

On a Certain Blindness in Modern Psychology

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Those of us who are researchers in psychology are privileged to be working on the most interesting phenomena imaginable. But I fancy that there are times when we do not really look at them. Or rather, we are taught to look at them in certain ways, using certain concepts, and certain techniques, so that sometimes we miss things that are obvious to everyone except psychologists. In other words, in trying to understand some psychological process or another we have a tendency to look first at what previous researchers have done and thought, so that afterwards we cannot help but look at these processes through their eyes. To put this in psychological terms, we acquire sets and then cannot easily discard them and look at the world afresh to see how things really are. This produces, to borrow a phrase from a classic paper by William James (1899), “a certain kind of blindness.”

I want to support this argument with a couple of examples taken from my own field, which is that of personality and motivation.

The limitations of the trait concept

My first example is the notion of a trait – the central concept in all psychometric work on personality. I do not wish to deny that there may indeed be certain consistencies in people’s way of seeing the world and acting in it. What I do wish to assert is that this is only a limited and relatively uninteresting part of their psychology. The interesting part is the way in which people change. It is, I think, obvious to all except psychometricians, that we are very different kinds of people at different times in everyday life, and that this is the essence of what makes us human. Personality is dynamic not static: we are more like dancers than statues. Tell someone that a test they have taken shows that they are extraverted and they will probably respond (as I have found on many occasions) that this may be true sometimes but sometimes they are also introverted. Try actually looking at people. Look at yourself.

Nor does this changeability depend in any simple way on changing situations as many behaviourists and social psychologists would have it. We can be in the very same situation in very different ways at different times. A given person might well be extraverted at a dinner party on one occasion, and introverted on another – indeed both these ways might even apply at different moments of the same evening! The reason for this seems to be that there is an ever-changing internal context to our actions as well as external environmental forces. We want different things at different times and, partly as a consequence, we see things differently. In this respect our personalities are shifting and unconstant.

This does not mean that all is chaos. What it does mean is that there are patterns that characterise people but that these are temporal patterns. What is most interesting about a person is his or her typical sequences and rhythms and trajectories of personality change, the particular factors that play a part in prompting change, the different ways in which different characteristics get to be expressed, and so on. These are indeed characteristics that distinguish between people. But they

are more like tunes than like continuously repeated single notes. Psychometricians act as if averaging all the notes in a Mozart Symphony would give us the essence of the work. Looking at a person's 'tunes' takes us beyond the old trait-situation debate by insisting that we add a third term: the way that the person is at a given moment, reflecting internal cycles and rhythms.

In turn this approach opens up a whole new area for research. It means that every research question that is usually posed in terms of traits – whether it be, for example, in relation to mental or physical health, criminality, lifestyle preference, sporting prowess or leadership – can be posed afresh in these terms. To give just one example, it is difficult from knowledge of traits to predict lapsing in people trying to quit smoking, but people turn out to be particularly vulnerable during certain recurring identifiable psychological states (O'Connell & Cook, 2001).

Not only is trait theory oversimple. It is also unhelpful. To give someone a test and then tell them that this is how they are, is to do them a grave disservice by limiting them and their possibilities. I refer to this dismal business as “chronotyping” (Apter, 2001). This is like stereotyping except that now instead of mistakenly assuming that all people in a certain category are the same, chronotyping involves mistakenly assuming that a given person will remain the same. Both involve over-generalising from limited information – in one case across people in the other across time for a given individual.

Let me give an example of the detrimental effects this can have. If you are in human resources, and you use personality tests, all you can do is use them to select people for a job, not help them to change and grow and develop into and beyond the job. If on the other hand you break with the trait concept and allow that people are changing all the time anyway, then helping someone to change in some desirable direction seems less daunting – it is only a question of nudging an ongoing change process in the desired direction.

Looking at this in another way, it is possible to assert that to be healthy is to be unstable – to be able to move between different kinds of personality to suit the occasion. In these terms, major types of psychopathology, like chronic anxiety, and depression, and addiction, involve being stuck. In other words, if someone can after all be characterised by traits, as people suffering from these clinical conditions can, then that person is probably suffering from some kind of mental disorder. If biodiversity is necessary to the health of an ecological system, then what we might call “psychodiversity” is just as important to the health of the individual: it allows him or her to adapt to ever-changing and relatively unpredictable environments, and also to have a life which is rich with experiential diversity and allows for the expression of all sides of his or her personality.

The limitations of the homeostatic arousal concept

Here is my second example of missing the obvious, this time in the field of motivation and emotion. It is commonly assumed that people do not like, and try to avoid, high arousal – which is equated with anxiety. What is obvious, and is missed by psychologists working in this field, is that people actually sometimes want high arousal – the higher the better – which they experience as excitement or even euphoria. In other words, high arousal has two alternative forms, one pleasant and the other unpleasant. It is not enough to say that this was recognised by Hebb when

he developed his optimal arousal theory and pointed out that people sometimes do things to raise as well as lower their arousal levels. For Hebb the most pleasant arousal is always more or less moderate and any raising or lowering has to be to this moderate level. But he gave no explanation as to why people might want to increase their arousal levels way beyond moderate levels. After all, when one goes to a fun fair, or a football match, or a rock concert, one does not just want moderate arousal – one wants very high arousal. In fact one wants to be thrilled. Some people will even go to dangerous extremes (such as bungee jumping and sky diving, etc) to achieve this experience. I have documented this phenomenon in detail (Apter, 1992). Simple homeostatic theories of the Hebb type (and this homeostatic idea underlies a number of personality theories such as those of Eysenck and Zuckerman) cannot convincingly account for this. What is needed is an approach that allows for people framing experience in alternative – even opposite – ways related to different needs and desires.

Here is where Freud, too, ran into trouble. On the one hand he asserted, in various formulations, that people want to reduce their psychic drives to low levels and that if they fail to do this they will experience anxiety. On the other he saw sexuality as a key drive. But the aim of sexual behaviour is to achieve the “highs” of sexual arousal and orgasm. It took Freud a lifetime of complex theorising to try to make sense of his own theoretical self-contradiction! It would have saved him a great deal of trouble if he had recognised what all non-psychologists know: that sometimes we want excitement (for example during sexual activity), and sometimes we want peace and quiet. (And here again we notice that people change in the course of everyday life, sometimes wanting high and sometimes low arousal so that it does not make a lot of sense to treat this as a trait in the traditional sense.)

There is another important point here. If a person at a given time is seeking high arousal, then any intense emotion can provide it and be a source of pleasure. This will include supposedly bad emotions like horror, anxiety, grief, and so on. At first blush it sounds unlikely that we could enjoy these detested emotions. But if we actually observe ourselves in real life, we see that this is indeed the case. For example, we enjoy “bad” emotions when we go to the pictures. In the secure setting of the cinema, bad emotions can become good. We want to enjoy the horror of a horror movie, the anxiety of a thriller, the grief of a tragedy. If we did not, why would we pay good money to go to the pictures? I have suggested that we call such pleasant “bad” emotions “parapathic emotions” (Apter, 1982). Again the existence of these kinds of emotions is, I venture, obvious to non-psychologists – but apparently overlooked in all psychological theories of emotion.

This is not just a theoretical matter. There are great practical advantages to recognising that a given level of arousal can be experienced in opposite ways. For example, a clinical implication is that there are two contrasting ways that one can employ in dealing with anxiety. The common assumption is that one must reduce arousal – whether this be through tranquillisers, relaxation techniques, biofeedback, or in some other way. But clearly there is an alternative: this is for the client to accept the level of high arousal that he or she experiences in certain situations, but to find a way of reversing the anxiety into excitement. For instance, in dealing with sexual dysfunction the aim should be to help the person to feel excitement, even ecstasy, in the sexual situation, not relaxation. In helping an athlete or musician or public speaker to perform well, we

should help them to feel enjoyably aroused – since they probably need to do what they are doing with intensity – not be “laid back.”

Reversal theory

For the last twenty five years I have, with colleagues around the world, been developing a systematic theory which takes account of these and other obvious, interesting and dynamic aspects of human experience and behaviour. The theory goes by the name of “reversal theory” or “motivational style theory” and is based on the idea of states rather than traits, multistability rather than homeostasis, inconsistency rather than consistency.

The theory has generated research of various kinds (psychometric, experimental, psychophysiological) and been used in a variety of applied settings (including therapy, health counselling, sports coaching and management consultancy). The results are often surprising when looked at from more traditional perspectives. There is evidence, for example, that people at work rarely want moderate arousal but switch backwards and forwards between wanting high and low arousal; that some problems are less easily solved if we take them seriously; that even in an unchanging situation people look for very different things at different moments; that it is possible to need hassle and stress; that in certain states of mind people can enjoy incongruity, ambiguity, confrontation and conflict.”

Reversal theory is represented by a substantial literature, including books and articles in a variety of areas of psychology (see review in Apter, 2001). And yet it continues to be ignored by mainstream psychology. My intention in writing this brief article is to draw attention to some ideas that non-psychologists find compelling and useful (if a little obvious), but that continue to be overlooked by the generality of professional psychologists.

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