

Erik Schultz

Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen

The Mystery of the Missing Person

In 1988 I defended my doctoral thesis with the subtitle "The Mystery of the Missing Person". (Schultz, 1988). In many ways I find a familiarity in the errand of this book and Robinson's article, and this is of course one reason for me to find it very interesting. However, it is certainly not the only one. To me the article appears very shrewd in making important points and also rather amusing in style. Besides that, it is written in a pleasant, elegant English language that for sure will gleam in contrast to the inevitable conference-English that I unfortunately have to do with. Through this clumsy medium, however, I shall do my best to throw some comments.

When reading the manuscript for the first time, I got the same feeling as one or another of the few listeners may have in a very small-numbered audience, if the lecturer complains: "Why are there not more people here?" The article seems first and foremost to address an audience that might be rather hard to get within earshot, while some few enthusiastic, united listeners could be very easy to get in touch with. Being one of the last mentioned, I agree in most of what the article has to say, but this is of course not the optimal platform for a discussion. My comments will mainly join in the talk, but there will also be a few questions to some issues that I find a little problematic.

My comments will be structured under three headings. First I want to enhance the critique of the troublesome split between constructionism and neuropsychology and applaud the article for its witty and well placed warning against foolish trends in contemporary professionalism. Second I want to question a tendency in the article to shoot with scattered hails instead of a few torpedoes. Third and last I put a question mark to the notion of the missing "psychological" psychology. It is for sure not to be found in the mainstream, but what about smaller streams? To claim that one has to begin from scratch in making a psychology worth having may be a disputable strategy if some psychologists around in the corners have already begun, because it may provoke a lot of isolated small "great theories" instead of adding to a more impressive, potent alternative to mainstream.

The orthodoxies of positivism

...is a quotation from the article. (p. 16). I find it well placed, and shall explore it a bit further. Comte (1842) had a vision in his philosophical considerations: Mankind has in its long history been inclined to wrong thinking. Take a thunderstorm as an example. In very ancient times people conceived of this meteorological phenomenon to be the emotional expression of

a furious god, that is: an angry subject somewhere out there in nature. To please this angry subject people had to communicate with it, please it with a rain dance for example. Often enough it helped, so people found it worthwhile to communicate with (angry) super subjects in nature. It did not help every time of course, but, as the article so rightly says, there is no "always" in subject's behaviour. (p. 16). In more recent times people, according to Comte, discarded the notion of a number of gods to communicate with, but they tended to see a forceful plan in nature, and a plan is always something that is made by a subject. In ancient times as well as in more recent times people thought of natural phenomena as the expression of one or more super subject's (read: god's) intentions. People, in other words, tended to think transcendently about nature, "transcendently" as it is used in the article.

According to Comte this transcendental thinking makes it possible for people to live with nature's freaks, but they do not learn anything about nature's real nature. The success of the impetuous western science is imbedded in a new way of conceiving nature. You refrain from all ideas about intentional subjects and thereby subjectivity in nature, and think of it all as objects. By this you obtain two things. Firstly, you do not communicate with your focus of interest in science, because whatever you study it is nothing but an object confronting you, never a subject. Therefore instead of appealing through communication - praying, dancing or whatever - you try to find necessary and sufficient conditions for the presence of your objective focus of interest. These conditions are loosely called natural laws. Secondly you learn to discipline your thinking about nature in refraining from seeing subjects and subjective expressions in it, for no matter how tempting it is in some situations to consider your focus of interest as a subject making subjective expressions and having intentions, it has none in reality. Comte called this breakthrough in mankind's thinking for positivism.

This philosophy has of course been very supportive to sciences that have objects as their foci of interest, because in reality objects are nothing but objects. Meteorology for example. It is a good idea to study thunderstorms as objects, because they are objects, and they therefore have no intentions or any hard feelings towards people at all. But what about psychology? What if your focus of interest is the minds of human and apes (and other highly developed animals for that matter)? Have they in reality no intentions and plans and do they not show expressions of subjectivity, such as tender and hard feelings?

According to positivism the answer is no. Precisely therefore Comte could not find any room for psychology as a science. In mathematics universal natural laws determining

movement and placement regarding objects in general are disclosed. In astronomy you find these universal natural laws at work in celestial bodies. In physics you try to find natural laws in simple minor objects in nature, in chemistry you do the same for more complex objectives, and in biology the job is done as to organic objectives. These sciences showed immense improvement in Comte's days, but there was a problem with so called vitality in higher developed forms of life in biology.

Of course there was. And this problem seemed insurmountable as to human beings. As communicating scientists people of course had to communicate each other as if they were subjects, but when people were foci of interest, they were nothing but objective matter.

Comte solved the problem in this way: Human beings have a hard time to avoid seeing each other as subjects in daily life communication, but in reality the necessary and sufficient conditions for human behaviour is to be found in the co-operation of two sets of natural laws. Partly the biological natural laws that determines the biological body and partly the discourses of the society in which a person is embedded. Therefore Comte completed his pedigree of sciences with sociology, and for that reason he is often called the father of sociology. There are mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology and sociology. In science psychological questions have to be answered through a mixture of biological and sociological natural laws. What people do is partly what natural laws in their bodies, especially regarding hormones and brains, determine and partly what societal laws determine. What comes out as a resulting vector of these two sets of determinants is our behaviour. One of the huge central flaws in Comte's positivism is of course to consider societal laws as natural laws, but in his days this mistake was easier to make than in contemporary democracies.

In my opinion one can find this positivistic idea implemented in all periods of the history of psychology. That is why some of us do not like positivism. In the first place Comte's vision of a non existent psychology is of course contravened by making a scientific psychology anyway, but this so called psychology has no real focus of interest. The mystery of the missing person!

In contemporary times the ghost of positivism is as present as always in psychology, such as Robinson's article so clearly points out. A kind of neuropsychology with a proper brain biology but a poor, impoverished psychology (p. 21-22), and a constructionistic interest in societal discourses with no genuine understanding of the essence in psychological foci. The Comtenian mixture of biology and sociology once more tries to do the trick for psychology, so it can be a proper science, and with the sad result, that it becomes no proper science at all but instead a confused profession. The label psychology is in a naughty way put on it, but it is nevertheless obedient to the idea that subjects do not exist; only brains and discourses, biology and sociology.

I want to applaud enthusiastically at the description of contemporary foolishness in mainstream professionalism. Probably the problem is more heavy in the USA than in Denmark, but here we certainly feel the impact from mainstream growing bigger every year. When something is

rotten in the state of USA, it soon will be likewise in the state of Denmark. To use methods suitable for sciences with objects as foci of interest looks like science when used on subjects, it is good for career meritation but not for a psychology worth having, as Robinson puts it. The description in the article of the weekly new great discovery based on a stupid psychology made me laugh, but having finished laughing, I will nevertheless point to some problems that I would like Robinson to consider.

To shoot a monster with scattered hails

I have so far followed Robinson as an allied. In a way this will continue, but now I shall question the strategy in the article. To me it almost shoots on everything that moves with short, sharp and witty critical remarks. I am not ignoring the fact that the article makes a deed out of not presenting a new great theory with a capacity to intrude and hit the enemy with precision in the heart, but the question is nevertheless whether all these minor hails hitting around here and there in the vast hostile environment will do more than causing local annoyance instead of substantial harm. Contrary to the proclaimed modesty of the article in theoretical ambition, I in any case sense the contour of a coherent alternative in the way the article in a prudent way suggests combining lines between civic, moral, aesthetic and transcendental features. Had Robinson chosen to outline these combining lines more forcefully into a lucid gestalt, some problems in the position of the article might have emerged.

I will illustrate this point with one example. The article presents (p 20ff) a list of seven measures in order to make psychology go straight. The second mentioned measure is to keep the sound core of measurements and controlled experiments in sensory psychology and psychophysics. In the third mentioned measure Milgram's famous experiments on obedience serves to illustrate that measurements and brilliantly executed controlled experiments do not teach us anything about "what actually took place among and at the bidding of the Nazis". The reader of the article is apt to conclude that measurements and controlled experimentation is all right in psychology, when we are dealing with the biological foundation of the subject, while this methodology is misplaced in dealing with more substantial core questions to the subject. In dealing with such questions, the third mentioned measure suggests that "the best simulations of life are found in art, in literature, in theatre."

A more forcefully outlined gestalt in the message of the article could be: When psychologists study the borderline between perception and body, traditional positivistic methods are well chosen, but when psychologists study personal and social issues, traditional hermeneutic methods are in place, because in art, literature and theatre aspects of subject's life are interpreted. Interpretation, therefore, is the core method in personality psychology and social psychology.

Now we have two possibilities: On the one hand I may have misunderstood the message of the article; this is not what Robinson means. On the other hand my interpretation of the article is correct; this is precisely what Robinson means. Given the first possibility I can ask Robinson to correct my misunderstanding, but I can stick to the claim that the article invites to this misunderstanding. Given the second possibility, I think Robinson's article has a problem with the requests to psychologists to *begin here*. In the last section I shall explore this.

Begin here

...if you want a psychology worth having!

As a departure point I could start with myself. In everything I have written for the last three decades I have conceived of myself as being on the way the article suggests. In my doctoral thesis from 1988 concerning social perception, I make an epistemology suited to criticise ethologists for not allowing psychologists to score intentions and emotions in behavioural observations, and phenomenologists to study intentions and emotions in other people as sheer observer-experience. I thus show that ethologists and phenomenologists agree upon the notion that intentions and emotions per se do not exist in reality in behaviour, so you can either discard of them in observations of behaviour or you can study them as experience with no claim as to empirical evidence. Through my observations I show that people in general are very good indeed in perceiving other peoples real intentions and real emotions. In my latest book (Schultz 1998) I make a comprehensive analysis of connections between civic, moral, aesthetic and transcendental issues in psychology.

Many of my colleagues in Danish anthropological psychology have also been working on these issues, and especially Engelsted (for example 1989) and Katzenelson (for example 1989) have to me been sources of influence. They have both in lengths explored civic issues in psychology, based on realistic conceptions of the subject.

Robinson may for very good reasons be unaware of this small, provincial stream in psychology, but these fellow colleagues and I have found inspiration from psychologists around the world, who also seems to "have begun". Let me in bulk throw a few names and schools at the table in order to ask a question to the article.

What about the works of C.G. Jung? What about the third force in American psychology? I think of the comprehensive humanistic critique of behaviourism and psychoanalysis from people like Allport, Maslow, Rogers and May. What about the early German Frankfurt School that inspired Eric Fromm and the late Frankfurt School that through the works of Habermas has inspired many psychologists to differentiate between technical, hermeneutic and emancipatoric sciences, and thereby to chance psychology in directions of the two last mentioned? What about Roy Shafers considerations concerning intentionality? What about the Russian psychologists Vygotski and Leontjev, who have a

lot to say about civic issues in psychology and have inspired Holzmann in Germany and Charles W. Tolman in Canada? The last mentioned has in his last works dealt with moral issues. What about Berger and Luckman who pointed out that societal laws are not natural laws? And what about Wundt's "enlightened and enlightening attention" (p. 13) to the subject? What does it mean that it is "officially neglected"?

I could go on, but will not. Instead I will go more thoroughly into my sensation mentioned at the start of my comment, where I felt as if a lecturer asked: "Why are there not more people here?"

I see two possibilities: The first is that Robinson literally means that no one has started to make a psychology worth having. The other is that Robinson grants that some or all of the mentioned colleagues and schools are good examples of psychologists making psychology worth having, but that their numbers and influence on mainstream is like a drop in the ocean and therefore not worthy of recognition.

If the first possibility is the right one, I would like to ask Robinson to tell why all efforts to overcome traditional mainstream from all these psychologists and schools that seems to be on the way wanted by the article are wrong after all. At the end of the day the problem for all psychological investigators using hermeneutic, humanistic methods is the difficulties in making cumulative progress in knowledge instead of sharp, analytic interpretations of issues of to-day.

If the second possibility is the right one, I would like to ask: "Even though only a fraction of psychologists have been working on a psychology worth having, is it not all the same very important to take-off from them instead of ignoring their efforts and say we have to start from scratch?" If we continue to start from scratch, we shall never get anywhere.

References

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