
The Unification of Psychology and Psychological Organizations

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The Tree of Knowledge is an imaginative attempt to construct a metatheoretical system that proposes to unify the discipline of psychology. However, it is limited in its appreciation of political factors, and so an optimistic view of the possibility of the system overlooks the power issues that beset the field. © 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *J Clin Psychol* 60: 1267–1269, 2004.

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Henriques (this issue, pp. 1207–1221) has presented his attempt to develop a metatheoretical approach that unifies the discipline of psychology. Because of space limitations, to appreciate fully this effort, it is necessary to refer to his earlier and more complete presentation of his Tree of Knowledge (ToK) system, an effort he himself recognized as “particularly audacious” (Henriques, 2003, p. 153). The same space limitations that resulted in his presentation of an abbreviated version of the ToK affect my scope in commenting on his presentation, and I must restrict myself to a specific issue. However, I do commend the broader effort, an attempt to place Skinner and Freud under the same metatheoretical umbrella, to the interested reader.

Before choosing an issue, however, I do want to take exception with Henriques’ characterization of human psychology as “a hybrid between psychological formalism and the social sciences” (this issue, p. 1218). I would much prefer that terms such as *integration* or *synthesis* be used rather than the potentially more pejorative “hybrid,” and think that such terms are more in the spirit of the presentation.

The issue I want to discuss is Henriques’ conclusions about the American Psychological Association (APA) and the possible reasons why it has aroused objections from several rival associations. Henriques approaches this as though the matter of organizational structure was based on content and conceptualization of the discipline. He then

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suggests that the APA should be renamed the American Human Psychological Association, as though this would be a satisfactory solution. The possible discontinuity between humans and other animals, which the ToK hopes to resolve, does not seem to me to be the basis for the organizational rifts in psychology. Rather, I see these more as issues of epistemology and, even more strikingly, power.

Focusing on clinical psychology, the subject of this journal, there are few people who do not agree that clinical practice should be based on evidence. However, there are striking differences as to what people view as constituting evidence, and this discrepancy has led to much acrimony. For some, evidence is based on psychological formalism, akin to the hard sciences, and the gold standard for action is the randomized clinical trial (e.g., Task Force on Promotion and Dissemination of Psychological Procedures, 1995). For others, evidence can be found in many places, the randomized clinical trial is but one such place (although one with a high warrant for believability), and it is foolish to disregard the evidence that is rooted in clinical experience (e.g., Stricker & Trierweiler, 1995; Trierweiler & Stricker, 1998).

This epistemological difference is not one that would drive a discipline apart, but rather can be viewed as a legitimate intellectual disagreement, save for the matter of power. For most of its existence, the APA was an organization dominated by academics. The strength of the organization and the discipline was in the science it produced. About two decades ago, practitioners began to clamor for a louder voice, and since that time, as evidenced by the people elected to the presidency of the organization and the issues considered to be critical, the balance of power has shifted markedly. Concurrent with this, splinter organizations such as the American Psychological Society (APS) began to form and attracted many people who previously were visible in the APA (interestingly, many of these people added the APS affiliation, but did not dissociate from the APA). Even if the unification of psychology was clearly recognized, this would not change the relative positions of the scientists and the practitioners in the APA, nor the wish for greater power on the part of whichever group happened to be reduced in influence at the moment.

We also must recognize that rival associations serve different purposes. Some are special interest groups (Henriques mentions the Association for Behavior Analysis), whereas others are umbrella organizations (e.g., APS). The special interest groups would continue to serve a purpose regardless of the unification of psychology, because they provide a forum for the discussion of narrow and specialized topics. The umbrella organizations do provide alternatives (or complements) to the APA, but I think that they are organized more around epistemology than around the fundamental nature of the discipline. After all, the APA does have many divisions devoted to the nonhuman aspects of psychology, and the APS does include clinical psychology within its boundaries.

The problem, in my view, is not the lack of unification of psychology, but the failure of scientists and practitioners to respect each other. This, after all, was the dream of the scientist–practitioner model (Raimy, 1950), a model that was limited to clinical psychology and not as ambitious as the ToK, but one that, I feel, has not been implemented by other than lip service (Stricker, 2000). The same difficulty may beset the ToK, in that a satisfactory metatheory may even achieve wide endorsement, but will founder on issues of politics and power that undermine attempts at implementation. I hope this is not the case, but I am not optimistic.

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