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Restoring Meaningful Subjects and “Demographic Hope” to Psychology

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As matter of fact every individual has grown up, and always must grow up, in a social medium. His responses grow intelligent, or gain meaning, simply because he lives and acts in a medium of accepted meanings and values. Through social intercourse, through sharing in the activities embodying beliefs, he gradually acquires a mind of his own. The conception of mind as a purely isolated possession of the self is at the very antipodes of the truth. The self achieves mind in the degree in which knowledge of things is incarnate in the life about him; the self is not a separate mind building up knowledge anew on its own account. ... True individualism is a product of the relaxation of the grip of authority of customs and traditions as standards of belief. ... Hence a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests.

(Dewey, 1916/1944)

The quotation above links the freedom of the subject and the truthfulness of our knowledge to an inclusive, tolerant democratic society understood broadly as including everyday practices, beliefs and values as well as democratic and inclusive institutions. Democratic practices and institutions are more hopes than assured realities because of the circular dependence of them on subjects capable of democratic engagement with others and the origins of such subjects in social practices and institutions. Democratic and tolerant communities of inquirers are key for the existence of subjects capable of democracy; an experimental,

inquiring, tolerant approach to living is the hallmark of a democratic subject.

This paper takes up and further develops neglected strands in psychological thought that embrace the contingency of subjectivity, understand it as applying to the psychologist as well as the subject of psychology, and that look to democratic and inclusionary forms of social inquiry as the most likely to advance both knowledge and freedom of the subject. It maps out relationships between conceptions of the subject and the potential for meaningful subjectivity and democratic hope. Meaningful subjectivity is understood as including the tension between ourselves as determined by discourse and condition but also capable of insights and taking part in creative action. As individuals we come into inherited fields of action and thought in which we are personally positioned. The world is not seen as a given nor as fully knowable. It is met with the awareness of limitations, errors (possibly even fatal ones), delusions, and potentially unique insights. Our particular selves and the collective selves we most embrace or seek to challenge are mutually defining. These conditions apply to ourselves as psychologists, researchers, and citizens at large. A subjectivity with democratic potential is simultaneously constructed historically, socially, materially and discursively (overlapping categories) and through the accident, effort, weaknesses and successes of being and will. For democracy to be necessary and possible, there must be a world beyond the self that discursively, materially, socially and in everyday life nurtures, challenges, shapes, hurts, rewards, disappoints and fulfills us. Democratic subjects have the

capacity to engage with that world so as to contribute to the shape of individual and collective projects that have lesser and greater promise for individual and collective flourishing. Obviously this is a big and ambitious terrain, and one that I can only begin to address in this essay.

This paper outlines briefly the limitations of current psychological conceptions of subjectivity. I then examine the work of Lewin as a more robust conceptualization of subjective life but one hampered by a weak analysis of embeddedness in material/social context and discourse. Classical American Pragmatism, as developed by writers such as William James and John Dewey, is introduced for its firmer situating of the self materially and socially, placing knowledge of the world within context and discourse. Pragmatism offers numerous ideas that are especially important for democratic hope. Pragmatists argue that because of our individually limited and uncertain situatedness vis à vis discourse and experience, a broad inclusive community of inquirers is the best warrant for true and useful knowledge. By pragmatist accounts, we are very much creatures of the world we are born into and subject to its institutions, exclusions, power relations, physical properties, and ways of thinking. Yet we remake ourselves individually and collectively (though not fully by intention) through modes of engagement with others that promote tolerant inclusive discourse, decision making and action. In this view, thought and feeling work together as intelligence. Thus democratic processes make room for emotional engagements that can interrupt existing patterns, challenge received representations, produce new sympathies and desires, and promote democratic processes. Over time, the hope is that these will leave their residue in history, practice, habits, discourse, institutions and power arrangements.

THE WORK OF KURT LEWIN

Kurt Lewin and his research group are characterized by Kurt Danziger as the “lost continent” of Berlin. Lewin and his group worked in Weimar Germany under conditions of “unrelieved instability and intense social conflict” that influenced the conception of human experience and personality and in the main bolstered an alliance between psychologists

and the increasingly militaristic state (Danziger, 1990). Lewin’s research group was predominantly Jewish, often female, and Eastern European making an alliance with the state unlikely and alerting them to the “embeddedness of the personality in social situations” (Danziger, 1990). That awareness translated into an understanding of psychological inquiry as intersubjective engagement (Danziger, 1990). ... Lewin’s psychology was for Danziger a lost continent because it represented uncertainty as inherent in psychological reality and social processes, and reality as emergent, thus going against the grain of psychology’s focus on control and prediction.

Lewin’s idea of how the human mind worked and how it resided in the larger fields of interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, culture and anti- or pro-democratic processes applied to both the researcher and the researched in a way that culminated logically in action research. ... The core of Lewin’s theory concerns the nature of the “lifespace”. The lifespace is a completely psychological construct though its content and dynamics rest within a foreign hull, a psychological ecology that influences the lifespace but is not part of it. The lifespace is topologically organized through force fields into regions which are self-bounding as a result of dynamic tensions arising from, on the one hand, desires and repulsions (valences), and, on the other, beliefs and perceptions concerning the conditions of attaining goals and avoiding negative objects. A person is contained within a region until the tensions of the particular force field encompassing the person at the moment are resolved or changed through either a rearrangement of psychological dynamics or changes in the environment. Psychological experience then is determined by our internal (and not necessarily conscious) desires, intents, fears, and ignorances, and also by the structure of particular situations, tasks, spaces, forms of interaction, etc. Goals change as we pursue our interests, achieve or fail to achieve our goals, and move into circumstances in which we perceive and feel new conditions and possibilities.

Lewin’s discussion of group dynamics employs the same notions of force fields and regions of inclusion and exclusion. When he writes of the differences between the personality structure of Americans and Germans, Lewin seems to imply a sort of historical genealogy of character

shaped by culturally distinct social practices not dissimilar to Bourdieu's account of the ways that "habitus" shapes tastes and behavioral repertoires (Bourdieu, 1977/1972; Lewin, 1997). Both are field theorists but Bourdieu's field encompasses both sociological and psychological fields simultaneously, with sociological fields constraining psychological fields. Both Bourdieu and Lewin see differences among cultures and for Bourdieu, social classes, as self-reproductive. However, Lewin offers two routes out of this reproductivity, both related to his hopes for democracy. On the one hand he believes that leaders have the capacity to organize group relations in democratic, *laissez faire*, or authoritarian channels. In Lewin and his research group's development of participatory action research, the process of democratic social inquiry is both a paradigm for democratic society and means of pursuing that end.

PRAGMATIC "TRUTH" AND DEMOCRATIC HOPE

Pragmatism presents a particular view of human experience that is inseparable from social inquiry, a position characterized as "a conception of human experience as motivated inquiry, organized and guided by an examination of the consequences of action" (MacGilvray, 2000). Pragmatists share many of Lewin's core conceptions: the task and context dependence of what we know and do; the unity of thought, feeling and action as we move through time, space, our lives and our thoughts; the instability of particular goals and identities as contexts change yet the anchoredness of both in social and personal histories as well as current rigidities of the environment; and a sense that the outcome of activities and inquiries are determined not by prior conditions but by the dynamics of a changing terrain both internal and external to the individual.

A pragmatic approach to knowledge, value, and action in the post-modern context involves building on Dewey's embrace of the inherent uncertainty of knowledge, the capacity of human beings for growth through experience, and the necessity of the cultivation of democratic communities and institutions for such growth to occur.

For pragmatists, ideas needed to be endlessly tested against experience even as experience is

inevitably a partial product of ideas. Experience unfolds as particular people pursue their interests and find out whether or not their efforts work. Since there are many individual actions and experiences, there are many truths at any particular moment. As James stated, "The truth is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events" (James, 1995/1906–1907). Dewey in virtually all of his work and after him Westbrook (2005) infer from this that the pragmatist notion of truth rests on endless and inclusive inquiry that is best encouraged by an open and democratic society.

Westbrook's linkage of the pragmatist concept of truth to democratic processes is crucial to the concept of inquiry set forth in this paper:

pragmatism—by virtue of its methodological commitment to experimental inquiry—is not neutral between democrats and fascists but rather has a powerful elective affinity with democracy. That is, democracy too is (in part, at least) a set of methods, and at their best the methods of democracy and pragmatic inquiry intersect. Pragmatic inquiry shares a "discourse ethics" with democracy. Pragmatists who embrace Dewey's conviction that politics should be a mode of "organized intelligence" believe that the intelligence of political communities, like that of all effective communities of inquiry, should be organized democratically. "Democracy is a requirement for experimental inquiry in any area", Putman says. "To reject democracy is to reject the idea of being experimental."

(Westbrook, 2005)

This argument brings into confluence the several aspects of pragmatism that I believe have important implications for psychological inquiry (as well as for other disciplines): an experimental understanding of truth in which its shared linguistic root with the word experience is important and the linking of truth as pragmatically conceived to the goals of an inclusive and democratic community. As Peirce put it, "men and words reciprocally educate each other" (*Essential Peirce*, Vol. 1). In this view, both truth and the extent to which social processes are in fact inclusive and democratic are made true by events, and by the particular people involved.

But not everything can be made to be true even if the belief that it is true is widely held. Views may be widely held because the punishments for departing from them are severe, the rewards for agreeing great, or the voices of those who disagree too far out of the conversation to be heard. Democratic inclusiveness is an elusive goal. At any point in time, both truth and democracy are hopes.

FEELING AS THE CRUCIBLE OF WISDOM

Feelings are the medium through which our experience of the world tests the adequacy of our knowledge and of received wisdom. On the one hand, emotions are error prone but on the other hand they also alert us to perhaps undiscovered potential truths that arise from our particular position in the world as well as our ability to reflexively deploy signs.

“Feeling” genuinely has at all times two meanings: feeling in the sense of an internal state as in “I feel sad” and feeling in the sense of seeking information through sensory experience of something or someone outside ourselves, as in “If you run your hand over the surface, you can feel its unevenness”. ... Feelings effectively make particular phenomena or actions more salient than others, provide direction, and keep the actor engaged with a particular project.

Pragmatists see in the cultivation of feeling a way to expand human solidarity and also to have larger more satisfying experiences as a result. Dewey develops the connection of social history and norms to mundane feelings in his argument about the relationship of values and aesthetic tastes to the everyday impulses, attractions and repulsions of normal life in virtually all of his major works. Some passages from *Art as Experience* (1934) provide an example of the fundamental significance that Dewey accords feeling in all its manifestations. Early in the book, he anchors aesthetic experience in rudimentary feelings:

Impulsions are the beginning of complete experience because they proceed from need: from a hunger and demand that belongs to the organism as a whole and that can be supplied only by instituting definite relations (active relations, interactions) with the environment.
(Dewey, 1934)

However, feelings in practice are as often hostile, angry, hurt, ashamed, vengeful, etc. as they are sympathetic, loving, trusting, and cooperative. Social history places individuals in opposition to each other's interests in situations in which some have more power than others. Emotions are not only the location of expanded social identity, sympathy and cooperation, they are also the arena for hurt, subjugation, conflict, and resistance.

POWER, DISCORD, DOMINATION AND RESISTANCE AS REFLEXIVE MOMENTS

The individual and society are held together in experience through discourse and through cohabitation in a world that conditions the possibility of action and the satisfactions and distresses of life. Dewey and Peirce would agree with Bourdieu (2005) in stating the case against the distinction of the social and the individual:

In so far as he or she is endowed with a habitus, the social agent is a collective individual or a collective individuated by the fact of embodying objective structures. The individual, the subjective, is social and collective. The habitus is socialized subjectivity, a historic transcendental, whose schemes of perception and appreciation ... are the product of collective and individual history.

Unlike Dewey, Bourdieu has clearly articulated how this understanding of the production of individuals and society, as well as knowledge, perpetuates oppositional interests anchored in inequality of power and resources. The concept of habitus can simplistically be defined as the physical and social world historically constructed and transmitted by particular social groups within particular institutional, political and cultural histories of development. Through engagement with a habitus, a person becomes him/herself in a way that socially reproduces the culture and society and especially its unequal distribution of power and resources while also finding a unique space of being afforded by the possibilities of the habitus.

Foucault and Bourdieu both socialize felt life. In their accounts, suffering brought about by the production of knowledge in service to power

naturalizes the conditions of those feelings and delegitimizes proscribed desires.

Both Foucault's challenge and Bourdieu's realism point to the gaps in pragmatist theory surrounding the exercise of power through discourse and practice, and sometimes in the name of democratic social processes. Dewey in *The Public and its Problems* showed himself aware of these issues, but perhaps idealistically (and perhaps hegemonically) hopeful of their resolution through inquiry made public rather than through struggle.

The essential need ... is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public. We have asserted that this improvement depends essentially upon freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and of dissemination of their conclusions. Inquiry, indeed, is the work which devolves upon experts. But their expertness is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend. ... It is not necessary that the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigations; what is required is that they have the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns.

(Dewey, 1927)

CONCLUSIONS

The implications of this argument for psychology turn on repositioning subjectivity both as an intellectual topic and a lived experience. This involves reformulating our conceptions of the self, understanding our selves as composed and situated in the same limited ways as the selves we study, understanding our relations with the selves we study as part of social and interest saturated projects, and understanding the methods and contexts of our inquiries as part of the making of democratic or anti-democratic communities.

The alignment of social inquiry with concerns for social inclusion and more just social policies and practices has made much progress in the last decades as feminists, critical race theorists, queer theorists, critical theorists and a host of other inquirers have entered the arena of social inquiry.

In the pragmatic tradition, a next move would involve a more deliberate democratic positioning of inquiry. To transform modes of inquiry as well as social practices it is important to remember Bourdieu's point (and the practices of feminist, black, queer, disabled, and other marginalized or silenced populations) that there is no substitute for organizing oppositional interests to contest these relationships and to develop more democratic institutional forms. Within the pragmatist framework, the engagement of oppositional interests promotes the growth of knowledge and of selves as capable of engaging successfully with the world.

The democratization of inquiry and the development of social practices that promote and sustain more democratic and inclusive institutions rest on the cultivation of whole ways of being and modes of association. Unequal capacities to mobilize power produced through fields of social positionality, experienced emotionally and reproduced through the bodily enactment of feeling and the routinized habits of practice are resilient. To change them involves "not only a transformation of habitus themselves through a perhaps arduous retraining, but also transformation of the very conditions, emotional and otherwise, of the production and reproduction of habits" (Emirbayer and Goldberg, 2005).

Thus the project of democratic social inquiry needs to occur in actually shared spaces and everyday practices with an aim to transforming consciousness in places and in bodies that support this change.

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