



# Three approaches to overcome compartmentalization in psychology: A brief epistemological analysis

Nicolò Gaj\*

Submitted: 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2024  
Accepted: 1<sup>th</sup> June, 2024

## Abstract

The authors of the target article (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022) provided an in-depth analysis of the features and the causes of professional psychology's fragmentation, generally referred to as compartmentalization. The present contribution is a critical reflection on the three approaches aimed at overcoming it. In conclusion, some preliminary remarks are presented regarding the primary components that a theory of practice should encompass.

**Keywords:** Unity in psychology, conceptual analysis, professional psychology, theory of practice.

## Introduction

The article by Salvatore and colleagues (2022) touches upon extremely important topics regarding the link between theory and practice in psychology. The significance of such topics lies not only in the social and ethical implications of professional practice, but also in the fact that the interaction between theoretical and practical aspects is

\* Research Unit for Philosophical Psychology, Department of Psychology, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano (Italy).  
E-mail: nicolo.gaj@unicatt.it; Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6089-178X>

*Rivista di Psicologia Clinica* (ISSNe 1828-9363), n. 1/2024

DOI: 10.3280/rpc1-2024oa17127

103

rarely debated within the psychological community. Indeed, professionals and academics tend to show off a reciprocal attitude of indifferent independence, with no interest in sharing ideas and visions of the field. From this perspective, I sympathize with the analysis provided by the target article about the reasons for discontent with the current state of psychology's hyper-compartmentalization. Before assessing the viability of the three identified approaches to overcome compartmentalization – as indicated by the title – I will provide some brief additional remarks about the causes of professional psychology's disunity. As the reader will notice, such remarks are consistent with the general frame traced by the authors.

First, in the last few decades, we witnessed an enormous expansion of the social mandate for the psychological community. This is not a bad thing per se: the number of stakeholders has been increasing because psychologists have gained more social respect and scientific credibility, and vice versa. Nonetheless, the broadening of psychology's range of action raised problems concerning the borders of psychology to other disciplines and, consequently, the issue of the autonomy and specificity of psychological interventions; many "grey areas" developed (e.g., counseling). This growth has been fostering the proliferation of assorted techniques and approaches of intervention, whose peculiarity (i.e., as psychological techniques) and solidity (i.e., as effective techniques) in responding to complex social problems may frequently be questioned. From this perspective, compartmentalization might promote methodological fragmentation and fragility, and, in the long run, it may be associated with a progressive dissatisfaction with the efficacy of psychology by the side of the general public. So, this issue should draw further attention of the psychological community. Second, psychologists have done very little to limit the critical consequences of the above scenario: indeed, we have been witnessing an uncritical acceptance of varied social mandates by the side of psychologists. On the one hand, this uncritical attitude is likely tickled by flattery: where social demands increase, psychologists might have easily taken advantage of the opportunity to increase their credibility and thus validate their presence in society. On the other hand, such an attitude risks hampering theoretical analysis and favoring the design of interventions based on extemporary methodological/technical tools (e.g., framing situations via common-sense categories, lack of proper

theoretical reformulations, blind application of old tools to new situations, etc.). This, in turn, may facilitate compartmentalization, understood as the fragmented development of numerous specialized sub-fields centered around either selected methods/techniques or unreformulated demands for intervention. Third, the link between scientific and everyday psychological categories should not be overlooked, when discussing the causes of compartmentalization. Indeed, the sources of scientific and professional categories cannot be located except in everyday language. Both languages, common sense and scientific-professional, express various forms of interests and preoccupations and thus may frame reality in numerous ways (Richards, 2022). For example, the same object or concept may be framed differently depending on diverging local interests<sup>1</sup> or according to different degrees of detail<sup>2</sup>. These, and similar, remarks show the irreducible plurality of the sources of scientific and professional psychology, as well as its dependency on the way the lay community of speakers frames the constituents of reality. To this, it must be added the variability inherent to the processes of “translation”, from everyday life to disciplinary language: these processes are also value- and interest-dependent and, as such, generate further variability. From this point of view, compartmentalization may be understood as a consequence of the strong link between the ways laypeople define the constituents of various aspects of social reality and the way psychologists organize the discipline and its concepts.

These aspects, together with those described by the authors of the target article, contribute to the phenomenon referred to as compartmentalization. Clearly, this phenomenon appears to be multilayered and prompts crucial questions for psychologists: first of all, one may wonder if it is an inevitable indicator of scientific and professional growth or a worrying sign of disciplinary vulnerability. Accordingly, should it be limited or promoted? How does it affect the advancement of psychological knowledge? How does it influence the development of the professional community? The present contribution will attempt

<sup>1</sup> Consider moths: the common-sense category and the biological order to which these animals would belong are far from overlapping (Duprè, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Consider the popular myth regarding the number of words Inuit would use for “snow”.

to provide suggestions for inciting reflection in response to these and similar inquiries. Unfortunately, the reader will hardly find some sort of answer; that is not the purpose of the article and, perhaps, the topic does not lend itself to such definitive conclusions. Rather, the article's limited objective is to critically evaluate the three approaches identified via the analysis of the literature by the authors (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, pp. 15-25) as possible responses to the problem of psychology's compartmentalization.

### **Some critical remarks on the three approaches aimed at overcoming compartmentalization**

The first approach to unification regards the identification of the ultimate causal explanation. In my opinion, this cannot be a defensible approach, if considering the specificity of the object of interest of psychology, namely human subjects (see Gaj, 2021). The traditional scientific method, heavily reliant on causal explanations, aims to establish cause-and-effect relationships to predict and explain phenomena; this approach has been immensely successful in understanding various natural phenomena. However, when applied to human psychology, it encounters challenges due to the subjective, intentional, and teleological nature of human beings (see Brinkmann, 2022; Von Wright, 1971;). A phenomenon like an action, for example, could be understood in terms of causal processes, within a framework whose aim is to reduce the phenomenon to its physical or chemical constituents (e.g., behavior as the outcome of nomic connections between stimuli and effects). This is the perspective adopted by those who promote an understanding of psychology as a natural science. However, this is just half of the story and, more precisely, the less interesting part of the story for those who strive to understand humans from a psychological perspective. In fact, to get the whole story, we have to supplement the causal explanation with a teleological explanation that considers that action as a meaningful expression of the subject's intentionality. From this point of view, an action should be understood as a means to obtain a goal that the subject considers desirable. Such remarks recall the traditional divide between causes and reasons. When referring to the former, we appeal to brute physical forces whose outcome is the

phenomenon at stake: this is the approach of the natural sciences. When referring to the latter, we appeal to what a person takes to be a rational course of action given her beliefs and desires (Von Wright, 1971). Reasons appear to be different sorts of things from causes and provide an alternative, irreducible framework for the understanding of individuals. This is the position of those who advocate for the autonomy of psychology from the natural sciences, in the wake of the human sciences. To summarize, if psychology is understood as an autonomous endeavor with a distinctive level of inquiry, it is imperative that psychological explanations encompass dimensions such as subjectivity, intentionality, and meaning. Otherwise, expunging these dimensions would mean collapsing psychology's level of inquiry on the level of some other disciplines such as, for example, biology, medicine, or ethology.

The second approach described by the authors would entail the progressive extension of the explicative capacity of specific theories on multiple phenomena. According to my opinion, this is also not a defensible approach in that it entails a problematic form of reductionism. Following a traditional account of reductionism, two forms of it can be distinguished. One of them is referred to as *homogeneous* reductionism, which deals with the broadening of the scope of a theory. Once formulated for a specific type of phenomenon, the theory is then extended to cover the same phenomenon when manifested by a broader class of objects. This is an unproblematic form of reductionism since the two classes of phenomena are similar, if not identical, so it is generally associated with scientific progress. The approach illustrated by the target article might look like a case of homogeneous reductionism because it deals with phenomena pertaining to the same field, namely psychology. Nonetheless, at a closer look, it is not. Indeed, it follows from the premises that psychology is a fragmented field characterized by diversity in many domains, first of all, theory and methodology. Indeed, psychological theories refer to various ontologies, that is, various classes of objects requiring different theoretical and methodological treatments: arguably, each ontology<sup>3</sup> reflects the specific quality of the domain under investigation. That being

<sup>3</sup> By ontology I refer to the class of entities a scientific theory recognizes as existing (Fraser, 2005).

considered, a reductionist approach such as the one described by the target article (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 18) should be more appropriately labeled as a case of *heterogeneous* reductionism. According to it, the class of objects of the secondary theory, i.e., the theory to be reduced, is somewhat assimilated to the class of objects of the primary theory, i.e., the superordinate theory formulated in another domain whose explicative domain is extended to that of the secondary theory. This is an untenable form of reductionism since a certain class of objects is treated *as if* it were similar (or identical) to another one, even if it is not (see Nagel, 1961). In this way, the qualitative specificity of the secondary theory's class of objects is rejected in the name of its (arbitrary) assimilation to the primary theory's class of objects. Turning back to the example proposed by Salvatore and colleagues (Nagel, 1961), extending operant conditioning theory to different domains such as individual psychopathology, career development, macro-economy, etc. would mean illegitimately applying a theory originally formulated for explaining a specific class of phenomena (i.e., learning processes in specific conditions) to classes of phenomena (e.g., those above mentioned) whose postulated qualitative homogeneity with the former is, to say the least, arbitrary and highly questionable. However, an objection may be raised: one might oppose that the classes of phenomena candidates to be reduced are associated, broadly speaking, with learning processes, so the reduction would turn out to be justified. Even if we concede this objection, it is evident that the content of those classes *exceeds* the domain of learning processes and displays qualitative specificities that require ad hoc conceptual treatments. It is precisely this specificity that attracts the interest of practicing psychologists. For example, what is interesting to psychologists studying psychopathology is the specific quality of the investigated phenomena, that is, what makes psychopathological expressions significantly different from other phenomena with which they might share some features. In other words, professional psychologists are mostly interested in what constitutes the *specific quality* of the classes of phenomena investigated, with the intention to provide a full account of them and to design sound interventions. These remarks ought to be taken into consideration when evaluating the viability of an approach entailing the extension of the explicative capacity of a certain theory on multiple phenomena.

Let us now move to the third approach described in the target article. It involves the building of a metatheoretical framework, which would serve as the foundation for unification. In this regard, I agree that psychology lacks a shared conceptual framework specifying the fundamentals of the discipline; therefore, I think this may be in principle a promising route (see also Hibberd & Petocz, 2022). My perspective aligns with the proposal of the authors, who assert that psychology ought to prioritize the theoretical level over the empirical one, as the former provides the framework for interpreting the latter. In my view, what they call “empiricism” (“Empiricism’s preference for constructs close to experience has been accompanied by the downgrading of abstract constructs (...)”) (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 23) may be rather reframed as common-sense: psychologists tend to subscribe to definitions whose source is the lay community of speakers to which they belong, which endorse a form of naïve realism. Accordingly, their approach may often appear to be unsophisticated and based on constructs that closely mirror our lay understanding of reality. This may lead to the thinning of the theoretical space in favor of common-sense thinking, promoting the adoption of common-sense categories as basic elements of psychological theorizing. In summary, I am sympathetic to the third approach and consider it to be the most viable.

Nonetheless, the proposal to identify the professional intervention as a criterion to compare the different approaches to overcome compartmentalization is not completely clear to me; probably it would need further development. Even if briefly presented, my feeling is that the authors’ perspective can be referred to as a form of pragmatism, based on the belief that the validity of a theory coincides with the practical effects achieved via its adoption. Assuming that this is the perspective adopted, some aspects need to be clarified. For example, it should be elucidated what may be the relationship between the theory’s practical implications and its explanatory power, and in what manner the explanatory and transformative properties of a theory intertwine in justifying its adoption over other theories; these and similar questions remain open. From my perspective, pragmatism is not an inevitable outcome for those who aspire to place professional practice at the center of the stage. Surely, the outcomes of practical interventions have a justificatory role for the theory on which the interventions are based. Nonetheless, the success or failure of a practical

intervention, or its adequate or poor fit within specific contexts, are not the exclusive determinants of the justification or falsification of all the theoretical ideas on which the intervention is based. Indeed, practical failure may not mean that the grounding theory is flawed or poor; rather, practical failure may also be derived from other factors, such as erroneous knowledge of the conditions of practice or of the means it is supposed to achieve (see Gaj, 2018). From this viewpoint, a pragmatist perspective may contribute to the erosion of theory in favor of uncritical practice, relegating the justificatory function exclusively to practical outcomes. Therefore, it appears that adopting such an outlook may not be a promising avenue, particularly if the aim is to broaden the scope of theoretical reflection.

As already noticed, I disagree with the suggestion that metatheoretical frameworks can be validated via the notion of intervention: in what follows, I will outline the main reasons. First, it should be remembered that the level of practice (pertaining to the notion of intervention) is logically and pragmatically subordinate to the level of theory (pertaining to psychological concepts and constructs). So, even if they are inherently connected, the practical domain cannot precede the theoretical domain (Gaj, 2017); in fact, the description and explanation of phenomena (i.e., level of theory) logically precedes the design of interventions aimed at manipulating and transforming aspects of those phenomena (i.e., level of practice). The argument is not empirical here: no empirical data can be found for or against it. Interventions at the practical level are designed employing theoretical principles, which fulfill the function of leading the professionals' acts toward desirable objectives by following prescribed steps: in other words, theoretical principles provide knowledge informing experts' actions toward transformative goals. This sort of "translation" from the level of the theory to the contingencies characterizing the level of intervention is provided by so-called bridge theories, whose role is to fill in the gap between the abstractness of theoretical knowledge and the concrete particulars characterizing real-life contingent situations (Gaj, 2017, 2021; Nelson & Stolterman, 2014). Bridge theories aim to make the knowledge formulated by the theoretical principles available on the practical level (Sternberg, Grigorenko & Kalmar, 2001). In brief, the cognitive aims of theorizing are to be prioritized, even considering that practical outcomes play a justificatory role for the theory at the basis



of the intervention. In my opinion, founding a metatheoretical framework for professional psychology on the notion of intervention would contradict one of the premises of the diagnostic outlook proposed by the authors, namely that «we need general theories in order to complement the specialistic understandings with interpretative frameworks (...)» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 14). What we need is to restore a major role for conceptual reflection, in order to develop an effective theory of practice that can successfully guide professional actions in various contexts.

The second reason for discontent with the thesis at stake is that I think that the main problem of psychology does not concern primarily the direct devise of a metatheoretical framework; rather, its devising may be a possible consequence of the formulation of shared assumptions regarding a. scientific inquiry, and b. psychology's object of interest. Regarding psychological inquiry (a.), I support the general idea that fragmentation in psychology is mostly concerned with the «*absence of coherence with respect to the logic of science*» (Hibberd & Petocz, 2022, p. 2, italics by the authors). The events that any science, including psychology, investigates involve both form and content. On the one hand, the form concerns a logical scaffolding<sup>4</sup> that is constant across situations, and whose universality should serve as a major unifying counterpoint to disciplinary fragmentation. On the other hand, the content involves different kinds of situations of interest to psychological inquiry. From this perspective, psychological (qua scientific) investigation necessarily navigates between invariant elements *and* features of a particular kind or type (Hibberd & Petocz, 2022). The fact that empirical investigation involves many logical presuppositions in the process of conceiving, designing, and conducting research emphasizes the priority of logic over empirical investigation: the latter requires the former, but not vice-versa. Nevertheless, the empirical side of research is frequently given precedence over logical and conceptual analysis, to the extent that discourses on methodology hold a primary position in the field of scientific psychology (Danziger, 1985, 1990; Hibberd & Petocz, 2022). Such a reversal of the relationship

<sup>4</sup> It is not possible here to delve into the complex issue of what principles underpin coherent inquiries. For a summary of their proposal, see Hibberd & Petocz (2022).

between form and content may be read as a sign of disciplinary immaturity underpinned by conceptual incoherence: arguably, methodology provides anchorages when inconsistencies at the conceptual level abound. From this perspective, one of the main problems pertaining to psychological inquiry is that research is mostly driven by the selection of methods, rather than by conceptual reflection based on psychology's subject-matter (see Danziger, 1990; Hibberd & Petocz). Conversely, a mature, subject-matter-driven approach to research would involve selecting methods according to the features of the objects that generated the investigators' interests. Accordingly, what the target article suggests about psychological constructs is accurate: they are generally investigated using established methods widely accepted in the scientific community, while their formulation is frequently standardized with common sense. This "method-driven" approach is indicative of a serious lack of conceptual and theoretical elaboration, which encourages the proliferation of psychological subfields around common-sense-defined objects, rather than their development centered around conceptually sound reflections.

Let's now move on to the second issue I raised, namely psychology's object of interest (b.). Salvatore and colleagues (2022) quoted Gregg Henriques (2017), who proposed that unity of professional psychology can only be accomplished by providing «a theory of the person, a theory of psychopathology, and a theory of psychological change processes» (p. 393). The quote is acceptable, but it does not explicitly state a hierarchy among the terms. Nonetheless, their relative positions are telling: indeed, the formulation of a theory of the person logically precedes the development of theories concerning psychopathology and change processes. Again, this is not an empirical argument, that is, an argument that can be defended or defeated by gathering empirical data. Rather, it is disputed on logical grounds. In this direction, it is my opinion that a metatheoretical framework should primarily revolve around the specification of the features attributed to the objects of interest of psychology, that is, the formulation of a theory around its objects (Hibberd & Petocz, 2022). From the formulation of such a (meta)theory, theories concerning all the other domains can be devised accordingly. Hence, the primary concern pertains to the subject matter of psychology: what is psychology about, then? Surely this is an immense topic that cannot be exhausted here nor cannot be

simplistically reduced to the formulation of «a single, clear definition of the basic concepts of the discipline – e.g., mind, self, behavior» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 21). Nonetheless, it is worth providing some clues for promoting preliminary reflections on the topic. Psychology as a scientific discipline has frequently been conceptualized around two concepts, namely the mind and the brain (Brinkmann, 2022). However, both alternatives have inherent flaws. Whether it is a biological organ whose functioning is necessary for the existence of our mental life, or a broad concept to which complex capacities are attributed, both alternatives involve a form of reification, that is, the process according to which a concept is treated as a thing (Blackburn, 2005). When it comes to the first option, tracing the object of psychology to the brain would mean reducing what we call mental life to the workings of a biological organ. So, the psychological discourse would fade into the biological. In this case, reification would also mean mistakenly attributing states and processes to an organ (the brain) that is just a part of the whole (the individual), while they can be appropriately attributed solely to persons: this is a logical mistake that has been referred to as the mereological fallacy (Bennet & Hacker, 2003). Indeed, only individuals can be sad, not the brain; only a person can think, not a brain. Similar remarks also apply to the second option, namely believing that the object of psychology is the mind. To reiterate, only individuals can be sad or can think, not the mind. Rather, this term stands for «the person's abilities to feel emotions, remember things past, plan for the future and much else» (Brinkmann, 2022, p. 22): the mind is not a thing, like a tree or a car. In other words, the subject of similar statements is inevitably the person, not the mind, much less the brain. From this follows that the notion of a person seems to be a promising route worth exploring. Nonetheless, even if scholars supporting a personalistic perspective are far from absent from the scientific debate (see, for example, Brinkmann, 2022; Corradini, 2017; Gaj, 2021; Lamiell, 2010; Martin, Sugarman & Thompson, 2003), the problem is that there is no consensus on the nature of the notion of person. Eventually, what is the link between these sketchy remarks and the issue at stake? What has been affirmed so far has solely served to underscore the difficulty of unraveling the issue of the object of psychology and to underline that frequently it has been attempted to be resolved via the adoption of reductivist perspectives,

thereby denying or betraying the autonomy of the psychological level of inquiry.

Lastly, we should consider another aspect inherent to psychological theorizing that is potentially relevant to the endeavor of building a metatheoretical framework: the historical nature of theories in psychology. As the works of Kurt Danziger (1997), Ian Hacking (1999), and Graham Richards (2002) demonstrated, the relationship between the objects of inquiry of psychology as a scientific discipline and the ways human beings understand their world is particularly tight. This is strikingly clear when considering the ways other cultures frame psychological phenomena. For example, a well-known emotion in Japan is “*amae*”, a feeling of dependence on another similar to that of a baby towards her caregiver. In Samoa, “*lotomama*” is an emotion usually expressed in terms of “having no angry feeling”. It is clear that different cultures fragment and frame subjective experiences according to prioritized values: avoiding conflict is emphasized in Samoa, just as dependence on others is in Japan (Brock, 2015). The dependence of psychological theorizing on a common-sensical categorization of the experience doesn’t only pertain to exotic cultures: it also characterizes Western psychology and psychiatry, even if not in such an obvious way. For example, think about the history of psychological objects such as intelligence, motivation, and memory traced by Kurt Danziger (1997; 2008). Or the history of multiple personality disorder, whose overtime development and progressive disappearance was successfully illustrated by Ian Hacking (1995). Or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), whose invention as a disorder played a central role in the opposition to the Vietnam War (Brock, 2015). According to the historian of psychology Adrian Brock, all these phenomena are «as culture-bound as the disorders that have been traditionally regarded as such, with the main difference being that they are subsequently exported to other countries while the disorders that are traditionally regarded as culture-bound tend to remain within their cultures of origin» (2015, p. 155). It follows that the objects to which psychology is devoted are not independent of anything laypeople might say about the mind, its contents, and its processes (see Fletcher, 1995). According to a historical approach to psychological objects, we couldn’t have a scientific theory of memory, intelligence, or motivation without a common-sensical view that people have memories, that their actions can be

attributed to motives, and that some people are more intelligent than others (Brock, 2015). Using a computational metaphor, we might say that the input of psychological theorizing cannot be anything except the output of a common-sense categorization of (psychological) reality as it is formulated by laypeople. This suggests that psychology – and human sciences in general – is influenced by, and in turn influence, the objects under investigation in ways that natural sciences do not (Hacking, 1999). In conclusion, in what sense does this pertain to the matter at hand? These arguments suggest that any formulation of a metatheoretical framework should include reflections concerning the relationships between the content of commonsensical categories – historically and culturally situated – and the scientific level of inquiry: in fact, the changing nature of the former have inevitably primary effects on the development of the latter. So, if the aim is to set a metatheoretical framework for psychology, psychologists should cultivate awareness about the contingent and situated roots of their subject matter.

Finally, the authors have put forward two separate strategies to tackle compartmentalization, with the aim of rediscovering the significance of “super-ordered abstract concepts” and opposing the primacy of «empirical concepts» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 24). Despite my agreement with the general framework, I will provide a few critical remarks regarding the two strategies in what follows. To start with, the claim that «physics share the same meaning of concepts like quantum, atom, gravity (...)» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 24) has to be downsized, and thus the idea that psychological science and profession require single, shared definitions of the discipline’s core concepts. For example, Morrison convincingly reported about nuclear physics that “there are over thirty nuclear models based on very different assumptions, each of which provides some “insight’ into nuclear structure and dynamics. However, none offers more than partial «truth’ and each is in conflict with claims made by the others» (Morrison, 2011, p. 547). Hence, despite the widespread acceptance of a broad theoretical view about nuclei<sup>5</sup>, theoretical models in nuclear physics embody important theoretical assumptions and exhibit significant variation, reflecting an

<sup>5</sup> Usually, they are referred to as being entwined by the residual strong force which is a minor residuum of the strong interactions that bind quarks together, resulting in the formation of protons and neutrons (Morrison, 2011, p. 547).

idea of physics as a “mature science” that is more complex than commonly expected. Such brief remarks suggest the need to increase our ongoing efforts in conceptual and theoretical research, to foster the confrontation of theories and models on common grounds without expecting to hastily unite the field under the same theoretical umbrella. Even a shallow glance at physics shows this is an ephemeral hope. Secondly, I think that the problem with the definitions of psychological concepts needs to be slightly reformulated. I sympathize with the authors’ suggestion that these definitions «need to be made at abstract and generalized level» (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 25). Indeed, this pairs with an attitude toward conceptual analysis, promoting the development of theoretical perspectives capable of reformulating common-sense categorizations; however, it is important to underline that this is not exclusively a matter of abstractness or generalization. Particularly in applied psychology, psychological inquiry navigates between the abstract level (e.g., the notion of a person as an abstract concept) and the concrete level (e.g., the particular contingencies related to specific individuals). In other words, the interplay between the general and the particular, and the abstract and the concrete, constitutes the pivotal aspect of psychology (see Gaj, 2016) and vindicates, once again, the centrality of conceptual analysis as a way to integrate those dimensions<sup>6</sup>.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I think that practice is a crucial component of psychology, as it represents the junction point between two fundamental dimensions. On the one hand, the theoretical understanding of psychological objects and the conceptual framing of the processes oriented to change; on the other hand, the demands arising from society, which justify the social mandate received by psychologists. From this perspective, psychological practice offers an invaluable vantage point for analyzing the interaction between common-sense categories – which

<sup>6</sup> To my understanding, the authors are referring to similar dynamics when they mention the interplay between short-range theories and the meta-theoretical framework (Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, p. 25).

channel the demands for intervention to psychologists – and the scientific categories – which constitute the conceptual scaffolding for designing competent, scientific-grounded interventions. For these reasons, accounts of topics related to professional practice in psychology are welcomed.

Attuned to many remarks made by the authors of the target article, I reiterate the primacy of theory over practice: the latter without the former is, at best, common sense and, at worse, malpractice. Hence, I suggest that scholars concentrate their efforts on the development of a theory of practice toward the unity of professional practice (Gaj, 2018). In general terms, such a (meta)theory should provide criteria for selecting and “knitting together” theories and methods that are significant for the design of psychological interventions. It should provide criteria for the development of sound interventions, clearly defining the steps between the starting point (state A) and the desired goal (state B). Accordingly, it should also provide criteria for assessing practical effectiveness. Moreover, it should provide tools for analyzing real-life contexts, that is to say, for conceptualizing contextual features that are relevant to the design of effective psychological interventions. Additionally, it should also foster the ecological adaptation of psychological knowledge to different contexts, promoting the practice of psychology based on a conceptual view of the portion of reality at stake, rather than on a view standardized on common sense. Finally, this (meta)theory should provide criteria for reformulating the issues for which clients asked psychologists to intervene. In other words, it should provide a conceptual toolbox for channeling common sense demands into a scientifically grounded framework, according to which psychological practices may be effectively delivered.

## References

- Bennett, M. R. & Hacker, P. M. S. (2003). *Philosophical foundations of neuroscience*. Blackwell.
- Blackburn, S. (2005). *The Oxford dictionary of philosophy. Second edition revised*. Oxford University Press.
- Brinkmann, S. (2002). Minds, brains, or persons? What is psychology about? In B. D. Slife, S. C. Yanchar & F. C. Richardson (eds.), *Routledge*

- International Handbook of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* (pp. 13-29), Routledge.
- Brock A. C. (2015). The history of psychological objects. In J. Martin, J. Sugarman & K. L. Slaney (eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology: Methods, Approaches, and New Directions for Social Sciences. First edition* (pp. 151-165), John Wiley & Sons.
- Corradini A. (2017). La frammentazione della psicologia: alcune riflessioni epistemologiche. *Giornale Italiano di Psicologia*, 3, 565-568. DOI: 10.1421/88358
- Danziger K. (1985). The methodological imperative in psychology. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 15(1), 1-13. DOI: 10.1177/004839318501500101
- Danziger K. (1990). *Constructing the subject. Historical origins of psychological research*. Cambridge University Press.
- Danziger K. (1997). *Naming the mind. How psychology found its language*. Sage.
- Danziger K. (2008). *Marking the mind: A history of memory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dupré J. (1993). *The disorder of things. Metaphysical foundations of the disunity of science*. Harvard University Press.
- Fletcher G. (1995). *The scientific credibility of folk psychology*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Feser E. (2005). *Philosophy of mind. A beginner's guide*. Oneworld Publications.
- Gaj N. (2016). *Unity and fragmentation in psychology. The philosophical and methodological roots of the discipline*. Routledge.
- Gaj N. (2017). La psicologia tra scienza e professione: riflessioni per una teoria della pratica. *Giornale Italiano di Psicologia*, 3, 599-605. DOI: 10.1421/88364
- Gaj N. (2018). Psychology between science and technology: A proposal for the development of a theory of practice. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 38(2), 77-91. DOI: 10.1037/teo0000081
- Gaj N. (2021). Why the professional practice of psychology requires a personalistic account of psychological phenomena. *Theory & Psychology*, 31(4), 573-591. DOI: 10.1177/0959354321989434
- Hacking I. (1995). *Rewriting the soul: Multiple personality and the science of memory*. Princeton University Press.
- Hacking I. (1999). *The social construction of what?* Harvard University Press.
- Henriques G. (2017). Achieving a unified clinical science requires a meta-theoretical solution: Comment on Melchert (2016). *American Psychologist*, 72(4), 393-394. DOI: 10.1037/amp0000143



- Hibberd F. J., Petocz A. (2022). Philosophy, realism and psychology's disciplinary fragmentation. *Philosophical Psychology*, 36(3), 621-649. DOI: 10.1080/09515089.2022.2081542
- Lamiell J. T. (2010). *William Stern (1871-1938): A brief introduction to his life and works*. Pabst Science Publishers.
- Martin J., Sugarman J., Thompson J. (2003). *Psychology and the question of agency*. State University of New York Press.
- Morrison M. (2011). One phenomenon, many models: Inconsistency and complementarity. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 42, 342-351. DOI: 10.1016/j.shpsa.2010.11.042
- Nagel E. (1961). *The structure of science. Problems of logic of scientific explanation*. Hackett.
- Nelson H. G., Stolterman E. (2014). *The design way. Intentional change in an unpredictable world. Second edition*. MIT Press.
- Richards G. (2002). The psychology of psychology. A historically grounded sketch. *Theory and Psychology*, 12(1), 7-36. DOI: 10.1177/0959354302121002
- Salvatore S. et al. (2022). Compartmentalization and unity of professional psychology. A road map for the future of the discipline. *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*, 1. DOI: 10.3280/rpc1-2022oa14450
- Sternberg R. J., Grigorenko E., Kalmar D. (2001). The role of theory in unified psychology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 21(2), 99-117. DOI: 10.1037/h0091200
- Von Wright G. H. (1971). *Explanation and understanding*. Cornell University Press.