Nietzsche, Sequoia, the Reichstag, Contingency Management, and Tango Therapy

Original review: Nietzsche, Sequoia, the Reichstag, Contingency Management, and Tango Therapy


Reviewer reply: Response to Tharp

A review of

Delta Theory and Psychosocial Systems: The Practice of Influence and Change

by Roland G. Tharp


Reviewed by

Kurt Salzinger

It is not entirely fair to put into the title of my review Nietzsche and tango therapy plus a sampling of the variety of information readers are exposed to in this brief book, Delta Theory and Psychosocial Systems: The Practice of Influence and Change, but they all
appear, though there is more tango therapy than Nietzsche. Author Roland Tharp, psychologist and poet, educator and applied behavior analyst, proposes what he calls a universal theory of influence and change, delta theory, and so readers encounter classes of data, concepts, and individuals not often discussed together.

This makes for interesting reading; for example, one learns about Sequoia, who constructed a syllabary of the Cherokee language. He achieved Cherokee literacy “with dramatic suddenness” (p. 92), only to see his singular achievement eliminated with the ill-advised American government suppression of it in public education. Rather than building on Sequoia’s achievement, the government decided to force-feed reading exclusively in English and produced, as a result, neither Cherokee nor English literacy.

According to Tharp, Sequoia’s singular achievement came through his use of existing social systems. He first illustrated the usefulness of literacy to leaders of the Cherokees; later, it was not schools but families (existing social systems) that taught one another how to read by any means they could rather than by the formal methods used in schools. For the Cherokee, being able to read and write was useful in creating historical records of lineage that previously had been based solely on memory. Tharp cites all of this as evidence for the usefulness of delta theory, but it seems to me that it actually shows how the reinforcing value of reading encouraged this activity.

Tharp provides other examples of change or lack of change in need of explanation, ranging from education to the creation of dangerous violent criminals, to school desegregation, to ballet instruction and training of nurses, to the spread of obesity, to Navajo “sings”: a mere sampling of the behaviors that Tharp describes and explains.

Citing the recruitment of underage prostitutes to illustrate delta theory, Tharp, it seems to me, once again actually shows how behavior analysis alone would be sufficient to explain how it all happens. For example, he cites “propinquity” as a concept needed to show how one influences the recruits, but that hardly seems like a concept. To influence someone, you have to be around him or her; in behavior analytic terms, you have to establish yourself as a source of positive reinforcement.

That can be achieved by “joint activity” (another concept Tharp cites) with the recruiter, but this simply means that the pimp is around and makes possible the receipt of positive reinforcement for the “recruit.” The pimp spends more and more time together with the recruit; thus, more and more of her positive reinforcement (money, affection, time spent together) comes from him or through him, and because time is finite, she spends less and less time with her other friends, with the result that soon her positive reinforcement comes mostly from him.

Tharp then cites “intersubjectivity” as a concept in his theory (the recruit begins to think as the pimp does, which is the way she gets positive reinforcement). Next, Tharp talks of the concept of the “zone of proximal development” in which the pimp asks the recruit to “do him a favor just this once and have sex with a friend,” inducing the recruit to gradually do this with someone else for money and the “appreciation” of the pimp.
This describes a well-known concept in behavior analysis—shaping. The pimp reinforces ever-closer approximations to what he wants, namely, for the recruit to have sex for money. The author also mentions that punishment is used as time goes by, and the prostitute might wish to leave this kind of activity because eventually there are bound to be unpleasant consequences for it. In brief, Tharp presents a very good case for behavior analytic concepts as explanatory devices without the need for the more complex concepts that he argues are necessary to understand behavior.

One learns a lot by reading his book. Tharp does sometimes refer to behavior analysis, but he also cites anthropology, physics, sociology, network studies, history, and synchronization of the blinking lights of fireflies, not to speak of poetry. This relatively brief book has range, and the author knows many things, most of which he cites and uses to explain his universal theory.

Unfortunately, Tharp seeks to explain a large number of phenomena with what seems to be an equally large number of concepts. A theory, no less a universal theory, ought to, I believe, explain complex behaviors with a relatively modest number of concepts. Otherwise one is merely translating one set of complexity into another set that is equally complex.

One cannot but admire the range of this author’s knowledge, and one cannot but sympathize with his wish to discuss all of these interesting phenomena that he knows and wishes to explain, but I am afraid it has not resulted in that “elegant” theory he proposes in accordance with the criteria of a universal theory listed in his book’s appendix. Delta theory needs to be pared down in order to result in what Tharp wishes to establish—an all-encompassing, elegant theory that will explain the behavior of humankind.