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Commentary on *Logical Operations in Theory-Building Case Studies* by William Stiles

Case Studies and Non-Abstractionist Theorizing

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ABSTRACT

Case studies offer a unique methodological resource for studying human practices in real-world settings and have the potential to facilitate non-abstractionist theorizing that may be especially useful to practitioners. Stiles' contribution regarding deduction, induction, and abduction in theory development—via case study methods—raises important, but often ignored, issues and suggests several ways that cases can facilitate this practically-oriented theoretical work.

Key words: case study; theory; practice; application; abstractionism

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What good are case study methods? Although rarely treated as a primary tool of inquiry in mainstream psychology, case studies offer a powerful methodological resource. The "thick" descriptions they generate can say much about human experience and practical involvement in meaningful contexts. Moreover, case studies seem particularly useful within applied fields such as clinical psychology (e.g., Fishman, 1999; Miller, 2004), education (e.g., Bassey, 1999), and evaluation (e.g., Stake, 1995) where detailed study of implementation and situational dynamics tends to offer more applicable insight to practitioners than abstract, highly-technical descriptions expressed in terms of aggregate scores, statistical indices, and probabilities. As their advocates argue, case studies play the important role of fostering "transferability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 124) and offering "naturalistic generalizations" (Stake, 1995, p. 85) that facilitate practice (see also Fishman, 1999; Miller, 2004); or put another way, cases offer ideas, strategies, and situational knowledge that can serve as strategically important grist for the practitioner mill. Such arguments in support of case study research gain cogency when practice is viewed as craftwork involving intuitive judgment, practical wisdom, and innovation (e.g., Polkinghorne, 2004; Rowland, 1993)

In "Logical Operations in Theory Building Case Studies," Stiles (2009) discusses a related role for case study methods and elaborates on some of the technical issues involved in this form of inquiry. As Stiles contends, case study methods are a valuable investigative tool when constructing theories in the domain of "context-dependent complex human phenomena" (p. 12). Case study methods can offer a glimpse into the significance and particularity of events within real-world contexts, and in so doing, offer insights that may provide the basis for, or be usefully woven into, applied theories of all types (psychotherapy included). While the general idea that cases can be used to help inform theory construction is not new (e.g., Yin, 2003), Stiles'

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discussion of the logical issues involved in this work and the ways that case-based data may inform the process of refining theories over time are not yet widely available and discussed in this literature. In this sense particularly, Stiles' article is a welcome contribution.

Through his exposition, Stiles (2009) invites the reader to consider several ways in which case study data can aid in the process of theorizing, with a particular emphasis on ways that they can be used to test the satisfactoriness of theories and inform the process of modification over time, the latter of which he refers to as "abduction" (p. 18), following C.S. Peirce. As Stiles suggests, theory building case studies are particularly helpful for: (a) revealing interesting phenomena that demonstrate areas where a theory is not yet adequately developed; (b) offering different versions and accounts of an experience (through multiple cases) in ways that enrich and broaden the scope of a theory; (c) adjusting some or many aspects of a theory over time; and (d) developing new tenets for a theory that better capture something of interest regarding the phenomena in question. If a theory is "permeable," as Stiles contends it should be, then it can be modified over time in light of continually accrued case study evidence. As he stated:

> Theories grow not by building an edifice, piling fact on fact, but by infusing observations that elaborate and change the theory. The theory thus conveys, in the form of signs, the accumulated observations of those who have researched it. When we understand a theory, we experience an aggregate of what previous investigators experienced. (2009, p. 20)

I assume that theory-building cases would focus on the kinds of therapeutic encounters created when using a given theory and the results that follow—that is, they would carefully describe interactions between therapist and client, therapist interpretations of client communications, and client responses to treatment over the course of therapy informed by a given theoretical perspective. Inferences about the plausibility of that theory, and ways it can be improved, would then be distilled from the data accrued and turned toward the process of abduction.

The strength of such case studies in general lies in their capacity to carefully examine and help improve theory regarding nearly any object, process, or experience as it exists normally or naturally unfolds in its environment. I am persuaded that studies of this sort are more likely to offer useful insight and inform practice than those involving statistical hypotheses testing. I would also suggest that studies in this vein have a greater capacity to be useful than those conducted in artificial settings such as traditional experiments (see also Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Studying psychotherapy theories in real clinical settings would seem to offer the best chance of understanding what those theories have to offer practitioners, the majority of whom do not work in close collaboration with theorist-researchers and do not practice in carefully controlled environments for research purposes.

To move further in this "naturalistic" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) direction, however, case study methods could be used to study not only actual therapeutic dynamics and outcomes when a given theory is used (which is important), but also practicing therapists' understandings of, judgments about, and facility with theories through ethnographically- and hermeneutically-oriented case study methods. Such case studies can facilitate the process of understanding and improving theories-in-context by revealing their strengths, affordances, limitations, weaknesses,

blind spots, and complexities from a practitioner standpoint. Using this approach, theories could be studied as conceptual tools, much like any other tools, by watching how they are normally used by practitioners, but also by treating practitioners themselves as the subject of investigation and thus collecting data regarding their experiences when applying theories: When and why did they use a given theory? Why did they use it in certain ways? How did it facilitate the therapy process in their view? What parts of the theory were readily understandable and helpful? What parts were not? What parts, if any, were combined with techniques drawn from other theories to achieve certain ends? And so on. If researchers and theorists are interested in knowing how practitioners not actively involved in formal theory building view and use a given theory, such data would be essential.

Stiles raises another important issue when discussing the nature of clinical theory. He states:

> Psychotherapy theories (e.g., psychodynamic, person-centered, cognitive-behavioral) are rich and detailed conceptual tools that psychotherapists use to understand their clients and guide their interventions (Leiman & Stiles, 2002). Theories are thus intensely practical. For better or worse, they organize therapists' experience of their clients, giving meaning and interconnection to the clients' past, present, and future. Whether and how one notices or challenges a depressed client's dysfunctional cognitions, or how one understands a slip of the tongue or a missed appointment, for example, must be creatively constructed in the moment based on theory. (2009, p. 10)

I believe this to be a crucial point about theory in general, and particularly about theory in applied fields. As others have argued, the distinction between theory and practice can be thin, and indeed, perhaps nonexistent, when theory is viewed as a form of social practice (Taylor, 1985) that facilitates an agent's ability to interpret experience, solve problems, make decisions, take action, and so forth. To the extent that this actually is the case, good theory would seem to be an essential part of an applied field that seeks to offer more than formulaic procedures that apply narrowly (if at all) to practice.

It is here that I wonder about the fit between case studies (as a means of offering thick, contextual descriptions) and formal theory (that is, theory as explicitly developed and advanced by social scientists). Despite the notion that theory as a form of social practice can, in principle, play a major role in professions like clinical psychology, it is widely acknowledged across disciplines that formal theory and everyday practice often fail to connect meaningfully with one another and that, in a sense, practice in actual work settings has tended to expand and evolve in ways that theory has not (e.g., Fishman, 1999; Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992; Miller, 2004; Polkinghorne, 2004); indeed, formal theories often stand aloof, unable to be used in ways that make a practical difference. Thus, although it's clear, as Stiles remarks, that cases are a powerful source of contextual insight in the formulation of theories and in their refinement over time, it's far from clear that many theories in the social sciences are cut from the same contextual cloth and offer the rich understandings and descriptions needed to facilitate practice.

In all likelihood, the issue with theory is *abstractionism* (for more on this issue, see James, 1907/1978; Slife, 2004). While some degree of abstraction is inevitably entailed in language, use of signs, representation, thematization, and so on, theory as traditionally viewed in

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the discipline is based on abstractions (constructs, concepts, laws, principles, etc.) that are taken to be in some sense real and, indeed, more fundamental than the manifest aspects of lived human experience they are invoked to clarify and explain. For example, people experience forgetting, but from the perspective of cognitive theory, this phenomenon is explained by an appeal to basic abstractions, that is, underlying mechanistic processes such as encoding, storage, retrieval, and retrieval failure. The experience and meaning of forgetting from this theoretical perspective is subsumed within the hypothetical realm populated by these cognitive mechanisms that come to be viewed as the reality of the situation; in some sense, these mechanisms come to be more real than forgetting itself, which, from this perspective, is merely the way that this mechanical failure manifests in people's experience. Of course, mainstream theories vary in the manner of their abstractionism, and some forms of abstractionism may be more troubling than others, but the formulation of abstract constructs to explain human action and experience characterizes much theorizing in the field.

Critics of abstractionism have argued—convincingly, I think—that this theoretical maneuver offers little more than empty placeholders for explanations, often distorts or trivializes human phenomena, and, in the end, sheds little light on the meaningful experiences that characterize much of human life (e.g., Danziger, 1997; James, 1907/1978; Robinson, 1986; Slife & Williams, 1995; Williams, 1990). From a practical standpoint, it is the abstractionism of theory and the abstractness of its articulation that offers a major stumbling block to its wider understanding and implementation. The world of abstractions typically expressed in theories—that is, theories characterized by generality, orderliness, and closure—tends to be minimally connected with or applicable to lived-in human contexts so often characterized by a unpredictability, contradictions, ill-defined problems, and complex human interactions. Abstractions invoked as explanatory are not typically experienced as part of this human context and don't seem to exist in ways that they may be harnessed to make a practical difference. They don't seem to fit into the narratives by which people live and are not easily made to contribute to everyday work. They can be useful at times—for example, as sources of ideas that may be occasionally applied—but they often do not provide the guidance needed to adequately cope with real situations. Research in the mainstream (e.g., experimental and quasi-experimental methods, measurement techniques, and common statistical procedures) tends not to ameliorate this situation because it is also characterized by abstractionism. Indeed, the majority of research strategies in mainstream social science are designed to manipulate and transform experiences in order to arrive at abstract principles (e.g., laws, models, constructs, prediction equations, etc.) expected to do the fundamental explanatory work deemed necessary.

As Stiles and others have suggested, case studies can be different. By virtue of their focus on contextual circumstances, practical involvement, and rich detail, they can offer accounts that begin and end in the world of lived experience, expressed in a language of practical discourse (i.e., the language of everyday human interaction and activity; Williams, 1990). Indeed, one of the great advantages of case study methods, as I view them, is their ability to thematize important aspects of everyday experience without transforming those aspects into something else or shifting meanings to some other level of analysis for explanatory purposes. That is, case studies have the potential to offer the insight required of a non-abstractionist science—agents may be agents, purposive action may be purposive action, and meaningful experience may be

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meaningful experience, all without threat of being explained away. I suggest that data with this character, in turn, can contribute to something other than abstractionist theorizing. While it is common for theoretical accounts to invoke some form of abstractionism—for example, introducing mental constructs or variables to explain phenomena—theorizing could be conducted in order to generate accounts that explicate, clarify, and thematize meaningful human action and social practice *as* meaningful human action and social practice. Such theorizing, like case studies in support of it, could begin and end in the world of lived experience and would not endeavor to invoke some "deeper" level of reality—some set of abstractions—that are taken to be the root cause of phenomena under investigation. Theory of this sort could be aided by case study data, quite obviously, because both endeavors would be committed to this type of non-abstractionist understanding. The cases could provide a rich source of data about practical involvement in context, and the theorizing could bring a (somewhat) higher-level organization to those data and offer more or less coherent accounts that advance scholarly work.

This alternative view of theory has little precedent in the social science literature and, in fact, there is little with which to guide its future development besides some philosophical notions offered by those who have also witnessed the excesses of abstractionist theorizing in the western intellectual tradition (e.g., James, 1907/1978; Taylor, 1985). Of the relatively scant amount of literature on this topic, Westerman's work (e.g., Westerman, 2005; Westerman & Steen, 2007) on participatory models can provide some examples and theoretical guidance. Warner (1986, 2001) has also produced theorizing that attempts to take account of complex human phenomena such as emotion and self-deception without invoking explanatory abstractions. Slife and Reber (2001) discussed the possibility of "temporal" theorizing and therapy processes that seek to avoid the abstractionism and universalism of typical approaches. And narrative theorists have called for a tradition of scholarship that understands human action not as caught in a matrix of mechanical forces (i.e., abstractions) but as a type of "storied" event unfolding over time against a meaningful backdrop of shared social practices (e.g., Bruner, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988). What these contributions feature is a commitment to understanding human activity qua human activity and theory that reflects this commitment.

Although research programs that advance non-abstractionist forms of theorizing—informed by case study data—are not particularly common in the literature of psychology, some examples that offer a concrete sense of this approach are available. One example that I wish to offer, namely, Malcolm Westcott's (1988, 1992) scholarship regarding the experience of human freedom, suggests one way in which certain kinds of case study data can be used to help develop a non-abstractionist theoretical perspective. Human freedom may be a paradigmatic place to start with scholarship of this sort, since the idea of invoking abstractions to explain human activity undermines any serious effort to consider persons as genuinely agentive beings (Williams, 1992).

Westcott's genuine attempt to consider persons as agents manifests in his explicit endorsement of human freedom as a fundamentally significant topic (i.e., not reducible to some more basic level of analysis such as biology) and in his call for accounts of freedom as concretely experienced. This is an approach aimed at generating statements that can be viewed as theoretical in some important sense (e.g., narrative descriptions that clarify and thematize important aspects of freedom), but that do not partake of the mechanistic and deterministic theorizing so predominant in mainstream psychology (Rychlak, 1988; Westcott, 1988; Williams,

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1992). Moreover, Westcott saw a need for theorizing that would be accessible and helpful to laypersons as well as social scientists. For these reasons, he sought to develop theory rooted in the everyday world of practical human involvement rather than some region of abstract space. As he stated (1992, p. 77):

> I have become rather disenchanted by psychological theory, which is at a level that requires expert interpretation if it is to be useful for human beings living human lives. I want my theoretical statements to be more directly useful to thoughtful persons in the conduct of their lives, without the necessary intervention of experts…Thus theory that is sufficiently abstract to suit academics may not be sufficiently contextualized to be directly useful by ordinary mortals.

Westcott's efforts in this regard were aided by a variety of research strategies, but finally, in his last works, were dominated by his case-based autobiographical approach (1992) that focused on narrative understandings of freedom as it is experienced and lived. Participants who acted as informants in this research were generally asked about "the role of freedom in their lives, the conditions under which they feel free, what importance this has for them, and what, if anything, they do to enhance experiences of freedom" (1992, pp. 76-77). Case studies based on this approach provided rich narratives that, in turn, were the source of themes for the development of theory regarding this topic. During his career, Westcott did not finish a large-scale, formalized theory based on these data; but through his research he provided an indication of some elements that might be involved in a theory of this sort—that human freedom is something someone does rather than something someone has; that people often see their freedom as intensely personal; that there are many constructions of what freedom means, based on social and personal circumstances; and that an adequate account of freedom must allow for the richness and variety of this phenomenon to be made apparent (not condensed into a rigid, abstract framework). By emphasizing people engaged in meaningful activity, and by resisting the temptation to construct a separate (background) reality as explanatory, these basic ideas avoid much of the abstractionism characteristic of mainstream theory.

Surely there are many ways to conduct case study research in the service of non-abstractionist theorizing, but Westcott's work offers one example of how such a project might be fruitfully carried out. Others conducting inquiry of this sort would be equally concerned with drawing connections between relevant phenomena and the concrete world of meaningful human activity; and research in support of this endeavor would connect with this practical activity and produce data "thick" enough to offer the descriptions needed—the thicker the better. One case study-oriented strategy for providing such thick description involves the use of examples from relevant interviews (such as in Westcott's research), or from therapy sessions in clinical research. Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie (1999) make this process one of the criteria of good methodological practice in qualitative research. In their words:

> *Grounding in examples*. Authors provide examples of the data to illustrate both theanalytic procedures used in the study and the understanding developed in the lightof them. The examples allow appraisal of the fit between the data and the authors'understanding of them; they also allow readers to conceptualize possible alternativemeanings and understandings (p. 222). . . . . Grounding in examples is analogous to reporting significance tests and effect

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> sizes in quantitative research, in the sense that both research practices are used rhetorically to support conclusions about the phenomena being studied (p. 224).

In closing, I also wish to emphasize the idea that non-abstractionist theories could be constructed in ways that increase their relevance to practice. If psychotherapists are workers of a craft (not mere technicians) and often put their own intuitive judgment, practical wisdom, and creativity to work in therapy, then one significant role of theory may be to provide insights and practical knowledge that facilitates this process and helps inform judgment. That is, the most practically useful theories would involve rich accounts of meaningful and relevant phenomena, expressed in terms that are understandable to practitioners. As practitioners become familiar with theories of this sort, they may glean from them what is of value and incorporate it into their working understanding of their craft. For example, being exposed to theoretical work focused concretely on the nature of self deception and self-evaluation (e.g., Warner, 2001) could invite a therapist to reconsider biases or beliefs she previously made in the therapy process and suggest alternative forms of practice that better reflect her evolving view of human nature, relationships, and optimal functioning. Other theorizing based to some degree on case studies could offer insight regarding therapy strategies per se, or values regarding successful therapy outcomes. In all of these instances, non-abstractionist theory could be a resource for continued development of practical skills, problem solving abilities, expert knowledge, and even professional identity over time. Theories of this sort would not be proffered as abstractionist explanations, static representations of reality, or rigid formulas for practice, but as rich resources that could be revisited as needed and offer new insights relevant to therapists' current circumstances.

Not only do I think that the ideas presented by Stiles regarding coherence, observation, and abduction apply to theory of this sort, I think that case studies are an important method for conducting this work (in conjunction with useful other data sources; see Yanchar, Gantt, & Clay, 2005). As I suggested above, cases provide the richness and contextual detail needed to inform theories that can, in turn, offer practitioners a glimpse into phenomena from a human standpoint—that is, accounts that are not disengaged from human contexts in the first place, that express ideas and concepts in a compelling form, and offer insights and possible courses of action that can be flexibly applied in a variety of contexts depending on the therapists' situation and judgment. While the idea of non-abstractionist theorizing is, in a sense, still abstract at this point, the ideal of theory and research that are more harmonious with actual human life, and more relevant to practice, is worth serious consideration.

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