

A Modern Approach to the Study of the Child's Mind

Bedford College Paper.

Address to the: Philosophical and Psychological Society

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The difficulty which faces every student of the human mind, whether he be philosopher, psychologist, anthropologist or clinical psycho-pathologist, is that the object to be observed and the instrument of observation are of the same nature. It is only with one's own mind that one can observe either one's own mind or behaviour or the behaviour and minds of other people.

All serious study of the nature of ourselves as beings finds itself confronted with the same difficulty as faced the physician up to the middle of the last century, before the physical discoveries that led to the microscope and the laboratory. Since the object of study and the instrument of contemplation are so fundamentally the same, there is no means of abstracting samples of the object to be studied as one now can a blood sample or a specimen of any secretion, so that it can be examined quietly and at leisure apart from the circumstances of its production.

The years which have followed the dawn of this century have seen an attack upon this position developing in nearly all the fields of thought. The dawn of experimental psychology and the introduction of objective tests for the examination of intelligence in academic psychology, the accurate record of folk-tale as told by the believer, the preservation of human products of primitive human cultures in anthropology and the introduction into clinical psycho-pathology of the use of drawings and accurate dream records, are beginning to provide data which can be abstracted from the sphere in which they were produced and studied quietly by themselves.

But certain very grave difficulties still confront all workers.

The first of these is the high degree of selection still necessary in subjects from whom psychological data can be drawn. It is a well-recognised difficulty attending all introspection that only the specially trained mind can produce material that is reliable as a basis for study. Introspection needs to be learned and the minds which can be looked to produce reliable material are very few in number. Laboratory instruments are not suitable for the study of spontaneous and uncultured people, nor for the study of children or of people in any emotional state; their use must be limited to those who have come within touch of the sphere of the laboratory.

The Second obstinate difficulty is the limited nature of the problems that can be approached by the laboratory method. Academic psychology is the study of the normal human being, but even there is the problem to be studied must be to some extent formulated before the study can begin.

In Anthropology it is becoming recognised that only field anthropology is of any service, but even here, as has so well and abundantly been shown, it is difficult for any human being to notice in another's behaviour, or for that matter in his own, that the existence of which he is himself emotionally not prepared to accept. In spite of the advances that have been made in the past 30 years in clinical psychopathology, we are still under the same difficulty that the material upon which we rely for our facts is obtained from suffering human beings in the close privacy of the patient-physician relationship and not susceptible of check.

When we come to consider the subject 'man himself' instead of the groupings of study, we find yet more obstinate difficulties. Man is commonly agreed to consist of three elements, - his body, his intellect or cognitive faculties and his affective and conative faculties; that is to say, his body, his mind and his emotions – to which some like also to add his soul or spiritual qualities.

Now the mind is not so resistant to examination: the intellect is accessible from various angles and a mass of information has been gained in relation to it. Man can set out to calculate, to remember, to imagine, and do these in laboratory conditions. – But no man can cause himself to have any emotion he may desire at any moment in laboratory conditions, and even were he able to do so he would not be able to extract for us a sample of that emotion for study. And until a sample of an entity can be produced for study and for comparison with other samples of a similar entity, its nature cannot be determined.

The intimate interaction of cognitive and emotional factors has been for some time impressing itself upon the minds of both philosopher's and psychologists and the interaction of both these with physiological factors is a basic concept of modern medical thought.

Since these are all inter-allied, it should be possible to devise some means by which they can be approached together, and by which records of their interaction and the nature of their interaction can be obtained.

I had the opportunity this year of taking part in two international congresses in Paris and in Copenhagen, where the papers read showed that several lines of attack are being attempted today upon this problem and many very interesting new facts coming to light. Approaches are being made from the physiological angle in the study of the bodily changes occurring under states of strong emotion, and from the psychiatric angle by the study of drawings and models produced in states of emotional disturbance. – What I want to put before you today is the beginning of an attempt to devise a laboratory method for the study of the mento-emotional experiences of children as they seem to the child himself.

In the case of children, we have particularly severe obstacles in every attempt to get in touch with them.

Uselessness of language of Children.

The nature of emotion in childhood.

Involvement of sense experiences with emotion and with concepts in children,

Desiderata of apparatus for recording children's experience.

