
Defining Psychology: What Can It Do for Us?



David A.F. Haaga

American University

"Psychology," like many abstract terms, is difficult to define precisely. Henriques' (this issue, pp. 1207–1221) argument that psychology, though unified and coherent, actually spans two realms—psychological formalism ("the science of mind," this issue, p. 1211) and human psychology ("the science of human behavior at the individual level," this issue, p. 1208)—seems likely to improve the clarity of the concept. The strongest contribution of his analysis may be its placing "psychology" in the larger conceptual framework of the Tree of Knowledge taxonomy. © 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *J Clin Psychol* 60: 1227–1229, 2004.

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"Psychology" is not the only concept difficult to define with sufficient precision as to resolve disputes about what does or does not merit inclusion in the category. What is a "sport," for example? Basketball, sure, but what about ballroom dancing? It is in the Olympics. Track and field: yes; tax-return filing: no, but what about poker? Articles about it have appeared in *Sports Illustrated*.

Closer to the subject matter of the target article, what is "behavior therapy"? It was once considered the application of modern learning theory to clinical problems, but objections were raised to the effect that there is no such thing as "the" modern learning theory. If it requires only commitment to empiricism as a guide to clinical practice, then was Carl Rogers a behavior therapist? Lester Luborsky? Hans Strupp? Krasner (1982) defined behavior therapy as "the behavior of those professionals who identify with it and the historical context within which these people work" (p. 17). By analogy, we could conclude that "psychology" is what people who call themselves psychologists do and the context in which they work.

This would have the appealing feature of being democratic and tolerant. If you say you are doing psychology, I will not try to invoke a definition that ejects you to the biology or cultural anthropology department. It also squarely acknowledges the reality that definitions evolve; if the context changes, the definition may as well. Some work

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: David A.F. Haaga, Department of Psychology, Asbury Building, American University, Washington, DC 20016–8062; e-mail: dhaaga@american.edu.

carried out under the banner of philosophy in the 19th century came to be seen as psychology once the term and supporting social infrastructure (university departments, textbooks, etc.) emerged. By the same token, work that might now be seen as neuroscience or cognitive science would some years ago have been considered simply psychology research.

However, there is something intellectually unsatisfying about answering questions regarding one's field of interest solely by reference to historical context and social convention. Living in the Washington, DC, area, I am often asked at social gatherings "what do you do for a living?" Fortunately, when I say, "I teach psychology," most people follow up with "What type of psychology?" rather than "What do you mean by psychology?" Still, in the event that someone does challenge me on the definition, it would be ideal to have something better to offer than "I teach about the theories, studies, and practices of people who identify with the term 'psychology' in this particular historical context."

What help can be found in Henriques' paper (this issue, pp. 1207–1221) for this social dilemma? It is a testament to the difficulty of the task he has set himself that in an extremely erudite paper called "Psychology Defined," I could not find a concise, quotable definition of psychology. I learned a lot about evolution, some new ways of thinking about Skinner and Freud, and the physics of the Big Bang, but I would not be able to tell you in one sentence what emerged as the definition of psychology. Instead, Henriques concluded that "psychology," though unified and coherent, spans two realms—psychological formalism ("the science of mind," this issue, p. 1211) and human psychology ("the science of human behavior at the individual level," this issue, p. 1208).

From the examples given, these realms appear to me to correspond fairly well to what is taught in my department's two-semester introductory sequence as Psychology as a Natural Science and Psychology as a Social Science. Our terms are not perfect, and I am not sure that Henriques' proposed terms will catch on either—"psychological formalism," for example, is not an everyday expression and would doubtless require considerable promotion and explanation before it would garner widespread usage. However, I do see Henriques' suggestions as improvements on some previous efforts to capture the sense that there are two rather distinct sides to psychology.

Cronbach's (1957) "experimental psychology" and "correlational psychology," for instance, made sense at the time but from the standpoint of contemporary psychology seem to place undue emphasis on research methodologies. Much of clinical neuropsychology is correlational, and much of social psychology and psychotherapy research is experimental, but I do not think most observers would place social psychology with perception, psychophysiology, animal learning, etc., nor neuropsychology with personality, psychotherapy, etc. Research methods are pluralistic, and ideally driven by the particulars of the research question and the state of the science; they do not provide a stable reference point for defining fields.

Definition: What Is It Good For?

If it is so difficult to define terms such as "psychology" with precision, why bother? Why not just agree that we all have at least a rough idea of what psychology is, and take the rest of the afternoon off? After all, if theoretical or empirical work improves our understanding of some aspect of the world or our fellow people, or improves our ability to help people enhance their physical or emotional well being, what difference does it make whether this work is considered to be part of psychology, of cognitive science, of behavioral neuroscience, of public health, or what have you? This raises the question of what definitions in general are good for.

If the point is to clarify otherwise ambiguous communication (e.g., “My research deals with self-efficacy.” [“what does self-efficacy mean?”]), then knowing we have a good definition would entail showing that some currently unclear point is illuminated by applying the proposed definition. The examples given in Henriques’ paper do not provide encouragement in this regard. Behaviors said to be not within the realm of psychology (e.g., “a subatomic particle bouncing off the nucleus of an atom,” this issue, p. 1213) did not sound to me like anything someone would currently mistakenly believe is a focus of study in psychology.

If the point of defining psychology is to highlight some underplayed issues (in principle, it is about x, y, and z, but most of the attention has gone to x and y only), then I believe that Henriques’ argument that animal behavior belongs at the center of concern within psychological formalism will have the greatest impact. He makes a compelling case that the study of animal behavior is not simply for convenience, allowing us to conduct experiments with greater precision and control than would be possible with human participants, but rather makes eminent sense conceptually.

If the purpose is to explain how a concept makes sense by showing how it relates to other neighboring concepts (e.g., a square is a proper subset of polygons, specifically those with equal sides), then the important issue is whether the larger conceptual framework makes sense and is coherent. This is the aspect of Henriques’ paper that in my view constitutes its strongest contribution. I found the Tree of Knowledge taxonomy, the theoretical joint points, the evolutionary history, and the levels of emergent properties highly illuminating.

The justification hypothesis, for example, has much to recommend it as a unifying concept for human psychology. It touches on one of the liveliest areas of research and theorizing in cognitive behavior therapy, the ways in which we tie ourselves up in knots by taking our own thoughts and feelings too literally (“I cannot speak to strangers *because* I feel anxious about being evaluated.”) and attempting to control them directly (Hayes, in press). The justification hypothesis also highlights the interplay of the social and the intrapersonal. Hilton (1990) provided an insightful analysis of causal explanation in the framework of conversation—likewise, Henriques’ evolutionary rendering of justification tendencies traces them to earlier contexts in which language development increased the “do ability” and the importance of access to one another’s thinking.

Whether this sort of intriguing insight actually generates new ideas for research; squashes disharmony between behaviorists and cognitivists or transpersonalists and conditioning researchers; or is crucial to deriving an optimal, consensual definition of psychology, will become clearer with time. For now, I congratulate Dr. Henriques on an ambitious, scholarly, provocative paper.

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