BETWEEN THE SCYLLA OF SHORT EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND THE CHARYBDIS OF ANTIEMPIRICAL THEORIZING

The text is a voice in the debate on Adam Niemczyński’s article, “The Importance of Developmental Theory to Psychological Empirical Studies on Individual Human Development.” Agreeing with the thesis that empirical reports dominate in today’s psychology, I critically consider arguments suggesting changes. I challenge the view of theoretical research vs. empirical research as opposites. I also show that short empirical reports make as little valuable contribution to science as does theorizing which ignores these reports. In conclusion, I propose three conditions for a good theory, which should be constructed as a synthesis of theoretical thinking and empirical research.

Science should be done consciously, and therefore the way in which it is done should be subject to continual reflection and criticism. Critical about modern developmental psychology, Professor Adam Niemczyński’s paper encourages this kind of reflection, which is its great value. Professor Niemczyński advances two theses, which – as it later turns out – actually amount to three. The first of these is a diagnosis of the state of modern developmental psychology, and at the same time, more broadly – a diagnosis of modern psychology in general. The essence of that diagnosis consists in the observation concerning the dominance of empirical research and the scarcity of theoretical investigations. The second thesis is the recommendation of departure from empiricism and enhancing the status of theory. In the course of the argument, however, it turns out that empiricism has been combined with positivism and biological reductionism, which means that the recommendation of departing from empiricism is not merely a suggestion of introducing a theory. More accurately, it is a suggestion of changing this theory (this being the third thesis), which – in the most general terms – would amount to a transition from biological monism to dualism.

The Professor’s argumentation sometimes raises doubts, since some of his interpretations are unobvious and his arguments are sometimes surprising. The empirical opponent has been presented in such an exaggerated way that it is difficult to imagine anyone calling themselves an empiricist as understood by Professor Niemczyński, although empiricism is a defining characteristic of psychology. In the present paper I will nevertheless try to comment on the intention and spirit of the Professor’s paper rather than on its letter.

The first thesis concerns the problem of theory in psychology. The problem is undoubtedly a fundamental one, and I do agree with the spirit of Professor Niemczyński’s first thesis.
Indeed, it is difficult not to notice the problem with theoretical thinking and with the synthesis of detailed empirical research in modern psychology. This is a problem addressed in both Polish and international psychology (Lamiell, 2007; Kimble, 1984; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Straś-Romanowska, 1992; Zagórska, 2007). Still, the Professor’s further theses, pertaining to the object and direction of proposed changes, raise doubts.

Professor Niemczyński’s second thesis is based on assumptions concerning the empiricism–theory relationship, which I find it hard to agree with, and his third thesis – intriguing though it is – has not been convincingly supported. In the present comment I will discuss the second and third theses. In particular, I will attempt to demonstrate that the nature of tension between empiricism and theory in research practice is somewhat different than Professor Niemczyński seems to assume; I will also challenge the added value of theory change that he proposes in the third thesis. As a result – in general agreement with the first thesis – I will attempt to outline the conditions that should be met for modern psychology to be enriched by theoretical thinking. Only after the accurate diagnosis of the problem and reaching agreement about the optimal state criteria does it become possible to propose a potentially successful therapy.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE RECOMMENDATION OF DEPARTURE FROM EMPIRICISM

Professor Niemczyński’s thesis postulating the need to depart from empiricism is founded on the assumption of a kind of opposition: empiricism vs. theorizing. In this construction, the opposite of empiricism would have to be some form of appreciation and recognition of theory – the acknowledgment of its importance and indispensability. It seems that what underlies this thesis is a kind of model postulating limited resources and the management of these resources in such a way as to attain balance. According to Professor Niemczyński’s diagnosis, there is too little theory in psychology and too much empiricism. What, then, should be done? Professor Niemczyński suggests changing the proportions. As in the case of a tap – let us turn off the cold-empiricism tap and turn on the hot-theory tap to with the optimal water temperature. I believe the assumptions explained above to be false, and I believe the above recommendation to be harmful.

A shortage of theory must not become an encouragement to depart from empiricism! Firstly, the opposite of a good empiricist is not a good theorist! The opposite of a good empiricist is a bad empiricist, and the opposite of a good theorist is a bad theorist. In other words, empiricism and theorizing are not two poles of one dimension but two dimensions that are fairly orthogonal, as various publications by theorists and empiricists reveal. Moreover, focusing on one dimension without due attention to the other is a simple recipe for scientific failure. Like Scylla and Charybdis, empiricism without theorizing and theorizing without empiricism lie in wait for a scientist wandering in the ocean of ignorance. The Scylla of empiricism without theorizing leads to fragmentary pure empirical reporting. There are many short pure empirical reports of this kind. Too many. However, I would venture the thesis that these short pure empirical reports are published particularly often in poor and good journals. In poor ones the they are poor, while in good ones they are good. By contrast, there is no place for such only empirical reports in very good journals, which publish only those papers in which reliable empirical research is based on a sound theoretical model and develops this model.

The Charybdis of theorizing without empiricism is equally dangerous. Unfortunately, there
is too much of it in the literature as well. The safe way, making it possible not only to survive but also to sail into new waters of knowledge, leads between Scylla and Charybdis.

Secondly, what is disturbing is the somewhat contemptuous tone of Professor Niemczyński’s statements on methodology, psychometrics, and statistics – the instruments used by empiricists. Short empirical contributions alone do not explain the investigated reality because they are – to use the terminology employed by the Vienna Circle – individual protocol-sentences (Koterski, 2000). However, if they are firmly grounded in empiricism, protocol-sentences contain some piece of information that has been incorporated into the treasury of human knowledge and is waiting for someone to use it in building a theoretical model that will explain a given phenomenon. A necessary (though, of course, insufficient) condition for them to be thus used is a methodology, as accurate as possible. It is therefore necessary to enhance the accuracy of methods of research and analysis and to refine them, since this is a precondition of the possibility of using short reports to build a theory. Empiricists cannot be blamed for refining their work techniques. They could, in fact, be blamed for not doing this.

The empirical method is a craft and a school of clarity of thought. It can be said that only a mind skilled in the methodological craft is capable of formulating a good theory. Incidentally, this also refers to Wundt, cited by Professor Niemczyński, who constructed Völkerpsychologie after his adventure with empiricism, even if the idea had appeared before (Stachowski, 2010). It is possible to write good literature only if you know grammar. As my secondary-school physics teacher used to say to my class with extended curriculum in humanities, a humanist is not someone doing philosophy instead of mathematics. On the contrary: a humanist is someone who does philosophy directly after learning mathematics. Mathematics teaches him of her precise thinking, while philosophy shows the limitations of that precise thinking. To sum up, disavowing methodology to argue the superiority of theorizing is not only groundless but also harmful because it puts theorizing in opposition to methodology.

Thirdly, it is not empiricists but... theorists who are responsible for the state of affairs diagnosed in the first thesis! Getting to know the world is an individual act, but doing science is a collective activity. Empiricists do their work perfectly – focused on the method, they want to capture reality as accurately as possible. They formulate and collect observations and protocol-sentences. In modern science, specialization is so advanced and narrow that to say something new and to add one’s own small contribution to the treasury of human knowledge it is necessary to focus on a highly specific fragment of that knowledge and the methodology used in it. The collective nature of doing science consists in putting the observations generated by the empiricist together into a theoretical construction is not a task for the empiricist, who is simply unable to perform it well. Whose task is it, then? It is, precisely, one for a theoretician! Drawing the picture with a somewhat thicker line, to convey the essence of the matter, we could say that psychology is not in a particularly good shape today. We have more and more detailed information, but at the same time we know and understand less and less. But those responsible for this situation are not empiricists, whose only fault is that they do their job excellently! It is theorists who are to blame for this state of affairs, because instead of following the example of empiricists in their accuracy and conscientiousness, and instead of constructing theories in a similarly accurate way, they accuse empiricists of not doing what it is not their task to do! Accusations made by a bee making honey that the nightingale is singing instead of doing something useful do not sound particu-
larly convincing, and neither do a nightingale's accusations that the bee cannot sing.

**THE PROBLEM WITH THE THEORETICAL CHANGE RECOMMENDATION**

In his paper, Professor Niemczyński initially identifies empiricism as an atheoretical or antitheoretical position – which is wrong, this kind of empiricism being simply impossible. Every empirical study is rooted in a theory, even if the author of the study is not aware of this fact. Even individual observations – protocol-sentences – are rooted in a particular theoretical paradigm and the solutions adopted in it (Cieciuch, 2008; Popper, 1972/2002). However, this issue is less important from the point of view of the general thrust of Professor Niemczyński’s paper, since he formulates an interpretation in which empiricism is combined with biological reductionism. Ultimately, the Professor's recommendation pertains to both, which means not only a rejection of empiricism for the sake of theory but a change of the dominant theory, associated with empiricism, to a different one – a certain kind of psychophysical dualism.

This is an interesting and compelling thesis, but the author does not support it convincingly. Professor Niemczyński’s argumentation is three-pronged. Its first path is rhetorical, the second one is epistemological, and the third one is historical. It seems that each of the three paths amounts to a kind of detour rather than a straight way towards the goal. To be able to choose a way leading directly to the goal, it is necessary to formulate a clear and precise view of that goal – namely, the conditions for a good theory. I will outline the paths of argumentation for good theory proposed by Professor Niemczyński and then provisionally formulate the conditions for a good theory.

The rhetorical argumentation runs through the text and manifests itself in the selection of expressions that are supposed to guide the reader’s sympathies in one direction or another. The expressions selected include references to freedom (e.g., *thought liberated from the dominance of statistics*), to the sense of human uniqueness that makes one revolt against comparing the mind to the stomach, or to the opposite – scientific hubris (e.g., *to parade around in a costume of scientificity*), and to many other categories evoking sympathy or antipathy. The epistemological argumentation concerns the object of psychological cognition and intuition as a method of getting to know that object; the consequences of these decisions for the theory of human development have been declared rather than identified. Finally, Professor Niemczyński’s historical argumentation consists in referring to controversies over psychology, its subject matter, and its method at the dawn of its history or shortly afterwards. It is true, of course, that psychology has not developed on Wundt’s legacy but only on one fragment of this legacy. Carried away to America by Titchener, that fragment returned to Europe after some time, as Wundt’s legacy – not complete, but certainly orthodox at any rate (Stachowski, 2010). Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie* is an intriguing work, and undoubtedly one that should be introduced into scientific circulation. This, however, does not change the fact that it is a purely historical work and can only function as a source of inspiration. From the perspective afforded by history it can be seen that psychology has grown on that fragment, but it would be difficult to support the thesis that the present shape of psychology stems from the decisions made and controversies won at that time. Many factors have affected and continue to affect the current shape of psychology, since psychology is a living entity that constantly changes its form. The key question, therefore, is not why we have forgotten a certain tradition of doing
psychology but what that tradition can offer us today and what is its theoretical value added to the theories that dominate in psychology. This brings us to what I believe to be the key issue when it comes to the legitimacy of changing theoretical paradigms.

WHAT KIND OF THEORY IS GOOD?

Do we need new theoretical approaches in psychology? Since we are dissatisfied with the current knowledge, the answer to this question must be positive. Still, it is worth reflecting on what kind of theories we need. What theories are good and better than those we currently have? Let me tentatively formulate three necessary conditions for such theories to meet.

First, new theoretical approaches must take contemporary empirical reports into account. This means a theory is built “upon” them and “over” them, but not “apart from.” A theory should take these reports into account and perhaps give them new meaning by reinterpreting the relations between them – by discovering what is unobvious even if already present in the data.

Second, a theory should be a signpost for empiricists. It should be a signpost that will chart new directions of research, leading to areas so far unknown or not particularly well known, even if it seemed we know them very well. The point, then, is not only that a theory should be empirically verifiable. Empirical verification concerns the level of theory that is close to empiricism, and a theory may have several levels of this kind. Its general paradigmatic assumptions do not always have to be verifiable. However, they should give rise to specific theoretical models, which are verifiable, and the theory itself should make it possible to study what has so far been hidden in the darkness of our ignorance.

Third, a new theory should propose interpretive heuristic value added to the existing theories. The point is for a theory to be “a better theory” rather than “yet another theory,” and being better consists in being “more effective” in explaining the phenomena that we do not understand at all or do not understand particularly well. A new theory should therefore shed new light – it should reinterpret elements of the well-established knowledge provided by empiricists.

Perhaps there are more of these conditions. Those proposed above have the status of a tentative suggestion. Nevertheless, we do need to adopt some conditions to discuss the legitimacy of a new theory proposal. According to the criteria discussed above, the dualism proposed by Professor Niemczyński seems to have a certain “good theory” potential, although this potential is still waiting to be brought out.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, I believe that, despite the imbalance and the dominance of empirical psychology, there is no conflict between theoretical and empirical psychology. There is, however, a conflict between good and bad psychology. Good psychological research is that in which reliable methodology is employed for the purpose of insightfully illuminating the world in order to yield added theoretical value. Bad psychological research is that in which theorizing ignores the requirements of methodological precision or empirical reports as well as that in which empirical reports, even the most precise ones, do not yield added theoretical value.

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MIĘDZY SCYLLĄ EMPIRYCZNEGO PRZYZCNKARSTWA A CHARYBDĄ ANTYEMPIRYCZNEGO TEORETYZOWANIA

STRESZCZENIE

Tekst jest głosem w dyskusji nad artykułem Adama Niemczyńskiego „Znaczenie teorii rozwoju dla empirycznych studiów psychologicznych nad indywidualnym rozwojem człowieka”. Zgadzając się z tezą o dominacji doniesień empirycznych we współczesnej psychologii, krytycznie rozważam tezy postulujące zmiany. Kwestionuję przeciwstawienie badania teoretyczne vs badania empiryczne i pokazuję, że przyczynki empiryczne są równie mało wartościowym wkładem do nauki, co teoretyzowanie, które ignoruje owe przyczynki. W za-kńczeniu proponuję trzy warunki dobrej teorii, która powinna być konstruowana jako synteza myślenia teoretycznego i badań empirycznych.