Metascientific foundations for pluralism in psychology

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore the metascientific basis for pluralism in psychology. In the first half, I outline the two levels of the metaparadigm: the epistemological and the methodological. The epistemological level includes the dichotomy between an internal, first-person point of view and an external, third-person one. The methodological level includes the dichotomy between explanation and understanding. The continuing debate regarding methodology, explanation versus understanding, has distinguished the human sciences from the natural sciences. Similarly, the continuing debate regarding the epistemological point-of-view has distinguished psychology from other sciences. I illustrate these points by placing various trends in psychology into the two-dimensional space formed by the two coordinate axes depicting the methodological and the epistemological dimensions. Each quadrant represents one definition of the object of psychology: quadrant 1 (internal, first-person - explanation) represents "consciousness;" quadrant 2 (internal, first-person - understanding) represents "experiences;" quadrant 3 (external, third-person - understanding) represents "meaningful acts and expressions;" and quadrant 4 (external, third-person - explanation) represents "behaviors and higher processes of the brain." All of the trends within the history of psychology can be placed within this two-dimensional space. In the second half of the paper, I introduce the third level of the metaparadigm: the metapsychological level. This level includes the three different, and incompatible conceptions of humans: the first-person, the second-person, and the third-person conceptions. A third-person conception of humans is most

compatible with trends placed in quadrant 4. A second-person conceptualization is most

congruent with quadrant 3, and so on. Thus, the unification of psychologies emerges as

not only difficult but actually unreasonable, because the plurality of psychological

paradigms originates from the epistemological, methodological, and metapsychological

levels of the metaparadigm.

Keywords: Explanation vs. understanding; first-person point of view vs. third-person

point of view; Madsen's metascience; metaparadigms; three conceptions of humans.

Introduction

This paper establishes a metascientific foundation for pluralism in psychology.

Historians of psychology have often observed that a single paradigm has never dominated this discipline (e.g., see Driver-Linn, 2003). Several theoreticians have reacted to the fragmentation of psychology by attempting to unify these "psychologies" into a single science. From a metascientific perspective, however, the attempts at unification are not only difficult but also unreasonable, because the plurality of paradigms in psychology originates from the plurality of metaparadigms in psychology.

In Section 1, I briefly describe Madsen's (1988) metascience of psychology for a discussion of the nature of metaparadigms. In the subsequent sections, I outline the three levels of the metaparadigm (see, Watanabe, 1994, 1999, 2003).

The epistemological level refers to the *point of view*, which includes a schism, as represented in the internal, first-person versus external, third-person dichotomy. The methodological level refers to the *attitude* toward the subject matter of psychology that includes a schism, as represented in the explanation versus understanding (or interpretation) dichotomy.

The continuing debate regarding methodology, explanation versus understanding, seems to have distinguished the human sciences from the natural sciences. Similarly, the continuing debate regarding the epistemological point of view, external, third-person versus internal, first-person, seems to have distinguished psychology from other sciences. I illustrate these points by trying to place various trends in the history of psychology into the two-dimensional space formed by the two coordinate axes depicting

the methodological and the epistemological dimensions.

In addition to the two levels of metaparadigm, I outline the third level that originated from the diversity of conceptions of *humans*. The third level of the metaparadigm, the metapsychological level, reflects the three different and incompatible conceptions of humans: the first-person, the second-person, and the third-person. This level comprises a *psychological hypothesis about the diversity of psychology* that could require empirical investigation. As a psychological approach to psychology, the metapsychological level properly resides in the domain not only of psychology, but also of the psychology of psychology, that is, the domain of *metapsychology*. In final sections, I present how this notion of a metapsychology can open a new area of research focused on the personal development of conceptions about humans.

Section 1. Madsen' metascience of psychology

Madsen (1988) suggested that three levels (or strata) of research coexist in psychology: the empirical, the theoretical, and the philosophical. Although every science is characterized by its own three levels, the philosophical level is more important in psychology than it is in the natural sciences. The history of psychology contains philosophical schisms with regard to three issues: the mind–matter problem, determinism, and conceptions of humans (p. 30–35). These schisms have disrupted the unification of psychology paradigms at the philosophical level.

Although my treatment of the metascience of psychology is based on Madsen, my characterizations of the metaparadigms differ a little from his. Madsen classified these three kinds of schisms as ontological. However, I could identify the first metaparadigm

used at the starting point of metascientific research as *explicitly epistemological and implicitly ontological*, and the second as *explicitly methodological and implicitly epistemological.* I will illustrate this in the following paragraphs[1].

Section 2. The epistemological level

Imagine living in a society without any bulk of psychological knowledge. Imagine beginning the project of gathering knowledge about the mind. A question would emerge: "Whose mind should I study in the first place? Mine or someone else's?" If you began by observing your own mind, you would have become a founder of introspective psychology. If you began by observing someone else's mind, noticed that direct observation was impossible, and proceeded by observing the *behaviors of others*, you would have become a founder of behaviorism.

The conflict between these two kinds of observation seems to represent the most fundamental schism, or metaparadigm, in the history of psychology. Kendler (1987) showed that, since the contrast of "observation from within" and that of "from the outside" insisted by August Comte (1857-1927), the observational foundation of psychology could "either be the intrasubjective examination of consciousness or the intersubjective reports of behavior" (p. 70). And even in twenty-first century, over one hundred years after the time of Compte, the epistemological dichotomy of "from within"

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[1] For presenting as clear as possible my framework in the limited space, I will keep this paper within an outline, occasionally using, so to speak, "thought experiment" examples instead of resorting to historical considerations. Two kinds of historical considerations, phylogenical and ontogenical, are yet to be written. See Section 4-2 and 5-4.

and "from the outside", that is, of internal, subjective point of view and external, objective one, is recognized as one of the most important schism by some theoreticians such as Drob (2003).

In recent years, the contrast between "first-person point of view" and "third-person point of view" is occasionally used in the study of consciousness and related fields (e.g., Dennett, 1991; Varela & Shear, 1999) as well as in psychology (e.g., Rychlak, 1993). A *first-person point of view* refers to observations of the observer's own mind, and a *third-person point of view* refers to observations of someone else's mind. The use of first-person/third-person may be advantageous in avoiding the ambiguity of "from within / from the outside", "internal/ external" or "subjective/ objective". So, I use the first-person point of view/third-person point of view terminology, yet occasionally under the expression of "internal, first-person point of view/ external, third-person point of view", because "first-person/second-person/third-person" is reserved to identify the three conceptions of humans at the metapsychological level, as discussed in the final sections of this paper.

Whether taking an internal, first-person point of view or an external, third-person point of view is an epistemological problem. However, it presupposes the ontological distinction between self and others. That is what I mean by identifying the first metaparadigm as explicitly epistemological and implicitly ontological.

Section 3. The methodological level

Identifying the conflict between points of view is not sufficient for comprehending psychology's history and present. The conflict between explanation and understanding

has been implicated in the debate about human science methodology that has continued for over a century, beginning at the time of Dilthey (1883/1989) (also, see Wright, 1971; Teo, 2005).

The conflict between explanation and understanding refers not only to the level of scientific activity but also to the kind of *attitude* adopted in daily life. As Dilthey said, "we explain nature, but we understand mental life" (cited and translated by Teo, 2005, p. 89). However, whether we explain or understand something does not depend on the nature of the "something"; rather, it depends on our *attitude*. Imagine walking around the countryside and saying to yourself, "the white cloud is swimming pleasantly in the sky." This utterance does not reflect a misunderstanding of the phenomenon; you did *understand* the white cloud. You did not regress to a primitive stage, nor did you make a category mistake such as those discussed by Ryle (1949). Understanding and explanation represent two fundamental epistemological attitudes towards the objects of knowledge.

An additional example may further clarify the situation. Robot dogs are becoming popular as artificial pets in Japanese families. In a study....[omitted].....This finding suggests that the children communicated with the robots and "understood" them, even though they were old enough to realize that robot dogs were not alive and that they were machines. This constitutes an additional example confirming the idea: Whether we explain or understand something depends on the epistemological *attitude* toward the object, rather than on the object itself. The attitude involved in *understanding*, then, might be classified as a "second-person attitude", and that involved in *explaining* might be classified as an "impersonal attitude". That is what I mean by identifying the second metaparadigm as *explicitly methodological and implicitly epistemological.*

Section 4. Historical trends in psychology placed into two-dimensional space

It is now possible to understand the history of psychology from a metascientific perspective. Figure 1 places the historical trends in psychology into two-dimensional space. The epistemological axis refers to the internal, first-person/external, third-person point-of-view dichotomy, whereas the methodological axis refers to the understanding/explanation dichotomy. Each of the four quadrants represents a definition of the object of psychology: quadrant 1 represents "consciousness"; quadrant 2 represents "experiences"; quadrant 3 represents "meaningful acts and expressions"; and quadrant 4 represents "behaviors and higher processes of the brain". Behaviorism, biological psychology, and a considerable part of cognitive psychology belong to quadrant 4; social constructionism, psychoanalysis, and some parts of humanistic psychology belong primarily to quadrant 3.
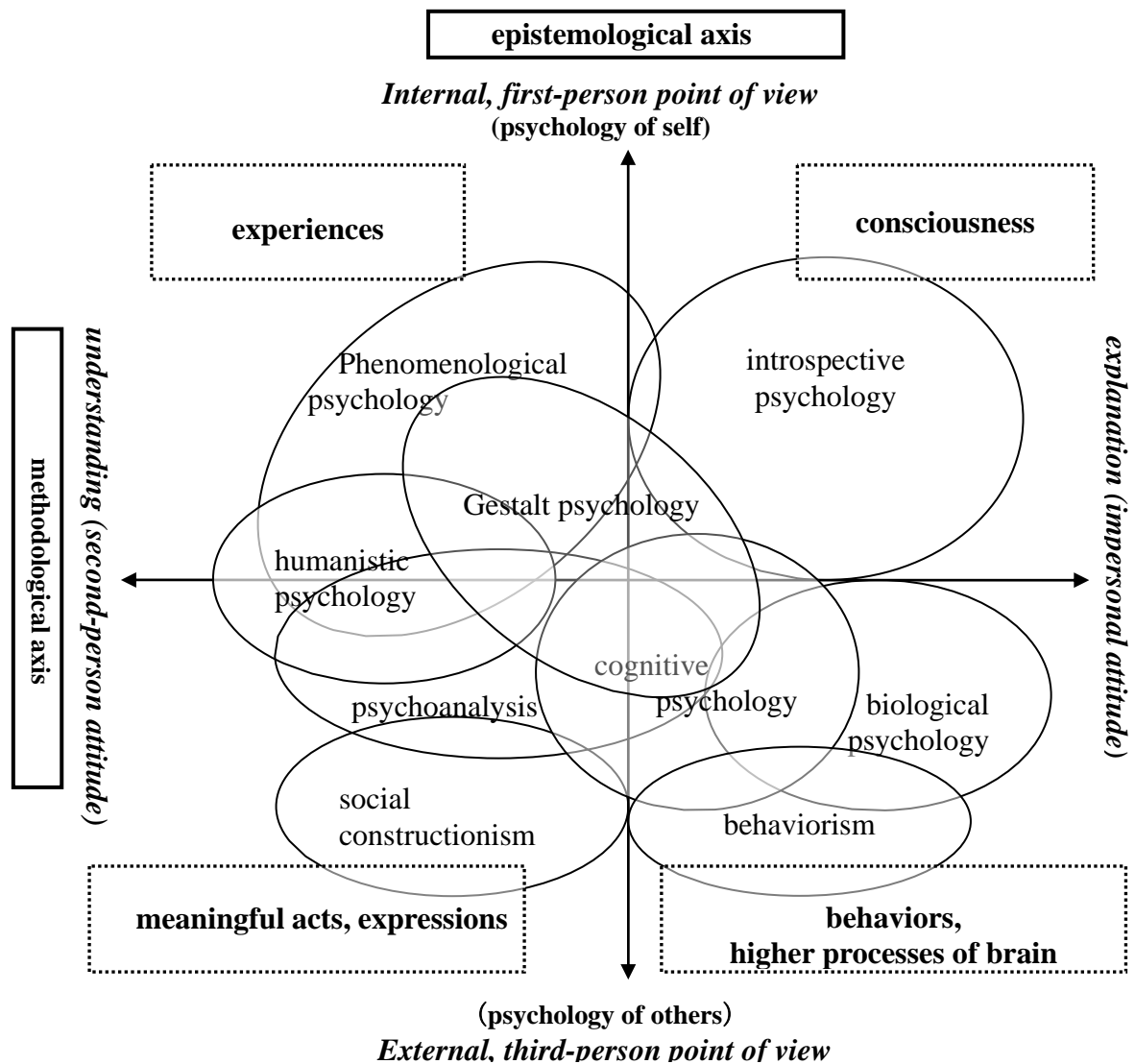
Figure 1. The historical trends in psychology are illustrated in the two-dimensional space comprised of two coordinate axes: the epistemological axis and the methodological axis. As designated by phrases in parentheses, the former axis is implicitly ontological, and the latter is implicitly epistemological. Revision of Figure 1 in Watanabe, 2003.

The distinction between quadrant 1 and quadrant 2 is more complicated and requires additional explanation. Causal explanation and nomothetic methods may apply not only to the outer, physical world but also to the inner, subjective world. Indeed, introspective psychologists tried to achieve a nomothetic science of consciousness but found this undertaking unlikely to be completed. As mentioned above, Dilthey proposed an

alternative method: we *understand* mental life. Subsequently, phenomenological and Gestalt psychologists, having learned from the failure of introspective psychology, tried to describe their experiences as they were; in other words, they did not resort to either the causal explanation or the nomothetic method. Imagine opening a window to feel a cool breeze. Introspection might reveal a chain of causal relations, moving from some sensation of heat to the behavior of opening a window. However, what appeared to be introspection might, in reality, represent retrospection, as suggested in the course of debate on the introspection (see, Lyons, 1996). What you experienced just at the exact time of acting was not a mechanistic connection between *cause and effect*, but a significant, indivisible relationship, a Gestalt, of *means and end* (see Merleau-Ponty, 1942). You tried in vain to explain your consciousness as causal connections. Rather, you should understand your experiences as meaningful relationships. Thus, Gestalt psychology and phenomenological psychology would be placed in different quadrants from introspective psychology, even though all three theories would be considered mainly internal, first-person on the epistemological axis.

I imagine that many proponents of the trend designated onto one of the quadrants would not have agreed with the Figure 1, because they tried to overcome such dichotomies as shown in Figure. However, for the purpose of this article, the important point concerns the overall framework provided by the two axes, rather than the exactness and exhaustiveness of plotting each trend. A complete elaboration of this illustration is beyond the scope of this presentation.

Before concluding the explanation about Figure 1, it should be noted that this schema omits the third dimension: the historical axis. This major issue would require a separate article focused on the history of psychology from a metascientific perspective.

Section 5. The metapsychological level

5.1

This discussion begs one more key question: Why do psychologists choose one trend over others as the theoretical underpinning of their work? That is, why does a particular psychologist adhere to a particular quadrant among the four possibilities illustrated in Figure 1?

Madsen's theory provides the framework for an answer to this question in his notion of a *tacit conception of humans.* Madsen (1988) recognized three conceptions of human beings: humanistic, social, and biological. He considered the distinction of these conceptions as ontological (p. 31). I adopt this trichotomy, but with revised designations: *first-person, second-person, and third-person*, respectively. Moreover, I regard this new metaparadigm explicitly as psychological, or *metapsychological*, and implicitly as epistemological and ontological.

Imagine again facing two alternatives: "Whose mind should I study initially? My own or someone else's?" This is an epistemological problem (and implicitly an ontological one because it presupposes the ontological distinction of self and others). However, whether you, *in fact*, chose your own mind or someone else's mind may be considered a psychological problem. Choosing one's own mind might reflect a tacit first-person conception of humans. In other words, the psychologist choosing his/her own mind as the first object of study might unconsciously view him/herself as the prototype of a "person". Choosing someone else's mind might reflect a tacit second-person or third-person conception of humans.

The foregoing raises the question of why we have these two kinds of conception of "others". Jankélévitch (1977) argued for three kinds of death: first-person, second-person, and third-person. First-person death signifies the death of oneself, second-person death signifies the death of a familiar person, and third-person death signifies the death of a stranger. On this basis, two kinds of others, the familiar and the stranger, can be distinguished. From an epistemological perspective, the distinction between self and others is fundamental. However, from a metapsychological perspective, the notion of "others in general" may have no meaning. Thus, tacit conceptions of human beings can be understood as first-person, second-person, or third-person. In other words, the unconscious prototype of a "person" might be oneself, a familiar, or a stranger.

5.2

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this section, psychologists with first-person tacit conceptions of humans would adopt an internal, first-person point of view. In other words, their psychological practice would be structured by a commitment to the trends placed into quadrant 1 (consciousness), or quadrant 2 (experience). Second-person or third-person tacit conceptions of humans would be likely to lead to an external, third-person point of view. And, a second-person conception might be associated with a second-person attitude toward the objects of study. In other words, trends in quadrant 3 (meaningful acts, expressions) would underpin psychological practice. A third-person conception might be associated with a more impersonal attitude toward psychological problems. In other words, trends in quadrant 4 (behaviors, higher processes of the brain) would dominate practice.

At this point, one might ask about a fourth conception, that is, an "impersonal

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conception", of humans. However, although the "impersonal conception of humans" might theoretically be possible as a kind of sophisticated concept elaborated by scientists in laboratories, it appears impossible that this fourth conception of humans would emerge spontaneously as a function of psychological development. Conceptions of humans do not represent products of intellect but, rather, represent unconscious and tacit conceptions, gradually formed during individual development and serving as prerequisites to personal development itself.

5.3

How is empirical confirmation and explication of these implicit concepts attainable? Imagine a group of very intelligent students who have neither knowledge nor any means of obtaining knowledge of psychology. They are instructed to invent the study of psychology by applying any method they like. Students who begin by observing their own minds could be considered as implicitly having a first-person conception of humans. Students who begin by attending to and seeking interpersonal communication could be considered as having, without consciousness, a second-person conception of humans. Students who begin by placing video-cameras on randomly sampled streets, and recording the behaviors of passers-by, could be considered as having a tacit third-person conception of humans. Each of these choices would offer, as it were, an operational definition of a first-person, second-person, or third-person conception of humans (see Watanabe, 1994). This is a reason why I considered these three conceptions as explicitly psychological.

However, any clear demarcation among these three groups would be unnecessary and impossible. These three conceptions may coexist or may change in dominance

throughout one's lifespan.

5.4

The use of *empirical* research to confirm the existence of a *metaparadigm* would seem controversial. However, according to Madsen (1988), metascience itself is comprised of three levels: philosophical, theoretical, and *empirical* (pp. 11–12). The psychology of science, along with the history and sociology of science, belong to the empirical level of metascience. Therefore, empirical and psychological research to confirm the existence of the metaparadigms (i.e., the three conceptions of human beings) is not illogical.

Empirical and psychological study of the metaparadigms of psychology reveals a new research domain: searching for the origins of pluralism in psychology within developmental psychology. Broughton (1978, 1981) studied young people, with ages ranging from infancy to adulthood, to clarify the developmental course of concepts of self, others, and world. According to Broughton (1978), "it is possible to see three phases: a predualistic childhood period, followed in adolescence by the emergence of the 'great dualisms' (such as mental/physical), which in adulthood the individual attempts to reconcile through a truly reflective awareness of self, reality, and knowledge" (p.79).

Following this research, I have proposed the following three-phases model:
1. First phase: Second-person conception of humans. Children model the concept of self and others (i.e., humans) on the basis of the people of greatest familiarity to them.
2. Second phase: The conception of humans dichotomizes into first-person and third-person conceptions. Several studies using a questionnaire methodology found that this dichotomizing may occur earlier than early adolescence (Spiegelberg, 1964; Watanabe, 2004, 2009).

3. Third phase: Intermittent attempts at unifying the first-person and third-person conceptions of humans. This attempt may well fail, and what appears to be unification might represent only an amalgam, a mixture of the three concepts. Indeed, unconscious changes in relation to conceptions of human beings according to situation may be the rule. For example, in the morning at breakfast, you may communicate with your family members implicitly depending on the second-person concept of humans. In the afternoon, walking along the street as one of an anonymous crowd, you may put into motion the tacit third-person concept of humans. In the evening, alone in your room, you may be occupied, without consciousness, by the first-person concept of humans. In addition, it is worth noting that apparently unified experiences of self and others may suffer repeated divisions at times of crisis or during developmental crossroads (Watanabe, 2009).

5.5

Before concluding this article, I would like to make one more additional comment. The search for the origin of pluralistic metaparadigms in psychology in developmental psychology might appear to endorse a kind of illogical vicious circle. Indeed, all *empirical* studies in developmental psychology rest on some *metaparadigm*. However, circular process is intrinsic not only to hermeneutics but also to every kind of knowing. Thus, what is necessary is not the rejection of the circle, but the constant awareness of it.

Conclusion

The unification of psychologies is not only difficult but also unreasonable because the plurality of psychological paradigms derives from the epistemological, methodological,

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and metapsychological levels of the metaparadigm. This represents the metascientific foundation for pluralism in psychology. Drob (2003), undertaking a comparative analysis of psychology's diverse schools in an effort to sustain a multiperspectivist perspective, nonetheless declared:

> "Psychology is not a single science, it is several. However, the fact that we have several relatively distinct psychological sciences does not imply that we have several relatively distinct subject matters to which they are applied. The psychologies may be many yet the mind may still remain one" (p. 115).

However, my analysis has suggested that the psychologies may be many because the minds may not be one but be several in the sense that we have three conception of humans, that is, three conceptions of the mind. As suggested above, what appears to be a unification might represent only an amalgam, a mixture of the three concepts of humans, that is, the three concepts of the mind. I addition, I considered this metaparadigmatic trichotomy of concepts of humans to be explicitly psychological, and implicitly epistemological and ontological.

The diversity of psychologies originates from the epistemological, methodological, and metapsychological levels of the metaparadigm. As outlined above, this is the metascientific foundations for pluralism in psychology. On this basis, the most effective way to cope with such diversity is not to overcome it but to comprehend each psychological school based on its metaparadigmatic foundation. It is particularly important to comprehend each individual psychologist, including oneself, in terms of his/her metapsychological basis. We can never be totally free from our own point of view. We cannot always behave with the same attitude toward everything. We cannot even have a perfectly unified concept of humans.

Nevertheless, it is to be recalled that, as described in section 5.4, the metascience itself include the empirical level. This means that the *metascientific foundation of pluralism* itself cannot avoid being the object of empirical, that is, historical, sociological and psychological, investigation. Naturally these empirical researchs themselves rest on some metaparadigm. Here is a circle. So here is our hope as well as our limitation.

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