

*Psychology
Today and Tomorrow*

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From Logical Positivism to Postmodernism

The philosophy that came to dominate research in psychology in the first half of the 20th century was called logical positivism. This philosophy began with meetings of philosophers and physicists in Vienna and Berlin in the 1920's. The names that come up most often in association with logical positivism are Moritz Schlick (the founder) and Rudolph Carnap.

The basic idea of logical positivism is that all knowledge is based on empirical observation, assisted by the rigorous use of logic and mathematics. The ideal method in science, in other words, is hypothesis testing. In fact, any theoretical statement is meaningful only if it can be tested empirically. This is called the verification principle.

What this meant in the larger scheme is that all metaphysical (and, of course, theological) statements are meaningless. The only purpose left to philosophy, according to the logical positivists, is the investigation of the meaningfulness of scientific statements. Over time, logical positivism came to dominate the thinking of most people in physics and chemistry, and many in biology and psychology. It was the behaviorists who adopted it most enthusiastically.

But in the second half of the 20th century, a new philosophy called postmodernism came in with some powerful criticism of logical positivism and all modern philosophy. The most familiar names associated with postmodernism are Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

Postmodernism started in architecture, when some young architects in the late 1900's rebelled against what their teachers told them about "right" and "wrong" ways to design buildings. Their teachers at the time were mostly modernists, who liked clean lines and pure geometric forms, such as we see in many modern skyscrapers. So the rebels started calling themselves postmodernists. Before, the emphasis was on keeping with one architectural philosophy or another, one style or another. The postmodernists said break the rules! mix up the styles! play with space! defy gravity if you like!

In philosophy, modernism refers to enlightenment philosophy. Back then, philosophers were seeking a single, monolithic Truth. But, beginning with Hume's skepticism and Kant's critical philosophy, philosophers became increasingly aware of the limitations of philosophy. Although often hidden by the popularity of approaches such as Hegel's absolutism and Comte's positivism, this skeptical or critical line of thought continued all the way through the 1800's to Nietzsche's perspectivism and William James' pragmatism.

The fundamental point of postmodernism is that there is no objective reality or ultimate truth that we have direct access to. Truth is a matter of perspective or point-of-view. Each individual constructs his or her own understanding of reality, and no one is capable of rising above their perspectives.

In the course of history, some constructions of reality have been privileged, that is, supported by a powerful elite – wealthy European men, to use a common example. Other constructions have been suppressed. Examples of suppressed constructions include the points-of-view of women, the poor, and nonwestern cultures.

Everything is seen through "glasses" – social, cultural, even individual. Even science! Thomas Kuhn, a philosopher of science, pointed out that science is actually a messy business, full of personal, cultural and even political influences. "Truth" is whatever the scientists presently in power say it is – until this status quo is overwhelmed by contradictions. Then a scientific "revolution" – a paradigm shift – takes place. And things start all over again.

The major tool of postmodernism is deconstruction. Deconstruction is when you show that some system of thought is ultimately incomplete or irrational even by its own internal ideas and reasoning. It's like an extended version of "reduction to absurdity" – criticism from the inside out. Or you can see it as an extension of nominalism: names refer to individuals, but words that pretend to refer to anything more (universals, ideals, forms, natural laws, Ultimate Truths...) are just empty noises!

By deconstructing some of our traditional philosophies, histories, literatures, and sciences, postmodernism made us aware of the biases we can't easily see because those biases are too close to us, too much a part of us. This has been the task, for example, of feminism.

Feminism began as a call to take women seriously. After eons of women's lives being seen as little more than a footnote to men's, it is way past time to pay attention to them both as subjects of serious interest and as thinkers in their own right!

Feminists say that being male unconsciously biases men as philosophers (or historians, scientists...). If we want to improve our understanding of our world, we need to take the female perspective into account. These are very good points!

Another postmodernist movement is multiculturalism. It is argued that western thinkers are unconsciously biased by their common cultural assumptions, social structures, and histories. For many years, for example, there has been a tendency to see Europeans and their descendents as somehow "normal," with other peoples and civilizations in some way inferior or deviant.

Today, most social scientists are well aware of other cultural perspectives, and are careful to examine their own biases. Social science generally has welcomed the contributions of a constantly expanding number of scientists from non-western backgrounds.

A bias that interests me is the bias that comes from class. Until very recently, the majority of scientists and other scholars have been members of the upper classes, with little sympathy for, much less understanding of, the working class poor. Even today, we have to ask ourselves, who do we as scientists work for? More often than not, it is for establishments, academic or corporate. We do, consciously or not, what our lords demand of us!

Unfortunately, some argue that the view from the lower rungs of society are actually better than those from the top. Similarly, some feminists have argued that the female perspective is intrinsically better than the male perspective. This point of view ignores the possibility that men may overcome their biases, and the possibility that women can be equally biased. We find the same tendency among advocates of other critical philosophies. It is not, for example, necessarily true that if a theory is clearly European it is wrong, or if it is non-western it is right. And even someone who does research for multinational corporations can occasionally be correct! Okay, probably not.

Furthermore, not all perspectives are equally valuable. Astrology and phrenology may be perspectives on personality, but they are, in fact, wrong! The explanations of human behavior given by Siberian shamans, although certainly interesting, are not anymore likely to be accurate than the explanations provided by Europe's own early thinkers.

Deconstructionism and postmodern philosophies in general tend to be negative philosophies. They criticize, but seldom offer alternatives. Their arguments often lack empirical support or even rational thinking: Remember that they are criticizing our very ability to be empirical or rational!

At first, traditionalists were impressed and became interested in recognizing their limitations. Men as well as women became feminists; westerners as well as others embraced multiculturalism. Most welcomed the variety of perspectives!

But eventually, some noticed: If all truth is relative (just as if all morality is relative), then feminism, multiculturalism, etc. are not intrinsically truer or more valuable than "masculinism" or Eurocentrism, etc. If we can't make judgments as to what is or isn't True, then how can we progress? How can we improve ourselves and our societies when "progress" is all in the eyes of the beholder?

If you believe that all perspectives are equally valid, then the only thing that raises one perspective over any other, as Nietzsche pointed out, is power. If philosophy and science are reduced to power struggles among "authorities," we are right back where we were on, say, February 17, 1600, when the church burned Giordano Bruno at the stake.

So, once we become aware (and stay aware!) of our limitations and biases, aware even of the limitations of empiricism and rationalism themselves, we must nevertheless return to empiricism and rationalism, as the only way we can at least approximate truth, perhaps as the only way we can survive as a species. We must learn our lesson and then get back to work!

The Situation for Psychology

So where are we today, in the first years of the new millennium?

Freudianism is slowly disappearing. Its insights have been absorbed into a general clinical psychology that is dominated by humanistic practices based more on Carl Rogers and Albert Ellis than on Sigmund Freud. The object relations school attempts to hang on to Freud, but is really little more than a belated recognition of humanist ideas, reconstructed into psychoanalytic language. Jungian psychology, too, is disappearing. Jung still lives on in the study of mythology and symbolism and in the amazing popularity of the Myers-Briggs categories. Adler, on the other hand, has been "rediscovered" and his insights thoroughly integrated into humanistic and existential psychology. The same can be said for "neo-Adlerian" theorists such as Karen Horney and Erich Fromm.

Sensation and perception, the concerns of most of the originators of psychology as a science, draw less and less attention over the years. Gestalt psychology has, for the most part, been absorbed into the mainstream and lost its status as a separate approach. Its two offspring, humanistic clinical psychology and the field of social psychology are, of course, alive and well. Humanistic psychology forms the bedrock of modern clinical practice, especially in the form of an eclectic blend of Rogers and Ellis (despite their outward incompatibility!), plus a few behavioristic techniques such as systematic desensitization.

Social psychology has become a blend of humanistic concerns and inventive experimental research. Unfortunately, it has rejected its phenomenological roots, and there is little in the way of coherent theorizing or long-term commitment to research programs. Much of social psychology is a matter of testing disconnected, intuitive hypotheses.

Other disciplines, such as personality and developmental psychology, follow the same pattern as social psychology. Not only is there little in the way of theorizing in personality, but the trend is toward quantitative research, almost all of it devoted to individual differences. The pet paradigm is test creation using factor analysis, despite the fact that factor analysis is a highly suspect methodology that may well relate more to word meanings than to constructs with real psychological referents.

Developmental psychology has become increasingly applied, especially, of course, in relation to education and parenting. One advance is the movement towards consideration of the entire life span. This change also has close ties to applied areas, this time the social problem of an increasingly elderly population.

Phenomenology as a method has become a part of a more general movement usually referred to as qualitative methods. These methods have become popular in certain fields, especially education and nursing, and in certain orientations, such as feminism and multiculturalism. Unfortunately, the methods are often poorly used. They are by nature far more susceptible to bias, and much of the research can only be taken as exploratory at best.

Existentialism has fused with humanism, sometimes contributing its philosophical depth, sometimes merely adding its confusing jargon. Many existentialists and humanists have drifted into the realm of transpersonal psychology, which investigates issues such as altered states of consciousness and spiritual experiences. Although there is legitimate and valuable research here, most of it is a form of new age mysticism in the guise of psychological science.

Behaviorism, much like gestalt psychology, has been absorbed into mainstream psychology. While students continue to memorize Pavlovian and Skinnerian conditioning paradigms, it is increasingly understood that these are not particularly useful for understanding human behavior. It is really Tolman and Bandura that appear to be having the long-term impact. Hard-core behaviorists are moving into the study of physiological processes.

The most disappointing area of psychology for me personally has been cognitive psychology. While it began promisingly with the works of psychologists like Ulric Neisser and the input from the artificial intelligence movement, it seems that both Neisser and AI researchers have abandoned the program! Neisser felt that cognitive psychology was ignoring reality and is becoming a sort of intellectual game. AI researchers found that it simply wasn't necessary to model human cognitive processes in order to outdo human performance. When the Deep Blue computer beat grand master Garry Kasparov, humanity's secure place at the top of creation seems to have ended.

One offshoot of cognitive psychology is a new interest in such traditional philosophical issues as the nature of consciousness. Often considered the "ultimate" psychological question, it has generated a great deal of excitement at conferences. I may be alone in this, but the problem of consciousness is not a problem for me. It is only a problem if you insist, against all reason, on being a materialist!

The most active part of psychology today is physiological psychology. First, the remarkable progress in mapping even the living, working brain with CT scans, PET scans, and MRIs will soon result in a fairly complete picture of brain circuitry. Second, the discovery of effective new drugs operating at the synapse has revolutionized clinical psychology. And third, the completion of the mapping of the human genome heralds the beginning of a far more thorough understanding of the links between genetics and behavior. On the other hand, physiological psychologists are identifying themselves more and more with their biological and medical colleagues, and distancing themselves from the "softer" side of psychology.

Related to the developments in physiological psychology is the impact of sociobiology on psychological theory. Often called evolutionary psychology, this approach has produced a significant number of intriguing hypotheses about the origins of human behavior and the existence of possible instincts that delimit, if not define, our natures. Unfortunately, the approach has offered little in the way of testable hypotheses as yet.

As it stands right now, psychology is fragmented, with a particularly large divide between humanistic applied psychology and a highly reductionistic biological psychology. What is needed is a unifying theory, one that avoids the easy extremes. It has to be informed by postmodern criticism, but must ultimately base itself on a broad empiricism and rigorous rationalism. It has actually been done before: William James did it in the 1890's; so did Gardner Murphy in the 1950's. Apparently, the field was not ready to recognize the full implication of their efforts and others like them. Maybe we will be ready next time.

In the meantime, courses in the history of psychology (however painfully boring they may be!) have an important place in our educations: By looking at things from the big, historical perspective, and from the "aspect of eternity" we get by studying philosophy, perhaps we will have progress in psychology sooner rather than later.

See you in the future!

-- George Boeree

