Unifying Psychology: Epistemological Act or Disciplinary Maneuver?

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Two arguments with attempts to unify psychology are adumbrated in this commentary. First, the unification of psychology is largely a disciplinary maneuver and not primarily an epistemological act. Second, the discipline of psychology has been unified for some time around a series of methodological and functional categories that have served to support its institutional projects but hide metaphysical problems. © 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. J Clin Psychol 60: 1259–1262, 2004.

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Unifying psychology has a long and venerable history. Indeed, one could argue that the discipline's putative founding father, Wilhelm Wundt, presented the first grand, unified theory, albeit one that was largely ignored after the technological advances it represented were skimmed off by its admirers. Crises of psychology are equally frequently announced, one of the early and more famous being Karl Bühler's 1929 account in his volume *Die Krise der Psychologie*. And who would not agree that the disciplinary structure of contemporary psychology is anything but unified? On these grounds it is not unreasonable that attempts to clarify, if not unify, come along at regular intervals. Professor Henriques (this issue, pp. 1207-1221) follows in a tradition that has recently included psychologists as diverse as Arthur Staats, Gregory Kimble, and Robert Sternberg. Despite these attempts at unification, I will argue that however well structured and reasoned these projects turn out to be, they are premised on similar assumptions that can only serve to undermine the very systematicity they seek to establish.

In discussing aspects of this problem, I wish to make two arguments in telescoped form given the short space available to me: First, the unification of psychology is largely a disciplinary maneuver and not primarily an epistemological act. It is concerned with the

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nature of institutional psychology even if that institutional entity is not divorced from its practices and problems. Second, institutional psychology has, by default, been unified for some time around a series of methodological and functional categories that have served to support its institutional projects while disallowing an inquiry into those problems it might otherwise pursue. In other words, methodology plays an important gate-keeping function that acts as a de facto unifying presence.

Institutional Versus Epistemological

The confusion between institutional concerns and epistemological ones are fairly evident in most writing on unification. Staats, for instance, argues that a theory must concern itself with the "unity–disunity" issue in science and that science has not concerned itself with this problem (Staats, 1983).[1] Sternberg was concerned, upon assuming the presidency of the APA with the unification of "science and practice." Likewise, Henriques (this issue, p. 1207) notes that the American Psychological Association does not fit the picture of a unified discipline under his rubric of the two domains. Without question, these are legitimate concerns but they are not problems of a psychological nature as much as they are problems of an institutional nature: how to carve up knowledge domains into manageable chunks when we are confronted with pluralism? How to create organizations that reflect our interests when there are so many of the latter? How to license practice when the variety of practices seems to overwhelm us? How to make funding decisions in the face of vast choices? And so on. If you are a university administrator, a government regulator, or a manager in health care then these questions are vexing enough. They are fundamentally different however from the business of solving real problems that might be characterized as psychological.

Sciences have, historically, been formed around solutions to real and pressing problems. The nature of those problems has led to unique and more creative domains and methods of inquiry that seek to answer those problems, throwing up new problems in turn. The history of science is not concerned with disciplinary issues save as secondary concerns–see for example the way in which map-making spurred the growth of applied mathematics in the 16th century. The introduction of the term *science* in the 19th century was a way of demarcating empirical work from that of the speculative or metaphysical philosophers. The widespread adoption of the label "science" then led to the backwards reconstitution of 16th and 17th century natural philosophy as a "scientific revolution." None of this had much, if anything, to do with the nature of planetary motion that preoccupied Galileo, Newton, and others. Genuine scientific inquiries will always follow problems, not dictates or disciplines even though the latter exercise considerable authority in the modern academy. And while we might be deeply concerned about the structure of our discipline, the problems seeking solution should always be the primary impulse for any activity that seeks to call itself scientific.

Unified Methods

If the history of science were not enough to make us skeptical of attempts at unification, then certainly the structure of contemporary psychology ought to give us further pause.

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[1]There is a good reason for this: unity and disunity is not a scientific problem despite what appear to be unifying moments in other sciences (e.g., the "modern synthesis" in biology, Julian Huxley's term for the unified evolutionary theory developed by geneticists and naturalists from about 1936 to 1950). Whatever *practical* outcome such unification may bring, it is always concerned in the first instance with a genuine and significant scientific problem and only secondarily with institutional considerations.

Despite its seemingly disjointed and radically fractionated character, it has a remarkably stable structure. This is attributed to two features: method and functionalism. Having recently written about this in another context I will only give a brief description (Stam, 2000, 2003).

Academic disciplines, sociologists of the professions argue, require three things to manage their institutional existence: (a) a marketplace in which they can disseminate their symbolic capital, (b) a recognizable manner of producing and reproducing a knowledge base, and (c) a scholastic system of training to produce new members of the discipline. Institutional pressures create a need to take a common stand in the face of competing symbolic markets. On these counts, psychology is doing remarkably well. I want to focus here on the second feature, namely the production of psychological knowledge.

For the better part of the last 50 years the academic discipline of psychology has come to some agreement about its fundamental methods. These include everything from testing individuals on psychometric instruments to the conduct of Analysis of Variance and the use of Multivariate statistics. Where the fundamental descriptions of the very phenomena of the discipline continue to plague psychologists the methodology courses have become institutionalized beacons of stability.

A second feature of contemporary psychology is its preference for functional accounts. These can be cognitive, behavioral, or even psychodynamic and are frequently mixed with various biological and neuropsychological features. Nonetheless, to use the methods we have largely agreed to use, problems must be redefined in such a way that they can be turned into variables. Most variables are functional descriptions. By this I mean that they are heuristically functional. That is, they make no commitment to real entities but are functional descriptions of properties that are defined according to how they act rather than what they are. This is extremely useful institutionally (but detrimental to its intellectual value) since it is relatively easy to construct new variables in this way or redefine old problems in a new way. For example, the field of personality psychology is populated with thousands of functional entities (e.g., self-presentations, expectancies, self-definitions, self-verification, infra-humanization, etc., as evidenced in the last several issues of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.) Trolling through the literature on clinical psychology, developmental psychology, and so on could generate equally long lists. (Perceptual and psychophysical cases are more complex and hence not included in this discussion.) Note that these functional entities are largely invented anew at a reasonably high rate and their relationship to one another appears to be of little concern to the research community.

One other fundamental feature of functional descriptions is that they can be multiplied indefinitely. In principle, there is no limit to the kind and degree of number of entities that can be imagined. Hence, there is never any limit to the calls for more research, there is no final conclusion to any program of study and any functional account can be used to generate further functional entities. Of course, there is always some empirical content to limit the theoretical expansion of any single entity. Nonetheless, the pool of functional entities remains indefinite. An easily understood example is the field of memory research: over the past half-century it has spawned numerous candidate entities each with various methodological features and attendant research programs. Nonetheless, no one of these has satisfactorily resolved the fundamental questions: "What is memory and how does it work?"

Functionalism has served institutional purposes well because it is ontologically neutral with respect to the kinds of entities under investigation. Hence, psychology proceeds through the multiplication of entities without ever committing itself to the reality (or lack thereof) of the objects it so constitutes. My claim is simply that the agnosticism with

respect to objects of investigation is hidden within functional kinds such that an army of researchers can proceed with little hindrance to the profound metaphysical questions that remain to be resolved.

Methodological prescriptions along with a heuristic functional framework has allowed us to recognize what constitutes psychological theory, method, research, and results in a way that clearly demarcates the discipline inside the academy. Calls for unification, no matter how well articulated, will likely fall on deaf ears since there are already deeply entrenched positions in the discipline that are supported by the implicit unity of method and framework.

Not wanting to close on an entirely unenthusiastic note, the current state of psychological theory and its attendant features is neither fixed nor entirely fluid. Institutions, particularly universities, respond to changing economic and other structural demands—as does institutional psychology. And it has always been psychology's sheer size in numbers that has allowed it to entertain multiple positions in its ranks. That diversity includes calls for unification that ought to be taken seriously as research programs.

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