

Psychology for the Third Millenium: Integrating Cultural and Neuroscience Perspectives

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Review by Mark McKergow

This important new book opens with one of my favourite Rom Harré quotes – ‘There is nothing in the universe except meanings and molecules’. From this starting point, the authors build a remarkably coherent case for a new version of psychology – one which they hope will be relevant for some time – based on integrating these two perspectives while taking great care not to confuse them. The book is written as a text book for final year undergraduate/masters level students, and hence is accessible and clear in a field where clarity is hard to find (and often devalued).

The ‘meanings’ in the opening quote refer to what the authors call ‘cultural perspectives’ – their term for the ways in which meanings are socially negotiated and determined within an interactional, interpersonal and ultimately cultural context. The molecules refer to perspectives from neuroscience, where brain processes can be investigated with fMRI scanners and other means. These are both firm and proper starting points for scientific investigations into people and how they operate in the world.

The authors are quick to make their key point:

“In order to understand the way a scientific psychology should develop we need to understand the basic principles of scientific research thoroughly. Unfortunately, through a series of misunderstandings, a good deal of the psychological research of the last half century has been profitless, based on a flawed philosophical account of the nature of scientific explanation.” (p. 5).

The key distinction drawn by Harré and Moghaddam in this opening chapter is the difference between ‘event causality’ (chains of hidden mechanisms, appropriate for molecule and other natural science explanations) and ‘agent causality’ (beings with powers to act, shaped and constrained by all sorts of environmental conditions). The misunderstanding of psychologists over the last 50 years has been to confuse these two, usually in favour of applying event causality (which looks more ‘scientific’) to matters where agent causality is the appropriate schema. Event causality looks for causal explanations, agent causality looks for discourse, interaction and the emergence of meaning.

The first part of the book sets out this programme in some detail. There are chapters about how to research in either domain, and a very Wittgensteinian look at the brain and consciousness from noted Wittgenstein scholar Peter Hacker. The book then sets out to explore many domains of psychology – perception, learning, memory, motivation, emotions, intelligence, personality, mental disorder and so on – from the new hybrid perspective. Each chapter is enriched by pen portraits of the key researchers and writers involved in the field, from Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), through old friends such as William James and Gilbert Ryle, to living writers like Antonio Damasio and Catherine Lutz.

So why is this book so important for SF practitioners? It lays out clearly and coherently why disorders of people – the kind of thing we work with – are best dealt with as matters of meaning rather than of molecule, while giving the hard science of brains and chemicals a proper place within that discussion. Our work is clearly meaning-based. In SF we assume and work with agent causality in a focused and consistent way (though we don’t call it that - yet). This shows up in the SFCT Clues (see the appendix of this journal), where we say under ‘Background’:

The focus of SF work is on the interaction between people as described, observed or experienced. We do not introduce systemic or psychological explanatory concepts like inner

drivers, inner teams, motivations, systemic structures or hypotheses. Whenever the client is introducing concepts with mentalistic words we use their language to talk about observable signs of progress. For example: "What will you notice when x is better motivated? How will you respond? What will your colleagues notice? What else?"

Much of the work and the explanations of the work would therefore be in terms of 'people grammar' – for example "what Mrs V does when she notices Mr W doing something" – rather than in mentalistic, molecular or otherwise diagnostic grammar. We focus on what the person wants and we assume that he or she has all the skills to get there. In short, the work should focus on what happens between the noses of individuals and avoid being diverted by speculation of what may be happening between the ears of the individual!

In "Psychology for the Third Millenium", Harré and Moghaddam have produced a very readable and usable account of the work developed by Harré and many others over the past decades. It allows us to position SF as being both very focused on people and discourse, while also taking hard science seriously in its proper domain. In doing this we go beyond the simplistic ideas of eliminative materialists and others who hoped that everything could be reduced to molecules, chemicals and deterministic forces, while also disappointing the fringes of the social constructionist world, where everything including electrons and gravity is said to be socially constructed by power-mad imperialist dogmaticians.

I think that this position – which has always been there in SF from de Shazer onwards – is made much clearer and more tenable by the arrival of "Psychology for the Third Millenium". Some elements of this book could and should be a part of every serious SF training, as well as helping us to connect with other sympathetic figures in the worlds of science, psychology and philosophy.