

Consciousness and Experiential Psychology Join the BPS

Richard Stevens

Psychology is changing! There is now a new Section of the British Psychological Society which is concerned with consciousness and experiential psychology. The BPS is the major professional association for psychologists in the UK.

So what is a 'Section'? The BPS has a number of Divisions which signify different kinds of groupings of professionals among its members. Sections, on the other hand, are groupings of members with interests in particular kinds of psychology.

Setting up a Section is by no means a straightforward matter. The initial proposal has to be agreed by the BPS Scientific Affairs Committee and Council and supported by a sizeable proportion of the membership before being put to the vote. In our case the whole process was guided by a steering committee of five who included John Pickering, Liz Valentine, Max Veimans and myself. Right from the start Jane Henry was the propelling force behind the idea, and she has been unanimously voted in as the first chair of the Section.

It would be reasonable to suppose that the study of subjective experience would be at the heart of psychology. The sad fact is that for most of this century, psychology as an academic discipline has gone out of

its way to disavow any interest in the topic, believing it to be outside the scope of a scientific psychology. It is vital to bring the topic towards centre stage again. We can hope also that the agreement to set up the Consciousness and Experiential Section (together with the recent establishment of a Transpersonal Section) may herald a decided movement of academic and professional psychology in the UK in a humanistic direction.

What do We Mean by Consciousness and Experiential Psychology?

I am sure the basic flavour of a section with this title is self-evident to readers of *Self & Society*. But let me spell out a bit more what the Section will be focused on. Consciousness is now taking off as a theme in psychology in a big way. There are new journals devoted to the topic, such as the excellent *Journal of Consciousness Studies*; and organisations like the Scientific and Medical Network have taken it up as a core interest. This awakening is also reflected in a stream of books on consciousness, and in major gatherings like the Tucson Conferences at the University of Arizona. Interestingly, the topic attracts as many

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philosophers, biologists, physicists and engineers as psychologists. Although the interdisciplinary nature of the enquiry is one of the excitements of the area, psychologists have a central role to play and one aim of the new Section is to promote more interest in the topic among them.

Themes to explore here include different ways of conceptualising and thinking about the nature of consciousness. How can we make sense of it? What methods do we have to study it? How does consciousness relate to brain processes? Why might it have evolved? These are just some of the questions that will engage us. An area of long-standing interest to humanistic psychologists has been different states of consciousness. Is it appropriate to think of peak and altered states of consciousness as distinctly different from everyday consciousness, and in what ways might this be so?

There are other issues of fascinating interest, such as different qualities of experience. Csikszentmihaiyi, for example, has described the state of 'flow experience'. This refers to the kind of experiences people seem to enjoy the most. He believes that these are essentially situations where we are absorbed in focused concentration, where there are challenges but where our skills are sufficient to meet them. The wide range of examples of 'flow' which Csikszentmihaiyi provides includes dancing, rock-climbing, and a mother playing with her small daughter.

Consciousness and Values

Other related topics of interest to the new Section might be the nature of intuition, and the relationship between conscious states and unconscious ones. There is a feast for thought and exploration in such issues which, in spite of being disdained by aca-

demical psychology for decades, must be central to any real understanding in the discipline.

The idea of experiential psychology takes us beyond the study of consciousness, however. We envisage it to include, for example, creativity and the development of experiential understanding, our sense of self (or selves) and the role this plays in our lives. An important focus will be the psychology of well-being. What is psychological health? How is it possible to foster joy and wisdom? Practical concerns about how to develop fulfilling lives and the social conditions required for this will take us into processes of change and transformation on both a personal and a social-political level.

Such interests inevitably require us to confront value issues. What are the consequences and implications of different ways of life, what are their pros and cons? What kinds of context and relationships are likely to promote psychological health? What we are talking about here is a notion of psychology not as just a natural science, but as what we might call a 'moral science', using the word 'moral' in its broad sense to denote a concern with values and how these bear on the ways we lead our lives and relate to each other. Traditionally academic psychology has fought shy of such issues, under the mistaken notion that, as a science, psychology needs to be removed from value concerns. This ignores the fact that all understanding is a construction and that what you look for and how you look for it will inevitably reflect the interests and values of you, the looker. In any case, what is involved here is not using our values to influence our enquiry, but asking whether any understanding about what constitutes

psychological well-being and the conditions which promote it can be drawn from psychological theorising and research — an altogether different issue!

With notable exceptions such as Erich Fromm, there have been relatively few psychologists prepared to venture into this area. Even Rogers and Maslow, I believe, avoid the critical issue here. They give the impression that, once the blocks are removed, then a natural, 'organismic process' will provide direction for the person concerned. I am not convinced that this is sufficient. The critical issues for our time, for us as individuals and as groups, are where are we going? How should we act? What should we do? In the past these have been the province of religions and political ideologies. In a secular society, people tend to pursue meaning in life by immersing themselves in their personal projects (like career or leisure activities) or perhaps find solace in mysticism. Psychology has a key role to play: not in the sense of producing definitive answers, but in confronting the difficult issues involved in supplying a psychological basis for the provision of values and directions for humans, both as individuals and as societies. Given the present-day undermining of religious beliefs and ideologies and the hunger for meaning and direction, it is more than time for such 'life ethics' to come high on the agenda for theoretical and research psychologists.

Such concerns take us not only into the social-political arena in which our personal lives are played out but also demand consideration of cross-cultural perspectives. Any understanding of value and life style (in the more fundamental meaning of that phrase!) must be in the context of understanding cultural patterns of religious belief and

ideologies and the role of myth and morals in our lives. Where do these come from? What are their implications? Can they be evaluated? If so, how? The goal of the Section is to provide a forum for rational analysis of such issues and to establish a network of psychologists interested in them. Our primary aim is to stimulate research, debate and teaching in these areas. We believe there is a need for this.

Even though the topics discussed above represent some of the most central issues of psychological being, academic psychologists, because of their methodological preconceptions, have been reluctant to engage with them. Now is the time to change this trend. With such a rich and fascinating menu, the main danger for the Section may be in maintaining a sense of coherence and scale. But our approach is to begin with an open canvas in these areas that interest us and let the energies of the members determine which topics become highlighted as active concerns of the group.

Like Humanistic Psychology?

You may be thinking that the menu sketched above sounds more than a bit like humanistic psychology. We did in fact consider describing the section in that way. After all, the BPS (unlike its counterpart the American Psychological Association) never did set up a Humanistic Psychology Section. One reason we did not call it 'humanistic psychology', however, was that we envisaged the Section as taking a much broader approach than that encompassed by one paradigm. (Our decision also reflects the fact that several members of the Steering Committee, and no doubt many of our prospective members, would not think of themselves as 'humanistic psychologists'.) We are very concerned to be integra-

tive. We feel that most understanding is gained from acknowledging the complexity of being human — that we are biological, social beings whose actions and experience are premised on meanings and some degree of self-reflection. Such a complex subject matter requires multiple forms of understanding, including scientific, interpretative and 'inspirational' ones. To understand consciousness, for example, means going beyond subjective experience and considering also what insights might be given by disciplines such as neuropsychology, psychobiology, philosophy and cognitive and social psychologies. There are major issues for the Section here, though, in working out how we can interrelate such diverse and wide-ranging forms of understanding into an integrated understanding of ourselves.

There is another, more controversial point to be made, too. Although the topics indicated above may sound 'humanistic', humanistic psychology, I believe, has not provided effective and high-quality theorising, research and understanding in these areas. This failure may have been due in part to the overemphasis on feelings over ideas that was so much part of the rhetoric of the movement in the 1960s, residues of which are still around today. So while humanistic psychologists have made many superb contributions in developing psychotherapeutic tools and techniques, the integration of broader understanding about the human condition has tended (with a few key exceptions) to be beyond their focus of interest. This is perhaps reflected in the selection of articles and discussion in *Self & Society* which is heavily weighted to therapeutic concerns. The establishment of the new Section is an acknowledgement of the need for an inte-

grative psychology with an experiential focus and humanist aims and orientation, but which nevertheless draws broadly on scientific work and also work from other traditions such as discourse analysis and social construction.

Forthcoming Events

Well, that is the broad-brush picture of the philosophy and aims of the Section: now to specify what we are going to do. We have already had our inaugural meeting. There were presentations on areas of interest to the Section and discussions involving networking and sharing ideas as to what we might do. Our next major event is our conference in London on the weekend of 11th–12th October. The focus will be on the twin themes of Consciousness and Change. Thus there will be papers and workshops which relate to psychological enquiry into consciousness (such as methodologies for studying consciousness and non-Western perspectives), and also on change and well-being (such as sessions and symposia on change processes, altered states, the psychology of well-being and the idea of psychology as a moral science). As keynote speaker we have Francisco Varela from the Centre National du Recherche Scientifique, Professor of Cognitive Psychology and Epistemology at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris. He is an acknowledged expert on both phenomenological and systems approaches to consciousness. There are lots of other interesting speakers and facilitators lined up as well. The deadline for submissions has strictly passed, but if you want to present then please send in as soon as possible a 150-word abstract plus a 1,000-word summary and we will see what we can do. We hope that we may at least see you



there. We have deliberately kept the conference as cheap as we can and our aim is to encourage as much interactive participation as possible. (See below for further details). We feel that setting up the Section

is an exciting new development but it will only be as strong, stimulating and active as its members. So, if you are interested, do join or come along and participate in our events. We look forward to seeing you!

Further Reading

M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology of happiness*, Rider Press, 1992

Richard Stevens, 'Humanistic perspectives' in I. Roth (ed.) *An Introduction to Psychology*, Ed-
baum, 1990

BPS Section on Consciousness and Experiential Psychology; How to Join

Membership of the Section is intended primarily (though not exclusively) for those who already belong to the BPS. If you want to join the BPS you should contact them direct. To become a full graduate member you will need a psychology degree which is recognised by them. There are also other categories of membership (such as Associate and Student) which do not have this requirement. We do have some provision for people who are not members of the BPS to join the Section, and most of our events, like the forthcoming conference, will be open to anyone who is interested. The conference is to be held on October 11th–12th at Parsifal College, Finchley Road, London NW3 and is non-

residential (a list of nearby hotels can be supplied). Registration fees (after August 31st) for the two days are: members £60, non-members £70, students £25.

If you are neither a BPS member nor planning to join but are interested in being associated with the Section and our events, or if you simply want more details about the Section or the conference, please contact Lynda Preston, Psychology Dept, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, email L.G. Preston@open.ac.uk. Further details on the conference may also be obtained from Janet Chambers, whose email address is j.e.chambers@open.ac.uk. There is also a website at <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/cep>.