On unifying psychology: A view from the trenches; and what's wrong with pluralism anyway?

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Abstract

   This paper addresses, from the perspective of a psychotherapist, a proposal for unifying psychology under some form of conceptual umbrella, as advanced by Salvatore and colleagues in this current issue of *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*. My response raises conceptual and practical questions. The unhappy history of universal models in psychoanalysis illustrates personal, social, and political dynamics that interfere with finding and implementing such models. There is no neutral meta-position; any meta-position is subject to challenge according to its angle, methods, and interests. The question may not be whether, a priori, psychology should be unified, but whether it will turn out to be so. Generalized scientific models applied to psychotherapy may not be close to how people understand and talk about themselves. Psychotherapists are likely to incorporate general principles and models without much rigor and as metaphors to justify and shape change in accord with cultural values rather than to describe or explain. Given different conceptual categories in psychology, natural/causal and humanistic, universal principles or models could be so general and abstract as to constitute philosophy more than science. Balancing assimilation and accommodation, or general stability

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with local level instability, allow for complexity, flexibility, and responsiveness to unique local conditions for human meaning systems – individual and collective, and for the academic disciplines that study them. Pluralism or polyphony may be an alternative meta-position which allows therapists to flexibly draw from scientific and humanistic perspectives, and from folk psychology, along with personal training and life experience, soft-assembled at the moment of contact with the messy subjectivity of the other.

Keywords: Psychology Unification, Unified Models, Theoretical Psychology, Theory of Psychotherapy, Psychotherapy Practice, Pluralism, Complex Systems in Psychology, Integrative Psychotherapy, Common Factors.

> *It is not easy to find an answer. We can only say: 'So muss denn doch hie Hexe dran!' [We must call the Witch to our help after all!] – the Witch Metapsychology. Without metapsychological speculation and theorizing – I had almost said 'phantasying' – we shall not get another step forward. Unfortunately, here as elsewhere, what our Witch reveals is neither very clear nor very detailed.*
> (Freud, 1937, p. 225; quotation from Goethe's Faust).

Many of us in the psychoanalytic world are wary of unifying theories – we have had some bad experiences. Theories start with a particular problem in living, traced to a problematic negotiation of a developmental task, likely one with personal resonance for the originator of the theory (Cooper, 1985). They soon go to the bedrock of human nature and the fundamental dilemma of the human condition (Cooper, 1985). All motives are reducible to the fundamental drivers and organizers of human experience and the dilemmas they create. The universalizing, colonizing impulse and the bloody turf wars that follow are also influenced by the originators' personal needs (Cooper, 1985)[1]. Kaplan (2006) has written about the history of fetishizing psychoanalytic theories in psychoanalytic institutions, where orthodoxy was enforced, alternatives "interpreted" and marginalized, and complexity and creativity suffered. When Pine (1988, 1990) introduced the notion that various psychoanalytic models of the mind, "listening

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[1] Freud, the "conquistador" (Freud, 1985/1900), though the quote above suggests that Freud regarded his more abstract theoretical constructions with more humility.

perspectives", can apply to different aspects of development, different people in treatment, or different moments with the same person, there was a collective sigh of relief. Pluralism was a good thing, a more accurate reflection of the complexity and fluidity of human subjectivity and behavior.

Scientific vs Experiential Language

General and abstract concepts, such as forces and mechanisms, what Freud called "meta-psychology", are removed from actual human experience and from how people talk and understand themselves. Influential psychoanalyst George S. Klein (1976) called for a moratorium on metapsychology, a "theorectomy", in favor of an "experience near", more personal language (Gill & Holzman, 1976). There is also an emphasis on listening from the patient's perspective and for the plausibility of how they construct what is happening (Schwaber, 1983, 1998). To privilege and help clients more fully articulate and elaborate their own meaning requires analysts to check their authority or privileged claim to know reality, especially regarding messy human exchanges.

I will elaborate below the notion that theoretical constructs useful for psychotherapists are hybrid metaphors, combining elements from psychology, humanism, and folk psychology. They must speak to clients in a language similar to their own. They are creatively brought together, usually nonconsciously and without much rigor, at the moment of contact with the subjective other.

Human and Social Impediments

Whether it makes sense to unify psychology within a generalized model or language might best be worked out by theoretical psychologists and philosophers of science. A psychoanalytic clinician, with the help of a sociologist of science, could add the complications from our humanity and from social dynamics to finding a universal framework. I was an undergraduate major in psychology and philosophy at a large Midwestern university in the US. Some twenty five years later I visited

the campus and was roaming the halls of the psychology department, looking for names on the doors that I might recognize. The chair of the department walked by and asked if he could help me and I told him I had been a student there. He was friendly and welcoming and gave me a tour of the new research facilities. Feeling a nice connection, I asked him if a psychodynamic perspective was represented among the clinical psychology faculty. He answered, "no, we only teach scientific approaches here". Behind my polite smile I took this personally. I thought – this man is oblivious to the empirical data on the efficacy of psychodynamic therapies and the experimental data on psychoanalytic constructs – he uses the pretension of "scientific" to advance personal and political bias. So much for our friendly bond.

Why do I tell this story, other than to nurse a narcissistic wound and resume a thwarted quest for recognition? It illustrates that claims for scientific universality can get personal and that our humanity and social dynamics complicate claims to know and projects to implement what we regard as the best way to integrate psychology. To what body, process, or methodology do we grant this lofty perch and authority? There are no philosopher kings or queens with a neutral place to stand. Any meta-position is subject to challenge according to its angle, methods, and interests. Salvatore, Ando', Ruggieri, *et al.* (2022) could answer that authority is distributed and methodological and that interrogating the position from which we see and integrate is part of the process. The criteria are pragmatic: how effective an integration and application results from the meta-theoretical constructs? But is this enough to settle disputes regarding power, authority, and method? Who defines effective outcomes? They are constructed from the very constructs they are to confirm. The chair of psychology at my alma mater appealed to science to justify his dominant and marginalizing voice. His appeal to scientific authority disavowed the complex socio-political history behind his claim. As cultural psychologist James Werstch (2009) writes, "... we must consider how and why a particular voice occupies center stage, that is, why it is 'privileged'" (p. 14). Human sciences are more vulnerable to passionate disputes, laying claims, as they do, to our very nature, and, according to Foucault (1980), providing the means for our subjugation and control.

Human Nature?

Does universal psychology claim to answer the very question of human nature? The question of human nature has been distributed among philosophers, psychologists, theologians, sociologists, and neuroscientists. Would a unified psychology have the final word? Or would lawful connections between the specialized domains of psychology apply whether we are by nature beasts or noble savages? And which speaks more directly to and grasps the human experience?

Sensation, perception, cognition, memory, brain function, are describable according to natural causal laws. Any linking framework that includes them would privilege scientific methods and laws. But psychotherapy is a pragmatic synthesis of scientific and humanistic perspectives and methods, often brought together at the moment of contact with the subjective other. Universal frameworks of natural and generalized laws could marginalize other ways of understanding and responding to persons. I had participated in a movement in psychoanalysis that sought to integrate and amend psychoanalytic concepts with findings from neuroscience, termed "neuropsychoanalysis". Many look to neuropsychoanalysis to answer questions about and challenges to psychoanalytic theories and to integrate the various psychoanalytic perspectives. I was in a local study group for neuropsychoanalysis and the group expressed an urgency to integrate neuroscience and neuropsychoanalysis into the curriculum at psychoanalytic institutes. One member said she could not imagine entering psychoanalysis with an analyst who did not have this understanding of the mind. I said I would prefer a personal psychoanalyst who was immersed in poetry rather than cognitive neuroscience. No one else shared the sentiment. Groups are vulnerable to extremes which interfere with the wise application of unifying knowledge.

Who is Unification For?

Is a unifying framework more for theoretical psychologists and researchers or for clinicians? The authors' arguments for the practical benefits of a unifying model, especially for the practicing psychotherapist, are currently too general and vague to be persuasive. We need

to see examples and how they actually work. Pluralism may be more usable for clinicians. Creatively drawing on psychology, humanism, and folk psychology, from the nomothetic and the idiographic, are also influenced by experience – with other clients and with the person before us over time, our own psychotherapy, supervision, and immersion in theories and other symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2007), in addition to a capacity for empathy and emotional resonance and responsiveness. They are fluidly assembled at the local level, at the moment of contact with the messy subjective other.

There is a welcome body of research on interventions common to all psychotherapies that mobilize change (Wampold, 2001; Norcross & Wampold, 2019a). These are not yet unified under common principles of change. Each psychotherapy school and their associated model of the mind would explain the effectiveness of these interventions in their own terms and they would regard the explanation as sufficient. It could turn out that each of these interventions influence meaning making according to different principles which may or may not be linked.

Misappropriations

Culturally shaped interventions could be justified and authorized by a post hoc appeal to or metaphorical appropriation of scientific principles from general psychology. Translating theory into practice is rarely done with rigor. And there is always something lost in translation from the original context of meaning. Philosopher L. Susan Stebbing (1937) described how translating theoretical physics from mathematics to everyday language yielded feel-good results but altered meanings and, sometimes, absurdities. In the psychotherapy literature there are frequent appeals to "the brain" to support and market an approach, indicating that the brain is more plastic than ever imagined.

The Ontological Status of the Theoretical Object

The claim or hope that subfields of psychology, with their different modes of discourse and methods, could be integrated by a common

model, set of principles, or laws, suggests that these subfields study different appearances of the same underlying thing. Given that many of these subfields, such as sensation, perception, or brain function are modeled with biophysical laws, the unifying entity must be a natural and independently existing object or organization. It seems more likely, though, that the different discourses, settings, methodologies, politics, etc. of psychology construct their own entities. They do not exist apart from the contexts that construct, study, and market them. The mind isolated in the laboratory is not the same thing as the subject that is jointly observed and jointly constructed in the psychoanalytic setting. They may not be organized by common principles or laws. Barret (2009), discussing the future of psychology, argues that brain states and the phenomena that emerge from them are both real, but "real in different ways'". The way we divide higher mental functions does not carve nature at its joints.

Salvatore and colleagues (2022) could respond that unifying constructs and principles need not refer to an underlying entity or natural organization. They are theoretical constructs, necessary to make sense, orient, and organize scientific activity. The ontological status of theoretical entities is debated in the philosophy of science and the project to integrate psychology calls for conceptual clarification on how to regard these constructs. The authors might find congenial the notion that theoretical constructs and entities are "as if" constructions that help us navigate the complexity of the world, or an aspect of the world (Appiah, 2017; Vaihinger, 1925). This notion is consistent with the idea that culturally different ways of constructing the world are local tools that evolved to cope with local problems (Baker & Galisinki, 2001; Shi-xu, 2005). I have argued that different psychoanalytic models are meaning making tools that mobilize the process where it has become truncated or stuck (Saporta, 2016). A teacher in my psychoanalytic training said that psychoanalytic interpretations are ways to keep the conversation going. Pluralism in cultural discourse studies resists universal, hegemonic forms of discourse or ways of constructing the world that are not sensitive to local realities (Shi-xu, 2005). Subfields of psychology could have emerged as local tools for local questions and local problems. Given questions and problems of different conceptual categories their solutions may be incommensurate. This is most evident with natural, causal models appropriate to some

questions and non-causal humanistic models appropriate to other questions and problems.

Given the different conceptual categories in the study of persons, linking principles would likely be so general and abstract that they would belong more to philosophy than to science – reminiscent of the great philosophical systems of a bygone age. Linking psychotherapy practice to other specialized areas of psychology by way of these principles would likely be metaphorical to justify and shape rather than describe and explain.

Prescription or Discovery?

Again, it is hard to assess the authors' (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022) proposal based on the abstract conceptual arguments presented. The question is not whether psychology should be integrated, but whether it will turn out to be so and will the integration be useful. Philosopher of science, Carl Hempel (1966) made a similar point for the physical sciences, «Generally, then, the extent to which biological laws are explainable by means of physical-chemical laws depends on the extent to which suitable connecting laws can be established. And that, again, cannot be decided by *a priori* arguments; the answer can be found only by biological and biophysical research» (p. 105).

Our colleagues (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022) might point to the conceptual and theoretical impoverishment resulting from the extreme positivism in which Hemple participated and which played a role in the atheoretical fragmentation at issue. As discussed above, constructs are necessary to make sense of, orient, and organize scientific activity. Constructs and empirical data are complexly interdependent. Still, the proof is in the pudding.

Balancing Assimilation and Accommodation

Generalized constructs are necessary to organize scientific activity. Those proposed by Salvatore and colleagues (2022) may be akin to Kuhn's (1962/1970) notion of paradigms which assimilate until they can no longer hold discrepancies. For general psychology, for

psychotherapists, and for individual persons, forms of experience and meaning can be overly dominated by universalizing constructs. In all three domains there should be a balance between assimilation and accommodation, or between generalized stability and local instability. Systems capable of local instability are more responsive to local conditions and can organize in different ways. For meaning making systems, new meaning in new circumstances can emerge. Pine (1988) advocates a similar listening stance for psychoanalytic psychotherapists, one that holds tension between organizing what is happening according to explicit and implicit models and open listening that allows the process to take its own shape. Generalized frames and settings confer constraint and local stability for meanings that emerge from dialogue (Linel, 2009) and for gestalts that make sense of experience (Salvatore, 2015). General constructs and principles in psychology have a similar stabilizing function, but top-down control should allow for local level disorder or messiness, for specialized areas in psychology to think in their own way. Local messiness in research and clinical practice allow new findings and organizations and creative solutions to emerge at local levels.

A Possible Unifying Principle?

Generalized stability and local instability, the ability to reorganize in response to changing local conditions, applies to change and adaptation in various complex systems. For meaning systems, balance between assimilation and accommodation (Wachtel, 1981) and between generalized stability and local instability (Saporta, 2016) have been applied to change in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Priel (1999), applying Bakhtin's ideas to psychoanalysis, sees the process as cultivating optimal tension between rules for narrative coherence and their disruption through free association. Personal transformation described in myths and in religious settings has been interpreted according to the pattern of dissolution and reemergence of order and, in religious contexts, emergence of less egocentric orientations in meaning making (Rohr, 2020). This pattern of change for individuals and systems resonates with Kurt Lewin's three stage change model (Lewin, 1947; Papanek, 1973). Messiness in local conversation and interaction are necessary for new meaning and

creative solutions to emerge (Shotter, 2008). Bakhtin thought that meaning emerges from dialogue at the intersection of stability and instability or the centripetal and centrifugal (Bakhtin, 1981; Linel, 2009, Shotter & Billig, 1998). Gestalts that emerge to make sense of local experience are constrained and stabilized by generalized factors (Salvatore, 2015). Stable and unstable meaning characterizes the tension between place and space, home versus migration and exile (Tuan, 1977, 1998). General stability and local instability apply to cognitive and motor development (Thelen & Smith, 1994) and corporate business models that advocate loosening top-down control to allow for local level instability and responsiveness (Burnes, 2004; Rozasand & Huckle 2020; Papaneck, 2015). The adaptive value of instability for biophysical systems in nature is described by Kaufman (1993), who studies such systems: «selection achieves and maintains complex systems poised on the boundary or edge between order and chaos» (p. xv).

Is this a general principle governing change and adaptation for complex systems? Does it explain personal transformation in psychotherapy and other cultural settings? If so, we could use it to develop more effective ways to mobilize such processes. Here is the rub with applying this supposed unifying principle to personal change in psychotherapy and other settings. It is not likely to be descriptive or explanatory. It is more likely a metaphor that justifies and directs interactions and change in accord with cultural values as to what constitutes "the good life". Such is the case with other unifying constructs from psychology and their messy incorporation into psychotherapy.

Pluralism

Pluralism and polyphony may be an alternative meta-position. Dialogue between perspectives or ways of organizing experience and meaning allows human meaning making systems – individual and collective, and the academic systems that study them, to be more complex, flexible, and responsive to local conditions (Saporta, 2013, 2014, 2016). Shi-xu (2005) advocates an "in-between" stance for cultural discourse studies, standing in between culturally different, local ways of constructing the world. Psychoanalyst Philip Bromberg (1998) similarly advocates "standing in the spaces" between multiple self states, which

to my mind are different orientations or positions for making sense of experience or different ways of organizing meaning. I have argued that psychoanalytic therapy cultures multiple dialogical positions to make sense of experience in varied local contexts and relationships (Saporta, 2013, 2014, 2016). Specialized fragmentation in psychology may be due to the absence of dialogue as each specialized fragment speaks its monologue, as opposed to lack of a meta-voice. Our colleagues (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022) could say that their goal is such dialogue, but dialogue requires a common language and unifying constructs are meant to create that in-between space. It is not clear, though, how much unity is needed for dialogue, and there can be dialogue between different languages. Neither is it clear that a supra-ordinate voice best creates the conditions for dialogue. Any meta-voice should be in dialogue with rather than standing above the many voices in psychology.

Different forms of pluralism have been advocated for psychiatry. Brendel (2004, 2009), writing from the philosophical perspective of pragmatism, advocates pluralism as a way to bridge the science humanism divide in psychiatry. McHugh and Slaveny (1999) recommend pluralism for psychiatry between the language of cause and the language of meaning, two languages that they consider incommensurate. Hierarchical pluralism has been advocated for psychopharmacology (Aftab & Stein, 2022). For example, antipsychotic medications are understood to work by blocking dopamine transmission at the receptor level. At a higher level of the hierarchy these medications seem to work by changing the brain's, or the person's, response to salience. The higher level on the hierarchy better explains the effects of these medications on delusional meaning making and is better for developing new such drugs.

Parenthetically, Salvatore and colleagues (2022) might consider whether horizontal integration/unification across subdisciplines is different in kind from vertical unification of organizations that emerge from hierarchically lower level interactions. Barrett's (2009) suggestion that emergent psychological phenomena, and our way of carving them, are real in different ways challenges the notion that one model can encompass all levels of emergent order. This may be true of different forms of organization emerging from lower level interactions in purely biophysical systems. Hierarchical or vertical pluralism seems more likely and more usable than vertical unification.

At the local level of psychotherapy practice, pluralism allows us to draw flexibly from scientific and humanistic perspectives, and from folk psychology, in connecting and responding to another person. Therapists have flexible access to a wider field of symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2007) in making sense of and mobilizing meaning for the client. Dialogue between multiple positions is more sensitive to local conditions, more responsive to an idiosyncratic, context dependent subject. Research shows that responsiveness, the therapist adapting his or her approach to the unique needs of the patient, is a trans-theoretical positive outcome variable (Norcross & Wampold, 2019a, 2019b). Varied possibilities for understanding and responding, along with personal experience, combined with empathy and emotional responsiveness, are fluidly or soft-assembled at the point of contact with the complex subjectivity of the other. Multiple possible dialogical positions allow for messiness in between, creating space for the subjects in the room to interactively find their resonances, ruptures, and realignments, in contrast to an approach directed from above.

Conclusion

Whether or not psychology moves toward a unified framework or disciplined pluralism, however similar or different these may be, important conceptual and practical issues are fleshed out in the conversation. Salvatore and colleagues (2022) have conceptual work and turf battles ahead. Unifying psychology will not be an orderly progression, it is a messy process. I hope that I have contributed to the mess.

Acknowledgments

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