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Editorial Article

It's Time for Psychology to Become a (Great) Science

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Editorial

In the late 18th century the renowned philosopher Immanuel Kant stated that “In every special doctrine of nature there is as much science as there is mathematics” but, he said, there was a special place for psychology: “empirical psychology must always remain outside the rank of a natural science”. Did Kant—with this statement—pre-destine psychology to become a branch of knowledge, in perpetual search of its own paradigm? Or, was he simply manifesting the dominant opinion at the time—when the religious conception of humanity was at its height, when the individual was seen as a unique creation of God, and any notion of the human psyche was explained as belonging to “the soul”, which was shrouded in a veil of mystery and expected to remain immeasurable forevermore. Since its conception, psychology was largely confounded to the boundaries of social sciences. Whilst there were moments in the 20th century when psychology stood at the crossroads of embracing the rules of natural sciences—the temptation of the scientific method was never enough to outweigh the influence of the orthodoxy of the humanistic-centered view. Despite the many theses written on methodologies in psychology, the fact remains: the main method of psychologists, “the self-assessment”, endures. The problem of psychology is not that it continues to reside in a “pre-paradigm state”—but rather that its current practicing experts are lacking in the natural and applied science mindset, and who continue to replicate and reproduce their existing mindset to batches of fresh graduates emerging in great numbers from universities worldwide. No wonder it took the superstar physicist Stephen Hawking (and not a psychologist) to raise the key challenge: how do we predict human behavior from mathematical equations [1].

From the point of view of natural science—the concept that personality, thought, and emotion cannot be directly measured—would equate to the implausible notion that the descent of a chicken feather or a cannonball cannot be described by the same set of physical laws, or even described by any physical laws at all. Galilei and Newton proved the latter to be wrong a considerable time ago. The aim of psychology should be to move away from narration and towards measurement. But before this aim can be achieved a set of crucial steps have to be overcome, as measurement requires the establishment of models: of behavior, human needs, emotions etc., [2,3]. In mechanics—the material and color of a feather or a ball can be said to be irrelevant, to the extent that these properties are not even considered worthy of being measured to gain an understanding of them. Instead, measurements are conducted in terms of “point particles”, which have properties such as positions, mass and forces that influence and shape them. Therefore, the most pressing ambition of psychology must be to establish models of behavior which capture “point particles”, and upon which measurement can be attempted.

Ironically, the current state of the field of psychology can be said to be rather good. Debate on unified psychology—which had been picking up pace for some time – has been pushed to the fringes of scientific discourse; instead, an ever-increasing number of schools of psychological thought continue to emerge. According to John Norcross, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Scranton, there are now at least 500 different types of psychotherapies. In fact, even the notion of belonging to a school of psychology is becoming irrelevant. Rather unsurprisingly, Bruce Wampold, Professor of Counseling Psychology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, concluded in 2001 that the school of therapy that is employed accounts for only about one percent of therapeutic effectiveness [4]. More often than not, for consumers of psychological services, the scientific paradigm is of marginal value. This leads to the very sensible question: why is a unified theory in psychology even needed, as after all, life is just fine without it? With seemingly growing amounts of stress in peoples’ daily lives, the gradual but persistent demise of religion, disintegration of traditional societal roles, and decline of “family values”, psychotherapists have taken upon themselves a role more akin to that of a paid-by-the-hour priest, friend or family.

There are currently more than 180,000 psychologists in the US alone, and it’s predicted that this number will increase by another 26,000 by 2028—meaning the number of professional psychologists is set to increase at a greater pace than the average across all occupations. For the remainder of the world this increase is expected to be even more rapid, as low- and middle-income countries continue to close the gap in social and economic standards to high income countries. If the current US per capita coverage was to be applied worldwide there would be a global army of 4.3 million psychologists. One can reasonably conclude that the commercial prospects of psychology have never looked more promising—whilst at the same time the discipline has been going through decades of insufficient scientific development. As such, the situation can be said to be somewhat unusual: psychology is witnessing increasing commercial success, growing public attention, and at the same time, scientific stagnation. On the latter point, it appears that psychology is not only moving from one crisis to the other, but even accumulating these crises: the never-ending search for a common paradigm, a complete lack of a unified theory, and a relatively new crisis of a lack of replicability of results; a large proportion of psychological research cannot be replicated in subsequently attempted studies [5].

We believe these crises represent different facets of the same underlying issue. It remains highly probable that psychology—even within its current state—will continue to enjoy an influx of clients and consumers eager to satisfy their needs for accomplishment, belonging, and self-realization. However, even within the current state, psychologists may see themselves outmaneuvered by emerging artificial intelligence experts, who may soon be able to not only assess their clients’ mental conditions, but also model traits, personality development scenarios, and conduct experiments using a “digital twin” of their clients’ minds. This transformation of the psychological scene may even give rise to its first unifying paradigm. This is the



futurists' forecast. However, there are no real barriers that prevent the field of psychology from capitalizing on developments in neuro and computer science, and work towards establishing a model of human behavior [2]. This would be subsequently enhanced by the development of further specific sub-models of emotions, needs, personality development, and other features of behavior. If, and when, a universal model of human behavior is established—it would inevitably unite the currently divided psychology perspectives. This would occur not through the announcement of a “winner” or a “loser”—but through a true amalgamation of the most applicable aspects of different schools of psychological thought.

As such—we ask the question: what would it mean to make psychology a great science? Whilst others may ascribe different meanings to it, in our opinion, true progress in the field of psychology is subject to tackling the following issues: moving away from a narrated and statistical description of observations, and towards modeling human behavior; a shift away from “using words” to “using numbers”; and a return back to “the basics” to address the “eternal questions”—what is the purpose of life, what is happiness, and what is the right way of living? Whilst philosophers may approach such subjects as “fundamental truths”, psychologists have the advantage of studying humans in real life and observe first-hand how individuals and societies transform throughout the flow of time.

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