I. The issue of merging the social sciences might be thought of as an issue of categorization. It may be that that things psychologists have learned about categorization and categories will illuminate this issue.

Categories are made on the basis of shared similarity between stimuli – they function to group together things that are similar and distinguish these things from things that are different. This is sometimes called “lumping and splitting”. But all things are similar to other things in some ways and different in other ways. So the question becomes one of which dimensions should we focus on? With regards to the social sciences, the question is which dimensions of our disciplines are the proper ones to form groups around. Should we focus on the dependent variables that are studied (which is more or less what we do now)? The methods we use? Political factors? Shared language/jargon?

Psychologists who study categorization recognize that there are often trade-offs between the ease with which something can be put into a category and how informative the category is about the characteristics of its members. That is, categories with few “rules for entrance” make it easy to assign members yet aren’t terribly informative about the specific characteristics of the things in the category. So, e.g., its easier to figure out if something is “an animal” than if it’s a “bear”, but the category of “bear” offers much more useful specific information about its members. The level at which ease and specificity are maximized is called “the basic level”. So one way to think about issues of merging is in terms of searching for the “basic level” of academic disciplines. Note that this implies that bigger categories are not necessarily better – unifying all the disciplines may not be better than specialization. Both big and small categories have advantages – it depends on what advantages one wants to maximize.

The act of categorizing has known effects on how stimuli are perceived. In particular, categorizing tends to make people focus on similarities between stimuli (or the dimensions on which categorization is based) and less on differences. This means that any mergin of our disciplines will result in “ways in which our disciplines differ” being lost. Of course, specialization results in obfuscation of similarities as well.

II. Another way to think about the social sciences is in terms of levels of analysis. John Cacioppo, a social psychophysioligist, has talked about this extensively. You can organize disciplines in a hierarchical way, micro to macro. Many people think about social science in this way. There is a tendency towards reductionism, such that lower, more micro levels are preferred. Certainly academics tend to disdain levels above them and be threatened by levels below them. But each level has its uses. Reductionism is a dangerous trend – it suggests that lower levels subsume or completely explain higher levels, but this isn’t so. Higher levels are a function of interactive aggregation of lower levels. You can’t predict characteristics of an emergent system from knowledge of its subunits. Also, levels influence each other – e.g., in doves, male social behavior affects female hormones which influences her social behavior; social support in humans affects RNA ascription. From a scientific perspective, different levels inform and constrain inferences you can make at other levels – both up and down.

Cacioppo recognizes two principles – the Principle of Multiple Determinism”, which states that phenomena have multiple determinants across levels, so you can’t just say that the causes of a phenomenon are at a lower level (e.g., “schizophrenia is caused by levels of dopamine”). The Principle of Nonadditive Determinism states that the properties of a whole are not predictable from its parts until the properties of the whole are documented. Not that mapping of one level on another becomes increasingly more complex with the number of intervening levels.

Disciplines at different levels have their own particular issues that they are best equipped to focus on. Also, they have their own jargon, their own variables of interest, their own methods, and a history of studying them. Cacioppo, then, believes that unity of fields across levels may have disadvantages, especially if done in a reductionistic manner. He does, however, believe that people should form cross-level collaborations to work on linkages between levels.

III. Psychology as a discipline has experienced this tension between unity and specialization in its history. Psychology is a big field that is quite fractured. We’d
need to unify psychology before we can think about unifying social sciences. Psychology spans multiple levels of analysis (but focuses on individual behavior, cognition, and affect mostly). In our early days, we had a few unitary theories (gestalt, behaviorism, functionalism) which gave way to specialization. Some people think that this is true of all maturing disciplines. We do have a loose paradigm now – cognition. In psychology, there is a certain loathing of big trends/paradigms (behaviorisms, cognition) – they are seen as totalitarian.

It actually doesn’t make sense to talk about psychology as a unitary discipline – people’s level of identification is in terms of the major subareas – social, personality, clinical, developmental, cognitive, physiological. There is tension between these areas. There are also tensions between the applied and basic areas – this has long been a political battlefield. Methods & analysis tend to be quite different across areas.

Interestingly, much of the specialization in psychology is the result of links between the major subareas – social cognition, cross-cultural psychology, social psychophysiology, evolutionary psych. So in a sense, in trying to unify, we specialize. In any event, getting more specialized seems to be a function of knowing where interesting problems are that haven’t been tackled yet.

Many psychology departments have tried breaking up or reorganizing psychology departments, often combining them with other disciplines. This often is along the lines of neuropsych with biology, social psych with sociology, applied disciplines and basic disciplines lumped together. There has not been a general pattern as to how effective this has been – there are political costs; proliferation is diluting and confusing to administrators and others. People in applied areas often prefer being close to the basic folks. Often these “regroupings” are driven less by scientific integrity than personnel conflicts within departments or political forces.