Paradigms and Grand Theories

Secure attachment relationships organize personal experience and support explorations necessary for future development. Attachment figures lend predictability and coherence to experience. Coherence and predictability are the cornerstones of security. Children (and spouses) are more comfortable venturing into the world, taking risks in order to learn, and pursuing important goals when their experience tells them that exploration can be interesting and productive, that the world makes sense, and that there is somewhere to turn if they get in trouble.

Science too is a matter of venturing out, taking risks, and knowing where to turn when things get difficult. And like a secure attachment relationship, a well formed scientific theory encourages exploration, organizes experience, and helps us work effectively under uncertainty. To be useful, experience needs organizing frameworks.

Both paradigms and theories organize experience and encourage exploration (Giere, 1992). Paradigms provide a general framework and approach that organizes broad areas of theory and research should proceed, what the key questions should be, and what the answers will be like. Evolutionary theory, psychoanalytic theory, and cognitive science (Baars, 1986; Bechtel, Graham, & Balota, 1998) are examples of such paradigms. For developmental psychologists, the most paradigm is the general organismic/developmental framework that we share with biology (e.g. Werner, 1957; Haraway, 1976; Immelmann, Barlow, Petrinovitch, & Main, 1981; Wolpert, Beddington, Brockes, Jessell, Lawrence, & Meyerowitz, 1998). This perspective keeps important insights about organization and adaptation, continuity and change, and the selection and construction of environments at the forefront of developmental theory and research.

In practice, paradigms are not incrementally revised in response to empirical data (Kuhn, 1962/1996). Instead, they last as long as they serve well (often a while longer) and then they are rapidly replaced in what Kuhn termed a “paradigm shift”. Paradigm shifts are revolutionary rather than evolutionary and thus even genuine insights are likely to be discarded if the paradigm as a whole fails. Indeed one of Bowlby’s most important insights was that genuine insights about close relationships were at risk when scientific psychology shifted away from the psychoanalytic paradigm. As in attachment relationships, we tend to love only one paradigm at a time. In addition, they are not usually given up willingly or completely.

In contrast, theories are more closely tied to specific content. It is easier to define their propositional content. They organize data, pose testable hypotheses, and change incrementally in response to empirical tests. The behavioral sciences have a long tradition of grand theories, ambitious efforts to integrate diverse phenomena under a relatively small set of general postulates. Psychoanalytic theory and Piaget’s Genetic Epistemology are examples of grand theories that emerged before mid-century and influenced developmental psychology for decades.

Unfortunately, grand theories have rarely realized the broadly integrative goals they set for themselves; as if to carve nature at its joints is to carve it into somewhat smaller pieces. This is

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1 Note to the effect that we are trying to place grand theory in context, not draw bright lines between paradigm vs. theory or grand vs. domain specific theory.
illustrated in cognitive development theory by a shift away from Piaget’s grand theorizing about
general modes of cognitive organization toward by increasing emphasis on organization within
specific conceptual domains (e.g., Carey, 1991). Flavell’s theories of meta-cognition and theory
of mind (vis. Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1992), Dodge’s information-processing theory of social
competence, and Patterson’s (1882, 1997) theory of coercive family interactions are are also
recent productive examples of domain specific theory in developmental psychology.

Following Freud, Bowlby developed attachment theory in the mode of Grand Theory. Rather
than developing separate analyses of infant attachment and adult attachment, or separate analyses
of cognition, emotion, and behavior in relationships, he worked toward an integrative perspective
that would cover all of these in a single theory. Although a certain aesthetic (and parallel to
“real” sciences behind this. Bowlby’s preference for Grand Theory reflects his belief that each
of these domains is best (perhaps only) understood and explained in the context of the others.

That Bowlby was striving for a Grand Theory is evident from the wide range of phenomena it
covers and from its broadly integrative goals. Unlike most theories in Psychology (and any
current theory of relationships), attachment theory:

(1) Clearly defines wide range of key phenomenon

(2) Has an evolutionary rationale

(3) Comprehends a wide range of individual experience

(4) Is relevant across the lifespan

(5) Includes a detailed developmental analysis

(6) Offers a broad perspectives on both normative and individual differences

(7) Makes reference to specific mechanisms underlying stability and change

(8) Claims that secure base behavior, representations of early experience, and defensive
    processes (affect regulating cognitions) are better understood in coordination than studied
    separately

(9) Offers a good analysis of what has to be work well for a relationship to be a good one

Unfortunately, in an era of domain specific theory, there is little if any research that specifically
test Bowlby’s hypothesis that Grand Theory will be more productive than a Domain Specific
approach in this area. The best evidence is indirect: The fact that attachment theory remains
coherent, productive, and seems to be on this course for the foreseeable future.
Psychology’s grand theories rarely survive to celebrate a silver anniversary. Grand theory remains an attractive goal, but in an era of specialization and domain specific theory, many have concluded that it is unattainable or even discredited as a way of organizing and guiding empirical research. Nonetheless, measured from Bowlby’s (1958) paper, “The nature of the child’s tie to its mother”, modern attachment theory has entered its fifth decade and seems likely to reach its silver anniversary more coherent and productive than ever.

It is something of a distinction that Developmental Psychology is host for one of the only modern examples of Grand Theory. But perhaps this is not surprising. After all, as in biology (e.g., Wolpert et al., 1998) the developmental perspective in psychology (from Freud to Werner, [1957], to Sroufe and Waters, [19 itself is something of a Grand Theory.

SOME POTENTIALLY USEFUL ABSTRACTS AND A BOOK REVIEW:


ABSTRACT: Assesses the growth and development of the fields of psychology by comparing publications and reports of experiments in the 1927 volume of Psychological Abstracts with those in the 1974 volume. The quantitative growth was found to be prodigious, the qualitative less so. The 1920's were seminal years, because many current concepts--most of them imported from Europe--began to affect American thought. Since then, Americans have refined the methodology related to these concepts. Grand theory began to wane in the late 1920's and miniature theory to develop. Interest in certain topics, particularly conscious states and self, has survived, while interest in other topics has waned. The American culture has had a strong influence on the direction of psychology's development.


ABSTRACT: Presents an edited transcript from the Canada Council-NATO Conference on Paradigms and Priorities in Social Psychology, 1974. The transcript documents the variety of social psychologists' views concerning the prospect and desirability of a "grand theory" in social psychology, one which will unify the work in this multifaceted area. Workers in several areas and from a number of different countries articulate their doubts, but the discussion terminates on a note of optimism.


ABSTRACT: Argues that the study of relationships might profit from the development of a grand overarching theory of relationships. Such a theory would directly address the principal relationship types, delineating the similarities and differences among them with respect to causal conditions associated with various relationship phenomena. An important class of causal
conditions that govern behavior in all relationships is the culturally defined norms, roles, and expectations associated with type of relationship. The author argues that these cultural prescriptions, as opposed to individualistic causal conditions, must play an important role in any unifying theory. If so, the sociological and anthropological perspectives need to achieve better balance with the psychological perspective that is becoming dominant in theory and research on interpersonal relationships.


ABSTRACT: Comments on the articles included in a special section on the study of relationships in the November 1995 Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. Taken together, these articles challenge readers to step back and assess the assumptions that guide research and shape the nature of the claims made about relationships. Three general questions that emerged from the articles concerned (1) sampling procedures and disciplinary isolation/integration, (2) what should be studied, and (3) the need for a grand theory of relationships.

Book review:

References


