Towards Rethinking the Primacy of Epistemology in Psychology

Call for a Special Issue of Theory & Psychology

Since its inception, *Theory and Psychology* has been at the forefront of conceptual debates within psychology. A particularly important issue that is threaded throughout various issues of this journal and others relates to the philosophical bases of our discipline. This special issue will contribute to further disciplinary reflections surrounding the philosophical foundations upon which our evolving discipline is assembled. An important consideration is whether or not there is, or should be, a first principle within psychology. Some would argue that we do have a first principle and that it is epistemology. This is particularly apparent in the work of many critical psychologists.

In writing on the philosophical bases of psychology, epistemology has made regular appearances to the point of becoming somewhat of a constant companion, often displacing ethical and existential concerns. This situation is, at least in part, the product of the emphasis placed on methodology in psychology and the efforts of some scholars to move beyond blind empiricism. As an unintended consequence of this focus on epistemology, complex ethical concerns can become impoverished and reduced to empirical procedure. Scholar/practitioners interested in broader understandings of ethics can find some solace in the work of Levinas (see Bergo, 2015) who proposed ethics as first philosophy. Such a move places particular emphasis on relationships, the way people engage with one another, and responsibilities of care in research and practice. It is also central to how we might avoid acts of epistemological violence (Teo, 2010) in the assimilation of psychologies from peoples who lie outside the scope of WEIRD psychology into the global discipline (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). A focus on ethics as a first principle can also offer diverse scholars different philosophical entry points into our discipline and alternative ways of operating.

In deliberating upon the philosophical bases of psychology, it is important to acknowledge the existence of multiple psychologies and culturally anchored traditions (Li, Hodgetts & Koong, 2018). It is time to bring together scholars interested in these issues into a focused conversation about the primacy of epistemology and alternative philosophical bases for psychology. Momentum for this conversation comes from a range of sources. One is ongoing discussions of the philosophy of psychology. Another is the need for psychologists to respond more effectively – through research and action – to issues of power, inequality, exclusion, and justice that populate many lives today. Rectifying these and related concerns requires renewed engagements with the philosophical bases of our diverse and evolving discipline.

In this special issue, we seek to bring together and make explicit, conversations that explore the de-centring of the primacy that epistemology holds within psychology. Of key concern is what psychology might look like when grounded in ethical, existential or other such philosophical concerns. Related questions include, is it advantageous to replace one philosophical focus with another? Alternatively, would a set of first principles for different psychologies prove more beneficial? Furthermore, is the embracing of such plurality already happening? We are seeking contributors from scholars who are engaging with the philosophical bases of psychology.
We welcome your contributions to this conversation. Please send an email registering your interest in contributing to the special issue to one of the Editorial Team members listed below. Full paper submissions will also be via email and are due 1 April 2019:

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References: