



The Human Paradigm (HP) as a Metaparadigm

Candidate in Psychology:

A Triadic Framework for Theoretical Unification

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Abstract

Psychology remains a fragmented discipline characterized by multiple, often incompatible paradigms. Despite numerous integrative attempts, no existing framework has provided a comprehensive causal architecture capable of explaining why paradigms proliferate, why they conflict, and how they might be systematically unified. This article presents the Human Paradigm (HP), a triadic metaparadigm grounded in the interaction of three irreducible layers of human existence: Nature (N), Consciousness (C), and Environment (E). Drawing on 4E cognition, predictive processing, developmental systems theory, and level-pluralist approaches to consciousness, HP offers a novel ontological framework that treats meaning, agency, and vulnerability as emergent systemic invariants arising from N–C–E interactions. The framework satisfies four criteria for meta-paradigmatic novelty: ontological innovation, explanation of existing paradigms, causal account of fragmentation, and generation of new predictive capacities. HP reconceptualizes psychological dysfunction as cross-layer mismatch rather than single-domain pathology, dissolves long-standing philosophical problems generated by reductionist assumptions, and provides falsifiable predictions with pre-registered empirical criteria. This article argues that HP constitutes a substantive advancement in the philosophy of psychology and a viable candidate for unifying the discipline under a shared conceptual architecture.

Keywords: metaparadigm, theoretical integration, Nature–Consciousness–Environment, paradigm fragmentation, philosophy of psychology, 4E cognition, systems theory

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Introduction: The Need for a Metaparadigm in Psychology

Psychology remains a fragmented discipline characterized by multiple, often incompatible paradigms—behavioral, cognitive, psychodynamic, humanistic, biological, evolutionary, and sociocultural. Each paradigm offers internally coherent explanatory models, yet none provides a comprehensive account of human functioning. This fragmentation has been extensively documented in the philosophy of psychology and the crisis literature, which identifies persistent theoretical disunity, methodological pluralism without integration, and recurrent disputes over the proper subject matter of psychological science (Kuhn, 1962; Staats, 1983; Yanchar & Slife, 1997; Henriques, 2011).

The fragmentation of psychology is not merely an academic concern. As Zagaria et al. (2020) demonstrated in their comprehensive analysis, the discipline lacks consistent definitions of its most fundamental concepts, including mind and behavior, across introductory textbooks. This conceptual inconsistency undermines the accumulation of knowledge and hinders communication among researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and the public (Finkelman, 2024). According to Kuhn's (1962) theory of scientific revolutions, psychology has not yet reached paradigmatic maturity but remains in a state of pre-science, characterized by perpetually conflicting frameworks that prevent the emergence of normal science.

Despite numerous integrative attempts—including Engel's (1977) biopsychosocial model, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, and various forms of theoretical integration in psychotherapy (Goldfried, 1980; Norcross & Goldfried, 2005)—no existing framework has provided a causal architecture capable of explaining why paradigms proliferate, why they conflict, and how they might be systematically unified. The biopsychosocial model,

while influential, has been criticized for lacking philosophical coherence, engendering undisciplined eclecticism, and providing no safeguards against the dominance or underrepresentation of any domain (Ghaemi, 2010; Benning, 2015; McLaren, 2021).

The Human Paradigm (HP) proposes to address this lacuna. HP advances a systems-level metaparadigm grounded in the interaction of three irreducible layers of human existence: the Natural (N), Consciousness (C), and Environment (E)—collectively termed NiCE. By modeling humans as multi-layered systems whose psychological phenomena emerge from the recursive interactions of these layers, HP provides a structural explanation for the historical and contemporary fragmentation of psychological paradigms. This article argues that HP constitutes a novel metaparadigm in psychology, distinct from prior integrative frameworks in both scope and explanatory power.

Defining a Metaparadigm and the Criteria for Novelty

A metaparadigm is not merely a broad theory or a synthesis of existing perspectives. In the Kuhnian sense, a metaparadigm provides the overarching conceptual architecture that defines what counts as a legitimate question, method, and explanation within a scientific field (Kuhn, 1962). Following the analysis of paradigmatic structure in the philosophy of science (Laudan, 1977; Lakatos, 1978), a novel metaparadigm must satisfy four interconnected criteria that distinguish genuine theoretical innovation from mere conceptual reorganization.

First, a novel metaparadigm must offer a new ontological framework for understanding the domain. This requires more than additive synthesis; it demands a reconceptualization of the fundamental entities, properties, and relations that constitute the subject matter. Second, a novel metaparadigm must explain the existence and structure of existing paradigms, rather than merely combining them. This metacognitive requirement ensures that the proposed framework operates at a higher level of abstraction than existing theories. Third, a novel metaparadigm must provide a causal account of fragmentation and integration within the discipline, explaining not only the current state but the historical trajectory of theoretical development. Fourth, a novel metaparadigm must generate new explanatory and predictive capacities unavailable within existing paradigms, thereby demonstrating its progressive nature in Lakatos's (1978) sense.

The following sections arguably demonstrate that HP satisfies all four criteria, positioning it as a genuine metaparadigmatic innovation rather than another integrative synthesis destined to proliferate rather than reduce theoretical complexity.

The Human Paradigm's Ontological Innovation: A Layered Systems

Architecture

The central ontological claim of HP is that human psychological phenomena arise from the dynamic interplay of three co-determining layers (Kitcey, 2025). These layers are not levels in a simple hierarchical sense but constitutively interdependent domains whose interactions generate emergent properties unavailable at any single layer of analysis.

Nature (N)

The Natural layer encompasses biological, evolutionary, and neurocognitive constraints on human functioning. This includes genomic architecture, neural organization, physiological systems, embodiment, developmental canalization, and the evolved capacities that make consciousness possible (Oyama et al., 2001; Sterling & Laughlin, 2015). The Natural layer establishes energetic budgets, plasticity bounds, and constraint priors that determine the possibility space for human development and behavior. Critically, these are not static parameters but dynamic resources shaped by ongoing interactions with the other layers.

Consciousness (C)

The Consciousness layer encompasses phenomenal experience, access consciousness, metacognition, intentionality, and narrative meaning (Block, 1995; Nagel, 1974; McAdams, 2001; Bruner, 1991). HP adopts a level-pluralist stance that maps phenomenality to Integrated Information Theory (Tononi et al., 2016), access to Global Neuronal Workspace Theory (Dehaene & Changeux, 2011), and metacognition to Higher-Order Thought Theory (Lau &

Rosenthal, 2011). This pluralist approach clarifies when these dimensions should dissociate or converge, avoiding both reductionism and eliminativism while preserving the distinctive contributions of each theoretical tradition.

Environment (E)

The Environmental layer encompasses ecological affordances, symbolic tools, institutions, norms, incentives, and developmental inputs (Gibson, 1979; Clark, 2008; Henrich, 2016). This layer provides the constitutive context within which both nature and consciousness develop and operate, supplying material and social resources necessary for human flourishing. The Environment is not merely a backdrop for psychological processes but an active participant in their constitution, consistent with ecological psychology and niche construction theory (Laland et al., 2000).

Mutual Constitution as Causal Architecture

This layered ontology is not a descriptive taxonomy but a causal architecture. HP distinguishes three types of relations that bind the layers: constitutive (synchronic) relations, where each layer is partially realized by the others at any moment; causal (diachronic) relations, where changes in one layer produce effects in others over time; and enabling (contextual) relations, where certain conditions must obtain for particular processes to occur (Craver, 2007; Woodward, 2003). Each layer imposes constraints and affordances on the others, producing emergent properties—including meaning, agency, and vulnerability—that cannot be reduced to any single layer.

The novelty lies in treating these layers as structural invariants of the human condition. They are not optional perspectives to be adopted or discarded according to disciplinary preference but necessary components of any complete psychological explanation. This represents a substantive ontological commitment that distinguishes HP from eclectic frameworks that merely juxtapose factors without specifying their interrelations.

Explaining Paradigm Fragmentation: HP as a Theory of Paradigms

A defining contribution of HP is its explanation of why psychological paradigms fragment. Each major paradigm in psychology can be understood as a layer-specific model that isolates one component of the triadic system and treats it as foundational (Kitcey, 2025). This structural analysis resolves apparent conflicts by revealing them as complementary partial perspectives rather than incompatible truth claims.

Behaviorism, with its emphasis on stimulus-response contingencies and environmental control, models primarily the Environmental layer's reinforcement structures while bracketing internal states (Skinner, 1953). Cognitive psychology models the Natural layer's information-processing mechanisms, treating mental representations as computational structures implemented in neural hardware (Neisser, 1967; Fodor, 1983). Psychodynamic theory models the interaction of Natural and Consciousness layers through developmental internalization, examining how early experiences become sedimented in unconscious structures that shape present functioning (Freud, 1923/1961; Kernberg, 1976).

Humanistic psychology models the intersection of Consciousness and Environment through meaning-making processes, emphasizing self-actualization and the phenomenology of experience (Rogers, 1961; Maslow, 1968). Biological psychology and neuroscience model the Natural layer's physiological substrate, seeking neural correlates of psychological processes (Kandel et al., 2000). Evolutionary psychology models Natural–Environmental adaptive pressures, examining how ancestral selection shaped cognitive mechanisms (Buss, 2019; Cosmides & Tooby, 1997). Sociocultural psychology models Environmental norms, power

structures, and cultural meaning systems, emphasizing the social construction of psychological realities (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1990).

These paradigms do not conflict because one is “right” and another “wrong.” They conflict because each isolates one layer of a multi-layered system and treats it as foundational. HP thus reframes paradigm conflict as a structural artifact of partial modeling, not a failure of empirical rigor. This explanatory move is unprecedented in the history of integrative psychology. No prior framework has offered a causal account of paradigm proliferation grounded in a formal ontology of the human system.

Emergent Properties and the Dissolution of the Hard Problem

HP treats meaning, agency, and vulnerability as emergent systemic invariants arising from N–C–E interactions. This reframing addresses the so-called “hard problem of consciousness” (Chalmers, 1995) by demonstrating that the explanatory gap is produced by illegitimate layer isolation—typically the attempt to derive Consciousness and Environmental phenomena from Natural-layer mechanisms alone.

On the NiCE view, the hard problem partly arises from a category error: abstracting away the constitutive E–N–C relations and then demanding a direct reduction from the remainder to phenomenology. HP adopts a non-reductive physicalist stance that avoids both eliminativism and property dualism. All processes are physically realized, yet consciousness is not a separable “stuff”; it is an organizational regime arising from the mutual constitution of organismic dynamics (N), worldly scaffolds (E), and recursive self-modeling (C).

HP calls this positive alternative experiential constitution: predictive models, environmental affordances, and bodily constraints co-determine experiential content, yielding system-level causal powers not reducible to component parts. This framing clarifies how prominent theories of consciousness interlock: Integrated Information Theory speaks to phenomenal structure generated by triadic co-integration; Global Neuronal Workspace Theory addresses which modeled contents achieve global availability; Higher-Order Thought Theory explains metacognitive appraisal of those contents (Kitcey, 2025).

HP does not solve the hard problem in the traditional sense; it shows that the problem as typically formulated is a category error generated by reductionist assumptions. This constitutes a novel philosophical contribution with implications for cognitive science, philosophy of mind,

and the foundations of psychology. The hard problem “feels hard” because “head-only” or “world-only” approaches miss the relational nature of experience. Progress requires methodological pluralism and experiments that perturb E, N, and C together.

Dysfunction as Cross-Layer Mismatch: A New Diagnostic Ontology

Traditional paradigms locate psychological dysfunction within a single domain: the brain (biological psychiatry), the mind (cognitive psychology), the environment (behaviorism), the self (humanistic psychology), or the social world (sociocultural psychology). Each localization carries implicit assumptions about etiology, mechanism, and intervention that may conflict with alternatives.

HP reconceptualizes dysfunction as a misalignment across layers—for example, when Natural-layer vulnerabilities meet Environmental-layer demands that exceed adaptive capacity, or when Environmental pressures destabilize Consciousness-layer meaning structures. This cross-layer mismatch model provides a more comprehensive account of psychological distress and resilience than any single-paradigm framework.

Empirical support for the mismatch hypothesis comes from multiple domains. Developmental research demonstrates that early environmental deprivation produces neural changes that persist across the lifespan (Felitti et al., 1998; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Critical period studies show that visual cortex development depends on environmental input during specific temporal windows (Hubel & Wiesel, 1962; Blakemore & Cooper, 1970). Literacy acquisition demonstrates how cultural artifacts (written symbols) reorganize cortical function, producing the Visual Word Form Area (Dehaene et al., 2010, 2015). Meditation research reveals how conscious practices reshape neural structure and function (Lazar et al., 2005; Tang et al., 2007).

The diagnostic ontology is operationalized through HP's nine-pathway model, which enumerates all directed influences between the three layers across time: $N \rightarrow N$ (neural homeostasis), $N \rightarrow C$ (capacity expression), $N \rightarrow E$ (niche construction), $C \rightarrow N$ (training-induced

plasticity), $C \rightarrow C$ (metacognitive regulation), $C \rightarrow E$ (intentional design), $E \rightarrow N$ (epigenetic modulation), $E \rightarrow C$ (affordance shaping), and $E \rightarrow E$ (cultural evolution). Dysfunction can be traced to perturbation, blockade, or dysregulation of specific pathways, enabling targeted intervention design.

HP's Relationship to Existing Integrative Frameworks

HP aligns with and extends several theoretical traditions, drawing on their strengths while addressing their limitations. The 4E cognition program—viewing cognition as embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended—provides the anti-Cartesian foundation for HP's treatment of mind as distributed across brain, body, and world (Varela et al., 1991; Clark, 2008; Newen et al., 2018). HP's characterization of humans as “embodied narrative agents” resonates with embodied cognition's insistence that cognitive processes are fundamentally shaped by sensorimotor capacities (Gallagher, 2005).

Predictive processing and active inference frameworks (Friston, 2010; Hohwy, 2013; Clark, 2016) inform HP's mathematical formalization, particularly the extension of expected free energy with an energetic prior that makes metabolic costs first-class citizens in policy selection. Developmental systems theory (Oyama et al., 2001; Griffiths & Gray, 1994) provides the resources language that HP uses to operationalize constitutive relationships—genes, cells, bodies, caregivers, artifacts, and symbolic systems as resources contributing to development.

Niche construction and cultural evolution (Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Henrich, 2016; Laland et al., 2000) inform HP's treatment of the Environment as actively constructed rather than passively encountered. Peircean semiotics (Peirce, 1931–1958; Deacon, 1997) provides structural precedent for triadic organization, with HP mapping environment as sign-rich scaffold, nature as evolved interpretive constraints, and consciousness as dynamic interpretation.

However, HP differs from all these traditions in critical respects. First, it provides a unified causal architecture rather than a descriptive list of influences. Second, it explains the structure of paradigms themselves, not merely the phenomena they study. Third, it integrates

meaning and agency as structural invariants, not subjective add-ons to be bracketed in scientific analysis. Fourth, it offers a general theory of dysfunction grounded in cross-layer mismatch. No existing framework accomplishes these tasks simultaneously.

Empirical Implications and Falsifiable Predictions

A metaparadigm that offers no new predictive capacities would represent mere conceptual reorganization rather than scientific progress. HP generates six core falsifiable predictions, each with specified measurement strategies and pre-registered falsification criteria (Kitcey, 2025).

Multi-Lever Intervention Synergy

HP predicts that interventions targeting multiple layers simultaneously will produce superadditive effects compared to single-layer interventions. For instance, combining sleep optimization (N), metacognitive training (C), and environmental scaffolding (E) should yield greater improvements in cognitive performance and wellbeing than the sum of individual interventions. Falsification criterion: If factorial designs consistently show additive or subadditive effects across diverse populations and outcome measures, the synergy prediction fails.

Sensitive Period Effects

HP predicts that cross-layer effects will show temporal windows of heightened sensitivity corresponding to developmental transitions in neural plasticity (N), self-concept consolidation (C), and institutional scaffolding (E). Environmental interventions during these windows should produce larger and more durable effects than identical interventions outside windows. Falsification criterion: If temporal windows show no moderating effect on intervention outcomes, the sensitive period prediction fails.

Symbolic Mediation Effects

HP predicts that symbolic tools and meaning systems will mediate the relationship between Environmental inputs and Consciousness outcomes. Cultural artifacts (language, mathematics, institutions) should shape not only what is experienced but how it is structured. Falsification criterion: If path analyses consistently show direct $E \rightarrow C$ effects without symbolic mediation, or if removing symbolic mediators produces equivalent outcomes, the prediction fails.

Plasticity Bounds

HP predicts that Natural-layer constraints will impose bounds on the effects of Environmental and Consciousness interventions. Interventions cannot produce unlimited change; there exist ceiling and floor effects determined by biological architecture. Falsification criterion: If interventions consistently exceed predicted plasticity bounds, or if individual differences in bounds are not explained by Natural-layer variation, the prediction fails.

Cultural Priors Shaping Metacognition

HP predicts that cultural meaning systems will shape metacognitive processes, including confidence calibration, introspective accuracy, and self-narrative construction. Cross-cultural variation in metacognitive patterns should correlate with Environmental-layer differences in symbolic systems. Falsification criterion: If metacognitive processes show no cross-cultural variation, or if variation is fully explained by Natural-layer factors, the prediction fails.

Rituals as Control Policies

HP predicts that cultural rituals function as active inference control policies, reducing uncertainty and free energy through predictable patterns. Ritual engagement should correlate with reduced physiological stress markers, improved affect regulation, and enhanced social coordination. Falsification criterion: If rituals consistently fail to reduce uncertainty markers, or if ritual benefits are fully explained by non-predictive mechanisms, the prediction fails.

Conclusion: HP as a Novel Metaparadigm

The Human Paradigm constitutes a novel metaparadigm in psychology because it introduces a new ontological architecture for understanding human systems; explains the historical and structural fragmentation of psychological paradigms; integrates meaning, agency, and vulnerability as emergent systemic properties; reframes dysfunction as cross-layer mismatch; dissolves long-standing philosophical problems generated by reductionist assumptions; and provides a unifying framework capable of integrating diverse psychological theories without collapsing them into a single level of analysis.

Unlike prior integrative attempts that merely juxtapose factors, HP specifies the causal relations that bind Nature, Consciousness, and Environment into a coupled system. Unlike eclectic frameworks that select tools pragmatically without theoretical grounding, HP derives intervention strategies from explicit pathway analysis. Unlike reductionist programs that seek to eliminate higher-level descriptions, HP treats multi-level description as necessary for complete explanation.

HP is not a final theory but a call for pluralist integration: a common ground where philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, and sociology can converge. Its promise lies in being both visionary and testable—predicting, failing, and improving by design—so that N, C, and E can be studied as one coupled system. If the framework is right, it should do more than cohere: it should predict, fail, and improve by design. A unified science of the human will be the one that survives its own falsifiers while reliably guiding systems toward lower load, clearer access, and richer affordances.

In doing so, HP offers a coherent, causally grounded, and philosophically rigorous metaparadigm capable of guiding future theoretical development, empirical research, and clinical practice. It represents a substantive advancement in the philosophy of psychology and a viable candidate for unifying the discipline under a shared conceptual architecture.

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