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# What Psychology Should Study

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## **Abstract**

One cannot understand either culture or mind without taking account of the manner in which they interact in situ. The student of mind who ignores the cultural setting that mind requires in order to operate effectively fails to do justice to the contextualized nature of mental activity. And to describe culture without regard to the limits imposed by our mental capacities is equally disabling. This brief paper seeks to bring mind and culture into a workable relation with each other.

**Keywords:** culture, mind, community, interaction

**I**n the deepest sense, psychology seeks to research and to understand the human condition. But the human condition, given its multifaceted nature, is not easily understood. Or perhaps it would be better to say that it can be understood in many ways, ways that may often seem incompatible with each other. For in some deep sense, the human condition is shaped both by the biological constraints inherent in our nature as a species living in a particular physical environment, but at the same time it is also shaped by the symbolically rich cultures that we humans construct and in terms of which we live our lives communally.

Indeed, uniquely as a species, we are both limited biologically, while at the same time liberated from those limitations by our amazing capacity to go beyond them, thanks to our capacity to construct “possible worlds” that transcend those limitations –or, in any case, that go beyond what seemed like limitations. We transcend the seemingly irreversible laws of gravity by inventing flying machines, go beyond the constraints of interpersonal communication by creating the Internet. In a word, then, we are constrained by our seeming biology, but liberated from it by our capacity to create cultures that actualize the possible worlds that we can imagine. There is no other species on the face of the earth that lives such a duality. Our human lives are a never ending dialectic between seeming constraints and imaginable possibilities.

Our course, our capacity to recognize and to realize the possible, far-reaching though it may be, is also limited by what we might call the intrinsic constraints of culture. For in their very nature, the cultures we create are also constraining on those who live within their bounds. For cultures in their own unique ways also limit the sense of the possible among those who live under their sway. For cultures too, if they are to be viable, need to institute and to maintain a requisite stability and order, whether by custom or by law, both which specify what is permitted and what forbidden. In a word, cultures, while freeing us to explore. Possibility also bind us to what is established.

Our human lives, then, are an endless dialectic between established convention and the temptation of the possible. And yet, for all that, it is a livable, feasible dialectic –though, alas, we must also pay a price in conflict and anxiety for living such dialectical lives.

But it is this perpetual compromise between the already Established and the imaginably Possible, however much it may generate conflict and anxiety, that also generates our remarkable human creativity. For living life in full conformity to the Established soon creates boredom and a desire to escape. Yet, living with a desire only for what is Possible easily becomes the road to crime and unacceptable non-conformity. So the challenge of human life is to find a viable compromise between the Established and the Possible.

And it is this challenge that I want to address now, for in my view, it is this very challenge that shapes how psychology should go about its business in researching the human condition. And let me confess that I did not reach this conclusion only through general speculation. Indeed, I was forced into it by my own earliest research. Let me begin, then, by telling you briefly how this came about.

It began with my earliest efforts to clarify what constitutes perception, how we go about recognizing what it is that is impinging on our senses. How lengthy a sensory input is needed for “the word out there” to be correctly recognized? My research instrument was a tachistoscope, a gadget that varies the length of exposure of a display. I’d begin by showing each of my experimental subject a display (in some experiments a picture, in others a word or pseudo-word) show it to them, say, for a thousandth of a second. Having got their report on what they’d seen, I’d then increase the exposure time. How lengthy an exposure would it take for them to correctly recognize the display?

I very soon discovered that my subjects, no matter how brief the exposure, almost always reported seeing something, though they’d often confess that they were only “guessing”. But their guesses were by no means wild. First of all, their so-called guesses were highly conventional, even banal, no matter how brief the input exposure might have been. Typically, for example, pseudo-words (like VERNALIT) were conventionalized into real words that conformed to English orthography (like VERBATIM).

And subjects often got trapped in their stereotypes. For, as exposure time increased, they would often stick to the “guesses” they’d made to the previous, briefer exposure.

Eventually, of course, given a long enough time exposure, they'd recognize the exposed picture, word, or pseudo-word correctly. But it would take longer for them to recognize the display correctly than it would if they'd not first been exposed to those prior fast exposures. They seemed to be, as it were, victims of their earlier wrong guesses.

And note two other things about their finally correct recognitions under these circumstances. First, they were often accompanied by a gasp of surprise, so convinced were our subjects that they'd already recognized it correctly on a briefer exposure. Plainly, they were victims of their own previous conventionalizing efforts.

All of which led me to propose what I called a hypothesis theory of perception: that perceiving was guided by, steered by hypotheses about the conventionally expected. So, for example, eight-letter pseudo-words that were distant approximations to English took a much longer exposure time to be recognized than ones that more closely approximated conventional English letter sequences. Words (and pseudo-words) are processed with the expectation that they conform to spelling conventions or to social convention generally. With respect to the latter, for example, dirty words (and lewd pictures) take much longer to recognize than conventionally "proper" ones if you start the sequence of exposures way down below threshold level. Subjects get stuck with their wrong, early conventionalizing hypotheses.

But note one other characteristic thing. Once a subject has been tachistoscopically exposed to a lewd picture or dirty word, he'll more easily recognize such pictures or words when they're subsequently presented to him. I asked one of our undergraduate subjects why thought this was so. "Good Lord", he said, "you don't expect to be shown dirty pictures in a Harvard lab, do you? But then things change". And that remark from that seventeen-year-old freshman led me to another line of work –and to a refinement of the hypothesis theory.

It had to do with the nature of expectancy. Let me put it this way. Your expectations are situationally determined, to be sure (you don't expect to be exposed to dirty pictures in a respectable Harvard laboratory), but those situational determinants also reflect broader features of your own culture and of your orientation toward that culture, what the French like to call your *déformation professionnelle*. So, for example, I sometimes look at the world passing by as a seasoned old New Yorker, sometimes

as a psychologist law professor, sometimes as an adventurer out for some fun. All of which will depend on whom I'm with, on what I'm doing, and other circumstantial matters.

Can a psychologist ignore such obvious matters in studying human behavior? And do our conventional psychological methods of research – the laboratory, the conventional interview, standardized tests, and the rest – do these take such considerations into account? A psychologist can learn a lesson or two from the anthropologist, the sociologist, even the historian. We will never understand human behavior simply by studying it in vitro or out of context, without taking account of the uneasy historical compromise that exists between the Established and the Possible, to revert to a distinction I made earlier.

I began by exploring so intimately personal a matter as visual perception. And I want now to go to the opposite extreme, to illustrate how these matters also affect the seemingly impersonal domain of law and jurisprudence.

Let me begin by asking why, for example, the United States is the only country left in the Western World that still punishes capital crimes with de death penalty? Public opinion polls indicate that Americans are no more in favor of such a practice than any other country. How come, then, that we go on using this barbaric and demonstrably ineffective practice – ineffective, for it is well known than American states that still use the death penalty do not thereby reduce their capital crime rate. My colleague David Garland (2010) has just published a stunning book on this baleful topic and it it is insistence of this barbaric practice depends upon a massive distortion of the concept of punishment as retribution and an aspect of assuring public welfare. Capital punishment is presented, instead, as part of a war against crime. We kill people in wars, don't we? Consider this typical verbatim transcript of a prosecutor's closing argument to the jury in a recent murder trial: "I say to you we're in a war again in this country, except it's not a foreign nation, it's against the criminal element in this country. The defendant, William Brooks, is a member of the criminal element, and he's our enemy" (Garland, 2010, p. 63). So, the administration of justice is converted into a "war on crime," and, as in war, your duty is to destroy the enemy. Not to do so is unpatriotic.

To do it right, as I've already hinted, requires that we appreciate the "rules" of conventional narrative genres – as with the prosecuting attorney's plea to the jury in the case just cited. A murderer in that genre deserves nothing better than death, eye-for-an-eye retribution in a "war on evil."

To grasp this more fully, we psychologists must return to the origins of this genres in our canonical bank of story forms. And that bank, we must never forget, is in origin and in form a bank of conventional narrative genres. And we as psychologist must come to understand better the nature and origins of these genres. For these deeply affect the shape and course of human thought. Which brings us back to what psychology should be concerned with. How can we ever understand the course of thought without taking this deep-lying human tendency into account?

And so we must go beyond our conventional studies of logical and associative thinking and into the realm of narrative thinking. And that inevitably leads into partnership with those engaged in narrative analysis elsewhere, whether in literary studies, cultural and anthropology, or even in historiography. Indeed, it even partners us with that rigid and hidebound discipline of law and jurisprudence where judicial decisions are so often influenced by narrative verisimilitude.

We must come to understand better how a culture's narrative forms become incorporated into our individual ways of conceiving of the world, how a culture maintains itself by shaping and governing the minds of those who live under its sway. This is a question that has puzzled mankind for a very long time, often quite productively. Indeed, it might be worthwhile to have a brief look at the past to see what we can learn.

Let's begin with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza drew a crucial distinction between what he called the "rightful power of rule" (potestas) and the "actual power of government" (potential). Let's translate these as, roughly, "political rights" and "government rights." Political rights are well defined in Rousseau's famed *Le Contrat Social* and are characterized as the customs, beliefs, and opinions of a people. He refers to these as "the State's genuine constitution." These rights, to quote the Oxford legal scholar, Martin Loughlin (2009), "imperceptibly

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Psychology, then, must concern itself with how the communal "force of habit" shapes a fitting "force of government" and how, in the long run, the latter manages to support and shape the former. Put psychologically, how indeed do the two interact, the subjective and the institutional? Developmental psychologists, at last, are beginning to concern themselves with such issues. Not Piaget, but surely Vygotsky puzzled over how individuals "internalized" the norms of their culture and incorporated them into their sense of Self. It is a line of inquiry that surely merits further study.

How, for example, does such internalization evolve with the growth of a culture? Do we, as many have suggested, come in time to draw a sharper distinction between our own beliefs and those incorporated in the culture generally – between the "inner" and the "outer." Comparative anthropological psychology must be a concern of the general discipline of psychology proper. Just as we pursue comparative psychology to study the evolution of species, so must we study how cultures evolve. Bronislaw Malinowski is surely as relevant to psychology as Charles Darwin!

Let me, finally, emphasize a point that I have already touched upon. I am deeply convinced that psychology cannot go it alone. The life of mind is not isolated from or independent of the life of the cultural community in which it develop and lives. Nor is it independent of the history that has shaped that cultural community. Our fate as human beings is shaped not only by our individual qualities but by the cultural circumstances in which we live our lives. Why, to take a striking exam-



ple, why is our North American system of punishing crime so much more punitive than it is elsewhere? We in America have some five hundred per hundred in prison, though we've known for nearly a half century that the chances of somebody committing a crime are roughly four times as great if they have served a prison term for a previous crime. Though we know this chilling fact, we still put roughly ten times as many people in prison per hundred thousand than any country in the civilized Western world.

I want psychology to enter the world more fully, as Malinowski did nearly a century ago, in his brilliant *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*. I think such cultural inquiry (which is growing) is essential for cultivating and maintaining psychology's breadth and scope. They make us forever aware of the constraints and the opportunities that characterize the human condition.

I have said little thus far about education and educational psychology. Psychology in its varied forms has become one of the most challenging disciplines of our day, particularly when it is paired with its historical, cultural, and biological cousins. We have learned about how our species manages to cope both with the culturally established while testing the limits of the possible. We are learning much about how our species reinvents itself to cope both with the constraints of our biological nature and with the opportunities of the cultural worlds that we create. And this has real implications for education.

Education is not and should not be devoted exclusively to the transmission of established knowledge. It should also dedicate itself to cultivating awareness of the human condition and to generating skill in understanding the nature and sources of knowledge. That is to say, education is not only about mastering content, but also about gaining insight into the nature of knowing and understanding. Yes, I am saying that we should cultivate an appropriate epistemological sensitivity in our school children, an awareness concerning the processes involved in learning and thinking and not just in the finished products that we call a curriculum. It is absurd to say that children are not capable of understanding such matters. Their spontaneous play activities are full of explorations of the possible, of what might be and why it sometimes is and sometimes isn't. I strongly urge that we cultivate that sense of the possible in our educational practices.

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