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Paul Meehl: Past and Future Lessons for the Field

Timothy B. Baker, Loren J. Chapman, and Jean Chapman
University of Wisconsin—Madison

Paul Everett Meehl (1920–2003) was an intellectual giant who made important contributions to several fields of thought. The present special section focuses on his contributions to psychopathology, personality, and methods of psychological inquiry. The editors identified six specific topic areas within these broad domains and invited a specialist on each topic to write a discussion. These authors were invited to review Meehl's contributions and clarify their historical significance and current relevance. The submitted reports received the usual peer review and editorial scrutiny. In addition, two authors contributed personal perspectives on Meehl, revealing that Meehl profoundly affected psychological science by routes other than his publications and formal talks. Rather, his voluminous correspondence and his personal relationships allowed him to engage numerous colleagues in his passionate pursuit of ideas and insights.

Among 20th-century psychologists, Meehl's contributions to psychopathology and personality research are without parallel. The breadth and depth of his contributions are unique, as are their implications for how we study, and think about, abnormal behavior. The intent of this special section was not to argue that Meehl was a profound thinker, an iconoclast, or a stimulating colleague, all of which are true. Some of this information arises in the individual articles, but it is peripheral to the central purpose of this section. The contributions, except for the brief material on "Meehl as a Colleague," address the nature and impact of Meehl's ideas.

Over the course of his career, Meehl induced several paradigm shifts in major areas of inquiry. For example, his work on schizotaxia, schizotypy, and schizophrenia anticipated several key propositions: that genetics plays a major explanatory role; that the phenotype is absolutely crucial to genetics research and a diagnostic label is an impoverished phenotype; that the phenotype needs to be related to behavioral, cognitive, physiological, and affective mechanisms and not be allowed to languish at the level of clinical symptoms per se; and that the phenotype is multidetermined, possibly being influenced by genes, nonshared environmental factors, and so on. In short, Meehl's work in this area has served as a model for the transdisciplinary, integrative models of psychopathology that have followed it. His work (in collaboration with Lee Cronbach) on construct validation has been even more seismic. It is difficult to imagine how the field was able to make any progress in assessment without some powerful heuristic that guides the assessment and analysis of a hypothetical construct: How does one decide what items to use, how item responses permit inferences, and how validity is established? The influence of this contribution is so fundamental and so ingrained that it is no longer recognized as "figure" but instead is part of the foundation on which our science is based.

Two things struck the editors as they read the papers making up this special section. The first observation is that Meehl's work presents a paradox. Specifically, some contributions have become so ingrained and embedded in what we do and how we think that it is difficult to appreciate the changes that they have wrought. Alternatively, some contributions have made an impact and clearly anticipated current thinking by many years, but they have mostly just perturbed the field rather than produced fundamental change. Meehl's contributions on the methods of science and scientific inference are examples of this, as is his work on clinical versus actuarial prediction. Thus, researchers continue to test null hypotheses in a seemingly obligatory manner, and clinicians continue to eschew formulas and embrace hunches and informal data-combinatorial strategies. Such refractoriness occurs, no doubt, when a message is disturbing, when it confronts institutionalized practices, and when solutions require a fundamental change in approach and thinking.

The second observation made by the editors is how difficult it is to delineate the effects of Meehl's contributions. For instance, to what extent has Meehl's work on methods and construct validation prepared the field intellectually for effect size estimates, testing of model fit, delineation of measurement and structural models, and so on? Thus, even though inferential tests continue to be routinely reported in the experimental literature, and in this journal, Meehl's work may have added to our receptivity to novel approaches that go beyond significance testing. Similarly, to what extent did Meehl's work on taxometrics prepare the field for different perspectives on classification and diagnostic conceptualization (e.g., for the notion that neither a rigid dimensional nor categorical approach to diagnosis is warranted and, rather, that the appropriate approach may vary from one disorder to another)? (See Krueger, Watson, & Barlow, 2005.) To what extent did Meehl's work on schizotypy help the field embrace the concept of the endophenotype? In addition to specific influences, the editors believe that Meehl's work has had pervasive and fundamental salutary effects on psychological theory and research; that is, Meehl's work left the field more intellectually sophisticated, more daring, and more dissatisfied with prosaic and comfortable answers.

We applaud the contributors to this special section. Their reports are provocative and insightful and will cause the field to consider anew how Paul Meehl's work has shaped the past and can inform the future.

Reference

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Timothy B. Baker, Loren J. Chapman, and Jean Chapman, Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin—Madison.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to T. B. Baker, Center for Tobacco Research and Intervention, University of Wisconsin, 1930 Monroe Street, Suite 200, Madison, WI 53711. E-mail: tbb@ctrt.medicine.wisc.edu

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