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Reply to target article: "Inventing the subject: The renewal of 'psychological' psychology"

There is much to be said for our taking a step back every so often, and reflecting on what we are and what we do. Daniel Robinson does this on behalf of psychology. What he sees does not please him. 'To begin, the character of contemporary Psychology appears to some as fragmented, complacent, self-congratulatory and intellectually arid'. It does not take long before we realize that Robinson is among the 'some'. In Robinson's view, the findings of psychology 'rarely make contact with anything of consequence in either mental or social life; a mental or social life whose most compelling contents are drawn from just those moral, aesthetic and the uniquely personal realms that are and must be stubbornly inaccessible to the "methodolology"' (p 2). What does he put in its place? We should study 'the civic, aesthetic, moral and transcendental dimensions of human life', for example by drawing on the 'database' of intellectual and social history and the literature of biography (pp 19- 20).

It would be easy to dismiss this heartfelt plea for re-introducing what is quintessentially human back into psychology – but I do not feel inclined to take this stance (and in fact, I feel unhappy that Robinson gets close to deriding the work of others.) For example, it seems to me a serious and worthwhile suggestion that psychologists should be supplying the Brain Sciences with a psychology worth having. By implication, this means (among other things) resisting the seductive pull of those who tempt us to reduce swathes of psychology to 'cognitive neuroscience'. Why 'cognitive' and not 'affective' or even 'aesthetic'; why 'neuro' rather than 'psycho'? Something funny – if it wasn't so serious – is going on.

And yet… I sympathize but also disagree with Robinson's thesis. The sources of my sympathy and disagreement are partly personal, partly theoretical, so I may as well spell them out. The personal bit is that as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst as well as an experimental psychologist, I am in complete agreement that a whole lot of what it means to be human, and what it means to have a human mind, is missing from much psychology. The theoretical bit is that as a developmental psychologist – and from this purely objective stance, I have always considered developmental psychology to be at the cutting edge of psychology – I do not agree that psychology is either so arid or so marginal as Robinson would have us believe. True, there is a regrettable and at times perverse emphasis within the field, as within other academic disciplines, on publication, publication, publication, with precious little regard as to whether what is published is worth the paper it is printed on, never mind whether it will have lasting value. True, there is a kind of evangelical arrogance in what psychology meets out as the Most Important Facts, and the situation has probably grown worse with the advent of brain imaging and genetic mapping and the apparent status that these assuredly Scientific enterprises confer on psychological endeavours. But in my view… untrue, that psychology is trivial; untrue, that the yield of experimental and observational data, at least in developmental psychology, is more or less irrelevant to deeply human concerns; and untrue, that the only cure for this profound malady is to turn to biography and art, hugely valuable though these domains of human creativity are.

And so it comes to arguing my case. I cannot do so for Psychology in General, because I do not know of Psychology in General. I can do so only for that small part of psychology with which I have first-hand experience. And as I have stated, my argument is not antithetical to that of Robinson; rather, it is less strident, less severe, and more respectful of what is being achieved and – perhaps more important – more optimistic about what can be achieved in the future by following the path we are following, rather than giving up and choosing another route.

For me, the critical questions are these: Firstly, are we learning anything worthwhile for our understanding of human mental life from contemporary psychological investigations? Secondly, is there a reasonable chance that if we go on as we are, then increasingly broad domains of human concern will be encompassed by psychology in a meaningful, albeit not exhaustive, way? Thirdly, how much should psychology seek to address, if it is not to become imperialistic in its ambitions; and as a corollary to this, what kind of interface should exist between psychology and the humanities and other humanistic disciplines?

My answers to these rhetorical questions will be egocentric. I shall proceed by citing specifics, rather than elaborating abstract argument.

Take the domain of research into attachments between infants and other human beings. It is no coincidence that it took a methodological advance in the study of infants' reactions to separations from and reunions with their caregivers to propel theoretical work on relationships among animals (including humans) to the forefront of developmental psychology and, more recently, developmental psychopathology. The reason is that it became possible to study the sources and developmental implications of secure, anxious-ambivalent, anxious-avoidant, and disorganised patterns of attachment between one-year-olds and their parents

– and to provide startling evidence that early patterns of relationship really matter for subsequent self-esteem, social engagement and in certain respects, emotional well-being. More recently, the advent of the Adult Attachment Interview has extended the range of this approach to investigate adults' patterns of thinking and feeling in relation to their own early upbringings, and most important of all, to link qualities of such adult 'mental representations' with the ways these individuals relate to their own infants.

Before tracing the relevance of all this for my thesis, let me give one more example. I have spent the last 25 years or so studying early childhood autism. Autism is a syndrome, which means that it is a constellation of clinical features that regularly go together. The principal features are a particular and profound impairment in personal relations, characteristic abnormalities in communication including language, and restricted and rigid patterns of thinking. It is instructive to observe how, in the years following the first description of autism as a syndrome in 1943, psychogenic accounts soon gave way to theories that cognitive and linguistic factors are 'basic' to the disorder. Psychologists are more at ease with things they can measure, and IQ tests and tests of language were available to do the measuring in these domains of mental functioning, children with autism were abnormal in these respects, so… why should not these things be 'basic'? Somehow the most striking and important thing about autism – what Kanner called the children's impairment in affective contact with others – became marginalized. Then in the last decade or so, autism has become something of a *cause celebre* within developmental psychology, for the reason that it appears to exemplify a relatively specific deficit in what is called 'Theory of Mind' – a fancy and misleading term for knowledge about the mental states of people. But at the same time that the most fashionable theory attributed this impairment to malfunctioning of an innately specified computational device that is supposed to 'decouple' mental representations from the realities they represent, another intellectual position was articulated: that perhaps in autism we can see how our knowledge of persons (with minds) is grounded in our specific quality of *personal relatedness* towards others, including mutual relations involving feelings; that perhaps here we can appreciate just how far human symbolic thought and human culture and human moral values are compromised when a young child suffers profound handicap in establishing and experiencing such personal relations; and that perhaps the phenomena of autism shows us how we need to reconfigure the terms in which we think about human psychology. New ways of conceptualising the relation between what is social and what is individual, between what is thought and what is felt, between how a computer works and how a human being works, between a person's mental 'representations' and what the person represents, become not only possible but necessary to achieve our explanatory ends. Autism even challenges our presuppositions about the sources of aesthetic productivity, in the sometimes breathtaking artistic or musical accomplishments of otherwise very handicapped and intellectually limited individuals with the condition.

So what do these two examples say about progress in psychology?

Firstly, I have already conceded that psychology as presently conducted tends to leave out a great deal that is important. In attachment research, for example, there is room only for a certain level of understanding human relations, and workers are more inclined to think in terms of a child's adaptive or maladaptive 'strategy' of dealing with relationships, rather than taking on board the tempestuous and terrifying depths of disturbed thinking and feeling that can be engendered by parental invasiveness or neglect. In autism research, almost everything in the children's social disability is now attributed to 'Theory of Mind' (essentially, conceptual) impairments, with little thought about the various *pre*-conceptual levels on which the children's abnormal *experience* of themselves in relation to others is not only 'basic' to their disorder, but also far-reaching for their whole mode of existence (on one level, for example, why are there signs that their *bodily* experience is unusual; or on another level, why do they not compete with others?).

Yet having said this, it is precisely the fact that one can address issues like these through psychological methods that one becomes aware not only of what is being left out of our psychology – and here, Robinson's criticisms are accurate and welcome – but also, of how what is being left out belongs with what is already in the psychological frame. Providing one is not too blinkered (and some psychologists are), then *psychological* evidence will prompt revolution in what we see and how we see it. The Truth will out.

Which is not to say that psychology will encompass all that Robinson holds dear. I agree that psychologists need to have firmly in mind all those cultural and historical (and philosophical) concerns that Robinson highlights, because these provide the context within which to place human mentality and give sense to what one is trying to explore as a psychologist. Moreover, I agree that psychologists should have *something* to say that is relevant for these domains. Yet it would be a mistake for psychologists to suppose that their task is to outdo cultural historians, art critics, moral philosophers or even psychoanalysts who apply methods that are more refined for their respective investigative tasks than those of scientific psychology. If psychological psychology is to be renewed, then it needs to recognize where its methods can and should illuminate important questions about human nature and the human mind; it needs to recognise where facts beyond its conventional remit should be respected by, if not incorporated in, its theories; and it needs to acknowledge the serious limitations of its scope and depth. If it does these things, then the potential strengths of psychology will be realized for what they are: modest and substantial.