

## COMMENT

# Achieving a Unified Clinical Science Requires a Meta-Theoretical Solution: Comment on Melchert (2016)

Gregg Henriques  
James Madison University

Timothy Melchert's vision for a unified clinical science that transcends the specific theoretical orientations and is grounded in the science of human psychology is a laudable goal. However, his solution to achieve this goal via reliance on evolutionary theory, neuroscience, and empirically verifiable research findings is not sufficient. The way forward is to recognize that the field of psychology is fragmented and lacks a clear meta-theoretical perspective. Conceptual work is needed to develop such a perspective, which can then allow for clearly defining the field and effectively integrating and assimilating the key concepts from the various theoretical orientations into a coherent whole.

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My reaction to Timothy Melchert's (2016) article "Leaving Behind Our Preparadigmatic Past: Professional Psychology as a Unified Clinical Science" was mixed. I applaud Melchert's call for professional psychology to be grounded in and informed by the science of human psychology (see, e.g., Henriques & Sternberg, 2004). I also agree that the competing theoretical orientations in professional psychology (i.e., behavioral, cognitive, humanistic, and psychodynamic) are not adequate in isolation and that the answer moving forward will come in the form of an integrative perspective. As Melchert noted, it is indeed a curious fact that programs and doctoral students get to choose which theoretical orientation to operate from, as if the model of human psychology one uses as a professional is similar to choosing a preferred flavor of ice cream.

But the idea that professional psychology should be based on the science of human psychology does not alone make the case that it *now* should be so. It should be so only if the science functions as a coherently organized body of knowledge that provides a theory of the person, a theory of psychopathology, and a theory of psychological change processes. This is where I disagree with Melchert (2016). He argued a revolution has taken place in the behavioral and neurosciences, such that "the current scientific understand-

ing of human psychology is now fundamentally different from many of the standard approaches" (p. 486). As exemplars, he cited evolutionary theory (encapsulated by Paul MacLean's, 1967, triune brain theory and Dawkins's, 1976, selfish gene theory) and the emergence of functional magnetic resonance images in the 1990s, which, along with other advances in neuroscience, have allowed for determining that consciousness "arise[s] from the interplay from a wide variety of neural structures" (p. 490). From these and other unspecified advances, Melchert argued that "knowledge of the inextricably intertwined biopsychosocial domains of functioning" (p. 491) provides professional psychologists with a "single, unified theoretical orientation" (p. 490).

It is worth noting that Melchert's (2016) cited examples have, at least in their broad forms, already been included in professional training programs. Every major perspective in psychology currently accepts evolutionary theory. Every major perspective accepts the idea that psychological processes are mediated in some way by neural structures. Every training program is also required to teach students about the biological, learning and developmental, and social and cultural bases of behavior (i.e., they are already "biopsychosocial"). And all American Psychological Association-approved programs require psychologists to adopt an evidence-based approach, an aspect of which means consulting the best available research when providing assessment and intervention. Thus, one can argue that, in many ways, the field very much exists along the lines of how Melchert claimed it should.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gregg Henriques, Department of Graduate Psychology, James Madison University, 216 Johnston Hall, 800 South Main Street, Harrisonburg, VA 22807. E-mail: [henriqgx@jmu.edu](mailto:henriqgx@jmu.edu)

The central novel claim of Melchert's (2016) argument is that it is time to give up the theoretical orientations and replace them with experimentally verified findings. But Melchert offered no such list of conditions or treatments, nor did he tell us how the empirical science of psychology resolves key controversies, such as the great psychotherapy debate (Wampold, 2001), which tends to pit practitioners who operate from different theoretical orientations against one another with no clear winner. Melchert also acknowledged that, although the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA, 2013) has innumerable weaknesses, the science of psychopathology has not advanced beyond it. It seems that if truly revolutionary advances in the science of psychology have taken place, practitioners would be in a position to transcend psychiatry's symptom-based classification model. Should they focus more on cognitions, emotions, unconscious defenses, learned habits, or family systems in treating psychopathology? Stripped of the theoretical orientations, the current science is largely silent on this kind of question. A review of a Psychology 101 textbook allows for additional clarity about why the theoretical orientations remain. The science of human psychology does not offer a holistic theory of the person, of human change processes, or of psychopathology. Rather, it offers a list of empirical findings, arranged in a piecemeal fashion.

So what is the best direction going forward? As one who directs an APA-approved combined-integrated doctoral program and who has proposed a unified theory of psychology (Henriques, 2011), I recommend a solution to achieve Melchert's (2016) goal that involves first identifying "the problem of psychology" (Henriques, 2008, p. 731). This problem is the fact the field of psychology resists clear definition because there lacks an effective meta-theoretical vision that defines key terms, concepts, and categories (such as life, mind, culture, consciousness, self, and behavior). To remedy this problem, I proposed the Tree of Knowledge System (Henriques, 2003), which is a framework that clearly defines and relates the physical, biological, psychological, and social dimensions of existence. It is from such a framework that one can assimilate and integrate the key concepts from behaviorism, cognitivism, emotion-focused therapy, and the psychodynamic approach grounded in the science of human psychology.

As an example of how this is accomplished, consider character adaptation systems theory (Henriques, 2016), which builds off the Tree of Knowledge System to link modern theories of personality with integrative visions of psychotherapy. It achieves this via the explication of five systems of character adaptation: (a) the habit system, (b) the

experiential system, (c) the relationship system, (d) the defensive system, and (e) the justification system. These systems of character adaptation directly correspond to the primary emphases of the major individual psychotherapy paradigms. The behavioral approach corresponds to the habit system, the neohumanistic emotion-focused approach corresponds to the experiential system, the modern psychodynamic approach corresponds to the relationship and defensive systems, and the cognitive approach corresponds to the justification system. In short, the unified theory allows one to put the theoretical orientations together rather than jettison them completely.

The effective meta-theoretical organization of the field is a central step that needs to be incorporated into Melchert's (2016) vision for it to be ultimately realized. It is only after the problem of psychology is solved and the science of human psychology clearly and consensually is articulated that one can begin to effectively leave preparadigmatic ways behind and operate from a truly unified view.

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