THEORETICAL PLURALITY AND UNITY IN PSYCHOLOGY

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The question of unity and diversity in science and psychology is a question that seems to resist final solution. Part of the problem is that the analysis is usually not pushed to the level where the ambiguity of the meaning of unity shows up. Unity can mean "singleness" in the sense of absence of difference or "singleness" in the sense of integrating diverse parts under one idea (concinnity). When scientists object to unity in science or psychology they imply "absence of difference" and when scientists argue for it they imply unity in the sense of concinnity. Thus the two senses of unity can be rendered compatible and the position is taken that unity in the sense of concinnity is desired and necessary for psychology to be a mature science.

A pair of recent articles in this journal (Observer, 1982; Dixon, 1983) have concerned themselves with the issue of theoretical unity and plurality in psychology. Several other accounts of the problem of unity and plurality in psychology (e.g., Observer, 1971; Koch, 1976; Leary, 1983) show that despite attempts to ignore it or put it away once and for all, it does not just quietly recede. Part of the difficulty is that the articles do not seem to detect the ambiguity that is the crux of the issue and thus genuine clarification of the problem is not achieved. In this article, I shall try to demonstrate in what senses unity and plurality can coexist within psychology and I shall say a word about interbehavioral psychology as the basis of a unified psychology.

I believe that a sense of unity is necessary for a scientific discipline even though it is not always easy or possible to articulate and express the sense of unity correctly in an explicit way. This is especially true for nonformal sciences. However, it should be made clear that seeking unity does not mean (a) uniformity, (b) dogmatism, or (c) absence of disagreement.

It is often forgotten that unity, while apparently simple, is a complex notion. Webster's (1976) unabridged dictionary lists eight meanings for unity, but these eight meanings can be grouped under two major headings with different implications: It can mean "singleness" as absence of difference or "singleness" as integration of a complex whole under one idea. Those who are against unity in science presuppose the former meaning; those who are for it, presuppose the latter. Among the first meanings given in the dictionary are: "State of being one; absence of diversity." It is the sense of unity as being without change or diversity to which scientists such as Dixon (1983) object. One does not want uniformity

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in science and this is especially true if it is a uniformity imposed by an idea which a researcher understands to be at odds with his or her concrete experience. A researcher wants the freedom to be flexible enough to modify procedures or design to meet the exigencies of the research situation. Thus, if scientists understand by unity a certain restriction of diversity or plurality, then of course they are against it. It means a kind of arbitrary uniformity that means dogmatism and certainly science and dogmatism are incompatible.

One should not misconstrue, however, the arguments of those who hold for unity into dogmatism. They are arguing for the second sense of unity: namely, integration of discriminable parts of a phenomenon or event into a single whole. In this sense, unity presupposes diversity. Without the latter, there could be no unity. Thus, this is the opposite of uniformity and would be more properly expressed by the word concinnity (Observer, 1971). Moreover, if scientific practice is being followed the guiding idea is not dogmatic because the unity being suggested is grounded upon a logic even if the logic as presented does not have the clarity and force of geometric axioms. But it is not based upon the whim of the theoretician; rationality is presupposed.

Can these two ideas of unity be brought into harmony? They can if one remembers to distinguish between the guiding idea, which is single, and the diverse parts that must be integrated, which are multiple. Uniformity would prevail if all the parts to be integrated were identical, or if one had to force them into a certain mold in order to integrate them. Dogmatism would prevail if the guiding idea had no logic or evidence to support it, and was superimposed where it did not fit simply because of bias or ignorance. Obviously, no one would want scientific unity at that price. Lastly, even if there are rational grounds for a sense of unity, but not sufficiently convincing ones, other scientists could disagree with the specific unity being suggested by using rationally based counterarguments. But this only means disagreement with the specific sense of unity being offered, not with the fact of a sense of unity. The positing of a sense of unity is not inconsistent with such a process. The point is that those who argue for unity in science are basically arguing for concinnity and they assume some correct sense of unity in terms of the proper fittingness of parts into a whole even when it is not known. Those who argue against unity are arguing against “absence of differences” in science. Thus, even though the same word is being used, the meaning of the word differs in each case, and thus the arguments go past each other. When the word “unity” is replaced by “concinnity” and “single-ness” it can be seen that there is no contradiction. The “singleness” applies to the idea and the diverseness applies to the parts that must be integrated under the idea.

This leads to the issue of how a “guiding idea” can guide when it is not known. Let’s explore this by beginning with a guiding idea that is known. A car, for example, is a self-propelled vehicle guided by a human being and capable of traversing land. If one were to examine the parts that are necessary for a car to function one would find the utmost diversity. There are metal doors, glass windows, rubber tires, cast iron engines, oil of different grades, water, upholstery, mirrors, plastic steering wheels, and so forth. Yet, these diverse materials form a unity in the sense of concinnity, the different materials relate to the varied