Qualitative Studies
Vol. 8, No. 3, 2023, pp. 1-28
ISSN 1903-7031

What is Psychological Research?

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This interview is a slightly modified transcript from the first PSYCHE Talk, hosted at the Department of Communication and Psychology at Aalborg University, October 6, 2023. PSYCHE – *Psychology of Culture, Humanity and Education*, is a newly established research section that gathers three different research groups: *Qualitative Studies, Situated Psychology* and *Cultural Psychology.* PSYCHE Talks are hosted as biannual events, where prominent psychological researchers are invited to discuss fundamental questions about the nature and subject matter of psychology through an interview-based format. The title of this interview is inspired by two interviews with the American anthropologist, Jean Lave, conducted by Steinar Kvale in 1991 (published in 1995) and 2004 under the heading: "What is Anthropological Research?". In this interview, Professor of General Psychology and Qualitative Methods, Svend Brinkmann, is interviewed by Assistant Professor of Psychology, Alfred Sköld.

A (Alfred): Welcome everyone to this first round of PSYCHE Talk on the theme: "What is Psychological Research?". Welcome to our first guest, Svend Brinkmann, Professor of General Psychology and Qualitative Methods here at the Department for Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, and welcome to the students and staff gathered here in Aalborg.

S (Svend): Well, thank you, Alfred, for organizing this. I am honored to be the first person to sit in this chair in a hopefully long list of people to follow. I think it is an excellent initiative you have made to do these PSYCHE Talks, and I have really been looking forward to it. It is quite rare that we have these kinds of conversations, where the only purpose basically is to have them and to learn about what work we do and to discuss. So, I think that is great and thanks everyone for coming.

The Mind

A: Let us start with the book *Persons and their Minds: Towards an Integrative Theory of the Mediated Mind* from 2018. To begin to paint the picture of the radicality of what you are saying in this book, I will simply note that if I would ask the person on the street about what the mind or the psyche is, that person will probably answer by pointing towards the inside: the mind is *something inner* and perhaps also add that the mind has something to do with the brain. You are not the man on the street, Svend, because you write in this book, not only once but several times that, "The mind as a concept refers to a range of abilities and dispositions of living human beings." So, my first question is, what does it mean that the mind is a range of abilities and dispositions of living human beings?

S: You are right that I see the mind as "a range of abilities and dispositions". With that formulation, I claim nothing original. It is, more or less, just a contemporary way of articulating Aristotle's view of the mind, which I find is deeply convincing but also, in a funny way, alien to modern psychology, which has conceived the mind as a storehouse of conscious experience and/or subconscious mental processes, mental representations and so on. But this is sort of an experiential view of the mind, it is something inner, as you say—if you ask the man on the street—it is almost a theatrical concept. The famous consciousness researcher Bernard Baars (1997) talks about "the cartesian theatre", where we are in touch with the outer world *through* mental representations. René Descartes would call them 'ideas', David Hume would call them 'impressions', and modern psychology would call them 'mental representations', where some of them are conscious and some of them unconscious.

This, I would argue, is a passive view of the mind. It assumes that outer world impinges on us as experiencing human beings, and I think there are so many problems with that image of the mind. Going back to Descartes, modern psychology believes that it might have solved the problems he raised, but it is, more or less, steeped in the exact same epistemological deadlock. How—once you have put the mind inside the head and claimed that the only thing that we are in contact with are inner mental representations—can you go from that to anything in the world as such? How can you ever claim that your mental representations represent anything outside of your mind? That is just a leap, a leap

of faith, and it very quickly leads to absurd conclusions. 'Solipsism' is how philosophers normally label it, and it is the logical endpoint of this way of conceiving of the mind implying that I am the only being who exist, because the only thing I am in touch with is my own mental content.

There are many other problems, but this is just the most serious one, solipsism. When I finished my PhD, Rom Harré was on the committee, and I have learned so much from his work. In the 90's, he wrote a famous article entitled *Forward to Aristotle* (1997). Let us *go forward* to this ancient Greek thinker, Harré argued, because that is what we need in psychology. When we go forward to Aristotle, we discover that there is a wholly different way of conceiving of the mind—not as an experiential realm, not as mental representations—but as something active. Skills, dispositions to act, to perceive, to feel, to learn, to explore and so on—always connected to something practical, always connected to some form of activity. Needless to say, this line of thought does not belong to Aristotle. In philosophy we find it in pragmatism, phenomenology, and in psychology we have emerging ecological perspectives.

I know that these are a lot of words about a small sentence but thinking of the mind as skills and dispositions implies that whenever we talk about something mental—the way we think, the way we feel, the way we act, the way we perceive, the way we remember and so on—we talk about *something being done*, and whenever we talk about something being done, we imply that *we can do it more or less well*. And that brings us immediately to *the normative realm*—perceiving is always trying to perceive truthfully, trying to figure out what is actually here—is it a snake in the forest or is it just a branch from the tree? Remembering is trying to remember correctly. Thinking is trying to solve the problem adequately. Even feeling is trying to "get it right", is what I perceive as a potential threat really worthy of being afraid of or is it just a pigeon that is totally innocent?

So, all psychological phenomena have this normative component. My work begins from the principle that psychology is normative, that it deals with normativity, that the mind is a normative phenomenon. This, I think, is a different way of understanding psychology entirely, which I find is much more adequate to what is important to people, namely that we *can act*. We do not just have behavior or driven by causes—we can *act*

for reasons. Simply put, you are responsible for what you do, you can, for example, be put to prison if you commit a serious crime, and this make sense only because we can act and act for reasons and exist in a normative realm, and not just in this inner experiential illusory realm.

Psychology as a Normative Science

A: Let's stick to this topic. I know that you have written about a wide range of topics, Svend, but a fair guess would be that normativity and psychology as a normative science could be aptly termed the core of the "Brinkmannian project". On that topic, I recall you writing that psychology is normative in two senses: first that it contributes to shaping the world we live in in various ways, but also that psychology or the subject matter of psychology is normative in itself, as you just described. The mind or psyche is a normative entity. I am not sure that I ever understood the second part, so could you elaborate how that should be understood? Why is the mind a normative entity?

S: Yes, while I see these two points as intimately connected, they are likewise different. Seeing the mind as normative simply means that all the things we think of as mental, all the things that psychology studies exist only because they can be assessed normatively, evaluated, and challenged.

A: As in right or wrong? Good or bad?

S: Yes, I mean some of them are moral. Moral normativity is one kind. Some of them are functional, some of them are aesthetic, some of them are political, others instrumental. There are many kinds of normativity, but I do not see how we can talk about a phenomenon as a psychological phenomenon, without presupposing or implying normativity. Returning to Rom Harré, I first read his book *Personal Being* (1997) that was first published in the early 80's, where he has these wonderful simple examples. For example, he poses the question: "Why do we think of anger as a psychological phenomenon whereas we think of constipation or exhaustion as physiological phenomena?" Constipation is like: "auw, auw, it hurts in my belly" and so on. Now, why

is that not a psychological phenomenon? Because it is not normative, and therefore we would never refer it to the realm of psychology. It might have *psychological implications* and *presuppositions*, but the phenomenon itself—being constipated or being exhausted—is purely physiological. It exists as a part of the natural world in its causes and relations. We do not blame the intestines, the belly, the stomach for its constipation, right? But we might, on the other hand, blame a person for his or her anger. So, whenever we talk about a psychological phenomenon, we talk about something as a subject to praise and blame. Maybe that is the simplest way of saying it.

I would argue that this includes emotions. We are responsible for our emotions, even in cases where we act almost reflexively, immediately, intuitively. We might ask ourselves afterwards: "Was that burst of anger really justified?", and reach the conclusion: "No, it was not. I better seek therapy because it happens again and again, so I can try to work on my anger". There was *no reason* to be angry. Constipation and exhaustion are caused by mechanisms in the organism. Anger, of course, has a similar bodily component because you can feel it in your body when being angry. Neurotransmitters and hormones are related to what we call anger. Sure, you can feel it, but there is likewise a question of justifying your reaction. The fact that neurons fire in your brain is not the reason for your anger, it is the cause. The reason might be that someone stole the ice-cream that I just bought, and I was therefore really annoyed, and became angry with that person. That is a reason for being angry. It refers to a normative space, where I am entitled to this ice-cream cone because I bought it myself, and now someone else stole it. So, the anger is legitimate, it is justified. Whereas if the other person accidently took my ice-cream cone because he thought it was his, and I yell out in anger, I might be the one to blame. "Wait up, do not be angry, try to check first. Was it an accident? Oh, it was an accident, so he is excused, right?" In this case, my anger was wrong—it implied a misunderstanding of the situation. This whole normative framework around a psychological phenomenon is not just something accidental that might be there or not—it is a necessary feature of what we think of as psychology.

A: Thank you. This subject to praise or blame that you mention, is that the person?

S: Yes.

Personhood

A: And following up on that: What is a person and why is the concept of personhood important for psychology?

S: That is a very good question. I am glad that you mention that because I really do not think that the mind is the subject matter of psychology. Until now, we have only been talking about the mind. Of course, the mind is a useful concept when we want to address this whole range of skills and dispositions that persons possess. But the mind is always possessed by a person. The title of my book is "Persons and their Minds”—it would be absurd to call it “Minds and their Persons”. It is not a mind that has a person, it is always a person who has a mind and a body and a brain and a lover and a debt and a car and many other things. This is a very peculiar feature of the concept of person in our language, in our interactions, in our language games that it is, in a way, primitive. And it means that a person cannot be analyzed into smaller parts. A person, in a sense, does not have parts.

Of course, I can only be an acting person because I have a brain, a body, social relationships, and many other things that enables me to exercise the skills and dispositions that we think of as the mind. But let us say that I am angry with this person who steals my ice-cream. In this case, it is me as a person who is angry. You cannot say that my mouth is angry if I yell, and therefore blame the mouth when the anger is illegitimate. No, you blame me *as a person*. You blame the person whose mouth it is, the person whose anger it is. So, in that sense, the concept of person is a primitive one. Of course, I should probably add that very few people agree with me on this. Many people would think of this as an ethnocentric idea of personhood, something belonging to a western tradition, and point out that other parts of the world have other conceptions of persons, minds and so on. But I think there is something universal in this way of conceiving of people, persons, and minds. In this perspective, psychology is only superficially about minds. It is much more about persons and the lives that persons live. And these lives have many interesting properties. They are collective, they involve the material world and minds. We should begin with persons and personhood and see the mind as a derived concept.

A: My next question is about the difference between human beings and animals. The discussion about how to make a distinction and how we understand this difference has always been ongoing and probably continue to be so. To provide some food for thought, you have already mentioned Aristotle, and in *Persons and Their Minds* (2018) you write that "If an animal were an eye, the mind would be the ability to see". Marx and Engels write in the *The German Ideology* (1977) that "the most the animal can achieve is to collect; man produces, he prepares the means of life" (p. 308), and Ludwig Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations* (1958) writes that "One can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, happy, startled. But hopeful? And why not?" (II p.148). Well, that was enough food for thought. Now, how do you understand the difference between human beings and animals?

S: There are many differences between human beings and animals, but those differences concern, in my view, differences between two kinds of animals or several kinds of animals because human beings are, in my view, animals. But animals of a peculiar sort, they are language-using animals, they are reflective animals, they are cultural animals. Some other animals might have some kind of culture but not in the elaborated sense in which human beings have culture. And these things mean that we have abilities shared by no other animals, for example—as Wittgenstein mentions—the ability to hope. The ability of looking forward to Christmas Eve—no other animal can do that!

A: Why not?

S: Because you need a concept of Christmas Eve and an understanding of this tradition and a sense of a calendar year and the future and so on and so forth. So many things which depend on mastery of a language and its concepts.

A: But does my cat not look forward to me feeding him later on?

S: Your cat, just as Wittgenstein said, might be joyful when you feed it, and it might know that around this time, when it is hungry it usually gets its food, but it cannot look forward to a special meal on Christmas Eve because it has no concept of Christmas Eve. Of course,

there is so much we share with other animals. I can definitely communicate emotionally with my dogs; they can comfort me when I am sad and vice versa. There is a shared intersubjective communication with other animals, sure, but we still have abilities that are not shared by any other kinds of animals, and other animals have abilities that are not shared by humans. Snakes have heat sense; bats have echo sense and so on. As humans, we cannot imagine what it means to be in the world with those kinds of abilities.

In that sense, it is not a human exceptionalism that I advocate. All animals are exceptional because they are all different, but the species to which we belong is different in this particular way, namely, that we are, as Aristotle would say, rational and political animals. No other animals share those features. I have forgotten who constructed this thought experiment, but I sometimes refer to it and often think about it: what would happen if we took a group of chimpanzees and placed it on a deserted island in the Pacific Ocean, left this group of apes for 500 years and then returned to see how would they live? The answer would be: just as we left them. We know that for sure. It is at least very, very likely. Of course, there is a new alpha male because several generations of chimpanzees have existed. We are 99 % identical with this species of animal, and yet, if we took a group of humans and placed them on a deserted island, left and came back 500 years later and asked the same question, how would these people live? The answer would be: we have no idea.

A: They probably would have killed each other.

S: Well, that is your conclusion. That is not mine. I imagine a flourishing democracy.

A: I get your point.

S: Because we are political animals in Aristotle's sense, we are social animals, like the chimpanzees, like swans and bees. I love this phrase in Aristotle where he says that humans are social animals like swans and bees, but unlike swans and bees and monkeys et cetera, we are political animals because we can think, we can reflect, we have language so we can decide to some extent. In a democracy, we have processes of deciding things by election. We can decide the norms by which we wish to live together. We might say

that we no longer want an alpha male, instead we want an alpha female or no alphas at all. Many things are possible, and unlikely things sometimes turn out to be possible.

Now, this is the difficult part of being a psychologist and not a primatologist. Primates and their behavior are difficult enough to study and to predict, but humans are almost impossible to study and at least to predict, so it is really difficult to be a human psychologist. But this unpredictability is also the great thing about human beings. Because we have freedom and reflexive thought, because we are persons who can act, we can bring something new into the world rather than just realizing genetic potential or instincts, or whatever we think of is the cause behind primate behavior. We talk about primate *behavior*, but we talk about human *action*, and these two are radically different. This is the reason why we have philosophies, religious traditions, art, and many other things—to understand human lives instead of cause and laws.

Psychological Research

A: Thank you. After this general introduction, I will allow myself to be inspired by the second interview that Steinar Kvale did with Jean Lave. The first line in the first interview reads like this "I will start with the difficult part: practice" (Lave & Kvale, 2004, p. 4), and then large parts of the remaining interview deal with the practicalities of doing anthropological research. Many things can be said about that because anthropologists are very much "out in the world". They have to *do a lot of things* when they do their research. But what about psychological researchers? What do we do? Do we do anything? Given that research *per se* is an activity, how do you *do psychological research*?

S: And by "you", do you mean we as a community of researchers?

A: Yes.

S: Well, thanks to, among others, Steinar Kvale, who made it legitimate to go out into the world and hang around and talk to people and observe what they do, we can do like Jean Lave and the anthropologists. For me, that is one of the most important sources of

knowledge about human psychology. It is not the only one, but if you want to study the lives of persons, if you want to study people and not causal reactions in laboratories, you need to go out and see what these people actually do, what kinds of motivations they have, what kinds of reasons they provide for their actions, and listen to their reflections when they talk about their past and so on.

But that is a new situation to some extent. Steinar Kvale published the first book on interviewing in the 90's, and back then, around 95 % of all psychological research was quantitative—survey- or laboratory based. Those are important traditions of inquiry in psychology, but it is great that we now have achieved the same methodological freedom as researchers in anthropology. Jean Lave is a social anthropologist. Her science is based on people traveling into the world, meeting people they do not understand, trying to understand them, right? How do you do that? You learn the language, you live with them, you hang around. It would be strange to meet people with whom you cannot talk, who have strange practices of mating or burial or something, and to put them into laboratories and subjecting them to tests that you have prepared in advance, right? So, you first of all need to understand them. That is the whole anthropological approach to people. In psychology, we began with ourselves, and we wanted to be a respectable natural science just like chemistry or physics. Wilhelm Wundt and others put people into laboratories and subjected them to tests with variables and results that could be quantified back in the 19th century. Because they thought they already knew what psychology was about, but maybe they did not?

Since then, we have spent 100 years trying to get to the point where we can do what anthropologists do, and now, finally, we have reached that point. Again, quantitative methods are extremely useful, and we could not do without them in psychology. If you want to know about mental health in a population, it is great to have surveys. But even though there are many things we can achieve by using these methods, they will always be secondary to me. It only makes sense to measure something in a survey once you have understood the nature of the phenomenon that you wish to measure. So, you have to be qualitative and normative first. It only makes sense to do a brain scan of someone solving a problem once you have identified what it means to solve a problem. And problems are solved in the human life world—it is a normative process. You can do it correctly or you can do it incorrectly. Then, as a secondary method of inquiry, you can put people in a

brain scanner, but we tend to forget that this only makes sense because there is a primary way of understanding other people, which is through human encounters; by talking, by observing, by listening and so on.

A: But does psychology then become anthropology? Which tools, concepts and methods do we have that anthropology does not?

S: We have none. The distinctions between anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies, are for me very arbitrary. When I read stuff about human life, I do not care if the researcher is an anthropologist or a psychologist. The distinction between these disciplines is very much based on the ways in which they are institutionalized into modern society, where psychology is related to a profession that has certain ways of helping people, which the other disciplines do not. That is what distinguishes psychology. For me it is not in the research domain or by its methods or anything like that. Psychology has in its past developed methods, almost always quantitative methods. I am not an expert on quantitative methods, obviously, and neither am I an expert on the history of methodology in psychology, but when I studied it decades ago, I remember being struck by how many of these founding fathers of quantitative methodology who were psychologists. They wanted psychology to become a respectable natural science, because they thought, falsely, that real natural sciences, by necessity, are quantitative. They are not. There are plenty of natural sciences that do not make use of statistical tests and still are concerned with processes in the natural world. How many statistical tests did Darwin do in order to formulate the theory of evolution through natural selection? None! He did not have control groups. He was an observer of the natural world—an excellent one, indeed—and he revolutionized human knowledge in so many ways. He traveled to Galapagos and charted how the beaks of finches differ and developed his ideas. Charles Darwin was a qualitative researcher. Few people think of him as such, but he was.

Everyday Life

A: What Darwin also had, I assume, was an everyday life, which brings us to our next question. In your book from 2012, *Qualitative Inquire in Everyday Life*, you talk about this kind of research based on going out into the world or simply being in the world because that is where we spend our lives. Research, you claim, is not exclusively an activity that we do here at the university. Your examples are from your everyday life with your kids such as going to school and kindergarten, things that happen all the time. You write, and I love this quote: "Everyday life is everywhere, and we live through it like fish proverbially live in the water" (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 17). Just a short anecdote from my everyday life: Since I spend considerable amount of time on trains, I get to listen to a lot of uninteresting conversations, and last week someone actually said something really interesting. This guy said to his friend: "You work a lot", and then his friend said: "No, I do not as long as I like what I do, I am not working".

S: That is attributed to Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, who said "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life". At least that is the meme on the internet!

A: I did not know that, but we also have C.W. Mills, in *On Intellectual Craftmanship* (1980) saying "You do not really have to study a topic you are working on; for as I have said, once you are into it, it is everywhere. You are sensible to its themes; you see and hear them everywhere in your experience" (p. 69). It sounds like we are constantly drowning in empirical material or data. On this background, are there any standards for what goes as good or bad use of everyday material in psychological research?

S: Yes. It has been a few years since I thought about research practice in this way, but when writing the book, I was inspired by the late French anthropologist of science, Bruno Latour (2005), who says something like, from now on everything is data! When you begin, Latour told his students: "Everything is data." From the moment you make a call to the person, who is going to fund your research, you begin researching. Keep a logbook and note down everything that is interesting in relation to your research question.

Everything is data! Even though I believe this is true, it also becomes overwhelming. If everything is data, how do you decide what to focus on? In that sense, your question is very timely. Is there a good way and a bad way on using all these sources of material as data?

I actually wrote a paper called *Doing Without Data* (2014), which circles around the same thing that I am saying now, seen from a different angle. Because if everything is data, you might equally claim that nothing is data. If you cannot distinguish, what is data from what is not, the concept of data easily becomes meaningless. Data means "the given" in Latin. Data is what is given. In a way, this is related to what we began discussing today, namely the notion of the mind as a container of impressions on which the outer world impinges. You have "data coming in", so to say. One of my heroes, John Dewey, asked what would happen if we replaced the word 'data", meaning the given, with something being taken? Instead of 'givens' we have 'takens'.

If we embark from that perspective, we can still claim that everything is potential data, because we live in a world that is so rich and interesting, and if you focus on something, you can begin from almost anywhere in the world. And by focusing on that, you can begin to unfold something interesting. You use the taken as a point of departure for your investigation. Charles Wright Mills, a genius sociologist writing in the 50's, said that when you use your sociological imagination, once you have taken something, there is almost no limit. If you go back to Latour with whom I began, "From now on everything is data", he would say that the way you decide when to stop is once you have reached the word limit. After that, nothing is data because you have no more space. In that sense, it is always a practical decision when to stop. That is almost all we can say. We can take everything as data, and sometimes it is very useful to delimit—to have methodological procedures of finding representative pieces of empirical material. It is evident that we do not only want to interview psychology students if we want to learn more about what it means to be human. Wanting a representative sample is a great methodological rule of thumb. Even though things can be done so differently within the field of psychological research, these are, ultimately, practical matters and not high philosophical ones in my view.

A: So, the art of research might be about findings ways of doing those limitations?

S: Yes, and that is why we have method books containing rules of thumb about how we tried this and it worked, so it might work in your context as well.

Method and Theory

A: My next question is about method. This subject might seem kind of boring, but it is, again, inspired by Steinar Kvale asking Jean Lave whether there "is an anthropological method and if so, how it could be described." Svend, is there a psychological method?

S: It is tempting just to repeat Jean Lave's answer. You quoted parts of it, but she actually began by saying something along the lines of: "I do not believe that there is a method in anthropology. There are a range of ways of researching the world. But ultimately, the only thing that is officially complex to understand a human being is another human being." That goes for psychology as well. There are some tools, rules of thumb about how many people to interview for example. Steinar always said 15 people plus/minus 10. That is a rule of thumb, and it almost always works. It is very rare that you get more knowledge by interviewing more than 25 people. And often you can do it with seven. We do have these rules of thumb, but they are more like a craftsperson's knowledge, and not something authoritative god given. When teaching and supervising, the most typical question I get is: "Is this allowed?" It is a funny question. Is this allowed? Who would punish you? Like some deity decided that this is forbidden—"Thou shall not!" I mean, try it, and if it works, it is great, and if it does not work, then write about why I did not work. "Everything is allowed until someone in power says no." That is another quote actually from Bettie St. Pierre, but in a way it is true.

A: Do you have a theory, Svend?

S: Do I have a theory? I think that is an interesting question, but I don't think I do.

A: No theory?

S: Of course, we talked for 20 minutes about the normativity of psychological phenomena. Is that a theory? In some sense, you could say that it is, but I would rather say that it is just how we have to begin. It is pre-theoretical in a way. In order to formulate theories about what remembering is, or what learning is, we have to understand the normativity of psychological phenomena. So, I would claim that normativity is a precondition for theory and not a theory in itself.

A: You are not a part of the game; you are formulating the rules?

S: I mentioned John Dewey, the pragmatic philosopher, and one thing I learned from pragmatism is that theories are tools. If they work, they can open up the world for us, so we can see more interesting things. If they do not work, they make us blind to important things. Thomas Reid, in the 18th century, said that "theories are the creatures of men which nature seldomly mimics." So, theories are what people construct in order to do something and explore the world. Nature does not care about our theories. They do not come from reality. I believe in an objective reality. I am a realist, but not concerning theories. I am an instrumentalist concerning theories.

A: But you still say that they can help us open up our understanding of the world. How does that work? When does a theory work? When does it do the job for us in making our understanding of the world better or deeper?

S: Well, the pragmatic answer is, whenever we solve a problem that enables us to go on, leading better lives, developing human solidarity, reducing suffering and so on.

A: They work, when they work?

S: Yes, in a way. This is both the key insight of pragmatism, but also its great problem. Because who decides what working means? Who decides that it works or when it works? Based on what values? This brings us back to normativity. There is a widely shared sense in which we think of, for example, how a science like psychology works, namely that if people improve their lives after seeing a psychologist, after being helped by psychological

research, and so on, I am content to say that is has worked. Sometimes psychological knowledge is used to oppress people, and in a way that is also a way of working, you could say. But it is a way of working, that I would disagree with, so we could criticize it.

A: My next question is about continuity. Jean Lave says that "good research is about sustaining a lifetime of interconnected research projects that are closely related." When I finished my Ph.D. on grief, I thought that I would never touch that subject again—no more grief— and then I quickly realized that this was rather naïve. And most of the things that I have been writing after my Ph.D. have somehow touched upon the subject of grief, probably since I spend three years reading and writing about that. It seems like our academic backpacks are hard to get rid of. You have done, as we have talked about, research on a large different number of topics: the normative aspects of psychology, personhood, psychiatric illness, grief and so on. So, my question is, how do you move from one project to the next?

S: It is hard to say, actually, because it just happens in a way. Of course, it is a question about money—if you have them, you can develop a new project. You want to work with good people, then you to develop a project that facilitates just that. Eventually, it is over, and at that point, you will have to think of something else. Again, that is a very pragmatic answer, but of course there is a connecting thread to what I do. In a way it is quite diverse: grief, mental disorders, diagnoses, identity, methodology, and so on. But in another way, I just say the same thing every time. I repeat myself, because I always approach these psychological topics with a normative aspect in the back of my mind, and then you can see what happens.

A: Have you ever found yourself in a situation, where you were beginning a project or did research that felt too far away from your standpoint or your point of departure?

S: We studied grief for five years, and when beginning that project, "The Culture of Grief", I did not know much about grief theoretically. So, I began by reading about the normativity of grief, and quickly realized that grief is a normative response to loss. You mourn because you love someone. There is a meaning dimension to grief. It is not just

like having a headache caused by brain processes. It is a *normative response to a kind of love relationship that is broken by death*. And then I already knew a bit about grief without knowing what I knew about grief. And then we began these projects because there are new psychiatric diagnoses for complicated grief, and then you can begin the discussion of whether that is a legitimate wat of treating grief. Grief is an example of a research topic that I engaged with because it was possible. We had received a grant, could hire people, could build a group, and it was a great experience. I learned a lot, but it was not a topic that I was familiar with as such before we began. Five years later, I obviously knew much more about grief. But having this way into the topic through this normative understanding enabled me to say something at the outset at least.

A: Thank you. The idea of making this interview came up at some point before the summer where I sent you an email asking you to list the ten books that had made the most substantial mark on your way of thinking. We are not going to have time to talk about all of them today but also inspired by your radio show, "Brinkmann's briks", I would like you choose three of these books, and imagine the following: you think that you have ended up on a deserted island, and then this island turns out to be not so deserted after all. It is populated with a different but friendly species. The members of this species read our language and are eager to hear about what human beings are occupied with—especially what Svend Brinkmann is reading. So, you get to choose three of these books simply to hand over to these creatures.

S: Perfect.

A: The ten books that you have chosen are: Aristotle's *Ethics*, Immanuel Kant's *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, Steinar Kvale's *Psychology and Postmodernism*, Ian Hacking's *Rewriting the Soul*, Emily Martin's *Bipolar Expeditions*, and Karl Ove Knausgård *My Struggle*.

S: Oh my god, it is so male.

A: I know, I noticed.

S: I did not think about it. That is shameful. I am sorry.

A: That is okay. Emily Martin is happy.

S: Yes, she is there, but she is the only one, is she not? I should definitely have had Iris Murdoch there.

A: Yes, but you did not.

S: I regret that now.

S: So, three books?

A: Yes. Three out of these ten.

S: I do not think these aliens would understand Søren Kierkegaard.

A: No, he is out.

S: So yes, it is too difficult. You cannot begin with Kierkegaard. You could begin with Aristotle, his *Ethics*. If the exercise is to inform them of humanity, they should learn about people like us.

A: Yes, let us say that it is the motivation.

S: Okay. Then I would definitely go with Aristotle as one of the three. Aristotle's psychology is a branch of biology, but his developed understanding of humans is found in his *Ethics*. It is a great book on everything that is important in human life: love, friendship, justice, emotions, everything. That is why we need to "go forward to Aristotle", as Harré said.

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is written in a very non-technical language. In a way like Aristotle's. So maybe they would find pleasure in reading Wittgenstein because it is immediately accessible. It is very deep and difficult in a way, but you can read it immediately. I learned so much from reading Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein might be the single most important philosopher for me, so he will be second.

Then I might go with Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* as the third. We have Aristotle and Wittgenstein. They have very, in a way, generic articulations of what it means to be human. But these alien species should also learn about cultural history. The subtitle Taylor's book is "The Making of the Modern Identity", that is, it is a cultural history about conceptions of the self. Beginning in ancient Greece, it moves forward to romanticism basically. At the same time, it is a philosophical anthropology, that is, a reflection on what it means to be human. But it has much more flesh on the bone compared to Wittgenstein or Aristotle.

A: They covered the basics and then Taylor could teach them or show how this understanding of what it means be human has evolved during the previous 2000 years?

S: Yes. But it is really a shame that these are three men.

A: Yes. You can think about that in your car ride home to Randers.

Society

A: So, we have Aristotle, Wittgenstein, and Taylor. There you go. All right, now we are moving into the last part of this interview that will focus on societal issues. I am going to pose some questions about the role of psychology in the world we live in, and also what that means with regard to our task of educating new generations of psychologists, many of them seated in this room today.

In Denmark and maybe also abroad, you are known as a very publicly engaged academic and psychologist. I also think that it is fair to say that you are well known from being rather sceptic about the role of psychology in the modern world, especially our

tendencies of understanding all kinds of problems in a psychological light. So, Svend, do you think that psychology and psychological research can contribute to a better world?

S: Certainly, absolutely.

A: How?

S: In many different ways. Often through the development of concrete techniques, in psychotherapy for example, or take educational psychological devices that might asses' people in different ways. I can understand why some psychologists are skeptical when I criticize the psychologization and the "everywhereness" of psychology, but, of course, I am not blind to the fact that once we live in an individualized and psychologized world, psychology can, within that framework, contribute to the improvement of human life. I know so many good psychotherapists, for example, that help people every day, so it would be foolish and wrong to deny that.

But I think we can, I addition to looking at these concrete ways of helping people, still discuss large societal issues, whether we sometimes forget about structural inequalities, and use psychological knowledge to adjust people in order to function within this system instead of actually discussing the system as a whole. That is why I am not a big fan of seeing the world only in light of psychology because then you just see a bunch of individuals, who might have dysfunctional thoughts, and then you try to correct their thoughts. But what if their thoughts are actually a reflection of the world in which they live? Then you really should change the world instead of the thoughts about the world.

A: Yes.

S: But it is, I think, a fair critique of psychologization.

A: Yes. Leaving the psychotherapists aside, do we as researchers in psychology have some kind of duty or responsibility to work for a better world?

S: Yes. Every human being has a duty to work for a better world. And every human being has different resources. If you have studied psychology, you have a specific set of resources that you might use. And if you are a very good psychologist, you also know how not to use them. That one size does not fit all. If you just have a hammer, you only see the world as a bunch of nails. The problem is that not everything is a nail so be careful with the hammer.

Technology

A: These psychologization tendencies that you mention, do you think they are going to continue, or how do you view the future influence of psychology in the public sphere?

S: I think that is a wonderful and interesting question. We have not talked about Nikolas Rose, but he has been a huge influence on me as well. I learned about psychologization mainly through his analysis of modern society. And Rose began, maybe ten years ago now, to see different lines of development occurring in our part of the world. Not just psychologization but human self-understanding coming more from biomedical sciences, from neuroscience, from genetics, from now also artificial intelligence and this whole algorithmic world that has exploded since, so I honestly do not know. It might mean the end of psychologization, and that we get something else. A new source of human self-understanding with pitfalls as well as possibilities, or we might see a merging of psychologization with these new and other influences.

For example, when studying ADHD as a diagnosis, I have learned that it is connected to heritability, that there is a neuroscience of ADHD, and you can treat it with medicine. This might make you think that this could be the end of psychologization, since it is an altogether different technological and natural scientific approach. But in reality, when you look at what people say, when they take their medicine, they say, "It is a way of giving space to the real me"; "I can be myself when I take Ritalin." It is suddenly spoken of as a self-realization tool. That is, it is the same trope, the same figure that we have from the psychologized world, coupled with an entirely different technology that has been developed by neuropharmacology. So, I think we are beginning to see crisscrosses that are really interesting. Rose referred to the 20th century as "the century of

the ear.” With the ears we can listen. Freud developed the talking cure by *listening* to what the patient said. The ear has to go beyond the manifest to understand, for example subconscious processes. You know everything about this. You know much more about psychoanalysis than I do.

Then Rose says that now, in the 21st century, we have “the century of the eye.” We no longer listen for latent subconscious meaning. We can see what is wrong with people directly through genetics, the sequencing, or genes, in images from brain scans, in samples from tissue. This is much more one-to-one understanding of human life and human problems, at least that was Rose’s analysis ten years ago: from the ear to the eye. From something deep and latent to something visible and manifest. I believe that there is something to that analysis. It is not complete—the ear to the eye is just a metaphor. But I am really curious to see what happens to our understanding of humans if we have this flattened image of who we are. Perhaps the algorithm knows more about you than you do yourself. You like five things on Facebook, and then the algorithm knows who you are and shows you more of what you are, so you are confirmed that this is who I am, and you just become part of the cycle. You merge with the technology, carry it around and are constantly confirmed that this is a proper self-interpretation. This is where we stand, I believe. Or, I do not know…

A: That is a very long and complicated discussion. You describe it in a very neutral way. To me the century of the eye sounds equally worrying and boring. How do you from a normative standpoint view this development?

S: Yes, it is difficult to assess.

A: Yes.

S: And definitely too soon, too early to judge it because there were certainly many problems related to the century of the ear. You had these “masters of interpretation”—psychoanalysts—and people wanting to educate you based on knowledge about processes that you did not know of yourself. One of the books on the list was Steinar Kvale’s *Psychology and Postmodernism* (1992), and there is a great chapter by a psychologist

called Paul Richer, who says that "psychology, in modern society, is basically part of the police". Not in the literal sense but in the sense of controlling the population. And psychoanalysis who is working with the ear is part of the secret police. When I read that as a student, I thought that was a pretty cool thing to say—I never want to be a psychoanalyst because I do not want to be a part of bad guys from the secret police. Instead, I turned to phenomenology and things that happen on the surface. There is a legitimate critique to direct at these masters of interpretation, who want to "go beyond", right? The assumption that nothing is ever what is seems, that there is always another story. In a way this goes against this idea of personhood that I endorse.

There is no golden age. There were problems before, and there are problems related to this century of the eye. Because if we have no depth, if we have no private space in which to reflect, we can have no freedom. If the algorithm knows you and lays out everything according to its predictions and so on, there is never a reason for you to stop and think for yourself, which means that freedom is history. There is always something to be worried about, but we might need to worry about something else now than we used to. We find ourselves in a new situation.

Education

A: One domain, where this becomes actualized, is the way we educate psychology students. Since we are in a room full of them, let us talk about how we do that, maybe in general but also here at Aalborg University where both of us are working. What characterizes a good psychology program? What do they need to learn?

S: Well, they need to learn how to think. They need to learn how to think for themselves using the tools and ideas that they have been handed over by the researchers teaching them. They also need to know the limits of the discipline into which they are initiated. That is a discussion about psychologization: it is great to use psychology for relevant purposes, but it is not great to psychologize everything in human life. It is great to know the classics—more important than reading everything that is published. But there is a fascination of "the new" in a science like psychology, but almost everything that is

published now is either a repetition of something that was said earlier or wrong. It is a harsh verdict in a way, but if someone is entirely new and surprising in psychology, there is a great change that it is wrong. Because psychology is concerned with the lifeworld, and there is a limit to how surprised we can be about what happens in the human lifeworld, right.

A: They could just read Aristotle?

S: Yes, they could just read Aristotle.

A: That brings me to the next question, which is about the relationship between philosophy and psychology. You have a background in philosophy, the list of inspirations that we went through earlier was primarily a bunch of philosophers, and you teach the course in 'Philosophy of Science" here on second semester. I have not read the curriculum for that course, but I suspect that it at least touches upon philosophical questions. So, would the psychology students here be better equipped having studied philosophy before they start here?

S: No, I do not think so. It has been great for me to have a background in philosophy, and I have strived to combine philosophy and psychology. I have posed philosophical questions to the subject matter of psychology, that is my thing. Everyone is invited if they want to do the same or a similar thing, but for me it is more a matter of having a different disciplinary perspective. I also think that we could have great psychologists with a background in biology.

A: So novel psychology lives through its conversations with other sciences?

S: It is not a necessity. You can be a wonderful, clever, intelligent, empathic psychologist in practice and in research just by studying psychology. No question about it! But I think that it is useful to have people with one leg in another discipline as well because it gives a reflective distance to psychology. The problem with psychology is that it can be about everything. It is not just a natural science or a health science or a social science or a human

science. It is everything. In principle, there is no limit to what we can say in psychology, and this gives us an almost grandiose view of ourselves—a highly inflated self-image that *should* be challenged by people who come from other disciplines.

A: My last two questions are about the university. We have both spent our entire adult lives at the university, and, I imagine, plan to continue doing just that. So, there must be something to say on that matter. Svend, what are the most significant changes that the university has gone through since your first day as a student?

S: I studied psychology and philosophy before the contemporary regulations of universities. Now we have professional boards, who hire the rector, and he hires the deans who hire the head of departments and so on. We have been witnessing a professionalization of the university. It is a market university funded like a private company to a much greater extent than when I began. When I began, people took turns—someone is the head of the department this year and the next year it is someone else. They often disagreed, but they were disciplined by the fact that I might have power now but next year it would be this guy, so I better not mess with him because then he will mess with me.

I will try to discipline my own nostalgia because not everything was great before. There is always something to be worried about. But I am a bit worried about this marketization—the instrumentalization of the knowledge we produce at universities. Think of the recent suggestion to reform our candidate programs in the name of economy. This is far from a positive development as I see it. It instrumentalizes knowledge instead of providing a space where you can really just study and research things that are interesting and relevant in other senses than being economically useful.

A: What is your dream for the future university?

S: Well, a realistic dream I guess could be to continue to have something like a university.

A: That is a good start.

S: Critics of the current Danish university system say that we had universities in Denmark from 1479, when the University of Copenhagen was established, and until 2003, when this professionalization started, which meant the end of universities. We no longer have them because a university is defined as an autonomous entity with tenured positions and people who can say what they want without the risk of being fired, and we no longer have that safety. But I am not that dramatic, I think we still have universities, not just by the name but also in practice, but I do not know for how long. So, we should probably avoid utopian dreams of having Oxford and Cambridge in Denmark. We cannot have Oxford and Cambridge in Denmark until we have private universities, and there are so many other problems associated with establishing private universities, related to inequality and so on. But it might be the best option actually, but that is another discussion. If we do not go in that direction, a realistic wish of continuing to have something like a university is worth fighting for.

A: Sounds like a feasible goal. Let us hope for that. All right, that was it. We have spoken for almost one and a half hour. Thank you very much, Svend.

S: Thank you, Alfred

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank research assistant, Sigrid Kastberg Jacobsen, for her much-appreciated assistance in preparing the manuscript.

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