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Unified Theory

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Developed by Gregg Henriques, the unified theory offers a way to theoretically unify the major approaches to the field of psychotherapy (e.g., modern psychodynamic, humanistic, and cognitive-behavioral) into a coherent whole. It achieves this synthesis by applying a set of ideas that, Henriques argues, defines the science of human psychology and integrates it to the art and practice of psychotherapy. Central to this approach to psychotherapy is adaptive living—that is, when an individual maximizes valued states of being, given his or her capacities, needs, and situation. Related to adaptive living, much of personality can be described in terms of systems of character adaptation, which are the unique and specific ways in which individuals adjust and respond to situations in their lives.

According to Henriques's unified theory, there are five systems of character adaptation: (1) the habit system, (2) the experiential system, (3) the relationship system, (4) the defensive system, and (5) the justification system. The major systems of psychotherapy correspond with these systems of adaptation. Specifically, the behavioral tradition corresponds to the habit system, the experiential and emotion-focused traditions correspond to the experiential system, the psychodynamic tradition corresponds to the relational and defensive systems, and the justification system corresponds to the cognitive and existential traditions.

The five systems of character adaptation set the stage for organizing the unified approach to psychotherapy, which Henriques argues consists of three major components. The first is the quality of the therapeutic relationship, which refers to the extent to which the client experiences the therapist as competent, ethical, and kind, and results in therapeutic flow, that is, the sense that there is a useful, meaningful exchange during the work. The second major component of psychotherapy is the formulation or conceptualization, which refers to the shared narrative of the nature of a client's problems and the goals of the therapy. This involves the therapist understanding the client's valued states of being and the nature of the distress, and an analysis of the systems of adaptation in the current and historical context. The final component refers to the interventions and tasks that are designed to foster achieving the goals, which should be assessed and used to determine the future course of action.

Historical Context

As psychotherapy began to gain significant traction in the 1950s and 1960s, it was initially dominated by “single”-school approaches, such as psychoanalytic, behavioral, or humanistic. Each school held different views of human nature, had different philosophies of science, were grounded in the science of psychology in different and often contradictory ways, and were largely based on what the respective theorists felt were the most effective ways to achieve change. Students were educated in the context of each school, and the general consensus was that each approach was a [p. 1022 ↓] separate, distinct paradigm and that practitioners must adopt only one approach.

Over the past 25 years, interest in and acceptance of eclectic and integrative approaches to psychotherapy have grown such that currently most mental health practitioners describe their orientation as eclectic or integrative. The unified theory was born out of the psychotherapy integration movement but represents a new phase of unification instead of integration. Henriques developed the unified theory to offer researchers, theorists, and practitioners a way to coherently assimilate and integrate previously disparate lines of thought into a comprehensive, holistic picture of the discipline and its relation to other fields, thus setting the stage for a general, unified approach to psychotherapy.

Theoretical Underpinnings

There are several key theoretical ideas that are combined in unified theory, which also form the basis of the major concepts used by therapists. These theoretical concepts include the tree of knowledge (ToK) system, behavioral investment theory (BIT), the influence matrix (IM), and the justification hypothesis (JH).

The ToK System

Historically, there has been no overarching metatheory of psychology that considers evolutionary perspectives and links among various dimensions of nature. To fill this

gap, the unified theory offers the ToK system, which depicts the evolution of complexity as consisting of four dimensions (Matter, Life, Mind, and Culture), which correspond to the behavior of four classes of objects (material objects, organisms, animals, and humans), and four classes of science (physical, biological, psychological, and social). Each dimension on the ToK system is linked at a “joint point.” For example, the modern evolutionary synthesis, the merger of Darwin’s natural selection with genetics, is the Matter-to-Life joint point. If this is valid, it suggests that there should be a joint point between Life and Mind and between Mind and Culture. Indeed, two of the other three pieces of the unified theory, BIT (Life to Mind) and the JH (Mind to Culture), fill in these gaps and are bridged by the IM.

Behavioral Investment Theory

BIT is the joint point between Life and Mind and provides the framework for understanding mental behavior. BIT merges B. F. Skinner’s concept of behavioral selection with cognitive neuro-science. The basic idea of BIT is that the nervous system has evolved as a value system that computes increasingly complex and flexible behaviors. BIT consists of six fundamental principles that are generally well-known in animal behavioral science but are often not effectively communicated to psychologists: (1) energy economics, (2) evolution, (3) behavioral genetics, (4) computational control, (5) learning, and (6) development. With regard to the five systems of character adaptation, BIT explicitly grounds the habit system in that it incorporates the foundational structure of the nervous system and how it habituates and sensitizes to new stimuli. It also provides a foundational framework for understanding the experiential system, which is organized by positive and negative emotional states that orient an individual to approach benefits and avoid costs.

The Influence Matrix

The IM is an extension of BIT to human social motivational and emotional processes. The IM maps the architecture underlying the way humans process social information, develop social goals, and are guided by emotions in navigating the social environment.

It corresponds to the relationship system of character adaptation. The first foundational assumption of the IM is that humans are motivated toward the experience of relational value, which is the extent to which they feel known and valued by others. From an evolutionary perspective, relational value is key because it is an evolved indicator of social influence; thus, it serves as a barometer of the degree to which others will act in accordance with an individual's interests. Relational value as a signal of social influence reflects a basic, primary need and desire. It is, of course, not the only foundational motivation humans have, but it is theorized to be a central one.

The second key aspect of the IM is that there are three conceptually distinct dimensions underlying the computation of high social influence in adults: (1) *power* (dominance–submission), [p. 1023 ↓] (2) *love* (affiliation–hostility), and (3) *freedom* (autonomy–dependence). According to the IM, higher levels of relational value and social influence are associated with higher levels of power and affiliation and a healthy balance between autonomy and dependency. In contrast, lower levels of social influence are associated with hostile and submissive orientations and relative extremes of independence or dependence. The IM is central to understanding the unified theory because motives for social influence play a crucial role in how humans construct reasons for their behavior, which is the focus of the fourth and final piece of the unified theory.

The Justification Hypothesis

The JH is the Mind-to-Culture joint point on the ToK system, and it corresponds to the defensive and justification character adaptation systems. The JH provides a framework for understanding the nature of human self-consciousness and the evolution of human culture. The JH interprets both human self-consciousness and culture as *justification systems*. Justification systems refer to the ways in which humans use language to legitimize their thoughts, beliefs, and actions and make sense of their own reality.

The JH consists of three postulates. The first is that the evolution of language created a new and unique adaptive problem for our hominid ancestors, namely, the problem of social justification, which refers to the fact that humans became the first animal species in evolutionary history that had to justify why they did what they did. Because humans have always been social creatures, there is reason to believe that social justification

was an essential problem in our ancestral past. The second postulate of the JH is the claim that the human self-consciousness system functions as a justification system that filters out problematic images and feelings and constructs narratives for why an individual does what he or she does that take into account the individual's social context and relative degree of social influence. The third postulate is that the JH provides the basic framework for understanding and analyzing cultures. On a cultural level, justification systems provide the rules and patterns for acceptable behaviors. Such cultural justification systems offer beliefs and values about what is morally right and wrong and make claims about how individuals should organize their personal and public lives accordingly.

The JH, in combination with BIT, gives rise to a tripartite model of human consciousness: (1) the experiential self, (2) the private self-consciousness system, and (3) the public self. The experiential self refers to the sentient aspects of consciousness, which include raw sensations (e.g., seeing the color brown), perceptions that relate to goals and generate emotions (e.g., seeing a bear), and images and simulated actions (e.g., planning to escape). The other two domains of human consciousness represent the two separable domains of justification: (1) the private and (2) the public. The private self is the center of self-reflective awareness in adults and is made up 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 to the experiential system. The public self is a mixture of how individuals want to be seen and how they imagine they are seen by others (although both may be quite different from how an individual's image is actually received by others).

The relationship between the domains of consciousness is regulated by two filters: (1) the Freudian filter and (2) the Rogerian filter. 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 sometimes filtered out and/or 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 is a central focus in both classical psychoanalysis and modern psychodynamic theory. The filtering that takes place between the private and the public selves is called the Rogerian filter because, in relationship to early psychoanalytic thinking, Carl Rogers shifted the focus to conscious experiences and here-and-now

interpersonal processes. He also emphasized that the root of much psychopathology was found in how others can stunt the development of an individual's real or true self. According to Rogers, individuals, fearing the judgment of others, filter out their true desires and put on a mask—a social self—often to appease (and sometimes to deceive) others.

Major Concepts

The major concepts of the unified theory are intimately linked to the theoretical underpinnings described above. These concepts are best understood within the context of the theory and include the ToK system, BIT, the IM, and the JH, which have been already defined.

Techniques

The unified theory does not come with a prescribed set of techniques or procedures; rather, it emphasizes the establishment of a strong healing relationship between the therapist and the client within psychotherapy. This process may have many unique elements, depending on the situation, the presenting problem, the policy and social context, and the personalities of the individuals involved. The art of psychotherapy is found in recognizing these idiographic factors and in creating a relationship with good therapeutic flow.

The unified theory offers therapists, clients, and researchers a road map to developing effective interventions that incorporate personality, psychopathology, relationship processes, and other contextual variables like biological, developmental, and cultural dimensions. This map is called the unified approach to conceptualizing and is depicted in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1 The Unified Approach to Conceptualizing



Therapeutic Process

The unified theory views the therapeutic process as a developmental process whereby individuals enter therapy with a vague understanding that they want things to be different but are often not sure what they need to do or how to go about changing. Therapy thus fosters individuals moving from contemplating what and how they might change into more active change, which if successful results in attempting to maintain those changes. Therapy is not expected to be a clear linear process. Unified theory emphasizes the three key process variables of awareness, acceptance, and active change; the work of therapy can be understood as moving toward valued states of being via (1) becoming aware (i.e., of one's capacities, conflicts, needs, history, and situation), (2) accepting elements of being that cannot be controlled, and (3) actively learning new skills and ways of behaving that foster change.

See also [Assimilative Psychotherapy Integration](#); [Common Factors in Therapy](#); [Integral Psychotherapy](#); [Transtheoretical Model](#); [Unified Therapy](#)

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