MY RESEARCH

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For more than forty years, my research has focused on the history and philosophy of psychology. As I have engaged in this research, I have usually thought of myself as a psychologist who is trying to understand and advance his discipline through the use of historical and philosophical methods and perspectives. In this regard, my work has often had a critical edge as well as a constructive aim. At the same time, I have been pleased to be seen as an historian and, occasionally, as a philosopher. This accords with the interdisciplinary nature of my work, which extends back through my doctoral research on the history and philosophy of psychology to my earlier education. I earned a bachelor’s degree in Philosophy with the equivalent of second and third majors in English and History before studying theology for a year prior to earning a master’s degree in Psychology. I subsequently earned my Ph.D. through the History of Science Program in the Department of History at the University of Chicago, writing a dissertation on The Reconstruction of Psychology in Germany, 1780-1850. This dissertation, which was awarded special honors, focused on Immanuel Kant’s influence on the development of modern psychology. Among my principal teachers at Chicago were the psychologists Norman Bradburn and Salvatore Maddi, the intellectual historians Leonard Krieger and Keith Baker, the historian of anthropology George Stocking, and the philosopher of science Stephen Toulmin.

Since my education, reading, and professional associations have been relatively broad, including anthropology, literature, religion, and sociology as well as history, philosophy, and psychology, I have taken a fairly catholic approach in my scholarly work. In general, I have tried to understand science – and, more particularly, psychology – as a very human activity, pursued by individuals who are trying to comprehend – and sometimes to improve – themselves and the world in which they live. As they struggle to do so, they tend to use any and all resources available to them. These resources typically include ideas and methods drawn from disciplines and practices outside their own immediate domain of concern and activity. Hence, the advancement of science – and psychology – frequently involves metaphorical or analogical thinking as well as the transfer of methods and applications from one sphere to another. As a result, the various spiraling loops created in the search for theoretical knowledge and practical applications supply much of the conceptual substance of any given “culture.” For instance, after Newton looked to social phenomena for analogs of “gravity,” others used “gravity” as a metaphor to understand the workings of society. Similar parallels and patterns are characteristic within every culture. Becoming conscious of these parallels and patterns can free as well as enlighten us, curing our blindness and opening new avenues of insight and action.

Partly because of my own particular background, education, and interests, I have tended to study the impact of the humanities, broadly construed, upon psychological understanding. So, for example, I have studied the impact of religion, poetry, literature, and the arts upon the development of psychological insights and the construction of
psychological practices. Far from supporting any idea of conflict between, say, religion and science, or literature and psychology, my investigations have confirmed that science and psychology are “all too human.” This is not to say that they are false or meaningless or unalterably biased; it is simply to say that any given proposition or finding – whether in science or psychology, in religion or literature – is situated within a particular framework of understanding. This framework is always oriented by a particular angle of vision or sequence of activity, but it can nonetheless be truthful even if it doesn’t represent the entire Truth. I feel strongly that we can and should aim for greater and greater truthfulness even as we doubt that humans will ever reach a final, un reversible expression of “the way things are.” As the American psychologist-philosopher William James said at the turn of the 20th century, the fullness of truth is reserved for the end of time, when no further experience will stretch our perspectives or add new data to consider.

While I have pursued a fairly wide range of topics, I have found my interests revolving, more and more, around the life, work, thought, and legacy of William James. This is partly because James was one of the premier psychologists and philosophers of modern times, but also because I am very sympathetic to his way of approaching and thinking about things and to his basic values and aims. James always respected and appreciated the distinctive views of others. Each of us, he said, must utter our own “syllable” in the overall “alphabet” of human experience; and any knowledge that we have, if it is to matter, must be aimed at directing and improving our behavior. Truly understanding something, for James, is never a merely cognitive achievement; comprehension must engage the whole person, from thinking to feeling, from the sensory to the aesthetic, from the empathetic to the ethical. People have wider responsibilities than knowledge alone, and science is but one means among others to grasp and enhance our station in life.

Research is done day by day, bit by bit. Sometimes the end-point is hard to see. But the long-range process of gathering facts, thinking, sharing conclusions, accepting criticism, amending one’s ideas, and sometimes starting all over again can, over a lifetime, make a difference. Just as teaching is a vocation, research is more than a job. It is a way of approaching some of the questions that call for attention. In addition to my own research, one of the great pleasures of my life as a teacher-scholar has been helping students respond to their own questions, so that they too can feel the excitement of adding to what is known, and perhaps to what can be done. Few things in life have provided me with as much satisfaction as participating in the age-old search for understanding, meaning, and influence over the vicissitudes of life.