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Unifying Psychology

In "Inventing the Subject: The Renewal of 'Psychological' Psychology," Robinson has taken issue with many features of psychology as the field exists today. I rarely find much, if anything, to disagree with in what Robinson writes, although my attitude toward the field is probably somewhat more optimistic than his. In his article, Robinson provides a critique, but also encourages psychologists to invent positive programs that will respond to his criticisms of the field as a whole. So numerous are these criticisms that perhaps no one such program will respond to all of them. But a modest beginning can be made by responding even to one of the features of which Robinson despairs, and that will be the goal of this response: to suggest a remedy for the problem of fragmentation in the field to which Robinson repeatedly refers.

Unified Psychology

In a series of articles, we have proposed a "unified psychology" that seeks to remedy the fragmentation and even schisms to which psychology has been exposed (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2001; Sternberg, Grigorenko, & Kalmar, 2001). My goal here is not to repeat those articles, but rather, to sketch a basis by which I believe psychology can unify itself.

Why We Have Fragmentation. Before doing so, it may be useful to comment on why psychology has become fragmented. I believe there are three main reasons.

1. *Devaluing.* Many students are being trained in ways that, early on, emphasize extreme specialization. Students may come to devalue approaches that are different from their own, just as people often devalue other individuals, in general, who seem different from themselves. Sometimes, such devaluing is a part of a more general snobbism on the part of those who feel that their own approach is better than other people's.
2. *Ignorance.* Many students are learning almost exclusively about things that seem immediately relevant to their own work. The result may be that these students never learn much about areas and approaches other than those within a narrow range. The students may then come to reject those things about which they know little.
3. *Competitive agendas.* Psychologists sometimes find themselves competing with each other. Researchers may compete for journal space, grant funds, or acceptance of their particular point of view. Practitioners may compete for clients. Competition may lead psychologists to reject the offerings of others with whom they are competing as one way of promoting the wares they, themselves, are offering to "sell."

The Costs of Fragmentation

1. It often is said that "United we stand, divided we fall." Sound reasoning underlies this aphorism. Whatever the reasons, psychology, as a field, only hurts itself in its fragmentation. Again, there are at least three reasons for this.
1. *Internal fights sap morale.* A house divided is a house full of unhappy people. Who can feel whole if the group with which one identifies is fragmented?
2. *Bickering consumes resources.* When we bicker, we deplete our own resources. The time and energy that could be put to productive use instead is put to fighting among ourselves.
3. *Schisms reduce external credibility.* To the extent that psychology, as a field, speaks with conflicting voices, it is less likely to be listened to by others. Indeed, it will be unclear to others who even to listen to because no one clearly will be representing psychology.

Why Unity? Unity as a field, rather than fragmentation, is the sensible path for psychology to take. An analysis of several sources of division suggests that they make little sense.

The science-practice split. Some psychologists who identify themselves as scientists eschew those who identify themselves as practitioners, and vice versa. But this split is founded upon misunderstanding.

Scientists need practitioners. The reasons are multiple.

First, without practice, there would be few students. The overwhelming majority of students who study psychology, especially at the undergraduate level, do so because they are interested in practice issues, such as what are the identities and characteristics of various psychological disorders and how can people with psychological disorders be helped? If these issues were not taught, many students would not take courses in psychology, resulting in decreased enrollments and decreased job opportunities for teachers and the many scientists who earn their livings teaching.

Second, without practice, there would be little grant funding. Most legislators who propose and authorize spending for psychological research are likely to be much more interested in why their child has a reading disability, or their spouse is depressed, or their parent has Alzheimer's, than they are in questions of basic research without obvious applications to practice. Much of the money that goes to non-practice related issues is an offshoot of the money that goes to practice-

related issues. Without the first, we would not have the second.

Third, without practice, there would be little application for the psychological research that is done. Ultimately, many people who enter psychology, even those who are scientists, care about people and their problems, and would like, sooner or later, for their research to have application to helping people with their problems. Practice provides a major vehicle for application.

Practice also needs science, however. Again, there are several reasons.

First, without science, many of the theories that are used by practitioners never would have been proposed. These theories are, or at least, should be, scientific, meaning that they provide predictions and are capable of being disconfirmed. If they are not scientific, they are of dubious use, because there will be no empirical way of disconfirming them.

Second, without science, there would be few useful assessments. Assessments of intelligence, personality, and other attributes, for example, are useful only if they have been formulated through, or at least subjected to, rigorous scientific scrutiny. Without such scrutiny, one cannot know whether the assessments are of value.

Third, without science, there would be no adequate tests of therapies, and perhaps few therapies at all. Clients spend a substantial amount of time and, often, money, for therapy. They should be entitled to some assurance that the therapy they receive is a good value for their investments of time and money.

In short, then, science and practice both need each other.

The teaching-research split. Sometimes teaching and research are pitted against each other. Such a manufactured opposition is foolish.

Teaching helps research. First, it can be a source of ideas for research. Second, it can provide a source of participants for research, whether through subject pools or otherwise. Third, it provides a laboratory for trying out many of the ideas that arise from research.

Research helps teaching. First, it provides the content for much of what we teach. Without research, the field would stagnate and we would have little new to offer to students over the course of the years. Second, it provides an experiential basis for teaching. What researcher has not found that he or she is in a better position to teach about something if he or she is doing or has done research in that area? Research provides first-hand rather than merely second-hand knowledge about an area. Third, research often provides passion for teaching. Many teachers find that they are most passionate in their teaching about the areas in which they do research.

In sum, teaching and research are synergistic, not opposed. They should not be viewed as in opposition to one another.

The basic-applied research split. The split between basic and applied research is foolish. Basic research exists, in large part, to serve as a basis for later applied research. For example, personality tests such as the NEO-PI-R, which are widely used today, emerged out of basic research on five-factor theory. Applied research, in turn, often helps provides ideas for basic research. For example, many of our theories of intelligence arose from the use of intelligence testing in practical applications. The two kinds of research should work in synchrony with, not in opposition to, each other.

Splits among subfields. Sometimes, we observe a separation or even mutual disdain among various fields of psychology. Biological psychologists may believe that their findings somehow are more basic or fundamental than the findings of other psychologists. Cognitive psychologists may believe that, when all is said and done, many of the problems studied by other fields, such as social and clinical psychology, are actually, at their base, cognitive. Both kinds of psychologists may look down upon clinical psychologists, whereas clinical psychologists may view their research as useful in a way that neither biological nor cognitive research is.

In our unified-psychological approach, we argue that arbitrary breakdowns of subfields is often counterproductive. We should concentrate on psychological phenomena rather than subfields, and when we do, we find that almost all subfields are likely to have something important to say about these phenomena. Psychological phenomena such as memory, intelligence, prejudice, aggression all can be studied from biological, cognitive, social, or clinical points of view. When we restrict ourselves to a single subfield as a basis for inquiry, we restrict the understanding we possibly can have of the psychological phenomena we study.

Splits among methodologies. In the same way, it is foolish to argue that there is any "right" methodology for studying psychological phenomena. Psychological phenomena are best understood when they are studied through a series of converging operations, whereby we use a variety of research methods to study a phenomenon, in the hope that the research methods all will converge upon the same findings. The current exaggeration in some quarters of the unique importance of cognitive neuroscience is, as Robinson points out, painful to those who hope to see psychology come together. There is nothing wrong, per se, with the methods of cognitive neuroscience. But no one set of methods answers all questions, and relying on any one set of methods as a panacea is a mistake.

Conclusion

Robinson has argued that the fragmentation of psychology is a mistake. I agree. In this brief response, I have attempted to point out why fragmentation is a mistake. I have also suggested a "cure," namely, unified psychology—an approach that emphasizes studying psychological phenomena from a variety of different perspectives. There is nothing new in this idea. On the contrary, it has been around for many years. Williams James certainly was a unified psychologist! What is sad is that psychology, as a field, has been so slow to adopt

such as idea, and that psychology has been moving in the direction of fragmentation rather than unity. As Robinson points out, it is time to reverse course, and move together rather than apart.

References

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Author Notes

Preparation of this article was supported under grant REC-9979843 from the U.S. National Science Foundation, a grant from the W. T. Grant Foundation, and the Javits Act Program (Grant No. R206R000001) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Grantees undertaking such projects are encouraged to express freely their professional judgment. This article, therefore, does not necessarily represent the position or policies of any of the sponsoring agencies, and no official endorsement should be inferred.