

Dr. Susan J. Buck
Associate Professor University of North Carolina - Greensboro
UNC-G PO Box 26170
Department of Political Science
Greensboro, NC 27402 USA

Fax: (336) 334-4315
Email: susan_buck@uncg.edu

Discussant's Comments, Theory Stream

These comments are in two parts. The first part provides my remarks for the closing plenary on 14 June 1998, and the second contains the suggestions made to me during the conference and afterwards for research directions for the Bloomington conference.

I. Closing Plenary

We have always had valuable theoretical work at this conference, but our interest has been explicit since Berkeley when a group of people interested in theory met in a stuffy basement room at 9:00 p.m., with most of us sitting on the floor. Two years later we have more than a dozen panels, explicit discussions in full-conference plenaries, and over 40 people for a break-out session at 4:30 last night. This is all very exciting.

It is difficult to know what to focus on. Over the past four days, I have heard 12 panels on such topics as heterogeneity, cultural factors, holistic management, platforms, the role of community, the tension between CPR discourse and environmental discourse, the role of language, changing scale, and concepts of community. On these panels have been discussed concepts about agency theory, power, leadership, problem definition, and cultural imperialism - the fine old panoply of social science constructs.

There were lots of panels dealing with theory in other streams, such as governance and multiple-use commons, that I did not hear, so I did not hear about, for example, re-conceptualizing the commons, intellectual property rights, and urban commons.

A great deal of valuable work and advancing of theory has been accomplished. In these few minutes I plan to make some general observations from the panels and panel discussions, to indicate some areas we might begin to address, and to offer a few suggestions for 2000 in Bloomington.

First, in the spirit of the discourse panels, we still lack clarity of definitions. For example, we have several ways to use the word "community." Thus, when we hear papers that challenge communities as appropriate action arenas in terms of watershed management or as unwitting

agents of the state, it is not clear that the "communities" are the same. I'd suggest we continue to work to develop common vocabulary. Otherwise, we talk past each other and fail to make use of each other's insights. This is not to say we must have a "true" definition, but if I mean one thing by "community" and you mean another, we must understand each other's meanings and find a label for each definition.

Second is the issue of scale. I saw a new level of interest in units of analysis beyond "user pool" or "community" or "individual" on such panels as multiple-use multiple-user CPRs, platforms/forums of representation, peak associations, regional or state level management systems, and ecosystems. This shift partially explains the increased confusion on terminology.

Third, no longer are the majority of the panels I saw driven primarily by the IAD framework. The language of the conference is increasingly multi-disciplinary. The field of CPR is spreading out; even two or three conferences ago we had a common intellectual foundation. Our conference content is also spreading out: several panels were very interesting intellectually and theoretically but they were not directly CPR. CPR was simply the example used to illustrate the theory. This is not a bad thing. Listeners have to work a little harder to understand and to remember the theory and to apply it rather than looking for similar CPR situations and then copying the theoretical approach. This is more difficult but probably will advance theory further.

Fourth, I was reminded yet again that substantive areas matter. There was a great deal of verbal deference to knowledge of time and place but few answers to "So what"? Analytically, CPRs dealing with fugitive resources such as fish are fundamentally different from watersheds which have geologic [a nice new word!] independent of human living patterns which are different from public housing projects which have no extractable resources, etc. To further our development of theory we need to begin to structure analytic categories, or, perhaps more accurately, we need to return to consideration of useful categories upon which we can agree.

Fifth, a large gap in our regular discourse is discussion of bureaucratic behavior. We reify the state and government agencies. We see them as black boxes and make little or no attempt to explain incentives, organizational norms, ethics, etc. for government agencies. Bureaucrats are not agents of Lucifer. They are generally hard-working, well-intentioned, underpaid people in very difficult jobs. We'd do well to spend a little more time incorporating their institutional imperatives into our analyses. This would increase the power of our theory and, to be a little instrumental, would also make it easier to provide information in a form they can use to help us achieve our own goals. [An editorial aside: after the plenary, a conference participant touched my shoulder in passing and said "I'm a bureaucrat. Thank you!" I wonder how many good people we have offended with our bureaucrat-bashing?]

To shift focus a bit, let me discuss the operation rules on the panels I observed. Remember these are theory panels so they may do best in a format that wouldn't be as effective for other substantive areas. The most successful were (1) organized around a single analytic perspective or question to which authors adhered. (2) Panelist presentations were short and focused on theory illustrated by cases and not the other way 'round, and (3) made only a few points rather than presenting the full arguments developed in the papers. (4) Ample discussion time was provided.

Clearly we have a strong interest within the membership of IASCP in developing stronger theoretical perspectives. I'd suggest we consider at the next conference a break-out session on theory, perhaps one full afternoon, with papers pre-read and everyone ready for discussion. This is not to suggest that theory papers and insights be limited to this arena, but this conference is a unique forum for CPR theory, and I suggest we maximize the exchange of ideas here.

Thank you.

II. Participants' Suggestions

At the Saturday evening theory stream discussion, I asked people to give me their own comments or suggestions about the work we were hearing at the conference. The material below came from conference participants and is edited very lightly, if at all.

A. In a third world context and a co-management / participatory management context, the question of power and power relations at different levels should be addressed more explicitly, especially related to the issue of "new" institutional structures being imposed on traditional institutional structures. To what extent is cooperation endangered by individuals or groups who are in a position in the power-hierarchy to benefit personally? This is also related to the question of legitimacy, which also should be addressed more explicitly. In some countries, this question goes hand-in-hand with the issue of democracy and transition to democracy.

B. The next time we have an IASCP conference it would be nice to have a forum on good governance and government as appropriate actor on the collective behalf--i.e., issues of representation and recourse.

C. There are many of us in the Association who do applied work. For this group, there is a need for a simple distillation of what has been learned about bureaucracies, both theoretically and sociologically. Are there short, simple, and clear statements about what theoreticians and sociologists have learned that would be useful to people working with communities of resource users as guides to understanding the other side of the human community?