UP AGAINST NASRUDIN

by

Helen Graham

Like the god Janus, psychology has a dual aspect. It has two perspectives, facing as it does two fundamentally different realities, for psychology is, as Hetherington (1983) observes, what people do and suffer. It is concerned with both the public world of outer behaviour and the inner world of experience or consciousness. Throughout its history psychology both comprehended and accepted the dual nature of its subject matter until the late nineteenth century when it became an inconvenience and an embarrassment to a discipline seeking scientific status alongside the natural sciences which, in addressing solely public phenomena, had no such dilemma. Thereafter, in order to gain acceptance as a science, it became necessary for psychology to conform to the scientific research tradition which is empirical rather than theoretical and defined by a method which rejects all but objective or positive fact. Unfortunately, as Laing (1983, p.9) observes, "No experiences, ordinary, everyday, usual or unusual, whether impressions, ideas, dreams, visions, memories, strange, bizarre, familiar, weird, psychotic or sane, are objective facts".

In confining the study of man to those of his aspects which are objective facts - physical behaviours - psychology precluded from its investigations any examination of experience, consciousness, senses, feelings and will, thereby eliminating what is essentially and distinctively human. Thus in suppressing its human face and squeezing out consciousness, psychology has, as Heather (1976) suggests, effectively murdered the man it claims to study. Moreover, it has done so with a singlemindedness which might be admirable were it not so absurd, Wittgenstein (1922) highlighted this absurdity by pointing out that psychology has methods but conceptual confusion. Indeed its confusion is in no small measure a direct outcome of its method - the experimental method, which Richer (1975) defines as the method of having a theory first and then trying to find phenomena to fit it. As he points out:

Failing to have an explanation for something is an everyday problem, but failing to have something to explain, yet having an explanation all the same (of what?) is a bizarre state of affairs. (p.344).

Contemporary psychology's attempt to understand man by experimental study of only his outward physical behaviour can thus be likened to that of Nasrudin* who, despite having lost his key indoors, searches for it in the street outside because it affords more light. Accordingly, psychology can justifiably be accused of converting method into madness (Child 1973), and almost astonishing irrelevance (Vine, 1977). Much experimental psychology, in its "decline into the science of party games" (Claxton, 1977, p.100), has therefore become the object of derision. Indeed, as Koch (1964, p.20) has indicated, "When the ludicrousness of the situation is made sufficiently plain perhaps it will be laughed out of existence"..

My feeling is, however, that its demise will be attended by yawning rather than laughter, for as Claxton (1977, p.97) observes: "Anyone involved in the teaching of psychology cannot but be aware that a lot of the students find a lot of it boring". Many students simply do not find the harsh glare of experimental method particularly illuminating and regard its discoveries as trivial, irrelevant to basic human concerns and their fundamental interests. They would prefer to forsake the clarity and precision afforded by objective scrutiny of behaviour for the investigation of the place 'where man lives' - his inner world of conscious experience.

Certainly upon returning to undergraduate psychology teaching six years ago after several years involvement in the training of professional counsellors, I discovered among students a profound dissatisfaction with, and disaffection for, the experimental, mechanistic orientation of contemporary psychology. I was also struck forcibly by the fact that courses in psychology were not reflecting important developments within the discipline or the physical sciences. More recently these observations were confirmed by Butters and Ward (1986) in their survey of final year undergraduate students of psychology. They found that most students had embarked upon the subject because of their interest in people and humanity and with the expectation that the study of psychology would provide insight into, and understanding of themselves and others. However, almost half of them reported that their expectations had not been met, and that they had found psychology boring, irrelevant and 'dead'. Many cited experimental design and method, data processing and statistics as specific sources of dissatisfaction, leading the authors to conclude that 'over-emphasis on experimental method has a negative effect in terms of interest and exclusion of other perspectives such as humanistic psychology' (p.54).

That these observations are not merely specific to one psychology department is indicated by Vine (1977) who, in reporting the results of a survey of psychology teaching in British universities, concludes that courses in psychology are generally

* Shah,I. **The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin** 1978, p.26

failing to reflect serious criticisms of the methods and paradigms within which behaviouristic, mechanistic and cognitive psychology have traditionally worked and shifts of emphasis in the discipline. He observes that despite the lip-service paid in some courses to humanistic psychology, figures such as Felly and subjects such as experimenter effects, there is very little sign that the significance of conscious experience, subjective and inter-subjective construal of reality, or the essentially purposive nature of most human action has so far permeated into modern psychology as taught in British universities. He claims that psychology teaching still seems set in a basically behaviouristic and mechanistic mould which ensures its basic irrelevance to major human concerns and everyday human experience, concluding:

> *If psychology is to do justice to its primary subject-matter, namely human beings, and if it is to achieve the public acceptability and utility necessary for it to become an effective branch of scientific enquiry and an instrument for humanistic social change, then we must be more prepared to respond to these new insights in our discipline. In particular these must be more rapidly reflected in the content of our courses for psychology students. (p.377)*

It was for precisely these reasons that I took the opportunity afforded by all existing course option scheme and in 1981 introduced a one-year course in Humanistic Psychology. This was enthusiastically received by a number of students and has since proved to be a popular course with some fourteen students (20% of the final year class) pursuing this option every year. However, the reaction of colleagues to this initiative was rather less than enthusiastic

The dominant ethos of science, as Hudson (1966, 1972) among others has indicated, is very macho. The pursuit of hard facts seemingly demands hard men - the most streetwise of whom (in Nasrudin's terms) are hostile towards those who appear to them to reject scientific outlook in favour of humanistic insight. Any attempt to find the key to human understanding by groping around in the dark interior of human consciousness is simply not in accordance with their restrictive and altogether too-simplistic definition of science. Moreover any such attempt, necessitating as it does, reliance on feelings is seen as both sensual and domestic, and by implication, effeminate. This view is reinforced by the hazy notion that humanistic psychology is something to do with long-haired, beaded hippies and other trendies emoting and otherwise 'letting it all hang out'; and, in my case, by being the only female on the teaching staff. Accordingly my course in Humanistic Psychology was disparagingly dismissed as a 'soft option'.

Frosch (1982) has pointed to the way in which the academic socialization process operates within departments of psychology. Interest in various areas is rapidly suppressed as students conform to departmental expectations, which in too many cases is that nothing apart from experiments is relevant to psychology. The idea that Humanistic Psychology is not

psychology in any accepted or acceptable sense of the word is therefore implanted early on by both implicit and explicit means. Accordingly many students feel that to admit to an interest in humanistic issues, much less opt to study them, will reduce their standing in the department, the esteem in which they are held by certain members of staff, and their chances of gaining a good degree.

The mythology surrounding Humanistic Psychology persists for a number of reasons, chiefly the lack of suitable literature on the subject which ensures a continuing climate of ignorance in which further misconceptions can flourish. This is not to say there are no books on the subject. They are abundant, but many of them have a very narrow focus, addressing only limited or specialized aspects of the subject area of Humanistic Psychology, which gives the impression that its concerns are diverse, diffuse and unrelated and that it lacks coherence as a discipline. Any hope of conveying its characteristic holistic perspective is therefore doomed to failure from the outset. Most of the available books are American publications which underrepresent, and arguably even distort British and European contributions to the field. Their style is often evangelical and with an apparent distaste for the presentation and evaluation of either theory or evidence which makes them unsuitable for academic use. British sources are relatively few and have a tendency to emulate their American counterparts in both style and content. They tend towards the jargonistic and inspirational and in their reworking of American material offer little in the way of originality. Not surprisingly, therefore, references to humanistic psychology in academic texts, tend to be highly critical and dismissive. Even so, much references are a comparative rarity, and actual textbooks on the subject even rarer. Even the best of them, in my view Shaffer's **Humanistic Psychology** (1978), suffers a number of limitations which reduces its suitability for use by British students. Perhaps the greatest drawback is its price, which at around £15 for a slim volume of 193 pages is far from attractive. Even so, whilst providing a fairly solid, albeit incomplete and rather superficial coverage of issues, it is now out of date. Thus it reflects nothing of humanistic psychology's compatibility with, and contributions to recent developments in the physical sciences which are to my mind the most important aspects of the subject. Furthermore, whilst the author rightly insists that the development of humanistic psychology needs to be seen in its wider socio-cultural context if it is to be adequately accounted for and understood, he then fails to provide such a framework with the result that the book lacks structure and coherence. For this reason I have found it unhelpful in orienting students and providing them with a basis for further study.

The alternative - presenting students with a booklist running to hundreds of titles, many of which are obscure, out of print or otherwise difficult to obtain - is both daunting and impractical. Indeed, the importance of easily available and suitable textual material cannot be overstated.

Where, as is the case with my option course in Humanistic Psychology, students are required to gain in-depth knowledge of the subject in a little over two terms, and examined upon it, it is absolutely essentiel to provide them with the necessary theoretical grounding. In the absence of a suitable textbook on the subject, I found it necessary to provide at the outset theoretical input in the form of lectures, seminars, and where available, films. This was not entirely satisfactory, however, as it compromises the humanistic philosophy of non-directive, student-centredness, is necessarily somewhat restrictive and very long-winded. It also proved difficult to provide a proper balance between theoretical issues and experiential exercises.

Clearly, given the difficulty of providing a cohesive synthesis of humanistic psychology over three terms, there is little prospect of disabusing colleagues and students of their often weird and wonderful notions about it in occasional lectures, seminars or coffee-time chats, especially as the nature of self-fulfilling prophecy often conspires to reinforce the worst of their prejudices. Inevitably it is the most disaffected students or those in search of the 'experience' so zealously promoted by the more evangelical writers who, initially at least, opt for humanistic psychology. This is redressed to some extent by the fact that they are typically of higher than average ability. Nevertheless, in their hostility to empirical research they frequently adopt anti-scientific and anti-rational stances which are more harmful than helpful to humanistic psychology, which is opposed to neither science nor empiricism but to psychology's narrow and restrictive definitions of them, and reliance on outmoded paradigms, which psychology alone among the scientific community, refuses to recognise as such.

It was with all these factors in mind that I wrote **The Human Face of Psychology** (Open University Press, 1986), which is by way of being both a manifesto and a disclaimer. From a teaching point of view at least it has achieved its objectives. Students who had opted for the course were provided (with the publisher's consent) with draft copies that they could 'sample the goods' before committing themselves further. (No one opted out as a result). This initial grounding enabled them to select areas for further discussion and investigation, and facilitated a more fully student-centred approach, with individuals taking responsibility for the areas of interest they wished to pursue, researching other sources and integrating experiential exercises as and where they felt it to be appropriate. In the past explorations of awareness, meditations, psychotherapeutic strategies and the development of attentional processes had been difficult to integrate into a broad conceptual framework, as the theories from which they proceeded could often only be related to each other and the whole field with some difficulty, especially by less able students. **The Human Face of Psychology** provided a common baseline for all, which inspired confidence, a more relaxed and informal approach and a greater willingness on the part of students to explore new areas, and read more widely and in depth. Certainly, having just completed the marking

of Finals papers it is clear that rather than adhering to the 'textbook', which I feared might happen, there has been a tremendous divergence in reading resulting in an impressive breadth and depth of psychological knowledge, far more successful integration of concepts than previously, and lively and stimulating discussion of issues.

With the completion of the book I feel I am now embarking on a new phase in the career of Humanistic Psychology within my department. Quite how the future will unfold remains to be seen, but looking back over the past five years there have been some changes which although slight are nonetheless significant. Student demand has led to the inclusion of humanistic perspectives in most teaching areas. Its perspective is introduced early in the first year course, and whilst not sustained subsequently, does feature in principal second year courses. Nevertheless, input is light and clearly perceived as insufficient by students, almost a quarter of whom stated a preference for the inclusion of more humanistic psychology in response to an open-ended question on desirable course changes (Butters and Ward, 1986).

This demand has acted as a stimulus to several colleagues who either already had closed interests, or have since developed them in areas such as holistic medicine, counselling and psychotherapy, creativity and meditation; interests which are increasingly being reflected in the content of taught courses. Furthermore, the humanistic option is gaining the reputation among students of being 'hard'; a view reinforced by scrutiny of the questions on past examination papers. For this reason it still attracts the more risk-taking students who prefer a challenge to what they see as the 'safety' of conventionally didactic, highly directive, over-supervised areas of empirical psychology. The availability of my book has gone some way to reducing the element of risk involved but it remains nonetheless, and is nowhere more highlighted than in the area of project work.

All students are required to submit as part of their Finals' assessment a report of an empirical investigation which they have conducted, this being equivalent to one examination paper. Neither the area of study nor the supervisor are confined to the final year course option being pursued, although the tendency is for these projects to be supervised by the option tutor. Increasingly students, including those pursuing options other than Humanistic Psychology, are eschewing conventional experimental methods in favour of phenomenological approaches, single subject methodologies and descriptive accounts, with the result that the contentious issue of what constitutes an empirical investigation divides the teaching staff as it has divided psychology for the past century. Resolution of the dilemma, one way or the other, is simply not possible given the subject matter of psychology, and the continued attempt of either side of the divide to do so by denying the validity or existence of the other is a folly worthy of Nasrudin:

Seeing a white shape in the garden in the half-light, Nasrudin asked his wife to hand him his bow and arrows. He hit the object, went out to see what it was, and came back almost in a state of collapse. That was a narrow shave. Just think. If I had been in that shirt of mine hanging there to dry, I would have been killed. It was shot right through the heart. (Shah, 1978, p.91)

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The grass always looks greener further up the hill

Maureen was downcast. She was a part-time lecturer paid on an hourly rate. She was envious of Wilson who had a permanent full-time job. Wilson was downcast because the college board had not promoted him from lecturer grade I to lecturer grade II. He looked at Smith with a mixture of affection and envy. Smith was 50 years old. He had been professor of anthropology and archaeology for 20 years and was famous for his proof that the ancient city of Phestos in Crete was a brewery.. He was downcast. Only 15 years before retirement and he felt he had not really done anything yet. Smith glanced across at Pike, whom he hated. Sir Arnold Pike had been knighted for the part he had played as a member of a Royal Commission on the Use of the Countryside. Sir Arnold was downcast. He felt slighted that Peters had become Vice-Chancellor at the University of Cornwall and downright angry that McOliver had been made a Lord. Peters had told his wife that morning: "Just because he writes books to fit in with the Labour Party's idea of how to run Big Business they put him in the Lords". McOliver was sitting, downcast, in his seat eyeing his lifelong friend and rival Lord Burns. Catching his eye he asked: "Where do we go from here?". "There's only one place to go from here", answered Burns, looking upwards and feeling downcast, "and that's to the seat of the Almighty - but there is little hope for us there. Some bloke is already occupying it". McOliver laughed. "As time goes on I'm beginning to enjoy the ordinary things of life". Burns's face looked puzzled. "Like what?". "Like going to a really good lecture. There's one on tonight. Something to do with Tibetan Overtone Chanting. Why don't you come? Terrific lecturer, name of Maureen . . . " They both felt downcast and envious of Maureen's freedom. They longed for her.

such things as communication skills, computing, working in groups, literacy and numeracy skills. The students also propose their own means of assessment and describe the objectives which are to be assessed. Every student's programme is, therefore, unique. At present the School offers programmes at Diploma, Degree and Masters level. Over ten years a couple of thousand students have been through this process. Most have succeeded even though many of them have been described as failures in their previous education.

The School is a real example of how humanistic ideas can be put into practice and made to work. The student has more power because he/she maintains so much control over his/her own educational process. The students are trusted to a far higher degree than is usual elsewhere to know what is best for themselves, and they are treated as responsible self actualising individuals. And it works. The only tragedy is that other institutions have not been able to do something similar.

The School for Independent Study is not the answer to the crisis that education finds itself in, but it is an example of what can be done in response to that crisis. What is important is that educators at all levels begin the process of confronting the inherent problems of a collapsing system. Perhaps Humanistic Psychology should become more vocal in stimulating that confrontation and doing more both within and outside the State system in proposing alternative models.

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