

PSYCHOLOGY - CULTURE, MIND AND SELF

Some reflections on the study of mind and mind

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This paper consists basically of two parts: The first part deals briefly with the general skepticism and uneasiness, if not outright disapproval that a number of psychological theories and research practices meet with - not only amongst philosophers of science - but also amongst a growing number of psychologists. The first part also underlines the ahistorical and context-free nature of these theories and explores the role of culture and context, providing various examples from a village study being undertaken by the author in India. The second part attempts, what follows logically from the first. Taking into account the essential nature of the field to find some other, more wholesome and satisfactory avenues of research using the concepts of mind and self and drawing perspectives that are both relativistic and universal. The concept of self is chosen because it retains what is essential to the thematic of this science - (i) the inescapable tension within the dialectics of the individual and culture, (ii) the dynamics of development and change, (iii) the possibility of involving such basic concepts as symbolisation and transcendence, (iv) developing perspectives that are both relativistic and universal.

There has been a growing realisation that the roots of our discipline are infected with some major conceptual problems. Design, methodology and analysis, however important, cannot compensate for a shaky conceptual foundation. I think we often choose our research problems in a way that avoids this challenge at the conceptual level, hence there has been relatively little contribution to fundamental research. The relevance of the choice of a research problem was brought out for me while listening to Professor Rao's Presidential address to the Indian Science Congress in January 1988, at Poona University. He said »It is my belief that in fundamental science, the choice of a research problem mainly determines the quality of research. . . . However, many of us often prefer to do repetitive work for various reasons rather than do something novel or new«.

One of the basic conceptual issues that psychology has to resolve when dealing with the nature of mind is its adherence to foundationalism on the one hand, and an understanding of the part played by culture and context on the other hand.

It is probably the same issue that Giorgi (1983) points to when he says »Psychology's commitment to be a science is in conflict with its commitment to understand the whole person. . . . The great division in psychology's perennial debate on this matter is between those who make a commitment to science first, and then turn to their phenomena of interest armed with the criteria of science as filters, or those who make a primary commitment of fidelity to human phenomena and then try to find rigorous (scientific) ways of interrogating them«.

Lately it has often been remarked that we have no satisfactory theory for our understanding of individuals and no satisfactory theory for our understanding of culture. Psychology, which needs to define both individuals and culture as interdependent entities has not succeeded in developing adequate conceptual tools for this purpose.

But some of our conceptual problems are historically conditioned. We have a heritage of theories that are fundamentally ahistorical and context-free, and the criteria that have guided theory construction are basically mechanistic in character. We have for long been foundationalists hoping to find the Archimedian point to which our knowledge can be securely anchored as true and objective from now to eternity.

In one form or another mechanistic conceptualisations still have a hold on our thinking and our rationality continues to be instrumental. This is also manifest in that while behaviourism has been on the retreat, its successor cognitivism has in many ways retained the basic paradigmatic stance.

While taking a critical view of the principles of positivism in psychology, I do not wish to give the impression that this is a straight forward case of a concept that should be rejected outright. What at certain micro-levels have feasibility may totally distort the phenomenon at higher functional levels. It is in this second sense that I wish to suggest that the history of science and the history of psychology is proof to the fact that underlying presuppositions, conceptual and methodological, have in various cases, both distorted phenomena and have imposed constraints and narrowed the perspectives along which psychological research has developed.

This has particular reference to the role of socio-cultural variable in the study of mind, and to the fact that important concepts of culture and self have been kept out of the mainstream of psychological research.

Before I go on to providing more specific evidence for the role of the cultural variable for an understanding of mind, I would like to refer to Lakatos' and Meehl's more general criticism of the research practices in psychology as stated in Reuven Dar's article in *American Psychologist*, February, 1987. This has a bearing on what we have been discussing.

With respect to »statistical techniques« Lakatos (1978a) states - »after reading Meehl (1967) and Lykken (1968) one wonders whether the function of statistical techniques in the social sciences is not primarily to provide a machinery for producing phoney corroborations and thereby a semblance of

»scientific progress« where, in fact, there is nothing but an increase in pseudo-intellectual garbage« (p. 88).

Secondly Lakatos (1978b, p. 149) makes the point that our theories are weak and fragmented and that we need to build up research programmes that can support the construction of unified theories. He says, »a research programme should successfully predict novel facts, but also that the protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses should be largely built according to a preconceived unifying idea, laid down in advance in the positive heuristic of the research programme«. Both Meehl (1967) and Lakatos (1978a) have referred to the ad hoc theorising in psychology which includes hypotheses generated on the basis of data separate from any theory or research programme.

I would suggest that culture and mind would provide one unifying idea, in the manner suggested by Lakatos, for a research programme in psychology. Furthermore, I should like to suggest that the idea of cross-disciplinary research, for example psychology and anthropology, could contribute to Lakatos' proposal for the construction of more viable theories.

Earlier on I had mentioned that most of the prevailing theories in psychology were ahistorical and context-free. In fact, most of these theories were developed within a given cultural environment but were put across as being generally given structures or that culture was one evolutionary process essentially common to all human societies.

While criticising technological instrumental rationality and foundationalism in psychology and human affairs, we are at the same time opening up for the culture-normative dimensions.

A large number of examples will now be provided to demonstrate the different ways in which cultural factors can make a difference at the very basic level.

Bharati (1985) very lucidly brings out the radical difference between the Hindu concept of the self and the Western concept of self represented by a Cartesian ego. The one is conceptually an empirical ego while the other is a meta-physical entity, the absolute, timeless and infinite Brahma. Note that this is not just a mote point for debate within theological and philosophical circles - it has very definite implications for psychology in theory and practice. The whole concept of the empirical ego is central to ego psychology, to psychoanalytic therapies and to basic questions of identity and agency. But clearly according to the Hindu and Western philosophical roots we are not agents in the same sense.

Now if you were an adherent of *Rational Emotive Therapy* (Ellis & Harper, 1975) which is presently flourishing across the oceans, you would not want to distinguish between the role of the belief system in the two cultures which are characterised by totally different concepts of self and self system.

As another example take the case of dependence as a psychological variable. Now in the west, the concept of independence is associated to the empirical self in relation to psychological development and mental health. In

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As another example take the case of dependence as a psychological variable. Now in the west, the concept of independence is associated to the empirical self in relation to psychological development and mental health. In

therapy you try to articulate and strengthen the ego boundaries. Neki (1976) examining the cultural relativism of dependence as a dynamic of social and therapeutic relationships came to the conclusion that the negative connotations to the concept of dependence were not valid in the Indian setting where cultural practices and socialisation did not support the idea of a solitary ego as independent agent.

Such examples can, of course, be multiplied from psychological and anthropological literature but we shall now turn to our own studies being conducted in rural India. These studies are revealing of certain interesting differences in the dimensions of what we call mind and indicate some of the far reaching implications that these findings have when set in relation to much of our conventional theorising in psychology.

The study is being conducted in a typical village about 50 km from the city of Pune in Maharashtra in what can be described as a semi-interior region. In most social and practical ways the village forms a conventional self-sufficient unit. This study involves a form of case study approach, collecting extensive narratives and scripts, using participant observation and construction both life histories and family profiles.

The major findings reflecting the cultural difference and demonstrating the links between mind and society can be tentatively summarised under the following headings:

- i The practical-concrete versus the theoretical-abstract mode of thinking and understanding
- ii The role played by autobiographical models and narratives as against the absence of such personalised life-histories and self-biographies

It has been of considerable interest to note how (i) and (ii) have been inter-related in a number of cases, suggesting configurations of mind integrating autobiographical history to abstract-inferential thinking and vice versa.

The other observations concern (iii) relationship to nature and (iv) relationship to work. Both (iii) and (iv) bring forth the discourse, relating to, on the one hand the instrumental approach and on the other hand the concepts of sharing and participation, in dwelling (a term used by Polyani), intimacy and embodiment.

While the data gathered from the village population is suggestive of interesting differences, and the differences are relevant, the reader must be cautioned not to interpret the differences as being absolute in any sense - the differences are still relative. At the same time the reader is also warned not to be tempted into simple idealisations relating to the rural life setting.

Let us now take count of some of the interesting findings and observations.

We found that our village subjects generally provide concrete descriptions of situations and events rather than developing hypothesis, drawing inferen-

ces and making generalisations - hence they also avoided idealisations in most instances. For example they do not refer to traits about a person being friendly or trustworthy, but how he acts and what he does in specific situations. This supports the findings reported by Schweder & Bourne (1984). Their study was designed to draw comparisons between an old town Indian population and an urban American community. At the same time our work supports the contention that the Indian population in question cannot be labelled as universally concrete. I would not say that our rural population was totally incapable of hypothetical-reflective thinking. What I think one can say is that there is no generalised model of hypothetical thinking in any abstract sense, divorced from a particular activity and its grounding in practical life. It may be cultivated in specific life situations where it is necessary and adaptive.

Another important difference has to do with autobiography and personalised history. The individuals we studied did not appear to have any clear sense of self-biography in the way it is implicit for us in our everyday knowledge and communication. They seemed to lack orientations or schemas of personalised history in their knowledge systems. This relative lack of a model of personalised life history seems also to be in correspondence with the data we collected on the nature of the relationships they shared amongst themselves. We found fairly widespread evidence for the fact that these relationships were not personalised in the sense that we are used to.

Another interesting but somewhat unexpected finding was that our subjects displayed a great lack of ability to provide memories of events and happenings as examples and illustrations to substantiate their views and statements. It was obvious that they must have memories of events, but these were apparently not organised and stored as part of some abstract and extensive functional model. And they did not appear to be stored as part of a self-system - refer also to the previous finding on self-biography. There did not seem to be any abstract model which could be activated for drawing inferences or extracting supportive evidence. But the memory of past events and experiences was elicited as parts of the practical dealings which have significance in real life. It seemed that meaning and significance were inseparable from the grounding in real life. This perhaps reminds one of the point that Gadamer has been trying to make, Bernstein (1983) in the chapter »From Hermeneutics to Praxis«.

There is another related feature to the configuration of mind that we are being exposed to. Somewhat disconcertingly we find our subjects making statements that are apparently inconsistent and contradictory without giving any indication of uneasiness. However, after a degree of reflection we realise that these inconsistent statements were made in different contexts and that within the confines of that situation these statements were appropriate with respect to the views and sentiments being expressed. What is more important is that even when they understood the inconsistency they did not

find it necessary to justify the case. Some abstract principle of consistency to be generalised over different situations was not a necessary part of, at least, the communication process. Expediency and the accepted rules of human conduct in the community seemed to be the framework for the script and for the moral adequacy of the behaviour.

In our own culture, our dealings are implicitly guided by some abstract model of a self-system having internal consistency and permanence over time. However, I think we in our schemas of personal being have incorporated an idealised belief system of internal self-consistency that in practice does not coincide with the kind of accountability that we are used to providing. This could be one reason for our indulgence in self-deception.

We have already mentioned the relative absence of personalised history and trait concepts which also fits in with the findings that there was not a transcendental permanence with respect to character concepts. One does not constantly go around with the feeling of being a particular type of person. Neither the individual nor the community experienced this feeling or acted on this assumption to any great degree.

It must be for similar reasons that the labelling phenomenon was relatively inconspicuous in this community. People were seldom labelled as being undesirable characters in any general and lasting sense. Moreover, criticism and condemnation of wrong doings was directed more at the consequence of the anti-social behaviour of the individual. In other words the moral order has an external-social orientation rather than an inward-individual orientation.

Relationship to Nature and Work:

Our entry into understanding mind and consciousness in our village population was also interestingly stimulated by what we learnt about the relationship of the people to nature and their relationship to work. What we found to be different in this population from what we know in our own culture can be summarised under three main concepts - instrumentalism, wholeness and intimacy.

Once again it needs to be pointed out that observing the differences brings into focus certain characteristics which must be understood as existing along a continuum and not as being either present or absent. They expressed their relationship to nature in terms of close proximity and a certain feeling of reverence. At the same time what constituted work and production, in various ways revolved round the principal features of the natural environment. The main objects of nature were the river, the land, the bullocks and the big trees around. The river is where they fetch the water for drinking and washing, for irrigation of the land or for fishing for food. The bullocks were precious for ploughing the land and transporting the goods, and the cows for the milk and the sustenance they provided. Most of these people live constantly in close

proximity to the nature which provides sustenance and meaning. But the meaning goes beyond sustenance since the existence of things is not comprehended only in instrumental terms. The river was symbolically referred to as the mother. The cows and bullocks were almost part of the family, not surprising when you think of the fact that they live in the same house, only a few meters away from where the family sit and talk, eat and sleep. Their smell and sound - their living presence becomes part of the household. We must also remember that the direct involvement of the animals in the work and existence of these people probably gives a dimension that is different from keeping household pets. This also means that the kind of intimacy that is shared between the people and the objects of nature is not only a kind of relationship but is constitutive of the mind and being that is created in the given conditions of life and cultural setting.

One salient feature that comes through is a sense of wholeness that embraces the life-world of these people, both at the functional and at the symbolic level. For them work and leisure, attachments and relationships are to a much greater degree part of the same stream of life, different from the segmentation and fragmentation that characterise our lives at both the functional and symbolic levels.

The other important fact that comes to light is that consciousness is not conditioned to a predominantly instrumental approach. The existence of the river, the land, the bullocks is not only comprehended, defined or felt in terms of what is made possible for one's goals and achievements. They are imbued with a meaning that is also in their own existence as part of a common world in which everybody and everything participates. It is probably this which makes for the fact that the world is pre-given as meaningful in its totality. The far reaching implications of this will be discussed later in the paper.

That kind of personalised reflective consciousness, which distances and alienates the objects of the world through its instrumentality and assertiveness has not yet invaded this part of the world, not to the degree when it generates the kind of existential isolation in which man of us seem condemned to live - at least till the time we can find some effective mode of transcendence.

Since I find the implications of instrumentalism rather far reaching for the nature of mind as we find it in contemporary western culture, I will take a short digression in the direction of what is known as instrumental-technical rationality. The concept has been quite thoroughly underlined by writers like Weber and Marcuse.

What I think psychologists need to realise is that in many cases technical rationality having guided the cognitivist framework has diverted attention from the essentially social-participatory nature of human communication and praxis. To illustrate what I mean by the social-participatory nature of human affairs, I would like to briefly refer to a case study I was involved in,

though not from the village in question. - A particular lady had become very anxious about her husband's health after his by-pass operation. This lady has also been through a great deal of distress in relation to a history of illnesses in the family. Her anxiety regarding her husband's health has resulted in her constantly overreacting to his eating and drinking habits. Given this context it was interesting to observe how within the intellectual circles the issue was debated purely within the framework of technical rationality. The history of the caring wife's anxiety and the factor of human distress did not form part of the discourse. Amongst other less intellectually inclined friends, mostly women, the discourse was motivated in terms of participation and sharing in the human distress and the comfort that would emerge from this. The moral for psychologists must remain that there is a basic meaning in life relating to participation and social togetherness that cannot find substitution in technical instrumental rationality. This kind of participation and sharing seemed more common in the village life than in the industrial urban setting.

However, when talking about the quality of participation and sharing, one needs also to consider the existential nature of man and its manifestation in a symbolic order. I have the feeling that the extensions provided in the form of communicational rationality as defined by Habermas, and noted by Giddens (1985) and Jay (1985) may not be totally adequate and whole-some.

I must once again state that in general my mission is not to romanticise village life, rather my purpose has been two fold: one to argue that certain theoretical orientations and methodologies are more sound than others in our attempts at understanding what is mind and mental life. And secondly to show some basic ways in which dimensions of mind differ in different communities as a function of their socio-cultural history and mode of adaptation. Considering how the socio-cultural system acts to shape the mind could keep us better to understand the construction of mind, including our own.

In our own case it is interesting to comprehend, by comparison, how the amplifications of personalised history, imbued with the belief in a transcendental ego and personal agency, go to the shaping of our minds in a decisive way.

However, this also raises certain problems for us with regard to understanding of cultures that are characterised by a communal and rational ethos. Gergen (1985) states the problem in the following terms »Western discourse is relatively barren of communal or rational terminology. The theorist cannot in this case fall back on implicit understanding already embedded in common social life. At the same time, if the theorist is to make sense within the culture, how can concepts be introduced that are not already conventionalised? To make sense typically requires individualistic language. The use of metaphor may furnish a means of transcending the boundaries of Western understanding in this case. However, the task remains a major challenge«.

Yet it is a major challenge since sufficient examples can be cited to argue the case that culture, mind and personality are too closely linked for psychologists to generalise any given personality theory, and consequently therapeutic intervention, without taking the culture variable into account.

While pleading for the role of culture I would be very unhappy to convey impression that the theme of man and mind needs no search for commonness. In fact, after a case has been made for taking cognizance of cultural differences a certain note of caution needs to be sounded. With the tendency to exaggerate differences, comparisons can also be fraught with some danger. The danger is manifest in total relativisations which leaves out of account the different perspectives relevant at different levels of comprehension.

Included here is the perspective on the sharing of common world between man and nature over the ages. What is importantly different at one level may have commonness at another level of comprehension. In what sense, and in what form, this commonness can be conceptualised must remain one of the major tasks of psychology as a science.

One line of study in this context is related to the phenomenon of symbolisation and transcendence. For the development of this perspective I would like to thank Professor Sundra Rojan of Poona University, India, Philosophy Department, for providing both inspiration and some useful ideas. In using the term symbolisation I wish to retain the meaning which in a sense contrasts with the concept of signification, indicating the idea of going from the context specific to the transcontextual - of going beyond the particular. It is in fact the meaning and connotations of the concept of going beyond that is crucial and requires a deeper penetration.

The phenomenon I think has very far reaching implications, not only for our cognitions but also the more extensive areas of personality, consciousness and embodiment. For this reason an attempt will be made to explore the dimension of »going beyond« using the frame of reference given by symbolisation and transcendence. At the same time the concept of embodiment, of the body subject, will be incorporated within this framework.

With respect to symbolisation we have already indicated the concept of going beyond the particular to the general. However, for the manner in which we wish to develop the idea of symbolisation we need to add another dimension. Symbolisation needs to be conceptualised within the framework of the self-other relationship. As Rabil (1967, p. 31) referring to Merleau Ponty says,

for Merleau Ponty every human project reveals intersubjectivity, a copresence with others.

I should like to add that this self-other relationship needs in turn to be embedded within the larger frame of reference constituting a pre-given world that is meaningful in its totality.

The implications of defining symbolisation in these terms will be evident shortly when we relate it to the concept of transcendence.

Perhaps a brief note on transcendence will be in place now. The term transcendence come from the Latin word »scand«, which means »I climb«. While the word »trans« means cross. The emphasis is on the process of moving beyond, while at the same time it implies an achievement. Something climbing out of something and developing its own features. There is the implication of a qualitative change.

We are now left with the concept of embodiment, of the body-subject, before we attempt a synthesis of the ideas that have been developed.

The idea of the body-subject was perhaps first effectively developed by Merleau Ponty (1962). The realisation is that the body is not just an object or an instrument but a subject. A. Rabil 61967, p. 31) says

Merleau Ponty describes the body as emergent with the world, i.s. as opening us onto a social world. See also Hall (1983, p. 344-346).

With this background we can now enter on our project.

The manner in which we wish to define transcendence in relation to symbolisation implies the idea of going beyond the structural level and involving an interpenetration of knowledge and self. But the realisation of this state is conditional to the idea of a pre-given world that is meaningful in its totality. Perhaps in a certain sense the idea of meaningless in its totality would also do.

However, the idea of a pre-given world that is meaningful in its totality is only possible if we accept that all things exist in a common world in which we all participate and share. A consciousness that is fundamentally instrumental would negate this possibility.

The realisation of a state of transcendence in this sense should also lead to a sense of embodiment - the idea of the lived body as a wholesome subject. What this also brings about is the link between knowledge and self - there is an interpenetration of cognition and personality. At the same time the link between self and knowledge manifests a moral component on the grounds that man's being is essentially moral in nature. Fingarette (1969) in his study of self deception also suggests that personal knowledge involves moral commitment.

Furthermore comprehending the link between »my« knowledge and the body-subject implies that the somatic dynamics become part of the knowledge system and vice versa, providing a potentially active framework for the understanding and praxis of therapeutics.

The ideas being developed here are close to what happens in genuine artistic creation. Such activity implicates meaning in the form of vital eternally recurring themes. In terms of meaning the work of art is inexhaustable, which can be seen as a reflection of its embeddedness in a world that is sym-

bologically transcendental. At the same time in a work of art, the form and the content/spirit remain inseparable. If you like there is an embodiment.

It would be interesting to reflect, if the principle of transcendence that we are concerned with, could become a regulative principle in consciousness, not just limited to being constitutive in particular cases. In such a case our self-other relationships, our life-worlds, would be constantly oriented in terms of the principles of symbolisation, transcendence and embodiment. This is, however, not a picture of Paradise, but a dimension of human activity and consciousness in which we are all involved to different degrees.

We have earlier in this paper discussed different ways in which mind and self are influenced by culture and context. We have seen how modes of thinking, concepts of self and ego, the instrumental approach to nature and work are related to cultural differences. It is certainly becoming easier today to point to differences when we focus on people from different parts of the world. At the same time, having left essentialism, the search for what is common becomes a more exacting task.

What is perhaps important to realise is that we need to think in terms of different levels of understanding. This could mean that some common process at one level could lead to variations at another level. However, this does not imply that we are back to seeking explanations which have a foundational character.

What has been tentatively attempted in the last part of this paper is to use the concepts of symbolisation, transcendence and embodiment to seek what might constitute a common framework of understanding at one basic level. Included in this was also the essential link between knowledge and personality and the essential link between the body and the social world. These could serve as the foundations of conceptual understanding across cultures.

Similarly we have the two contrasting concepts, the concept of instrumental consciousness on the one hand, and on the other hand the idea of a world that is pre-given as meaningful in its totality - a common world in which we all share and participate. This framework also provides for an effective common platform for transcultural discourse. Similarly there is something common to the world of artistic creation - it provides a basic mode of activity and being that transcends cultural boundaries.

If it is possible, very briefly, to summarize the main theme of the project that has been attempted in the later part of the paper, it might be stated in the following terms: (a) we have been emphasising the relationship between knowledge and self, (b) which implicates a moral commitment and requires a framework consisting of (i) participations and sharing in a common world that is pre-given as meaningful in its totality (ii) a transcendental mode of consciousness as seen in the process of symbolisation. It may be suggested that in some sense and to some degree man is constantly realising his moral nature through some process of transcendence which brings him in correspondence with the world. When this process breaks down we may be in for a

large scale crisis.

Finally, if there is a moral to this paper, then it is the continued search for conceptualisations which can bring to light both the differences and commonness that characterise our minds and consciousness.

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