

# Recovery and Renewal: The Center for Advanced Study in Theoretical Psychology

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## Summary

The *Center for Advanced Study in Theoretical Psychology* was a world-renowned institute at the *University of Alberta* in the period 1965-1990, dedicated to conceptual analysis and integration in psychology and the training of new generations of 'generalist' psychologists. In the period of its active operation the Center brought together over 120 distinguished visiting scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including several Nobel laureates. Many of those visiting scholars remained in residence in order to engage in a series of so-called *Seminars-in-the-Round* that involved intense mutual exchange of ideas and no-holds barred verbal involvement. Recently recovered thought-to-be-lost audio and video recordings from this period offer a unique and multifaceted picture of a discipline that prides itself for its empirical approach, but seems to lose itself in narrow specialization and a lack of articulation of what constitutes the psychological. More than a thousand hours of reel-to-reel audio recordings, as well as a selection of U-matic video recordings have been recovered up till now. Our *Culture in Action* lab at the University of Alberta has started the process of digitizing those materials and will create a repository in order to make them available for the international academic community. Together with colleagues Dr. Leo Mos (former director of the Center) and Mike Dawson, we are actively seeking collaboration with scholars interested in the history and theory of the behavioural, social and human sciences, in the conceptual, epistemological and ontological basis of psychology and in the discursive processes that constitute science-in-action.

## The Center

As is well known by the readers of this *ISTP Newsletter*, the *International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP)* was founded at its first bi-annual conference in Plymouth, 1985 and ever since it has provided a broad institutional basis for the advancement and international dissemination of theoretical psychology. What is less well known, however, is that the ISTP had a direct precursor in a Center dedicated to the study and development of theoretical psychology, which ran successfully at the University of Alberta, Canada for 25 years. In 1965



J. Royce, founder of the Centre

Joseph Royce, then head of the first Department of Psychology at the University of Alberta, received official approval for the founding of a *Center of Advanced Study in Theoretical Psychology*. The central aim of the Center was, in Royce's words, to meet an "urgent need" within a discipline lionizing its empirical approach, yet characterized by increased fragmentation and narrow specialization. This need was to be met, according to Royce, by advancing psychology's understanding of behaviour through conceptual analysis and integration (Royce, 1970, p. 3). The possibility of founding a Center concerned with fundamental conceptual and philosophical issues underlying psychology and

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"the study of man" in a broad sense of that word had been one of the University's main promises to entice Royce to come to Edmonton. Under Royce's leadership and with the initial assistance of the biologist and founder of *General System Theory*, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the Center would come to be recognized as "one of the world's most important institutions dedicated to psychology throughout the three following decades" (Pouvreau, 2009, p. 176).

Although the Center was officially approved by the Board of Governors of the University of Alberta in November 1965, recently recovered documents show that it's founder Joseph Royce (1921-1989) already had the

idea for the Center years before his appointment as the first head of the Psychology Department in 1960 and that Center related activities already started just two years after his appointment as head. As Royce was on a sabbatical at the time of its inception as an independent administrative unit, the Center was temporarily headed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, professor of theoretical biology who had been brought to the University of Alberta by Royce to help him with the Center. The only other official member in the early period was William Rozeboom, a logical empiricist and sophisticated defender of behaviourism, steeped in the tradition of Carnap and Feigl. Shortly thereafter the Center was joined by

affiliates Herman Tennessen, a professor of Philosophy with an interest in both analytic and existential philosophy, Thaddus Weckowicz, an expert in the history of ideas and existential-phenomenological psychiatry, who held a joint appointment in Psychology and Psychiatry and Kellogg Wilson, an early adopter of the new mentalism promoted by Noam Chomsky and George Miller, who held a joint appointment in Psychology and Computer Science. This diverse group held a broad variety of perspectives, based on phenomenological, existential and humanistic approaches as well as approaches informed by biological systems and computational theory. The Center would soon be joined by a growing number of faculty, post-doctoral fellows and graduate students (Mos & Kuiken, 1998).

In the 25 years of its administrative autonomy, the Center invited around 120 distinguished visiting scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including Nobel laureates Sir John Eccles, Roger Sperry and Nikolaas Tinbergen and other influential figures like Sigmund Koch, Willard Quine, Donald Hebb, James Gibson, Raymond Cattell, Karl Pribram, Wolfgang Metzger, Hans Eysenck, Bernard Kaplan, Rudolf Arnheim, Amedeo Giorgi and many others. Not only did those distinguished visitors present at a series of conferences, but many also remained in residence, allowing them to participate in seminars and discussions.

The Center had a unique and shifting place within the University's administrative structure, but its main activities can be seen as falling within three broad categories. One of the main activities of the Center was to establish a graduate program, aimed at training generalist psychologists well-versed in meta-theory and interdisciplinary thinking. One of the mandatory readings in this course was Royce's own book *The Encapsulated Man* in which he wrote:

"This book represents one encapsulated man's views as to why 'specialization' is a profoundly serious problem in today's world, why we must remove some cobwebs in our thinking on this matter and at least seriously entertain the idea of

developing 'generalists' as well as 'specialists'" (Royce, 1964, p. v)

Letters between Royce and Bertalanffy and extensive lecture notes and hand-written revisions show that a lot of effort went into the preparation of graduate seminars and particularly the Center's flagship *Seminar in Theoretical Psychology* (see Dawson, Baerveldt, & Shillabeer, 2017). The interdisciplinary nature of activities and thinking within the Center was also reflected in the



organization of a series of so-called *Banff Conferences* on themes ranging from unification in psychology, the psychology of knowing, and multivariate analysis to humanistic and existential psychology and behaviour genetics (see Royce, 1970, 1973; Royce & Rozeboom, 1972; Royce & Mos, 1979, 1981). Perhaps most importantly, however, the Center ran a successful *Distinguished Visitors Program* that brought together a broad variety of thinkers in a unique interactive configuration. These seminars were inspired by the *Ford Foundation-sponsored Intercollegiate Program of Graduate Studies* and involved distinguished speakers from a broad variety of backgrounds in the human, social and biological sciences. In the period 1967-68 alone, these included philosophers Joseph Margolis and Michael Scriven; psychologists David

Krech, Sigmund Koch, Duncan Luce, Kenneth Hammond, Bennet Murdock, James Gibson, Donald Campbell, James Bugental, Thomas Natsoulas, and Robert Knapp; computer scientist John Holland; neuroscientist Karl Pribram; and psychiatrist P. Owen White. Letters sent by Royce to potential visitors to the Center give a clear picture of the nature of the conversations. The primary format for discussion in the Center was called *Seminars-in-the-Round* and involved an 'inner circle' of Center faculty, affiliates and visiting scholars and an 'outer circle' of visiting faculty and graduate students. In a 1966 letter to Wolfgang Köhler, Royce writes:

"The basic idea behind the visiting scholar scheme is to invite world-wide leaders in theoretical-philosophical psychology to visit the Center for the purpose of mutual exchange of ideas. The scheme implies thorough study of the visitor's work on the part of Center staff and Fellows prior to the proposed visit and a 'no-holds barred' involvement during the seminar meetings to be conducted while the visiting scholar is in residence."

Royce goes on to say that "such ground rules are in the name of advancing the discipline of psychology rather than to inflict scars on our most highly respected colleagues." Aware of the historical importance of the *Banff Conferences* and the *Seminars-in-the-Round* Royce insisted that all conversation sessions be recorded. In 1979 Royce suffered a debilitating stroke and it seems that the frequency of recording diminished soon after that. Recordings from the period 1965-1980, however, seem to have survived.

### **Recovery and Renewal**

Like the memory of the Center itself, the recordings, as well as a wealth of other Center materials, were either forgotten or deemed to be lost, until they recently resurfaced after a sewage leakage in the room in which they were stored for half a century and were salvaged by our lab. In collaboration with colleagues Dr. Leo Mos and Michael Dawson we have begun the process of



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making the materials accessible and putting them in proper historical context. These materials include, apart from at least 200 reel-to-reel tapes, U-Matic video tapes, cassette tapes, microfiches, slides and letters, most notably the correspondence between Royce and Bertalanffy concerning not only their vision for the Center as a unit, but also their plan for the Center's graduate seminars. The recordings are unique, not only because they contain formerly unpublished perspectives on the discipline by a range of distinguished speakers, but also because they capture those preeminent figures in extensive debate and informal academic conversation. What makes the encounters between visitors and Center members so unique, is not merely the sheer variety of perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds, but the fact that those renowned scholars came together

in a time in which the future of psychology was more than ever contested and in a way that allows us to see new and opposing ideas in their pre-sanitized, emergent form.

Because of the broad range of its visitors and the strongly interdisciplinary nature of the discussions at the Center, the recorded materials should now be highly relevant to psychologists and non-psychologists alike. First, the materials are of particular value to multidisciplinary studies into the history of behavioral and social sciences. The common narrative of psychology's self-understanding today reads as the paradigm of cognitive psychology emerging triumphantly in the past half century to march with little contest towards cognitive neuroscience. The Center materials indicate, however, that the ontological, epistemological and methodological basis of psychology in the nineteen sixties and seventies was very much contested, though in ways that led to sustained generative debate of a kind not commonly seen in our own era. Cognitive, humanistic, systems, neurological and



Seminar led by S. Koch

to research on the social processes that underpin knowledge production in both natural and human sciences and to Science, Technology and Society Studies on the roles of scientific and technological practices in our everyday lives. Many visitors to the Center were exceptionally well-equipped to offer a perspective on the role of psychology in society as a whole and were willing to debate their viewpoints

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behavioural approaches all laid claim to the soul of the discipline of psychology, however, some of the most important representatives of each of those approaches at the time found ways to engage each other in productive conversation about the possibility of theoretical unification and conceptual integration in psychology. The interdisciplinary nature of the recorded debates make them directly relevant to present-day efforts to bridge the gap between the humanities and the natural sciences and to study human conduct in its full complexity.

Apart from its particular relevance to the history of psychology and neighbouring disciplines, the recovered materials are also of great importance

with colleagues of different academic persuasions. Because of the informal and conversational nature of their engagements, the recorded materials lend themselves not only to conceptual and historical analysis, but also to discursive and conversation analytical approaches to science-in-action. Such approaches would focus, for instance, on interpretative repertoires (ways of constructing alternative, often contradictory versions of events through terminology, style, grammatical features and preferred metaphors and figures of speech) and discursive strategies (involving rhetorical organization and ways of attending to the normative accountability of one's words and actions). Having

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direct access to scientific discourse in its non-idealized productive form will help us to avoid both sociological reductionism and ‘great man’ accounts of academic history.

As more specific questions will start to emerge while we access the materials and make them available for scholarship, there is a broader concern for us that sits in the background of our own interest in this historical and conceptual reconstruction. Today, even within ISTP, the Center is hardly remembered at all and the need to articulate a synthesizing and integrative notion of “the psychological” now seems almost anachronistic. Although there are specific administrative and bureaucratic reasons for the Center’s eventual demise, the fact remains that with regard to its core mission and the vision for an integrative psychology that breaks through narrow disciplinary boundaries, the Center was ultimately a failure. If the Center was able to gather the best and brightest thinkers in psychology, representing both neuroscience and existential psychology, systems thinking and behaviour genetics, psychometrics and humanistic psychology, ecological and cognitivist perspectives, and often around the same table, this failure of the Center might very well prefigure the failure of the discipline as whole. It is our observation that nowadays psychology as an academic discipline seems to be slowly evaporating, giving way to an increasingly narrow and shallow biologism that lacks any reflection on the nature of the psychological. If theoretical psychology, as currently conceived, is to be one of the alternatives to that trend, it might do well to study its own past and both its successes and its failures.

Recovery, digitization and dissemination of the Center materials will be a massive undertaking.

As we are in the process of acquiring funding and material support, we are reaching out to researchers with an interest in the materials. For a list of recorded speakers and other inquiries about the Center materials, please contact Cor Baerveldt at [cor@ualberta.ca](mailto:cor@ualberta.ca).

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