

What is Theoretical Psychology?

Travelogue from the 10th Biennial Conference of The International Society for Theoretical Psychology, June 22-27, Istanbul, Turkey

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Theoretical psychology

ISTP – the International Society for Theoretical Psychology – is an active community of theoretical psychologists that gathers biennially, this year in Istanbul, the city where Europe and Asia meet. I participated in this conference and my guiding question was ‘What is theoretical psychology?’ My own PhD-project, *Psychology as a Moral Science*, can be said to fall in the area of ‘theoretical psychology’, but I am not exactly sure what this area designates. I thought that going to a conference dedicated entirely to theoretical psychology could clear this up. In the following I plunge into a presentation of some main impressions from the conference, and afterwards I return to the question about what makes theoretical psychology theoretical.

Keynote speakers

During the five-day conference, there were four keynotes and one plenary session. I shall begin with the plenary session, which included three non-psychologists: **Ernesto Laclau** from the University of Essex, **Chantal Mouffe** from the University of Westminster and **Yannis Stavrakakis** from the University of Nottingham. All three plenary participants are political theorists and Laclau and Mouffe are famous for their radical version of Marxist political theory informed by literary, psychoanalytic and semiotic concepts. The plenary session was on *Political Identities and the Construction of Subjectivity*. This seemed to be a very topical theme in light of the situation in the local region and in the world at large. Laclau wanted to throw light on the question about what happens when social demands get transformed into political demands. He argued that “the moment of representation is the political moment”, that is, when we begin to signify people and processes, e.g. by using terms such as ‘terrorism’, ‘democracy’ etc. (what he calls “empty signifiers”), we are in the field of politics. And this is relevant for psychologists who are inevitably participants in societal “moments of representation”. Mouffe talked about problems in liberal democratic theory. Liberalism is unable to understand “the political”, she argued, because the rationalism, essentialism and individualism of liberalism preclude a perception of the inherent antagonism in all political processes. Any consensus is built on exclusion, Mouffe argued, and we must, she added, accept both antagonism and democratic pluralism. Much of Mouffe’s talk was directly relevant to most psychological research, which often presupposes an idea of the human person congenial to the liberalist model of man, as Sampson has demonstrated (Sampson, 1989). Stavrakakis talked about a psychological phenomenon – affect – and its relation to politics. He found that very few theorists have addressed the role of affect in political processes, but as a matter of fact, some people are willing to die for their imagined communities and their nations, which can only be explained by including the body and the affective. Stavrakakis pointed to the works of Lacan as particularly relevant in this regard. Lacan argued that affect is constituted *in* discursive processes (some of these

political) and do not exist prior to discourse. All three speakers clearly demonstrated the relevance of political theory to psychology and vice versa. In my view the links between political theory and psychology have been under-theorised. Of course, much psychology, especially in Denmark, builds on Marxist conceptions of social life, but most psychologists ignore the developments in recent political theory, e.g. the important debate between liberalists and communitarians (Delaney, 1994). This is a shame because this debate and others seem very relevant to psychological discussions. Political theories always operate with implicit psychologies, and vice versa.

The four keynote speakers were first **Nükhet Sirman**, a Turkish sociologist from Bogazici University, who talked about something similar to Stavrakakis, viz. the relation between emotions and nationalism. She analyzed how love as a phenomenon had been constructed historically and in modern Turkey, both at the national and individual levels. Secondly, **Jaan Valsiner** from Clark University in the US gave a talk on *Theory construction and theory use in psychology*. Valsiner is one of the leading exponents of socio-cultural psychology. He urged psychologists to concentrate more on the theoretical dimensions of their research, since, as he argued, there are no pure empirical sciences. He also warned against what he termed the postmodern view of theory as particular and local, and argued instead that science should always generalize. Finally, he argued, quite interestingly, that new insights in psychology are likely to come from the margins: from “third world psychology” for example, since some things, such as certain aspects of societal change, are most clearly visible from marginal perspectives. He did not consider the extent to which this contradicted his claim *contra* postmodernism that theories should not be local. The third keynote speaker was **Jane Flax**, an American psychoanalyst and political theorist from Howard University. The topic was *From self to subject: Theorizing and clinical practice after Michel Foucault*. Flax gave an introduction to the late works of Foucault, including his ideas of subjectivity and technologies of the self, and argued that we need to pose “how-questions” in relation to subjectivity: not “*what* is the subject?”, but rather “*how* is the subject, and *how* is it constituted in practices?” Flax is an example of one of the few psychologists who connect “the psychological” and “the political”. Finally, **Michael Billig** from Loughborough University, renowned for his rhetorical approach to psychology, gave a very funny talk on *Freud and the psychology of humour*, which resembled stand-up-comedy but with dark undertones as regards the social, and also racist, functions of humour, which Freud touched on in his analysis of Jewish jokes. Billig turned psychoanalysis against Freud himself and showed how his analyses contained significant omissions that revealed a lot about this great founder of psychoanalysis.

Individual presentations

In addition to the keynotes, I attended more than 40 presentations during the conference, some as individual papers, some included in larger symposia. I cannot, of course, refer to them all, so I limit myself to a presentation of some of the best. On the first day I attended a symposium on *Ethics: Perspectives on psychology from Lacanian psychoanalysis*. **Eugenie Georgaca** (City College, Thessaloniki), **Sean Homer** (City College, Thessaloniki), **Christian Dunker** (Sao Marcos University, Brazil) and **Ian Parker** (Manchester Metropolitan University) all talked about Lacan’s approach to psychoanalysis, in which the unconscious is understood as being structured linguistically and arising in discourse. Subjectivity is understood as an effect of language. Parker’s talk was particularly clear, even for an outsider to the Lacanian tradition such as myself, and he

argued that we should think of psychology, not only in terms of science as we usually do, but also in terms of politics, love and art. He further argued that ethical questions (in particular concerning evil) can appear in all spheres of psychology: politics, love, art and science. Ethics and psychology are intertwined in Parker's eyes.

Related themes were discussed in the double panel session on *Theorizing value* with 11 individual speakers. These speakers addressed general questions related to psychology's role as a moral agent, value as an object for psychology, the fact-value dichotomy, and more specific questions about the value of agency, value in technology studies, and value in gay and lesbian psychology. While all speakers seemed to agree that psychology has to transcend the fact-value distinction, I missed more theoretical or philosophical accounts on how to do so, and on what value is – and also on what fact is, for that matter. Philosophical accounts were legion in another session, *Metatheoretical reflections*. **Marco Barendregt** from the Free University of Amsterdam gave a philosophical paper on reductionism, and **Guy Saunders** from University of the West of England discussed philosophical issues about the differences between what exists, and how what exists is characterised. He used the example of self as agent. From an idiosyncratic point of view, I especially enjoyed **Gavin Sullivan's** (from Monash University, Australia) talk on *The history of Wittgenstein's effect on psychology*, where he showed how the contemporary social constructionist use of Wittgenstein to legitimize certain ideas about meaning in fact misuses the Wittgensteinian approach and makes a theory out of something that was most definitely not a theory in Wittgenstein's own eyes. Wittgenstein is well known for his hostility towards theorizing, and he wanted philosophers to describe instead, but as Sullivan made clear, much of the psychological appropriation of Wittgensteinian insights, ignore this.

Interdisciplinary work is very important and quite a few participants from outside psychology attended the conference. I have already mentioned some political theorists, and also the Århus-based philosopher, **Uffe Juul Jensen**, was there in a symposium with **Ole Dreier** from Copenhagen. The theme was *Theorizing and Critique in Social Practice*, and Dreier presented his new work on psychotherapy that seeks to examine the importance of what goes on in clients' everyday life contexts, which is largely a black box in psychotherapy research. Dreier is a critical psychologist, and Juul Jensen is, as a philosopher, interested in the idea and practice of critique. Juul Jensen talked about what critique could be with frequent references to Kant (who was credited with having key Foucauldian insights – this was news to me), and it was argued that social theory should proceed “from inside out” of social practices, articulating together what goes on with the people concerned, which will be critical social science.

Ken and Mary Gergen (from Swarthmore and Penn State, USA) then held a conversational session on *Social construction and relational theory*. It was very interesting to go from Dreier and Juul Jensen's session on critique to the Gergen session, where one of the first statements made were that social constructionism should be a positive framework – and not just critique! Ken and Mary Gergen want to get away from criticism and – through dialogic processes – toward reconstruction of certain important concepts and practices. They articulated some of their points by “performing psychology” (i.e. through small plays), but they also talked about their long and important careers that have formed social constructionism, and they gave examples of their recent work. One example

concerned an attempt to reconstruct the concept of aging: away from decline and toward enrichment and growth instead. Another example concerned the much-used method in business consultancy, appreciative inquiry: away from problem-talk and toward positive change instead.

Two days later I attended another session (a symposium) with Ken Gergen, biblically entitled *After the deluge*. Also in this session an attempt was made to reconstruct rather than criticise. The question all participants tried to answer was “where do we go after all the de-/construction?” Ken Gergen gave a talk – *Beyond moral thought* – where he pointed to relational theory and its focus on the relational processes in which moral meaning is created, as a place to begin after the deluge of critique. The key word should be dialogue, according to Gergen, and this will, in his eyes, ensure domination-free communication and meaning creation. I asked him if the relational-dialogic approach does not, like other approaches, carry with it specific forms of power, but this he denied, even though he himself charged Habermas’ discourse ethics with favouring certain groups over others. In this symposium, Mary Gergen gave a relational interpretation of Judith Butler’s work on sex and gender, **John Rijsman** (from Tilburg, The Netherlands) interpreted mainstream social psychology as a theatrical mirroring of societal processes, **Angelica Tratter** (from Dallas, USA) tried to save and reconstruct the concept of individualism from communitarianism and virtue ethics, while **John Shotter** (from New Hampshire, USA) gave a Wittgensteinian interpretation of the concept of attitude, which led him to reconstruct the concept. Personally, while I find that there is much to learn from reconstructing concepts and practices, I am also sceptical about the wish to get away from critique. In my ears, it seems equally odd to declare that “I am critical” and “I do not want to criticise but to reconstruct”. All social and psychological inquiry should be critical, I think, so the concept is largely redundant. I share with the philosopher Juul Jensen the assumption that psychology as a social science cannot but work critically, i.e. by articulating social practices “from the inside out”. The constructionist insistence that we get away from “problem-talk” and focus instead on positive reconstruction, seems to me to invite a certain form of laissez-faire social science in which anything goes.

This, by the way, I addressed in my own presentation on *Values and validity: Psychology as a moral science*. I charged social constructionism with being a sophisticated form of neo-liberal ideology, and I argued that we need some version of moral realism according to which not anything goes. Ken Gergen was kind enough to attend my presentation, and, despite our disagreements, he commented on my paper and gave me valuable advice. Other papers in my session were given by **Andrew Hunter** (a philosopher from Ryerson, Canada) who talked about affective dissonance and the moral psychology of narratives, **Shu-hui Tsai** (from Taiwan), who talked about Lacan’s essay on Kant and Sade and **Dorota Pomagalska** (from Adelaide, Australia) who gave a very good paper on the ways in which self-esteem is constructed as an ethical obligation in Australia, and how this serves the liberal ideal of responsible autonomy. Pomagalska used linguistic theory to analyse publications from government and other authorities in Australia in which self-esteem is framed as an obligation of all citizens, particularly in the educational system.

The symposium *Rethinking method-theory relations* included some very interesting talks. **Lisa Osbeck** (from West Georgia, USA) explored the methods of theoretical psychology, and tried to invigorate Descartes’ often-misunderstood thoughts on method. Descartes understood method, not

primarily as rigorous rules, but as a practice. Method is the art of directing thought, Descartes said. That Descartes held a view of Method-as-art was new to me, and more arguments like this is needed to remove the straw-man-like character of Descartes: Today, he is identified with everything that we do not like, often quite unfairly. **Stephanie Koerner** (an archaeologist from Manchester) defended a kind of moral realism, similar to the one I called for in my own paper. She argued that human life-worlds are prisms of diverse fields of experience, and some of these fields are irreducibly ethical. She further lamented what she called “the privatization of ethics” and “the globalization of indifference”. It was very interesting for me personally to find that the talk most congenial to my own came, not from a psychologist, but from an archaeologist! **Betty Bayer** (from Hobart and William Smith Colleges, USA) gave a fascinating paper on Festinger’s classic “When prophecy fails”. Bayer traced the history of Ms. Martin, the woman who received the visions in the sect (aka Marion Keach), and the paper served as an analogue to the classic paper “Whatever happened to little Albert?” (Harris, 1979). Bayer wanted to throw light on the history of one of psychology’s famous subjects; something that is too rarely done. Bayer’s paper was a perfect example of how to do the history of human science as itself a human science.

Another very good session was the symposium *Internationalization of psychological knowledges*. The speakers each addressed the dangers that are connected to the current internationalization and globalization of psychology. Do non-Western cultures now become individualist and psychologistic due to a proliferation of psychological techniques and modes of understanding? The sad answer that emerged in this session was: yes! Not just because of historical materialist conditions, but due to very concrete proliferations of psychological vocabularies and techniques. **Irmgard Stäuble** (from Berlin) analysed how psychology was established with the disciplinary order of Western modernity and liberal democracies, and she pointed out that we must avoid a new psychological colonization of the world. **Gordana Jovanovich** (from Belgrade) analysed the psychological decontextualization of knowledge as a manipulation strategy, and **Natalia Avtonomova** (from Russia) gave a historical example of the internationalization of psychological knowledge, viz. the export of psychoanalysis to Russia around 1910-20 and again after 1989. **Kurt Danziger**, the grand-old man of critical psycho-history, should have been there, but unfortunately he had to stay in Canada on doctor’s orders. The three presentations all gave me lots to think about, and stressed how little reflection psychologists normally give to their own embeddedness in society and culture, which is a clear danger in a rapidly globalized world, where everyone else is increasingly becoming “like us”.

And what about theory?

After these presentations, it is pertinent to return to the question: what is theoretical psychology? Brent Slife and Richard Williams (Slife & Williams, 1997) have recently posited the need for the formal recognition of theoretical psychology as a subdiscipline within psychology. The recent history of psychology, in particular its commitment to positivism that is still found in most mainstream psychology, has downplayed the importance of theoretical psychology. It is often presupposed that scientific methodology will secure a steady, cumulative knowledge production. But it is becoming increasingly clear that methods, as well as all other aspects of psychology, are theory-laden. The belief that methods alone determine truth is no longer viable to many commentators, and this applies just as much to qualitative methodology as it does to quantitative.

Slife and Williams find, therefore, that theoretical psychologists are needed, just as statisticians and methodologists, to fill a role as consultants in psychological departments. Theoretical psychologists should facilitate the necessary discussions of the theories and theory-ladenness of psychological inquiry. This all sounds fine, but what is theoretical about theoretical psychology?

As a preliminary naïve exercise one can speculate about what ‘theoretical’ means. Theoretical psychology might be opposed to un-theoretical or even a-theoretical psychology, but this doesn’t seem quite right, and few psychologists would probably subscribe to having an un-theoretical position (B.F. Skinner was a notable exception, but one could argue that even such hostility toward theorizing is itself based on a theory about what one does). Perhaps theoretical should then be opposed to practical psychology. But most people in Istanbul talked about practice, and if they didn’t talk about practice, and in particular *social* practice, they talked about activity, action or some similar category. So judging from the Istanbul-conference, theoretical psychology is clearly practical in the sense of being about practice. Perhaps theoretical psychology should be opposed to applied psychology? Well, even applied psychology should be theoretically based, if it is to receive formal recognition. And furthermore, in Istanbul, many participants came from applied fields. Empirical then? Theoretical psychology might be psychology without the empirical? No. In Istanbul many speakers reported about empirical findings, albeit the empirical material was more often approached through discursive or other qualitative methodologies rather than more traditional quantitative methods.

Taking a look at key words from the conference might be more informing. The words ‘critical’, ‘political’ and ‘cultural’ are used in many titles and abstracts. So theoretical psychology is perhaps critical, political and cultural? It appears so, but that leaves out much theoretical psychology concerned with traditional problems such as the mind-body problem, for example. Theoretical psychologists from “traditional” fields within psychology, e.g. cognitive psychology or neuropsychology, were very few in Istanbul compared to the many psychologists labelling themselves critical, cultural-historical or social constructionist. Also very few philosophers of science (or psychologists concerned with the philosophy of psychological science) attended the conference. According to the organizers, this was an unusual situation for the conference, because normally, these people do show up. But perhaps, as it was suggested, the unrest in the Middle East could explain why some, especially Americans, chose not to attend.

We are forced to conclude that theoretical psychology is just as elusive, diverse and heterogeneous as other psychological subdisciplines. Do we need it, then? Should it be recognized as a subdiscipline? My own impression is, yes, we do need it, and perhaps it should even be recognized as a subdiscipline. At the Istanbul-conference one could hear important papers and analyses that are normally absent from psychology’s discourse, e.g. about psychology’s role in society and in the world at large, and about the value-presuppositions of different kinds of psychology. But these are not exclusively theoretical questions. So for pragmatic reasons, I think it is good to have theoretical psychology, but ideally, if there is no absolute split between theoretical and practical, theoretical and applied, theoretical and empirical, then all psychology should consider itself as (at least partly) theoretical. But many psychologists today lack the tools and skills to engage in theoretical reflection about their own (theoretical) practice. For that reason, theoretical psychology is needed, even if we

can't say exactly what it is, and even if, ideally, it shouldn't be necessary as a separate subdiscipline.

The conference in Istanbul was a great place to learn, and it was carefully organised. I can warmly recommend the future ISTP-conferences to others. The next one will be in South Africa in 2005. It remains to be seen if moving the conference to Africa will imply an illegitimate internationalization of Western psychological knowledge, or a genuine attempt to learn from the marginal African perspectives *pace* Valsiner.

References

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