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Editorial

New Ideas in Psychology

For over two decades, *New Ideas in Psychology* has advocated and supported theory, innovation, criticism, and integration. Today many psychology journals are open to theory—within their particular emphases and foci. But *New Ideas* was not just one of the very first theory journals in psychology; it is still the one that defines its niche the most broadly. Psychologists owe an enormous debt to Dick Kitchener for his 22-year stewardship of *New Ideas*. He has provided a way for theoretical work to be published, for people doing theoretical work to learn about and from each other, and for the world of psychology to gradually become accustomed to theory-related activity. His service has been long and of deep importance.

At a time when multiple communities of psychologists are exploring theory and innovation in their domains, there is still no legitimate role for theory or theoretical criticism in the "official" philosophy of science that is taught to most psychologists. So all too often these communities and individuals are isolated from one another.

As the new editors of *New Ideas*, we will continue to nurture theory, innovation, criticism, and integration. We will work to connect people doing theory that is of relevance to psychology. Sometimes we will also be working to connect groups that scarcely know of each other's existence. We will do our part to reduce the "cultural lag" between related, even adjacent, domains of research, which in this highly interconnected world can still last up to a decade.

Limitations of time and resources compel researchers to specialize; they can make fragmentation seem inevitable when it need not be. Without a robust culture of theory and theoretical criticism, there are few ways to bring the different empirical specialties together, or to promote cross-fertilization. By helping theory assume its rightful central role in psychology as a science, we aim to foster more vital communication across research domains.

Although theory was held in somewhat higher esteem during the earliest years of modern psychology, it was massively delegitimized nearly a century ago. A naïve form of positivism, ultimately inspired by the works of Ernst Mach (1838–1916), became the discipline's prevailing ideology of science, particularly in the United States (Smith, 1986). In the 1930s, neo-Machian positivism was fortified with operationism, according to which theoretical terms were just abbreviations for patterns of empirical data, specifically those that result from the application of measurement operations. Operationism left hardly any room for theory at all. Who needed a deep, explanatory theory of anxiety, when anxiety had been operationally defined as a galvanic skin response reading? Who needed a deep, explanatory theory of intelligence, when intelligence was just a score on an IQ test? What could such notions as "anxiety" or "intelligence" even mean, if operationism was true?

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When behaviorism was overthrown by the cognitive revolution of the 1950s, psychologists rejected its prohibitions against referring to unobservable mental processes. They tossed aside doctrines that behaviorism had inherited from the older empiricist schools, most notably associationism. It was now acceptable to postulate computational processes, even neural network processes. But the behaviorists' conception of science hung on. All too often, the new frameworks were merely seen as more powerful ways of stating or summarizing Machian data patterns. Today they are still being pressed into service to account for local data sets about a few phenomena here and a few more phenomena there, while their underlying ontologies go unexamined. Genuine theorizing requires that psychological theories be judged as realistic models of mental and person-level phenomena: criticized as such, explored as such, and tested as such. Genuine theorizing will be in short supply so long as psychologists cling to the inductivist, dust-bowl empiricist picture of what good science is supposed to look like.

Operationism was demolished all the way back in the 1930s, when Carl Hempel showed that even the most basic notions in science could not be successfully defined in operational terms (Hempel, 1965). But psychologists paid little heed. Today, researchers routinely ask questions (for instance, about convergence between different ways of trying to measure anxiety) that are meaningless or forbidden under operationism. Yet the rhetoric of operationalizing is still being passed down to students, who are rarely taught an alternative conception of theory. There is still far too little guidance for anyone—student or researcher—who might wish to examine and explore theoretical possibilities.

Meanwhile, if piling up data inexorably leads to correct generalizations about the phenomena of interest, even the most venerable lore about experimental design becomes superfluous. If the point of science is merely to accumulate inductive evidence in favor of some favored hypothesis, what need could there be for control groups or conditions in an experiment? For the standard, taken-for-granted procedures of empirical research to make sense, science needs to be understood as a decision making process that generates, criticizes, and tests theories and hypotheses. A Machian cultural eye that, over time, sees vaster and vaster patterns of data has no need of experimental design.

Every science needs data collection and analysis. But every science also needs theory. Empirical work done atheoretically—without regard to the assumptions that lie behind it, the implications of the hypotheses being proposed, and the wider meaning of its results—will never deliver the answers that were expected from it.

It is instructive to consider the fate of Jean Piaget's genetic epistemology, which served as an inspiration to all three founding editors of this journal—Dick Kitchener, Pierre Mœssinger, and John Broughton. Piaget departed from the norms that prevailed in philosophy because he insisted on bringing evidence to bear on his hypotheses—in fact, he and the members of his research group spent nearly 60 years collecting data about human beings. He departed from the norms that prevailed in psychology because he put forward an explicit ontology of knowledge and its development that demanded to be evaluated as a system. It was because he would not defer to positivistic norms that the exciting rediscovery of Piaget's ideas by developmental psychologists during the 1960s sank into disappointment and dwindling interest in the 1970s and 1980s. His theory was reduced to low-level empirical hypotheses about local data sets (sometimes, to hypotheses that were actually inconsistent with the underlying theory). What passed for discussion was a series of exchanges in which positivistic misconstruals of Piaget's theory were met by refutations of each particular misconstrual, whereupon a fresh set of misconstruals took their place (Chapman, 1988).

Piaget's genetic epistemology was not taken seriously as theory because, for the most part, it was not understood as theory—not to criticize or refute it, let alone to build on it.

When any science, natural or social, is functioning well, thought and criticism move up and down among levels in dialectical fashion—from metaphysics to theory, from theory to data, and back again. Even activities that look like routine aspects of data gathering—procedures such as measuring this person's propensity to develop an eating disorder, or that person's working memory capacity—require ongoing participation in the dialectic. Researchers need to keep asking such questions as: "How good a measurement of working memory capacity is this?"; "Would that other one be better?"; "Is working memory capacity the right thing for us to be trying to measure?" Neglecting the interrelations among the levels—or within each level—hampers rational decision making and prevents a science from fulfilling its potential. *New Ideas* will keep encouraging the world of psychology to fully appreciate and functionally integrate all of these aspects of science.

We have sought to summarize these goals in our new description of the journal:

> *New Ideas in Psychology* is a journal for theoretical psychology in its broadest sense. We are looking for new and seminal ideas, from within Psychology and from other fields that have something to bring to Psychology. We welcome presentations and criticisms of theory, of background metaphysics, and of fundamental issues of method, both empirical and conceptual. We put special emphasis on the need for informed discussion of psychological theories to be interdisciplinary. Empirical papers are accepted at *New Ideas in Psychology*, but only as long as they focus on conceptual issues and are theoretically creative. We are also open to comments or debate, interviews, and book reviews.

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