Abstract. Although the value placed on theoretical work in psychology has diminished over recent years, new and significant challenges to the status of theory have emerged within the intellectual community more generally. The demise of the mapping metaphor, the reduction of reason to rhetoric, and the recognition of the impossibility of value-neutral theorizing all raise questions concerning the status and function of theory. Critical theory in psychology has provided one response to these issues by employing theory as an emancipatory device. However, given the limits to pure critique, many search for means of employing theory in the service of pro-active practices of social change. Given the various problems of theory in the traditional mold, what is the function and status of theory in these emerging practices? In the present issue, we bring together five explorations of the utility of theory in processes of social action. Pivotal in these offerings is the reconceptualization of theory as a form of discursive action. When viewed in this light, new and important issues emerge in our understanding of theoretical work and its place in both intellectual and social life.

Key Words: critical theory, discursive action, ideology, mapping metaphor, rhetoric, social change, social construction

In theory, theory and practice are one; in practice they have nothing to do with each other. (Anonymous)

Introduction

The status of theory within psychology has long been controversial. A certain aversion to theory may be traced to psychology’s earliest attempts to separate itself from philosophy. Claims to superiority on matters of mind were based on the use of ‘empirical’ as opposed to ‘armchair’ methods of validation. Today most psychologists might smile appreciatively at the ancient story of the philosopher Thales, who is said to have fallen down a
well while contemplating a theory of the stars. Yet, possibly stimulated by the success of theoretical physics in the mid-20th century, psychology did move through a period termed by Sigmund Koch (1959) ‘the age of theory’. With the theories of Clark Hull (1943) and B.F. Skinner (1938) in the vanguard, it appeared that psychology might indeed be able to achieve grand, synthesizing theories of human conduct. As such theories later confronted difficulties in generating ‘crucial experiments’, and the work of Chomsky and others began to undermine the grounding assumptions of behaviorism, the quixotic romance with grand theory was gradually abandoned. In its place psychologists began to favor restricted models tied tightly to laboratory research. The latter trend has continued into the present. At this juncture, courses in psychological theory have largely disappeared from graduate curricula, while offerings in research methods and statistics have burgeoned.

Yet, while the pages of this journal amply reflect the creative and robust character of theoretical inquiry in psychology, a second movement has taken place from within the ranks of the intellectual world more generally. Here we find significant developments that both call into question the value of theory in its traditional role, and invite important reflection on the future of theorizing more generally. After a brief scanning of these developments, we can lay out the rationale for the articles comprising this special section of the journal. Three arguments are of signal importance.

The Demise of the Mapping Metaphor

As Stephen Toulmin (1996) describes, the traditional aim of scientific inquiry is the generation of universal, trans-historical accounts of the Order of Nature (including human behavior). These accounts should be grounded in systematic empirical research, and should be free of individual or cultural bias. Professional practice should represent deducible applications of general theory. These classic assumptions are intimately entwined with a mapping metaphor of language. In effect, theoretical accounts should provide an accurate map of the order of nature. Without such correspondence, the rationale for theory rapidly erodes. Yet, as philosophers such as Quine (1960) and Goodman (1978) came to demonstrate, the relationship between word and world is effectively indeterminate. Observation in itself does not lead ineluctably to any particular arrangement of language, nor does any particular account of the world determine what counts as its instantiation in observation. Neither can theory be induced from observation, nor observation be deduced from theory. Further, as Kuhn (1970) proposed, and as was subsequently demonstrated by a host of scholars in the history of science and the sociology of knowledge, the discourses employed by scientists for purposes of description and explanation are created within particular communities. These discourses essentially construct an ostensible world of
particulars. The extent to which observation can confirm, correct or discredit a given theory depends on the set of conventions shared by participants within the community. A commitment to the discursive conventions will enable empirical work to advance within the community; however, to abandon the conventions is to destroy the claims to knowledge.

Rationality as Rhetoric

The traditional account of theory in the sciences is often characterized as logico-empirical, drawing in this way from both the empiricist and rationalist strands of epistemological philosophy. The demise of the mapping metaphor effectively undermines the empiricist platform. At the same time, the rationalist vision of logico-determined knowledge was slowly undone by developments in semiotic, literary and rhetorical scholarship. For many, Derrida’s (1978) work is pivotal, in its demonstration of the way in which major philosophic works are held together by a series of binaries that serve to create hidden contradictions within the text. Only through a suppression of meaning does philosophic reasoning remain coherent. Further, because the meaning is never inherent in a word itself, but relies on an expansive network of other words, the meaning within any philosophic proposition is inherently indeterminate. In Rabate’s (2002) terms, theory posits a ‘Platonic logos, but it cannot avoid being enmeshed in the letter of the text’ (p. 140). A vast array of studies in the rhetoric of science (see, e.g., McClosky, 1985; Simons, 1989) expanded on such ideas by demonstrating the way in which theoretical discourse is shaped by persuasive ends. Good reason, then, is not dependent upon culturally and temporally transcendent axioms, but is lodged within communal traditions of discourse.

The End of Ideological Neutrality

On the classic account, the contribution of both observation and reason to theory should be free of individual or cultural bias. Theory should neither be a slave to ideology, nor should the selection of one theory over another be based on ideological commitment. Yet, if theories issue from relations within interpretive communities, and commitment to a theory effectively sustains the community, then any given theory will carry with it the values (implicit or explicit) of a given community. For example, a theory that posits a material world will tend to favor a materialist ideology; psychological theory will typically lend support to an ideology of individualism; individual difference theories of human capacities will tend to favor competitive institutions. It is largely in this domain that Foucault’s (1978, 1979) work on power/knowledge has acquired such prominence. For Foucault, and a host of scholars from across the social sciences and humanities, theoretical knowledge-claims function as potential encumbering devices. To accede to
their truth is to become a ‘docile body’. Broadly put, to propound theory is to join the ranks of the potentially oppressive; to resist others’ theories is to retain one’s freedom.

These are only a few of the important arguments challenging the place of theory within knowledge-generating enclaves.¹ On the whole, the traditional view of theory as the grand summation of knowledge, pure in reason and un tarnished by value biases, is slowly receding into history. The major question that now confronts the conceptually oriented is that of identifying the rationale for theoretical work in psychology. If we, in the pages of this journal, are not engaged in the process of moving toward the goal of empirically and rationally based knowledge, if indeed the very concept of such knowledge is problematic, then what is the purpose of such activity? If our exercise is one of rhetoric, and this rhetoric subtly obscures its ideological grounds, then do we not function in a relationship of bad faith with our audience? Are we unwittingly mired in an unceasing and ultimately fruitless struggle to ‘get it right’, with no exit to the continuing struggles of humankind more generally? Are theoretical pursuits serving as insulation against participating in the quest of the world’s peoples toward more viable forms of life? As one colleague remarked about a fellow scholar departing for an elite conference on literary theory, ‘Ah, the leisure of the theory class . . . .’

**The Emancipatory Alternative**

Confronted by waning confidence in the role of theory in traditional psychology, and the prospect of theory becoming an effete and irrelevant practice, many psychologists have turned to a specific variant of the rationalist legacy for an alternative. Drawing from a lineage extending from Kant and Hegel to the 20th-century offerings of the Frankfurt School, they have come to see theoretical work not so much as a contribution to universal knowledge but as a contribution to rational and critical reflection. Theory is not so much a summation of what is the case about human behavior as a way of emancipating people from stultifying and repressive conceptions of what is the case. Rationally based critique, in particular, should enable people to discern the problems embedded in a particular array of assumptions and its various institutionalized expressions, and thus liberate them from mindless repetition.

This move toward reflexive critique has offered a robust alternative to many psychologists, and particularly to those who wish to see theory play a more important role in public affairs. The work of scholars such as Sampson (1993), Parker (1989), Walkerdine (1988), Ibañez and Íñiguez (1997) and Prilleltensky (1989), among many others, has left a lasting imprint on the
field. The emergence of critical psychology conferences and journals, and the institutionalization of critical psychology into the mandatory curriculum in the UK, all represent major steps toward the resuscitation of significant theoretical work.

At the same time, circumscribing theoretical analysis to critique has important shortcomings. In part these shortcomings are inherent in the pragmatics of the critical idiom. For one, critique often tends to reduce complex problems to single dimensions, such that the voices of those not represented by the binary in question are silenced. Critique also tends to create resistance among target groups, with the resulting polarization reducing the possibilities for productive dialogue. In effect, if theoretical work is to incite social change, the rhetoric of critique may not be the most useful. One may also find in much critical work a latent commitment to the mapping metaphor of language. The critic treats his/her account of the target as an objective representation of what is the case. Further, the account itself is treated as unbiased by the value investments of the critic. (For a more extended analysis of such issues see Gergen, 2001.) There is, then, good reason to expand the scope of useful theoretical work.

**Toward Theory in Action**

While critical analysis may be an insufficient goal for theoretical endeavors in psychology, such efforts do begin to illuminate a broader pathway of potential. Specifically, in the case of emancipatory efforts we begin to realize that theory is nothing more or less than a form of human discourse. It is a way of talking or writing within a community, a constituent of the meaning-making process by which realities, rationalities and values are constructed. As such, it can also be embedded within various patterns of non-linguistic action. In a Wittgensteinian sense, theories are constitutive of various forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1953). As a discursive practice, theory may often sustain a given form of life; to transform this discourse is potentially to alter a traditional pattern of action. In effect, there can be a close relation between theory and other forms of human action.

From this pragmatic perspective, we suspend the traditional theory–practice distinction, which holds theory to be the summation of knowledge and practice a second-order derivative. Rather, we are sensitized to the possibility of a full blending of theoretical discourse and societal practice. Practitioners may employ theoretical discourse to coordinate their activities, to unite them as a community, to infuse their actions with intelligibility, to offer alternative metaphors, to reflect upon their activities, and to provide each other with a supporting rationale. In all these ways theoretical discourse may be constitutive of effective practice. Or, to reverse Kurt Lewin’s
problematic dictum, we may say that there is nothing more theoretical than a good practice.

This line of reasoning invites the psychologist into a far broader set of dialogues than that sustained by the field of psychology thus far. In recent decades theoretical work has not only been increasingly severed from research, but both theory and research have become increasingly remote from societal issues more generally. Publishing theoretical work for one’s peers can now serve as an end in itself. As theoretical psychologists we run the risk of creating a community that simply thrives on its own self-created discourse. From the present standpoint we are invited as theorists to engage in social issues more directly, and to link our discursive tools to social action about which we care.

It is this line of reasoning that gave birth to this special section of the journal. Given the importance of linking theory to societal action, not only for the vitality of the profession but for human well-being more generally, it seemed essential to explore the theory/action relationship more fully. How are we to understand this relationship? What traditional distinctions or concepts can be laid to rest? What new distinctions are needed? With such issues in the forefront, we invited a number of scholars, active in their participation in theoretical psychology, to explore the status and consequence of theory in their professional work. Of particular importance, our invitation was extended to scholars who were both conversant with existing critiques of theory, and engaged in practices of societal consequence. It was our strong hope that by sharing their current views on the relationship between theory and societal action, the dialogue on theoretical potentials could be pressed forward in productive ways.

The Present Issue: Theory in Action

In the pages that follow, the contributors to the present issue offer a rich range of perspectives on the relationship between theory and practice. In the initial contribution, Japanese psychologist Toshio Sugiman (2006) first locates a close relationship between social constructionist meta-theory and collaborative research. Drawing on this relationship, he brings new insights into the relation between theory and practice. Specifically, he differentiates between two modes of collaborative inquiry. In the first mode—similar to the empirical approach—the researchers share the constructions of the world and implicit rules guiding the participants’ practice. These rules are neither questioned nor deliberated in this first stage, but form the basis of the collaborative work between psychologists and those with whom they work in the society. Instrumental realism prevails. In the second mode the constructionist researcher invites theoretical reflection on the content of the tacit assumptions implicit in the actions in the previous period and upon
their constructed nature. This does not mean a devaluation of the results achieved in the first phase, but an enhanced cognizance of limits, a consideration of alternative theories, and possible exploration of new directions for action or research. For illustration, Sugiman introduces the concrete case of Chizu town, a revitalization project in a depopulated Japanese rural community. He describes how the researchers’ theoretical offerings, on the one hand, and the insights stemming from participatory research experience, on the other, may fruitfully be combined.

Following Derrida’s notion of philosophy as a kind of writing, Alexa Hepburn (2006) suggests viewing psychology as a kind of writing, and discursive psychology as an attempt to write psychology differently. Discursive psychology allows a focus on the function of ‘psychological’ terms and references for people in interaction, and this leads us to see emotion and its management as parts of participants’ everyday practices. Hepburn applies a discursive analysis to the problems faced by call-takers on a child protection helpline when they have to communicate with distraught callers. From a discursive perspective we do not assume a self-evident presence of meaning for the categories of ‘emotion’, ‘crying’ or ‘upset’ in advance of researching the topic. Hepburn argues that discursive analysis has a particular utility for the organization, in that explicating and making visible the kinds of embodied, untheorized, practices in which people engage enables them to carry out useful dialogue on what constitutes good practices, and how communication can appear to break down. In this way, Hepburn addresses some of the dilemmas for the researcher who wants not only to do psychology after deconstruction, but also to contribute to societal practices more generally.

Glenda M. Russell and Janis S. Bohan (2006) suggest that theory is always enactment, thus itself a form of practice. And practices always rest on certain theoretical understandings of reality. Referring to the construct of ‘internalized homophobia’, the authors first show how this theoretical construct enforces a certain practice in dealing with—thus also theoretically constructing—the ‘phenomenon’ in question. Importantly, the authors propose an alternative theoretical perspective of internalized homophobia, rendering it a result of socio-pragmatic process. Rather than individualizing and pathologizing, as in the traditional vision of homophobia, Russell and Bohan see both positive and negative narratives of homosexuality as circulating within the society more generally. Such narratives are available to us all, and may be used on various conversational occasions. ‘Homophobia’ is not ‘in the head’, but in the conversational space among people. As Russell and Bohan go on to show, this reconstruction has important implications for psychotherapy, and ultimately favors forms of political activism.

In her article, South African psychologist Catriona Macleod (2006) develops an argument for what she terms intellectual activism. The author
describes the situation of post-Apartheid South African psychology and then, drawing on Foucauldian discourse and post-colonial studies, develops a feminist theoretical perspective of special relevance to the South African context. From this orientation Macleod proceeds to lay out routes to intellectual activism. These include various forms of social resistance, developing plural identities, illuminating oppressive discourses, and continuous reflexivity regarding assumptions. Introducing the concept of ‘chains of equivalence’, emerging from similar or common practice of members of radically different cultures, Macleod argues that the striving for difference and diversity doesn’t necessitate a rampant relativism among radically different identities or language games.

Holding that the purpose of theory is to intervene in and have effects on social and political action, Niamh Stephenson and Susan Kippax (2006) present a specific action research perspective. Here they draw from their work with HIV prevention practices among gay men in Sydney, Australia. The authors distinguish between an ‘affirmative’ and a ‘negative’ approach to research and social action. The ‘affirmative approach’ fundamentally strengthens the agency of the rational subject, but as a form of research it is limited to the representation of practices and forms of subjectivity that have already been identified. The ‘negative approach’, while providing valuable criticism, holds that subjectivity is a product of anonymous forces. The capacity for agency is deconstructed. Both approaches overlook the unexpected and creative ways in which people may engage in relationships with each other and thereby change their life-world. Seizing on this capacity for collaborative change, the authors propose an approach that emphasizes ‘transfiguring relations’. As they see it, the purpose of theory is not to drive social action. Rather, their attempt is to identify processes of transformation, articulate them, and then contribute to discussions and debates in which various actors are working on the problem in question.

Continuing the Dialogue

The hope of this special section is to sharpen and extend dialogue around the function of theoretical work in psychology. Of special concern is the significance of theory for social action initiatives. We do not emerge from the present contributions with a set of definitive conclusions on such matters. At the same time, we do find in the present papers a range of frequently recurring views, and several of these may be especially useful as incitements to furthering the dialogue. We call attention in particular to the following provocations:

● The traditional distinction between theory and practice is flawed. Theory is not a verbal map essential for effective practice. Rather, theory is a form of discursive action, and is thus itself a practice.
The meaning of all action—discursive and otherwise—is generated within communities, and derives from its use within relationships. Yet, within the scholarly world, theoretical meaning is often dependent on a history of discourse alone, with little reliance on forms of action outside the genre of discourse. If concerned with societal change, theorists should ideally work within communities of the concerned.

Theoretical practices do not dictate or prescribe action within themselves. There is no logical relationship between theoretical discourse and any other form of action. Theory can only suggest or invite practices if there are bridging conventions, that is, traditions in which certain words are associated with particular actions (e.g. the term ‘justice’ has no action referent in general, but in specific communities of practice its action implications can be quite clear). Such conventions are developed, transformed and abandoned within communities. If theoretical work is to be useful for social action initiatives, efforts must be made to articulate (or translate) it in such a way that it can be absorbed by communities of practitioners.

There is no principled difference between theoretical discourse and other forms of discourse used by people within their various forms of life. Theoretical terms are not inherently more abstract, logical, philosophic or rational than other forms of discourse employed by researchers or practitioners.

Existing forms of action and the quotidian discourse in which such action is embedded can influence or change the content of theoretical discourse. However, there are no necessary theoretical propositions that derive from any particular array of actions. Once again, bridging conventions are essential to secure the theoretical implications.

Practices are not based on, nor do they derive from, unarticulated theoretical premises. Employing bridging conventions, an analyst may trace the implicature of a given practice to locate a congenial theoretical account. However, such accounts are not thereby required for the generation of the practice.

When secreted into practices of social change, theoretical discourse may have many different and important functions. Among these, theory may provide a supporting rationale for action, provide useful terms for coordinating practitioner communities, alter the existing terms of description and explanation so that new forms of action are invited, and place existing practices under critical reflection.

We look forward very much to future dialogue on these important issues.

Note

1. See, for example, Shotter and Lannamann (2002) for a critique of what they call ‘the way of theory’.
References


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