




Introduction

I have written this book based on half a century of intense participation in the project of psychology, as a clinician, as an experimenter, and as a theoretician. All the time I have pursued the question of how to develop psychology as a science and a profession. Gradually, I have arrived at some conclusions. I present them here.

In what follows I argue for a new view of psychology. In a nutshell, this view entails two prescriptions, one negative and one positive. The negative prescription is that one should cease to try to develop, validate, and rely on general causal theories, diagnostic systems, and fixed techniques. The domain of psychology does not sustain empirical generalizations. The positive prescription is that one should begin to understand, predict and deal with people by means of a calculus embedded in all human languages. People have made themselves understandable, predictable and controllable by being socialized into societies with shared languages. The calculus is a formalization of implicit common sense.

The above no doubt sounds strange to you. Let me, therefore, very briefly, summarize some of my main reasons for arriving at these prescriptions. First, the negative one: I think the domain of person psychology has three characteristics that preclude the existence of general causal laws. One is that chance plays a significant role in the lives of all persons; the second is that necessity also plays such a role, and the third is that everything persons do is intentional (goal-directed). The role of chance means that each person becomes partly unique. Therefore, persons are not predictable from any general laws, subsumable under any diagnostic system, and treatable with any fixed technique. The role of necessity means that what persons do is guided by what follows from given and often shared, meanings. In other words, what persons do is guided by social rules and logic, and not by causal laws. Finally, the role of intentionality (goal-directedness) means that everything persons do is sensitive to its context and consequences. Hence, by changing context and consequences, acting can always be changed.




Therefore, no fixed general principles are possible. The ensuing uniqueness and flexibility means that what persons do cannot be predicted by any general theory, incorporated by any general diagnostic system, or dealt with by any general fixed techniques.

According to the positive prescription, one must rely on what follows from the meanings of words, sentences and nonverbal acts, and one must be open to and deal with the ever-changing uniqueness of the persons and situations one encounters.

Where does the preceding leave us? How can there be a science and a profession dealing with persons, if persons are so changeable and unique? As an answer to this question let me first remind the reader that people are also very predictable because they speak the language and follow the social rules of their group or culture. Language imposes heavy constraints on what can be said and done, what follows and does not follow, and what can and cannot be accepted as observation. Since language is shared, we can predict innumerable things about every competent speaker. For example, everyone will answer, “yes” to the question “Is a dog an animal?” There are also many basic psychological concepts embedded in ordinary language. Among them are: I, YOU, CAN, KNOW, THINK, WANT, FEEL, TRY, DO, SAY, GOOD, BAD, RIGHT, and WRONG. These concepts are related to each other in definite ways, that is, form a system. For example, what a person feels in a situation follows from what the person thinks and wants in that situation. And, if a person can do something and tries to do it, then the person does it. By means of the axiomatic system called psycho-logic (Smedslund, 1988, 1997, 2002), formed by these and other concepts, one can describe, explain, predict and control what persons do, given information about the situation. The latest version of the calculus with 20 axioms is presented in chapter 9 in this book. The basic concepts appear to be lexically represented in all human languages (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1994), hence making psycho-logic a trans-cultural framework for psychology.

Hence, even though the content of psychology does not allow for general causal laws, the existence of a common conceptual basis for human languages and cultures makes it possible, to some




extent, to describe, explain, predict and control what persons do. Hence there exists a possible scientific and professional approach to psychological phenomena even though one must remain atheoretical, adiagnostic and atechical. As will become apparent from the dialogues, future research in the new psychology will, I believe, take the form of case studies aimed at increasing our understanding as well as evaluations of local practical procedures and programs. The new professional worker will work as what Claude Levi-Strauss called a bricoleur, that is, someone who creatively utilizes whatever possibilities are available in each unique case to solve the problems, but always relying on the calculus of psychologic. I believe that the new researcher and also the new practitioner will feel at peace because there will be harmony between what he or she does as a professional, and his or her experience of life as a human being.

The arguments for and against and the implications of this new view are expanded and discussed in the book in the form of dialogues between three fictional characters, a clinician, an experimenter, and a theoretician.

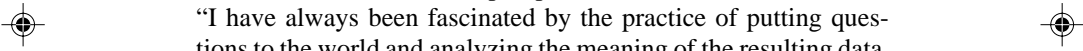
By externalizing my inner dialogues to be carried by the three characters, I hope to present with maximal clarity, the considerations that have led me away from the old and towards a new conception of psychology. The reader will soon realize that this is, indeed, a radical reorientation. Hopefully, the dialogues will help make the transition intelligible, and provide opportunity for critical evaluation of the arguments and counterarguments.

The Participants

Eve is an experienced practicing psychologist, 70 years old, widowed, has three children, and is still carrying on a full-time private practice. Her work has, over the years, included crisis-intervention, and short- and long-time therapies with individuals, couples, families and groups, and consultation with organizations and agencies. She also has considerable experience working with drug addicts. When asked to describe her own position she answers: "To me, psychology has to do with being a person in a society. It is about what goes on in the inner dialogues and in the




exchanges with other persons. It is about the dialectics of being solitary and social at the same time. Being a psychologist, I see myself primarily as an actor. To know is to me very much a matter of how to act. Obviously, acting may often consist in doing nothing, and in just being present. I do not claim originality in the way I work. Innumerable able scholars have already thought and written about these well-known matters. Strategies follow logically from the practical problems confronted. When psychologists differ, this can be explained by a lack of sufficient concrete information. A question that occupies me is how can we possibly advance our already existing practical know-how?"

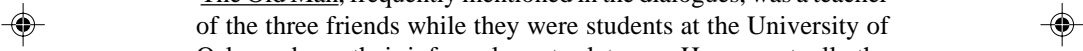


Adam is a seasoned experimental psychologist, 72 years old, divorced, father of two, and keeps up with his research and teaching at the university, even though formally retired. He has done extensive research on intellectual and social development, and became fascinated early on with the question of exactly what children learn at different developmental stages and how to diagnose it. When asked about his deepest professional concerns he answers: "I have always been fascinated by the practice of putting questions to the world and analyzing the meaning of the resulting data. Unfortunately, straight answers are rarely forthcoming and truth rarely appears in manifest form. Even so, I feel that this is the only game in town. We must keep on asking, 'What is the evidence for and against given propositions?' I have come to realize that the outcome of every experiment can be manipulated by subtle changes in the instructions, and that the questions of how the participants understand the experimenter's instructions and how the experimenter understands the participants' responses are widely ignored. The psychological experiment is really an encounter between persons. I used to believe that experiments are a valuable way of acquiring new knowledge, but I am becoming more and more concerned about the many presuppositions that must be taken for granted in interpreting the results."


Manny is a theoretical psychologist, 71 years old, widowed, and father of three. He, too, is formally retired from his university position, but maintains an office, teaches seminars and provides



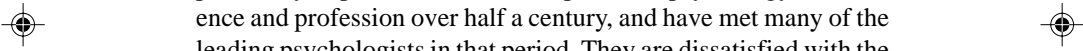
supervision to students writing theses. As a student, he became interested in philosophy, and has retained a strong engagement in questions relating to the foundations of psychology. When asked about his deepest interests, he answers, "I have been fascinated by the richness of psychological common sense and the psychology embedded in ordinary language. Scientific psychology has tried to detach itself from common sense, by trying to demonstrate its faults and by trying to go beyond it, but I have become increasingly skeptical of these efforts. I think that both clinicians and experimentalists, without saying so, have really continued to rely on the conceptual framework of ordinary language in describing their data and formulating their theories. Hence, an important task is to explicate and clarify this conceptual framework. Only when we have a precise way of describing data and formulating assumptions is it possible to decide what follows and does not follow from given formulations. This is a basic requirement for every science."



The Old Man, frequently mentioned in the dialogues, was a teacher of the three friends while they were students at the University of Oslo, and was their informal mentor later on. He was actually the same age as the three, but had finished his Masters degree at 22, and had been awarded his doctorate at 26, and, therefore, was giving classes while the others were still psychology students. The "Old Man" was a nickname, referring to his atypically fast career. He made a strong and lasting impression on all of them, but particularly on Manny. The Old Man was the founder of a new approach to psychology called psycho-logic. Psycho-logic was an attempt to formalize the system of psychological concepts embedded in ordinary language. From the point of view of psycho-logic, common sense psychology consists of statements that follow from these ordinary concepts and their combinations. For example, it is common sense that if a person is surprised, then he or she must have experienced something unexpected. This is true because it follows from the meaning of the words. From the point of view of the Old Man, psychological hypotheses are generally valid only when they follow from the meaning of the terms involved and,




hence, are necessarily true. He also thought that psychological processes are historical, irreversible, and influenced by chance events. This means that psychological research aimed at finding general laws is just as senseless and wasteful as would be a search for general laws in geography or history. The phenomena in all three domains are the outcome of irreversible processes sprinkled with random events. According to the Old Man, the only general order to be found in psychology is man-made, and consists of the systems of shared linguistic and non-linguistic rules that make up the social reality of human communities. Humans are rule followers. References to the Old Man's works are always references to Jan Smedslund's publications.



The three friends, now all living alone, have agreed to meet once a month, over a year, to discuss fundamental questions. They have agreed that each meeting will have a main topic, and that, after the meeting, they will take turns preparing a summary of what was discussed and e-mailing it to the two others. They have personally experienced the development of psychology as a science and profession over half a century, and have met many of the leading psychologists in that period. They are dissatisfied with the state of the art and share a feeling that something is fundamentally wrong. They believe that one needs to find a new way of looking at the familiar phenomena. The perspective proposed by the Old Man continues to fascinate them, and makes them wonder. Manny is the one most convinced of the value of psychologic, and Eve often agrees with him, whereas Adam, from time to time, tries to defend the mainstream empiricist view.

The City

The stage for the meetings is the city of Oslo where the three psychologists live and work. Surrounded by forested hills and situated at the bottom of the fjord, the city is not outstanding in any spectacular way. It does contain much that is beautiful, and much that is less so. The Royal palace, the Parliament building, the Town Hall, and the buildings of the Norwegian Government can be found in the center of town. To the east of the small river, Akerselva, are older mostly 4-story houses built for a lower income population,



and farther east are industrial areas and vast suburbs of high rise and low cost modern apartment houses. To the west of the town center the apartment houses are for the better off, and farther westward are miles and miles of suburbs with large and high-standard one-family houses with surrounding gardens. Although Norway is not a country with extreme differences in wealth, the west-east axis of the city clearly reflects a gradient from more to less affluence.

Oslo is a good place for pedestrians, with broad sidewalks everywhere, and has a well-developed system of public transportation, including an underground metro. It has the Akershus medieval castle, the famous Vigeland Sculpture Park, the Holmenkollen ski jump, Viking ships, museums, art galleries, theatres, an opera, and numerous cinemas and restaurants. To the north and the southeast are deep forests, with lakes and wild life, where one can ski or hike. In summertime, the fjord is filled with sail- and motorboats.

This is the capital of a very wealthy oil country in the northern outskirts of Europe. But, above all, it is a good place to live for most of its inhabitants, including our three psychologist friends.

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