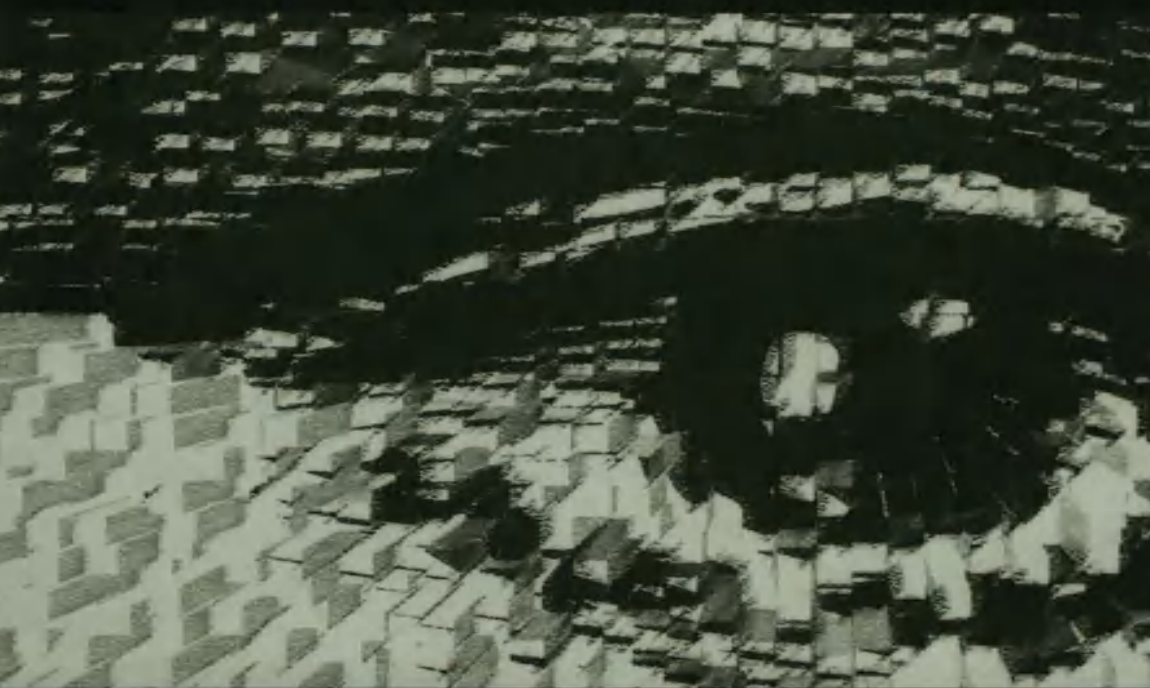


THE STRUCTURE OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL COMMON SENSE



JAN SMEDSLUND

The Structure of Psychological Common Sense

**The Structure of
Psychological Common Sense**

Jan Smedslund

LEA LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES

Copyright © 1997 by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by photostat, microform retrieval system, or any other means without prior written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smedslund, Jan.
The structure of psychological common sense / Jan Smedslund.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8058-2903-2 (alk. paper)

1. Psychology. I. Title

BF121.S 546 1997

150—DC21

9723186

Books published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates are printed on acid-free paper and their bindings are chosen for strength and durability.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Contents

Introduction	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
1. Persons	1
1.1 <i>The Subjective</i>	1
1.2 <i>The Intentional</i>	4
1.3 <i>The Normative</i>	7
1.4 <i>The Unreflective and the Reflective</i>	9
1.5 <i>The Irreversible and the Reversible</i>	14
2. Acting	18
2.1 <i>Cognizing and Doing</i>	18
2.2 <i>The Conditions of Acting</i>	20
2.3 <i>The Conditions of Can</i>	21
2.4 <i>The Conditions of Trying</i>	24
3. Wanting and Believing	29
3.1 <i>Wanting</i>	29
3.2 <i>Good and Bad</i>	30
3.3 <i>Strength of Wants</i>	33
3.4 <i>Believing</i>	36
3.5 <i>Strength of Beliefs</i>	38
3.6 <i>Parallels and Interplay Between Wants and Beliefs</i>	40
3.7 <i>Wants and Beliefs About Existence</i>	41

4. Feeling	45
4.1 <i>General Characteristics of Feelings</i>	45
4.2 <i>Reflectivity of Feelings</i>	46
4.3 <i>Strength of Feelings</i>	47
4.4 <i>Categorization of Feelings</i>	48
4.5 <i>Positive Feelings</i>	51
4.6 <i>Negative Feelings</i>	53
5. Interpersonal Processes	59
5.1 <i>Respect</i>	59
5.2 <i>Care</i>	62
5.3 <i>Understanding</i>	64
5.4 <i>Control</i>	66
5.5 <i>Trust</i>	68
6. Intrapersonal Processes	74
6.1 <i>Self-Respect</i>	75
6.2 <i>Self-Care</i>	77
6.3 <i>Self-Understanding</i>	78
6.4 <i>Self-Control</i>	80
6.5 <i>Self-Trust</i>	81
7. Personal Change	83
7.1 <i>Types of Change</i>	83
7.2 <i>Open and Closed Systems of Dispositions</i>	85
7.3 <i>Changes in Acting</i>	88
7.4 <i>Changes in Can (Ability)</i>	89
7.5 <i>Changes in Trying</i>	90
7.6 <i>Changes in Strength of Wants</i>	91
7.7 <i>Changes in Strength of Beliefs</i>	92
7.8 <i>Changes in Strength of Feelings</i>	95
7.9 <i>Changes in Strength of Specific Feelings</i>	96
7.10 <i>Epilogue</i>	100

CONTENTS

vii

Appendix A: Primitive Terms

101

Appendix B: Definitions

102

Appendix C: Axioms

104

**Appendix D: Presentations, Critiques, and Replies
Concerning or Related to Psychologic**

108

Introduction

How can one work as a psychologist? One encounters one unique and complex person after the other, and the very uniqueness and complexity may seem to preclude practically useful generalizations. Yet something *must* be general if we are to have a psychology at all.

One source of generality can be found in language. The endless diversity of individuals and situations is all the time incorporated into the same schemes, understood by means of the same concepts, described in the same terminology. There seems to be an invariant structure embedded in the way we talk and think about persons, and deal with them. What is this structure and how can it be formulated?

In order to begin to answer this question, we must become more sensitive to word meanings than is usual in contemporary psychology, where language tends to be *invisible*. By this I mean that psychologists tend to focus on the phenomena and procedures under consideration and to use language unreflectively in describing and explaining them. The phenomena and procedures are apprehended in terms of a language, but the language itself is not in focus. It is composed of a multitude of more or less unanalyzed terms and consequently, the meaning of what is stated can be grasped only intuitively. One cannot formally decide what follows and does not follow logically from any given psychological statement and therefore, it is not possible to distinguish between what is noncontingent (necessarily true or necessarily false) and contingent (possibly true and possibly false). Seen from this perspective, unanalyzed language is an obstacle to scientific progress.

Psychologic is a project of explicating the implicit conceptual system of psychology embedded in ordinary language, or in other words, the basic assumptions and distinctions underlying our ways of thinking and talking about psychological phenomena. The first version of psychologic (Smedslund, 1988a) is here referred to as PL, and the present version is called EL (referring to the initial working title of this book, "Elements of Psychologic"). The development of PL, and the subsequent transition from PL to EL has occurred in the context of a continuous critical discussion with other psychologists over a period of altogether two decades. See Appendix D. The arguments and counterarguments are not repeated here. However, I believe it is instructive to consider the outcome of the revision process. In what

follows, I compare EL with its predecessor PL, describing how the systems are similar and how they are different, and discussing why this is so.

Stable Content. Content has remained remarkably unchanged in the transition from PL to EL over a period of 8 years. The content of all the 26 axioms in PL is retained in EL. Twenty two are unchanged or have only minor changes in wording, 3 are condensed into one EL axiom, and one is changed into a theorem. EL has 33 new axioms, but 27 of these are reformulations of definitions in PL, and only 6 are new. The transition from definitions to axioms (see later) has been strictly one way. No axiom in PL has been changed into a definition in EL.

PL contains 83 definitions. EL has retained 32 of these, and added 13 new ones, yielding a total of 45. As already mentioned, 27 of the definitions in PL have become axioms in EL. Finally, 11 of the 22 concepts formally designated as undefined in EL, were defined in PL.

The stability of the content of psychologic, from PL to EL, may be numerically expressed as follows: Of the 109 basic propositions in PL (axioms + definitions), 96 are retained in some form in EL (axioms + primitives + definitions). None of the discarded 13 PL definitions are contradicted in EL. Hence, the two systems are almost identical in content, and appear to reflect a stable kernel structure in psychological common sense.

Although the content is largely unchanged, the form of the propositions involved has changed in three important ways from PL to EL.

Introduction of Undefined Terms. To explicate (make explicit) means using a language, and using a language means that the meaning of some terms must be taken for granted. We can explicate the meaning of terms by means of other terms, and the meaning of these other terms by means of still other terms, but the process is open-ended and must come to a stop. Hence, the explication of implicit psychology must, ultimately, rely on a set of terms whose meaning is taken for granted. It is also obvious that these terms must come from ordinary language. My selection of undefined concepts has been largely a matter of intuitive judgment, but I have also been inspired by Wierzbicka's work on a natural semantic metalanguage (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1994), and many of the selected terms are in that language. The undefined terms function as basic elements. They must be evaluated by their potential for being combined into useful definitions and axioms.

The selection of undefined concepts is only in its beginning. PL has not formally designated such terms, and the propositions in EL still contain many terms which are neither defined nor formally designated as undefined. A list of the 22 undefined terms so far selected can be found in Appendix A.

Revised View of the Function of Definitions. I now think that definitions of ordinary language terms are relatively useless. To define a term such as "sad," for example, is to stipulate what is to be the entire meaning of the term. The contrast

between an attempted strict definition of a term and the richness, vagueness, and variability of its meaning in ordinary language leads to repeated and unending debates. See, for example, my proposal of a definition of “sadness” (Smedslund, 1991c), and the commentaries by Cushman (1991), Ossorio (1991), Rosenhan (1991), Shweder (1991), and Williams (1991). There are numerous similar debates about other terms I have tried to define. People already know what the word “sad” means in given contexts, and they argue that no definition can catch this subtle knowledge in a totally satisfactory way. If this is accepted and generalized to other ordinary language terms, the only proper use of definitions in psychological theory appears to lie in the introduction of *technical/scientific* terms. These do not belong to ordinary language and hence, need to be explicitly introduced and explained to the reader. They can be construed in precise, context-independent and, hence, definable ways. The definitions that remain in EL are all of this type. They are listed in Appendix B.

From Definitions to Axioms The difficulty of formulating satisfactory definitions of ordinary language terms does not mean that the domain is entirely chaotic. Proposed definitions do catch something important, even though they cannot cover the full meaning of the terms. In my view, axioms can take over the role of definitions in providing a foundation for a deductive system. Briefly, the argument goes as follows: A definition stipulates exactly what a term shall mean and hence, exhausts and fixates its semantic content (“X shall mean exactly the same as Y”). On the other hand, an axiom stipulates that the term shall have a fixed relation to one or a few other terms, but except for this, leaves its meaning open (X, if, and only if, Y). Hence, moving from definition to axiom means moving from freezing the total meaning of a term to freezing its relation to one other term only. As already mentioned, this has taken place to a considerable extent in the development of psychology from PL to EL.

The preceding means that axioms are becoming the most important basic premises for EL as a formal deductive system. They attempt to catch the core or essence of the meanings of terms.

Elimination of Reference to Context and Time. The clause “in C at t,” used in PL, is eliminated from all formulae in EL. The clause was originally introduced in order to safeguard the propositions. Statements referring to the same moment in time and the same context were intended to ensure conservation of the constituent elements and hence, the applicability of logic. If one premise refers to one time and/or one context and another premise to another time and/or another context, the validity of a logical inference becomes uncertain and depends on nothing relevant having changed or nothing relevant being different. For example, if $A > B$ and $B > C$, the validity of the logical conclusion $A > C$ depends on the assumption of conservation over time of A, B, and C. If one of the quantities has increased or decreased between the recording of $A > B$, $B > C$, and the final comparison of A and C, then the standard conclusion $A > C$ may be wrong.

The argument for eliminating “in C at t” is that it is, after all, unnecessary. Although instantiations of logic always refer to a given time and a given context, logical structure itself is valid irrespective of time and place. A logical structure implicitly presupposes that premises are unchanged and therefore, does not need to be explicitly safeguarded by the clause “in C at t.” The elimination of the clause also abbreviates the formulae and hence, increases their elegance.

Avoidance of Metatheory. PL contains an extensive metatheoretical discussion, and was preceded and succeeded by metatheoretical debates. (See the references in Appendix D.) Here I avoid this. EL is presented without discussing its metatheoretical status. I have come to believe that prolonged such discussion may be relatively unprofitable. Determination of the value of EL can take place through evaluating the logical consistency, predictive power, and practical usefulness of the system. In this respect, psychologic is not different from, for example, Euclidean geometry or Newtonian mechanics. These systems work within certain ranges of application. The same may be true for psychologic. If it does work then it is useful, even though one has not yet reached an agreement, for example, about the empirical or a priori nature of the axioms.

The system presented here is composed of what Lewis (1972) labeled “platitudes” of folk psychology. The reader is invited to consider carefully the meaning and implications of these “platitudes.” Each of them is set forth as an exceptionless generalization with predictive value in everyday life, as well as in the psychological laboratory and consulting room. The system is supposed to function as a calculus by means of which psychological processes can be explained, predicted, and controlled. It is my contention that it is the only way in which this can be done.

Acknowledgments

Ever since the publication of *Psycho-Logic* in 1988, I have worked on revising and improving the system. Now that that book has gone out of print, it is time to bring out a new version. A main source of inspiration has been the discussions over the past 3 years with Tore Helstrup and our students in the seminar “Theoretical Problems in Psychology,” and also with Waldemar Rognes.

The Research Council of Norway has supported the publication of this book.

I am grateful to the Department of Psychology, Stanford University, and the Department of Psychology, University of New Mexico, for allowing me to work undisturbed as visiting scholar for 2 and 4 months respectively, in the first half of 1993. For the remainder of the period, the Institute of Psychology in Oslo has been a familiar and protective setting for my work. The daily luncheon has continued to offer stimulating intellectual exchanges in a warm atmosphere.

Working with clients has served as a constant reminder of the complexity of the human realities that the book is about.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Åsebrit Sundquist, for loving and intellectual companionship.

—Jan Smedslund

Chapter 1

Persons

Note 1.0.0 *Persons* are individuals of the species *Homo sapiens* and can be regarded as natural entities. *Psychology* is the study of persons.

Primitive term 1.0.1 *Person*

Note 1.0.2 Persons are highly distinct entities just as organisms are. Although, normally, one person corresponds to one human organism, the phenomena of *multiple personalities* highlight the fact that an organism and a person are quite different concepts. In rare cases, two or more persons can be clearly distinguished, even though they are manifested by the same organism.

Note 1.0.3 Because psychologists study persons, and because psychologists themselves are persons, *personal encounter* is involved in every instance of psychological research and practice. Major parts of the present work consist of analyses of the preconditions, concomitants, and outcomes of personal encounters.

Note 1.0.4 When we encounter a person, numerous conceptual schemes are engaged. This chapter presents five of these dichotomous schemes, namely *subjective/objective*, *intentional/causal*, *normative/neutral*, *reflective/unreflective*, and *reversible/irreversible*. Person processes are always subjective, intentional, and normative, and they may be either reflective or unreflective, and reversible or irreversible.

1.1 *The Subjective*

Primitive term 1.1.0 *Aware*

Note 1.1.1 In encountering a person, we take it for granted that the person is aware of what goes on, that is, that the world exists *for* the person. We also take it for granted that the person's awareness is limited, that is, refers to only *some* of the indefinitely numerous parts, aspects, and possibilities of the world. The limits are both internal (limited capacities) and external (limited availability of information, given previous history and current situation). Because different persons have