



Relationships Give Coherence to Psychological Theories

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Abstract

The ability to allow unitary meaning to emerge from the fragmentation of theoretical approaches in psychology may come from posing methodological attention to one facet of observed behaviors, that of relationships. The author aims at creating opportunity for establishing a thought process for the reader on the ongoing enactment of separating the objective from the subjective nature in psychological inquiry and theoretical formulations within the field. This written contribution can be seen as a participation in a dialogue with other authors in response to the position paper of the current issue by advocating for a meta-theory that unifies diverse theories and observations while also attributing relevance to specialized areas of study and intervention in psychology that partake in a recursive relationship with each other. In conclusion, the author also articulates ideas on the stance that a unitary meta-theory in psychology grounded on the relevance of intersubjectivity can offer to current collective or societal crises.

Keywords: meta-theory, fragmentation and unity in psychology, relationships, crises response.

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Psychological experiences, unlike cells, fibers, chemical reactions and other biological constituents, do not exist as “observable entities” that remain the same across observers and across time. Scientific literature in our field consists, among others, of a well-shared conceptual framework that governs our approach to studying observable behaviors which cannot be reduced to a scientific methodology capable of identifying psychological phenomena outside of the observer. In this conceptual framework, the observer of psychological phenomena, the scientist that measures behaviors and mind processes, cannot be an entity outside of a relationship with the observed.

This manuscript, as a commentary, a dialogue on the matter, in response to the position paper of the current issue, “Compartmentalization and unity of professional psychology: a road map for the future of the discipline”, aligns with the need for a meta-theory that affords for more complexed, nuanced observations able to support a methodological strengthening in the field.

Scientific authors often stated that the methodological weakness of psychology as a scientific discipline lies in the problem of replicating and measuring an observed phenomena multiple times and expecting the same behavioral objective outcomes each time. In a recent paper Michael Mascolo (2020) points out that the issue with forming a unified psychological science is not one that sees psychology as excessively irregular or inconsistent in its attempt to be both grounded in the biology and the cultural variables of the observed individual, but one that does not consider the fact that scientific inquiry is to be at a psychological level itself. Mascolo (2020) argues that emulating the methodology of the “hard” sciences will not lead to progress in the formation of a fundamental psychological science. Natural scientists do not need to consider how their objects of study (atoms, projectiles, or organ systems) perceive their own worlds in order to understand them; psychological scientists, on the contrary, do.

The need to chase away subjectivity from the measured psychological phenomena has created, as in the behaviorist paradigm, for example, a limited understanding of the actual behaviors observed and a difficulty in generalizing the same observations to different ecological conditions. Overcoming the tension between subjective and objective nature of scientific inquiry in psychology might have pushed us too far into emulating other scientific disciplines while ignoring the

chance to form a unified theory of psychology from focusing on the intersubjective nature of the experience, as it arises between people in joint actions (Mascolo, 2020). This is to say that finding a broad psychological meta-theory that can encompass the need to generalize observations from the empirical to the abstract and then back to the individual circumstances by recursively signifying them with greater complexity of understanding, may not exempt from identifying the intersubjective engagement in a shared relationship as the core (actual) object of study for all scientific observations in psychology. Psychological phenomena always happen simultaneously at a biological, individual and cultural level, as well as at a relational level between these.

Moreover, psychological concepts forming the core principles of a meta-theory of psychology through solid definitions of what the mind is or what anxiety or anger are, what are the reasons for a motivation to relate to others etc., can only emerge from studying self-organizing dynamic systems of relationships. In essence, there is no psychology without a relationship that forms and is formed by different biological, individual, and socio-cultural contexts of interaction. Anger and anxiety are emotions that cannot exist and therefore cannot be accurately observed outside of their emergence from the relational experience that individuals have with their world. A meta-theory that is based on a relational definition of psychological phenomena can inform abstract generalizations of why we do what we do, not because “we are who we are” but because we always find ourselves caught behaving in relationships of exchanged meaning between ourselves and our ever-changing biological and socio-cultural selves.

Relationships confer complexity to the observed phenomena by creating a context of meaning. When translating psychological science into professional psychological interventions, we can see this being clear. A multiplicity of theoretical approaches to clinical work unquestionably subscribes to the evidence of the relationship formed between the client and the psychologist as a relevant element of change and efficacy of this work. The theoretical knowledge of relationship dynamics affords the psychologist with understanding and with identifying psychological phenomena emerging from the interaction with the client, as these appear at a biological, individual, and cultural level within the confinement of the professional space provided. The

fragmentation of theoretical approaches in the professional field, as we see in cognitive-behavioral approach on one side and psychodynamic approach on the other, has also sustained a fragmentation at a theoretical level of psychology. For example, concepts like schemas or biases have been traditionally thought to be eminently describing cognitive-behavioral mental processes, distinct from theories of the unconscious in psychodynamic conceptualization that may have been using different terms to refer to similar if not same mental and relational processes of same psychological observations of human behavior. The concepts of transference and repetition compulsion as an understanding of the implicit schema within cognitive science can be an example of this. Studying psychological phenomena as emerging from relationships can be the focus of a scientific psychology that intends to overcome this fragmentation and favor an integration of the different psychotherapeutic theoretical approaches to clinical intervention. The intersubjective focus allows to add complexity to clients' request for psychotherapeutic service. In a clinical field that encourages specialization, as in the northeastern American health care where I work, a need for simplification of clinical presentations often characterizes clients' requests. The bio-medical cultural model of course plays a part in it, but also the public understanding of psychology as being a multiplicity of areas of empirical intervention that specializes in problem solving theories of intervention, does. Specializations become expertise in breaking apart and analyzing the cause and effect of one's psychological experience and give reductionistic explanations of presenting symptoms. This can be very helpful in promoting precise diagnostic work, as in the work of a medical specialization, when someone suffers from the uncertainty of one's symptoms. However, I would argue that a specialization in psychology allows to promote an initial connection, a shared relational space, where the client can access the experience of being understood by someone "that knows" how he or she feels about the experience that the psychologist is "a specialist of." If I as client meet with a trauma psychologist, I can be relatively sure that he or she will immediately understand me in my experience of "undergoing traumatic incidents and not feeling like myself anymore". If I see an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder specialist, I can be sure not to be told "why can't you just stop checking several times". From the initial reassurance that a specialist can provide the client we can then

build on attachment processes, emotional narratives, schemas, in due course add complexity to the understanding of the experience unfolding in the relationship. This can emerge over time from the relational patterns between the psychologist and the client. Thus, we can say that ultimately the role of a psychologist is to add complexity to the client's experience of the problem presented, not to simplify it. This happens through the professional relationship offered him or her, grounded in psychological theories of relationships between individuals.

In the American Psychological Association there are 54 different Divisions. These are described as «interest groups organized by members. Some represent subdisciplines of psychology (e.g., experimental, social, health or clinical) while others focus on topical areas such as aging, ethnic minorities or trauma» (APA Divisions, 2022). Divisions are a great way to allow psychologists with specific interests to learn and participate in communities of researchers, practitioners, and maintain relevance in that specific theoretical area of psychology. Focusing on different areas of research, like publishing specialized journals on specific areas of psychology, Divisions favor immediacy of knowledge and learning, dissemination. The challenge here would be to promote and sustain meaningful communication across different Divisions, different researchers, authors in these “divisions of inquiry”, that can facilitate a unitary meta-theory of psychology across Divisions, through common language and common methodology. We follow here a clear attempt through initiatives of Division 1 (The Society for General Psychology). In its mission statement, Division 1 is to «promote the creation of coherence among psychology's diverse evidence-based specialties, other scientific disciplines and the humanities. Encourages analysis of the merits and challenges of bridging concepts, methods, and theories» (APA Divisions, 2022). Their scientific journal, *Review of General Psychology*, publishes with interest in «articles that bridge gaps between subdisciplines in psychology as well as related fields or that focus on topics that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries» (APA Divisions, 2022). On a brief and quick excursus of the journal's most recently cited articles, we can see relevant research on wellbeing, on dangers of social media and on the benefits of the wandering mind for developing intentional actions in the future. All these three articles could be a more valuable contribution to a general theory of psychology, I believe, if they placed more

attention on understanding the role of relationships and relatedness between the individuals and their wellbeing, the individuals and social media communication, the individuals and their future actions. This type of attention could enhance the identification of psychological theory concepts that can be identified across psychology disciplines or Divisions. The separate, specialized areas of the APA Divisions could benefit from discovering or defining the general theory of wellbeing, for example, using a theory of inter-relatedness between oneself and his or her world or oneself and others, that can generalize to different areas such as health psychology, trauma psychology, couples and family, development and aging, just to mention a few of the Divisions present in the APA.

At the time of writing this contribution, the APA main webpage, www.apa.org, reports on recent changes in how mental health is experienced by workers on the job. And states that APA's 2022 "work and well-being survey reveals 71% of workers believe their employer is more concerned about mental health now than in the past (APA, 2022)." This is one specific observation that adds to the evidence of relevant changes we have all undergone throughout the past couple of years because of the COVID-19 pandemic's lifestyle disruptions. It is the role of the APA and more broadly of the mental health field, to address a crisis in mental health that emerged from the loss of the usual expectations, patterns of interactions, sudden changes in social norms and level of safety for oneself and significant others. Psychology, by finding a scientific ground within a meta-theory of relationships, can provide appropriate sustainment in navigating this mental health crisis but also several broad crises that are related to it, including the more general health uncertainty crisis, the economic inequality crisis, the climate crisis, the political crisis, the migration crisis, the gentrification crisis, the education crisis and the substance abuse crisis, to name a few. A compartmentalization into different areas of research without a cross-bridging meta-theory renders psychology weak in addressing these crises. The mental health crisis promotes a reflection upon the relationship that society has with common struggles that individuals may experience in their lives and that they may conceal from others to maintain a shared collusion of social efficiency and productivity on the job, in school, etc. Communicating on ones' mental health has become in the past couple of years more commonplace in the media and

within institutions like schools, families, work. The toll of loneliness, social separation, physical and ideological, that the pandemic rendered undeniable, forced a much more open dialogue about mental health daily struggles (Castiglioni & Gaj, 2020). Among the socio-cultural changes COVID-19 promoted we see awareness expanding on the interconnectedness of different crises and it is becoming clearer how these are relationship crises, as in relationships with the environment, relationships we have with geo-political views, with rapidly advancing technology that our wisdom and morality is struggling to keep up with, and ultimately with ourselves and the limitations of the fragility of the human condition. Limitations have also emerged in our ability to confer meaning and relevance to our lifestyles, with the increased crisis of religious institutions that can historically provide a sense of identity and belonging. The rise of pseudo-religious extreme movements in the USA, spawning from divisive political views but also from a need for belonging within cultural identities, is a testament to an undergoing crisis of meaning, contextually to a lack of meaningful relationships (Mastropietro & Vervaeke, 2021). Different areas of psychology research can certainly confer a layer of understanding to specific crises as we could see, for example, with health psychology and the study of decision making towards the adoption of healthy behaviors for the containment of COVID-19 spread in certain populations. Even so, the requirement of an encompassing, coherent theory of psychology that can inform an understanding of decision making within different categories of relationships can facilitate meaning making of relevant changes across currently experienced relationship crises. A coherence of theories in psychology that focuses on relational or intersubjective meaning of the observed behavioral phenomena provides a common shared language that can define core concepts of insight into the “mysteries” of “why we relate the way we do” to the world and each other. Repeated insights into a current multitude of relational crises can eventually afford wisdom and societal changes apt to contain or even divert the current crises.

In conclusion to this brief written contribution, we can state that identifying a common basis of knowledge in psychology between areas of study, between scientists and professionals, may require abandoning the naturalistic science methodology in favor of cultivating a science of participatory observations and learning. We can achieve

this through constant attention to the experience of the relationship that the objects of psychological study have with aspects of themselves, as well as to the experience of the relationship with others in their shared context of intersubjective significance. The meta-theoretical concepts that we can derive from studying relationships can ultimately inform the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities of each relational experience, create a recursive dynamic of complexification of learning between the empirical observation and the abstract theorization.

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