
Some Discontents With Theoretical Unification: A Response to Henriques' "Psychology Defined"

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In response to Henriques' article "Psychology Defined" (this issue, pp. 1207–1221), I argue that theoretical unification should not be pursued for its own sake and that many psychologists are unlikely to endorse the specific unifying principles of the Tree of Knowledge System. It is suggested that other scholarly endeavors such as the open pursuit of truth, sustained dialogue among diverse discourse communities, and critical reflection on psychological theories and practice are more important than theoretical unification. © 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *J Clin Psychol* 60: 1279–1281, 2004.

Keywords: Tree of Knowledge System; theoretical unification

Henriques, in his article "Psychology Defined" (this issue, pp. 1207–1221), has provided a thought-provoking, and indeed, sweeping, proposal that not only defines the field of psychology in a sharp way, but also suggests a unitary theoretical framework to guide research. As Henriques (this issue, p. 1208) put it: "If the current cacophony of conflicting perspectives can be orchestrated to function in concert with each other, the potential payoff is immense." Although there is much that could be said about this multifaceted and sophisticated approach to psychology's unification—both laudatory and critical—I wish to focus my remarks on the pursuit of theoretical unification in general and on the specific theories utilized by Henriques.

Regarding the general issue of theoretical unification, Henriques' proposal proceeds as if such unity were an uncontroversial goal, desired by psychologists across the discipline irrespective of their theoretical and philosophical leanings. An examination of the literature of fragmentation, however, suggests that many have cautioned against this type of unification, arguing that it would undermine open scientific inquiry and essentially force psychology into a theoretical straightjacket (e.g., Green, 1992; Koch, 1981; Kukla,

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1992; Rychlak, 1988; Toulmin, 1987; Viney, 1989, 1996; Williams, 2000; see also Yanchar & Slife, 1997, for a review of the literature of fragmentation). The theoretical exclusivity and rigidity of Henriques' proposal manifests most clearly in its explicit reliance on Skinnerian and Freudian concepts. Within Henriques' system, concepts such as "the justification filter" (this issue, p. 1216) and "Skinner's three layers of selection" (this issue, p. 1213) are neither optional nor tentative; they are essential to the reality that this unifying system invokes, even though nothing like them can be found in other perspectives such as humanism and phenomenology. Further, Henriques' proposal does not suggest the need for critical, reflexive examination of this unification scheme (and its constituent theories) as it would be implemented and continually utilized. The scheme is presented as if the theoretical work of psychology is largely finished—spearheaded by Freud, Skinner, and perhaps some neurocognitive theorists—and that current scholarly efforts within psychology need only work out the empirical details of these conceptions.

But why should psychologists be willing to let the disciplinary agenda be set by Henriques' interpretation of these historically prominent theories? Historical prominence does not necessarily imply truthfulness, theoretical cogency, or even optimal practical utility. Indeed, many psychologists with diverse perspectives—humanistic, phenomenological, existential, hermeneutic, feminist, and others—are unlikely to endorse Skinnerian, Freudian, or neurocognitive principles; and it is equally unlikely that the precepts from these diverse theoretical perspectives can be coherently subsumed within Henriques' "human psychology" (this issue, pp. 1207–1221) without altering them fundamentally. Thus, the very idea of theoretical unification, and the exclusivity that inevitably comes with it, requires substantial defense. Given the many arguments against theoretical rigidity and orthodoxy in psychology, what immense payoff is likely to ensue from the more or less official adoption of a single theoretical perspective? And supposing that a persuasive defense for theoretical unification can be offered, what benefit does Henriques' specific proposal deliver that other such strategies (e.g., Staats, 1996) do not? Answers to these questions would need to follow from a careful examination of the historical and contemporary literature of psychology's fractionation, but such an examination is not reflected in Henriques' proposal.

Moreover, critics have persuasively argued that there are other theoretical values whose importance likely overshadows unification, such as the pursuit of truth in view of other relevant ethical and ontological concerns (e.g., Green, 1992; Williams, 2000) and the need for continual dialogue among psychologists from diverse research communities (Kristensen, Slife, & Yanchar, 2000; Richardson, 2000). A psychology oriented toward truth, for example, rather than unity per se, is not likely to benefit from adherence to a single theoretical perspective set out in advance, although some consideration of the basic questions or subject matter of the discipline—at least as tentatively construed—would be necessary, without which there would be nothing to reasonably call a scholarly discipline (Yanchar & Hill, 2003). The movement of psychologists toward a uniform theory may or may not result from a genuine pursuit of truth, but the legislation of theoretical unity for its own sake seems more like a decoy that pulls psychologists away from what matters most (genuine considerations of human nature, agency, ethics, the purpose of life, etc.) than a task of the highest priority. As one commentator stated: "I would much rather see a fragmented human science than a monolithically wrong one" (Williams, 2000, p. 4).

If one clear message has emerged from the vast literature of fragmentation, it is that the topic of human nature is controversial, perhaps even more controversial than it is complex. For this reason, it may not be reasonable to expect uniformity in the theoretical biases of psychologists. Moreover, the topic of human nature may be controversial for

good reasons. There is much at stake in the theorizing and research that will impact people in a variety of contexts such as school, the workplace, counseling, and therapy (e.g., Slife & Williams, 1995). Even a false theory or a misleading set of research findings can influence people who believe it to be true (Williams, 1995). Thus, the principal theoretical task facing psychologists would seem to have more to do with critical reflection on human nature—in the most general ontological and ethical senses—than on condensing and repackaging extant theoretical perspectives much in need of critical examination. Henriques' proposal may be appealing to some in that it situates several icons of psychology's past into an overarching, contemporary framework. To others, however—even those who appreciate Henriques' theoretical and philosophical sensitivity—this proposal has side-stepped important critical reflection required to address the discipline's future, and indeed, to understand its past.

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