

A Journey in Psychology

... Schopenhauer said that he learned more psychology from Dostoyevsky than from all the books he had read on the subject.¹

Not long after I embarked on the study of psychology, a vague feeling of dissatisfaction with the field began to take hold of me. It took me a while before I realized why I felt this way, but eventually I came to understand that it was due to the limited ability of the discipline to capture the emotional truths of ordinary experience. While I have great respect for its application of the experimental method and have observed its successes in some areas, I have to confess that much of what passes for psychological research today seems trivial and of little consequence to me.

I have come to this view after a lifetime of schooling that has continued almost without a break since I was 5 years old and, during the last forty years of my life, has been largely devoted to the study of psychology. In the beginning I was student, then a researcher and after that a teacher, and then sometimes all three. These days I also do a little of each with unpredictable frequency.

However, at this point in my life, I have more or less given up on psychology, at least its current versions and preoccupations. I try to keep up with the literature and maintain subscriptions to the leading journals. But I rarely find much of

¹ Interviewer's comment during interview with Julian Barnes, *Paris Review* #157, Winter 2000-2001.

anything that I care to read, as each new issue brings yet another batch of quantitative analyses of esoteric processes that, in most instances, seem remote from human experience. Instead my interests have turned to literature now, for that is where I find the truths that I do not find in psychology or anywhere else for that matter.

Before I went to college, I had not given much thought to my future. But after my first year at Stanford, I was certain that I didn't want to stray far from the academy. In those days Stanford freshman took a full-year course in the history of Western Civilization and then often followed it with another in the Humanities that was devoted to literature and the arts. Those courses introduced me to the world of culture and I've never recovered from the experience or found an alternative that even comes close. Critics who decry the "narrow" Western focus of courses like this would deny undergraduates an incomparable educational experience, one that has little to do with their content and much more with a way of thinking. At least it was a way of thinking that was completely foreign to me at that time, as I suspect it still is for most students today.

Those courses led me to the study of philosophy, which soon became my major, although I was far from well prepared for its rigors. However, I did understand the questions and was much taken by its quest for clarity which was the dominant concern of the Analytic Philosophers of the day. The students also impressed me. They were bright, intense, so unlike those I had known before and I hoped that by associating with them, some of their intelligence would rub off on me.

However, when it was time to enter graduate school, I began to have my doubts about philosophy. It was plainly not making much headway in answering questions that it had been considering for ages. Frankly, I was not entirely convinced it was even a goal. It was enough to simply clarify their meaning.

Psychology seemed more promising. It had a method for investigating the questions and procedures for deciding between competing answers. I was also attracted by its experimental method that seemed to me to hold out the hope that, at long last, some progress could be made in resolving those perennial philosophical issues

I did most of my graduate work in the experimental psychology of learning and motivation, where I sought to test Freudian hypotheses in the laboratory. Like many beginning psychology students, Freud's analysis of mental processes appealed to me, as did the importance of early experience in his accounts of adult behavior. Anxiety also played a central role in his theory of the neuroses and because I was young and beset with all the anxieties of youth, I was often preoccupied with the strenuous and usually unsuccessful effort to deal with it. What an excellent topic to study, I thought.

So, in the manner of a clinician, I set about to try to find a way to conquer anxiety. However, my studies were carried out in the laboratory, rather than the clinic. The research employed an animal model of human anxiety, an approach that was highly regarded at the time. Through a series of experiments, I eventually developed a technique that successfully reduced anxiety responses in animals, one that was not unlike a closely related clinical procedure later adopted by behavior therapists. In those days there was a good deal of interest on the part of clinicians in applying findings derived from animal models in therapeutic settings, a practice that has all but disappeared today.

I continued to pursue learning theory once I began teaching, primarily within the conditioning framework developed by B. F. Skinner. I was always attracted to Skinner's views and research methods, which stressed the study of single organisms in tightly controlled experimental conditions. Using this technique, Skinner sought

to develop a set of laws that could predict and control human and animal behavior. While his *deterministic behavioral* model received considerable support at the time, most psychologists eventually came to believe that it could not adequately deal with mental processes and, in due course, it was supplanted by the so-called cognitive revolution, which continues to dominate the field to this day.

However, I was content working within the Skinnerian framework. I welcomed its emphasis on the environmental control of behavior, which I felt was consistent with the weight Freud gave to early experience. I had no trouble employing rigorous laboratory methods or focusing on the behavior of single subjects. Moreover, in the beginning it was exciting to be teaching and doing research with the undergraduate students who came to Reed College, a small liberal arts college in Oregon. I was young, the youngest member of the department, and they were only slightly younger, intelligent, energetic and a bit nutty, as is often the case at Reed.

They were also attracted by the research I was doing. If I was interested in it, so were they. My lab was crowded, as were my classes. Every once in a while I would return to my office in the evening, only to be sidetracked by a group of students still working in the lab. It was pretty heady stuff. Looking back on it now, it seems inconceivable--I was studying problems in animal conditioning and the students wanted to work with me.

During the energy crises of the seventies, I began to appreciate the shortcomings of the behavioral approach. I thought profligate energy consumption on the part of individual consumers played a large role in bringing on this crisis and that, while the behavioral approach worked well in producing short-term reductions in energy consumption, the research demonstrated over and over again that these changes never lasted very long. The behavioral account was severely limited in this respect.

About this time, I read some remarkable experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram that set me on the path of understanding this shortcoming. Milgram's classic experiments on obedience and disobedience to authority stunned me. They revealed, in a way the behavioral approach never did the enormous power of the social situation in controlling behavior. They also did this in a compelling laboratory situation of deep personal consequence to the participants. Finally, their relevance to the Holocaust moved me deeply. Countless other students and scholars to this day have been similarly affected by the force of these experiments.

Milgram's program of research turned my interests sharply in the direction of social psychology, a subject that I had never studied before. There I found a provocative body of knowledge on techniques for changing behavior, techniques that relied more on internal rather than external control (rewards and punishments) that was advocated by behavioral analysts. In turn, this suggested a number of applications for promoting energy conservation, as well as other resource conserving behaviors. As a result, my students and I carried out a program of research within this framework during the next several years.

Naturally, all this eventually came to an end. Younger people came into the department. Their views were new and more in line with the current direction that psychology was taking. Animal conditioning became a thing of the past, indeed, subject to considerable objection on the part of critics. The energy crisis faded away. My lectures became stale. I wasn't learning anything new so my interest in the subject matter flagged and the students no longer seemed interested in my methodical analysis of psychological problems. And so, gradually, I withdrew from the academic fray.

As the years went by, I also lost confidence that psychology could ever become a science of human behavior, at least a science that could speak with any degree of

precision about the richness of human experience. Perhaps that was too much to ask of the discipline, too much to ask at this time in its evolution. Yet, I never accepted the claim that psychology was still a young science and that as it matured, some of these limitations would be overcome. In my lifetime, I really didn't see anything to indicate that this was happening. Quite to the contrary, all I could see was growing conflict between theoretical accounts, increasing physiologizing of the field, and continuing contradictions between empirical investigations.

Others have expressed similar views. For example, Rom Harre, researcher, teacher, and writer in the philosophy of science, and later in social psychology has written:

It has been about 30 years since the first rumblings of discontent with the state of academic psychology began to be heard....It is a remarkable feature of mainstream academic psychology that, alone among the sciences, it should be almost wholly immune to critical appraisal as an enterprise. Methods that have long been shown to be ineffective or worse are still used on a routine basis by hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. Conceptual muddles long exposed to view are evidence in almost every issue of standard psychology journals.²

Geoffrey Loftus, a leading cognitive psychologist has also spoken of his concerns about the field.

But I have developed a certain angst over the intervening 30 something years, a constant nagging sensation that our field

² Rom Harre (2000 August 25). Acts of living. *Science*, 289, 1303-1304

spends a lot of time spinning its wheels without really making much progress.³

Most recently, in a call for greater unity within the field, the current President of the American Psychological Association, Phillip Zimbardo, expressed his concern by writing:

Psychology continues to be a sea of professional disciplines, rarely connected with each other, loose from any common theoretical moorings, and rarely within sight of the shores of the "real world."⁴

Psychologists seek to establish very general laws of human thought and action. Yet I never understood how evidence derived by averaging the scores of a group of individuals could serve as the foundation for a science of *individual* behavior. Laws based on such aggregate data tell us very little about specific individuals and serve only to obscure crucial features of human variability and uniqueness.

Further, the many exceptions to these laws severely limits their generality. Thus, it is impossible to say with much confidence that they hold for a particular individual at a particular time and place. I have come to believe that psychology will always have to be content with this sort of limitation. Laws based on group means hold for some people, some of the time, but one never can be sure on any given occasion if they apply to a particular individual in the situation at hand.

As a case in point, consider the nature of psychological research on the impact of media violence. This is an important social and personal issue, one in which psychologists have been called upon to provide the kind of evidence that will count

³ Geoffrey Loftus. Psychology will be a much better science when we change the way we analyze data. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 1996, 5, 151-171

in public policy discussions of the matter. After years of research in both laboratory and field situations, it is almost universally accepted that exposure to media violence increases aggressive behavior.

At the same time, it is essential to recognize that there are many important studies in both settings that do not support this claim. It would be more accurate to say that exposure to media violence is not sufficient to produce aggressive behavior. It may teach some persons how to behave aggressively. But individuals simply do not perform everything they learn. Whether or not a person will perform what he or she has learned depends on many factors, most of which have little to do with what they have observed and far more with conditions in their immediate environment--they have had a bad day at the office, been insulted by a close friend, been involved in an automobile accident, etc.

Above all, there are important individual differences in responsiveness to media violence. Obviously such exposure does not affect everyone in the same way. The observation of media violence may have an immediate, short-term effect on some individuals. But almost all the studies agree that these effects do not last very long. In short, exposure to media violence *may* affect only a very few individuals for a very short time under very limited conditions. The question then becomes who and under what circumstances? And if media violence does only influence a few on those occasions, what are the social policy implications of this conclusion, especially when it is impossible to predict who will be influenced in this way?

This conclusion is not unlike one often voiced in judicial proceedings, where the legal standing of psychological research is also called into question. It took me a while to understand why courts were so hesitant to admit social science evidence, let alone take it seriously in adjudicating cases. Yet legal cases are decided on an

⁴ Phillip Zimbardo. President's Column, *Monitor on Psychology*, March, 2002.

individual basis and so, even when the weight of evidence clearly supports the relevant social science generalization, the courts still require "proof" that it applies in the case being decided. When judges ask psychologists to link the general principle to the specific case, it is difficult, if not impossible for them to do so with certainty. But that is what the law requires. Psychologists can provide relevant case knowledge and guidance, but the information they present is rarely, if ever, decisive in judicial decision making.

In his essay *Medicine and Literature*, Robert Coles puts the matter eloquently.

I am constantly impressed with mystery, and maybe even feel that there are certain things than cannot be understood or clarified through generalizations, that resolve themselves into matters of individuality, and again, are part of the mystery of the world that one celebrates as a writer, rather than tries to solve and undo as a social scientist.....As physicians we also know, or ought to know, that each person is different, each patient reacts in his or her special way to any illness, and indeed to life itself. A sense of complexity of human affairs, a respect for human particularity, ...these are the stuff of the humanities at their best ...⁵

During all the time I was primarily engaged in psychology, I never stopped reading literature, mostly contemporary fiction. I did not have the time to read widely, but the literature I did read always seemed to be telling me things about myself and others that I never heard expressed in psychology. With rare exceptions, I rarely saw individuals in psychology as clearly or as deeply as I did in the novels and short stores that I read.

⁵ Robert Coles, *Times of Surrender*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 1988.

Several years ago I started to record the passages that conveyed these literary truths in the books and stories that I read. Some had a great many, while others had none. I tend to judge the quality of a literary work by the number of passages that I have taken the trouble to record. At the end of each year, I make a copy of the collection and place it in my Journal. The computer has made all this possible. In the days before I had one, I don't remember doing anything like this. Perhaps I wrote a phrase or a sentence in long hand, but never very many and never as extensively as I do now.

While some are simply amusing or witty expressions, the majority convey a truth that I've not been aware of or seen so clearly expressed before. Sometimes the passages reinforce a belief I already hold and then at other times it is a truth that I've always wanted to hear or hoped I would, even though I may not have been able to articulate it myself.

In his book, *Existential Psychology*, Irving Yalom wrote perceptively about these special truths of literature:

Great literature survives, as Freud pointed out in his discussion of Oedipus Rex because something in the reader leaps out to embrace its truth. The truth of fictional characters moves us because it is our own truth. Furthermore, great works of literature teach us about ourselves because they are scorchingly honest, as honest as any clinical data: the great novelist ... is ultimately highly self-revelatory. Thornton Wilder once wrote: If Queen Elizabeth or Frederick the Great or Ernest Hemingway were to read their biographies, they would exclaim, Ah—my secret is still safe. But if Natasha Rostov were to read *War and Peace* she would cry out, as

she covered her face with her hands, How did he know? How did he know?

Phyllis Rose expresses a similar view in her recent book on Marcel Proust.⁶

...but what I looked forward to most in reading Proust were revelations about myself. The best moments had been those in which I descended most deeply into myself...so I achieved a sudden clarify of vision....Proust understood that every reader, in reading, reads himself. Far from minding this, he saw it as the writer's task to facilitate it. Thus the writer's word is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book he would perhaps never have perceived in himself. And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is *proof of its veracity*. [Italics mine.]

Here Rose suggests that the power of literature lies in confirming those truths of experience that are unique to each individual. These are truths that are not to be found in the pursuit of generalities, but rather in the conditions of our own lives. I think an idiographic science of the individual is possible, a science that is occasionally revealed in psychological research, but far more often in those unforgettable passages of literature that we are lucky enough to stumble upon.

I respect the effort of psychologists to understand the world and render it in some lawful fashion. I am grateful for the chance that I was given to study the discipline and for those times when it set me to thinking. But this work has taught me to be wary of generalizations about human beings and to value instead the truths of individual experience.

This is why, as I come to the last leg of my life, I have decided to make a turn to literature and to the pleasure of putting words, instead of numbers, on the page. I have no expectations of being able to achieve any distinction as a writer. But there are times when nothing can hold a candle to it, to say nothing of the way it helps get me through the day.

⁶ Phyllis Rose, *The Year of Reading Proust*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press. 2000