A BRIEF REFLECTION ON HOW LITTLE WE KNOW

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My fundamental view of cognition is it is rather like a colonoscopy, a necessary though unwelcome event best experienced under the influence of powerful drugs. That is an exaggeration but I think it is a pretty good line. Wittgenstein (1921) fell into a cognitive trap when he maintained we cannot conceive of anything that we cannot express in language. The standard texts on cognitive psychology seem to have a furiously mechanistic view of human beings. Comparatively Freud had a mild case. Another facet cognitive psychology has in common with several other tasty academic specialties is a presumption of the validity of academic research. Baars (1997) reminds us that it is impossible to be objective. Granting that as axiomatic, objective research is antimony. I, of course, am being totally objective in choosing a statement from Baars that I like for my axiom! I have a friend who got his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology in about 1975. He has been teaching at a local university for many years. He freely admits that almost everything he was taught is obsolete and mostly useless. Many cognitive psychologists seem to ignore that our knowledge only allows us to say, "our present understanding seems to indicate that possibly…" It is rather like an analogy with William James' (1892, 2001) stream of consciousness. There is no state. It is an ever-changing continuum. A few years after James Einstein noted that a 'point in time' does not exist. Currently geneticists are starting to cringe every time new research in epigenetics shatters another of their cherished beliefs. After years of their adamant assertions, I think they deserve it. In every area of knowledge change is continual and stasis does not exist. Ultimately we know very little, if anything, and it is risky to forget this and equally risky to forget that we are all biased.

Let me philosophize a bit more. I sense academic psychology is rapidly evolving from focusing on cognition to attempting to understand human beings from a standpoint of neurology. Within the decade we may well see Neurological Therapy (NT) burst upon the scene. What we do not seem to realize is we are still a century behind the physical sciences. We are dealing with the chemistry. Has it occurred to no one that like the rest of the physical world neurotransmitters are made from atoms that operate both on an atomic and sub-atomic level? What are the psychological implications of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle! The limitations of our academic knowledge become obvious whenever I sit down with another human being.

For many years non-verbal communication has fascinated me. The chapter written by Greenberg and Goldman (2008) talks about it in depth in terms of spousal relationships. They provide a framework within a specific situation. I have found it generalizes in many ways that they do not directly address in this chapter. A while ago I stumbled across a definition of intimacy that used the word communion to describe this type of relationship. The definition also said that an intimate relationship could be intellectual as well and emotional and physical. Further emotional intimacy could happen without a physical relationship. Originally I was trained as a musician. In performances with other musicians I have experienced transcendent altered-state intimate non-verbal emotional communication with the other musicians. To a lesser extent this communication extends to the audience. Consistently after the performance was over the other musicians agreed about the experience. I have known many musicians who report similar experiences. Communion is a wonderful word for it.

How do we account for the communicative power of music? Rather, how can we put this into a cognitive model? I really do not believe we can. This is where my answer to Wittgenstein (1921) is “gotcha.” My major was music theory so I am obliged to admit Western European

Music has a formal grammar, syntax, and semantics. I suspect the brain studies show music moves through the brain in a significantly different way than spoken language. Within the tradition of Western European Music there is a tremendous amount of cultural variation. My sense is that there is a direct relationship between the nature of a culture and the popular music of that culture. It would be fascinating to study it. A love of music is something I have found in many of the 'wounded ones,' I have worked with. Yet many psychologists seem reluctant to acknowledge the importance of musical communication. As an example Howard Gardner (1999) writes the he is profoundly moved and transported by music but he cannot allow it to affect his theories about intelligence. The idea that if the observation does not fit the theory the observation should be ignored is scientific balderdash. When a physicist finds observable data that does not fit the theory, the theory is invalid and must be adjusted to include all the data.

In recent weeks we have explored some of the other things in human beings that do not readily respond to the reductionist answers so beloved by 'objective' academic psychologists. Again, thank you Baars (1997) for pointing out there is no way we can be objective. Look for a moment at questions about the nature of 'non-consciousness.' Though it is probably not original I just made that up to indicate all mental activity that happens without specific intention. As I write this I am thinking what might happen if I took this concept and played it against Husserl's theory of consciousness (Husserl, Findlay, & Cho, 2000). What roles do non-conscious states play in human existence? Is there some kind of an A-B switch between conscious and unconscious? The concept strikes me as implicitly reductionist? There do seem to be various 'states' of consciousness. But at any moment the only real one is the current one. Right now I believe that last night's dream was a different state. Tautologically my dream is unreal, except when I am actually dreaming! This seems to be true of all the 'states' I can think of.

Are there ‘moments of shazam’ that mark transitions between different states? Or do we flow unconsciously (pardon the pun) and imperceptibly through a consciousness continuum? I find the idea of multiple concurrent unconscious streams quite attractive (Smallwood, Obonsawin, & Heim, 2003). What happens if we take James (1892, 2001) who also believed in multiple unconscious streams and apply it to all the streams? Are all of them in a constant state of flux, continually evolving? This is a type of question my mind loves to contemplate. There is always something going on up there and it seems to magically move from place to place. I rarely perceive changing from one state to another. As my perception matches the idea of moments of ‘shazam,’ that becomes my reality. I am told I continually mutter. As I write this I am aware I am muttering. I am muttering what I am writing (Baars, 1997). However in this running internal monologue the oddest thoughts pop out unbidden without warning. Looking at the way my mind operates, I really sense there are multiple streams operating in a continuum but one jumps into consciousness and I sense it as a separate event. This whole concept of multiple streams moving simultaneously with one being conscious at any moment seems to go right to the later thinking of Gordon Allport (1955).

Going back in time in the course, how does our understanding of consciousness affect our understanding of altered states of consciousness? How do emotions, those elusive realities, affect us? How does our present conscious state relate to emotions and to creativity. And how does all of this relate to non-verbal communication so crucial in intimate relationships (Goldman & Goldman, 2008). Jerome Singer’s (1998) chapter about daydreams offers an interesting contrast to Freud’s view of the role of the unconscious in our daily lives. Neither view really seems to work for me. A couple of years ago I did a modified version of Murray’s (2008) Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). In this modification I picked the pictures, wrote the stories

in a Freudian free association style. Then I read the stories myself over the course of several weeks and found two core underlying themes that seem to continually influence my emotions and actions. I very much like this approach to the TAT. It reflects a Carl Rogers approach to therapy. I derive the meaning from the stories rather than having it handed down from a professional interpreting according to a predetermined set of guidelines. Murray's concept is that a few key themes buried in the context of our lives unconsciously affect much of what we do and the way we react to life. One of the things that strikes me about it is it seems an ontological view. It includes underlying themes of affect, cognition, emotion, social relationships, personality, pathology, and so on and so forth.

Have western psychologists collapsed into culturally bound views? Markus and Kitayama (1991) extensively tested numerous aspects of cultural differences. I thought it was fabulous article. I was fascinated that different cultures have words that express emotions unknown cross-culturally. For me the question is how can we relate and communicate with fundamentally difference semantics? Going back to the idea of non-verbal communication, to what extent does it work across cultures? The other question I ask in contexts like this is whether we define cultures too broadly. The United States is unusual in that it is an immigrant culture. Those who choose to abandon their birth nation and come to the United States may well have been more independent than those who stayed. I assume the distinction between independent and interdependent cultures is taught in every introductory psychology course. I wonder if Americans may be extraordinarily independent as a result of that immigrant background. Obviously this does not apply to those whose ancestors arrived here by force. What might happen if the same studies discussed by Markus and Kitayama (1991) were done using different Western cultures. There might well be a career just examining the cultural

differences in the Balkans. This is not a trivial question. Dissent in this geographic area led, among other things, to the collapse of Metternich's Consort of Europe and the dissolution of the Austrian-Russian alliance. Many historians consider the latter the most significant underlying cause of World War I. Today the Balkans are relatively quiet but the same questions are applicable in the Middle East. This is not a question of judging from a superior standpoint. Rather it is an attempt to deeply understand how the culturally diverse mental and emotional characteristics have led to terrible conflicts and further how we may help foster resolution and accommodation leading to peaceful resolution of those conflicts.

In one of our recent readings Galotti (2008) discussed differences caused by aging and gender. I had never heard the term "experimenter expectancy effects." Alas, long ago I lost the reference, but the State of California, like Galotti, found there came an age when girl's math scores no longer matched boys. They took the text and created story problems that were either gender neutral or balanced between activities generally like by girls as well as boys. In essence they replaced some of the problems dealing with trucks and planes with problems about cooking and decorating. You can guess the result. The girls were better than the boys. Let us call it textbook writer expectancy effect!

Let me now talk about age differences. Bah. Humbug. I turned seventy in September. I choose to say I have entered the last year of my seventh decade. Much of what Galotti (2008) says I am experiencing. But as an old friend, now dead, put it, growing older is a privilege not a right. Now where the hell did I put my glasses? Ah, they are on top of my head. And with that, I rest my case.

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