

Coming together or moving apart? Separation and fragmentation within psychology

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Many of us entering academic psychology did so with broad, if not lofty, goals. We wanted to understand the human “mind” as comprehensively as possible. But hasn’t that been the ideal of psychology since Plato, to comprehend the human psyche as a whole? In the past century, however, it seems to me that our discipline has become divided, some might say fragmented, even, into increasingly narrow specializations, and the ideal of comprehending the ‘whole’ seems both lost and impossible. Indeed, philosopher Gilbert Ryle argued for the “abandonment of the notion that ‘psychology’ is the name of a unitary inquiry or tree of inquiries” (Ryle, p.305, 1949).

This is potentially dangerous. Psychology may become so fragmented that researchers risk no longer being able or willing to see the discipline in a comprehensive, purposeful manner. This arguably places our field at a critical time in its development: at what point do we attempt to tie various sub-fields together? Equally important, especially for graduate students, is the question of whether a successful career requires ultra-specialization.

New graduate students aiming for a research career quickly learn that success requires finding some minute, understudied problem, and becoming the go-to person on that subject. Perhaps this contention is accurate; the days of the grand theorists, such as Freud, Skinner, and Rogers, all of whom

sought to understand human nature, really are over and graduate students are condemned to pursue a hyper-focused sub-discipline of psychology.

To say this is not to fall into a “renaissance-man syndrome” in which we foolishly believe we can know or understand all that psychological research has to offer. Attempting to synthesize the many ideas within psychology requires collaboration between a variety of disciplines; it does not require knowledge of the entire field on the part of one researcher.

Some researchers, however, are looking to big theories to tie together a wide range of empirical evidence. For instance, Tooby and Cosmides’ evolutionary psychology has been praised for its ability to explain a wide range of human behaviours. Indeed, it attempts to “assemble out of the disjointed, fragmentary, and mutually contradictory human disciplines a single, logically integrated research framework” (Tooby & Cosmides, 2005, p.5).

Of course, this theory may not be the big integrative theory; but it is an example of an impressive step in the right direction. Furthermore, the value of such a theory rests on the assumption that a large, integrative theory is more useful than ‘smaller’ theories in individual sub-fields. Regardless, at the graduate level, perhaps students should not despair. A career spent pulling ideas together is, in my view, as laudable as one

spent carving out a niche. Arguably, if the field of psychology is to move forward, we must begin to bring together our diverse sub-disciplines. Otherwise, psychology may not, in fact, deserve to be considered a “unitary tree of inquiries.”

References

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