“Epistemology.” “Diversity.” What better words to complicate a conference from the very start! They offer an especial challenge when applied to our science of psychology, which has taken its epistemology to entail an unproblematic given, tacitly assuming that epistemology is singular, not plural, and certainly not diverse. My aim is simply to locate some epistemological alternatives in the course of modern psychology’s century-long life and, yes, to engage in what Sigmund Koch referred to as “epistemopathic surgery” (Morawski, 2001). Prior to that task, however, attention needs to be given to our central organizing terms “epistemology” and “diversity.” Rendering these alternatives without prolixity poses an added challenge to the task. Let’s start with relatively clear definitions. Epistemology: the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature, structure, sources, and scope of knowledge. The theory of knowledge or, theories of knowledge. Diversity: (in its current common usage) refers to all of the ways that humans differ from canonical classifications of difference that include race, gender, age, class, and religion to newer or less bounded dimensions of language, customs, physical capabilities, needs and so on.

Psychology’s Epistemic Choice

What is psychology’s epistemic foundation? Perhaps the only uncontestable question posed today is this one. Adherents and critics alike concur that twentieth century psychology is an “empirical” science, deploying exact methods of human perception to know the world. The world, it is first presumed, exists as a material entity with particular features. Second, it is determinist or law-governed (thus its causal patterns are universal and transhistorical) and, third, is best explained by reductionism. The world, then, is knowable, and the most valid knowledge of that world is acquired by using the scientific method of controlled, objective, and reliable (repeatable) observation. More specifically,
modern psychology adheres to a specific brand of “positivism” that provides a method of verifying empirical experience: logical deductions, verifiable statements about the world, and a logical structure of knowledge and discovery. Positivism led us to appreciate and privilege hypothetico-deductive method, reductionism, quantification, and mathematical models among other tools. As Ernest Gellner put it,

Reductionism, roughly speaking, is the view that everything in this world is really something else, and that the something else is always in the end unedifying. So lucidly formulated, one can see that this is a luminously true and certain idea. The hope that it could ever be denied or refuted is absurd. One day, the Second Law of Thermodynamics may seem obsolete; but reductionism will stand forever. It is important to understand why it is so indubitably true. It is rooted ... not in the nature of things, but in our ideal of explanation. Genuine explanation, not the grunts which pass for such in "common sense", means subsumption under a structure or schema made up of neutral, impersonal elements. In this sense, explanation is always "dehumanising", and inescapably so (1970, 107).

An even more troubling account of reductionism is Sigmund Koch’s:

The reduction of man to his present dimension need not be temporary. When the ability to differentiate among experiences is lost, experience is lost. When the perception of differential values as they in the quiddities of experience and action is lost, then value is lost. Nothing says that these things need return” (1970, 130).

Positivism, but not always discernable in logical positivism, has at its historical origins a commitment to human progress or improvement through science, and this commitment is wholly compatible with modern psychology’s mission. Also in accord with positivism is psychology’s understanding that values such as progress or improvement (or protection, amelioration, access to health or even diversity) are external to and, therefore, without effect on, the scientific process.

Gellner’s half comical depiction of positivism and Koch’s totally sober one intimates several of the problems enumerated by psychologists who have gazed critically at psychology’s master epistemology. For sake of time, I will simply list the central problems that have been associated with this master epistemology. They can serve as an
introduction and guide to the alternative epistemologies that have emerged within psychological science over the last century. The short list:

1. The **commitment to quantification** as the best means to classify mental life and behavior and the consequent disregard or rejection of qualitative experience and related methods for studying the qualitative experience of others. Along with this commitment is an associated skepticism toward “self report” or personal experience (as Gellner describes the denigration of the “grunts” which pass for common sense experience).

2. The **privileging of reductionism** as an explanatory mode and the consequent neglect of holism, emergence, Gestalt.

3. The **exclusivity of the positivist scientific method**, taken to be sufficient and, in fact, the only valid way to know the world of human thought and action.

4. The assumed **abstract position of the observer** who is taken to stand outside the observational situation (and with that assumed stance, as Gellner described, inescapable “dehumanizing” explanations result).

5. The **assumed value-freedom of science** understood as the clean separation of values, beliefs, and ethical commitments from the scientific process.

6. The resolute **search for lawful (universal, trans-historical) features** of human nature and consequent abeyance of dynamic, temporal, and contextual qualities of nature are considered.

The epistemological diversity of psychology, as much as such diversity exists, has developed more or less in response to these conditions of psychology’s master epistemology, or what Steven Toulmin and David Leary called its “method fetishism” and others have termed psychology’s “physics envy.” In the concise taxonomy that follows, I take license in selecting among some remarkable epistemic alternatives and also in associating meta-theories and theorists whose intellectual kinship is marked as well by notable differences. Omitted, I confess up front, are phenomenological,
psychoanalytic, and Marxist models that promote an alternative epistemic system (though not all practitioners of these models advocate an epistemology beyond positivist science).

**A. Radical Empiricism**

One of those ironies that make life worth living is the fact that William James, renowned as the champion of a scientific psychology freed from philosophy, also generated an alternative epistemology. Called “radical empiricism,” James’ modifications of scientific thinking were apparent even in his orthodox *Principles of Psychology* (1890) (a textual juxtaposition that one historian called “a wild mixture of many things” Reed, 1995,62). Briefly put, James professed the dynamic indeterminism of the world; the plurality of ways to know that world; the transformation of that world through human knowledge seeking with its attendant values; and the “knowing self” as inescapably present in the production of knowledge about the world. An early statement brings most of these alternative precepts together: “The knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth, which he helps to create. Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action – action which to a great extent transforms the world – help to make the truth which they declare” (quoted in Leary, 1995,930). Later in this century, radical empiricism was embraced by a small group of social psychologists in the 1930s (see Pandora, 199 ) and later yet became founding premises in ecological psychology (see Heft, 2001). The premises of pragmatism, transformation, and engagement also are found in action research.

**B. Standpoint Epistemologies**

In an attempt to synthetically describe a number of epistemic projects, my term “standpoint epistemologies” might not be entirely accurate label. What these projects share is an understanding that psychological knowledge and the scientific method used to garner that knowledge did not accurately represent the experiences of all human kinds. They challenged one of psychology’s principle conceits, described candidly by G.H. Ladd as early as 1894 in declaring that the “trained psychologists understands not only
the child, the idiot, the madman, and the hypnotic subject, but also the artist, the scientist, the statesman, and the thinker, as psychological beings, far better than any of these classes understand each other, or even themselves” (21). Of such privileging, they suggested that the “trained psychologist’s” psychological knowledge reflects his membership in a particular social group and, as such, comprises only a partial understanding of human experiences and practices. One exponent of standpoint epistemologies is Horace Mann Bond, an African American trained in the 1920s and an active scholar through the 1950s. In the 1920s Bond wrote a critique of studies of race differences in intelligence, brilliantly enumerating the many nonscientific assumptions that white researchers made in the course of intelligence testing research. He called these the “rules” of the scientific “game” then proceeded to break those rules by assuming, for instance, that if “white investigators are able to gain fullest rapport with white children, the same thing might be true of Negro testers with Negro children” (Bond, 1927, 258). Bond changed, too, the constraints of scientific observation: “instead of discounting environment to begin with, he kept it in mind as a possible factor (257). This critical parody also questioned psychology’s public performance, particularly that “vast array of statistical tables, bewildering vistas of curves and ranges and distributions and other cabalistic phrases with which we clothe the sacred profession of Psychology from the view of the profane public” (257).

In the 1960s Bond’s epistemic stance could be seen in the emerging feminist and black psychology movements. In one of the key papers of early feminist psychology, Naomi Weisstein reasoned remarkably like Bond:

In brief, the uselessness of present psychology (and biology) with regard to women is simply a special case of the general conclusion: one must understand the social conditions under which women live if one is going to attempt to explain the behavior of women. And to understand the social conditions under which women live, one must be cognizant of the social expectations about women (1968).

Although much of what currently constitutes feminist psychology and black psychology actually subscribes to the dominant positivist episteme, some research more critically and creatively addresses the partiality of perspective of positivism. Standpoint – both of the observer and the observed – and experience – again, of both observer and “subject” are
inseparable from the process of knowledge seeking and the very knowledge ultimately produced. This research “at the margins” aims toward developing a science of human kinds not restricted by a singular perspective cloaked as the of “objective observer.” Standpoint epistemologies do not taken science to be insulated from values and politics. Nor do these alternative projects assume that human nature is explicable outside of culture, history, economics, and material conditions or is reducible to its parts i.e. genes.

C. Postmodernism/Constructivism

Probably best known of the so-called alternative epistemologies is postmodernism. However, postmodernism is known mostly as a spectacular, “way-out” philosophy and not in its serious particulars. Postmodernism is many things, but can be understood to spring at once from trenchant critiques of western thought (of rationality, scientism, progress). Another postmodernist perspective posits that modern techno-science and industrial labor have substantially changed human experience—a chain that intimates the plastic or protean qualities of human nature (and the products of human nature, including science). Challenged in postmodernism are the modernist beliefs that there is a singular foundation of knowledge, a singular route to truth; that our knowledge is cumulative and progressive; that human experience ultimately stands outside of material conditions and historical change; and the self of (modern liberal theory) is rational and autonomous (instead the self is seen as neither autonomous, singular (unified), universal, nor trans-historical).

One fruit of postmodern thinking is constructivism, the epistemic view that we cannot know the world with certainty. Instead, through active social processes, we construct not only the world but also ourselves. This construction, despite some constructivist critics’ comments, is not freely chosen; it is not an improvisation of whatever one might want but, instead, a complex process determined, for example, by existing social structures, rules of knowledge validation, changing worldly conditions, historical understandings of embodiment, and cultural traditions. Constructivist views are evident in such alternative psychology ventures as role theory, relational psychology, narrative psychology, and several recent theories of the self. They can be discerned in a number of post World War
II psychologists’ non-conventional theory explorations. For instance, in 1953 William Bevan described the vital confection of psychological theories.

D. Dynamic Nominalism

The final case of epistemological diversity is not practiced by many psychologists, but warrants attention because of its affinities with each of the other epistemes presented here. “Dynamic nominalism” owes its name to Ian Hacking, a philosopher of science who shifted his scholarly efforts to studying not how physicists come to know quarks but how psychologists come to know the psychological. Dynamic nominalism assumes that human kinds are both found and made in a dynamic, looping process. New kinds of humans coming into being just as they are observed, calibrated and classified and these scientific practices, in turn, influence how those kinds subsequently think and act, and so on.

Dynamic nominalism thus assumes that we engage in constructing ourselves but not without the press of material, embodied conditions, and that as human kinds are named or even self-ascribed they act under these new descriptions of their actions and past experiences. In turn, generate new “data” for observing, describing, classifying, and regulating those kinds. This worldview informs us how we, as a particular human kind, become our statistics and, in turn, how our statistical machinations and indicators, become us. Human kinds change and change the human sciences. All of the problems of positivist science are addressed. In addition, dynamic nominalism truly recasts the human sciences’ reformist or emancipatory goals of improving the human condition by indicating how that reforming constituted the very project of the human sciences and re-occurs within the science, not merely in later practical applications of that science.

Although there are no distinct schools of dynamic nominalism within psychology, its precepts are evident in a variety of projects, including queer psychology, feminist and race studies, and some intervention research.

Conclusion

This brief exposition of some of psychology’s other epistemologies that have been advanced in the last century is not exhaustive of the experiments in ways of knowing
human nature. Perhaps more importantly, it does not venture to explain the oddest feature of psychology’s epistemic commitment: the continued dominance of a model of science that even the so-called more advanced sciences, like physics and the now king of sciences, biology, do not practice. Uncertainty, indeterminism, pluralism, plasticity, and complexity are common terms in these advanced sciences, yet such working terms for understanding nature have found no ready or steady place in mainstream psychological discourse of predictability, objectivity, determinism, statistical regularity. In our psychological science, we talk, instead, of risk, predisposition, cognitive structure, syndrome, disorder, and the like as existing out there in the world as relatively universal, stable and trans-historical objects; sufficiently knowable through quantitative means (not qualitative) and without the reports of personal experience; observed, calibrated and assessed by beings whose subjective experiences and social status are assumed not to intrude on objective observation. Why, we might ask, do we submit so keenly to this epistemology well after its transformation in our fellow sciences? What does this monolithic epistemology give us? What does it deny us?

References


