

Reconstructing the Person

Clinical Psychology Forum 162, p.13-16 June 2006-05-30

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[p.13] **Reconstructing the Person**

This paper proposes that feelings, rather than cognitions or behaviours, are the core stuff of human experience and should provide the starting point for clinical understandings.

So far in this special issue, we've suggested in various ways that cognition and its alternatives, narrative and discourse, are not primary in human experience. But what is?

Feeling Bodies

The moment by moment flow of our experience consists, before it consists of anything else, of a flow of embodied sensations or *feelings*. In neural terms, this is the fundamental fabric of consciousness: deprive the brain of all physical feedback from the body, and consciousness also disappears (Damasio, 1999). The body-brain system that enables consciousness provides it, whilst we are awake, with a constant flow of feelings from our viscera, muscles, joints, and skin. These get fluidly interwoven with other feelings, generated on the one hand as part of our emotional responses to stimuli, and on the other as elements of our memories for previous events.

So feelings are not just emotions. They include emotions, but they also include a far wider class of experiences. Being hungry, thirsty or tired are feelings but not emotions, as are being gripped by sexual desire or pain. And there are other half-recognised, inarticulate feelings, that arise fleetingly in social interaction and which lead us afterwards to say things like “well, it just *felt* wrong”. And although they are embodied experiences, feelings are nevertheless thoroughly socialised: evidence for this comes from neuroscience (Damasio, 1994); anthropology (Shweder, 2004); sociology and social theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Charlesworth, 1999; Elias, 1978); and psychology (Benson, 2001; Ginsburg & Harrington, 1996; Ratner, 2000; Shotter, 1993).

Feelings, then, are the core stuff of our psychological being. Because their source is twofold, their character and meaning bears two kinds of influence. On the one hand they are biological, generated from information gathered by the body-brain system to

support the process of homeodynamics. And on the other they are enculturated, or socialised: they are the extra-verbal, non-pictorial, bodily component of elements of prior learning and of memory. Moreover, these two sources, the biological and the social, remain neither separate nor distinct. They interact sensitively and profoundly through the early years of infancy, when important brain systems and structures are still maturing and hormonal-physiological equilibriums are being established, and continue to do so throughout life (see Gerhardt, 2004).

So to be a person is first and foremost to be a feeling body. The feelings that constitute subjectivity give us a constant, “automatic” sense of our bodies: we don’t have to *decide* whether the chair we sit in is comfortable, we just *know*. They bias us toward goals, depending on material influences such as bodily state (hunger biases us towards eating), elements of previous history (a situation that felt bad previously is one we might more readily avoid in the future), and broad patterns of socialisation (people tend to do the things that “feel right” for them, based upon acquired subcultural norms). Feelings also direct our attention, making some objects appear more pertinent and others recede into the background.

Because social and material feelings primordially constitute experience, their influence is continuous. Even when we imagine that we are simply being ‘rational’, the very *form* of our rationality will, in all probability, [p.14] be one that feels appropriate to the current situation (and if not, we will be uncomfortably aware of this). Feelings are not cognitive, in the usual sense of that word: they are not simply information about body and self that enters some kind of decision making model. Rather, feelings are the pre-cognitive, unreflective ground upon which information processing, ‘rational’ choosing and decision making occur. It is not that feelings cannot be taken as information: we can, for example, recognise that we feel tired and make deliberate efforts to compensate. But whether we recognise their influence or not, feelings are *always* present: shaping our goals, biasing our evaluations, and guiding our attention.

Feelings, language and inner speech

Many will be surprised by this analysis since it is often assumed that language, in the form of *inner speech*, is the primary element of subjective experience. Vygotsky

(1962) is often credited with being the first to theorise this, showing how the contents of inner speech are acquired in social interaction. Things said to us during these interactions are first rehearsed aloud (outer or “egocentric” speech, as Piaget called it) before later being spoken wordlessly as inner speech. The claim that socialised, embodied feelings constitute the core of subjectivity is not a denial of the experience of inner speech. The point is that inner speech typically comes *afterwards*, and is not the primary force shaping our activity.

Evidence for the secondary role of inner speech is suggested by work with split-brain patients (Gazzaniga et al., 1996); by studies of people with anosognosia (where impairment consequent upon brain injuries is not recognised or even denied) (Damasio, 1999), and by other, rarer neurological conditions. Drawing on this and other evidence (including extensive experimental findings), renegade cognitive psychologists like Zajonc have also argued for versions of affective primacy, as have most psychodynamic theorists. A similar conclusion may be suggested by empirical studies of discourse which show that what people say is situated and occasioned in orientation to their current social situation, rather than being the simple expression of an “inner” decision-making process (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Such evidence suggests that there is a kind of primacy to feelings, and that inner speech functions to make sense of them, relate them to things that are going on: to *fix* them, if you will, such that we can represent them to ourselves and *know*, in a thoroughly human sense, what our feelings mean. Through inner speech we make sense of our feelings, and because what we tend to remember of situations is the sense we made of them inner speech can appear primary. But the appearance is illusory: as Vygotsky himself theorised, inner speech functions to *complete* feelings, which always come first. This does not mean that inner speech has no influence, since clearly it does. We can, indeed, consciously choose to do one thing rather than another: not to have that extra cream cake, for example. But when inner speech guides our actions in these ways it does so by calling out further, alternate states of feeling. Indeed, the everyday phrase we use to reference such moments – “talk ourselves into...” – already suggests the secondary role that language typically has.

So things that happen evoke feelings, which we name with inner speech. This inner speech can call out more feelings, which in turn may incite further commentary or

reflection. There is a constant iteration between socialised feelings and socially-derived inner speech, a dialectical relationship, a ceaseless flux of fluid movement from one to the other. But because language is representational in ways that feelings are not, our introspection and memories tend to emphasise the *words* that became relevant to our state of being rather than the nameless feelings that preceded them. Words (our own, or other people's) can call out states of feeling, and they can to some extent *guide* or *channel* feelings we already have so that we act upon them, or relate to them, in one way rather than another - and again, when it fulfils this role we easily imagine that language *made us do* what we did. In these ways language and inner speech are hugely significant in our experience of being a person, [p.15] so significant that they can appear primary in our experience. But the real primacy lies with feelings.

Making it up as we go along?

At least since Spinoza, thinkers have recognised that feelings resist conscious efforts to change them. Since one of their key functions is to imbue subjectivity with a character appropriate to the material and social conditions we occupy, this may not be surprising. Feelings are how our primordial being-in-the-world is disclosed: both as habitual embodied intentional stances (which psychologists usually refer to using such constructs as "beliefs"), and also momentarily, in the here-and-now, in our immediate, pre-cognitive responses to things that happen, the events that occur and the situations we encounter.

However, this is not to say that socialised feelings simply and unproblematically locate us in our worlds, since our fully human sense of our selves only emerges from their dialectical interaction with language (relationally, and as inner speech). But the fundamentally non-verbal character of feelings problematises their direct translation into words; moreover, the actual sources of our feelings are sometimes mysterious to us. So although feelings influence the trajectory of inner speech they do not wholly determine it. For example, if we fail to notice or recognise what prompted a particular feeling, our interpretation of it may be incorrect. Moreover, we often have good reason to disavow our feelings: to keep us going to a job we dislike, to avoid hurt to someone we care for, to protect ourselves against understandings too difficult or painful to contemplate. In these ways inner speech imbues our experience with a realm of ideality that can be both protective and harmful. In some situations, too,

feelings may be mixed, vacillating or confused, further problematising their interpretation. Scheff (2003) proposes that the mixture of fear and shame is especially toxic, for example, and possibly productive not only of erroneous interpretations but also of aggressive or even violent behaviour.

As a result, the view from the fleeting point of “rational” reflection that is “I” is always somewhat limited. Introspection is in any case not a natural ability, but rather a mode of culturally plausible commentary on the reasons for our own behaviour that, like other metacognitive abilities, we develop through interaction with others (King-Spooner, 1990). Compounding this, there are often too many influences making up our present for us to be cognisant of them all without getting hopelessly lost in reflection. Moreover, much of what we feel is driven by immediate situational, environmental or social structural factors, or subtended by neural mechanisms that operate outside of conscious awareness. The sources of other feelings are chronologically distant, or otherwise hard to identify – for example because it is in our immediate interest to ignore them, or because they are the outcome of social forces that remain mysterious to most of us (Smail, 2005).

Consequently, we are in important ways making it up as we go along. We are, in fact, making our *selves* up as we go along, spinning out narrative constructions to fix our experiences, to render them coherent, sensible, morally acceptable, and rationally accountable to ourselves and others, according to prevailing subcultural norms. Nevertheless, our selves are not just socially constructed in discourse. They are socially *co-constituted* - in language and discourse, to be sure, but also, and much more fundamentally, in the embodied, material, socially situated flow of our being in the world. In this way, we are *being made up* by the experiences our narratives strive to fix, and this making up is more important and powerful than the retrospective ordering that mere narrative provides.

Inevitably, then, selfhood is a somewhat fragile achievement. Those whose early parenting was insufficient to protect them from the hardships they encountered already know this, to the very core of their being. Where parenting is more adequate, however, and where the acquired internal dynamic (of feeling and inner speech) continues to resonate in broad consonance with the social and material conditions that

shaped it, the [p.16] self may garner the illusion of solidity and permanence. But when power causes social and material conditions to change, and particularly when those changes are sudden, large and uncontrolled, this apparent stability may be revealed for the sensitive interdependence it actually is. In such ways, states of distress are produced.

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