

Emerging Perspectives of Metatheory and Theory: A Special Issue of Integral Review

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A New Focus

Welcome to this special issue of *Integral Review*. Here, we have encouraged contributions from a diverse group of serious thinkers. Their peer-reviewed contributions provide a broad range of insights into the emerging field of metatheory. Metatheory is an important field of study because each person's metatheoretical perspective shapes the way she or he understands theory. And, the way we understand theory influences how we create, validate, test, select, and apply theory to improving ourselves, developing goals, and working to optimize the human (and post-human) condition. Without consciously understanding metatheory, we lack a "second loop" of learning – a second level of awareness.

Generally, our experiences give rise to concepts, which we combine, into theories. Theories are like lenses we use to view and engage the world (and ourselves). Having better theories means we are better able to engage the world around and within us. Despite the obvious importance of theory, few have taken the time to understand what it is all about. Engaging theory as a topic of study instigates an important recursion in human thought. Such recursions open the door to revolutions in understanding. For example, what if you changed your nation's policy on how it makes policy, or changed your ethic for changing your ethics?

Here, we investigate our theories about what constitutes a good theory. This approach is conceptually similar to second-loop learning – or learning how to learn. Clearly, if one learns how to learn more effectively, one can learn more quickly and more deeply. This can save a great deal of time (and tuition) and allow one to apply the learned knowledge sooner. This too, is a potential usefulness of metatheory. By using our lenses to look at our lenses, we can create better lenses. Continuing, we may accelerate the process of lens-improvement. With metatheory, we can accelerate the process of theory-improvement. And, thereby, we can accelerate our understanding, self-improvement and conscious co-evolution. Finally, these changes are desperately needed in an era where such understandings are desperately needed and hotly contested.

In this special issue, some authors adopt an approach to metatheory where they essentially combine and integrate multiple theories. Other authors adopt an approach where they use one theory as a lens through which to view (and gain insights into) other theories. A third general theme includes conversations around how we can best engage this thing called metatheory. All of our authors take on this difficult and complex task of understanding theory, integrating theory, and advancing the field of metatheory. My hat is off to each of them, for they are bold explorers in a new field of study.



We begin with a paper by **Zachary "Zak" Stein** who suggests a philosophical metatheory by investigating the history of metatheory. Exploring a rather interesting idea about metatheory and metatheoreticians he asserts that we are concerned with nothing less than the “trajectory of knowledge production processes.” And, with our metatheoretical perspectives and metatheories, we serve a normative function – guiding and enhancing academic discourse. Importantly, his reflections help us to understanding metatheoreticians – helping to define the field and helping us to learn who we are.

In the process of investigating a theory, one must adopt some conceptual stance. **Stratos Ramoglou** presents an investigation using two such stances to evaluate one theory within the field of organizational studies. One approach is founded on a constructivist view while the other is pragmatic. He shows that it is possible that these metatheoretical approaches can find themselves in conflict, thus raising difficulties for the analyst. To resolve this conflict, Ramoglou presents a third metatheory, an emancipatory perspective, which serves as a “tie breaker” and possibly suggests an evaluative perspective that is more effective than the other two. In plain language, it may be that we do not have (and may never have) all the answers to the uncertainty of the world. Yet, we must engage it. There may be no way to avoid the use of some metatheoretical model. And, emancipatory values allow for the emergence and engagement of new ideas. This, in some sense, cuts through a difficult dilemma. Instead of asking, “Is this true or not?” his approach suggests that we may benefit most by accepting the idea based on the benefits that such a belief may provide.

In another example of an emancipatory perspective, **Carter Haynes** adopts a high-level approach to identify the limitations of positivist research in the analysis of complex, subtle, social systems. Specifically, and appropriately, his exemplar here is fundamentalist religions. He draws an interesting parallel between religious fundamentalism, and positivism – where positivism may be understood as a sort of an academic fundamentalism. Haynes goes on to describe a variety of qualitative methodologies and, importantly, suggests that epistemological flexibility and metamethodology are useful supports for critical analysis and the building of more effective metatheory.

Instead of looking at a metatheory as a combination of perspectives that describe an overarching perspective, **Alan Singer** looks at a metatheory as a set of under-girding commonalities – something that connects and integrates core ideas of multiple perspectives from multiple perspectives. His paper is more complex than most in this special issue and his many insights are well worth reading. Here, Singer is focused on business strategy as a form of metatheory. He demonstrates by careful example how metatheorizing might be used to combine strategy, ethics, and more. He also suggests the importance of metatheory as part of a formal educational process to help students understand and integrate ideas across disciplines.

The importance or usefulness of metatheory depends on how effectively the field of study is developed. In the next paper, **Steve Wallis** provides an outline of metatheory’s standing as a science; and, what we might do to advance the study of metatheory. He includes modern, postmodern, and integral approaches to science and so opens the door for greater synthesis and extensions of this emerging field. Usefully, he reviews a wide range of metatheoretical

methodologies from critical and appreciative perspectives, while highlighting those that appear to the most effective in developing more rigorous theory and metatheory.

It is interesting to note a German-English connection in the growing field of metatheory. Authors from previous issues of the *Integral Review*, such as Markus Molz and Wendelin Küpers, are joined in the present issue by **Karim Fathi**. Fathi's paper, in German, investigates two approaches to conflict resolution. Importantly, he consciously applies a specific model to investigate the integration of those approaches. That model, an Integral Approach based on Wilber's AQAL model, clarifies important aspects of the conflict management approaches. He finds that this approach is useful for integrating multiple theories. Specifically, he finds that AQAL (in its present form) lacks categories that appear necessary to understand the process of conflict resolution. Thus, Fathi opens the door to advancing both conflict resolution theory, and integral theory. And, like Singer's work in this special issue, suggests that researchers should be familiar with a variety of epistemological, metatheoretical, and practical approaches. For those who do not read German, Karim has thoughtfully provided an extended abstract in English.

Special Section – Combining the Combinations

An important part of metatheory is the process and product of combining and integrating multiple theories. In this special section, we begin with three papers – looking at three metatheories where the authors have used their understanding of metatheoretical methodologies to integrate theories within disciplines. The fourth paper takes the additional step of integrating the three across disciplines. Both process, and results, provide valuable insights to those interested in metatheory, transdisciplinary studies, and (of course) each of the specific fields of study addressed directly in the papers.

In the first paper, **Annemie Ploeger** begins with evolutionary psychology, which has already been advanced as a metatheory. In this, she asks a question that is often asked by theorists and metatheorists, alike: Why has this metatheory not been widely adopted? Importantly, she draws useful conclusions as to how a theory works (or does not work) within a discipline and opens the door for interesting conversations and explorations into the effectiveness of metatheory within the social sciences.

In the second paper, **Mark Antley** investigates the field of human development. He uses complexity theory as a lens to interpret, and find linkages between, multiple theories (as developed by Bandura, Sameroff, and Erickson). Mark finds this approach useful for identifying contradictions and inconsistencies between theories; which, itself, points to a useful tool for metatheoretical studies. That understanding, importantly, represents a purposeful and metatheoretical approach to identifying opportunities for advancing theories and disciplines.

Latha Poonamallee begins the third paper of this special section with the recognition that paradox and contradiction between competing theories creates a challenge to the creation of metatheory. She proposes a resolution to this issue that involves the adoption and implementation of a metatheoretical stance based on advaita (non-dualism). Through her investigation of the epistemology, ontology, and praxis of advaita, she develops an intriguing

line of inquiry balancing spirituality and metatheory. Practical implications are also suggested that may be applied to individuals, communities, and combinations of approaches to research.

In the final paper of this special issue, **Annemie Ploeger** provides an essay with a bold and intriguing goal – she seeks to integrate the three metatheories of this special section. Her effort points to some of the exciting possibilities, as well as some of the inherent difficulties, of this kind of process. From her effort, it seems that it is easier to integrate theories that share a common intellectual heritage (evolution and systems, in this case). It is more difficult, though not impossible, to integrate those metatheories with advaitic approach. Another difficulty may be in linking different "forms" of conceptual constructs. In this case, evolutionary theory and systems theory are fairly well advanced as "theories." In contrast, the advaitic approach is more of a philosophy (including elements of ontology, epistemology, and more).

Toward the Horizon

These authors do not engage in an easy task. Metatheory is an emerging field and our scholars are explorers. Explorers who purposefully eschew the daily commute in exchange for a challenging voyage on uncharted seas. In this, they are not merely mapping uncharted territory; they are also exploring what it means to have a map.

This kind of exploration does not occur with great frequency. Indeed, for the social sciences, this may be the challenge of the millennium. To help us meet that challenge more effectively, we need new ways to identify the topology of our “conceptual constructs.” If our experienced world oscillates between relativism and determinism, is it possible to point to something and unarguably identify it as a philosophy, paradigm, theory, ontology, or fact? And, what if those things may be recognized as facts from a relativist perspective, but theories from a deterministic one? Those designations may become “moving targets” that may change depending on the context in which they are observed or used.

On one level, such questions may appear to generate quite simple answers. One might simply say, “I know it when I see it – and there it is.” On another level, the interrelationships between these conceptual constructs makes that process as difficult, and as important as defining one’s relationship with the universe. To merely think about such relationships, tends to change them.

To conclude, it is important to note that each of the articles in this special issue is developing, presenting, or using a methodology for the combination and/or analysis of theory. These exercises advance our understanding of metatheory and theory, thus advancing the field of metatheory and improve our ability to understand and develop theory to optimize the human condition in concert with our planet.

My profound thanks to the authors, reviewers, editors, and publishers of *Integral Review* for their encouragement and support in the creation of this special issue. It is rare to find this blend of brilliance, dedication, and empathy. And, I feel that we are all better for their efforts. It is my hope that the examples and insights presented in these articles and essays will enable and encourage you, the reader, to become a conscious and active participant in the nascent field of metatheory.