
"The focus of this book is upon understanding the requirements for effective intervention when the targets are human social systems or their parts (individuals, small groups, intergroups, norms, etc.)" (p. 8). The author asserts that "research and theory about intervention activities are truly at a primitive stage" (p. 12). In accounting for this condition, the author clarifies his own motivation in writing this book. Social and behavioral researchers have traditionally been taught to refrain from having normative interests. Where they have studied processes of change in human systems and of knowledge utilization in practice settings, they have studied processes led and conducted by others, usually nonscientists. Responsibility for intervention activities and the consequences of these have been left to practitioners, consultants, and others, who typically have little interest in either research or theory.

On the other hand, behavioral scientists, like others, have become morally concerned to help ameliorate, if not solve, the massive and accelerating human problems of contemporary society. In some cases, they have left research and theory behind and joined the ranks of committed actionists. The danger is a polarization of behavioral scientists between thoughtful analysis and committed and responsible action.
Argyris is committed personally to coaching behavioral researchers toward the conjoining and synthesis of thoughtful analysis, responsible action, research, and reform. The theorizing in this book may be read as his attempt to bridge conceptually the gap between the requirements of valid organizational research and those of effective and ethical reform of institutions.

Argyris’ theory and methodology of intervention, though not grounded in detailed empirical research on intervention, are designed to locate areas of needed research, to recruit empirical researchers, and to brief them in their two-fold roles: (1) as interventionists and (2) as researchers into the processes and human consequences of their own interventions. He leans toward an audience of research interventionists in developing the counsels of this book. In fact, his theory is equally useful for enticing and guiding thoughtful practitioners—consultants, educators, and administrators—into participation in processes of applied or action research.

Actually the data base for Argyris’ theorizing is not so primitive or unavailable as he claims. His own book makes this clear. In the first place, he has kept records of his own and of colleagues’ experiences as research interventionists in organizations. The annotated case descriptions in Chapters 9, 11, 14, and 16 draw upon these records. Moreover, he has had access to research and theorizing in fields such as personal counseling and therapy, systems analysis, participant observation, group therapy and training, and teaching. This observation is not meant to disparage the originality of Argyris’ theorizing. Rather, it is intended to assure readers that he has sought to make his primitive theorizing as civilized as the literature of current applied behavioral science permits. It might have been civilized even more had he delved more deeply into available practitioner theorizing such as that in education, social work, public health, and political reform. Some people in these areas have thought deeply and originally, as Argyris has, about the dilemmas, cognitive and normative, which confront the interventionist.

Argyris defines intervention as “entering into an ongoing system of relationship, to come between or among persons, groups or objects for the purpose of helping them” (p. 15). The primary intention of the intervener is to be helpful to the system. Argyris’ theorizing is designed to clarify, justify, and operationalize the meanings of helpful intervention.

The three fundamental conditions of being helpful are described as primary tasks of the interventionist. These are independent of the substantive issues or problems which the client confronts and apply to all organized levels of clientship—individual, group, or organization. They are requirements of helpful intervention, irrespective of the temporal span of the intervention—a brief training laboratory or an extended period of survey research and feedback.

The first task is the generation of valid information about the client and his situation; this is necessary for the client to learn and for the interventionist to help. The second task is to support the client in making free and informed choices about what to do and how to do it. Argyris is committed to the maintenance of client autonomy during the intervention process and much of his agonizing comes from the interventionist’s permitting or inducing the client to depend upon him rather than learning to make the choices himself. The third task is to support the client in taking internal commitment to carry out and evaluate the choices made.

Argyris’ entire theory of intervention activity is constructed around effecting these primary tasks of helping. The competences needed by an intervener are derived from the requirements of these tasks. One must be open to ideas and feelings of himself and others, experiment with new ideas and feelings, help others to be open to and experiment with ideas and feelings, and build norms of individuality and of trust within the system.

Argyris is convinced that there is a congruence between competent and effective intervention and competent and effective organization. This is a normative conviction and the theory which he elaborates to support it is a normative, not a descriptive, theory. His frank descriptions of organizational entropy in Chapter 3 and of the organization of traditional research in Chapter 4 make this clear. Argyris’ demonstration of the isomorphism between the traditional mechanistic and pyramidal organization of industrial and other enterprises and the mechanistic and pyramidal organization of traditional rigorous research, field or experimental, is brilliant and convincing.

Thus, his intervention theory demands reorientation in the organization of research enterprises toward what he calls organic research as well as in the organization of practice and action enterprises. The gap between the two must be bridged and their relationship must become more open, collaborative, and experimental. Competent intervention activity
by behavioral researchers in practical organizational settings is a prototype of this required assault upon the crippling polarization between theory and practice in our currently nonadaptive or maladaptive institutions, both of research and of practice. His hope is that collaborative, organic research will at once improve the competence of organizations and add to our basic knowledge of organizational behavior and change.

For the final chapters Argyris draws heavily upon case material, from dialogic records of intervention processes, to illustrate ineffective and effective intervention activities. He recognizes that this book deals primarily with early phases of intervention relationships and promises a second volume which will detail the later phases as well.

Argyris’ book thus presents a valuable challenge to traditional researchers into organizational behavior and change as well as a guide to those researchers who accept his challenge to develop more organic and collaborative relationships with clients in the pursuit of their inquiries. His book, though not written with this in mind, has important implications as well for practitioners who might accept the risk and ordeal of collaboration with interventionists from the behavioral sciences. To round out the picture, we need a theoretical handbook for practically oriented clients, giving them advice on how to deal with scientific interventionists when they behave in closed fashion. Organic practice requires such an addition to its literature if it is to become the intelligent helpmeet to organic research.

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Illinois is one of the lowest tax states in the nation. Its public revenue structure is relatively narrow and regressive, and is characterized by a high sales tax, the absence of a state income tax, and considerable unevenness of the administration of the local property tax.

How do these facts bear on a theory of taxation and politics? In Taxes and Politics: A Study of Illinois Public Finance, Glenn Fisher, an economist well acquainted with the intricacies of state politics, struggles with this question with limited success. While he produces a competent analysis of state and local government revenue patterns and several detailed case studies of recent taxation legislation in Illinois, he is unable to interrelate the two areas in a satisfactory fashion. In short, this is an empirically solid but theoretically weak book. While interesting and highly readable, this study of one state's revenue problems offers little light for the analysis and explanation of state-local taxation policies throughout the nation.

The book does not lack theory; much of the final chapter is devoted to an inventory of several relevant perspectives from the literature of economics and political science, including pricing theory, public finance, budgeting, “Downsian democracy,” and systems analysis. This inventory is a bit more than window dressing, since it serves as a background for a final normative and explanatory appraisal of the Illinois taxation system. But the theories are not directly applied to the previous descriptions of revenue trends and legislative politics. There is no attempt to order or interpret the data, to test existing hypotheses or develop new ones. In fact, Fisher somewhat rejects the feasibility of engaging in such a process when he admits that there “is no theory which satisfactorily relates the economic and political aspects of public finance.”

The problem, however, is not the lack of such a theory but the scope of the analysis and the assumption that one theory must suffice for such a weighty subject. Perhaps it is too much to expect a comprehensive interrelationship of all the economic and political aspects of a state’s public revenue policies, as appears to be the intention of this study. A more profitable approach might be to focus on one or more relatively narrow dimensions of state-local taxation in Illinois. Likely candidates for a selective approach might include legislative decision making on taxation policy, interest group activity in this area, and the degree to which state decision makers are guided by objective information on revenue problems. Fisher presents a great deal of descriptive material on all of these aspects. Given his finding that revenue legislation in Illinois tends to be incremental and supportive of the status quo—tinkering with rates and bases of existing sources rather than wholesale reorganization of the entire revenue system—a manageable area for hypothesis-testing and development might have concerned the politico-economic conditions which establish such behavior and the likely conditions under which innovation could occur.