

The problem of choosing between irreconcilable theoretical orientations:

Comment on Melchert (2016)

Melchert (2016) argues that knowledge of psychological processes is now grounded in experimental tests of falsifiable theories that support a unified, paradigmatic understanding of human psychology. While his argument for leaving behind our preparadigmatic past of competing theoretical orientations is welcome, Melchert (2016) presents a perspective in which the degree to which this is currently possible is overstated. In this comment it is argued that scientific research does not replace paradigmatic assumptions but takes place within them. As such, it is not possible to take the theoretical orientations out of the practice of psychology, which is inevitably an expression of our philosophical assumptions of first principles.

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Melchert (2016) begins his article by commenting critically on the proliferation of theoretical orientations. He notes that the problem of irreconcilable theoretical orientations has long been recognised. One of the reasons for this, he says, is that traditional theoretical orientations are based on philosophical assumptions of first principles, for example, the biologically based drives in Freudian theory, the blank slate of behaviourism, and the self-actualizing tendency of Rogerian theory (for an overview of these theories, see Joseph, 2010). Melchert's (2016) argument is that we are now in the position to replace these conflicting theoretical orientations with a unified paradigmatic scientific understanding. Falsifiability and scientific precision have led to replicated and well-controlled research and thus new understanding. With these new understandings the traditional theoretical orientations can, Melchert (2016) argues, be left behind, allowing professional psychology to move forward as a unified science. The aim of this comment is to put forward the counter argument for why the traditional theoretical orientations cannot be left behind.

All research has an ontological stance. Because psychological researchers do not always articulate their philosophical first assumptions does not mean that they don't have them. Research is not outside looking in at these orientations but is itself an expression of a particular orientation. The choice of constructs that are operationalised, the mechanisms that are hypothesised to underpin change, are not detached from theoretical orientations, but arise from them (see, Nafstad, 2015). As such, professional practice even when based on scientific research cannot be disconnected from the philosophical assumptions of first principles. All professional psychology promotes a vision of human nature, either implicitly or explicitly.

As an example, recently we have seen the challenge to clinical psychology that its science is based on an illness ideology that has outlived its usefulness and been to the detriment of the profession and the people it serves (Maddux & Lopez, 2015). What may have seemed like a unified clinical science is increasingly understood to be grounded in a theoretical orientation that ultimately has its roots in Freudian theory. It was this argument that led Seligman to champion positive psychology as an alternative to what he saw as the 'rotten-to-the-core' view common to Western thought and academia (Seligman, 2003), echoing the challenge from humanistic psychology to psychoanalysis decades before (Rogers, 1963).

For some it may seem perplexing why many psychologists seem to prolong these therapy wars, but the reason is that these philosophical assumptions of first principles define the therapy, whether it is to control and restrict, mould and shape, or empower and free people - to describe the implications of the biologically based drives in Freudian theory, the blank slate of behaviourism, and the self-actualizing tendency of Rogerian theory, respectively. That is to say, all professional psychology takes one of these stances. It is simply an escapable fact of clinical practice that how we decide to interact with another person rests on our philosophical assumptions of first principles. Practitioners of these traditional theoretical approaches choose them, by and large, because they understand that these are the options and they think their choice of theoretical orientation already offers the most valid unified view.

A clinical science in which there was universal agreement on philosophical assumptions of first principles would be desirable. But to achieve this it must first be possible to either reconcile the different philosophical assumptions of first principles, develop an alternative, or choose between them. But as a scientific question we are no

further to understanding whether human nature is characterised by biologically based drives, the blank slate, or the self-actualizing tendency, or even how to definitively answer this question. These are philosophical assumptions of first principles that are not directly accessible to observation and measurement. Evolutionary theory does not provide support for a unified clinical science as Melchert (2016) suggests. Any theory that is incompatible with evolutionary theory must be questioned, but a case can equally well be made for the compatibility of each of the traditional theoretical orientations. Proponents of each will differentially interpret evidence regarding the characteristics that people have been endowed with through evolution and which characteristics are the product of human nature and which are the result of culture.

Until we are able to provide a definite answer to the question of philosophical first assumptions it needs to be recognized that the practice of psychology is likely influenced by cultural conceptions and the values and ideals which prevail in society at any time and how that shapes the nature of psychological science (van Drunen & Jansz, 2004). Clinical science is important for professional psychology but it needs to be recognised that professional practice even when based on scientific research cannot be disconnected from the philosophical assumptions of first principles.

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