THE POSTULATE OF STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN THEORIES AND EMPIRICAL STUDIES IN RESEARCH INTO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The article constitutes an input in the discussion initiated by Adam Niemczyński. He formulated the following theses:
1) Thesis I - on the dominance of empiricism in studies on human development;
2) Thesis II – on the need to move away from empiricism.
In the first part of this article, I consider the reasons for the advantage of the empirical approach in contemporary developmental psychology and analyse the logic of this trend. In the second part of the elaboration, I formulate conclusions regarding the negative consequences of the precedence of the empirical approach in psychology and postulated the need to curb this tendency and strive to achieving a balance between psychological theories and empirical research in developmental psychology. I also develop several recommendations that could contribute to reducing the negative impact of the dominance of the empirical approach.
The aim of these considerations was to facilitate further discussion on the importance of psychological theories pertaining to human development in empirical research on development. Theory development has significantly been compromised due to the precedence of the empirical approach in contemporary psychology, both in Poland and globally. The main postulate advanced by me in the presented article is striving towards a balance between theory and empirical research in human development research.

INTRODUCTION

In the introductory article, Adam Niemczyński put forward two theses. The first concerns the dominance of empiricism in research into development. The second emphasises the need to move away from empiricism. The main reason for the Author proposing a discussion on the importance of theory in studies on human development is the diminishing interest in theories of development both in Polish and international psychology.

REFLECTIONS ON SELECTED ISSUES

In my paper, I will attempt to address the aforementioned theories. In order to do this, the following topics and assertions will first be considered:
1) Psychology and philosophy – the divorce of psychology from philosophy;
2) Psychology as a theoretical and empirical science;
3) The complexity of the subject matter of psychology, namely, that of the human person – the complexity of human nature;
4) The need for a differentiated approach in psychological research and maintaining a balance between theories and empirical research.

Wishing to respond to the issues and statements formulated above, one should first reflect upon two major issues: the origin of psychology as a science and its subject.

Psychology as a science stems from philosophy and was a part of philosophy for centuries (Stachowski, 2000; Trempała, Olejnik, 2011; Przetacznik-Gierowska, 1996; Pietrasinski, 1990). It was only in the late 19th century that it became a separate science and it undertook the study of human development right from the very beginning. It focused primarily on observations of the child mental development (Przetacznik-Gierowska, 1996; Pietrasinski, 1990).

Philosophy always was and still is a theoretical science. It should also be noted that it is thriving as a theoretical science. However, the theoretical approach proved inadequate in psychology, including in developmental psychology. Therefore, developmental psychology based itself on the achievements of biology as a science, which already had strong achievements in human development at that time. The findings of biology studies undertaken into the transformation of organisms turned out to be highly relevant to psychologists in their studies on human development (Przetacznik-Gierowska, 1996; Pietrasinski, 1990). However, over time, this reliance on biology as an empirical science led to the strong anchoring of the biologistic model in developmental psychology (Przetacznik-Gierowska, 1996; Pietrasinski, 1990).

At the same time, the reliance on biology as an empirical science triggered the gradual dominance of empiricism and empirical research in developmental psychology. This also ties in closely with the reinforcement and progressive supremacy of the positivist approach to science in psychology. Empiricism is, according to Niemczyński, a “philosophical thesis on our knowledge about the world, originating from sensory experience, and only from this experience” (Niemczyński, introductory article, p. 1). This is, in Niemczyński’s view, an inadequate and flawed theory of scientific cognizance. Empiricism also meant tangible research findings based on increasingly complex statistical analyses. This allowed psychology to obtain substantial and measurable knowledge. The dominance of empiricism in psychology, including in developmental psychology, also had a negative effect by successively limiting new psychological theories on the human person and his/her development. Niemczyński strongly emphasises this fact in his article, expressing his concern because of this, and specifying the risks and threats entailed.

At this point, I should like to point out the important distinction between empiricism as a flawed theoretical doctrine and empirical research and its significance in gaining greater insight into the human development process. I will focus in my deliberations on the issue of the dominance of empirical research in developmental psychology and its advantages over theoretical analyses. I will not, however, be referring to empiricism as a theoretical doctrine.

In my view, it is this very dominance of the empirical approach and empirical studies in developmental psychology that has led to the gradual curbing of theories on human development and to diminishing interest in development theories among psychologists in Poland and globally. The dominion of the empirical approach and empirical research over psychology has also prompted its gradual detraction from its roots, that is, from philosophy as a science.

It should be stressed that philosophy and psychology have a common subject of analysis, namely, the human person, and common research considerations regarding the human being (Stachowski, 2000; Łukaszewski, 2000).
To this end, it is well worth considering the complexity of the field of research that the human person constitutes. According to Straś-Romanowska (1995, p. 22), in line with the assumptions of the philosophical anthropology of the first half of the 20th century, the world is differentiated into the material and spiritual reality, whereas the human person is an indivisible and irreducible whole of a bodily and spiritual nature (Husserl, 1976, quoted after: Straś-Romanowska, 1995). The peculiarity of the human being consists in the fact that material (naturalistic) and spiritual (consciousness) elements form a unity in the every person. The human being, according to philosophical anthropology, is not an individual but a person. This is why psychology which refers to philosophical anthropology is described as personalistic. The material dimension is the person's bodily dimension. The spiritual dimension is the person's consciousness (Straś-Romanowska, 1995).

The spiritual sphere includes, in my view, such immaterial beings like human morality, its value, worldview, life goals, religiousness, and meaning of life, etc. The spiritual dimension in general is not subjected to classical empirical research, which harnesses complex statistical analyses. It is qualitative methods and analyses that are more suitable to capturing and describing the spiritual dimension (Straś-Romanowska, 1995). If we are not implementing qualitative analyses, we are missing out on a plethora of important information concerning these highly significant dimensions of the human personality and the human being as a person (subject). That is why I believe it to be imperative for a differentiated approach to be taken in research on human development.

1) Quantitative approach. This involves research on the material (bodily) dimension of the human being and the physiological grounds for his/her functioning, however, it is not limited to this alone. It may also include studies on other problems that are not directly related to the material (bodily) dimension of the human being (e.g., research on thinking, on various kinds of judgements, etc.).

2) Qualitative approach (e.g., introspectionism, intuition, hermeneutics, etc.). These encompass qualitative analyses and research on the spiritual dimension of the human being (e.g., morality, the meaning of life, values, worldview, religiousness, etc.).

My angle on this matter is, to a large measure, consistent with the views of Niemczyński set out in his introductory article and with the approach of Straś-Romanowska (1995). The combination of complementing yet different approaches is necessary to be able to understand the human person as fully as possible.

It is justified to refer here to different psychological concepts of the human person (Łukaszewski, 2000). Reviewing them, it can be observed that none of them was universal enough to fully give across the true complexity of human nature. In my opinion, the most comprehensive approach is provided by humanistic psychology, although it too is not exhaustive. It is, therefore, worth employing various different theoretical approaches, depending on the research subject and problem.

THEORIES OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT VS. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

An important rule which should be observed in empirical research is that theory should be at the core of every research programme; theory, which allows the meaning and significance of the research and its problem to be justified and which also constitutes a research strategy roadmap for researchers. Most of all, theory allows us to justify exactly why these specif-
ic hypotheses and not any others should be verified. Niemczyński’s stance is very similar (introductory article).

The aim of research is usually to either: 1) consolidate theories; 2) develop theories; or 3) change theories. The research objective can also be to 4) create a new theory. However, any new theoretical concept should, in my view, at least be outlined as a general theoretical model before an actual research programme is developed. The point is for the study to attempt to test this concept by formulating and then verifying the resulting hypotheses. This is because the very value of empirical research, as Niemczyński points out, depends on its sound theoretical framework – right from its theoretical underpinnings.

This position is in line with the so-called inductive approach to scientific knowledge, which requires the researcher to derive predictions about facts that are currently unavailable to the him/her from theories (Brzeziński, 2000). It should be underlined that the role of theory as the main component of methodological awareness is strongly emphasised in psychology (Brzeziński, 1997, 2000). The necessity of observing the above guidelines is also stressed in developmental psychology (cf. Tyszkowa, 1996; Przetacznik-Gierowska, 1996; Trempała, Olejnik, 2011).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE PRECEDENCE OF THE EMPIRICAL APPROACH IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

Certain negative effects of the dominance of empirical studies in the development of human development research theories are becoming ever more apparent. They can be presented in the form of several main conclusions, namely:

1) The gradual reduction in basing empirical research on theories.

2) The progressive impoverishment of theories.

3) The triumph of the empirical approach leading to the dominance of statistical methods and analyses over qualitative analyses and over theoretical analyses of the problems being studied.

4) A disproportionately applied empirical approach has brought about a proliferation and predominance of highly detailed empirical research, which hinders any general reflections from being carried out and results in simple findings concerning often important but very narrow problems. This prevents the development of new broad theories.

5) Certain problems simply cannot be measured and described using classical methods and statistical analyses or their measurement is very limited. This may sometimes lead to research artifacts.

This primarily concerns problems that are qualitative in nature, which often do not submit to empirical analyses using quantitative methods and statistical analyses. Examples of such problems include morality, the meaning of life, values, worldview, and religiousness, etc. This was very strongly emphasised by such researchers as Niemczyński (1994, 2000, 2007), or Straś-Romanowska (1995) in their considerations.

6) A steady reduction in psychological theories of development, their considerable impoverishment, and sometimes even their demise in certain areas. A lack of new theories can also be noted in certain fields.

The last conclusion is fully in accord with the views of Niemczyński. According to the Author of the introductory article, this is the effect of the dominance of empiricism in world and Polish psychology, also in developmental psychology. I fully agree with this position, which I have made clear in the above conclusions.
PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the foregoing considerations, it would be worth formulating recommendations the implementation of which would help limit, at least to a certain extent, the negative consequences of the dominance of the empirical approach in contemporary psychology, including in developmental psychology. The recommendations made by me are seemingly obvious and very simple but their uptake by developmental psychologists could significantly improve the present situation and remove many negative effects which were discussed earlier. These recommendations include:

1) Striving towards achieving a balance between theories and empirical research,
2) Observing the rule of basing each empirical study on psychological theories,
3) Fostering the development of new theories.

The call to cultivate the development of new concepts and theoretical models, despite the current trends in science favouring empirical studies, is particularly relevant. These tendencies often give rise to researchers, especially young academics, trying to “escape” from having to create or develop theories since this is not perceived as beneficial or appreciated (“highly” ranked) in terms of academic output. Empirical studies — conducted in line with the applied methodology and described according to global psychology models, the findings of which are further disseminated through international journals — are assessed (and “ranked”) better.

It is worth drawing attention to the above formal arguments, which clearly have a significant impact on the triumph of the empirical approach in modern developmental psychology and on the advancing impoverishment and weakening of psychological theory development. The question of how this impact of the prevailing formal requirements can be limited is indeed worthy of consideration. In my view, they constitute a formal and major barrier in the development of psychological theories. Primarily, they restrict creative thinking and invention as well as the creative freedom of researchers in the area of psychology as a science, including in psychology of human development.

SUMMARY

I have endeavoured in the presented considerations to look at certain reasons for the dominance of the empirical approach in contemporary psychology of human development as well as the negative consequences of this triumph, primarily on neglecting the development of developmental theories and their impoverishment. Alongside this, I have presented several postulates the implementation of which would help limit, at least to a certain extent, the negative consequences of the dominance of the empirical approach. I very much hope that the reflections presented by me will be useful for further discussions on this highly significant problem.

REFERENCES:


Trempała, J. (Ed.) (2011). *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka* [Human Development Psychology]. Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.


---

Studia Psychologiczne. t. 55 (2017), z. 2, s. 31–37
POSTULAT RÓWNOWAGI MIĘDZY TEORIAMI A STUDIAMI EMPIRYCZNYMI W BADANIU ROZWOJU CZŁOWIEKA

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł jest próbą odniesienia się do dwóch tez sformułowanych przez Adama Niemczyńskiego w artykule wprowadzającym. Tezy te są następujące:
1) Teza I – o dominacji empiryzmu w badaniach nad rozwojem człowieka.
2) Teza II – o potrzebie odejścia od empiryzmu.
Część pierwsza artykułu zawiera refleksję nad przyczynami przewagi podejścia empirycznego we współczesnej psychologii rozwojowej, a także analizę niektórych przyczyn tej tendencji. W drugiej części sformułowano wnioski dotyczące negatywnych skutków przewagi podejścia empirycznego w psychologii oraz postulat konieczności ograniczenia tej tendencji oraz dążenia do równowagi między teoriami psychologicznymi a badaniami empirycznymi w psychologii rozwoju człowieka. Sformułowano także kilka zaleceń, które mogłyby być pomocne w ograniczeniu negatywnych skutków przewagi podejścia empirycznego.
Celem tych rozważań była pomoc w dalszej dyskusji na temat znaczenia teorii psychologicznych dotyczących rozwoju człowieka w badaniach empirycznych nad rozwojem. Rozwój teorii został znacznie ograniczony z powodu przewagi podejścia empirycznego we współczesnej psychologii, zarówno polskiej, jak i światowej. Głównym postulatem przedstawionym w artykule, jest dążenie do równowagi między teorią i studiami empirycznymi w badaniu rozwoju człowieka.