HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AT L.S.E.

by

David Jones

Scientific Psychology

I graduated in the 1960's in psychology and philosophy. In those days psychology was defined as the science of perception and learning. We assumed that human experience and action are a response to stimulation of the senses. Half the psychology course concentrated on how patterns of stimulation resulted in perception of objects. The other half concentrated on memory as this influences the way we react to a situation next time we encounter it. We also had to assume that the processes of perception and learning are the same for all animals and can be discovered by scientific enquiry. So we learnt a lot about experiments on rats and pigeons.

One day a wild, brown rat got into our laboratory and sniffed around among the cages of tame white rats. The rat catcher was called in. He was a mine of information. He told me how difficult it is to poison a whole colony of rats. When they discover a new food, only one rat eats it. If that one survives, the others will try it. I had an education in how rats live and realized that the theories I had studied about perception and memory were intellectual exercises which told me little about rats and even less about humans.

The philosophy courses followed the theme of how to assess the truth of what we know and logical positivism provided an irritating answer. Any show of curiosity or an interesting idea would be killed dead by the question, "What does it mean to say that?" or, worse still, "How can you prove it?".

For the last twenty years I have taught psychology at the L.S.E. The sterile courses in perception and learning have been replaced by equally sterile courses in 'cognition'. The assumption which students are required to make nowadays is that human experience and action is brought about by our brains, and psychology has become the study of brain science. This involves looking at the ways in which a brain might construe the world we live in and how it communicates by generating language. Computers are used as tools for exploring these aspects of brains. Perhaps the rat catcher will return to psychology in due course in the guise of a computer designer and point out that computers are superb at carrying out complex numerical calculations. This is why they can 'think' so far ahead in games of

draughts or chess. By comparison we are not very good at calculations. What we are good at, the rat catcher could tell us, is intuition. We can get a good grasp of what is going on in a situation without doing any reasoned calculations at all which is why we are good at agreeing on policies and following them creatively. Computers have no intuition and using them in place of rats does not make academic psychology any less sterile. It merely provides a different set of intellectual exercises telling us little about ourselves as human beings, and even less about computing or rats. However, being an academic is not all bad. There is some good in higher education.

The Good in Higher Education

Higher education in Britain aims to give students three things - a liberal approach to scholarship, some practical skills and the opportunity to develop as a young adult.

The liberal approach to scholarship involves developing the ability to argue a case from relevant material. It encourages skill in using incomplete, ambiguous and changing material to develop lines of argument without being doctrinaire or bigoted. Practical skills are also taught in higher education. They depend on the discipline involved. In my own subject, psychology, statistical analyses of data using a computer is taught as part of a first degree and it is becoming common for psychology students to learn to use a word processor.

There is recognition, too, that students are developing as young adults who need space to try things out without being as fully accountable, for their actions as other people are. Rowdiness, irregular life styles and drug abuse are more likely to be tolerated or dealt with 'in house' without recourse to the law courts. The provision of counselling and advisory services to students seems to reflect the view that they are in a special stage of life in which help is needed with relationships and decisions: it is called pastoral care.

I value the opportunity that universities give for a liberal and, in patches, practical education with some pastoral care thrown in. On the whole the opportunity to study without any literature being proscribed and, in principle, no theory deemed anathema provides students with a good precedent for studying things later on in life. Nevertheless, university education is based on a cockeyed notion of what a human being is. It has assumed, like psychology, that the head is paramount.

The Cockeyed Model

Universities exist as part of an enterprise which places thought in a central position. The unquestioned assumption is that if you learn to think accurately and skilfully, then you will behave in a useful, skilled and enjoyable way. The belief that thought is paramount in determining good human life is encoded so deeply into our language, education, religion, law and work practices that it is difficult to challenge it.

The education of thought is done superbly well in our system.

Lectures, practicals, tutorials and essay writing coupled with answering examination questions against the clock have evolved for this purpose. Students learn to define their terms. describe phenomena, state theories, operationalise concepts, categorise, be consistent and to look for alternative explanations. In short they learn to think.

The emphasis on educating our thought processes is cockeyed because we are not guided by thought alone but, more importantly, by our feelings. Psychology is no help here. Academic psychology calls feelings emotions and treats them as products of physiology which threaten rational behaviour and cry out for control. Devising schemes so that people can learn to get in touch with feelings and learn how to express them appropriately and effectively is unheard of in psychology departments. Psychologists would not know where to begin. Closely linked with education of emotions is education of behaviour. Relating to people in normal life events such as birth, death, dieting, exercise, sexuality, moving home, changing job and so on form no part of the educational process in universities. Students discover them by running into them and then seek help. Well educated thought processes do not help us develop our feelings as we go through the usual events in the human life cycle for they do not help to develop and grow as adults.

In order to balance university education as it exists at the moment it must be recognised that students should spend time educating their emotions and behaviour as well as their thoughts. Humanistic psychologists know the techniques well. Role playing, sharing, feedback, peer and self-assessment, self-discovery, integration and confrontation are examples of the exercises which can be used to educate affect and action. They require a workshop format led by an authoritative guide who facilitates individual and group work in an atmosphere of trust. The role of university teacher as an expert exercising power and authority over ignorant students who need to be coerced into learning is in marked contrast to the experienced guide who works with the energy, power and motivation of pupils. In British universities the teaching staff are largely unaware of the workshop and facilitator format. Education of emotions and behaviour and the potential for students to gain more awareness and skills in connection with their own life-span cannot find a secure place in universities until a suitable format is accepted. It is my belief that this would not threaten the current teaching format. Indeed, it would strengthen it, define its appropriateness and reduce some of the stress associated with it for both the staff and the students. A few years ago I began to experiment.

Exploring Alternatives

In the 1970's I sought ways of working on what I consider to be the central issue in psychology which, to put it in one sentence is: how can we improve our policy making capacities? In other words, what can we do to make sure we choose the best things about which to be active and how we can be sure our action is sound? I tried

psychoanalysis. Although my training as a psychologist had taught me to reject everything that had not passed a scientific test (and psychoanalysis was not even testable), I had noticed that Freudian theory formed the basis of much practical work, especially in the field of social work, psychiatry and some rehabilitative work especially among young people who have fallen foul of the legal and medical authorities. I had, as an undergraduate, attended a series of optional lectures on Freud which were held on Saturday mornings and were emphasised as being unrelated to course work required for a degree. These lectures lay dormant in me until my own analysis took place.

I gained a lot from my hourly, four times a week, sessions. I had four blocks each lasting four months. It is a slow process and there is a risk of getting nowhere because the analyst does not come across as valid or sticks rigidly to making interpretations according to theory but without sensing the needs of the client. There is also no possibility of feedback from other participant observers. These considerations reactivated an interest in T-groups which I had attended in the 1960's and I joined the Group Relations Training Association. Soon after that I did a Facilitator Styles course run by the IDHP (Institute for the Development of Human Potential) at the University of Surrey. I went on every workshop in sight and joined the AHP. I discovered that the techniques for personal development and change offered by humanistic psychology are very powerful.

In 1982 I decided to run some experiential groups at LSE. I found no colleague to work with although there are a handful of colleagues who are sympathetic. They are mostly in departments which recognise clients of some sort and teach social work or industrial relations but they do not want to be involved in running workshops. I was buoyed up by meeting students from Greece and South Africa as well as from Britain who had done some Gestalt, Psychodrama or Co-counselling. (I discovered that Fritz Perls, who fled Germany for South Africa before going to California, left more of a mark on degree courses there than he ever did in Europe). The liberal education system in which I work upholds academic freedom. Precisely what that means is obscure but it does allow any university teacher to book a lecture room and teach anything they like in it in addition to their normal teaching responsibilities. I decided to run some groups.

There are usually about 15 students in a group which meets weekly for a couple of hours for at least a term. I try to explain AHP philosophy and facilitate exercises which demonstrate some aspect of it. I mention the major systems. Trust builds up. The exercises are done or sat out. (I always emphasise the autonomy clause). As the weeks go by the mood fluctuates. We get stuck, transference develops and counter transference, we free ourselves and we look at feelings about the group and at group process. Laughter, tears, the pub, more exercises, a little personal work, intense feelings, painful feedback, dinner in a restaurant. We review our work

and find a lot of good in what we have done. The views of those who do not attend the groups are more negative.

Reactions to Experiential Groups

Students' attitudes vary. Most hold a sort of can't be bothered approach. These sometimes become favourable if they listen to students who have been to groups, either mine or elsewhere. A few students show a marked hostility to group work and present a distorted picture of it. As far as I can tell they cut little ice in the face of those students who, based on their own experience, give different testimony and do not appear to have an axe to grin. The reactions of colleagues in my department are characterised by the following statements:

It might cause a division among students with some believing they are an elite.

It will disturb some students in ways which tutors ought to be able to handle but cannot.

There is no place in a university for this sort of thing.

The term 'staff development' should not be used. (It had appeared in a list of activities linked with experiential work, such as counselling, social work, management training).

I will leave the reader to judge how much of these responses is bigotry, projection, denial, wishful thinking or whatever. What struck me was the amount of distress shown, and profound ignorance.

Colleagues in the Psychology Department at LSE have sometimes been quite intemperate and disturbed when discussing experiential groups, and they have always been ignorant. One circulated a letter saying that humanistic psychology should not be allowed in universities as it was a method for playing on people's weaknesses. Most confuse it with frightening accounts of encounter groups or with old-fashioned T-groups in which the trainer remains silent for long periods and then gives an interpretation for what they think has been going on in terms of a particular theory, usually a version of W.R. Bion's, and disclose nothing about themselves. Playing the role of group leader as if one were a psychoanalyst is very discomforting for group members. Academic psychologists have been slow to learn that there are other ways of running a group, just as there are other parts of the body to be educated than the head i.e. the heart and the hand. When they recognise and overcome their fear of such an idea they will catch up on what has been going on in humanistic psychology during the last 20 years. When that happens, studying and researching psychology at university will glow with real importance and excitement.

David Jones is Lecturer on Psychology at L.S.E., on the Editorial Board of Self and Society and Guest Editor for the special edition on Higher Education and Humanistic Psychology (Self & Society, Vol XIV No.6, 1986).