

Toward a Theoretical Psychology:  
Should a Subdiscipline Be Formally Recognized?

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### Abstract

The purpose of the article is twofold: 1) promote careful consideration of a new subdiscipline called theoretical psychology, and 2) invite psychology's evaluation of its own scholarly and intellectual status. Increased signs of disciplinary fragmentation as well as threats to mainstream psychology's philosophy of science have presented challenges that call for thoughtful disciplinary discussion. We propose the formal recognition of a subdiscipline whose role is to facilitate this discussion--theoretical psychology. At the local level, theoretical psychologists should fill a role as consultants to their organization or department, similar to that of statisticians and methodologists. Those doing research and practice would consult with the theoretician about the types of explanations and methods they are employing to see if these approaches are coherent, hold hidden problems, and are appropriate to the assumptions being made. Many psychologists already perform these roles, using a variety of supporting journals, organizations, and institutions. These supports are briefly reviewed, along with anticipated objections to this role and possible considerations for training these professionals.

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This article responds affirmatively to the question posed in the title. Although we attempt to present the main arguments for and against the formal recognition of this subdiscipline, our view is that the arguments in favor far outweigh the arguments against. In short, we feel that this is an idea whose time has come. However, we are not naive enough to think that our proposal will not generate considerable controversy. On the contrary, the question of a theoretical subdiscipline raises all sorts of issues that go to the core of the discipline as a whole. Consequently, the question we raise is important to consider not only for the obvious reasons regarding the need for a new subdiscipline (or the need for subdisciplines at all), but also for the inevitable disciplinary self-evaluation this question engenders. From our perspective, this evaluation is precisely why a subdiscipline of theoretical psychology is needed.

We begin by attempting to situate the question historically. A historical question related to the title question is: Why has there not been a formally recognized subdiscipline of theoretical psychology to this point? As we will show, psychology's stake in being recognized as a science, as well as its particular philosophy of science, are important parts of the answer to this question. Another issue that appears to be embedded in the title question is: Why propose a subdiscipline of theoretical psychology at this point? We will attempt to demonstrate that the philosophy of science long embraced by the discipline, and perhaps even our disciplinary identity, is changing. Part of the purpose of theoretical psychology is to understand this change and to provide informed and formal discourse about what psychology may be changing to.

Furthermore, issues that psychology must confront in the current intellectual climate argue for a formal subdiscipline. Fragmentation in the discipline, trends toward the biologizing of psychology, and postmodern challenges to mainstream methods all

require thoughtful discussion. As we will describe, a crucial role for the theoretical psychologist is to facilitate this disciplinary discussion. At the local level, theoreticians should fill a role as consultants to their organization or department, similar to that of statisticians and methodologists. This paper will briefly review the current status of theoretical psychology in filling these roles, and the final sections of the paper will explore objections to this role as well as possible considerations for training professionals in this proposed subdiscipline.

### Situating the Question

Perhaps the first thing we should note is that there has always been a theoretical psychology of sorts. Theory has always seemed to be an important part of the discipline, from the presumably more rigorous learning and cognitive theories to the supposedly less rigorous explanations offered by personality theorists. The acknowledged founders of psychology were, of course, all highly theoretical. Wilhelm Wundt was a philosopher before his foray into psychology. Although he clearly supported and engaged in experimental research, his interest in and pursuit of theorizing as a means of advancing the discipline never flagged. William James, another philosopher, contributed much to our repertoire of theoretical ideas. John Watson, by many accounts the founder of modern behaviorism, launched his "behavioral revolution" by means of an essentially theoretical paper (Watson, 1913). And, of course, Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychotherapy, was one of the grander theorists in an era of grand theorizing.

Many theorists have since followed in the footsteps of these disciplinary forebears. There are so many that any listing would be incomplete. Practically speaking, however, the notoriety of theorists, such as Edelman (1987), Gergen (1991), Kagan (1971; 1984), Kazdin (1980), Meichenbaum (1977), Neisser (1995), and Sternberg (1990), is for the most part confined to their own subdiscipline. The discipline is now so large and diffuse that few psychologists would know the general, let alone detailed,

contributions of all these luminaries. In this sense, there has never been a lack of theoretical activity in psychology. However, this activity is fragmented, because it addresses increasingly isolated subspecialties and fails to take into account the theoretical themes and problems that motivate the enterprise of psychology as a whole.

The works of only a few theorists, such as Piaget or Skinner, are considered broad and penetrating enough to be important to all or many subdisciplines. Interestingly, however, few psychologists in the more recent era have been afforded similar status. With the possible exception of Albert Bandura, there are few living psychologists recognized for their theoretical impact across subdisciplines. It is as if the discipline is content to believe that all the possible, or at least all the necessary, overarching perspectives from which human behavior can be understood have been discovered; there is no further need to question our understandings or to push the frontiers of our understandings in search of new ones. Consequently, there is less allegiance to and less direct engagement in overarching theories.

As a result, there has been a general disaffection with theory in psychology. The discipline has moved away from grand, subsuming theories in the traditional sense and moved toward models, techniques, and micro theories in the more modern sense. Most experimentally oriented psychologists, for example, focus on models (Hergenhahn & Olson, 1992; Sahakian, 1970). Models are typically delimited explanations that involve only a circumscribed field of endeavor, such as visual memory or neurotransmitters. These models are rarely expanded to full-blown theories. And yet, as shown elsewhere (Slife & Williams, 1995), such models rest on a host of broader theoretical assumptions that are often never recognized and almost never examined.

In the more applied fields, such as education and psychotherapy, techniques constitute another form of micro theory. Techniques are the practical applications of the various theories of the subdiscipline--what the therapist or educator actually does with

the client or student. However, once techniques become established, they often have a life of their own, as though they exist apart from or are more important than the theories that spawn them. The recent trend toward eclecticism in clinical psychology is evidence of this disaffection with theory. Many eclectics presume that they can use various treatment techniques without extensive knowledge of the theories and philosophies that lie behind the techniques (Bergin & Garfield, 1994; Held, 1995). Of course, the dependence of techniques on their originating theories is itself a theoretical question, one deserving careful theoretical work. Nevertheless, the main point is that most eclectics--consisting now of a majority of psychotherapists (Jensen, Bergin, & Greaves, 1990)--rarely examine the theoretical assumptions that generate their techniques.

Most psychologists do not appear to be concerned by this lack of examination. Theorizing should be of secondary significance, they seem to argue, especially if psychology is advancing as a science. Following a particular reading of the philosopher August Comte (Lenzer, 1975), theorizing is considered only a stage to be passed through in the advance toward scientific knowledge. From this perspective, theorizing in the broader and more philosophical sense is the mark of a primitive, pre-scientific discipline. Formulating theories may have been necessary historically--to get psychological knowledge and practice off the ground--but the science of psychology should be replacing such grand, conceptual schemes with scientifically derived and validated explanations.

In this sense, experimentalists and other researchers should have to deal less and less with broad theories and more and more with specific models as they uncover the principles of memory, learning, neuroscience, etc. Likewise, psychotherapists and other mental health practitioners should be involved less in theorizing about personality and abnormality and occupied more with discovering how to match techniques and disorders. That is, research should be ferreting out which therapy techniques are the most effective

for which disorders. In this sense, theory is viewed as an educated speculation--the first phase of the scientific process--that is eventually replaced by scientifically precise knowledge.

This understanding of science, then, is perhaps the main answer to our query above: Why is there not a subdiscipline of theoretical psychology? Essentially, the answer of many in the discipline is that none should be needed. Having been around for over a hundred years, psychology should be replacing the speculations (e.g., of Freud and Rogers) with empirically grounded findings. Formulating a theoretical psychology at this point would be tantamount to admitting that disciplinary advancement has not taken place. In this sense, a subdiscipline of theoretical psychology would be an embarrassment. And trends in psychology--toward models and techniques--seem, if anything, to be in a direction opposite to that of greater emphasis on theory.

Similarly, psychologists have recently tended to stress the more scientifically rigorous side of the discipline. The emphasis on biological foundations of behavior in basic subdisciplines, such as experimental and cognitive (e.g., Churchland, 1986; Edelman, 1987), and the greater reliance on outcome research in the more applied subdisciplines, such as psychotherapy (Bergin & Garfield, 1994, pp. 821-822), are evidence of this emphasis. Acknowledging the need and value of a subdiscipline of theoretical psychology would appear only to hinder these movements. The formulation of such a subdiscipline might be read as a regression to an earlier "Comtean" stage of disciplinary development. According to this reading, psychology would undoubtedly lose status and power. As a result, few psychologists could be expected to be sympathetic with this proposal. Any change of status and power could jeopardize crucial political and funding initiatives.

### Positivist Methodolatry<sup>1</sup>

These attitudes toward theoretical psychology betray a set of assumptions about science that, in our view, require examination. The thinking of August Comte here seems particularly germane, because he is credited with founding positivism, and thus social science as science (Leahey, 1992). Psychology has often been characterized as essentially positivist in its scientific outlook (Gergen, 1982; Giorgi, 1970; Koch, 1992; Polkinghorne, 1983; Robinson, 1985, 1995; Rychlak, 1988; Slife & Williams, 1995; Williams, 1990; Valentine, 1982). Although others have supported this characterization more thoroughly than we can here (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1983), it is important nevertheless to review the main ideas underlying positivism to reveal why those who espouse this philosophy of science might oppose a new field of theoretical psychology.

We should first recognize that positivism is a term that has come to be used quite loosely. It has come to describe an intellectual position widely espoused and strongly defended, yet seldom articulated and almost never carefully explicated or delineated. Where once it meant studying only what can be known positively or through sensory experiences, it has now come to encompass an amalgam of positions, all attempting to embrace the spirit of Comte's positivism, but doing so in an essentially uncritical manner. The heart of positivism, as it has come to exist in the discipline, is that a method, a logic, is the pathway to truth. That is, if someone wants to find out about something accurately--the truth of it--then he or she must turn to a particular process or means, called scientific method, for doing so.

Sigmund Koch (1959), in his influential history of the development of psychology, observed that psychology settled on its way of answering questions--its methods--before it developed its questions. The natural sciences developed their methods as a specific response to particular theoretical problems: problems and questions came first and method came second (cf. Polkinghorne, 1983; Ronan, 1982).



Psychology, however, was born of a determination to apply the methods of positivistic science to human beings. Only those questions that could be cast in ways amenable to scientific study were taken up by the discipline. Because of this commitment to positivistic methods, theories have been evaluated in terms of whether they generate empirically testable hypotheses, or whether they are themselves, in some sense, testable. There is certainly no logical reason why theories should generate empirically testable hypotheses. The only reason is a privileging of method in general and positivistic method in particular.

Further evidence that psychology has become a method-driven discipline is readily available in textbooks and curricula. Textbooks in nearly all subdisciplines routinely have chapters devoted to methodological considerations, often including definitions of psychology as science and setting it apart from other disciplines. In addition, courses in research methods and statistics are core courses in both graduate and undergraduate departments of psychology. No courses, except perhaps the introductory course, are more common. All of this bears testimony that psychology is a discipline defined and driven principally by a commitment to method. Theorizing is secondary to the supposedly more precise, experimental pursuit of knowledge. For generations, theses and dissertations were judged not by their theoretical coherence, but by whether specific hypotheses were posed in relation to exact procedures, methodological controls, and quantitative analyses.

Theorizing, in this sense, is relevant only if it is part of the method. Theorizing may begin the methodological process, as one speculates about the phenomenon of interest, or theorizing may ensue from careful observations as one systematically assembles the observations into a coherent whole. In either case, theorizing is merely part of the procedure that one follows; it serves the method, and thus, exists only as prescribed and delimited by the method. In this positivistic philosophy of science, a

subdiscipline of theoretical psychology could serve only a very minor role, a role to be subsequently subsumed by the established positivist method for ascertaining the truth of the matter. This role is presumably one that any scientist (who by definition follows the method of science) can surely fill without the need of a subdiscipline of specialists.

However, psychologists enamored of positivistic approaches frequently forget the simple fact that scientific method itself is essentially a philosophical argument (Slife & Williams, 1995, Ch. 6). This is clear when we remember that method cannot scientifically validate itself. Method has what some philosophers call a "boot strap" problem. Just as those who wear old-fashioned boots cannot raise themselves into the air by pulling on the straps of their boots, so scientific method cannot use its own methods to validate the methods it is using. Some people argue that the many successes of science demonstrate its validity. Nevertheless, this argument still has the same bootstrap problem within it. Citing success merely begs the philosophical question of what one considers success and how one verifies it as success.

The conflation of validity with success is usually grounded in a particular reading of pragmatism, which is itself a philosophy rather than a scientific fact. As most serious pragmatists recognize, designating a criterion of "successful" is itself a theoretical issue fraught with all sorts of hidden complexities and assumptions. Success can have a multiplicity of definitions, and there exist multiple criteria for what might constitute adequate measures of success. There is thus no indisputable concept of "success" that can serve as the validation grounding for scientific psychology. Even the successes of science today might be limited by problems in theoretical understanding. Is our inability to establish a sustained, controlled nuclear fusion simply a technical issue, or does it have to do with our conception of the strong (e.g., gravity) and weak (e.g., nuclear) forces of matter? Similarly, could the current frustrations in developing superconducting materials be resolved by conceptual innovations that could lead to new experiments? Of course,

analogous questions arise in psychology. It might be asked, for example, whether current success rates in psychotherapy or educational strategies might be increased through a theoretical reconceptualization of the human being.

Even if we grant that the natural sciences have been successful in pursuing an essentially positivist agenda, this does not imply that the same methods will prove successful in the social sciences. Positivism's success in psychology is, at the very least, a matter of considerable debate (cf. Faulconer & Williams, 1990; Gergen, 1983; Giorgi, 1970; Koch, 1992; Leahey, 1992). Certainly, there are few established laws to point to, and the technology spawned by current scientific findings, such as educational strategies and therapy techniques, have debatable merit, especially when compared with the technology spawned by the natural sciences. The upshot is that the so-called success of scientific method is a more complex and highly debatable issue than it might appear at first glance. At the very least, the question of the success and relevance of scientific methods for psychology is a theoretical issue, because no method can validate itself; method is always dependent on a set of theoretical assumptions and arguments.

If this is true, then method itself is a theory--a philosophy. Like any other theory or philosophy, it makes assumptions about the world, and important implications arise from those assumptions. This truism is what is conveyed by the phrase, "philosophy of science;" scientific method is a philosophy with all the commitments and consequences of any other philosophy. In the case of traditional positivistic method, these commitments and assumptions are widely acknowledged to encompass certain types of determinism, reductionism, and epistemology (Heiman, 1995; Hoshmand & Martin, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1983; Robinson, 1994; Slife, 1993; Slife & Williams, 1995; Valentine, 1982). As a philosophy, science is not committed to, and in some cases rules out, certain other philosophical and theoretical ideas. These ideas are not ruled out because they are "unsupported by the data;" they are ruled out because they belong to a

different, but not necessarily fallacious, philosophical position (Feyerabend, 1988; Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970). In effect, some psychological ideas are ruled out in a very unscientific manner--by philosophical fiat in the guise of "scientific method."

Science, then, is not a neutral tool of inquiry, but a particular theory--among other theories--about how one evaluates theories. In a sense, method is a metatheory. It is one means of judging the suitability of other theories as well as organizing them according to specific criteria of suitability (e.g., predictability). Method provides no foundation for arguing that psychology has any other than an essentially theoretical nature. The same is true in all sciences. Method will never resolve the fundamental theoretical issues of a discipline, unless, of course, all members of the discipline agree to a particular set of assumptions, including a method.<sup>2</sup> Although such agreement has not been universal in psychology so far, it is not beyond the realm of possibility. However, such agreement should only be reached in the light of rigorous and careful consideration of assumptions, implications, and consequences, as well as in the context of a full knowledge of alternative positions.

The crucial point, then, is that a discussion about whether to adopt a particular set of assumptions would necessarily be a theoretical discussion. We would need people who are generally familiar with theoretical assumptions and their consequences to facilitate this discussion. Although many philosophers have this familiarity and can offer much to psychology in this vein, we would argue that psychology is a unique disciplinary context with distinct requirements and traditions. This means that a specially trained set of people, with an expertise in both theory and the unique requirements of psychology, is necessary. In other words, we need theoretical psychologists.

#### Current Need for Theoretical Psychology

The need for trained theoretical psychologists seems especially strong at this juncture in psychology's history. There is a widespread weakening of agreement about

methodological assumptions in the mainstream of the discipline (i.e., positivism) as well as a long standing lack of consensus, at least an explicit consensus, about any disciplinary paradigm. Essentially, a subdiscipline of theoretical psychology would be devoted to increased understanding of such consensus and disagreements. Historically, theoretical psychologists--mostly those now known as personality theorists--have been accused of making psychology obscure and complex through the multiplication of theoretical schools. This stereotypical view of theorizing is, in our minds, both inaccurate and unfair. Still, we wish to be clear that the thrust of theoretical psychology would not be the needless multiplication of theories. Instead, its main impetus would be the clarification of issues that are fundamental to the discipline, so that the people engaged in the discipline can themselves decide how the discipline should be conducted.

We do not attempt here to predict the outcome of this discussion. We cannot even say that disciplinary unity would be this subdiscipline's ultimate goal, because that would foreclose on an important disciplinary discussion. Indeed, it seems requisite in a scholarly discipline that such discussion be both ongoing and integrated into the core practices that constitute the discipline. The essence of the discussion would be a careful clarification of the issues involved, along with an evaluation of outcomes and consequences--pragmatic as well as rational and moral.

That such a clarification is needed in the discipline is evident in many ways. The past several decades have brought a number of changes to psychology, changes that have had clear and lasting impact on the field, both as a scholarly and as an applied pursuit. However, there is only occasional acknowledgment of these changes, because there is no theoretical subdiscipline to monitor and expose them for discussion. Foremost among the recent changes is the fragmentation of the discipline (Staats, 1983). Biological psychologists are finding homes in centers for neuroscience, cognitive psychologists are moving into departments of cognitive science or artificial intelligence, and

psychotherapists are shifting into professional schools, to name only a few disaffected subdisciplines.

Fragmentation is also evident in the differing loyalties of the many divisions within the founding scholarly society for psychology, the American Psychological Association (APA). These differences have led to many conflicts within APA, and ultimately to the founding of an alternative society, the American Psychological Society. These differences have also resulted in some psychologists dropping out of either organization, affiliating instead with smaller, narrower organizations rather than with larger, umbrella organizations. Psychology curricula have also become increasingly fragmented. Employment positions are often advertised and filled in terms of very narrow specializations, and graduate training reflects the same specialization as it prepares psychologists to fill narrowly defined positions.

It might seem contradictory to propose a new subdiscipline as part of a recommended response to disciplinary fragmentation. However, theoretical psychology would consider the fragmentation itself as part of its subject matter, so that it might be discussed, and alternatives to such fragmentation might be explored. Taking the whole of the discipline as its subject matter, theoretical psychology would provide a home for the generalist, and a sophisticated response to de facto fragmentation and specialization.

Next among these forces for change is the growing influence of various "postmodern" perspectives. Although many psychologists have attempted to ignore these perspectives, they exist and thrive in the broader intellectual discourse of feminism, social constructionism, structuralism, phenomenology, existentialism, and hermeneutics, among others. The effect of these perspectives on the intellectual climate of our culture has been dramatic and far-reaching, particularly in the applied areas, such as education and psychotherapy. In one sense, the integration of these perspectives into psychology is a *fait accompli*, as the existence of new journals and societies, and the publication of

increasing numbers of books and articles in the "literature of dissent" (Gergen & Morawski, 1980) can adequately attest.

In another sense, however, psychology has not known whether to incorporate postmodernism into its discourse or, perhaps, how to integrate it productively. Positivism--itself a bulwark of "modernism"--has prevented thoughtful discussion of these issues. (See Polkinghorne, 1990 for a lucid explication of modernism and postmodernism.) In effect, parallel disciplines have emerged--one embracing postmodern thought and the other eschewing it--an odd state of affairs for any field that aspires to the status of either a science or a profession. A subdiscipline of theoretical psychology could facilitate informed discussion of what is at stake in this confrontation between these influential, intellectual movements. Theoretical psychologists could serve an educative as well as critical function. Even the most adamant critics of "postmodernism" should welcome a subdiscipline that might meet this perceived intellectual insurgency on its own grounds.

These changes are by no means the only evidences of the need for careful and thoughtful clarification of theoretical issues in psychology. As our discussion has already shown, recent decades have witnessed developments in the philosophy of science that have tremendous import for psychological study and practice (Bohman, 1991; Kuhn, 1970; Lakatos, 1970). This work has led, in turn, to the development of a host of alternative, largely qualitative, methods for doing science, in both "pure" and "applied" settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

These new methods cannot be simply ignored or dismissed out of hand. They currently enjoy an already wide and growing acceptance not only in psychology but also in other social scientific disciplines (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Many in these disciplines view qualitative methods as a means of addressing complex phenomena that do not fit a natural science or

engineering/technology framework. One of the roles we foresee for theoretical psychology is the doing of methodology (i.e., the study of method as opposed to the application of method), and thus evaluating various methods, as well as, perhaps, teaching and training in method itself.

Finally, focus and clarification are also required to understand the changes brought about by rapid globalization. American psychology, grounded in positivism and infused with often unacknowledged values, is a significant intellectual and cultural export to other cultures and traditions, both as scholarship and as practice. Mogaddham (1987) has argued that "first world psychology" is a threat to dissolve various "second" and "third world" psychologies. The consequences of this cultural exportation, particularly in the form of an unexamined devotion to any tradition, are deserving of clarification and critical evaluation. As indigenous psychology (Kim, 1990; Mogaddham, 1990) emerges as a discipline, theoretical psychology could make a substantial contribution to a careful examination of the issues related to the globalization of psychology.

At this juncture, we have shown that psychology, as all sciences, is fundamentally a theoretical enterprise. Even the attempt to derive a disciplinary identity from scientific method cannot alter the discipline's fundamentally theoretical nature. We have also argued that the rules (and theories) for conducting psychology are changing. There is considerable evidence that traditional methods--the core of what a science like psychology is believed to be about--are being questioned. A subdiscipline of theoretical psychology would oversee the discussion of theoretical issues such as these. The meaning, purpose, and future of the discipline must be the responsibility of those in the discipline, not just those with theoretical psychology credentials. Nevertheless, while it would not be theoretical psychology's task to prescribe psychology's course, we believe



skilled specialists are needed to focus and clarify these discussions and to make certain that they find their way into the disciplinary discourse.

### Objections to a Subdiscipline of Theoretical Psychology

Potential objections to this proposal are many and varied. We attempt here to give voice to the main ones we anticipate. Some of the expected objections are based on analyses and issues dealt with above. However, we feel that it is important to proffer a fairly comprehensive list of objections for the sake of future debate and discussion of our proposal. These objections also afford the opportunity for clarifying the niche we foresee theoretical psychologists occupying in the discipline.

**Objection 1:** *We already have too many theories as it is.*

This objection, of course, assumes that a theoretical psychology subdiscipline would merely perform the same perceived role as that of personality theorists of old--creating and formulating new schools of thought. As we conceptualize it, this role would not be the major thrust of the new field. Its major thrust would be the clarification and critical evaluation of psychology's ideas and practices. This, of course, is a function that no method can perform, because methods are themselves part of the ideas and practices being evaluated. We would also not want to rule out the formulation of new theories. Clearly, as the discipline moves and turns in new directions, new thinking and theorizing will be needed. However, with theoretical psychologists as critical evaluators and clarifiers, focused on the process of theorizing itself, it is unlikely that these new turns would result in needless multiplicity or inevitable disunity.

**Objection 2:** *A subdiscipline of theoretical psychology would have no content. Developmental psychology studies development, cognitive psychology studies the mind, but what does theoretical psychology study?*

A theoretical psychologist's content and focus would not be directed at the same conceptual level as those of other subdisciplines. Theoretical psychology would be, in a

sense, a metadiscipline--studying the studiers as well as the content of the discipline. Of course, theoretical psychologists could and perhaps should specialize in particular subdisciplines, but they would necessarily be called to a broader and more general perspective than is addressed in any other subdiscipline. In an important sense, the content of theoretical psychology would be the whole of the discipline, particularly its conceptual and methodological grounding, as well as those often overlooked relations among subdisciplines and between psychology and other disciplines.

The subject domain of theoretical psychology is theory--in all its manifestations within the discipline, including formal theories, models, techniques, methods, and assumptions, both explicit and implicit. In other words, it is the discipline as a whole, for there is nothing done in the discipline that does not employ or involve theory in its most general sense. Theoretical psychologists would concern themselves with the implications and grounding assumptions of these theories. They would mark out conceptual blind alleys and help psychological scholars become aware of and avoid conceptual problems that have befallen previous intellectual endeavors. Theoretical psychologists would also anticipate the conceptual ends toward which various theories and practices tend and help scholars evaluate these ends. In short, the subject matter of the subdiscipline is the theoretical whole of the discipline itself.

**Objection 3:** *Psychology is doing fine without broader or deeper theorizing. Scientists should be about the business of developing models and techniques and leave the business of philosophy to the philosophers.*

This type of objection likely has its roots in the positivistic view of science sketched above. This objection clearly has roots in some philosophy about how science and/or psychology should be conducted. In this sense, the objection is itself another philosophy, which begs the question of whether it is the best philosophy or whether philosophy itself is important. The need to respond to this type of question is part of the

rationale for theoretical psychology. Most psychologists, as specialists within a subdiscipline, are not in a position to address such questions. They are quite rightly working on various models and techniques, rather than continually evaluating whether such models and techniques are the best way to go about their study. A subdiscipline of theoretical psychology would ensure that these issues were constantly being examined. This is not to foreclose on the use or importance of models and techniques. Theoretical discussion of current methods, both formal and informal, might reveal that they are the best for the job, but pending sustained and considered discussion, we cannot know.

Theoretical psychology is also not the same thing as philosophy. Professional philosophers concern themselves with many issues and questions that bear little on the theory or practice of psychology. There is a tendency to think of anything that is not science as "philosophy." However, a subdiscipline of theoretical psychology would be more like "applied philosophy," a field that takes from philosophy (as well as other sources) intellectual tools, ideas, and concepts, and brings them to bear on the discipline of psychology in a way that is relevant to psychology's questions and purposes.

**Objection 4.** *Programs and research in theoretical psychology cannot be funded. There are no "theoretical research" grants or moneys available for paying theoretical consultants.*

This objection ignores the many granting agencies that do grant funds for theoretical projects. If the ideas are good, if the proposal draws important relations between conceptual or empirical realms, or if the project solves important problems, then there will always be money available to fund such projects. However, this objection also ignores a prominent means-end issue in psychology. Should fund availability dictate psychological research, or should the ideas and initiatives of researchers contribute to the prioritizing of funds? Surely, most psychological researchers would answer the latter question affirmatively. Of course, the benefits and priority of theoretical psychologists

are yet to be determined. Still, the recognition of theoretical psychology (and the availability of funds) should be decided on the basis of its merit, not on the de facto way in which funds are currently designated. If theoretical psychology produces important scholarly and scientific fruit, funding should follow.

**Objection 5:** *Other sciences seem to be doing just fine without a formally designated theoretical subdiscipline.*

This objection, of course, ignores formally designated theorists in virtually every scientific discipline (e.g., Ellis & Tang, 1990; Lawrie, 1990; Nye, 1993; Waddington, 1968; ). Theoretical physicists are perhaps the best known. It is relevant to note that other sciences--from biology to chemistry to economics--have legitimated the role of the theoretician. However, we should be clear that we do not call for recognition of the role of theoretician in psychology because other sciences, such as physics, recognize the role too. We advocate a theoretical subdiscipline because we feel that it is genuinely needed in psychology.

Even if the other sciences did not perceive a need for specialists in theoretical scholarship, this would not necessarily indicate anything about what psychology should be doing. As we described above, it is not entirely clear that psychology is doing fine. Many within the discipline (e.g., Cushman, 1990, 1993; Gergen, 1991; Koch, 1992; Koch & Leary, 1985; Robinson, 1992; Rychlak, 1988; Slife, 1993; Slife & Williams, 1995) and outside the discipline (e.g., Faulconer & Williams, 1990; Fox & Slife, 1995; Harre, 1993; Kockelmans, 1990; Roth, 1995; Schrag, 1992; Yankelovich, 1981) have questioned psychology's health and progress in terms of political and economic issues and in terms of scientific and academic integrity. This is not to say that theoretical psychologists would always be critical of the discipline in this negative sense. However, critique--both positive and negative--is an important part of every discipline that seeks to be scholarly.

It seems essential that any scholarly discipline and any applied discipline that intervenes in the lives of human beings should be vitally concerned about its own conduct, and engaged in constant and careful self-examination. At present, there seems to be little official recognition of this need. Trends in professional conduct are monitored and ethical standards are derived, but trends in intellectual conceptions and their implications for research and practice are not systematically tracked and evaluated. Certainly, there is little ongoing monitoring of these intellectual trends in our governing bodies or our training programs.

**Objection 6:** *Empirical results, particularly those results issuing from the neurosciences, will eventually obviate any need for theorizing or theorists.*

This type of reductionism--itself a theory--was sketched briefly above. Positivistic views of science often espouse the displacement of theory by some type of "objective" data, particularly data emanating from biology. As noted in other works (e.g., Robinson, 1985; Slife & Williams, 1995), such reductionism should not de facto be considered legitimate in psychology. In addition, there is good reason to believe that issues surrounding such displacement--theory displaced by empirical findings, psychology displaced by biology--will never be settled by scientific method itself (Fisher, 1996; Robinson, 1992, 1995; Slife & Williams, 1995). However, because current views (theories) of science favor reductionism, it is not surprising that scientists espousing this view would contend that reductionism will resolve theoretical problems.

Of course, once this view is seen as a view, its privileged status--as the way in which psychology progresses--is immediately undermined. Alternative views of the relation between the psychological and the biological abound (e.g., Fisher, 1995; Leder, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1983), and these alternatives can be "scientific," either in the traditional sense or within an alternative understanding of science. The point is that the "results" of neuroscientific research, however much they may accumulate, will never

displace the need for theory and theorists. Data always need interpretation. All scientific work reflects theoretical bias in the formulation of questions, the choice of topics, the application of methods, the development of instruments, and the interpretation of results. At least since the publication of Kuhn's work (1970), philosophers have acknowledged the paradigmatic nature of science, the social groundedness of the entire scientific enterprise (Crease, 1993; Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970; Shotter, 1994). Materialistic reductionism is merely one of these socially grounded conceptions vying for paradigmatic status.

**Objection 7:** *Why have a separate subdiscipline? Wouldn't it be better for each subdiscipline to do its own theorizing?*

First, as we conceive of theoretical psychology, it should never be "separate" from the discipline generally, or from established subdisciplines specifically. The extent to which it is separated would be the extent to which it fails in its role as we have conceived it here. Second, there is nothing about theoretical psychology, as proposed here, that would prevent or discourage psychologists within the various subdisciplines from doing their own theorizing. On the contrary, this should be encouraged and facilitated by theoretical psychologists.

We envision theoretical psychologists functioning, at least in part, in essentially the same role as methodologists and statisticians--as consultants to other scholars in research and practice. Conceivably, these latter would consult with the theoretician about the types of theories, explanations, and methods they are employing to see if these approaches are coherent, hold hidden problems, or are appropriate to the assumptions being made. Our proposal to establish a "separate" subdiscipline is meant to focus on and emphasize the particular expertise and concern necessary for a theoretical psychologist.

Thus, as we said, we see the role of the theoretical psychologist as very much analogous to that of a statistical or design consultant. These specialists apply particular skills and expertise over a wide range of subdisciplines and subject matter. They not only consult with colleagues on proper design and analysis, they also teach courses in these topics at both the graduate and undergraduate levels--thus training future scholars and specialists. Just as every psychology department profits from one or more specialists in experimental design and statistics, each department could profit from one or more theoreticians.

**Objection 8:** *Theory alone cannot advance science. Therefore, a new subdiscipline of theoretical psychology cannot advance the discipline.*

We would first dispute the logical consequent--the "therefore"--of this objection. Even if we were to grant that theory alone cannot advance science, it does not follow that a new subdiscipline which focuses on theory could not aid in advancing science. For example, no focus or emphasis on theoretical psychology would preclude scientific experimentation and consideration of data. This objection, again, is rooted in a particular view of theory that we believe to be untenable--that theory is merely groundless speculation. Theory, as we see it, can never be separated from our scientific or personal experiences. Theorizing, of necessity, must take into account previous research of all kinds, previous experiences, and history. In this sense, then, the theoretical psychologist should never be ignorant of nor oblivious to research data or another part of the discipline. A focus on theory would mean just that, a focus. This focus would presumably aid others who require theoretical expertise but have other dominant interests and concerns.

Of course, it should also be noted that the history of the sciences, including psychology, includes many instances of individuals contributing to and advancing their disciplines through essentially theoretical means (Feyerabend, 1988). Einstein's

contribution, through his gedanken experiments, exemplifies this. We should certainly not overlook the contribution made to the biological sciences by evolutionary theories, formulated for the most part rationally, based only minimally on empirical data (Darwin, 1888; Valentine, 1982). Again, this is not to say that Einstein or any others theorized in a vacuum, without the benefit of earlier work, both empirical and theoretical. It is to say, instead, that a focus on theory and thought experiments has a long and illustrious history of bearing fruit--even scientific fruit.

Indeed, it can be argued that all knowledge advancement is essentially theoretical in nature. That is, knowledge is only possible through understandings that make contact with other ideas, arising from a context of assumptions and implications. In other words, theory and knowledge may be indistinguishable. If this is true, then method and data are in the service of theory, rather than theory being in the service of data and method. Once again, it is not our purpose to advocate this perspective on knowledge, nor to debate this particular point. Our purpose is to note that such a debate goes to the heart of psychology and that the debate has a theoretical core. The debate itself argues for a subdiscipline within whose domain of interest the debate might find fertile intellectual ground.

### The Current Status of Theoretical Psychology

Whatever position one may take regarding the objections we have anticipated, theoretical psychology is already a vibrant and growing enterprise in many important senses. The recent interchange between Smith (1994) and Gergen (1994) in American Psychologist suggests that there is already substantial interest in the theoretical state of affairs of the discipline. In this light, a proposal to formally recognize a theoretical subdiscipline is simply a call to recognize what is already a fait accompli. Formal recognition, however, could do much to advance theoretical work. It could lead to a greater acknowledgment among training institutions that theoretical and critical skills should be formally incorporated into curricula. It could also lead to accreditation



bodies' investigating how theoretical and critical skills are taught. Such recognition could be expected to increase the potential contribution to the larger discipline that theoretical psychologists might make.

The past two and a half decades have witnessed a remarkable and sustained increase in the careful theoretical work that we foresee as the province and product of the subdiscipline we envision. Much of this work has been critical of the mainstream, but even the critical work has been constructive, laying out alternative approaches and methods. Amadeo Giorgi's (1970) analysis of the phenomenological approach in contrast to empirical psychology, and Joseph Rychlak's (1968) analysis of the philosophical and scientific status of personality theories were two of the important and influential early works produced from within psychology. Other scholars also contributed to the foundations of theoretical psychology, chiefly from the perspective of humanistic and existential psychology (e.g., Harre & Secord, 1972; Misiak & Sexton, 1973; van Kaam, 1966).

Since these early books, scholars from a number of fields have published critical works at an accelerating rate. Any list of examples would be incomplete, but such a list does afford an appreciation of the breadth and variety of perspectives that currently inform theoretical psychology. Important critiques and alternative formulations have been offered by scholars who might be thought of as classicists, such as Daniel Robinson (1985; 1996), and from the perspective of Joseph Rychlak's Logical Learning Theory (1988; 1994). Criticisms of the traditional scientific methodology as applied in psychology are now widely circulated (e.g., Bevan, 1991; Danziger, 1990; Howard, 1986; Morawski, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1983; and Rosnow, 1981). The social constructionist perspective has produced a rich and impressive literature relevant to a wide range of psychological topics (e.g., Gergen, 1982; 1985; 1991; Harre, 1986). Scholars within the phenomenological/existential perspective have been among the most active in bringing alternative theories and methods to bear on the discipline (e.g., Kruger, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1988; Valle & Halling, 1989). Feminist (e.g., Gergen, 1988;

Merecek, 1995; Morawski, 1994), lesbian (e.g., Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993), and other scholars (e.g., Cushman, 1995; Prilleltensky, 1994) have challenged the traditional assumptions as well as the political implications of traditional social science. Several edited volumes, aimed at broadly articulating alternative theoretical perspectives, have appeared in the literature over the past few years (e.g., Faulconer & Williams, 1990; Messer, Sass, & Wolfolk, 1988; Miller, 1992; Packer & Addison, 1989).

Many theoretical explications and calls for alternative conceptualizations have focused on particular subdisciplines or topics in the discipline. We take this to be a sign of the maturity of the theoretical psychology enterprise. Examples of areas that have been carefully studied include social psychology (Harre, 1979; Parker & Shotter, 1990), the concept of the self (Gergen, 1991; Harre, 1984), cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence (Evans, 1993; Gillespie, 1992; Rychlak, 1991; Winograd & Flores, 1987), the concept of time in psychological explanation (Slife, 1993; 1995), schizophrenia (Sass, 1992; 1994), the theory and practice of psychoanalysis (Barratt, 1993), the psychology of minority groups (Jenkins, 1995), the nature and role of narrative in human life (Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986), and human agency (Howard & Conway, 1986; Rychlak, 1979; Westcott, 1988; and Williams, 1992).

Another measure of the viability of a scholarly enterprise is the availability of publication outlets. The past twenty years have witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of journals devoted entirely, or in part, to theoretical work and alternative perspectives. We offer here a partial list as illustration: Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, Theory and Psychology, New Ideas in Psychology, Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Humanistic Psychology, Family Process, Studies in Linguistics and Philosophy, Consciousness and Cognition, Theoretical Issues in Cognitive Science, Behavior and Philosophy, American Psychologist, International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology, Annals of Theoretical Psychology, Psychological Inquiry, Death and Dying, Journal of Mind and Behavior, and Philosophical Psychology. Of course, this list does not acknowledge the many more empirically

oriented journals that welcome theoretical contributions. Several professional organizations of theoretical psychologists exist to provide forums for scholarly discussion, publication outlets, and the elusive “scholarly critical mass.” Examples include the Division of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology (24) and the Division of Humanistic Psychology (32) of APA, the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, the Section of History and Philosophy of Psychology (25) of the Canadian Psychological Society, the Section on History and Philosophy of Psychology of the British Psychological Society, and the International Human Science conference, and the Society for Philosophy and Psychology.

Further evidence of the vibrance and viability of theoretical psychology is seen in the number of academic programs or sites where theoretical psychology is either officially or historically recognized. Duquesne University, the University of Dallas, Seattle University, and West Georgia have long had strong theoretical programs with a human science orientation. In Canada, the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta have been recognized as institutions where emphasis in theoretical psychology and alternative perspectives could be pursued. York University in Toronto has had a program in the history of psychology with a strong theoretical/philosophical emphasis for a number of years. More recently, Brigham Young University has established a theory/philosophy emphasis in their Ph.D. program, and the University of Notre Dame and Georgetown University have established programs in theory and philosophy as well.

By all accounts, theoretical psychology is alive, well, and growing. In this light, the call for formal recognition of a subdiscipline is, as we stated above, largely a call to recognize what is already happening. However, such recognition on the part of the larger discipline would also provide needed impetus to the work. It would do much to overcome the marginalization of theoretical work, and thus, its rather insular status. More importantly, it would allow the discipline as a whole to profit from ongoing work. This would, we believe, infuse the discipline

with a new intellectual vitality and bring it more fully and actively into the broader intellectual discourse of our times.

### The Role and Training of a Theoretical Psychologist

To facilitate this recognition, clarification of the role of a theoretical psychologist is needed. We have noted that such a person would be interested in and concerned about the discipline as a whole. The "metadisciplinary" nature of this subdiscipline would not consist in merely fanciful flights into abstractions, having no bearing whatsoever on what is happening in the discipline, either in terms of current research or current interests and issues. A theoretical psychologist must always be thoroughly grounded in the discipline of psychology. As mentioned also, specialization within theoretical psychology would be permitted and even encouraged, but special attention would always be paid to the discipline as a whole.

A theoretical psychologist must be broadly educated and knowledgeable in areas outside the discipline of psychology. If this were not the case, such a person would be of little use to the discipline. Overlooked relations among the various components of the discipline--data, method, theory, various subdisciplines--would be particularly emphasized by theoretical psychologists. Relations between psychology and other disciplines, particularly other natural and social sciences, would also be within the intellectual domain of the subdiscipline. Training in theoretical psychology would require a perspective that would ordinarily be considered philosophical. That is, the philosophy of psychology would be a primary area of study for theoretical psychology.

Courses in the philosophy of social science, intellectual history of psychology, psychological epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, and ethics would be important in the training of theoretical psychologists. Courses in these content areas would enhance the scholarly discourse within psychology. The establishment of a subdiscipline of theoretical psychology would thus require the establishment of a theoretical curriculum at

both the graduate and undergraduate levels. The establishment of this curriculum is an integral part of our call for a theoretical subdiscipline.<sup>3</sup>

Training in theoretical psychology might also include what has been termed "the psychology of science" (Gholson & Houts, 1989; Gorman & Carlson, 1989). This is a field that looks at the ways in which people do science. It is, in most cases, a scientific study of the ways in which scientists go about studying their topics of interest. As such, it has relied primarily upon positivistic approaches, though some qualitative methods have also been employed. This, of course, illustrates how theoretical psychologists could themselves be positivistic, in a sense. They would simply have to know: a) that positivism is itself a theory, b) that alternate theories of knowledge and method exist, and c) that each of these theories may have its own conceptual advantages and disadvantages. In this manner, theoretical psychologists could successfully engage and contribute to the psychology of science. The "meta" disciplinary aspects of this emerging field of the psychology of science could be a natural adjunct to the metadisciplinary aspects of theoretical psychology.

We should emphasize that it is not the task of the theoretical psychologist merely to clarify what the discipline is currently doing. This is a necessary part of their concern, but it is not sufficient as a *raison d'être* for theoretical psychology. Theoretical psychologists should also be attempting to discern what the future of the discipline might be. That is, their concern is not just with the past and present of the discipline, but with its future as well. People in this new subdiscipline should be attempting to understand where psychology is headed. Given its history and current state, where will it likely lead us? Coursework might therefore include training in the evaluation and prediction of disciplinary trends and movements.

This evaluation and prediction would not exhaust the theoretical psychologist's concern with the future. It is not enough to show the intellectual implications and thus

the future course of the discipline. It is also necessary to promote debate and discussion about where the discipline should be going. That is, theoretical psychology also has an agenda that calls for ethical and moral discernment. As many have noted, no discipline, including the sciences, can ignore the moral grounding and consequences of their work (e.g., Cushman, 1993; Fuller, 1990; Hodges & Baron, 1992; James, 1956; see also the essays in Robinson, 1992) Part of the task of theoretical psychology is to clarify and submit for discussion the moral grounding and consequences of current trends and practices.

Obviously, responses to such issues are complex and difficult. Still, psychology cannot avoid the issues. They are the heart and soul of the discipline, and they require professionals whose interests and expertise lie in illuminating and clarifying them as much as possible. It bears repeating that the task of such professionals is not to decide these issues for the whole of the discipline. However, it would be their task to keep such issues in the forefront of disciplinary discourse and make psychologists aware of the history and implications of their theories and practices. This would ultimately permit psychologists to act deliberately, rather than ignore the issues or resolve them by default or by decibels.

### Conclusion

The need for a new subdiscipline of theoretical psychology is thus affirmed. Psychology's recent history, particularly mainstream psychology's commitment to a positivist view of science, has not lead psychologists to consider theoretical psychology to be very significant. However, developments both within and outside the discipline have brought greater attention to the theory-ladenness of virtually all aspects of psychology, including what was previously presumed to be a neutral tool of inquiry--scientific method itself. Within the discipline, increasing fragmentation, deep conflicts, and differing agendas, both methodological and theoretical, threaten disintegration of the

discipline. Outside the discipline, developments in the philosophy of science and the increasing influence of postmodern accounts have called into question many aspects of psychology's current commitment to its paradigms and its methods. Although the specifics of this questioning remain controversial, the theory-ladenness of any method is now nearly universally affirmed.

A serious call for the formal recognition of theoretical psychology is obviously controversial. However, the establishment of such a subdiscipline is important, if only because of the issues it raises for the discipline. An ongoing disciplinary discussion of the theories, methods, and direction of the discipline as a whole is vital. We see too little of this discussion currently. It is, of course, quite debatable whether the need for such discussion calls for specifically trained professionals to help fill this need. We obviously believe that it does. Our experience in a theoretical psychology program tells us that not everyone is inclined toward this task, nor do all psychologists have the necessary desire and interest in these issues. Moreover, we have found that specific training and a special curriculum, such as that outlined above, is necessary for anyone to do it adequately. We therefore submit for disciplinary discussion this proposal for formal recognition. We realize that many aspects of this subdiscipline's role are as yet unspecified, but we feel that there is sufficient justification for the subdiscipline. Its precise parameters and purview will evolve in the course of time--as all disciplines and subdisciplines evolve. Our purpose here is to begin the discourse and affirm the call for recognition of a subdiscipline of theoretical psychology.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>We are indebted to Danziger (1990) for this term.

<sup>2</sup>This is not to rule out other proposals, such as methodological pluralism (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1983; 1991). However, even "pluralism" requires some metatheory--some notion of truth--to bring coherence to its methods and to justify their use.

<sup>3</sup>A recent book (Slife & Williams, 1995) is an example of a primer in these topics.



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<sup>1</sup>We are indebted to Danziger (1990) for this term.

<sup>2</sup>This is not to rule out other proposals, such as methodological pluralism (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1983; 1991). However, even "pluralism" requires some metatheory--some notion of truth--to bring coherence to its methods and to justify their use.

<sup>3</sup>A recent book (Slife & Williams, 1995) is an example of a primer in these topics.