Psychology and the Postmodern Condition

John Pickering
Warwick University

Abstract

The postmodern condition of psychology promotes a blending of traditions and a plurality of perspectives rather than unified theories. Psychological inquiry will be distorted if it concentrates too strongly on a developing a unified theory of disembodied cognitive structure. Phenomenological traditions such as Buddhism provide a useful antidote to this imbalance. They do not however, support our conventional sense of self and have much in common with deconstructive cultural analysis. Psychology's cultural milieu notwithstanding, the message from the elders is that its future crucially depends on taking an exclusively scientific line. To reduce science to a matter of faith and restrictive modernist dogma in this way is to lapse into scientism. It reflects a fixation with psychology as it has developed at a particular time and in a particular place. Clearly, science will continue to be an important part of psychology and a postmodern blending of traditions does not in any way oppose this. But phenomenological traditions such as Buddhism are not simply adjuncts to 'real' psychology. They are means by which the whole discipline can advance and grow.

Key words: psychology, postmodern, boddism, cross-culture, embodiment, cognition.

Introduction

Psychology and Buddhism may sound an unlikely juxtaposition; as if some boundary that is conventionally observed between science and religion may have been ignored. But psychology reflects its cultural *milieu*, the postmodern condition of which is said to promote the critical reappraisal of such boundaries. A powerful image of this condition is that of the Internet, the World Wide Web that is bringing forth McLuhan's global village. Across the web flashes an electronic discourse and the village murmurs with a cybernetic parley of voices, texts and signs. The medium has indeed become the message. The Internet symbolises a new world order which, by assimilating other cultural systems, is moving towards global homogeneity. As the Internet radiates over, diffuses through and cables underneath cultural boundaries, the boundaries

themselves become blurred and flexible. Ideas and images migrate and mingle. Information technocracy, bearing the values and traditions of a scientific worldview, is carrying the heroic project of the European Enlightenment to the rest of the world.

But even as this cultural colonialism gathers momentum, a counter movement is retarding the Enlightenment project. The worldview of scientific technocracy is indeed spreading, but it is fragmenting at the same time. Within science and between science and other areas of Western culture, boundaries are becoming blurred and flexible while theories and practices migrate and mingle.

The impetus for this counter movement is the deconstructive analysis of how culture is carried in discourse. This analysis discloses that a system like science, which for four centuries or so has been taken as the means to absolute and final knowlege, is culturally relative in a deeper way than might have been thought. Writers such as Derrida and Foucault show that cultural discourse of any type, whether in the media, thc arts, humanities or science, is supported by and is subject to what Baudrillard calls the "ecstasy of communication" (Baudrillard, 1988). Moreover, psychoanalysts such as Lacan likewise recognise that individual psychological processes are constructed through a process of cultural discourse. It appears that the objects and conditions that we take to be reality, what we take to comprise both the world and ourselves, are more like an endless play of signification. Becoming aware of this play and the inevitability of unconscious and conscious simulation produces a state of self-conscious irony that is central to the postmodern condition (Jencks, 1992).

But scientists often baulk here. Such a condition, they object, may indeed concern cultural theorists, literary critics, architects and novelists, but science is different. Science, after all, is subject to a powerful methodological discipline. Critics may endlessly recast our view of this novel or that building, but reality is uniquely reliable. Aesthetic judgements are notoriously re-negotiable but observations can be checked and repeated to establish whether they are correct. Works of the imagination may be indefinitely reinterpretable, but theories and proofs must be explicit or they fail. Thus, it is claimed, science escapes the postmodern critique and is free to persue the heroic Enlightenment project.

But the escape is partial at best. Scientific theories too begin as works of the imagination. What is implicit and what is explicit depends on the level of reality at which a theory is directed. Techniques of observation and of testing theories, no matter how refined and accurate, are themselves cultural practices. Their meaning and interpretation changes, hermeneutically, with their historical context. Now the limits to detached observation are clear, interest is shifting to how observers participate in creating the conditions for observation. Science is changing: from order and determinism to chaos and emergence, from reductionism to pluralism and from unified theories to a systems approach (Checkland, 1981). At its broadest, this postmodern shift is from mechanism to organicism; from the metaphysics of Newton and Descartes to those of Bohm and Whitehead (Griffin, 1988).

Psychology is not immune from the postmodern condition (Gergen, 1992). In fact, it is more sensitive to it than other sciences, since in psychology the accuracy of observation is secondary to the questions of whether what is being observed is at all relevant. The choice of what observations to make is more open than elsewhere in science, and there is change. There is a shift of attention away from individual cognitive structure and towards discursive processes between individuals. Recent critiques of cognitive science emphasise, in their different ways, the need to consider cognition within its biological and cultural settings, to rebalance a discipline which has over-emphasised internal cognitive mechanisms (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Edelman, 1992). This shift towards a contextualised view of mental life is very much in line with the postmodern condition and, to anticipate the discussion of Buddhism below, note that part of the condition is that traditions distant from each other in space and in time may blend and emerge in new alliances (Jencks, 1992).

The postmodern condition is one of simulation and irony. It is a deep irony that as science moves away from a modernist agenda, so psychology, by simulation of the physical sciences, clings more firmly to it. At a recent conference, a patriarch of British psychology delivered a stern warning that the discipline must develop exclusively as a science. Psychology is a citadel, to be defended against quackery such as hermeneutics, phenomenology and social constructivism.

Psychology and Buddhism

If psychology takes this view, then it would seem there is no scope for interaction with Buddhism. While not quackery perhaps, it is nonetheless a religion and hence, to believe that it can have anything more than a superficial relationship with scientific psychology is to make some sort of category error. Beliefs, especially when coming from alien cultures and when so often mis-appropriated and debased into new age waffle have no place in a science which deals in explicit facts. The Buddha's Enlightenment and the European Enlightenment, it seems, do not mix.

But Buddhism is not like the Abrahamic religions of the West. It is especially inappropriate to identify it with mysticism, faith, revelation, an immortal soul, a personified Creator and so on. In its original form, none of these things are to be found. Inasmuch as anything like faith is concerned, it is the confidence that certain insights into the human condition have been achieved and that teachings based on these insights are the means to live more skillfully.

These teachings are not to be taken on trust but are to be explored and tested by each individual. Buddhism is a systematic mental culture based on psychological investigation and observation of the everyday world. Mental processes are analysed from the standpoint created by superimposition of the subject and the object of experience. Indeed, an essential element of Buddhist practice is *Sati*, the skillful paying of attention to what happens in the mind without involvement, distortion or evaluation. Buddhist practices and teachings are fundamentally psychological and are developed by investigation, not fixed by faith.

Nor is Buddhism so alien, since it has influenced European thought since the time of Plato and since the sixteenth century has played an explicit role in the development of Western philosophy. However, as Jung noted, Buddhism suffers a projective distortion when it is taken up in West. Compensating for the loss of Western mysticism, there is an exaggeration of the transcendental and of concern with unusual states of consciousness. Such things are to be found in Buddhism, but the far more characteristic emphasis is on becoming aware of how the mind functions in everyday situations.

It is this systematic inquiry into the real world that makes interaction between scientific psychology and Buddhism not just possible, but productive. To explore this interaction is not a category error. In a time of cultural pluralism and blending, the patriachal single vision of an exclusively scientific future for psychology need not be taken too seriously.

There is another reason to think that now is a good time to make more specific the interaction between Buddhism and psychological science. There is confidence that cognitive psychology has come to the point where consciousness itself may be understandable in scientific terms. The last five years or so has seen a sharp increase in the number of conferences, journals and books specifically on consciousness. The feeling seems to be that the theoretical and methodological resources now exist to reductively analyse consciousness *per se* instead of leaving it as some 'higher', possibly mysterious aspect of mental life.

Perhaps it is this, as well as any postmodern blending of traditions that has produced the recent increase in the specificity of interaction between Buddhism and Western psychology. Research is now appearing on topics well outside the more usual areas of interaction such as therapy, meditation and humanistic psychology. Cognitive scientists and Buddhists, sometimes the same person, are now looking at how their traditions complement, overlap and contrast with each other.

Embodiment and Cognition

In their book *The Embodied Mind*, Varela, Rosch and Thompson blend cognitive science, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the Madhyamika school of Buddhism that flourished in south India during the second century AD (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1981). They advocate that as well as the detached observations of cognitive science, psychologists examine experience directly and observe both body and mind as they function in the environment. This participatory observation is the inquiry into embodied experience.

Such an inquiry shows the mind to be in constant activity and to reflect the actions and the situation of the body. Cognition is enacted by embodied in cognisers. They in turn act within

situations. A theory of embodied cognition starts from the fact that mental life is situated and is a process. It cannot be properly understood by reducing it to explicit, decontextualised cognitive structure.

This statement of the obvious is in fact a necessary reminder. The success of the cognitive revolution has de-emphasised situations, interpersonal processes, organic action and the body while over-emphasing mechanistic metaphors for internal cognitive structure. For example, no prizes for guessing that in a recent book entitled *Unified Theories of Cognition* computation is the basis for unification (Newell, 1990). In their different ways, approaches like connectionism, artificial intelligence and cognitive science in general all persue a direct Cartesian descendant of the Enlightenment project: to develop an explicit, mechanistic theory of what is in the head. A project which is occasionally carried out with remarkably little concern for the biological stuff which is actually there.

But the balance is shifting. For instance, Varela, Rosch and Thompson also commend Brooks' work on robotics (Brooks, 1991). This attempts, as Brooks puts it, to 'build complete creatures'; not artificial intelligence, but artificial life. He demonstrates how apparently purposive action emerges when appropriately structured robots engage with an environment in which they can act. Note 'structured' and not 'programmed'. Within Brooks' robots there are no data structures which represent the environment and no programs which plan or decide. Action emerges from the robot-environment system, it is not prefigured anywhere with in the robot.

Natural cognition too, emerges from a historical process of animal-environment interaction. However explicit our theoretical representation of internal cognitive structures may be, they are only part of the process. Psychology needs to approach mind and body as different aspects of one system with mutually evolved parts. Ecological psychology, for example, holds that perception and action are not functions of the brain alone. Rather they reflect the mutually evolved relationship between animal and environment (Michaels & Carrello, 1981). What affordance an animal is apt to perceive in the environment is a function of what that animal can do, that is, of the body of the animal in question. The environment,

however, also reflects what the animal does. The colours of plants reflect the capacities of animals to see them; the presence of thorns reflects the capacity of animals to eat the plant that bears them; the capacity to see that thorns do not afford chewing reflects the evolutionary history of the animal that so perceives them. The situation is one of co-production, mutuality and interdependence.

At the heart of Buddhism there is something intriguingly similar. This is the doctrine of *pattica samupada.* There are many translations of this term, including 'co-dependent arising', 'conditioned co-production' and 'reciprocal causal genesis'. Perhaps the most frequently encountered translation is 'dependent origination', and it is this will be used here.

Embodiment is central here, since dependent origination holds that the flow of experience is bound up with the activity of the body. Cognition, emotion and the will participate in a cycle of interacting causes within which experience arises and is sustained. Dependent origination is often presented as a chain of statements. Each statement links two terms as cause and effect. Successive statements take the effect term of the previous one as its causal term. The chain is closed into a cycle since the first effect is the last cause. Indeed, there is neither a first cause nor last effect. This cyclic interpretation of causality is the essence of dependent origination (Rosch, 1995). The metaphor here is the familiar Buddhist image of the wheel. It is to this wheel of cause and effect that consciousness is bound.

Terms in the cycle of dependent origination differ greatly in how easy it is to put them into a relationship with terms from Western psychology. When it is relatively easy we typically find statements about moment to moment determination of the flow of consciousness. A pair of such statements are: "sentience causes contact" and "contact causes feeling". The first of these statements holds that if external sense objects are within sensory range of an attentive perceiver then states of sensory consciousness neccessarily arise. In Western psychological terms, this corresponds to early sensory processing or bottom-up stages of perception. The second step holds that if a state of sensory consciousness arises then a state of affect neccessarily also arises. In Western terms this step is harder to place since the affective dimensions of sensory functions is somewhat neglected.

When it is difficult to place dependent origination in relationship to Western psychology we typically find it is because psychological and transcendental issues are blended in ways that go beyond the contemporary Western scientific world view of causality. For example, the doctrine of karma holds that cause - effect relations persist over many individual life spans. This doctrine has to be invoked to understand the following aspects of dependent origination: "attachment causes becoming" and "becoming causes birth". The first statement holds that actions with karmic consequences are produced by attachment, attachment itself being produced by craving the cessation or prolongation of the feelings that arise from sensory contact. The second statement holds that these karmic consequences enter into the production of a new human being, over and above the usual biological preliminaries.
Clearly, deeply held Western assumptions are being challenged here. Elsewhere, however, there appear to be productive resemblances (Hayward & Varela, 1992). In attempting to bring Buddhism and Western psychology into a more specific relationship, embodiment, consciousnes and the self are all central. The final section takes up these matters with a brief general point on the deconstruction of self and embodiment.

Embodiment and Selfhood

Encountering the deconstructive projects of thinkers such as Baudrillard, Lacan and Derrida can be disconcerting. Is there really no self apart from what is constituted in discourse? Is there no authentic author's voice in the books we read? Are creativity and personal responsibility only bourgeois false consciousness? Those of us coming from traditions of empiricism and critical realism may feel uneasy here. Surely, there is, or there needs to be, something more tangible on which our sense of individuality can be grounded?
Embodiment, as treated in Buddhism, may at first sight appear to provide such a ground. But any sense of relief has to be temporary at best since this grounding is the prelude to another attack on the self. Although it might appear that selves are identified with their material support, the reverse in fact is the case. The teachings of

annatta ("there is no essential self") and *anicca* ("all things arise and pass away, there is no abiding essence in anything") are as radical a deconstruction of individual existence and its material surroundings as anything that has originated from Parisian marxism.

These teachings go beyond cultural discourse and question the very ground of embodied existence: matter, biological and psychological structure, action and experience. At heart of Buddhism is the effort to understand this ground, its origins and how, in a process of cyclic causation, it produces consciousness. This effort ultimately demonstrates the emptiness of all levels of the ground, including, paradoxically, Buddhism itself; a deconstructive program indeed.

Western deconstruction concentrates on cultural discourse since so much of our identity is a cultural production involving language and other signs. Human self consciousness arises within a cultural context that is itself produced and shaped by conscious human action. Indeed, it is this strange loop or closure that eventually has brought us to the postmodern condition. However this neglects embodiment, since selves are bodies too. The human condition is embedded in social practices that depend on the body itself. Development, especially early development occurs in an environment that carries those practices. Ian Burkitt notes that embodiment in this sense is a useful counterweight to the deconstructive program (Burkitt, 1994). What has been proposed here is that attention to process and embodiment will likewise help psychology to recover from an over-emphasis on decontextualised cognitive structure.

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