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Psychology and Ethics: the double face of Janus

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore the relation between psychology and ethics, by studying the epistemo-logical status of psychology. Emphasis is placed on examining the views of positivism, humanism and social constructionism, as regards the relation between psychology and ethics. According to the positivist approach, psychology is an objective, experimental science that should be free of any moral values and of any attempts to determine what is morally right. Proponents of the humanistic orientation have been critical of the "value neutrality" view of psychology and attempted to highlight the moral dimensions of psychological knowledge. Social constructionists have critiqued individual humanism and proposed a relational humanism that would make the relationship networks encompassing individuals explicit.

In conclusion, we established that in examining the relation between psychology and ethics some epistemological contradictions occur, which should be more thoroughly researched.

KEY WORDS: *ethics, positivism, humanism, social constructionism, epistemological contradictions*

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the moral dimensions of psychologists" work, as regards the scope and limitations of their ethical code of practice (American Psychological Association, 1992; Kitchener, 1996; Brown, 1997; Rossiter, Walsh-Bowers & Prilletlensky, 2002). In our view, examining the moral dimensions of psychologists" work depends, to a large extent, on an understanding of psychology's epistemological status.

Psychology resembles the Roman two-faced god Janus, who was the god of beginnings and transitions such as doors, gates and bridges. The one "face" of

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Psychology is turned towards the natural sciences, whereas the other "face" is turned towards the humanities (Kvale, 2003). Advocates of different trends within psychology have often one-sidedly opted for either one or the other "face" of psychology.

THE POSITIVIST VIEW ON PSYCHOLOGY'S VALUE NEUTRALITY

According to the positivist approach, psychology is an objective, experimental science, which should be modelled on the natural sciences. "Psychologists, assuming that physics was the best science, tried to apply the methods and aims of physics to their subject matter –and felt inadequate when they did not succeed. Physics envy is a hallmark of twentieth– century psychology, especially in America. Psychologists engage in a Newtonian fantasy. One day, their faith says, a Newton will arise among psychologists and propound a rigorous theory of behavior, delivering psychology unto the promised land of science" (Leahey, 1997, p. 25). "This approach can be labelled "scientism': the borrowing of methods and a characteristic vocabulary from the natural sciences in order to discover causal mechanisms that explain psychological phenomena" (Langenhove, 1995, p. 14).

Philosopher La Mettrie's (1974) view on the machine man became very popular in the era of industrialization and had a significant impact on psychology's development as an experimental science (Kvale, 2003). Taylor's attempt to establish a modern scientific method for workers" management in the American factories is also worth noting. The behavioural view on objective control and prediction of human behaviour follows along the same lines as the human engineering approach, as laid down by Taylor (Kvale, 2003). According to Watson, "Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behavior" (Watson, 1914, p. 1).

Positivism served as the philosophical justification of behaviourism and contributed to a new definition of psychology as a science of behaviour and not of consciousness (Leahey, 1991). The view of psychology as a science that aims to describe, predict and control behaviour is, according to Smith (2002), an expression of the technological ideal of science.

In accordance with the positivist approach, the requirements of psychological research are the "exact" description of facts, the empirical verification and the control of assumptions, the use of standard measuring tools, mainly on the basis of quantitative methods, and the generalization (extrapolation of some general rules) based on the research of a representative sample. Danzinger has justifiably compared the positivist view of science with the tale of Sleeping

Beauty: "The objects with which psychological science deals are all present in nature fully formed, and all that the prince-investigator has to do is to find them and awaken them with the magic kiss of his research" (Danzinger, 1990, p. 2).

One of the most prominent features of positivism in psychology is objectivism. "As psychology evolved in the 20th century, its practitioners manifested an almost neurotic need to be seen as scientific, by which they meant, just like the physicists, and this led them to reject the subjective world (i.e., the person) precisely because this was not in the physical domain" (Baker, 1991, p. 13). One of the consequences of positivism is the reduction of psychology into a study of individual organisms and not of persons in interaction (Kugiumutzakis, 1994, p. 50). An extreme expression of positivist objectivism is the view that since all things are physically determined –there is no choice and therefore no personal responsibility (Blakemore, 1988). "From the perspective of naturalism, human thoughts, feeling, needs, interests and values are approached scientifically by reducing them to what are taken to be more basic physical, chemical and biological (i.e. natural) processes" (Sugarman, 2005, p. 795).

Many scientists argue that the causal determinism involved in the scientific account of human action is incompatible with the account of autonomy and self-determination that legal, political, and ethical arguments require (Ringer, 1996, 356). Skinner clearly realized the incompatibility of a scientific determinism and morality: "In what we may call the prescientific view (and the world is not necessarily pejorative) a person's behaviour is at least to some extent his own achievement. He is free to deliberate, decide, and act, possibly in original ways, and he is to be given credit for his successes and blamed for his failures. In the scientific view (and the world is not necessarily honorific) a person's behavior is determined by a genetic endowment traceable to evolutionary history of the species and by the environmental circumstances to which he has been exposed as an individual he has been exposed. Neither view can be proved, but it is in the nature of scientific inquiry that the evidence should shift in favour of the second." (Skinner, 1971, p. 101).

This incompatibility is held not only by radical behaviorists but also by other radical psychological determinists. Many researchers criticize the tacit radical psychological materialist reduction of mental to brain behavior and the consequent "elimination" of ethical categories from "scientific" discourse (Webel & Stigliano, 2004, p. 81).

According to the positivist view, psychology should be free from any moral values or any attempts to determine what is morally right (Kendler, 2002). Positivistic psychologists reproduce dominant bourgeois conceptions of aca-

demic knowledge as in principle separate from the world and as independent of moral-political activity (Parker, 2002, p. 71). The positivist view of psychology's "value neutrality" was even reflected in the Ethics Code of the American Psychological Association (APA, 1992): "implicit in the code was a steadfast faith in the ethical neutrality and objective vision of scientifically trained psychologists who are unaffected by human interests, values, ideologies and social locations" (Brown, 1997; Rossiter, Walsh-Bowers & Prilletlensky, 2002).

Led by the "science for science" principle, positivists have examined the scientific research as the sphere of "pure", "objective" knowledge, which reflects the "is" as opposed to the "ought". Many researchers consider the relation between science and ethics by means of juxtaposing "facts" and "moral values". The attempt to derive values from facts, "ought from is", is usually referred to as "Naturalistic Fallacy" (Moore, 1903; Techan, 2004). This fallacy states that one cannot define ethical terms such as "good" or "what ought to be done" in terms that are purely factual, descriptive, and non-evaluative (Kitchener, 1996, p. 377). It was David Hume, who famously observed that an "ought" cannot be logically derived from an "is" (Brinkmann, 2005, p. 750). For empiricist philosophers and scientists, the important and answerable questions are matters of "what is the case". Concern about "what ought to be" is beyond answer –mere metaphysics or worse (Gergen, 1994, p. 99).

The split between facts and values forms one of the manifestations of epistemological dualism, the two poles representing naturalistic objectivism and mentalistic subjectivism. The epistemological dualism of psychological knowledge reproduces the two known poles of natural sciences and mental sciences (Naturwissenschaften, Geisteswissenschaften), the Neo-Kantian conflict between "explanatory" and "understanding" Psychology, and between "nomothetic" and "ideographic" research methods (Cahan & White, 1992; Hill, 1996; Vygotsky, 1997; Dafermos, 2002).

THE HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE IN PSYCHOLOGY

Humanistic psychology made its appearance as the "third power in Psychology", as an alternative to behaviourism and psychoanalysis approach. The proponents of humanistic psychology have criticized positivism in that it idealized natural sciences" research techniques by means of which people have been examined solely as objects and not as subjects. The proponents of humanistic psychology differentiated themselves from the singleone-dimensional examination of individual psychological functions, which was typical of functional psychology, and attempted to explore the human being as a whole person. Humanists have an image of the human being which is holistic, and so as

a result they want to respect and protect the integrity of a person's experience against the attempts to break it down and explain it away. In place of "explanation", then, humanists tend to favour understanding of experience, and so thus they will take peoples accounts very seriously (Parker, 2005, p. 50).

The origins of humanistic psychology can be found in "understanding", "descriptive" Psychology, the advocates of which have tried to illustrate the living connection between the component elements of a person's mental life in its entirety (Dilthey, 1997). The proponents of humanistic psychology have questioned the nomothetic method and the deterministic interpretation of psychological processes and have proposed adopting the ideographic method for examining psychological states (ideographic psychology) (May, 1969).

According to Hergenhahn (2001, p. 506), humanistic psychology combines romanticism (particularly the ideas of Rousseau about humans being inherently "good") and existentialism. The advocates of existential psychology have mostly emphasized the moral dilemmas presented before human beings, the conflict between the individual subject and the moral law, the awareness of their responsibility, loneliness, etc. (May, 1969). If the person is free to choose, as the advocates of existential psychology claim, then he or she is morally responsible for his/her actions.

In contrast to the view of the "value neutrality" of science, Maslow (1970) adopted the argument that science is based on human values. The aesthetic, cognitive and emotional needs are the source of science development, and the satisfaction of such needs constitutes a "value". Dewey's views (Dewey, 1930, p. 296) are of great interest: he argued that all sciences from physics to history "are a part of disciplined moral knowledge so far as they enable us to understand the conditions and agencies through which man lives... Moral sciences areis not something with a separate province".

Many researchers have adopted the view that the human world has moral dimensions and that psychology must change its epistemological "paradigm" and take moral values into account. Brinkmann (2004) by reflecting on the views of Aristotle, Dewey and Heidegger, has attempted to create the framework for a peculiar Moral Ecology. "Psychology cannot even begin to investigate human action without presupposing that there are better and worse ways of doing things (i.e., without presupposing objective value judgments). Second, I argue that understanding human action involves what have been called "thick ethical concepts" (Brinkmann, 2005, p. 757). According to Taylor, to be a fully human person is to become a self-interpreting agent, and a necessary condition to understand ourselves in this way is to exist in a moral space defined by distinctions of worth (Taylor, 1985; Sugarman, 2005).

In contrast to the positivist view of value- neutral knowledge, the advocates

of the humanistic approach give priority to the moral conscience of the concrete subject. The exponents of the humanistic approach have criticized the mechanistic materialism, which examines the human being as a mere physical object that is passively subjected to the laws of physical reality and determinism. According to Maslow (1968), the principle of causality does not apply to psychology, because human beings are not passive participants in events and external influences, but active subjects that interact in complicated ways with the environment and exercise certain influences upon it. The above argument shows that for Maslow causality coincides with the mechanistic approach of causality that prevailed in Physics during the 16th and 17th centuries.

The advocates of humanistic psychology argue that human beings have free will and are responsible for their actions. This is exactly why they think that humans cannot be effectively studied using traditional scientific methodology (Hergenhahn, 2001, p. 528). Some supporters of the humanistic and existential psychology ended up rejecting causality and focused on the description of a person's peak - experiences, such as ecstasy, and psychological elevation (religious experiences, creative experiences, nirvana, etc.) (Maslow, 1968). This trend is particularly evident in Transpersonal Psychology, the advocates of which moved towards examining the borderline and ecstatic states of consciousness, meditation, and the mystic experience. Transpersonal Psychology is "the most recent American representative of a visionary tradition with roots that extend back to the shadow culture of Western rational thought –from the Greek mystery schools, neo-Platonism, and the hermetic tradition, to the Kaballah, Sufism, and on to the 18th century English and German mystics" (Taylor, 1999, p. 16). In this way the abstract anthropologism, the questioning of conceptual, scientific thought and the fetishisation of the immediate experience opens up the way to irrationalism and mysticism.

Humanistic psychology in some respects close to a consumer ideology with its promotion of spontaneity, of living out fantasies and desires, and with individual self-actualization as the goal of life...To the client-centred therapists, the client was the ultimate authority –"the customer is always right"(Kvale, 2003, 591). Some researchers have pointed out that the new middle class offers the social grounds for the flourishing of humanistic psychology, by adopting new forms of consumer behaviour and seeking new, qualitative and "humanistic" standards for moral values and classifications (Alexiou, 2002, p. 374).

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM'S CHALLENGES

During the 1980s ideas related to social constructionism became particularly popular (Gergen, 1991; 1994; 1997a; 1997b; Shotter, 1992; 1995). Social

constructionism has been one of the most ardent opponents of positivistic approaches to the study of human behavior (Brinkmann, 2006, p. 93). According to social constructionists, subjects can neither represent the outer world objectively and accurately, nor produce universal truths. Contrary to the view that knowledge is the reflection of an objective reality, advocates of social constructionist theory view knowledge as constructed within social interaction.

Drawing on social constructionism, K. Gergen has critiqued traditional humanism, which is based on a theory that views the person as being isolated in his/her subjective experience, making decisions in an imaginary and ideal space, free from the outside influence of public opinion. K.Gergen (1997a) questions the "romantic" humanistic view that people have free will and independence. Lovlie (1992) point out that the postmodern "death of the subject" eliminates a basic presupposition of psychology –the idea of an autonomous and intentional agent.

According to social constructionists, within the postmodern cultural context the focus is shifted from self to relationship (Gergen, 1991). The private sphere no longer provides the stage on which the subject's drama is played out, a subject in conflict with its image and its targets, while people are portrayed as the terminals of multiple networks (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 10). The postmodern self is a multiphrenia saturated and populated with the presence of others (Gergen, 1991). In the place of traditional Individual Humanism, social constructionists propose a new Relational Humanism. From examining individual consciousness, social constructionists have shifted their attention towards exploring the relations between subjects, and analyzing the context of their interaction. We come to moral decisions through dialogue and negotiation with others, not through autonomous self-reflection (Gergen, 1991). Modern morality capitulates to pluralism, tolerant of a multiplicity of moral choices made through negotiation and dialogue (Hill, 1996). Contrary to traditional humanism's, the proponents of which place an emphasis on the person's freedom and moral responsibility regarding his/her actions, social constructionists focus on understanding the network of relations in which individuals participate. Therefore, social constructionists attempt to disempower the trend for incriminating individuals for their actions, and to highlight cultural relations, which lead individuals to conflicts and wrong actions (Gergen, 1997b). According to K.Gergen, social constructionism may contribute to the examination of the moral and political context within which psychologists incorporate their theoretical activity and, therefore, to identifying alternative strategies for understanding and acting (Gergen, 1997a).

Social constructionists criticise the traditional attempt to establish a universal system of moral values that determine the behaviour of individual per-

sons. "Principles of the good do not and cannot dictate concrete actions, and any action at any time may be constructed as good or evil from some vantage point" (Gergen, 1994, p. 111). Social constructionists reject the attempts to create a common code of ethics at a psychological and philosophical level, and try to stress out the heterogeneity of the human world. According to K.Gergen, constructionist relativism replaces absolutist claims of universal ethics with a collaborative search for meaning, and disquisitions on transcendental goods with communal considerations of consequence (Gergen, 1994, p. 109).

Smith sees Gergen's antifoundationalism as the abandonment of hope to find a secure foundation for beliefs and values (Smith, 1994). Moral relativism, on which social constructionism is based, may lead to the deconstruction of the moral grounds on which the action of concrete individuals is based, may produce moral vacuity and strengthen a sense that there is no meaning in life.

Social constructionists have adopted the postmodern view that any moral and, more generally, any social ideal constitutes a "grand narrative" and must be rejected. Dismissing any social plans "claiming to be universal or radical" Foucault has argued that the attempt to escape the system of contemporary reality and produce total projects of another society, another way of thinking, another culture and another way to view the world, has only resulted in bringing back the most dangerous of traditions (Foucault, 1988, p. 37). However, to fully deny any moral or social ideal in general, deprives individuals of the possibility to seek out other prospects and get consciously involved in social transformation processes, making them prone to resignation and accepting the dominant status quo.

In postmodernism, the distinction between "moral" and "immoral", as well as the one between "truth" and "lie" becomes uncertain and indeterminable. The examination of moral decisions becomes a matter of point of view and perspective, within the context of the multiple relations in which individuals are embedded. What is seen as immoral by the dominant cultural system, is presented as moral if seen under the light of the person's own sub-culture (Gergen, 1991). Accepting this approach can lead us to a complete relativisation and subjectivisation of morality, which becomes dependent on the various networks of relations that individuals are engaged in. Cultural and moral relativism that forms the core of postmodern thought may legitimize the ethnic, religious and fundamentalist movements, and strengthen the most dangerous forms of "cultural totalitarianism" (Eagleton, 2003, p. 139).

The relativism in postmodern approaches has often been treated by its critics as equivalent to amoralism. Once the grounds for distinguishing between good and evil have been eaten away, then there is no reason why one should not opt for one or the other (Parker, 2002, p. 41). Shotter thus accepts an epis-

temic relativity, where all beliefs are socially produced, but he rejects moral relativity where all beliefs are equally valid, taking the postmodern standpoint that in the forum of scientific judgement questions of justice take an equal place with those of truth (Shotter, 1992; Kvale, 1992).

Brinkmann argues that contemporary consumer societies already work according to the logic of social construction and that constructionism has already has become many people's philosophy. Some points of conversion between constructionism and consumerism are pointed out, including a shared focus on identity morphing, aesthetization of life, and a denial of life's tragic dimensions (Brinkmann, 2006, p. 92).

CONCLUSIONS

In examining positivism, humanism and social constructionism, we established a series of epistemo-logical contradictions, which present an epistemological dualism in the field of psychology. The first one of these contradictions concerns the epistemological status of psychology, its place within the science complex. We have concluded that positivist psychologists have attempted to found psychology upon the epistemological "paradigm" of the "physical" sciences. Positivists adopt the tenets of scientism with regard to the "morally neutral" knowledge, the role of which is being reduced to describing empirical facts. The theoretical project of positivism in psychology has been substantiated in the radical behaviourism of Watson (1914) and Skinner (1971, 1975), who proposed that the internal, subjective aspects of experience must be rejected as causes in the scientific study of human behavior.

Humanistic psychologists present psychology as a humanistic science and give priority to its moral aspects. Humanistic psychologists attempt to explore human personality as a whole and point out the subjective experience of human beings (Maslow, 1954; 1968; May, 1969). The advocates of humanistic psychology focus on the experiences, values, meanings and generally the attitude of the subjects towards the world, on the basis of a subjective philosophy of life. Considering the moral values as something completely distinct from the natural world of experience and as product of actions and subjective will, may lead to the creation of a pre-scientific, metaphysical moral philosophy or even to pure religious irrationalism. Some researchers qualify this paradox as the subjective versus objective Schism (Staats, 1983, p. 114). Kvale argues that the apparent opposites of behaviourist objectivism and humanistic subjectivism are both sides of the same modern coin (Kvale, 1992, p. 14).

The proponents of radical behaviourism examine people as machines that respond to stimuli from the environment, and attempt to process the technol-

ogy of their behaviour. If, however, human behaviour is determined mechanistically by stimuli the organism receives, then the question of the person's responsibility for their actions is being abolished. Many humanist psychologists question causality and uphold peoples" free will. However, should moral choice be detached from the wider context of causal relations within which the person is situated, it then appears as an expression of their subjective arbitrariness. Some researchers qualify this paradox as the freedom versus determination Schism (Staats, 1983, p. 121).

We have also established the occurrence of various approaches to the subject within psychology. Humanist psychologists assume that people have free will and independence. On the contrary, social constructionists critique the romantic view of the free self and attempt to examine the network of relations individuals are nested in. The following question becomes the topic of many scientific discussions and debates: can we speak of individuals with free will or should we accede to the postmodern views on the "death of the subject"?

Conflictual views on the character of human nature and the origins of moral behaviour seem to emerge. Watson and Skinner assume that people are neither good nor bad, but rather neutral. The behaviourists maintain that experience makes a person good or bad or whatever. On the contrary, humanist psychologists, such as Maslow and Rogers, adopt Rousseau's view that people are good by nature (Hergenhahn, 2001, p. 528).

The above mentioned contradictions are not the product of some subjective fallacies or of the arbitrariness by the proponents of different orientations, but rather the product of real difficulties that appear in reflecting on the epistemological status of psychology and its relation to ethics. The proponents of various theoretical orientations overstate and absolutise this or that facet of the epistemological contradictions, highlight one or the other "face" of psychology's Janus, thus eliminating the prospect of understanding the deeper nature of contradiction. Nevertheless, the research into the social and epistemological reasons that contribute to the formation of these contradictions, as well as the bringing forth of the prospect of transgressing these contradictions, should be the topic of a separate study.

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