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## “Psychology” or “The Psychological Studies”?

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Sigmund Koch

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*On both historical and principled grounds, the author has long argued that psychology cannot be a single or coherent discipline—whether conceived in scientific or sui generis terms. Instead, the desirability of renaming psychology as the psychological studies has been urged. The present article is a synoptic review of the basis for such a position and its entailments for the future. These are seen to be rather inviting ones for all competent persons engaged in psychological inquiry.*

Although I have long focused on the ubiquitous evidences of increasing differentiation and fractionation within psychology (e.g., Koch, 1959, 1961, 1964, 1965, 1969a, 1969b, 1971, 1973, 1976, 1985, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1992d), I do not think that recognition of this leads to some ultimate relativism. Differing frameworks, perspectives, hypotheses, or theories bearing on the same domain are in no necessary way equally plausible, illuminating, insightful, salient, or true. The “logic of confirmation” as dictated to the world by philosophers of science during much of this century is not well suited to the discrimination of such characters of a formulation as are suggested by terms like *plausible* or *insightful*—or, indeed, *true*. I have tried to explore more fruitful modes of assessment. Moreover, although perspectivity is ineliminable, one can certainly hope the future will bring more revealing and broader perspectives than many of the rather arbitrary and dismal ones that have constrained vision throughout the past century. We can hope, too, for more flexibility in the capacity of inquirers to enrich their vision by trying on the spectacles of their neighbors.

What I have been talking about for all these years is whether psychology has been, is, or can be a conceptually or theoretically coherent discipline. My position in no way entails the desirability of fragmenting the American Psychological Association or other organizations that facilitate the association of psychologists of widely varying cast. We share a common history (to whatever extent we may allow ourselves to know it), and all are responding however idiosyncratically or tendentiously—or speculatively, or empirically, or practically—to a challenge endemic to the human condition: namely, to understand it in ever-increasing depth and salience, perhaps to enrich and even ennoble that condition.

My argument has been that psychology is misconceived when seen as a coherent science or as any kind of coherent discipline devoted to the empirical study of human beings. Psychology, in my view, is not a single discipline but a collection of studies of varied cast, some few of which may qualify as science, whereas most do not. I imply nothing invidious in the distinction between the former and latter classes of studies. Long ago, I recommended the desirability of supplanting the term *psychology* by the *psychological studies*, but I hardly expected to prevail.

The 19th-century belief that psychology can be an integral discipline, which led to its institutionalization as an independent science, has been disconfirmed on every day of the 112 years since its presumptive founding. When the details of that history are attended to, the patent tendency has been toward theoretical and substantive fractionation (and increasing insularity among the “specialties”), not toward integration. Moreover, there are many principled considerations that underline the futility of seeking theoretical, conceptual, or even paradigmatic unification.

The coherence of the increasingly differentiating subfields of fundamental psychology has been broadly questioned. Coherence of the almost nondenumerable congeries of applied interest areas would be maintained by no one. Few could any longer argue for some systematic or clear-cut distinction between all fundamental and applied areas. And the questioning has been at levels ranging from theoretical through paradigmatic to methodic integrability. Furthermore, many would raise questions as to whether any of the traditionally discriminated fields of psychology are, in fact, one field. Even the newest and most fashionable of the fields with integrating intentions—cognitive science—increasingly shows signs of fuzzy boundaries and fuzzy internal relations that cannot be wholly rationalized through the resources of fuzzy logic.

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Sigmund Koch, The University Professors, Boston University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sigmund Koch, 37 Bay State Road, Wellesley, MA 02181.

The conceptual ordering devices, technical languages, open to the various psychological studies are—like all human modes of cognitive organization—perspectival, sensibility dependent relative to the inquirer, and often noncommensurable. Such incommensurabilities will frequently obtain not only between “contentually” different psychological studies but also between perspectively different orderings of the “same” domain. Characteristically, psychological events are multiply determined, ambiguous in their human meaning, polymorphous, contextually environed or embedded in complex and vaguely bounded ways, evanescent, and labile in the extreme. This entails some obvious constraints on the task of the inquirer and limits on the knowledge that he or she can hope to unearth. Different theorists will—relative to their different analytical purposes, predictive or practical aims, perceptual sensitivities, metaphor-forming capacities, preexisting discrimination repertoires—make asystematically different cuts on the same domain. They will identify variables of markedly different grain and meaning contour, selected and linked on different principles of grouping. The cuts, variables—concepts, that is—will in all likelihood establish different universes of discourse, even if they are loose ones.

Corollary to such considerations, it should be emphasized that paradigms, theories, models (or whatever one’s label for conceptual ordering devices) can never prove preemptive or preclusive of alternate organizations. That is so for any field of inquiry but conspicuously so in relation to the psychological and social studies. The presumption on the part of their promulgators that the loose-grained, sensibility dependent, and often arbitrary paradigms of psychology do encapsulate preemptive truths raises a grave moral issue within psychology. In the psychological studies, the attribution to any paradigm of a preemptive finality has the force of telling human beings precisely what they are; of fixing their essence; of defining their ultimate worth, potential, meaning; and of cauterizing away that quality of ambiguity, mystery, search that makes progress through a biography an adventure. Freud’s tendency to view dissidents and critics in symptomatic terms—and to resolve disagreement by excommunication—is no circumscribed failing but indeed renders problematic the character of his effort. One is tempted to laugh off the ludicrous prescriptionism of self-anointed visionaries like Watson and Skinner and even certain infinitely confident prophets of the theory of finite automata, but their actual impact on history is no laughing matter.

Because of the immense range of the psychological studies, different areas studied will bear affinities to different members of the broad grouping of inquiry as historically conceived. Fields such as sensory, physiological (or broadly neuroscience-oriented) psychology may certainly be seen as solidly within the family of the biological and, in some reaches, natural sciences. But psychologists must finally accept the circumstance that extensive and important regions of psychological study require modes of inquiry (and correlative researcher sensibilities and

training backgrounds) rather more like those of the humanities than those of the sciences. And among these latter, I would include important sectors of areas traditionally considered fundamental (e.g., perception, cognition, motivation, and learning), as well as such obviously more rarified fields as social psychology, psychopathology, personology, aesthetics, and the analysis of creativity.

I have buttressed this position by developing in several sources (cf., especially, Koch, 1976 and 1992a) an analysis of the lexical aspect of language, which shows that the very processes of definition and word use, whether in natural or technical languages, render perspective dependent incommensurabilities and mismatches inevitable in efforts to order psychological (and, indeed, other) phenomena by linguistic means. For instance, I have sought to show that, contrary to those misreadings of the thought of P. W. Bridgman which psychologists have called *operational definition*, all definition is based on the initial discrimination of a relational unity within the outer or inner world, which is then communicated by a process of perceptual guidance. It is through such an analysis of the lexical aspect of language that the inadequacies of both traditional and modern analyses of the fiduciary warrant for knowledge claims can be rectified.

## Conclusion

It is fair to say that views similar to those sampled in this article have become something like a majority stance over the dozen years of our second century. The integration, integrability, coherence, or unity of psychology—whether as a scientific or some kind of sui generis discipline—has been questioned in so many ways that one might raise second-order questions concerning the integrability of the critiques. Yet, there is some overarching sense of purpose shared by all who study mind in any of its manifestations. We sense it but have not achieved the vulgarity of attempting its encapsulation in an operational definition. Perhaps that is the ultimate guarantor of the dignity of our effort.

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