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Psychology's Progress and the Psychologist's Personal Experience

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The research interests and prejudices of "objective" scientists appear to be determined by a variety of influences. But one for which it is especially difficult to compensate is the tendency to study and give credence only to personal and common experience. Thus an uncommon experience, even if the minority experiencing it reports it to be beneficial and easily achieved, tends to remain uncommon. It seems important that psychologists be especially open to the possibility of exceptional human experience. Yet responses to an exploratory survey of 96 psychologists attending a regional meeting suggest that, in the case of the "pure awareness" experience (reported and lauded by a few in nearly every generation and culture), lack of experience is associated with doubt about the value of even researching the phenomenon. Recommendations for correcting such blind spots are presented.

In a spirit of self-reflection, science has begun to study itself. We now have a sociology of knowledge (Manheim, 1949) and of science (Barber & Hirsch, 1962) and a psychology of knowledge (Atwood & Tomkins, 1962) and of science (Mitroff, 1974), as well as a sociology (Buss, 1975) and psychology of psychology (Coan, 1973). (And presumably soon a psychology of psychology of psychology, when one of us becomes curious as to why some psychologists study their colleagues).

One result of all this valuable self-scrutiny has been the not-too-surprising dethronement of impersonal objectivity as the only stance of the True Scientist. Instead, as Mitroff (1974) concludes, objective scientific knowledge seems to be distilled from the *subjective* insights of well-trained scientists (who even get excited about their insights, devoted to them, and engage in impassioned disputes about them). These insights, accompanied by their relevant research data, are then filtered through the rest of the scientific community, which is less involved in the issues, to determine their "objectivity." Of course, this filter will also be biased by the constraints of the prevailing paradigm. All of which makes objec-

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tivity less a quality of scientists than of their discoveries, after those discoveries have proven repeatable (reliable) and received consensual validation. And this makes sense—given the *practical* meaning of objective: a quality ascribed to a phenomenon when enough people have experienced it (or think they could), at which point everyone agrees it must be "real." (When ideas are widely experienced as true, they become a paradigm.)

People can of course be wrong about reality. Whole groups of them get misled. Nor can we be perfectly sure *any* experience is the same as another, even when we call ourselves behaviorists and the experience is reading a pigeon-peck counter. Wundt (in Brett, 1912/1962) made this point when he called psychology the first science, the science of experience itself, and saw other sciences having to settle for second hand data, the objects *of* experience.

This preface is not meant as a discouraging lecture on solipsism. Nor do we feel we should ever cease to expect and demand scrupulous data collection and analysis. We only wish to give a practical reminder that science is a human affair, and like other human affairs requires discretion and insight into motivations and effects.

What determines the interests and prejudices of psychologists? Sociologists have a head start on the answer: the shaping of research interests and prejudices by positive and negative social reinforcement is easy to observe. From graduate school to the grave, paradigms and politics prevail. Research grants, publications, positions, tenures, smiles—they all depend on a delicate balance of creative orthodoxy.

But psychological determinants of research values are more slippery. Certain basic predispositions have been noted: to be intuitive versus objective (Schaeffer, 1953) or restrictive versus fluid (Coan, 1973). In turn, a few possible causes of these causes have been offered: anxiety (Fisher & Fisher, 1955), role modeling (Schaeffer, 1953), and age (Lipsey, 1975). In a less reductionist vein, biographies have been searched for childhood experiences that seem salient—exposures to stimulating phenomena, crucial insights—that scientists felt decided their research interests and theoretical orientations (Atwood & Tomkins, 1976; Roe, 1953).

While age and levels of basic polar predispositions and anxiety, probably are fairly normally distributed through the population, we think the last—certain precipitating subjective experiences (or their lack)—may be more skewed, and thus more salient when trying to identify

widespread, systematic gaps and prejudices in the pursuit of knowledge.[1] In exploring this thought, we will use as a case study the phenomenon of higher states of consciousness, especially the pure awareness experience, and psychologists' experience with, attitudes toward, and research on them. At times we will draw on our own experience—Transcendental Meditation research being one of our main interests—as we (1) outline the reasons for considering the role of psychologists' personal experience in the progress of psychology, (2) present some supporting data and observations, and (3) offer some suggestions.

Gaps in Experience Often Mean Gaps in Knowledge

As handmaiden to the larger effort, the psychology of science seems mainly to explore how the sciences can manage to harvest objective truth from subjective scientists. Which gives the psychology of psychology the most tricky assignment of all—discovering how the human mind can harvest truth from itself about itself (or about other minds, which it cannot help but assume to be essentially like itself). This is important work, however, because unlike gaps and errors caused by wider social forces, which seem to correct themselves when their effects become obvious—psychological gaps may never be noticed by either the scientific "filter" of colleagues or the public, especially gaps due to *lack* of experience. Psychologists are very unlikely to take an interest in an uncommon psychological phenomenon, especially if they have not personally experienced it (unless it can be very easily and objectively measured, as with color blindness, or society needs and supports its investigation, as with psychopathology). Thus, if an otherwise normal individual describes an unusual subjective experience to a psychologist, even if it has important but nonadverse behavioral consequences, unless the experience can be reproduced in the psychologist (and the psychologist cares to try) or some objective measure of the experience easily demonstrated (and the burden of operationalization lies with the nonpsychologist experiencer), that experience is not likely to be researched. After all, why try to objectify something for which one, personally, has no evidence? Why fight the obstacles of skepticism and lack of financial

[1]In addition, the approach *feels* like psychology. While personal experiences are undoubtedly influenced by biology (e.g., age) and society (e.g., through role modeling), personal experience seems to emerge from the interplay of these factors over time to yield peculiarly psychological phenomena (Atwood & Tomkins, 1976). Another argument for examining personal experience more closely is that it seems closer to the tradition of starting infant sciences on a diet of simple observations of what-happens-when.

support to prove someone else's uncommon experience is valid as they perceived it?

But psychology has been left with the responsibility to understand human subjective experience—to some degree—even though that experience must ultimately be objectively verified through the observation of behavior. For, inconvenient as it is, most of our social problems do seem to boil themselves down to ones of "subjective" psychology. Even the global energy shortage is ultimately a shortage of intelligence, creativity, and the ability to delay gratification. Therefore, society cannot afford any non-self-correcting gaps in psychology. In particular we cannot afford to ignore unusual phenomena that may represent solutions, stumbled upon by a few individuals, to widespread human problems. Yet we all too often do ignore these uncommon experiences: "spontaneous" recoveries from addictions and mental illnesses are one example. Another is psychology's focus upon the common experience—the potent effects of society on the individual—while largely ignoring the less common but crucial experience of individuals affecting society, a major mechanism of social change (Aron, 1979).

We consider the most serious gap produced by the exclusive focus on common experience to be the ignoring or explaining away of the uncommon experience of higher states of consciousness. These experiences have been reported in similar terms in every generation and culture (Aron & Aron, Note 1), but always only by a few. They appear to have remarkable positive effects on behavior, and also to have clear physiological indicators (e.g., see Orme-Johnson & Haynes, in press). Yet transforming these preliminary discoveries into well-researched phenomena, so that they are publicly supported and a *common* experience, seems to require a lifting by our own bootstraps that is almost impossible: those who research and reinforce research interests naturally want first to have this experience themselves, or at least see irrefutable evidence that it exists, before they will explore the phenomenon. But they will not take the steps either to experience it or to see that high quality (high cost) research is done and published, until someone else has proven the experience exists.

An Exploratory Questionnaire and Some Observations

To test this suspicion, we developed a simple questionnaire which opened with a brief description of what is probably the most frequently occuring higher state of consciousness—the "oceanic," "transcendental,"

or "pure awareness" experience.[2] A substantial, though not widely-circulated, body of data exists on those reporting this "transcendent" experience, mainly from those practicing the Transcendental Meditation program. (While other techniques in the past and present have no doubt produced this experience, they are neither as standardized or as widely practiced.) The experience apparently has specific physiological correlates (high EEG coherence, Levine, 1975; long breath stoppage without compensatory breathing, Farrow, 1977) that distinguish it from general relaxation (Glueck, 1977) and that correlate highly with specific changes in behavior (Orme-Johnson and Haynes, in press). However, while our description was based in part on this research, it did not mention the Transcendental Meditation program or use terms associated with it. Following the description, several questions were posed, including:

1. Have you ever had or thought you had the experience described above?
2. Have you known individuals who thought they had had such experiences?
3. In your opinion, should psychology study individuals reporting such experiences?
4. Would you recommend the publication of an article on this topic in a major APA journal if it met the same criteria of scientific and scholarly soundness as articles on other topics?

At registration on the first day of the 1981 meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, 96 individuals completed the questionnaires (all that we had printed, although we could have distributed more). Mean age was 33; 40 females responded; 52 were from university settings; half had Ph.D.'s, a quarter M.A.'s, and the rest B.A.'s or lower (in the data to follow the 6 undergraduate responses were dropped); 12 described their interest area as experimental, 62 as clinical, and 21 as social, developmental, industrial, educational, physiological, or other.

Sixty-four of 90 had never had the experience, 11 had had it once, 8 yearly, 4 monthly, and 3 daily. Twenty-eight individuals thought they had no friends who had; 15 had one experiencing friend; 28 had 2 or 3 experiencing friends; 17 individuals had many experiencing friends.

As seen in Table 1, having the experience was significantly related to

[2]"Many individuals past and present have described 'oceanic' or 'transcendent' experiences during which they report feelings of unboundedness—of eternity or infinity—and a sense of well-being or wholeness, both during the experience and after. While thoughts and feelings may accompany these experiences, they usually are reported to be essentially 'beyond thought,' an experience of consciousness *itself,* devoid of its objects (thoughts, feelings, perceptions). To some, consciousness has even seemed to be the very essence or basic constituent of the universe. During these experiences, they frequently report their breath stopping and other physiological functions slowing, while full alertness is maintained. Persons claiming to have this experience often also typically feel it has a highly beneficial effect on their abilities and satisfaction in life."

Table 1

Questionnaire Responses

		Self Had Experience		Friend Had Experience	
		No	Yes	No	Yes
Psychology should study	No	27	3	17	12
	Yes	35	24	10	49
Publish sound article in APA Journal	No	17	6	14	9
	Yes	47	20	14	51

thinking psychology should study this experience ($\chi^2[1] = 8.86$, $p<.005$). Having a friend experiencing it was even more highly related ($\chi^2[1] = 15.85$, $p<.001$). As for recommending publication, own experience was unrelated but friends experiencing was related ($\chi^2[1] = 12.12$, $p<.001$).

This small, exploratory questionnaire is certainly informal. In particular, we realize the demand characteristics were strong (though presumably against our prediction) and the direction of causation could be questioned (perhaps interest leads to experience, non-interest to non-experience, instead of the reverse). Still, it suggests in part why at least one rather remarkable nonordinary phenomenon is not yet a standard topic in psychology: the few psychologists who have had the experience or, interestingly, have had friends who have, are eager to see it studied. The rest are not. And while not having the experience personally was not frequent grounds for rejecting for publication any well-conducted research, having friends who had had the experience made such a recommendation significantly more likely. Apparently *some* objective verification of a personal nature is helpful, and perhaps a friend's experience seems even more valid (or less threatening) than one's own when the publication arena is the context.

The gap in psychology created by this gap in psychologists' experience is easily observed. Research on higher states of consciousness, although actually quite extensive, is remarkably under- or misrepresented in accessible journals. (And introductory text books as well. Of 40 texts we surveyed at SEPA, 1980, only 2, in our opinion, covered the topic with even marginal adequacy. When we communicated this to authors, they were uniformly contrite: "It's a new field," "There isn't much research on it." The problem is obviously circular.)

It is odd, and a little troubling for psychology, how uncomfortable psychologists can become when confronted by unfamiliar experiences.

One of those approached in our study began to read the "transcendent" experience paragraph and then wadded up the questionnaire, threw it vigorously to the ground, and exclaimed, "Oh _____, not more of that self-actualization _____." And as we and colleagues have submitted articles in this area over the years, we have reaped from our fellow "objective scientists" many helpful suggestions—and a collection of invectives of truly astounding vehemence and grandeur. In our opinion, a number of sound, provocative studies have been forced into less-read journals or back into files because of a gap in the reviewers' experience. No doubt the various submitted materials had their shortcomings, but Barber's (1976) dictum in his *Pitfalls in Human Research* also appeared to apply: "Research results which are in harmony with a prevailing paradigm are generally viewed as acceptable whereas those which are inharmonious are generally viewed as not acceptable" (p. 8). Barber also describes Goodstein and Brazis' (1970) mailing of an abstract of a study on astrology (a field with which *we* might have trouble being fair) to a random sample of psychologists. The design of the study reported in all abstracts was identical, but half reported positive, half negative findings. Nevertheless the study supposedly finding negative results was rated to be better designed, more valid, and more adequate in its conclusions.

But how can anyone be objective about consciousness? It isn't easy, but we do it all the time. We begin by counting the heads of the people (or *Ss*) we know who have had the experiences—apparently counting our friends as equal to about 50, ourselves as 30—and then study it—identify as many different covariables as possible. For example, if a subject has been lying still with eyes closed for several hours, has REM and "stage 1" EEG, and if roused, reports vivid mental images, do we doubt she or he was asleep and dreaming? No. After all, we dream every night ourselves, and know others who describe the same experience. We even know its physiological correlates. So it is all right. It is science.

However, if after meditating a subject reports she or he has experienced "pure awareness"—no thoughts or perceptions, just unbounded alert awareness—apparently those of us unfamiliar with this experience may well have our doubts even about physiological correlates! An experience becomes objective when it sounds like our own, when it is shared, it is common.

But again, if psychology must limit itself to experiences shared by almost everyone, it will be overlooking all exceptional experiences. We feel that if these exceptional experiences are predictable and affect variables that we all *can* experience through the scientific method, and especially if their after-effects may be highly beneficial, as may very well

be the case with the pure awareness experience, then such experiences are a high priority for research, for they may represent important steps in human progress.

Recommendations

Fortunately there is a way to fill gaps in the appreciation of uncommon but perhaps useful phenomena: Psychologists only need to recognize that their personal experiences are but a subset of all possible human experiences, and that forcing others' experiences into existing molds (for example, reducing the "pure awareness" experience to a "relaxation response") may lose much information about the ways to improve the existing mold. We suggest four cures for this form of narrow-mindedness:

1. If the experience does not appear to be harmful—and, obviously, if it appears to be beneficial—have it.

2. Do not be mesmerized by what Mitroff (1974) calls the "storybook version" of science. Yes, science proceeds objectively, but it also proceeds very subjectively, as he found in his study of NASA lunar scientists:

> For too long one of the myths we have lived with is that science is a passionless enterprise performed by passionless men, and that it *has* to be if it is to be objective. What this myth ignores is that many of the great scientific achievements of the past have been the result of passionate, if not outright biased, inquiries. I wish to show that science is no less objective because of this passion. Indeed, there are serious reasons for contending that science is more, not less, objective *precisely because of* (and not in spite of) the presence of great passions (pp. 23-24).

To apply Mitroff's thoughts to the case of research on the pure awareness experience, we can assume it will be initially researched, theorized about, and, yes, "promoted" mainly by psychologists who have experienced it—not, we believe, for status or profit—the rigorous scientific study of topics outside the mainstream is rarely rewarded in these ways. Rather, scientists take on such burdens mainly to gain consensual validation of their own unusual personal experiences; and, perhaps, even to serve humanity—in this case, perhaps to offer the same benefits and pleasures they feel they have gained. So do not reject such forthright proponents lightly. Their stubbornness puts them in good company—Darwin and Einstein, to name two. It just may be that they have actually experienced something the majority has not.

3. Expand your perspective historically. In the case of higher states of consciousness, one finds psychologists in the past, such as Fechner and James, who had great confidence in the existence of such states, and others who at least warned against projecting one's own state onto others. (Freud said of an honored friend's "oceanic feeling" that it gave him "no small difficulty," as he saw its significance for his theory, but could not discover the feeling in himself. "But this gives me no right to deny that it does in fact occur in other people." (1930/1961, pp. 11-12).

4. And expand your perspective cross-culturally. Again, in the case of states of consciousness, many cultures systematically alter consciousness, and from the East we have elaborate descriptions of higher states (the Vedic tradition describes four, e.g., Maharishi, 1972) which are said to be as different from one another and from the or-

dinary waking state as the ordinary waking state is different from the sleeping and dreaming states. Each of these is said to provide an entirely new perspective on the world. Really new perspectives seem to be in short supply these days in both psychology and society. And obviously, new perspectives do not arise from common experience.

It is not easy to imagine experiences we have never had. For psychologists who are trained to be skeptical, it may seem unnecessary, or even dangerously open-minded. We may actually feel it is our duty as scientists to dismiss such experiences, even warn the public of their nonexistence. However, on the other hand, we will all agree that we would never wish to see mainstream psychology acting as a roadblock to human progress. So we must take care.

Reference Note

1. Aron, A. & Aron, E. What is consciousness? Perennial hypotheses in light of Transcendental Meditation research. Paper presented at the meeting of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology. Birmingham, April 1980.

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