners will read higher education scholarship only when they can see it as a representation and extension of their work. It will also ensure that formal theories are interpreted by practitioners as scholars intend per Evans and Guido (2012). More publication outlets that emphasize the publication of works accessible to practitioners yet structured by careful attention to various types of theory would facilitate this process. While this implication is most tightly connected to empirical findings when framed as limited to publication venues focused on student affairs, there seems little doubt that critical engagement with theory would likewise be beneficial in other areas of educational research.

Another clear implication concerns the connection between practice and student experience. Participants repeatedly suggested the importance of both of their own experiential knowledge and the experiential knowledge of students. Since student affairs practice is principally concerned with the creation of student experiences designed to foster learning and development, the field could benefit from greater attention to assessing whether their practices actually produce the experiences for which they are designed. This implication echoes Bensimon’s (2007) warning that we ought to be attentive to whether we are producing the outcomes that we set out to create. In this regard, one of the most significant limitations of this study was the inability to include student-level research data. Future work should investigate the extent to which the expert judgments of



practitioners actually capture student experiences. This form of reflexivity has broad implications throughout critical educational research wherein good practice is predicated on the ability to identify and address unintended consequences of hidden assumptions, biases, and beliefs. To that end, a regular component of reflexive practice should include assessment and self-evaluation activities designed to structure thinking about the field of praxis uniting practice and experience.

Another major implication of this study concerns how this empirical research might be produced. Study participants consistently sought affirmation of their ideas and perspectives. As Love (2012) has indicated, this stems in part from the seeming difficulty in reconciling personal experience with scholarly knowledge. ECA (Burawoy, 1991; 1998; 2009)—the utility of which is demonstrated by this paper's empirical findings—provides a means for accomplishing this reconciliation. The expert knowledge of practitioners represents a meaningful supply of information about student learning and development that could be harnessed to determine how formal theories might be revised on an ongoing basis. To capture this information, practitioners must be well-versed in formal theory, reflexive practice, and research techniques. However, producing highly-trained scholar-practitioners and honoring the knowledge that they possess might lead to both more accurate formal theory and more carefully considered informal theories. In this process, ECA can be useful because of its utility in connecting informal and formal theories through a shared set of methodological epistemological assumptions. And in turn, we can produce more practice-oriented scholarship and more theory-informed practice. Once again, there seems little reason to believe that this implication would not apply equally well in other areas of critical, theory-engaged educational research.

Perhaps the most important implication of this study is simply the importance of asking critical questions and using theory to help understand the results. Findings from this study demonstrate the potential for the application of critical, theory-engaged methodologies in educational research. Critical post-pragmatism offers an epistemological lens suitable for the exploration of the multiple competing truth claims that exist in many educational realms—not just in student affairs practice. Meanwhile, extended case analysis allows theories to be held up to the lens of focused empirical observations—and to offer suggestions for how these same theories might be reconstructed based on discrepant findings. Using both a critical post-pragmatist epistemology and extended case analysis provides a critical, theory-engaged methodology that can be used both to produce new empirical findings and to challenge underlying assumptions about social reality.

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