

A Science Astray

Psychology is a young scientific field, and youth is a time of identity crises. I believe that the field of psychology is now experiencing just such a crisis, and not for the first time. The sources of this crisis are of a methodological nature: firstly, the extraordinarily flurry of empirical research and simply incredible surge in available data. That would not be anything problematic in itself, if it were not for how the phenomena being studied are being defined and for the language used to describe them. Variables are often sloppily identified and defined in terms of the very methods used to measure them. William Stern (1871-1938) has for years been ridiculed for his answer to the question of what intelligence is. Intelligence is what my test measures, Stern responded. Yet phenomena are quite often being defined in precisely this fashion nowadays, albeit more discretely.

Things are even worse in terms of the language of description. The very same phenomenon is sometimes given various names, while differing phenomena may have the same name, and this process is gaining momentum. Scientific language is too often metaphorical. I have nothing against using metaphorical names for phenomena, but I believe that concepts do need to be defined well. That is often not the case: who can decently define such phenomena (!) as authenticity or spirituality?

Contemporary psychology constitutes a broad collection of theories, most of them of a low degree of generality. There are quite a few theories that rest upon a single premise, such as the concept of emotion representing the outcome of interpreting the causes of success or failure. There are quite a few concepts which explain only a single phenomenon, such as the explanation that picturing a future action to oneself makes taking that action more efficient. Several explanations may also be given without attempting to integrate them.

Theories have their counter-theories. Related phenomena are sometimes explained in different ways, but no efforts at proposing how to integrate them are evident. I long to see scholarship of the caliber of Andrzej Malewski (1929-1963), who showed that if variables are defined well and clearly measured, if various hidden assumptions are revealed, then incredible progress can be made in systematizing and generalizing both empirical data and theoretical concepts.

I also see a great task faced by contemporary psychology to overcome the individual-differences paradigm. Of course, distinguishing between phenomena requires study of their differences, yet psychologists devote too much time and

effort to the differences between people, too little to differences between phenomena. As if they have forgotten that the process of differentiation is unbounded and singling out more and more differences frequently contributes nothing new to our understanding of human behavior. It is obvious that people differ from one another in many respects but consideration is rarely given to how little that matters under normal conditions. The fact that someone is slim or overweight matters when they have to squeeze through a hole in a fence, but not when they have to solve a mental task. The basis for generalizing data lies not in differences between people, but in the similarities between them. Moreover, while it is quite easy to detect correlations between the various human traits, the correlations seen between traits and

human behavior are by no means regular or even very great (explained variation of 10 percent is considered a very good result!). Aside from the other benefits of knowledge about peoples' similarity, the ability to generalize from data about similarities is clearly greater than for data about differences. It very frequently turns out that invoking individual differences provides only a surface explanation of certain phenomena. Nearly all survey-based studies, both psychological and sociological, evidence differences of opinion that are correlated to respondents' level of education, and correlations even exist between education and the

likelihood of contracting various illnesses. Yet no responsible researcher will assert that education is the cause of anything here. Unfortunately, such assertions are encountered quite often. It is hard to convince many psychologists that the benefits to be gained from analyzing individual differences are quite limited. It is even more difficult to convince journal editors. No self-respecting psychological journal will publish a negative outcome, evidencing an absence of differences - regardless of what they pertain to.

There are many serious substantive challenges ahead for psychology. In large part they concern the link between brain processes and phenomena of a psychological nature - such as memory, emotions, conscious and unconscious regulators of activity, plus much, much more. But those are topics for another time...



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