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14 In Summary

In summary

The putting together of this book coincided with my moving to a Chair in Psychology at The University of Liverpool from Surrey University where I had been for 23 years. This return to my *alma mater* after 30 years provides both an opportunity for new developments as well as a curious feeling of completion and consolidation. Reading through and editing the material for this book, all originally written while I was at Surrey, I can see that a particular style of research and of psychological thinking did evolve through these many studies (and of course the many others not covered here). There is still the need to give as full and coherent an account of that approach as is possible rather than the demonstration by example which is currently the main way the approach has been explored. Of course, it is not a fixed framework. In particular it is now evolving rapidly through use with many colleagues in application to the emerging area of *Investigative Psychology* which I identified and named shortly before I left Surrey. This book thus can be taken both as a review of the past and a sketch plan for a future more elaborate examination of a particular approach to psychological research.

In summary, for the present then, it may be helpful if I list the characteristics of this research 'style' as I see it.

Perhaps the first characteristic of my work is to recognise that research, like all other human activities does have a particular 'style' to it. There will never be one biting logic that will identify one dominant research pathway and drive out all other forms or research, leaving one particular 'paradigm' with a monopoly. The pretence in some text books that there is only one true path to scientific knowledge is challenged by the fact that no two text books agree on what that path is! But against that background it is important that scientists, especially psychologists, are as clear as possible about what their assumptions are upon which their approach is based. Probably as much as a third of the present volume attempts to articulate those bases in my own work, to show the principles out of which my own research 'style' has emerged. This may provide too self-conscious a psychology for many people's taste, but I will leave it to others to search for more profoundly psychological explanations for why I carry out research the way I do, confident that such explanations can be found and are relevant to understanding the work described on previous pages.

The second characteristic of my research appears to me to be the interest in the structure of relationships between psychological phenomena. That is an examination of systems of thought and action, rather than an interest in sequential causal

mechanisms. This often requires a high tolerance for ambiguity, but is rewarded in providing honest reflections of real-world (as opposed to invented) phenomena that do offer practical implications.

This interest in psychological systems must have its roots in the work which I devoured as an undergraduate in Liverpool, of Charles Osgood and George Kelly as well as the psychometricians in intelligence and personality theory that so impressed me as a student. But I always combined that with a third characteristic, a fascination with individual uniqueness and the significance of the person. That has always had a small but verbose following in psychology from the days of William James through Gordon Allport onto Rom Harre and their followers today. Much of my research can be seen as an attempt to model general patterns of actions and cognitions in ways that derive from their context yet that enable us also to recognise the uniqueness of each person, not just as points on general dimensions but as a unique perspective on a particular set of experiences.

From this approach a fourth quality of the studies described usually emerges. This is the recognition that in any domain there will be issues and experiences that are common to everyone in that domain, whether it be patterns of actions in a building on fire, uses of a place or the way an attacker carries out a rape. These, typically, are what gives the domain its identity, but there will also be aspects of action or experience that distinguish between people in that context, some of them being unique to an individual. This framework provides the equivalent to the adjustment of the strength of magnification for the consideration of any issue. Without the need for radically different models we can compare the psychology of any domain by focusing on what the participants in each domain have in common, or we can adjust our sights to look at rare occurrences that will relate to sub-groups. Or we can use an even finer magnification and look at what is unique to individuals.

I suppose all of this provides a fifth characteristic that many will see as fundamental to my work, the recognition of the importance of context and the need to study any psychological phenomena in relation to how and where it naturally occurs, an almost anthropological stance. If the context defines the phenomena then it is feasible to consider how much detail to seek out about that phenomena. The adjustment of the 'focus' of a study is only possible because the actions and experience have a fixed setting in some conceptual 'place'.

The rather static view of humanity that emerges from this is something I have always struggled with, but it is only in studies of environmental transactions, notably human behaviour in fires, and some of the considerations of criminal development in which I have been able to introduce a little dynamism into my thinking. Recent attempts at modelling criminal actions over time have lead me to explore a way of thinking that is fundamentally dynamic, the narrative. The future will show how powerful that is and how far the framework is applicable.

The broad range of topics I explore is both a personal quirk, an undoubted aspect of my style, and an inevitable product of my fascination with the outer reaches of the realms in which psychology has been applied. It has become almost axiomatic for me that if there is a pressing human concern to which psychologists have not

made a contribution then I am intrigued by the possibilities for such a contribution, and how the challenge of that new domain can illuminate central, more academic questions. Alternative medicines, behaviour in emergencies, the detection of crime and the design of complex buildings are all areas that illustrate a particular fascination with new fields that have not been well ploughed by other psychologists in the past.

The interest is in what these areas of human endeavour can teach us about people. But, almost inevitably because the problems for study are defined in relation to the context in which the actions occur there are a set of practical issues that arise. Whether psychological study can assist those practical concerns always has to be an open question. In most cases of even the most applicable psychological research there is little uptake of the findings. I have often wondered why the results of my research get applied when so much other research does not. The answer lies in the difference between the early studies I did on schools and hospital design, working with architects, that had no obvious applications and the later work on behaviour in fires and criminal behaviour that clearly does.

The difference in uptake must have some relationship to the other disciplines that would incorporate and act on the findings from psychology. There are, indeed, surprisingly few areas of professional activity that are under the sole control of psychologists. Even the heartland of clinical psychology often require collaboration if not actual authorisation from medical practitioners. But in the areas in which I have been involved it is more typically the case that the actions that are recommended must actually be carried out by non-psychologists. The willingness of those groups to respond to psychological guidance may be rather limited. Architecture is a good case in point. During the late sixties and early seventies there was a sizeable minority of architects who took an active interest in environmental psychology, but that group virtually disappeared during the eighties. A contrasting example is industrial management. In Britain at least during the sixties and seventies, industrial/organisational psychology was looked on with some general suspicion, but my own experience is that by the early nineties most major industrial directors would feel that they were not doing their job properly if there were not some psychological expertise active somewhere in their organisation. So although the uptake of psychology is not entirely out of the hands of psychologists it is only realistic to recognise that the readiness of the recipients for whatever largesse we have to offer must play a significant role.

The recipients will nonetheless be more or less amenable to the psychologists' message depending on how that message is expressed. Perhaps one of the clearest lessons I have learnt is that the closer the expression of the findings can come to specific interpretations of the relevance of the research to the recipient the more likely are they to take any notice. I was always reticent of such interpretation, naïvely thinking that the professionals with whom I was communicating were better informed in their own area and therefore better able to see the implications of my studies. But it was only after considerable experience that I realised that the detailed knowledge that I and my colleagues had of the topics we had studied put us in a strong position to make sense of that material in ways that others could use. This

was demonstrated most dramatically in the guidance I gave to the Trinity police enquiry. I stuck my neck out and described the person they were looking for rather than giving them statistical tables and an account of the hypotheses open to test. The senior investigating officer did take my suggestions much more seriously than I would ever have expected, with very good results.

The other aspect of my more recent work that also contributes, I think, to the possibility of practical uptake is the preparedness to build arguments around illustrative case studies. Few people are prepared to act on the basis of general trends no matter how statistically sophisticated but if they can have that trend elaborated by reference to an actual person or department then they can gain confidence. I was brought up academically to distrust the case study and so it still takes an act of courage to prepare an argument around a solitary example, but I have found that whether it be the Kings Cross underground fire or a particular threat letter there is often much to learn from their detailed consideration, provided one is careful not to fall into the trap of believing that example exhausts the possibilities.

For journalists the one-off example is their stock in trade. As a consequence once you are prepared to comment on particular cases, especially if they are exotic or bizarre you then have to face media interest. Dealing with Radio, TV and newspaper journalists is an activity that I have often likened to riding a tiger. For some of the time you might have the impression that you are in control and have the exhilarating feeling that you may be travelling somewhere, but it is very probable that you will end up as just another lunch.

The media fascination with the excesses and extremes of human behaviour presumably reflects a more general human interest in these matters? I suspect that this is driven by a personal desire to understand and explore the more exotic aspects of human existence that are paralleled in my interest in broadening the boundaries of psychology and testing theories central to psychology in the crucible of actual life and work. The minutiae of short term memory or selective attention as studied with students in a laboratory, have never had me in their thrall, but what people notice when caught in a fire, or remember about an assault do seem to me interesting and important. Although, with the mellowness of my maturity I am prepared to accept that the answers to both sets of questions can inform each other. The question my own research brings me back to again and again is how much it is the theories, the ways of thinking, that are the contribution to daily life and how much it is the methodologies that psychologists develop that provide procedures for solving practical problems? My view is that it is the theories and concepts that feed applicability but that these need to be turned into practical methodologies open to solving local, focused issues.

I find the facet approach that guides so much of my work, so attractive because it bridges the theory methods divide so elegantly. Future developments, especially in the information technologies will I believe, further reduce the boundaries between theory and method in psychology. It is from these developments that future applications of psychology are most likely to grow.

Developments in the applications of psychology

I am of the generation that grew up with information technology. We used slide rules at school, but by the time I was doing my PhD it was necessary to have some programming skills in order to complete the data analysis. My research group was one of the first in the University to use desk-top computers on a regular basis, and when I was Head of Department I was instrumental in introducing one of the first integrated local area computer networks into a departmental office. I was around in the late sixties when many predictions were made about the future of these new technologies. I have survived long enough to see that many of the major predictions have failed to come about (such as the widespread use of the video telephone) and a few of the most significant developments (notably the fax) appeared on the scene virtually unheralded. So I know how parlous is the prediction of developments in the information technologies and their likely impact. As an applied psychologist, though, I see major developments emerging not from the creation of new technologies but from the great increase in the ease of use of all the existing ones. Once we can all actually use spreadsheets and graphics packages, e-mail and on-line interactive data bases then there will be great developments in research and the applications of psychology.

This will mean that there will be increasing pressure to convert psychological theories and results into computer based systems. There are already clear indications of this trend in the demand from our safety work for a computer based attitude analysis system, a pilot version of which has already been made available to one company. The studies of criminal behaviour has also already spawned a sophisticated data base that has been drawn upon to contribute to criminal investigations. These days the term 'expert system' is often (rather loosely) applied to these types of system and although that term may be somewhat inappropriate it gives a gloss of futuristic science fiction that makes such packages so attractive to senior management.

The consequence of this sort of development is to nudge applied psychologists away from a pure science base to their work towards what might be regarded as an engineering framework. This framework is evaluated in terms of the utility and efficiency of the system rather than the profundity and validity of the science on which it is based. This will put even more emphasis on the need for clear statements of what the psychological base is of the systems developed. Indeed there are already many examples of software technicians chasing off with limited understanding of the behavioural phenomena they are modelling. As a consequence they are producing systems that have a dubious and certainly short life span. Perhaps the most widespread example of this is the building of supposed readability formulae into many word processors when there is no clear evidence that such formulae do indeed measure the readability of a piece of text.

The building of effective decision support tools based on psychological formulations will therefore, I believe, put even greater emphasis on the need for powerful concepts and models, robust theories. This somewhat paradoxical demand for stronger, clearer theories comes about in part because of the pressures on

people building computer systems to modify their objectives to accommodate the technical possibilities and limitations of the software, or to fit within established ways of doing things. It is the challenge of these demands that I see the facet approach responding to. The end result of a good facet study is a set of clearly defined concepts that are usually related to specific data handling activities. As our computer systems become more useable the boundaries between the methods of psychology and the theories can become much more permeable so that the science can effectively drive the engineering.

Turning process into product

This book has brought together examples of my work that have attempted to put psychology into action. It is therefore appropriate to conclude by trying to encapsulate what it means to take the university based scientific discipline of psychology and bring it into connection with the world beyond the groves of academia. How it is possible to take such abstract ideas as humans being active agents who make sense of their world and act on that sense, constructing their reality through the use of biased and limited although extremely subtle capabilities. The challenge comes from the predilection of psychologists for studying and describing processes. Perhaps that is all that can be readily established independently of a particular context. But to use the knowledge gained of those processes it is necessary to turn them into some form of product that can be made available for use. The demand in a nutshell, it seems to me, is to convert ideas into action. If this book helps us to put psychological ideas into action it will have become a process with a worthwhile product.