

A CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Interpretation of the Personal World



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A CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY: Interpretation of the Personal World

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A CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Interpretation of the Personal World

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PLENUM PRESS • NEW YORK AND LONDON

To my children:

JEREMY, MEARA BRIGHID, AND DAMIAN

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PREFACE

If the reader will excuse a brief anecdote from my own intellectual history, I would like to use it as an introduction to this book.

In 1957, I was a sophomore at an undergraduate liberal arts college majoring in medieval history. This was the year that we were receiving our first introduction to courses in philosophy, and I took to this study with a passion. In pursuing philosophy, I discovered the area called “philosophical psychology,” which was a Thomistic category of inquiry. For me, “philosophical psychology” meant a more intimate study of the soul (psyche), and I immediately concluded that psychology as a discipline must be about this pursuit. This philosophical interest led me to enroll in my first introductory psychology course. Our text for this course was the first edition of Ernest Hilgaard’s *Introduction to Psychology*. My reasons for entering this course were anticipated in the introductory chapter of Hilgaard’s book, where the discipline and its boundaries were discussed, and this introduction was to disabuse me of my original intention for enrolling in the course. I was to learn that, in the 20th century, people who called themselves psychologists were no longer interested in perennial philosophical questions about the human psyche or person. In fact, these philosophical questions were considered to be obscurantist and passé. Psychology was now the “scientific” study of human behavior. This definition of psychology by Hilgaard was by no means idiosyncratic to this introductory textbook. In looking over other introductory texts, one could easily see that this was normative to the discipline as it attempted to define itself and its ultimate concerns.

I would be inclined to say that most students who take a course in introductory psychology have initial motivations somewhat similar to my own. As an early adult, it makes sense to try to engage in a deeper reflection on motivations, one’s own and other people’s—in short, what makes people tick. The promissory note that I received in this introductory chapter was that this was to be achieved if I made myself more of a scientist and less of a philosopher. Twenty years later, I am professionally a psychologist and not a philosopher, a testimony to the

“normative power” of my socialization into that discipline. Let me now briefly discuss how this socialization occurs in more general terms.

In one sense, it is a misnomer to call psychology an internally coherent discipline. The relationships between clinical, personality, learning, and physiological psychology are tenuous at best. These topic areas appear side by side with one another in introductory psychology textbooks, and I would say that the closest relationship between these areas of concern is their proximity to each other (spatially, not conceptually) in the text. With some exceptions, most chapters within introductory texts can be reshuffled without changing the text appreciably. In a very important sense, these chapters appearing side by side are bureaucratic arrangements, that is, they are separate compartments with an interior life of their own existing side by side with other compartments having their own interior life. In giving this interpretation of a psychology text, I have also partly given a fairly good description of a psychology department. The bureaucratic arrangement of a text holds together more easily than the departmental arrangement because the text is not a dynamic, living thing. A department must present a coherent program of teaching and research, and this involves departmental meetings that bring these elements or compartments into the same room with one another. When this happens, conflicts arise and we hear of the perennial political struggles that are, in essence, conflicts in ideologies arising from the need to set priorities for a department. In many instances, the only integration (i.e., integrity) of a particular department’s program is seen in the departmental catalog.

Yet all the personnel involved in this undertaking are willing to call themselves psychologists and would probably agree that their ideological enemy is a psychologist also. Despite their differences, they seem to share a common history of socialization that they are prepared to pass on to a new generation of students. I would like to hazard a guess as to some of the features shared in common by psychologists of different persuasions that give them a “professional identity” of sufficient integrity to be passed on to new generations. First, in the division of labor of the professions, psychologists have, relatively speaking, an interest in molecular versus molar events. Even though psychologists use group data, they are not, in contradistinction to sociologists, interested in the construct of group in molar terms. The typical commonsense way of saying this is that psychologists are interested in individuals while sociologists and anthropologists are interested in societies. The assumption here is that the different disciplines can do justice to these constructs separately. Second, psychologists are scientists and not philosophers. As the norms for psychology as a science have developed in this century, the science was to be a natural science with an emphasis on quantification. As opposed to philosophers who “armchair” it, psychologists as scientists have a desire to generate data and facts that are independent of their own cogitations. Although clinicians, experimental psychologists, and others will argue about

what constitutes data or facts, they are all in agreement that data are important. Third, it seems to be understood that the single most important method of gathering data or facts is via the “experimental” method. Correlation studies come second and life-history and other types of interview data are much further down the line. There is no question that many psychologists, now and in the past, would disagree with these priorities for making observations. What they would not disagree to is that these priorities are generally normative for mainstream psychology. They would probably deem their own disagreement as countercultural to the mainstream. Fourth, psychology as a science is a theoretical (epistemological) and not a normative (ethical) science. In relation to “facts” and “theories” generated by psychologists, these are to be considered free from ethical norms (i.e., value-neutral). As a science, psychology is amoral and apolitical. This type of socialization allows a psychologist such as Jensen to regard his position on “genetics and racial equality” as a value-neutral and apolitical stance.

The book that you are about to read departs in substantial ways from these assumptions. If the set of assumptions stated above can be considered “normative” for the discipline without appearing to be strident, this book, it is hoped, offers a countercultural socialization to the reader. First, this book will attempt to hold the individual and society (i.e., molecular-molar) in dynamic tension. I assume that the person and society are dialectically related to one another, and that any attempt to collapse this tension would end up concealing more than it revealed. The separation of these constructs follows from the specialization and isolation of method within disciplines and subdisciplines. Thus, in order to achieve clarity and explanatory power, it was necessary to operate within a continually decreasing “circle of interpretation.” The historical would be separated from the political, the psychological from the sociological, and so on, to the point where some would say that there was a crisis of imagination produced by the myopia of specialization. Ignoring, for the moment, the possibility that methodology in the social sciences replicates the social nature of production in the marketplace, it seems appropriate here to focus on this vacuum in imagination and how it affects inquiry. Here I would like to quote at some length from C. Wright Mills’s *Sociological Imagination* (1959). Speaking of the general populace, Mills says:

It is not only information that they need—in this age of fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it. It is not only the skills of reason that they need—although their struggles to acquire these often exhaust their limited moral energy.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. (p.

5)

Second, in a broader interdisciplinary effort with an emancipatory intent, one would hope that psychology would provide a critical interpretation of what is happening within people in the context of wider social structures. Our assumption clearly is that the personal world exists, is influenced by, and influences the wider social context and cannot be considered apart from it. It is therefore necessary to be dialectical in order to pursue the approach I am advocating. Mills refers to it as a “sociological imagination,” and for all intents and purposes we may consider psychology as critical interpretation as the development of a “psychological imagination.” As Mills puts it:

For that imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military; from the considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and see the relations between the two. Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being. (1959, p. 7)

In this attempt, we are not trying to make psychologists into philosophers or sociologists; rather, we are encouraging a certain philosophical reflection as an essential component of a psychologist’s professional identity.

Third, this work will systematically attempt to develop a rationale for other modes of inquiry that are neither experimental nor correlational. We are not saying that the latter do not have merit. We are challenging their primacy as the “to be desired” mode of inquiry for theory and research in psychology. It is hoped that by the end of this book, alternative methods such as “life histories” and ethnographies will be seen as intellectually viable.

Finally, as a form of inquiry, it is hoped that psychology will be seen as a normative science. In the tradition of Emile Durkheim, we see psychology as an ethical enterprise. The position developed here is that the issue of “value neutrality” is an impossible, unrealistic, and—in the end—undesirable ideal for psychologists to be pursuing. We therefore have to tackle all the issues that follow from viewing the pursuits of psychologists as ethical enterprises. In order to do this, there must be a radical shift in ground from a theory (episteme) to practice (normative) working dichotomy to that of *praxis orientation*. A *praxis orientation* starts from the point of view of *human action* and formulates a reflection on that action (i.e., theory). This point of view is not a reverse dichotomy (i.e., practice to theory). *Praxis* assumes that human action is *intentional* in nature and, therefore, that reflection is embedded in human action where human actions are concerned.

Finally, the radical orientation being proposed shifts the interest nature of the definitional structure from one of control to an emancipatory interest in

human freedom. This emancipatory concern needs unpacking, which is the reason for this book. At this point, one can say that an emancipatory interest in human freedom rests on the assumption that part of all human action is *creative* and on the assumption that humans create their world while, at the same time, being determined by it. The human intentions that can motivate human actions are history making. We call the latter function “culture.” Up to this point, the psychological enterprise has been, we might say, “uncultured.” This book intends to add a cultural dimension as the essential location where human freedom operates.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many persons and groups that have influenced my thinking and thus helped in the writing of this book.

I would like to acknowledge a collective dealing with psychology and political economy that I sat with in New York City for several years; its members included Leon Rappaport, John Broughton, Joel Kovel, Adrienne Harris, Ricardo Zuniga, Howard Gruber, Harry Garfinkle, and Arnold Kaufman.

Also, the Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Studies Working Group at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto: Paul Olsen, David Livingstone, Jack Quarter, Mal Levin, Madan Handa, Gord West, and Roger Simon.

To friends at St. Michael's College: Bernard Black for gracious use of the library during sabbatical; also, Gregory Baum and Lee Cormie, theologians at St. Michael's, who encouraged my efforts at important stages of this work.

To friends among my colleagues: Susan Eadie, Dian Marino, Claudio Duran, Paul Callaghan, Howard Richards, Dieter Misgeld, Pat Lee, Jeri Wine, Cliff Christensen, John Weiser, and Jim Fowler.

Specific thanks to my PATH in Psychology editors, John Broughton and Robert Rieber. To Morry Ulrich and Donaleen Hawes for judicious proofing of the final manuscript. Enormous appreciation to my secretary, Diana Postlethwaite.

Finally, to my wife, Pat, the person who helps me nurture a sense of justice with our children and to whom this book is dedicated.

I depart from the usual "I do not hold them responsible for my ideas." I hold them all responsible in small and big ways.

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