

Theory and History in the Human and Social Sciences

Series Editor

Jaan Valsiner, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark

Theory and History in the Human and Social Sciences will fill in the gap in the existing coverage of links between new theoretical advancements in the social and human sciences and their historical roots. Making that linkage is crucial for the interdisciplinary synthesis across the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, semiotics, and the political sciences. In contemporary human sciences of the 21st there exists increasing differentiation between neurosciences and all other sciences that are aimed at making sense of the complex social, psychological, and political processes. Thus new series has the purpose of (1) coordinating such efforts across the borders of existing human and social sciences, (2) providing an arena for possible inter-disciplinary theoretical syntheses, (3) bring into attention of our contemporary scientific community innovative ideas that have been lost in the dustbin of history for no good reasons, and (4) provide an arena for international communication between social and human scientists across the World.

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Courageous Methods in Cultural Psychology

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Preface by the Series' Editor

Ordinary Courage: How to Make a Methodological Revolution Without Anybody Noticing It Is Going On?

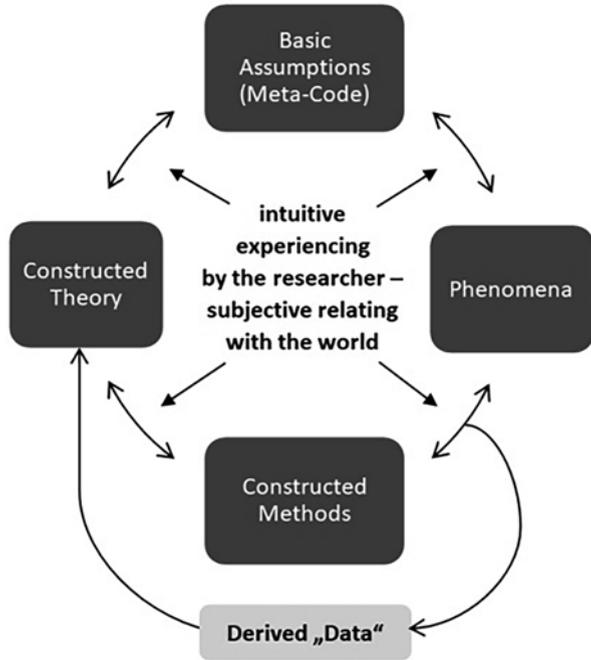
Psychology is hopelessly stuck in its focus on methods and has overlooked their wider context—methodology. Separating methods from theories and phenomena has led to the creation of “empirical science” that is hyper-productive formally and dead intellectually. It is not the question of *which kinds of methods* are used (quantitative or qualitative, standardized or creative). Rather, it is the question of *what kinds of knowledge* the insertion of one or another method into the methodology cycle (see Fig. 1) allows us to produce.

Answers to that question are the privilege of the meta-codes—basic assumptions about the whole effort of research. In a basic distinction, non-developmental meta-codes (which characterize most of psychology) make no knowledge about developmental phenomena possible. The empirical research efforts are thus comparable to the blind guiding the blind (Fig. 2).

The biggest danger in twenty-first-century methodolatry is the proliferation of the belief that the move from quantitative to qualitative methods (or their hybrid/mixed methods) in itself solves the *methodological* problems the social sciences have inherited from their history. Replacing quantitative empiricism by its qualitative counterpart is merely a translation of the basic problem from one domain to the next. General knowledge does not accumulate inductively—a bitter lesson for those who are proud of psychology being “an empirical science.”

The alternative is obvious: We need to restore the primacy of methodology—as an epistemological cycle leading to knowledge—in the discussions about methods. How can this be done? In Fig. 1 we can see that it all starts from the deep subjective desires of a researcher. The researcher is similar to an artist in the desire to understand—even if the tools for art and science are different (cp. Pollmann, Chap. 12, this volume).

Fig. 1 The methodology cycle



The researcher educates oneself in relation to phenomena—by feeling into some aspects of it (and overlooking others). This exposure to phenomena is crucial for psychology where we may meet our computer screens more often than real human beings. This primary contact is followed by counterclockwise move through the methodology cycle—from phenomena to the discovery of one’s own basic assumptions. As an example, I may look at some phenomenon (Z) via two opposite meta-codes:

Mechanical causal assumption—factors X, Y cause it (Z). The passive role of the organism—treated as intentionless mechanical system of no action potentials—is in the focus.

Organic assumption—the organism resists any inputs—the focus is on RESIST-X, RESIST-Y leads to Y. The active role of the organism is in the center of focus.

The two meta-codes are exclusive of each other, leading to vastly different ways how research questions are asked. Consider the ever-asked question about how parents participate in child development. The first assumption focuses on the causal inputs from the parents to the child. If something turns out not well, it is the parents who failed to provide the input. The child is a passive receiver whose role is to be critical or laudatory about parents. The child does not constructively participate in one’s own development.



Fig. 2 *The blind leading the blind* (Pieter Bruegel d.A., 1568)

In contrast, the second (organic) meta-code focuses on the acts of resistance to the various inputs from parents. The child actively—and selectively—accepts or rejects (or transforms) the parents' educative efforts. The inputs are not *causes of* development but *resources for* development.

Needless to add that our contemporary child psychology mostly operates on the basis of the mechanical axiom—even as it is clearly misfitting if viewed from the standpoint of phenomena. Any parent or teacher understands instantly that children are active persons, the resistances of whom are to be carefully circumscribed.

After the meta-codes are made explicit in our counterclockwise move through the cycle, the researcher moves on to the construction of a theoretical scheme that remains adequate to the phenomena and is explicitly guided by the meta-code. Theory consists of abstract statements about the phenomena that would lead further to empirical work that can reveal new knowledge—rather than repeat what has been found already. After discovering the first example of something new in our empirical observation, we have all the necessary material for generalized new knowledge. Paleontologists discover fragments of a skeleton of a fossil and can set together the full view of the given species. Discovery of thousands or more of similar skeletons does not add to this knowledge—even if it is important for specifying how widespread the species was at its time. But this is already a different research question.

Following setting up one's own theory—completely new or combining parts of other already existing theories—the researcher only now moves on to the construction of methods. I need to emphasize that any decision about methods is a constructive act by the researcher—even if the latter uses methods created by others. The methods set up are to be contextualized in the given research project—and that contextualization is always new. This eliminates the value attributed to “standard”

in description of methods, and even a “standard method” applied in a particular context is always new since the researchee—through one’s own resistances and non-understandings—creates a message that differs from the mechanical assumption of “standardization.” There can be standard questions in a psychological method, but answers to these questions are either explicitly or implicitly non-standard. This follows from the meta-code of all biological, psychological, and social organisms being open systems that constantly innovate themselves.

This look at methods eliminates the perceived differences between “quantitative” and “qualitative” methods—all methods are coordinated methods. This coordination pertains to the importance of juxtaposing the rich reality (phenomena) with abstract questions (stemming from theory) in the making of a method. A number—even a real number—is a qualitative sign that represents some feature of the phenomena. If that number is that of a binary code (0, 1), it involves two domains—non-being (0) and being (1). Both of these are basic philosophical terms of wide implications. Zero (0) simultaneously indicates everything and nothing. The

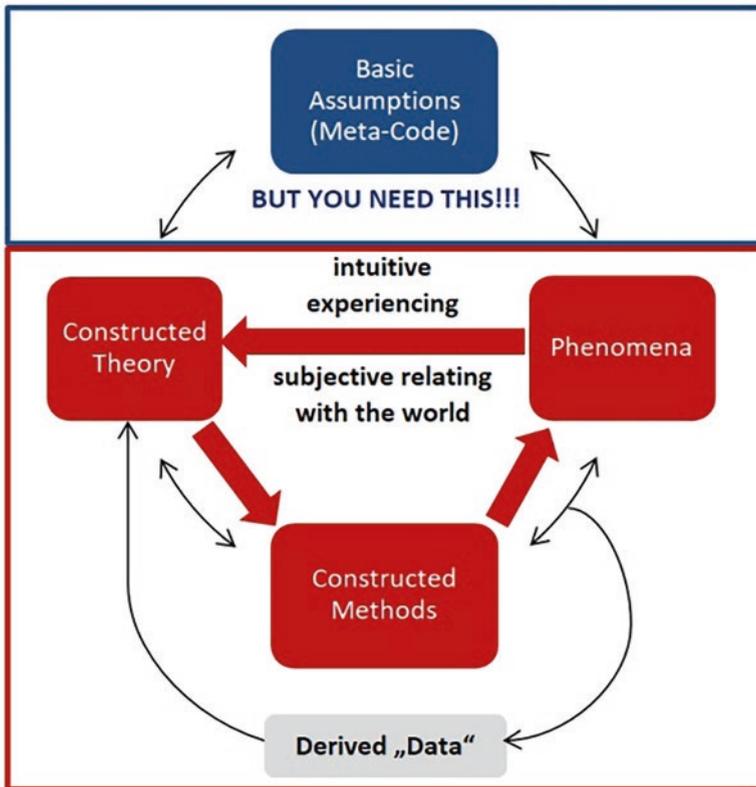


Fig. 3 Where silent scientific revolution happens (marked in red)

different ways of being (1) are likewise of very different concrete forms. There is no quantity in itself present in numbers other than researcher's invented conventions treating such qualities *as if* these were quantitative.

To conclude, the new silent methodological revolution in the social sciences happens through restoring the centrality of the meta-code to guide the triangulation of phenomena-theories-methods coordination (see Fig. 3).

What also follows from Fig. 3 is the importance of *selective entrance* into the phenomena via adequate methods. The data are relevant only if the theory in its abstractive schematic form relates meaningfully with the phenomena. If they do not, the method is useless and needs to be reconstructed. Researchers are in constant search for methods, but that search is organized by the fine-tuning of the theory and further penetration into the intricacies of the phenomena. And that is the beauty of empirical research—finding the rare and beautiful previously unknown flower in the middle of the vast meadow.

Aalborg, Denmark

Jaan Valsiner

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