

# Evolving From Methodological to Conceptual Unification

Gregg Henriques  
James Madison University

The absence of a philosophical system that can effectively address the profound problems that exist at the heart of psychology has resulted in the discipline becoming increasingly defined and unified simply by its commitment to the scientific method. This article articulates why unification via method is a weak intellectual solution and explains how the Unified Theory (Henriques, 2011) provides the needed framework so that the field can evolve from its current unity via method to a more mature conceptual unity that clearly defines psychology, grounds it in a scientific worldview, and assimilates and integrates its key insights into a coherent whole.

*Keywords:* Unified Theory, unifying psychology, theory of psychology, worldview

The “Unified Theory” (Henriques, 2003, 2004a, 2005, 2008, 2011) offers psychologists a new way to approach their field. Currently, psychology is presented to students as a vast menagerie of interesting and relevant topics, and modern introductory texts share the many disparate facts and findings that psychologists have uncovered regarding human behavior: Interested about differences between men and women? Psychologists have studied the extent to which men and women have different sexual interests and relationship preferences. Want to know more about perceptions or attitudes about race and ethnicity? Psychologists have found that many people have positive or unbiased explicit attitudes about racial minorities, but have more biased implicit (i.e., subconscious) attitudes. Curious about human suffering and psychopathology? Psychologists have explored the genetic, neurophysiological, cognitive, and environmental factors that contribute to depression.

Given how relevant and “experience near” these topics are to students, it is not surprising that psychology is such a popular undergraduate major. Yet as students dive more deeply into the field, it is not at all uncommon for them to begin to question what it is, exactly, that connects the dots and unites the discipline (cf., Richards, Fowers, & Guigon, 1999). These students are becoming aware of “the problem of psychology” (Henriques, 2008, 2011), which is the fact that the field connects to many different areas but is incredibly nebulous at its core and has, historically, defied clear definition. Nevertheless, the field continues to grow—even flourish by some standards. What, then, gives it its form? Many psychologists think of the field as being unified by its commitment to its scientific methods. For example, in their review of the central role that quantitative training has in psychology doctoral programs, Aiken, West, and Millsap (2008) note that the “common training in quantitative methodology may be *the one aspect of doctoral education that continues to unify the discipline of psychology*” (p. 32, emphasis added). Stam (2004, p. 1261) similarly noted that modern psychologists are unified by the scientific method, and he

characterized the situation as follows: “Where the fundamental descriptions of the very phenomena of the discipline continue to plague psychologists the methodology courses have become institutionalized beacons of the field.”

To appreciate the extent to which many psychologists are committed to methodology, consider the clinical science movement in professional psychology (Baker, McFall, & Shoham, 2008). Proponents of this movement see essentially no distinction between science and practice, and argue that all professional psychologists should first and foremost be trained as scientists. But what do they mean by science? Here the authors are explicit. Rather than consisting of a set of ideas, theoretical propositions, or even a cumulative knowledge base, the authors define science as a commitment to researching claims via the scientific method.

Unification via method, for the reasons I articulate below, is far from ideal. Facts are theory laden, and if psychology is to become a mature science, the facts uncovered by the scientific method must ultimately be placed into a coherent explanatory network. This is what the Unified Theory provides for the field; it shows that the discipline can be clearly defined, and that the key insights from the major paradigms assimilated and integrated into a coherent whole (Henriques, 2011). This was not a foregone conclusion. It was definitely possible that with the right framework the conclusion would have been that psychology was really best thought of as a “collection of studies” (Koch, 1993). Indeed, the history of the field up to this point has been one of increasing conceptual fragmentation. But this trend is simply a function of the fact that there has been no philosophical system or worldview that could solve the problem of psychology.

## Unification via the Scientific Method Is a Weak Intellectual Solution for Psychology

The province of human behavior is so vast and there have been so many attempts to understand it that emphasizing a scientific approach is indeed one way to characterize one’s approach relative to others. The scientific attitude is one of skepticism, openness, careful logical argument, and empirical observation and measurement, and it also involves a rejection of traditional authority, faith, or subjective revelation. Dember and Jenkins (1970), for example,

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gregg Henriques, Associate Professor, Director, C-I Doc Program, Department of Graduate Psychology, 216 Johnston Hall, MSC 7401, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA 22807. E-mail: [henriqgx@jmu.edu](mailto:henriqgx@jmu.edu)

contrast a scientific approach with that of poetry, literature, and theology, stating that a scientist's "aim is to create a map of some segment of the world—a world that, he [sic] assumes, exists outside his own private, subjective experience" (p. 16).

Although a scientific approach to human behavior is distinctive at one level, unifying psychology via the commitment to research methodology fails for a host of reasons. For starters, it fails at the level of specificity. There are many other disciplines that employ the scientific method to explain some aspect of human behavior, including, for example, economists, anthropologists, biologists, kinesiologists, sociologists, neuroscientists, and political scientists. Second, it fails at the level of sensitivity. Recall Aiken, West, and Millsap's (2008) claim that quantitative training might be the one aspect that unifies the field. Yet the authors only surveyed PhD programs in psychology. They did not include programs that conferred the Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) degree because such programs tend to emphasize the notion that the practice of professional psychology is a different enterprise than the researching of facts. But the very existence of such programs undermines their claim that psychology is unified by its training in research methods.

A final reason is that the facts derived from the scientific method must be interpreted by conceptual frameworks to have meaning and applicability. As Machado, Lourenco, and Silva (2000) explain, facts (and the methods used to derive them) represent only one point on what they characterize as "psychology's epistemic triangle." Concepts and theories make up the other two points, and these authors argued that excessive reliance on methods and a failure to attend to the interplay between facts, theories, and concepts leads to the proliferation of information with no genuine growth in cumulative knowledge. In a similar vein, Koch (1981) argued that the ultimate consequence of blindly applying scientific methods without a coherent conceptual framework was a syndrome of "ameaningful" thought.

The bottom line is that the scientific method is not an end itself, but is rather a means to an end. Psychologists use the scientific method because it supposedly leads to new and more accurate knowledge, or better and better maps, to use Dember and Jenkins' (1970) term. Why, then, has psychology more or less landed on methodological rather than conceptual unification? The answer is straightforward. As a discipline that committed itself simultaneously to being a naturalistic science, and one concerned with human consciousness and the nature of the human condition, and the application of scientific knowledge toward human betterment, psychology found itself confronted with many of the deepest and most challenging philosophical issues imaginable. And there simply was no philosophical system that could solve the complex problems that were raised. Questions about the relationship between the mental and the physical, scientific facts and human values, free will and causality, and the nature of animal and human consciousness could not be effectively framed and addressed. Consequently, the field retreated to its methods, which was easy to do because, in many ways, the field was defined by its methods in the first place. But methodology per se doesn't resolve the issue, and this gives us the current state of the field—a vast menagerie of interesting facts with absolutely no big picture map of how these facts fit together into a coherent explanatory framework.

## Grounding Psychology in a Scientific Worldview

The Unified Theory moves the field beyond a commitment to the scientific method and toward a psychology grounded in a coherent, scientific worldview. What might such a worldview look like? In *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, E. O. Wilson (1998) offered one vision of how all knowledge might be organized into a single overarching framework. Although Wilson's work was an important step forward, it struggled on several grounds, including a failure to address the problem of psychology (Henriques, 2008; see also Quackenbush, 2005, 2008). Via the Tree of Knowledge System (see Figure 1), the Unified Theory offers a new consilient vision of scientific knowledge that solves the problem of psychology, and explicitly depicts how the domain of psychological knowledge exists in relation to the other special sciences.

It is here, rather than with research methodology, measurement theory, and data analysis, that instruction about human psychology should start. Humans are part of an unfolding wave of Energy-Information, sparked 13.7 billion years ago in an event known as the Big Bang. And students should also be clear that there have been four great emergences since the beginning time. The Big Bang gave birth to Matter, the first dimension of complexity, which is studied by physical scientists. Life, sparked on earth just less than four billion years ago, is the second dimension of complexity and is studied by biological scientists. At around the time of the Cambrian explosion 600 million years ago, a new type of multicellular creature emerged that moved around in its environment. The capacity for movement gave rise to the nervous system, which, after genetic systems, is a second novel information processing system. The nervous system gives rise to Mind, the third dimension of complexity and the province of basic psychological scientists. (Yes, this means that basic questions about psychology extend far down the phylogenetic chain).

The last hundred thousand years has seen the full flowering of the fourth dimension of complexity, Culture, which is studied by many social scientists, including human psychologists. Once again the radical shift in complexity was driven by the evolution of a novel information processing system, this time symbolic syntactical language. Between 60,000 and 30,000 years ago there was an explosion of cultural artifacts, such as carved statues, artwork in caves, and burials with ornamentation. And the pace of change since has only accelerated. Agriculture set the stage for civilizations, and technology exploded in complexity. Systems of belief emerged that coordinated the behaviors of huge populations of people, setting the stage for the evolution of human knowledge.

From this meta-physical-bio-psycho-social perspective, the Unified Theory follows the trail mapped by the Tree of Knowledge System to the current situation of teaching students about psychology. The Unified Theory explains that human language systems became functionally organized into large-scale systems of justification that provide meaning, legitimize action, and coordinate human populations. As societies have grown in complexity, so too have human justification systems, which have branched into different domains such as religion, law, and philosophy (Shaffer, 2008). Several hundred years ago a new method for constructing justification systems emerged, called science. Science, then, is a kind of justification system—but it is a very unique one. Built on the value of objective evidence, the scientific method has allowed humans to develop increasingly accurate models of complexity

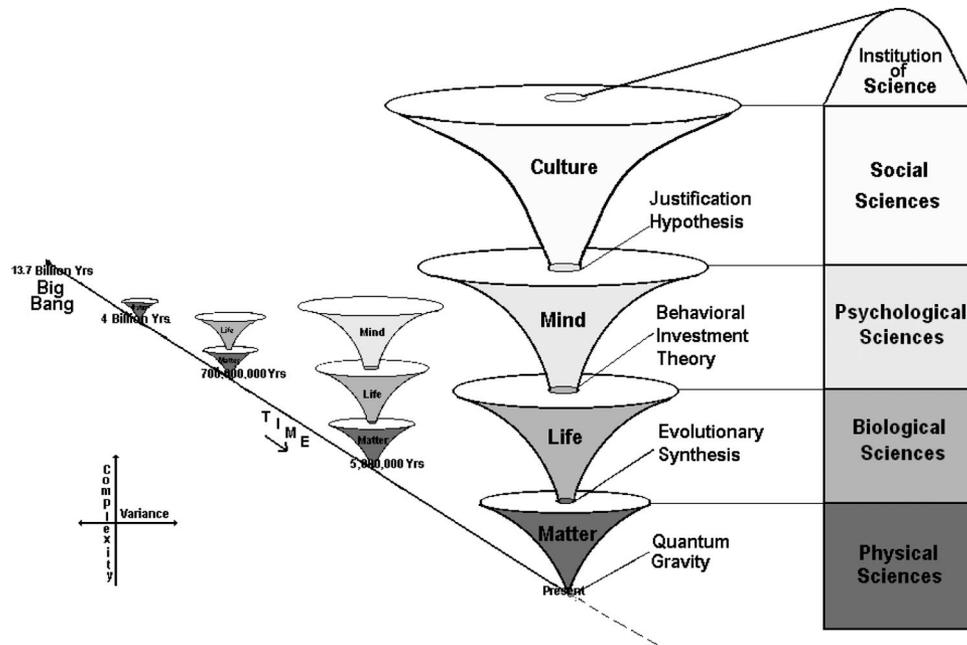


Figure 1. The Tree of Knowledge System.

and change, and this has given birth to new, previously unimaginable technologies, and greater and greater knowledge about the world.

### Defining Psychology and Assimilating and Integrating Key Insights Into a Coherent Whole

The Tree of Knowledge System provides a clear way to understand and define the field of psychology (Henriques, 2004a). Importantly, it ultimately divides the field into three broad domains: (1) basic psychological science, (2) human psychology, and (3) professional psychology. To understand the division between basic psychology and human psychology, return to the Tree of Knowledge depiction of dimensions of complexity and note that Mind and Culture are fundamentally different dimensions of complexity. The basic science of psychology is a naturalistic science and corresponds to ‘Mind,’ which in this system means the behavior of an animal as a whole, mediated by the nervous system, which produces a functional effect on the animal-environment relationship. Human psychology is a separate branch because via language and justification, individual human behavior is part of and is greatly influenced by culture.

This division then leads to the question of whether the various brain-behavior perspectives that correspond to the mental dimension of complexity can be integrated. The Unified Theory says yes and offers Behavioral Investment Theory (BIT) as the solution to the Life-to-Mind joint point (Henriques, 2004b). Technically, BIT provides a way to merge B.F. Skinner’s behavioral selection with computational neuroscience and ethology (Henriques, 2003). In more straightforward terms, BIT frames animal behaviors in terms of invested work effort, specifically expenditures of time and energy calculated in terms of costs and benefits. In this light, the nervous system is seen as an action control system that computes

the investment of work effort on a cost–benefit ratio that evolves intergenerationally via evolutionary processes and is further molded via experience during the life of the animal. BIT is grounded in six foundational principles, which are as follows: (1) energy economics; (2) evolution; (3) genetics; (4) computational-control; (5) learning; and (6) development.

Elsewhere (Henriques, 2011, Chapter 3) I have elaborated how BIT provides the framework for integrating evolutionary, neuroscience, behavioral science, and cognitive science perspectives. Here, to give a flavor for how BIT assimilates and integrates key psychological phenomena, consider the following schematic of the architecture of the human mind derived from the implications of BIT (see Figure 2). Directly consistent with the work of the famed Russian psychologist A. N. Leont’ev (1981), BIT posits a four-layered view of mental processes that include the following: (1) an elementary sensory motor level characterized by animals that react automatically and immediately to physical stimuli (e.g., worms and jellyfish); (2) a perceptual-motivational-emotional level characterized by animals that react to their perceptions of objects and situations; (3) an imaginative level stage, which is characterized by the capacity to mentally manipulate relations between objects in the environment; and finally (4) linguistic justification, which is characterized by human self-consciousness, language, and social and analytical reasoning.

The fourth level in Figure 2 brings us to another central claim made by the Unified Theory, which is that human psychology must be conceptualized as a unique and separate branch of psychology. Indeed, according to the Unified Theory, courses and majors in psychology should be explicitly either basic psychology or human psychology. Whereas BIT provides the framework for conceptually uniting the various brain-behavior paradigms in the basic psychological sciences, the Unified Theory offers the Justification

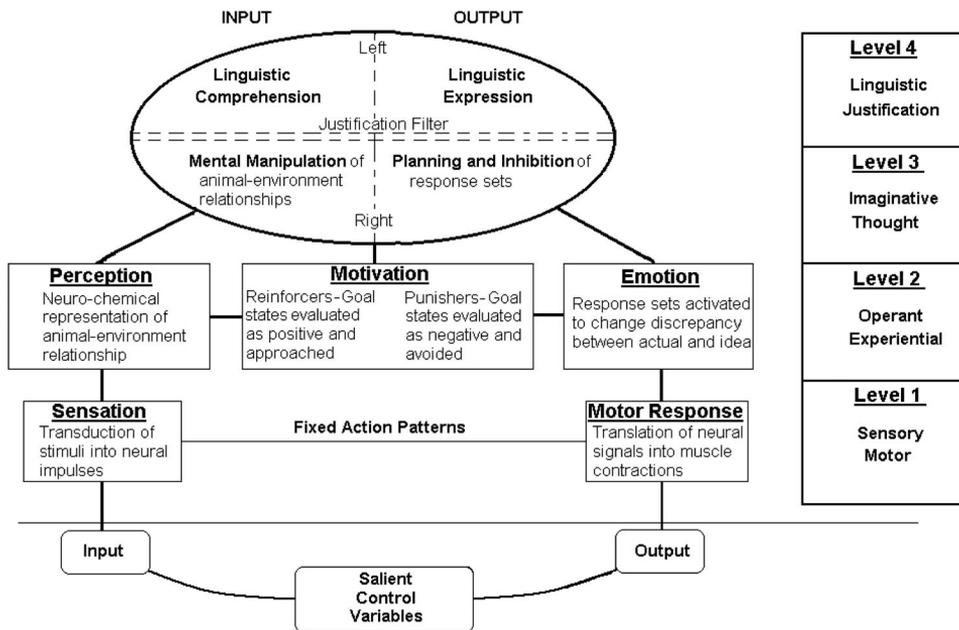


Figure 2. The architecture of the human mind.

Hypothesis (JH; Henriques, 2003) to provide the framework for understanding the joint point and division between Mind and Culture. The JH links the evolutionary adaptive problem of social justification, which emerged because of symbolic language, with the current organization of the human self-consciousness system and the structure of large scale justification systems that organize human societies. In doing so, it integrates many vast and historically disparate domains of inquiry, including modern psychodynamic conceptions of defense mechanisms, brain hemispheric specialization, cognitive dissonance, attributions and self-serving

biases, research on the forces that organize and influence self-knowledge, research on implicit and explicit attitudes, research on reason giving, research on reasoning, and the emergence and impact of large-scale norms and cultural traditions (Henriques, 2011, Chapter 5).

The combination of BIT and the JH provides for a rather straightforward map of human consciousness, shown in Figure 3. Three broad domains of consciousness are identified: (1) the Experiential Self; (2) the Private Self-Consciousness System (the Private Self for short); and (3) the Public Self. The experiential self

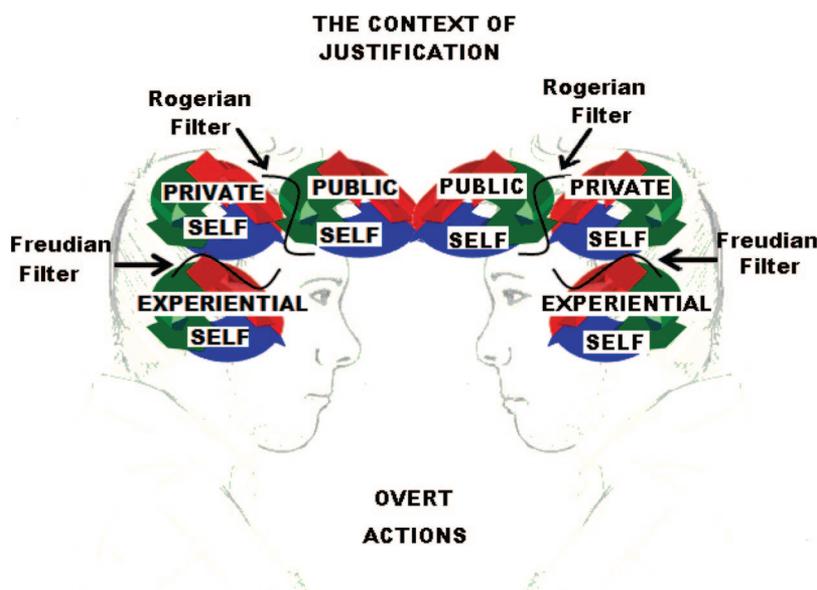


Figure 3. The tripartite model of human consciousness.

refers to the sentient aspects of consciousness, which can be loosely mapped to the first three levels depicted in Figure 2, including level 1 raw sensations (e.g., seeing brown), level 2 perceptions that relate to goals and generate emotions (e.g., seeing a bear moving toward you), and level 3 imaginings (e.g., planning on your escape route).

The two other domains of human consciousness represent the two separable domains of justification, the private and the public. The private self is the center of self-reflective awareness in adults and is made up most immediately of the internal dialogue that weaves a narrative of what is happening and why. It is a second order awareness system, one that is influenced by, translates, and feeds back onto the experiential system. The public self is a mixture of how we want to be seen and how we imagine we are seen by others (although both may be quite different than how one's image is actually received by others).

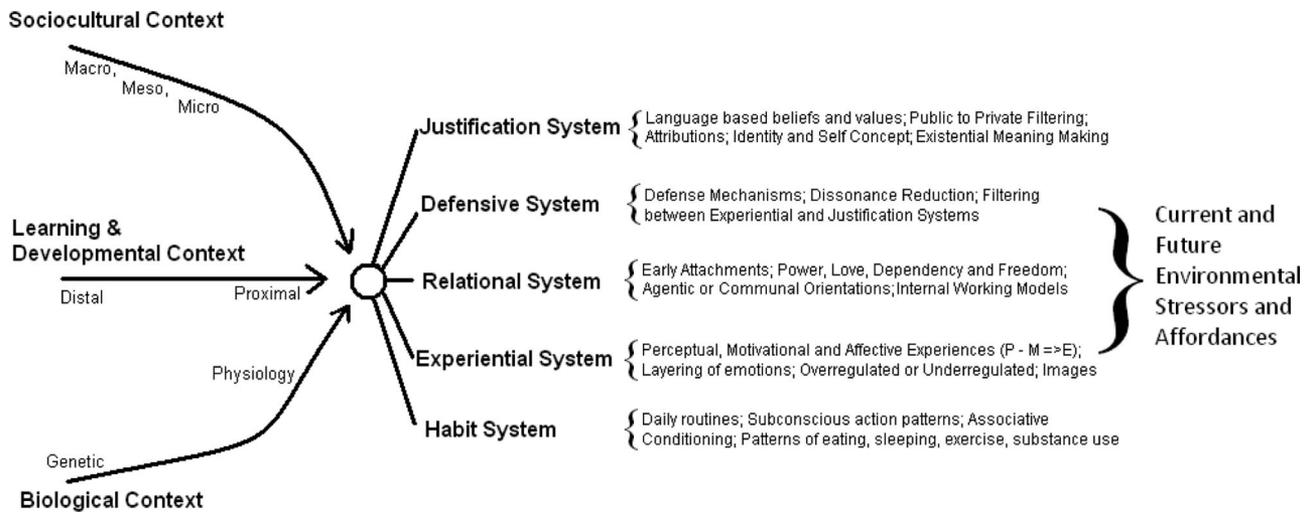
Inside each individual in Figure 3 are two filters, labeled the Freudian and the Rogerian. The Freudian filter exists between the experiential self and the private self and refers to the process by which unjustifiable or painful images and impulses are filtered out and/or are reinterpreted to be consistent with the individual's conscious justification system. It is called the "Freudian" filter because the dynamic relationship between self-conscious thoughts and subconscious feelings was (and still is) a central focus in both classical psychoanalysis and modern psychodynamic theory. The filtering that takes place between the private and the public self is called the Rogerian filter because, in relationship to early psychoanalytic thinking, Rogers shifted the focus more on conscious experiences and here-and-now interpersonal processes. He also emphasized that the root of much psychopathology was found in how judgmental others would stunt the development of one's "true self." This is because, fearing judgment, individuals filter out their true desires and put on a mask—a "social self"—often to appease (and, sometimes, to deceive) influential others.

Although some students study psychology for the description of human behavior it affords, many others think of psychology more as a profession that helps people. This raises another crucial distinction that needs to be made, that between the science and the profession. This division is required because the mission, goals, and competencies of professional psychology are fundamentally different than that of the science (Henriques & Sternberg, 2004). Whereas the goal of the scientific psychologist is the description and explanation of animal and human behavior, the goal of the professional psychologist is to enhance human betterment and well-being.

Concepts and theories are the bridge that links research and practice, and the Unified Theory provides professional psychology with a theoretical and conceptual frame that effectively maps the discipline, clears up the current psychotherapy tower of Babel, and allows the key insights from across myriad perspectives and traditions to be coherently integrated into a whole (Henriques, 2011; see also Melchert, 2011). For example, behaviorists have historically tended to think and focus on habits, whereas humanistic practitioners have focused on core emotions, psychodynamic practitioners have focused on relationship patterns and psychological defenses, and cognitive and narrative therapists emphasize semantic meaning making. The Unified Theory provides a way to understand how these are all component systems of adaptation that can be effectively woven together (Henriques & Stout, 2012). Figure 4 provides a diagram that maps five systems of adaptation, which directly correspond to emphases of change from the major individual psychotherapy paradigms.

**Conclusion**

The methodologies that address factual questions relevant to psychology are, of course, crucial. But methodology alone is helpless in linking the disparate facts discovered by psychologists



**The conceptualization weaves a narrative together from these domains that tells a story of how the person got to where they are and what will influence the trajectory in an adaptive as opposed to maladaptive way.**

Figure 4. The unified approach to conceptualizing people in psychotherapy.

into an overarching conception of context that provides the students of the discipline a map of the key variables in a manner that effectively addresses the deep questions of our field. It is this gap that the Unified Theory seeks to fill. Instead of lumping questions of basic psychology with human self-consciousness, the Unified Theory clarifies why and how these ought to be separated. Instead of introducing disparate lines of inquiry as being joined only by reliance on scientific method, the Unified Theory provides a coherent framework in which to embed and connect these lines into a web of understanding. And instead of competing midlevel paradigms (e.g., evolutionary vs. cultural psychology or cognitive vs. psychodynamic therapy), the Unified Theory allows for researchers, theorists, and practitioners to see the whole. Via its capacity to connect the dots, the Unified Theory ultimately enables the discipline to evolve from the current weak unification via method to a healthier, more mature conceptual unification.

### References

- Aiken, L. S., West, S. G., & Millsap, R. E. (2008). Doctoral training in statistics, measurement, and methodology in psychology. *American Psychologist* 63, 32–50. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.63.1.32
- Baker, T. B., McFall, R. M., & Shoham, V. (2008). Current status and future prospects of clinical psychology: Toward a scientifically principled approach to mental and behavioral health care. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 9, 67–103.
- Dember, W. N., & Jenkins, J. J. (1970). *General psychology: Modeling behavior and experience*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Henriques, G. R. (2003). The tree of knowledge system and the theoretical unification of psychology. *Review of General Psychology*, 7, 150–182. doi:10.1037/1089-2680.7.2.150
- Henriques, G. R. (2004a). Psychology defined. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 60, 1207–1221. doi:10.1002/jclp.20061
- Henriques, G. R. (2004b). The development of the unified theory and the future of psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy Bulletin*, 39, 16–21.
- Henriques, G. R. (2005). Toward a useful mass movement. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61, 121–139. doi:10.1002/jclp.20094
- Henriques, G. R. (2008). The problem of psychology and the integration of human knowledge: Contrasting Wilson's Consilience with the Tree of Knowledge System. *Theory & Psychology*, 18, 731–755. doi:10.1177/0959354308097255
- Henriques, G. R. (2011). *A new unified theory of psychology*. New York, NY: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-1-4614-0058-5
- Henriques, G. R., & Sternberg, R. J. (2004). Unified professional psychology: Implications for combined-integrated doctoral training programs. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 60, 1051–1063. doi:10.1002/jclp.20034
- Henriques, G. R., & Stout, J. (2012). A unified approach to conceptualizing people in psychotherapy. *Journal of Unified Psychotherapy and Clinical Science*, 1, 37–60.
- Koch, S. (1981). The nature and limits of psychological knowledge: Lessons of a century qua 'science'. *American Psychologist*, 36, 257–269. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.36.3.257
- Koch, S. (1993). "Psychology" or "the psychological studies"? *American Psychologist*, 48, 902–904. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.48.8.902
- Leont'ev, A. (1981). *Problems of the development of mind* (English translation). Moscow, Russia: Progress Press. (Russian original 1947)
- Machado, A., Lourenco, O., & Silva, F. J. (2000). Facts, concepts, and theories: The shape of psychology's epistemic triangle. *Behavior and Philosophy*, 28, 1–40. Retrieved from <http://webs.psi.uminho.pt/labpsi/papers.htm>
- Melchert, T. (2011). *Foundations of professional psychology: The end of theoretical orientations and the emergence of the biopsychosocial approach*. Waltham, MA; Elsevier.
- Quackenbush, S. W. (2005). Remythologizing culture: Narrativity, justification and the politics of personalization. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61, 67–80. doi:10.1002/jclp.20091
- Quackenbush, S. W. (2008). Theoretical unification as a practical project: Kant and the Tree of Knowledge System. *Theory & Psychology*, 18, 757–777. doi:10.1177/0959354308097256
- Richardson, F. C., Fowers, B. J., & Guignon, C. B. (1999). *Re-envisioning psychology: Ethics and modern values in practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Shaffer, L. S. (2008). Religion as a large-scale justification system: Does the Justification Hypothesis explain animistic attribution? *Theory & Psychology*, 18, 779–799. doi:10.1177/0959354308097257
- Stam, H. J. (2004). Unifying psychology: Epistemological act or disciplinary maneuver? *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 60, 1259–1262. doi:10.1002/jclp.20069
- Wilson, E. O. (1998). *Consilience: The unity of knowledge*. New York, NY: Knopf, Inc.

Received April 4, 2013

Accepted April 9, 2013 ■