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A New Unified Theory of Psychology

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To Andee

Preface

Seeing the Forest Through the Trees

We persevere in looking at small questions instead of large ones and our view of the forest is forever obscured by the trees. Yet specialized knowledge derives its meaning from the context of larger perspectives and questions. When it loses touch with that larger context, it loses its coherence.

William Bevan (1991, p. 475)

Ask a biologist, “What is biology?” and you are likely to get a relatively unambiguous response. Biology is the science of life. In contrast ask a psychologist, “What is psychology?” and if the individual has considered the question in depth, you are likely to get something along the lines of the following: “It is basically the science of the mind, except for the fact that there still are a number of psychologists who think of it as the science of behavior, and argue that ‘the mind’ is not a helpful scientific construct. So you can call it the science of behavior and mental processes, but that glosses over the basic philosophical problems that initially pitted behaviorism against mentalism. It currently deals primarily with human behavior, although historically many psychologists studied animals, perhaps most notoriously the lab rat. And yet, the line between humans and other animals—if there is one at all—is not generally agreed upon. Some scholars believe that psychology is really a loose federation of subdisciplines and that as our scientific knowledge becomes more advanced it will break up into fields like neuroscience, cognitive science, linguistics, and other areas. And now there are quite a few psychologists, especially those studying culture and continental philosophy, who question whether natural or even social science epistemologies are appropriate. They argue that psychology is best thought of as a collection of studies and belongs as much with the humanities as the sciences. Finally, there is the issue of whether the discipline is mainly a science like biology or is mainly a healing profession like medicine, or is simultaneously both. Given all of this controversy, it is probably best just to think of psychology as an institution, a human construction that doesn’t necessarily map directly onto nature. Rather than worry about definitions, we should spend our energy conducting studies on phenomena of interest.” Such is the current state of our knowledge on the question of “What is psychology?”

It does not have to be this way. The unified theory articulated here paves a way to logically and coherently define the field of psychology, resolve the long-standing

philosophical problems, and weave together key insights from various paradigms into a coherent whole. The unified theory offered here consists of four separable but interlocking ideas that fit together to allow one to see the forest of psychology and how it can be clearly and crisply defined in relationship to biology from below and the social sciences from above. The unified theory also integrates and assimilates key ideas from the major paradigms, clarifies the relationship between the science and the profession, and ultimately helps to show how and why psychology connects to each of the three great branches of learning—the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities—more than any other discipline.

This book is written for anyone with a broad interest in psychology. I am especially writing for advanced undergraduate and graduate students who yearn for a more coherent way to view the field. Students, for example, who have been in classes with professors who subscribed to behavioral or cognitive or psychodynamic or humanistic or evolutionary or cultural or neuroscience perspectives and have found themselves wondering, “This seems to make sense, but what my other professors say also seems to make sense. Do they have to be defined against one another? Is there any way to integrate these perspectives into a coherent whole?” I am also writing for professional psychologists who see themselves as eclectic or integrative in their approach to psychotherapy because they have come to see that each of the major schools has good insights to offer, and it seems that there should be a way to blend them together in a manner that makes sense. I am also writing for scholars of the field, those who have probed deeply into the theoretical and philosophical problems associated with the discipline and its subject matter. To them, I offer a solution to a previously unsolvable problem. Finally, this book is written for those individuals outside the discipline who have a keen interest in obtaining a larger sense of the field and want a comprehensive set of ideas that help make sense of the human condition.

So I am introducing a new unified theory of psychology that is geared toward students, professional psychologists, academic scholars, and others interested in the human condition more generally. Needless to say, this creates problems of both breadth and depth. Any way you slice it, psychology is a broad field, so I am going to be covering a lot of ground and only have one book to do it. At the same time, it needs to be written in a manner that is accessible to students, is practical enough for professionals, and holds up to the scrutiny of scholars. To achieve this admittedly difficult goal, I am employing a frame I call qualitative generalizability. Einstein’s famous equation, $E=mc^2$, is a pinnacle of quantitative generalizability because it parsimoniously represents the quantitative relationships between the foundational variables of energy, mass, and the speed of light. In contrast, qualitative generalizability refers to the ability to introduce a frame that represents relationships between key variables in the subjective field—that is, the field of human consciousness and human understanding.

One of the great strengths of folk psychology (i.e., the way each of us makes sense of ourselves and others in our everyday lives) is that it is strong on qualitative generalizability. When we listen to a rich story and are readily able to empathize with the characters, we are doing so based on folk psychology. In contrast to folk

psychology, many perspectives in psychology are weak in qualitative generalizability. For example, the theories of Skinner and Freud, the two men who have probably had the greatest influence on the discipline, are both weak in this regard. Although Skinner has much to offer the field, his strong anti-mentalistic approach fatally handicapped the capacity of radical behaviorism to produce a qualitatively generalizable framework. And where Skinner seemingly refused to dive at all, Freud's psychoanalysis dove so deeply into the hidden layers of the human mind that it ended up claiming truths about human nature far different than everyday experience would suggest.

The unified theory outlined here paints a picture that is much closer to folk psychological conceptions than either of these approaches. It argues that humans have interests shaped by biology, learning, and culture, and that they spend their time and energy attempting to coordinate the flow of important resources in a manner that aligns well with economics. The unified theory further argues that social influence is a crucial resource and that much of human psychology is about relationships and navigating the dynamics of power and love and freedom and dependency in the social environment. And the unified theory posits that humans are unique animals because of symbolic language. However, it adds a specific twist to this common conjecture by pointing out that the evolution of language resulted in the adaptive problem of social justification. This is the problem of determining what is socially legitimate and explaining one's actions in accordance with those pressures. The unified theory argues that, as a consequence of the adaptive problem of social justification, the human self-consciousness system evolved to function as a justification system, and this ultimately is why humans are constantly justifying their actions to themselves and to others and why they seek out justification narratives that provide meaning and make sense of the world and their place in it.

If my point about qualitative generalizability is on target, these ideas should resonate with you. That is, it should not take long to see yourself as working to control the flow of resources, that social relationships are crucial to your mental life, and that you often—either implicitly or explicitly—are using language to justify things to yourself or to others. Indeed, according to the unified theory, you should be pondering the justifiability of my argument at this moment. Moreover, as you think about human culture—especially its laws, norms, religions, roles, and values—the notion that these are large-scale collective systems of justification that function to coordinate populations of people should make sense. My point is that although the unified theory itself is grounded deeply in science, the ideas offered here mesh reasonably well with folk psychology. That is good news because it means that the gap between folk psychology and psychological science is not nearly as wide as some have believed.

As a licensed professional psychologist, professor, and director of a doctoral program that combines Clinical and School Psychology, I wear a number of different hats. I am a clinician, researcher, educator, supervisor, and administrator. I am also a theorist and something of a philosopher. This book is written from my perspective as an educator, clinician, and theorist. The goal is to introduce to the psychological community concepts that can go a long way toward organizing findings and

providing the field with a shared language and conceptual framework for how the world works. I have attempted to write it in a way that emphasizes communication and understanding, and the goal is for one to “get” the ideas I am sharing.

The book is not written as a traditional psychological research project in the sense that one will not find much in the way of lab-based experiments, hypothesis testing, or rigorous quantitative analyses. At one level this is a weakness of the book, as such research methods are absolutely necessary for detailed scientific understanding. Given this, let me acknowledge at the outset that there is some validity to a likely criticism from some scientifically oriented psychological researchers that many complicated issues are glossed over, many specific areas of psychology untouched, and many important questions unanswered. Although true, my response is that the level of detail required relates to the goals of the communication. For too long psychology has failed to address questions pertaining to the forest. This book is about the forest, and its central justification is that if we can effectively map the forest then the careful scientific work we do examining the trees will be much more meaningful and informative because we will then be able to put our findings into a context of a shared understanding that can then be given away to the public in a positive and impactful way.

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