

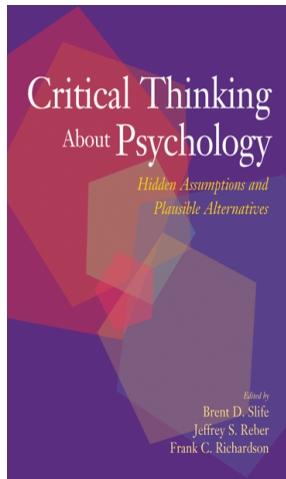
Commentary

Critical Thinking about Psychology

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Critical thinking has often been considered to be a cornerstone for many disciplines, and an essential skill for academics, especially within psychology. Indeed, psychologists are taught to use their research and findings to examine common myths and debunk false beliefs. However, do they subject psychology itself to any evaluation? This volume intends to show that, despite the emphasis on critical analysis, rarely psychologists can give a positive answer to the question.

The book is organised into six parts corresponding to some of the major subdisciplines of psychology. Each part is composed of two chapters: the first examines and critiques many hidden assumptions of specific subdisciplines, while the second explores alternative points of view to better understand the human mind. Part I is focused on the discussion of clinical psychology in comparison with virtue ethics. Part II investigates social psychology in the light of constructionist psychology, hermeneutic philosophy and ethical phenomenology. Part III is concerned with the concept of mental disorder – in particular, depression – in experimental psychology and neuroscience. Part IV undertakes a critical analysis of memory and reasoning in cognitive psychology. Part V considers the biases imposed to theories of development by the Western culture. Finally, Part VI concerns statistics methods used in psychology.

In Chapter 1, Frank Richardson identifies and shows the limits of some of the crucial assumptions underlying both the theory and the practice of modern counselling, which he says triumphed in our time after the Freudian revolution in psychology. The first assumption is value-freedom. Indeed, due to its objectivity, psychotherapy thinks to be independent in the same way as other natural sciences from ethics and virtues. That is, moral and cultural values are irrelevant to understand human behaviour and do not matter for psychotherapy. This leads to the contradiction that therapists «ought value being value-free» (Slife et al. 2003). Another strong assumption in modern psychotherapy is that the individual is the basic unit of human reality, which inevitably constitutes a slide toward moral relativism. We can distinguish a utilitarian and an expressive form of such individualism. The first considers human life to be an effort by individuals to maximize their self-interest to reach given ends such as survival, security and satisfaction. The latter is guided by the belief that each person has unique feelings and intuitions that should be pursued and realized. The last assumption is instrumentalism: people think in terms of means-ends and cost-benefit, and are comfortable with such a language. However, instrumentalism leads to social fragmentation, and it fosters emotional problems to people grew under this principle.

Chapter 2 contends that psychotherapy should respond to the dilemmas generated by these assumptions. Blaine Fowers reformulates psychotherapy as a process «of helping clients

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to cultivate the best in themselves and to live the best kind of life available to them» (p. 39). He refers to the Aristotelian Nicomachean Ethics and maintains that virtues like generosity and honesty are the traits that enable us to pursue a good life. Virtue ethics singles out that human “flourishing” – as Aristotle said – is the outgrowth of becoming one’s best self. This account is in contrast with instrumental individualism, which sees the social context as an adversary, and not as the arena in which we learn what is good.

Virtue ethics helps people – and therapists – to go beyond instrumental reasons and to focus on what is most important to them. Fowers examines six ways in which virtues and human activities are related, and that therefore should be considered in the therapy. First, virtue ethics portrays human activities as pursuing what we see as a worthwhile goal, because humans are goal-seeking beings who act to accomplish meaningful aims. This suggests to the therapist to help the person to consider what is possible, what is in her interest, and what the consequences of seeking a particular goal are. Second, virtue always shows itself in action, and there is no virtue without concrete activity. In fact, also for a therapist excellence is reflected in the way he acts. Third, to make an action virtuous, we have to act for the right reason. Therefore, the therapist should stimulate the understanding of the praiseworthy end we seek to guide our action and help us to better enact it. Fourth, our actions depend also on our heartfelt emotions, thus we should be aware of what these are. Fifth, virtue is a character, that is, a settled disposition, and does not depend on acting well on an occasional basis. Sixth, since virtue ethic is a practical wisdom, there is no training to recognize what is most important for a client. This imposes to the therapist to learn to make wise choices at the moment.

Part II is about social psychology. In Chapter 3, Jeffrey Reber and Lisa Osbeck consider the implicit assumptions in three of the main topics of social psychology: human sociality, love and helping behaviour. The assumption beyond human sociality is atomism, that is, the idea that the self-properties, although developed in social circumstances, are inherent to the individual and not to the group. Atomism allows studying complex social phenomena in a systematic way both by isolating variables and by maximizing experimental control. However, it restricts the understanding of human sociality. Moreover, the proper subject of social psychology is not only the person, but also the social environment, which exists for and in relation to that person. Since the social whole is different from the sum of its individualistic parts, and atomism is concerned only with the latter, atomism is rejected as a candidate principle for a real social psychology. The assumption beyond love is naturalism, that is «the idea that human beings are fundamentally the same as other objects of nature and as such are subject to the same laws, that determine the behaviour of those objects» (p. 168). According to a naturalistic perspective, love is an adaptive mechanism that facilitates the proliferation of genes. In this way, psychologists have a material referent to investigate it. However, this approach hinders a deep understanding of love. For example, it is inadequate to explain why people attach to love and their experience in intimate relationships. Moreover, if love is a function of natural selection, it would be a natural phenomenon, and should not be studied by social psychology. Finally, the authors analyze the assumption beyond helping behaviour, namely, egoism, that is, the idea that human beings are intrinsically selfish. Egoism has the advantage of explaining human behaviour because there is an endless list of egoistic reasons for either helping or not helping people. Nevertheless, it does not explain the range of altruistic behaviours. Indeed, even though we can always find an egoistic reason for an act, such a reason does not prove that any behaviour is egoistic. The conclusion is that human sociality, love and helping behaviour easily reduce subjective experiences to biological mechanisms.

In Chapter 4, Edwin Gantt examines alternative perspectives on human social life: social constructionism, hermeneutics, and the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas. Each of



these three approaches forces social psychology to wide the range of the considered phenomena in order to understand the moral nature of human social relations. According to social constructionism, the reality of human social existence occurs only by considering the complex social relationships between people. Truth and knowledge are the products of the social negotiation and consensus building that constantly take place between people and cultures. Moreover, hermeneutic social psychology aims at understanding human behaviour, and not at explaining it in terms of natural forces. It shares with social constructionism the aversion to atomism and determinism. Finally, Levinas argued that human existence is based on “alterity”: that is, we are who we are because we are with others. Our life has a meaning in that we are first relational beings. To be a human being is to exist in obligation to others, and only this allows the possibility for genuine altruism in human action.

Part III regards neuroscience. In Chapter 5, Dawson Hedges and Colin Burchfield consider depression as an example of the current trend to rely on neurobiological explanations in psychology. Materialism, that is, the idea that at some point biological explanation will be able to clarify psychological phenomena, is the assumption that guides neuroscience. Despite that many advances have been made thanks to the materialistic investigation of depression, some assumptions beyond materialism need to be considered: material causal determinism, atomism and objectivism. Material causal determinism is the idea that biological forces determine behaviour. It implies that any psychological change in the individual requires a causal force. For example, even though there is a gap between neurochemistry and the subjective experience of depression, the treatment for depression have to be pharmacological. Atomism asserts that objects are composed by single cells or atoms, and that the properties of an individual can be explained on the ground of their mere inner structure. This means that depression origins from within individuals, not from their interaction with others, and that individual’s own neurobiology is responsible for depression. Finally, objectivism assumes that materialistic methods are sufficient to investigate materialistic phenomena, and to provide observable, transparent truth. Unfortunately, if a research is based on unevaluated assumptions, its conclusion will be limited. Therefore, objectivism limits the possibility to extend the results of every research. The authors also consider another consequence of materialism: by eliminating the immaterial side of the brain as a reaction to Cartesian dualism, materialism joins a one-sided dualism, because the immaterial remains a part of the methods for investigating psychological phenomena.

In Chapter 6, Brent Slife and Ramona Hopkins explore the possibility of a true monism, postulating the oneness of mind and body without giving up the notion of agentic responsibility. They propose a holistic perspective, where mind and body are viewed as parts of a larger system in which they mutually constitute one another. Materialism alone is not sufficient for understanding our minds and behaviour. Therefore, we need at least three categories to explain human behaviour: the mind, the body and the context. The authors think that holistic monism is a better framework for neuroscience because it takes into account the limits of current methods, and it is more open to other empirical possibilities. This proposal will facilitate research because it admits also agentic and contextual factors.

Part IV is concerned with cognitive psychology. In Chapter 7, Robert Bishop criticizes four assumptions that make this approach so appealing: efficient causation, instrumental reason, individualism and atomism. Efficient causation is the most widely accepted form of causation in the sciences, and also cognitive psychology wants to explain all questions about human behaviour in terms of it by proposing the “input-processing-output” model. The instrumental view of reason means that agents are immersed in the causal flow of events, and in some way are able to manipulate it. This notion fits well within a physical world of efficient causation, and with the idea that all information is representational. However, it does not consider that



we use other forms of non-representational knowledge (e.g., to understand how to comfort a small child). Individualism and atomism remove psychology from its purpose, that is, the understanding of the human mind and behaviour into his most intimate sphere, which involves also a social and shared context.

In Chapter 8, Stephen Yanchar proposes an alternative contextualist theory based on holism and on the concepts of “lifeworld” and narrative structure. By endorsing holism, contextualism assumes that information is not fragmented, but that the meaning of one part of a system is constituted and codetermined by the other parts. The parts are already connected and meaningful because of their shared existence within the whole context. The concept of lifeworld refers to the «world of meaningful human activity as experienced prior to detached contemplations and scientific analysis» (p. 176). Lifeworld removes the separation between the inner mind and the external world, because it is presupposed that the mind has unmediated access to objects and people. Finally, the assumption of narrative structures stresses that people experience their lives in narrative meaningful sequences, while for the mainstream cognitive psychology life is based on the metaphor of the machine, so that it is separated in bits and information. Yanchar contends that contextualism does not deny the importance of the results of cognitive psychology, and makes an example of how the concepts of holism, lifeworld and narrative structure can explain empirical findings, such as reconstructive memory and mental imagery.

Part V regards developmental psychology and ethical issues. Brian Vandenberg and Shawn O'Connor want to demonstrate how historical understanding can help critical thinking about contemporary psychology. They use as an example Piaget's theory about the change from theological explanation to material cause in children cognition. Piaget's work constituted an important step toward a new conception of human development. In fact, Piaget interpreted human intelligence as adaption to environment. Thanks to the cognitive functions of assimilation and accommodation, the organism incorporates the world into existing structures and adjusts its structures to the environment. In order to reduce the rift between science and ethical issues, Piaget tried to empirically establish that the universal laws of the progress of knowledge, according to which explanation passes from religious and teleological to material causes in the history of the humanity, applies to individual development. However, his attempt is problematic. Indeed, facts and values, *is* and *ought*, cannot be separated. Moreover, science is not free of moral values and ethical implications. Therefore, we do not need psychological theories incorporating religious beliefs, but theories providing understanding of the meaning of ethical issues in human life.

In Chapter 10, John Chambers Christopher weaves together insights from interactivism (an emerging proposal developed by Mark Bickhard) and the hermeneutic philosophy of Heidegger and Gadamer to explain, in a different way from the universalism of Piaget's developmental psychology, both the universals of human being and the cultural variations. Christopher makes a deep critique to the individualistic cultural roots of current psychology, and to the Western notion of individual. Indeed this notion arises from one cultural tradition and it is not objectively true through reason and science. Christopher claims that the perspectives he examines maintain that different traditions – though identifying some constants across people – cultivate a variety of moral vision. Developmental psychology should examine the moral vision of other cultural groups, and other accounts of good life, in order to understand also why these accounts are so compelling to those who embrace them.

The sixth part of the book is about methodology. In Chapter 11, Richard Williams examines the assumptions underlying the application of traditional scientific methods to psychological phenomena, and he contends that we should reassess the pretension that psychology is a



science. He claims that the methods of empirical science, namely verification and falsification, are the product of human reason, and they are not unproblematic. With respect to the case of psychological explanations, they do not have the power to support causal inferences. Indeed, the isolation of a cause requires the complete control of other causal influences, and this is in principle not possible. Hence, empiricism fails as a basis for a noncontingent knowledge. Williams invites the reader to search for alternative approaches, which enable psychology to be a more relevant discipline for the understanding of human condition.

In Chapter 12, Jeff Sugarman and Jack Martin follow these suggestions and propose an alternative based on hermeneutics, which is concerned with interpretation of what is to be human and how human understanding is possible. Indeed, hermeneutics starts from an analysis of human nature and its conditions to understand how people think, act and experience their lives. A hermeneutical psychology opposes naturalism and reductionism by assuming that human motivations, thoughts, and actions are immersed in a context of historical traditions and social practices. Moreover, unlike natural phenomena, psychological phenomena require interpretative practices because interpretation is strictly involved with the subject of psychology, and does not concern only its interpretation.

The book ends with a reflection by Suzanne Kirschner, who resumes the main merits of every section and wishes that the volume will open the mind of students by making them understand that one's "truth" can always be imperfect and partial.

This volume is very rich and accurately organised. The reader is accompanied in the lecture by a well defined and clear structure. Even if each chapter has a different author, all of them share the same approach. The book critiques the most common beliefs in psychology, but owing to its arrangement it is quite easy also to individuate some of the "alternatives" proposed. Therefore, it is a very good instrument for students who want to take a hard look at some fundamental themes in psychology and go beyond traditional assumptions.

All the chapters provide good cues and give the chance to understand the topics from different points of view. I want to highlight, in particular, the first chapter about clinical psychology, which, by opposing the great diffusion of psychotherapy and psycho medicine in our time, stresses the importance either of values that we have lost or of facets of our life that we often forget. Despite the number of scholars who contributed to the volume, all of them focus on the same issues: the conviction that the human beings should be analysed in their context, as a "social animal", the importance of assuming a holistic perspective and opposing individualism, the wish to abandon a perspective grounded on materialism and determinism, the need to avoid to give importance only to "scientific data", as if psychology were a science. The authors share the idea that psychology cannot be considered a science just solely for the fact that interpretation and hermeneutic are at the basis of its work and investigation.

This approach is meaningful and of great interest for it attempts to develop a critical thinking in people studying psychology, but runs the risk of taking an explicit direction that might involve some others limitations.

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