

Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology

As Karl Jaspers once observed, "There is no escape from philosophy. The question is only whether [a philosophy] is good or bad, muddled or clear" (Way to Wisdom, New Haven, 1954, p. 12). Even "scientific" disciplines such as psychology cannot escape from the theories and philosophies that underlie them. One of the purposes of theoretical psychology is to articulate, help evaluate, and generally make less "muddled" the theories and philosophies that are important to psychology (see Slife, B., & Williams, R., 1997, American Psychologist, 52, 117-129).

Impetus for Theoretical Psychology

Psychology has long had a strong theoretical tradition, and many theoretical psychologists still work within this tradition (e.g., personality theory). However, the recent emergence of theoretical psychology as a subdiscipline stems, in part, from a renewed awareness of the theoretical significance of scientific method. Modern psychology has often viewed theory as mere speculation or hypothesis to be tested with objective scientific methods. Recent work in the philosophy of science, however, clarifies the theoretical nature of these methods (e.g., Lakatos, I., & Musgrave, A., 1970, Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge, Cambridge). Increasingly, psychologists are viewing the scientific method as itself a meta-theory—a theory for evaluating theories—rather than an objective or value-free tool for validating theories or disclosing facts.

This view has fostered significant theoretical issues that the field of theoretical psychology considers. If, for example, traditional scientific method is not value-free, how do its implicit values influence its use in assessing psychological theories and practices? Should other methods with other values (e.g., qualitative methods) be accorded an equal status with traditional scientific methods? As these questions illustrate, theoretical psychologists must now consider more than the content of psychological theories. They must also articulate, evaluate, and clarify the theories and

philosophies that ground the methods used to investigate this content. Donald Polkinghorne's book entitled, Methodology for the Human Sciences (Albany, 1983) is an example of this articulation and evaluation.

Another impetus for theoretical psychology is the increasing fragmentation of psychology. For example, biological psychologists are finding homes in centers for neuroscience, cognitive psychologists are moving into departments of cognitive science or artificial intelligence, and psychotherapists are shifting to professional schools. Fragmentation is also evident in the differing theoretical loyalties of the many professional societies in psychology. These societies often represent distinct theoretical communities, each with its own language, philosophy, and method.

Although many psychologists value diversity, this type of fragmentation seems so profound at times that communication among the various theoretical communities is jeopardized. Disputes about various methods (e.g., qualitative versus quantitative) serve to compound these problems, because such disputes imply that there are no common grounds for evaluating theories. Without some communication, and some shared standard of evaluation, the coherence of the discipline is at stake. Fragmentation, then, is another example of the importance of distinctly theoretical questions to psychology: How serious is this fragmentation? How might disparate theoretical communities communicate with one another and arrive at some common criteria of evaluation? Arthur Staats' book, Psychology's Crisis of Disunity (1983, New York), exemplifies a thoughtful consideration of these questions.

The significance of such questions has provided an already strong theoretical tradition with new visibility and recognition. In the past, many psychologists seemed to assume that the scientific method would eventually address all the theoretical concerns of the discipline. However, as these questions illustrate, there are vital disciplinary issues that cannot be addressed through method. Moreover, the assumptions of the scientific

method are often the bone of theoretical contention. Empirical research cannot address such issues alone; there is a boot-strap problem in a method that attempts to use its own validity procedures to validate itself. These procedures, and any research produced by them, must be at least supplemented with discerning theoretical and philosophical analyses.

Emerging Role of a Theoretical Psychologist

The need for such analyses has helped shape the role of the theoretical psychologist. Theoretical psychologists not only consider all the relevant empirical information in generating new theories and hypotheses; they also critically evaluate the assumptions of the theories and methods that produced this information. This critical evaluation includes an articulation of the implications of these assumptions as they affect important psychological issues. A recent book by Brent Slife and Richard Williams, entitled What's Behind the Research? Discovering Hidden Assumptions in the Behavioral Sciences (1995, Thousand Oaks, CA), is an example of the attempt to articulate some of these assumptions and their implications.

At the disciplinary level, theoretical psychologists facilitate discussion about the foundational questions and issues of psychology. They do not preemptively decide these questions and issues for the whole of the discipline. Rather, their job is to keep fundamental questions in the forefront of disciplinary discourse, so that they can be addressed by all members of the discipline and all consumers of psychology.

At the local (college or department) level, theoretical psychologists function in essentially the same role as methodologists and statisticians—as consultants to other scholars in research and practice. Psychologists and other scholars can consult theoreticians about theories, explanations, and methods to see if they are coherent, hold hidden problems, or are appropriate to the assumptions being made. Theoretical psychologists bring to bear historical and philosophical perspectives as well as critical

and analytical skills in these consultations. They also teach courses on these topics to both graduates and undergraduates—thus training future scholars and theoretical specialists.

Theoretical psychologists do not merely consider what the discipline is currently doing; they also reflect on the future of the discipline. Given psychology's history and present state, where will current trends likely lead us? Where should psychology be headed? As William James (1842 - 1910) and others have noted, no discipline, including the sciences, can ignore its moral grounding and consequences. Part of the task of theoretical psychology, therefore, is to clarify and submit for discussion this moral grounding. Daniel Robinson's edited volume, entitled Social Discourse and Moral Judgment (1992, San Diego), is an example of this discussion.

Current Status of Theoretical Psychology

The past three decades in psychology have witnessed a remarkable and sustained growth in theoretical work. This growth is a testament to the accomplishments and vitality of the subdiscipline of theoretical psychology. Much of this work has been critical of mainstream psychology, but even the critical work has been constructive, laying out alternative approaches and methods. Important and influential early works include Amadeo Giorgi's volume Psychology as a Human Science (New York, 1970) which contrasted the phenomenological approach with empirical psychology, and Joseph Rychlak's book A Philosophy of Science for Personality Theory (Boston, 1968) which analyzed the philosophical and scientific status of personality theories. Other scholars also contributed to the foundations of theoretical psychology, chiefly from the humanistic, existential, and postmodern perspectives (e.g., May, R., Existential Psychology, 1969, New York).

Recent critical contributions include the rich and impressive literature of social constructionism (e.g., Gergen, K., 1991, The Saturated Self. New York). Scholars who

might be considered classicists, such as Daniel Robinson, have offered critiques and alternative formulations (Philosophy of Psychology, 1985, New York). Feminist scholars have challenged the traditional assumptions as well as the political implications of traditional social science (e.g., Morawski, J., 1994, Practicing Feminisms, Reconstructing Psychology, Ann Arbor). Several edited volumes, aimed at broadly articulating alternative theoretical perspectives, have appeared recently (e.g., Faulconer, J. & Williams, R., 1990, Reconsidering Psychology, Pittsburgh).

Important theoretical work is also occurring within specific subdisciplines and topic areas. This work includes: clinical psychology (e.g., Miller, R., 1992, The Restoration of Dialogue, Washington), social psychology (e.g., Parker, I., and Shotter, 1990, Deconstructing Social Psychology. London), cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence (e.g., Winograd, T., and Flores, F., 1987, Understanding Computers and Cognition. Reading), schizophrenia (e.g., Sass, L., 1992, Madness and Modernism, New York), the theory and practice of psychoanalysis (e.g., Barratt. B., 1993, Psychoanalysis and the Postmodern Impulse, Baltimore), the idea of time in psychological explanation (e.g., Slife, B., 1993, Time and Psychological Explanation. Albany), the psychology of minority groups (e.g., Jenkins, A., 1995, Psychology and African Americans, Boston), and human agency (e.g., Williams, R., 1992, American Psychologist, 47 (6), 752-760).

In the past twenty years, the number of journals devoted partly or entirely to theoretical work and alternative perspectives has increased dramatically. Offered here is a partial list: Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, Theory and Psychology, New Ideas in Psychology, Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Humanistic Psychology, Family Process, Studies in Linguistics and Philosophy, Consciousness and Cognition, Theoretical Issues in Cognitive Science, Behavior and Philosophy, American Psychologist, International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology, Annals of Theoretical Psychology, Psychological Inquiry, History and Philosophy of Psychology

Bulletin, Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, Journal of Mind and Behavior, and Philosophical Psychology. Moreover, many empirically oriented journals welcome theoretical contributions.

Several professional organizations provide forums for theoretical discussion, publication, and a scholarly critical mass. Examples include the Division of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology (24) and the Division of Humanistic Psychology (32) of the American Psychological Association, the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, the Section of History and Philosophy of Psychology (25) of the Canadian Psychological Society, the Section on History and Philosophy of Psychology of the British Psychological Society, the International Human Science conference, and the Society for Philosophy and Psychology.

Training and Employment of Theoretical Psychologists

Training in theoretical psychology requires a perspective that would ordinarily be considered philosophical. However, theoretical psychology is not the same thing as philosophy. Professional philosophers concern themselves with many issues and questions that bear little on the theory or practice of psychology. The subdiscipline of theoretical psychology is "applied philosophy," a field that takes from philosophy (as well as other sources) intellectual tools and ideas, and brings them to bear on psychology in a way that is specifically relevant to its purposes and problems.

Theoretical psychology requires a broad education in areas both inside and outside the domain of psychology. Relations between psychology and other scholarly disciplines are part of the intellectual purview of this subdiscipline. Consequently, courses in the philosophy of social science, the intellectual history of psychology, epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, and ethics are crucial for training theoretical psychologists. Theoretical psychologists may also acquire an expertise in a traditional

subdiscipline of psychology (e.g., clinical, cognitive, social). This permits them to focus their theoretical efforts on a more limited domain of interest.

Training in theoretical psychology can be found in a wide variety of programs, both within and outside other psychological subdisciplines. Duquesne University, the University of Dallas, Seattle University, and West Georgia have long had strong theoretical programs with a human science orientation. In Canada, the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta have been recognized as institutions where an emphasis in theoretical psychology and alternative perspectives could be pursued. York University in Toronto has, for a number of years, had a history of psychology program with a significant theoretical/philosophical emphasis. More recently, Brigham Young University has established a theory/philosophy emphasis in their Ph.D. program, and the University of Notre Dame and Georgetown University have established programs in theory and philosophy.

Graduates of these programs work primarily in academic institutions. Some universities or colleges specifically advertise for "theoretical psychologists." Others seek a specialist in another subdiscipline who has also acquired theoretical training. Many liberal arts colleges desire teachers who possess the broader perspective and training of theoretical psychology. Theoretical psychologists may specialize in the theoretical issues of a particular subdiscipline, but the nature of theoretical psychology calls them first to a more encompassing and thus more general standpoint.

Conclusion

Although theoretical psychology is relatively new as a recognized subdiscipline, its intellectual roots run deep. It has long served a critical as well as a generative function in psychology through the formulation of theories and hypotheses. However, recent developments have broadened and brought new visibility to its role. Theoretical psychologists are now called upon to evaluate methods and maintain disciplinary concern

for the wider issues of psychology, both as a social science and as an understanding of our humanity.

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Hypertext Terms

theory

philosophy

assumption

scientific method

hypothesis

philosophy of science

meta-theory

values

qualitative methods

human science

fragmentation

theoretical community

empirical research

theoretical psychologist

consultant

history

morality

foundations

phenomenology

humanism

existentialism

postmodernism

social constructionism

feminism

clinical psychology

social psychology

cognitive psychology

time

schizophrenia

psychoanalysis

agency