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The Development of the Unified Theory and the Future of Psychotherapy

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Questions about the nature of psychotherapy and conflicts between competing paradigms awakened in me a deep intellectual curiosity that ultimately culminated in the development of the “unified theory” (see Henriques, 2003; 2004; in press). I was fortunate in that early in my graduate education I gained a rich exposure to the psychotherapy integration movement. This led me to many important realizations, including: a) many of the “single” schools were defined against one another both conceptually and politically; b) no single school had the depth and breadth in both the humanistic and scientific domains to offer a comprehensive solution; and c) much overlap between the schools becomes apparent as one becomes proficient in their language and concepts. However, despite these problems, there were significant difficulties in achieving a coherent integrative view. First, the competing schools clearly had different (although often implicit) moral emphases. Messer and Winokur’s (1980) critique of Wachtel’s (1977) work offered perhaps the most eloquent articulation of this point. Second, if one considers, as I do, psychotherapy to be the application of psychological principles in the service of promoting human well-being, then it follows that the disorganization of psychological science seriously hampers, if not completely prevents, the development of a coherent, general approach to psychotherapy (see Henriques & Sternberg, 2004).

Although now obvious with the benefit of hindsight, I essentially backed into this second point. I was looking for basic, core conceptual commonalities that cut across the various perspectives in psychotherapy and started to explore a broad array of literatures. Fortunately, evolutionary psychology was just beginning to make a major impact on the field and in it I found a major piece of the puzzle¹. All the major perspectives assumed an evolutionary perspective, thus this could provide a shared point of departure from which to view each of the competing

paradigms. Moreover, it was in the context of my immersion in biological theory that I realized I needed to make a shift in my thinking from an integrated psychotherapy to an integrated psychological science. As an applied discipline, psychotherapy inevitably involves a moral dimension that basic psychological science does not. Specifically, the descriptions of change offered by the basic science of psychology are a fundamentally different kind of thing than the prescriptions for change offered by the psychotherapeutic community (see Henriques, 2002). I found that clearly disentangling these two domains was crucial in my quest for cumulative knowledge.

The Development of the Justification Hypothesis

It was against this background that I made my first major theoretical breakthrough, in an idea I came to call the Justification Hypothesis (JH; Henriques, 2003). Although it would take years to develop into a formal proposal, the proverbial “flash” of insight came on a drive home after completing a psychological evaluation on a woman hospitalized following a suicide attempt. In her late thirties, she was diagnosed with a double depression and an avoidant personality disorder. A woman with an above average intellect, she had graduated from high school, worked as a teacher’s aide and lived in almost complete isolation on the brink of poverty. In a reasonably familiar story line, her father was an authoritarian, verbally abusive, alcoholic who dominated her timid, submissive mother. He would also be physically and violently abusive to her older brother, who was much more defiant of his power. She distinctly remembered several episodes of her father beating her brother, while yelling at him that he needed to be more like his obedient sister. Perhaps the most salient feature of this patient’s² character structure was her complete sense of inadequacy. She viewed herself as totally incompetent in almost every conceivable way and expressed an extreme dependency on the guidance of others. In presenting

the case to my supervisor and classmates, I argued that the network of self-deprecating beliefs served an obvious function, given her developmental history. Namely, the beliefs she had about herself had justified submission and deference in a context where any form of defiance was severely punished.

It was when I was driving home that the broad generalization dawned on me—this patient wasn't the only individual whose “justification system” for why she was the way she was could be understood as arising out of her developmental history and social context. No, the process of justification (and thus the development of justification systems) is ubiquitous in human affairs. Arguments, debates, moral dictates, rationalizations, and excuses, as well as many of the more core beliefs about the self, all involve the process of explaining why one's claims, thoughts or actions are warranted. In virtually every form of social exchange, from warfare to politics to family struggles to science, humans are constantly justifying their behaviors to themselves and others.

Yet, it was not only that one sees the process of justification everywhere one looks in human affairs that made the idea so intriguing. (Consider, for example, this essay can readily be considered an “act of justification). It also became clear upon reflection that the process is a uniquely human phenomenon. And a crucial aspect of the JH is that it allows for a much clearer view of the relationship between the human mind and the minds of other animals (Henriques, 2004).

Ultimately, I came to organize the JH around three basic claims. The first claim is that Freud's fundamental observation was that the self-consciousness system (SCS) functions as a “justification filter” that inhibits unjustifiable behavioral investments and provides socially acceptable justifications for behaviors that are expressed. The second claim is that the evolution

of language created a new and unique adaptive problem for our hominid ancestors, namely the problem of justification. The essence of the problem of justification is that humans became the first animal in evolutionary history that had to justify why they did what they did. This problem arose because the evolution of language allowed other humans much more direct access to one's thought processes. The third claim is that the JH that provides the basic framework for understanding cultural levels of analyses because the concept of large-scale justification systems providing the rules and patterns for acceptable behaviors is consonant with modern conceptions of culture (e.g., Cronk, 1999) and social constructionist viewpoints.

The JH became an obsession for me because the idea seemed to cut across many different areas of thought. It was obviously congruent with basic insights from a psychodynamic perspective. It was also clearly consistent with many of the foremost concerns of the humanists. For example, Roger's argument that much psychopathology can be understood as a split between the social self and the true self could be easily understood through the lens of the JH. Consider how a judgmental, powerful other might force particular justifications in a manner that produces intrapsychic rifts between how a person "really" feels and how they must say they feel. The JH is also directly consistent with cognitive psychotherapy, which can be readily interpreted as a systematic approach to identifying and testing one's justification system.

But the idea also pulled in basic psychological science. Cognitive dissonance, the self-serving bias, human reasoning biases, and the "interpreter function" of the left hemisphere all were readily accountable by the formulation of the JH (see Henriques, 2003 for a summary). The JH also seamlessly incorporated insights from those who emphasize cultural levels of analysis. Thankfully, the innovative and useful nature of the JH has recently been demonstrated by writers articulating its application in clinical and developmental psychology (e.g., Shealy, in press),

sociology and social psychology (e.g., Shaffer, in press), and social constructionism (e.g., Quackenbush, in press).

The Tree of Knowledge System: Five Essences Linked By Four Joint Points

By clearly delineating the dimension of human behavior from the behavior from other animals, a fascinating new formulation began to emerge. Reality, in the deepest sense of the word, could now be thought of and clearly depicted as a set of hierarchically arranged levels of complexity. This concept ultimately evolved into a novel scientific philosophy, called the Tree of Knowledge (ToK) System. The ToK System offers a vision of knowledge as consisting of one level of pure information (Energy) and four levels or dimensions of complexity (Matter, Life, Mind, and Culture) that correspond to the behavior of four classes of objects (material objects, organisms, animals, and humans), and four classes of science (physical, biological, psychological, and social). A variety of different representations of the ToK System have been developed and a parsimonious depiction of the system is offered in Figure 1 (see <http://psychweb.cisat.jmu.edu/ToKSystem/> for additional diagrams). The formal representation of the system is given in Henriques (2003, p. 154).

A key element of the system, highlighted in the figure, is that each of the four dimensions is associated with a theoretical joint point that provides the causal explanatory framework for its emergence. Accordingly, there are four formal theoretical joint points: (1) Quantum Gravity (theory of Matter; see Hawking 1998; Smolin, 2001); (2) the Modern Synthesis (theory of Life); (3) Behavioral Investment Theory (theory of Mind); and (4) the Justification Hypothesis (theory of Culture).

The ToK System is constructed in the spirit of consilience, but it offers a considerable advance of Wilson's (1998) formulation through the introduction of the novel visuospatial

representation and the description of the joint points linking the different levels. The tremendous advantage offered by the system is that it simultaneously defines extremely broad concepts (e.g., life, mind) and defines how they exist in relationship to one another in a single, coherent knowledge system. The system of interlocking definitions ultimately provides the potential framework for a universally shared conceptual foundation and definitional system from which all psychologists can work. Said differently, the ToK System can be thought of as a new map of the subject matter that can function to provide a base of shared general understanding.

Implications for the Science of Psychology and the Practice of Psychotherapy

As evidenced by the two recent special issues of the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* [Vol. 60(12) and 61(1)], the unified theory carries with it substantial implications for the science of psychology. Suffice it to say that with the new map of the sciences offered by the ToK System, I believe psychologists of the future will be able to crisply define the subject matter of psychology, see how psychology exists in relationship to the other sciences, and systematically integrate the key insights from the major perspectives in a manner that results in cumulative knowledge.

The implications for psychotherapy are also substantial. One of the biggest obstacles to psychotherapy integration has been the absence of a common language and theoretical framework for psychologists (Norcross & Newman, 1992). In combination, the two large concepts of behavioral investments and justifications have the potential to organize much extant psychological research and provide a framework for understanding everyday psychological phenomena. Consider, for example, the construct of depression. The unified theory allows one to easily move between behavioral, cognitive, and psychodynamic perspectives when conceptualizing depression. From a behavioral perspective, consider what happens if the behavioral shutdown associated with depression results in increasingly greater loss. If the

shutdown creates greater loss, then a vicious cycle ensues in which the behavioral reaction results in the additional loss, resulting in greater shutdown and so on. The individual can also justify behavioral investments and events in a problematic fashion and overly negative or pessimistic interpretations can also result in vicious depressive cycles. This is essentially the cognitive formulation (e.g., Beck, 1976). Or, from a more psychodynamic perspective, consider how self-criticisms so prominent in depressed individuals might sometimes function to justify submission and the inhibition of aggressive impulses. The unified approach allows one to consider depression from each of these perspectives under the same general framework of understanding. The approach also integrates a biopsychiatric perspective and clarifies the difference between mental disorder and disease (Henriques, 2002).

A Scientific Humanistic Philosophy as a Guiding Frame for a Unified Psychotherapy

Although a common language for psychotherapy does begin to emerge through the application of the unified theory, not all the problems that confront the practice of psychotherapy are of a scientific nature. As mentioned in the beginning of this essay and as is being recognized with increasing regularity in the literature (e.g., Downing, 2004; Shealy, 2004), the practice of psychotherapy is an inherently prescriptive and thus moral enterprise. In offering our services to facilitate change in a particular direction, we inevitably (be it implicitly or explicitly) adopt a moral stance about the way things should be. Yet as a group, we psychotherapists have been timid in acknowledging this fact. For example, many cringed when Szasz argued we were secular priests. And too often we use the justification of empirical support to mask the underlying moral value structure that is motivating the change process (Quackenbush, in press). We have, in short, been either unable or unwilling to stand up and be counted as offering a moral vision of what constitutes psychological health and the contexts that promote it.

I believe the time for reticence and caution in pronouncing our moral values in this way has passed. In the concluding article of the JCP special series, I described the ToK System as a scientific humanistic philosophy that explicitly recognizes Knowledge as an interaction of Knower and Known. The two components, the scientific and the humanistic, reflect two different valuations of the knower. In attempting to construct general laws that objectively describe complexity and change, the scientist works to de-value the influence of the specific knower in the knower-known interaction. In other words, the task of the basic scientist is to describe “reality” in as knower-independent terms as possible. Scientific methodology can be thought of as the tools by which this knower-independent knowledge is acquired, and, in accordance with the analysis offered by Wilson (1998), I believe that the quest for objective truth (defined as accurate models of complexity and change) should remain the idealized goal of the institution of science.

But science is not the only way of knowing and describing change is not the only thing humans want to do. As discussed previously, psychotherapists work to facilitate change and thus must construct notions of what kind of change is desired. Basic science can not answer this question and this is where a need for the humanistic side of the philosophy becomes clear. In this system, the humanist values the knower and all of the idiosyncratic subjective elements that contribute to the uniqueness of her knower-known interactions. In the process of valuing the uniqueness of the knower, humanism defines humans as the most valued of subjective objects and, thus, unlike the “cold” formulations of basic science, the humanist side of the equation functions as a prescriptive value system. The value placed on humanity in general forms the base out of which more specific prescriptions about what are the aspects of human life that are most valuable and desirable emerge. I believe this scientific humanistic philosophy provides a

framework to construct a general moral vision, one that includes the inevitable pluralism inherent in moral questions.

To conclude, as a new unified theory the ToK System affords us a way to more readily disentangle (although never completely separate) the moral dimension from the scientific one. In doing so, the moral responsibility that accompanies the charge of professional psychology becomes clear. It is to generate a vision of the “good life” and an evidenced based fund of knowledge and technologies that allow human beings move toward it.

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Footnotes

1. Although there was much about evolutionary psychology I found to be extremely appealing, I eventually came to see it as yet another school in psychological science, rather than a truly integrative framework that many of its founders hoped it would become.
2. I realize that the term “patient” is less popular than client or consumer for individuals receiving mental health services. My rationale for using the term is that I believe it is appropriate to think of people receiving services for psychological ailments to be thought of in terms of the “sick role,” which is defined in this context a diminished capacity to function adaptively and the need for assistance from a caretaker. This does not mean, however, that I adopt a “medical model” approach to psychotherapy (see Henriques, 2002 for a full discussion of these issues).

Figure 1.

Tree of Knowledge

*FIVE ESSENCES LINKED BY FOUR JOINT-POINTS:
A Five Factor Analysis of Variance
Solution to the Problem of Knowledge*

